

Patches

THE EP & TEXT

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you have always been destined to become. Never silence your voice again; remember to take a chance rather than live in regret. You are worthy. You are *unique*. You are loved. I love you so much.

Abstract

Self-reflection can aid in unpacking the complex layers of navigating the intersectionalities of identities. By exploring these layers, we gain a deeper understanding of the societal structures that influence our lives and find ways to navigate them. This creative project, created imperfectly over a three-year academic and musical journey, embodies an extended play (EP) and explication grounded in autoethnography as a framework to explore the intersectionality of being black and gay in South Africa. Titled *Patches*, the project documents my personal experiences that informed and shaped my journey of becoming, especially when there is no guarantee of acceptance. An essential component of this exploration is the role of music as a usable space in the expression and connection of defining identity through four key themes (or, in this instance, “patches”): insecurity, survival, self-love, and acceptance. Music, in its production and consumption, emerges as an essential resource in the self-making and cultivation of identity. In its written and sonic landscape, the project serves both as a product and a process, allowing for an embodied yet critical reflection and representation of self.

Notable words: Patches, Music, Usable Space, Autoethnography, Black, Gay, Insecurity, Survival, Self-love, Acceptance.

Please note that the lyrics may have changed slightly since the explication was written and submitted. The overall meaning and context of the submission remain the same.

To my younger self.

Introduction: I Have Something To Say

My name is Fumani, and I have something to say¹. I write this explication from a place of excitement while, at the same time, a place of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. I have always wanted to create an honest and personal body of work. I never thought that the nature of the work would require me to introspect and confront the fears and hurt that I had buried in my subconscious for nearly two decades. This project required me to accept the experiences that I have gone through. Instead of reminiscing about how things could have been, I had to accept that they could not be changed and that they had played a role in understanding who I have become as an adult. I also had to awaken the toddler in me who died the moment he was teased for being different. The same toddler who would grow up to be a teenager and endure years of verbal abuse for his difference, even threatened with physical abuse if he did not conform to the code of what was expected of him as a boy child. Now, as a grown adult in a new decade of his life, he has to take stock of the silencing that he had imposed on himself to avoid being a target of further abuse and to hopefully, like many people who are considered different, belong.

When I started conceptualising this project, I knew that I wanted it to be queer² focused, particularly on black gay folk. I had initially wanted to feature undiscovered or upcoming artists who would speak about the realities of being black and queer in South Africa. Despite its liberal Constitution guaranteeing the protection of queer rights (Ncube, 2015: 38), South Africa still expresses deeply conservative views on queerness to the point where there are almost weekly news or social media reports highlighting an account of hate speech or hate crimes committed against a black queer person (Lane et al, 2008: 2). Though this remains one of the projects that I would like to explore in the future, I could not proceed with it without first confronting what my own experiences were. This was mainly moulding myself so that I would deny myself joy and pleasure and not truly live in moments where I could make meaningful and lifelong memories. Such denial meant denying the ability to truly express myself authentically. That led me to seek the approval of others, which ultimately shaped my view of what it meant to exist in the world as a black gay man.

As selfish as it may sound, I envied those who were able to speak openly about their sexualities. I feared being seen and heard, having to shrink myself to the toddler and teenager who wanted to be liked and

¹ The opening statement was inspired by *Ru Paul Drag Race* Season 9 contestant and drag queen legend, Jazmine Masters, who would start her YouTube videos by saying “I am Jazmine Masters, and I have something to say” (2014-present). Masters beginning her videos with the phrase asserts her authority of what it is she will discuss in her videos. Like Masters, I am asserting my authority in reflecting on the motivations that led to the journey of creating the EP.

² I use the words gay and queer interchangeably throughout the paper when making a specific point related to the project and explication.

accepted. During my schooling days, not a single day went by where I would not be called *stabane*³ in the corridors to my classes or, in one instance in my first year of high school, having a male matric learner sit next to me on a bus ride home, tormenting me in front of other learners for his amusement. At one point, I remember crying to my register teacher and telling her that I contemplated suicide because I could not bear the vile words that my peers needled me with. I thought I was an abomination to the world that needed to find a way to end the embarrassment I thought I was. Fortunately, supportive teachers and friends encouraged me to overcome those thoughts.

The lingering traumas of those years of abuse came to a head when I was in two very loving relationships in the last four years. I feared being authentic outside those relationships or in spaces where I felt I would not be judged. I felt that I needed to defend myself at all costs because I thought that such abuse would land itself in my relationships, despite my partners' assurances and actions proving there was no such need for me to be so defensive. I had conversations with friends, acquaintances and relatives that spoke harshly of queer people that I felt trapped in silence, almost suffocating me not to be genuine except in enclosed spaces.

After the release of her critically acclaimed album *Dirty Computer* in 2018, singer-songwriter Janelle Monae told Ebro Darden that when choosing to sing about her sexual orientation, she had to make sure that she was "choosing freedom over fear. Freedom is not always free; it comes with sacrifices, it comes with losing people" (Monae via Darden, 2018). Her statement stuck with me since. I had to contemplate choosing society's approval to survive its harshness or choosing liberation, which would likely mean losing people, potentially those closest to me.

In his explication for the anthology, *They Called Me Queer*, edited by Kim Windvogel and Kelly-Eve Koopman, Lwando Scott's explication "Harnessing the Power of Queerness" draws on his personal experience of being subjected to suspicion due to his effeminate qualities which are seen within the black community as "a lack, a loss, a deficiency, a state of being that needed alteration, cleansing, and praying over" (Scott, 2019: 18). A similar narrative was articulated by *The Voice South Africa* Season 2 winner Craig Lucas's contribution titled *Open Letter*. Lucas writes about his suicidal thoughts and his engagement

³ The term *stabane* is positioned in isiZulu literature which is used to describe an intersex person. However, those who identify and are called the term, "rarely have mutually weathered bodies" (Ashamu, 2020: 3). The assumptions around its usage and identification are broadly applied to people who are in same-sex relationships and/or have same-sex encounters, who may or may not be intersex (Swarr, 2009: 525). As such, there are slippages between "bodies, sexual practices, and identification" (Swarr, 2009: 530). Despite this, the term is attached to negative and violent connotations (John, 2011) to belittle, invalidate, or violate a queer person (Swarr, 2009: 525 & 532). Due to this, there is some desire to not be called the term as it can be offensive and inflict emotional, psychological pain (Swarr, 2009: 532-533).

in destructive behaviour that came from suppressing his identity to have a successful career, especially in the South African music industry where the fear that “no one will buy your music if they think you’re gay” (Lucas, 2019: 50). Both their contributions have been particularly true in keeping my sexual orientation at bay so that I would not be subjected to being prayed for, seen as a lack or loss, or having my sexuality be a hindrance to my career. It was a stumbling block that, at times, remains challenging to navigate.

Arel, in her writings on affect, shame and theology, states that “shamed bodies” (2016: 11) become shaped by their social situations and environments where shame is “lived into, perpetuated and interred” (2016: 50). These environments inscribe a *habitus*⁴ on the body as a form of symbolic violence (Arel, 2016: 50) where the feeling of shame often results in shame denial as it is internalised, impacting emotional development and decision making (Arel, 2016: 2 & 7-9). Such denial “recognises the unbearable way that shame corroborates a diminished sense of self-worth”, which elicits that a person either chooses to regulate themselves in a way that does not warrant shame or expresses themselves in anger as a defence mechanism (Arel, 2016: 23-24).

These environments are shaped, for example, by cultural perceptions and conceptions that create a preferred social order, and the infringement of these is deemed defiance. This leads to “confused awareness”, where a person disregards their intuition, autonomy, and individuality due to the shame that may arise when these environments choose to act against them (Arel, 2016: 51). Choosing freedom and personal agency while overcoming shame is always a risk as it may come with stigmatisation, judgement, and rejection. This deters most black queer people from choosing to disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity (Legate et al., 2012: 145). Before starting this project and writing its reflection, I was scared to choose liberation. Now, it is something I am willing to embrace “even if it makes others feel uncomfortable” (Monae, 2013).

Since I was a child, music has helped me shape my understanding of the world. I could say things to myself in an imaginary safe space, which music helped me create. It has safely allowed me to express the uncertainty I felt in talking about my experiences as a black gay man growing up and living in South Africa. Music, especially in South Africa, has been a medium of political exploration and contestation, either of political ideology, group agency or individualistic politics (Allen, 2004: 4). It allows people to find ways to “voicing who they are and who they want to be, what they believe in, and what they want” (Allen, 2004:

⁴ Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1997: 86), refers to the “subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class”. These structures and perceptions serve to inform and solidify a person’s worldview and how they operate (Gillespie, 2019). Certain values are promoted while others are stigmatised with the core understanding that both such values are not up for contestation as they are the framework a society is meant to exist (ibid., 2019).

1). Its influence cannot be understated as it is a powerful medium that can capture the mood of a people and articulate “ideas, beliefs and feelings through its creation, performance or consumption” (Allen, 2004: 2). This provides an avenue that can influence public opinion on any topic, primarily if its messaging is expressed by affected persons who wish for a change of perception to occur (ibid: 2). It is especially the case when marginalisation becomes a focal point of political and ideological contestation where music can be a mediating medium that serves as an intervention to musicians and audiences alike (Allen, 2004: 8).

When marginalisation is a focal point, Livermon (2014: 509-510) states that marginalised groups create *usable spaces*. Usable spaces transform disempowerment and disenfranchisement into spaces of possible autonomy, articulating meanings connected to notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. While music is not a physical space, its existence is a form of activism that affected parties use to engage with their personal, social, economic, and political environments for educational and societal purposes (Williams et al., 2019: 129). It also enables a meaningful way to express and interpret agency and self-actualisation (Haupt et al., 2018: 13).

The concept of usable spaces highlights the importance of understanding subcultures. Hebdige states that culture is an ambiguous concept as there is no fixed meaning attached to it (Hebdige, 1979: 5) from food, intellectualisation, civilisation, cultivation (NPTEL-NOC IITM, 2019), spiritual and aesthetic motifs (Rens, 2021: 23). As ambiguous as it is, its centrality is premised on a hegemonic, grand narrative authority that stifles non-hegemonic and marginalised representations (NPTEL-NOC IITM, 2019 and Hebdige, 1979: 6). In his writings on stereotyping, Hall (1997: 258), states that the assertion of dominance in a culture deploys the strategy of ‘splitting’ where it excludes people who do not fit into the norm, essentially symbolically fixating boundaries and isolating those who are not in alignment with them. It fails to consider that dominance in a complex society is not homogenous as society has layered differences that are continuously finding ways to defy the ‘norm’ (Clark et al., 1989: 12) as well as reject an ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ narrative where ‘Us’ is the norm and ‘Them’ is the other (Hall, 1997: 258).

Subculture is a form of resistance to a culture deemed hegemonic and perceived as “living in a way that contradicts” uniformity and societal norms (Grinnell College, 2017). A subversion of culture, or as Murchison states, “flipping the script”, means that the grand narrative needs to be disrupted to question the restrictive or ‘accepted’ categorisation that it imposes. This forces engagement with “discursive practices and performative acts”, continuously pushing against orthodox social relations and structures of meaning and power (Murchison, 2018: 79).

For Hebdige (1979: 88), subculture represents a form of organised resistance where socially accepted meanings of everyday words, signs and behaviours are subverted to create alternative yet competing definitions and interpretations. Subverted meanings challenge narratives “that are ultimately grounded in the reproduction” (Hassler-Forest, 2021: 6) of dominance, which, as Hassler-Forest highlights, provides a space “to claim the position of [the] subject” (2021: 7), thus rejecting being Othered which has stereotyped and oppressed people along racial and gendered lines (Hassler-Forest, 2021: 7). The differences in meaning can coexist in spaces as they should not aim to create binaries of what is considered significant and dominant to that which is subjective and marginalised (Hebdige, 1979: 86).

Usable spaces, in this instance, highlight “complex multi-layered local and trans-local queer...subcultures” (Taylor, 2013: 194). Queer identities challenge and resist the privileged conceptions of identity as heteronormative, confined, and universal (Taylor, 2013: 194-195). By way of referencing David Bowie, Hebdige highlights that Bowie and the ‘Bowie-ties’ questioned the notions of gender and confronted chauvinism to show that alternative identities can be discovered, explored, and expressed (Hebdige, 1979: 88). Essentially, Bowie communicated “an Otherness” which challenged “‘inevitability’, the ‘naturalness’ of class and gender stereotypes” (Hebdige, 1979: 89).

Another central artistic figure who has used her art to challenge uniformity and is known as an “all-around aesthetic troublemaker” (Pritchard, 2017: 1) is Grace Jones. Androgyny was a popular metaphor in the 1980s which represented bodily transformations. Jones embraced the metaphor to model alternative visualisations of black and queer identities through fashion, music, and motion pictures. At that time, the entertainment industry (and, to a large extent, still the case in current times) viewed style, beauty, and other creative productions through a white and heteronormative lens (Guzman, 2007: 10).

In her performances, such as *Pull Up To The Bumper* as part of her full-length feature, *A One Man Show*, she would have a man wear heels to dismantle the perceptions of masculinity to show that men can wear heels without it being ascribed to a particular gender (Guzman, 2007: 12-13). This speaks to perceptions that queer identities, or anyone who represented themselves beyond the confines of gender norms, were viewed negatively in a context where non-heteronormativity was considered as sexual deviance and a psychological affliction. This created the stereotyping of queer bodies being “unsanitised or out of control”, which needed to be curtailed (Guzman, 2007: 11). By manipulating visual symbolic meanings such as heels and singing about creating a space of inclusivity, she challenged such hegemonic views by creating “a parallel between the imaginary drama of contagiousness that marked queer identities with its more positive and marketable twin, fashionability” (Guzman, 20117: 12) and radically “exploding the neat

boundaries built around race, gender, sexuality, time, and space from one moment to the next” (Pritchard, 2017: 4).

As a usable space in its production and consumption, music represents an essential resource for self-making, collective identity, and resistance (Taylor, 2013: 197). While this may be the case, it is crucial to note that within subcultures, certain narratives can be privileged over others due to proximities to a grand narrative. By this, Taylor remarks that queer subculture can be overpowered, subsumed, and appropriated through a white gaze where white queer narratives take precedence (Taylor, 2013: 198 & 200). Murchison states that black queer narratives are frequently excluded even though their narratives “falls beside and sometimes coupled with a range of social, cultural, and political movements along a continuum from social commentary and critique to outright political action and revolution” (2018: 79). As such, black queers are at risk of erasure as their experiences are not adequately documented, facing alienation if they do not align with the white gaze or as Mntungwa argues “is weaponised to keep Black queer African individuals living in the peripheries of a society that does not accept them” (Mntungwa, 2022: 15).

White perspectives are afforded greater socio-political and economic privilege and power (Taylor, 2013: 198) at the expense of different racial experiences within the queer community (Grant, 2020: 3). It creates vulnerability and exploitation where “black queers are not meant to feel at home or feel a sense of ownership” (Haupt, 2019: 439) as the erasure exists in duality within the broader society and their subcultures. It should be noted that this project and explication do not explore the erasure of black queers within queer culture as it is not the scope in which both outputs are based. However, it is essential to be aware of this as dual marginalisation on racial and sexual lines exists, and there are efforts to counter this.

Drawing on the concept of usable spaces and intertwining it with an understanding of subculture, I create and express my usable space in *Patches*, a six-track extended play (EP) that encapsulates selected but equally essential phases in my life as a Black gay man. This project serves as my form of resistance, where the expectations of me as a black man meant that I ought to be heterosexual and that black gay men, especially in Africa, do not exist. Dreyer, drawing from Weinberg's definition, states that homophobia, besides being the irrational fear and condemnation of gay people, is the prejudice that leads to “acts of discrimination, abuse, and violence” (Dreyer, 2007: 5). It is steeped in heterosexism⁵ where there is the

⁵ Heterosexism is the ideal categorisation of homophobia as it is “both the cultural precedence of heterosexuality and what is commonly referred to as homophobia”, where the belief of heterosexual relations is superior to same-sex relations leading to violent and discriminatory practices against queer people (Dreyer, 2007: 5).

belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation socially and culturally, merged with the hatred and fear of people who have same-sex attractions (ibid.: 5).

I was intrigued by Ratele's definition and explanation of *non-traditional desires*, in which he states that these are identities that lie outside the status quo of how African societies ought to be, whether romantic, sexual, or platonic (Ratele, 2013: 140). He further positions two provocations, with the first questioning how such desires are deemed 'non-traditional' and the second being how to read and reconcile with narratives of tradition that deem these desires un-African (ibid.: 140). The determination of 'traditional' desires stems from traditional or governing power to 'outlaw' particular desires, thus governing people's private lives as they 'disrupt' the sexual and gender order (Ratele, 2013: 141). People are sometimes persuaded, but mostly forced, to reconcile with such outlawing by suppressing their non-conforming feelings and acting in a way that is neither comforting nor arousing (Ratele, 2013: 143).

