Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces

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ABSTRACT
Due to the systemic reality of heteropatriarchy, queer bodies often struggle to find a place of belonging within the African context in general and faith spaces in particular. Even though there has been a shift towards a more inclusive theological discourse within the African Christian faith landscape, the bodies of African *Izitabane* are still predominantly viewed as a Western import and a threat to African culture and its traditions. Because of this, queer bodies continue to find themselves within hostile environments. This has contributed to queer people moving towards alternative spaces of worship and the development of the queer church in which all bodies are welcomed. Although queer bodies have created these alternative faith spaces to move away from the systems of heteropatriarchy that force them to conform to heteronormative standards within the church, a study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, found that queer people often recreate these systems in their own spaces. The pervasive systemic nature of heteropatriarchy finds expression in the insistence on masculine bodies being placed in positions of authority and the exclusive recognition of relationships that conform to heteronormative standards. In the process of trying to escape spaces of a male centred heteropatriarchal African church, we argue that queer people have not succeeded in tapping into the full potential of the power of "queer" as a tool to disrupt and destabilise the pervasive system of heteropatriarchy. Our contribution aims to reflect on our collective queer journey, orientated towards understanding and interrogating the systemic realities underlying and informing the queer appropriation of patriarchy and heteronormativity in African queer faith spaces.

KEYWORDS
queer; heteropatriarchy; heteronormativity; power; black queer Christian bodies

Introduction

Izitabane is a derogatory term used in the African context to mark LGBTIQA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual/agender, with the plus referring to other sexual orientations, gender identities, as well as gender expressions that do not appear in the abbreviation) people as the "other" and "outside" the norm prescribed by heteropatriarchy.[1] The otherness of African *Izitabane* is written on the

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[1]   Although we use the terms "Africa" and "African" throughout this contribution, we do not consider Africa to be homogenous, but rather a richly complex and contextually diverse landscape. Most of our collaborative work speaks to the Southern African civil society,

body and informs the vulnerability of queer people in the process of navigating their gender identity and sexual orientation. This makes the body central to the work engaged in this contribution, because the body is symbolic of the systems that uphold society – systems informed by culture and religion, systems such as heteropatriarchy.[2] Heteropatriarchy insists on a binary construction of gender, which aligns biological sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation. However, queer bodies express sex, gender, and sexual orientation outside of the norm and because of this, they are viewed as disruptive and a threat to the "natural" order of the family and the sacred institution of marriage. As a result, queer bodies have become "opposed and denounced" by African political leaders, faith leaders, and cultural custodians.[3] It is argued that queer people have the potential to destroy African traditions and hetero-normative family values.[4] These arguments are fuelled by the idea that queerness is a "Western import," threatening the heteropatriarchal values of the Christian church and the African cultural landscape.[5] In order to maintain the stability of the norm that heteropatriarchy prescribes, queer bodies are often excluded, marginalised, and ultimate-ly annihilated. The reality of discrimination against and the marginalisa-tion of the LGBTIQA+ community has contributed to the multiple oppres-sions faced by the queer community within the African context in gene-ral, and within the African faith landscape in particular.

The experiences of exclusion in the African faith landscape have led black queer Christian bodies to "find alternative spaces of worship, where they can be accepted and open about who they are."[6] These alternative spaces move queer Christian bodies from the margins of Christianity to the centre of worship without being forced to conform to

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church, and academic context, and the case study that we discuss is located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

[2] Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing body theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 10.

[3] Thabo Msibi, "The lies we have been told: On (homo)sexuality in Africa," *Africa Today* 58, no.1 (2011): 55.

[4] Msibi, "The lies we have been told," 55.

[5] Hanzline Davids, R. Abongile Matyila, Sizwe Sithole, and Charlene van der Walt, "Stabanisation – a discussion paper about disrupting backlash by reclaiming LGBTI voices in the African church landscape" (Johannesburg: The Other Foundation, 2020), 4.

[6] Sindisiwe G. Sithole, "An exploration of religio-cultural concepts of transgender identities in Ethiopian Zionist churches in the Midlands, KZN" (Mater's diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019), 17.

gender binaries to become visible in the presence of God, spaces that are life-affirming.[7] Although queer bodies have created these alternative faith spaces to move away from the systems of heteropatriarchy that force them to conform to heteronormative standards within the church, the empirical research work that from the basis for this contribution, conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, found that queer people often recreate these systems in their own spaces.

The pervasive systemic nature of heteropatriarchy finds expression in the insistence on masculine bodies being placed in positions of authority and the exclusive recognition of relationships that conform to heteronormative standards. We argue that in the process of trying to escape the confines of a male centred heteropatriarchal African church, queer people have not succeeded in tapping into the full potential of the power of "queer" as a tool to disrupt and destabilise the pervasive system of heteropatriarchy.[8] Our focus of analysis is orientated towards understanding and interrogating the systemic realities underlying and informing the queer appropriation of patriarchy and heteronormativity in African queer faith spaces.

