AJGR

African Journal of Gender and Religion

Volume 25. No. 1   July 2019

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF GENDER AND RELIGION

Publication Information

Volume 25 No.1 July 2019

ISSN: 1025-5648

Published semi-annually, in July and December, by:

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Since 2004, the Journal has published research papers, which are relevant to gender, religion, and theology in Africa. The editorial committee considers for publication submissions of a scholarly standard from any of the social science and theological disciplines or related fields of inquiry, which provide useful perspectives at the intersections of gender, religion, and theology in Africa. Particular areas of interest include the gendered analysis of religion; theology and the study of religion; innovations in contextual theological education; theological and ethical reflection on social transformation; the significance of new religious movements and African-initiated forms of religion; the role of women in religion and society; interfaith dialogue; peace-making and reconciliation; normative and non-normative sexualities, and queer politics.

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Written submissions to the *African Journal of Gender and Religion* may take the form of researched scholarly articles or essays. Book reviews, brief responses to articles, conference reports and summaries of research projects are also welcome. Articles submitted for the section called "praxis" must show evidence of how sound theoretical reflections are brought to bear on practical action. Within this section on "praxis" we will publish essays that are not considered "mainstream academic" but nonetheless point to theories of gender justice in action. Submissions are evaluated through an editorial committee screening process. Further, the articles are also sent to a minimum of two competent scholars working in a similar field of interest for peer-review. Prospective contributors of scholarly articles should send a typed copy of their article via e-mail to the submissions editor at submissions@ajgr.org. All submissions must strictly follow the guidelines set out in the *AJGR Style Sheet*. Any article that does not conform to the *Style Sheet* will be returned and will not be further considered until the style requirements are adhered to. Published contributors will receive one complimentary copy of the issue in which their work is published. Opinions expressed by contributors are solely their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial committee or the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape.

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Volume 25 No. 1 July 2019

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Can Religious Women Choose? Holding the Tension between Complicity and Agency

Elisabet le Roux[1]

[1]SHORT BIO
Dr Elisabet le Roux is Research Director of the interdisciplinary *Unit for Religion and Development Research* at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her empirical research is internationally done with and for governments, global faith-based organisations, and development networks and organisations. Over the last ten years she has secured funding and delivered research projects across 21 countries on four continents. The bulk of her work is within the Global South and in conflict-affected settings, and reflects on religion, religious leaders, and religious communities as role-players within the international development arena. Dr le Roux has a particular interest in religion and various forms of social violence, especially gender-based violence, and her recent interfaith work has included Hindu, Islamic, and Christian settings.

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ABSTRACT

Women are oppressed and made to suffer violence by a patriarchal system that values them less than men. Yet, at times they are complicit in this system. Those advocating for gender equality and non-violence tend to interpret this based on a simplistic patriarchal resistance/compliance model. This is especially the case with the religious woman, whose devotion to a religion that decrees her subjugation is challenging to especially feminists.

The article argues that, in order to recognise the agency of religious women, a splitting of the feminist project is needed: the analytical project, that strives to understand actions from the perspective of the doer, should be separated from the political project, which strives to bring change for the betterment of women. Yet, the analytical and the political are not a binary and exist in constant tension. Second, the analytical project is a dual one, where the positioning and worldview of the outsider is also interrogated. A case study from Zambia is used to illustrate the importance – for researchers and practitioners – of separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project when engaging with religious women and their role in gender inequality and violence.

This essay challenges feminist researchers and practitioners on two fronts: to constantly grapple with the tension between the (dual) analytical and political, and to take religion seriously when striving to understand compliance. Religious women's actions can possibly be a profound act of agency but can be misinterpreted if only analysed from the perspective of patriarchal resistance or compliance. This challenge reflects the constant tension that is the reality of feminist work with and on religion and gender inequality and violence.

KEYWORDS
religion; religious women; feminism; complicity; resistance; agency

Introduction

At a conference dinner, chatting with my table of staunch feminists, we were unpacking the high rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in South Africa. Referring to fieldwork I had conducted a few years before, I raised the issue of female perpetration of violence at household level, recalling certain situations where women had disclosed the violence they had perpetrated against their own daughters. It was met by an icy "that is impossible" response from one of the table's guests: "Women cannot perpetrate violence."

To this day I am not sure whether she meant that it is physically impossible for women to commit a violent act – surely not? Did she mean that women cannot be named as perpetrators of violence or that mothers cannot hurt their daughters? She never explained. Yet, since then, I have repeatedly found similar reactions when discussing women's complicity in patriarchy and VAWG. Women's agency – which includes their choice to support systems and structures that perpetuate gender inequality and violence – is constantly dismissed when faced with the reality of women opposing empowerment programming or equal rights. I feel this knee-jerk reaction within myself, too. The narrative of women as only victims is a strong one.

In this article I explore the issue of women's complicity in the patriarchal systems and beliefs that subjugate them. I argue that we limit our ability to respond to women's oppression by refusing to acknowledge their participation in gender inequality and violence-supporting attitudes and practices. Yet, automatically labelling all such attitudes and practices as either complicity or resistance, means that we often do not recognise women's agency. By focusing on *religious* women's complicity and agency, I show how separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project is needed in order to understand religious women's actions and agency, and second, to formulate transformative endeavours that are appropriate and respectful. Furthermore, the analytical project should have a dual nature, requiring constant critical engagement with the framing and worldviews of all parties involved. I draw on research conducted in Zambia as a case study to illustrate the value of intentionally including this separation in the design of research projects, but also in the design of intervention programming.

This article is written by a researcher working on religion and violence within the international development arena and aims to help bridge the ongoing gap between theory and praxis, both in its framing and through the case study included. The focus is on the religious woman, as she is a challenge to especially feminism, in as far as she is seen as willingly upholding a religion that ensures her continuous subjugation.[1] The article is not merely a contribution to the existing theoretical discussion of women's complicity, but aims to also inform how religious women's

[1] Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no.2 (2001): 202-36.

complicity is understood and responded to within practical interventions that aim to empower women and counter gender inequality and VAWG.

In discussing the Islamic veil, anthropologist Saba Mahmood wonders why "that to ask a different set of questions about this practice is to lay oneself open to the charge that one is indifferent to women's oppression."[2] In writing this essay, I am laying myself open to this charge. Thus, I wish to make it clear that it is not my intention to dismiss the comprehensiveness of women's oppressions. On the contrary, I believe that a better understanding of the comprehensiveness of women's agency will help those that seek to understand and transform women's lives for the better to enter into an encounter that is respectful and valuing of the worldviews and perspectives of both parties. I believe this is urgently needed in order to better respond to a world where many women are subjugated and remain victims of violence.[3]

Below, I first unpack women's complicity, identifying the pitfalls of blindly upholding a simplistic binary of male/perpetrator versus female/victim, after which I discuss the reasons that have commonly been offered for the existence of women's complicity. In the next section I focus the discussion specifically on religious women, looking at how their agency has often been ignored or misinterpreted, and call for a separation between the analytical and political dimensions of feminism as a way to allow for the recognition of agency. Thereafter, I use a case study from Zambia to illustrate how this separation can be embodied both in research and in intervention practice. I conclude with a brief discussion of what this means for our engagement with religious women.

Understanding Complicity

Feminism, while taking on various strands, emphasises that systematic gender inequalities exist within all societies. It takes on different forms depending on the economic structure and social organisation of the particular society and culture.[4] Gender inequality is a central cause of the

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2 Saba Mahmood, *The politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 195.

3 This essay was written while being a member of the Religion & Violence Seminar at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, USA. The author is thankful for the input and feedback on earlier drafts of this article from her colleagues at CTI as well as Princeton University's School of Religion.

4 Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

violence that many women experience. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognises this framing, stating that violence against women is "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women."[5] Patriarchy, as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women,"[6] is both a result and a cause of gender inequality and takes on various forms, depending on locale, meaning that male domination looks differently within different societies at different times.[7] While radical feminists have used the term to describe almost any form of male domination, socialist feminists have focused on the relationship between patriarchy and class under capitalism. Arguably, the concept is most useful when it helps to unveil culturally and historically distinct arrangements between genders.[8] While the concept of patriarchy has been heavily criticised, it remains useful, for it keeps the focus on social contexts, rather than on individual men.[9]

While emphasising the power imbalance between men and women is crucial, especially when trying to understand VAWG, it unfortunately can lead to a simplistic binary where women are seen only as helpless victims and men only as all-powerful perpetrators.[10] Instead of a nuanced engagement with the dynamic interaction between male and female, the archetypal weak, helpless woman is called upon to ensure emotional and financial investment in an effort to empower women. By reifying gender binaries, men are only portrayed as perpetrators, and work with men and boys called for as part of a transformation of patriarchy "from within" approach. In this understanding, achieving gender equality and ending VAWG become a process that requires only men to change. However, a simplistic binary of male perpetrator versus female victim does not explain the full range of responses to VAWG and

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[5] UN General Assembly, "United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women," *United Nations*, Original publication 20 December 1993, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm

[6] Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 20.

[7] Gwen Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence against Women: Resurrecting 'patriarchy' as a theoretical tool," *Violence against Women* 15, no.5 (2009): 553-73.

[8] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 274-5.

[9] Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 564.

[10] Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 565.

patriarchal dominance *from women*, and lessens one's ability to respond to it. What about the counter-intuitive situations, such as women countering attempts to advance women's rights, or women blaming and shaming VAWG survivors? A number of studies have noted how women directly or indirectly support systems and practices that subjugate them or oppose efforts to end such systems and practices. For example, in a study of female genital mutilation and cutting in Mauritania, 70% of female respondents wanted the practice to continue;[11] the end line results of a VAWG intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo showed that 62% of the women still felt that physical intimate partner violence could be justified;[12] and in a recent baseline study conducted in local faith communities in Liberia, female congregants' patriarchal and violent-supportive attitudes were statistically significantly higher than male congregants'.[13]

Indian economist Amartya Sen has stated in his discussion of utilitarianism that "the most blatant forms of inequalities and exploitation survive in the world through making allies out of the deprived and the exploited."[14] This could have been written in a feminist manifesto on global gender inequality. It is not only men who ensure the continuous existence and domination of the patriarchal system. Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter have coined the term "for*men*ism" to explain the phenomenon whereby women support and perpetuate patriarchy: "For*men*ism, like masculinism, subscribes to a belief in the inherent superiority of men over women…but unlike masculinism, it is not an ideology developed and sustained by men, but constructed, endorsed, and sustained by women."[15]

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[11] Nacerdine Ouldzeidoune, Joseph Keating, Jane Bertrandm, and Janet Rice, "A Descrip-tion of Female Genital Mutilation and Force-Feeding Practices in Mauritania: Implications for the Protection of Child Rights and Health," *PLoS ONE* 8, no.4 (2013): 1-9.

[12] Selina Palm, Elisabet le Roux, Elena Bezzolato, Prabu Deepan, Julienne Corboz, Uwezo Lele, Veena O'Sullivan, and Rachel Jewkes, *Rethinking Relationships: Moving from Violence to Equality. What works to prevent violence against women and girls in the DRC* (Londen: Tearfund, 2019).

[13] Elisabet le Roux and Julienne Corboz, *Baseline Report: Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls* (New York: Episcopal Relief & Development, 2019), 24.

[14] Amartya K. Sen, *Resources, values and development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 308-9.

[15] Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, "Living It Out. Liberated Through Submission? The Worthy Woman's Conference as a Case Study of Formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2010): 141-51.

Women have been regarded as supporting or even encouraging their subjugation by the patriarchal system, and this compliance has been explained in different ways. First, compliant women are seen as without the freedom to oppose male dominance.[16] The dominance of the patriarchal system is so total and all-encompassing that women have no opportunity or power to resist it, are forced to conform, and unable to embrace efforts that will ensure them more freedom and rights. A woman with any form of power would have resisted.

Second, women who act in such a way can be regarded as suffering from false consciousness: while they think they are making their own choices for their own benefit, they are actually bowing to the patriarchal script. Using Steven Lukes' third dimension of power, this enactment of power is insidious: the power of A (men/patriarchy) over B (women) is such that A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests, but without any conflict arising.[17] Thus, women are not opposing their subjugation, as they are not even aware of it. The term "false consciousness" is usually not used any more, having fallen out of favour especially in the light of postcolonial feminism's efforts to emphasise the importance of local and contextual analysis and interpretation. Nevertheless, in various guises, women's continued compliance with oppression, or their resistance to "development" or "empowerment," is understood as being a result of them being unaware of their own best interests.

Third, in a process sometimes called "patriarchal bargaining,"[18] women are regarded as being aware of their subjugation and choosing to go along with it in return for the benefits that they can attain from doing so. The degree of their compliance depends on the nature of the patriarchal oppresssion they are subjected to. Explaining women's responses to what she calls classic patriarchy, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that some women support their submissiveness and resist efforts to change their circumstances, as they are protected and have power within the existing system:

> The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves.[19]

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16 Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 2.

17 Steven Lukes, *Power: A radical view* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

18 Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 274-90.

19 Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 279.

In other words, while they may be subjugated to men, many women do carve out pockets of power for themselves. They are then often unwilling to risk transformation of a system where they do have power of however limited a nature, in return for an uncertain future: "[W]omen often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives."[20]

Fourth, women's compliance can be understood as limited or even as faked. In this understanding, the subjugated is said to develop clever strategies through which they counter the dominant order; they create mechanisms that protect them, even if only a little.[21] James Scott, in his study of domination and resistance, goes so far as to argue that compliance is actually a form of resistance: "[T]he victims of domination are to be seen as tactical and strategic actors, who dissemble in order to survive."[22]

In many settings one or more of these explanations of women's complicity could be accurate. However, I suggest that to understand all of women's complicity in terms of these four explanations may deny the full potential and actuality of many women's agency. With these four explanations, all women's actions are interpreted only in terms of how it is formed by or responds to patriarchy. If they go along with it, then it is forced compliance, as they have no other/better choice; if they do not comply, it is because they are resisting patriarchal dominance. There is little room for interpreting their actions and choices outside resistance or non-resistance to patriarchy; and agency is only acknowledged if what is enacted resists patriarchy.

Engaging Religious Women: Splitting the Analytical from the Political

Religious women's complicity in patriarchal religions is often explained in one or more of three ways. First, it is said that, while religious women may still be restricted by religion, religion simultaneously frees them from the broader structural forces and limitations placed on them by patriarchal family structures and competitive labour markets.[23] As a

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[20] Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 282.

[21] Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 556.

[22] Scott, in Lukes, *Power*, 124.

[23] Orit Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency," *Gender and Society* 22, no.4 (2008): 411.

"lesser of evils" they then agree to abide by religious edicts even though it restricts them, for it shields and protects them too. The second explanation argues that women actively strategise around and appropriate religion for extra-religious ends. In other words, being religious is strategically used so as to circumvent the other challenges they face.[24] Last, religious women's compliance with restrictive religious orders have been explained by demonstrating that they do not actually comply. They adapt, subvert, or resist official dogma through non-compliance, partial compliance, or personal interpretations.[25]

Religious women's actions are therefore explained in terms of how they comply or resist patriarchy, and how religion serves them (non-religiously) in doing so. However, there appears to be little attempt to understand what women's actions would mean if they are religious because of religion and not for any other purpose. How would you understand their actions if their religion and the way they understand it is used to frame the interpretation of their actions? How would you understand religious women's behaviour if a patriarchal resistance/compliance binary is not the default frame of analysis? Some of the strongest calls for a wider understanding of agency has come from scholars studying religious women, such as Saba Mahmood, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Orit Avishai.

Mahmood has been a key figure in criticising a narrow understanding of religious women's agency. She argues that you have to allow for modalities of agency that are not focused on achieving liberty from existing systems, for agency is not synonymous with resistance. Mahmood uses the Islamic practice of veiling and the pietist movement amongst Egyptian women to provide a thick description of how and why current, liberal thought, especially as captured in its understanding of agency, is too limited. This, she argues, is especially so in the case of most feminist analyses with its focus on identifying the moments and modalities of resistance to domination. Agency is then seen (only) as the ability to achieve your own interests despite the pressure of custom, tradition, religion, or any other obstacles.[26] This is a result of feminism's dual agenda: it is both a mode of analysis (diagnosing women's status) and a political agenda (prescribing what needs to be done to bring

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[24] Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world," 411.
[25] Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world," 411.
[26] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 8.

change), and unfortunately these two are often collapsed. In other words, analysis is done with the feminist political agenda dominating and all acts interpreted in the light of this. What is needed, however, is to be contextually sensitive and relevant, analysing based on what is seen and experienced by those in the situation. This infers the need for a different approach to agency:

> [I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity...In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.[27]

Separating the analytical from the political allows both researchers and practitioners to engage with a community in a respectful way. The analytical process is the process of understanding the contexts, the problems, and its drivers. This process is typically associated with research. The political process is the process of intervening to bring change. Whereas both processes involve action and engagement, the analytical process aims to understand women's current context and realities from these women's perspectives, whereas the political process aims to bring change in line with a feminist agenda. Of course, the two processes should not be viewed as a binary. They exist in constant tension and can arguably never be completely separated. The Zambian case study discussed in the next section showcases this tension and how it can be managed.

Mahmood analyses the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo with a separation of the analytical and the political, leading her to understand their actions not primarily as submission to patriarchy, but as a profound act of choice-making. Viewed through the eyes of these religious women, the act of wearing a veil is a process of acquiring piety and can be understood as an act of agency. Looking at their actions only through the lenses of patriarchal compliance or resistance would miss why these women do what they are doing. In other words, *being* religious is rather a process of *doing* religion, through which each individual woman show-cases agency. Compliance and agency are not polar opposites, but

[27] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 14-5 (original emphasis).

rather a false dichotomy that “reflects the intellectual biases of students of religion rather than the realities of religious subjects.”[28]

This approach could be criticised for leading to culturally relativist thinking that prohibits any opposition to women’s subjugation and VAWG. I would, however, argue that broadening one’s understanding of women’s agency is actually crucial for sustained transformation, by allowing for the possibility of a fuller understanding of what drives women’s decision-making and positioning, and, as a result, the development of more appropriate and effective avenues of intervention.

Postcolonial and decolonising strands in various fields, including theology, sociology, and international development, have been particularly vocal in condemning the outsider’s (usually Western) dominance of discourse and frames of interpretation. The same is true of feminism, where colonial feminism has shown how the social and political transformation of women’s lives need to be formulated and embodied in local and contingent ways.[29] To allow for the possibility that action can be driven by something other than resistance or compliance to patriarchy is to invite frames of interpretation that look at a woman’s actions not only in terms of compliance or resistance to patriarchy, but in terms of the frames that she herself allows. This is part of the process of recognising the insights and expertise of/from the local context. It should be noted that this is not simply a call for intersectionality. Intersectionality is a reminder of the need to account for the various intersecting forms of oppression that women are subjected to. What is argued here, however, is something else: to not only analyse women’s actions in terms of their oppression and resistance to oppression, but to consciously strive to identify the actual frames of reference that drive many women’s actions, and to use those in the initial process of analysis. Consider, for example, a mother who allows her nine-year-old daughter to marry a forty-year-old man, based on the religious belief that such an early marriage will ensure the salvation of the parents of the young girl. Intervention efforts that aim to end the practice by promoting girl child education and women’s rights will fail to address the key driver of this mother’s decision, namely her religious convictions. The religious framing of the action needs to be taken seriously – and attempts to transform the practice will have to engage religiously.

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[28] Avishai, “‘Doing religion’ in a secular world,” 429.
[29] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 36.

Of course, broadening an understanding of women's agency does not negate the fact that some women's support for the patriarchal system is due to patriarchal bargaining or similar modes of compliance/resistance to patriarchy. Recognising that women's agency can be more than patriarchal compliance or resistance does not mean that it cannot also be this. Broadening your understanding of agency avoids, however, an *a priori* assumption of the framing of compliance and resistance and allows for religion to be taken seriously within this process.

Furthermore, and importantly, broadening your understanding of women's agency does not negate efforts to also engage for change. Understanding that child marriage is happening because of the parents' hopes for salvation, does not mean that you cannot critique or even condemn this belief. On the contrary, it offers a more honest, transparent point of engagement from which to do so. By separating the analytical project (i.e. understanding the drivers of complicity) from the political project (i.e. ending complicity), *à la* Mahmood, you allow for research that is more respectful and reflective of local women and their lives, and enables intervention practices that can speak into it and bring change. With such an approach, "analysis [becomes] a mode of conversation, rather than mastery [that] can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making others' lifeworlds extinct or provisional."[30] Splitting the process (analysis, then political engagement) allows a dialectical tension to exist between respecting the local (i.e. current religious beliefs that inform actual women's agency), whilst having a vision for a safer future. Both research and intervention practices can benefit greatly from a more careful distinction between these two tasks.

A Zambian Case Study

At the outset I stated that this article will engage with the need to bridge the ongoing gap between theory and praxis on the issue of religious women's complicity and agency. Therefore, a recent research project under my direction is offered here as a case study to practically illustrate the importance of separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project when engaging with religious women. As such, the case study does not focus on the findings of the research project, but rather on the process used in an attempt to concretely separate the

[30] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 198.

analytical from the political for both the researchers and the practitioners involved in the project.

I was approached by Episcopal Relief & Development,[31] Speak *One Voice*,[32] and the Zambian Anglican Church, to assist in doing research within the Zambian Anglican Mothers' Union. Feminist activists from within both the Zambian Anglican Church and Mothers' Union (MU) had identified practices and beliefs within the MU that they felt promoted violence against women and children. However, while they could identify some of these harmful practices and beliefs, they felt that they did not understand why it was happening, or why and how the MU supports or facilitates it, and therefore how to respond to it in an adequate and sensitive way. There was a need for research as an analytical exercise that could help them to clearly understand what is going on, so that they could then design intervention programming to respond to it. For this group of feminist insiders, inviting me to do research was an exercise of separating the analytical from the political. All of them had ideas based on their feminist agendas of what is going on and what should be done, but they believed their intervention practices might be inappropriate and fail if they did not respond to why and how the MU operates the way it does.

As a result, my team entered as researchers studying how and why members of the Anglican MU in Zambia contribute to and/or challenge violence against women and children. However, we were outsiders, with our own personal feminist agendas and worldviews influenced by the West. We realised that this would impact the way in which we conducted and interpreted the data we collected – our feminist political agenda would influence the analytical process of studying this religious women's organisation.

We therefore designed a highly participatory research project, where the MU's contribution to and challenging of violence against women (VAW) and children (VAC) would be identified and analysed by women from

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31 Episcopal Relief & Development is an international relief and development agency affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

32 *One Voice* was started by senior African women leaders in the Anglican Church who recognised how violence against women and children was impacting not only individuals, but families and communities. The movement aims to actively engage both the Anglican Church hierarchy and women at grassroots level, in ending violence against women and children.

within the Zambian Anglican Church and MU. The key method used was Photovoice, a community-based participatory research method. Over a period of six months, trained research assistants (all members of the MU) took photos (on camera phones), covering themes such as power, gender roles, and social norms. We adapted Photovoice to link with new mobile technologies, which allowed rural women and women who only speak local languages to not only be included as participants, but as research assistants, sharing their photos, accompanied by oral voice notes, in-time with the research team. Moreover, the research assistants did not only function as data collectors by taking photos; in their voice notes they were also interpreting the photos, explaining why they took it and what it meant. This process was continued at end line, when all the research assistants were part of a two-and-a-half-day intensive process of analysing their photos themselves.

For me as researcher, the choice of research methodology as well as the adaptations made to the methodology were all part of an intentional process of separating the analytical from the political. MU members' own understanding of its practices and beliefs had to be captured. Therefore, they had to be included not only in the data collection, but very centrally in the analysis of the data. Adapting Photovoice so that illiterate and local language speakers could serve as research assistants, was another way of separating the analytical from the political, as it ensured that rural women could also be research assistants. This meant that a variety of MU-insider worldviews and interpretations were part of the data collection and analysis process.

One example is offered here of how this split allowed for the recognition of religious women's agency. The Photovoice research assistants took a number of pictures of the MU teaching its members how to cook different kinds of food. My team, seeing these pictures, understood it as showcasing how the MU enforces rigid and limiting gender roles. However, the voice notes accompanying the photos, as well as the end line analysis discussions, showed how many MU members actually experienced joining these sessions as acts of agency and empowerment. They were getting out of their houses, choosing to learn how to cook meals from other cultures and countries, stepping out of the restrictions of only preparing "cultural" food. These sessions were joyful activities, creating community and cohesion amongst members. Yet, it is important to realise that the research assistants also identified spaces and acts of complicity. For example, by taking pictures of the MU

uniform, they explained that certain parts of the uniform are understood as symbolically representing the importance of keeping the secrets of one's household. Women who are abused by their husbands thus believe that they should keep quiet about it, so as to protect the sanctity and stability of the marital relationship. Outsider researchers would never have known the symbolic meaning of the uniform in this particular Zambian context.

This example illustrates how the research (analytical) process benefited from engaging religious women not only as research subjects or data collectors, but as co-researchers, as well as how the intervention (political) process benefited from understanding what certain practices meant *before* deciding if and how to engage and transform it.

The process in Zambia showcases how both researchers and practitioners benefited from not unreservedly forcing their political agenda onto the communities they engaged with. The practitioners benefited by being able to design their intervention programming based on a thorough and in-depth understanding of the cultural and religious setting, the MU practices and beliefs, and MU members' experiences and interpretations of events. Yet, while the produced research report helped to show them what to respond to and what is driving it, it did not detract from their political agenda of wanting to end VAW and VAC by promoting gender equality and equity within the church and the broader community. On the contrary, it enabled them more to do so, by allowing them to develop tailored and responsive intervention programming. It also paved the way for a much more responsive and welcoming reception from the MU as an institution, as the MU recognised that their interpretations and perceptions were taken seriously during the analytical process.

As researcher, I also benefited from separating the analytical from the political, although it was at times challenging to do so. I had to be very intentional. It was more than only using participatory methodologies. I had to adapt methodologies to ensure that various voices could be included (and not only voices with the same political agenda as mine) and to ensure the local analysis of the data. Furthermore, it was challenging to not automatically interpret data with a feminist political lens. It constantly required what I call a dual analytical project, where I had to also critically engage with my own framing and worldviews. Arguably, the analytical project is inherently a dual project, requiring the development of understanding of both the other's worldview and framing,

as well as your own. Intentionality is required: you must do the difficult work of investigating your own positioning and biases. Yet, you cannot completely divorce yourself from your worldview. There was therefore a constant tension between the political and analytical projects. I tried to manage this tension through a constant reflexive process, where the research team was consistently reflecting on whether our interpretation of the data authentically reflected our discussions with the research assistants. This is in line with what Bonnie Honig argues when emphasising the importance of holding up your own practices to the same critical scrutiny as you do with others' practices. She challenges fellow Western feminists, bent on reforming other cultures: "For the sake of a future solidarity of women as feminists, the question of what constitutes gender (in)-equality must be kept disturbingly open to perpetual reinterrogation."[33]

Conclusion

Many women are oppressed and made to suffer violence by a patriarchal system that values them less than men. Yet, at times they are also complicit in this system by supporting beliefs and practices that subjugate them, by condoning VAWG and even by perpetrating violence themselves. Those advocating for gender equality and the empowerment of women often tend to interpret these counter-intuitive practices based on a simplistic patriarchal resistance/compliance model. A woman's agency is only recognised in relation to resistance or compliance to patriarchy: she has agency if she resists, and she does not if she complies. This is especially the case with religious women, whose devotion to a religion that decrees her subjugation is often challenging to feminists fighting for gender equality.

Yet, this article has argued that what is needed is an analytical project that takes religion seriously. Religious women's actions should not automatically be interpreted only in terms of patriarchal resistance or compliance; their religious meaning-making acts should be taken into account. Their actions can be a profound act of agency, but it can be missed and misinterpreted if it is only analysed from the perspective of patriarchal resistance or compliance.

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[33] Bonnie Honig, "My culture made me do it," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 40.

I have argued, in line with Mahmood, that a splitting of the feminist project is needed: the analytical project that strives to understand actions from the perspective of the doer, is separated from the political project that strives to bring change for the betterment of women. Both feminist research with religious women and feminist practitioners engaging with religious women will greatly benefit from more intentionally separating the analytical from the political. By doing this, we do not automatically "explain away" counter-intuitive cases where women enforce the patriarchal system or condone VAWG. We grapple with the complexity of it, by taking seriously the religious worldviews that might be driving these actions. We are then also willing to grapple with the tension between the analytical and the political, with the constant challenge of trying not to let our vision of how things should be, dominate our understanding and interpretation of the current context. Both research and intervention practices benefit from a dual analytical project, whereby the positioning and worldview of the outsider is also interrogated. Neither the analytical nor the political project can be fruitful if there is no attempt to unpack it and be more transparent about this.

What does all of this mean for our engagement with religious women around gender inequality and VAWG? I would argue that it serves as not only a justification, but also a call for faith-based engagement with religious women. First, understanding and appreciating what religion is and how it functions, is critical for the analytical project. Those who are not simply "faith literate" (which seems to currently be the skill *du jour* in international development circles) but have an insider status, are uniquely positioned, such as faith leaders, religious institutions, and faith-based organisations. Where individuals and institutions are themselves religious, it gives authority and trust, enabling the encounter with religious women to be more authentic.

Second, you *can* and *should* engage religiously, often regarded as a controversial request. Engaging religiously does not mean that you have to suspend all critique and desire for change. On the contrary, if religious framing is driving women's support for VAWG and patriarchy, you *have* to engage religiously. It will require an understanding of their framing of religion, a critical reflection on one's own framing of religion, as well as a religious framing of the alternative (political project) that is being proposed. An example of such engagement is how many faith-based development organisations are increasingly engaging in the reinterpreta-

tion of sacred scriptures (e.g. the Bible and Qur'an) with religious leaders and communities, in their efforts to address VAWG.[34]

This is a unique value-add of faith-based agents, as being "of the faith" can allow them to engage influentially in a critical conversation about religion and religious beliefs. Because of their own religious framing and understanding, they can often also critically engage with others' religious framing and understanding in a more open and transparent conversation around how their shared religion is understood and interpreted. The feminist Islamic scholar Amina Wadud is one example of this kind of positioning. As one of the founders of Islamic feminism, she is consciously and outspokenly both Muslim and feminist, and argues for gender equality and justice through her rereading and reinterpretation of the Qur'an.[35] From her position "within," she is able to critically engage for transformation. Consider this in juxtaposition with a Christian development practitioner. Such a person would not have the ability or authority to critically reread the Qur'an and have these reinterpretations recognised by the Islamic community.

Taking religion seriously not only allows for a fuller, more accurate understanding of the agency of religious women, but it allows for an entirely new avenue of engagement with religious women. If you take religion seriously, engagement can (and should) be around shared religion. This is the unique value-add of faith-based agents, who are insiders in the sense that they are of the same religion and can speak into it.

For anyone bent on improving the lives and status of women, the continued subjugation and violence suffered by many women is challenging. The drive to immediately bring change can take precedence. Yet, ignoring the full scope of the agency of women will mean not only that intervention efforts can be in vain, but that they can strengthen the patriarchal system by having local women react defensively.

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[34] Elisabet le Roux and Selina Palm, *Tackling the roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage* (London: Girls Not Brides, 2018), 26.

[35] Amina Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis," in *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, ed. Zainah Anwar (Malaysia: Vinlin Press Sdn Bhd, 2009), 95-112.

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From "Imperial Maternalism" to "Matri-centrism:" Mothering Ethics in Christian Women's Voluntarism in Kenya

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ABSTRACT
In this article I review some contributions to "mothering ethics" in African feminist religious studies and African gender theory, to examine whether recent and historical practices in Kenyan Christian women's voluntarism constitute forms of ethical "mothering." I show that the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Mothers' Union (MU) in Kenya have a history of "imperial maternalism," which highlights that mothering is a set of practices marked by imbalances of power. The social interventions of the YWCA and MU demonstrate that the social and religious authority of "mother" has provided a route through which African Christian women can assert authority in politics and social life. I suggest that this is because mothering is a useful metaphor through which Kenyan Christian women at the YWCA and MU express a relational, caring ethic that has the potential to avoid the problem of essentialism.

KEYWORDS
Christianity; ethics; gender; imperialism; Kenya; mothering

Introduction

Mothering, reproductive justice, women's caring labour, and gender essentialism remain vitally relevant topics for feminists theorising about religion and ethics.[1] In the Western Anglophone theory, the idea of an ethics based on women's experiences of mothering was popularised in the work of Sara Ruddick and other care ethicists, often drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan.[2] Many critical feminist responses to this body of

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1 This is evident in recent gender studies, for example Christianne Collantes, *Reproductive Dilemmas in Metro Manila: Faith, Intimacies, and Globalization* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Eliza Getman and Sarojini Nadar, "Natality and Motherism: Embodiment Within Praxis of Spiritual Leadership," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no.2 (2013): 59-73; Margaret Kamitsuka, "Unwanted Pregnancy, Abortion, and Maternal Authority: A Prochoice Theological Argument," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no.2 (2018): 41-57; Dawn Llewellyn, "Maternal Silences: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity," *Religion and Gender* 6, no.1 (2016): 64-79; Tushabe wa Tushabe, "Memoirs of Motherhood: Reflections on Pedagogical Motherhood in Community," *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 23 (2013): 11-31.

