

**Activism in Unsympathetic Environments:
Queer Black Authors' Responses to Local
Histories of Oppression**

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Jewel Lashelle Williams
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Abstract

Queer black authors use locality as a strategy for incorporating difference into the definitions of a national or communal identity. Rather than universalizing the concept of tolerance or assimilating into hateful practices, these writers respond to anti-gay atmospheres by positioning themselves and other LGBT black citizens as integral to nation-building efforts. This conscious attempt to empower the minority makes the texts activist in nature. Furthermore, the activist effects of these literatures complement advocacy groups that strive to support LGBT populations in the same areas. Tendai Huchu's *Hairdresser of Harare* (Zimbabwe), Nkunzi Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* (South Africa), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (America), and Dee Rees' film *Pariah* (America) serve as examples of various modes of this literary activism. The intellectual goal for this project is to destabilize the normative victim narrative attached to most analyses of queer black literature and to understand the agency that accompanies racial and sexual representations.

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Introduction

Positioning Authorship: Literary Activism and Queers of Color

Although perhaps uncommon, I will begin with the overarching thesis of this dissertation: Queer black authors incorporate, and manipulate, particular local histories into their works in order to insert the gay black body into conceptions of the communal identity. Because *localizing* the argument for LGBT inclusion (rather than *universalizing* the concept of acceptance) acts as the most effective tactic for challenging national anti-gay sentiments, the strategies of historical manipulation vary depending on the location, gender, and activist-leanings of the author. Furthermore, the activist effects of these literatures complement the advocacy organizations that strive to support the LGBT populations in the same geographical areas. To provide the evidence that grounds this thesis, I consider three works produced and set within three different regions: Tendai Huchu's *Hairdresser of Harare* (Zimbabwe), Nkunzi Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* (South Africa), and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (United States). The intellectual goal for this project is to shift queer black conversations away from Western/white-based observations on the how or why of homophobia (especially on the African continent) and towards the ways in which authors respond to their perceived circumstances of LGBT/gender/race-based oppression. This shift will allow for a more fruitful and productive dialogue about anti-gay atmospheres found in different nations by deconstructing established hierarchies and thus allowing for a wider variety of critical voices on the matter.

I want to begin with clarifying certain terms that will appear throughout this work: anti-gay, atmosphere, and response. Anti-gay sentiments are complex surroundings that affect LGBT individuals on a daily basis and on varying levels. My own definition of anti-gay refers to exclusionary practices and beliefs that reduce the quality of life for any non-normative

individual. The term includes both male and female members of the LGBT group, although I do acknowledge the gendered implications of the reference. If desired, one can imagine anti-lesbian or anti-queer as appropriate synonyms throughout this project in order to more succinctly cover the communities that face rejection. I do not use the word “cis-heteronormative” to discuss those with prejudices because the normative population doesn’t inherently mean that they hold anti-gay beliefs. Additionally, some homosexuals may also hold hostility toward other members of the LGBT group (or even toward themselves). Furthermore, anti-homosexual beliefs and actions manifest in several realms.

Anti-gay beliefs are fostered by public and private spheres that introduce, encourage, and validate homophobia through paths such as familial ties, religious affiliations, and preferred news stations. This birthing and parenting of identity-based bias generate what I call an atmosphere—integrated routes of oppression. And this climate both affects and reacts to LGBT individuals.¹ In other words, just as these aspects—religion, politics, social norms—silence and undermine queer citizens, homosexual community members also have the power to manipulate and subvert those systems. This agency to fight back serves as the foundation of this dissertation. I explore the ways in which gay and lesbian citizens respond to and destabilize beliefs and practices.

The reaction-based objective of this project answers Herman Gray’s call for new strategies that analyze how representation can do social and political work that challenges preconceived notions of a community.² The focus on *response* allows for a conversation about activism. I emphasize the word and process of *response* because, in the words of Herman Gray,

¹ I use “climate” as a synonym for atmosphere throughout this project.

² Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 4.

“we are experiencing a ‘waning’ in what cultural politics of representation can yield.”³ So instead of overly-concerning myself with black and queer subjectivity, I assess the ways in which writers resist or correct oppressive systems. In fact, I hold that LGBT depictions as well as the analytical lens used to dissect them often falls within the confines of a victim narrative. I will show later, through Zethu Matebeni, Chimamanda Adichie, and bell hooks, why this singularly negative track damages the populations needing assistance. While I will contextualize racial constructions later in this project, this dissertation focuses more on how writers advocate for themselves by reconfiguring their local histories. Ultimately, I aim to side-step the analysis of how the authors construct their queer black selves and focus more on the moves made in the works that criticize and correct socio-political anti-gay, anti-black attitudes. This necessity accounts for the purposeful incorporation of locality.

To further iterate how writers position queer black bodies in local anti-gay circumstances, I observe how queer black authors engage in various forms of histories, especially because history often serves exclusionary purposes in a number of countries. This project investigates the ways in which literature employs history-based discourse—often used by governmental/communal leaders and some members of the general population to marginalize the LGBT community—in order to, as Rinaldo Walcott aptly states, “allow for different ways of cohering into some form of recognizable entity.”⁴ Unlike Walcott’s claims for diasporic readings, I do not employ global conceptions of blackness when assessing literary responses. In fact, part of my claim is that a national analysis is required for communal integration, especially when the diaspora is seen as an offense (as I will show in later chapters). I examine how queer

³ Herman Gray, “Subject(ed) to Recognition,” 771.

⁴ Rinaldo Walcott, “Outside in Black Studies,” 93. *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology*, eds E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.

black writers in America, South Africa, and Zimbabwe use history tropes to renegotiate the (often inferior and thus invisible) place held by the queer black body. In other words, I explore how writers use anti-gay contexts to authenticate and empower gay black subjects as productive members of society. Queer black authors incorporate remnants of their local contexts into their works in order to subvert those systems that are working against their queer identity. Tendai Huchu integrates national histories into his fiction; Nkunzi Nkabinde's memoir encompasses South African spiritual and political histories; Jewelle Gomez's novel includes African-American literary and social history. These authors reconstruct and redefine histories alongside LGBT characters in order to challenge attitudes against homosexuality. This project thus questions positionality: How do authors translate various histories? Why reformulate these particular histories? How do authors position the queer black body in relation to these histories? What effects do these positionalities produce? How do these literary strategies differ according to region? according to literary genre? according to the gender of the writer and/or fictional character? Ultimately, this project inquires into how queer black authors use the tool of literature to locally diagnose and prospectively treat a possibly oppressive situation.⁵

For the past few decades, analyses of queer black authors and their works have focused on identity-based constructions in the representations and on the systems that operate against the black homosexual. Scholarship concerning hostile environments for LGBT individuals in African nations as well as those from the African diaspora includes: 1) socio-political projects that explain cultural/historical systems in an effort to reverse Western/white-import arguments about the source of queerness, and 2) humanities-based projects that involve readings of queer

⁵ I hold that this dissertation localizes the investigation because I only bring in authors who were born and raised in the same country featured in their novels. I do recognize the complexities of this statement as Tendai Huchu no longer permanently lives in Zimbabwe.

novels to clarify constructions of the gay self in order to inspire sympathetic understanding of the queer individual.⁶ The anthropological investigations by Africanists such as Marc Epprecht and Neville Hoad act as prime examples of the first category.⁷ Epprecht and Hoad's works are vital in the construction of the academic field of African queer sexualities. Their projects have contextualized the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial conditions under which non-heteronormative citizens exist. Unfortunately, many scholars and public officials (both within African and Western nations) discount such projects because Epprecht and Hoad are white Western males, a fact that plays neatly into the assumption of homosexuality being a Western import. Nonetheless, the goals of this dissertation borrow Epprecht and Hoad's aspiration of theorizing strategies for improving conditions that may act as a barrier for minority populations.

