

Seeing ghosts:

The absented presence of black lesbian women in mid-2000s Kwa-Thema and the legacies of trauma

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BA (Hons) UCT 2018

A minor dissertation presented in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts

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University of Cape Town

February 2022

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Date: 14 February 2022

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are mine and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

I am grateful to:

Dikeledi (DK) Mabogwane, a force of life. My mother, who started this project with me, encouraged me to push myself, and supported me at every (dramatic) turn—while on this plane of existence and from the next. Who listened with keen interest at my seeking to journey back to 2008 Springs and gave me important insight into the queer world of Kwa-Thema. Whose belief in me has been steadfast, otherworldly, and truly incredible. Who helped me climb out of bed these past three years, and on the many days when I couldn't, whose gentleness lay down with me and led me to dreams where I would meet her. My mum, whose screams of excitement I can hear and whose pride I can feel as I finish this project.

My supervisor Associate Professor Hedley Twidle, for his unending grace and patience. For being not only the supervisor I wanted but also the supervisor I needed. For granting me the freedom to discover what I needed to, which enabled me to produce a study that would otherwise remain nonexistent. For trusting me and my abilities, while sincerely caring for my wellbeing (even more than the production of a paper), and for celebrating me without reserve.

The world's greatest, Dr. Daniela Franca Joffe. My singularly brilliant mentor and friend, whose faith in me pushed me forward against all realistic odds. Who advised me on virtual calls for hours and shipped me care packages of Italian coffee beans, almonds, avocados, and cranberry, apple, and cinnamon tea. Daniela, who has been supporting my journey from a first-year first-semester English tutorial and has been rooting for me since, "like a madwoman!"

Jan-Louise Lewin-Perez, whose discerning eye was always ready to help me see better, and whose hugs I could count on. Associate Professor Chris Ouma, for a five-minute conversation at the beginning of this degree, who advised me against dismissing the violent history I so desperately wanted to ignore on my quest to all things 'queer joy'. Dr. Khwezi Mkhize, who was the first in the department to encourage my voice, and who still listens to and celebrates me from afar.

Professor Zethu Matebeni, who created an environment where young black lesbian theorists can produce the work we are bringing forth, and who keenly sifted through her collections and photographed books when I approached her with a request for creative literature. Jabulile Bongiwé Ngwenya, an exceptional writer who warmly responded to an Instagram DM from a fangirl and gently held space to discuss her work and the intimate ways in which we as queer black women move in this country.

My phenomenal therapist Saskia Wolfaardt MA Clinical Psychologist (UP), who doubled as an academic mentor and without whom this project simply would not be. Who, with deep care, waited at the shore as I waded through the muddy waters of trauma until they cleared and revealed their secrets. Who freely gave expression to what I had been feeling and encouraged me to dig deeper—with the security of a steady lifeline at hand. Saskia, who taught me to breathe through the paralysing depression of losing my mother (my world) during this project and the freshly unearthed emotions and memories of a study such as this. Claire Hurst, my soul twin, who, though across the world, messaged me (literally) every day and kept me sane.

The National Research Foundation, the Mellon Foundation programs, particularly Kathy Erasmus and Dr. Gideon Nomdo, and the Klaus-Jürgen Bathe Leadership Programme.

Finally, thank you to the many women whose spirits journeyed with me on this polyphonic project. In particular, Eudy Simelane, Girlie Nkosi, Nokuthula Radebe, Noxolo Nogwaza, Duduzile Zozo, and Busi Sigasa for allowing me to write about and alongside them. Rest gently.

To the 13-year-old girls who lived in graveyards and learned to run from themselves.

“How do I engage with you so that I do not harm you?”¹

This text holds pain. It is my sincere hope that as you engage with me in this project, as you traverse the planes of physical and sexual violence held here and sometimes described in great detail, you remember to prioritise your mental and emotional health.

¹ Danai Mupotsa, “Kin,” African Feminisms Conference 2021, 3 November 2021.

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Abstract

This project is about connections. Connections made from the body, from the personal, and from the spiritual. Putting into practice the concepts of autoethnography and affective research as methodologies that are lived, I use my body as an archive of experiences and geographic knowledges. In this approach, my personal subjective nature is not only recognised but also essential to the study of my own trauma as a living black lesbian woman and the vicarious trauma I experience in relation to the long list of assaulted and murdered black lesbian women in South Africa: specifically, the ones from my hometown of Kwa-Thema, Springs, in the mid-2000s, as well as the trauma of the black lesbian women I study in Jabulile Bongiwe Ngwenya's "*I Ain't Yo Bitch*" and Koleka Putuma's *No Easter Sunday for Queers* (in poem and play form). By analysing key moments in Zanele Muholi's documentaries *Difficult Love* and the Human Rights Watch's *Zanele Muholi, Visual Activist*, I foreground the "unbearable wrongness of being" and separation from citizenship and Africanness that black lesbians have experienced and continue to experience in this country.² It is my position that the purpose of trauma is to ask questions about the past and the present. The absencing of black lesbian womanhood in the mid-2000s in Kwa-Thema was a massacre that shifted the social spatiality of the township from a queer haven for people in Johannesburg to a graveyard. Prioritising memory work through the Sojan trialectic of historicity, spatiality, and sociality, the Wynterian-McKittrickian demonic and geographic knowledges, and Gordonic hauntology leads me to the potential answers: what the process of seeing and witnessing allows as a Thirdspace for the hope of arriving at joy. This project is an exploration of what is absent and absented yet simultaneously present, and how it exists as such.

² Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-America Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordan and Jane Anna Gordon (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996645.ch9>.

What lingers...

In deciding what gets left behind and discarded in this project, which voices do not ‘make it’ to be seen or heard, and which narratives of arriving at joy do not get encountered, this project is also a graveyard.

Lying outside of “the limits of disciplinary bounds” as Gordonic hauntology does, these words are scratched out.³ The narratives do not make the 25,000-word limit of this paper and may remain discarded by its reader if they so choose. However, they do haunt this project and the ways in which it is offered by epistemically disobeying what is considered important enough to be remembered, which is the very function of *Seeing ghosts*.

The redacted words utilise the hauntological spectre (as ghostly apparition and as a memory, as well as simply spirit). By scratching out, I use both haunting as relating to ghosts or spirits and memories/experiences/ruminations of things that haunt (me and the redacted), as well as hauntology as a sociological method that questions what lingers from violence.

³ Avery F. Gordon, Katherine Hite, and Daniela Jara, “Haunting and Thinking from the Utopian Margins: Conversation with Avery Gordon,” *Memory Studies* 13 no. 3, (2020): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020914017>.

Preface: Politics of remembrance and meditations on death

*A wall of remembrance. The city is passing away, said Jeff, even as we speak, and everyone in it, including ourselves. We must build ourselves a memorial while there is still time.*⁴

When I chose Associate Professor Hedley Twidle’s seminar “Literature for Real”, a class on life-writing and creative non-fiction, in the second year of my undergraduate degree, everyone in the class was asked to start reflecting on the connections between time, place, the social, and the personal by sharing with each other our names and where we grew up, followed by the words “I was born into a situation.” Born in Springs, in a black, female, and gendered-girl body, a year after South Africa’s first democratic elections and automatically ‘born free’, I was born into a situation.ⁱ Aside from its status as the top university on the continent, I was drawn to the University of Cape Town because it was so far from Johannesburg that it would challenge me to fashion myself anew and discover where my interests actually lay, since this is unfortunately not what is typically taught at high school level. So, I was surprised when we studied Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys*, subtitled *Joburg & what-what* and learned that the class I had chosen was asking me to venture back to Johannesburg, a place that I realised I did not know all too well and would have to start seriously reimagining in terms of its spatiality and sociality, all while paralleling it against the experiences of Vladislavić.

When he brought up Carlton Centre as the complex that would mark he and his brother’s “regular meeting place over the [past 15] years: from the Koffiehuis, where the waitresses were got up as Dutch dairymaids in clogs and lace caps, to the Brazilian Coffee Bar, where the cups and saucers arrived and departed on a conveyor belt,” I did not believe he could be talking about the same Carlton Centre that I knew.⁵ Two white men, Dutch dairymaids, and a Brazilian coffee shop? At Carlton Centre? When I think of Carlton Centre, I think of the anxious business of a one-stop shop in the Joburg CBD, where my mother would firmly clasp my small hands. The Carlton Centre I knew was black, not white and Dutch and Brazilian. When I presented this seemingly inaccurate representation to my mother on one of our two-hour-long daily phone calls, she informed me that Carlton Centre had, in fact, previously been a rich and lively place where my grandparents’ generation would meet for a night out in town with a nice dinner and a movie. It was from this kind of disjuncture that I started thinking about how significantly spaces transform depending on the bodies that occupy it and at what time in history they do so. How one place can coevally be a

⁴ Ivan Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006), 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

favoured coffee joint in the 90s for two men with distinctly European-sounding names, a night on the town for black working-class professionals who had lived through apartheid, and a busy marketplace for their children and grandchildren, the born-frees.

Of the many experiences of space that Vladislavić, or Vlad as we started calling him in the class, cites, it is the extract above by a character named Jeff that I have continued to find so intriguing—the idea of space changing; passing away as human beings do. Indeed, Carlton Centre served as an example of a kind of Derridean freeplay event: a significant alteration and recentring of a defined historic structure, brought upon by the ‘disruption’ of presence.ⁱⁱ Most memorable, however, is the idea of building a wall of remembrance. The idea of seeking to be remembered upon death and doing so while being alive. It was what Jeff expressed immediately afterwards that disturbed me:

Every person in the Greater Johannesburg area, identified by the voter’s roll, must be required to donate an object to the artist for use in the work. This object, which shall be no larger than a standard brick, will be enclosed in due course in a transparent resin block of those very dimensions. These object-enclosing bricks will be used in turn to construct a wall. The Great Wall of Jeff.⁶

The East Rand surely fell under the “Greater Johannesburg Area”, so I (or my mother or grandmother, considering the apartheid-era setting) would need to be considered under “every person”. However, the next phrase is what disqualifies the three of us: “identified by the voter’s roll”. We were black and women. We could in no way vote—whether legally or socially—and could therefore not be counted in the wall of remembrance. We would not be remembered. Most disturbing to me in Jeff’s detailed vision of the monument was its name: “the Great Wall of Jeff”. Every person in the Greater Johannesburg area (including Springs) would offer as a sacrifice an object of their choosing to a white boy, under the guise of communal remembrance, to a wall of his namesake.

Since reading this text, my intellectual endeavours have been preoccupied with the practice of remembering, and specifically, with who gets to be remembered. Why “who”? And how would such a (re)memory even work? These are the questions I explore in this project.

⁶ Ibid., 46–47.

“Remember me when I’m gone”

These are the words of Busisiwe Sigasa, a black lesbian poet and activist who died from a diabetic coma eight months after being attacked and sexually assaulted by a man who infected her with HIV. A Soweto resident, she arrived home tired one day and her mother reminded her to take her diabetes medication, but before she could do so, she took a nap from which she never awoke.⁷ When South African lesbian visual activist Sir Zanele Muholi started their iconic black portraiture project *Faces and Phases*, Busi Sigasa, their colleague and friend, was the first participant they photographed for the first iteration of the series (see Figure 1).⁸ “Remember Me When I’m Gone” is a poem Busi Sigasa wrote on her WordPress blog three months before she died on 12 March 2007.



Figure 1: Busi Sigasa, photographed by Zanele Muholi for *Faces and Phases*, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 2006, <http://www.vaslisouza.com/exhibitions1/we-live-in-fear>

If one can ruminate about seeking to be remembered upon their death while they are still alive (like Jeff and Busi Sigasa did), what possibilities are available once the act of death has transpired, once one has departed this physical plane of existence? The inherent human need to leave a mark and, most importantly, to be remembered is not specific to the living realm. This is where Gordonic hauntology offers us a way of imagining what alternative routes are made available through these channels.

⁷ Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, “Remember Me When I’m Gone” by Busisiwe Sigasa, in *Queer African Reader*, edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, (Dakar, Nairobi, and Senegal: Pambazuka Press, 2013), 440.

⁸ Zanele Muholi, “We Live in Fear,” Fotogalleri Vaslisouza, December 2015, <http://www.vaslisouza.com/exhibitions1/we-live-in-fear>.

A note on autoethnography and affective research: Methodology that is lived

The body is our first primary text.ⁱⁱⁱ I cannot deny that I bring into my research my whole body—its reactions to the screen, to the books, to the discoveries and findings, are evidence of this fact. Like the popular feminist definition of the “personal as political,” the personal is theoretical.^{iv} The personal is intellectual.^v The personal is research. I research from my person. I research from this body.

The signals that the body gives us are pointers to knowledge about ourselves, the world(s) we inhabit, and the ways in which we do so. Psychology around mental health and trauma has long attested to this fact. As Lynn Norton explains, “context is complex and my view of the world has been shaped over time through the social, cultural and political environments in which I grew up.”⁹ This statement is particularly true for me as someone who was a 13-year-old black girl living in Kwa-Thema when talented national soccer star Eudy Simelane, also from Kwa-Thema, an identifying lesbian woman, was murdered in a field that is a walking distance from my childhood home.^{vi}

Reflecting on his 2015 walking seminar (themed “Decolonizing Table Mountain”), a seminar that brought together scholars, artists, activists, curators, and practitioners to explore emergent Anthropocene landscapes, Nick Shepherd rightly notes, “So much scholarship involves forms of disembodied research and reportage”. He then pertinently asks, “What happens when the body, affect, the senses, and the imagination enter the equation?”¹⁰ This proposed convergence is the crux of my project. Leading sociologist and queer theorist Professor Zethu Matebeni argues that “the research process requires more sophisticated, adaptable and unconventional methods that allow researchers to traverse sexualised terrains that simultaneously present pleasure and danger”.^{11vii} Alongside hauntology, I use autoethnography as a sophisticated, adaptable and unconventional method that embraces affect, the senses, and the imagination to aid my spatial navigation of black lesbian womanhood in this country.

⁹ Lynn Margaret Norton, “Pathways of Reflection: Creating Voice Through Life Story and Dialogical Poetry,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 18 no.1 (January 2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.1.2516>.

¹⁰ Nick Shepherd, “Escaping from the ‘White Cube’ of the Seminar Room,” in *The Walking Seminar: Embodied Research in Emergent Anthropocene Landscapes*, eds. Nick Shepherd, Christian Erntsen, and Dirk-Jan Visser, (Amsterdam: ON AIR: Artist-in-Residence Program, Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2018), 15.

¹¹ Zethu Matebeni, “TRACKS: Researching Sexualities Walking abOUT the City of Johannesburg,” in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2011): 54.

The practice of autoethnography attempts to remediate “how traditional forms of scholarly representation function to erase the contradictions of emotion and work”.¹² If these contradictions are not highlighted and restored, how then do we explain our emotional, visceral reactions to certain works? Autoethnographers invite readers to “read with” and “read themselves into” stories.¹³ While the methodology is often used to maintain ethical practice when engaging with research participants, in this project, I turn myself into my own research participant.¹⁴ The purpose of my autoethnographic exercise is, as Norton explains, “not to tell you my lived experience but to reveal any advantages (or disadvantages) of following a deeply reflexive process that challenges my own perceptions of reality, of how I see things.”¹⁵ Most pointedly: of what I remember and how I remember it with this particular body, and ultimately, what it means for me as a black lesbian woman and scholar living and writing in South Africa.

[T]here is no substitute for experience, none at all. All the other paraphernalia of communication and of knowledge—words, labels, concepts, symbols, theories, formulas, sciences—all are useful only because people already knew them experientially.¹⁶

Following Abraham H. Maslow, quoted above, in this project, I intend to “disrupt the binary of science and art” by way of an autoethnographic methodology focused on experiential knowledge.¹⁷ In this approach, my personal subjective nature is not only recognised but also essential to the study of my own trauma as a living black lesbian woman and the vicarious trauma I experience in relation to the long list of assaulted and murdered black lesbian women in South Africa (specifically, the ones from my hometown of Kwa-Thema), as well as the trauma of the black lesbian women I study in Jabulile Bongiwe Ngwenya’s *I Ain’t Yo Bitch* and Koleka Putuma’s *No Easter Sunday for Queens* (in poem and play form). By analysing key moments from Zanele Muboli’s documentaries *Difficult Love* and the Human Rights Watch’s *Zanele Muboli, Visual Activist*, I foreground the “unbearable wrongness of being” and separation from citizenship and Africanness that black lesbians have experienced and continue to experience in this country.¹⁸

It is my position that trauma, like anger, demands to be felt and exists to lead its subject to certain realisations and conclusions. Its purpose is to ask questions about the past and the

¹² Karen L., Ashcraft and Angela Trethewey, “Special Issue Synthesis: Developing Tension: An Agenda for Applied Research on the Organization of Irrationality,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 32, no.2 (May 2004): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14795752.2004.10058565>.

¹³ Ashcraft and Trethewey, “Special Issue Synthesis,” 266.

¹⁴ Lynn Norton, “Pathways of Reflection,” 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ Abraham H. Maslow, *The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance*. (Britain: Harper & Row, 1966).

¹⁷ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 no. 1 (2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.

¹⁸ Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory”.

present. In studying my body as an archive, I employ traumatic experiential knowledge as an affective research methodology, while prioritising memory work through the Sojan trialectic of historicity, spatiality, and sociality, the Wynterian-McKittrickian demonic and geographic knowledges, and Gordonic hauntology to lead me to the potential answers.

According to Avery F. Gordon, to study social life means that we must confront the ghostly aspects of it. In this project, I use the following conceptualisation of hauntology that Gordon presents to explain the affective experience of seeing ghosts:

The possibility of a collectively animated worldly memory is articulated here in that extraordinary moment in which you—*who never was there* in that real place—can *bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else*. You are walking down the road or into the building and you hear or see something so clearly, something that isn't necessarily visible to anyone else. You think, "I must be *thinking it up*, making it up." Yet in this moment of enchantment when you are remembering something in the world, or something in the world is remembering you, you are not alone or hallucinating or making something out of nothing but your own unconscious thoughts. You have bumped into somebody else's memory; you have encountered haunting and the picture of it the ghost imprints.¹⁹

I do not limit my personal experiences towards, of, or in this research to a preface. Rather, they are the thread that runs through all of my research, frequently reminding me not to run away from myself.

MaThoko's

What made the early murders of Eudy Simelane and Girlie Nkosi in Kwa-Thema, in particular, (in 2008 and 2009, respectively) much more horrifying was the understanding of Kwa-Thema as a recognised haven for queer people living in the East Rand at the time. In fact, the Kwa-Thema home of Thokozile Khumalo served as a refuge and a hub of interprovincial connectivity for queer persons in South Africa. A shebeen queen, MaThoko, as Khumalo was fondly known as, ran a tavern in Kwa-Thema during the 1980s and 1990s. Significantly, this period also marked a time when homosexuality was criminalised by the apartheid state. MaThoko, a heterosexual woman whose nephew was gay, opened her home to young queer persons who felt

¹⁹ Avery F. Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 166.

unsafe and needed shelter and a sense of community. Under the banner of anti-apartheid nationalism, MaThoko's home, a simple four-roomed house not much different from the one I grew up in, became the headquarters of the Kwa-Thema chapter of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW).²⁰

The chapter was established by Kwa-Thema residents British Sgxabai, a black gay man, and Manku Madux, a black lesbian woman.²¹ The GLOW Kwa-Thema chapter became one of the strongest township-based chapters of the organisation, with 32 Legodi Street, MaThoko's address, serving as a 'social centre' for the queer youth of Kwa-Thema and Johannesburg. One of the founders of GLOW Graeme Reid writes that "All GLOW's mailing to members living in this East Rand township was addressed to 'No. 32'."²² It was through MaThoko's post box that homosociality was fostered for queer people living in the Gauteng province primarily and even throughout South Africa and the world. It is no wonder then that when MaThoko's home was demolished in 1997, four years after her death, Reid and fellow activist Phumi Mtetwa, a black lesbian, sought to save the post box. After successfully doing so, the post box was donated in the same year to the newly established Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa, which would become the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) and is now on permanent loan from GALA to the Apartheid Museum.²³

Young queer people felt free in Kwa-Thema at MaThoko's house. The sociality of black lesbian women was one of freedom and joy and revelry. Celebrated author and journalist Mark Gevisser describes the setting to a meeting of the GLOW Kwa-Thema chapter:

1970s disco sounds scratching through the static of an over-extended hi-fi system, the orange-and-white striped marquee in the yard... In a corner, two women have salvaged a quiet space from the revelry to embrace, and on the *stoep* a group of teenage boys are earnestly discussing outfits for the next drag show.²⁴

Gevisser continues to make it clear that the street party is "within full view of neighbours who pop over for a drink, and even send their children round for an afternoon of festivity".²⁵ I was

²⁰ John Marnell, "Radical Objects: MaThoko's Post Box and the LGBT Movement in South Africa," *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, February 17, 2015, <http://links.org.au/node/4296>.

²¹ Mark Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom: A History of South African Lesbian and Gay Organisation from the 1950s to the 1990s," in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, ed. Edwin Cameron and Mark Gevisser, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 67.

²² Graeme Reid, "Khumalo, Thokozile [MaThoko] (1947-93)," in *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay & Lesbian History: From World War II to the Present Day*, ed. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2001), 226.

²³ Graeme Reid, "Khumalo, Thokozile [MaThoko] (1947-93)," 226.

²⁴ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

only two years old when the house at 32 Legodi Street, which is only a 20–30 minute walk from my childhood home, was destroyed, but I do remember there being plenty of queer people in my community as I grew older. Lebohang Mabogwane, one of my aunts, was quite popular and had a big friendship circle of queer friends who were assigned male at birth. The red-lipstick-wearing, ‘bonding’-rocking group of gay men and transwomen would frequent our home before attending the many parties in the area.^{viii} Another queer person close to home is well-known and celebrated musician and transman Theo Nhlengethwa, from the ’90s breakout group Boom Shaka, a group whose contribution helped define and pioneer Kwaito music in South Africa a year before the first democratic elections in the country were held. His family lived on the same street as mine.