2 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,

work question whether a focus on mothers can be reconciled with an anti-essentialist understanding of gender. It is widely recognised in feminist theory and practice that caring for children, elders, unwell, and disabled people is labour that has been under-valued. However, this insight is weighed carefully against the reductive stereotype of women as "naturally" nurturing. In other words, feminists recognise that "women" and "mothers" are distinct but overlapping categories, while many still wonder if "maternal thinking" can be part of feminist ethics and politics. These questions become more pressing when considering the heightened relevance of the mother-figure in Christianity and its usage to legitimise heteropatriarchal definitions of gender.[3] Christian women have come together under the banner of "mothers" both because it has value for them, and because they have been denied other social roles. The Mothers' Union (MU) is an example of this for many Anglican women, and its continuing popularity is testament to the relevance of a specifically religious subjectivity in African contexts, although its membership dwindles in the United Kingdom.[4]

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and MU in Kenya are examples of Christian women's voluntarism: they are both membership organisations that work towards social transformation with a focus on women, youth, and children. I argue that the existence of the YWCA and MU rests partly on women's ability to exercise power from their social positions as mothers. The values and politics of the YWCA and MU have not often been studied, but I suggest that many of their activities may reflect the maternal authority offered by "imperial maternalism" in colonial women's movements. This has blended in complex ways with some African conceptual frameworks, to which I refer in this essay with the broad term "matricentrism:" the organisation of

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1984); Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989).

3 Heteropatriarchy is defined by Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill as "the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent" ("Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no.1 [2013]: 13).

4 Abby Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: The Last Active Anglican Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation 1876-2008* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); Deborah Gaitskell, "Crossing Boundaries, and Building Bridges: The Anglican Women's Fellowship in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no.3 (2004): 266-97.

society and moral values around mothers and mothering. The number of people involved in the YWCA and MU underlines their significance in the context of the contemporary Kenyan women's movement. Worldwide, the MU reports a membership of approximately four million,[5] while the YWCA claims to "indirectly influence 13.6 million women" through its work.[6] Within Kenya, the MU has branches in all 32 dioceses of the Anglican Church, and in 2018, its membership was an estimated 450,000,[7] while the YWCA counts approximately 26,000 members across its seven branches.[8] These membership numbers do not account for the beneficiaries of the development and welfare projects these organisations conduct. Thus, in terms of membership numbers and the relative lack of other avenues for women to take up leadership positions in Christian institutions, the significance of the YWCA and MU is in no doubt. With reference to these organisations, I review some African contributions to mothering ethics in feminist religious studies and gender theory, to examine whether recent and historical practices in Kenyan Christian women's voluntarism constitute forms of ethical "mothering."

Imperial Maternalism

Mothering has a historical significance in Kenya through the association of Christian voluntary service with middle-class white womanhood during the colonial period (1885-1963). Power differentials were inherent in the relationships within the YWCA and MU and with the beneficiaries of their work. These two groups are voluntary membership organisations of and for Christian women, each of which was established in Britain in the mid-19th century.[9] They spread across the globe through missionary activity and the British Empire and have grown to become worldwide institutions. A group of 15 British women established the Kenya YWCA in Nairobi in 1912,[10] while the wife of a colonial official in central Kenya founded the

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5 Mothers' Union, "Our Vision," 2013, https://www.mothersunion.org/our-vision/.

6 World YWCA, "Annual Report 2016," 2018. https://www.worldywca.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/annualreport2016-v7.pdf.

7 Mothers' Union, "Where we Work: Kenya," 2018, http://www.mothersunion.org/about-us/where-we-work/worldwide/kenya/.

8 Eleanor T. Higgs, "Narrating Christianity, Living "Fulfilled Lives:" The Young Women's Christian Association in Kenya, 1912-2012" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2017).

9 Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*; Carole Seymour-Jones, *Journey of Faith: The History of the World YWCA* (London: Allison & Busby, 1994).

10 Vera Harley, *Rickshaw to Jets: A History and Anecdotes of the Kenya YWCA, 1912-1965* (London: Self-published, 1995).

first Kenyan branch of the MU in 1918.[11] Typical of that historical period, the YWCA and MU were both racially exclusive organisations, admitting only white women as members until the mid-1950s.[12] In Kenya and Britain, both organisations institutionalised a social hierarchy that placed middle-class, middle-aged, white women in positions of authority over women of colour, impoverished women, and working women. The YWCA began its work in Britain to protect young single women from the perceived moral threats of the city.[13] It also offered an avenue for married, middle-class women to exercise their Christian duty to safeguard society's moral and spiritual well-being. For this highly circumscribed group of women, a degree of social influence and some positions of authority were accessible through their social roles as mothers.[14]

Just as there is no universal category of "women," there is no universal category of "mothers." The historical development of the YWCA and MU in the context of colonised Kenya reveals the extent to which the social position of "mother" was differentiated by power. It illustrates "imperial maternalism," or the instrumentalisation of motherhood in articulation with racism and colonialism.[15] The YWCA, MU, and other colonial women's organisations acted from imperial maternalism in their characteristically forceful promotion of Victorian Christian social norms. Colonial and racist definitions of whiteness and Africanness as opposite in nature and value, allowed colonisers to define themselves as superior to African women by defining the latter as morally and culturally

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11 Galia Sabar-Friedman, "The Power of the Familiar: Everyday Practices in the Anglican Church of Kenya," *Journal of Church and State* 38, no.2 (1996): 386, n.32.

12 Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen*, 109; Galia Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya: From Mediation to Opposition 1963-1993* (New York: Frank Cass, 2002), 56.

13 Seymour-Jones, *Journey of Faith,* 2-4.

14 Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*, 151; Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992), 38, 67; Angela Woollacott, "From Moral to Professional Authority: Secularism, Social Work, and Middle-Class Women's Self-Construction in World War I Britain," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no.2 (1998): 86-90.

15 For a discussion on the concept of "maternalism," see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880-1920," *American Historical Review* 95, no.4 (1990): 1076-108; Rebecca J. Plant and Marian van der Klein, "A New Generation of Scholars on Maternalism," in *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century,* eds. Marian van der Klein, Rebecca J. Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1-21.

"lacking."[16] The British Christian colonisation of Kenya simultaneously reduced women's authority and sharpened distinctions between public space and the private, domestic sphere of the home, in relation to which mothers and their caring labour were defined.[17] The YWCA and MU contributed to this construction through their education of girls and women in literacy and domestic skills like sewing, cooking, and childcare.[18] These phenomena were part of wider attempts to regulate women's conduct with/in a colonial, legal, economic, and social apparatus by containing them in the home.[19]

Imperial maternalism is not only imperialism achieved through women identified with motherhood; it is also imperialist interventions in mothering practices. Missionaries' Christian education for girls elided the social roles of woman, wife, and mother, and the home was reconstituted as the domain of this newly (re)gendered figure. Colonial women's groups' promotion of the cult of domesticity targeted "African" mothering practicees for intervention to change the living standards of Africans in accordance with middle-class British norms and expectations. These socio-cultural interventions complemented colonial authorities' interventions, such as the medicalisation of childbirth through the introduction of maternity hospitals.[20] Thereby, not only were African mothering practices subjected to criticism, but wider family structures were transformed. Such interventions have motivated postcolonial projects to recuperate African understandings of motherhood.

Since the Kenyan independence, the utility of the social position of "mother" has been reflected in Kenyan women's political activism.[21] The internal hierarchies that characterised the YWCA and MU in the colonial period persisted, as more urban, middle-class, and educated women took up leadership positions, while the beneficiaries of their work remained poorer, more rural, and less educated. Much of the work

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16 Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 242.

17 Elizabeth Francis, "Migration and Changing Divisions of Labour: Gender Relations and Economic Change in Koguta, Western Kenya," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 65, no.2 (1995): 206-7.

18 Harley, *Rickshaws to Jets*; Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50* (London: James Currey, 2005): 205-8.

19 Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 9-10.

20 Kanogo, *African Womanhood*, 169-73.

21 Wangari M. Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (London: William Heinemann 2008), 220-1; Alexandra Tibbetts, "Mamas Fighting for Freedom in Kenya," *Africa Today* 41, no.4 (1994): 31-2.

undertaken under the auspices of these organisations since independence has been a continuation of the programmes that had been initiated in the colonial period: providing vocational training, classes in literacy and nutrition, youth groups, and nursery schools.[22] In Christian organisations and church institutions in Kenya, women and mothers are paradoxically recognised as powerful, but systemically denied opportunities to exercise that power. Despite the fact that many churches in Kenya now ordain women, and congregations largely consist of women, men dominate the institutional hierarchy of clergy, management, and leadership positions.[23] It is well-known that the exclusion of women from positions of leadership and power within church institutions across the world has been justified partly by considering priesthood incompatible with motherhood and the range of bodily functions that biological mothers typically experience, including menstruation and breastfeeding.[24]

In the context of such exclusions, the YWCA, MU, and similar organisations like churchwomen's guilds, are a significant avenue through which Christian women take up positions of authority and leadership parallel to the church, both at local and national level.[25] However, these Christian women's organisations do not necessarily operate independently of clergy, nor do they always oppose the heteropatriarchy of the churches to which they belong.[26] Esther Mombo has critiqued the MU's poor track record of responding to domestic abuse, noting that the organisation has been known to encourage women to endure abuse rather than "rebel against their husbands," reflecting an attitude towards marriage that does not serve women.[27]

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22 Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya,* 96-9, 107-20.

23 Ruth M. James, "Women's Participation in Church-Based Organizations," in *Quests for Integrity in Africa,* eds. Grace Wamue and Mathew M. Theuri (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), 162-3; Esther Mombo, "The Ordination of Women in Africa: A Historical Perspective," in *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*, eds. Ian Jones, Kirsty Thorpe, and Janet Wootton (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 123-43.

24 Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 59-60.

25 James, "Women's Participation;" Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra: Legon Theological Studies, 2000).

26 Erica Appelros, "Gender within Christian Fundamentalism: A Philosophical Analysis of Conceptual Oppression," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 75, no.5 (2014), 460-73.

27 Esther Mombo, "Resisting Vumilia Theology: The Church and Violence Against Women in Kenya," in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion,* eds. Andrew Wingate, Kevin Ward, Carrie Pemberton, and Wilson Sitshebo (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 1998), 221-2.

Neither the YWCA nor the MU was established as a campaigning organisation, or to include African women. As social platforms for pious, middle-class women, they promoted the institution and sacrament of Christian marriage, the ideal of the nuclear family, and protected young women from the dangers of the urban environment.[28] It is therefore interesting to observe the extent to which these organisations have reinforced or undermined heteropatriarchal gender norms in their more recent work under the leadership of Kenyan women.

"Mothering" in the HIV Epidemic

Since the 1980s, the institutionalised maternalism of the YWCA and MU has worked in parallel with the paternalism of international development interventions. As described above, the MU exists in part to promote and support marriage, within which a woman's role as wife and mother is understood to be divinely mandated. This continues to inform the focal points of the MU's programmes: education and care for children, teenagers, and young women, skills classes, opposing early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), sex work, and visiting hospital patients.[29] Since the 1990s, both the YWCA and MU have additionally sought to respond to the HIV epidemic. The first case of HIV in Kenya is thought to have occurred in 1984, and until 1999 the majority of HIV-related work was carried out by churches and NGOs.[30] The extreme risk posed by HIV to children, young people, and future generations, made it a focus point for Christian women's voluntarism and their expression of mothering ethics.

The YWCA incorporates HIV in its programmes addressing women's and young people's sexual and reproductive health and economic empowerment projects, while they are against FGM.[31] The focus of the YWCA's programmes is largely on educating adolescents and young adults in schools, churches and youth clubs about sex and relationships, with the

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[28] Caitriona Beaumont, Moral Dilemmas and Women's Rights: The Attitude of the Mothers' Union and Catholic Women's League to Divorce, Birth Control and Abortion in England, 1928-1939, *Women's History Review* 16, no. 4 (2007): 463-85; Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union*; Woollacott, "From Moral to Professional Authority."

[29] Sabar-Friedman, *Church, State, and Society in Kenya.*

[30] Karen Booth, *Local Women, Global Science: Fighting AIDS in Kenya* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Elsa Ouko, "Christian Ethics and HIV/AIDS in Kenya," in *Christian Ethics and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, eds. James N. Amanze, Fidelis Nkomazara, and Obed N. Kealotswe (Gaborone: Bay Publishing, 2007), 87.

[31] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 141-50.

emphasis being on how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, and HIV infection. When it comes to older adolescents and adults, the use of contraception is promoted, with demonstrations of how condoms should be used, and the occasional distribution of free samples.[32] Condoms are suspect within the hegemonic Christian sexual ethics in Kenya, which makes the YWCA's cautious promotion of them somewhat unusual.

From the prevailing pronatal perspective of the Kenyan Christianity, the prophylactic use of condoms is problematic. In order to conceive, condom use must be abandoned, which means one or both partners must risk HIV transmission or reinfection. The YWCA prioritises protecting young people from contracting HIV over the hegemonic Christian sexual ethics that would deny the use of condoms on the basis of their contraceptive effect. Meanwhile it discourages abortion for a range of theological and pragmatic reasons.[33] The YWCA's approach to reproductive health is complex, because the reality of HIV transmission makes becoming a mother even riskier than it already is. The specifically Christian interest of these organisations in promoting and valuing motherhood and mothering takes into account the high rates of maternal mortality and lack of access to maternal healthcare for impoverished women. The Christian mothering ethics of the YWCA seeks to protect young women (and men) from HIV transmission in a context where becoming a mother is both central to the good life, and a life-threatening risk.[34]

Meanwhile, the MU's care for orphans and other vulnerable children focuses on providing food, medical care, and sometimes a place to live, in a context marked by the absence of well-resourced public social services. Orphans are fed, medically treated, and offered weekend classes in literacy and numeracy. The MU in the Diocese of Mount Kenya South describes its work as providing "shelter, love and education" for children orphaned by AIDS.[35] The provision of care to those suffering with HIV-related diseases and their dependents is usually the responsibility of women, meaning that the overall consequences of

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[32] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 175-6.
[33] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity,* 177-9.
[34] Higgs, *Narrating Christianity,* 182-3; 254-5.
[35] Mothers' Mercy Home, "Our History," n.d., http://www.mothersmercyhome.co.ke/?page_ id=169/.

the HIV epidemic disproportionately affect women.[36] Since the MU is constituted mainly by women, its care for orphans conforms somewhat to this tendency. However, by addressing the care of orphans on a larger scale, the MU expands definitions of motherhood to publicly, collectively "mother" orphaned children. The relegation of HIV to the private realm, and AIDS to the hospital bed, is reflected in the pervasive stigma and silence surrounding the illness.[37] The work of the YWCA and MU breaks the silence. By maintaining that provision for the survival and welfare of children orphaned by AIDS is a collective responsibility of the wider community, the MU takes some of this labour which would otherwise be shouldered by women in the extended family who are already likely to perform many other types of unpaid care work.

Both the YWCA and MU pursue social transformation by leveraging the status that biological and social motherhood grants to women. Both organisations act on mothering ethics in their activities, and often draw on their members' experiences as parents to inform their work.[38] This stands in continuity with their histories of imperial maternalism, as the YWCA and MU staff are usually middle-class, middle-aged, married mothers. While their work with children, youths, and women in the context of the HIV epidemic seems to resist the public/private split and complicate essentialist definitions of mothering, both organisations remain unable or unwilling – explicitly or consistently – to challenge the heteropatriarchy, repronormativity, and essentialism that inflect Christian understandings of mothering.[39] However, these are not the only conceptual or cultural resources on which African Christian women may draw to construct a mothering ethics.

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36 Nyokabi Kamau, *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender: Experiences of Women in Kenyan Universities* (Eldoret: Zapf Chancery, 2009); Nyambura Njoroge, *Gender Justice, Ministry, and Healing: A Christian Response to the HIV Pandemic* (London: Progressio, 2009), 6-8.

37 Kamau, *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender*, 193.

38 Higgs, *Narrating Christianity*, 177.

39 The concept of "repronormativity" is not used by the African theorists discussed here. It names the uncritical gendered and heteronormative expectation that sexually mature people are capable of reproducing, and that they want to have children. See, for example, Jennifer Denbow, "Sterilization as Cyborg Performance: Reproductive Freedom and the Regulation of Sterilization," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no.1 (2014): 108.

African Motherhood in Postcolonial Kenya

Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí contrasts the centrality of mothers in the West African Yorùbá culture and in Yorùbá women's lives, with a Western feminism's aversion to mothers.[40] At least since Simone de Beauvoir's observation that patriarchal cultures associate women with motherhood so closely as to believe that "woman is womb," many (though certainly not all) Western feminists have critiqued the gendered limitations that motherhood has imposed on their lives and downplayed maternal experience as a source of moral wisdom.[41] However, many Western feminist ethicists and philosophers have positively valued mothering, often tracing their origins to the definitive writings of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and/or Carol Gilligan.[42] The ambivalence that characterises many feminist readings and uses of motherhood is arguably a result of Western feminism's focus on the situation of the middle-class white wife-and-mother, which excludes the different experiences of women and mothers in other class and cultural contexts. So, while the Western Anglophone gender theory does have a tense relationship with motherhood, it is more varied than Oyěwùmí suggests.[43] Oyěwùmí's analysis is entirely correct when she identifies the conceptual frameworks that have informed white-Western Christianities and feminisms, which led many scholars, missionaries, colonial officials, and development professionals to assume that to be a woman, wife, and mother is naturally coherent and universal.[44]

In contrast, African gender theorists have unsettled the fundamental association of motherhood with women that has been promoted as

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[40] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 211-20; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: Norton, 1995).

[41] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), xli; Margaret U. Walker, "Moral Understandings: Alternative 'Epistemology' for a Feminist Ethics," *Hypatia* 4, no.2 (1989): 16.

[42] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1978); Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*; Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

[43] Agnes A. Apusigah, "Is Gender yet Another Colonial Project? A Critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's Proposal," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy* 20 (2008): 37-8.

[44] Ifi Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy in Africa: Kinship Ideologies and Systems in Africa and Europe," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader,* ed. Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 92; Cherryl Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no.3 (1995): 431.

"natural" in European social formations.[45] African political deployments of the lessons and values of mothering and motherhood have been theorised under the titles "matriarchy,"[46] "matrifocality,"[47] and recently, "matripotency,"[48] to which I refer collectively as "matricentrism." Although these theorists' contributions should not be presumed to offer the same understanding of gender or mothering, they are similar in that they are based on the claim that the social position of mothers in many precolonial African cultures was one marked by authority and power. The social power of mothers is what Oyěwùmí has more recently called *matripotency*, the "supremacy of motherhood."[49] Famously, Oyěwùmí argues that in the Yorùbá society, the imposition of a British, Christian gender regime through colonisation, redefined mothers as women, substantially modifying the ungendered precolonial "motherhood" category of *iya*. The colonial introduction of a binary definition of gender changed the meaning of kinship terms and reduced *iya*, formerly "the most consequential category in social, political and spiritual organisation," to the domestic ideal of woman, wife, and mother.[50] Similarly, Ifi Amadiume claims that many pre-colonial African societies traced their family lineage through the mother, and focused on the leadership of mothers in matriarchal formations.[51] Additionally, she argues that there

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45 Catherine Acholonu, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (Owerri: Afa, 1995); 'Jìmí O. Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality: Endogeneity and African Gender Scholarship," *African Sociological Review* 14, no.1 (2010): 2-19; Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London: Zed, 1997); Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1988); Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy;" Mary Kolawole, "Reconceptualizing African Gender Theory: Feminism, Womanism and the *Arere* Metaphor", in *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa,* ed. Signe Arnfred (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2006), 251-66; Obioma Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1997); Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies," *Signs* 25, no.4 (2000): 1093-8; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

46 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Victoria Inyang-Talbot, "Who Pounds the Yam? Perspectives on the 'New Matriarchy,'" *Journal of Pan African Studies*, no.16 (2018): 16.

47 Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality."

48 Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

49 Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, 2.

50 Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, 47; Oyěwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds," 1093-8.

51 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 156; Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 88.

was no clear masculine public/feminine domestic divide, and therefore, if there was a gender division of labour, it followed a different logic.[52]

Oyěwùmí's claims are specific to the Yorùbá culture and therefore do not necessarily apply elsewhere on the African continent. Indeed, her findings have been contested by other gender theorists familiar with the Yorùbá society.[53] What is relevant here is that colonisation changed the value and status of mothers, which may be considered similar to the situation in Kenya, because both contexts bear witness to the attitudes of British colonisers and the cultural norms they imported. The existence of African cultural resources which emphasise the power and centrality of mothers, and the possibility of defining motherhood without requiring a binary definition of gender or sex, are highly relevant for those worried about essentialism in mothering ethics. The central theme in these historical and theoretical considerations of African gender and motherhood is that mothers, as women, have had their power usurped. To the extent that Anglophone gender theories and feminist activism disengage from (African) mothering as a source of insight, they risk siding with imperial maternalism.

Matricentric African Ethics

My interest is not to claim that before colonisation, certain African societies were matriarchal. Rather, I am interested in a further conclusion that Amadiume and others draw out of their arguments for precolonial matriarchies, namely, that the value systems of precolonial Africa were fundamentally informed by mother-centred customs – that ethics and norms were "matricentric."[54] At least two points emerge as critical in considering this possibility: first, the content and implications of the matricentric ethics identified, and second, whether it is significant that mothering and/or mothers are the source of its insight, authority, and application. In answer to the first point, I suggest that three theoretical insights for mothering ethics emerge from the foregoing discussion: (i) the recuperation of cultural resources which emphasise the power and

52 Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality," 11; Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 90.

53 Apusigah, "Is Gender Yet Another Colonial Project?;" Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "'Yorubas don't do Gender:' A Critical Review of Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*," in *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*, eds. Signe Arnfred, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Esther W. Kisiang'ani, Desiree Lewis, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, and Filomena Chioma Steady (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004), 61-81.

54 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 29.

centrality of mothers; (ii) an anti-essentialist definition of motherhood without reference to a binary definition of gender or sex; and (iii) a politics of prioritising reproductive and caring labour and the people who perform it.

African theorisations of matricentric ethics typically start from a distinction between mothering as an experience and motherhood as a social institution.[55] This distinction is made in acknowledgement of the ways gender unequal social structures actually give low social status to mothers in contemporary African societies, similar to points made elsewhere by Adrienne Rich and Mercy Amba Oduyoye.[56] Mothering as a practice is a source of valuable experiences that generate political and ethical insights as a set of shared concerns among mothers of different social locations. In this vein, "motherism" has been considered an African alternative to feminism. It has continued to be relevant to the dynamics of self-definition within the African gender theory and women's movements, and their relationships with/rejections of Western, imperialist, white feminisms.[57] More recent deployments of motherism were careful to acknowledge that African motherism is not necessarily *anti*-feminist, but it nevertheless poses an implicit challenge to any conceptualisations of feminism that associate mothering with women's subordination.[58] In this view, motherism is a form of activism and resistance based on "solidarity located within the experience of mothering," as was the case in South Africa in the context of anti-apartheid activism.[59]

The idea of mothering as a source of power seems to be applicable to many of the social interventions of Christian women in Kenya, as women in politics and advocacy have drawn on their status as mothers to give

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55 Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)othering*, 5-6.
56 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13; Mercy Amba E. Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space," in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell,* eds. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105-21.
57 Acholonu, *Motherism*; Filomena C. Steady, *Women and Collective Action in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 38.
58 Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 66.
59 Gertrude Fester, "Women's Organisations in the Western Cape: Vehicles for Gender Struggle or Instruments of Subordination?" *Agenda* 34 (1997): 45-61; Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism," 66; Shireen Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

them authority as leaders.[60] Beyond the instrumental value for women establishing their social position, the ethical dimension of mothering practices equally provide a rich resource on which to draw. The sanctity of life and the love of mothers for their children have been cited as the foundations for African matricentric ethics, thereby linking the historical centrality of mothers to society, to an underlying veneration of life and those who create it.[61] Under the colonial disruption of this pattern, mothering may have been a way to cultivate hope by nurturing the children who might grow up to overthrow colonial rule.[62] Matricentric ethics is therefore pronatal – forming an interesting parallel with Grace Jantzen's theorisation of "natality"[63] – and centres on compassion for specific others, whose personhood is fundamentally constituted through a relationship with their mother(s) and community.[64] Furthermore, the power of mothers has often been reflected in and legitimised by female deities and divine mothers, particularly in creation myths, suggesting commonality with the Catholic veneration of Mary as the mother of Jesus. [65]

Mothering as Ethical Metaphor

I have suggested here that both the YWCA and MU in Kenya articulate a particular ethical perspective that capitalises on the social status of mothers as it arises specifically in the context of women's movements in

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60 Faith W. Ngunjiri, "Servant-Leadership and Motherhood: Kenyan Women Finding Fulfillment in Serving Humanity," *Gender, Development, and Globalization Program Working Paper #294* (Center for Gender in Global Context, Michigan State University, 2009), 1-33; Faith W. Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa: Tempered Radicals and Critical Servant Leaders* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010); Faith W. Ngunjiri, "'I Am Because We Are:' Exploring Women's Leadership under Ubuntu Worldview," *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 18, no.2 (2016): 226.

61 Amadiume, "Theorising Matriarchy," 94; Ngunjiri, "Servant-Leadership and Motherhood," 14; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?,* 74.

62 Betty Govinden, "Feminism and Decoloniality: Thinking from the South" (Lecture, Decoloniality Summer School, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, 24 January 2019).

63 Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

64 Acholonu, *Motherism*; Adésínà, "Reappropriating Matrifocality;" Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Getman and Nadar, "Natality and Motherism;" Nduka Otiono, "Catherine Acholonu (1951-2014): The Female Writer as a Goddess," *Nokoko* 4 (2014): 71-2; Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Motherhood*; Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*

65 Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*; Mercy Amba E. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 21-30; Otiono, "Catherine Acholonu."

postcolonial Kenya. Considering the prevalence of the Christian model of motherhood evident in the work of these organisations in Kenya and in other African contexts, I would like to consider some further implications of African gender theorists' various proposals of mothering as a site for articulating a distinct version of African women's collective political mobilisations under which they can stage interventions in the service of social justice.

Motherism, maternal ethics, and matricentric social movements have tended to presume heterosexuality and make repronormative assumptions that have excluded queer women. The analysis of the YWCA and MU offered herein is not intended to sideline such vitally important concerns about the potential problems presented by mothering ethics. It is certainly true that the YWCA and MU in Kenya show no signs of broadening their heteropatriarchal, institutional practices of mothering. Some practices, like care for orphans, have begun to disassociate Christian matricentric values from any biological definition of the mother. Indeed, other work on the leadership of Christian women in Kenya has emphasised the significance of mothering beyond the confines of biological reproduction.[66] Critiques of matricentrism tend to be based on a conflation of motherhood (as social institution) and mothering (as practice), and in so doing they overextend the valid concern that the essentialism and reification of mothers are politically conservative, regressive, and unable to challenge gender inequality.[67] While it is true that contemporary socio-political trends – such as fundamentalist Christianities – insist on essentialising women as mothers and reifying the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, the YWCA and MU in Kenya demonstrate that this is not necessarily the meaning and usefulness of Christian women's practices of "mothering."

In these examples of African Christian matricentric ethics, mothering is aptly considered a *metaphor* through which ethical values are communicated. Perhaps it expresses a theological anthropology, that is an African Christian understanding of what it means to be human.[68]

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66 Ngunjiri, *Women's Spiritual Leadership in Africa*, 115.

67 C. Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood," 420-1; Marc Epprecht, "Sexuality, Africa, History," *The American Historical Review* 114, no.5 (2009): 1266.

68 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 45; Rachel Jones, "Afterword: Giving Voice: The Contested Sites of Motherhood, Religion and Spirituality," *Religion and Gender* 6, no.1 (2016): 112-7.

Mothering practices highlight the fundamental interdependency of our personhood, an understanding of subjectivity as dialogic and co-created in relationships with others. Mothering as a metaphor presents the care-giving labour of mothers as the paradigmatic example of the significance of our relationships, an idea that finds support in the African communitarian philosophy.[69] The metaphor of mothering is meaningful not because women "naturally" understand what it is to bear and/or raise children, but because people live in communities that rely on the care and labour of mothers in multiple ways, and in cultures that tell stories of divine mothers in their mythological origins or religious practices. The idealised mother, caring for a child, represents in an accessible form the value of compassion and the interdependent nature of personhood. Insofar as matricentric ethics can be thought to emerge from the recognition of subjectivity forged in relationship to one's mother, it shares much with African communitarian ethics and the maxim of *Ubuntu*: "I am because we are."[70]

Therefore, the success of the YWCA and MU in Kenya may be explained in part by the extent to which they echo alignments of African matricentric ethics with Western feminist care ethics, and correlate Christian deployments of mothering ethics with aspects of African matricentrism. Relying on mothering and motherhood to provide avenues for women's social activism may be a pragmatic response to the oppor-tunities provided in the Kenyan context. The YWCA and MU recognise that the social position of the "mother" offers opportunities for women to publicly assert their authority. Similarly, to the matricentric values outlined by African gender theorists, these organisations affirm the power and social value of mothers and the performance of caring labour. The theological and spiritual significance of motherhood for many Christian women makes the recuperation and reformation of maternal values an urgent task. However, mothering remains a risky metaphor for ethics, if and when it advocates ideals promoted by explicitly patriarchal Christian institutions.[71] The influence of imperial maternalism on the historical

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69 Thaddeus Metz, "The Western Ethic of Care or an Afrocommunitarian Ethic? Specifying the Right Relational Morality," *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no.1 (2013): 77-92.

70 Narnia Bohler-Muller, "Really Listening? Women's Voices and the Ethic of Care in Post-Colonial Africa," *Agenda* 54 (2002): 86-91; Metz, "The Western Ethic of Care?;" Ngunjiri, "I Am Because We Are."

71 Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advcate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London: Continuum, 2002); Jessica Horn, *Christian Fundamentalisms and Women's*

development of the MU and YWCA suggests that it is only *some* women who are enabled to do things as mothers that they could not do otherwise. While mothering may be an apt ethical metaphor in theory, further research is needed to determine the extent to which either organisation is *deliberately* constructing an African Christian mothering ethics.

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Exploring Religious and Cultural Identities and the Right to Bodily Self-Determination in a South African Higher Education Context

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that it is essential to create safe spaces in which to explore conversations at the intersection between personal religious and cultural identities and human rights. To facilitate this exploration, located within a feminist research paradigm, an empathetic-reflective-dialogical approach is adopted to engage with pre-service teachers in a South African Higher Education Institution. Selected Bachelor of Education Honours students were encouraged to engage in self-dialogue and to write their self-narratives. Participating in Communities in Conversation, Communities in Dialogue, and Communities for Transformation provided the opportunity for empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying to take place. This restorying has the potential to address the possible disconnection between the individual's personal identities when considering human rights issues, and in this instance, the right to bodily self-determination, and more specifically the termination of pregnancy. In doing so, the ways in which power operates in gendered relationships, often promoted by religious and cultural norms, is explored. In particular, female students found it empowering to engage with their "other" (male students). Both female and male students described this engagement as transformative.

KEYWORDS
empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying; communities in conversation; communities in dialogue; communities for transformation; right to bodily self-determination

Introduction

In a recent study, adopting an empathetic-reflective-dialogical approach, women and men found it helpful and empowering to hear perspectives

from their "other"[1] with regard to gender (in)equality.[2] The findings showed that gender equality is not promoted in their religious discourses[3] and that it is important for both women and men to be secure in their personal identities so as to be able to acknowledge the other as having equal value.[4] The participants in this study suggested that the same approach be employed to engage with other human rights issues. The women, in particular, suggested that this approach would be helpful to explore their integrity and autonomy when it comes to their right to bodily self-determination, and more specifically the termination of pregnancy.

In African countries, including South Africa, a number of women, both young and old, have terminated pregnancies. This practice is perceived to be un-African and contrary to particular religious and cultural[5] discourses.[6] Constructed within socio-cultural gendered spaces, religion, ethics, and societal moral values influence attitudes to the termination of pregnancy in African societies.[7] Socio-economic barriers in particular become a dilemma, especially for young women, compelling them to terminate unwanted pregnancies. In South Africa, women may request a legal termination up to twelve weeks of gestation and the decision-making rests with the woman.[8] However, even when women are legally provided with "choice" and "right" concerning the outcome of pregnancy, unintended pregnancies remain a major problem. When looking at bodily

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1 While it is recognised that there are more genders than the male and female binary, in the context of this study, "other" is used by the female students to refer to their male counterparts and *vice versa*.

2 Janet Jarvis, Ncamisile P. Mthiyane, Eva M. Lindhardt, and Olav C. Ruus, "Which Right is right? An exploration of the intersection between religious identity and the human right to gender equality in two different teacher education contexts: South Africa and Norway," *Journal of Religion and Society* 20 (2018).

3 Janet Jarvis and Ncamisile P. Mthiyane, "Conversing at the intersection: religious identity and the human right to gender equality in a South African teacher education context," *Alternation*, *Special Edition*, 23 (2018).

4 Jarvis, Mthiyane, Lindhardt, and Ruus, "Which Right is right?"

5 Religion and culture are being used synonymously.

6 Malvern Chiweshe and Catriona Macleod, "Cultural De-colonization versus Liberal Approaches to Abortion in Africa: The Politics of Representation and Voice," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 22, no.2 (2018): 49-59, doi: 10.29063/ajrh2018/v22i2.5.