At the centre of our engagement is the reality of the black queer Christian body as a mediator for experience and a site of meaning making and knowledge production. In line with Settler and Engh, we understand that "the body is not simply a site of inscription but also significantly, a site of performance (resistance and self-assertion)."[9] We view "the body as a site of oppression," through which belonging and exclusion are reflected.[10] We further understand queer bodies as active, creative, disruptive, and as a result, susceptible to violence and heteropatriarchal policing and control. In this contribution, we will refer to queer bodies and queer people and by doing this, we refer to those

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7   Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical love: An introduction to queer theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 8.
8   Patrick Cheng defines "queerness" as an erasure of what is fixed in society, a disruption of sexuality and gender binaries that keep us from the love of God. Queerness challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality, and because of this, society tries to control its discomfort with queer bodies by pushing them to the margins of human social existence. Queer individuals struggle to become visible, mainly because of the power projected within a heteronormative society that refuses to accept what is considered as different or counter to the norm (Cheng, *Radical love,* 6).
9   Federico Settler and Mari H. Engh, "The black body in colonial and postcolonial public discourse in South Africa," *Alternation Special Edition* 14 (2015): 132.
10 Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing body theology*, 15.

making meaning and navigating identity formation from the reality of a queer embodiment within a heteropatriarchal system. We believe that embodiment, personhood, and community are realities that should be explored in close proximity to each other, and we aim to centre the fluid, complex, messy, and destabilising ways in which the body is central to all of these explorations.

Much of our discussion is based on a research project titled, *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces*, conducted in 2021.[11] The study examined the realities of black queer Christian bodies located within the South African context in KwaZulu-Natal. The project started by examining the underlying factors contributing to the decisions taken by black queer Christian bodies in the African context to move from "traditionally" heteronormative churches to queer spaces of worship. This project found that although black queer Christian bodies had migrated into queered spaces of worship, it could not escape the pervasive systemic reality of heteropatriarchy.

Our collaboration queers the power relations, traditionally constructed and maintained in the academic landscape when thinking of teachers over students, or supervisors over researchers, when these become interchangeable categories. Our collaboration has stretched and blurred these categories and has placed each of us at various junctions in the position of teacher, student, researcher, collaborator, and colleague.

The lead researcher is a queer activist within the South African landscape, based in KwaZulu-Natal. She is an isiZulu black body in a context of historical racial conflict, a woman in a landscape that shames and silences women's experiences,[12] and a queer Christian individual where any other form of gender identity or sexual orientation other than cisgender and heterosexual is defined as unAfrican. These race, gender, and sexual intersections assist in the process of understanding the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy and the centrality of the body in the process of identity negotiation and community formation. This woman is both an insider and an outsider, a researcher, an activist, and a scholar

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[11] Tracey M. Sibisi, "Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces" (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2021). Protocol Reference Number: HSSREC/00001767/2020.

[12] Jessica Murray, "'And They Never Spoke to Each Other of It:' Contemporary Southern African Representations of Silence, Shame and Gender Violence," *English Academy Review* 34, no.1 (2017): 27.

looking into the realities informing the experiences of black queer Christian bodies. The second author is a white queer *womxn* navigating faith, academia, and life as a socially engaged biblical and gender scholar in systems and institutional spaces, deeply informed by hetero-patriarchy. Our collaboration, ongoing conversation, and exploration brings together complex race, gender, and sexuality intersections. It challenges dominant power dynamics and it expands the landscapes of knowledge production beyond that of the academy to include both civil society and faith contexts.

Through this contribution, we reflected on the journey taken to understand the systemic realities that inform the observed phenomenon of queer appropriations of heteropatriarchy. We engage the lived realities of nine black queer Christian bodies within the South African landscape as they share their stories of becoming visible and occupying space as black queer Christian bodies in various queer churches in the KwaZulu-Natal context.[13] We did not only interrogate the power dynamics that inform the situatedness of black queer Christian bodies, but also imagin-ed how black queer Christian bodies could become instrumental in queering spaces of faith and ultimately disrupting the pervasive nature of heteropatriarchy.

Queer Bodies within the African Landscape

As already highlighted above, the human dignity of queer people is threatened within the African landscape, with African leaders viewing homosexuality as "deviant behaviour which is uncultured and un-African."[14] Queer people within this context find themselves in unwel-coming environments that are deeply informed by underlying systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity.[15]

Defined as a penis-centred system, "glorifying and idolizing traditional toxic masculinities and male sexual prowess," patriarchy has been a major underlying factor contributing to the oppression of women and bodies that are regarded as weaker in society.[16] Patriarchy as a system

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[13] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 10*.* The ethical clearance number for the empirical re-search is HSSREC/00001767/2020.

[14] Lindiwe P. Mkasi, "A threat to Zulu patriarchy and the continuation of community: A queer analysis of same sex relationships amongst female traditional healers at Inanda and KwaNgcolosi" (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013), 1.

[15] Mkasi, "A threat to Zulu patriarchy," 14.