Additionally, scholars such as Chantal Zabus and Brenna Munro research the development of queer literature in African nations, focusing on how literary depictions have changed over time.⁸ For instance, Zabus demonstrates how authors from Sub-Saharan Africa depict queerness as an identity, starting from the mid-19th century up through the first decade of the 21st century. She argues that homosexuality was first thought of, by non-heteronormative citizens, as a practice or ritual in which they would engage. It is only with the advent of queer theory that literature from southern African begins to portray homosexual acts and feelings as an essential self. This argument acts as further evidence for Joseph Massad's "gay international," a theory of hegemonizing identity construction as I will explain in chapter one. This dissertation begins from the acknowledgement that many citizens may take this knowledge of postcolonial

⁶ The "Western-import" argument seen in some African nations manifests as "white-import" in the African American communities.

⁷ See Epprecht's *Hungochani*, *Heterosexual Africa*, and *Unspoken Facts*; See Hoad's *African Intimacies* and *Sex and Politics*.

⁸ See Chantal Zabus' *Out in Africa* and Brenna Munro's "Queer Futures."

manipulation and use the concept to further silence and erase their black gay/lesbian community members. Beginning with analysis of how the queer black authors are minoritized in their respective areas, this project expands this conversation to consider how these writers attempt to change those conditions through their responsive literatures. This lens decenters Western assumptions of socio-political atmospheres in black contexts by focusing on the changes that artists suggest instead of using universal ideologies about human rights to recommend societal acceptance. My reading of queer black literature widens these analyses by investigating how the writers bring commonly excluded homosexual populations back into communal conversations about social citizenship. I shift the focus from literary and societal productions of queerness to literary deconstructions of those stereotypical constructions. Additionally, literary assessments of homosexuality as it interacts with history allow us to see how writers repurpose previously exclusionary discourses. I use established analyses from Black Queer Studies (BQS) and Queer of Color Critique (QCC) scholars in order to achieve this goal.

Black Queer Studies acts as a foundational lens through which I analyze the texts in this dissertation because my interest lies in the effects of literary and visual representations. Previously separate academic endeavors, queer theory and critical race theory have finally come together in the last two decades to assess the life experiences and representations of LGBT people of color. The fusion of the two areas stemmed from the gap in either field to account for black gays and lesbians whose identities fell into both categories—i.e, assessing gay African-Americans as either black or gay, making each group mutually exclusive. This project aligns with Dwight McBride’s claim that the academic study of either group, but especially of African-American culture, condones a homogeneous categorization of identity “at the expense of other

critical forms of difference.”⁹ Indeed, my analyses ultimately emphasize the need to expand views of what constitutes blackness. Marlon Riggs, in his film *Black is...Black Ain't*, also discusses this identitarian separation, how it reflects cultural attitudes and affects those who must choose to sporadically ignore sexuality or race.¹⁰ As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson note in the introduction to their inaugural Black Queer Studies anthology, the field’s “objective is to build a bridge and negotiate a space of inquiry between [black studies and queer studies] while sabotaging neither and enabling both.”¹¹ Although the editors note a prevalence of interdisciplinary approaches throughout the collection’s contributors, they also acknowledge a purposeful separation from the social sciences that “have often been antagonistic toward African American culture.”¹² The amalgamation of the two fields is rooted in humanities and American-based research and scholars—although later anthologies include more scholarship on and by Africans and the diaspora.¹³ BQS invests its research in how blackness and queerness intersect and the effects that that formulated juncture has on the surrounding contexts of social justice—effects such as questioning preconceived notions about black gay individuals as well as bringing attention to how identities interconnect. The field finds power in the “recognition of the relationships between sexual and racial oppression” and identity formation.¹⁴

With this thread in mind, the purpose undergirding the literary readings within the BQS frameworks manifests as an attempt to “theorize black queer subjectivity.”¹⁵ This means that

⁹ Dwight McBride, “Straight Black Studies,” 72. *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology*, ed E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.

¹⁰ See Marlon Riggs’ *Black is...Black Ain't* for more on the exclusion of the black queer from both black America and queer America.

¹¹ E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 1.

¹² E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 2.

¹³ See Rinaldo Walcott’s “Outside in Black Studies” for more on the need to break out of the national boundaries of consideration when using the black queer studies lens.

¹⁴ E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 6.

¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson, *No Tea, No Shade*, 3.

most (not all) of the essays written by the major BQS scholars in the field follow a “know thyself” trend that focuses mainly on the representation and construction of the black/queer self in cultural texts. For instance, in her exploration of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Mae Henderson argues that Baldwin must “perform racial drag” in order to “come to terms with his own homosexuality.”¹⁶ I would actually very much agree with her analysis of him having to dismiss his blackness in order to explore his queerness. However, in addition to self-construction, I would emphasize how this racial erasure acts as a very particular response to his black community’s exclusionary attitudes towards homosexuality. So that although Baldwin’s work does “challenge dominant understandings of what constitutes African American literature,” I also see his work as an admonishment of his racial contemporaries for forcing him to adopt white skin as a means of engaging in certain topics.¹⁷

I find that the BQS analytic allows for a positive focus on the doubly or triply marginalized individual—including an investigation into the particularities of oppression as well as the distinctiveness of identity construction (much like the work of Chantal Zabus). For instance, Rinaldo Walcott traces the death thematic incorporated into the structure of the black/queer self as it stems from the trauma of the Middle Passage.¹⁸ Walcott illustrates that death pervades black history and culture and must therefore be considered in the analysis of black/queer life experiences. The Black Queer Studies lens offers an understanding of queer black subjectivity that is crucial to any form of analysis that concerns that population.

With that said, Queer of Color Critique (QCC) also operates in my considerations of the texts. QCC acts as the model behind my analysis of the political and social environments against

¹⁶ Mae Henderson, “James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*,” *Black Queer Studies*, 320.

¹⁷ Dwight McBride, “Straight Black Studies,” 82. *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology*, ed E.Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.

¹⁸ Rinaldo Walcott, *Queer Returns*.

which these authors are writing. With the publication of his *Aberrations in Black* in 2005, Roderick Ferguson developed the beginning of another critical lens through which scholars can examine the black/gay community. *Queer of Color Critique* is a sociological assessment of black gay individuals and experiences that, as Johnson put it in the introduction to his updated BQS compilation, “complements very nicely the work in BQS.”¹⁹ In fact, Roderick Ferguson contributed an essay in the original BQS collection. While BQS strives to bridge racial and sexual conversations, QCC aspires to connect racial and national productions by “challenging ideologies of discreteness and disturbing the idea that racial and national formations are obviously disconnected.”²⁰ Ferguson claims that although scholars often explore African-American culture as separate from national ideals of normativity, the marginalized actually assists society in building and achieving that insistence on homogeneity. This means that investigating racial constructions offers an understanding of national productions and vice versa. As Ferguson explains, “understanding the drag-queen prostitute means that we must locate her within a [national] mode of production that fosters her own formation.”²¹ Indeed, identities are not formed in a vacuum, the self is a complex phenomenon that is nurtured by several different spheres. Therefore, this project recognizes the role that nation plays in the development of epistemologies that lend itself to rejecting non-normative practices and individuals. However, I do not assume that the self is the nation or vice versa. Instead, my analysis relies on acknowledging the participation of individuals in governmental environments as well as the ways in which political/social domains affect the lives of its citizens. For instance, Jose Esteban Munoz theorizes identity-composition through the concept of disidentification—that queers of

¹⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, *No Tea, No Shade*, 1.

²⁰ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 4.

²¹ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 11.

color perform disidentification as a “ survival strategy in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the normative citizenship.”²² According to Munoz’s arguments, the queer (wo)man is not simply acted upon by oppressive, often governmental and social, systems but also actively engage with the realms that reject zir.²³ I agree with this constant interchange between the queer citizen and his/her nation. However, I’m looking specifically at how these engagements, or responses, manifest through literary creations.

I argue that local incorporations in these novels rely on using one’s black/queer self, or other formations of identity, to deconstruct anti-gay conceptions of national and social citizenship. While BQS assists in the exploring how LGBT black authors construct and position black queerness in marginalizing local domains, QCC helps in assessing how black queer authors/characters demonstrate the ways in which anti-gay systems exclude the black/queer person. To be clear, BQS shows the oppressed subject and their experiences and positions while QCC analyzes the non-linear mechanisms of subjugation. I bring the two together to demonstrate that authors are responding to their local oppressive environments by revealing and correcting their societies’ anti-homosexual attitudes. Building themselves as queer and black is not the goal of these authors. Instead their objective is to hold a mirror up to the hateful culture and offer strategies for correcting harmful behaviors and beliefs. In order to demonstrate the connection between these authors and their anti-gay contexts, I position the writers as arbitrators of local history.