7 Dorothy Shaw, "Abortion and human rights," *Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 24 (2010).

8 Republic of South Africa. Government Gazette, *The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Amendment Act, Number 1, Volume 512, No. 30790* (Cape Town: Govern-ment Printers, 18 February 2008).

self-determination as a human right, as underpinned by the South African Constitution,[9] the associated dominant religious and cultural discourses can play a central role in maintaining entrenched religious and cultural perspectives. Braam and Hessin indicate that religious and cultural ideologies and practices have institutionalised the idea of male dominance in all decision-making, including reproduction.[10] This disempowers women, rendering them as powerless to engage with their right to bodily self-determination that includes their health and well-being.[11]

Research has indicated that young women in particular struggle “alone,” often feeling judged, embarrassed, guilty, and shameful about the decision they have made to terminate a pregnancy.[12] For this reason, terminations are often carried through in secrecy. Acknowledging the need for safe, supportive, and accessible spaces in which to discuss a woman’s right to bodily self-determination, women speak of the utmost importance to “unsilence” women’s discourses on the termination of pregnancy, with the aim of advancing their position in a patriarchal society.[13]

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[9] Republic of South Africa. *The Bill of Rights: Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Cape Town: Government Printers, 1996).

[10] Tamara Braam and Leila Hessini, “The Power Dynamics Perpetuating Unsafe Abortion in Africa: A Feminist Perspective,” *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 8, no.1 (2004).

[11] Fiona K. Bloomer, Kelly O’Dowd, and Catriona Macleod, “Breaking the silence on abortion: the role of adult community abortion education in fostering resistance to norms Culture, Health & Sexuality,” *An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1257740.

[12] Emily M. Mojapelo-Batka and Johannes Schoeman, “Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy: Moral Concerns and Emotional Experiences among Black South African Adolescents,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 33, no.3 (2003): 144-53.; Sian M. Beynon-Jones, Merran G. Toerien, and Catriona Macleod, “Articulating reproductive justice through reparative justice: case studies of abortion in Great Britain and South Africa,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (2017): 601-15, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1257738.

[13] Indira Gilbert and Vishanthie Sewpaul, “Challenging Dominant Discourses on Abortion from a Radical Feminist Standpoint,” *Affilia* 30, no.1 (2015): 83-95.; Stephanie Herold, Katrina Kimport, and Kate Cockrill, “Women's Private Conversations about Abortion: A Qualitative Study,” *Women Health* 55, no.8 (2015): 943-59, doi: 10.1080/03630242.2015.1061092.

This article argues for the creation of safe spaces[14] in higher education institutions where students can engage in self-reflection and negotiate their religious and cultural identities. These safe spaces do not only refer to literal or physical safety, but rather denotes the figurative and discursive use of the notion.[15] In this small-scale research project, employing an empathetic-reflective-dialogical approach, Bachelor of Education Honours students were provided with the opportunity to engage in particular with the issue of the termination of pregnancy.

“Empathetic-reflective-dialogue” refers to the capacity of individuals to understand and respond to others with an increased awareness of the other person’s thoughts and feelings and that these matter,[16] while simultaneously examining responses, beliefs, and premises resulting in the integration of new understandings into experience.[17] Engaging in dialogue encourages the search for meaning and understanding, recognising that each person has something of value to contribute,[18] opening up to the possibility of learning from the other.[19] Empathetic-

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[14] Petro du Preez and Shan Simmonds, “Understanding how we understand girls’ voices on cultural and religious practices: toward a curriculum for justice,” *South African Journal of Education* 31 (2011): 322-32; Cornelia D. Roux, “A Social Justice and Human Rights Education Project: A Search for Caring and Safe Spaces,” in *Safe Spaces: Human Rights Education in Diverse Contexts,* ed. Cornelia D. Roux (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 29-50; Esti Strydom, “Exploring safe spaces for students to engage with critical and caring thinking regarding portrayals of ‘self’ and ‘other’” (Master of Visual Arts diss., Stellenbosch University, 2018).

[15] Melissa Redmond, “Safe space oddity: Revisiting critical pedagogy,” *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 30 (2010): 1-14; Barbara Stengel and Lisa Weems, “Questioning safe space: An introduction,” *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 29 (2010): 505-7; Petro du Preez, “A Human Rights Based Curriculum for Religious Schools: The Responsibilities of School Leaders,” in *Effective Leadership for Religious Schools: What Leaders Should Know,* ed. Michael Buchanan (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2012), 53-68.

[16] Andrew Abdool and Marlize Drinkwater, “Guidelines to create a positive classroom climate for Religion Education: An empathetic approach,” *Scriptura* 89 no.2 (2005).

[17] Coralie McCormack and Robert Kennelly, “We must get together and really talk... Connection, engagement and safety sustain learning and teaching conversation communities,” *Reflective Practice* 12, no.4 (2011).

[18] Lew Allen, “From Votes to Dialogues: Clarifying the Role of Teachers’ Voices in School Renewal,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no.4 (2004): 318-21.

[19] Julia Ipgrave, “Dialogue, citizenship and religious education,” in *International perspectives on citizenship, education and religious diversity,* ed. Robert Jackson (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 131-49.

reflective-dialogical restorying[20] provided the students with the opportunity to engage reflectively with their own religious and cultural identities by way of self-dialogue and expressed through self-narrative. They then engaged separately as men and women in a Community in Conversation (CiC)[21] and then together in a Community in Dialogue (CiD).[22] This provided the opportunity for both men and women to discuss lived experiences and the lack of autonomy that women experience in the decision-making process about bodily self-determination, given the persisting inequalities in power between men and women.[23] As they engaged in this community in dialogue, the strength and potentialities that emerged from these encounters had the potential to be emancipatory and transformational.[24] This approach reinforced and facilitated Nicolescu's theory of the Included Middle which conceives "of people moving to a place where they become open to others' perspectives…[valuing] premises and belief systems… letting go of aspects of how they currently know the world."[25] This concept was explored in a Community for Transformation (CfT)[26] which empowered the students to construct a narrative in which both women and men have some ability to direct future-oriented action.

Empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying

This approach is framed by Hermans'[27] Dialogical Self Theory, advocating that individuals do not only live in external spaces, but also in the internal space of their society-of-mind. Possible identity recreation

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20 Janet Jarvis, "Restorying for Transdisciplinarity: a proposed teaching-learning strategy in a context of Human Rights Education," *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 14 (2018), https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v14i2.483.

21 Cornelia D. Roux, "Social Justice and Human Rights Education;" Annamagriet de Wet and Glynis Parker, "Communities in Conversation: Opportunities for Women and Girls' Self-empowerment," *Gender and Development* 22 (2014).

22 Roux, "Social Justice and Human Rights Education."

23 Monica Frederico, Kristien Michielsen, Carlos Arnaldo, and Peter Decat, "Factors Influencing Abortion Decision-Making Processes among Young Women," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15 (2018).

24 Sue L.T. McGregor and Russ Volckmann, "Transversity: Transdisciplinarity in Higher Education," in *Leading transformative higher education,* ed. Gary Hampson and Matthew ih-Tolsma (Olomouc, Czech Republic: Palacky University Press, 2013), 51-81.

25 McGregor and Volckmann, "Transversity," 62.

26 Jarvis, "Restorying for Transdisciplinarity."

27 Hubert Hermans, "The dialogical self: a process of positioning in space and time," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self,* ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 652-78.

can result from the dialogical self in action. This occurs when the individual moves from one position to another in the self, as a way of gaining understanding about the self in relation to the world.[28] An example of this would be a woman adopting a counter-position to both individual and collective religious and cultural discourses that undermine her integrity and autonomy. Self-dialogue can be expressed through self-narrative. Various scholars[29] make the link between narrative and agency, arguing that self-narration can help individuals to make sense of their lives – past and present. Self-narrative has a role to play in enabling individual women to discover the degree to which they are entangled with their other (men) and, furthermore, the extent to which it might be possible to become disentangled from their other (men) and thus be freed to build new identities.[30] In this sense the self-narrative can be emancipatory and empowering in addressing male hegemony and fragmenting and reinterpreting dominant religious and cultural discourses.[31] The articulation of this agency, however, depends greatly on the extent and strength of an individual's identity capital.[32]

The basic assumption in the concept of identity capital is that every person has it to some extent. "Identity capital" refers to the stock of resources, or "set of strengths" that individuals have when constructing, framing, and presenting their identity in social circumstances.[33] Identity capital comprises two assets, namely tangible resources such as social group membership, and intangible resources that could include the

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28 Hubert Hermans and Agnieszka Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and counter-positioning in a globalizing society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

29 Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009); Mihuel Gonçalves and Antonio Ribeiro, "Narrative processes of innovation and stability within the dialogical self," in *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory,* eds. Hubert Hermans and Thorsten Gieser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 301-18; Edie White, *Whiteness and Teacher Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Mike Hayler and Jess Moriarty, *Self-Narrative and Pedagogy: Stories of Experience within Teaching and Learning* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017).

30 Nuttall, *Entanglement.*

31 Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

32 James Côté, "Identity Capital, Social Capital and the Wider Benefits of Learning: Generating Resources Facilitative of Social Cohesion," *Journal of Adolescence* 20 (2005).

33 James Côté and Charles Levine, *Identity Formation, Agency and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishing, 2002), 164.

ability to reflect and negotiate self-identity. The accumulation of successful identity exchanges, i.e. the social interaction of an individual with others, increases an individual's identity capital. Hermans[34] contends that it is in an individual's mind that agentic power is created, by voicing implicitly or explicitly, and/or practising a counter-position to dominant religious and cultural discourses. It is the extent and the strength of identity capital being at stake, and it can be argued that as an individual's identity capital increases, they will be empowered to take a stand on issues that run counter to dominant religious and cultural discourses.

Open space stories have the greatest potential for transformation,[35] allowing sufficient space for deconstruction and reconstruction of discourses. The possibility then presents itself that as students engage in open conversations, they might restory what they know, as new interpretations are applied in the light of clarified or new understandings of dominant religious and cultural discourses. This can potentially lead to the coproduction of new knowledges as individuals, previously locked into their religious and cultural traditions, embark upon personal journeys of restorying.[36] This restorying takes place in and through the following conversations:

- CiC, which provides the opportunity for an informal sharing of information in a safe space. For this reason, men and women meet separately. Informally exchanging perspectives and personal experiences can foster respect, trust, and tolerant understanding as "divergent ways of thinking and speaking"[37] are reflected upon. This reflection entails the examination of responses, beliefs, and premises with regard to the termination of pregnancies, resulting in the integration of new understandings into experience.[38]

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34 Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory*; Hermans, "The dialogical self."

35 Ina ter Avest, *Voices: Beyond the Confusion of the Encounter with the Other* (Utrecht: Hogeschool Inholland, 2011).

36 Alette Willis, "Restorying the self, restorying place: Healing through grief in everyday spaces," *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no.2 (2009); Wayne Slabon, Randy Richards, and Vanessa Dennen, "Learning by Restorying," *Instructional Science* 42, no.4 (2014); Laura S. Foote, "Re-storying Life as a Means of Critical Reflection: The Power of Narrative Learning," *Christian Higher Education Journal* 14, no.3 (2015); Ebony E. Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo, "Restorying the Self: Bending Toward Textual Justice," *Harvard Educational Review* 86, no.3 (2016).

37 McCormack and Kennelly, "We must get together," 522.

38 McCormack and Kennelly, "We must get together."

- CiD fosters the opportunity in which the "other" is disclosed to his/her "other" (woman/man) in a dialogue which includes a rhetoric that questions and a rhetoric that reveals respect and inspires reciprocal exchanges with tolerant and empathetic understanding and collaboration initiatives for transformation.[39] Conversations could be designed around unpacking the lived experience of religious and cultural discourses and the implications for female bodily self-determination, and more specifically the termination of pregnancy.
- CfT[40] aims at exploring how, in this case, new knowledge could inform respect for women's reproductive self-determination autonomy.[41] CfT could identify challenges and possibilities for constructive engagement that could lead to new layers of consciousness[42] which have the potential to lead to the recognition of women's rights of equal citizenship with men.
- Self-dialogue (to an internal audience) is expressed as self-narrative (to an external audience) in the spaces created by a CiC, CiD, and CfT. As students explore how their religious and cultural identities intersect with the human right to bodily self-determination, the possibility exists for restorying to take place.

Methodology

Located within a feminist research paradigm,[43] a narrative research design[44] has provided the space conducive to the exploration of the ways in which the participants construct, interpret, and give meaning to their subjective experiences with regard to bodily self-determination. Feminist research, while addressing the assumption that there are structural gender inequalities, seeks to deconstruct commonly held discourses.[45] Unequal power relations existing as a result of gender inequality and the way in which women are represented and positioned

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39 Jarvis, "Restorying for Transdisciplinarity."
40 Jarvis, "Restorying for Transdisciplinarity."
41 Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens, "Human rights dynamics of abortion law reform," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no.1 (2003).
42 White, *Whiteness.*
43 Claire M. Renzetti, Daniel J. Curran, and Shana L. Maier, *Women, Men, and Society* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012).
44 David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010); Lawrence Newman, *Social Research Methods* (New York: Pearson, 2011).
45 Beynon-Jones, Toerien, and Macleod, "Articulating reproductive justice."

in society, are addressed.[46] Narrative inquiry as a methodology within narrative research[47] supports the exploration of narratives which are socially constructed. As such, narratives can be reinterpreted and have an emancipatory function, transforming individual lives and the broader culture.[48]

This research project was located at a South African University in the College of Humanities, and more specifically in the School of Education. 39 Black[49] African Bachelor of Education Honours students, ranging from their mid-twenties to 50 years of age, and registered for a module called "Contemporary Issues in Life Orientation," agreed to participate. Data was generated during the final block session of this module. The ethical code of conduct and requirements set for narrative research by the tertiary institution's ethics committee, was adhered to. Participants signed consent forms and were assured that their anonymity would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used when citing their responses. While the position of the researcher in feminist research is typically that of an "insider," in this case, the researchers who co-teach this module, adopted the position of insider/outsider.[50]

The data collection process took place on five levels. On *level one*, participants engaged in self-dialogue. They were asked to respond to three questions, providing the opportunity to consider the dominant individual and collective religious and cultural voices informing the

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[46] Christine E. Bose, "Intersectionality and Global Gender Inequality," *Gender & Society* 26, no.1 (2012); Seema Vyas and Henrica A.M.F. Jansen, "Unequal power relations and partner violence against women in Tanzania: a cross-sectional analysis," *BMC Women's Health* 18 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-018-0675-0.

[47] Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews, and Maria Tamboukou, "What is narrative research?" in *Doing Narrative Research*, eds. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou, (London: Sage, 2008), 1-26; Steven Chase, "Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices," in *Qualitative Educational Research,* ed. Wendy Luttrell (New York: Routledge, 2010), 651-9; Jean Clandinin, Shaun Murphy, Janice Huber, and Anne M. Orr, "Negotiating narrative inquiries: Living in a tension-filled midst," *Journal of Educational Research* 103 (2010); W Luttrell, *Qualitative Educational Research* (New York & London: Routledge, 2010).

[48] Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou, "What is narrative research?"

[49] While the authors do not endorse politically racial classifications, the term "Black" has been used by some scholars to refer to "Africans," "Indians," and "Coloureds." In this study the participants were Black Africans.

[50] Maki Motapanyane, "Insider/Outsider: A feminist Introspective on Epistemology and Transnational Research," *Atlantis* 34, no.2 (2010).

internal positions which they hold in their society-of-mind with regard to the termination of pregnancy:

- How would you describe your personal religious and cultural identity?
- How does your religious and cultural discourse speak to the way in which you view the issue of terminating a pregnancy?
- What do you think are the rights of the female, the male, and the foetus, when it comes to terminating a pregnancy?

It is on this level that the participants negotiated their self-dialogue and considered or adopted counter-positions to dominant individual and collective voices in their religious and cultural discourses, as they engaged their dialogical self in action.[51] Their self-dialogue found expression in *level two* where they wrote their self-narratives. According to Gonçalves and Ribeiro, this self-narrative is "the outcome of dialogical processes of negotiation, tension, disagreement, alliance, and so on, between different voices of the self."[52] Ellis[53] contends that the self-narrative, or writing for the self, can be therapeutic as it causes the individual to pause and to think about their positionality in relation to, in this case, the termination of pregnancy. This can also be empowering, as their writing exposes a new sense of consciousness and a greater sense of control in the present and for the future.[54]

At *level three*, the participants were separated into two groups – one for the men and the other for the women. In each group, or CiC, they were afforded the opportunity to share their written reflections orally in response to the questions provided for levels one and two. Sharing their self-narratives provided the opportunity for them to individuate as "equal… dignified partner[s] in constituting reality and constructing the world."[55]

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[51] Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, *Dialogical Self Theory*.

[52] Gonçalves and Ribeiro, "Narrative processes," 302.

[53] Carolyn Ellis, *The ethnographic I: a methodological novel about autoethnography* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Creek, 2004).

[54] James Paul, Larry Christensen, and George Frank, "Accessing the intimate spaces of life in the classroom through letters to former teachers: a protocol for uncovering hidden stories," in *Stories out of school: memories and reflections on care and cruelty in the classroom*, eds. James Paul and Terry Smith (Stanford, CT: Ablex publishing Corporation, 2000), 45-63; Hayler and Moriarty, *Self-Narrative and Pedagogy*.

[55] Anne Becker, "Identity Premised on Equality of Difference as a Fundamental Human Right," in *Safe Spaces: Human Rights Education in Diverse Contexts*, ed. Cornelia D. Roux (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 83-96.

At *level four*, the participants – women and men together – entered into a CiD that fostered reciprocal exchanges with tolerant and empathetic understanding. The researcher facilitated the responses of the participants who were asked to discuss their responses from the CiC.

At *level five*, a whole group discussion (CfT) took place with the aim of exploring how their substantial attitudes towards the termination of pregnancy could inform their situational or professional practice.[56] Constructive engagement such as this has the potential to lead to new layers of consciousness,[57] as the participants consider self-respect and own positionality, and inspire reciprocal exchanges with empathetic understanding. This could potentially lead to the emergence of collaborative initiatives for negotiating entrenched positions and restorying for transformation. The researchers guided the discussion at level five with the following three questions:

- How has your participation in empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying impacted your understanding of the right to bodily self-determination, and more specifically the termination of pregnancy?
- Evaluate the efficacy of empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying for the transformation of attitudes and for better understanding of your "other."
- How do you think empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying could possibly be an effective strategy to use in a classroom setting with learners?

Findings and Discussion

Drawing on the work of various scholars,[58] narrative analysis was employed as a tool of analysis. All five levels of empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying are implicit in the discussion which follows. The written responses (level two) and audio recorded conversations at levels four and five were crystallised[59] to lend authenticity.[60] Various threads

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[56] Jennifer Nias, "Changing times, changing identities: Grieving for a lost self," in *Educational Research and Evaluation,* ed. Robert Burgess (London: Falmer Press, 1993), 139-56.

[57] Joy Ritchie and David Wilson, *Teacher narrative as critical inquiry: rewriting the script* (New York: Teacher's College Press Columbia University, 2000); White, *Whiteness*.

[58] Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, *Analyzing Narrative Reality* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009); Chase, "Narrative Inquiry;" Luttrell, *Qualitative Educational Research*; Silverman, *Doing qualitative research*.

[59] Kobus Maree, *First steps in research* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2007).

[60] Newman, *Social Research Methods*.

emerged on how the religious and cultural identities of the participants intersect with the human right to bodily self-determination and influence attitudes towards the termination of pregnancy.[61] It became clear that while the Bill of Rights[62] stipulates that a woman has a right to bodily self-determination, religious and cultural discourses often override that right and are considered by most participants to be a tool that silences women, precluding them from making personal decisions about terminating a pregnancy. The women were of the opinion that they are expected to do as their religion/culture prescribes, out of respect for their elders. Lungi (a female) expressed this as follows:

> I feel and know that some parents (especially in our African culture), if they know that you are pregnant, can even chase you away from home. There is no space to discuss what you are going through and how and why you are pregnant, let alone what impact in your personal life can this said pregnancy do to "you" as a person, not the wider community. Therefore, I think sometimes decisions are taken as one is forced by circumstances…as long as it is within the 12th week, termination can be done.

One of the men (Bheki) dispelled this notion, however, contending that the termination of pregnancy is an indication of an immoral society:

> People are hiding behind religion and culture as being oppressive to women and now the "rights"…human rights, but the truth is that we are losing our morals and culture.

Both men and women acknowledged that a foetus has a right to life and that the women should take responsibility to ensure that termination takes place only in cases where the mother's life is endangered, and in cases of rape and incest:

> My personal worldview strongly stems from my Christian faith…God. I would rather stand with God and be judged by the world, than to stand and be judged by God…I believe that no pregnancy should be terminated, a child is a gift of God. There will always be options to share in the raising of that blessing (Bongi – female).

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61 Mojapelo-Batka and Schoeman, "Voluntary termination of pregnancy;" Beynon-Jones, Toerien, and Macleod, "Articulating reproductive justice."

62 Republic of South Africa, *The Bill of Rights.*

> As males we agreed in view that a foetus has a right to life. Abortion can only be based on the constitutional values or under certain circumstances like rape and incest or ill-health. Other than that, abortion is wrong because there are contraceptives which are free (Jacob – male).

The predominant responses from the men were that they were excluded from the decision-making process to terminate pregnancy. They argued that they are powerless and voiceless in matters pertaining to the life of the foetus and that their rights as "fathers" are violated when women, often secretly, make the decision to terminate a pregnancy.

> For some cases I can say termination of pregnancy is right like rape, incest, the severely disable infant; other than that I feel that "father's" wishes about the unborn baby are not considered and they are silenced by the law and policies (Lawrence – male).

Several female participants passionately described their lived experience of pain and abandonment, having gone through with the birth of a child only to have their partner abandon them as soon as it became evident that the man would need to provide for the child. Most of the times the men left them for another woman.[63] Often women struggle "alone," often feeling judged, embarrassed, guilty, and shameful about the decision they have made to terminate a pregnancy.[64] For this reason, terminations are often carried through in secrecy. The narratives of these female participants included stories of low self-esteem, depression, and health-related issues. In particular they referred to the stress associated with socio-economic difficulties and the responsibility of raising a child as a single woman without support. The women expressed anger at gender inequality and the unfairness when, in most cases, they had to suspend their studies while the men continued and succeeded in their studies without any encumbrances, and failed to meet their responsibilities to the child they had fathered.

The female participants referred to psychological and emotional stress as follows:

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[63] Cf. Catriona Macleod and Jateen Hansjee, "Men and Talk about Legal Abortion in South Africa: Equality, support and Rights Discourses Undermining Reproductive Choice," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15, no.8 (2013); Bloomer, O'Dowd, and Macleod, "Breaking the silence;" Beynon-Jones, Toerien, and Macleod, "Articulating reproductive justice."

[64] Mojapelo-Batka and Schoeman, "Voluntary termination of pregnancy;" Beynon-Jones, Toerien, and Macleod, "Articulating reproductive justice."

> [L]ooks can be deceiving (outside appearance): you can look at the female and think everything is all right, hence what she is feeling is emotionally deep. You are left to decide alone…sometimes what you are undergoing cannot be discussed even with your partner if he is still around, as some of the male counterparts do not stick with you when you are pregnant (Zanele – female).
>
> When a woman is pregnant, she undergoes a very lonely journey…There is no support…pre- and post-pregnancy; if you are pregnant you have to take HIV tests alone, fearing for yourself and the unborn baby, and the so-called father is nowhere to be found. There is a clinic on campus and community/public clinics/hospitals, but there is no support or time for counselling for women. This directly impacts on self-esteem which sometimes escalates to stress and depression (Agnes – female).

Both the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Amendment Act, Number 1 of 2008[65] and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)[66] explicitly recognise that the right to a woman's health includes access to the safe and legal termination of pregnancy. These documents state that the right to decide whether or not to have children is fundamental to a woman's physical and psychological social health and well-being. However, this choice is countered by most religious and cultural discourses. This results in women's reluctance to choose termination for fear of being recognised, stigmatised, and ostracised. The women were in agreement that a woman who chooses to terminate a pregnancy is most often judged and shunned into isolation. Termination of pregnancy is considered taboo in society. If the woman has undergone a termination, there are rituals that need to be performed, including cleansing ceremonies, to prevent negative consequences for both the individual and the community.[67] According to Princess (female), her religion and culture do not permit the termination of a pregnancy. She states:

> Our parents have power over what we believe in as our rights…they can easily chase you away from home if you are pregnant. Culturally, if you abort the baby you have to find someone to cleanse you. It is bad luck, but also it depends…therefore certain rituals have to be done because

[65] Republic of South Africa, *The Bill of Rights*.

[66] Romi Sigsworth and Liezelle Kumalo, "Women, peace and security. Implementing the Maputo Protocol in Africa," *Institute for Security Studies*, Paper 295, July 2016.

[67] Cf. Mojapelo-Batka and Schoeman, "Voluntary termination of pregnancy;" Beynon-Jones, Toerien, and Macleod, "Articulating reproductive justice."

> that is the same like having a miscarriage and spiritually that baby is growing and it should be regarded as such.

Research confirms the findings from female participants that decisions to terminate pregnancies are kept secret to avoid judgement, alienation, and the loss of respect from elders in the community. It became clear that women are not supposed to question religious and cultural discourses. As the women engaged in their CiC, the identity capital of individual women increased as they drew on the tangible asset of their membership of a social group of women.[68] This identity capital was consolidated as they reflected upon and negotiated their self-identity, adopting definite counter-positions to religious and cultural discourses. This is evidenced by the response of one of the participants (Nomsa – female) who suggested that an empathetic, supportive response should be extended to a woman who has chosen to terminate her pregnancy.

> For me, firstly, the foetus has a right to life, and therefore I believe that it takes a very brave person to terminate pregnancy and to never regret that decision, because every action taken has consequences. Respect of an individual's decision is important...As women, we felt that for women, responsibility is the first action to think thoroughly about, and women have the right to terminate a pregnancy…My body, my choice.

The CiD provided the opportunity for the participants to dialogically challenge the gender inequalities that were raised by the women in their CiC. Women were able to tell their "other" (men) how they felt and to express their frustrations and anger at the injustice of this inequality. The accumulation of successful exchanges in the CiD with their "other" (men) continued to increase the women's identity capital. Participants said that they benefited from the dialogue in a safe, supportive, and accessible space, and were empowered and gained confidence as they voiced their opinions and shared their lived experiences without being judged:[69]

> The strategy allows people to open up, share with one another, and the goal is to learn and acquire new knowledge…one's story can help or groom somebody and my story can also groom the "other"…I think these dialogues should happen in wider communities as well as in the wider university community…for other students to benefit as well (Maureen – female).

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68 Côté and Levine, *Identity Formation*.

69 Gilbert and Sewpaul, "Challenging Dominant Discourses;" Herold, Kimport, and Cockrill, "Women's Private Conversations."

> I must say that the strategy is therapeutic. One learns to get the perspectives of others and realise that I am not alone, I can survive. If what I do is a sin, then I will go to church, apologise to God, and move on with my life because if there is no support, I have to find ways so that I do not bring a child in this world who is going to suffer (Agnes – female).

Having participated in empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying, the participants related that they were far more aware of their self-dialogue and were sensitised to the possibilities of their dialogical self in action, as they adopted counter-positions to the dominant religious and cultural voices in their society-of-mind. They expressed their self-dialogue (level one) in their self-narratives (level two). Ellis[70] and Lawler[71] consider this to be therapeutic, emancipatory, and empowering in addressing male hegemony and fragmenting and reinterpreting dominant religious and cultural discourses leading potentially to new layers of consciousness.[72] The CiC and CiD provided the opportunity for the participants to think critically about the complexity of power relations that operate to perpetuate religious and cultural norms and understandings with regard to the right to bodily self-determination, and more specifically the termination of pregnancy.

The CfT (level five) provided the opportunity for the participants to think critically about processes of socialisation and to discuss and begin the process of deconstructing the same. While the participants (both men and women) were aware of how their particular contexts can shape their behaviour, engaging in this strategy assisted them to see that they can be agents of change. The strategy opened up a space for constructing a narrative in which they have some ability to direct future-oriented action. This is expressed by the participants as follows:

> I think that this methodology is helpful, constructive, and transformative in that it gives you an opportunity to sit back and self-reflect on the topic and further gives you a particular worldview to think about other people as well and understand their actions (Nonjabulo – male).
>
> It teaches us not to be judgemental, whether female or male (Bongi – female).

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70 Ellis, *The ethnographic I.*

71 Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives.*

72 Ritchie and Wilson, *Teacher narrative*; White, *Whiteness.*

> The methodology allows you, and especially us as males, to understand the female side of the story. At the same time it allows every one of us time with yourself, and discussions allow you to make a choice to change or not to change your attitude (Spha – male).
>
> I found this strategy to be helpful especially in levels 1 and 2 where one had to listen to different voices before one takes a decision…it gives you possible ideas to question yourself to say: "What can you change?" "How can you do that?" "Why should you act in that particular way?" (Sabelo – male).
>
> [T]his strategy stimulates the mind and gives us many possible ideas leading to critical thinking and to question yourself for better understanding, and the probing questions assisted…it has a potential to be transformative (Agnes – female).

The participants collectively agreed that this strategy could be an effective tool to employ in their professional spaces to enhance teacher-learner relationships. Their views included the following:

> As teachers, we need to do what is just with our learners...social justice…We need to teach them and expose them to such issues (Bongi – female).
>
> The strategy transforms the way you perceive issues and other people. We need to go out there as changed men and women so that we will be transformed parents to our children (Andile – male).

In the classroom, empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying has the potential to assist in the teaching-learning process with regard to human rights education. Participants suggested that empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying could be used to engage with various human rights issues.[73] They were of the opinion that this approach could be beneficial, not only in a classroom, but also in the broader community, and that it has the potential to be transformative for the wider society.

Conclusion

This article contributes uniquely to the ongoing gender and religion discourse, by offering a methodology which encourages, in this context, pre-service teachers "to see the world through the lens of [their 'other']… providing space within which to grow [their] capacity to communicate

[73] Cf. Jarvis and Mthiyane, "Conversing at the intersection."

across boundaries."[74] This methodology transforms classroom practice into classroom praxis which is both reflective and reflexive, internalising new knowledge so as to inform new action.[75] Empathetic-reflective-dialogical restorying created an opportunity for self-dialogue and self-narrative to be communicated in a safe space, within a CiC, CiD, and CfT. Students considered the disjuncture between religious and cultural discourses and the right to bodily self-determination. By challenging male hegemony and the effects thereof, students increased their identity capital, and this has the potential to be personally empowering and socially transformative. The findings of this study inspired the researchers to continue to create safe spaces for pre-service teachers to explore conversations at the intersection between their religious and cultural identities and human rights issues.

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74 McGregor and Volckmann, "Transversity," 62-3.

75 Cornelia D. Roux and Petro du Preez, "Clarifying students' perceptions of different belief systems and values: prerequisite for effective education praxis," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no.2 (2006).

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"These Things Might Be There in the Bible, But They Are Hidden" – Christian Appropriations of the Practice of Labia Elongation in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT
It is well documented that Christianity played a significant role in advancing discourses of modernity and in reconfiguring gender and sexual cultures in Africa. However, calls for a return to African traditional cultural practices are dominantly associated with "traditionalists" and rarely with Christians. This stems from a long discursive history of negative constructions of these practices since colonialism through institutional Christian discourses and more recently, Western hegemonic versions of feminism. Participation or non-participation in these practices was (and still is) often projected as signifying whether one is a Christian or non-Christian. While Christianity remains significant in the construction of identities in many African countries, this article troubles the illusion of a shared "Christian identity" by interrogating how Christians relate to certain practices that have historically been framed as "traditional" or "cultural" and therefore divorced from Christian values and norms. In particular, the essay draws from empirical studies done with young urban women and men in Zimbabwe on the practice of labia elongation. The ways in which participants spoke about this practice, challenge essentialist understandings and dominant representations of these so-called traditional practices. Participants took complex and contradictory positions in criticising and supporting labia elongation at different moments by invoking Christian discourses interwoven with notions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. Drawing from the work of poststructuralist and postcolonial feminists, the essay demonstrates how contemporary Zimbabwean urban Black Christians exercise agency in redefining this practice in relation to their own Christian identities as they take up different subject positions and navigate multiple identities connected with their lived realities.

KEYWORDS
labia elongation; Christianity; Zimbabwe; identities; sex education; tradition

Introduction: Christianity, Sex Education, and Tradition

As Africa continues to face the HIV and AIDS pandemic, there have been calls by some traditional leaders for a return to some African traditional cultural practices because they see HIV and AIDS as punishment for Africans for abandoning their culture.[1] Against this background, there has been a revival of practices such as virginity

[1] Preben Kaarsholm, "Culture as cure: Civil society and moral debates in KwaZulu-Natal after apartheid," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 18, no.2 (2006): 89.

testing promoted as a solution to fight HIV infections as it supposedly controls sexual immorality. The danger with this is the romanticising of cultural practices that subjugate women by controlling their sexuality, when men or boys are not subjected to virginity testing practices.