[16] Msibi, "The lies we have been told," 60.

actively informs the lives of women, children, and queer people, determining how they should act, dress, speak, and exist in relation to others in society. Patriarchy is a system that continues to construct and demand an ideal construction of masculinity that is unattainable and un-realistic, fuelling violence, instability, and aggression in those who cannot meet its standards. Patriarchy systemically aligns with heteronormativity to prescribe the pervasive heterosexual norm for the expression of sexuality and the construction of sanctionable relationships.[17]

Deeply informed by culture, religion, and African traditions, hetero-patriarchy has contributed widely to the exclusion and marginalisation of queer bodies within the African context, with the issues of gender and sexual diversity remaining "strongly contested within broader African intellectual framework, especially in religion and theology."[18] Although there are some noticeable shifts in the theological landscape relating to the queer community within the African framework, there remains a substantial divide between the faith actors moving towards inclusion and those strongly determined to exclude "homosexuality as a controversial and divisive topic for many Christians in Africa."[19] Some important examples show the progress being made towards the full inclusion of queer people within their faith settings. Although highly contested, the Dutch Reformed Church made a landmark decision to affirm the dignity of queer bodies in 2015, while the Anglican Church in South Africa has shown an increasing awareness to the reality of LGBTIQA+ rights. There is a visible "destabilization of conservative traditions in which churches have begun to move towards a culture of inclusion regardless of sexual orientation."[20] This, however, is not met with the same energy within some other faith communities based within the African faith landscape. The Methodist Church of South Africa, for instance allows queer ministers to become visible in the church but continues to put a limitation to full identity and relationship expression by setting aside the covenant

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[17] Melanie Judge, "In the garden of 'good' and 'evil:' Lesbians and (in)visible sexualities in the patriarchy," in *A Consultation Held at Mount Fleur Conference Centre, Stellenbosch*, vol. 5 (2009), 12.

[18] Sithole, "An exploration of religio-cultural concepts," 14.

[19] Elias K. Bongmba, "Homosexuality, ubuntu, and otherness in the African Church," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4, no.1 (2016), 15.

[20] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 12; also see Davids *et al.*, "Stabanisation," 19, 21.

of marriage as a heterosexual institution.[21] With their sexuality apposing this acceptable norm, queer bodies are viewed as immoral and the act of homosexuality as a sin against nature. The church has played a major role in the discrimination and violence against queer bodies in relation to this.[22] These life-denying realities have forced black queer Christian bodies to leave these spaces informed by heteropatriarchy, and move towards alternative spaces of worship.

Pervasiveness of Heteropatriarchy

Patriarchy has found a way to manifest itself in many ways, however, remaining true to its main agenda which is to privilege the male body over the "other." It has been successful in embedding itself in different structures that hold a great amount of influence in society, which continues to uphold its values, making it difficult to fight against its ideologies, elevating the positions of men in society while oppressing those that are viewed as weaker and passive. Some of these structures have been "equally maintained by those which it has been successful in taming,"[23] grooming women and queer people from a young age through the family, schools, churches, tertiary institutions, and the workplace to know their place in the patriarchal system.[24] Patriarchy has been powerful in that it has been able to socialise men and masculine present-ing bodies into believing that they hold a sense of power over the "other" (women and queer bodies) by upholding certain norms imposed by it, such as heteronormativity.

Through heteronormativity, "sexuality has been made a central tool, through which Africanacity is expressed…and is seen as…a marker of

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[21] Ntobeko Dlamini, "The implications of queer sexuality in ministry: The experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist church of Southern Africa" (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019), 10.

[22] Mkasi, "A threat to Zulu patriarchy," 35.

[23] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 19; also see Nazizwe Madlala-Routledge, "'Reconciliation between men and women,' in T*he evil of patriarchy in church, society and politics*, A Consultation Held at Mount Fleur Conference Center Stellenbosch 5 and 6 March 2009, hosted by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), in partnership with the Department of Religion and Theology of the University of the Western Cape, and the Centre for Christian Spirituality, Stellenbosch, 2005, 4.

[24] Dennis A. Francis, Anthony Brown, John McAllister, Sethunya T. Mosime, Glodean T.Q. Thani, Finn Reygan, Bethusile Dlamini, Lineo Nogela, and Marguerite Muller, "A five-country study of gender and sexuality diversity and schooling in Southern Africa," *Africa Education Review* 16, no.1 (2019), 22-25.

citizenship, claiming one's rights and denying other people their rights."[25] Through heteronormativity, bodies become divided in society, first imposing gendered norms that assign a particular sex at birth through the observation of sexual organs, and second, by imposing the idea that all bodies must conform to a predicted "norm" which maintains that all bodies should commit to sexual relationships with bodies of the opposite sex. For us, it is a life-denying system that is upheld by culture, religion, and traditions that enforce the idea of gender binaries that are viewed as "fixed and legitimate,"[26] discrediting the "other" that exists outside of this norm because of the imposed gender norms, and labelling the "other" as uncultured, unbiblical, and un-African.