For as long as I can remember, I would struggle with being called gay because of how derogatory it would be spoken of. Gayness has traditionally been seen to be a weakness to manhood and the very essence of being a man in society (Mantell et al., 2016: 5-6). In African societies like South Africa, especially among black people, being gay is viewed as an import of colonialism and seen as a "white bourgeoisie disease" that ought to be eradicated (Li, 2019: 24). This is even though homosexuality has always existed in African societies and belief systems. As Msibi argues, it was the imposition of Eurocentric values that led to the view that homosexuality was deemed 'un-African', "arguing that Africa was a sodomy-free zone" (Msibi, 2011: 63).

South Africa's sealed relationship with homophobia can be traced to the apartheid era when the regime made it illegal to be gay, punishable with a criminal offence and prison time. The modification of the Immorality Act in 1969 led to this criminalisation where state police discovered a queer subculture in Johannesburg (Serrano-Amaya, 2018: 65). The regime had inculcated the fear that gay men, particularly in the white community, were predators who placed national identity and the family structure at risk. As such, their existence needed to be controlled, often through violent and degrading means (Falkof, 2019: 274). As a result of this, same-sex relationships were not given the room to be expressed, forcing obedience to the conservative stance of the state to avoid punishment such as imprisonment, forced medical intervention, torture or even death (Kaplan, 2004: 1415-1416).

Though the state's main objective was to segregate the country racially, their fear of homosexuality had also infiltrated the black community (Serrano-Amaya, 2018: 70). If it were known that an anti-apartheid

activist was gay, like in the case of the late activist Simon Nkoli, they would use their sexuality to denounce their involvement in the liberation struggle. State security forces would argue that the liberation struggle should be fought by men who fit the mould of masculinity, something which they believed that gay men, by their sexuality, did not align with (ibid: 70). They went further, saying that homosexuality, as in the white community, brought shame to the black community as they were deviating from their actual cause of liberation and their aspirations of living comfortably in an emancipated state (Martin, 2020: 679-680).

Such messaging led to the gradual isolation of black queer activists and, by extension, black queer people from their communities (Serrano-Amaya, 2018: 70-71). There were, though, voices in the struggle that expressed consideration of the LGBTIAQ+ community in the fight for emancipation and the eventual inclusion of queer rights in the Constitution (Martin, 2020: 680). Despite the Constitutional inclusion, the divisions, both on the racial and sexuality front, led to the normalcy of deafening silencing of violent attacks of queer people in the black community (Serrano-Amaya, 2018: 71). Such normality deepened my fear of embracing my sexuality as I feared that I would be a continued target of abuse who perhaps needed to be eliminated. The violence perpetrated against black queer folks has seemingly gotten worse since the democratic dispensation and is mainly ignored by state institutions meant to protect civilians (Serrano-Amaya, 2018: 71-73).

What is interesting about the state of acceptance and reception towards black queers is that the white community has to some extent, reflected on its conservative stance. This has solicited apologies from colonial regimes where sodomy laws and attitudes arose, such as former Britain Prime Minister Theresa May, who apologised for Britain's role in creating hostile conditions for African queers (Edozien, 2018). Being white and queer is considered somewhat acceptable; however, as a black community, we still hold onto the laws and attitudes that continue to place us at a disadvantage from genuinely embracing our differences which could lead to complete communal and personal emancipation.

How Personal Narratives Shape Identity: Exploring Past Experiences and Future Aspirations

Connelly and Clandinin (2006: 479) state that individuals shape who they are by the stories they share of their past and their future ambitions. Stories act as a “portal through which a person enters the world”, and how their experiences are interpreted and made meaningfully personal. I believe it is evident that this explication will adopt a narrative approach to unpack the themes explored in the EP and document the genre choices made in its creation. This will be done through a narrative inquiry focusing on stories as a data source to gain insight into lived experiences (Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk, 2007: 459). A narrative inquiry

explores “social, cultural and institutional narratives” that influence a person’s experiences, thus directing how they are likely to respond to the issues of the day that affect them (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006: 42). A traditional approach to narrative inquiries is to have a researcher become an active participant in detailing the stories they hear from their participants thus requiring ongoing negotiations and trust between parties (Clandinin, 2006: 47). In the case of this explication, it will be a self-reflective, personal inquiry detailing my experiences that have informed the project’s creation.

There are three dimensions to a narrative inquiry that will form the basis of reflection and will be explored interchangeably. The first is *interaction*, which entails sharing life experiences that require a storyteller to speak about their hopes, fears, desires, feelings and what influence their external environments may have in shaping their emotions (Nguyen and Dao, 2019: 5; Clandinin, 2006: 47). The second is *continuity*, referred to as the past, present and future dimension (Clandinin, 2005: 47), requires a storyteller to reflect on their past experiences and how they may relate to and influence present moments while determining how these may shape their future experiences and their likely responses to them (Nguyen and Dao, 2019: 5). The third is *situation*, telling us where the events of the experiences have taken place which could give additional sentiment and insight (Nguyen and Dao, 2019: 5-6).

My supervisor, Adam Haupt, introduced me to a theoretical concept which succinctly articulates my approach. Autoethnography, as a theoretical framework, seeks to understand cultural experiences through a systematic analysis of personal experiences, treating such research as a form of consciousness within social and political dialogue (Ellis et al., 2011: 273). It “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis et al., 2011: 274). It combines autobiography and ethnography where with autobiography, authors write, rethink, and analyse past experiences or epiphanies that have a significant impact on their lives (Ellis et al., 2011: 275) whereas, with ethnography, authors write about “relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences” for cultural members and strangers to have a better understanding of a studied culture (Ellis et al., 2011: 275-276). Combined, autoethnography encompasses past experiences that involve being part of a culture or identifying with a cultural identity (Ellis et al., 2011: 276).

Autoethnography can be written in the first, second or third person. Authors writing in the first person do so when they have personally experienced and participated in “intimate and immediate” events (Ellis et al., 2011: 277), thus being able to take ownership and responsibility for the events that they have gone through. Authors in the second person involve the reader to actively partake in the story by placing them as the

character or subject to whom the story will be told. Second-person narration is also used in experiences that are difficult to take ownership of. Third-person narration presents interactions and findings based on what has been said to the author, who subsequently acts as the voice for whom they have gotten their narrations (ibid.: 277).

First-person narration is the chosen authorial voice as the events and song motivations discussed in this explication are ones that I have personally experienced and can take ownership of, thus being the phenomenon where I can merge my “academic, research and personal lives” (Ellis et al., 2011: 279). This may be viewed as a controversial choice, as most higher education professionals may consider personal narration to be lacking the academic rigour of being reputable, such as being exclusively grounded in and analysed within the scholarly literature (Ellis et al. 2011: 275, 279). I dispute this, as personal narratives provide a glimpse into cultural and ethnographic moments, thereby enhancing future research by strengthening or challenging existing theoretical paradigms (Ellis et al., 2011: 274). This also reduces the inherent expectation and exploitation of researchers engaging with cultures and subsequently discarding them once their research is complete, often to pursue monetary and professional status (ibid.: 274).

This is not to say that traditional approaches to conducting research and presenting findings are incorrect; however, the authorship of research by members of a culture is just as valid as that of those who do not come from the same culture but have research interests (Ellis et al., 2011: 283). As with other fields, the field of research must respond to changing times in how research is conducted, which does not put the entire sector at risk of losing its credibility (Ellis et al., 2011: 284). Taking heed of Livermon’s notion of usable spaces (2014: 509-510) and Clandinin and Rosiek’s definition of narrative inquiry (2006: 42), autoethnography can serve as the framework and broad application to which alternative and nuance narratives find a voice, countering and resisting hegemonic expectations of society and culture while also “reduc[ing] prejudice... encourage personal responsibility and agency... raise consciousness and promote cultural change” (Ellis et al, 2011: 280).

In 2006, visual activist and photographer Zanele Muholi became aware of the absence of black queer visibility in South African visual culture and history, which prompted them to embark on a photo series that captures black queer narratives. This led to the critically acclaimed *Faces and Phases (2006)* (Market Photoshop, 2017). Muholi described the series as ‘Faces’, representing the person who goes through various ‘Phases’ that signify the transitions a person undergoes from one stage of their life to another (ibid., 2017). I expand on this explanation further in that each ‘phase’ serves as a reflection point of past experiences that

inform how a person decides a way forward in their lives and the lessons learnt in reaching a place of peace with themselves in the face of mounting opposition that decries from their paths.

I purposefully draw on Muholi's definition of phases along with my interpreted understanding in using each song from the EP to illustrate the stages in reaching acceptance about my sexuality, or in the form of the three-dimensional approach of narrative inquiry, illustrating past realities, present moments, and future desires. However, instead of calling them 'phases', which they indeed are, I refer to them as patches. The project's title stems from the saying, "Everyone goes through a rough patch". Going through a rough patch requires a person to take charge of the issues they face. A rough patch is uncomfortable to navigate as it tends to unearth suppressed emotions linked to previous memories. It becomes a wound that requires close observation at that moment in time, thus necessitating healing⁶. Once healed, it leaves a scar that serves as a reminder of the challenges that have been overcome and embraces a new reality, becoming a stronger, more determined individual.

Patches explores four themes, each with a song dedicated to it. Each song on the EP serves as a 'patch' that encapsulates different aspects of my experiences as a black gay man. A throughline covers the themes or 'patches' of *rejection*, *regulation*, *realisation*, and *release*. While exploring each theme, I also discuss the justifications I made in choosing the genres and provide detailed accounts of the lyrics, which will support the song and genre choices.

The first theme is *rejection*. The opening theme focuses on how I used to be uncomfortable with being labelled gay due to how it is seen as un-African, especially in the black community, where homosexuality is seen as a smear of Africanness and weakens the protection of the black identity. It is at this point where there is the discovery that one is gay; however, they are ashamed of this discovery based on how the black community condemns others for having a different sexual orientation and gender identity (Ratele, 2013: 140). The second theme, titled *regulation*, talks about how I would feel the guilt and shame that is imposed on black gay men and how we are forced to explore our sexual orientation in secret. This leads some to the point where they live double lives of fulfilling their authenticity in secret while also keeping a facade that appeases those who deem homosexuality to be a sin.

⁶ My supervisor came to an interesting position which I agree with: Just as we apply plasters to cover cuts and help them heal, we also sew patches onto ripped clothing to restore them. This creates a metaphor that bridges medical and tailoring practices, emphasising repair and recovery in different contexts.

The third theme, *realisation*, highlights the awareness that I came to understand and fully acknowledge that regulating oneself from the point of rejection and regulation is a burdensome task. Instead of living authentically, deep survival instincts become a new norm, thus finding ways to protect oneself from being targets of abuse, which in turn brings internal shame and hollowing of self (Lee, 2021). The last theme *release* is the love of self and affirming thoughts that being a black gay man is not un-African or a sin, and that I and others can live in our authentic truths. This is essentially a new beginning where a person fully embraces their sexuality. While they must work through the survival instincts that they have built from policing themselves, they can find peace even if it means losing people along the way (Ncube, 2017: 36). This extends to not fearing to form genuine relationships with others in fear of reprisal and that black gay men are leaders, lovers, friends, and providers.

The project consists of six songs, with the second through fifth songs referred to as the 'patches', which encompass the themes covered and mirror a profoundly personal story. The second song addresses pain from individual and societal rejection for being gay, showcasing the vulnerability and isolation tied to queer identity in hostile settings. This rejection leads to the third song, which examines hiding in shadows and navigating secret queer relationships. The fourth track signifies a turning point: a moment of realisation, reflection, and confronting truths, as the protagonist makes sense of their inner world. Finally, the fifth song provides release and resolve, celebrating self-acceptance and queer pride. Collectively, these songs create a sonic dialogue, illustrating a powerful journey from shame to self-love and secrecy to liberation.

The first song provides an overall synopsis of the emotions and thoughts that went into creating the project. In contrast, the sixth song concludes the project by presenting additional perspectives through an interview. The interview explores the project's significance and how it relates to the overall aspirations and expectations that it aims to fulfil. The first song reveals that I initially sought perfection in the project, which hindered my ability to produce work. Once I confronted this fear after deep introspection, I could lean into the 'patches' and express myself both in writing and musically, enjoying the creative process. The last song serves as a platform for reflection, which is necessary for a project of this nature. It provides a debrief from an emotionally demanding process, particularly when self-reflection is involved. Debriefing from the 'patches' allows for the formation of perspective and more profound and further analysis, essentially putting the pieces or 'patches' together to create a fuller picture.

A considerable amount of scholars such as Dalamba (2013), Schumann (2008), Gilbert (2008), Coplan and Jules-Rosette (2008), Vershbow (2010), Drewett (2003), Phajane (2020) have primarily focused on the influential role music has played in the downfall of the apartheid regime as it was a form of protest in

highlighting the daily struggles that black South Africans faced from subpar living conditions to discriminatory treatment of essential services (Schumann, 2008:18). How music has spoken to other forms of marginalisation, especially on black queer experiences during the oppressive regime and in the current democratic dispensation have primarily been limited in their documentation. There has also been a gap in detailing the journeys of black queer musicians from the past and in the present in how they navigate their existence in a country that tends to push them to the curb of society, invalidating them.

This is not to say that there have been no attempts to salvage this gap. The most notable contribution to date has been the works of Ncube (2015, 2017), who has succinctly articulated the journey of self-discovery of Black queers by unpacking the critically acclaimed albums of Nakhane's debut, *Brave Confusion*, and Toya Delazy's second album, *Ascension*. In both contributions, Ncube outlines how the artists have used their music to address four themes that tend to be prominent in discussions of sexuality. The first is the artists' cultural origins and how their cultures respond or practice particular customs in responding to different sexualities; the second is their religious upbringing and how they have to navigate religious teachings with their sexuality; the third is of race in that their experiences as black queers are vastly different to those of white queers and, lastly, local geographics of where they were born which consolidates these aspects to establishing how their upbringing has shaped how they reconcile their sexuality with the kinds of artists they are today.

Although such contributions are essential and provide valuable insight into the experiences of Black queer artists, they are limited contributions that highlight Black queer narratives in a narrative format musically, nor do they position the self as a subject area on which to sing, write, and critically reflect. It is this limitation that I hope this project can contribute and provide additional insight into the works that have explored and articulated Black queer narratives through music. I am by no means saying that my approach is new or revolutionary; however, providing a personal perspective in which academia and musicality intertwine is a way to deepen perspectives that are often not heard of or remain within the confines of what it means to produce academic literature.

The Process

I Am Nervous

“It’s okay to be nervous. I would be, too. You are worthy of the new. You are worthy of the stars.”

FUMZ FEVA⁷

I had chosen to create an EP instead of a long play (LP) as an LP traditionally requires more than six songs, equating to a full-length album (LANDR, 2022). As this is my first project, which I mostly wrote, recorded, and produced, I wanted to establish myself as a performer and producer and experiment with musical software and sounds before creating a full-length album. Most of my other musical works have been relatively minor, where I had submitted them for class assessments and experimented with sound production on various online and mobile applications. I wanted to enhance my production skillset for this and future projects that I may work on. The songs were recorded in a home studio I curated at the start of this project to fulfil my desired learning outcome. There were time limitations as creating a song took about two months to produce with limited resources. This project may be reworked at a later stage and form part of a future LP. The scope of the explication posed a limitation, as providing extensive reflection notes for each song went beyond the required scope of the degree of study, as I could not adhere to the required word count due to its autoethnographic nature.

I enlisted the help of a producer with extensive industry experience, having worked with critically acclaimed artists and produced commercially successful songs. He produced one song for the project, with the remaining five being self-produced. Enlisting his help was first to learn how they navigate the creation process of making a beat for a future project; secondly, to assist with moments where I had a creative block where I could not complete a song; and, lastly, to help me think beyond the initial ideas of how I wanted the song to sound like. The producer was required to sign two sets of forms before working on the project. The first was an ethics form to fulfil the ethics requirement for the project and to ensure that he was aware that his involvement in the project was voluntary and that he understood the project’s overall theme. The second form was a contractual agreement, as I would like the project to be used for future career development and commercial purposes. This agreement included the split in royalties, payment structures,

⁷ This is a lyric from the spoken song, *It’s Okay To Be Nervous*, from my recent spoken project, *Patchy: Audio Stciky Notes To (My) Self*. The song positions nerves as a good thing to experience when deciding to let go and following through with the choices associated with that feeling.

and the use and administration of the song once the project was released to the public. I wanted the contractual agreement to be in place, as I did not want to prevent the song from being released or used for developmental and commercial purposes due to potential disputes that may arise once the project is completed and the results are received. One song features a guest interview about the project's process and rationale, with the guest feature also signing both forms.