In most instances, discussions around these cultural practices take either the "return to culture" or the "liberation from culture" discourses.[2] The former argument is dominantly associated with "traditionalists" and rarely with those constructed as Christians, who are associated with the latter. This stems from a long discursive history of negative constructions of these practices since colonialism through institutional Christian discourses and more recently, Western hegemonic versions of feminism. Christianity came as a modernising mission, with colonialism as an accompanying ally.[3] The overarching goal for missionaries was to replace indigenous practices with Christian practices which were presented as superior. This was achieved through the oppositional construction of tradition relational to Christianity – one of the versions of modernity. Christian missionaries attempted to denigrate most of the traditional cultural practices that marked the transition from childhood to adulthood.[4] These customary practices (especially those relating to sexuality) were, according to Schmidt,[5] "repugnant to European concepts of morality." What seems clear, which I will elaborate on in detail below, is that Christianity, with the support of colonial authorities, contributed immensely to a redefinition of African cultures and sexualities and gender relations.[6]

Christianity not only influenced a shift in modes of sexual expression for the colonised, especially Black African women, it also emerged as an

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[2] Anette Wickström, "Virginity testing as a local public health initiative: a 'preventive ritual' more than a diagnostic measure," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no.3 (2010): 534.

[3] Ezra Chitando, "Down with the Devil, Forward with Christ! A Study of the Interface between Religious and Political Discourses in Zimbabwe," *African Sociological Review* 6, no.1 (2002): 2.

[4] Tompson Makahamadze and Fortune Sibanda, "'Battle for survival': responses of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96, no.3 (2008): 293.

[5] Elizabeth Schmidt, "Negotiated spaces and contested terrain: Men, women, and the law in colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1939," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, no.4 (1990): 623.

[6] Sylvia Tamale, "The rights to culture and the culture of rights: a critical perspective on women's sexual rights in Africa," *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, no.1 (2008): 47-69.

important site of identification for the colonised and still does for most people in postcolonial African countries as reflected in this article. Although Christianity is not presently associated with a particular social class, it is worthwhile mentioning that during colonialism it played a central role in the creation of an African elite.[7] This was achieved most significantly through missionaries who were the first to offer formal education to Black Africans.[8] This is why Christianity was seen as "an agency of social mobility" for Africans, especially during colonialism.[9] To demonstrate this shift in social status in that colonial context, the Zimbabwean middle-class "rejected tradition and custom in favour of modernity."[10] Partly, this was to show that they had progressed more than their uneducated counterparts. More significantly, assuming this position was more connected with Christian teachings in missionary schools, which sought to denounce African traditions.

Writing from a historical South African context, Erlank[11] observes that, in the twentieth century, attitudes by Black South Africans towards sexuality matters were largely dependent on whether one was a Christian or non-Christian. Nonetheless, even among African Christian communities themselves, ideas on sexuality tended to be distinctly framed around one's social class. Prior to the Christian influence, literature suggests that discussions about sexual experimentation and sexual pleasure were acceptable within various African cultures.[12] For instance, the practice of non-penetrative "thigh sex" among adolescents was an acceptable practice among the Xhosa and the Zulu.[13] However, this practice became less common because of its "immoral and un-modern connotations"[14] that were not in tandem with Christian ideals. It must also be noted that missionaries sought to ban traditional initiation schools which were the main transmitters of sexuality education and promoters of sex related cultural practices such as circumcision. They

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7 Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

8 Michael West, *The rise of an African middle class: colonial Zimbabwe, 1898-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

9 West, *The rise of an African middle class*, 60.

10 West, *The rise of an African middle class*, 4.

11 Natasha Erlank, "Plain clean facts and initiation schools: Christianity, Africans, and sex education in South Africa, c. 1910-1940," *Agenda* 18, no.62 (2004): 77.

12 Cf. Peter Delius and Clive Glaser, "Sexual socialisation in South Africa: A historical perspective," *African Studies* 61, no.1 (2002): 27-54.

13 Delius and Glaser, "Sexual socialisation in South Africa," 33-4.

14 Erlank, "Plain Clean Facts," 78.

argued that these initiation schools promoted "improper sexuality and obscenity."[15] While some young Christian converts found themselves withdrawing their participation in initiation ceremonies as an expression of devotion to their new religion,[16] to a greater extent, missionaries faced resistance from the communities in which circumcision was predominantly practised. This prompted some Christian churches to create alternative Christian initiation schools with the intention of stopping Christian boys from taking part in traditionally run circumcision schools. It can be argued that this was an attempt, not only to separate Christians from non-Christians, but to construct Christian initiation schools as modern and distinctly different from those run by "traditionalists." The difference was seen in the reconfiguration of the sexuality education within these Christian initiation schools, which was now delivered in moralist ways and became less and less sexual over time.[17]

While what I have discussed so far presents precolonial and colonial constructions of cultural practices within Christian discourses, current Pentecostal Christian teachings still emphasise premarital abstinence, which arguably signifies a "break with the past" and an integral component in the creation of a modern personhood.[18] Some scholars suggest that these teachings continue to appeal to "upwardly mobile [Christian] women" who are educated, from urban backgrounds, and are in the upper economic social ladder. Implied in these authors' conclusions is that the conservative Christian sexual teachings have little to no resonance with rural low-class uneducated women. This essay aims to interrogate such arguments that seem to reproduce rather than challenge essentialist and binary constructions of identities. In particular, the article foregrounds the argument that Africans continue to exercise their agency to reshape Christianity even in contemporary postcolonial contexts. Deploying discourses on Christianity, I aim to demonstrate how the current African context Pentecostalism appears to produce "rigid moralities about sexuality" for its members, yet also showing "how these

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15 Erlank, "Plain Clean Facts," 78.

16 Mercy A. Oduyoye, "Human rights and social justice: A theological reflection on Christian social teaching from 1966-1976," *RELIGIONS: A Journal of Nigerian Association for the study of Religion* 2, no.2 (1977): 76-7.

17 Erlank, "Plain Clean Facts," 79.

18 Astrid Bochow and Rijk van Dijk, "Christian Creations of New Spaces of Sexuality, Reproduction, and Relationships in Africa: Exploring Faith and Religious Heterotopia," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 no.4 (2012): 325-44.

rigidities produce new fascinations and alternative positions at the same time."[19]

The article draws from an empirical study conducted with young urban Shona women and men in Harare, Zimbabwe, to understand how they constructed their identities around the practice of labia elongation.[20] Much of the existing literature about this practice is from Uganda,[21] Rwanda,[22] Lesotho,[23] and Mozambique.[24] Indications from these studies are that labia elongation is the way through which women conform to cultural and marital expectations. This literature also associates the practice with enhanced sexual pleasure, although there are contradictions in terms of whose sexual pleasure improves – those of men or those of women? In the Zimbabwean context, some White male historians, anthropologists, and medical doctors wrote about labia elongation among the Shona during and shortly after the colonial era, producing limited narratives about this practice,[25] while it is unclear who provided them with this knowledge. For example, one of these authors wrote that labia elongation was done to prepare a girl's body "to receive the man," adding that "in no way [was] it intended as a form of sexual excitation."[26] From this, it is unclear whether the author implied that the practice has no association with sexual pleasure in general or female sexual pleasure in particular. There are suggestions that in the past, husbands who married women without elongating their labia would send them back to their families, which is why girls were forced by their family

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19 Bochow and Van Dijk, "Christian Creations," 329.

20 Labia elongation is a process that involves the massaging and pulling of the inner labia of the vagina, using the thumb and index finger, sometimes after applying certain herbal oils or powder to ease the stretching process.

21 Cf. Sylvia Tamale, "Eroticism, sensuality and 'women's secrets' among the Baganda," *IDS bulletin* 37, no.5 (2006): 89-97.

22 Cf. Josefine Larsen, "The social vagina: labia elongation and social capital among women in Rwanda," *Culture, health & sexuality* 12, no.7 (2010): 813-26.

23 Cf. Mathabo Khau, "Exploring sexual customs: Girls and the politics of elongating the inner labia," *Agenda* 23, no.79 (2009): 30-7.

24 Cf. Guillermo Martínez Pérez, Esmeralda Mariano, and Brigitte Bagnol, "Perceptions of Men on Puxa-Puxa, or Labia Minora Elongation, in Tete, Mozambique," *The Journal of Sex Research* 52, no.6 (2015): 700-9.

25 Cf. for example, John Williams, "Labial elongation in the Shona," *The Central African Journal of Medicine* 15*,* no.7 (1969): 165-6.

26 Michael Gelfand, *The genuine Shona: Survival values of an African culture* (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1973), 169.

members to engage in this practice, even if they were Christians.[27] Zimbabwean scholarly literature on this practice remains limited, which makes it difficult to ascertain how widespread this practice is in the country. However, discussions about this practice are common on social media platforms such as closed women's Facebook groups, and some women's rights activists' personal blogs,[28] which may not be seen as proper sources of intellectual knowledge. In the following sections, I present findings on how participants in my study framed themselves in relation to labia elongation and, to a lesser extent, male circumcision,[29] but first I reflect on the methodological and theoretical approaches I used.

Research Process, Theoretical and Analytical Focus

In selecting research participants for my study, the characteristics I was interested in included their age,[30] gender, ethnicity,[31] and their middle-class[32] status. Their religious affiliation was not among the characteristics I was looking for, yet (Pentecostal) Christianity emerged as a significant defining identity for most participants as I engaged them in conversations through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. In total, I engaged with 28 participants (18 female and 10 male) through focus groups. I then conducted ten in-depth interviews with women only, six of whom participated in the focus groups. I also need to state that the women who participated in this study were not selected based on whether they had undergone the practice, and neither

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[27] Mavis Muguti and Nomatter Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies: Dealing with Women's Sexual Autonomy in Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe," in *The Bible and Gender Troubles in Africa*, ed. Joachim Kügler, Rosinah Gabaitse, and Johanna Stiebert (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2019), 185-201.

[28] Cf. for example, Betty Makoni, "Labia elongation is female genital mutilation type 4 – harmful to girls," personal blog, http://muzvarebettymakoni.org/labia-elongation-is-female-genital-mutilation-type-4-harmful-to-girls/.

[29] While my PhD study intended to focus exclusively on the practice of labia elongation, male circumcision emerged from the participants as a male version of genital modification. This is why my analysis will also refer to this practice.

[30] My participants were in their 20s and 30s.

[31] My sample was limited to those who identified as Shona. The Shona are considered the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe as they are said to account for 82% of the total population. However, the Shona as a sociolinguistic category is made up by various sub-ethnicities, notably the Karanga, Manyika, Zezuru, Korekore, and Ndau.

[32] Because "middle-class" is a contested category, in the context of this essay I use it in its relative and loose sense to refer to people who are both educated (at least to the level of a first degree) and salaried professionals (or children of professionals) who stay in medium to low density residential suburbs.

did I select men on the basis that their wives or girlfriends had elongated labia. However, these details sometimes emerged during our conversations when some women would disclose their labial status. The inclusion of men in a study about a female practice was motivated by arguments that gender is a relational category, and therefore "to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that…the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other."[33] Prior conversations before my study indicated that labia elongation, though a female practice, was done for men's benefit. Hence, it was also important to capture men's views regarding this practice.

I took an inductive approach where I treated those who participated in the research as producers of knowledge and authorities about the social worlds they construct.[34] With this, I mean that inasmuch as I started off by focusing specifically on the practice of labia elongation, I allowed the research participants to set the agenda and incorporate themes and issues which seemed significant to them and which ultimately influenced the direction that the research took.

Theoretically, my study was influenced by poststructuralist feminism, which attempts to theorise the relationship between meaning and subjectivity by placing emphasis on the importance of language, discourse, and other signifying practices.[35] Influenced by Foucault, poststructuralist feminists argue that discourses are multiple and vary in authority. As such, discourses offer different subject positions that women can take up, which arise from "competing [and] potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world."[36] Women may relate with and "conform to traditional discursive constructions of femininity or they can resist, reject, and challenge them."[37] In other words, individuals are not passive pawns of powerful institutional or cultural discourses.

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[33] Joan Scott, "Deconstructing equality-versus-difference: Or, the uses of poststructuralist theory for feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14, no.1 (1988): 32.

[34] Emmanuel Mayeza, "Playing gender in childhood: how boys and girls construct and experience schooling and play in a township primary school near Durban" (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2014).

[35] Nicola Gavey, "Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 13 (1989): 459-75.

[36] Gavey, "Feminist Poststructuralism," 464.

[37] Gavey, "Feminist Poststructuralism," 464.

The Foucauldian discourse analytical framework guided my analysis because it allows one to "identify the ideological and power effects of discourse."[38] Drawing from the Foucauldian genealogical discourse analytical steps developed by Carabine,[39] I was particularly attentive to the interrelationship between discourses; absences and silences; resistances and counter-discourses; the effects of the discourse; and contextualising the material in the power/knowledge networks of the period. I attempted to analyse how and why participants position themselves in relation to "popular and influential discourses" of gender and sexuality.[40] I also paid attention to the shifting subject positions that young women and men took up during the different interviews. I took note that subjective positions are linked to gender scripts informing what is framed as appropriate "masculine and feminine norms" for people of a particular "background, culture, ethnicity, religion, and class [which] then play into the membership categories that they perceive they belong to."[41] In my focus on Christian identities in this essay, I try to show how these are constructed in quite complex ways as they intersect with other significant identities. As I present findings, I sometimes quote extensively from what participants said to demonstrate how their positions shifted precariously within focus group discussions and even in individual interviews. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants appearing in this essay are all pseudonyms.

Pentecostal Churches, Bridal Showers, and Labia Elongation

I introduce the notion of bridal showers[42] as important contemporary urban feminine sites of sex education and initiation platforms that mark

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38 Vivien Burr, *Social Constructionism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 18.

39 Jean Carabine, "Unmarried motherhood 1830-1990: A genealogical analysis," in *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis,* eds. Simeon Yates, Stephanie Taylor, and Margareth Wetherell (London and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2001), 267-310.

40 Rob Pattman, "Researching interviews, braais and diaries and the gendered performances of young men in South Africa and Zimbabwe, and setting agendas for HIV/AIDS education," in *Society in Focus-Change, Challenge and Resistance: Reflections from South Africa and Beyond*, eds. Lindy Heinecken and Heidi Prozesky (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 272-89.

41 Helen Cahill, "Approaches to understanding youth well-being," in *Handbook of children and youth studies*, eds. Joanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Singapore and London: Springer, 2015), 95-113.

42 Bridal showers are celebratory urban parties organised for women who are about to wed, and normally take place a week or two before the white wedding. They become sites of sex education or initiation for a soon-to-be bride.

the transition from being a single to a married woman.[43] A bridal shower represents "a new sanitised, urban version of girls' initiation" introduced by middle-class urban women "to avoid the dangers of initiation ceremonies becoming too traditional."[44] What is more significant, however, from personal observations, is the increasing role that the church takes in organising these parties as a platform in which female church elders take in educating the soon-to-be bride on how to conduct herself as a proper Christian wife, replacing paternal aunts who traditionally performed this role. It has become very common in Zimbabwean churches (through women's groups) to host bridal showers for its female members. Even in cases where the relative or friends of the bride organise the party, they might even invite a female pastor or a pastor's wife from her church to give a speech during the party proceeding. The role of the church in contemporary feminine sites of sex education, such as bridal showers, could contribute to scholarly debates, yet it remains an unexplored area especially in Zimbabwe.

One of the female participants in my study, Tanya, who married a pastor, had her bridal shower organised by women in her church. She recounted how she was taught to "balance the work of God, to balance being a mother, being a wife, [and] even to handle myself [sexually] in the bedroom." She said she was also urged to "enjoy sex" because it was God's "covenant" and "the only special thing between a wife and a husband." Having attended one bridal shower where the bride-to-be and other women present were encouraged to elongate their labia, I was keen to know whether this topic featured in my participant's party, to which she responded:

> Nobody even mentioned it [laughs] at the kitchen tea [party]. [Laughs] No one ever said that, maybe they said it and I missed it or what, but no one

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[43] While bridal showers are for women, there are also bachelor's parties for men about to get married, although these are not as common as bridal showers. When they occur, they are organised by male friends, while pastors are rarely invited. I did not focus on bachelor's parties, because from interviews I conducted with men about how they know about labia elongation they did not mention these as platforms through which they learn about this practice. Instead, they mentioned the internet and peers as their sources of information on labia elongation. However, I must add that some female participants complained that, while women at bridal showers were encouraged to sexually please their husbands, men were not subjected to similar teachings at bachelor's parties where all they do is "drink beer and braai meat."

[44] Gisela Geisler, *Women and the remaking of politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating autonomy, incorporation, and representation* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2004).

> ever told me that at the kitchen tea. I think churches don't [teach this]; most churches are silent about such things though they know that it's important or that men like it, or that some women in church actually already have them, but I [think] they do it outside the church, because I personally haven't seen any church where they talk about it except recently.

When I asked her why she thought most churches do not teach about this practice, she said it was because they believe that it is "done in the name of tradition, [therefore] it's not holy-like." Interestingly, she told me that her husband in one of the ladies' church meetings had encouraged women to elongate their labia which aroused "a lot of interest" among the ladies from this church. Contributing to these women's interest and delight, it seems, is the idea that a male pastor, and a religious figure, was endorsing a traditional practice often constructed as ungodly in dominant Christian discourses, yet quite significant to most of them.

Following this conversation, and upon Tanya's invitation, I had an opportunity to attend a belated bridal shower organised for a recently wed bride in their church. Interestingly this bridal shower was held in the same church building where Sunday church services are conducted.[45] Tanya, as the pastor's wife, assigned the vice chairwoman of their women's fellowship group to teach the new bride about how to transition into marital life where she was expected to satisfy her husband sexually. The vice chairwoman (whom I was informed is of Malawian origin)[46] told the women present that "our father" (referring to their pastor, Tanya's husband), had asked older women in church to teach younger women about labia elongation and its benefits. She encouraged women present to engage in this practice if they had not done so, adding that elongated labia would help to clip "nhengo yababa" (daddy's part), implying penis, stopping it from constantly slipping out of the vagina. She added that elongated labia were significant because it enhanced sexual pleasure for

[45] Normally bridal showers are held in houses. This was the first time I had attended a bridal shower held in a church building.

[46] Although it emerged in my study that most women in Zimbabwe had undergone labia elongation, there was a suggestion that this practice had been popularised by older women of Malawian and Mozambican origin who are said to be more knowledgeable about this since they attend cultural initiation schools. Emerging from conversations with other participants were stories that Malawian and Mozambican women have established "sex academies" in some highdensity suburbs where they teach women how to spice their sexual lives including how to pull one's labia effectively within a short period. Women will then pay for these services.

the husband. She reminded them that a “woman’s vagina should not be like that of a girl,” and therefore elongated labia brought that difference. So, in this context, elongating one’s labia was very explicitly constructed as differentiating a girl from a woman, who was presumably deemed sexual. She ended the topic by offering her services to show those who wanted to do it, about how to do it.

Despite witnessing this Christian led bridal shower, the other women I interviewed could not agree whether Pentecostal Christian churches teach or should teach about labia elongation. However, the main position they took was that they “don’t normally teach” this specific subject and sexuality issues in general, especially in public events such as kitchen parties. One of the women, Chenai, explained that because sexuality and labia elongation were “intimate [and] private things,” only those women who were about to get married and those already married were taught about these individually and in private and by specialists in the area.

Others indicated that in the few cases where young women were taught about labia elongation by religious figures, it was often done in non-sexualised ways despite the fact that they are already adults. Ruva, another female participant, indicated that she once attended a single-women meeting at their church when she was 26 years old. A female church elder who was leading the meeting told the young women to elongate their labia as that would help them to urinate in a “smart way without splashing urine all over the toilet seat.” When I asked Rudo whether they had responded to this elder, she said, with laughter, that they kept quiet. She added that while the young women in the meeting did not openly question what they were told, most knew that what the church elder had taught them about labia elongation “was a lie.” This was an indication that young women can act ignorant of sexuality issues in front of prospective suitors, teachers, or parents who construct themselves as authorities on sexual knowledge.[47] In this case, the assumption by the church leader was that, since these young women were still unmarried, they have no prior knowledge of sexuality matters from other sources of sex education including traditional initiation schools, family, and peers. This is tied to Christian discourses em-

[47] Abigail Harrison, “Hidden love: Sexual ideologies and relationship ideals among rural South African adolescents in the context of HIV/AIDS,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 10, no.2 (2008): 175-89.

phasising chastity before marriage. This, however, problematises churches as sites of sex education because they continue to impart knowledge that does not match the realities of their congregants.

Defying Creation? The Bible and its Position on *Mabhaibheri* (Elongated Labia)

As the previous section demonstrated, there was no consensus about whether Pentecostal Christian churches allow teachings about labia elongation and whether this practice is against Christian norms, because of its association with culture and tradition. Nonetheless, some of the participants invoked biblical discourses to justify labia elongation, although this often took complex and contradictory forms. Before discussing the appropriations of labia elongation by Christians, it is worth mentioning that among the numerous metaphorical names that participants gave to elongated labia,[48] was “mabhaibheri,” a local Shona term loosely translated to mean “Bibles.” In other words, the folds that characterise the protruding extended labia are said to resemble pages of the Bible.

In this section, I wish to focus on the arguments and counter arguments that emerged from women and men, after some argued that labia elongation interfered with the natural order of things, a concern significantly framed in religious terms. In my initial conversations with some women, they indicated that women who undergo labia elongation have “no clue about what the Bible says,” which reiterates other findings that this practice and female genital mutilation are not backed by biblical scriptures.[49] Although noting that the practice is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, other participants even quoted Bible verses to support labia elongation. In the excerpts below, taken from separate interviews I had with Tanya and Rudo, who are both married women, they both argued that labia elongation was in line with biblical teachings, although they voiced their opinions with traces of doubt.

> Tanya: I’m not so sure if it [labia elongation] is satanic or if it is godly (laughing) about why church people don’t talk about it. But I guess, I

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48 The euphemist names given to elongated labia varied but were linked to their physical appearance (for example “number elevens,” *nzeve* [ears], “extended family,” *mabhaibheri* [Bibles]), or their purpose – *maketeni* (curtains), *zvidhori* (dolls), “daddy’s toys,” and *madhoiri* (doillies).

49 Cf. Muguti and Sande, “Women’s Sexualized Bodies,” 193.

> guess it's because that it is not mentioned in the Bible, because in the Bible you don't hear it explicitly. You hear of girls that they are, they were prepared…like in the book of Esther that they [women] took like a year preparing to go and parade themselves before the King and you wouldn't really know that for that year what exactly will they be preparing. You might be tempted to think that maybe they were being inspected of all those things like elongated labia but it's not written, so you wouldn't really know whether it is so acceptable, is it biblical? But…why I think it wouldn't be sinful to do it, is [that the] Bible respects the fact that as a wife you should [do what your husband wants]. Just like the husband is commanded to love his wife, the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband, so if the husband thinks that he wants them [elongated labia] on his wife, the wife can go out of their way to have them. So I guess it's not out of line [with biblical teachings].
>
> Rudo: [W]hat happens in churches is that they say that one thing that you must value most if you are a married woman, you must value your husband. So what your husbands wants, that's what you want, that's what you do meaning that it is not a [biblical] teaching that is done openly that do so-so-so and do this because maybe another man doesn't like it.

The fact that the practice of labia elongation is not explicitly stated in the Bible could be the reason behind some churches' silences around it, especially those who follow the doctrine that "we speak where the Bible speaks and become silent where the Bible is silent."[50] However, what is most significant in this context is the way these two women justify labia elongation by drawing from biblical discourses around husband-wife relationships which, as they demonstrate, are characterised by unequal power relations. It has been demonstrated in other studies that "in some cases the Bible is unfortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women."[51] What we see in the above narratives, is how women (and not men) employ biblical discourses that support female submission,[52] which reinforce rather than challenge female sub-ordination. The implication is that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband *wants* and as the Bible *commands*. What this also highlights is the reification and deification of the Bible as a powerful person, the same way "culture" is also often personified by participants in relation to gender and sexuality. Often, discourses on "culture" and the

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[50] Francis Machingura and Paradzai Nyakuhwa, "Sexism: A hermetical interrogation of Galatians 3:28 and women in the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no.2 (2015): 94.

[51] Machingura and Nyakuhwa, "Sexism," 95.

[52] These are based on the biblical verses, Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18.

Bible are used to emphasise and justify female submission, a clear indication of what has been theorised as an alignment of discourses of tradition and Christianity, especially in postcolonial countries like Zimbabwe.[53] Therefore, this stands in stark contrast to colonial discourses which constructed the two in oppositional ways.

My findings seem to support the argument that Black African Christians selectively appropriate dominant Christian messages and in the process identify "possibilities for creative agency in the midst of constraints."[54] Whereas, what the two female participants quoted above, affirms dominant discourses of a shared Christian identity (as Christian wives) in the passage below, I illustrate how religion was raised by other participants to critique labia elongation around discourses of individualist self-improvement and agency. I demonstrate how the idea of the *Creator* arose in the focus group I conducted with men where labia elongation was constructed by others as a practice that undermines the authority and expertise projected on to *the* Creator. This followed an argument between Masimba and Ras, which was provoked by a question about whether labia elongation ought to be promoted. Taurai then draws an analogy, immediately supported by Ras, between labia elongation and going to the gym to build muscle, or getting circumcised, constructed as male versions of "working" one's nature in relation to one's body.

> Masimba: Personally, the way I see it is that, nature, if a person was created normal [without elongated labia], there is nothing to add or subtract.
> Ras: Were you born circumcised? (Taurai laughs)
> Masimba: What I am saying is (Taurai laughs) whoever…
> Ras: Let's talk guys, is there a man who is born circumcised? (Masimba: No, wait, wait let me finish.) So why are they encouraging circumcision?
> Masimba: I am saying that the Creator, when he created humankind, he created something that is perfect, a human being, and you can't add or subtract anything from it. When a human was created, it was perfect, but we (Taurai: We are adding on), it's now our own thinking, we think

53 Rob Pattman, "The beer drinkers say I had a nice prostitute but the church goers talk about things spiritual: Learning to be men at a teachers' college in Zimbabwe," in *Changing men in Southern Africa*, ed. Robert Morrell (Durban: University of Natal & Zed Press, 2001), 225-38.

54 Paul Kollman, "Classifying African Christianities, Part Two: The Anthropology of Christianity and Generations of African Christians," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40, no.2 (2010): 118-48.

> differently. We are thinking that what we are doing has a benefit or whatever.
> Taurai (interjecting): Masimba, Masimba, why do you go to gym? Why do you go to the gym?
> Masimba: What?
> Taurai: Why do you go to the gym?
> Ras: If you were created perfectly?
> Masimba: To change my appearance.
> Taurai: Why do you want to change what God has created as perfect?
> Obert: No, going to the gym is not to go and change, it's to…
> Taurai & Ras: You change! You change!
> Masimba: (chuckles) Yes, I change, but the change…
> Obert: It's for healthy reasons…
> Sam: I personally feel that natural things taste good just as they are… People now want to put spices, but natural is the best, so people should just be as God created them.
> Taurai: Nothing is added, herbs or anything when pulling labia, it's the same with you, you just lift weights and your muscle grows.

In the above excerpt, going to the gym in this case is on the one hand presented as a male activity, while situated around versions of middle-class masculinities and discourses of self-improvement on the other hand.[55] Furthermore, arguments in favour of labia elongation and male circumcision are both secular and individualistic which render people's bodies as projects on which to *work* and *improve on*, from where the Creator ended, through their own actions. Such self-improvement discourses and practices seem to resonate with key features of modernity, yet, ironically deployed by some participants to justify a traditional cultural practice. The reason why men alluded to male circumcision is against the background that currently Zimbabwe is one of the countries in Southern Africa promoting it as an HIV prevention strategy. The circumcision campaigns are, however, not exclusively framed within health discourses, but also in discourses of modernity and sexuality. For example, medical circumcision is presented as desirable because it supposedly limits the likelihood of premature ejaculation, while also carrying connotations of being fashionable and wise.

Just like men in the conversation presented above, some women, who identified as Christian, also drew analogies of applying make-up and trimming eyebrows to justify the practice of labia elongation, at the same

[55] Hannah Farrimond, "Beyond the caveman: Rethinking masculinity in relation to men's help-seeking," *Health* 16, no.2 (2012): 208-25.

time deploying a discourse of creation as exemplified in the following response:

> Chido: [T]he issue is, it's not all about that God created me without them [elongated labia]; if it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal,[56] people would not be trimming their eyebrows, because you were not created [like that]. God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them, but it's all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives. Even in churches, people would not be wearing trousers, people would be walking around naked because we were created naked.

Like the men's accounts discussed above, Chido seems to construct labia elongation in terms of its aesthetic value,[57] just like applying make-up, or wearing clothes, supposedly to improve from where God left off. This seems to support the "interplay between modernity and religion"[58] since the colonial era and how Christianity operated as one of the idioms of colonial modernity. For Coly,[59] "the modern and civilised body is a religious (Christianised) body." In the light of these observations, my participants' invocations of religion appear to be linked to their affirmations of their Christian and middle-class identities. For example, the gym and muscle building analogies to labia elongation, which made such a powerful impact in the men's group discussion, are reaffirmed by Chido's own feminised analogies (of trimming eyebrows and applying Black Opal) which appear to signify middle-class femininity.

The support and justification of traditional practices such as labia elongation, specifically by my participants and more generally, Black African women, in some way demonstrate their "silent struggles against colonialism and postcolonial forces including religion, which [were] aimed at imposing a 'modern' view on sexual behaviour."[60] Yet, not always does this imply "struggles" against religion and modernity. In other contexts, there is an affirmation of both, summoned to signify modern

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56 This is a range of make-up products popular with Black African women.

57 Bridgette Bagnol and Esmeralda Mariano, "Politics of naming sexual practices," in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 271-87.

58 Ayo Coly, "Un/clothing African womanhood: Colonial statements and postcolonial discourses of the African female body," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 33, no.1 (2015): 18.

59 Coly, "Un/clothing African womanhood," 18.

60 Bagnol and Mariano, "Politics of Naming," 26.

rather than traditional appropriations of labia elongation, and to accentuate their middle-class femininities.

However, I wish to return to Chido's remark that people's participation in (or support for) some of these practices is "all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives," since it requires elaboration. In my conversations with women, most of whom were married, they seemed to be of the opinion that when one elongated her labia, this limited the chances of her male partner becoming promiscuous. This is because a significant number of participants associated labia elongation with enhanced male sexual pleasure. In other words, labia elongation was perceived not only as a practice but a strategy that women use to control men's sexual behaviour. This is significant in the wake of HIV and AIDS that is also infecting and affecting Christians.[61] Similarly, some women appeared to embrace male circumcision (despite coming from non-circumcising communities) which they associated with their own female pleasure and better penile hygiene. Hence, in this context, participants suppressed their ideal Christian identities, choosing to highlight that they were also desiring sexual beings who encounter the same struggles as non-Christians. Although most Christian churches still shy away from discussing sex education issues or cultural practices, marital challenges such as high divorce rates and health complications are realities that confront even Christians.[62] This could explain why some Christian pastors and leaders now exercise some flexibility by speaking in support of these practices even if the doctrine of the churches they represent remains rigid.

The Shifting Christian Identities in Relation to Varying Feminine Subjectivities

What I have highlighted is the issue of participants' agency through framing labia elongation in particular ways and how they negotiated their identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways to demonstrate that human beings are "site[s] and subjects" of multiple discourses.[63] As people engage in processes of identity construction, they "can only

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61 Mike Kesby, "Participatory diagramming as a means to improve communication about sex in rural Zimbabwe: A pilot study," *Social Science & Medicine* 50, no.12 (2000): 1723-41.

62 Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 186.

63 Chris Weedon, *Feminist practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

identify their 'own' interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses." Thus, the way participants spoke about labia elongation was not just about how they perceived this practice, but represented "a staking of identities"[64] against an array of possible femininities and masculinities. In certain instances, participants were constructing labia elongation as a cultural practice but in ways which did not make them appear traditional or cultural when they associated themselves with it. In particular, this is evident in how they invoked Christian religious discourses to either justify or critique labia elongation. Others emphasised discourses of self-improvement to critique dominant Christian discourses which may construct labia elongation as cultural, and therefore "unchristian," since it was going against the Creator. The positions they took, I argue, were in many instances a demonstration of how significant this practice is in their lives even though they identify as Christians.

In this section, I wish to demonstrate that identities and subject positions are never static nor coherent, but are contradictory and always in motion, since they are always (re)constructed in relation to the prevailing social context and multiple social categories in which individuals place themselves. Poststructuralist feminists note that

> many women acknowledge the feeling of being a different person in different social situations which call for different qualities and modes of femininity…contradictory and precarious but…can introduce the possibility of political choice between modes of femininity in different situations and between the discourses in which they have their meaning.[65]

I trace the shifting positions of one of the female Christian participants that I interacted with in a focus group discussion, an interview, and other informal conversations. When I initially communicated with her with a text message, requesting her to participate in my research, while expressing interest to be part of the research, she indicated that she felt labia elongation was "altering God's creation [and] it's abuse." She then asked whether I personally supported the practice. When I evaded the question, she then specifically asked if I had undergone elongation. When I indicated that I had not, she was quick to say that "most of those

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[64] Pattman, "Beer Drinkers Say," 235.
[65] Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 86.

[women] who think it's important are uneducated." Reflecting on this, one can argue that she was presenting herself (and even myself) as educated and empowered women, thus disassociating us from the practice she constructed as a source of "abuse" and against Christianity. However, months after this conversation, when I asked her during an interview why some women were not keen on pulling their labia, she pointed out that some women

> think it is some form of abuse, that why should you pull yourself? Why should you try to be something that you are not? If God wanted these things [labia] to grow long, he would have created them long (laughs); there are some people with those line of thoughts, but then…each one will be trying to justify their decision.