Of course, at the time, the term “trans” was not notably present in our vocabulary, but the concept was certainly ingrained in our society and relatively well-understood—we referred to some of my aunt’s friends as ‘ausi’ or ‘Mme’ (sister, Ms.) as they asked us to and largely had no qualms doing so. So, queer people were visible in my community and a considerable population of them were openly queer and openly enjoying themselves at parties in their full queer selves. Gevisser supports my observations by writing in 1995 that “kwaThema has, rather unexpectedly given its low-key and peri-urban nature, the largest and most visible gay population,” with gay icon and anti-apartheid and HIV/AIDS activist Simon Nkoli proclaiming that “kwaThema gays and lesbians have a place to go—Ma Thoko’s”. MaThoko declared herself ‘Ma GLOW’ and ‘the mother of the gay people’.²⁶ Speaking of the queer bars and clubs in Soweto, Tembisa (another East Rand township), and Sebokeng, Gevisser even goes as far as saying that “Nowhere, however, has a gay community become as much part of an African community’s fabric as in KwaThema—aided in no small way (until her unexpected death in mid-1993) by Thoko Khumalo’s vociferous sponsorship.”²⁷

So significant was MaThoko’s house to the open sociality of the queer community in Kwa-Thema and Johannesburg that when GALA launched a publishing imprint in 2011, after the murders of Sizakele Sigasa, Salome Masooa, Eudy Simelane, Girlie Nkosi, Nokuthula Radebe, and Noxolo Nogwaza, as well as a number of queer persons assigned male at birth in Kwa-Thema, they named the imprint ‘MaThoko’s Books’. The imprint’s logo, a post box, is derived from the post box that stood outside of MaThoko’s and served as a symbol of queer life.²⁸ MaThoko’s Books’ first fiction title in 2014 was *Queer Africa: New and Collected Stories*, edited by Makhosazana

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 68.

²⁸ GALA, “MaThoko’s Books,” Books and Resources, Accessed April 17, 2019, <https://gala.co.za/books-and-resources/publications-and-publishing/mathokos-books/>.

Xaba, which is the first book on the continent to have been awarded the prestigious Lambda Literary Award (in the anthology category). In the queer negotiation of space, MaThoko's house and post box stood as a beacon, serving as a landmark to the queer East Randers and Joburgers.

What happened to transform this site of safety, from one with a 'gay shebeen', into one of unsafety, a graveyard of lesbian women, is a matter of sociality: the social dynamics at play and at stake for black lesbian women living in Kwa-Thema.

Out of touch

Despite the perception of general tolerance towards the queer community in Kwa-Thema, consider the sentiments expressed by three random bystanders interviewed in visual activist (and now-queer-icon) Sir Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid's 2010 landmark documentary on the precarious materiality of queer lives in South Africa, *Difficult Love*. Two black men and one black woman are interviewed on the street. The first man exclaims, "God created Adam and Eve; not Adam and Steve". The second takes on a more legislative stance, "We must go straight to government, and government must put a law against what is happening." He later continues, "No, that one is not an African thing", presumably referring to homosexuality (we do not hear the interviewer's questions). The woman proclaims, "Some sort of evil... evil spirit living in them. I don't really understand why a man and a man can do that". This is the kind of social sentiment that existed in the city and in black townships. The documentary was released in 2010, almost two decades after the roaring years of MaThoko's 'gay shebeen', yet the general discourse 17 years later was that homosexuality is unbiblical, unnatural, confusing, and something that should re-enact the colonial law. Rebecca Hodes writes that the people who opposed the Civil Union Bill of 2006, which legalised same-sex marriage, "argued that the Bill was undemocratic because most South Africans do not believe in equal rights for gay people." In fact, they believed that the bill was the result of "gay lobbyists and sympathetic jurists who were out of touch with the beliefs and values of the general population."²⁹ This last statement finds expression in the words of the second bystander.

It is significant that same-sex union, made illegal by the colonial imperialist apartheid state through the Marriage Act, became legally recognised by the new democratic government in 2006, the same year that a hate crime against a black lesbian woman received notable (yet not extensive) media attention for the first time in the country. The woman in question is 19-year-old soccer

²⁹ Rebecca Hodes, "Populist Hatred: Homophobia and Political Elites in Africa," *E-International Relations*, July 25, 2012, <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/25/populist-hatred-homophobia-and-political-elites-in-africa/>.

player Zoliswa Nkonyana, who was stabbed and stoned to death by a mob of her contemporaries in Khayelitsha on 4 February.³⁰ What the ‘anti-lobbyists’ do not (or rather, do not want to) realise is that it is them who are “out of touch” with reality by firstly, being averse to consider queer persons as fellow citizens who are, in fact, part of “the general population”. And secondly, by not being willing to be honest about what homophobia actually does—which is promote fear (undue on their part and very real and relevant for queer persons), hatred, brutality, and murder. Even though the 2006 bill was momentous, what is even more poignant about who exactly is “out of touch” was the missed opportunity on a governmental level in not advocating for legislature that was expressly against violence at a time when it was at its peak for queer persons.

Considering the three bystanders’ commentary around 2010 in *Difficult Love* and the fact that the reason Ma’Thoko’s home hosted so many displaced young queer people is that they felt unsafe or were shunned from their homes, as well as the murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana in 2006, it is true then that both the reality of intolerance and homophobia as well as certain carved out safe spaces could coexist coevally. The legislative act of legalising same-sex unions would not be enough to transform the far-reaching and established, strongly held, and practiced beliefs of homophobia.

³⁰ Marianne Thamm, “Not Just Another Murder,” *Mail & Guardian*, February 26, 2006, <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-02-26-not-just-another-murder/>.

On epistemic disobedience and tilling the soil: Unsettling methods of writing and remembering

Looking at the trajectory of my academic career, it appears that I have been arriving at this research for a very long time. In the life-writing and creative narrative nonfiction seminar described in the Preface, we studied Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope*. This is a rich journalistic investigation and an award-winning book but one that I found myself increasingly annoyed with. Steinberg had planted himself so firmly in the story of Asad Abdullahi's life that even though many read the book as a biography, as the story of Asad's life, that was not my experience of the text. We, the readers, were learning about Asad's life alongside Steinberg's, and most importantly, his experience of entering Asad's life and the resonances and disparities he found. For example, interjections such as "I find it difficult to coax to life Asad's memories of this time. His description of Gandeqore is flat and half-hearted, and it is only when I walk through the neighbourhood myself that I get a sense of it" felt to me like Steinberg superimposing himself and his experiences onto the narrative, when I believed that Asad's voice should have been prioritised, since it was Asad who was a 'man of good hope' and not Steinberg.³¹

On page 115 of my copy of the book, I recently found a faded yellow sticky note I had added back in 2015 upon first reading the book, pencilled with the words, "I get a little confused sometimes. I ask myself who's talking?" The first half of this particular page has direct quotes, with the use of quotation marks, as well as prose, which is where Steinberg comments. However, the last quarter of the page, written in prose, reads:

Many people in Bole Mikhael had uncles and aunts and cousins and siblings in America, in Britain, in Italy, in Scandinavia and they all received regular wire transfers or wads of cash from hawala agents. So clearly, there was a good life to be had in Europe. But who, precisely, got to live this good life was never clear, for the flesh-and-blood people one knew in Bole Mikhael who went to Europe seldom communicated much. What exactly happened to them on the other side? It was hard to form a picture.³²

Reading this in 2021, I am still confused about which sentiments, all expressed in prose, to ascribe to which research participant—Asad or Steinberg. ~~On page 89, another canary-coloured note reads "Why press for certain facts or events if it's his story Jonny?"~~ Alongside my note, on the previous

³¹ Jonny Steinberg, *A Man of Good Hope* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2014), 100.

³² Steinberg, *A Man of Good Hope*, 115.

page, Steinberg writes “I press him about Ethiopia.”³³ I find another of my notes, “Psychoanalysing him. Haa?!” alongside the following paragraph:³⁴

Perhaps he decided early on that this was not his history. He needed for there to be a foundation. Once upon a time, there was a prosperous Mogadishu family: that is how his story must begin. And that is how it must end. His time adrift is an anomaly, a parenthesis. It will end soon.³⁵

Again, I wondered if this was Asad’s interpretation of the events of his life, or Steinberg’s? It is, after all, a case of creative nonfiction and not a novel. On page 113, I underlined the following words written in prose: “How can you even begin to live like that?” with the pencilled inscription “Who’s saying this?”³⁶

The most annoying and memorable part of the book for me, however, was when Steinberg first notices the sociolinguistic phenomenon of altering the spelling and/or pronunciation of words originally derived from the English language. In the case of *A Man of Good Hope*, transforming the word “Eastleigh” (an area in Nairobi) to what Asad spells as “I-s l i i?”. Steinberg comments, “I discover later that all Somalis say and spell it that way. I will come to see what they have done to the English name of the neighbourhood as an analogy for what they have done to the neighbourhood itself.”³⁷ It is here that I took issue with Steinberg’s anthropological take. This specific use of cultural and regional dialect was nothing surprising to me, since most of us black people who grew up in South African townships do it all the time and quite naturally so.

From childhood, the word I and all the black kids I knew growing up in White City, Kwa-Thema, in the East Rand of Johannesburg (as well as in several other black townships throughout South Africa) used for the fun multicoloured baked corn snacks ‘disco pops’ was “skopas”, “amaskopas” to be exact. A hair salon in Kwa-Thema belonging to a woman named Thembi, for example, would be branded “Thembi’s Saloon” (written and pronounced with the double-o sound) in the same way that the Afrikaans term “voor se ek” became “voetsek”, and in the same way that the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) became “eWusu”. In fact, White City, the specific section of Kwa-Thema where my grandmother’s house is located, is called “Hit City”, one of the reasons being the ‘W’ and ‘E’ of the first word fading off the town’s entrance board. We colloquially call another section of Kwa-Thema “Peace”, and many younger children do not know that the full

³³ Ibid., 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 95.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 113.

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

~~name is “Rest in Peace” and that it is called as such since the area is located near a gravesite. And although not an English word, we pronounce “Vergenoeg”, another section of Kwa Thema, as “Vergenog”, halving the double-o sound in the original name.~~

I realise now what my annoyance and discomfort with Steinberg’s writing was about. Firstly, Steinberg’s analogising, “psychoanalysing,” and anthropologising about space and especially intimate space—whether physical places like Islii ~~(and in my case as a reader, Hit City, Peace, and Vergenog)~~ or the precarious material life of a displaced African like Asad—as an outsider, a white outsider. Secondly, the superimposition of Steinberg’s voice, experiences, and narrative onto the latter intimate space. I do feel that it is extremely important that Steinberg wrote about Asad’s life; the resultant acute awareness of xenophobia and its tangible impact on the material and social lives of refugees that the book, and the theatrical production of the same name inspired by Steinberg’s book, brought about is incredibly crucial in creating a communal respect for human life, especially towards those whose citizenship does not match ours. However, I felt that Steinberg, a white man of class privilege and notable social status, had no place inserting himself into the story of Asad, a black displaced refugee of Muslim faith, as he did in the book. Notably, the musical adaptation staged at the Baxter Theatre in August 2016, a year after the seminar, centred fully on Asad’s life and did not feature Steinberg (as interviewer or journalist) at all.^{ix}

A few years after this showdown between Steinberg and I (neatly housed within my copy of the book), I encountered a respected scholar who warned against ‘overindulgence’ when black woman theorists wrote about themselves. She used the word so disparagingly that the term still feels like an insult, and my body remembers how I would recoil into myself in her class after that day. However, I have since lovingly adopted the idea of a young black woman in a historically white institution located in South Africa in 2022 indulging fully in herself and her work as an act of rebellion. I am learning to take pleasure in it, in intellectualising and writing my full self into being. I find this position to be an employment of “epistemic disobedience”, which is the academic stance advocated and ascribed to by the South American school of decolonial thinking.³⁸

I was first introduced to this school of thought through Professor Walter D. Mignolo when I was in the first year of my academic career, an opportunity not afforded to the majority of my graduating class (dare I say, across the entire Humanities faculty). The African Studies Unit and the Decolonial Theory Reading Group at UCT were hosting Mignolo for a seminar on the topic

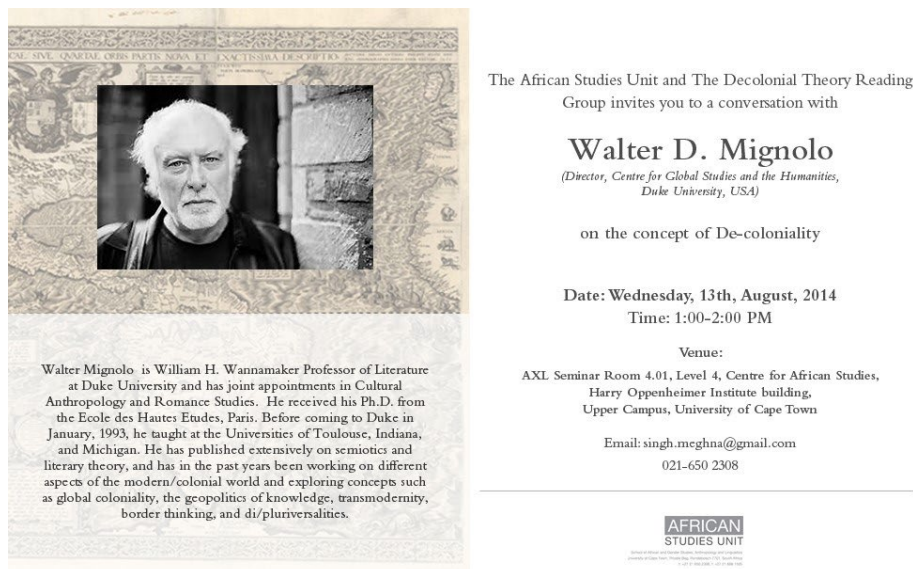
³⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (February 15, 2010): 160, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/10.1177/0263276409349275>.

of decoloniality (see Figure 2 for the poster invitation). I was incredibly privileged to have been invited to this talk by my mentor Dr. Daniela Franca Joffe, tutoring foundational English development classes to first-year students in the English Language and Literature department at the time, who believes in prioritising her students' engagement with deep critical racial and postcolonial theories even at the undergraduate level:³⁹

To my brilliant students past and present —

Please do everything you can to be at this talk on Wednesday [13 August 2014]. I cannot adequately convey its importance.³⁹

She was right. I have no qualms in revealing that a big chunk of what Mignolo spoke about that day would only become intelligibly accessible to me after my first year, but that talk singularly and certainly forever changed and shaped the ways in which I engaged with pedagogy and the idea of a singular episteme from then on. Understanding that there was a “decolonial option” that would make it possible for me to enter into and occupy scholarship in exponentially different ways than I was typically being taught to do in a lot of my first-year classes is what helped me to eventually arrive at new epistemes: the spiritual (ancestral) epistemes, the Wynterian-McKittrickian demonic, and the vicarious trauma I feel as a black lesbian woman scholar who grew up in Kwa-Thema during the mid-2000s massacre of black lesbian women that I explore in this project, now at master's level.⁴⁰



The African Studies Unit and The Decolonial Theory Reading Group invites you to a conversation with

Walter D. Mignolo
(Director, Centre for Global Studies and the Humanities, Duke University, USA)

on the concept of De-coloniality

Date: Wednesday, 13th, August, 2014
Time: 1:00-2:00 PM

Venue:
AXL Seminar Room 4.01, Level 4, Centre for African Studies,
Harry Oppenheimer Institute building,
Upper Campus, University of Cape Town

Email: singh.meghna@gmail.com
021-650 2308

AFRICAN STUDIES UNIT

Walter Mignolo is William H. Wannamaker Professor of Literature at Duke University and has joint appointments in Cultural Anthropology and Romance Studies. He received his Ph.D. from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris. Before coming to Duke in January, 1993, he taught at the Universities of Toulouse, Indiana, and Michigan. He has published extensively on semiotics and literary theory, and has in the past years been working on different aspects of the modern/colonial world and exploring concepts such as global coloniality, the geopolitics of knowledge, transmodernity, border thinking, and di/pluriversalities.

Figure 2: Invitation to a talk on decoloniality by Professor Walter D. Mignolo, at UCT, circulated via email.

³⁹ Daniela Franca Joffe, personal correspondence via email, 10 August 2014.

⁴⁰ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.5070/T412011807>.

The way in which I articulate this project is something I myself could have easily deemed unscholarly and unintellectual had the concept of decoloniality not been brewing in my mind for all these years. While the idea of ‘overindulgence’ that I became so afraid of is centred around writing about the self as an egotistic unscholarly endeavour, this very notion (judging the intellectual and narrative expressions of others as ‘overindulgence’) is a construct of colonial modernity and rests on the Cartesian dualism between the mind and body. In fact, Mignolo would term it an “ego-politics of knowledge”. Warning against black woman theorists’ ‘overindulgence’ when we prioritise our experiences is “locating knowledge in the mind only, and bracketing ‘secondary qualities’ (affects, emotions, desires, anger, humiliation, etc.)” as unintellectual.⁴¹ ~~Anger. I am reminded here of what was supposed to be an intergenerational conversation between academics and students at the height of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) movements at UCT in 2015. When a certain academic denounced how we, the students, were choosing to protest, telling us that we should not let anger cloud our judgement, I remember how Zethu Matebeni, the first and only black lesbian woman academic I knew of at the time, interjected his speech and said, “Can we not tell our students how to feel. Can we not police their anger”.~~

The “body-politics of knowing/sensing/understanding,” which Mignolo proposes instead of ego-politics, ~~and that I felt Matebeni exhibit that day,~~ is the foundation upon which I ground my project: the understanding that the sensory, what the body carries as knowledge, cannot be divorced from the intellectual.⁴² Mignolo’s “epistemic disobedience” is a term I started thinking about more deeply when the Decolonial Reading Group hosted Professor Nelson Maldonado-Torres for his seminar titled ‘Whiteness Must Fall: A Fanonian Meditation’ on 8 March 2016.⁴³ His talk was purposefully not widely advertised and, again, I am indebted to Daniela who shared it as far and wide as she could. But because a lot of students were not able to attend it, during his visit, Maldonado-Torres also met with a group of us fallists at the Alma Park in Mowbray for an intellectual exchange on black and student of colour movements across the Caribbean, United States, and South Africa. “Epistemic disobedience means to delink from the illusion of the zero point epistemology”: the idea that knowledge is universal and universally acquired, from the same geo-historical and bio-graphical locations.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option,” 177.

⁴² Walter, D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience,” *Postcolonial Studies* 14 no. 13 (September 2011): 274, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2011.613105>.

⁴³ Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Sitting outside on the grass in a playground, listening to Maldonado-Torres, I revelled at the idea of flipping the script, of being encouraged to work against the grain, against what older established academics would preach, against the rigid disciplinarity that I thought was the only way to do scholarship, to do intellectual work. Campus was not a safe place to be recognised as a fallist at the time, and doing scholarship with the physical earth beneath me, off-campus, was a step towards knowing, sensing, and understanding myself and the politics of my body, with its affects and anger, on a different epistemological plane. Shepherd explores refuting “our principle forms of scholarly engagement [that] are remarkably disembodied” since they “tend to be based on and to reinforce a set of distinctions: mind versus body, reason versus emotion and imagination, thinking versus feeling.”⁴⁵ The foundation of this project is that the items in these set of “distinctions” are not in fact distinct from each other, but are rather dualisms. Speaking of his experience as a lecturer at UCT, Shepherd continues, “In the average seminar situation, students were required to discuss abstract knowledge in an imperial language, disavowing the things that condition their daily experience: being black, being a woman, being worried about personal safety... being denied the forms of discourse through which to have a meaningful discussion about any of these things. In other words, their relationship to knowledge begins by excluding the very thing that so profoundly conditions their experience under and after apartheid: embodied being in the world.”⁴⁶ It is through understanding myself as an embodied being in the world, as a black woman scholar, that I look to my body as an archive of knowledge where I can begin theorising from.

I am in community with other scholars who have thought about queer and literary studies through the lens of epistemic disobedience. When I began this project, I conceived it as a comparative literary analysis between the Eastern Caribbean and South Africa, tracing texts focused on and written by black lesbian women and lesbian women of colour. Alongside Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here*, I studied Gabby Rivera’s *Juliet Takes a Breath*. Consuelo Martínez-Reyes, who theorises on Rivera’s novel, shows how the history of epistemic exclusion from public spaces of ‘knowledge’ facilitates a gap between white people and people of colour that ultimately leads to confrontation or rebellion.⁴⁷ Avery Gordon’s conceptualisation of hauntology has since then drawn me closer and deeper to South Africa.

⁴⁵ Nick Shepherd, “Escaping from the ‘White Cube’ of the Seminar Room,” in *The Walking Seminar: Embodied Research in Emergent Anthropocene Landscapes*, eds. Nick Shepherd, Christian Ersten, and Dirk-Jan Visser, (Amsterdam: ON AIR: Artist-in-Residence Program, Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2018), 13.

⁴⁶ Shepherd, “Escaping from the ‘White Cube,’” 13.

⁴⁷ Consuelo Martínez-Reyes, “Lesbian ‘Growth’ and Epistemic Disobedience: Placing Gabby Rivera’s *Juliet Takes a Breath* within Puerto Rican Literature and Queer Theory,” *Centro Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 30 no.2 (Summer 2018): 333, 335, 341.

Closer to home, Zanele Muholi's black portraiture projects are also a manifestation of epistemic disobedience: in particular, their photographs of Busi Sigasa from Soweto, Tumi Nkopane from Kwa-Thema, and Mbali Zulu, also from Kwa-Thema, in *Faces and Phases*. Alexandra Poulain focuses on Muholi's self-portraiture series *Somnyama Ngonyama*, where, instead of prioritising the faces of other queer people, Muholi turns their camera onto themselves. Poulain explains how "the project performs a double agenda of escaping the restrictive space commonly allotted to Black female bodies and breaking into new spaces, delinking from hegemonic systems of knowledge in a protracted gesture of epistemic disobedience".⁴⁸ Academia is one such "restrictive" space, and it is the space I aim to frustrate with this project.