History is a very complex term as the academic field has shifted both in scope and practice (such that one “does” history or historicizes). I am not so bold as to suggest that this

²² Jose Munoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

²³ Please note that I use zir as a gender neutral pronoun.

project falls within this field. However, a large portion of this literary endeavor relies upon certain assumptions about its academic and popular formulations. First and foremost, this dissertation adheres to the notion that history is an inherently literary phenomenon; not as purely fictive accounts but instead as an activity involving calculated interpretations and imaginations that shift with each historian.²⁴ Indeed, Donnelly and Norton comment on the biased nature of historical accounts in their *doing history*:

Another aspiration of historians has been to serve current political or ideological interests—most obviously in providing an agreed picture of a shared past for projects of nation building or the configuration of a national identity. All historians are ideological in the sense that they provide a view of the world and a perspective on what we should know about that world. This is why the kind of history that is taught within national educational systems, or the kind of historical research that attracts national research funding, has political implications.²⁵

This dissertation opens up Donnelly’s use of the term “historian” to account for the public. In this project, political leaders are historians, novelists are historians, citizens of the nation are historians. In other words, everyone tells a story about the past. These individuals use history to serve their (usually) political purpose. Their “kind of history” paints a picture of how they conceive of themselves as citizens.

Additionally, I add race to Donnelly’s assertion of nation building so that it is not about being a Zimbabwean but instead about being a *black* Zimbabwean. These histories shift according to racial identity as can be seen in the various archival accounts of the slave trade;

²⁴ Donnelly points out the “unsuccessful attempt to sever historiography from its literary or rhetorical roots” [91].

²⁵ Donnelly and Norton, *doing history*, 13.

some tales sympathize with white identity while others build a common black identity.²⁶ Alongside the evident literary focus, while properly trained historians choose their focus on a particular type of history, this project resists a narrowed application of one type of history. In other words, the featured writers use the particular types of histories that they feel best stimulate queer conversations. For instance, while Tendai Huchu uses political history to his literary purpose, Nkunzi Nkabinde chooses spiritual history against which to position the queer self. Furthermore, Jewelle Gomez revises social and literary history as a way to intervene into exclusionary customs in black society. For this reason, I do not center this dissertation on a single history because that focus does not apply to all of the works treated in the analyses. This academic endeavor, then, keeps a broad reference toward history, albeit writing more explicitly of specific histories when approaching the novels in the chapters.²⁷ The authors in this project bring in allusions to various forms of history but always position a queer character in relation to these particular histories. The relationship between the two inspires this project.

History works as a trope within the novels in this manuscript in order to shift ownership of a constructed history away from solely heteronormative masses and towards a national public—so that both heterosexual and homosexual blacks share a history. I would argue that racialized movements such as *Négritude*, Pan-Africanism, and Black Power hold the common thread of an uncritical, rose-colored pride—in that the focus on the value of the black race often

²⁶ In fact, Donnelly posits that “all history writing relates to questions of power” (135). Indeed, Museveni’s version of history emphasizes an uncolonized pure Africa resisting neocolonial powers. Authors in this project position the queer black body in relation to outside powers (social, political, spiritual, etc)—giving that body more agency against (within) those powers.

²⁷ Please forgive the constant use of the overly-generative word “history.” Although I do keep the language of “a past” because of its subjectivity and multiplicity. I will refrain from using assumed synonyms such as “the past” because this interchange would be inaccurate. In his review of Donnelly and Norton’s text, Alun Munslow mentions that “distinguishing ‘the past’ from ‘history’ is basic” practice (283). Indeed, I am not speaking of the actual past when I speak of historical allusions in these novels. I also do not believe that the authors speak of the actual past; for the past is never truly captured. Donnelly states that “the ideal of describing the past ‘as it was’ always remain beyond reach” (55).

undermined problematic instances in the black community.²⁸ Investment in the “motherland” stood at the center of these movements. And even today, this “motherland” is often conceptualized not as a hybridized Africa but instead as a past, pre-colonial and thus untainted Africa.²⁹ This untarnished Africa then becomes the Africa without homosexuals. Tellingly, Nkunzi Nkabinde recognizes this anti-gay tactic and therefore effectively places queerness back into the pre-colonial picture of Africa by using history as a literary thematic (as I will explore in chapter 2).

Furthermore, in order to show how the texts in this project operate as activist efforts, I compare the authors and their works to advocacy organizations in the same locale. I put Tendai Huchu’s Zimbabwean novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, in conversation with the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) group, one of the most active and well-known organizations in the country. I connect Nkunzi Nkabinde’s South African memoir, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*, to the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) with which Nkabinde works to collect ethnographic narratives. And I link Jewelle Gomez’s *Gilda Stories* to the advocacy organization that she helped to create, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD). I compare the goals and strategies behind both literature and advocacy in each chapter—accomplished by analyzing explicitly stated objectives as well as implications behind implemented programs and campaigns—in order to assess how they supplement each other. Additionally, I demonstrate that the authors’ investment in and integration of local issues inherently create literatures that are activist in nature because advocacy groups engage in a similar tactic. In fact, as Josephine Ho

²⁸ All of these movements were against colonialism and oppression and thus encouraged black people to think differently from the oppressors. Brotherhood was imperative and pride was pertinent in understanding the power and rights of one’s race. Aimé Césaire theorized a model that placed power in black skin. Marcus Garvey, a Pan-Africanist, sponsored ships to take African Americans back to Africa. Black Power encouraged natural hair to keep one’s roots instead of trying to mimic the look of white people’s hair and their concept of beauty.

²⁹ See Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* for the theory behind a hybridized Africa.

explains in her book chapter focused on the global consequences of queer activism, “local queer activism increasingly needs to reflect upon its own making and *draw upon the socio-cultural specificities* that make up its vitality.”³⁰ In order to effectively challenge and possibly change anti-gay atmospheres, social advocates must consider and implement the cultural and social particularities of the places in which the organizations function.

Besides a common thread of having queer black authors, the literature in this project all have clear incorporations of local symbols. Universal calls for social inclusion often produce counterproductive results, as local populations can often argue that their ideas are imports of hegemonic forces. Just as Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Wallace observe in their *Mobile Homecoming*, the “designation of safe space changes based on the local co-organizers in the cities and their definition of safe space based on the history of that community.”³¹ Safety for black queer individuals, and thus the ways of securing it, must adapt according to both location and historicized contexts. This finding validates why the novels in this manuscript avoid universal arguments for social justice and instead advocate for black gays and lesbians by maneuvering through the particular social environment in which the marginalized population must live. Advocacy organizations and activist literatures, although both aspiring for social change by focusing on local conditions, often use different means. While advocacy groups inform communities on the struggle and ultimate humanity of black LGBT individuals in hopes of gaining sympathy, the literary activism seen in the novels of this project attacks *how* readers know the gay subject as well as their relationship with a common history. In other words, literary

³⁰ Josephine Ho, “Localized Trajectories of Queerness and Activism,” 121. Italics added.

³¹ A. P. Gumbs and J. R. Wallace, “Something Else to Be,” 392. *No Tea No Shade*, ed E. Patrick Johnson.

activism steps beyond representing the individual—the foundation of advocacy—by exposing and correcting the systems that produce the knowledge about marginalized individuals.³²

Finally, before moving into the chapter previews that will include the particular social environments against which the authors are writing, I must also iterate that the goal of this project is not to assess the level of homophobia in African nations or the diaspora. I am not interested in proving that black attitudes toward the queer body should be deemed homophobic. Similarly, this project does not assess how or why these attitudes came about. There is simply no space to cover such a topic. While I discuss the terminology for queer persons and acts in respective areas when appropriate, I cannot cover the extent to which conceptualizations of queerness shift according to the geographical area.