When I reminded her that she had expressed a similar opinion earlier, she said her "mindset has changed to some extent" adding that she "wouldn't even mind trying it [although she] wouldn't go to a lot of trouble to do it." I found it puzzling that she was now among the women who alluded to biblical references to rationalise labia elongation. She is the one who argued that labia elongation, though not stated in the Bible, is implicitly biblical if done to please the husband. In the focus group discussion that she participated in, after other women spoke positively about the practice, I was surprised when she posed the question, "So what do we do? I have girl children, should I tell them to pull?" The question implied that her perception of labia elongation was shifting to an extent that she was now considering educating her own (and church) daughters about this. I found her question perplexing because I was under the impression that she would criticise this practice using the same arguments she gave to me in our earlier conversations.

While her shifting narratives seem to suggest problematic contradictions, I argue that they are just an affirmation that *the self*, or one's positionality (in relation to a research context and particular discourses) is fluid and in a constant flux.[66] If the self "also conveys the notion of identity,"[67] then this woman's accounts clearly emphasise that identities are not intrinsic but relational, produced, and constructed through interaction with

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66 Rob Pattman, "Ways of thinking about young people in participatory interview research," in *Handbook of children and youth studies*, eds. Johanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Singapore and London: Springer, 2015), 79-92.

67 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988).

others.[68] Her shifting perspectives on labia elongation were, therefore, influenced through interaction with other women, to which she admits that because most women constructed labia elongation as "very important," one could easily "buy into some of their ideas." This, of course, begs the question of whether individual interviews are research contexts in which an interviewee is free to reveal the "authentic" self as suggested in realist or naturalist approaches to social research.

I also want to allude to responses by another woman – Ruva from the Remba ethnic group.[69] She was clearly not keen to affiliate with this group, especially those in rural areas, because she believed that they did not "value education" and were too much into "cultural things," such as practising labia elongation. The position she took seemed to be influenced by the fact that she identified as a Christian residing in an urban area, hence affiliating herself with an ethnicity she constructed as cultural or traditional would conflict with her Christian beliefs and urban middle-class identities. She made this apparent when she stated that "our versions about cultural practices such as labia elongation differ from those by people in the rural areas who have no clue about what the Bible says." Yet, after she revealed that she had also elongated her labia, I asked her what motivated her to elongate despite her attempts to dissociate herself from the Remba cultural practice, to which she responded that she did it "for the sake of being girls." Here she presented labia elongation as a feminine practice which should not simply be associated with particular ethnic groups – a position that was also echoed by other participants. In some way, this contradicts studies cited above, which associate this practice only with specific ethnic groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

Earlier in this essay I alluded to how colonial discourses constructed (Western) modernity in opposition to (African) tradition, and Black African culture in opposition to Christianity, which served to produce hierarchies and asserted the superiority of the colonisers. Yet, in a postcolonial African context, we are advised to be wary of naturalising categories by

68 Jane Elliott, *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

69 The Remba are part of the ethnic groups in Zimbabwe that are said to still be practising traditional initiation schools where male circumcision and labia elongation are emphasised.

simply taking "either/or" approaches that "posit complex social issues on a binary plane"[70] – precisely because in everyday practice, categories of modern and tradition (or Christian and non-Christian) do not operate in their essentialist form as stark opposites.[71] The findings presented above reflect this, while further observations made in a study of the Igbo identities in Nigeria support the notion that Black Africans have exercised agency in ways that have Africanised the earlier versions of Christianity to an extent that their cultural and Christian identities no longer appear as "fundamental contradictions."[72] Seemingly, African Christians appear to positively reconcile their Christianity with African cultural practices in assertive ways, showing how normative Christian discourses operate not only as suppressive, but also as productive forces. This is made apparent in the way that some Christian participants reinterpreted biblical scriptures to give meaning to labia elongation in their lives, even though it is predominantly presented as a non-Christian practice. The bridal showers that I alluded to, have also become sites that enable African Christian women to exercise their agency in redefining their cultural identities as postcolonial Christian women.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the invitation of (female) pastors (as moralistic figures) to kitchen parties and not to bachelor's parties, signifies how morality and the duty to provide sexual pleasure is often imputed to women, while men can revel in their naughtiness in bachelor's parties. In order to challenge this, some scholars argue that "there should be a synchronisation of the syllabus taught at bridal showers and the bachelor's party" where both men and women are taught about how to mutually please each other sexually.[73] The church discourse in biblical texts shared at some of these bridal showers or other Christian women gatherings contribute to the representation of women as mere objects of sexual desire, whose bodies are and should be under the control of their husbands.[74] This argument is affirmed by how Christian women in my studies implied that the decision for some women to elongate their labia is not personal but depends on whether or not their husbands express desire for elongated labia. The desire to please husbands stems from

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70 Tamale, "The rights to culture," 48.

71 Harry Garuba, "Explorations in animist materialism: Notes on reading/writing African literature, culture, and society," *Public Culture* 15, no.2 (2003): 264.

72 Axel Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

73 Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualised Bodies," 196.

74 Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 186.

the fear that men might leave them for other women who have elongated labia. Women are subjected to additional pressure from female church leaders to provide maximum sexual satisfaction to their husbands even if it means engaging in cultural practices that "militate against women's sexual autonomy."[75]

This article has highlighted the continued significance of the cultural practice of labia elongation in the lives of urban Christian women even though its importance is linked more with enhancing male sexual satisfaction than women's sexual desire. It has also demonstrated that while dominant Christian discourses either denounce or are silent about such practices, some ordinary Zimbabwean Christians are exercising agency in reshaping these narratives by openly associating themselves with labia elongation even in Christian spaces.

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[75] Muguti and Sande, "Women's Sexualized Bodies," 191.

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the presence of the lord is [here]: black christian theology and trans-ancestral interventions on the genders of the black body

d. r. d.[1]

[1]**SHORT BIO**
Dray is a Black Southern *femme* proudly hailing from North Florida. They're a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, at Pomona College, majoring in Africana Studies with a concentration in literature. Their pastimes are distinctly Southern: they're invested in sweet tea, Black Christian theological interventions, root-work, and communing with the sun and the soil. This article is their first published work.

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ABSTRACT

Departed ancestor James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* emerges as a powerfully meditative text on the conditions of possibility for Black bodies on Earth, and for theology as a vehicle for resistance *only* when it is imbued within Blackness and Black liberation. Cone argues that God is aligned with those on Earth who suffer most, and that Black liberation is so by divine right. In this essay, I argue that the Black Church is inhibited from true and honest Black liberation because of its failure to access revelation through knowing of Black trans bodies and the fullness of Black gender. This essay addresses not necessarily a teleological concern of whether revelation can happen, but whether normative Black bodies can catch up to the work that is being forged by Black trans and queer bodies. Most prominently, what does it mean for Black liberation to be exclusively expressed in terms of bodies who are deemed normative: cisgender and heterosexual? What Black liberation through the Black Christian Church is fungible or possible for Black trans/nonbinary bodies? In what ways does a Black liberatory politic that obfuscates or omits the existence of Black non-normative genders fail to examine the full potential of Black liberation and the fruit that it bears, specifically, in the overturning of violent, rigid, and gendered prohibitions surrounding the Black body? I take up the words of Hortense Spillers, M. Jacqui Alexander, Zenaida Peterson, Hari Ziyad, Marquis Bey, and C. Riley Snorton to suggest a Black theology that has actively been conjured by Black non-cis and queer bodies. Such a theology, black-trans-queer, outpaces the normative considerations of Blackness and revolution/ revelation, currently and historically housed in the Black Church – and I imagine what it would mean for the normative Black Church to catch up. If we understand self-knowing and revelatory power in Black theology as conducive to liberation of Black bodies, what would it mean for this intimate, internal awareness to be housed in that part of our Black bodies that inherently resists colonial gender metrics?

KEYWORDS
Christian theology; Black theology; Trans-queer theology; James Cone; Africana Studies; Queer Studies; Trans Studies; the American Civil Rights Movement; Queer of Colour Critique

In the hallowed halls of my family church, I must sign the visitor's book. The stained-glass windows are inscribed with hymns that have been tucked into my chest. I must know that the presence of the Lord is

ephemeral, here-and-gone, circumstantial, and altogether overpowering – but allegedly alienated by my queerness; inextricable; attracted only by a distinct lineage that does not possess all of my kin.

The perennial struggle for civil rights and Black liberation in the United States was originally able to take root in Black Churches in myriads of Christian denominations in the American South because of the theology's premise: salvation, liberation, and a new temporality for the abused on Earth. Black bodies under constant siege took refuge behind stained glass windows with texts that promised recovery. In the deepest niches of the Jim Crow South, my great-grandmother sought a family church that would bear her lineage. There she demanded her favourite hymn be sung during her last Sunday on Earth. Her daughter has buried two mothers, two husbands, and one son, all taken by the same plague: cancers caught too late and too little money for finer care; overwork; depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and anxiety undetected and silenced. The crucifix of the Jim Crow South, of anti-Blackness underscored the recorded cause of death.

Liberation is by no means here. If anything, the line of Black women in the front pews, showing how the artillery of whiteness has weathered their skins, assert that point by virtue of their existences. Yet still, I make room for minor concessions: though the fact of liberation is not one that has been fully actualised, what does it mean for the Black Church, specifically Black cis, non-queer bodies, to believe that they possess the makings of Black liberation without Black trans and queer bodies?

In his seminal text, *a Black Theology of Liberation,* departed ancestor James Cone leads with this: "There can be no Christian ideology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused."[1] Published in 1970, this book emerges as a powerful and meditative text on the conditions of possibility for Black bodies on Earth and for theology as a vehicle for change *only* when imbued within Blackness and Black liberation. James Cone dedicated his life, body, and energy to not simply inscribing Christianity and Christian theology with Blackness, but by emphasising that God himself is Black. He makes clear that those aligned with Christian theology must be aligned with the obliteration of whiteness, the affirmation of Blackness, and the obliteration of all oppressive entanglements related to racial capitalism and systems of

[1] James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 1.

anti-Blackness. He emphasises that "anyone who claims to be fighting against the problem of oppression and does not analyze the exploitive role of capitalism is either naive or an agent of the enemies of freedom."[2]

My introduction to Cone happened shortly after his death in April 2018. Perplexed by the expectations of academic writing and with where to situate Black trans and queer bodies – with where to situate *my* Southern Black trans-queer body in life and in the Christian theological traditions in which I was reared – my mentor Jared Rodriguez introduced me to Cone. I took considerable interest in his pointed and prescient takedown of ideological fallacies that keep Black bodies trapped, the words-like-anvils that weighed on my queer, economically-exploited, Black body like a shroud during every altar call. He spoke against the idea of the perpetually-eventual "win" through divine right – this idea that Black bodies had to wait for a vague, liberal "win" that would then situate, I read, those most conventionally-divine (i.e. cis, heterosexual) as free. He indicted white/ned, and Black non-radical, neoliberal articulations of freedom unmotivated towards the obliteration of *all* of the trappings of white supremacy, which includes trans- and queer-antagonism. I take up the text to which I was introduced, the text in which I found most immediate resonance, *A Black Theology of Liberation* – his second work, released in 1970. Cone eked out a radical lineage up to his death with 2011's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, which articulates the death of Christ as a lynching. This article is by no means a comprehensive assessment of his wide corpus of knowledge, but rather a close reading of *A Black Theology of Liberation* by a Black Southern trans-queer femme scholar. This article is, too, a conversation on the ways in which I have found resonance with Cone's indictments of what holds the Black Church from the premise of revelation, and my abstractions on what it takes for Black bodies – of the Church and not – to access material and spiritual liberation in the ways that we seek. That liberation lies within my body and that of others – Black trans and queer bodies, who naturally usurp the violence of colonialism, binary gender configurations, and heterosexism. We are what liberation looks like, through our presence' through the bodywork that goes into our very being.

What is perhaps paramount to Cone's praxis, which still lives, is his commitment to the annihilation of the normative, disabling assemblage[3]

[2] Cone, *A Black Theology*, xvii.

that is whiteness. Cone indicts the internalisation of white and liberal metrics of how Black bodies should be and move. He warns:

> Black theology also rejects those who counsel Blacks to accept the limits which this society places on them, for it is tantamount to suicide. In existential philosophy suicide is the ultimate expression of despair. If we accept white definitions of Blackness, we destroy ourselves.[4]

I speak from a perspective of the American South. I breathe through parents who remember and are continually reintroduced to the violence of the Klu Klux Klan; of militarised police; and of antagonisms above and below the Mason-Dixon line that eroded their bodies – generationally, spiritually, materially.[5] I am because of a black domestic worker who sought change through the church in which she was reared. When I speak of the Black Church, I refer not to expressly physical churches and steeples, but to the spiritual, theological, ontological, metaphysical, and material configuration of Black-American Protestant Churches in which people worshipped, sought refuge, and under which people rallied for any tangible freedom and relief from the necropolitics[6] of white supremacy. For Cone, too, Black liberation theology is something not ensconced inside the physical walls of churches. The Black Church does have an immense level of power and credence over Black theology. Cone writes:

> In the New Testament the church (*ecclesia*) is the community that has received the Holy Spirit and is now ready to do what is necessary to live out the gospel. It is the assembly of those who have become heirs of the promises of God; and because they have experienced what that means for humanity, they cannot accept the world as it is. They must rebel against evil so all citizens may know that they do not have to behave according to unjust societal laws.[7]

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3 This term is largely influenced by the work of Dr. Alexander Weheliye in his book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

4 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 17.

5 The Mason-Dixon line is a demarcation that has historically and famously separated the American North from the American South. It borders Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Delaware.

6 J.-A. Mbembé and Libby Meintjes. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (2003): 11-40, https://muse.jhu.edu/.

7 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 130.

The purpose of this article is threefold. I offer an abbreviated trans-queer reading of Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and I articulate the failings of Black theological traditions that do not detect Black trans-queer bodies, which are effectively removed from any legitimate liberation due to their obfuscation of non-cis, non-heterosexual bodies. Critically, I explain how Black trans-queer bodies perform the work of revelation that is so intrinsic to theological readings of liberation and healing, which non-trans and non-queer Black bodies in and outside of the Black Church must understand if they are truly committed to a world free of white supremacy and colonial violence. To be clear, I do not identify the Black Church as the only entity moving towards liberation. Black folks of any religion or spirituality, and of none, are moving towards liberation in a myriad of ways, but those who are non-trans and non-queer must also attend to the bodywork being done by Black trans and queer people if they (cis, straight people) are committed to any kind of tangible liberation politic. The Black Church was one of the central homes of the Civil Rights Movement, but, as Cone dedicated his life to articulating, it is by no means a holistically revolutionary site. I say this as a student of his work, and as a body who has endured harm and listened to fiery polemics against my closeted being since my childhood. I often say that I only go to my home church for the community in which I was raised and for the music, but it is an infrequent visit that is fraught with nerves. I possess a body that they are not yet ready for.

Cone's work is a response to the violence of the Black Church and its pandering to white supremacy, a direct abjuration to Blackness itself, but it is of note that he does not abandon it. Rather, he understands the Church's power, its meaning, its ability to merge with Black radical movements and thought traditions that could fuel the total revelation that must happen. I feel similarly. I still pray. I will always long for the stained-glass windows, the feeling of a hymn book in my hands, and the kindness of ushers. I listen to Mahalia Jackson and Aretha and recall women elders and their humming when I was in times of distress. The Church is in me; I cannot leave it, and so this article is altogether a desire for it to transform and to understand the abject violence of its abandonment and refutation of the bodies that it marks as errant. This work is an opportunity for me to articulate in community the power of Black trans and queer bodywork.

I extend Cone's work to interrogate and find more resonance with the Black theological, and within that, the epistemological concept of

knowing that is cultivated through the process of revelation. Through others' work on queer theology, James Cone has aligned himself with queer bodies and has sought to make queer struggles visible, given the resonance with anti-Black struggles and the struggles of all oppressed people under racialised and gendered capitalism. Paul B. Raushenbush, Senior Vice President at Auburn Theological Seminary and editor of the Auburn Seminary's online journal, *Voices*, relays a critical and warm anecdote on what I would term as an intersectional[8] lens by James Cone. Raushenbush recalls:

> I remember my first theology paper, which was an examination of the intersections of Black Theology and Queer Theology. Cone invited his students to understand how different communities understood God, especially communities that had lived under oppression. When Dr. Cone taught the section on LGBT history and theology, I could see how he relished quoting the profanity laden statements by the drag queens who stood up and refused to take the abuse anymore. Dr. Cone was generous that way; he wanted people to know about the experience of oppression and terror that Black people had experienced in this country but he also was moved by other voices. He told me, "God is a God that makes liberation meaningful to those who are marginalized no matter where they are. God takes on that identity of the oppressed".[9]

Cone's take on Black theology and Blackness is that Black theology is a theological, ontological, and epistemological mode of self-awareness and internal decolonisation that allows one to galvanise towards total and unabashed revolution and liberation. Cone gave us a transformative understanding of the Bible itself: God is not simply being borrowed and arbitrarily Blackened; God is and always has been Black, and configurations of him that align more with whiteness are erroneous. Cone emphasises that he is unconcerned with a Christian theology that is wholly abstract or distanced from the material conditions afflicting bodies on the ground. God is more closely identified with, as Hortense Spillers terms in describing the ontological condition of Black flesh, "lacerations, woundings, fissures…openings, ruptures, punctures of the flesh" that line Black

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8 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (1991).

9 Paul B. Raushenbush, "Dr. James Cone, Professor and Prophet of Black Liberation Theology, Rest In Power," *Auburn Voices*, 2018, https://auburnseminary.org/voices/dr-james-cone-professor-and-prophet-of-Black-liberation-theology-rest-in-power/.

bodies and reinterpret Black gender.[10] Any practitioner or worshipper must align themselves with racial justice and the dismemberment of systemic anti-Blackness, if they truly and adamantly worship. To continue to allow systems of anti-Blackness to proliferate, renders a body and one's alleged status as a believer inert. Cone raises that,

> if the oppressed of this land want to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of the reality that is antiwhite. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness.[11]

Cone's theology shows that Black theology can be a liberating force that must be transnational and intersectional. His life's work demonstrates an alignment with bodies maligned by the many evils of Eurocentricity and the violent project of whiteness, and of racialised-gendered, fascist capitalism. My work does not detect an obfuscation, but instead, a need to go further; to address the contours of *misogynoir* and trans-antagonism that lie in non-radical, cis-heterosexual, white, liberal interpretations of theology.[12]

I concede to the differences in language and semantics that exist in the time in which Cone was writing, that exist in his 1986 revision, and from where I write today. I give credence to Cone's in-text acknowledgment of Black feminism and womanism, and his critique of masculinist writings within Black philosophy and theology that ignore or create a present-absence about Black women. The language of trans, transgender, cisgender, many vibrant non-cisgenders, and the recent linguistic and semantic shift towards addressing systems of anti-trans violence as trans-antagonism, is one that has largely been codified by younger trans bodies. However, I contend that trans bodies, especially trans bodies of colour, have always been articulating and mapping out our oppression in

[10] Hortense Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (Baltimore: Diacritics, 1987), 67. This idea of black gender is attributable in large part to Hari Ziyad, as well as Hortense Spillers, Zenaida Peterson, C. Riley Snorton, and Marquis Bey.

[11] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 7.

[12] "*Misogynoir*" is a term coined by Moya Bailey and @TheTrudz that addresses the intersection of misogyny/transmisogyny and anti-Blackness experienced by Black women and *femme*-aligned folks. Moya Bailey, "They aren't talking about me..." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 2011, http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/.

words that are enough. I do not believe that the language in which Black trans bodies have articulated themselves is necessarily new, or that a lack of sufficient address can be written off as a 21st-century semantic shift. Thus, there is still an absence within Cone's text that is still cis-masculinist and not centred on queer and trans bodies. My work dives deeper into the specificities of transgender and Blackness, of Blackness-as-gender, in ways that Cone's intersectional analysis of revelation and Black liberation theology can situate.

Cone argues that religion must be codified along lines of Blackness and Black liberation. Christian theology must take shape as a method of theological expression for bodies under domination. He insists that,

> to be passionate, Black theology may find it necessary to break with traditional theological concerns. Such concerns are often unrelated to oppressed existence…it believes that racism is incompatible with the gospel of Christ, and it must, therefore, do everything it can to reveal the satanic nature of racism, so that it can be destroyed.[13]

I move to extend his indictment of the Church's code of moral purity that has ousted and silenced calls towards the very insurgence upon which the Black Christian Church is founded. My concern is that current, normative conceptualisations of Black liberation and Black liberation theology are illegitimate because they obfuscate these catalytic bodies – Black trans and queer bodies – which are intrinsic to the formation of Blackness. The Black church's break with immediate insurgence and the internalisation of a biopolitical moral code is evident when examining who, in fact, remains visible and present in the mouths of the congregations, and in the archives of history. Cone speaks of this "purity" code but does not fully articulate the queerness and transness that the Black Christian Church expressly disallows and shames. An icon in his own right, Bayard Rustin was eschewed and made illegible in the old Civil Rights Movement and in the campaign of Martin Luther King Jr., solely for possessing a Blackness that is queer. As Imani Perry asserts in her 2018 text, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*, we are still searching for Lorraine Hansberry – a Black gay poet on many of the frontlines of the Civil Rights Movement, who wrote

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13 Cone, *A Black* Theology, 7.

towards a Black and liberated future – in ways that, until recently, have been obscured and overwritten.[14]

The discourses of Black liberation are imbued within heteronormative conceptualisations, ontologically and in terms of material positioning. In other words, liberation, the act or embodiment of "overcoming" that is situated or extolled from and by the Black Christian Church, is moored by, as Cone argues, white, and as I extend, cis and heteronormative conceptual geographies or grounds that foreclose the multitudinous potential of Black gender, and the centrality of transness to Blackness. Cone asserts that religion that moves away from or severs connection with Black liberation is itself null and inert. Where might we find Rustin? Hansberry? Most prominently, what does it mean for a Black liberation to be articulated in terms of and expressly for bodies who are cis and/or heterosexual? What Black liberation through the Black Christian Church is fungible or possible for Black trans and nonbinary bodies? In what ways does a Black liberatory politic that obfuscates or omits the intrinsicness of Black non-normative genders to any conceptualisation of Black revelation and liberation fail to examine the full potential of a Black liberation and the fruit that it bears, specifically, in the overturning of violent, rigid, and gendered prohibitions surrounding the Black body?

Cone offers us a series of questions that search for the contours of Black liberation theology. In Part 1 of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he says this:

> The Black experience forces us to ask, "What does revelation mean when one's being is engulfed in a system of white racism cloaking itself in pious moralities?" "What does God mean when a police officer whacks you over the head because you are Black?" "What does the church mean when white churchmen say they need more time to end racism?"[15]

Cone provides answers to his own ponderings by reminding that

> Black theology is concerned only with the tradition of Christianity that is usable in the Black liberation struggle. As it looks over the past, it asks:

[14] Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).
[15] Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 24.

> "How is the Christian tradition related to the oppression of Blacks in America?"[16]

He emphasises that religion is not "irrelevant altogether…religion unrelated to Black liberation is irrelevant."[17]

To be truly liberatory arbitrators of a Black theology, the Church must be committed to ending systemic and communal violence against all people. However, Black theology is itself an ontological and teleological paradigm that is representative of bodies who align themselves with the obliteration of all facets of white supremacy and Eurocentric hegemony. What does it mean, though, for the revelatory work of knowing and self-knowing to be held up within the Black Church out of rejection of the fullness of Blackness, i.e. the relationship of Blackness to transness? Cone argues that "the contemporary Christ is in the Black ghetto, making decisions about white existence and Black liberation."[18] If the contemporary Christ is ultimately concerned with bodies most imbricated and dispossessed by axioms of power, especially *Black* bodies at increased axioms of power, could the contemporary Christ not be a Black trans poet, indicting other manifestations of anti-Black oppressions – anti-Black trans and anti-Black queer violence – that go invisible to normative or cis and heterosexual eyes?

My intercession on Cone's work lies largely in an expansion of the terms of revelation, and a re-inscription of a Black liberation theology that emphasises the intrinsic nature of Black gender to any formation of Blackness. Through his text, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I question if the Black Church can even articulate a Black theology that is conducive to legitimate Black liberation for all Black bodies, or liberation that does not re-inscribe anti-Black trans and anti-Black queer violence on Black trans and queer bodies – which is not liberation at all. I take up the words of Hortense Spillers,[19] M. Jacqui Alexander,[20] Zenaida Peterson,[21] Hari

16 Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 25.
17 Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 58, 59.
18 Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 39.
19 Spillers, *Mama's Baby*.
20 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
21 Zenaida Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black." *SlamFind*, YouTube, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0Mv8CYvQAA.

Ziyad,[22] Marquis Bey,[23] and C. Riley Snorton[24] to suggest a Black theology that has actively been conjured by Black non-cis and queer bodies. Such a theology, black-trans-queer, outpaces the normative considerations of Blackness and revolution/revelation currently and historically housed in the Black Church; I imagine what it would mean for the normative Black Church to catch up. If we understand self-knowing and revelatory power in Black theology as conducive to the liberation of Black bodies, what would it mean for this intimate, internal awareness to be housed in that part of our Black bodies that inherently resists[25] colonial gender metrics?

Because white supremacy exists, James Cone cites that omnipotence does not function in a way that allows for its complete obliteration by God. As God is Black, was oppressed, and is aligned with Black suffering, the dismantling of whiteness as a system is a protracted effort that must happen by Black bodies and bodies aligned with Black struggle and liberation, through any means necessary here on Earth. Cone writes: “Omnipotence does not refer to God’s absolute power to accomplish what God wants. As John Macquarrie says, omnipotence is ‘the power to let something stand out from nothing and to be’.”[26] Theodicy exists, which is why Black theology must be Black *liberation* theology, which is inherently concerned with the obliteration of white supremacist paradigms that hold Blackness back from complete and total liberation.

James Cone argues that Black bodies should not altogether eschew theology simply because it has been tainted by whiteness, but that we must instead cultivate a Black theology of liberation that obliterates all structures of whiteness. He writes:

> Black theology cannot reject the future reality of life after death – grounded in Christ’s resurrection – simply because whites have distorted

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[22] Hari Ziyad, “My Gender Is Black.” *AFROPUNK*, 2017, https://afropunk.com/2017/07/my-gender-is-black/.

[23] Marquis Bey, “The Trans*-Ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-Ness,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no.2, 2017: 277, doi:10.1215/23289252-3815069.

[24] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: a Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[25] This idea of black gender is attributable in large part to Hari Ziyad, as well as Hortense Spillers, Zenaida Peterson, C. Riley Snorton, and Marquis Bey.

[26] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 81.

> it for their own selfish purposes…What is needed is redefinition in the light of the liberation of the black community.[27]

Cone emphasises that Black theology is the legitimate theology, white theology being itself a distortion: "To receive God's revelation is to become Black with God by joining God in the work of liberation."[28] On revelation, Cone continues:

> There is no "abstract" revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel. God meets us in the human situation, not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true…Revelation as the word of God…is too limiting to serve as an adequate way of doing theology today. Theology…is the second step, a reflective action taken in response to the first act of a practical commitment on behalf of the poor.[29]

In essence, under Black theology, revelation is a tangible and material action that leads to a higher paradigm of self-knowing and self-affirming. Revelation leads to the pursuit of the elimination of all shackles of oppression in the world, and within that, the annihilation of systems of anti-Blackness that delimit the movement, freedom, right to life, and quality of life of Black bodies on Earth. Black theology, as he writes, rejects theological imperatives held in hypothetical airs or in eventuality — those imperatives are ultimately unconcerned with the immediate and permanent freeing of Black bodies. If God is Black and divine revelation pushes us to annihilate the shackles of domination that God himself once wore and broke, Black theology mandates that Black liberation is a project that must continue *now,* on Earth. Cone writes that Black bodies encounter God on Earth through the recognition of their beauty and their chains, and that revelation pushes them to transform and transcend their condition, which inevitably means the destruction of whiteness by any means necessary.[30]

I extend Cone's work to interrogate and find more resonance with the Black theological, and within that, epistemological concept of knowing that is cultivated through the process and pursuit of revelation. White

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27 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.
28 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 66.
29 Cone, *A Black Theology*, xix.
30 Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews, and a Letter by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 35-67.

notions or definitions of Blackness are also commensurate with other anti-Black and white supremacist notions, such as heteronormativity, cissexism, trans-antagonism or transphobia, ableism, and so on. These –isms inhibit us from imagining – theologically, ontologically, and in terms of Afrofutures – the fullness of a Black body unencumbered by the chains that Cone commands us to remove once and for all.

a gender in flux: black trans bodies and black liberatory discourses

In any consideration of Black liberation, there must be an expansion or a recognition of the expanded nature of Black gender that defies male/female dimorphism. In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*, Hortense Spillers articulates that the inherent mutability of gender/s of/on Black bodies is, in part, a direct result of the colonial project of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that violently mapped Eurocentric gender formations onto Black bodies. She asserts that those gender formations, shaped by nation-state discourses, are violent fissures on our captive bodies, fissures that are reopened by the workings of neoliberal and necro-political nation-states. In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity,* published in 2017, C. Riley Snorton draws from Spillers to produce a racialised historiography of trans identity that understands Black gender as mutable, in part due to the slavery-industrial complex. Snorton quotes Spillers on a later section of *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*:

> [T]he female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy." Because of this peculiar American denial, the Black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood – the power of "yes" to the "female" within.[31]

In order to reckon with the fissures created on captive flesh by colonial violence, both Spillers and Snorton argue that African-American men, imbued in contexts of cis-hypermasculinity and *misogynoir*, must accept and say "yes" to the Black femininity that is invested within their bodies. Spillers' argument indicts what we, through the work of Moya Bailey and

[31] Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 80.

@TheTrudz, would today term as "*misogynoir*,"[32] a term with which Spillers' work resonates, and anti-Blackness within the 1965 Moynihan report that her article takes up. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, otherwise known as the Moynihan report, was written by Daniel P. Moynihan, assistant secretary of Labour to the Johnson administration. Released in 1965 by the Johnson administration, the report relies on racist, patronising metrics to explain deviations from white, nuclear family structures and rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth by Black American family structures. The report obfuscates and deliberately ignores structural, systemic anti-Blackness and racial capitalism during and in the afterlife of slavery (as Saidiya Hartman terms) which relies on the parsing apart of fundamental aspects of Black life.[33] Moynihan cites E. Franklin Frazier, a Black sociologist who relies on *misogynoir*ist readings of what Frazier writes as "Negro family life." Spillers articulates that Frazier conceives of a kind of Black women's independence that is reliant or deferent to the whims of a master, whether that be on the plantation itself or through patriarchal formations of a lineage:

> I support Angela Davis's skeptical reading of Frazier's "Black Matriarchate." "Except where the master's will was concerned," Frazier contends, this matriarchal figure "developed a spirit of independence and a keen sense of her personal rights." The "exception" in this instance tends to be overwhelming, as the African-American female's "dominance" and "strength" come to be interpreted by later generations – both black and white, oddly enough – as a "pathology," as an instrument of castration.[34]

Undoubtedly Moynihan cited Frazier to feign for legitimacy in this abusive report, relying on his textual violence against Black women and *femmes* as material proof of the abjectness of Black bodies and familial structures; as an authentication that he uses to move forward with his own anti-Blackness and *misogynoir*. Moynihan's report was described by many as a grotesque, state-sponsored attempt to victim-blame Black American descendants of slaves from non-nuclear, non-white family structures that depart from Euro-Western articulations of family, what Spillers terms as "the vertical transfer of a bloodline; from *fathers* to

[32] Moya Bailey, "They aren't talking about me..." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 2011.

[33] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

[34] Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 74.

sons."[35] In deference to white compulsory heterosexuality, the Moynihan report is a State-sponsored attempt to render Black bodies as errant, especially in the presence of what the State reads as an incohesive, inefficient, and "broken" attempt at normative white structures.

Spillers analyses how the *misogynoir* that is marketed by the State and by Black men – and, I argue, specifically cisgender and heterosexual Black men – is itself a kind of internalisation that ignores the lineage of the/a Black Mother that is constitutive to his being. Spillers speaks of a holistic reinscription of Black gender from the hegemonic fringes of cis colonialist male/female binaries: "This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside."[36] Black bodies carry, blur, and make indistinguishable or mutable the biopolitical/ necropolitical bounds of how bodies can thus appear. Blackness, as Spillers and Snorton argue, has a mutable gender inherently, which whiteness indicts; and also due to the project of chattel slavery and necropolitical violence, like the 1968 Moynihan report itself, which ignores racial capitalism and refers to Black bodies as abject for refusing to silo ourselves into white configurations of gender. Black bodies, and especially Black trans and queer bodies, are conducting the vulnerable project of mimesis against this colonial hegemonic grammar.