I used the Digital Audio Workspace (DAW) GarageBand to create, record, and edit the self-produced songs. I found GarageBand to be relatively more straightforward to use. I could create songs with relative ease compared to other DAWs, which I struggled with because they often crashed, were not easy to understand the first time I used them, and I constantly had to research how to navigate features that would aid in the creation process. These challenges significantly slowed down the time spent creating a song. This is not to say that I will not use those DAWs in the future; however, as this is my first full-scale musical project, where I am learning new things and enhancing my skills, GarageBand proved to be easier for me to do so. A natural progression from GarageBand would be Logic Pro, as both DAWs are created and operated by Apple Inc. and have similar functionalities. With Logic Pro, I would like to build on the skills I've learned from GarageBand and utilise them for future projects. This move does not eliminate the possibility of learning and using other DAWs, as each has its strengths and limitations regarding what it can offer.

My creative process typically begins with writing lyrics, which helps me develop a deeper connection to the song. Once the lyrics are written, a beat is created that can help capture the song's message. The lyrics are adjusted during this process to align the production with what is being sung. The adjustment of lyrics was particularly the case with the fifth song, where I wanted the original lyrics to remain; however, the producer encouraged me to rework the lyrics as the created beat inspired a different direction in which the song could be heard and understood. I also experimented with genres, as each song addresses a different aspect of the themes covered and has emotive responses which I want listeners to hear and feel. This also aligns with the project's title, as each song and its genre support the patches I reflect on. As such, no singular genre is heard throughout the project, and I justify my choices for each Patch. It should also be noted that my classification of the genres heard in this project may differ from that of another listener, and I welcome feedback.

I would be lying if I said that creating the EP and reflecting on the moments that informed its creation was a seamless journey. I often wanted to change the project's direction and scrap it entirely. As I wrote this paper, I became anxious about the backlash I would likely face. There will be close and distant people who will learn about my experiences for the first time, and would have preferred me to tell them rather than

choose this mode of expression. There may also be people who will isolate me from their lives once they read this paper and listen to the EP.

I had to consciously decide that choosing to express myself in this fashion and using my experiences as case studies was not to cause harm. I felt secure in controlling the narrative in a manner I felt comfortable with. For those who would have preferred a personal and direct conversation about these experiences, I understand their concerns and hope they will understand my position on this approach. I understand they may want further enclosed conversations, which I am open to.

I remember my first supervision meeting with my supervisor. He warned me that creating music, while enjoyable, can be a frustrating process as creatives, more so musicians and producers, are always trying to perfect their sound, often with limited resources. I remember telling him that I would be happy with whatever came out, making sure it would be presentable and not feel the sense of perfection I tend to have when creating a project. That was short-lived. I became increasingly frustrated as I wanted it to sound and feel a particular way. When that did not happen, I would be despondent for days, even months, trying to find the motivation to create again. I had limited resources at my disposal, which I only realised once I got into the depths of the creation process. This is a common challenge that most upcoming creatives face when trying to chart their creative journey.

What I wish I had done from the beginning was to let go of perfectionism in fear of letting myself down and those who may listen to it. Letting go of perfection and trusting my creative process is what I speak about in *I Am Nervous*. The idea of perfection slowed down the creation of the songs on the EP. It was only after speaking with numerous friends and my supervisor towards the end of the process that I truly embraced the idea that I could only do so much. At this moment, I also truly enjoyed making music again and allowing creativity to be my modus operandi, imperfect as it may be.

Instead of wanting to create the ‘perfect’ album at my first attempt, I should have let the process unfold in whatever shape or form it led to. There will be more projects where I will reflect on my experiences, and with any skill set, it will be enhanced over time. I should have asked for help much sooner from fellow creatives who could have lent support and helped me in my endeavour with their input and resources, which could have enhanced my creation and learning experience. I wanted to perfect my skill set by creating a solo project, and it dawned on me that, at times, bringing people on board could also help me achieve that goal.

I needed to verbalise letting go of perfection to myself. I imagined being interviewed telephonically by a radio host with music in the background, explaining my reasons for creating the EP and stating that I would be proud of it in its submitted form, thus embracing the feedback I would receive. I recorded this imagined exchange on my laptop and edited the recording to sound like a voice note from a telephonic interview. I remembered that singer and rapper Frank Ocean had created a similar sound for his acclaimed album, *Blonde*, particularly for the song *Be Yourself* where Rosie Watson, the mother of his childhood friend, left him a stern voicemail advising him to be himself and avoid destructive behaviour (Genius, 2023). The voicemail is paired with a minimalist yet enhancing melody that embellishes the message.

Mulling over this, I wanted *I Am Nervous* to represent the imperfection of making music, which should be heard in the accompanying melody. I envisioned accompanying keys being played imperfectly in the background; in some instances, they would be in sync and play off-key. A genre which I have found to embody this is lo-fi⁸. I have been intrigued by the genre since I stumbled upon the YouTube channel LoFi Girl (previously known as Chilled Cow), which features a continuous stream of lo-fi songs accompanied by a looped animation of a girl. At the same time, she completes her homework with her cat gazing out the window. In some instances, she will be sitting on a balcony at night or sleeping on her bed (Neal, 2022: 32). The songs would have light distortion with an interplay of amateur and professional instruments as well as “jazz samples, fuzzy vinyl sounds, and the light crashing of waves” often with little to no lyrics (The Music Origins Project, 2020). As an aesthetic of music, lo-fi allows imperfections in recording and production to be audible in the final recording (Greenfield, 2018). This is “a positive appreciation of what is perceived and/or considered normatively interpreted as imperfections in a recording, with particular emphasis on imperfections in the recording technology itself” (Harper, 2014: 6).

The exact history of the genre is not easily located due to its many interpretations and subgenres; however, some of its earliest history dates to the 1950s “as a new wave of amateur musicians” created music with limited budgets (Greenfield, 2018) As a result, the recordings were commonly referred to as low-quality music as they were not recorded ‘professionally’, where recording imperfections could be removed (ibid: 2018). During this time, lo-fi recordings in mainstream music had a negative connotation due to the distinct characterisation of hi-fi⁹ recordings being of a higher standard which most musicians ought to have strived for (Harper, 2014: 7). Despite such connotations, the genre gained mass appreciation from the public due to its DIY-style (Greenfield, 2018) which would come to represent “a more authentic and desirable

⁸ Lo-fi is short for low fidelity which is characterised by sounds that are of imperfect nature often of low or poor audio quality (Harper, 2014: 7).

⁹ Hi-fi is short for high fidelity where recordings are deemed to be of high quality, clear and balance even when the original audio has been manipulated (Neal, 2022: 32).

recording” (Harper, 2014: 7). A key moment that solidified lo-fi as a recognisable and appreciated genre was in the 1980s when WFMU radio host Bill Berger would dedicate a 30-minute slot called *Low-Fi* and later *Home Tape Showcase* where amateur recordings would be played. The slot would be described as “thirty minutes of home recordings produced on inexpensive equipment. Technical primitivism coupled with brilliance” (LCD, 1986b: 3 in Harper, 2014: 10), later informing its categorisation in the 1990s (Harper, 2014: 10).

After I recorded myself, I used a pre-loaded lo-fi dark piano VST¹⁰, experimenting with different keys to create a sound I believed would match the voice recording. I did not follow any regimented approach to playing the keys, as I wanted to authentically find the sound that would enhance what I had articulated. After a few attempts, I found enjoyment in the melody in F minor, as it balanced the feelings of uncertainty with hopefulness and excitement (The Music Studio, 2023). As a usable space, this brought about a sense of empowerment to experiment and create a project from scratch (Neal, 2022: 37-38) and to embrace the honesty that this project embodies (Neal, 2022: 38).

The project and explication only cover selected experiences, as a much broader approach would be required for a future study. These selected experiences do not invalidate the experiences of people who may identify with or have different experiences that align with what has been explored here. Additionally, the project does not adhere to traditional musical conventions, nor does it incorporate music theory or offer a detailed analysis of music genres and notes. This, too, could be a future study; however, this project aims to utilise music as a means of self and meaning making, where a usable space is employed to convey a form of storytelling.

In the following chapter, the first Patch, I examine my emotional well-being, which stemmed from feelings of rejection by both society and myself. This rejection was fuelled by the fear and despair I faced as someone considered ‘other’, especially in the African context, which has a complicated and troubled history regarding sexual orientation. I also connect this reflection with music, highlighting the song made for this Patch.

¹⁰ Virtual Studio Technology (VST) is a digital interface which connects and integrates with “software audio effects, synthesizers and effect plugins with recording systems and audio editors” and usually requires a stable internet connection to make use of (Techopedia, 2015).

PATCH I: Rejection

Mr First (His Love)

“‘Non-traditional desires’ is used to refer to non-conforming desires, practices, identities, relationships, as well as bodies such as what are often called girly boys, pretty boys, tomboys and intersexed babies, but also instances when a male child wants a pink (anything), or a female child wants to play stick-fighting with boys”.

Kopano Ratele¹¹

It was January 2014 when Africa was gripped by news that Nigeria had passed its anti-homosexuality laws. I remember it quite vividly when South African news agencies, more so *News 24* and *Eyewitness News* (EWN), provided coverage about the implications the controversial law would have on queer Nigerians and queer people from other parts of the world who happen to visit the country and are suspected of being gay. After reading these articles, I read the comment sections of both news entities’ websites and their related Facebook pages. I believed, at the time, that South Africa had made tremendous strides in respecting LGBTIAQ+ rights and that its previous history of violence, discrimination and hate speech towards queer folks was becoming a thing of the past as more people became aware of these aspects and started speaking out against the brutality. I was wrong. I wish I had not read the comments, as it became pretty evident that what I thought was a myth. Some of the comments had purposefully advocated for further violence to be instituted, with the core message being that queerness, especially for black people, did not exist in Africa.

This took me back to when I was 16, when a BBC Special Debate recorded in 2010 in Johannesburg posed the question: *‘Is Homosexuality un-African?’*. This debate came at a time when Uganda was the leading country on the continent that had considered passing legislation that would criminalise homosexuality, either with life imprisonment or, for supposed repeat offenders, the death penalty (SABC News, 2013). Anti-homosexuality sentiments have, for the last decade, captured the African continent, where states have proposed and passed legislation limiting the rights of queer people and placing control mechanisms where those who knew of a queer person had to inform the authorities otherwise, they would face sanctions for their concealment (News 24, 2014 and Okeowo, 2014). The earliest supporter of such laws was the Ugandan Member of Parliament (MP) and current Minister of State for Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, David

¹¹ This quotation comes from Prof Ratele’s journal article, *Masculinity without Traditions* (2013: 140) which aims to provide different understandings in the interpretation of masculinities and ‘the traditional’ and attempts to undo the patriarchal hetero-masculinist constructs that hinder the acknowledgement and progression of same sex relations (2013: 133).

Bahati. At the BBC debate, he argued that homosexuality goes against African values as it threatens the family unit and stifles procreation to grow African families (SABC News, 2013). He was countered by the late South African journalist and ethics & philosophy lecturer Eusebius Mckaiser, arguing that such an argument is misplaced because Africanness is not purely about procreation, as there are heterosexual couples who are not able to procreate. There are queer couples who can do so and still seek to be in same-sex relationships. Health scholar, author and activist Paula Akugizibwe argued that the question that should be asked about anti-homosexual sentiments is whether to align with ideological prejudice, which denies lived experiences or align with humanitarian values that allow people to live to be who they are without conditions. She further elaborated that homophobia creates a culture of intolerance and fear, which should not form the basis of an African society (SABC News, 2013).

While Mckaiser and Akugizibwe's positions were valid and should be the norm, Bahati's stance seems to capture the sentiments of a majority on the continent. In South Africa, African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) leader Reverend Kenneth Meshoe opposed gay marriage when same-sex marriage was proposed by Parliament in 2005. He said that the Civil Unions Act of 2006, which enshrined same-sex marriage, tested God's patience. When the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu expressed his support for queer rights, Meshoe said that the archbishop was out of order and that his support did not align with the Bible (eNCA, 2015). Former President Zuma in his capacity as then deputy president of the African National Congress (ANC) (eNCA, 2015) said that if a gay person were before his presence, he would have given them a beating and that same-sex marriages were not natural to God (Hodes, 2012: 4). Former official opposition leader Mmusi Maimane who, during a 2014 sermon, said that God sent him to be "friends of sinners", which at the time he equated to queer people, as he too was a sinner (eNCA, 2015). Though Zuma and Maimane later clarified and apologised for their comments, their earlier sentiments have fed into the broader attitudes that are held against queer people in the country and continent (Msibi, 2011: 62).

Where do these sentiments arise from, and how do they affect the lived realities of queer folk, especially black queer folk, who have to proceed with caution in hoping not to be a victim of hate speech or a hate crime? Many leaders in influential positions have asserted that queerness has never existed in African society; thus, it is a foreign concept that must be corrected or removed (Dlamini, 2006: 128-129). There is a failure to recognise that such sentiments did not form part of African culture until the colonial project began in the 1800s (Dlamini, 2006: 132). Colonialists, especially the British, drafted anti-sodomy laws in fear that their soldiers and colonial administrators would engage in same-sex engagements as they were likely away from their controlled environments where such engagements were against their moral and religious codes, especially of Christian faith (Han and O'Mahoney, 2014: 6). The first anti-sodomy law was

the Indian Penal Code, which under Section 377 stated, “Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man... shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment ...for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall be liable to [a] fine”. This law soon became an integral part of the colonial system imposed on colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean (Han and O’Mahoney, 2016: 6-7).

As a form of survival, same-sex encounters were not given the room to be expressed, and many had to be in line with the religious and legislative stances to avoid punishment and rebuke (Kaplan, 2004: 1415-1416). I would assume that there were also instances of shunning by those who were known or suspected of being queer not to be a victim of violence by association essentially embracing a “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” status quo (Msibi, 2011: 64). This could have also meant that extremely secretive engagements needed to take place so that the colonialist could not subject queer men to the rule book as that meant violence met with imprisonment which is currently happening in postcolonial Africa (Msibi, 2011: 64-65).

Most tragic of them all is that while queerness has always existed in African society dating back to pre-colonial history, same-sex interactions were also used as a form of violent control (Perkins, 2017: 2). Sexual violence by colonial ‘masters’ on black men has resulted in internalised resentment since colonial and enslaved persons gave no consent (Perkins, 2017: 8). This is also because colonialism had moved from being a fight between races to becoming a fight between men of different races (hooks, 1990: 58-59) with white men using the same tactics of sexually violating black women to emasculate black men (Perkins, 2017: 2). There were instances of duality where, due to same-sex intercourse being frowned upon, colonialists who were gay could only be able to explore their desires through violent means while ensuring black men’s emasculation using the unequal power dynamics that the ‘master’ had to further his sexual fantasies (Perkins, 2017: 4-6).

Considering these historical perspectives, how have they profoundly disrupted a social order seemingly accepting of differing sexual orientations before colonialism? I think it creates dual-negative positions. On the one hand, it creates an imposed hostile environment where queerness is seen as the root cause of disrupting the social order, which needs to be eradicated to reach ‘normality’ (Ratele, 2013: 140-141 and Perkins, 2017: 9). On the other hand, it aims to stifle the voices of those who identify as queer and try to solidify or expand repressive colonial laws to ensure compliance with an ideal status quo of heteronormativity (Ratele, 2013: 143 and Msibi, 2011: 57). These measures create the illusion that queer people do not exist in the continent thus being branded as a white man’s disease intended to destroy Africa and her people (Msibi, 2011: 63).

After I had read the comments on each publication, it was the first time that I truly felt utterly unwelcome, as the remarks were calling for gay South Africans to be extinguished or shipped to Europe. I remember feeling anxious because I was thinking to myself how I could make myself malleable to being perceived as heterosexual and hide any characteristics that would show that I am gay. It was exhausting because I would automatically police myself in spaces that I felt were danger zones and then adapt mannerisms that I deemed critical for my survival¹². This had a long-lasting impact on other aspects of my life, which I will explain as this explication continues.

Thinking back to this memory, taking stock of the continents' and South Africa's queerphobic attitudes and thinking about the teasing I experienced in my junior years made me write *Mr. First (His Love)*. The title combines two elements: *Mr.* speaks to the perspective of a black gay man who needs to talk to himself about everything he has been subjected to, which has shaped his lived realities and experiences. As black men, we are taught to find destructive outlets in which to see ourselves, especially when it comes to our hurt, vulnerability, and rejection. We are told not to express emotions or have conversations with ourselves to reflect, as it is seen as a sign of weakness, more so if we are gay. *Mr.* seeks to reclaim this supposed weakness by allowing black gay men to have honest discussions with themselves, which *First* compliments as they are the first person whom they speak to before managing the world's pressures and seeking others' counsel. *His Love* encompasses both meanings, suggesting that we must navigate self-love while also seeking an intimate connection with another person, when it may not be socially or legally accepted.