Zimbabwe

The first chapter of this project investigates Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010) and its implications on the anti-gay atmospheres within the Zimbabwean context. I feature this novel mainly because of the narrative choice to center a female heterosexual in the story. Because of this decision, I see a shift in audiences and effects—Huchu intervenes in anti-gay atmospheres by employing a normative black Zimbabwean citizen. The novel follows Vimbai, the best stylist in the city. One day a charming young man, Dumisani, secures a position as a stylist in her salon and quickly exceeds her in popularity among clients. At first at odds with the young man, Vimbai slowly becomes friends and then hopeful lovers with Dumi. After moving in together for some time, Vimbai suddenly learns that Dumi is gay and takes steps to report him. However, after seeing the damage, she decides instead to help him emigrate.

³² These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. I am aware that some advocacy organizations attempt to attack epistemological issues of the anti-gay masses. I want to suggest, however, that the groups' attempts at this area are not quite as effective as literary attempts.

Tendai Huchu creates an affective relationship in the form of intuition as a means of destabilizing preconceived notions of black queerness. The intuition featured in the novel operates alongside the political history of Zimbabwean identity, including the Rhodesian war and anti-gay statements by Robert Mugabe. This tension culminates in a less-than-optimal end for Dumi but a cognitive shift in Vimbai's conception of queerness. Instead of using solely Western scholars who define intuition, I implement a combination of sources in an attempt to theorize Vimbai's ultimate change of heart. I use Shona theories of personal relationships, conceptions of intuitive knowledge, as well as (African-) American practices and experiences concerning non-material racial and sexual subjugation in order to argue for feeling as a legitimate path for attaining knowledge strong enough to challenge other social ideals. In the specific analysis of Vimbai supporting Dumi's escape, I focus on Shona-based manifestations and understandings of *hunhu/ubuntu*. Huchu does not explicitly divulge the ethnic origin of Vimbai or Dumi, but there are several hints that Vimbai is Shona. First and foremost, there are non-English words throughout the story. For instance, from the very beginning Vimbai recounts a customer saying "*makadini henyu*" as she enters the salon.³³ Considering that readers see, hear, and understand everything through Vimbai, this suggests that Vimbai understands the language of these words. Secondly, Vimbai explains cultural habits of the Shona. She states that the differentiate between good and bad areas, "we *Shonarize* these names."³⁴ The use of the collective "we" as well as knowledge of how and why the names are changed implies that Vimbai belongs to that ethnic category. Finally, the Shona is the "largest ethnic grouping" in Zimbabwe which suggests that the likelihood of Vimbai belonging to this category is high.³⁵ This novel shows that the

³³ Tendai Huchu, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, 5. Original Italics.

³⁴ Tendai Huchu, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, 10. Original Italics.

³⁵ Fainos Mangena, "Shona Epistemology and Plato's Divided Line," 66.

interactions between history (manifested through Vimbai) and queerness (Dumi) activate a discord between believed facts—what the reader or character may already know—and queer portrayals. This dissonance forces the character into an attempt to understand the disconnect. This is not to say that the epistemological tensions can be remanufactured or even purely defined, but I believe that the cognitive conflict itself may be the goal of that relationship. The writer creates a dialogue that forces mental negotiations but resists simple answers. The intuitive relationship produced by Vimbai’s engagement with Dumi unsettles her cognitive positioning of the queer black body.

The educational programs and events put forth by GALZ, the most well-known LGBT advocacy organization in Zimbabwe, further highlight the promising effects that Huchu’s more affective approach have on contemporary beliefs against black gays.³⁶ For instance, the “skills for life” self-development series from GALZ significantly supplement Huchu’s literary goals as the service provides “short vocational training courses which improve chances of finding employment in the formal sector.”³⁷ The site lists economic circumstances as playing a vital role in family reconciliation, stating that a LGBT person is “less likely to be evicted from home if they are income generators.”³⁸ Positioning the LGBT individual as the financial support for a family, even for a family that would otherwise reject him/her, repositions the queer body as an important aspect of familial unit which works against the concept of LGBT persons being antithetical to family. Therefore, both GALZ and Huchu’s novel reorganize conceptions of the queer citizen in Zimbabwe.

³⁶ See GALZ.org.

³⁷ GALZ, “Skills for Life/ Safety Net,” <https://galz.org/skills-for-lifesafety-net/>.

³⁸ GALZ, “Skills for Life/ Safety Net,” <https://galz.org/skills-for-lifesafety-net/>.

Black queers in Zimbabwe face legal, political, and social persecution. As Marc Epprecht notes in just one of his many works on sexuality in Zimbabwe,

“GALZ’s attempts to display its educational materials at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (1995 and 1996) and the lodging of sodomy charges against the former president of the country (Canaan Banana in 1997), brought the existence of homosexual behaviors among indigenous blacks even more forcefully to public attention.”³⁹

Epprecht goes on to observe that although “many black Zimbabweans maintain that homosexual behavior is UnAfrican,” the academic label of homophobia tends to dismiss the complex history of masculinist conceptions of discretion and ethnic continuity.⁴⁰ In other words, Epprecht brings attention to the gender roles that also help to construct anti-gay attitudes. So that while the term “UnAfrican” manifests as an anti-gay argument based in a history of colonization and imperialism—that LGBT individuals are not a part of a genuine African past before and without colonial influence—societal roles for masculinity further requires a normative performance of male and female identity. However, getting to the “root” of the anti-LGBT problem does not change the fact that some leaders see homosexuality as a Western import. President Robert Mugabe, in several of his public speeches, “intimated that Zimbabwean patriots should defend the nation against this new form of Western imperialism with violence, if necessary,” which invites violence against what is seen as products of Western imperialism, homosexuals.⁴¹ Thus, black homosexuals in Zimbabwe are seen as a problem whose existence challenges the ethnic and procreative status of the heteronormative black population in the nation.

South Africa

³⁹ Marc Epprecht, “The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe,” 632.

⁴⁰ Marc Epprecht, “The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe,” 632.

⁴¹ Marc Epprecht, “What an Abomination,” 1090-91.

The lack of criminalization does not necessarily indicate a tolerant society, as seen with the social situation of black queers in South Africa. In 1996 with the end of Apartheid and the beginning of Mandela's leadership, South Africa became the first nation in the world to pass laws against discrimination based on sexuality.⁴² This means that South Africa legally protects its citizens from anti-gay attacks and/or barriers. However, as Mark Massoud explains via polls taken in those same years, these protective measures "did not reflect the attitudes of most South Africans, who did not support gay rights."⁴³ The difference in positions toward queerness results in a distinction between de jure and de facto experiences—the first consisting of the freedoms gained on a governmental level and the latter indicating rejection within the social sphere. The anti-gay opinions of some citizens throughout the country's population are especially dangerous to black lesbian existence. As Luis Anguita states in his article on rape and violence against black lesbians in South Africa, "LGBT [people] are frequently attacked, both verbally and physically, because of the widespread intolerance and prejudice against them in the population."⁴⁴ Anguita goes on to describe the "corrective" rape and vicious beatings that occur particularly in the townships even while the city center holds underground gay clubs. Although black lesbians in South Africa face many barriers and attacks throughout their lifetime, scholars like Zethu Matebeni insist on analyses that begin to step away from the victimized sexual construction.⁴⁵ She advocates for a lens through which one can see the vibrancy of Lesbian sexual identity, instead of how the queer female is punished by society.⁴⁶

⁴² Mark Massoud, *The Evolution of Gay Rights in South Africa*.

⁴³ Mark Massoud, *The Evolution of Gay Right in South Africa*, 301.

⁴⁴ Luis Anguita, "Tackling Corrective Rape," 489.

⁴⁵ See Zethu Matebeni's "Sexual Minorities in South Africa."

⁴⁶ See Zethu Matebeni's "Sexual Minorities in South Africa" and *Reclaiming Afrikan*.

The autobiography featured in chapter two answers Matebeni's call for more complex narratives of the sexual black female self. In this chapter, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008) offers a life experience that does not depend upon suffering or complete social rejection but instead on the finding and embracing of the sexual self within a spiritual sphere. In South Africa, a sangoma is an individual who has spiritual connections with ancestral guides and communicates with those past souls to cure, advise, and cleanse clientele. *Black Bull* is an autobiography coupled with an ethnographic project conducted by Nkabinde and sponsored by GALA. Readers catch a glimpse into Nkabinde's development as a lesbian but also as a spiritual healer in South Africa. In an effort to build a community, Nkabinde travels across the country to interview other black sangomas who identify as same-gender-loving.