Unbiblical and Un-African

While exposing the fear of anxious masculinities, queer bodies have been powerful in revealing the instability of enforced gender binaries that find expression in a fixed and stable normative construction of masculinity and femininity. By destabilising what is regarded to be fixed, queer individuals blur the lines informed by culture and religion. Through their gender performativity and sexual interactions, queer Christian bodies trouble the norm as "outsiders," questioning systems that have labelled them as uncultured and unbiblical, which reveals an instability imposed by the Bible, mainly within Christianity: "With scriptures quoted from the books of Leviticus and Genesis, biblical narratives have been used to support heteronormativity as the divine order of the family, [which demands a] particular sexual system…a compulsory sexuality" that is informed by male privilege.[27] Many male dominated voices have been used to enforce heteropatriarchy, justifying abusive language from the pulpit, which has threatened the existence of queer individuals,[28] labelling queer bodies as *unbiblical* and creating hostile spaces for queer Christian bodies, further enforcing this through culture and traditional practices within the minorities, through their power of naming, enforcing systems of heteropatriarchy that ensure that only "real men" and "real women" exist.[29] African political, traditional, and faith leaders have turned a blind eye through languages that refuse to acknowledge or affirm

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[25] Adriaan van Klinken, "Homosexuality, politics and Pentecostal nationalism in Zambia," *Studies in World Christianity* 20, no.3 (2014), 260.

[26] Msibi, "The lies we have been told," 71.

[27] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer", 24.; also see Judge, "In the garden of 'good,'" 12.

[28] Bernadett Barton, "'Abomination:' Life as a Bible Belt Gay," *Journal of Homosexuality* 57, no.4 (2010): 465.

[29] Judge, "In the garden of 'good,'" 12.

queer individuals, which is no different in the African faith landscape. African Christian religious leaders have ignored the historical documentation of queer individuals within the African landscape, basing their arguments on the Bible, culture, and Christian faith. They are rather supporting the argument that homosexuality "violently offends the culture, morality, and heritage" of this context,[30] labelling queer individuals as *un-African*, unacceptable, unethical, and unnatural, "a cancer that is eating into the life of the church with the ordination of gay bishops and the recognition given to various people and governments."[31] This perception has led to the development of queer churches.

The Queer Church: A Queered "Norm"

In light of the above, black queer Christian bodies have moved towards the development of queer churches, which are established with the aim to provide safe spaces for those who are regarded as the "disruptive other." "Queer churches move queer bodies from the margins of Christianity to the center of worship without being forced to conform to gender binaries to become visible in the presence of God."[32] These alternative spaces aim to disrupt gender binaries and, in the process, to promote a culture of acceptance and equality in which all bodies are welcome, regardless of their sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

However, while conducting research and gaining insight into the establishment of queer churches within this project, we found that in the process of becoming visible within their own spaces of worship, black queer Christian bodies have resurrected or recreated systems of heteropatriarchy.[33] These heteropatriarchal systemic realities found expression in, among other examples, gendered seating arrangements, the exclusive acknowledgment of relationships that conform to the heteronormative ideal, and a strict adherence to the binary construction of gender.[34] Queer people within these spaces have recreated a life deny-

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[30] Kwame Essien and Saheed Aderinto, "'Cutting the head of the roaring monster:' Homosexuality and repression in Africa," *African Study Monographs* 30, no.3 (2009): 127.

[31] Kehinde E. Obasola, "An ethical perspective of homosexuality among the African people," *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences* 1, no.12 (2013): 77.

[32] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 26.; also see Cheng, *Radical love*, 8.

[33] Tracey M. Sibisi, "The development of Queer Churches and the contextual realities that brought them into being" (Honours Research Project, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2019), 43.

[34] Mkasi, "A threat to Zulu patriarchy," 51.

ing system based on heteropatriarchy, failing to move away from a culture of oppression and exclusion.

The theoretical insights offered by the Queer Theory in general and Queer Theology in particular, are underpinned our engagement with this phenomenon. Queer Theory "challenges and disrupts the traditional notions that sexuality and gender identity are simply questions of scientific fact or that such concepts can be reduced to fixed binary categories."[35] Queer Theology, in turn, helps us to do a theology from the body, allowing us to "expose the voices of those who have been silenced and disempowered."[36] It also helps us to understand what defines a queer space for individuals that are not completely free of heteropatriarchal systems that inform their reality.

As we explored the embodied realities of nine black queer Christian people, representing a diversity in terms of their gender identity and expression of sexuality, we found presented ideas and experiences intersecting gender and sexuality in interesting and complex ways. The process of study became a rich reflection and embodied exploration of what is constructed as normative and how counter normativity is expressed, embodied, and explored. Collaboratively, we engaged the possibility of queer bodies finding validation outside of the heteropatriarchal "norms" of gender and sexuality instilled by culture and religion. We attempted to reflect on the possibility to find ways, if any, through which black queer Christian bodies might destabilise heteropatriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality in faith spaces within the African landscape.