Importantly then, Snorton, Spillers, and Bey perform a necessary intervention to illuminate the historic and natural existence of Black trans and queer bodies, in a way that contests the lethal and historic tradition of pathologising Black bodies. They note that Black trans and queer bodies arise out of precolonial contexts – before the hegemonic and Eurocentric ordering of bodies into cis white men's and women's genders; and into hypermasculine or hyperfeminine genders – inasmuch as they arise in direct opposition to the demands of a neocolonial and necropolitical ordering of life. Snorton and Bey trans/queer the work of Achille Mbembe's *necropolitics* by identifying a deep and inextricable connection between Blackness and transness, and highlighting a distinct persecution by the State – to invoke Bey's terminology, the "Blackness of transness; the transness of Blackness."[37] Together, Blackness and transness are all the more endemically persecuted by the wealthy and

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[35] Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 74 (original emphasis).
[36] Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 67.
[37] Bey, "The Trans*-Ness of Blackness," 277.

powerful nation-state and their mandates on identity formation and visibility. Says Bey of Black trans (in)visibility in public arenas in their article, *The Trans*ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness*:

> The necropolitical and carceral state govern the politics of public space, which is a space predicated upon the assumption of the impossibility of Blackness, transness, and Black transness: a *hegemonic grammar* that utterly disallows the very possibility of transgender…This could also be said to be the case with Black bodies occupying space implicitly coded in and through whiteness."[38]

Asserting a discursiveness and diffusiveness between Black bodies and trans bodies neither codes nor genders all trans bodies as Black, and *vice versa* – rather, a reading of this discursiveness recognises the relationality of disparate bodies spaced into disparate categorisations. There *is no* Blackness without a recognition of the dynamism that inherently resides within it, and without recognition of the way that Black bodies do gender differently. Transnational feminist and indigenous spirituality scholar Jacqui Alexander provides a way of seeing Black trans bodies in the context of Cone's Black theology of liberation, as bodies already committed to the tradition and power of self-knowing and self-venerating, and as the task of liberatory revelation commands. What becomes visible when we understand Black trans bodies as inherently connected to the transformative theological paradigm of revelation to its fullest potential? Can we see Black trans bodies as always-already committed to the very paradigms that Black theology commands of Black bodies – that revelation/revolution, that obliteration, that waymaking into divinity? Can we understand Black theological revelation as insufficient without the understanding and legitimate acknowledgment of Black trans bodies as intrinsic and ineffaceable from Blackness?

In her 2006 book, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, Alexander utilises African cosmologies and Christology to articulate an anti-imperial body politic that reformats theses of salvation and liberation. She blends a consideration of Black queerness (and, I read, transness) with her analysis of Black Christology. I borrow her articulation of the palimpsest, which is "a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly

[38] Bey, "The Trans*-Ness of Blackness," 277 (original emphasis).

visible."[39] She contends that this "imperfect erasure, hence visibility, of a 'past'" is especially palpable in the context of bodies under domination and on demonic grounds, to invoke the language of Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, wherein the suffering and violation of colonised bodies in their disparate locations is altogether imbricated and layered.[40] Black trans bodies exist as testaments to the ancestral project, lineage, and heritage of gender imbued with Blackness, or of *Black gender* as Hari Ziyad coins: "Black people are out of step with womanhood and manhood. Black gender is always gender done wrong, done dysfunctionally, done in a way that is not 'normal'."[41]

Hari Ziyad takes up Spillers's work in their 2017 Afropunk article, "My Gender Black" in order to articulate a Black trans historiography that detects and emphasises the mutability of Black gender. They indict white and colonial formations of gender that are inherently foreclosed to the breadth, beauty, and generative nature of Blackness. Blackness alone creates space for myriad conditions of possibility for gender, ontology, and movement that has always existed outside of the Euro-Western terrain of limited, and essentialist dimorphic sex/gender formations. The article begins with Ziyad overhearing an interrogation spoken by a Black child on their gender and relationship with their partner, spoken to their Black woman mother, "Why can't they be normal boys?"[42] In the article, the mother brushes off the question, but looks at Hari in dismissal of their body:

> Initially, I turned to whom I assumed to be his mother expected her to chastise him for the outburst, but she just stared at me as well with a slight grimace on her face. "Yes," she said without saying, "why can't you be a normal boy?" He had to learn it from somewhere, I realized. But where did she? And where did I learn what I know about my gender? And what do I know?[43]

The dialogue against Ziyad here is similar to the interrogation posed by the white child to a Black man in Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness." In Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, a white French child illustrates the infantile processes of colonialism by forcing a Black man's body into a

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[39] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.
[40] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.
[41] Ziyad, "My Gender Is Black."
[42] Ziyad, "My Gender Is Black."
[43] Ziyad, "My Gender Is Black."

third consciousness, calling to him in violent jest on the streets at his mother's side: "Look, a Negro!"[44] The contours of the white French child's interrogation of Fanon's Black cis man body are in parallel to the violent tropes that enforce the passivity and dehumanisation of Black women, to misreadings and exploitations of the Biblical chapter of Leviticus; to the misgendering in violent death of Black trans bodies; and is surmised in the interrogation and inquisition of the Black child wrapped up in the complex and violent lattices of cis- and heteronormativity, "Why can't [Hari] be a normal boy?"[45] The theological and linguistic attempts at unraveling and reclaiming bodies who are held up to impossible colonial metrics are fraught and difficult. Still, the thunders of the Civil Rights Movement mantra by Black men, "I am a Man," and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" alongside June Jordan's proclamation that "wrong is not my name," echo in direct response to an anti-Blackness that kills.[46]

In response to the violent inquisition Ziyad writes: "No matter how much I explained, the world never seemed to make enough room for my being. I am only now realizing that this is because Blackness ruptures the laws of gender just like the laws of the state seem intent on rupturing Black life. *My gender is Black*."[47] Ziyad's gender is not blank, not an absence, but Black.[48] With Ziyad's work, I'm reminded of Afro-ontologist Jared Sexton's assertion that "Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space…Black life is not social, or rather that Black life is lived in social death."[49] Black trans bodies are palimpsests of liberation. Black trans bodies exist because of the gendering and ungendering in which Black bodies are bound, but also because of the palimpsest of Black gender that defies and always has resisted colonial gender markers. Black trans bodies are not to be understood as tragic, but rather as resilient, beautiful, and *real* products of the immemorial uniqueness of Blackness and the ungendering of Black bodies.

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44 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.
45 Hari Ziyad, "My Gender Is Black."
46 June Jordan, *Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005).
47 Jordan, *Collected Poems*.
48 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays & Interviews* (Toronto, Canada: BookThug, 2017).
49 Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions* 5 (2011): 28-9.

Normative binaries can never fully encapsulate the moves, mimesis, presentation, and ontology of a Black body that is always in (ontological, physical, social, political, etc.) transition. The parroting of these normative confines and the adamant rejection of Black gender might be tantamount to Cone's mandate of dismantling structures of whiteness: "Black theology represents that community of Blacks who refuse to cooperate in the exaltation of whiteness and the degradation of Blackness."[50] To be invested in structures of whiteness or white gender formations that are expressly anti-Black-trans, is to be against the work of Black theology, which cannot exist divorced from Black ways of doing gender, and from pushing for the liberation of Black trans and queer bodies; of all Black bodies from garrotting by European gender construction. Can the Black Church truly articulate Black theology when it does not practice the epistemes of self-knowing that the Black body has so diligently cultivated? I suggest that legitimate revelation and revolution cannot occur – intimately, internally, in the space of the Church, and elsewhere – without those intimate and radical ways of knowing and seeing, ways that cannot operate so long as there exists a condemnation of Black trans life.

Black trans poet Zenaida Peterson's body exemplifies Alexander's palimpsest, and the mutability of gender due to slavery, systems of anti-Blackness, and out of both survival and love by Black trans bodies. In the tradition of Spillers and Snorton, Peterson inscribes the notion of Black gender as mutable in a new, succinct grammar through spoken words. In their poem, *My Pronouns are Black*, Peterson interrogates this relationality of Blackness and transness, or the mutability of Black gender against the hegemonic constructions of gender that have been forced onto their body: "How do you go from a slave to a gendered thing / from a mule to a person / and expect gender to function the same across race?"[51] Peterson begins and ends with a tracing of their mother. They inaugurate their work with dawn, dusk, and rupture: "I woke up to my mama's voice and it wasn't erasure. / Sometimes I wake up a boy, switch to nothing by noon, go to sleep a girl. / My pronouns are Black. My pronouns code-switch."[52] Peterson closes the piece with,

[50] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 55.
[51] Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black."
[52] Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 0:03 to 0:21.

> My gender starts every poem about my mama, who don't wanna hear about the things white people taught me anymore. I say, white people didn't teach me how to be brown, how to overcome, how to gender. Mama, my body taught me that. Our ancestors taught me that. You taught me that. I watched you."[53]

Peterson performs a necessary, rhetorical inquiry directed at Black bodies who only accept or acknowledge conventionally-normative, or cis and heterosexual Black bodies. Black trans and queer bodies are most importantly and inalienably committed to disrupting and destroying gender that disallows the mutability of gender on Black bodies or Black gender itself – cisgender. Black trans and queer bodies are some of the only bodies committed to this total obliteration of the confines of Eurocentric, sexual-dimorphic gender configurations that impede true Black liberation, and beyond that, an honest liberatory theology that is committed to the destruction of all structures of power.

Normative and hegemonic considerations of the Black body require a singularity of spirit, in direct contrast to Black and indigenous genders that allow for a multiplicity of soul.[54] What would it mean to understand the impossibility of separating the body and the soul, as colonialism demands and as Black transness rejects? Is it to understand physical elements like the Eucharist or communion as bodywork that follows the lineage of bodywork and self-knowing that Black trans and queer bodies produce?[55] What would it mean, in tandem, to comprehensively transition spirituality out of the physical space of the Church to our bodies, as Black transness so cosmically does? Peterson and Ziyad offer us, as Toni Morrison articulates about the late James Baldwin, "a language in which to dwell," or a language that offers up the revelatory and liberatory work that Black trans and queer bodies are already protracting.[56] They lay out the ways in which normative Black bodies,

53 Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 2:18 to 2:42.

54 Tony Enos, "8 Things You Should Know About Two Spirit People," *IndianCountryToday. com*, 2017, https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/8-things-you-should-know-about-two-spirit-people-294cNoIj-EGwJFOWEnbbZw/. Enos describes an indigenous gender, two-spirit, wherein bodies possess two spirits, or both the man and woman genders within their bodies. The gender is expressly non-cis and defies colonial gender markers.

55 This idea was developed through the writing of M. Shawn Copeland.

56 Toni Morrison, "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in His Language." *The New York Times*, 20 December 1987, http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-morrison.html.

and I extend, cis-hetero-normative bodies in the Black Church, eschew epistemological ways of knowing Blackness and doing freedom-work through the abjection of non-cis and non-queer Black bodies.

Along the trajectory mapped by Peterson, I argue that there must be a dialogic and paradigmatic shift from hegemonic renderings of Black gender articulated by Black bodies deemed normative within Black theology. Peterson and Ziyad emphasise that the movements and motivations behind their bodies are inherently survival theologies, given the transformative and spiritual bodywork that they perform and embody towards their freedom and maintenance of life. They extend Cone's articulation that resistance against all forms of violence and systemic oppression is a spiritual mandate for all bodies, under Black theological paradigms. It would be an oversimplification and generalisation of the works of Peterson, Ziyad, Bey, and Snorton to truncate the languages that they offer us as *only* calls to undo systems of anti-Black-trans violence. That work is indeed absolutely crucial, but Peterson and Ziyad emphasise a necessary understanding of gender as Black, and Blackness as constituting a gender; as never outside of any contours of possibility nor actuality; and Black trans bodies as inherently connected to any utterance of a Black theology of survival and liberation. True Black revelation rests in a resignification of the flesh (to return to Spillers) that allows for understanding of the flux and the spiritual and ontological moves that all Black bodies endure as a result of gender and bodywork across generational lines, and as a result of the ontological gymnastics that Black bodies must perform in order to live.

Placing Peterson and Ziyad in context with departed ancestor Cone makes visible the need for a radical reinterpretation of Black gender and the mandates of survival theology that must state the power of "yes"[57] to the multitudinous potential and actuality of Blackness within, in order to articulate a Black body that *lives* in order to seek a survival theology and, as Peterson writes, "long enough to have an identity politic."[58] The survival theologies of Black trans bodies exist as ontological predecessors to heteronormative liberation theologies. In order for Black theology to position itself as a truly generative site of liberation, there must be an arraignment that situates Black trans life as the fulcrum of Blackness and any survival theology that dwells within it. There must be

57 Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 80.
58 Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 1:11 to 1:14.

a reunification of the body to the soul under Black Christological paradigms, a union that Black transness offers by virtue of our very being. The *bodies* of Black trans poets, eulogisers, and organisers must be understood as expressly spiritual and transformative, and belonging to the archive of Black theology as much as cis and heterosexual preachers and writers have been situated.

Black non-cis bodies are simply open about the ways in which that ontological movement occurs. Ziyad and Peterson make visible the multiplicity of gender within Blackness that is as much intrinsic to Blackness as it is ancestral. Blackness reveals itself as a gender for Black bodies given the legacy of fugitivity, transition, and breadth that exceeds the limitations of white gender binaries. Gender as Black, or the Blackness of gender, is forged out of Black trans and queer technologies of survival. Peterson navigates the world in a way that necessitates both fugitive transformation and resurfacing of ancestral ties to Black gender.

Peterson's mediations on movement and being, mediations that seem to rest at the very core of Blackness itself, are active, and can be categorised as a kind of bodywork in protraction of freedom. Peterson joins Black theologian M. Shawn Copeland in describing bodies as directly invested in the cosmological and theological work of protracting freedom. In *Enfleshing Freedom*, Copeland inscribes the Eucharist as bodywork that, at its core, is positioned to transform bodies or galvanise them towards salvation.[59] What is the Eucharist but bodywork? Similarly, what is Peterson's body of work and body's work but an act of transformation and a continual spiritual practice? Peterson allows us their body as a lens through which we might see and accept the integrity of Blackness as trans, and of transness as Black; as a medium that displays Black gender as the palimpsest of Blackness. Their poem mandates a teleological reconfiguration of Blackness as intrinsically trans. If, for Cone, Black theology is survival theology, we might also understand Peterson's Black transgender and trans-ancestral mediations on being, body, gender, and movement, and towards freedom, security, and liberation of their Black trans body, as survival theology at work, or a central component of Black theology in its own right.[60] Peterson exalts

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[59] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

[60] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 17.

themselves towards not towards subsistence, but survival and liberation in full:

> I know how to survive myself. /
> My gender is my mama and every other Black woman calling me "girl." /
> My gender sees themself in the callouses of people who call me lovely. /
> My gender loves my body so much; it sticks to me under all these clothes. /
> In-between my legs, there is a nonbinary brown love letter written to the multitudes of me."[61]

Peterson's body of work *and* bodywork is a necessary contribution and intervention on Black theology, and an emphatic reminder that Black trans reconfigurations and resignifications of the body are practices of the self-knowing and self-veneration that Cone inscribes as part of liberatory theological revelation. Across the poem's lines, Peterson charts their body's movement across volatile public spaces, limiting home spaces that seek to disrupt their Black gender, and the interstices and fissures in which they find themselves most visible and mine for a gender that is constantly in flux. Peterson's work re-inscribes Black liberation theology to understand Black trans bodies as intrinsic to the formation of Blackness. They illuminate Black trans bodies as arbiters of a Black liberation theology that truly understands the urgency surrounding resignification of the flesh, that acknowledge the unfixity and multitudinous potential of Black gender. This understanding of urgency is expressly related to an understanding of the totality of Blackness itself and is expressly related to Cone's interpretation of revelation: "To know God is to know about ourselves, our beautiful Black selves. This is what revelation means to Blacks. It is a contemporary decision about a contemporary event, the event of Black and white beings."[62]

If revelation is about unveiling, about the process that unveils knowledge about the Black body, or if the uncovering of true and intimate knowledge about Black bodies by Black bodies is inherently revelatory, then there must be an understanding of the relationality of Blackness to transness given Black fugitivity and the ontological legacy of Black bodies

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[61] Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 1:54 to 2:18.
[62] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 54.

negotiating selfhood along lines of flesh and gender. We might interpret Peterson's resounding call to their mother as both an indictment as well as an illumination – "You taught me that"[63] – of the ancestral knowledge that is both known and aged, and informs the gender and body of Peterson. In a December 2000 guest editorial in the *Theological Studies* journal, Copeland indicts the intellectual obfuscation of Black theology by white Catholic theologians: "When will White Catholic theologians acknowledge the insights of Black theology as a permanently valid theological achievement? What other name can one give to this refusal and exclusion of Black insights but scotosis?"[64] I borrow her use of the term "scotosis," or intentional intellectual and social obfuscation, to conceptualise the Black Christology's refusal to detect the legibility of Black gender in its discourses on liberation. Scotosis might be understood as a metonymy for the palimpsest – that indigenous, original terrain that is obscured and overwritten – as I employ it: it is upon the present-absence of Black gender that heteronormative Black Christology founds its liberation ideology.

Peterson's haunting call to their mother, "You taught me that,"[65] is an objection against the scotosis being conducted upon their body by their mother. Their body is the palimpsest, containing knowledge that undergirds the body even throughout its continual process of radical, Black, and trans resignification by Peterson. Ziyad also does visibility work through the affirmation that their gender is Black, which is a powerful teleological indictment of an anti-Black-trans reduction of their body to colonial formations of gender. These indictments are expressly configured for people who adamantly subscribe to a neat configuration of all gender, and specifically for white bodies who have never made the ontological journey through a colonial dissecting enterprise predicated on servitude and dehumanisation.

If the Black Church is unwilling to assist in this process of resignification of the Black body, is a Black theology even at play? Can the Black Church do or assist in this work of resignification?

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[63] Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 2:36 to 2:39.

[64] M. Shawn Copeland, "December 2000 editorial," ed. Michael A. Fahey, 12 January 2000, http://theologicalstudies.net/2000/12/01/december-2000-editorial/.

[65] Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 2:36 to 2:39.

Cone asks us to hold on to the future, and to understand the work of Black theology as interpreting and moulding the future. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*'s discussion of eschatology, he writes: "This is precisely the meaning of our Lord's resurrection, and why we can fight against overwhelming odds. We believe in the future of God, a future that must become present."[66] He continues:

> The future is still the future. This means that Black theology rejects elaborate speculations about the end. It is just this kind of speculation that led Blacks to stake their whole existence on heaven…Too much of this talk is not good for the revolution. Black theology believes that the future is God's future, as are the past and present. Our past knowledge and present encounter with God ground our confidence that the future will be both like and unlike the present – like the present in the encounter with God, and unlike it in the fullness of liberation as a reality.[67]

For Cone, the past is prologue, to echo the language of Julie Dash, and remains visceral and present as Black bodies articulate a future free of chains.[68] Cone moves to unmoor Black liberation from the chains of a white and Eurocentric eventuality that seats Black bodies in perpetual eventuality. A lack of acknowledgment of Black trans and queer bodies, and plain understanding of the mutability and malleability of Black gender inhibits the Black Church from inciting true revolution and Black liberation. Commensurately, without an understanding of Black trans bodies and Blackness as gender, and a willingness to address the epistemic violence of anti-Black-trans- and anti-Black-queer-antagonisms, any articulation of Black liberation actively recreates fissures, to draw from Spillers, that bind Black bodies to white notions of gender.

The hope that Cone inspires his readers to feel, is towards an Afrofuture wherein Black bodies, including all oppressed bodies on Earth, are free. Actively working towards this freedom is an act of divine revelation: God is Black, Black bodies are God. Moving towards freedom is in alignment with unlocking divinity for bodies on Earth. I would argue that, through their works that articulate the complex epistemes of self-knowing and self-affirmation, Peterson and Ziyad are already passionate Black

[66] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.
[67] Cone, *A Black Theology*, 141.
[68] David Carter, "'What's Past is Prologue': Julie Dash, Daughters of The Dust, and Building a Solid Foundation for the Future," 8 December 2016, https://blogs.iu.edu/aplaceforfilm/2016/12/08/whats-past-is-prologue-julie-dash-daughters-of-the-dust-and-building-a-solid-foundation-for-the-future/.

theological bodies. But can the Black Church meet them where they are? Is it too late? Can this radical paradigm shift that Black trans and queer bodies articulate be actualised by normative bodies in the Black Church who have never wanted to deal with Black gender that does not configure itself with ease?

Cone writes that the Church, including the Black Church, "must rebel against evil so all citizens may know that they do not have to behave according to unjust societal laws."[69] I ask, how committed is the Black Church to dispelling the evils that are articulated inside their own walls?

Perhaps my questions are leading – they should be more transparent. Cone's hope and faith in Black theology and in a radical reworking of the Black Church, in order to move away from white gradualism to immediate work towards Black liberation, is warming. It is a condition of possibility – which he might have seen as an actuality – that is what I want: to have the Black Church understand Black genders, from infancy onwards, known as in harmony with divine revelation because we know ourselves, love ourselves, is dreamlike. But the remnants of pandering – to whiteness and white gender formations – keep honest Black theology within the Black Church as but a dream.

I remember my mother, whose body was the roadmap for my own gender that defies white and colonial anticipations. She herself is a "marked woman,"[70] as Spillers writes, who will always understand me as, as Peterson lists, "the Belle, the Peach, the 'yes, ma'am' [I] need to be."[71] I am still working on not drowning under the weight of her language, and our A.M.E. church's lace head coverings, the white Easter and church pageant dresses of my youth that foreclosed the possibility of me not being a girl in the conventional sense for too long, a forced hyper-femininity that precluded me from locating my current reality sooner, and less desperately. Eddie R. Bradford and Byron Cage sing two of my mother's favourite gospel hymnals, the ones that she listens to as she careens down the wooded highways of North Florida. Bradford, with a voice weary, cries: "*Because He lives / I can face tomorrow / He came to love, heal and forgive / He lived and died to buy my pardon*."[72]

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69 Carter, "What's Past is Prologue," 130.

70 Spillers, *Mama's Baby*, 65.

71 Peterson, "My Pronouns Are Black," 1:49 to 1:52.

72 Eddie R. Bradford, "Because He Lives," *Too Close to the Mirror*, Juana Records, 2003.

Cage and his choir sing a triumphant hymn that compels every able foot to stand, women in white to stroll down the aisles, grand(mother) to drive a speed far past what is indicated on the limit sign a while back – "*I can feel the presence of the lord / And I'm gonna get my blessings right now*."[73]

When the bread is broken in my palms every First Sunday, and I drink from the wine gauntlet, should it taste acridly to my tongue? Should the white lace that covers my feminised scalp feel funny? For whom is this pardon? If this pardon is preordained through the routine that has been etched into this flesh, that is as Black as it is trans as it is queer; do I, too, get my blessings right now? Can I?[74]

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[73] Byron Cage, "The Presence of the Lord," *Live at New Birth Cathedral.* GospoCentric Records, 2003.

[74] *Acknowledgements:* There's no world wherein this work, this perilous yet freeing project could be done in isolation. I am endlessly grateful to my mentors, Dr. Myriam J.A. Chancy, Dr. Maryan Soliman, Profé Jared Rodriguez, Dr. Jon Ivan Gill, and to the community of Black and brown trans-queer scholars and folks whose existences allow me to write this work.

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Pentecostalism, Media and the Politics of Homosexuality in Contemporary Ghana

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the role of religion, specifically Pentecostal Christianity, and the media in shaping the public debate on homosexuality. Pentecostal leaders have generally used the media as a main platform for their politicisation of homosexuality. Using the theory of mediatisation, this article examines ways in which religion and the media play a role in sensitising, influencing, and shaping people's perceptions and attitudes towards homosexuality in Ghana. The article argues that the increasing role of the media and the infusion of religious ideas, beliefs, and values in the debate on homosexuality has a tendency of influencing, framing, and shaping people's minds and attitudes towards homosexuality.

KEYWORDS
Pentecostalism; homosexuality; media; Ghana

Introduction: Religion, Culture and Sexuality in Africa

My aim in this article is to discuss the central role played by religion and the media in shaping people's opinions and perspectives on the debate on homosexuality in Ghana. Though literature abounds on the discourse and politics on homosexuality in Africa, what has often been overlooked is the way in which the media is frequently used to frame passions and inspire public sentiments and general panic. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando have highlighted how the media in the West have many times represented Africa as one of the homophobic continents in the world, and they critically observe how such Western narratives about "African homophobia" depict a racist and colonialist perception of the "black continent as inherently hostile to sexual minorities."[1] Instead of focusing on Western media narratives about homosexuality and homophobia in Africa, this article focuses on the contribution of the media in

[1] Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando, "Introduction: Public Religion, Homophobia and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

African contexts to the politics of homosexuality.[2] I aim to take the debate further by highlighting how the media is integrated into the debate on homosexuality and how such politicisation in the media raises awareness and creates different gendered attitudes towards homosexuals in general. In Ghana, for instance, it has been argued that homosexuality only became a major public issue when, in 2006, the media reported of the first proposed gay and lesbian conference to take place at the Accra International Conference Centre.[3] This particular instance and the general use of the media as a platform for both anti- and pro-homosexuality activists to channel their views and express concerns regarding the unacceptability of the rights of LGBT individuals, call for academic analysis. There is specifically a need to examine ways in which the media is sensitising and influencing public opinions about homosexuality.

Public debates in Ghana, especially in the media, have often evinced how religious, cultural, and religiopolitical ideologies are used to polarise the issue of homosexuality. In these debates, Christianity, specifically the Pentecostal moral ethos and praxis, are usually used as vanguards against homosexuality. Pentecostal leaders and religious groups repeatedly raise criticism and virulent attacks on homosexual activists, gender advocates, and human rights groups who are in support of gay, lesbian, and transgender rights.[4] Pentecostals see Christianity and homosexuality as "incompatible bed-fellows,"[5] while various biblical and ethical philosophies are espoused and marshalled in sermons and public discourses against its decriminalisation on the continent of Africa. Homosexuality is repeatedly constructed in the media by preachers and church leaders as a perverted act and an aberrant lifestyle that deserves extermination and condemnation to eternal damnation. Individuals who

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2 See, for example, Barbara Bompani and S. Terreni Brown, "A 'religious revolution?' Print Media, Sexuality, and Religious Discourse in Uganda." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9, no.1 (2015): 110-26.

3 Seth Tweneboah, "Religion, International Human Rights Standards, and the Politicisation of Homosexuality in Ghana." *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, no.2 (2018), 34.

4 Asonzeh Ukah, "Sexual Bodies, Sacred Vessels: Pentecostal Discourses on homosexuality in Nigeria," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 21-37.

5 Samuel B. Adubofuor, "Christianity and Homosexuality: What Makes them Incompatible Bed-fellows." Paper presented at Christian Service University College, Department of Theology Faculty Seminar, Kumasi, Ghana, October 2008.

are homosexual are cast as evil and "sick" people who need divine therapy and the deliverance of God to erase the vestiges left in their bodies and lives by evil and demonic forces.[6]

Recently, President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo's comments on homosexuality during an interview on Al-Jazeera with Jane Dutton, that a sufficiently strong coalition in the future may perhaps push for a change in the law on homosexuality in Ghana, was met with strong opposition, especially from Pentecostal leaders.[7] The Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC), the largest Pentecostal umbrella body in this country, which consists of over 200 Pentecostal and charismatic denominations and claims to represent over four million of the Christian adult population in Ghana,[8] issued a public statement decrying the president's comments. The GPCC avowed "the evil nature of homosexuality" and resistance on any attempt on the part of the political leader to succumb to pressure, especially from the West, to decriminalise homosexuality. In their statement, the GPCC argued that homosexuality is evil and could not be legalised in Ghana. Speaking on behalf of the Council, the general secretary, Rev. Emmanuel T. Barrigah argued that the traditionalists, Christians, Muslims, and other religious bodies do not support homosexuality and therefore it could not have any legitimate approval in Ghana, because it is not part of the Ghanaian culture and it is evil. He stated: "It is against our cultural and social norms as a nation which cuts across all religious boundaries, hence government cannot legalize it."[9] He further bemoaned personally that "homosexuality can never and ever be legalized in the country because it is devilish, it is demonic, and it is from the pit of hell so I cannot subscribe to it at all."[10]

Pentecostals in the country have also tended to pray against the practice of homosexuality with the aim of seeking God's divine grace and power against the supposedly evil forces that are behind the push for the

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6 Seth Tweneboah, "Religion and Law in Contemporary Ghana: Traditions in Tension" (PhD. dissertation, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, 2017), 177.

7 Alex E. Koomson, "Nana Addo's interview on Homosexuality." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rc2rfg1mtsw.

8 Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, *Terms of Reference for Consultants to Develop a Five-Year Strategic Plan 2015-2019*. GPCC, Accra, 2015, 1.

9 Admin, "Homosexuality is Evil – Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council." Gpccghana.org, 28 November 2017. https://gpccghana.org/2017/11/28/homosexuality-is-evil-ghana-pentecostal-and-charismatic-council/.

10 Admin, "Homosexuality is Evil."

legalisation of homosexual rights. For Pentecostals, the act of homosexuality and the idea of same-sex marriage are demonic and must be warded off completely from the affairs of humanity through prayer and deliverance. In a continued effort to fight against homosexual rights, the GPCC organised a three-day nationwide prayer (30 June to 2 July 2018) to pray against the demonic influence and legalisation of homosexuality and to also use their presence to raise the consciousness of the public about the grave social consequences of the acceptance of LGBT rights in Ghana.[11]

Alongside these developments in Ghana, elsewhere in Africa, literature on the discourses and politics on homosexuality, including Nigeria,[12] Uganda,[13] Zambia,[14] Zimbabwe,[15] Cameroon,[16] and Kenya[17] points to how the Pentecostal movement has strongly backed calls for laws against homosexuality. In Nigeria, Asonzeh Ukah has highlighted how prominent Nigerian Pentecostal leaders such as Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and David Oyedepo of the Winners Chapel International acted as backdoor forces behind the

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[11] Adomonline.com, "Pentecostal Council to organize prayers against gay rights," *Ghanaweb.com*, 6 June 2018. https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Pentecostal-Council-to-organize-prayers-against-gay-rights-657876.

[12] Ukah, "Sexual Bodies, Sacred Vessels," 21-37.

[13] Marcia Olivier, "Transnational Sex Politics, Conservation Christianity and Anti-gay Activism in Uganda," *Studies in Social Justice* 7, no.1 (2013): 83-105. See also Barbara Bompani, "'For God and for My Country:' Pentecostal-Charismatic churches and the framing of a new political discourse in Uganda," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 19-34.

[14] Adriaan van Klinken, "Gay Rights, the Devil and the End Times: Public Religion and the Enchantment of the Homosexuality Debate in Zambia." *Religion* 43, no.4 (2013): 519-40.

[15] Jonathan Connor, "Development for Whom? Homosexuality and Faith-Based Development in Zimbabwe," *Development in Practice* 21, no.6 (2011): 860-9. See also Molly Manyonganise, "We will chop their heads off:" Homosexuality versus Religio-Political Grandstanding in Zimbabwe," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 63-77.

[16] Frida Lyonga, "The Homophobic Trinity: Pentecostal End-time, Prosperity and Healing Gospels as Contributors to Homophobia in Cameroon," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 51-64.

[17] Adriaan van Klinken, "A Kenyan queer prophet: Binyavanga Wainaina's Public contestation of Pentecostalism and Homophobia," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Africa*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 65-81.

passing of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill by ex-President Goodluck Jonathan in 2014 after the latter had been reluctantly refusing to sign it into law for about three years.[18] In Uganda, there is evidence to suggest that Pentecostals were vocal on the condemnation of homosexuality towards the passing of the Anti-Homosexual Bill.[19]

Apart from Pentecostal Christian sentiments on the homosexuality debate in Africa, the cultural trajectories of sub-Saharan Africa are also mounted as a force against the decriminalisation of homosexuality. In Africa, religion and tradition play a very significant role in shaping personhood and subjectivities and, in a larger context, the ways in which people comprehend and experience sexuality. The deeply cultural and family values are bound up with particular normative views on personhood and agency.[20] Evidently, there is a strong influence of Africa's dominant religions, and an amalgamation of cultural integrity and moral etiquettes in contesting what is regarded as the imposition of Western homosexual imperialist ideals. In Ghana and most parts of Africa, the belligerent stance against homosexuals' rights cannot only be viewed in religious terms but also as "systematic traditional mechanism of governmentality. That is, traditional regulation on sexuality is a systematic means of what society holds as its rightful ordering of citizens."[21] As argued by Sylvia Tamale, "contrary to popular belief, sexuality is not only exclusively driven by biology; a very significant part of it is socially constructed through legal, cultural and religious forces driven by a politico-economic agenda."[22]

Data underlying this article was gathered from media sources such as interviews with political and religious leaders on homosexuality in Africa at both international and Ghanaian media houses, online news portals, social media, and press releases by religious groups in Ghana, mainly the GPCC. Some of the data were also gleaned from political and social talk shows on television stations in Ghana on the debate on homo-sexuality. The article also relied on secondary materials on the subject under discussion. A content analysis was employed in interpreting the extent to which some of the language and expressions used in the

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[18] Ukah, "Sexual Bodies, Sacred Vessels", 21-7.

[19] Bompani and Brown, "A 'Religious Revolution?'"

[20] Tweneboah, "Religion and Law in Contemporary Ghana."

[21] Tweneboah, "Religion and Law in Contemporary Ghana," 152.

[22] Sylvia Tamale, "Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 14, no.1 (2014), 155.

debate contributed to the framing of sentiments and passions on the decriminalisation of homosexuality as well as the kind of militarised attitude it generates towards LGBT individuals. In terms of theory, the article employs the mediatisation approach in analysing the politics that are implicated in mediatised religious messages on homosexuality, which I will outline in the following section.