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which Nkabinde positions the queer South African back into the narrative of social citizenship. Nkabinde uses spiritual history as a tool both for self-discovery as well as public incorporation. In order to reverse the argument that homosexuality is UnAfrican, Nkabinde demonstrates that she and other black lesbians are a part of South African citizenship, sometimes more so than other populations. She integrates black queers into national conversations on identity by first and foremost showing an active participation in the struggle against Apartheid, which acts as the tactic for national cohesion. Her spiritual abilities also present a queer self that literally manifests a true African history for which political leaders advocate by embodying ancestors that predate white colonialism. Finally, Nkabinde inspires a reconsideration of non-normative sexuality by illustrating the broad spectrum of gender and sexual performance so that the original binaries that accompany exclusion are deconstructed.

Nkabinde's connection with GALA allows her to expand her queer community. However, GALA's goals rest almost entirely in creating an archive of queer representations (of all races and ethnicities).⁴⁷ This broad approach to inclusion actually plays into the "homosexuality as UnAfrican" argument because the organization was created by and is predominantly made up of white South Africans. However, GALA and Nkabinde's goals complement one another because Nkabinde gains the means to build the lesbian sangoma community only through the funding and support of GALA. And of course, GALA's archives of the lesbian sangomas are collected through Nkabinde's efforts.

America

Blackness and queerness are often considered mutually exclusive by those in the African-American community,⁴⁸ as seen in the responses to popular figures such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Bayard Rustin.⁴⁹ Black lesbians hold an even lower position in both black and white society because they face both racist and sexist limitations, as shown in the concept of Jane Crow—"the gender oppression preventing black women's full participation in society."⁵⁰ Barbara Smith extends this barrier into a context of black lesbian existence as she states "critics, instead of simply accepting that Black lesbians and Black lesbian writers exist, view the depiction of lesbianism as a dangerous and unacceptable 'theme' or 'trend' in Black women's writing."⁵¹ Social, historical, and political views on black female sexuality imply that the focus on the queer self takes away from the narrative of black progress—that the expression of

⁴⁷ See GALA.co.za.

⁴⁸ The concept and effects of blackness and queerness being mutually exclusive can also be seen in Jessie Daniels' article "Minority Status Among Sexual Minority Women."

⁴⁹ James Baldwin and Langston Hughes were adamantly encouraged to privilege racial matters over sexual topics in their literary works. Bayard Rustin, MLK's strategist during the civil rights era, was told to step down from his post because of his open sexuality and the possibility of the American public using his sexuality to the detriment of black progress (See William Eskridge's *Dishonorable Passions*).

⁵⁰ Ayesha Hardison, *Writing Through Jane Crow*, 2.

⁵¹ Barbara Smith, *The Truth that Never Hurts*, 51.

lesbianism means the disavowal of blackness. In fact, Smith and Matt Richardson discuss the absences that make up what Richardson calls a “limit of black memory.” African-American archives often lack material on the black LGBT community because “queers threaten mainstream Black political and cultural narratives of racial uplift and achievement, respectability and civility.”⁵² These archives suggest that the black community strives to create “evidence of the nuclear family” in the midst of queer black people who act as “a reminder of the accusation of sexual deviance and gender aberrance that [they] have fought so long to deny, decry, and defend against.”⁵³ Both archival and communal memory render black homosexuality invisible.

Smith identifies this communal refusal of gay inclusion as the “great divide” between “Blacks and Gays.” Smith explains that “family relationships were not legally recognized or protected” during slavery, which carries repercussions in current perceptions.⁵⁴ For example, heterosexual black individuals, especially heterosexual females, often cite the breakdown of the black family and civil rights as reason for condemning homosexuality. Smith illustrates this strategic denunciation in a preamble to her essay “Black and Gays: Healing the Great Divide:”

In august 1997 Alveda King, a niece of Martin Luther King Jr., denounced California legislation designed to crack down on antigay discrimination. She stated, “To equate homosexuality with race is to give a death sentence to civil rights.” A few weeks later gospel singers Angie and Debbie Winans released a song entitled “It’s not Natural” that condemned homosexuality as unnatural and antifamily.⁵⁵

A conflation of the two identities dismantles both equality as well as perceptions of the black family according to King and the Winans. King’s statements insist upon a separation between

⁵² Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 4.

⁵³ Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 4.

⁵⁴ Barbara Smith, “Blacks and Gays: The Great Divide,” *The Truth that Never Hurts*, 127.

⁵⁵ Barbara Smith, “Blacks and Gays: The Great Divide,” *The Truth that Never Hurts*, 124.

race and queer sexuality in order to preserve the civil rights that her uncle helped to achieve. In other words, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's dream—a major facet of African-American history—did not include homosexuals. So then, similar to the previously illustrated instances within African nations, a considerable portion of African-American leaders and documents exclude LGBT individuals from their production of history. Audre Lorde goes so far as to suggest that an “enormous [amount of] energy is being wasted in the Black community today in antilesbian hysteria.”⁵⁶ Although this second decade of the 21st century has seen more analyses involving the perceived overlapping of race, gender, and queer sexuality, explicit representations of black lesbianism are still rarely introduced into the college classroom or academic scholarship.

Chapter three and the conclusion of this dissertation intervene into this gap in critical involvement. I use explicitly queer works by openly lesbian artists in order to resist the common scholarly implication insisting that male sexuality is the only form of queerness worthy of study. Although the genres are drastically different, one being an Afrofuturist novel while the other is a realist film, both products demonstrate the vital contribution that black lesbians make to conversations surrounding race, gender, and sexuality in both black and white society. Black lesbians offer alternative views and processes of exploring identity expression that do not demand the erasure of particular identities or voices. The third chapter investigates a written text while the conclusion shifts the lens to view visual works, the commercial film, in order to explore the contexts of visibility and wider audiences.

Chapter three explores Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991) which brings in a mythological translation alongside the history of slavery. This text follows Gilda Jr., born a slave but turned into a vampire, throughout her very long life. Gilda Jr., taking the name of her white

⁵⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 48.

female creator, struggles to find a sense of family both within and outside the vampiric species. As she negotiates the tension between her inferior social status as a black woman and her superior abilities as a vampire, Gilda positions herself as a leader of several black communities by empowering other women (human and non) around her. The book ends in a futuristic society in 2050 with the population of vampires seeking out a refuge to avoid exploitation and death (two very common realities of the black community from colonial enslavement to current times).

This chapter argues that Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* deconstructs pervading black power hierarchies that further marginalize LGBT individuals while reconstructing alternative modes of existence within the black community. I posit that Gomez consciously revises traditionalist tropes of the vampire and hunger to redirect racial conversations away from a broader white context and towards a wholly black framework. Her versions of the vampire and hunger deconstruct three major tactics used by African-American leaders to silence the internal sexual minority: religion, the patriarchy, and uplift methodologies. I support this argument by analyzing Gomez's essays in which she discusses the creation of Gilda, admitting to the detachment of the vampire from its original religious connotation because black freedom is constrained by religious boundaries. In these essays, Gomez also discusses her decision to create a queer black female protagonist to align with her queer black feminist ideals of community structures. Finally, I compare her representation of hunger to previous versions of food deprivation in African-American novels to demonstrate the shift from a white framework of uplift to a black framework of empowerment. I maintain that for black society during the AIDS era, Gomez's literary activism is a highly effective pairing to her advocacy organization, GLAAD. While GLAAD strives for visibility for the queer body, Gomez's literary proposition

for queer black acceptance aspires towards a black society whose existence and progress do not depend on white standards.⁵⁷

Finally, chapter four sharpens the gender lens used from chapter 3. To provide further evidence for the social and activist burden of the black lesbian, I explore film and gender representations in Dee Rees' *Pariah* (2007 and 2011) and, to a lesser extent, Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016). I only bring in *Moonlight* as a point of reference, as its popularity has become a large component of contemporary conversations about black queerness, in order to illustrate the ways in which black lesbianism requires a hyper-cognizant construction of self. This consciousness often results in more potent social commentary as opposed to mere social representation. One will also notice that the conclusion does not include a simultaneous analysis of advocacy. This omission is because the conclusion is aimed not at how the activist effects of black lesbian portrayals compare to the effects of advocacy for the queer black female, but instead at how the representation of female queerness compares to the male counterpart.