At the 2021 African Feminisms (AFEMS) Conference, held on 1–5 November at the UCT Graduate School for Business and streamed online, Dr. Danai Mupotsa expressed, "The capacity to live has been lost in this place [academia]", this place where you (we) are "supposed to discern something you know already". As someone who was 13 years old when Eudy Simelane's body was found a walking distance from my Kwa-Thema home, I already know the kind of trauma and internalised violence that took over my young self, yet for too long I believed that writing about it was not something I could do as a 'respected scholar'.

Mupotsa's next utterance encapsulates the realisation I have been operating on in this project since that dreadful year of death, 2020: "Being unaffected by yourself to something like you is performing intelligence".⁴⁹ Trying to distance myself from the black women I was talking about in my research, writing in an unaffected tone and style, forcing them and myself into a rigid traditionally academic structure that we were both anxious and unsettled in, was a mere performance of intelligence. Furthermore, it was supposing that the work that was already being done, the connections made in and from my body, the work of putting it onto paper, was intellectually deficient, lacking in academic worth. This belief is the very work of coloniality that Mignolo was expressing all those years ago, in the cosy, earth-toned open space of the Centre for African Studies, on the third floor of the antithetically named Harry Oppenheimer Institute Building.^{xi}

With the idea of intimate (and intimately lived) space in mind and the "body-politics of knowing/sensing/understanding" my black lesbian body as an archive of experience and knowledge, as well as the epistemic disobedience of my very existence, the undoing of the

⁴⁸ Alexandra Poulain, "Self-Portrait as Epistemic Disobedience: Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama*," *InMedia: The French Journal of Media Studies* 8 no. 2 (2020): 11–12, <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.2409>.

⁴⁹ Danai Mupotsa, "Kin," AFEMS conference 2021, 3 November 2021.

“unbearable wrongness of [my] being” in the ways that June Jordan and Sylvia Wynter would posit, I ask: Why can’t I—a young black woman in the academy, who identifies as lesbian—indulge in my own experiences, the banks of which facilitate the very systems of my knowledge?⁵⁰ Why can’t I write about my own experiences in the same way that Steinberg (a white man) can write about another’s (a black man’s)? Why should we, intellectual black women, not be allowed to explore the ways in which we occupy our bodies and, moreover, the knowledges we acquire from this occupation and from our experiences?

I am not Steinberg, and while I admire his work as a researcher and writer, I do not aspire to be Steinberg. I aspire to be myself. Simply by existing in this body, by hearing about Eudy Simelane’s ruthless murder as a child, her found body reconstructing the social spatiality of the place I knew as home, I have earned the right to intellectualise about myself and about my body, which holds these intimate knowledges. Even the idea of deserving or earning is itself a colonial construct—the notion that I am human and that I am worthy because I produce for, because I contribute to, known systems of recognised knowledge, is something I refute with this research.

I do not doubt the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic on fostering an environment in which I engaged deeper and more intimately with death, grief, trauma, and the idea of spiritual continuation. ~~For the first year of writing this project (and on many occasions thereafter), I experienced what could only be called ‘writer’s block’. However, as Hedley said, “No such thing as writer’s block: just give an objective account of the difficulties you are facing”.~~⁵⁴ The objective account of the difficulties I was facing was that going back to Kwa-Thema in the sincere ways that this project would require of me was daunting. It felt unsafe to my body. The specific difficulty I was facing was that writing would require me to do the thing that I have little language for: talking about seeing ghosts.

The spirits of the murdered black lesbian women of Kwa-Thema that I encountered in this project were not bombarding or loud in getting their point across. I have come to understand that a big part of why they are here as I write is simply to be observed, simply to sit with me as I do this work, reassuring me that the experience (my experience) needs to be told. In one of the classes for the coursework component of this master’s project, I learned from Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter that demonic ground is the “absented presence of black

⁵⁰ Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory”.

⁵¹ Hedley Twidle, “Returning the Gaze of the Elephant’s Eye,” in *The Walking Seminar: Embodied Research in Emergent Anthropocene Landscapes*, eds. Nick Shepherd, Christian Ernten, and Dirk-Jan Visser, (Amsterdam: ON AIR: Artist-in-Residence Program, Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2018), 15.

womanhood”.⁵² What these spirits came to do was simply to be present, to be allowed to sit fully in presence, in the present. So, as I sat with them, I dug into my own pool of knowledge and experiential knowledge, in order to take seriously the idea of the self as intellectual praxis, and to do so in a master’s dissertation. I heard from them what it is they had journeyed to show me.

Tilling the soil^{xiii}

Land that has blood on it, spilled without consent and in horrifying, brutal, inhumane ways, is not asking to be broken. I have no immediate desire for this project to be ‘ground-breaking’, since that language goes against the very foundations of what I am unearthing with this research—within myself, within Kwa-Thema. Instead, blood-soaked land, especially that soaked by the blood of black women, asks to be tilled. A gentle action, creating upheaval, certainly, yet without the chaos of breaking the ground that is so reminiscent of not only violent masculinity but also the colonial imperial conquest. The soil is already there; it already holds the stories, the truth, the knowledge. It asks fervently, demanding not to be ignored, which is the very mark of trauma—its inherent psychological premise and resultant physical affect—but it asks to be tilled, not smashed. Not disputing the etymology of the word “demonic”, McKittrick explains how Wynter draws the concept of ‘demonic ground’ from mathematics, physics, and computer science: “the demonic connotes a working system that cannot have a determinist schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future.”⁵³ It is from here that McKittrick speaks about black womanhood lying on demonic ground.

The term, however, upon first (and even subsequently) hearing it, does not spring to the ears and heart as a mathematical, analytical tool. Demons have long been associated with blackness, with black womanhood, and with homosexuality.⁵⁴ So I build on Wynterian-McKittrickian demonic ground by introducing the category of ‘lesbian’ in the humanness of black womanhood. Like McKittrick, I argue that the “category of black [lesbian] woman is intimately connected with

⁵² Katherine McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): xxv.

⁵³ McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xxiv.

⁵⁴ Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Peter Thomas Sandy, “Religion-Related Stigma and Discrimination Experienced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students at a South African Rural-Based University,” Taylor & Francis (2015); E. A. Omoteso, “A Study of the Demonization of Black Women and the Myth of Black Female Sexuality in the Prose Narratives of José Lins Do Rego,” *African Journals Online* 17 (2011); Elwood Watson, “Marginalization, Demonization of Black Women’s Real,” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/demographics/african-american/article/15096620/marginalization-demonization-of-black-women-is-real>; Karine Geoffrion, “Homosexuality and Religious Fundamentalism in the Ghanaian Mediascape: Clashes between an ‘Un-Godly’ Concept and Lived Practices,” in *Genre et fondamentalismes/ Gender and Fundamentalisms*, ed. Fatou Sow (CODESRIA, 2018), 269–288.

past and present spatial organization and that black femininity and black women's humanness are bound up in an ongoing geographic struggle.”⁵⁵

So tilling the demonic grounds on which black lesbian womanhood finds itself in this country means handling the soil not with the force of exorcism, the brute force that dislocates Mimi's throat in Koleka Putuma's *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, or that kills 17-year-old Ruth by water baptism in the same play, or even the one that Andile, a man we think of as dotingly supportive, protective, and caring of his younger black lesbian cousin, so easily, naturally, and without thought employs when he unbuckles his pants and informs Tebogo that he will show her how to be a man.⁵⁶ No. Tilling the soil means sitting with the stories, sitting with the ghosts—the sociological ones that Avery Gordon invites us to engage with as well as the spiritual remnants of the black lesbian women who no longer walk this physical plane of existence on the account of senseless murder.⁵⁷

Although an often-daunting experience, I am grateful to have been gently nudged by some of their spirits in this project, particularly those from Kwa-Thema. I realise that I am not unique in having these meditations about African spirituality and ancestral knowledge systems. Also at AFEMS 2021, literary critic Dr. Faith Mkwesha shared how, despite growing up in a Christian household and not being exposed to or encouraged towards ancestral connection (an experience we share), she found herself awoken from sleep one night by the spirit of Nehanda, a Zimbabwean woman and warrior who led an army to revolution.⁵⁸ As Mkwesha explains, the spirit of Nehanda has, on a number of occasions in the past, appeared to black women to undo the colonial and patriarchal work of removing her contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe from history. Along with Mkwesha, Mischka Jade Lewis, presenting on the relationship between bodies, remembering, and the historical trauma of slavery and colonisation in post-apartheid South Africa, has posed questions about co-authoring with our ancestors.⁵⁹

Speaking about the UCT fire that took down the archives at the Jagger Library on 18 April 2021, decolonial feminist thinker and activist Wanelisa Xaba gives expression to the concept of “ancestral consent” that I use in creating this project.^{xiii} They explain this kind of consent as

⁵⁵ McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xviii.

⁵⁶ Koleka Putuma, *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, (Pinelands: Junkets Publisher, 2020), 32, 31, and Jabulile Bongwiwe Ngwenya, “*I Ain't Yo Bitch*,” (Johannesburg: Paper Bag Publishing, 2009), 162.

⁵⁷ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 139.

⁵⁸ Faith Mkwesha, “Decoloniality: Prophesy and Haunting in Gender and the Nation Constructions in Zimbabwe,” AFEMS Conference 2021, November 3, 2021.

⁵⁹ Mischka Jade Lewis, “Plantation for The Nation: Archive of Body and Sacredness,” AFEMS Conference 2021, 3 November 2021.

the belief that (because our ancestors are living entities in the spiritual realm) we need consent about which stories to tell. You cannot just tell your ancestors' story as if you have ownership to their life and journey when there may be parts of their lives that require privacy. Our ancestors' lives and stories require the very same deep care, sensitivity and respect we would require from our grandchildren when they write about this current historical moment.⁶⁰

They go on: "I am clear that when we invoke the archive a) we invoke our ancestors b) we as Africans belong to a spiritual reality regarding ancestry that predates colonialism c) this means that our academic work cannot dismiss ancestors as the living entities."⁶¹

In prioritising spirits as living entities, I explore alternative modes of knowledge production and ask about the possibilities of creating worlds that are life-giving and -affirming when we venture into the past.

⁶⁰ Wanelisa Xaba, "An Awkward Dance with the Black Middle Class: On Decolonial Scholarship, Grief, Anthropologised Ancestry and the Cleansing Role of Fire," *Imbiza Journal for African Writing* 1, no.2 (August 2021): 87.

⁶¹ Xaba, "An Awkward Dance," 86.

On historicity — The historical production of social spatiality

Building on Edward W. Soja's concept of the Thirdspace as "an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness," I explore how the Sojan trialectic of historicity, spatiality, and sociality allow for imagining the geographic knowledges of black lesbian women.

"Fateful moments"

I begin my project with the historical events that have affected my geographic knowledges as a black lesbian woman. I do so in the tradition of Anthony Giddens' concept of "fateful moments", framed by Dr. Gideon Nomdo as an anchor concept that helps to "unpack the existential basis of identity formations".^{62xiv}

In this section, I highlight the significant moments in time that have pointed to the material experiences and existences of black lesbian women in South Africa or to when that existence (my existence) is and has been in crisis. Katherine McKittrick uses Édouard Glissant's poetics of landscape to argue that "[t]he individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history."⁶³ As such, and following Soja's trialectical position, I begin at what has been an iconic declaration, then trace my fateful moments of how the church and religion have facilitated the process of unseeing black lesbian women in this country.

1995: "I didn't know I was making history"⁶⁴

The same year I was born in Springs, Johannesburg, an event happening in Beijing, China, would affect me years later. On 13 September 1995, Beverly Palesa Ditsie became not only the first lesbian-identifying person to address the United Nations at the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace in Beijing, but also the first African to do so on the subject of sexual orientation. It was the first time someone used this platform to address issues faced by the queer community.

Speaking at the first Global Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) Women's* Conference held at the Century City Conference Centre in Cape Town, alongside other key organising activists

⁶² Gideon Nomdo, "At the Crossroads of the Identity (Re)construction Process: An Analysis of 'Fateful Moments' in the Lives of Coloured Students Within an Equity Development Programme at UCT," (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2015), 4.

⁶³ McKittrick, "Introduction: Geographic Stories," xxii.

⁶⁴ Nickita Maesela, "I Didn't Know I Was Making History": Bev Ditsie on UN Speech," *City Press*, June 21 2019, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/i-didnt-know-i-was-making-history-bev-ditsie-on-un-speech-20190621>.

from Mexico, Peru, and the US who attended the conference, Bev Ditsie explains how Hillary Clinton, who was the First Lady of the United States at the time, gave the speech “Women’s Rights Are Human Rights” at the conference on 5 September 1995.⁶⁵ Following this speech, Ditsie and The International Gay and Lesbian Rights Commission were told they could only have five minutes to convince the UN and the audience in attendance that ‘lesbian rights are women’s right and women’s rights are human rights’. So Ditsie volunteered to speak.

~~No woman can determine the direction of her own life without the ability to determine her sexuality. Sexuality is an integral, deeply ingrained part of every human being’s life and should not be subject to debate or coercion. Anyone who is truly committed to women’s human rights must recognize that every woman has the right to determine her sexuality free of discrimination and oppression.~~

~~I urge you to make this a conference for all women, regardless of their sexual orientation, and to recognize in the Platform for Action that lesbian rights are women’s rights and that women’s rights are universal, inalienable, and indivisible human rights.⁶⁶~~

~~—Beverly Palesa Ditsie~~

Speaking to the City Press, Ditsie expresses, “I didn’t know I was the first. I didn’t know I was making history. All I knew was that somebody was going to have to make the speech and I was the perfect person to do it.”⁶⁷ The reason Ditsie felt that they could volunteer was because they had the backing of South Africa’s first black president Nelson Mandela, a president who spoke of the inclusion of sexual orientation in the then-upcoming Bill of Rights. Despite this speech being made when I was only a few months old, it went a considerable way in asserting the human rights of black lesbian women, including mine.

2015: Zizipho Pae and The Church versus The Homosexuals

In my second year of undergraduate studies, the US Supreme Court ruled in favour of legalising same-sex marriage for its citizens. When the news was released, then-vice president of the UCT Student Representative Council Zizipho Pae, who was my fellow Fuller Hall resident, caused quite

⁶⁵ Bev Ditsie, “Some History of Lesbian Feminist Activism: Personal Stories from the World Conference on Women in Beijing: Before and After 1995 (Mexico, Peru, South Africa, USA)”. Global Feminist LBQ Women’s* Conference 2019, Cape Town, July 6, 2019.

⁶⁶ Beverley Palesa Ditsie, “Statement Delivered by Palesa Beverley Ditsie of South Africa, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission,” United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, September 13, 1995, <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/ngo/13123944.txt>.

⁶⁷ Maesela, “I Didn’t Know I Was Making History,” June 21, 2019.

the uproar when she took to Facebook to share her opinions on the matter (see Figure 3). Pae posted, “We are institutionalizing and normalizing sin! Sin. May God have mercy on us...”⁶⁸



Figure 3: Zizipho Pae’s homophobic commentary on the US legalisation of same-sex marriage, no longer on her Facebook page. Screenshot from Carlo Petersen’s article.

Fascinatingly, the South African constitution was the first in the world with a clause explicitly forbidding discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. This language was present in the 1996 Bill of Rights that Ditsie referred to. Pae’s statement, then, was not only challenging the US’s legislative seeing of queer people, but also South Africa’s.

Despite the immediate bewildered response from the queer community at UCT, Pae did not back down. Instead, it seemed that public outrage invigorated her even further. Her response to the SRC’s request for a statement was, “As a Bible believing Christian, I want my first response to be that the core/fundamental message of the Bible is about a God of grace and love, who forgives sin... I do not believe that this, in the context of a God of grace, who forgives sin, can never (sic) constitute as condemnation, hate speech or homophobia.”⁶⁹

I wonder, to the incredibly large population of “Bible believing Christian[s],” what *would* constitute hate speech, when Pae’s defence, fiercely supported by a litany of churches countrywide (including the Pietermaritzburg and Baxter Theatre branches of my then-Cape Town church, His People, which claimed that Pae was being discriminated against by the “LGBT gang”) argues that her statement was an expression of her freedom of speech.⁷⁰ I recall how Pae had been free to launch her SRC campaign under the slogan “Here I Am, Send Me,” which is based on the Christian Bible’s Book of Isaiah. Most importantly, with a shame I did not consciously experience at the

⁶⁸ Carlo Petersen, “I Am Not Homophobic, Says Pae,” *IOL News*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/i-am-not-homophobic-says-pae-1879964>.

⁶⁹ Petersen, “I Am Not Homophobic,” July 3, 2015.

⁷⁰ Daniela Ellerbeck, “Breaking News in the Zizipho Pae Story,” *For SA: For Faith & Freedom*, July 24, 2015, <https://forsa.org.za/breaking-news-in-the-zizipho-pae-story/> and “U.C.T. Reinstates Christian Leader,” His People Church Pietermaritzburg, accessed September 26, 2015, <http://www.hispeoplepmb.co.za/2015/08/uct-reinstates-christian-leader.html>.

time, I recall my enthusiasm to help put up posters for her campaign, not knowing that being ‘sent’ also meant unseeing others (myself) and diminishing their (my) human rights.

2017: “While we are here”

Throughout my undergraduate career, I was part of the UCT Student Christian Fellowship (SCF) society. Every Friday evening between 18:50 and 21:00 (sometimes much later “as the Spirit leads”), we would meet at a lecture theatre that the Fellowship Council—the leadership team of the SCF—had booked for the service under the university’s student societies system. The service would be set much like a typical church service, starting with praise and worship to set the tone for the evening, followed by general announcements about the society’s events and similar, then by a sermon, where one of the Fellowship Council members who was training for a career in ministry (often not enrolled in theology studies but rather in the physical and commerce science studies) would deliver a Scripture-based message. Every year, the newly elected Fellowship Council, who had in 2017 named themselves the ‘Dynamic Influencers’, would pick a theme for the year. In 2017, the theme was ‘stepping into purpose’.

At one particular service that year, which would become momentous for me, one of the Dynamic Influencers delivered the sermon—a tall, visibly muscular, cisgender man (whom I will call the Apostle Saul in this project)^{xv}. He took to the mic and explained that “We must live with purpose.” Agreed. He then saw it necessary to explain how the people in the university lecture theatre should practice a purposeful life by proclaiming, “Homosexuals cannot exist on this campus while we are here,” and took a deliberate pause to glare at the audience. It became clear that his dramatic pause was one that was intended to garner concession when clapping erupted around me, accompanied by many “Mm!”s and “Amen!”s.

I immediately froze in space and despite my insistence (towards both others and myself) on being ‘straight’, I became hyperaware of my visibility among these people who had made a blatant threat (whether physical or spiritual) against people who are homosexual, people like me, an imposter among the Dynamic Influencers. I felt the other queers around me feel and think what I was feeling and thinking—the thought of this strong-looking man ending my (our) existence so that his would be the only one on my (our) campus. I felt us panic. The thought of him supported by an entire auditorium-full of his followers, an audience that would cheer in his favour, an audience where none would intervene in the rescinding of the queers’ (my) existence, was scarier.

2017: “There’s nothing like that in nature”

It also did not go unnoticed to me that the infamous ‘Somizi church storm-out’ of 2017, where a guest pastor at the widely recognised Grace Bible Church had proclaimed homosexuality as unnatural, had happened at my own church, at a place that I considered (and to some extent, paradoxically and by virtue of my mother’s membership certificate, still consider to be) my spiritual home.⁷¹ The statement by Ghanaian Bishop Dag Heward-Mills became publicised when celebrated choreographer, media personality, and South African queer ‘problematic fave’ Somizi Mhlongo, who was in the audience that day, stormed out of the church and immediately (behind the wheel of his car, still parked outside the church) took to Instagram to speak about what he had experienced. SomGaga, as he is affectionately known, narrates how the bishop had declared how “[homosexuality is] sinful and disgusting and how not even animals practice that, blah blah blah.”⁷²

In a snippet of the sermon, posted by News24 to its YouTube channel, Heward-Mills explains,

That’s nature. Dogs, cats, leopards. Which animal has one partner? Just like homosexuality, you don’t have male and male. If you use that reasoning to say homosexuality is not natural. You don’t find two male dogs or two male lions [*cheering from the congregation*] two male [*continued cheering*] um two male impalas, two male cats, even lizards, two male elephants [*ruckus and people randomly standing in agreement*], two male... There’s nothing like that in nature. It’s unnatural. [*increased rowdy cheering*] Ai. Yes [*resounding clapping*]. There’s nothing like that... in nature.^{73.xvi}

It is at this point that I wonder if the invited pastor has perhaps witnessed the entire lifespans of all the male dogs, lions, impalas, lizards, and elephants that have roamed this earth (or Africa, or even Ghana, at least) in order to arrive at this definitive deduction.

Of course, Heward-Mills’ statements were and remain simply nonsensical, especially when there have been extensive research reports detailing same-sex engagements between some 1,500 animal species, particularly between the very lions and elephants he explicitly casts in his fable, not

⁷¹ Vhahangwele NemaKonde, “Somizi Storms Out of Grace Bible Church over Homosexuality Remarks,” *The Citizen*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.citizen.co.za/lifestyle/1404845/somizi-storms-out-of-grace-bible-church-over-homosexuality-remarks/> and Kaveel, Singh, “Grace Bible Church Distances Itself from Bishop’s Homophobic Comments,” *News24*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/grace-bible-church-distances-itself-from-bishops-homophobic-comments-20170123>.

⁷² Somizi (@somizi), “No opinion or advice needed. I’m just venting. @grace_bible_church,” Instagram, January 22, 2017, https://www.instagram.com/p/BPj6_pcuS8/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=94e60999-f3f5-457e-a025-ed706fcc582e.