Mediatising the Homosexuality Debate

Much of the debate on homosexuality in Africa takes place in the media. The media, whether print (newspapers, magazines) or electronic (radio, television, social media, etc.), have become the platform through which various actors – whether religious actors, political leaders, or gender and sexuality activists – advocate their concerns in support or against homosexuality in Africa. This means that one cannot downplay the role of the media in regulating, influencing, or shaping opinions regarding the discourse on homosexuality in Africa or elsewhere. As a platform and social environment, the media shape people's opinions on the issues of homosexuality in the larger context of the society. The process through which the media become highly interspersed with discourses on society, be it religious, political, economic, or personal relationships, has been described as "mediatisation."[23]

More generally, the concept of mediatisation has been defined to refer to the processes through which people have incorporated into their perception, sensations, and affects, the way media communication represent reality.[24] Thus, it refers to the extent to which the media have become increasingly influential in and deeply integrated into different spheres of society.[25] This comes close to what Erving Goffman defines as "frames," i.e. cognitive and perceptual structures that individuals use to encompass reality, and that the public share what the media frame.[26] Mediatisation as theoretical concept has "sensitising" as an ingrained

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[23] Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Society," *Nordic Review* 29, no.2 (2008): 105-34.

[24] Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Dictionary of Media Studies* (London: Penguin, 2007), 220.

[25] Luis Mauro Sa Martino, *The Mediatization of Religion: When Faith Rocks* (London: Ashgate, 2013), 13. See also Lynn S. Clark, "Theories: Mediatization and Media Ecology," in *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 85-101.

[26] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*: *An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (London: Penguin, 1974).

characteristic.[27] The concept of mediatisation might be partially placed on two different traditions in media research, namely the "medium theory" and the studies of "media effects."[28] From the medium theory point of view, the concept of mediatisation borrows the idea that media communication is a central element in contemporary society, and no social process might take place outside the media realm.[29] However, this does not allude to the fact that the media are the unique or even the main cause for social changes: "[T]he medium itself could not be important if it is not articulated with [the] society as a whole."[30] It is the uses of media, not the medium itself, that matters,[31] for "media effects," as the name suggests, focus on the alterations and changes provoked by the media. It claims that the media – mainly the "mass media" – would have the power to frame political opinions[32] and change the way people see the surrounding reality.[33] "Mediatisation", thus, generally refers to the processes whereby the media become the fulcrum and a central place for communication in the society, but also its importance to other aspects of the society such as culture, economics, politics, and personal relation-ships.

Over the last decades, mediatisation has become a popular concept, applied not only to the context of religion and media, but also politics and democracy, and other areas such as consumption, culture, and society.[34] In the context of politics, mediatisation has been defined as a "long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over

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[27] Strömbäck and Esser, "Mediatization of Politics," 4.

[28] Joshua Meyrowitz, "Medium Theory," in *Communication Theory Today*, eds. David Crowley and David Mitchell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[29] Martino, *The Mediatization of Religion,* 16.

[30] Martino, *The Mediatization of Religion,* 16.

[31] Meyrowitz, "Medium Theory," 53. See also Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[32] See for example, Walter Lipmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Pelican, 1946); Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (Boston: MIT Press, 2009); Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of mass media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 no.2 (1972): 176-87.

[33] George Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview." *Mass Communication and Society* 1 no.3 (1998): 175-94.

[34] Jesper Strömbäck and Frank Esser, "Introduction: Making Sense of the Mediatization of Politics," *Journalism Studies* 15, no.3 (2014): 243-55. See also Jesper Strömbäck and Frank Esser, "Mediatization of Politics: Towards a Theoretical Framework," in *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, eds. Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 4.

effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased."[35] The increasing effects have been categorised into four essential features which include 1) "the long-term and dynamic process;" 2) "the essence of mediatization as increasing the importance and influence of media;" 3) "mediatization affects all parts of politics including the process of as well as political institutions, organizations and actors;" and 4) "many of the media-related influences may be indirect rather than direct, and result from how political institutions, organizations and actors more or less reactively or proactively adapt to the media and their own needs to communicate through the media."[36] Broadly speaking, the mediatisation of politics simply demonstrates how political actors and institutions adapt to media logic in their interaction with the public.

Essentially, the debate on homosexuality in Africa goes beyond the issues of religion and cultural values, but takes added and increasingly political connotations at the governance level of the State.[37] The politicisation becomes significant since the debate on homosexuality is meaningfully tied to the democratic process of society and within the context of human rights. In Africa, for example, many political parties are afraid to lose the next elections if they fail to make their stands clear on the practice of homosexuality. This has forced many African political leaders to come out publicly and state their position to the public on same-sex relationships and LGBT rights.

In Ghana, Seth Tweneboah has already examined how the debate on homosexuality is politicised, showing the intricate relationship between religion and politics within the discourse of sexuality.[38] He notes how the whole politics of homosexuality is linked to governmentality, power, and influence. This work attempts to further explore this issue by examining how the homosexuality debate is mediatised politically and what role Pentecostal actors play in it. Pentecostals constitute a large segment of the religious market space in Ghana and their adept use of the media

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35 Strömbäck and Esser, "Introduction," 244.

36 Strömbäck and Esser, "Introduction," 244. See also Jesper Strömbäck, "Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics," *Press/Politics* 13, no.3 (2008): 228-46.

37 See Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (eds.), *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

38 Seth Tweneboah, "Religion, International Human Rights Standards, and the Politicisation of Homosexuality in Ghana", *The African Journal of Gender and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2018): 34-8.

has contributed to a wielding of influence in the public sphere. Pentecostals' engagement of and the use of the media in the discourse against homosexuality help in aligning public discussions on homosexuality more from Pentecostal sensibilities.[39] Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors argue that the media create and reinforce "certain modes of religious intervention in society."[40] For Meyer in particular, "one intriguing aspect of current Pentecostal modes of public appearance is that personal, intimate, or secret matters move center stage, becoming prime matters to be made public."[41] She states further that "in becoming a public force, Pentecostalism turns the personal into a matter of public concern" and as a result, what hitherto remained a private matter, such as a discussion on sexuality, has now become a public concern.[42]

The increasing integration of the media in the conversation on homosexuality by Pentecostal actors in the public sphere and the influence this has on the public minds and how it shapes their attitudes towards different sexual minorities, cannot be ignored. The engagement of the media has a consequence in framing people's minds. For instance, as highlighted earlier, homosexual practice was a "silent trade" in Ghana until 2006, when the media reported of the first proposed gay and lesbian conference. Thus, the Ghanaian society's consciousness of the practice and prevalence of homosexuality was precipitated by the media which generated a heightened tension regarding the practice of homosexuality in Ghana. Tweneboah documents how this news generated headlines and gained attention in public debates and discussions. For instance, he reports that a radio caller has cautioned: "Let us wait until they gather in Accra and we can cut them in pieces."[43] This example shows how the media generates and flames inspired passion and tension on the homosexuality debate in Ghana.

Evidently, in Ghana and other liberal democratic societies in sub-Saharan Africa, the mass media have become part of the environment and are constantly engaged in the discourse of public issues that affect

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39 Bompani and Brown, "A 'Religious Revolution?'" 112.

40 Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 57.

41 Birgit Meyer, "Going and Making Public: Pentecostalism as Public Religion in Ghana," in *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*, ed. Harri Englund (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), 158.

42 Meyer, "Going and Making Public," 158.

43 Tweneboah, "Religion, International Human Rights Standards," 34.

the society. In a recent Pew research on the use of social media, it is reported that 32 percent of young adults in Ghana between the ages of 18 and 36 use social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp on a daily basis.[44] Arguably, the extent to which people, especially young adults in most African countries, use these media platforms to engage in national issues, cannot be overemphasised. If it is important to consider the extent to which people in contemporary developing countries and liberal democratic states are immersed in the media as a regular part of their daily lives, it is also equally important to consider looking at how this development contributes and shapes public discourses especially on a topical issue such as homosexuality. The question might be, to what extent do this media usage and its integration into the daily lives of the people help to shape opinion and discourses around the debate on homosexuality?

Due to the saturation of the media and its driving role in the debate and politics on homosexuality, the consciousness of homosexuality and LGBT issues in African societies can hardly be denied. This has specifically become possible due to the recent heated public and political debates on television shows and interviews of political and religious leaders on radio and television by journalists in both local and international media houses. The media (both print and electronic) as well as films have also become conduits for propagating pernicious attacks on homosexuals in Africa. Consciously or unconsciously, the messages that are constructed and reconstructed through the media by religious groups, social commentators, traditional leaders, and even the sentiments and language tone used by news broadcasters and journalists in reporting on homosexual news items has a potential in contributing and framing people's views and forming attitudes against the rights of homosexuals.

Gender and Sexuality in a Mediatised Society

> GAY MARRIAGE BECOMES LAW IN THE UK TODAY…A sign of how "Civilized" the world has become…But if your government gives you the "Right" to break God's law, it doesn't exonerate you from God's judgment…we are all "sinners" but a law to justify our sins is a bad law

[44] Jacob Poushter, Caldwell Bishop, and Hanyu Chwe, Pew Research Center, "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones," *Pew Research Center*, June 2018, http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/.

> and a slap in the face of God…1st John 2:16-17: For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. Shalom.[45]

This Facebook post of Bishop Wood (the president of the Concerned Clergy Association of Ghana), posted on the day same-sex marriages became legal in the United Kingdom, typifies how Pentecostal leaders use the media to share their concerns about issues of homosexuality. It illustrates the public presence of Pentecostal leaders and their use of modern media technologies and platforms to engage, initiate, and participate in matters that are of public interest in Africa. It shows how issues that hitherto were considered private, are made public through the media. It also evinces Pentecostal leaders' awareness of global issues and their potential local impact. Above all, it delineates Pentecostal leaders' resolve to make a salient issue of faith part of public discourse.

The perceptibility of an issue can be boosted by its presence in the media, and this is evident in the case of the heightened debate on anti-gay rights in both the local and international media. In the last decade, almost every journalist (from international media houses such as the BBC, Al-Jazeera, and CNN) who has had the privilege of interviewing an African leader, has asked the question on the possibility of decriminalisation of homosexuality in their respective countries. The nature of the response to these questions posed to African leaders has often generated a heated debate and arguments in the media of their home countries. A recent example, which has been indicated earlier, is the interview Jane Dutton had with Nana Akufo Addo on Al-Jazeera. It shows how the media has become a catalyst in the homosexuality debate, and especially, how the Western media, for example, are often used as a backdoor and a platform to exert influence on political leaders in Africa to express their views on same-sex relationships. It further raises the concern of how the media have become a tool in championing or otherwise resisting the rights of LGBT individuals. This, in short, is what I am referring to as the mediatised politics of homosexuality.

With the liberalisation of the media in many African states, individuals and religious groups alike have employed the media in various forms to

[45] Bishop Prince Benny Wood, Facebook Post. 29 March 2014, https://www.facebook.com/BishopWoodgh/.

put their messages across to the public. Religious groups, especially Pentecostals, have become very forceful in channelling their views and concerns through the media. Through their messages, Pentecostals initiate public negotiations on matters that concern the morality and purity of the nation. Thus, Pentecostals attempt to "colonize the national public space and reconceptualize the structure and normative basis of the nation through the production and dissemination of a multitude of discourses via the media."[46] In Ghana and many parts of Africa, it is evident that the adept use of the media by Pentecostals and other religious groups has made religion a major actor in influencing public opinions and policies. The media has become an agent in shaping the ideologies that seek to regulate the debate on homosexuality in the Ghanaian airwaves, particularly through preaching, and sometimes press statements from Pentecostal churches. Pentecostals' arguments or sentiments against gay rights are depicted in messages on radio and television. This is likely to influence the consciousness of the Ghanaian populace and reinforce issues that border on human rights and governance.

This is because the debate on homosexuality in Ghana does not remain at the official level, but the public joins in and radio presenters feature special or dedicated phone-in programmes in which religious leaders are called to express their opinions on the subject. The general public are also invited to phone in and express their opinions. One of such programmes was organised by one of the leading Accra radio stations, Asempa FM, during one of its most popular political programmes, *Ekosii Sen*, on Friday 27 April 2018. During the programme, Moses Foh-Amoaning,[47] raised a sharp rebuttal to the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Theresa May's assertion on decriminalisation of homosexuality in Africa during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in April 2018 in London. According to the Prime Minister, campaigners and activists have urged her to intervene and assist former colonial states to repeal their anti-gay rights laws. However, Foh-Amoaning argued that homosexuality is not consistent with Ghana's cultural values and is a threat to the existence of human life. Through the

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46 Walter Ihejirika, "Research on media, religion and culture in Africa: Current trends and debates," *African Communication Research* 2, no.1 (2009), 28.

47 Foh-Amoaning is a private legal practitioner and the Executive Secretary and spokesperson for the anti-gay rights movement, The National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values.

radio he rallied the general public and the President of the republic to reject any attempts by Western imposition to legalise homosexuality in Ghana. According to him, President Nana Akufo Addo has a spiritual mandate to fulfil by rejecting anti-gay rights:

> It is God who uplifted him to be president; spiritually he is occupying a Davidic throne. The kingship that God bestowed on David because he called on God, is the same throne our president is occupying. He [Mr. Akufo Addo] went to churches and mosques to say the "Battle is the Lord's…Look at the difference" [in the election results]. Everyone knew that it was God's hand at work…Ghanaians believe he has a higher moral and spiritual obligation…A president who has fought for the presidency for over eight solid years using the name of the Lord, he has a higher spiritual responsibility that when Westerners say things that are against God's word and also our Ghanaian culture, our president must speak…If God gives you something, He expects you to stand for Him. Mr. President, this is your time…It is time to show that you are on the Lord's side.[48]

He further reiterated that homosexuality is not a human rights issue and such individuals need to be helped to reform. Clearly, the views expressed by Foh-Amoaning reflect a range of biblical concerns against homosexuality. Through the media, he appeals to the president and the general public using religious and cultural values of Ghana which have much purchase at the local and national levels. As a result, he charges the president to reject the pressure to consider proposing laws that support homosexuality in Ghana. In his view, the president has a spiritual pedigree as someone appointed by God to externalise his authority and political legitimacy against the rights of homosexuals in the country. In a similar statement at the Church's 43rd General Council Meeting, also calling on the president to reject the UK prime minister's suggestion, the then chairman of the Church of Pentecost, the single largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana, Apostle Opoku Onyinah said:

> [T]he call to legalise homosexuality, LGBT, by some leaders of the Western world must be seen as neo-colonialism and must be condemned at the highest level. We do not accept this as an aspect of civilisation…Africans must see ourselves as people who are matured and

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48 Classfmonline.com, "Condemn homosexuality – Foh-Amoaning to Akufo-Addo," *Ghanaweb.com*, 27 April 2018. https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Condemn-homosexuality-Foh-Amoaning-to-Akufo-Addo-647014.

> know what is good for us and our people. The church in Ghana will continue to reject and oppose this and we are prepared to demonstrate against this if pressure continues to mount on our leaders.[49]

Delivering a sermon at the Agape House New Testament Church, Prof. Emmanuel Martey, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, argued that "it is a disgrace to a nation that sanctions homosexuality." It should be noted here that the Presbyterian Church is one of the denominations representing what has been called "the Pentecostalisation of the mainline churches" in Ghana.[50] Martey went on and questioned the idea that homosexuality is something one is born with, a genetic trait, a claim that he argued is without scientific base. According to Martey, one cannot be Christian and still claim to be a homosexual:

> …for somebody to call himself or herself a Christian and homosexual or lesbian at the same time. For me I don't want any argument…they say we were born that way, okay, you were born that way but if you say you want to be a Christian there's something, a doctrine in a Christianity called regeneration, being born again if you were born homosexual and you want to be a Christian then you must be born again [regeneration].[51]

These narratives, which are also mediatised narratives because they are mostly carried as news headlines by media houses on radio and television news as well as newspapers, call on the attention of the general public to reject such acts that are seen as affront to the Ghanaian culture. Clearly, the public discourse on homosexuality, sexual control, and transgressions as argued by Martey, are communicated through narratives about personal salvation and transformation. In the public sphere, mediatised politics on homosexuality is often interspersed with religious and cultural ideals which are supported by the "moral" majority. Among religious groups, especially the Pentecostals, the ardent use of the mass media allows them to insert their messages in the public space. The Pentecostal denominations use the media to articulate their

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49 Ghana, "Church of Pentecost threatens demo if pressure to legalise gay rights continues," Myjoyonline.com 3 May 2018. https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2018/may-3rd/church-of-pentecost-threatens-demo-if-pressure-to-legalise-gay-rights-continue.php.

50 Cephas N. Omenyo, "From the Fringes to the Centre: Pentecostalization of the Mainline churches in Ghana," Exchange 34, no.1 (2005), 39-60.

51 Emmanuel Martey, "Most homosexuals are satanists," *Ghanaweb.com*, 4 March 2018. https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Most-homosexuals-are-satanists-Prof-Martey-631453.

values in the public space to their followers and potential followers. The views articulated by Pentecostal leaders become part of the popular views and, by extension, popular religion that regulate discussions on homosexuality in the media. Thus, with the help of the media, Pentecostal leaders alike transcend the space of personal decision-making and reach into that of public discussion to sensitise and influence the public.

Obviously, there can be no public debate about an issue that everybody ignores. Clearly, in order to gain public support, especially regarding the politics of gay rights, Pentecostals, by declaring their positions on the issues publicly, draw the sympathy of the public who are largely in support of their views. Sometimes, what instigates and fuels the discussion are not even Pentecostals, but media commentators and journalists who, by making their stance public, invoke a public interest in the discussion. These public discussions require the individual to publicly take sides in the discussions. The media debate on homosexual rights by Pentecostals rely on the public oriented engagement with the media as well as socio-cultural values that forbid the act. The more people they are able to convince through preaching on radio and other public events, the more powerful they become in rallying the public against gay rights.

Media, Religion, Cultural Construction and Reconfiguration of Homosexuality

The intersection of religion and media, as dominant actors in the homosexuality debate in Africa, has not only helped in bringing about the awareness of homosexuality but to reconstruct the practice through the lens of culture and religion. One of the contested issues in the debate is the perception that homosexuality is alien and ahistorical in the African context. This popular view has been interrogated by scholars of African sexualities, who have reproduced historical evidence of same-sex behaviours in pre-colonial African pasts.[52] According to Macharia, the homophobia arrayed by government leaders in countries such as Cameroon, Uganda, and Nigeria have elicited activists to delve into

[52] Thérèse Migraine-George and Ashley Currier, "Queering Queer African Archives: Methods and Movements," *Women Studies Quarterly* 44, no.3&4 (2016): 190-207; Zackie Achmat, "'Apostles of Civilised Vice:' Immoral Practices and Unnatural Vice in South African Prisons and Compounds, 1890-1920," *Social Dynamics* 19, no.2 (1993): 92-110; Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); Keguro Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies." *Agenda* 29, no.1 (2015): 140-6.

queer archival work and this has subtended “sexual minority organizing in Africa: against claims that homosexuality is ‘un-African,’ activists, artists, and intellectuals have attempted to produce archival evidence of same-sex acts in African pasts.”[53]

The examples of media items such as those highlighted in the previous section demonstrate how the discussion on homosexuality in the media is placed within a conservative and normative way of addressing sexuality in the public sphere. For instance, on a Good Evening programme on Metro TV in Accra, Foh-Amoaning expressed the following concern against homosexual rights in Ghana:

> At the end of the day, the bottom line is legally there is no basis. They claim that there is a human rights call. I have asked this question, fundamentally, how can you bring into the whole construct of human rights, a principle that will fundamentally contradict the fundamental human rights which is the right to life? Because *reductio ad absurdum* if all of us became homosexuals…got involved in the lesbian and gay activities then the right to life will be destroyed.[54]

Foh-Amoaning’s argument was premised on the value of procreation as a religious and social responsibility and the continuation of human life and existence. This example shows how discussions on homosexuality are largely aligned and mediated by religious sensibilities and values. In the view of Barbara Bompani and S. Terreni Brown, this makes the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches’ message about sex very powerful and politically appealing.[55] This is because, according to them, “when sex and sexuality are discussed within the moral framework of normative heterosexual Christian families, they do not contravene codes of moral behaviour or present a serious challenge to the dominant realm of patriarchal power.”[56] Just like in the case of Uganda, as pointed out by Bompani and Brown, this also helps the media in Ghana to discuss sex in a “nonthreatening and ‘morally acceptable’ way.”[57] In the public discourse, Pentecostalism emphasise the “adherence to cultural norms that stress the importance of reproduction and moral behaviour.”[58]

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53 Macharia, “Archive and Method in Queer African Studies,” 141.

54 Moses Foh-Amoaning, “Gays have no rights,” *Good Evening Ghana*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iA5q3nBYDc&t=334s.

55 Bompani and Brown, “A ‘religious revolution?’” 115.

56 Bompani and Brown, “A ‘religious revolution?’” 116.

57 Bompani and Brown, “A ‘religious revolution?’” 116.

58 Bompani and Brown, “A ‘religious revolution?’” 115.

In the context of mediated religion in the public sphere, Meyer and Moors have argued that, in mediated religion in the public sphere, believers or the "publics are not bounded entities but rather are involved in a continuous process of construction and reconstruction, of negotiation and contestation."[59] They further assert that "the presence of mediated religion in the public sphere is both constitutive of and constituted by political activism, especially identity politics or the politics of difference."[60] They argue that contemporary religion "refuses to be bound" to a particular "religious sphere" and "appears to be intermingled with politics and sometimes violent political action."[61] Clearly, the cultural values and observance as expressed in the debate by Pentecostals in the media, socialise the public into believing what may be prohibited or desired, and what desires may not be practised, pursued, or even expressed. The stated prohibitions championed in the media are unconsciously internalised by members of the society which produces different gender configurations and gender transgressions as perverted acts. Consequently, these are producing militarised attitudes toward individuals who are seen or perceived as homosexual. Though culture is dynamic, issues of globalisation have evidently resulted in the liberalisation of some sexual ethic on the continent, while politicising others. The use of the mass media to reinforce cultural and religious proclivities has sustained cultural values on sexuality and this continues to make Africa an epitome of how traditional culture continues to influence aspects of sexuality in modern society. The moral argument raised by Africans has continued to enforce a kind of resistance against diplomatic ploys and lobbies towards the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Africa.

What is also clear in the Pentecostal engagement of the media is the sort of imaginaries they create of the world. Meyer has argued that "imaginaries of the world position self and others in the world conceptually, socially, and politically, mobilize people into mass movement, and determine spaces of action."[62] According to her, "this yields imaginaries that organize powerful ways of thinking and feeling and sustain particular

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59 Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 12.
60 Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 11.
61 Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere*, 11.
62 Birgit Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, eds. Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers, and Cornelis van der Laan (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 117.

modes of belonging that thrive on inclusion and exclusion."[63] Pentecostals, for instance, share a view of the world as the site of a spiritual warfare between demonic forces and God. For Meyer, the extensive use of the mass media by many Pentecostal/Charismatic churches is to assert their presence in the public sphere and thereby engage in "an active conversion of the public space into a Christian environment, much in line with the project of world making."[64] This project includes winning individual hearts and bodies that are seen as temples of God for the manifestation of God's power against demonic forces that take control of people's bodies. In this vain, the act of homosexuality is branded evil, devilish, and demonic in the media campaign. For instance, as highlighted earlier in the discussion, the general secretary of the GPCC, Rev. Barrigah indicated in a press statement that homosexuality is "devilish, it is demonic, and it is from the pit of hell."[65] In so doing, he invokes the notion of good and evil and calls on the born-again Christian and the general public through the media to condemn immoral behaviour in the society. Again, the concept of hell as expressed in the statement also evinces how sexual transgressions such as gays and lesbianism are situated in an eschatological narrative about the impending rapture, before which the individual's body and sexuality are involved in a metaphysical battle between good and evil, and demons have been granted to lead people astray by means of giving themselves to the dictates of the devil.[66] Pentecostals, especially, have been noted to adhere to a clear-cut conception of gendered divisions.[67] This "clear chain of command as it were, reinforces patriarchal authority along the notion that gendered roles are divinely ordered" and can therefore not be altered.[68] Consequently, where there are distortions, they must be corrected, and the proper forum for this reconstruction is within the domain of the divine – through the ritual process of deliverance – because anything that is divinely created can only be divinely reconstructed or restored. In other words, since gender roles are

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63 Birgit Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, edited by Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers and Cornelis van der Laan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 117.
64 Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Globalization," 118.
65 Admin, "Homosexuality is Evil."
66 Van Klinken, "Gay Rights, the Devil and the End Times."
67 Isabelle V. Barker, "Charismatic Economies: Pentecostalism, Economic Restructuring, and Social Reproduction," *New Political Science* 29, no.4 (2007), 419.
68 Barker, "Charismatic Economies," 418.

divinely regulated, the reconstruction process to restore the subjects back to their original and proper states should also be divine. In the end, the Pentecostal deliverance ritual provides spiritual freedom and confirms one's status while denouncing the confessed act to ensure the proper restoration and functioning of the self.[69]

Conclusion

Overall, this article has argued that the continuous engagement of the media in the debate on homosexuality has the possibility of influencing and ordering people's attitudes regarding the rights of homosexuals. Through the media, the politics on homosexuality is heightened and the public is inspired in ways that create different gendered attitudes and panic reactions. Religion, technology, and media are essentially among the most powerful elements in the contemporary society that are influencing and framing ideologies of people on many matters in society. The media have enabled personal autonomy in decision-making among the lives of many individuals on matters that border on faith and sexuality. The media can be both constructive and destructive. They exercise a form of control. Communication that potentially reaches society in a large scale, Manuel Castells writes, is shaped and managed by power relations, rooted in the business of media politics of the State.[70] He states that "communication power is at the heart of the structure and dynamics of society."[71] Thus, the constant use of the media to propagate messages on the fight against homosexuality in Ghana is likely to contribute to the continued rejection of homosexual rights in the society, until the media, with increased liberalisation, come to express a wider variety of opinions on the subject. The current disparaging media attacks on homosexuals as being evil and in need of deliverance to recorrect and reform their sexual transgression, evinces the religious reconstruction and configuration of homosexuality. The aim is to depict and recast homosexuals as repugnant individuals that need to be reconfigured in order to be acceptable for the society.

69 Abamfo O. Atiemo, "Mmusuyi and Deliverance: A Study of Conflict and Consensus in the Encounter between African Traditional Religion and Christianity," MPhil thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 1998.

70 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

71 Castells, *Communication Power*, 3.

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Praxis

Poetry, Religion, and Empowerment in Nigerian Lesbian Self-Writing

Unoma Azuah[1]

[1]**SHORT BIO**
Unoma Azuah is a college professor from Nigeria, teaching at Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, Valdosta, GA, USA. She is also a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activist and a creative writer. Her research focus is on LGBT rights with a specific focus on Nigerian LGBT lives and rights.

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ABSTRACT
The Nigerian LGBT community is nearly invisible and mostly functions underground or through pseudonyms, in spite of the emerging visibility of queer writing in recent times. As a Nigerian lesbian woman and writer, in this article I seek to analyse some of my queer poems through an auto-ethnographic lens. While providing a brief history of contemporary Nigerian queer writings, their beginnings, their struggles, and their growth, even in the midst of their attacks, I will focus on and draw upon specific experiences as narrated in some of my poems, to explore how the religious constructions of my life and the lives of LGBT Nigerians can both limit and empower us. Through my experiences and the sharing of these involvements, I hope to be a part of the process that dismantles the religious block of homophobia that crushes us, and to reclaim religious language and imagery as a site of empowerment. Through my poetic testimonies, I liberate myself and, hopefully, my queer community.

KEYWORDS
queer; autoethnography; Nigerian LGBT; Christianity; African Religion

Introduction

Can the Nigerian LGBT community, which is largely invisible, be written into visibility? Can writing be an empowering tool to fight oppression? In my experience, being a Nigerian lesbian-identifying writer, writing is liberating. Writing is empowering, especially when used as a healing process for surviving pain and oppression. Several other writers have also testified to this. For instance, Lawrence Yeo states that "[w]hen we experience sadness, we use it [writing] as a form of therapy to provide light in the darkness that envelopes us."[1] Thus, the power of writing is in its ability to affect and change lives, to begin with our own lives. Dawn Lemirand-Poepping states that she believes in the ability of writing and creativity "to empower us to overcome adversity in our lives."[2]

One form of writing is the literary form, and interestingly, queer literary writing has recently emerged as a new genre in Nigeria and indeed across the continent. Various queer-themed novels, collections of sto-

1 Lawrence Yeo, "Three Ways to Turn Systemic Oppression into Creative Inspiration," *ExtraNewsFeed.com*, 10 February 2017.
2 Dawn Lemirand-Poepping, "This I Believe: Writing as a Tool for Learning and Empowerment," *Greater Madison Writing Project (GMW), Medium.com*, 4 October 2017.

ries, and/or poetry have been published. Originating in Nigeria is a collection of poems by Unoma Azuah and Michelle Omas, called *Mounting the Moon: Queer Nigeria Poetry*, as well as Nnanna Ikpo's novel, *Fimí Sílẹ̀ Forever: Heaven Gave it to Me*, and Chinelo Okparanta's novel, *Under the Udala Trees*. Autobiographies are another form of writing, with various collections of LGBT and queer life stories having recently been published across the continent. Among these texts are those of Chike F. Edozien, *Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man*; John MacAllister (ed.), *Dipolelo Tsa Rona*; a collection of stories by Azeenah Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*; Kevin Mwachiro, *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*; and Makhosazana Xaba and Crystal Biruk (eds.), *Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbian and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals*.

Both forms of queer writing make visible what hitherto was largely invisible to the public eye: the reality, complexity, and plurality of African queer experiences. African queer writing therefore serves crucial political and intellectual purposes, as it contributes to the building of what Keguro Macharia has called "queer African archives."[3] In this article, I combine the queer literary form and the autobiographical form, engaging these two forms of African queer writing in a unique way: I present an auto-ethnographic reflection on my work as a Nigerian queer literary writer and I use some of my own autobiographical poems to explore the significance and potential of literary and autobiographical production for the understanding of Nigerian – and broader African – queer experiences and lives.

Methodology

In the design of this article, an auto-ethnographic, qualitative methodology is used. Qualitative research that is based on autoethnography offers readers and writers the opportunity to share in the experiences and certainties that developed through the relationship between a writer and his or her background. As Denzin and Lincoln put it: "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people

3 Keguro Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies," *Agenda* 29, no.1 (2015): 140-6.

bring to them."[4] Though there are reservations about the subjective nature of qualitative methods of research, it is still a trusted and viable technique for researching and arriving at progressive results. For instance, Creswell and Merriam attest to the viability of the qualitative method as being human based just as the auto-ethnographic writing utilises the involvements of the author as a partaker of that practice.[5] Mariza Méndez further captures the value of this approach when he echoes Marshall and Rossman by stating that "[i]t is because of this particular approach to inquiry that personal narratives, experiences and opinions are valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for.[6] By using the theoretical perspective of qualitative autoethnography as an approach to this research, I recount and analyse experiences through my poetry as a way to interpret cultural and environmental conditioning that constrained me to first accept and internalise homophobia; understand the process better; recognise the damages homophobia causes; and then fight it with the tool of writing and rewriting the wound.

I cannot presume, and therefore do not claim, that my own experiences as a Nigerian, lesbian-identifying woman are representative of Nigerian, let alone African, queer experiences in general. However, it is my experience as an activist-writer, that in the process of sharing my self-writing, and helping others to write their life experiences, identification and recognition occur. Other members of the LGBT community become aware, identify with my experiences, and recognise the same patterns in their own journeys as members of a queer group. It is my hope and also my experience that, by engaging my work, they would feel encouraged in knowing that they are not alone and can "right" their existence into visibility and into being. They can thereby perpetuate the trend because, as Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner state, "auto-

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4 Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2000), 3.

5 John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed-methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2009); Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

6 Mariza Méndez, "Autoethnography as a Research Method: Advantages, Limitations and Criticisms," *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 15, no.2 (2013): 279-87. Cf. also Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative* Research (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

ethnography is both process and product;"[7] or in the words of Shari Stone-Mediatore, storytelling and life-writing can generate "knowledges of resistance."[8]

In the discussion of some of my selected poems below, I will pay specific attention to the religious language and imagery that I creatively use. I believe that this is vital, because religion is so often used as a source of homophobia in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa,[9] but needs to be reclaimed as a site of self-empowerment by LGBT people. As much as organised religion is a factor in the politics against LGBT rights and lives, many Nigerian LGBT people, myself included, are deeply religious, and religious self-writing therefore is of critical importance in the building of queer African archives.

Why Do I Write?

My name is Unoma Azuah, a college professor and a LGBT activist. My research focus is on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights with a specific focus on Nigerian LGBT lives and rights. There were little to no existent LGBT narratives in Nigeria in the 1980s and 90s when I was growing up in that country. Our lives and narratives are under the threat of being erased by the predominantly homophobic Nigerian society. However, in resistance and insistence come presence and acceptance. Therefore I will, through my writing, be part of the process that dismantles the institution of homophobic oppression. Through my poetic testimonies as well, I liberate myself and remain optimistic about the liberation of my queer Nigerian family.

Why do I write? Perhaps I am clinging onto the hope that some kind of change may begin with me. Perhaps, David M. Halperin feeds my hope when he says that "Harriet Beecher Stowe channeled her anguish and her ambition into a socially acceptable anger on behalf of others, transforming her private experience into powerful narratives that moved

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7 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 no.1 (2010), Art. 10.