Drawing from the Lo-Fi genre that I wrote about for *I Am Nervous*, I drew on the “slow, mellow” production to create a “soothing and calming atmosphere” where listening to the song can allow a listener or creator to safely locate and reflect on their emotions and express their imperfections should they wish to do so (Chemical Reaction Music, 2023). I composed the song in C minor, which evokes passion and “sorrow, grief, despair and self-punishment” (The Music Studio, 2023). As the journey of being black and gay in the continent is of rigorous imperfection, I wanted the song to be one of reflection for black gay men who face multiplicities within the continent of having to negotiate their Africanness while dealing with the rejection of society that deems their sexuality a stain to being African and their heritage. In such navigation, which I wanted to be heard in the song, there is always a feeling of longing, reflection, and contemplation to being socially accepted, and where one is birthed and raised, one will accept one's existence without conditions.

¹² These mannerisms included taking on a far more masculine exterior where I would perform act tougher, talk in a stern masculine voice, act unnecessarily aggressive, act as if I was sexually and romantically attracted to women and sadly, in one instance, denounce my queer friends all in the name of self-preservation.

This longing carries itself into other facets of a person's life, which can harbour suppressed emotions that lead to internalised hate and wondering why something as natural as sexuality is treated with disdain, thus restricting the ability to make connections with those with whom we identify to seek friendship and companionship.

In the first two stanzas of the lyrics, I sing:

*Yes, you want his love//
But his love is not the law//
The streets do not kiss and tell//
But know it's not the rule.*

*I need you to please come home//
'Cause nowhere else is home//
Mr please, handle your demons//
Sir, you are the first.*

I had difficulty singing the end of the verse "'Cause nowhere else is home" during the recording as I became emotional. This line represents the emotions of queer individuals seeking acceptance and a place to call home. I considered re-recording that line, but I kept the original recording to preserve my emotional state, as it sets the tone for the project and its meaning.

When I sing "handle your demons", I remember convincing myself that I was an issue that needed to be resolved because I was angry that I had same-sex attractions that were rejected by society, especially by the black community. The self-policing I subjected myself to was a coping mechanism that made me highly irritable as I would be envious of my friends, acquaintances and colleagues who were gay, as they were able to express themselves when I could not freely. It led to the point where I internalised my anger and resented my existence. I was upset at God for bestowing something that came with such a lifelong burden of continuous verbal abuse and a highly likely case of physical abuse. I kept asking myself why the attraction and emotions towards men felt right but wrong simultaneously. Surely, my attractions were right because they felt unnatural and inconsistent with the romantic life I envisioned when I tried to avoid them. While African countries might make regressive laws to criminalise same-sex relations or frown upon them socially, it is not a rule that one has to follow because personal agency, where sexuality is concerned, is

paramount. It was an internal warfare that I had to navigate from feelings of rejection to feeling completely isolated in society.

The rejection and isolation I felt are captured in the song where I sing:

The soil that birthed you said that you do not exist//

Please know that this is your home//

Sir, please don't run, please stay.

The soil represents the continent, offering a worldwide view that Africans and their offspring are considered the world's first people, and that life originated on the African continent (Zimmer, 2016). As such, it should be largely embraced that there is diversity in human interactions, relationships, and ways of being. However, I felt that I had to dim my light in compliance. This created regressive feelings of invalidation and extremely sporadic moments of comfort, where I felt I was able to be my true self. Such feelings can lead to two aspects. The first is a sense of displacement where queer people feel like they are unwelcomed in their homes¹³ thus having to leave them and find a place where they will be accepted (Ratele, 2013: 144). The second is that it creates internalised oppression when they see someone like them who can express themselves in light of the punitive conditions that exist which can have violent outcomes if the internalised oppressed person wishes to act on their impulses (Ratele, 2013: 143).

Ratele's explanation of non-traditional desires helped me understand that desires, actions, or expressions outside the traditional realm of the 'norm' are treated with disdain, almost as if the existence of people who express these attributes plays no role in everyday life, whether in their personal, familial, or community lives. The preface of our existence is significantly narrowed in that merely entertaining what is outside our structured realities increases the likelihood of losing status, respect, and the material possessions that help us acquire these aspects.

In my case, I feared the most common rebuke that is ever articulated against queer folks: we are going to hell, and our ancestors will not accept us in the spirit world when we depart Earth. Keeping in line with the soil as representing the beginning and embracing of life, were my innate feelings of same-sex attractions going to be a detriment in my afterlife? Would it mean secretly having to confine my romantic and social life to what is expected of me, as per what is dictated by African leaders? I had to constantly, and still do,

¹³ The context in which 'home' is referred to is where a person lives in either a certain area, location, city or country.

navigate the voice in my head that my existence as a black and gay person is valid and that the basis of my sexuality should not serve as a detriment to being less African or black. I would think and eventually sing:

This is your truth, Mr, please//

That's what makes you unique//

**Those before us know the truth//*

**They will guide you in this life.*

They may never understand//

But please give yourself love//

Handle your demons, they cannot win//

Please, Sir, come home.

In thinking about the denial of existence, the last two lines of the first* stanza are significant: they speak to the ancestral spirits that see and understand the world's true nature at a heightened level. It is my firm belief that our ancestors accept and love the people of their lineage, including queer folks. For example, in her autobiography, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Zandile Nkunzi Nkabinde states that as a traditional healer, her ancestors “supported me... [and] helped me to become who I was” (Nkabinde, 2008:38, cited by Lake, 2021: 25) when she discovered that she was both a sangoma and lesbian. For Nkabinde, her sexual identity goes beyond coming out as lesbian but is about finding community and solidifying her life ethos that “affirm(s) her identity as a lesbian, a Zulu woman and a traditional healer” (Lake, 2021: 25).

Even though our ancestors lived experiences, norms, and conventions may have differed and contrary to the type of societies that currently exists, in the spirit world, they are a guiding force who love openly and freely but are firm in their messages and guidance (Lake, 2021: 29). The experiences of queer folk continue to be hostile and challenging, however, at least in the spirit world, there is acceptance as ancestors continue to play a role in the lives of queer folks, despite the constant messaging in the physical world that homosexuality is un-African (Lake, 2021: 29-30).

Positioning the song as a usable space represents no singular claim to African identity, as Africans have always had a multiplicity of identities that form what Africanness means to them. Eze (2014: 234) states that Africa, as a continent and her people, has always been a complex and diverse continent where a unanimous understanding of what it means to be African has never been achieved, despite Western and

colonial attempts to enforce a consolidated rhetoric of such identity. Africanness has fluid definitions that supersede cultural and racial markers, calling for “a new, more nuanced understanding of identity” (Eze, 2014: 235).

Ngwena, on the other hand, who seemingly echoes Eze’s position while expanding it within the scope of sexuality, states, “Failure to see a multiplicity of identities and affiliations or to accommodate intersectionalities... renders equality an oppressive hegemonic blunderbuss” (Ngwena, 2018: 208). Inclusive Africanness, thus laying claim to African identity, should be devoid of sexual essentialism that seeks to enforce “a heterogeneous sexual domain of non-exhaustive benign variations” (ibid.: 208). Africanness should create a space for and embrace distinctiveness as Africans consistently discover and reveal themselves in new, unpredictable, and dynamic ways that go beyond the expected norms of being African, especially where sexuality is concerned (Ngwena, 2018: 209).

The sexual essentialism plunges queer Africans into cyclones of hidden and internalised oppression, where the notion of joy in being true to themselves is perceived as a distant and unattainable reality. Consequently, in places where joy is experienced, albeit briefly, it remains enveloped in secrecy. This leaves queer Africans in precarious positions, with those with whom they share their joy yearning for more, even when the presence of what they desire is unstable. I discuss my experience of hidden joy, particularly in my romantic pursuits, in the next Patch. In speaking about it and the song created for it, I lay bare the stage I inadvertently curated, where my romantic partners, who were out and proud, became unwitting actors in my script, all while I attempted to be the lead actor wishing to remain hidden away.

PATCH II: Regulation

At Past Nine

“In every person, there live two possible selves: the lead and the understudy. The understudy hides in the shadows while the lead takes centre stage and does everything it can to get an applause. But after the bows are taken and the lights go down, the understudy takes to stage and performs to an empty room, hoping no one can hear.”

Chadwick Williams¹⁴

I am a hopeless romantic. When I am in a relationship, I give it my all. I treat my partners the way I would like to be treated, and I can admit that I sometimes go overboard, which can be overbearing to them. Despite the affection that I show my partners, I would always be conscious of how people, especially relatives and acquaintances, would react if they knew that I had a boyfriend or same-sex attraction. Around my friends and those of my partners’ friends, I would openly express myself and show my partners affection as I was in my comfort zone; however, around acquaintances and relatives, I would be reserved and not utter a word about my relationships, in fear of jeopardising any relationships I had with them.

This would take its toll on my partners, who would be drawn into my predicament. Around my friends, we were lovers; however, around my acquaintances and relatives, we were simply friends. My first¹⁵ ex-boyfriend battled to understand why I could not tell my relatives about my sexuality and not have to denounce our relationship whenever we were around them. In my most recent relationship, I had restricted the pictures he could post of us on social media. He created a closed group of friends on Instagram where he would share our photos; however, whenever he wanted to share outside the group, I would be hesitant, to the point that he would almost exclusively post within the group he created. My partners had to become accustomed to the double life I had created. While they sympathised and understood my fears, it would strain our relationships as we had to consistently regulate how we interacted with those who did not know about our relationship. I was scared, and as I write this, I am still scared of the possible rejection I could face.

¹⁴ Character played by Damian T. Raven from the award-winning television series *The DL Chronicles* (2007). This quote was mentioned in the opening scene of the episode titled *Robert*. Robert is a closeted, successful talent agent who falls in love with Austin, a health food store manager. His attraction to and relationship with Austin is threatened due to his shame of being gay and the fear that his family, more so his daughter, will disown him (Gantt via IMBd, 2023).

¹⁵ By first, I refer to the relationship I was in before my recent separation 4 years ago.

The duality of presenting myself was closely aligned with the dramaturgical framework articulated by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Goffman states that human activity manifests as crafted scripts played out on stage, accompanied by sets, props, accessories, and a backstory that we create or inherit, making our performances believable (Khan, 2020: 399). Goffman's exploration of everyday life emphasises social encounters where people try to express and manage an encounter through the use of actions and gestures that define how the encounter ought to occur and how individuals wish to be perceived and treated, essentially engaging in impression management (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015: 68-69). This is not to say that there is complete consensus among parties in an encounter; however, it may represent a moment where parties may suppress sincere emotions and actions, putting on a 'face' to present a front that is acceptable to others (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015: 70).

My partners, who were essentially actors on my stage, cooperated in staging my singular routine of suppressed authenticity (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015: 71) before the people we encountered, choosing not to reveal the backstory of our relationship and why our romantic encounter unfolded in the manner it did. These efforts were to "prevent embarrassing episodes, or eventually, situational breakdown[s]" (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015: 72). This would require them to ignore my slippages, contradictions, and sporadic emotional episodes (ibid: 72), cooperating with a simplified reality that hid the complexities of our interactions (Kivisto and Pittman, 2012: 299).

This reminded me of the popular and controversial television show *After Nine*, which aired on SABC 1 in 2007 and 2013. It was the first time South Africans were exposed to the realities of black gay men living a double life of sleeping with a man and a woman concurrently (Modisane, 2017). The show's title is centred on the term "after nine"¹⁶ which is primarily used within the black community to speak to closeted gay men who stereotypically present as heterosexual but exhibit apathy towards gay men during the day. At night, however, usually after 9 pm, they make themselves available to out and fellow closeted gay men to pursue sexual, sometimes romantic relations without the knowledge of those closest to them, such as their families, friends, colleagues, and community members (Mantell et al., 2016: 954). In most instances, closeted gay men are in romantic relationships with women with whom they have families and play the role of the patriarch in leading their families and solidifying their rule (Grant, 2020: 1).

I think the reason why secret relations between closeted and out gay men are called "after nine" is structured around the family structure routine. During the day, families are expected to conduct stereotypical activities

¹⁶ It should be noted that after nine is not exclusively associated with the black community, as men from other races can also be an after nine. The term has been more popularised and discussed within the black community.

such as preparing for and going to work and school, with the matriarch bearing the responsibility of facilitating the ease of each person being adequately prepared for the day ahead. At night, she is to ensure the same routine, but this time, the children and husband are fed, and house chores, homework and work responsibilities are completed, all while preparing for the next day to follow a similar routine. By 9 pm, it is expected that both the matriarch and the children will have completed their respective tasks and have opted to rest by the time 9 pm arrives. For the patriarch, it is expected that, as he is responsible for leading his family and ensuring their financial well-being, it is a norm for him to work late into the night to earn a living that can support his family. It is also a norm that he may spend time with his family during the evening; however, at a particular time, he needs to leave his home and attend to his work obligations.

While this is an actual reality for many black families in that the patriarch does have to work into the night or must shorten their quality time with their families to make a living, in some instances, in the case of after nines, some use these expectations to fulfil their most authentic sexual and romantic relationships while misleading their families in believing that it is work that they are exclusively occupied by. In other aspects, it also has to do with the fact that at night, they will very likely be away from their colleagues or be less visible to their communities to whom they present the image of hypermasculinity, whose default attractions are to women and that he likely has a female romantic partner and children whom he goes home to. His sexual and romantic desires with men proceed with caution, where it is “never to be seen during the day” (Mzanzi Tips, 2021).

After Nine is centred on a love triangle between China, played by Lucky Khoza, his pregnant fiancée, Bokang Maema, played by Matsehpo Maleme, and his romantic lover, Hector, played by Aaron Moloisi (Modisane, 2017; De Barros, 2013). China is a successful, closeted gay businessman who meets Hector, an architect recruited to work in his family’s successful construction company (TVSA, 2021). They had an instant mutual attraction, leading to a secret relationship. China initially seems to believe that he has managed to balance his double life, having a loyal, long-standing fiancée and a loyal but secret lover. This, however, changes when Bokang becomes pregnant, and his family pressures him to marry her; at the same time, he wants to continue his relationship with Hector, who also pressures China to decide whom he wishes to be with (Modisane, 2017; TVSA, 2021).

The love triangle between the three characters shows a choice that confronts closeted gay men: choosing to live according to the status quo of heteronormative relationships to please his family and friends or choosing to come out of the closet and face the possible repercussions of being disowned (Gyamerah et al., 2019: 13-15). I could identify with China in having to maintain an inauthentic image to avoid rejection. The love

triangle that had to be navigated was between my fears of rejection, my relatives and peers' perceptions and my partners, who had to play according to a script I had written. At the same time, I could identify with Hector's frustration, as he wanted a genuine, unconditional relationship with China, just as my partners did. Unlike China, who at times seemed to rejoice in having his cake and eating it simultaneously, I found it to be an excruciating task to present two fronts to different people.

Crafting a script and playing out various scenes meant that there would be opportunities to change the dynamics and shield myself from likely rebuttals. At the same time, my partners had to deal with the consistent inability to predict my next move. My lack of consistency in fully embracing and respecting my romantic relationships meant that my partners were second best to my fears to the point where my one ex told me he feared something tragic happening to me where we would likely be in bed together, potentially naked, and he would have to explain to my family what had happened and why I had not introduced him as my partner. To him, he felt as if he had been forced to be a bystander in the relationship while I continued my feared escapades. My most recent ex sighed deeply when I told him about my predicament, and he said that while he loved me, it would be difficult to juggle because when he is in love, he is exceptionally expressive and loves deeply. It would eventually reach the point where I would control whether images of us on social media were published, but if they were, I would mostly request that they be limited to a Close Friends group, as is the case with Instagram. I had placed them in compromised positions they should not have been in, dishonouring their truths.

When I wrote *At Past Nine*, I envisioned it as a house song. I wanted the music to encapsulate the fear of ostracism and the emotional conflict of having to justify our romance to those with whom we selectively display it. At the same time, as a usable space, the song counters these fears by allowing us to express our deepest and truest feelings without justification or understanding the reasons behind our selectivity. Harrold states that listening to house music usually encompasses messages of love, peace and freedom where queers felt that they could soothe their “anger and pain, the brewing sexuality and violence” and express themselves or come out should they wish to if they feel safe in doing so (Harrold, 2019: 258). House music, as Denise states, has been a musical genre that has allowed black queer bodies to “transcend earthly troubles and [being] a soundtrack” for people who were ostracised from their communities, shamed and silenced from places of cultural, religious and spiritual worship. It has anchored “the children”¹⁷ in their chosen communities, where they felt a sense of belonging and protection (Denise, 2022).