A Queered Method
Our exploration of lived realities outside of the norm called for a queer methodology. Queering traditional methods of research, we used a mixed methodology, which allowed for a deeper engagement of the participants' lived realities and contexts. This methodology allows for the centring of the lived experience of participants, but also for ongoing personal praxis reflection by the main researcher in the process of navigating the research process. A "Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology" was employed as a steppingstone in the collection of queering data, by erasing the boundaries of traditional data collection,

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[35] Cheng, *Radical love*, 6.
[36] Sithole, "An exploration of religio-cultural concepts," 36.

blurring the lines of time and space as well as the relationship between the researcher and the researched.[37] Through this process, the main researcher became aware of her positionality, understanding that she is an active body within this process and a collaborator in the process of meaning making and knowledge production.

Participants within this study were selected with the aim to reflect on how, if at all, queer bodies could destabilise heteronormative faith spaces. Considering this aim, the profile of research participants required that the participants self-identify as queer Christian individuals who are members of the queer church within the KwaZulu-Natal context in the past two years, and self-identifying as a South African of isiZulu origin between the ages of 18 and 60 years.

We used a snowballing method, reaching out to three members known to the main researcher, who then assisted in identifying suitable participants for the study. The participants included a pastor within the queer church, elders representing a diversity of gender expressions and sexual orientations, and several regular queer church members. The participants represented an interesting sample in terms of marital status, level of education and economic standing, positionality within the church landscape, and diversity in terms of gender and sexual identities.

Taking the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic into consideration, the study moved towards innovative virtual data collection tools, as online platforms were used to conduct a focus-group discussion, as well as individual interviews. Interview questions allowed for discussions that engaged the embodied lived realties of black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape and in the process amplified the voices of those that have been pushed to the margins of Christian faith. The employed methodology centred the body in the research process and facilitated reflections on the pervasive nature of heteropatriarchy. Beyond interviews as a data collection tool, and to enable a reflection on gender performativity in the absence of in-person fieldwork, we requested pictures of research participants in which they depicted their

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[37]   Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, *Queer methods and methodologies: Intersecting queer theories and social science research* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 25; also see Megan Robertson, "Called and Queer Exploring the lived experiences of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2020), 60.

dress code for church attendance. We engaged these images in our discussion of the study results below. Finally, a research diary was employed as a tool to enable the main researcher to reflect on her positionality and embodied experience as she conducted the embodied fieldwork. The diversity of methods employed in the data collection process produced rich and complex data and we will discuss some of our main insights and learnings below.

Sitting with the Bodies and Hearing the Voices from the Margins

Using a thematic analysis as our main analytical tool, we identified three main themes in the process of reflecting on how black queer Christian bodies navigate the process of becoming visible in heteronormative faith spaces, and explore possibilities of finding placement within alternative spaces of worship.

1. Alienated in coming out

First, we noted that all participants shared a sense of isolation in the coming out process. Participant 1 noted: "I was a Sunday school teacher…I enjoyed being part of Sunday school with the kids because they do not judge. Someone found out about my sexuality, and I was reported to the elders, and they prayed for me. They did not chase me out, but they treated me differently. It changed the love of God for me. I became a demon. My good work did not matter, so I decided to leave."[38]

The statement illustrates the reality of queer Christian bodies becoming othered within the church because they are homosexual or identify outside of the fixed gender norms as prescribed by heteropatriarchy. The narratives of black queer Christian bodies illustrate how "[t]he body is inscribed into the hierarchies, the inequalities, the roles, the norms, the do's and don'ts of society. As such not the body itself, but what the body should or ought to be, shifts into focus."[39] This inscription of the body moves into sharp focus in the narratives of black queer Christian bodies as they choose to move towards alternative spaces of worship.

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[38] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 75.
[39] Johannes N. Vorster, "The body as strategy of power in religious dis-course," *Neotestamentica* 31, no.2 (1997), 396.

2. Liberated and allowed to be

The second key research theme that emerged from the data, illustrated something of a sense of belonging and homecoming in alterative queer faith spaces. Participants indicated that they found solace in a space occupied by other queer bodies and in the process finding a comfortability in each other and the love of God. Black queer Christian bodies found the freedom to exist in a space, fully aware of their own bodies, worshipping together in faith, in spirit, and being themselves. An opportunity to belong is shared by Participant 2: "I was allowed to be myself, allowed to wear pants. They do not look at me, but my faith. I am no longer hindered to be in His presence. I rejoice. There is a spirit of togetherness, I belong where I am."[40]

Participants expressed a freedom to participate and belong, which is an important aspect of being within the church, noting that belonging within the church is "not solitary and individual but communal and engaged with others."[41] The data allowed us to reflect on the individual and collective nature of belonging – a realisation that is often overlooked when a unified space becomes segregated.