⁷³ “WATCH: Grace Bible Church Guest Pastor Calls Homosexual Relationships Unnatural.” *News24*, YouTube, January 23, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jHSroC7RuM>.

least the direct comparison of queer human beings to animals.⁷⁴ However, due to the high ranking he holds as bishop, along with the general unquestionability and, sadly, often blind and undeserved reverence for ‘men of God’ that many Christians hold and are taught to hold, as well as the prominence of Grace Bible Church and the respect that its leadership has earned, the unsupported, unscientific monologue that Heward-Mills spewed from the church’s pulpit would have been widely believed and held by many members of the congregation.^{xvii}

In an interview with *Carte Blanche*, Somizi explains, “It’s about time that we cannot be scared to speak out about what hurts us. As a person of influence, you cannot stand there and perpetuate hate, and I’m tired of the church using the Bible to be homophobic.”⁷⁵ Despite having been a member of Grace Bible Church for 32 years, he adds, “People smiled at me. They looked at me thinking I couldn’t take the heat or was embarrassed.”⁷⁶ Being a member of the church while made to feel like an outsider by not only Heward-Mills but also a significant portion of the congregation is a similar kind of disjuncture to the one I felt among the Dynamic Influences at that SCF-booked lecture venue on a Friday evening in 2017.

It is crucial to note, though, that the Apostle Saul and Heward-Mills are not the only ones who are happy to promote homophobia. The Apostle Saul had an audibly agreeing crowd in the same way that Heward-Mills had a laughing, standing, clapping, jeering crowd. Somizi and I, and by extension, the queers at the SCF lecture venue and those at Grace Bible Church (whether in physical attendance at the Pimville branch or watching the live online stream), were altogether unnatural, church members whose existences should be quelled. Our ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’ were not shy to make this fact known to us, and thanks to Somizi’s celebrity, our fellow queers and allies on Twitter were likewise not shy to object.

In an interview with the *Mail & Guardian*, Grace Bible Church’s resident Reverend (now-Bishop) Ezekiel Mathole expresses that he “believes that the discussion around the sermon could have been done differently, and there needs to be further talks going forward within the church and outside it to establish rules of engagement around certain issues.”⁷⁷ However, his stance in an

⁷⁴ Anne-Sophie Brändlin, “10 Animal Species that Show How Being Gay is Natural”, *Deutsche Welle*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/10-animal-species-that-show-how-being-gay-is-natural/g-39934832> and PETA UK’s “Gay Animals Who Prove Same-Sex Love Is Natural,” June 8, 2021, <https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/gay-animals/>.

⁷⁵ Somizi Mhlongo, “Carte Blanche Full Interview with Somizi,” interview, *Carte Blanche*, February 12, 2017, video, <https://m-net.dstv.com/video/carte-blanche-full-interview-with-somizi>.

⁷⁶ Mhlongo, interview.

⁷⁷ Raeesa Pather, “Grace Bible Church: We Don’t Discriminate against Anyone,” *Mail & Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-23-grace-bible-church-we-dont-discriminate-against-anyone/>.

interview with *Morning Live* indicates that he and/or the church believe the Twitter storm that ensued after Somizi's video was a positive thing. Here, he says:

Within the Christian body, there's two different views. There's people who are pro and there's people who are not for *er* same-sex orientation, and those views are there. We are happy that the teaching came out in such a way that now today, we are having a conversation—a conversation to deal with issues around *uh* both heterosexual relationships and both homosexual relationships, in a way that these views have to co-exist in society.⁷⁸

When asked if the church believes homosexuality is a sin, Mathole replies, “I can't say.”

Heward-Mills is a citizen of Ghana, a country that is infamous for its discrimination and extreme ill-treatment towards queer persons, where homosexuality is still criminalised, and where queer people have “on numerous occasions, been attacked both by mobs and members of their own families, subjected to sexual assault, intimidation and extortion”.⁷⁹ In fact, in a recent move against divergent sexuality, Ghanaian lawmakers have drafted the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, which Danny Bediako from the queer activist group Rightify Ghana calls “a homophobe's dream law”.⁸⁰ The bill would enable authorities to prosecute not only people who identity as queer for up to five years, but also their allies, even advocating for conversion therapy.

While I did not assign responsibility to Grace Bible Church or its presiding leader Bishop Mosa Sono for the views that someone else shared at the church's pulpit, the church's own views on homosexuality do not inspire faith in equality and the equal treatment of its members. There is a considerable population of queers at Grace Bible Church, some of whom work there every Sunday; some are notable and occupy varying degrees of celebrity status and visibility in terms of gender performativity, and some are unknown, inconspicuous, or unperceived through the lens of performance—much like how I existed at SCF among the Apostle Saul and the Dynamic Influencers in 2017.

⁷⁸ Reverend Ezekiel Mathole, “What Is the Position of Grace Bible Church on Homosexuality?” Interviewed by Leanne Manas, *SABC News*, YouTube, January 24, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-S1WdtGbHM>.

⁷⁹ “No Choice but to Deny Who I Am’ Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in Ghana,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 8, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/01/08/no-choice-deny-who-i-am/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-ghana>.

⁸⁰ Lynsey Chutel, “Ghana Doubles Down on Homophobic Laws,” *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/04/ghana-homophobic-law-lgbtq-family-values-bill/>.

Like me, my mother was not one for large crowds, so my family and I would attend the early morning service at Grace Bible Church at 07:00 every Sunday. So because Heward-Mills was invited to the 9:00 service, I missed his free-flowing rant and did not experience the resultant affect on my queer self and body. The next week at church, 29 January 2017, we attended the 7:00 service again, where Bishop Mosa Sona read the church's 'statement of faith' in response to the social media storm that the 22 January service had created. Bishop Sono read:

With regards to sexual behaviour, we believe in heterosexual relationships between a natural man and a natural woman within the confines of lawful matrimony. Adherence to this stated principle of sexual behaviour is an inherent requirement of membership of Grace Bible Church.⁸¹

He continued to explicate that the church believes in opposite-sex marriage only, and as such, will only marry persons who are heterosexual. While I expected this response, it was still disappointing to hear, especially to me, a black lesbian woman identifying at the time as a (suspiciously overinvested) queer ally. It was as Bishop Sono read this statement that I realised that any intention I had to get a membership certificate at my church would mean that I would be inherently required to adhere to a disavowal and discrediting of same-sex partnership, let alone marriage. And if any queer person takes offence to this position, Reverend Mathole already has an answer: "The same way that gay people don't like certain things that Christians do, we respect their views and we respect any other person's views".⁸²

Hearing and reading this statement together with Reverend Mathole's insistence that he does not believe the statement of faith to be homophobic because gay rights are protected in the Constitution highlights the denial of psychosocial and psychophysiological violence that the church (including its members) enact on queer individuals, particularly those in the church.⁸³ It is this kind of violence that leads to lasting trauma and that I explore in this project.

In terms of the Sojan trialectic of historicity, spatiality, and sociality, the common thread connecting these three fateful moments is familiarity and safety. In all three instances, the fear- and hatemongers were people who masqueraded as safe and operated from sites of perceived safety. As the vice president of the UCT Student Representative Council, Pae held the second-highest position of power by a student at the university, which meant that students should have

⁸¹ "Our Statement of Faith," Grace Bible Church, accessed September 26, 2021, <https://gracebiblechurch.org.za/about-us/statement-of-faith/>.

⁸² Raeesa Pather, "Grace Bible Church".

⁸³ Ibid.

been able to view her as a defender for the issues affecting them, including social matters, and free to approach her with these issues. Instead, what we saw happening was her launching an attack (however indirect) against the humanness and rights of a substantial constituent of the student body. A similar situation transpired with the Apostle Saul. As an executive member of the SCF, all other members should have been able to feel safe with him. In contrast, his attack against queer students was much more explicit in its (subliminal) intent for physical harm than Pae's. Heward-Mills, on the other hand, promulgated pseudo-scientific hatred and divisiveness from a church: a space that has historically and universally branded itself as welcoming, a shelter and, as such, a site of safety.

The unseeing of black lesbian women as facilitated by the church: *No Easter Sunday for Queers*

In acclaimed queer poet Koleka Putuma's play *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, published in 2020, the church facilitates the manifold violences that lesbian women experience. These violences are directly responsive to the simple presence of lesbian identity, as well as same-sex love and the hope of marriage for Napo and Mimi.

In the list of characters, we (the readers) observe Father/Pastor Nkosi, Daughter/Napo, Mimi, and the choir.⁸⁴ However, there is another character in the play: a 17-year-old lesbian girl named Ruth, whom the church (as metonym) killed during an exorcism/water baptism. This paratextual absence is significant because even though she does not speak in the play, she is a present character.^{xviii} In fact, I argue that the entire story rests on Ruth's death and subsequent haunting of the church. As Avery F. Gordon explains, haunting is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes directly, sometimes not".⁸⁵ Ruth is the spiritual embodiment of reflecting on what is absent and simultaneously present, and how it exists as such. Moreover, it is in Ruth that the concept of unseeing black lesbian womanhood as well as lesbian sexuality itself takes shape, since she is equated to a sacrifice that will 'cleanse' the church. How she haunts the characters is by leaving her "assigned place" as dead, forgotten, and purposefully not spoken about to "show up without any sign of leaving."⁸⁶

The very concept of Easter Sunday is about an innocent person being murdered for and because of other people's failures and moral misgivings. In the Christian faith, it is Jesus who is

⁸⁴ Putuma, *No Easter Sunday*, 13.

⁸⁵ Gordon, Hite, and Jara, "Haunting and Thinking from the Utopian Margins," 339.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

nailed to the cross at Calvary and murdered by his community. The play opens with this story. When we meet Pastor Nkosi, it is Easter Sunday, and he is delivering a sermon at the Holy Fire Baptist Church on the crucifixion of Jesus. He says, “Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, but they kept calling out, saying, ‘Crucify, crucify Him!’ And he said to them a third time, ‘Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death.’”⁸⁷ This speech is poignant because it harkens to Ruth, a girl whom Pastor Nkosi killed because of her attraction to women. Most importantly, when Pontias Pilate, the Roman governor who presided over Jesus’ trial, questions the reason for Jesus’ killing, it is the crowd that demands that he carry out the crucifixion, and it is both the large group of witnesses as well as the governor who enact the murder. In the play, it is innocent Ruth who is crucified, “dragged by her hair to the pulpit, her body mopping the alter with her blood”.⁸⁸

Playing with form, Putuma employs what I call trivocal confusion: altogether inadvertent, convenient, and purposeful. The first belongs to Pastor Nkosi, who “confuses the stories”. As his daughter Napo narrates, “He has memorised the one story very well and he is not able to forget the other one”.⁸⁹ The story he has memorised is the Biblical story of Jesus’ crucifixion. The “other” story is the story of Ruth’s crucifixion, functioning itself as a memory in the play. Throughout the play, Pastor Nkosi mistakenly conflates Jesus/He/Him/His with she/her/hers, and it is his daughter, a queer woman, who corrects him.⁹⁰ It is in this way that Ruth “show[s] up without leaving,” until her murder is openly spoken about by all those who witnessed and/or are responsible for it.

This inadvertent confusion by Pastor Nkosi is symbolic of him knowing that he is to blame for Ruth’s death but also not being willing to admit it, because “it was God’s will” to perform what Mimi, a church member and woman in a relationship with Napo, calls “a fucked-up satanic baptism ritual”.⁹¹ Pastor Nkosi claims that “Ruth didn’t survive that baptism because she was God’s sacrifice, a sacrifice that would cleanse this church”.⁹² It is clear that the ‘evil’ that needs to be expelled from the church is lesbian sexuality when Pastor Nkosi tells Napo, “I don’t want to see you with her, around her, near her, talking to her; I don’t want to hear that you are accidentally seeing her, you hear me!” referring to Mimi, who was also Ruth’s girlfriend, and whose throat he dislocated during the satanic baptism ritual organised for her and Ruth.⁹³ Even though the church

⁸⁷ Putuma, *No Easter Sunday*, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, 33.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19, 20, 33.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 23, 32.

considers Mimi's baptism—the 'removal' and unseeing of her lesbian sexuality—to have been successful, she still presents a threat to Pastor Nkosi when he notices her and his daughter Napo's close relationship.

Convenience is the second function of confusion in this play, and it is expressed through the choir members. When Mimi finally confronts Pastor Nkosi about Ruth's murder, he relieves himself of exclusive blame and shares it instead by casting the people who served as witness to the ritual: "And you stood there and watched — why didn't you do something? If you believed that it was not God's will? All of you! (*To the Choir.*) Why didn't you do something!? Why didn't you say something!?"⁹⁴ The playwright highlights the church members' awareness of the possibility of their function as accomplices in Ruth's murder by prefacing their responses with "*The Choir (as if they have been caught in a lie, or as if they are on trial, or both)*".

Their various responses (19 in total) range from "I was in the spirit"—which is understood in Pentecostal churches such as the one set in the play (and mine) as a trance-like state (echoed in another member's response: "I was high") wherein you are not cognitively aware of your actions and are therefore relieved of moral accountability—to complete epistemological denial in "What baptism?" and "Who is Ruth?".⁹⁵ It is significant then that Pastor Nkosi did not perform that murder and double-assault on his own. Like the "Mm!"s and "Amen!"s from the UCT students at SCF garnered by the Apostle Saul's threat and the raucous clapping, cheering, standing Grace Bible Church congregation supporting Dag Heward-Mills' service in 2017, the Holy Fire Baptist Church's congregation/choir is inextricably complicit in the violences experienced by queer people, and black lesbian women in particular.

The writer's purposeful conflation of events, spaces, and time, the third element of the trivocal confusion, allows us to think about how Ruth haunts Pastor Nkosi who led her death-by-exorcism, the church members, and the queer couple in the play. This employment of confusion also shows how what I call 'spatial blurring' underpins the transformation (or coeval existence) of sites typically experienced as safe into those that are not. When Mimi challenges why Napo is comfortable having sex with her in the church's bathroom but not comfortable enough to kiss her at a club, Mimi cites safety, saying that "[t]here is no danger there".⁹⁶ Mimi responds, "For you, because they don't see what you are," referring to how Pastor Nkosi and the church members do not know that Napo is attracted to women, the outcast Mimi in particular. However,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 31–33.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 28.

once Pastor Nkosi discovers that his daughter is in love with the lesbian Mimi, once he sees her black queer sexuality, like he did with Ruth, he drowns her at the pulpit as well and reconfigures Napo's social spatiality of the church she has fondly grown up in.⁹⁷

No Easter Sunday for Queers (play): The church versus Zero21^{six}

At first, it seemed strange to me that Napo finds safety at church, where her father and the congregants murdered Ruth, but not at a club, until I remember how Kwa-Thema's Eudy Simelane, Girlie Nkosi, and Duduzile Zozo were all murdered after leaving clubs. So it is possible that the reason Napo does not want to kiss in the club is because she knows how dangerous being publicly 'seen' by violent men can be, how it can lead to being targeted and absented. Putuma highlights this very fact even in the story's poem form, where "LESBIAN STABBED AFTER LEAVING TAVERN, KHAYELITSHA, C.T." makes the news in the Southern Suburbs.⁹⁸

It is no wonder then that Femmes & Them, the Cape Town party-hosting community "for queers, by queers" and founded by Lunghile Ashley Chauke and Carly Hendricks posted the following statement to their Instagram account ahead of their upcoming first party of the year (on 25 February 2022): "Femmes and Them recognises the danger that comes with identifying and presenting as Queer and Trans. We are especially aware that the risks facing QTBPPOC partygoers are significantly higher and as such we vow to prioritise the comfort, safety and joy of Queer black people."⁹⁹

~~I understand Napo's fear when I recall how scary it was for me to Uber on my own to Zero21, a recognisably queer club, after midnight for the Pride afterparty a few years ago. I anticipated in fear the Uber driver asking me if I am lesbian too and my lie was ready: "No, I'm not lesbian. I'm just meeting my friends." Even going as far as, "My boyfriend's going to pick me up later" if I needed to. The thought of this man having the same exterminatory ideals as the Apostle Saul at my daring to be lesbian, with only the two of us in the car after midnight, was too great for me to retain my Pride, which, tragically, would not save me from the potential of being absented. As McKittrick articulates, "Black women's histories, lives, and spaces must be understood as enmeshing with traditional geographic arrangements in order to identify a different~~

⁹⁷ Ibid., 39–40.

⁹⁸ Putuma, "No Easter Sunday for Queers," 2017, 28.

⁹⁹ Femmes & Them (@femmesandthems_), "***ATTENTION**," February 3, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZhJfnKynh/>.

way of knowing and writing the social world and to expand how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination.”¹⁰⁰

The experience of reading Putuma’s play is disorienting. Conversations between Napo and Mimi happen alongside Pastor Nkosi’s Easter Sunday service, with Napo regularly interjecting his speech. The landscape shifts without warning from the imagined to the real when Napo and Mimi emerge from their imagined wedding ceremony by Pastor Nkosi’s physical and audible knocking on the pulpit, which draws them back to reality.¹⁰¹ This act, drawing Napo and Mimi from the hope of their love being seen, witnessed, and celebrated by others highlights the church’s many ways of unseeing and absenting the presence of black lesbian womanhood. However, it is the church’s haunting by Ruth that kicks open the space for Napo and Mimi to imagine a reality where they are fully seen. It is in this way that haunting functions to allow seeing what was repressed.

¹⁰⁰ McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xiv.

¹⁰¹ Putuma, *No Easter Sunday*, 22–23.

Kwa-Thema: Haunted grounds

Not here

~~Not a single sentence of these seven pages was written without weeping.~~

Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* is the text that helped steer me back towards a significant place: here.

The acclaimed novel about two black women in love oscillating between the Caribbean and Canada, danger and safety, and the traumas of the past and the precarious hopes of the present allowed me to start pondering on what it means to exist here. Or rather, what it meant to exist there. The irony of my travelling with Brand to the Eastern Caribbean in order to arrive at my childhood home in Kwa-Thema is part of the significance that trauma holds in the discomfort of existing in a defined space.

Detailing how she tries to escape Isaiah, the physically and sexually abusive owner of the sugar cane plantation where she works, Elizete explains that “That was long time now. No need to remember. I don’t even remember when I stop trying to run away, stop trying to make that junction.”¹⁰² In my reading of Brand’s work in 2019 at the beginning of my project, I slowly realised that Elizete’s musing was how I felt about the mid-2000s Kwa-Thema. A long time ago that I felt I did not need to remember, and a place that I had run away from.

As a black girl entering her teens, Kwa-Thema in the early 2000s was a graveyard to me. Not my grandmother’s house, where I was loved and held dearly, where I was allowed to read indoors all day, wear my teen aunt’s baggy jackets, and crop up the one leg of my cargo pants, but the outside. Over there. The outside was a massacre that I had to make myself invisible in order to survive. From the age of 13, I knew that to be what they called a ‘lesbian’ and ‘istabane’ was to be murdered. Not killed—not a happenstance or mistake or ‘freak accident’—but murdered, with intention and with motive.

As Elizete is “plotting [her] way through the mangle,” one of the older women working at the plantation asks her, “Where you running running so all the time?” Away from the massacre is what I had subconsciously decided before I knew the definition of the omen, “lesbian”. Elizete explains, “The spite of the thing hit me and it take me by surprise, and I suppose I didn’t have nowhere in mind except not here.”¹⁰³ The day I understood that the Banyana Banyana soccer star,

¹⁰² Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* (Canada: Vintage Canada, 1997): 8.

¹⁰³ Brand, *In Another Place*, 9.

who had come from my own hometown of White City, Kwa-Thema, was no longer cause for cheer but for hanging one's head in shame was the day I started running. The day I understood that Eudy Simelane had been murdered for being lesbian was the day I realised that anywhere other than here—being a “lesbian”, being “istabane”, being a lesbian in Kwa-Thema—was a good place.

In 2008, on the night of 27 April, a day that marks South Africa's Freedom Day, Eudy Simelane was denied not only her freedom but also her citizenship and her life. The 31-year-old soccer player and coach was training to become the first female referee at the Men's World Cup in 2010, famously held in Africa (South Africa) for the first time.¹⁰⁴ She was one of the first openly identifying lesbian women in Kwa-Thema and an outspoken activist for the rights of lesbian women. On her way home from a local bar, she was attacked by four men who stabbed her a horrifying 25 times and sexually assaulted her.

Her body was found in a ditch in White City only a short walking distance from my home, behind the open field where my older cousin would excitedly gather us in secret to watch drifters ‘spin’ their cars. Eudy Simelane murdered for being lesbian became the topic of much discussion in my township, which then, of course, led to a discussion on lesbians and what kind of women they were.

Professor Zethu Matebeni explains how she turned to the dictionary to see herself “printed in black on white” as a child who heard others tell her who she is before she had associated the word to the identity.¹⁰⁵ Like Matebeni, I too befriended the dictionary upon being confronted with my possible identity with Eudy Simelane. However, instead of it “reveal[ing] [my] existence, each letter spelling out [my] new name” as it did for Matebeni, I shuddered at that word becoming my new name.¹⁰⁶ I knew that I had no particular interests towards boys (in fact, their flirting with me at school annoyed me so much that I became infamous for getting my stern-eyed mother involved whenever such an inconvenience happened), but I was not about to take on a name that already bore so much shame, brutality, and fatality for the older iterations of myself I saw living in Kwa-Thema.

What created this tripartite connotation to the word for me was not just the murder of Eudy Simelane; it was the specific sociality of the event. I listened to the adults around me,

¹⁰⁴ Charlayne Hunter-Gault, “Violated Hopes: A Nation Confronts a Tide of Sexual Violence,” *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/28/violated-hopes>.

¹⁰⁵ Zethu Matebeni, “Black Lesbian Feminist Thoughts of a Born Queer,” in *Surfacing: On Being Black and Feminist in South Africa*, ed. Desiree Lewis and Gabeba Baderoon, 130.

¹⁰⁶ Matebeni, “Black Lesbian Feminist Thoughts,” 130.

neighbours making house calls, and the choir members who were friends with another one of my aunts remarking on how brutally Eudy had been killed.