¹⁷Ballroom culture revolves around ‘houses’, which act as supportive family structures, and the competitive balls they organise. Led by house mothers and fathers, these houses provide a sense of family and support for marginalised individuals who essentially become house children, allowing them to freely and safely express their gender and sexuality (Arnold and Bailey, 2009: 3).

The genre's roots can be traced to underground clubs in Chicago in the late 1970s. DJs experimented with various mixing and remixing techniques that reinvigorated the fading disco era. This became known as house music and was highly popularised in the 1980s (PQ, 2019). A key entertainment institution that contributed to its popularity was the dance club The Warehouse, established by Chicago promoter Robert Williams and Bronx-native DJ Frankie Knuckles. The club catered predominantly to Black and Latino gay men, and Knuckles was the resident DJ for all Warehouse parties (Denise, 2019). The Warehouse is attributed to the naming of the genre as music stores would label dance records "as played at The Warehouse," which, when shortened, became known as house music¹⁸ (PQ, 2019; Denise, 2019). What makes it an embodied genre is its incorporation of "gospel, soul, jazz and funk [and] Latino salsa music" (Rietveld, 1998: 6) as well as "combining city innovations, southern roots, and African heritage" (Harrold, 2019: 258). From these genres, house music primarily draws on the rhetoric of "better days are coming", which enables people to connect with various phases of their identity (Rietveld, 1998: 6).

I can attest to the mood and feeling of the genre when speaking of and seeking better days, especially in South Africa. Much like its successors, kwaito and amapiano, the genre speaks to the "aspirations of success, wealth and prosperity and turn[ing] them into a reality", as the country had come from an oppressive past of protest and ruin which the apartheid regime inflicted on black South Africans (Jwara, 2022). The introduction and popularisation of the genre in the country from music veterans such as DJs Vinny Da Vinci and Christos enabled South African musical traditions to be deeply infused with the genre, thus becoming popularised internationally (Simmert, 2015: 90). This essentially was an acknowledgement of different musical styles which the racist regime sought to homogenise through suppression due to its misalignment with the ideals of the State thus whitewashing what they deemed to be accepted musical conventions (Jaftha, 2021: 39). This recognition and the successes of DJs such as Black Coffee and Fresh amplified the ideals of prosperity that South African music and its incorporations embodied (Simmert, 2015: 89-90).

It is worth noting that the desire for 'better days' which house music embodies, is actively demonstrated by its "roars from...sound systems of taxis and cars, and one can hear it in tuck shops, barber shops and from many homes, where radios are tuned in to national radio stations" (Simmert, 2015: 92). It is also increasingly heard in many communal places such as party venues, clubs, pubs and shizanyamas¹⁹ (ibid:

¹⁸ The removal of *Ware* from Warehouse lead to the genre being called *House* music.

¹⁹ Shizanyama is the isiZulu word for skewers (Simmert, 2015: 92), loosely translated as "burning the meat." Burning, in this regard, means braaing or barbecuing meat. Shizanyamas are buy-and-braai establishments where patrons buy raw meat and braai/barbecue it themselves. These establishments are meeting points where people gather for enjoyment and entertainment, which enhances local public life and creates micro-entrepreneurial hubs (Simmert, 2015: 92).

92). The democratic dispensation promised a better life for all citizens, including queer people. However, as earlier articulated in this paper, the realities of the promise remain theoretical and have not practically materialised, including the protection of queer rights. These communal places represent a space where people can temporarily suspend their displeasures and be encapsulated by the rhythmic nature of the music. With this in mind, I envisioned *At Past Night* being performed in a queer-friendly space where those who hear it can experience the emotions I previously articulated. At the same time, those who are or were in a similar predicament as I can identify with its lyrics and be taken by the beat, navigating themselves to a point where they can express themselves without needing to worry about the validation of others. For this reason, I composed the song in C minor for its ability to evoke passionate intensity engulfed by self-guilt and resentment for being in a predicament that warrants self-policing.

In certain parts of the song, I used a voice filter to enhance the feelings of guilt and pleasure. Combined with the standard vocal production in other sections, this contrast highlighted the distant yet persistent yearning for pleasure I sought romantically. Moreover, staying true to the theme of "better days," I hoped to convey that better days will come when being true to oneself is possible and no longer needs to be hidden in the shadows.

The opening lines of the song speak to the safe spaces where I felt I could truly express my affection towards my partners when I sing:

*Just wanna feel your warm embrace, love, and touch//
It's only at past nine when I taste your lips of joy//
Where we can sin and be who we are//
At past nine, those eyes become views of joy.*

In the song's context, the after-nine embodiments went beyond nighttime intimacy. It also included the daytime, where I felt I was in a safe space where I could become an authentic person and partner. However, in spaces that did not offer such security, I would shudder in fear, trying to limit my expressions, not to provide a platform where I would be ridiculed and humiliated. Jones and Ferguson (2020: 336) highlight that the double stigmatisation that comes with being black and gay unfairly causes a deep-rooted fear that being known to exist in both categories potentially threatens the ability to access opportunities and lessens a gay man's status and standing in society. Due to this, these limitations and fears lead to the fear of humiliation being the next phase of ridicule that black gay men do not wish to encounter (Grant, 2020: 4).

During the daytime, though with hesitation, it is easier to conceal one's sexual orientation because it is less likely that judgmental individuals will see things for what they truly are (Bradley, 2016: 594).

Subsequently, because homosexuality is seen as a sin, the mere insinuation of being considered as such is enough to force a person into obedience. At times, I believed (and still do) that being in a space of fellow 'sinners' would be an ideal situation to find myself in. At least in the space of 'sinners', everyone is equally accountable for their lives and bears the responsibility for defending what they have done that led to their 'sin', even if it meant that it offered partial yet scattered satisfaction to my partners and I thus the sinners become views of joy as we are all at an equal footing when accounting for our deeds.

My supposed sin of being in love with a man meant I could bask in the glory of liberation, where the intertwined nature of my queerness, Africanness and blackness was not questioned nor put through a litmus test, where one wrong move could mean the nearest road to succumb to the deathly flames of evil. However, how reassuring is such liberation when it is shrouded in secrecy or is conditional on those who genuinely express love and affection towards you?

Mantell et al. (2016: 9-10), in their research about after-nine men, state that there is unsatisfactory romantic fulfilment with such men as they often prevent out gay men from expressing their romantic feelings towards them in public. The only relationships that after nine and out gay men have are in confined spaces, such as clubs, where there is general acceptance towards gay men; however, those encounters are often brief or transactional to receive sexual pleasure. Msibi (2013: 112), in his study on internalised homophobia and agency, where he explored the construction of love by African male teachers who engage in same-sex relations, found that black gay men find it difficult to truly experience romantic affection with other men as they have internalised the negative sentiments surrounding their sexuality thus viewing it as "joke', 'not serious' and 'sex-driven". Part of the reason why such sentiments exist is due to the secretiveness that is imposed on same-sex relations; thus, it is rendered invisible and "symptomatic of disease" (Msibi, 2013: 112).

Rigid social systems do not enable the legitimisation of visible romantic relationships between people of the same sex, thus the internalised suppression exhibited by gay men (Msibi, 2013: 113). Gay men from their early youth are never allowed to establish the lingo, boundaries, and nuances of what it means to date or be in long-term relationships, unlike their heterosexual counterparts who have had a significant part of their lives to understand these elements which most times leads to lasting relationships (Kheraj, 2018; Aaron, 2021). There is also the absence of discussions about planning a future together, which includes

marriage, family life and continuous partnership, as they cannot fathom the idea that such a future can exist for them (Woods, 2021). This can have ripple effects on their mental and emotional well-being, where they consistently deny their agency, leading to hate of others whom they identify with but are unable to express their feelings openly (Msibi, 2013: 114). As such, embodying the after-nine dynamic provides temporary relief to suppressed feelings. I sing of this in the song where I say:

*Daylight rises up and tears us apart//
Takes the word and land to state its case//
Only at past nine when I get with you//
That my feelings of you become real.*

The "word" refers to religious texts that have historically been used to condemn queer individuals for simply being who they are. In contrast, the "land" symbolises lineage, particularly in African cultures, where the concept of land and the expansion of our lineages are highly valued. There is a belief that queer individuals are unable to continue their family lines because procreation is expected to follow traditional norms, which prioritise heterosexual relationships. However, it has been proven that queer couples can have children through methods beyond traditional procreation. The misuse of religious texts and lineage to shame and repress queer individuals restricts their ability to express their complex identities freely. It hinders their pursuit of the lives they truly desire.

I do not endorse an after-nine life or anything that it resembles. It is emotionally taxing and needs continuous yet toxic relationship management to maintain a façade as a form of self-preservation at the expense of others' well-being. Having said that, however, how then are black gay men supposed to balance all these conflicting emotions and sets of expectations and still be loving partners? Some would say that the easiest step is to come out and deal with the backlash of such a decision, provided that truth and freedom have been unearthed; however, it is easier said than done. What if the after-nine dynamic is the only tool that allows him to fit into a society that already diminishes his existence? What if the only thing to avoid further eradication is to keep his sexual and romantic desires a secret, even if it means temporary pleasure?

Throughout my relationships, I felt I would forever be a half-baked partner who could not give what was rightfully expected of me. My joy and becoming felt like a myth because I was trapped by society's conservative beliefs that entrapped my own. Therefore, I sing:

*I try to be your friend, a friend I could deny//
But now I cannot hide, my love for you is true//*

*Every day when I see you, I'm up in my feels//
I try to be your friend, a friend I could deny.*

Every moment I encountered my partners, my emotions intensified, and I found myself deeply immersed in my feelings. Despite my efforts to maintain the boundaries along the intertwined lines of friendship and romance, it became evident that my resistance to the affection I had for them, publicly, was becoming undeniable. I knew at the end of my last relationship, and taking stock of my life up until that point, that something had to change. I could not continue to be an understudy in my life, given the limited time I have on earth. I could no longer be the seasonal partner who whimsically operated between the love of others and the fear of self, which would deliver incomplete results. I knew that authenticity is the most genuine pursuit, which would pay its dividends in the form of being. I speak about this realisation I came to discover and accept, all while mourning what could have been, yet also embracing what is to become in the upcoming Patch. In the song and its reflection, I articulate that at some point, the actualisation of self must triumph over the versions of us that people hope we will be. This may be an uncomfortable journey to follow, but it is an essential resource to experiencing true liberation.

PATCH III: Realisation

I'm Sorry (Interlude)

“I am sorry that you are only able to look upon me with fear and disappointment. I am sorry that you won't allow yourself to see me. The pain of your disapproval will no longer distract me from going after everything I deserve in this world”

Elektra²⁰

It is often during defining moments that you are forced to reflect critically. At those moments, you must make choices determining the next phase of your life, whether you choose a different path or remain in the same position that stagnates your growth.

Following the experiences I articulated in Patches I and II, they brought up another defining, painful memory. Many years ago, I had told someone close to me about my sexuality, after being convinced that they were an ally and that our connection was unconditional. I was barraged with homophobic slurs that still haunt me. I remember crying profusely because this was a person I assumed would not have said the kinds of things they said to me. A lot was said that day, but I remember them vividly saying that the only time they would see me again was when I was buried six feet underground, having died of AIDS. I must admit that, emotionally, I have never really healed from that moment because the history of HIV/AIDS discourse has been discriminatory against queer folks since the first case of HIV was known to the world. Such stigmatisation has hindered our ability to access crucial, life-saving resources due to the shame and poor treatment of requesting such services (Luvuno et al., 2017: 2).

In South Africa, queer folks, up until very recently, have been excluded from sexual health studies that inform health policy directives that are mindful of the types of sexual health services needed in the country (Evans et al., 2016: 50). Though there have been substantial changes in policy and perception, there is still a lingering aftermath that is entrenched in shame. In the days after that confrontation, I felt a fundamental shift within myself. It conjured the hurt and invalidation I felt throughout the years to the extent that it diminished my self-esteem. The pain of disapproval had stagnated my emotions, and I felt like I could not

²⁰ Character played by Dominique Jackson from the award-winning television series *Pose* (2017-2021). This quote was a monologue by Elektra to her mother, Tasha, who wanted a relationship with her but on the condition that she tone down her look, essentially implying that she looks like a man like the son Tasha had envisioned and not a transwoman (Season 3, Episode 3).

be the successful gay man I wanted to be. I had to continuously focus on compartmentalising my feelings to not go through moments of self-destruction and focus on getting through the days. Though that moment has never been spoken of again, it significantly contributed to my anxieties about the types of relationships I had formed. It made me question my ability to bolster and solidify my confidence. It also made me question whether I could form genuine friendships, become a seasoned professional, or find a romantic partner. It heightened my sexual anxieties about whether I was sexually attractive and worthy of any such relations, romantic or purely on an agreed-upon basis. This anxiety remained throughout my twenties.

Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000) established the self-determination theory (SDT) which explores how social environments or instances impact personal motivations and well-being (Legate et al., 2012: 145) and whether they “facilitate or hinder human flourishing” (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 3). Social contexts influence the type of situational responses a person has in different environments, thus shaping “social and cognitive development and personality” (Legault, 2017: 1). SDT is premised on autonomy support where in environments of high autonomy support enable people to express themselves unconditionally whereas environments of controlled autonomy support pressurise people to act, appear and behave in a certain manner thus conditional and limiting (Legate et al., 2012: 145). The process of sharing one’s sexual orientation is closely associated with developing an authentic sense of self to “mitigate the negative psychological effects of identity management” (Legate et al., 2012: 146). Queer folks who come from high-autonomy environments are likely to feel supported, whereas those from controlled autonomy environments are likely to limit with whom they share their sexuality (Legate et al., 2012: 145). Psychologically, positive and supportive environments are closely linked to sound mental health, high cognitive flexibility, creativity, and greater satisfaction in both work and relationships (Legate et al., 2012: 146). Adverse, unsupportive environments lead to concealment of identity that is linked to depression and anxiety, risky sexual behaviour, decrements in cognitive and physical tasks and affects the quality of meaningful relationships, romantic or platonic (Legate et al., 2017: 861).

The pernicious words from that encounter restricted my ability to fully submit to moments of genuine romance, moments of pleasure and friendship. Coupled with the fact that my queerness has been seen as weak, unmanly, a disgrace to my lineage and the disapproval for possibly being married to a man, put me on an emotional tailspin which I concealed for years. The suppression manifested in how I responded to moments meant to be kind, loving, and pleasurable: I became abrasive, avoidant, extremely overwhelmed, and erratic towards people who wanted to express their love to me. I became a shadow of myself, affecting every aspect of my life.

When I conceptualised this project, I did not think of creating an interlude as I felt that the three songs I had in mind were sufficient to tell the narration of the EP. This, however, changed when I realised that before reaching the end of this project, which will be better articulated in the last Patch of the EP, there needed to be a point of reflection and trying to piece together the themes that can guide the listening experience of what the project aimed to narrate (Mostafa, 2020). I had to decide whether I would remain the present yet absent individual who came from a place of being enslaved to my fear of societal and personal rejection, or make peace with the fact that personal liberation is not always easy and that likely losses will be experienced along the way.

Internalised stigma, although often viewed as a source of harm, can also become a space for transformation. Recognising the shame, self-doubt, or silence enforced by dominant social norms opens the door to healing and resistance. By confronting the narratives that have been absorbed about our worth, identities, and place in the world, we begin to reframe our inner landscapes. This is not about erasing the wounds but about understanding their roots and reclaiming our agency. This personal yet inherently political internal process challenges societal structures that promote stigma in the first place. Transformation does not come from denying pain but from the brave act of confronting it with compassion and clarity.

I guess this project's journey has compelled me to confront some of my most feared memories and explore the depths of my mind that I had long forgotten, but they have nonetheless impacted my life in one way or another. *I'm Sorry* offers the reflective point of the EP, highlighting the change in mood, thought, and emotions as I reach a point of accepting the consequences that come with embracing a truth I can rally behind. It was challenging to decide what sound to channel this as I had initially thought that it would be a ballad; however, I felt that a ballad, while powerful, would go against the supposed triumph and induce sadness. I wanted the song to reflect a new sense of empowerment by letting go yet mourning my former self, who would not have considered creating such a project due to fear of the unknown.

After listening to sounds from various VSTs and combining them in the production process, I was captivated by the combination of R&B²¹ and Soul sounds with slight trap, dance and lush undertones, which sounded like a progressive sound. This combination became the sound of the interlude in what I would deem to be alternative R&B because of such a mix, which Walters states is “the [unconventional] exchange between EDM, rock, hip-hop, and R&B’s commercial avant-garde” (Walters, 2012). It is also because when

²¹ R&B stands for Rhythm and Blues. The foundation of the genre started in the 20th century when African American music styles were popularised in urban centres in the USA, particularly jazz and blues, which had the instrumentations of the electric guitar, piano and saxophone. The genre was known as “race music” before rhythm and blues replaced this from the 1940s (Alessi, 2022).