3. Unified, yet segregated

The third theme that emerged from the data was an uneasy discovery within queer churches that the reality that they tried to escape, started to pervade their own spaces of worship. The systems of heteropatriarchy have found its way into these queer spaces, creating hostile environments that were forcibly normalising queerness in line with the fixed binary understandings of gender and sexuality. The pervasive heteronormative systemic reality became visible in the instance of placing masculine bodies in positions of authority, enforcing strict gender binaries by using gender specific uniforms, and in the exclusive recognition of heteronormative relationships defined by hegemonic representations of the masculine and feminine.

A pastor (participant 3) within the queer church spoke to this gendered segregation when stating that the system of heteropatriarchy is often even more pervasive in queer spaces: "They have the mentality that we can do it better than heteros, they are forcing things. Uniforms are the

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[40] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 78.
[41] Susan Rakoczy, "Thomas Merton: The true self and the quest for justice," *HTS: Theological Studies* 72, no.4 (2016): 6 of 7.

problem. Uniforms are segregating people and force people to belong somewhere. Sexuality is more about the bedroom."[42] This statement reveals the way in which queer bodies have conformed to a hetero-normative structure of the church. It illustrates the creation of a segregated space, dominated by an imbalance of power and oppression where gender is expressed in a way that is life-denying for those who identify outside of these fixed binary notions informed by patriarchy. Queer churches have become fixated on a person's gender representation, rather than the spiritual needs of those who come to find healing.

We augmented our interview data with the appropriation of an exercise where research participants were asked to share a picture of themselves, showing how they would look when they go to church. The pervasiveness of fixed gender binaries became clear in the way that the participants of this study performed and identified themselves in relation to others within a fixed structure such as the church. We now briefly turn our attention to these images and the explanations offered by research participants as they reflected on their gender representation in the context of church.

In our first example,[43] we have an image of a transwoman, Participant 4, who is dressed in a way that reveals her position as *iDwala* (mother) within the queer church, which is how she identifies herself in relation to God and others. Her experience is that God transitions with her in the process of socially transitioning within the fixed binaries of gender. What we found most interesting in engaging with Participant 4, is how God's pronoun changes in relation to her perspectives of God. In the process of her transition, we find that her image of God is transitioning with her. God becomes what she needs: God becomes the Father, *she* becomes the Mother, and *they* become non-binary when the heart desires it. Moreover, we found that the

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[42]   Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 80.
[43]   Trans identifying participant, "iDwala" in the queer church, has consented to her picture and story being shared for academic and awareness raising purposes.

way she presents herself within the church becomes a reflection of this transition.[44] Here we see her wearing black and purple attire, which are the main colours of the church that she is a member of. Even though she does not go into detail in terms of explaining this outfit, the gap is filled by the following participant (Participant 5) when she explains her outfit and her position within the church. Both participants strongly identify and represent themselves as women in line with a stable binary construction of gender.

Participant 5 is a lesbian woman.[45] She explains: "The colour is black and purple, but you can wear black only. I dress like this because I am a mother within the church, as I told you, I am also married. Therefore, they call me a mother. I am a woman of prayer, and I am married."[46]

Both outfits represent a sense of pride in being a woman, defining their positionality within the church and providing a sense of affirmation in being recognised as a woman. Within their embodiment and identity, both women reflect a resistance to a patriarchal understanding of what it means to be a woman, and in the same breath resisting the "normalization of sexuality, moving out of the limits of heterosexuality."[47] However, the statement made by Participant 5 also illustrates how often the category of women is strongly associated with dominant gender roles such as being a wife to a husband and a mother to a child. Although both women embody positionalities that challenge or resist normative patriarchal understandings of womanhood, it is interesting to note how normative binary understandings of gender are used to reflect on positionality and how it informs gender representation.

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[44] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 93.
[45] She is a feminine identifying lesbian who demonstrates an interesting mix of femininity and masculinity within her demeaner. She has also consented to her picture and story being shared for academic and awareness raising purposes.
[46] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 94.
[47] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "On non-docility and indecent theologians: A response to the panel for Indecent Theology," *Feminist Theology* 11, no.2 (2003): 26.

It is clear from the engaged examples above that the queer church still subscribes to strict binary understandings of masculinity and femininity and that it informs gender positionality and representation. It is, however, noteworthy that uniform is central in the process of identity construction and affirmation within the church. The uniform seems to affirm a person's positionality and therefore validates their place within the church. A pastor from the queer church (Participant 6) affirmed this when he explained the importance and meaning of his church regalia.[48]

In this picture, Participant 6 wears a black suit and purple shirt[49] – colours symbolizing power and position within faith spaces as these are colours that are often associated with clergy and church leadership. The gay pastor who is married to a man and raises an 11-year-old biological son, draws on the traditional dress to affirm his power and position within the church. By drawing on the classic dress that signifies church leadership, he disrupts the heteronormative instance that clergy must be either celibate or married to a woman to be ordained and sanctioned for ministry. Through his presence and gender expression, he shows society that there is a need to queer heteropatriarchal understandings of the church to allow others to find "liberation from cultural and religious oppression and discrimination."[50] We begin to understand that to become a Christian and to be within the presence of God, do not mean to lose yourself, but to affirm yourself in his presence and his image[51] – a realisation that was appreciated by the next participant.