A few years earlier, Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn asserted that “[n]ot only is the society being transformed, much of the language we use to describe it has also been made contentious.”¹⁰⁷ This statement was true in 2005 when van Zyl and Steyn were pondering over the previous 10 years, and it was true in 2008 when “lesbian soccer star murdered” splattered the front pages, and it is true in 2022, where we have a much better linguistic command over self-identification regarding sexual identity and orientation yet still have many black lesbian women carrying inherited fear when we walk the streets of our townships.

At 13, I deduced how Eudy Simelane being murdered for identifying with the ‘l’ in the queer acronym was secondary to the manner in which the act had been conducted. “Why bambulale kabuhlungu kangaka?” (Why did they kill her in such a painful manner?) is what I heard from the adults around me, not “Bambulale for ini?” (Why did they kill her?). As an adult, it is interesting to me that the women I heard so expressly distanced themselves from the women who had been murdered. There was a clear distinction that was made, and categories of black womanhood were formed, with a brutal ending ascribed to those who identified as lesbian. However, the kind of violence they were commenting on could have easily been (and was) enacted on them too—by simple virtue of them sharing with the murdered the identity of ‘black woman’. Consequently, “Why bambulale kabuhlungu kangaka?” could have been allotted to them as well. And “Why basibulala kabuhlungu kangaka?” (Why are they killing us in such a painful manner?) could have been the collective clarion call towards justice—and this is the point of tragedy.

What I understood at 13 from the multiple dialogues I heard in my township was that Eudy’s death was eventual, which then read to me as her identity equating with the eventuality of her murder. This firm cause-and-effect reiterated the fact that the dictionary had to be wrong about me; better yet, the word in the dictionary could not be associated with me in any way, shape, or form. So I ran from it, towards another identity, another place, where I would be safe.

Found

Despite hers being among the first two cases of its kind to go to trial, it did not help that Eudy Simelane’s case was not the only one I had heard of in my East Rand home of Kwa-Thema. There were many before her—which started the whispers, gathered the foreboding clouds on my young

¹⁰⁷ Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn, “Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994–2004 —Volume One”, (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2005), 9.

mind—and certainly many after her. In 2011, Vasu Reddy, then-researcher at the Human Science Research Council, revealed that around 30 attacks had been reported since 2003 (in the span of eight years) and that the number was most probably higher considering cases that do not get reported.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Helen Wells and Louise Polders’ survey at the time found that fewer than half of the lesbian rape attacks were reported to the police.¹⁰⁹

Only a year after Eudy Simelane’s murder, there was another black lesbian murder that made the news. 22 June 2009. Kwa-Thema, East Rand.

Girlie Nkosi was a 37-year-old soccer player, who had played with Eudy Simelane on one of the local soccer clubs, an activist, and a lover of Kwaito music. Affectionately known as S’Gelane, she was part of the Kwa-Thema 070707 campaign, which sought to highlight the murders of lesbian women Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa on 7 July 2007 in Meadowlands, Soweto.¹¹⁰

- She was described in her memorial programme as “arguably the most visible lesbian of Kwa-Thema.”¹¹¹
- She was attacked and stabbed on 19 June 2009, the day I turned 14, after leaving a Kwa-Thema club and died of her injuries a few days later. Her murderers were never found. In fact, the police claimed that they had no reason to look into her death.¹¹²
- “Why bambulale kabuhlungu kangaka?”

Less than two years later, **Nokuthula Radebe’s** body was found on 28 March 2011 in Thokoza, a neighbouring township in the East Rand.

- She was 20 years old and had just dropped her girlfriend home safely.
- Her body was found by two children who were playing in an abandoned building.¹¹³
- Her pants had been pulled down and her face had been covered with a plastic bag. She was strangled with her shoelaces.
- “Why bambulale kabuhlungu kangaka?”

¹⁰⁸ Bryston, “Only a Matter of Time”

¹⁰⁹ Helen Wells and Louise Polders, “Anti-Gay Hate Crimes in South Africa: Prevalence, Reporting Practices, and Experiences of the Police,” *AGENDA: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 2,3, no. 67 (2006): 25.

¹¹⁰ Emily Craven, “070707: 10 Years On and the Struggle Against Homophobic Hate Crimes Continues,” *Mail & Guardian*, July 8, 2017, <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-07-08-070707-10-years-on-and-the-struggle-against-homophobic-hate-crimes-continues/>

¹¹¹ Robyn Dixon, “In South Africa’s Black Townships, Being Gay Can Be Fatal,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-may-27-la-fg-south-africa-gay-killings-20110528-story.html>

¹¹² Charlayne Hunter-Gault, “Violated Hopes: A Nation Confronts a Tide of Sexual Violence,” *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/05/28/violated-hopes>.

¹¹³ “Township Life of LGBTIs: Dying for Justice in Thokoza,” *Mail & Guardian*, May 22, 2014. <https://mg.co.za/article/2014-05-22-township-life-of-lgbtis-dying-for-justice-in-thokoza/>

I think often about the two children who found her body. I wonder had one of them been queer, what kind of effect this would have had on their young minds—not only being traumatised upon hearing of this, as I was, but also upon seeing first-hand the brutal handling and snuffing out of one’s existence.

Only four weeks later, still in the East Rand, I hear of the murder of **Noxolo Nogwaza**, a 24-year-old soccer player and mother of two (a then-seven-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl) and a lesbian activist who served as a member of the Ekurhuleni Pride Organising Committee.¹¹⁴

- A Kwa-Thema resident, she had gone to a bar in Tsakane, a neighbouring township and a place I frequented to visit my great-aunt, on the night of 23 April 2011.
- Her body was found in Tsakane in an alley not far from the bar on the morning of 24 April 2011.¹¹⁵
- She had been repeatedly stabbed with broken glass, her teeth had been knocked out and scattered about from being beaten severely with blocks of concrete, her head had been split open, and her eyes had been pulled out of their sockets.¹¹⁶ There were several used condoms around her, and a beer bottle was inserted inside her vagina.
- Her uncle explains that he picked up several pieces of her face splattered around the gruesome scene.¹¹⁷
- She was attacked within minutes of dropping off her girlfriend.¹¹⁸
- “Why bambulale kabuhlungu kangaka?” In fact, police Captain Petros Mabuza said: “Our people don’t have humanity anymore, how can someone kill another human being like that? You wouldn’t even kill an animal in that way. Perpetrators must be brought to book, no one should take someone’s life just because they don’t like the way that person lives.”¹¹⁹

Despite this statement by the Tsakane police captain, Noxolo Nogwaza’s murderers were never found. After her body had been found, Human Rights Watch researcher Dipika Nath exclaimed, “If the police and other state officials do not act swiftly, it will only be a matter of time

¹¹⁴ Lerato Dumse, “Black Easters for Black Lesbian Community,” *Free Gender*, May 3, 2011, <https://freegender.wordpress.com/2011/05/03/black-easters-for-lesbian-community/>.

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Lesbian Murder Hate Crime: Human Rights Watch,” *Sunday Times Live*, May 3, 2011, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2011-05-03-lesbian-murder-hate-crime-human-rights-watch/>.

¹¹⁶ Donna Bryston, “Only a Matter of Time Before Next ‘Corrective Rape’,” *Mail & Guardian*, May 11, 2011, <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-11-only-a-matter-of-time-before-next-corrective-rape/>.

¹¹⁷ Dumse, “Back Easter”.

¹¹⁸ Haute Haiku, “South Africa: Corrective Rape Claims another Victim,” *Global Voices*, May 10, 2011, <https://globalvoices.org/2011/05/10/south-africa-corrective-rape-claims-another-victim/>.

¹¹⁹ Dumse, “Black Easters”.

before they have to account for their failure to the family and friends of the next lesbian who is beaten and killed in KwaThema”.¹²⁰

Indeed, only two years later, again in the East Rand but this time in Thokoza, the body of **Duduzile Zozo** is found on 20 June 2013.

- She was 26 years old, and she and her best friend Bianca Laban, a transgender woman, had gone out to Lizzy’s Inn, a tavern considered a haven for queer people, the previous night. Bianca received a phone call around 4 am telling her to go to Dudu’s neighbour Lucky’s front yard where she would find her body.¹²¹
- Duduzile Zozo had been strangled and raped. A toilet brush had been shoved inside her vagina.
- Her mother explains that she had feared for her daughter’s safety after hearing about the increased number of attacks on lesbian women in Thokoza and the greater East Rand area, but “everyone loved her”, so she believed her child would be safe.¹²²

There is a long history of what is incorrectly termed the ‘corrective rape’ of black lesbian women in this country. Nechama Brodie writes about the “jackrolling” years of the 1980s and 1990s, where gang rapists would select and abduct a known woman whom they believed presented herself as if she was ‘better than them’ and ‘out of reach’ in order to teach her ‘how to be a proper woman’. Brodie explains that this is the background context of early 2000s projects that campaigned for “the recognition of these acts of violence as hate crimes”; something that, in 2021, Brodie believes “has still not been achieved.”¹²³

What made these stories of Eudy Simelane, Girlie Nkosi, Nokuthula Radebe, Noxolo Nogwaza, and Duduzile Zozo even more terrifying to me as a young teenager was the fact that women who were older than me and living the thing that the dictionary had described me as were not only being raped as a psychotic means to ‘teach them how to be proper women’, as if that was not already inhumane, but they were being murdered as well—and tragically so. These stories continually gave me cause to run away from the massacres, away from the graveyard.

Elizete explains how she

¹²⁰ Bryston, “Only a Matter of Time”

¹²¹ “Township Life of LGBTIs”, *Mail & Guardian*.

¹²² Victoria, A. Brownworth, “Op-ed: The Other Ex-Gay ‘Therapy,’” *Advocate*, July 10, 2013.

<https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2013/07/10/op-ed-other-ex-gay-therapy>.

¹²³ Nechama Brodie, *Femicide in South Africa*, Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2020.

dream[s] of running though, to Aruba or Maracaibo... I imagine it as a place with thick and dense vine and alive like veins under my feet. I dream the vine, green and plump, blood running through it and me too running running, spilling blood. Vine like rope under my feet, vine strapping my legs and opening when I walk. Is like nowhere else. I destroying anything in my way. I want it to be peaceful there. The air behind me close thick as mist whenever I move and Maracaibo open rough and green and dense again... I dream it a place where a woman can live after she take the neck of a man. Fearless.¹²⁴

However, it was the fear that motivated my running, away from the blood I had imagined pouring out of Eudy, Girlie, Nokuthula, Noxolo, Duduzile, and many others, towards a green peaceful place, a place where they could have lived after leaving bars at night or dropping off their girlfriends home safely.

Running like that can be numbing though. It can ensnare and heighten the senses but ultimately dull the mind from the exhaustion of it all. Elizete continues, “by the time I recognize myself I was a big woman... How I reach here is one skill I learn hard. The skill of forgetfulness.”¹²⁵ And so, as a teenager, I subconsciously decided to forget as well. I forgot what I was running away from until I encountered Eudy Simelane again, but this time, in Cape Town, at the Century City Conference Centre, on 5 July 2019. But before Cape Town, I have to journey back to a place we once both called home.

¹²⁴ Brand, *In Another Place*, 12.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

A complicated citizenship

When I started my undergraduate career, Nick Shepherd was one of my first-year first-semester Anthropology lecturers at UCT, and he called our constitution ‘the Rolls-Royce of constitutions’, remarking on how radically progressive it is on paper in terms of protecting all human life across the racial, economic, and sexual board. Another memorable lecturer in the same course, titled “Words, Deeds, Bones, and Things”, was Dr. Susan Levine, a white US American lesbian woman who had expressed her sexual orientation to us in the first lecture. She explained that she could not reasonably teach anthropology to us, bright-eyed students fresh out of high school, without casting her sexuality, since doing so would be against the very tenets of hybrid social life that we would explore in the discipline and course. My sheltered 18-year-old self was shocked but intrigued, and Levine’s position is a choice I still highly respect and admire to this day. She then explained that since same-sex marriage was illegal in the US, her home, she and her partner had decided to have a destination wedding in South Africa with some close friends, where the constitution, ‘the Rolls-Royce of constitutions’, explicitly protected the rights of queer persons, including that to marry. The ease of this vacation wedding has plenty to do with race and class and the coloniality of being, which, unfortunately, Levine did not delve into.

Anibal Quijano argues, “The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality” and each one of its institutions depend on each other for their existence and the existence of the entire structure.¹²⁶ Levine participates in coloniality in two ways. Firstly, in her hold of the racial axis. Secondly, in her negation-by-omission of the institutions of power afforded to her in how she benefits from a citizenship that disregards its own when they are simultaneously black and women and lesbian, what Mark Gevisser would call “Mandela’s stepchildren”.¹²⁷ Sylvia Wynter builds on Quijano’s discussion of the coloniality of power by describing it as the “structures of power that dictate every human’s Being/Truth/Freedom that is directly resultant of the coloniality and colonizing mechanisms of the non-West world.”¹²⁸ The inherent and complicit

¹²⁶ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533, Duke University Press.

¹²⁷ Mark Gevisser, “Mandela’s Stepchildren: Homosexual Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” in *Different Rainbows*, ed. Peter Drucker (London: Gay Men’s Press, 2000).

¹²⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 268.

hold of the racial axis and coloniality of power in Levine’s story—white, US American, protected by a foreign constitution, contrasted against black, South African, dismissed by natural citizenship—is a significant part of black South African lesbian women’s historicity, sociality, and spatiality, as discussed in the previous chapter, ‘On historicity’.

When Zoliswa Nkonyana was murdered in 2006, it took two weeks before the story made it onto a newspaper. The Triangle Project, a South African non-profit human rights organisation that offers professional services in the aid of realising the constitutional rights of queer persons, approached journalist Marianne Thamm, who covered the story for the *Mail & Guardian*.¹²⁹ When Thamm asked the investigating officer Constable Geldenhuys if he had taken a statement from the sole witness, his answer was, “I was getting around to [it]”.¹³⁰ When she asked news editors why the story took so long to make it to the media, one of them responded, “Nobody told us.” Thamm notes, “I wondered how editors might have responded to the story had it been a white lesbian clubbed to death with golf clubs on the promenade in Sea Point?”¹³¹ Zoliswa Nkonyana was in Khayelitsha. The Words, Deeds, Bones, and Things class took place at UCT, similar to Sea Point in its proximity to whiteness. Both locales bear a whiteness that protects Levine and her same-sex marriage that it could never afford to a 19-year-old girl who went partying with her friends.

Like Katherine McKittrick, “I am emphasizing here that racism and sexism are not simply bodily or identity based; racism and sexism are also spatial acts and illustrate black women’s geographic experiences and knowledges as they are made possible through domination.”¹³² In 2010, following the increased rate of murders against black lesbian women, Zanele Muholi’s *Difficult Love* explains the social context of how a space like Kwa-Thema could become the site of a massacre. With the film, and their work in general, Muholi explains, “I want people to know more about black lesbians living in South Africa. We come from families, we have friends, we work, we think, we care, we’re conscious”¹³³. Muholi’s now-highly acclaimed portraiture project *Faces and Phases* began in 2006 as a “Black South African queer archive” and a “lifelong project, a living archive”.¹³⁴ Sarah Allen explains that Muholi’s archive “seeks to evidence lives and histories which testify to inequality and injustices felt by individuals who cannot access the rights enshrined

¹²⁹ “About,” Who We Are, Triangle Project, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://triangle.org.za/about/>.

¹³⁰ Thamm, “Not Just Another Murder.”

¹³¹ Mandy De Waal, “We’ll Make You a ‘Real’ Woman—Even If It Kills You,” *Daily Maverick*, December 9, 2011, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2011-12-09-well-make-you-a-real-woman-even-if-it-kills-you/>.

¹³² McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xviii.

¹³³ Zanele Muholi and Peter Goldsmid, *Difficult Love*, 2010, South Africa, 01:27. <https://www.imdb.com/video/vi3128728089>.

¹³⁴ Sarah Allen, “Thinking Activism: Zanele Muholi and Queer Photography Histories,” in *Zanele Muholi*, ed. Sarah Allen and Yasufumi Nakamori (London: Tate Publishing, 2020), 82.

in the South African progressive constitution”— those queer lives whose experiences and bodies are rendered incompatible with the doctrine of the constitution.¹³⁵

Within the first three minutes of *Difficult Love*, Muholi stands among a group of mostly older women and shows them some of the photos they have taken. “Ngeke ingane yam iyenze kanje,” we hear from one of the isiZulu-speaking women.¹³⁶ I want to pause here to point out a significant error of translation. The subtitles read, “I would never allow my child to do that.” However, what the woman actually says translates in English to “My child would never do that”. This distinction is crucial to understanding the sociality that black lesbian womanhood hinges on in South Africa, among other black South Africans who do not identify as lesbian. The woman’s statement firmly supposes that this (a black woman being photographed intimately with another woman) is not something that women do. Not only that she, a parent (and by extension, other parents) would not allow it, but also that it is simply not something that women, their children, are preoccupied with. What is interesting here is that this woman’s conviction is operating on an assumption—how does she know what her child would or would not do? In truth, it is almost impossible for her to definitively know that her child is not queer. So what is the basis of her assumption? Is it her child’s observable heterosexual relations that she assumes are exclusive, or the woman’s own cisheteronormative teaching practices that assure her of her child’s sexuality, or perhaps cultural beliefs that she assumes her child holds wholeheartedly?

It is a statement such as this (“Ngeke ingane yam iyenze kanje”) that perpetuates the idea in black South African townships like Kwa-Thema that to be lesbian is to be something that does not exist, something that ‘normal women’, other women’s children, would not seriously think or do or even consider. It is in instances such as this where the young queer people who frequented MaThoko’s home were privileged, since as Nkoli attested to a year before he died in 1997, MaThoko would not only counsel a lot of the young people, but she would also speak with other women whose children identified as gay and lesbian, to help them better understand their children’s sexual orientation.¹³⁷

The woman in the documentary continues, “You see, something like this gives a bad picture, to us as virginity testers and black people. Our image has been dented by this thing.” Again, the last sentence is an error of translation. What the woman says in isiZulu is “Isthunzi sethu siyaphela yilento”, which neither singularly denotes ‘image’ nor the idea of something being

¹³⁵ Allen, “Thinking Activism,” 82.

¹³⁶ *Difficult Love*, 03:17.

¹³⁷ Marnell, “Radical Objects”.

dented or bent out of shape. The translated expression is more closely aligned to “Our dignity is being depleted by this thing.” “Our” as in virginity testers, and, by extension, young women who are virgins and undergo the testing practice, as well as black people. Here, it is important to ask, what is “this thing” understood as, and what (blatantly negative) connotations has the woman, like many others, associated with lesbian sexuality? The communities that the woman invokes are far-reaching and bear serious consequence for the sociality of black lesbian women in this country. The woman invokes blackness and African tradition. The widely accepted, in 2010 and in 2022, notion of homosexuality as un-African is borne from the sentiment that this woman, an ordinary woman in an ordinary South African township, expresses so clearly and emotionally. Interestingly, among the group are three older women dressed in all-white attire, a dress code that is usually synonymous with and reminiscent of members of the Apostolic Christian denominational faith and church.¹³⁸

Religion has long been used as a means to advance homophobia and homophobic sentiment, with a small number of selected verses of the Christian Bible manipulated (including through translation) and used to argue for homosexuality as sinful. However, Bisi Alimi asserts that homosexuality being thought of as a Western construct, not African, is based upon the very Western import of Christianity. Alimi argues for a retelling of actual African history, where terms denoting homosexuality pre-date colonialism and are found in several African countries and languages including ‘adofuro’ in Yoruba (Nigeria), ‘yan daudu’ in Hausa (Nigeria), as well as Khoisan (South Africa) artwork portraying sexual activity among men. In addition, King Mwangi II of the Buganda Kingdom, which is now part of modern-day Uganda, was a man who openly loved men and who “faced no hate from his subjects until white men brought the Christian church and its condemnation”.¹³⁹ Furthermore, while noting that precolonial vocabulary did not definitively align with homosexuality as understood by the West, Sylvia Tamale explains how “the Shangaan of southern Africa referred to same-sex relations as “inkotshane” (male-wife); Basotho women in present-day Lesotho engage in socially sanctioned erotic relationships called “motsaalle” (special friend) and in the Wolof language, spoken in Senegal, homosexual men are known as “gordigen” (men-women).”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ “The Politics of Church Uniforms,” Sunday Mail, August 23, 2015, <https://www.sundaymail.co.zw/the-politics-of-church-uniforms> and Alexander Willis, “Here’s Why Some Churches Wear Uniforms—And How to Tell Them Apart,” Huffington Post, April 7, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2017/04/07/identity-and-faith-church-uniforms-in-south-africa_a_22030625/.

¹³⁹ Bisi Alimi, “If You Say Being Gay is Not African, You Don’t Know Your History,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/being-gay-african-history-homosexuality-christianity>.

¹⁴⁰ Sylvia Tamale, “Homosexuality is not un-African,” *Aljazeera America*, April 26, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/homosexuality-africamuseveniugandanigeriaethiopia.html>.

Despite these detailed historic records, in 1992, Pan-Africanist Congress Secretary-General Bennie Alexander proclaimed, “homosexuality is un-African. It is part of the spin-off of the capitalist system. We should not take the European Leftist position on the matter. It should be looked at in its total perspective from our Afrocentric position.”¹⁴¹ This speech comes after ANC executive member Ruth Mompati’s statement in a 1987 interview, held in London:

I hope that in liberated South Africa people will live a normal life. I emphasise the word normal... Tell me, are lesbians and gays normal? No, it is not normal. I cannot even begin to understand why people want lesbian and gay rights. The gays have no problems. They have nice houses and plenty to eat. I don’t see them suffering. No one is persecuting them... We haven’t heard about this problem in South Africa until recently. It seems to be fashionable in the West.¹⁴²

Of course, this view also intimates at homosexuality being a white person construct, belonging to people of a privileged social class, such as Dr. Levine.