I created the song, I could not easily identify it within the two realms of the genre from classical R&B from the 1940s until the 1970s, which “derived from gospel, jazz, folk, and traditional blues music and emerged in tandem with rock ‘n’ roll” (MasterClass, 2021; Alessi, 2022) or contemporary R&B from the 1980s until present which integrates soul, funk, pop and hip-hop (Discogs, 2023; Alessi, 2022).

Alternative R&B, also known as indie R&B, is a stylistic variation that became popular in the 2010s (Henry, 2017: 13). This variation embraces Nelson George’s 1998 concept of retro-nuevo, which draws inspiration from rock, EDM, hip-hop, blues, jazz, and soul styles: essentially drawing from and incorporating past genres to try to create something new. Lyrically, which is the case with *I’m Sorry*, the songs explore introspective themes from personal experiences which reflect a sense of adventure and openness (Henry, 2017: 13). Alternative R&B songs come from an “unpolished, down-to-earth approach” by covering themes such as race, gender and sexuality which are deemed as relatable to fans and listeners (Henry, 2017: 14). There is limited academic literature which explores alternative R&B however what is available from online publications such as *Essence* (2022) and *The Atlantic* (2012) speak to how the sub-genre has shifted the definition of what is considered an R&B song and asking questions about whether the genre is still relevant in the current century. This provides an avenue to potentially further existing literature on R&B and how alternative R&B may redefine the genre for future generations.

To this effect, I sing some of the lyrics of *I’m Sorry*:

*I tried to fight it//
I’m sorry for hurting you...//
I know you worry about what people might say...//
I tried to pray the sin away//
But he chose to stay; he’s within me//*

The lyrics remind me of the *abantu bazothini syndrome*, colloquially known as ABS. The saying “abantu bazotini?” is loosely translated to mean “What will people say?”. Posel and Rudwick (2014: 291), in their study on attitudes towards *ukukupita* (cohabitation), state that the saying is rooted in how people are concerned about how they are perceived in their communities, families, as well as traditional, religious, and cultural settings. I expand this by categorising it into two folds. The first is the accumulation and display of status, mainly class and wealth. The association with status often aligns with access to social capital, such as connections with influential people, which can lead to access to financial and knowledge capital, and the acquisition of valuable information that can ultimately lead to financial freedom. As a black community in

South Africa, we are often preoccupied with constantly displaying our improvements, which puts us under enormous pressure to acquire the things that will increase our supposed status. Shota (2019), in her article for *True Love Magazine*, mentions that the loss of or the inability to improve, thus not being able to display status, can lead people into predicaments, often financial, that result in unsustainable debt to appease others because “what will people say?” if we have seemingly reached a ceiling or downgraded.

The second aspect builds upon the first one and is related to this explication. The expected norms and standards of how a person should be lead them to act out in survival mode, where if they were to act or become outside of these boundaries, “what will people say?” (Labase, 2018). This can range from a boy child choosing to engage in cultural and artistic activities as opposed to sports, having effeminate characteristics that immediately put him in harm's way, or when he eventually becomes a grown adult, he is sidelined or painfully disowned for stating that his romantic orientation is outside the heteronormative construct because “abantu bazothini?” (Kekana, 2020).

Non-alignment with the second aspect leads people to question their association with you, as you are perceived as a disappointment. There may be recommendations for enforced interventions, often religious and cultural, to transform you into a former or their ideal version of yourself, with the ultimatum being the loss of their connection and resources. The loss of people, resources, and opportunities can be a debilitating experience that ultimately affects the quality of life and hinders navigation in a world without the necessary tools. The renewal process, however, of embracing a self that is personally defined and proudly proclaimed, can open new ways of navigation and define future engagements, desires, and pathways that serve a higher purpose of being.

As the opening quote of this Patch and positioning the song as a usable space, the looks of disappointment and disapproval and the inability to connect with me based on my sexuality will no longer act as deterrence from “everything I deserve in this world” (Jackson, 2021). As black queer folk, we are always told to hide our existence in fear of “abantu bazothini?”. There is an added layer of fear of discriminatory world practices, which often leads to succumbing to such practices, and we rarely report on them, both in our professional and personal lives (Tshisa and van der Walt, 2021: 6).

The ABS must, at some point, reach an expiry date, especially for those nearest and closest to queer folks. Hobbs-Russell’s research on the reactions of black and coloured families upon finding out that they have a queer relative found that there is validity in worrying about what people might say about their loved ones’ sexuality as them experiencing hate speech and hate crime, thus living in a state of constant precariousness,

was their primary concern (Hobbs-Russells, 2020: 155-161). Findings from a 2016 study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on attitudes toward queer people revealed that, among the 3,000 people surveyed, less than 10% of participants expressed positive sentiments. In contrast, over 50% of the participants voiced negative views and were indifferent towards the discrimination queer folks were subjected to (Hobbs-Russells, 2020: 158-159). While their concerns may be valid, it is unfair for queer folks to have to defer their existence in the hope of better days to come or diminish their light to be loved, welcomed, and accepted.

Black queer individuals deserve the space to be themselves, even in the face of adversity. This is essential for living a fulfilled life and understanding what freedom looks and feels like. We should be able to find release in our physical, mental, and emotional states, where clinging to the ideals of others is no longer central to our existence. As articulated in the next Patch, we should be able to breathe in that liberation that awaits us. Existence, particularly alongside identity formation, should not be a combat mission. It should be an expression of freedom.

PATCH IV: Release

Talk About Me (Be A Star/Talk Of Town)

“I hope you push yourself and discover things about you that you didn't know. You grow more comfortable in your skin and have a clearer clarity of who you are. I hope you learn to trust yourself more.”

Luyanda Mfeka²²

It is not easy to breathe. On 10 February 2021, I received the opening statement for this Patch as a WhatsApp message a few days after I landed in Cape Town to continue my dual MSc/MA at UCT. When I received it, I was emotional because it captured what I wanted my life to embody: confidence, security, a clear mind, and trust. As highlighted in earlier patches, I neglected my truth, which hindered my growth in every aspect of my life. High self-esteem and joy were mutually exclusive, as I would unconsciously remind myself that internally, I was not truly at peace, accepting the things I could not change, nor did I start to embrace the kind of person I wanted to be. I guess I allowed what people said about my sexuality to get to me, and I played into their immensely narrow perceptions of what being black and gay was. I felt that I was suffocating, and there was no room to breathe.

The air I inhaled was just enough to survive, where I would get through the day and still conform to the expected standard of what was required of me as a male-presenting individual. Being able to breathe in moments of continuous threats of attacks, verbal or otherwise, felt like true freedom was a pipe dream that only those who could bite the bullet and handle its rapture could experience. Breathing felt like a combat mission that I had to brief myself daily in that I should not make it known that I was gay, whether through my mannerisms, my friends, or the romantic and sexual encounters that I had. It felt like a self-imposed military exercise, with classified information being closely monitored and declassified only within confined spaces. When I spoke to a close friend about my lack of breath, they told me this reminded them of Fanon's exploration and theorisation of *combat breathing* and how violence, whether physical or verbal, can limit a person's ability to express themselves in society freely.

²² Mfeka is a senior communications specialist in governance, politics, energy and mineral resources. He is a good friend and confidant whom I met while studying in the UK, and he has always offered sound and affirming advice. Mfeka is a voice of reason and is stern yet kind in how he states his viewpoints.

For Fanon²³, combat breathing is a survival technique that marginalised groups employ when violence is perpetuated on them (Perera and Pugliese, 2011: 2). The use of violence is to limit their expressions in a way that forces them to comply with a status quo, so much that they have difficulty in finding avenues that allow autonomy. This makes breathing a challenging task as they must hold their breath daily to avoid any harm inflicted on them. Their energies are fully dedicated to this technique, not to resist, contest, or subvert harm from society or any organ of the State (ibid: 2).

When do we get to breathe? Breathing, while an everyday task, is a luxury to experience. I would constantly wait for a moment to exhale; however, that moment never seemed to arrive. When the slightest opportunity did present itself, it would be marred by backlash. I would coil into a space of oblivion that felt safe insofar as the status quo, but uncomfortable that it restricted my ability to express my being. I had earlier referred to Janelle Monae's comment about freedom being the loss and sacrifice of people when choosing to declare one's sexual orientation. For this Patch, I must expand on what I have interpreted freedom to mean as I have referred to it throughout this explication. A default position would be the legislative, political, and constitutional approaches and their importance for a democratic state in that its citizens have the necessary protections to live and express themselves without fear of intimidation and discrimination (Livermon, 2012: 299). While this may be the case, freedom, in this context, is choosing to exist and deliberately defy the expected norms of existence in the face of adversity (Livermon, 2012: 300).

Freedom is choosing to go beyond the combat mission. hooks states that for any liberation struggle to be won, it must be centred around love. Without love being the premise of liberation, "our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed" (hooks, 2006: 243). hooks' positioning of love is within a political context, more specifically to centre love among activists when fighting for holistic civil rights, rather than for specific rights (hooks, 2006: 243-244). Her articulations, however, can be applied to personal freedom when a person chooses to internally release the

²³ It is important to note that Fanon, in his writing, had expressed conservative views on homosexuality, where he viewed it as a colonial import which was "as a sign of psychological distress, exclusive to Western peoples" (i.e. white people), which black people were immune from (Hilson, 1996). He also stated that it was a tool which white men used to emasculate black men as white men did not have the physical and sexual characteristics of black men that they secretly desired. Homosexuality was seen as the pathway through which the repressed sexual desire of black men could be sadistically expressed (Li, 2019: 23). The lens through which Fanon viewed homosexuality was skewed as the emasculation of black men has a long history in which sexual violence was a mechanism of enforced submission in the continuous oppression of black people during the colonial and slavery eras. However, the broader notion of homosexuality being immune to black people is flawed as homosexual/queer people in the black community have existed throughout history, pre-dating colonialism. While I disagree with Fanon's positioning of homosexuality, his explanation of combat breathing is beneficial as his writings and political positioning have provided the language that oppressed groups have used in understanding the nuances of power that have prolonged their oppression while they (oppressed groups) have fought for their freedom. Combat breathing is literature that helps position the notion of breathlessness while trying to find a voice, which the Patch explores.

shackles of internalised and external oppression as they have embraced a love of self as their foundation. It is easier said than done, as the words and actions of others can pierce through our emotional and mental states. However, self-liberation starts to arise when we embrace love and acceptance of ourselves. When the love of self becomes the foundation of being, the combat mission that induces our combat breathing, while ever-present, no longer becomes a primary goal to overcome. Breathing becomes freedom when we allow ourselves to exhale.

Talk About Me is an ode to the moments when exhale becomes freedom. At this stage in my life, the fear of existing, essentially breathing, has reached a point where it cannot be delayed or denied. The song symbolises the shift from seeking approval to being unconditionally self-assured. Being the talk of the town, as the saying goes²⁴, is perfectly fine, as whether I choose to hold myself back, I will always be spoken about. Recognising the need to feel a sense of belonging and extending an olive branch to others to recognise, understand, and accept our right to belong can sometimes place collective sentiments over personal agency.

While I wanted every song on the project to be self-produced, I felt it would be good to involve another producer with extensive music industry experience. It would be a teachable moment for me, as this is my first self-produced project, and there are lessons to draw on from those who have been producing music longer than I have been. I had asked my close industry friends who would be a great producer to work with, as I was unfamiliar with many, and who would understand the project's magnitude. My good friend, Grace Barnes, subsequently showed me Chadwin “Chad Muso” Alexander’s profile and the projects he has been involved in. Barnes spoke highly of him as she performed and MC’d events where Alexander played instrumentals. I managed to contact him through her, and we subsequently worked on the song together.

In our initial meeting in 2022, where I explained the project to him and what I wanted it to achieve, he agreed to work on the project where a small fee was paid for his contribution as well as equal sharing of rights for the song as both of us contributed to the song where I provided the lyrics, song guidance and vision and for this stage of the project, self-record the vocals. He created the beat according to my specifications and his vision and insights of what the song should sound like. I shared an initial voice recording outlining what I wanted the song to sound like. I initially wanted it to be a guitar-only song with my vocals accompanying the guitar. After listening to the voice note, Chad liked the subtle nature of the

²⁴ According to Merriam-Webster (2022), this saying means “a person or thing that many people in a town, city, etc., are talking about in an interested or excited way”. Interesting or exciting can be perceived with positive or negative connotations. Both connotations can elicit an array of feelings which impact the way in which something is spoken about.

recording and suggested that I rethink how I wanted the song to be, from being a purely one-instrument accompaniment to something more embodied. He envisioned the song as soulful, with a smooth, feel-good, and vibrant essence that would resonate with audiences across the generational spectrum. I concurred with him, as I wanted the song to make a listener feel that their listening experience was complete, which could soulfully yet vibrantly elevate their spirits. Two possible song versions were played on his MIDI keyboard, one drawing from the R&B genre and another from neo-soul. He felt either sound would work well with my voice and the song's message. After listening to both versions over our two-hour meeting, I decided to go with the neo-soul version as it fully encompassed the thought process and meaning behind the song.

We can trace the roots of neo-soul to two distinct paths of soul music. The first pruned a nationalist orientation, which developed a radicalised black protest that advocated for equality, and black pride, raised black consciousness, and deconstructed racialised policies (Fila-Bakabadio, 2014: 922). The second was driven and influenced by Motown Records. The label seemingly adopted an ambivalent approach to the Civil Rights Movement, opting for a cautious yet willing approach to producing soul records that incorporated political messaging (Fila-Bakabadio, 2014: 923). Label founder and producer Berry Gordy Jr had moved the genre towards softening the “hard-driving gospel beats with prominent strings and muted brass, slowed down the tempo of rhythm and blues and filled songs with doo-wops and breathy vocals” along with a balanced, nuanced messaging (ibid: 923). What firmly led to its global commercial success was when former label president Kedar Massenburg termed and marketed the sound as neo-soul as it had the fusion of soul and contemporary R&B and later incorporated funk, jazz, fusion, hip-hop, pop, gospel and musical influences from the African continent (Jazz History Tree, 2023).

There have been debates about defining the genre with questions of whether it was a standalone or a reincorporation of soul music stemming from the 20th century (Fila-Bakabadio, 2014: 924). The discussion surrounding the classification of works by artists who had not initially contemplated labelling their creations was necessitated by the need to position them within the established category of traditional soul. While artists were reluctant to engage in such categorisation discussions, the question persisted (ibid.: 924). These debates and misunderstandings among some critics aimed to identify a distinct musical framework that could distinguish neo-soul from well-defined and pre-existing genres. Neo-soul artists are seen to offer a wide range of musical styles while acknowledging that soul is foundational in their artistry. For this reason, it would be appropriate to characterise neo-soul as a genre that transcends musical boundaries while remaining rooted in soul music tradition (Fila-Bakabadio, 2014: 925). Additionally, neo-soul exhibits “culturally-conscious” lyrics (Jazz History Tree, 2020) that are often personal, which, like *Talk About Me*,

“gives off a sense of authenticity and organic feeling that allows the listener to get emotionally involved in the content” (Yona Marie, 2023).

In the first stanza of the song, I sing:

*I just wanna be a star//
I'm feeling a freedom I've never seen//
I just know I've got peace of mind//
I know, I'm the talk of town.*

I would be inundated with queries about my sexuality, and not a day went by when my sexuality was not a discussion point. It reached a point where the daily enquiries became a part of my daily routine, where I would learn with an obsessive interest in what was being said about me. I would go into a tailspin, trying to control the narrative by denying the talking points about me. I did this because I did not like the attention that came with it, as it often came with ridicule and sensationalism. This has slowly changed over the years, as it has become second nature for me to no longer fold under the pressure of denying my existence when I am being spoken about.

It is essential to acknowledge that acceptance of oneself is a lifelong journey, despite popular, political, and capitalist culture suggesting that acceptance or closure has a definitive outcome (Berns, 2011: 48). The process of unlearning patterns and the feelings, thoughts, and teachings associated with them is not a singular experience. The expectation that we ought to automatically unlearn the things that we have been taught the moment we embrace self-acceptance, “makes it difficult for us to imagine other ways of handling a situation” (Berns, 2011a: 4). In the song, I sing:

*I know, they want to keep me on a leash//
So I can never be the me I want to be//
I know, they want me locked up in their minds//
So I never be the me I want to see.*

Throughout our lives, we are told that we will all go through Judgement Day (Van Wyk, 2006: 703): a day where God will evaluate our time on earth and assess whether we are to be elevated to heaven or burn in ruin in hell. Judgement Day, in religious text, is the day when the world we currently live in will be destroyed and usher in a new one where a clean slate will be given to all living and departed, especially

those seeking eternal glory, honour and immortality (New Covenant Baptist Church, n.d.: 2-5). This day is often stated to be a day when we will be judged harshly by God or our higher powers, should we not follow their directions on the ways we should be living our lives in the present (New Covenant Baptist Church, n.d.: 5-6). Part of the scolding will be directed to people who identify as queer as they have allegedly ‘violated’ the word of God for not being heterosexual.