Pariah started as a short film in 2007 at OutFest in L.A before Rees adapted the original screenplay into a feature film in 2011. The movie focuses on the sexual development and expression of Alike as she navigates the expectations of her non-normative friends and her normative black family. In order to satisfy both her social and her familial circles, Alike must actively perform the form of sexuality that each side prefers. Eventually she understands that she cannot maintain either performance and begins a journey of genuine self-expression. *Moonlight*, winner of the Oscar's 2017 Best Picture Award, shows Chiron from boyhood into manhood as he unpacks and deals with his sexuality. Facing a mother with an addiction, bullies at school, and a

⁵⁷ See GLAAD's information about services and objectives (glaad.org).

drug dealer unofficially adopting him as a boy, Chiron struggles with what it means to be a black gay male.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to investigate the ways in which different genders—in the form of the directors/writers as well as the main characters of the films—respond to their oppressive environments. I posit that Rees' *Pariah*, the female representation, works to reverse or at least challenge gendered stereotypes held by white and black America while the male depictions settle into the victim narrative often placed on the black population. Rees uses models of silence and violence through which to advocate for a new consideration of the queer black female. She integrates forms of distracted silence to reveal the ways in which black female voices are suppressed for the purpose of lifting the black male voice. Rees also exposes the victim narrative imposed upon the queer black female by creating a cause-effect relationship between sexuality and violence. Alike is also hyperaware of sexual performance, which questions the politics of respectability within the black community, as she manages expectations and beliefs of those around her. Meanwhile, Jenkins builds a gay black male mostly as a victim to his circumstances who is often oblivious to his own performances, and whose silence cannot be ignored. From this contrast, I conclude that black lesbians are more aggressively deconstructing the assumptions placed upon them by society.

Chapter One

Intuitive Truths, Historical Conceptions: Alternative Affective Epistemologies in Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare*

*I knew there was something not quite right about Dumi the very first time I ever laid eyes on him.*⁵⁸

This line opens Tendai Huchu's 2010 novel, *The Hairdresser of Harare*, a story about Vimbai, a single mother working a popular salon—where her employer, coworkers, and clients know her as the most talented hair stylist in Harare, Zimbabwe. When the salon hires Dumi as a new stylist, he quickly usurps Vimbai's throne as the best, causing tensions between the two. However, they soon decide to put their differences aside after Vimbai agrees to rent out one of her bedrooms to Dumi for financial reasons. As time goes on, Vimbai falls in love with Dumi but begins to doubt whether he feels the same. Vimbai, fearing that he has found someone else, reads Dumi's journal, which details his love for and relationship with another man. Hurt and initially disgusted, she turns him in to the authorities as a "homosexual" but soon reconsiders and helps him escape the country.

The mere inclusion of the homosexual topic works as an act of resistance in the midst of anti-gay laws enacted in Zimbabwe throughout the 15 years prior to the book's publication. The opening line aptly broaches a conversation about intuition, homosexuality, and the reliability of historical accounts in order to question the current beliefs about and attitudes against LGBT community members, beliefs and attitudes that ultimately culminate in sexuality-specific legislation. To the lay(wo)man's eye, the phrase "something not quite right" implies (in this particular circumstance) gaydar—an intuitive reaction that indicates homosexuality. Later, I will discuss the significance of intuition within Shona philosophy. In this chapter, I will investigate

⁵⁸ Tendai Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 1. Italics in the original.

the connection between local history and the work's anti-gay construction which will allow me to use the literary effects as proof of activist inflections. Later, I will further show how this literary response coincides with the social/political responses of the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), a local LGBT activist organization.

This chapter will assess the interactions between, and thus varying effects of, homosexuality, history, and intuition in Huchu's tale. Indeed, the very construction of the narrative serves a purpose, illustrating how intuition moves with and/or against national history in order to affect epistemology behind widespread bias against homosexuals. Huchu uses an alternative epistemology as a response to the anti-gay climate in his home country of Zimbabwe. Huchu's novel not only questions the practicality of adhering to a single formation of knowledge but also creates an affective epistemological tool for changing one's conception and perception of alternative sexualities. Unlike previous scholarly approaches to the novel, I consider Vimbai to be the focus of this story; readers are meant to follow her progression from holding anti-gay perspectives to becoming an ally.⁵⁹ Additionally, I will not focus on the construction or maintenance of Dumi's sexual identity but instead on how Huchu incorporates his local community into the character of Vimbai in order to demonstrate how change can occur.

Since the terms homosexuality, history, and intuition risk universalizing Western concepts, I will provide further contextual clarification on my decision to use them in this chapter. The term "homosexual" can belittle cultural difference because Zimbabwean citizens have different ways of identifying with the act of loving another of the same gender, terms such as same-gender-loving, lesbian, gay, or even simply not giving themselves a categorizing

⁵⁹ See Ncube's "Festering finger" and "Deconstructing the closet." Both articles focus on Dumi's homosexuality and the implications that his identity has on his surroundings. This is simply one way of interpreting the novel.

name.⁶⁰ However, because Huchu decides to incorporate the word homosexual(ity) into his novel—instead of gay or same-gender-loving— while discussing the novel, I will adhere to that same expression to refer to those who hold romantic feelings for others of the same gender and to the theoretical conception of being attracted to the same gender. The term certainly appears outside of discussing the novel, and in conjunction with other identifying words, in hopes of diversifying the almost unavoidable labels. When I discuss history, I mean any references toward national events and people throughout the book, especially to Mugabe as a national representative figure.⁶¹ This Mugabe-based national history manifests in anti-gay and/or violent figures such as The Minister, the veterans, and Vimbai. Finally, intuition is a complex manner in which one may attain knowledge.

Speculative knowledge can be a powerful tool for shifting preconceived notions about homosexual individuals.⁶² Phillip Harper, when assessing the lack of evidence for proving a racist encounter, insists that “queer black studies must necessarily take recourse to the evidence of things not seen.”⁶³ He traces the roots of this felt intuition as “outward engagement, signifying contemplation, or the practice of looking upon some entity or another—and, by extension, coming to some speculative conclusion about it.”⁶⁴ African philosophers, Munyaradzi Mawere and Maduabuchi Dukor, define the term in a similar sense. According to Mawere, intuition is “direct apprehension of truth or a kind of quick, direct, or immediate perception of knowledge

⁶⁰ This same idea can be found in Massad’s “gay international,” as I will later discuss.

⁶¹ Between the original research and the final revisions of this chapter, a 2-year span, Mugabe fell from power. I am aware that the development may affect the implications on the current LGBT situation in Zimbabwe. However, my analysis of Mugabe and GALZ’s reactions to the president relies on the time span in which Huchu was writing the novel and before.

⁶² I take the term “speculative knowledge” from Phillip Harper’s essay, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition.”

⁶³ Phillip Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition,” 115. *Black Queer Studies*, ed Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson.

⁶⁴ Phillip Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition,” 116. *Black Queer Studies*, ed Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson.

and insight.”⁶⁵ Mawere and Dukor disconnect this feeling from cognitive reasoning, consigning intuition to a gut reaction that produces truths.⁶⁶ However, Thembe Sachikonye, a writer for a Zimbabwean daily newspaper, comments on the interlocking existence of the brain and feelings.⁶⁷ She insists that logic often includes emotional assumptions, “intuition allows us to make decisions without actually having proof or knowledge about the outcome. More complex than common sense, intuition draws on an inexplicable inner reserve of awareness that one can either trust and follow or doubt and discard.”⁶⁸ If taken as an example of Zimbabwean thought about felt processes, sense-based knowledge is always accompanied by other paths of obtaining information. This chapter focuses on assessing the ways in which intuition functions in the novel. The differences between Mawere, Dukor, and Sachikonye’s definitions show the clash of general continental views against more specific national outlooks. Throughout this chapter, I will bring Mawere and Dukor’s scholarship together with Sachikonye’s more particular understanding of felt knowledge if their positions converge. However, I will privilege Sachikonye’s arguments because she is a Zimbabwean writing for and about the Zimbabwean audience.