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[48]   Sibisi, "Queering the Queer", 94.
[49]   This is participant 6 that self-identifies as a gay minister within the church. He is married to a man and has shared that he has a biological son. He has also consented to his picture and story being shared for academic and awareness raising purposes.
[50]   Mkasi, "A threat to Zulu patriarchy," 16.
[51]   Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 95.

Participant 7 shared this image as a transman who expresses his identity by wearing masculine clothing,[52] which best shows his positionality in relation to others. In this picture, he wears the uniform of the church that he belongs to. While simultaneously subscribing to the masculine norms as prescribed by heteropatriarchy, the outfit also challenges what society believes to be the accepted gender performativity for a female born body by the "erasing or deconstructing of boundaries, particularly with respect to the essentialist or fixed binary categories of sexuality and gender."[53] Through this, he helps us in understanding that gender is performed, and it is not fixed, but fluid: "Gender and masculinity are socially constructed – masculinity is a gender and not a natural attribute."[54] This implies that gender and masculinity can be defined by the self for the self, that it is fluid and can change over time, which is something that gives Participant 8 affirmation within the church as a black butch lesbian body within the queer church.

In this picture, Participant 8 portrays a female masculinity,[55] which is viewed as the "production of masculine subjectivities by biologically female individuals."[56] The image represents a rejection of normalised understandings of female performativity as defined by traditional ideas of gen-

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[52]   Participant 7 self-identifies as a transgender man who appreciates the role of patriarchy within the church. This participant also consented to his picture and story being used for academic and awareness raising purposes.

[53]   Cheng, *Radical love*, 8.

[54]   Msibi, "The lies we have been told," 71.

[55]   Participant 8 self-identifies as a butch lesbian and a preacher within the church. This participant also consented to her story being shared for academic and awareness raising purposes.

[56]   Tommaso M. Milani, "Querying the queer from Africa: Precarious bodies – precarious gender," *Agenda* 28, no.4 (2014): 80.

der. In the picture, Participant 8 is holding a Bible that is symbolic of her agency as a black queer Christian person to draw on the resources of faith to inform the process of sense making and meaning making.

All these images reveal the way in which gender is performed and how deeply this is influenced by pervasive heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality. Although all the queer bodies engaged during the data collection and analysis for this study, in fixed constructions of binary gender representation, they also recreated and reinforced these fixed and stable categories in their own gender expression. The representations revealed something of the desire to belong and to become, but also how this desire can reinscribe the categories that we try to dismantle or escape from. In the process of gender representation, queer bodies could paradoxically trouble fixed binary constructions of gender and simultaneously reinscribe the binary notions of gender as dictated by heteropatriarchy.

When Things get Complicated

In the process of collecting data and making visible the narratives of those who have often been banished to the margins of Christian faith, we took note of some of the hindrances or complexities in engaging black queer Christian bodies. We engaged in these reflections as part of our ongoing process of knowledge production and meaning making when engaging black queer Christian bodies in African faith landscapes.

The first challenge that we identified was that of language. Language is a powerful tool that affirms and oppresses, and the oppression became poignant in our research when names used to describe queer people were used in a negative sense, or when the words used to make sense and meaning were not accessible in one's own indigenous language. This form of oppression and misrecognition was articulated by those participants who expressed that they struggled to positively affirm themselves as queer individuals in the isiZulu language in their process of identity construction and navigation. As a result, participants often switched to English to find a more comfortable term to address the topic of gender, sexuality, and queerness. This was a troubling reality, revealing how "the relationship between language and gender has largely reflected how linguistic practices, among other kinds of practices, are

used in the construction of social identities relating to issues of masculinity and femininity."[57]

We started this contribution by reflection on the derogatory nature of the term *izitabane* that is often employed in local communities to other, shame, and violate queer people. In line with the impulse of the Queer Theory to radically reclaim al that is derogatory, we argue for the *stabanisation* of terminology. Rather than remaining within a derogatory discourse, we propose a reclaiming of the term *izitabane* to affirm the visibility of queer bodies within their own context, so that they no longer feel the need to use another language to feel comfortable in such conversations.[58]

The second issue that we identified is that of power. All dimensions of the process and levels of engagement, analysis, and interpretation were steeped in complex power dynamics. Besides navigating the power dynamics between researcher and research subjects, and researcher and supervisor as we navigated these different roles, we also became aware of other less obvious power dynamics in the data collection phase. Although there are more examples to highlight the complexity, we limit ourselves to two examples here.