The fear of having a negative Judgement Day and the heightened fear of living in eternal hell can be obstreperous. Placing such negativity on one crucial aspect of a person’s life, such as their sexual orientation, can severely limit their lived experiences, where they feel that because they cannot offer authenticity in one aspect, it cannot be provided holistically in another.

While I do believe that we will have to account for our time on earth, I firmly believe that sexual orientation is not a factor that will be counted harshly on that day. An argument that is often raised by those who oppose homosexuality and/or queerness is that we (queers) are living a sin that will lead us to live in eternal hell. I disagree with this as it positions oppression and sin in the same category. Something as natural as sexual orientation is not a chosen oppression or sin, when this is far from the case. I would like to believe that Judgement Day is about assessing the deeds and character of a person, and whether they led a life of doing good and trying to be an outstanding member of society. In that assessment, our authenticity will also be judged if we live an honest life.

As queer individuals, authenticity is what we strive for. It does, however, come to a point where the choice between truth and rebuke becomes our default position. For me, it becomes a choice between truth and allowing myself to be judged accordingly by God for accepting and honouring my truth as a proud, black, gay man. Therefore, in the song I sing:

*I pray and worship, happy-lujah to above//
For helping me reach a point of no return//
I know they want to be jailed in their mind//
So I never be the me I know to be.*

Happy-lujah is a word combination between happiness and hallelujah. Hallelujah, in the religious context, closely means God to be praised or expressing a feeling of rejoicing (Mullis, n.d., 1). In as much as the existence of queer folks is seen as a sin by those who oppose our existence (kaCanham, 2022), for queer folks, our relationship to God or a higher spiritual and religious being is extremely important as they provide

guidance in moments of uncertainty (Harrisberg, 2019). It is a closely guarded relationship that provides comfort during trying times (Ntombana et al., 2020: 81-82), even though such times may push us to our wits' end. Be it as it may, it is in the comfort of such a relationship that we find solace in knowing that our truth exists as we are accountable to them at the end of our lifetimes (Van Klinken, 2015: 6-7). It is within this thought that we try to find our joy so that we can determine the kind of happiness or aspirations we seek when we choose to be ourselves (Iqani, 2022: 2). Such positioning becomes the building blocks that aid self-confidence to transition to self-acceptance where gradual resistance to words and actions and their lifelong consequences are not internalised to which resistance is the core of our existence.

With everything that has been said and created thus far, it was essential to reflect on the selected experiences of which I have spoken until this Patch. Part of the resistance that becomes our core is the ability to consider the motivations that propel us into embarking on creative pursuits. To this end, I needed a platform that allowed me to speak openly about creating *Patches* in both its creative and written forms. This reflection, and essentially this project, would greatly benefit from speaking with a distinguished scholar whose research underscores the significance of media and cultural texts, particularly where the self as a research form is an integral part of the broader creative and theoretical project. In reading the succeeding chapter, through an interview, I outline my motivations and explain how I believe this project could impact not only me personally but also those who engage with it.

Resolution: Conclusion

*You Have Many Things To Say*²⁵ (featuring Simphiwe Rens)

*“Stop putting yo’ head down in my house! You know my rule. It’s all love and all pride in this house!
Do you feel me?”*

*Teresa*²⁶

As I concluded the project, I asked my good friend, music and media studies scholar Simphiwe Rens²⁷, to review the project. He read earlier drafts of this explication, and I would occasionally make him listen to the various versions of the songs. I wanted us to have an honest discussion where he interrogated the project and ask me questions about it, especially as someone who has researched music and visual culture from a queer and feminist lens. This led to the project’s final track, where the idea of a virtual interview came to mind, in which Rens would ask me questions about the significance of this project and what it meant to me. I was inspired by Kendrick Lamar’s closing song *Mortal Man* from his critically acclaimed album *To Pimp A Butterfly*. He sampled a 20-year-old interview with the late rapper Tupac Shakur, where they explored themes of legacy, success, and hip-hop (Aswad, 2015), which, for me, perfectly concluded the album’s many messages but mainly addressed “oppression and above else, self-love” (Chinapen, 2021).

In May 2023, Rens and I had our interview that lasted over an hour. I analysed the interview and cut it down to fifteen minutes to succinctly capture the essence of what the interview entailed. From there, I had to decide what the interview’s accompanying sound would be. This, in a way, brought to life the imagined radio interview I had envisioned for *I Am Nervous*. By making it the closing song, it brings the project full circle, where the uncertainty I had when I started this project ultimately gave way to a project where I could freely express what I needed to say and had much to share with anyone who inquired about it.

²⁵ The title of this song came from the interview held between Rens and myself, where he said, “as I read through the dissertation, *you have many things to say*”. Considering the circumstances and reasons for creating this project, this indeed is the case.

²⁶ Character played by award-winning singer and actress Janelle Monáe in the critically acclaimed film *Moonlight* (2016). Teresa addressed the teenage Chiron, who walked and carried himself in a way that made his posture and presence as small as possible, seemingly apologising for his existence. He continued to do so when he sat at the dinner table with his head down. Teresa reminded him that he must keep his chin up and be proud of who he is and that in her house, he is loved and supported (Blair, 2020).

²⁷ Rens is an associate professor of media studies whose research interests include cultural studies, popular culture, gender studies, celebrity culture, media consumption, audience studies, and popular music. His PhD explored the visual culture of Afrobeats music, focusing on the dominant representational tropes regarding gender, sexuality, and Africanness in postcolonial Africa (ResearchGate, 2023).

Considering the length of the interview and the unconventional approach of adding an interview that is longer than 10 minutes to an EP, I was undecided on what genre to create the accompanying sound. My primary concern was that having one sustained sound throughout the interview would be a limiting experience, diverting the listener's attention away from the content. Similarly, I found myself losing interest in only one sound. I reviewed many sample packs before ultimately selecting the one that can be heard in the project. When I found the sample, it invoked two sets of emotions. The first was a feeling of relief that I had finally expressed what I needed to through this project. The second was a feeling of hopefulness, as what has been said is not the end but a continuation of the story. It also felt natural for the ending track to follow the genre of the opening track, providing a clear start and end point for the project, which, in this instance, is lo-fi. With the sample identified, I added additional elements to create an embodied experience, aiming to amplify what is being said in the interview and to allow the listener to share their thoughts.

Starting our conversation, Rens asked me why I felt the need to create the EP, considering that it could have been purely as an explication, to which I answered by telling him that music was a way in which I have always found expression from creating my songs in my head to listening to songs where I could “identify with the songs or the melody or lyrics or whatever the case may be, [that] helped me express certain issues, especially as a queer body - as a black queer body” (Rens and Jwara, 2023). I further stated that as a black gay man, I find that “we don't have a lot of safe spaces and [by] safe spaces [I mean] physical spaces”, and we “have to find solace in other things so for me it's been the creative space, but more specifically music because music has always [had] that way of really soothing the soul, warming the heart and just the addressing things, or just speaking to what you're feeling, and if even if it doesn't give you a solution, it just makes you feel and understand things more clearly” (Rens and Jwara, 2023).

As marginalised people, we try to find solace in spaces that allow us to express ourselves in ways that give us room to define and share our agency, hoping others can do the same. These spaces may be physical; however, they can also be non-physical and expressed in other ways, such as through music. Gobodo-Madikizela states that injurious experiences can cause a breakdown in our mental ability to organise past events into meaningful memories (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2023:5). Internal suppression of these experiences can “manifest in intrusive ways” where there is a “break in the capacity to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory... [where] a story... can be told by victims and witnesses about their trauma” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2023: 6). A default position to how trauma and its memories are seen to be expressed is through oral narration, however, this negates the multifaceted ways trauma plays out. Victims may not always be able to express themselves through narration and may find that they can do so in “song, dance and other

embodied expressions", which gives "traumatic memories an edge, but it may also re-awaken and give form to what may have been hidden or pushed below the surface of consciousness" (Ibid: 6).

As a person of non-traditional identity and desire, I have found that music has unearthed the hidden feelings that I suppressed for all these years, which oral narration, while helpful, has not always been able to do. Through musical form, I have been able to document the moments that have defined this project and create an experience that can be shared and heard in other spaces and by individuals who may have similar experiences. Lavy states that the production and perception of music "constitutes a form of human communication" where members of a particular group may identify and respond to its utterances (Lavy, 2001: 39). Listeners of music do so from a place of "complex knowledge, thoughts, and environments" where they try to establish a narrative that "link(s) disparate fragments of information and to find connections and commonalities between different stimuli" (Lavy, 2001: 12). Its existence, along with the accompanying vocals, beats, instrumentals, lyrics, and overall production is to be monitored and analysed by those who connect with how it sounds, thus informing the direction in which it can be heard, contributing to how they feel and respond to what they hear (ibid: 12).

Speaking of making connections between fragments, Rens was intrigued by the fact that I explored my work in Livermon's usable spaces framework where he, Rens, found that the centrality of my work seemed to affirm that as queer bodies "we need to come to terms with the fact that there's nothing wrong with us having [our] desires, feelings [and] emotions" and that we can turn environments of disenfranchisement on their heads into usable spaces (Rens and Jwara, 2023). I echoed his sentiments, saying it was essential to anchor my work within the framework, as it provided a lens through which physical and abstract spaces could be appropriated into spheres of empowerment where self-expression could be articulated. It also informed my decision to use autoethnography as a form of writing to explore music as an essential resource in the self-reflection process, which I sought to achieve by highlighting that alternative and nuanced approaches to narratives can be expressed, even if they resist the dominant expectations of how people ought to act or be.

Besides documenting selected moments, I wanted this project to serve as a connection point for people, especially those who are queer, who may relate to what has been articulated and perhaps address their memories that this project may evoke. The explication should be used to enhance their interpretations and to reconcile and navigate their own experiences. Read and heard together, both elements aim to guide audiences to utilise the usable space to find avenues for reflection and expression that align with their agency. Not intertwining the musical and academic approaches would mean that an explication would

suffice without requiring a creative output, such as an EP, and would likely remain within the sphere of academia. By expressing this project musically and academically, it serves both academic purposes and has the potential for societal impact. Once released, audiences can draw from both outputs that form their reading, listening, and educational journeys.

Essentially, as Rens inquired, I want this project to be a resource that creates a usable space and understanding for those needing a safe space to navigate their journeys. I also want this project to be a teachable experience, where those who may be opposed to queerness or are curious to understand the experiences of Black queer folks can gain a deeper understanding of what we go through and that our existence in the world is not an infringement on any social or legal laws. In fact, the supposed violation of social laws for being black and gay is what causes internal turmoil for many who feel that they cannot authentically express themselves, thus creating and moulding a life of uncertainty not to be a 'shamed' body. While the latter objective is impossible to measure, it is a start in trying to steer and enhance the ongoing conversations about sexuality.

I wanted to highlight the hostile treatment and attitude towards black queers, especially in the African continent. Utterances from influential figures compel us into undue submission, where we fight for survival, rather than facing their wrath continuously. Colonial laws, such as the Penal Code, go against the backdrop of same-sex or different romantic, sexual and platonic engagements, which were a norm in the continent and countries considered to be of the Global South. It must, however, be acknowledged that encounters of different oriented relations have been used in violent ways to force submission in brutal colonial regimes when they should have been genuine and warm, hence cementing the negative attitudes towards such relations. African societies have consistently distanced queer folks from their communities, using religious and cultural texts as their justification. It is as if our association with God and our spiritual guides are positioned in a nexus of exclusion, making it ever so difficult to find a place of belonging in communities where we seek comfort and support. The impact of this is enduring a survival-of-the-fittest mentality, which has become our way of life.

Continuously being in survival mode limits the ability to find and appreciate joy. It is a part of autonomy that enables liberation, where we can choose to find and express it without fear of retaliation or self-censorship, and instead, allow our natural response to be one of embracing and wallowing in the positive sensations and experiences it brings. Alternative ways of expression can cause more harm than good, as we do not want to face rebuke and isolation from our communities, which we hold dear. We put those joyous

moments in jeopardy by presenting two versions of ourselves: those who know our true selves, while sympathetic, end up having to accompany the double life they did not anticipate being a part of.

Whether or not we consolidate our double identities into one, it can become a life-defining moment as our minds and bodies remember the trauma we endured to reach a point where the acceptance of self and its implications becomes a way of life. We must heal from memories ingrained in our subconscious to embrace our new reality. At some point, it should no longer be a hindrance to reaching personal autonomy where sexuality is concerned, as it is one key element of feeling whole. The choice of self is paramount to being the version we are most comfortable with and following our hearts in all facets of our lives. What people will say should not be an impediment, as their thoughts and opinions will consistently change over time, whereas being true to oneself should remain a constant.

It should not feel like a combat mission where we cannot breathe because the fears, projections and insecurities of others constantly threaten our existence. While there are forces that will continuously create hostility in hopes that we comply with what they expect of us, we should never forget that our authenticity carries us through such moments. Eventually, the world will have to adjust and accept who we are. By allowing ourselves to breathe, we find freedom. Once we breathe, we can face the challenges of being unique as we embrace the foundation of self-love and acceptance.

The songs that created *Patches* do not merely exist alongside one another. They communicate with each other, building a cohesive emotional arc. It begins with a personal note that provides a holistic justification for the project's existence, all while being honest yet apprehensive about how it will be received. It then addresses rejection, where being gay means feeling alienated by family, society, and even oneself. Next, it delves into the shadows, where secret yet vaguely open relationships coexist, embedded in hidden truths, where desire is genuine but never fully visible. A shift then occurs, as difficult questions arise that invite reflection, confront truths, and spark a longing for authenticity. It ultimately realises self-acceptance, stepping into the quiet yet divinely connected power of being seen. In its conclusion, these patches map a journey from silence to voice, from shame to selfhood, narrated in my own words and my sound.

I do not unsure how this project will be received in both its written and musical forms. As I write this, I am unsure how the project will read or sound once submitted and made available to the public. I must allow my perfectionist self not to overthink the process and allow for the variation of feedback it will receive. What I am sure about is that I am grateful to have created this body of work and given it reflection, regardless of what the result and feedback may be. If I had not followed through with this project, it would

have been a missed opportunity to capture a vital moment in my educational and personal journey, which I would have regretted for years to come. This project has solidified my academic and industry interests in music and sound, queer studies as well as narrative and autoethnographic inquiry.

As a concluding note, I could not help but think of one of my musical icons, Beyoncé, and her popular songs, *Alien Superstar* and *Church Girl*, from her critically acclaimed album *Act I: Renaissance*. *Alien Superstar* has a futuristic sound laced with a message of empowerment for uniqueness, which decries conformity as it brings complacency, denying the world the chance to experience the uniqueness each of us possesses. Essentially, it embodies a high-energy, often misunderstood version of ourselves in contrast to worldly standards. *Church Girl* has a 90s and early 2000s R&B/Soul sound, which also carries a message of empowerment to people who have been outcasts in their faith communities, resulting in them finding alternative communities where they can express their faith and come as they are without fear of retaliation.

With *Alien Superstar*, the one lyric that stood out for me was from the post-chorus, where she narrates, “fire beneath your feet, music when you speak, you're so unique”, and with *Church Girl* in the pre-chorus, she sings “I'm gonna love on me. Nobody can judge me but me. I was born free” (Knowles-Carter, 2022). These lyrics articulate that being unique is essential in owning your story and deciding the approach it needs to be told. While there may be judgment from others, their judgment is subjective and not a reflection of the story that needs to be said. I hope that the story I have told is seen and understood. It has been nearly two decades in the making, and I am pleased that the world will now listen to it and draw its interpretations. This is not the last time my story will be told, as future projects will highlight a different part of my journey.

My name is Fumani, and I have said what I needed to say.

-QIBILE/QEDILE/FEDITSE/HETILE-

A Side Note: What *Patches* Inspired

While working on this project, I decided to embark on a journey of healing through therapy. This was extremely important as I had just entered a new decade where place, peace and meaning were increasingly significant. This decision has been on my mind for years. I felt that without addressing the discomfort I felt in dealing with the honesty that emotions conjure, it would hinder me from living a fulfilled life. The fear of carrying these unresolved feelings into this new phase, potentially leading to a debilitated and unfulfilled old age, prompted the need for change.