Instinctive notions play a large role in Zimbabwean epistemologies dealing in community cohesiveness, or the daily exchanges between individuals and the mutual respect for each other’s identities. Gut-based intellect is just one mechanism that drives the Shona conception of unhu, a Zimbabwean variation on the more generalized African philosophy of ubuntu. Unhu focuses mainly on relationality between people, finding one’s own freedom of self in the acknowledgement and encouragement of others’ freedoms. Or, as Oswell Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru explains in his essay on hunhuism’s position in Zimbabwean education, “a person is a

⁶⁵ Mawere, *African Belief and Knowledge Systems*, 109.

⁶⁶ See Mawere’s *African Belief* and Dukor’s *African Philosophy*.

⁶⁷ Thembe Sachikonye, “The Battle Between Intellect and Intuition,” *NewsDay.co.zw*.

⁶⁸ Thembe Sachikonye, “The Battle Between Intellect and Intuition,” *NewsDay.co.zw*.

person through other persons.”⁶⁹ According to T.A. Chimuka’s illustration of social cohesion through Shona epistemologies, a part of hunhu “involves accommodating the various differences amongst people of the same community.”⁷⁰ This link between intuition and shona interpersonal ideologies suggests that intuition helps Vimbai create a necessary bond with Dumi that allows her to see and eventually accept his differences.

Intuitive knowledge forces Vimbai, a very headstrong character, out of her preconceived notions by the end of the story. Intuition is a culturally significant knowledge production that extends beyond (and sometimes even rejects) logical reasoning while still being accompanied by the aural and/or sight senses. As I will demonstrate later, Vimbai’s affective knowledge of Dumi as an individual overcomes her conservative adherence to anti-gay beliefs and actions. The early suggestion of Vimbai as anti-gay, as implied by her connection between homosexuality and being “not right,” later creates tension with her decision to help Dumi escape the death sentence that his sexuality incurs. That is to say, Vimbai clearly states her position against homosexuality when she learns of Dumi’s love affair yet still sympathizes and helps him escape others who share her original anti-gay views by the end of the novel. But this shift in perspective is no light matter as Vimbai is an almost immovable character.

Her argument with and separation from her family establish our understanding of her strength; from the novel’s beginning, readers learn that Vimbai does not have a good relationship with her family. Vimbai is the youngest and the only female of five children. Her third eldest brother, Robert, dies while living in the UK. The reading of Robert’s will informs the family that he has left his house in Zimbabwe to Vimbai and her daughter, Chiwoniso. This bequest takes

⁶⁹ Oswell Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru, “Hunhu: In Search of an Indigenous Philosophy for the Zimbabwean Education System,” 6.

⁷⁰ T.A. Chimuka, “Conceptions of Social Cohesion in an African Culture,” 123.

the family by surprise. Because “the family would lose the house” if Vimbai ever got married, the two eldest males of the family, Takesure and Knowledge, naturally expected to receive it.⁷¹ Vimbai’s refusal to sign over the house causes her family to disown her but not before “Takesure and Knowledge threatened to beat [her] up if [she] didn’t sign the house over to them.”⁷²

Vimbai bases her decision to keep the house on the fact that Robert understood that Chiwoniso would also have the home: “I would have given in, if half of that inheritance didn’t belong to Chiwoniso.”⁷³ Seeing that she would stand her ground, “Takesure and Knowledge move their families forcibly into the house”⁷⁴ and refuse to leave until Vimbai wins a “peace order barring [her] family from being a hundred metres near [her] or [her] house.”⁷⁵ Knowing that her actions would sever her familial connections does not prevent Vimbai from fighting for her decision. She is willing to sacrifice the connections with her parents and two brothers in defense of her choice. Even during a memorial service for Robert, the family does not let Vimbai into the house to mourn. The only member who stays neutral in the debacle and still speaks to Vimbai is the youngest son, Fungai. This entire episode demonstrates Vimbai’s immovability in terms of her beliefs and ideas. There is no compromise. So then, when intuitive knowledge moves Vimbai to help Dumi at the end of the novel, readers understand that her doing so is no small feat. A mountain has been moved. Employing felt experience as a way of debating anti-gay attitudes allows Huchu to insert himself and his opinions into the political landscape.

Therefore, the novel is a response to the harsh climate within Zimbabwe and an attempt to construct an alternative space that challenges the existent, exclusionary beliefs. The

⁷¹ Huchu, *Hairdresser of Harare*, 33.

⁷² Huchu, *Hairdresser of Harare*, 32-33

⁷³ Huchu, *Hairdresser of Harare*, 33

⁷⁴ Huchu, *Hairdresser of Harare*, 33.

⁷⁵ Huchu, *Hairdresser of Harare*, 33.

importance of fiction in this activist endeavor lies in its capacity to establish other worlds through the imaginative deployment of character and plot. Huchu creates a realm in which different insights into and expressions of homosexuality may occur. This literary universe acts as a low-stakes venue to practice different habits of perception and develop socially-significant questions. In other words, the very process of reading necessitates a reader's instinct and interpretation through which s/he can develop responses separate and different from his/her normal beliefs. Huchu, for instance, uses intuition and history to create a cognitive dissonance in the main character as well as the reader to effect a change in Zimbabwean views on homosexuality. This process of self- and social interrogation depends not on the reconciliation of ideals but instead on the very act of questioning, for this act of awareness designates the beginning of a possible shift in opinions.

Furthermore, Huchu's creative strategy intersects with the programs and ultimate goals of the oldest and largest activist organization in Zimbabwe, the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ). Both the book and GALZ use local history and affective appeals to discuss topics of sexuality. While the novel can shift between identitarian and non-identitarian modes of criticism and expression, the very construction of the GALZ organization requires an identity-based stance from which to advocate for rights. In this endeavor, GALZ sponsors scholarship that highlight the country's queer past in addition to writings that inform citizens on the myths and strife of those within the LGBT community. We can see the potency of such affective and historical rewritings in the reaction that LGBT-themed fiction has provoked in Zimbabwe.

Indeed, it is telling that the first public proclamation of homosexuality being "UnAfrican" arose in the distinct context of a book fair devoted to writing.⁷⁶ In 1995, Zimbabwe held its 12th

⁷⁶ I do not assume that this phrase was coined and first thought of by President Mugabe, only that the height of international publicity and gay rights movements were spurred by this particular event.

International Book Fair (ZIBF), an annual event hosted in the country's capital, Harare. As the largest book fair on the continent, the ZIBF brings in writers, readers, and publishers from around the globe.⁷⁷ Organizations and individuals alike set up and take charge of booths to promote their cause and materials. This affair benefits all parties: publishers find the newest, hottest writers; writers have the prospect of gaining new readership and being published; organizations find audiences; readers obtain new resources and sources to consume. Needless to say, this occasion attracts a variety of individuals.

However, a week before the 1995 opening, the fair council received a letter from the government protesting the inclusion of GALZ in the event.⁷⁸ The letter used language that prevented attempts at negotiations:

The Government strongly objects to the presence of the GALZ stand in the events which has the effects of giving acceptance and legitimacy to GALZ. Whilst acknowledging the dynamic nature of culture, the fact still remains that both Zimbabwean culture and government do not accept the public display of homosexual literature and material... In the interest of continued cooperation with the Government, please, withdraw the participation of GALZ at this public event.⁷⁹

This language not only makes a sweeping statement linking anti-gay stances to a national culture but also mentions governmental cooperation, which threatens the future of the iconic fair. Despite recognizing the multiplicity of public beliefs, the letter flattens the population to just one attitude: an anti-gay opinion. It is vital to note that although Zimbabwean citizens choose the government officials who represent them, the inherent diversity of national culture automatically

⁷⁷ "Zimbabwe International Book Fair," sardc.net.

⁷⁸ "The Impact of GALZ in Zimbabwe," Outrightinternational.org.