The woman in the film continues, “This whole thing is for Whites because it causes people to become gay.” The isiZulu-speaking woman, throwing her hands in the air as if in a defeated stance, specifically uses the English word “gays” with an inflection in her tone that surmises that the term is an ‘in’ thing, a buzzword, more than a real, established identity, especially one that has a long history on the continent. The idea of homosexuality as ‘a thing for whites’ is rooted in colonialism and the false claim by many pan-Africanist thinkers that homosexuality is a colonial construct. Eusebius McKaiser explains, “Colonialists are often accused of bringing homosexuality to Africa. Yet they never get attributed with a likelier anthropological truth: introducing penal codes to the continent that outlaw gay sex.”¹⁴³ This statement means that homosexuality has been a practice and identity that has long been expressed on the continent, and not, as many South Africans still believe, ‘a white thing’. Instead, anti-sodomy laws were “first designed and implemented by the former colonial powers now accused of exporting homosexuality”.¹⁴⁴

This one, 23-second on-screen interaction between Muholi and the woman, taking place in the street, reveals how black women who identify as lesbian are perceived by their township communities to be altogether engaging in something that is not done, something that snubs the

¹⁴¹ Hodes, “Populist Hatred.”

¹⁴² Hodes, “Populist Hatred.”

¹⁴³ Eusebius McKaiser, “Homosexuality Un-African? The Claim is an Historical Embarrassment,” *The Guardian*, October 2, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/02/homosexuality-unafican-claim-historical-embarrassment>.

¹⁴⁴ McKaiser, “Homosexuality Un-African?”

dignity of black people, and something that is exclusive to white people and therefore un-African. It is not difficult to imagine that these myths were ascribed to Eudy Simelane and Girlie Nkosi as well, who were the East Randers murdered before the film was released.

Spatial blurring: Sites of coeval safety and unsafety

The anti-gender-based-violence (GBV) discourse in South Africa has largely been, subconsciously, focused on heterosexual women (or individuals who are perceived as such). For example, in April 2017, when 22-year-old Karabo Mokoena was brutally murdered by her former boyfriend, an incredible amount of media attention on GBV cases went to her, even sparking the #Menaretrash movement.¹⁴⁵ This attention to the everyday horrors experienced by black women is paramount and its significance cannot be adequately expressed. However, black lesbian women are often separated from the category of black womanhood and any safeties that might arise from public outrage at their treatment by violent men. When 27-year-old Lerato Tambai Moloji, a lesbian woman, was murdered only weeks after Karabo Mokoena, her body found a mere 40 minutes from Karabo's, she did not receive the same media treatment as her heterosexual counterpart. Lerato was murdered after leaving Gift's Inn tavern, her half-naked body found in an open veld in Naledi Soweto on 14 May. She had been stabbed and stoned to death after being raped, just days before starting a new job.¹⁴⁶ Hers was one of four women whose bodies were found in Soweto just that weekend.¹⁴⁷

McKittrick argues that when we as society produce space, we simultaneously produce its meaning. In *Kwa-Thema*, McKittrick's arguments of black women's geographies take shape, in that there is "a constant interplay between domination and black women's geographies that is underscored by the social production of space"¹⁴⁸. In this project, I emphasise the lesbian sexuality of black women's geographies that are explored by McKittrick, since it is their (Lerato, paralleled against Karabo) specific "concealment, marginalization, boundaries [that] are important social processes."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ "Behind the Headlines: Telling Karabo Mokoena's Story," *Drum Magazine*, June 23, 2021, [https://www.news24.com/drum/Behindtheheadlines/behind-the-headlines-telling-karabo-mokoenas-story-20210623#:~:text=Karabo%20Mokoena%20\(22\)%20was%20murdered,in%20a%20field%20in%20Johannesburg.](https://www.news24.com/drum/Behindtheheadlines/behind-the-headlines-telling-karabo-mokoenas-story-20210623#:~:text=Karabo%20Mokoena%20(22)%20was%20murdered,in%20a%20field%20in%20Johannesburg.)

¹⁴⁶ Lou-Anne Daniels, "We Remember Lerato Molo," *IOL News*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/we-remember-lerato-moloi-16640633> and Roberto Igual, "Case Delayed as Activists Demand Justice for Lesbian Hate Crime Victim Lerato Tambai Moloji, MambaOnline.com, August 31, 2017, <https://www.mambaonline.com/2017/08/31/activists-demand-justice-lesbian-hate-crime-victim-lerato-moloi/>.

¹⁴⁷ Pertunia Mafonkwane, "'Lerato Was Killed by People She Knew, It Was a Hate Crime,'" *Sowetan Live*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2017-05-18-lerato-was-killed-by-people-she-knew-it-was-a-hate-crime/>.

¹⁴⁸ McKittrick, "Introduction: Geographic Stories," xi.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Kwa-Thema

Speaking on Kwa-Thema specifically, in the 2013 Human Rights Watch documentary *Zanele Muboli, Visual Activist*, directed by Muboli, they venture to Kwa-Thema. Muboli starts, “Very very interesting township. I’ve done a lot of shots here. I shot the first gay wedding here in 2002.”¹⁵⁰ This time, Muboli visits Kwa-Thema to capture a follow-up shot of Boitumelo Tumi Nkopane, who first featured on *Faces and Phases* in 2010. The first photograph of Tumi was taken in Kwa-Thema as well, the same small town where my grandmother’s home, where I grew up, lies, and where Eudy Simelane’s body was found two years earlier on 28 April 2008 (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Tumi Nkopane, photographed by Zanele Muboli for *Faces and Phases*, Kwa-Thema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2010. Michael Stevenson, <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muboli/faces90.html>.

While stylishly braiding Tumi’s hair, Muboli explains, “You have a young generation that is growing up now who doesn’t share maybe the same commonalities like lesbians who were out there in the ’90s or late ’80s before South Africa gained independence. The young lesbians now, they are socialites, connected by the social medias and all of that. And they’re free when it comes to photographs, etc.”¹⁵¹ It is their alignment, though, with being socialites and ‘free with photographs’ that simultaneously facilitates their hypervisibility in societies that may not accept them.

¹⁵⁰ Zanele Muboli, *Visual Activist*, Human Rights Watch, 2013, 00:58.

¹⁵¹ Zanele Muboli, *Visual Activist*, 01:54.

The following conversation between Muholi and Tumi is crucial to understanding how the specific geography of black lesbian womanhood's placement fosters their bodily acquired knowledges and accompanying trauma.

Zanele Muholi (ZM): So, this is three years later, and we are in the same township. And this township is so popular with um—

Tumi Nkopane (TN): The killings.

ZM (awkwardly chuckles): No, gay lives. There are a lot—

TN: And the killings.

ZM: —of gay people in Kwa-Thema. And also, it has since become notorious for hate crimes—

TN: Mm.

ZM: —because in 2008, a known black lesbian was brutally murdered here.

Tumi's interjections in Muholi's analysis foreground her body's affective responses to being a Kwa-Thema resident. Unlike Muholi, Tumi's everyday intimate space is foreshadowed by the knowledge that her township, her home, was the site of both Eudy Simelane and Girlie Nkosi's murders and that it might also be hers since she shares with them the identity of being a known lesbian woman. By virtue of the *Faces and Phases* shoots in Kwa-Thema (such as the two of Tumi Nkopane as well as that of another Kwa-Thema resident, Mbali Zulu in 2010), like McKittrick, "I want to suggest that if practices of subjugation are also spatial acts, then the ways in which black women think, write, and negotiate their surroundings are intermingled with place-based critiques, or respatializations"¹⁵².

¹⁵² McKittrick, "Introduction: Geographic Stories," xix.



Figure 4: Tumi Nkopane, photographed by Zanele Mubholi for *Faces and Phases*, Kwa-Thema, Springs, Johannesburg, 2013. The Walther Collection, <https://www.walthercollection.com/en/collection/artworks/tumi-nkopane-kwathema-johannesburg-from-faces-and-phases>.

In this project, I specifically sought out creative works by black queer women who prioritised narrating the lives of black lesbian women. Both Jabulile Bongiwe Ngwenya’s *“I Ain’t Yo Bitch”* and Koleka Putuma’s *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, which I study in both its poem and play form, are heavy with the implications of sociality on the spatialities of black lesbian women and in how they refashion themselves against and because of it. As McKittrick discusses, “the poetics of landscape, whether expressed through theoretical, fictional, poetic, musical, or dramatic texts, can [disclose black women’s spaces and places and] also be understood as real responses to real spatial inequalities.”¹⁵³

¹⁵³ McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xxiii.

***“I Ain’t Yo Bitch”*: Braam versus Soweto versus Kimberly**

Braam

In this 2009 novel, our protagonist Tebogo is a confident, assertive yet hot-tempered music artist living in Soweto and attending the University of the Witwatersrand. A black lesbian woman who presents her gender in androgynous and masculine ways, she is the only woman in her cousin Andile’s hip-hop group SWAT. From early in the book, we see that Tebogo, who has dubbed herself as Tube, is popular and well-liked by the young Braamfontein community. When we meet Tebogo, she is “dressed in a red and white Adidas tracksuit. She moved with a pronounced swing, while hiding half her face behind a pulled down black New York cap”.¹⁵⁴ After SWAT’s first performance in the novel, at a club in Newtown next to the Market Theatre in downtown Joburg, a fan exclaims, “You guys did great. The crowd loved you.” Immediately, one of the SWAT members Sphiwe retorts, “You mean they loved Tube”. In a conversation I had with the debut author Jabulile Bongwiwe Ngwenya, she answers the question of Tebogo’s popularity and likability by expressing, “Aren’t people always attracted to something that shows itself off as confident and then they turn around and realise that they can’t contain it, and that scares them.”¹⁵⁵

We immediately get the sense that there is some discomfort and potential jealousy towards Tebogo from Sphiwe. However, her cousin Andile comes to her defence, “Tube is one of us, Man!... She may have tits and ass, but she’s got balls of steel. She understands the game.”¹⁵⁶ However, despite his seeming support of Tebogo and how she might understand the game, it becomes apparent that her balls of steel are not enough to save her from the fragility of her femininity and sexuality.

Despite spending invested time with her men friends (‘the boys’) for four years, writing and performing songs for SWAT, while relaxing on a bench on campus, Welile asks Tebogo if she is serious about being part of the group. Tebogo knows that the question has to do with her sex though and responds, “You want me to carry a dick? I’ll see what I can put together”.¹⁵⁷ Despite the question coming from Welile, it is Sphiwe who undoubtedly takes the most issue with Tebogo’s sexuality, and he makes it known at every turn. When Tebogo takes a jab at Sphiwe for not giving his girlfriend Lerato enough attention or ‘action’, he snaps, “I hardly think you give Ayanda enough action... Besides your finger and tongue, how do you satisfy your so-called

¹⁵⁴ Ngwenya, *I Ain’t Yo Bitch*, 22.

¹⁵⁵ Jabulile Bongwiwe Ngwenya, personal communication with the author, August 2, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Ngwenya, *I Ain’t Yo Bitch*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

girlfriend?” To which Tebogo easily answers, “Ask Lerato... She wasn’t complaining when I fucked her before she dragged you onto the scene”.¹⁵⁸ Even though Tebogo says this to slight Siphwiwe, the reality is that the boys are surprised and annoyed at her ability to ‘get’ the girls that they also desire.

Before Tebogo arrives at the bench the boys are seated at, Welile remarks, “Game or no game, she’s still a woman even if she sleeps with other chicks. I mean dang, Nigga, she’s fucking Ayanda — this godforsaken place’s prettiest bitch”.¹⁵⁹ Welile and Siphwiwe are so affected by her relationship with Ayanda that, later in the book, Ayanda tells her girlfriend that, despite supposing to be his friend, Siphwiwe thinks she is “a total fuck-up” and that Ayanda needs Jesus. He goes so far as convincing her to attend a religious fundamentalist group meeting where they tell Ayanda that she “could be healed from lesbianism” and that if she gave Tebogo up, “God would pull [her] through [her] sinning”. It is significant that Siphwiwe thinks the hyperfeminine Ayanda can be saved, while andro-masc Tebogo is too far gone and “a total fuck-up”. When Ayanda sees Tebogo with a “past lover”, one of the many Braam women that Tebogo cheats on Ayanda with, Spizo takes it upon himself to defend Ayanda’s honour and tell Tebogo that what she did hurt Ayanda. In true Tube fashion, she asks him if he is Ayanda’s “knight in shining armour”. Before walking away, however, Spizo declares, “Ayanda’s a good girl”.¹⁶⁰ This conversation is important because it casts Spizo as the straight male saviour of a ‘straight’ femme girl who’s mistakenly dating an andro-masc lesbian and therefore ‘acting’ gay.

Soweto

After performing at a club in town, Siphwiwe asks Tebogo about her ailing grandmother, uMakhulu, who is very dear to Tebogo. When Tebogo’s mother Angelina became gravely ill from breast cancer, uMakhulu moved from rural Kimberly to urban Soweto to take care of the family. When Angelina died two years later, when Tebogo was 14 years old, uMakhulu stayed in the township to raise her alongside her father Jerry, who struggled with the reality of having to raise a teenage daughter, who had just lost her mother, on his own. Despite the closeness of Tebogo and uMakhulu’s relationship, Tebogo responds, “Well, as soon as I have a moment I’ll go down to Kimberly to see her. I just haven’t been in the mood to meet relatives and be the typical girl. I think I’ve had enough of being asked when I’m getting married”.¹⁶¹ He then proceeds to ask her the very question she has expressed being tired of hearing. Annoyed, she responds, “In case you

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 115–117.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 43.

hadn't noticed, Spizo, I'm what some would call an anomaly. I swing for the other team". Spizo then proceeds to offer her his "honest opinion": "You heard about those lesbians that were killed *ekasi*, didn't you?... All I'm saying is be careful".

When asked where that sentiment comes from, Spizo only repeats that Tebogo should be careful, "that's all". Tebogo, however, picks up on his ill-veiled homophobia masquerading as concern for her safety: "Fuck you, Spizo. This is not about you trying to help me out. You're just using scare-tactics to tell me what you really think of the fact that I fuck girls". Caught out and attempting to back down by saying that Tebogo's "lifestyle" might affect SWAT, Tebogo is quick to defend herself and her hard-earned musical reputation: "Listen to me, you low-life-dog-balls-licking-son-of-a-bitch, my sweat helped make SWAT what it is. Don't ever fucking play me that way." His response to this direct subversion of his homophobia is what reveals the true sentiment behind his speech about the lesbians killed in the township: "Stop fucking girls and I won't".¹⁶²

Since Tebogo lives in Soweto and this novel was published in 2009, a year after Eudy Simelane's murder in my East Rand township of Kwa-Thema and the same year of Girlie Nkosi's murder in the same kasi, Spizo could have been casting many black women in his warning to Tebogo: Zoliswa Nkonyana murdered in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha three years before that in 2006, Salome Masooa and Sizakele Sigasa, the women whose deaths on 7 July 2007 inspired the 070707 campaign championed by Kwa-Thema's Girlie Nkosi, Khanyiswa (Lhoyie) Hani in Port Elizabeth in May 2008, Sibongile Mphelo in Strand, Cape Town in June 2008, as well as Eudy and Girlie themselves in April 2008 and June 2009, respectively .

At home, ekasi in Soweto, Tebogo's dad notes the messy state of her room and remarks, "Look at this room! ... Is this a girl's room? What are those pictures on the wall?" referring to the picture of a brunette woman sitting atop a Ferrari with only a pair of yellow panties on.¹⁶³ Frustrated by her arriving home in the wee hours of the morning, he continues, "You don't cook or clean here and you hardly attend class, which means you spend twenty hours of every day being useless and walking the streets of Joburg like a prostitute."¹⁶⁴ Equally frustrated, Tebogo asks, "Who says girls were born to be maids?" Her father shuts her down with the ultimate stamp of patriarchy, *Thula!* "There's only one man in this house." Both in Braam and Soweto, Tebogo is reminded of the fragility of her femininity as well as her masculinity, which are easily challenged by the men in her life.

¹⁶² Ibid., 43.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 47–48.

Kimberly

After Tebogo's arguments with Spizo and her father, she learns that her beloved grandmother has died. Tebogo had expressed to Spizo her anxiety about being observed and visually studied by her relatives due to the ways in which she performs her gender. It is clear that her anxieties were not unwarranted when upon entering her grandmother's yard in Kimberly, Tebogo "felt embarrassed as everyone was now looking at her and no doubt discussing her. She could see heads gathered in small groups whispering to each other".¹⁶⁵ Entering the house, "Tebogo could tell the older people were looking at her, taking in her hair, clothes, and style. No doubt whispers would start once she left the room".¹⁶⁶ The conversation about Tebogo's andro-masc appearance reaches its peak when Relebogile, a man whom Tebogo and Andile knew from the neighbourhood, demands a drink from Ayanda, Tebogo's girlfriend. After staring at Ayanda, forcibly waiting for her to personally take a beer from Welile and Andile's hands and hand it over to him, Tebogo turns to her, "Relebogile is asking you for a drink, my love. Do you want to give it to him?" Ayanda is visibly afraid, eyes filling with tears and shaking her head. When Tebogo tells him that he has his answer, he grabs her shoulder and the force in Tebogo's push causes him to stumble backwards. It is here that we understand the book's title, which is presented with quotation marks. While attempting to lunge at him (held back by Andile), Tebogo screams, "I ain't yo bitch, motherfucker. I will kill you, bitch!"

Significantly, when Andile tells Relebogile to get out, he says "You're disrespecting our home. This is a funeral". So, the chief reason that Andile throws this man out of the house is that he is disrespecting their home at a time of death, not because he is exhibiting violent masculinity and behaviour, as well as homophobia, towards his cousin Tebogo and her girlfriend Ayanda. What follows reveals how black women's spatiality is incredibly contingent on their sociality. Relebogile proclaims, "This whore obviously thinks she can fight me. We know how to handle women in this community. This is not Jozi where women can do whatever they want!"¹⁶⁷ The perception of the city as a place where women are free to express themselves and their sexualities however they want is not true though, since the threat to Tebogo's body as one that is simultaneously black and perceived as woman and lesbian, whether located in the city, the township, or the rural space, is constantly looming.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 111.

In Relebogile, this threat is immediate, physical, phallic, and unperturbed by being witnessed—and therefore completely secure in itself and the protections afforded to it by virtue of it being employed by a black man. Relebogile continues, “I know what you need *wena*, Tebogo. I can show you how to be a woman.” He then reaches for his penis before Tebogo kicks him at the very source that he draws his entitlement and toxicity from. As he bends over in pain, Tebogo asks him if he still wants to show her how to be a woman. Even at this public display of assault, no one intervenes in Tebogo’s aid. Instead, the men present rush to calm her down, with Andile holding her from further lunging onto Relebogile and Papa Jerry only shouting, “Enough! Get away from here” to the man who just assaulted his daughter and “Enough, Tebogo! Your mother would be so disappointed in you” to his child.¹⁶⁸

Back in Braam

In our conversation about how the baseline of homophobia is homophobes feeling that what they consider comfortable is compromised, Ngwenya remarks, “As long as it [divergent sexuality] doesn’t encroach onto their space and their way of being. Once it does, it becomes an issue.”¹⁶⁹ The biggest affront in the novel to black men’s domination of black lesbian women’s sense of safety and the incumbent trauma that arises from our bodies was not Siphwiwe warning Tebogo or even Relebogile threatening to rape her amid a crowd. It is Andile, someone who has defended Tebogo throughout the book. When Tebogo was raped by one of his friends at Andile’s home the day before her mother’s funeral, Tebogo told Andile and shortly thereafter, Mzwandile, the rapist, died from wounds inflicted during what was called a mugging. Andile said nothing of the incident to Tebogo, but it is clear that he either killed Mzwandile himself or arranged for his attack. Coupled with him declaring that “Tebogo is one of us” to his friends whenever one of them questions her place in the group, this is the kind of protectiveness that Andile exhibits towards Tebogo.

However, in each of these instances, Tebogo’s sexuality did not encroach on his personhood or comfort. So, when Andile finds Tebogo naked and having sex with Nthabiseng, SWAT’s new music agent and a woman they have both grown to romantically care for, he finds it deeply insulting and threatening to the ways in which he carries comfort and security as a man. Despite a reviewer calling the ending “cliché,” his response came as a complete shock to me when, as if by instinct, he attacks her, strangling her and throwing her against the cistern in the changing room.¹⁷⁰ Numb from the horror and pain, Tebogo could not get up, yet Andile repeatedly slaps

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹⁶⁹ Ngwenya, personal communication with the author, August 2, 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Lindelwa R., “Five Books to Cuddle with in This Weather,” *Represent.co.za*, November 12, 2014, <http://represent.co.za/five-reads-to-cuddle-with-in-this-weather/>; and Ngwenya, “*I Ain’t Yo Bitch*”, 160–161.

her and while kicking her, he shouts “Wake up, bitch! Wake up!” His next utterance showed me that in many ways, Andile is more dangerous to Tebogo than even Relebogile. While unbuckling his pants, he asks Tebogo, “Do you want to know how to fuck, you bitch? Let me show you how the real men fuck! ... I’m going to show you how to be a man. The fucking fake-ass bitch.”¹⁷¹ It is Andile though who has been fake to Tebogo in how he only tolerated her sexuality when it did not affect the ways in which he moves in the world.

When Ayanda cries for Andile to stop, reminding him that she is his cousin, Andile responds, “She’s nothing to me. You hear me, *Sitabani*, you are nothing to me. Don’t ever let me see you bitch! I’ll kill you.”¹⁷² How Andile becomes someone who uses the derogatory word “sitabani” on Tebogo, which neither Siphwe nor Relebogile used, is indicative of the reality that “very often, it is the people close to us that do that,” as Ngwenya reminds me.¹⁷³ Suddenly, to Andile, Tebogo is a “stupid ugly bitch” and not the cousin whose rapist he killed. He removes all the safety his presence in her life afforded her and turns instead into the source of her unsafety and pain.