At the time, my therapist assigned three weekly tasks that have since become instrumental in my healing process. These have enabled me to view the world through the duality of a child's and an adult's eyes. The first task was to write a letter to my inner child, acknowledging and being kind to him, as he had been hidden away due to life experiences that stripped him of joy. The second task involved writing about things I wanted to let go of. The third task was understanding that healing is not a linear process, but rather the beginning of a journey of acceptance. Writing the first letter inspired me to continue addressing moments of overwhelming emotions. I decided to turn those letters into a spoken EP that can be heard and interpreted alongside this project and its explanation.

The spoken EP, titled *PATCHY: Audio Sticky Notes To (My) Self*, comprises seven songs, of which six feature a roughly recorded voice note capturing my state of mind which sought clarity, and one instrumental track represents the idea that our thoughts are not always put into words but can be expressed through sound. "Patchy" reflects how experiences can be buried in our minds, only resurfacing when triggered and that we often need to piece them together for better clarity and understanding. "Sticky Notes" symbolises the letters to me as reminders, akin to sticky notes urging kindness and self-embrace. This concept also aims to motivate others struggling with similar feelings, reminding us of our uniqueness. These sticky notes would serve as daily reminders that would be heard constantly, reminding oneself to stay focused. "Audio" represents my passion for music, a passion I previously denied due to impostor syndrome and the opinions of others. However, I couldn't resist creating accompanying sounds for the sticky notes, using a DAW, samples, and my creativity. This project has been a valuable exercise in honing my music production skills. The project can be accessed [here](#).

Patches has inspired the importance of reflection and the fact that our stories are key to being heard, which I attempted to convey throughout the project and in the explication. Although challenging, both *Patches* and *Patchy* became a cathartic journey, leading to significant progress in navigating deep-seated emotional

wounds - a therapeutic exercise and a creative endeavour that blended my passion for music with my journey towards self-acceptance, kindness, and the uniqueness that each of us possesses.

Appendix I: Production Credits

P a t c h e s**Executive Producer:** Fumani “FUMZ FEVA” Jwara**Contributing Artist:** Fumani “FUMZ FEVA” Jwara**Reserved, Distributed & Exclusive License:** FUMZ FEVA™ Entertainment Pty Ltd***I Am Nervous***

Performed by: FUMZ FEVA

Written and Produced By: Fumani Jwara

Produced and Recorded in Cape Town

Mr First (His Love)

Performed by: FUMZ FEVA

Written and Produced By: Fumani Jwara

Produced and Recorded in Cape Town

At Past Nine

Performed by: FUMZ FEVA

Written and Produced By: Fumani Jwara

Produced and Recorded in Cape Town

I'm Sorry (Interlude)

Performed by: FUMZ FEVA

Written and Produced By: Fumani Jwara

Produced and Recorded in Cape Town

Talk About Me (Be A Star/Talk Of Town)

Performed by: FUMZ FEVA

Produced By: Chadwin “Chad Muso” Alexander

Written By: Fumani Jwara

Produced in Johannesburg

Recorded in Cape Town

You Have Many Things To Say (feat Simphiwe Rens)

An interview by Fumani Jwara and Simphiwe Rens

Written By: Fumani Jwara and Simphiwe Rens

Music Produced By: Fumani Jwara

Interview By: Simphiwe Rens

Recorded Virtually: Cape Town and Johannesburg

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P a t c h e s can be heard on [Soundcloud](#).

Appendix II: Lyrics

1. I Am Nervous

It's amazing how it's been so many years
Since I've wanted to do a project like this.
I'm excited. I'm nervous as hell, scared as fuck.
But I'm so glad to be doing this.

I'm so glad to be able to create a project that
Speaks to some of the experiences that I've had
Hell, this is just one element of it.
Hell, this is an experimental project,
Hell, I don't even know how it's gonna come out or sound like.

But I've reached a point in my life where
It's okay to write things out and sing things out
And release it to the world in whatever form
It comes out and go through a cathartic moment
Of just really reflecting on the things and the desires
And the memories that have shaped who you become
And unlearning some of the behaviours that have held you back
And not really aided your growth
Your mental, your physical, your emotional growth.

I'm excited.
Hope the world can accept this project.
I don't know how it's gonna be received.
But hey. This is my story when I have something to say.

Written by Fumani Jwara - 2022

2. Mr First (His Love)

Yes, you want his love
 But his love is not the law
 The streets do not kiss and tell
 But know it's not the rule

I need you to please come home
 Cause nowhere else is home
 Mr, please, handle your demons
 Sir, you are the first

The soil that birthed you said that you do not exist
 Please know that this is your home
 Sir, please don't run, please stay

Yes, you want his love
 But his love is not the rule
 The streets do not kiss and tell
 But know it's not the law

This is your truth, Mr, please.
 That's what makes you unique
 Those before us know the truth
 They will guide you in this life

They may never understand
 But please give yourself love
 Handle your demons; they cannot win
 Please, Sir, come home

Mr, you're the one
 Go and chase his love
 I am part of your tribe
 Go on and chase his love

Go, and chase his love
 Go and chase his love
 I am part of your tribe
 We gonna figure this out
 Go and get his love

Written by Fumani Jwara - 2023

3. At Past Nine

Just wanna feel your warm embrace, love and touch
 It's only at past nine when I taste your lips of joy
 Where we can sin and be who we are
 At past nine, those eyes are views of joy

Daylight rises up and tears us apart
 (tears us apart, tears us apart, it's on the rise, it's on the low)
 Takes the word and land to state its case
 (its evidence before the court of our love)
 Only at past nine when I get with you
 That my feelings of you become real

I wanna be your man
 I wanna hold your hand
 I wanna feel your soul
 Meet me at past nine

I try to be your friend, a friend I could deny
 But now I cannot hide; my love for you is true
 Every day when I see you, I'm up in my feels
 I try to be your friend, a friend I could deny

I can't deny you now
 I try so hard to lie
 I try to lie to you and lie to everyone
 I try to be your friend, a friend I could deny
 But now I cannot do that anymore, I tried

I wanna be the
 I try to be the
 I only wanna be, the main, not the side x2

I know that you are on my mind
 I got your mind on fly; oh, my
 I wanna be your number one
 Your only one, my baby

I wanna be
 I wanna be
 Your number one

I wanna be
 I wanna be
 Your only one

After nine,
 I wanna be your number one

I wanna be
I wanna be
Your only one

I wanna
I wanna
I wanna be your number one

I wanna
I wanna
I wanna be your only one

Written by Fumani Jwara - 2024

4. I'm Sorry (Interlude)

I tried to fight it
I'm so sorry for hurting you
I'm sorry for not being the man you need
I know you worry about what people might say
I'm sorry for the stares that will come our way

I tried to pray the sin away
But he chose to stay, he's within me
He is part of my soul
He is my way and truth

I tried
I tried to hide my man
He's part of my soul
I just can't deny
I love this man
I can't deny

Written by Fumani Jwara - 2021

5. Talk About Me (Be A Star/Talk Of Town)

I just wanna be a star
 I'm feeling a freedom I've never seen
 I just know I've got peace of mind
 I know, I'm the talk of town

I just wanna be a star
 And feel the grace from up above
 Rise and shine against the odds
 See the praise and the word from Your love

I know, they want to keep me on a leash
 So I can never be the me I want to be
 I know, they want me locked up in their minds
 So I never be the me I want to see

I just wanna be a star
 I wanna feel a feeling I've never been
 I'm okay being the talk of town
 I know, you talk about me all the time

I just wanna be a star
 I wanna feel a feeling I've never seen
 I'm okay being the talk of town
 I know, you talk about me all the time

I pray and worship happy-luah to above
 For helping me reach a point of no return
 I know they want to be jailed in their mind
 So I never be the me I know to be

Blessings from up above. You may not understand
 But that's for me to figure out and find my feet
 My soul has found itself, connecting to me
 Being the way and the truth from above

I just wanna be a star
 I know, I'm the talk of town
 Blessings from up above
 Praise and word from above
 Talk now

Written by Fumani Jwara - 2024

6. You Have Many Things To Say (featuring Simphiwe Rens)

An interview - transcribed.

Rens

I'd love for you to contextualise why we are having this conversation in the first place, within the context of your dissertation and your creative project.

Jwara

I will try my best (laughs). So, where do I begin with this project?

Music has been a form of expression for everything for me. Everywhere I go. I think even in our interactions, whenever people say like one or two words, I'm just like, "Oh, one line!" I can already pick up a song that's from this person, this person, and I just go into singing song mode like, and I've always used music as a way of just expressing things.

So, I always find the songs and identify with the songs or the melody or lyric, whatever the case may be, and I'm just like, that has helped me express certain issues, especially as a queer body, as a black queer body. We don't have a lot of safe spaces, and safe spaces as in physical spaces, so you have to find solace in other things. So, for me, it's been the creative space, but more specifically, music because music has always that way of really soothing the soul, warming the heart and just addressing things or just speaking to what you're feeling. And even if it doesn't give you a solution, it just makes you feel and understand things more clearly.

Rens

Fantastic. What I also get from this is just your strong love for music. And in there, I can see that you appreciate music, actually, and you're sort of attracted to the art of music, because like you describe it, because of the fact that it is this strong tool, you know, for self-expression, or just any help, like a helpful outlet if I can put it that way, for you to communicate emotions, thoughts, experiences, which then brings me to my next question.

One of the key things I think that will draw anyone's attention is the fact that you introduce yourself to us and you let us know immediately that you have something to say. And as I read through the dissertation, you *have many things to say*. And I don't know if, within about four to five points, if you can let us know what are the three, four or five main things you have to say that are critical to this project.

Jwara

Okay, I think the first thing that I, Fumani, has to say is this is a time to find expression in a space or even tools where you might feel or when you feel that your voice has been silenced. Because for so long, I felt like my voice was silenced, and I just feel like where do I go to, where do I say things to heal the inner child or the truer version of yourself, which I think this project was trying to get to. And I think in my acknowledgements, there's a section just like to "my inner child, this is a project that you've wanted to do or something that, you know, addresses a project you wanted to do. Hope this is a starting moment to heal the experiences that you speak about in this project." These are things that I've been exposed to. So, I'm writing it from my experiences.

We're forced to deny our agency. We're forced to deny our autonomy. We're forced to deny the things that excite us, that make us feel whole. You know, our upbringing, our upbringing is hindered in some ways because we're dealing with expectations of what it means to be a black child in South Africa and these rules and expectations, and we don't have the similar experiences of what straight people go through where

they're allowed to grow up, dates, go through that phase of figuring out what it means to date and form intimate, romantic, even sexual relations. We don't have that as queer people.

You know, we always have to find avenues and some of these avenues are not even safe for us to do that. But we have to because society doesn't allow us to give us the opportunity to figure ourselves out. So we go through life figuring things out, and then by the time we're older, we're like, jeh, we went through a lot, or we did not go through enough, you know, in terms of going through experiences, that would have made us better, you know, or at least say, that's what we like and what we don't like.

So now this project is like, let me speak to the inner child, the inner, the 16-year-old, the 20-year-old, the 25-year-old, the eight-year-old, and just piece together all of these experiences, present them in a body of work and hopefully, it's a healing process. It has been a painful process of doing this because then you're like, "Konje this happened? Konje, that happened? Yoh!"

Rens

I can just imagine, yeah. Because you are resurfacing stuff from the subconscious stuff that you might...

Jwara

You know...

Rens

... actively repressed and suppressed, and so forth. So, I can just imagine how all of that coming to the surface through this project, what that might feel like, Oh, my goodness.

Jwara

You know...

Jwara

Safe spaces are not always physical. We try find our safe spaces, whether it's through our interactions with friends, or we go and engage with other people, so on and so forth, but sometimes, there's not enough of those.

So, we have to find solace in the things that we can use ourselves, like music, like theatre, like dance. Yes, they provide avenues where we can possibly find safe spaces, but then if we're not in physical spaces, per se, where else do we feel like we can find safety, where we're not going to feel judged, we're not gonna feel like we're the weird ones, or the black sheep, or whatever the case may be. Music, in this case, is not a physical space, but it does provide that avenue, and you can find yourself lost in that avenue for hours and hours, days on end; you can go to it and come back to it whenever you want to. You can change it up with a different genre or, a different artist, or a different style, whatever the case may be.

I want people to know that you can create your own space, and music is that avenue for you to create that space, even if it's for yourself and I think that concept of usable spaces really clicked when I read it. I was like, oh, this is something that we can view things from, and music being a usable space allows us to break down concepts of race and gender, and sexuality and class and all of those things. Because, as human beings, we're fragmented. And I think this also leads to the title of the project. I called *Patches* because we go through moments, they are rough, they're nasty, they're exciting. They're up and down. They're in between. And sometimes we go through life, and we never really get the time to really say, okay, let's put these experiences together and how these experiences have shaped us to who we are in the present and also inform us who is either we want to continue being the person we are in the present or change that along the way.

So, when I write about the different patches or the different songs in this project like, these are different moments that when you really take a moment to sit down and listen to yourself and think to yourself, and really evaluate your life like "These things, I've had an impact." Now let's put them together and try and write a story to it and *Patches* is where I'm like, patch things together and see what story you can put together. It might not be the greatest but at least there's a beauty, there's a uniqueness. There's a lesson, there's an element in all of that. And we can express those and we can write about this and say the things we need to say about it.

Rens

So overall, I think then and correct me if I'm wrong, through this project, this is basically a journey of seeking freedom: a freedom from sort of those historical shackles, you know, that have kept you imprisoned within yourself all in the name of fitting in, you know, or just considering others emotions, others comfort because maybe perhaps personality-wise, you are somewhat of a peacekeeper, but through this project, I'm sensing it's somewhat of a journey towards freedom for you which I think brings me to my next point where you yourself have you, problematise the very idea of freedom in relation to sexuality and sexual expression, you know, and sexual identity. And I think it's Janelle Monae's words that you use where she says I'm going to party quote, she says and I quote, "freedom is not always free. It comes with sacrifices. It comes with losing people."

I'd love for you to (laughs) just within those words from Janelle Monae, and the fact that I find that this project for you is a journey towards some sort of freedom. Have you contemplated some of the, you know, what this journey towards freedom might entail for you and what it might carry for you in terms of who you are as Fumani?

Jwara

Ahh... Yes, I think that's why, besides the creative element of, you know, writing, producing the stuff. The other reason it's taken so long, as you have to think of the implications of what a project like this is, because it's also autobiographical, and I choose that as a form of writing throughout this whole project.

You have to think of that, the implication, so I had to toil and twirl and have nights where I'd wake up in the middle of the night and thinking, "Konje, I want to create something for this project." But I'm like, joh, mara, who's gonna read this? There's gonna be people that I know, and care about and who are probably friends, family, colleagues, people who don't even know me, or I don't know them, but they know me who are probably gonna read this, and they're gonna be like "ey, deuces!", you know. It takes another step where you're able to say, "You know what if it means I'm going to have to lose people along the way." Because as human beings, we don't like to lose connections we hate it. We see this with friendships, we see this with relationships. We're always trying to make things work, even if they're not the best for us, but we just really try and make it work because we want that connection, we want that closeness, we want to feel like we are supported, and we are loved, and we're cared about.

Sadly, some people come with conditional love, or conditional care and conditional support, and when you make the decision to do something for yourself or something as it's a small element, but it's very pertinent in a person's life, such as sexuality, because it defines who you're going to be in relationship with, the kind of family structure you want to create for yourself, the kind of romantic life you want to create for yourself, a person you want to build with: sexuality then becomes a defining block, you know?

So, when I heard that quote from Janelle Monae because I was watching that interview that she did for Apple Music, and that's when she just released *Dirty Computer*. When she said, I was just like, "Whew, freedom is not really freedom, personal freedom is not really freedom", because people like you as the version that they see. If they've seen you been this way for 20-odd years, or 30-odd-years or 50-odd-years, even one year, and you decide "I want to change", for you to feel more secure and more loved within yourself, not

necessarily what everybody wants to do. People will move along, and they will put you aside and not want to interact with you again, or, you know, everything is conditional.

That quote just made me think of how have I moulded myself in such a way where I'm not seen as the outcast, I'm not seen as the black sheep, because I'm a male who has effeminate and masculine characteristics. And when I express those aspects of myself when the feminine side comes out, they're like, "Mara umjita, you can't do that," and I'm like, whoa! And the immediate characterisation of what that means, means you have to mould yourself. You can't have nice things for yourself.

Inner freedom is a bold decision to make when you decide you want to get to full self-emancipation because being a prisoner, being a personal prisoner, not prisoner-prisoner but being a personal self-prisoner, we hold everything in then you don't express yourself and that rage and that build is toxic and we've seen the implications of it with a lot of people who resort to more extreme ways to feel heard and feel seen and interact with people because we as a society, have said that their autonomy or their personal agency doesn't exist.

So yeah, I wanted to change the project at one point. I was just like, "I can't do this. I'm scared." But then I thought I don't want to wake up at 50 and regret not doing this while I still have the chance to do a degree.

Interview conducted on 7 May 2023

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