8 Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

9 Cf. eg. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (eds.), *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

a nation."[10] This faith may be mind-boggling when my country, Nigeria, criminalises homosexuality. This belief may be idealistic when Nigeria has inscribed as its law a 14-years jail sentence for homosexuals found guilty of practising a sexual orientation they did not choose. This conviction could be futile, especially when I was excited to catch up with a college friend whom I had not seen in more than 20 years. After our exchange of pleasantries, he inquired about my husband and children and I told him that I have neither children nor a husband. He became concerned enough to ask me why. I told him I am a lesbian. His demeanour changed. He told me that my life is an abomination and proceeded to quote the Bible, specifically Romans 1:24, 26 and 27:

> [24]Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:
> [26]For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:
> [27]And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

I was upset by his judgement, but my anger became a repeat of an emotional stress often triggered by a society that wants to police my body. The attack of my sexuality which he represented, became a "conscious attempt to place sexuality at the point at which various systems that regulate the social…are openly displayed.[11] I tried to initiate a dialogue, but he shot me out by concluding with this statement: "The word of God is divine and final." His verdict was not unfamiliar – it remained the one judgement that caged my life. The decree that my sexuality and my sexual practice is and has always been evil, a thing of horror, and a crime particularly through my friend's biblical eyes, has been a constant marker in my life. It follows me around like a shadow and that perception has also been the prevalent belief that fuelled my self-hate and low self-esteem as a lesbian who grew up in a rather homophobic society: Nigeria. My gaze has always been fixated on biblical interpretations of my sexual orientation. As a result, I lived in the closet and expressed myself enthusiastically in many other issues except for who I am, because it is easier and safer to talk about any

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[10] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110.
[11] Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 130.

other thing but the abomination I have been branded with; that is, “it is easier to theorize and to talk about what we would like to be than to talk about what we are,” as Judy Greenway puts it.[12]

In the blind acceptance of my judgement as an abomination, I forgot to insist on speaking up and to question the context of the Bible verses my schoolmate cited. For instance, I failed to ask why verse 25 was omitted in his quotation. This verse says: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.”

This verse, from all indications, focuses on idolatry. Consequently, the context goes beyond homosexuality to mention rites that perhaps happened during idol worship involving vulgar activities as part of the worship. This idea is far from standing side by side with a loving same-sex relationship. As a result, Troy Perry’s position on the subject reveals an affirmation when he states that “[t]he homosexual practices cited in Romans 1:24-27 were believed to result from idolatry and are associated with some very serious offenses as noted in Romans 1. Taken in this larger context, it should be obvious that such acts are significantly different than loving, responsible lesbian and gay relationships seen today.”[13]

However, there are also biblical verses that speak to the likes of my disparaging schoolmate, like Romans 2:1: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself.”

Thus, I have learned to battle the persecution that comes with homophobia. For many of us, our sexual orientation continues to be an aspect of our subjugation that we fail to scrutinise. So, my body is a site of oppression. To manage the pain, I have navigated the terrain of self-hate through biblically justified assaults and abuses. The same hate and biblically justified attacks seem to have driven not just the Nigerian LGBT lives underground, but also their narratives. Queer writing in Nigeria remained invisible for years. Even in one of the early mentions of

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[12] Judy Greenway, “Questioning Our Desires,” 2019, judygreenway.org.uk.
[13] Troy Perry, *Don’t be Afraid Anymore* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), 342.

homosexuality, for instance in Soyinka's *The Man Died*,[14] the theme surrounding such lives or issues remain one of "foreign" or "alien." In recent times, when queer topics are broached in Nigerian popular culture or even in Nigeria's literary scene, they are usually treated as pariah or taboo. Hence, queer characters, where they exist, are typically treated the way queer lives are treated: abused and criminalised. These tendencies remain faithful to the view that homosexuality is from the West and is alien to Africa. Thus, the point that sexuality is neither a racial nor a cultural but a human phenomenon, is blatantly ignored.

Pioneering Nigerian Queer Writing

In the 1990s, as a pioneer of LGBT writing in Nigeria, I began researching and writing queer topics and literature, particularly with the publication of my essay, *Emerging Lesbian Voice in the Nigerian Feminist Literature*,[15] which was instantly condemned with a pandemonium that suggested that my life and ideas are treacherous to the stable fabric of an African society like Nigeria.[16] Nonetheless, my emerging voice was not killed and instead, in recent years I have received great company with many other African queer writers emerging.

In 2005, Jude Dibia released *Walking with Shadows*, a novel about a gay man married to a woman who ends up struggling to conceal his sexuality. However, in 2014 the then President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, signed the anti-same-sex marriage bill into law. Resistance to the absurd law came from multiple channels, which gave birth to a steady and bold flow of queer Nigerian literature. In the year the anti-same-sex marriage act law was passed, Kola Tobosun edited an online e-zine, *The Gay Edition*, as a response to the despotic law. Then there was Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree* which was published in 2015 and features a lesbian protagonist. Next came a flurry of queer literature and queer writing with the publication of books like *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of LGBT Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender*, a collection of the real-life experiences of queer people

[14] Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft, 2014).

[15] Unoma Azuah, "Emerging Lesbian Voice in the Nigerian Feminist Literature," eds. Dirk Naguschewskin and Flora Veit-Wild, *Body Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature* 1 (New York: Matatu Press, 2005), 129.

[16] Uduma Kalu, "The Lesbian Voice in Current Nigerian Literature," *Sunday Vanguard* February 1997, 17.

that I edited in 2016.[17] In the same year came Joe Okonkwo's *Jazz Moon*,[18] which made the finalist list of LAMBDA Literary Award for Gay Fiction. Also in 2016, an essay that garnered great attention was *Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men*[19] by Pwaangulongii Dauod. In the same year, a South African based Gerald Kraak Prize which gives visibility to queer literature, celebrated four Nigerian Queer narratives. They include Otosirieze's *You sing of a Longing*; Olakunle Ologunro's *The Conversation*; Amatesiro Silas A. Dore's *For Men Who Care*; and Ayo Sogunro's *One More Nation Bound in Freedom*.[20]

In expanding the reach of LGBTQ writing, in 2017, Nigeria's first LGBT literary collective used the pun "14" as their title being a play on word for the 14 years jail term that awaits any Nigerian LGBT person. Other writers of courage came along. In 2017, for instance, Romeo Oriogun won the Brunel International African Poetry Prize for his bravery in treating issues of desire in the aftermath of Jonathan's criminalisation of LGBT lives.[21] Chibuihe Obi's bold Brittle Paper essay, *We're Queer, We're Here*,[22] received a wide applause and then Arinze Ifeakandu's *God's Children Are Little Broken Things*, a queer themed story, was shortlisted for the Caine Prize of African Literature.[23] However, between 2016 and 2017, with the energy that LGBT writing brought with it, came violent and homophobic attacks. For instance, in 2016, the writer, Chibuihe Obi, was constantly threatened because of his outspokenness about his sexuality. He was consequently kidnapped and assaulted. Another writer had to vacate his home for a safe space, after constant

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[17] Unoma Azuah, *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People* (Jackson, TN: CookingPot Publishing, 2016).

[18] Joe Okonkwo, *Jazz Moon* (New York: Kensington Books, 2016).

[19] Dauod Pwaangulongii, "Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men," *Granta* 136: Legacies of Love, https://granta.com/africas-future-has-no-space/.

[20] Sisonke Msimang, Sylvia Tamale, and Mark Gervisser (eds.), *The Gerald Kraak Anthology, African Perspectives on Gender, Social Justice and Sexuality: Pride and Prejudice* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018).

[21] Sarah Cox, "Brunel International African Poetry Prize Awarded to Nigeria's Romeo Oriogun," 2017, https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Brunel-International-African-Poetry-Prize-Awarded-to-Nigeria's-Romeo-Oriogun.

[22] Chibuihe Obi, "We're Queer, We're Here," *Brittlepaper.com*, 2017, https://brittlepaper.com/2017/05/queer-chibuihe-obi-essay/#comments.

[23] Sabo Kpade, "Caine Prize Preview 2017: 'God's Children Are Little Broken Things'," by Arinze Ifeakandu, *Okayafrica.com*, 2017, https://www.okayafrica.com/arinze-ifeakandus-god-children-little-things/.

harassment and threats to his life.[24] A third was stripped of his money, beaten, and extorted. Despite these setbacks and threats, Nigerian queer literature is picking up pace and gathering momentum. Just recently, for example, Chike F. Edozien's memoir, *Lives of Great Men*, the first memoir by a gay Nigerian, won the LAMBDA Award for Gay Memoir; then Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Speak No Evil* was published. This was followed by the book, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak* – a Nigerian anthology of queer female experiences by Azeenah Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu. 14 released its second anthology called *The Inward Gaze*.

In that tradition of creating presence and pushing visibility for queer writing, I ask: Why do I choose to look through the autoethnography lens to excavate and sieve through my life? I choose this lens to fight what Chimamanda Adichie calls "the single story,"[25] in the sense that I would not let somebody else obscure or reframe my story through their own limited scope, as Chinua Achebe puts it, "the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."[26] In line with this, homophobia becomes the hunter glorifying his/her own story. However, I must be a witness to testify to the true story of the hunt. Further, Viv Ellis and Sue High give me the answer for my need to write my own story, in their words:

> The truths of auto ethnography exist between a story teller and a story reader…because we want you to engage with our struggles with adversity, to empathize with the too often heartbreaking feelings of stigma and marginalization, to identify with difficulties we experience in finding words to express pain and disruption meaningfully and want to do something…to assist fellow sufferers.[27]

This is necessary because hate and homophobia, under a religious umbrella, have broken down oppression into different blocks of

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[24] Obi-Young Otosirieze, "Un-silencing Queer Nigeria: The Language of Emotional Truth," *Brittlepaper.com*, August 2017, https://m.facebook.com/brittlepaper/posts/1253152881477910.

[25] Chimamanda N. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story." *National Geographic Learning*, 2016, https://ngl.cengage.com/21centuryreading/resources/sites/default/files/B3_TG_AT7_0.pdf.

[26] Cf. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

[27] Viv Ellis and Sue High, "Something more to tell you: gay, lesbian or bisexual young people's experience of secondary schooling," *British Educational Research Journal* 30 no.2 (2004), 347.

combating the so-called deviant and obscene lifestyle. Mark Vicars expands upon this issue when he states that through his reflective analytical explanation he tries to pull together his fragmented experiences that question how power is formed and used to categorise "otherness" into blocks of subjugation.[28] These are found in social and religious spaces of my growth. However, I have evolved through drawing upon specific experiences in my poems to illustrate how particularly the religious constructions of my life and the lives of LGBT Nigerians bind us. However, through my experiences – the sharing of these involvements – I engage both in subtle and active ways in the process that dismantles the religious block of homophobia that crushes me and the likes of me. Nevertheless, through my poetic testimonies, I come to points of avowal.

Growing up in a Christian home meant that I adhered to most, if not all biblical principles at the top of which my sexuality became the most daunting. I constantly, through self-hate, tried to "obliterate" myself because I was not becoming what I was supposed to be. Ellis and High amplify this position when they show that "heteronormative practices… operate to punitively inscribe difference and discipline those subjects who lack the presence of embodied heterosexuality."[29] In line with that, I stuck to espousing heterosexual ideals and relegated homosexuality to disparaging spaces where it belonged: infestations, trash, and blot. In that self-loathing I birthed the poem *Forbidden*:

My hair is a palm tree
Where birds build their nests
Hatch their eggs and fly
I droop, heavy with their excreta

My head is a mortar
Where you pound pain
And gaze into my hollow

My face is a landscape
Festered with uprooted trees
Where owls hoot their dirge

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[28] Mark Vicars, "Who are You Calling Queer? Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones but Names Will Always Hurt Me," *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no.3 (2006): 347-61.

[29] Ellis and High, "Something More to Tell You," 213-25.

My body is a bin
Where you dump your crumbs
To cast my ashes to the wind

Because my being was reduced to worthlessness as good as a piece of trash that is tossed out, the images of trash bin, chaos in uprooted trees, pain, and *excreta* remain consistent features of the poem.

Added to this, my grandmother introduced me to the basic concepts of her indigenous Igbo religious motifs and resources as a child, and these were centred on Onishe, the river goddess of the Niger, who is considered the guiding mother of the Asaba people in Delta State, Nigeria. Yet, as a teenage Christian in a Catholic high school, I was conflicted about my Catholic faith and my indigenous religious background. Then I found ways of reconciling my indigenous beliefs with my Christianity, by drawing a connection between Onishe, the river goddess and the spiritual mother of the Asaba people, and Mary, the mother of Christ – their roles as guardian mothers intersect. I did not always identify with Mary, specifically because my grandmother told me the story of how Onishe fought the institution of the Catholic Church at Asaba. However, because I found myself in a Catholic boarding school, I was constrained to make a connection between them. While the sense of sexual purity is attached to Mary, the same was not the case with Onishe. Her purity is not seen through a sexual perspective. Instead, the nature of her untainted being is seen through her territorial and invincible nature. For instance, Rev. Father Patrick Isichei confirms Onishe's sectional and possessive nature when he also shares the story of how Onishe resisted the emergence of the Catholic Church at Asaba. According to Isichei, Catholic missionaries took stones from Onishe's shrine at the Niger River for constructing their church, but each time the stones were compiled, Onishe took them back, and she did not relent till the Catholic Church was forced to gather their building stones from another region away from the river.[30]

I did, however, find more affirmation in the indigenous religious motifs my grandmother nurtured me with, because I found acceptance and a meaning to my variance. For instance, my grandmother emphasised that Onishe was supernatural and though seen as a woman, her power and

[30] Wale Akinola and Austin Oyibode, "Reverend Patrick Isichei: How rivergoddess disrupted early attempts to build church in Asaba," *Legit.ng* 2018, www.legit.ng.

spirit is not fixed to a specific gender, because she is said to be androgynous in essence. In other words, some of these motifs give spaces for my queerness because she characterised my being different as a sign of being special and of having a distinct link with the goddess who was also seen as unusual, as her core is not gender limited. Nevertheless, I still battled with the clash within my Christian upbringing that homosexuality is wrong. So, in consigning homosexuality to its monstrous spot, came death wishes and the willingness to offer myself as a sacrifice for dehumanised lives. Consequently, I came to present myself as an object of ransom, a sacrificial object to the goddess of my maternal Niger River. I evoked the goddess in the poem titled *Onishe*, pleading with her to take me:

> Let me be the egg bearing the
> stench of stillbirth
> Let me be the blood bleeding before
> the oracle
>
> I may be the white yam ringed with cowries
> I may be the lone voice piercing the
> path of fear
>
> Let me be the calabash
> bearing totems at the cross-road
> of death.

When no recourse came in the throes of death wishes and self-hate, I battled with whether or not to pass as straight. It would have eased the pain. It would have made life much easier. Vicars once more gives voice to my feelings because, like him, I lived a divided self which was made possible through my participation in the discursive rules of my society and my family. This

> meant that sexuality proved to be an increasingly problematic terrain…the division I felt I had to maintain between public and private truth produced a growing psychic conflict. I consciously tried to enforce separation between a private dangerous knowledge of a homosexual self and the public heterosexual role that would have enabled me to pass through the…day unscathed.[31]

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[31] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?"

I could not tow the two lines. So often I fumbled with playing straight which made me look even more conspicuous and guilty through my strategising about ways to be less gay. I had to find less conspicuous ways to hide myself, as Michel De Certeau puts it, “to avoid scrutiny from the strategic, panoptic and inscribing gaze of normativity.”[32] These thoughts of camouflaging myself preoccupied my mind when I lived in the convent and I fraternised with nuns while considering whether or not to become a nun. I still felt out of place. My experience at this time was recorded in the poem *Escape*:

> The panic attacks began at Nsukka and
> I was a wind blowing southward.
> I love women, but others love men.
> Moments paused in doubts, fears and taboos.
>
> The ache attacks started at Saint Peters chapel near hilltop
> I was an aspiring nun in tight jeans and a t-shirt
> when others prayed, I cursed.

In high school as a teenager who was already aware of my sexuality and where my attraction to women was seen as an anomaly, I lived next to a convent and observed their lives as I considered becoming a nun as a way to escape expectation that I should be married to a man, though I was also drawn to faith and found a spiritual life alluring. The nuns seemed to live a life of their own, even though in prayer and service. They did not have to get married to men, so it was quite an attractive alternative as opposed to facing homophobia in a society where I could not live what is/was considered a “normal” life. However, I worried about living as a lesbian nun. So, while I contemplated being a nun by spending time in convents, the haunting voices of judgement trailed me in what I believed was my curse as a lesbian. After graduating from College, I applied to become a nun and lived in a convent for some time.

While there, I retreated further in my mind and sought refuge in monasteries where every ritual tormented me because I felt unworthy. I could not find a home or even a sanctuary in a place of supposed peace and calm. Instead, the quest for acceptance and home brought me closer in scrutinising my steps towards a religious life in the poem *Home Is Where the Heart Hurts*:

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[32] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 348.

In the monastery of my mind
light and silence share a bend
and at both stations, I have knelt
bruised and bleeding, pruning wild petals
even as my cassock gather stones and dust.

My life is of gazes at metal crosses
the thorns and blood that was Christ's lot
I live to partake of the one thorn ripping through
a clear flesh
in the communion that is a flash
in a pan of bread and wine.
The tolling bell calls
to sleep, waking, baking, prayers in
beads of blunted edges
it calls to vows, reunions, knots and strings of
dangling hopes.
First, there is silence, then a flood of light
my gown shuffles across cold floors –
to summons at the tower of grace. This is a familiar temple…
but it hurts.

In search of a spiritual fulfilment in my existentialist dilemma as a lesbian surrounded by judgement, I often visited monasteries at Enugu in Enugu State and Umuoji and Ozubulu in Anambra State, Nigeria, to reflect and withdraw into the shell of my soul. While these monasteries gave me solace in the healing power of silence and meditation, it created a hollow in my heart because I could not find answers. So I lived a life of isolation in the context of carrying the serene nature of the monastery inside of me. In other words, where I had left a physical monastery, I have borne one inside of me. This gave me a better understanding of how Christ must have felt during his last days before he was betrayed and persecuted. I came to identify my own feelings of isolation, marginalisation, and despair with the experiences of the suffering Christ, humiliated and dehumanised on the cross.

Since the monastery could not be my permanent home, I felt the emptiness that came with the realisation that I am on my own in a world that was not accommodating. In these rituals of spiritual quest, there were still the sting of despair and hopelessness. All I heard was the empty fluff of the religious garb I tried to cover and cleanse myself with. Yet, the shallowness of that performance hobble along as I drag my essence along these paths of void. My queer love is overwhelming even

as I am troubled by the looming consequence of sin and death. Thus, the poem continues:

> In the monastery of my mind
> my lover and I cannot lock lips in the wind
> there is no name for the frames of our love
>
> but we smile into the faces of strangers
> hoping they ignore the weight of what we share –
> it's heavy, so heavy – it tilts the globe.
>
> After a long trek in the desert of life
> My lover is a festival of meals
> We have devoured love and made lust
> the aroma that hangs in our kitchen.
> I bore my lover like news delivered
> to a keen receiver.

So even as my lover and I find our queer love liberating, our society renders it non-existent and disempowers it by not naming it. In naming is power. Instead, we are condemned to irrelevance, as fruitless, as sterile as shown in these lines from *Home is Where the Heart Hurts*:

> My lover and I
> are eunuchs on the corridors of echoes
> the sterility of crosses, silence, prayers and mortality
> are the landmarks of our barren landscape.

Since I could not find a way out, I contemplated resistance. I did show forms of resistance within the confines of struggle and self-hate. That sense of fight is what I explored in the last stanza of the poem *Forbidden*:

> Burn me in your gathered fire
> I will not become a liar
>
> Grind me on your largest slab
> I remain, a taboo
>
> I will defy the rage of the rain
> And erode no more.

I had to fight back in some way by at least trying to love myself, trying to find love. So, in a mutual quest to find Christ in the pursuit of a religious life, I found my first love, Nelo. But our love confused us. We were on holy grounds but defiled the grounds with our unholy love. The second movement of the poem *Nsukka* shows this:

> The convent calls were soothing
> I laid in love and lust
> Straddled sin and sainthood
> My mother's absence
> re-incarnated in Nelo's presence
> she unbound me
> and pulled the strands of lightening
> away from the ball of fire
> that was my head
> she nailed me to healing walls.

We did not stop our forbidden love. We could not stop because even in prayers and novenas in serene monasteries in retreats to reach the farthest parts of our forbidden selves, Nelo's face became God. She shone through the holes of my dilapidated body and each thought of her rescued me. These I chronicled in the poem *Aevum*:

> I am facing walls
>
> in this spiritual slab
> In the recesses of my seclusion
> You're still my companion
>
> I bear you like a birth mark
> In the alcove of my caves
> My nerves threaten to burst
> and focusing in this holy altar is a squeeze
> the stones, the light, the white
> sleeping air, frozen trees
> yet, the bulging, the pounding,
> the heaving of this single heart
>
> My legs refuse to lift to this retreat
> For you are one with God
> The layers of separation blur where I meet the trinity – the son
> the Father, and
> the spirit

> Your face is etched on every stretch of silence
> In every incantation your voice floats
>
> You become the fever that subdue me in my quest for power
> and the herb that heals me in my drift into weakness
> My altar of worship…

Even in retreat, in my attempt to be close to God, my lover's presence dominates, and I do not feel any antagonism in merging her soothing presence of love with the same love Christ gives me. My lover is an embodiment of God. God reaches me through her because our love is my glimpse into what heaven looks like: beautiful. Hence, my lover's face is etched on every stretch of silence in God.

In being healed by love and not consumed by hate at the initial stage in life, I began to open up to love to believe in its holiness. I started questioning. I started realising that there was no truth in a society that spewed hate and bombarded me with a plethora of reasons why I should not live. I began to unthaw. The scales began to fall off my eyes. Judy Greenway helped me interpret my situation when she says that

> those feelings which we take as "given," as spontaneous responses to people and situations, are in fact created in us by family structure and our particular experiences in it, by the dissociation in our society between work and home, public and private, emotion and intellect. It is not just that our desires are repressed and manipulated by society; the desires themselves, with all their contradictions, are formed by our specific conditioning.[33]

I had to get rid of the conditioning and retell my story even as I un-learn and re-learn myself. I had to claim myself and my sexuality, and in that process challenge the *status quo* by embracing that all I was told was evil, because "[i]f practice is productive of power then practice is also the means of challenging power," as Avtar Brah states.[34] Additionally, Vicars echoes Butler, affirming that, "by choosing to challenge prejudice in the initiatory performative utterances…in countering explicit homophobia [we] disrupt the normative processes by which they and I are being formed as subjects within [a] discourse."[35]

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[33] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?", 349.
[34] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 1996), 125.
[35] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?", 352.

Hence, I started celebrating myself and my sexual orientation. I started to make love to my lovers, women, as a way to own myself and dare homophobic institutions that banished me. If resistance is not built to challenge heteronormative insistence to render us invisible, then they thrive because, as Speer and Porter have pointed out: "Heterosexism normalizes heterosexuality and buttresses a rigidly demarcated two gender system. Heterosexist talk relies on and invokes normative notions of gender and sexuality, policing their boundaries, consequently telling us much about the construction of both."[36] Therefore, I love and lift the homosexual love – the woman-to-woman love – by subverting biblical allusions and dismantling fixed biblical images, particularly biblical verses that are misconstrued and used as tools of animosity instead of love, as Christ preached. So I subvert skewed scriptural interpretations rooted in hate by reinstalling my own monument to lesbian love, such as in the poem *Woman to woman*:

I eat your sacred scriptures
Tonguing through each page
A devout supplicant
Feeding on your divine
Fuel
Devouring this body of worship
Your neck
To
Your toes
Each flicker, each lick, each suck
Hangs at the tip of my tongue
Lithe
Nipples
As supple as mango juice

Bulging at your every breath
Down your legs
Where your calves shudder
I gather your toes in a squeeze
Before we merge in multiple moans.
Your belly is the landscape that elevates me
And lowers me
Down to your confluence
Where babbling brooks sooth our quiet cries

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[36] Susan A. Speer and Jonathan Potter, "From Performance to Practices: Judith Butler, Discursive Psychology and the Management of Heterosexist Talk," ed. Paul McIlvenny, *Talking Gender and Sexuality* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 174.

But we explode:
A hurricane in paradise.
And in the midst of this waterfall
Woman
I speak in strange tongues
Testifying to your splendor
I will spread your gospel
To the ends of the earth.

In these songs of love, I hear the echo of the biblical book, *Song of Songs*, for my moans of love merge with the erotic imagery of this book: the "queen" has brought me into her chambers. The above poem is also inspired by imagery from the Pentecost narrative, from the biblical *Book of Acts*. When the spirit of God descended on the apostles, they spoke in multiple languages as a way to reach all peoples with the gospel of Christ. The overwhelming presence of God's spirit transformed them into acquiring powers that were not ordinary. In the same vein, when my lover and I make love, the overpowering presence of love leads us to utter the intensity of our love expression in words we cannot explain, but it is a language our merged bodies understand and express as a way to celebrate our essence. Therefore, just as the apostles processed the love of Christ by spreading the gospel of the good news, I profess my love for my lover and spread the wonder of this love to the ends of the earth, just as the good news is dispersed all over the world. As a Christian who feeds on the word of God to grow and be nurtured, I feed on my lover's quintessence as a believer in love. Consequently, I eat her sacred scriptures, tonguing through each page, as a devout supplicant, feeding on my lover's divine fuel, devouring her body, a body I worship as in the image of God.

In my poetry, therefore, the language and imagery of sexuality, desire, and embodiment fluently merge with the language and imagery of God and the sacred. Indeed, this follows a trend in queer religious writing, in which the embodied and erotic experiences are closely connected to the experience of the divine.[37] Crossing the boundaries between what is often seen as separate spheres of human experience is a queer thing to do. In some of the poems discussed above, I also cross the boundaries between the spheres of Christian and biblical language, and of the language and symbols of African indigenous religions. That, indeed,

[37] Cf. eg. Marvin Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (eds.), *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

might well be an African queer thing to do, as it is a pattern emerging from other African queer writings too.[38] In my poems and other writing I seek to creatively engage with religion as a source of meaning and value to write my body, identity, and sexuality into being. This is particularly crucial because religion is so often used as a source of homophobia in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, but is too rich to be left in the hands of the homophobes and therefore needs to be reclaimed as a site of self-empowerment.

Conclusion

I will keep testifying to the power of queer love to the ends of the earth. There are little homosexual boys who need to believe in themselves and not buy into the hate. There are little lesbian girls who are growing and do not need to be stifled as I was. Instead, they can identify with the queer body of knowledge to affirm their sexual orientation. Grace and Hill attest to the truth that "queer knowledge can proffer a location where identities grow. They enable learners to challenge hetersexualizing discourse and heteronormative ways…In doing so they situate queer performance as an alternative pedagogy that often forms new directions for personal development."[39] So you can ask me again: Why do I write? Why do I write my pain? I write, we write, because we need to create modes of interventions to face and fight homophobia in every shape they take to silence us and make us invisible. There is a need to counter the notion that our lives are evil and should remain criminalised. The impact of hate is eroding our lives as the Nigerian LGBT community of writers and artists, but we cannot sit back and watch in deafening silence. Voicing our truths through our actions and through our words will gradually dismantle barricades of hate, especially because Vicars once again sums it up so succinctly when he declares that "a sense of self can become constituted through the authorizing performative utterances of wounding words."[40]

[38] Cf. eg. Adriaan van Klinken and Kwame E. Otu, "Ancestors, Embodiment and Sexual Desire: Wild Religion and the Body in the Story of a South African Lesbian Sangoma," *Body and Religion* 1, no.1: 70-87.

[39] André P. Grace and Robert J. Hill, "Using Queer Knowledges to Build Inclusionary Pedagogy in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings* 2001, 4. https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2301&context=aerc.

[40] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?"

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Review

Tapiwa Praise Mapuranga (ed.), *Powered by Faith: Pentecostal Businesswomen in Harare*.

Eugene: Resource Publications, 2018.
Pages: 149.
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-6240-9

Reviewer: Maria Frahm-Arp[1]

[1]**SHORT BIO**
Prof Maria Frahm-Arp completed her PhD at Warwick University in the UK. She is the author of *Professional Women in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches in South Africa* (2010) and co-editor of *Development and Religion from Below: Exploring Religious Spaces in the African State* (2010). She has written several articles and book chapters on Pentecostal Charismatic Christians in South Africa. Her current research is focused on the ways in which religious women use their faith to make meaning of the work experience and politics and religion in South Africa. Prof Frahm-Arp is currently the Executive Director of the Libraries at the University of Johannesburg. She has taught at Wits University, the University of Johannesburg and St Augustine College of South Africa and is an Anglican (Episcopalian) minister.

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This interesting and timeous book examines the relationship between faith and economics amongst Pentecostal businesswomen in Harare. Four churches were studied in this book: Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PhD), Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), United Family International Church (UFIC), and Christ Embassy Church. These are four of the largest and most popular churches in Zimbabwe at the moment. The book shows that in the churches investigated by the contributing authors, faith played an important role in helping businesswomen to set up and run their businesses in a variety of ways.

The book can be divided into two sections. The first section contains a collection of chapters by Ezra Chitando, Fortune Sibanda, Nancy Mazuru, and Richard Maposa, giving a detailed overview of the history of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe and a history of the socio-economic and political reality of Zimbabwe leading up to and during the crisis of 2010 to 2017. The second half of the book contains a chapter on UFIC's "Victorious Ladies" by Molly Manyonganise, women at Christ Embassy Church by Fungai Chirongoma, businesswomen at PhD Ministries by Tabona Shoko, and the engagement of women in business at ZAOGA

by Richard Maposa and Tapiwa Mapuranga. These four chapters all draw on qualitative interviews done with businesswomen in these churches and explore the relationship between faith and business in the lived experiences of the women being interviewed.

All the chapters point to the multiple ways in which these churches help women as they try to negotiate the maze of financial and social challenges that face women trying to run a business in contemporary Zimbabwe. A key feature of the help that these churches offer is training in managerial skills. These include both soft skills like leadership, conflict resolution, and listening skills, as well as more technical skills like learning how to use current technology, keeping accurate records, and developing financial literacy. The churches also encourage women to use the space of the church as a platform for advertising. At UFIC, for example, women use the parking lot outside the church to advertise their businesses by distributing flyers and pamphlets. A third important way in which these churches help women is by offering them endless motivational material. Similar to the findings of Maria Frahm-Arp (2010)[1] in South Africa, the pastors at the Zimbabwean churches in their sermons, TV programmes, CDs, and books offer women a wealth of motivational material that helps to encourage them through the difficult process of starting and maintaining a business. Fourth, these churches help women by connecting them to social networks of support that assist them to develop self-confidence and learn from each other. While some women have enjoyed financial success, the book makes it clear that many women work hard to establish a business, tithe, and attend church regularly, but are not able to enjoy any of the promised prosperity that these churches preach.

One of the important contributions that this book makes is to show how women have been marginalised from the business world, echoing some of the findings of Linda van der Kamp (2016)[2] in her work on women in Maputo, Mozambique. At Christ Embassy, Chirongoma's chapter shows how many husbands were against their wives starting with a business, how they refused to give their wives capital to invest in a business, and how hard it is for women to get a loan from a financial organisation. As in

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1 Maria Frahm-Arp, *Professional Women in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches in South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

2 Linda van der Kamp, *Violent Conversion: Brazilian Pentecostalism and Urban Women in Mozambique* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2016).

the case of Mozambiquan Pentecostalism, Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches are helping women to gain access into this male dominated world. A significant way in which they do this is to preach that it is morally and socially good for families and the country as a whole when women are involved in business.

Through their preaching and the powerful examples of female pastors or pastors' wives who have succeeded in business, these churches are changing the way that the larger society perceive women in business and are taking away many of the negative stereotypes associated with women and trade in Zimbabwe. While opening up a new space in which it is acceptable for women to trade and run a business, the book also shows that these churches expect women to behave in a particular way, usually centred on the example of the head pastor's wife and her behaviour. At UFIC, "women in the church who desire to be successful are told to copy the way she [head pastor's wife] does her things."[3] The book would have been significantly strengthened if the authors had been able to unpack the implications of this in more detail. E.g. what does this mean for the constructions of gender that are shaped by these churches?; what are the power dynamics that have emerged with the rise of very wealthy pastors' wives who have been able to achieve their wealth through the businesses they run, which are directly marketed at their husbands' churches?

While this study covers a lot of ground, it is limited by the thin fieldwork that it is based on. In the chapter on UFIC women, only five women were interviewed. Very little information is given about the research process: how, when, and where the data was collected and how it was analysed. The different chapters give interesting reports of what the authors observed and heard from interviewees in their interviews. Sadly, this is not followed up with an in-depth engagement in a theoretical way with the findings, or does it try to offer a broader analysis of social, economic, political, or theological shifts that may be occurring in Zimbabwe or within contemporary Pentecostal Charismatic churches in Southern Africa? While the book does have these limitations, it offers a very interesting overview of women, Pentecostalism, and economics in Zimbabwe at the moment.

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[3] Tapiwa P. Mapuranga (ed.), *Powered by Faith: Pentecostal Businesswomen in Harare* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2018), 71.

It is a pity that the copy-editing of the book was not done well, resulting in many typos throughout the book, but this should not detract scholars of studying women, Pentecostalism, or Christianity from purchasing this book as it adds some valuable insights into our understanding of the role of religion in the context of State and economic crisis in Africa.