“No Easter Sunday for Queers” (poem): The Northern Suburbs versus the Southern Suburbs

In Koleka Putuma’s “No Easter Sunday for Queers,” she offers us a way of understanding black lesbian women’s spatiality in terms of how we negotiate and refashion space to keep ourselves safe. This text (both in its poem and play form) marks the study of a new era in my project: the legacies of trauma. Published in 2017, this poem is featured in her breakthrough anthology *Collective Amnesia* and finds itself located almost a decade after the mid-2000s massacre of black lesbian women in Kwa-Thema. Indeed, it is offered to us a full 11 years after Zoliswa Nkonyana’s murder in Cape town, where the anthology is published and where the poem is set. Though unnamed in the poem, Zoliswa is cast when the speaker declares that “Hell is the possible statistic we become when we leave this place,” which refers to the alarming data on the physical and sexual attacks against black lesbian women.¹⁷⁴

In the Northern Suburbs, where the speaker is “a pastor’s daughter loving a Muslim woman,” she writes about those who “hoard two lives in one body,” those who have “[t]wenty

¹⁷¹ Ngwenya, “*I Ain’t Yo Bitch*”, 162.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷³ Ngwenya, personal communication with the author, August 2, 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Koleka Putuma, “No Easter Sunday for Queers,” *Collective Amnesia* (Cape Town: uHlanga, 2017), 27.

years of hiding who and how [they] love.”¹⁷⁵ It is no better in the Southern Suburbs though, where she explains how her body is always one of precarity. Despite the location, the speaker dually hides and respatialises herself, noting, “I stay away from the march/I also stay away from the church.”¹⁷⁶

Thinking about her body being ‘found,’ she imagines her father, “preaching about a God whose hands were tied with underwear and her ankles with shoelaces.”¹⁷⁷ This image is reminiscent of Nokuthula Radebe, whose body was found in the Thokoza township of the East Rand with shoelaces around the neck, and particularly of the state that Sizakele Sigasa’s body was found in on 7 July 2007, her underwear used to tie her hands and the shoelaces of her new sneakers used to tie her ankles.¹⁷⁸ Why bababulale kabuhlungu kangaka?

The Northern-Southern-Northern-Southern Suburbs

~~In the North, my hands are raised in worship./In the South, my hands are raised in protest./Either way, I am always surrendering./The North says my body belongs in hell./The South says my body belongs in a dump./In both spaces, my body is at the mercy of men.~~¹⁷⁹

1st Global Feminist Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) Women’s* Conference

In 2019, when I encountered Eudy Simelane again, after disremembering her as a child, I was in an academic/activist environment. The launch event of the first Global Feminist LBQ Women’s* Conference featured a cleansing ceremony conducted by a group of black lesbian sangomas. Speaking from inside the large circle we all stood in, one of the women, donning her red, black, and white regalia, explained the reason for the ritual: before we could engage in the heavy intellectualising that the packed five-day schedule would require of us, we needed to not only cleanse the space to prepare for the work of healing, but we also needed to acknowledge the women and transmen who could not be in attendance, those absented from the physical world by murderous hate crimes. I remember feeling anxious that I had entered a spiritual space without

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 30

¹⁷⁸ Baldwin Ndaba, “‘Hate Crime’ Against Lesbians Slated,” *IOL News*, July 13, 2007, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/hate-crime-against-lesbians-slated-361821>.

¹⁷⁹ Putuma, “No Easter Sunday for Queers,” 27.

being prepared. However, I have found through writing this project that spirits often visit when we are least prepared but when we need them the most.

As the sangomas lit imphepho across the entire open foyer space, the woman read from a piece of paper in her hands: the names of murdered queer women and transmen, detailing the manner in which they died, and where their bodies were found. As she went down the list, I regretted attending—hearing these stories “[m]akes my sexuality panic,” as Putuma would say in the Southern Suburbs.¹⁸⁰ When the woman read, “Eudy Simelane. Stabbed 25 times. Kwa-Thema,” my body remembered what it was my mind had been running away from all those years, and I was instantly taken back to the graveyard I had lived in. The psychosomatic response I experienced disallowed me from remembering anything else from that evening as my spatial geographies blurred together and transported me back, in time and place, to Kwa-Thema 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

Vicarious trauma and regarding the pain of others

I sit ready to fight an unseen assailant, but one whose presence I can feel in front of me, towering over me.

I might not feel their breath on my skin, but my body can sense them. The hairs on my skin warn me of their looming attack, ready to sense a shift in the air, an indication of their advance.

As I read about Endy being a “woman who knew how to defend herself with her fists and her elbows,” a woman “not easy to kill,” I feel my own fists clench...¹⁸¹

As I read about how her upper thighs were stabbed, my body knows it was in retaliation to her trying to force them closed, and I force mine shut too, so much until the muscles in my inner thighs ache.

When I read about Noxolo’s eyes being plucked out, I squeeze mine shut and draw my hands over them protectively.

When I read about how they found her head split open, I plaster my hands over mine firmly, so much until the scar on my forehead—caused by the man wielding a wall pounder at me—starts to ache.

When I read about Nox’s teeth being pulled out, I don’t notice how quickly my hands form a cage over my mouth and how tightly I lock my jaws until I taste the iron of blood (and of the wall pounder) in my mouth.

—Kamohelo Bohlale Mabogwane

In Virginia Woolf’s 1939 essay *Three Guineas*, she formulates a response to the question “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” by looking at wartime photographs. She posits: “Let us see then whether when we look at the same photographs we feel the same things.”¹⁸² ~~Her body found in a Soweto veld, Lerato Moloji’s family was devastated by the way the images of her body were passed around on social media.~~¹⁸³ When I, a black lesbian woman, see a photograph depicting the crime scene of Lerato Moloji or Noxolo Nogwaza’s murder, I feel something different from my heterosexual counterparts, since I am bound to the photo by intimate familiarity and by vicarious trauma.

¹⁸¹ Barry Bearak, “Mixed Verdict in S. African Lesbian’s Murder Trial,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/23/world/africa/23safrica.html>.

¹⁸² Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 10. Blackwell Publishing. http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL/Images/Content_store/Sample_chapter/9780631177241/woolf.pdf

¹⁸³ Pertunia, Mafonkwane. “Lerato Was Killed by People She Knew, It Was a Hate Crime,” *Sowetan Live*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2017-05-18-lerato-was-killed-by-people-she-knew-it-was-a-hate-crime/>.

Continuing the conversation from Woolf, in her essay “Regarding the Pain of Others,” Susan Sontag notes, “For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war.”¹⁸⁴ She asks, “How does the spectacle of the sufferings of others in the media affect us? Are we inured to violence by the depiction of cruelty?” Importantly, Sontag asks her reader to define who is involved in viewing the suffering of others.

She ends her essay by arriving at the conclusion that “‘We’—this ‘we’ is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like. We can’t imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can’t understand, can’t imagine.”¹⁸⁵ However, my vicarious trauma argues otherwise. The ways in which I encounter Eudy Simelane, Girlie Nkosi, and Noxolo Nogwaza as haunting spirits argue even louder and with more urgency. Gordon makes a notable distinction between trauma and haunting: where trauma is focused on the past, haunting is “an emergent state” that creates a something-to-be-done response, which is a reckoning with the present.¹⁸⁶ In this project, I use both concepts, since the functions of historicity require that we travel to the past.

In August 2021, I journeyed back to Kwa-Thema for the first time in a very long time. This time for my aunt Lebohang’s funeral. My girlfriend at the time, a black queer-identifying woman who also grew up in Kwa-Thema, travelled with me from our respective homes in Cape Town. We left my aunt’s gravesite pained, me with grief anew from visiting my mother’s 15-month-old gravesite, only a few lines away from Aus Lebo’s, and her fresh with the grief of her grandmother’s 16-month-old gravesite. Leaving my childhood home, we walked towards her grandmother’s house, less than 10 minutes away from mine. Walking along the busy main road, I held her hand as we usually did in Rondebosch and Gardens. This time though, she reminded me that we were not just ‘in the hood’, but we were also back in *our* hood.

Suddenly, the simple act of tethering our pained selves—overtaken by loss—to earth by making physical contact was dangerous and reminiscent of the blood of the gravesite under our feet. Rebecca Solnit writes that “[w]alking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts,

¹⁸⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003), 126.

¹⁸⁵ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 126.

¹⁸⁶ Gordon, Hite, and Jara, “Haunting and Thinking from the Utopian Margins,” 339.

experiences, arrivals.”¹⁸⁷ Breathing faster, my heart pounding, my mind wondered how many people had seen us in the few seconds before my girlfriend’s reminder. I wondered how many of them were the acquitted murderers of the spirits around me and whose blood I walked on, or worse, the ones never found. I wondered how many of them were the countless free men behind the rape attacks that went undocumented.

As I reflect on this experience, Katherine McKittrick reminds me that “geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing.”¹⁸⁸ The ground we walked upon reminded us that it was the site of a massacre, and the legacy of trauma took over. Speaking on researching sexuality through the practice of ‘walking about’, Zethu Matebeni presents the idea of ‘walking about’ the city of Johannesburg, on the outskirts of which Kwa-Thema is positioned, as a way of capturing “the feel of the city as well as reposition[ing] the walker in that particular space, because the walker is visibly ‘out’.”¹⁸⁹ A similar dynamism is true for township spaces. Walking in Kwa-Thema and holding hands, with my bald head and black dress and her ‘Hiddin’g aesthetic’, we were visibly ‘out’.

The reality though is that not only were we away from Kwa-Thema long enough for most people to not recognise us as residents but also that the possibility of any manifest danger coming to us—in broad daylight, 13 years after Eudy Simelane’s murder—was slim. However, the point is that our geographic knowledge as black lesbian and queer women who grew up in Kwa-Thema during the massacre did not care that a decade had passed or that a group of men would not have organised an attack on us that day. Our geographic knowledge had already begun the process of emotioning. As Walter Mignolo offers, “Emotioning implies responses to body-knowledge that reasoning processes through semiotic systems. Emotioning was banned from Western epistemology under the belief that it obstructs objectivity. In so doing, it hid from view the fact that no one is convinced by reasoning and arguments, if one is not also convinced in his or her emotioning.”^{190xx}

¹⁸⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin, 2001: 5

¹⁸⁸ Katherine McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): ix.

¹⁸⁹ Zethu Matebeni, “TRACKS,” 54.

¹⁹⁰ Nick Shepherd, “Escaping from the ‘White Cube’ of the Seminar Room,” 15.

Regarding the pain of others

- ~~Jabu Sibisi, a young lesbian from Thokoza, East Rand: “I fear for my life, I feel like I am the next victim, I can never be free again after this.”²²⁻¹⁹¹~~
- ~~Fikile Mazibuko, a lesbian woman from Thokoza, East Rand: “I am traumatized and angry, this is my second friend to be murdered, whatever that is happening in my community pains me, but it won’t stop me from being who I am. I am a proud lesbian and no one can change me.”²²⁻¹⁹²~~
- ~~Tumi Mkhuma, a lesbian soccer player from Katlehong, East Rand, a survivor of hate crime rape, and a friend of Nokuthula Radebe’s: “I feel sad for my friend, the fact that she didn’t survive this pains me. As a rape survivor myself, I know what she went through and it is not a good place to be.”²²⁻¹⁹³~~
- ~~Funeka Soldaat, a lesbian activist from Khayelitsha: “When you see guys, you are seeing your — these are the enemies, because it’s just men who are raping us.”²²⁻¹⁹⁴~~
- ~~Bontle Khalo, Public Relations officer of the Ekurhuleni Pride Organising Committee in the East Rand: “I can’t walk with my partner on the street and hold their hand... I can’t go out at night and say ‘I’m going to dance somewhere,’ because I’m not safe. I might get killed because of who I am, because of who I love.”²²⁻¹⁹⁵~~

~~In Zanele Muboli’s documentary for the Human Rights Watch, they are visibly disturbed when talking about Noxolo Nogwaza’s murder. They point out where her body was found and when walking along the site, they sigh a heavy breath, almost as if in defeat, and look away.¹⁹⁶~~

I argue that vicarious traumatising is not a phenomenon that is specific to people in the helping professions such as counsellors and therapists, police officers, and doctors. In discussing how mental health care workers may be impacted by working with the experiences of their clients, Mark R. Evces explains that “[i]n contrast to primary or direct exposure, in which an individual experiences or observes a threat of or actual harm or loss, secondary exposure involves exposure

¹⁹¹ Sokari, “Continuous War on Black Lesbian Bodies,” July 6, 2013. Black Looks. <http://blacklooks.org/2013/07/continuous-war-on-black-lesbian-bodies/>

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ *Difficult Love*, Funeka Soldaat, 39:33.

¹⁹⁵ James Fletcher, “Born Free, Killed by Hate—The Price of Being Gay in South Africa,” *BBC News*, April 7, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35967725>.

¹⁹⁶ Zanele Muboli, *Visual Activist*, 08:36.

to the traumatic memories, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others”.¹⁹⁷ Secondary vicarious trauma is also the process that explains what happens when I hold my girlfriend’s hand in Kwa-Thema as well as in Rondebosch—located in the “New Testament” of Putuma’s Southern Suburbs in her poem, “No Easter Sunday for Queers”.¹⁹⁸

The Southern Suburbs represent a space where “[t]wo womxn [can hump] in the back of a cab ride from a club in Green Point to res.”¹⁹⁹ Fostered considerably by the university and student culture that is so intertwined by the place, Rondebosch becomes a place where queer people can feel free to express themselves without the immediate fear of violence. However, because of the specific historicity of my body-politics of sensing/feeling/knowing, Rondebosch also functions as the place where I can feel fear upon being observed by men when I hold my girlfriend’s hand. Again, the reality is that it is not very likely that I will be attacked in Rondebosch or Gardens, but because of my historical proximity to the black lesbian women murdered in the mid-2000s in Kwa-Thema, because I have “bumped into somebody else’s memory” as Gordon would say, I carry their fears and mistrust as I walk “abOUT” the streets of Cape Town (visibly out, as Matebeni would explain)²⁰⁰. A similar effect is borne from photography.²⁰¹

~~In her essay, Sontag argues that images are always produced with a point of view: “There is a record of the real, and there is the person who takes the record. Subjective narrative and framing inevitably leave something out of the picture and put a certain spin on images.”²⁰²~~

Zanele Muholi sits comfortably here, choosing to focus their camera on portraiture rather than on the cruelty enacted on the bodies they have captured. Reflecting on living in fear, Muholi ponders, “Another case number becomes part of our history. And what are we doing about it? Do we always go and attend funerals, and then after funerals, you go home and wait for another funeral, what? You have to document. You are forced to document.”²⁰³

Raél Jero Salley describes a photo of Kwa-Thema resident Mbali Zulu taken by Muholi in Kwa-Thema in 2010 (see Figure 5): “Mbali confronts us with a confident gaze and an open, three-quarter pose. The arrangement proudly displays her t-shirt, emblazoned with the iconic

¹⁹⁷ Mark R. Evces, “What is Vicarious Trauma?” in *Vicarious Trauma and Disaster Mental Health: Understanding Risks and Promoting Resilience*, eds. Gertie Quitangon and Mark R. Evces (New York: Routledge, 2015), 10. <https://doi.org.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/10.4324/9781315761343>.

¹⁹⁸ Putuma, “No Easter Sunday for Queers,” 26.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰⁰ Zethu Matebeni. “TRACKS: Researching Sexualities Walking abOUT the City of Johannesburg,” in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale (Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2011): 50–56.

²⁰¹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 166.

²⁰² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

²⁰³ Zanele Muholi, *Visual Activist*, 03:27.

superwoman symbol.”²⁰⁴ Even though Salley’s article was released in the *Queer African Reader* in 2013, this image of Mbali is eerily similar to how we are introduced to Tebogo in Ngwenya’s “*I Ain’t Yo Bitch*” in 2009. In the novel, Ngwenya writes, “At full height she stood above most men, her thin frame and ebony skin allowing her to blend into androgyny. She wore a simple black T-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘Die Swart Gevaar’, which accentuated her strong arm muscles and hid her small breasts.”²⁰⁵ Speaking to me about Tebogo, Ngwenya says, “She is lesbian and in that way, she is very strong, and she has always been strong. Throughout the book, she is strong about who she is.”²⁰⁶ With their small frames and adorning symbols of strength, both Mbali and Tebogo stand firmly in their identities, despite being located among men who could so easily hurt them (in Kwa-Thema for Mbali and in Braam among Siphwe and Andile for Tebogo).



Figure 5: Mbali Zulu, *Faces and Phases*, Kwa-Thema, 2010. Michael Stevenson, <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/faces76.html>.

Salley continues,

²⁰⁴ Raél Jero Salley, “The Face I Love: Zanele Muholi’s ‘Faces and Phases,’” in *Queer African Reader*, ed. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Nairobi: Pambazuka Press, 2013), 108.

²⁰⁵ Ngwenya, “*I Ain’t Yo Bitch*,” 8.

²⁰⁶ Ngwenya, personal communication, August 2, 2021.

Muholi's engagement with Mbali comes after violence — a hate crime in 2008 in which a member of the community (Eudy Simelane) was murdered. Mbali's portrait is made with this event in mind. Muholi describes the picture as a commemoration, memorial and historical record of the roles brave women play in the face of pain and suffering. Mbali's choice to wear an icon of heroism communicates a defiance, resilience and fearlessness in the face of violence, stigma and homophobia.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Salley, "The Face I Love," 109.

After years of documenting the funerals of queer persons, Muholi reflects in the 2010 documentary *Difficult Love*, “Why, why, why do I have to be killed because of loving someone? I’ve said this thing before, I’m sick of it (ngikhathela manje, isiyangdina), so I’ve decided to take a different approach in the work that I do. I’m just capturing love. Like, love. Love. In as much as I know that I’m hurting inside (ngibuhlungu ngaphakati).”²⁰⁸ This statement comes a year after exhibiting photographs of nude and embracing black lesbian women—love—at an art exhibition for young black women artists at Constitution Hill. This exhibition, however, is oft-cited not for its beauty in purposefully seeing black lesbian women, but for then-Minister for Women, Children, and People with Disabilities Lulu Xingwana’s storming out upon seeing Muholi’s photographs. Xingwana, who had been invited to speak at the exhibition, claimed that she left because “Our mandate is to promote social cohesion and nation building. I left the exhibition because it expressed the very opposite of this... It was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building.”²⁰⁹ Muholi’s exhibition and the resultant dramatic ministerial storm-out came almost two years after Eudy Simelane’s highly publicised murder, and less than a year after Girlie Nkosi’s murder—both in the East Rand of Johannesburg.

In the documentary, journalist and critic Gail Smith responds to Xingwana as follows: “Her work so obviously is not setting out to titillate, which is the object of pornography—it’s to arouse, it’s to titillate. Zanele’s work is obviously art. It’s forcing us to think about our society and ourselves in a very very ingenious way.”²¹⁰ The minister, whose career in government Ranjeni Munusamy calls “something like the 22-car pile-up on the N1—multiple wrecks with no real explanation for why and how the crashes occurred,” had donated R300,000 to the Innovation Women exhibition.²¹¹ Yet even though Muholi’s exhibition catalogue entry clearly expressed that their work would be “without precedent in South Africa, where there are very few instances of black women openly portraying female same-sex practices,” Muholi’s take on innovation and the advancement of innovative thinking in the minds of South Africans seems to have been far too advanced for Xingwana to comprehend.²¹² I offer a reminder here that Xingwana is the same person who was supposed to serve as the custodian of women’s issues in this country between

²⁰⁸ *Difficult Love*, Zanele Muholi, 41:16.

²⁰⁹ *Mail & Guardian*, “Lulu Xingwana describes lesbian photos as immoral,” March 3, 2010. <https://mg.co.za/article/2010-03-03-lulu-xingwana-describes-lesbian-photos-as-immoral/>

²¹⁰ *Difficult Love*, Gail Smith. 00:25–00:43.

²¹¹ Ranjeni Munusamy, “Dear Lulu Xingwana: Think You’d Better Go Now,” *Daily Maverick*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-03-08-dear-lulu-xingwana-think-you-d-better-go-now/>

²¹² *Mail & Guardian*, “Lulu Xingwana”

2010 and 2013, when more than 20 fatal attacks on black lesbian womanhood were recorded by the media. Xingwana had seen not only 16-year-old Madoe Mafubedu murdered before her term in April 2007,

- ~~And 34-year-old lesbian and HIV/AIDS activist Sizakele Sigasa and 23-year-old Salome Masooa on 7 July 2007~~
- ~~And 23-year-old Thokozani Sdo' Qwabe on 22 July 2007~~
- ~~And national soccer treasure Eudy Simelane on 27 April 2008~~
- ~~And 25-year-old Khanyiswa (Lhoyic) Hani on 26 May 2008~~
- ~~And 21-year-old Sibongile Mphelo on 20 June 2008~~
- ~~And 37-year-old soccer player and activist Girlie Nkosi attacked on 19 June 2009~~

But during her term, she had also witnessed:

- ~~21-year-old Nontsikelelo Tyatyeka in September 2010, whose body was only found a year later in her neighbour's yard~~
- ~~And 21-year-old newspaper merchant Neumisa Mzamele in November 2010~~
- ~~And 20-year-old Nokuthula Radebe whose body was found on 28 March 2011~~
- ~~And 23-year-old Nqobile Khumalo who went missing on 4 May 2011 and whose body was found two days later~~
- ~~And 21-year-old Phumeza Nkolonzi on 23 June 2012~~
- ~~And 28-year-old school clerk Sanna Supa on 30 June 2012~~
- ~~And 29-year-old Hendrietta (Andritha) Thapelo Morifi on the same day, 30 June 2012~~
- ~~And 25-year-old Mandisa Mbambo in August 2012~~
- ~~And Desiree Ntombana Mafu on 23 September 2012~~
- ~~And 19-year-old activist Sihle Sikoji on 9 November 2012~~
- ~~And 36-year-old saleswoman and mother of two Patricia Mashigo on 21 April 2013~~
- ~~And 26-year-old Duduzile Zozo on 30 June 2013~~

All of the 20 women mentioned in this list are young, and since she donated R300,000 to the cause of young women, that money is only effective if they are heterosexual, clearly.