First, in the data collection process, one of the participants indicated that they needed a person of authority to give them permission to tell their story, indirectly reflecting the power dynamics within the church, opening our eyes to the "contrasts between understanding the relationship between 'power over' (power obtained by one over the other) and 'power to' (power efficacy, or life-giving to the other)."[59] Our second observation links to an incident where a participant felt the need to apologise to the religious leader present before sharing something that could seem to be negative about the church, revealing the fact that calling out patriarchy in the presence of authority will always be a difficult task. It became apparent that "one of the difficulties of studying power is that it is not one thing to be observed," which also raises awareness of the complexity of power.[60] The complex and multi-layered reality of power within social

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[57] Michael Williams, "Cultural identity, language identity, gender identity," *English Academy Review* (2011): 3.

[58] Davids *et al.*, "Stabanisation", 9.

[59] Roy Kearsley, *Church, community, and power* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 10.

[60] Martyn Percy, *Power and the Church: Ecclesiology in an Age of Transition* (London: Cassell, 1998), 9.

spaces informs our commitment to continued contextual and academic work, aimed at a troubling dominant power discourse and critical reflections on the systems of oppression and exclusion.

Third, as stated at the outset of this contribution, we started our critical reflection from the centrality of the body as a sight of meaning making and knowledge production through which validation, belonging, and exclusion is experienced. We understand the body to be the starting point for all theological reflection as we note that "the body is symbolic in human culture, it is the means by which the person and the community express themselves."[61] Through these engagements, we began to understand "what it means to be human in a way that is no longer defined by a dominant culture," but at the same time understanding the vulnerability of a longing for affirmation and confirmation of identity and belonging from cultural spaces.[62] We again realised that "it is hard to talk about African queer bodies without talking about culture, spirituality, and religion as they form part of who we are."[63] These notions and institutions are foundational to African identity, which then becomes the site of great disruption for the individual and the community when having to engage or navigate bodies that do not conform to the normative.

We remain committed to the creation of open theological spaces that address the failure of the church to understand that "we are body-selves that are gendered biologically and sexually, who have varying sexual orientations, who need intimacy, who have conflicted feelings about what it means to be bodied."[64]

There is a clear gap between theological discourses leaning towards inclusion and the experiences of queer bodies within the church. This also rings true for black queer Christian bodies in queer spaces of worship. The pervasive power of heteropatriarchy within the church in the African landscape becomes apparent in "prescribing roles, values, expectations, and responsibilities – dictating – socially appropriate ways of feeling, thinking, and doing."[65] These normative notions "constitute an abuse of power against those who are perceived as deviant, weaker, or

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[61] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing body theology*, 10.
[62] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing body theology*, 22.
[63] Sithole, "An exploration of religio-cultural concepts of transgender," 18.
[64] James B. Nelson, *Body theology* (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press, 1992), 45.
[65] Judge, "In the garden of 'good,'" 11.

socially unnormalized."[66] In this context, it seems imperative to "call out processes that are informed by heteropatriarchy within these spaces, contributing to the exclusion of some bodies within the church when realized."[67] We need to scrutinise "the continued marginalization of, and the attack on those whose sexualities do not conform," even when the church goes against what we understand to be the purpose of a queer space.[68] We cannot fully "experience a queer environment while drawing on the heteronormative understanding of relationships, as well as the patriarchal understanding of hierarchal rule within the church."[69]

Imagining the Potential of Queer

Queer bodies are constantly being placed at the centre of theological discussion and church conversations and are predominantly conceptualised as a disruption of the normative, a sin, and as an abomination. Queer people are, however, very seldom agents within these discussions, but rather considered to be a topic of discussion or an uncomfortable point on the agenda of a church meeting. Although there is a growing discourse developing in the African faith landscape, leaning towards the inclusion and affirmation of queer lives and queer experiences, the overwhelming nature of the conversation remains life denying in nature and contributes to the exclusion of queer individuals and at its most extreme, to violence. In response to these experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, we note the migration of black queer Christian bodies to alternative spaces of worship where the possibility of homecoming, care, and recognition exit exists.

Our contribution, however, highlights that it is not a simple matter of finding an alternative space to cure all oppressions because even in these alternative queer spaces we find the pervasive systemic results of heteropatriarchy.

Queer Theory and Queer Theology enable us to trouble the normative nature of heteropatriarchy by centring the experiences of queer people in the African landscape, by not asking what bodies should do, but rather

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[66] Selina Palm, "Reimagining the human: The role of the churches in building a liberatory human rights culture in South Africa today" (PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016), 58.
[67] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 112; Palm, "Reimagining the human," 235.
[68] Judge, "In the garden of 'good,'" 11.
[69] Sibisi, "Queering the Queer," 113.

using what bodies are doing as the starting point for theological engagement. As argued elsewhere in an initial collective discussion document, we outlined the contours and the central ideological strands offered by the *Izitabane zingabantu Ubuntu* theology.[70] This Queer Theology for an African context "calls for an embodied reclaiming of all that is life-affirming within faith landscapes, reimagining community and the engagement with the sources of faith and remembering of communal sacramental identity."[71] We believe that the liberation for black queer Christian bodies lie in the radical reclaiming and brave imagining of what it truly means to be queer in Africa.

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[70] Davids *et al.*, "Stabanisation."
[71] Davids *et al.*, "Stabanisation," 9.

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