In “Young: “Gone @ 20 — the lucky ones are not yet born!” Zethu Matebeni reviews Muholi’s *MO(U)RNING* exhibition. She writes that, because they were famous, we as society remember people like RNB star Aaliyah, supermodel Gia, rapper Tupac Shakur, and singer Amy Winehouse,

all of whom are “immortal members of the infamous ‘Club 27,’” which consists of people who died before reaching the age of 27.²¹³ Poignantly, Matebeni recalls how

— No one remembers Nokuthula Radebe (20), Ntsiki Tyatyeka (21), Thokozone Qwabe (23), Khanyiswa Hani (25), Tshuku Ncobo (26), Mpho Setshedi (27), Sanna Supa (28), Hendrietta Thapelo Morifi (29), and many others like them. They did not make it to “Club 27”. They were not musicians, artists or entertainers. However, they joined a special club, notorious in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (lgbti) community of South Africa. They are among the endless list of lives lost too soon, and too violently. Murdered for who they are and their sexual/gender expression — they lie forgotten.²¹⁴

In response to the backlash Xingwana received for storming out, her team claimed that “the minister objected to the stereotyping of black women and was actually protecting women’s rights.”²¹⁵ Nationhood and citizenship were stripped from these 20 women at the time of their deaths, when the stories of their murders made the news, and again after their deaths by a person who held governmental power over their black women bodies. It seems that when issues of citizenship are involved, black lesbian women are viewed as distinct from womanhood, from black womanhood, and from humanness. Now, a decade later, in a collection of essays on Muholi’s work, co-editor Sarah Allen argues that “[b]y representing Black queer lives absent from the visual landscape in a new era of democracy, Muholi ultimately reveals a more democratic view of post-apartheid South Africa. Ushering this archive into existence is therefore the means through which Muholi has spoken of claiming full citizenship, insisting that the so-called Rainbow Nation deliver on its promise of inclusion.”^{216xxi} The process of unseeing black lesbian women that Xingwana advocated for, in her high-ranking ministerial position, emphasises the assumption that black lesbian women are “seemingly in place by being out of place”.²¹⁷

“God will be their judge”

The identity of misplacedness finds expression in how carelessly murder cases are handled in South Africa. When Duduzile Zozo was murdered in Thokoza in the East Rand, it quickly became clear that Xingwana went to the township simply to show face, because three months later, when a reporter asked Thokoza Police Captain Johannes Mbeka about the role that Duduzile Zozo’s

²¹³ Zethu Matebeni, “Gone @ 20 – The Lucky Ones Are Not Yet Born!” HUMA Institute for Humanities in Africa, November 12, 2012. <http://www.huma.uct.ac.za/news/gone-20-%E2%80%93-lucky-ones-are-not-yet-born>.

²¹⁴ Matebeni, “Gone @ 20,” November 12, 2012.

²¹⁵ Munusamy, “Dear Lulu Xingwana.”

²¹⁶ Sarah Allen, “Thinking Activism,” 82.

²¹⁷ McKittrick, “Introduction: Geographic Stories,” xv.

sexuality had played in her murder, Mbeka said that it was “of no importance to the investigation, adding that the police did not believe she was ‘correctively’ raped or targeted because she was a lesbian. He said the LGBTI community doesn’t really face any dangers at all.”²¹⁸

~~By 2011, a court case involving the murder of 19-year-old Zoliswa Nkonyana in 2006 had been postponed more than 30 times in five years.~~²¹⁹

~~After Noxolo Nogwaza’s horrifying murder, Human Rights Watch researcher Dipika Nath declared that “Nogwaza’s death is the latest in a long series of sadistic crimes against lesbians, gay men, and transgender people in South Africa... The vicious nature of the assault is a potent reminder that these attacks are premeditated, planned, and often committed with impunity.” Despite these findings however, police spokesperson Tshisikhawe Ndou said investigators did not consider the murder a hate crime: “We do not have evidence to conclude that the crime was committed against her based on the fact of her sexual orientation. It is just purely murder and rape that we are investigating at this stage.”~~²²⁰

The biggest and perhaps most poignant example of how black lesbian women are unseen even by the judiciary officials whose jobs it is to protect and defend them is in the legal case of Eudy Simelane’s murder. The court proceedings case left Zethu Matebeni and the many other activists in attendance “baffled, not knowing how to make sense of the role of the court and the judiciary in parts of South Africa.”²²¹ Matebeni details the proceedings of 12 February 2009, when murderer Thabo Mpiti’s statement was read and where he pleaded guilty, while “seem[ing] relaxed” yet “rattl[ing] the many [activists] in the court”. Matebeni tracks how Mpiti clearly expressed that Eudy Simelane recognised one of the murderers (Themba Mvubu), who then gave Thabo the knife and told him to “do something” since they feared that Eudy would get them arrested.

However, Mpiti changes course and claims, “I was informed after my arrest of her name and where she is from. I was told she was a Banyana Banyana soccer player. I also heard about her sexual orientation, while I was in custody.”²²² It is simply implausible that Mpiti did not know Eudy, a successful soccer star playing at national level and a woman who openly presented her gender in a masculine way and was therefore hypervisible in Kwa-Thema, where he was also a

²¹⁸ *Mail & Guardian*, “Township Life of LGBTIs.”

²¹⁹ David Smith, “Teenage Lesbian is Latest Victim of ‘Corrective Rape’ in South Africa,” *The Guardian*, May 9, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/09/lesbian-corrective-rape-south-africa>.

²²⁰ “Brutal Murder of Lesbian Activist Condemned,” *Mail & Guardian*, May 3, 2011, <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-05-03-brutal-murder-of-lesbian-activist-condemned/>.

²²¹ Matebeni, “Deconstructing Violence,” in *Queer African Reader*, eds. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press) 348.

²²² Matebeni, “Deconstructing Violence,” 349.

resident. Not only did Judge Mavundla choose to ignore how Mpiti's story contradicted itself so starkly, but he also interrupted the prosecutor's questioning about the murderers being privy to Eudy's sexual orientation, claiming, "There is no significance of the victim's sexual orientation in Mpiti's case".²²³ Matebeni rightly argues that the judge "committed a serious injustice by silencing sexual orientation and identity, silencing it also as a motivating factor in the murder. Through his power and position, he committed a painful and further violation of many lesbians and of Eudy's family."²²⁴

I follow the case where Matebeni left off. Seven months later, two of the murderers, Khumbulani Magagula and Johannes Mahlangu, are acquitted by Judge Ratha Mokgoathleng for a lack of evidence. It seems quite ironic that, in his capacity as a judge, Mokgoathleng says, "God will be their judge," suspending himself from the role of judge and instead leaving justice up to fate and the god that many Christians believe has no tolerance for homosexuality.²²⁵ Themba Mvubu, the fourth murderer, received a life sentence but walked away smiling, saying, "Ach, I'm not sorry at all".²²⁶ Like Judge Mavundla at the February trial, Judge Mokgoathleng also believed that sexual orientation was no motivating factor in the murder. This denial and unseeing of Eudy's lesbian sexuality and, therefore, her full personhood and complete humanness is extremely regrettable because it also means that her murder, as well as those of every other black woman killed for being lesbian, would not be classified as a hate crime—resulting in a further negation of black lesbian womanhood. Astoundingly, Judge Mokgoathleng was uncomfortable with the term 'lesbian' itself. He asked the prosecutor, "Is there another word that you can use instead of that one?"²²⁷

~~Activist Phumi Mtetwa noted, "This judgement is extremely important. It doesn't state that she was killed as a lesbian but because she was known. How did people know her in the township? She was a soccer player who was 'butch' and was known. People are killed because of who they are."²²⁸ Pretty Makhalya, Eudy Simelane's closest friend, says "There were three of us: Eudy, me and Zodwa. Whatever we did was boyish. We were different, you could tell."²²⁹^{xxii}~~

²²³ Ibid.," 350.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ "Gang-Rape Killer of Lesbian Footballer Gets Life," *Mail & Guardian*, September 23, 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2009-09-23-gangrape-killer-of-lesbian-footballer-gets-life/>.

²²⁶ Barry Bearak, "Mixed Verdict in S. African Lesbian's Murder Trial," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/23/world/africa/23safrica.html>.

²²⁷ Bearak, "Mixed Verdict."

²²⁸ "Gang-Rape Killer," *Mail & Guardian*.

²²⁹ Bearak, "Mixed Verdict."

For someone who was a famous soccer club star in the 1960s, Mokgoathleng claiming, “I’m told [Eudy] was a famous athlete” is incredible considering that Eudy played soccer, his favourite sport, on national and international level and serves as further evidence to the level of recognition—(un)seeing—that is afforded to black lesbian women, during life and death.²³⁰ Furthermore, speaking on his career and journey from the soccer bench to the legal bench, Mokgoathleng says whenever he convicts a criminal to a prison term, he always says: “Come back a better person... It’s a difficult equilibrium you must attain. The human empathy in you is there, although the law says the person has transgressed the laws of society.”²³¹ It is no wonder then that while passing the verdict at Simelane’s case, he expressed, “It’s painful to send a young person to jail,” speaking about then-24-year-old rapist and murderer Themba Mvubu, whom he jailed for life.²³²

I find Mokgoathleng’s statements intriguing because empathy was afforded to Themba simply for his youth while Eudy was the one who was stabbed 25 times by four men. Even by highlighting that it is the law that finds the person guilty and not necessarily the empathy that Mokgoathleng has for the victims, the judge reveals that Wynterian-McKttrickian “terrains of domination” are not unique to physical spatiality but extend even to the judiciary. Studying these cases reveals how the Rolls-Royce of constitutions is not enough to maintain black lesbian women’s social citizenship and spatialities, and that we are, in fact, “Mandela’s stepchildren” as Mark Gevisser proposed—often hypervisible yet unseen.

²³⁰ “Gang-Rape Killer” and Timothy Molobi, “Judge Ratha Mokgoathleng’s Journey from Football Star to the Bench,” *City Press*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/judge-ratha-mokgoathlengs-journey-from-football-star-to-the-bench-20190719>.

²³¹ Molobi, “Judge Ratha Mokgoathleng’s Journey.”

²³² “Gang-Rape Killer,” *Mail & Guardian*.

Laying to rest: A possible conclusion

It is significant that Busi Sigasa, who was the first person captured by Zanele Muholi in *Faces and Phases*, asked us to remember her when she is gone. Her words and poem are kept alive not only on her blog now, 15 years later, but they have also been immortalised in print through Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas' *Queer African Reader*, as well as Sarah Allen and Yasufumi Nakamori's collection *Zanele Muboli*.²³³ Busi Sigasa has been remembered and archived in her special kind of 'wall of remembrance' that Ivan Vladislavić's Jeff felt an urgency to create. The materiality of the past, felt in the present.

Our Ghosts Were Once People, Bongani Kona's edited collection of creative essays, poems, and short stories on dying and grief, gets its name from Jesmyn Ward's memoir of her brother who died along with four other men: "To say this is difficult is understatement; telling this story is the hardest thing I've done. But my ghosts were once people, and I cannot forget that."²³⁴ Journeying back to Kwa-Thema, to 2008, and talking about seeing ghosts is the hardest thing I've done. But, like Ward and all the contributors in Kona's collection, the spirits (in my case, of black lesbian women) around me remind me that they were once people. Significantly, disremembering them is an act of violence unto myself.

Edward Soja builds from Henri Lefebvre's work in "expanding geographical imagination" to produce what I have argued is the trialectic of historicity, spatiality, and sociality that is so implicit in the geographic knowledges of black lesbian women and how we move in this world, particularly from sites of massacre.²³⁵ For researchers like me who need to "traverse sexualised terrains that simultaneously present pleasure and danger," such as Kwa-Thema (and the academy that requires us to perform intelligence), we will require something new in discipline yet adaptable: epistemologies that were previously untapped, such as the (African) spiritual, which has become subalternised and rendered hostage by disciplinary and disciplinarian knowledges.²³⁶ As I explained in my note on autoethnography and affective research as lived methodologies, the purpose of my autoethnographic study is to follow a deeply reflexive process—a process of connection-making between my body, my personal traumatic experience and recall, and the spiritual that leads me to

²³³ Busisiwe Sigasa, "Remember Me When I'm Gone," in *Queer African Reader*, eds. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Dakar, Nairobi, and Oxford: Pambazuka Press), 440–442; and Busi Sigasa, "Remember Me When I'm Gone," in Zanele Muholi, eds. Sarah Allen and Yasufumi Nakamori (London: Tate Publishing, 2020), 75.

²³⁴ Bongani Kona, *Our Ghosts Were Once People: Stories on Death and Dying* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2021) x.

²³⁵ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996):7.

²³⁶ Zethu Matebeni, "TRACKS," 54.

new imaginaries. The Sojan Thirdspace, as I use it, is about creating new possibilities through embodied connection-making.

Thinking trialectically is a necessary part of understanding Thirdspace as a limitless composition of lifeworlds that are radically open and openly radicalizable; that are all-inclusive and transdisciplinary in scope yet politically focused and susceptible to strategic choice; that are never completely knowable but whose knowledge none the less guides our search for emancipatory change and freedom from domination. Trialectical thinking is difficult, for it challenges all conventional modes of thought and taken-for-granted epistemologies. It is disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving, unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions.²³⁷

With Thirdspace, I propose an alternative regime of care for the absented presence of black lesbian women: witnessing. It is for the simple yet powerful act of being witnessed that the spirits have come to me.

In a world where Kwa-Thema had its first Pride protest in 2009 following Eudy Simelane and Girlie Nkosi's murders, and Gugulethu had its first after Zoliswa Nkonyana's murder in 2006, and where Napo and Mimi's imagined wedding in *No Easter Sunday for Queers* takes place after the couple and the church have encountered the ghost of Ruth—speaking openly about her murder—what possibilities we have for arriving at joy come after the act of witnessing, of seeing ghosts.²³⁸

~~On the wall in the living room of Ayanda Magoloza and Nhlanhla Moremi's home hangs a framed photograph of the pair, foreheads touching as though they are about to kiss, taken by Muholi on their wedding day in Thokoza, East Rand.²³⁹~~

~~When asked, "What would you like to read about in the mainstream?" Kwa-Thema resident and journalist Lerato Dumse answers, "Not even read, even when seeing, you know. I'd like to see an advert of a family where it's the mother and the mother and the baby, you know, and they're fighting germs in the household. It shouldn't only be about the violence and the homophobia."²⁴⁰~~

As Gordon explains, "ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer contained or repressed or blocked from view. In other words, haunting is a way we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, interfering with

²³⁷ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 70.

²³⁸ Bryston, "Only a Matter of Time"

²³⁹ "Township Life of LGBTIs," *Mail & Guardian*

²⁴⁰ Muholi and Goldsmid, *Difficult Love*, Lerato Dumse, 7:28.

us and with the systems of repression that produce concealment and blockage.”²⁴¹ The violence of suppressing (of absenting) has kept itself alive by morphing into something slightly less tangible. Where the threat on black lesbian women’s bodies was immediate, physical, sexual, and resulting in a massacre in the mid-2000s, a decade later, the threat is more implicit—carried and facilitated by the church and religious fundamentalism, in the negation of crimes as hateful, and in the functions of the vicarious trauma that fuels the fears of living young black lesbian women. This thesis is the “something-to-be-done” that resulted from the haunting of Eudy Simelane that I experienced at the LBQ Conference in 2019. This project is the Gordonic emergent state of seeing, of tilling the soil.

I am wary of invoking ancestors not only in a way where they are spoken about without care but also in a way that allows them to not rest, that requires them to enter into further unrest. I am wary of asking them to “rest in power”. In practicing Wanelisa Xaba’s ancestral consent, I am wary of un-resting the matriarchs who have contributed to my particular matriarchive and geographic knowledges as a black lesbian woman scholar who grew up in Kwa-Thema. In a significant way then, this project is my mother’s house.

In *Our Ghosts Were Once People*, Toni Stuart writes:

the spine against which i grew my spine is now ash
i have not yet turned myself into a home
for another spine to grow against death
is how i learn to be a woman²⁴²

Arriving at joy (the Thirdspace kicked open by imagining) for me in this body with its particular historicalities, socialities, and spatialities means considering myself and my work as a home where I can lay my ghosts to rest. It means asking the spirits I sit with as I write this project to rest gently in the soil I have tilled for them. Like Lefebvre and Soja believe, “there are no ‘conclusions’ that are also not ‘openings’.”²⁴³ In this ‘undisciplined/ill-disciplined’ academic project, I understand that haunting is about endings that are not over. These considerations are ‘conclusions’ that are in a present continuous state. So, for me, as a black woman in the academy

²⁴¹ Gordon, Hite, and Jara, “Haunting and Thinking from the Utopian Margins,” 339.

²⁴² Toni Giselle Stuart, “we become women when our mothers die”, in *Our Ghosts Were Once People*, ed. Bongani Kona (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2021). 209.

²⁴³ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 9.

who identifies as lesbian, remembering means to keep arriving at a space I could perhaps one day call joy.

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ⁱ For the purposes of this project, based primarily on a specific demographic in the specific site of Kwa-Thema, Springs, I use the term ‘black’ instead of the capitalised version ‘Black’, which is connotative of the Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1960s in South Africa.

ⁱⁱ As inspired by a class I took for the coursework component of this master’s project, exploring Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” and “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event” with Dr. Peter Anderson.

ⁱⁱⁱ This clause, “The body is our first primary text”, is credited to Noluthando Mpho (Jupiter) Sibisi, with whom I had a conversation that inspired this autoethnographic position.

^{iv} Largely attributed to second-wave white feminist Carol Hanisch in the late 1960s and re-imagined by black feminists Angela Davis and bell hooks. See J. Oloka-Onyango and Sylvia Tamale’s “‘The Personal Is Political,’ and Why Women’s Rights Are Indeed Human Rights: An African Perspective on International Feminism,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 17, no.4 (November 1995): 691–731.

^v I am indebted to my co-authors, dear friends, and intellectual community at the Young Women’s Leadership Project at UCT, who, under the gentle guidance of Jan-Louise Lewin, created an environment where we could collectively ponder on “our lived experiences and intersectional identities as young Black women to make sense of the question: What is Blackwomanhood?” in the 2019 *Agenda* article, which led me to deepen the autoethnographic investigations explored in this project.

^{vi} I use the word ‘lesbian’ as an adjective, hence my use of the term ‘lesbian woman’, since ‘lesbian’ is a descriptor and not (always) a standalone noun. Furthermore, persons identifying as lesbian could also identify as gender non-binary or -conforming (like Bev Ditsie and Zanele Muholi), bigender, agender, transwomen, or ciswomen.

^{vii} I use the word ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for any person identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual (and bicurious), transgender, queer (and questioning), intersex, asexual (and aromantic), and “+”, denoting other sexual identities such as pansexual, omnisexual, demisexual, bigender, agender. However, I use the word ‘queer’ with the understanding that this word was not (and to a large extent, is still not) widely used or recognised in South African townships such as Kwa-Thema, particularly in the period studied and referenced in this project. See Zethu Matebeni’s “How NOT to Write About Queer South Africa” for a deeper, insightful analysis.

^{viii} ‘Bonding’ is a term used to denote hair extensions or weaves.

^{ix} See the trailer for *A Man of Good Hope*, the theatrical production, on Leon van Zyl’s (The Baxter Theatre’s Sales and Digital Marketing Manager) YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZBo_S3Rro. This musical adaptation was a joint project by Young Vic, the Royal Opera House, and the Isango Ensemble, directed by Mark Dornford-May, and with music directed by Pauline Malefane and Mandisi Dyantyi.

^x I remember the distinct jump in both the level of engagement as well as the range of the increasingly important and critical race studies between undergraduate and postgraduate courses and seminars, and I credit my ability to engage on a deeper, more fulfilling level when I arrived at postgraduate level to Daniela’s, as well as another significantly influential mentor Dr. Khwezi Mkhize’s, insistence on sharing this work with younger students like me.

^{xi} See David Pallister’s article on how Oppenheimer, an “Industrial baron whose diamond and coal mines stoked the economic engine driving apartheid” represented the political party of General Jan Smuts, pioneer of and the person who coined the term ‘apartheid’, and took over the De Beers diamond company, which was founded by chief coloniser and imperialist of the African continent, Cecil John Rhodes.

^{xii} This term, “tilling the soil”, is credited to the brilliant Saskia Wolfaardt, MA Clin Psych (UP) who shared it with me in October 2021 while discussing the ways in which anxiety, trauma, and depression function and ask to be held.

^{xiii} Wanelisa Xaba credits this term to an uncited fellow feminist thinker at Berkley University.

^{xiv} Dr. Gideon Nomdo is the academic coordinator of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship at UCT. As a Mellon fellow, I was introduced to this concept by Gideon (presented in his PhD dissertation).

^{xv} In the Christian Bible, Saul was a famed and zealous persecutor of Christians. He was converted when God, appearing with a flashing light from Heaven, asked him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Saul’s name then changed to Paul as he became the highly influential Apostle Paul, believed to have written about 13 of the 27 books of the Bible (see Acts 9:1–19).

^{xvi} During some Pentecostal or charismatic church services, you may find some people who will feel the need to stand up at some point in the sermon to show concession with or praise and admiration at particular points that the speaker is making.

^{xvii} Take, for example, the most unfortunate case of people who follow without question pseudo-prophets like Shepherd Bushiri and Penuel Mnguni, who urged his congregation to eat rats and serpents and drink petrol in a manipulated literal interpretation of Scripture. See coverage by BBC News’ Pumza Fihlani and *IOL News*’ Goitsewang Tlhabye.

^{xviii} Gérard Genette defines paratext as “those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader.”

^{xix} In the poem, Putuma mentions receiving a WhatsApp message from a friend asking if she is going to Zero21, which is a queer club.

^{xx} By personal correspondence with Nick Shepherd.

^{xxi} See Zethu Matebeni’s collection *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism* for a deeper discussion on the ways in which queer people’s citizenship is perceived and (re)claimed, as well as Deborah Posel’s “reflections on the politics of sexuality and nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa”.

^{xxii} Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn’s *Performing Queer*, as well as Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa’s *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, offers keen insight into the performativity of gender by black lesbian women in South Africa, particularly the pieces by Cheryl-Ann Potgieter and Busi Kheswa and Saskia Wieringa, respectively.