⁷⁹ quoted in Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 12.

undermines statements that insist on ideologically-based homogeneity. Despite this blatant generalization, the book fair council, in a panic for funding and support, decided to follow the letter's instructions to remove the group from the list. The council felt compelled to go to such lengths: "We had to face not only withdrawal of state participation and support but also the very real possibility of further state action or disruption of the fair itself."⁸⁰ The board first asked GALZ to step down voluntarily, and when GALZ refused, the board—"with great reluctance and acting under severe constraint"—repealed their original inclusion of the organization's booth.⁸¹ GALZ was prohibited from participating in the event. The committee's response provided evidence that despite organizational support from individuals and other groups, the intervention of the government forced exclusion. This intrusion and its results demonstrated that anti-gay attitudes and actions may originate from, and/or heightened by, governmental provocations.

Although this incident was not the first anti-gay episode in Zimbabwe, it pushed the country into the international spotlight, further complicating the event. However, the prohibition itself was not the cause for this international attention even though many national groups and individuals protested the government's measure against GALZ. Instead, the opening speech and subsequent comments by Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe inspired the outrage. He opened the Fair by speaking on human rights, stating that the goal is to "strike a practical balance among the rights of the majority versus those of minorities and the individuals."⁸² He went on to condemn homosexuality as an offense against the majority, insisting that it offends both "the law of nature and the morals of religious beliefs espoused by [their] society."⁸³ Soon afterwards,

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 12-13.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 13.

⁸² Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 13.

⁸³ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 13-14. This statement made by Mugabe demonstrates that the majority is responsible for the exclusion of the minority. This further suggests that the effort put into minority literature may be better spent speaking to the majority rather than the minority if change is the goal of the work.

when questioned further about his stances, Mugabe added that homosexuality “degrades human dignity. It’s unnatural and there is no question ever of allowing these people to behave worse than dogs and pigs,” a quote that would follow him for years to come.⁸⁴ Mugabe and his governmental associations legitimated anti-gay violence. Calling for the arrest of homosexuals, both by officers finding offenders and by citizens turning suspects in, validated mob justice and corrective rape against LGBT individuals in the community.

Western interference heightened these kinds of violence toward the LGBT community in Zimbabwe. These types of interference reflect what Joseph Massad has called the “gay international,” the universalization of the homosexual category that imposes its own colonial sense of sexual identity.⁸⁵ This global attention invites Western nations to orient non-Western sexuality in a manner that the West can understand.⁸⁶ Hence, the use of a discourse that focuses on identity rather than actions,⁸⁷ or backwardness rather than progress.⁸⁸ We must understand that the danger of international spotlight (especially American and British) lies in the use and origin of that information. Some media outlets have a tendency to use blanket generalizations when referring to the politics of sexuality in African nations. To this day, international media often quote Mugabe when discussing LGBT issues in the countries throughout Africa.

Solidarity is an important tool in social movements, providing both mental and financial support to activists and advocacy organizations, allowing for an increase in monetary donations to struggling and oppressed groups. However, because of the imperialist history between the

⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 15.

⁸⁵ Joseph Massad. *Desiring Arabs*.

⁸⁶ Massad. *Desiring Arabs*.

⁸⁷ Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 163. Authors Joseph Massad (*Desiring Arabs*) and Chantal Zabus (*Out in Africa*) discuss the Western influence that caused a shift in non-Western representations of homosexuality—a shift from an engagement in particular actions to a connection to a collective identity.

⁸⁸ Author and activist Marc Epprecht discusses the Western tendency to ignore the progress made in nations like Zimbabwe, where 10 years ago a physical LGBT-designated building was not possible but now one can see a pride flag on the street. (Personal Contact)

West and Africa as well as its current neocolonialist relationship, critiques from the West are often seen as colonialist attempts at hegemony. In this view, Western interference “produces an effect that is less than liberatory” for the LGBT community in Zimbabwe, as some Zimbabweans consider self-identified LGBT members to be brainwashed by Western ideals instead of adhering to their own.⁸⁹ Without a move to understand Zimbabwean culture, Western news outlets condemned the president’s statements, often deeming the country homophobic—a term with Western origins. Additionally, outreach in light of Mugabe’s statements often fell short because of a frequently condescending attitude toward the country. After the anti-gay comments from Mugabe, officials around the world sent in protests, but the president dismissed all of them with national justification: Zimbabwe is Zimbabwe, and the United States and England have no right to intervene in its affairs, insisting that “we need continuity in our race.”⁹⁰ Essentially, cultural respect is vital in approaching minority rights in other countries and cultures, with silence sometimes being the best form of protection.

Despite these complications of international attention and the unfortunate events of 1995, GALZ did not resign their efforts. In 1996 GALZ applied to participate in the fair once again. The LGBT group received a promise both from the council to resist governmental persuasion and from the government to not intervene. Despite the promises, the day before the fair’s opening, the Board of Censors wrote a letter banning the participation of GALZ based on the reasoning of censoring their materials. This time, GALZ did not accept their exclusion; they sued the government—and won. The court ruled that “the government could not censor material without examining it first.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Massad, *Desiring Arabs*. 163.

⁹⁰ Rick Noack, “Mugabe says of Obama’s gay rights push, ‘We ask, was he born out of homosexuality,’” *Washington Post*.

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 17.

Although the court ruled in favor of GALZ, some members of the public dismissed the ruling as going against the national government and thus the will of the people, so they took action. On the second day of the fair, a crowd pushed GALZ away from its stand. According to GALZ, “a violent mob, led by Public Prosecutor Herbert Ushewokunze, descended on the GALZ stand. The Public Prosecutor stated that he and his followers represented ‘the People’s Court’ and that they ‘did not care about High Court Ruling.’ This provided concrete evidence of a direct link between government and the violence against GALZ.”⁹² Those who organized to remove GALZ from the event separated the court from the government—and thus separated the judicial system from the decision of the people. Mugabe was the first and final word on the matter of homosexuality and human rights according to this violent group of people.⁹³ At the end of the fair, GALZ obtained a booth on the outskirts of the fairgrounds but was once again forced to flee because of an impending mob. This group of people aimed to prevent GALZ from networking freely.

After pushing the organization from their stand, the crowd burned the texts that the group was promoting. This violence extended beyond the homosexual individuals and their advocates. The animosity was also aimed at the merchandise that represented and supported homosexuality—literature that actually served both gay and straight members of the population. The burned materials were pamphlets detailing ways to avoid HIV/AIDS and also challenging stereotypes attached to the people—both heterosexual and homosexual—living with the disease. These pamphlets could hypothetically be found at any women’s rights booth. However, because the brochures were found at the GALZ table, the mob considered them homosexual propaganda.

⁹² Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 17.

⁹³ Many national news outlets suggested that Mugabe’s anti-homosexuality platforms were simply a strategy to divert attention away from other pertinent issues like women’s rights and poverty.

This assumption opens the door to questions about the practice of reading: reading as contagion, reading as acceptance, reading as betrayal. If one considers the act of reading as a practice of “changing how, not just what, people think about others,” then the burning implies a fear of knowledge and epistemology becoming a gateway to homosexuality, and thus a gateway of contagion.⁹⁴ No matter the content of the materials, the group attacking the table treated GALZ’s literature as an extension of an alternative sexuality and thus as an offense to the Zimbabwean population.

The continuation of Mugabe’s condemnation of the LGBT community spurred public effects that made mob violence of this nature a typical affair. Although most Zimbabwean citizens do not patrol the streets in search of people who deviate from sexual norms, those aligned with the stances of the president sometimes contribute to an anti-LGBT atmosphere. The type of attack seen at the fair was certainly not the last. A decade later at the same event, a mob made the same move. As GALZ obtained its own stall in the national book fair, a group arrived to condemn GALZ’s presence and began to pack up the booth’s materials. After failing to obtain police protection, GALZ left the fair.⁹⁵ As seen from this repetition of events, various individuals aligned themselves with and acted upon the statements given by Mugabe.

These anti-gay occurrences, in addition to other measures being introduced to the parliament, help to create an atmosphere of animosity and exclusion; same-gender-loving individuals are being pushed out of the heteronormative national, social, and ethnic history. For many, being arrested for homosexuality spurs blackmail from officers and community members. Observations of homosexual actions, or even tendencies, could give reason for arresting LGBT individuals and holding them for an extended length of time. To avoid jail time, especially since

⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*, 17.

⁹⁵ “The Impact of GALZ in Zimbabwe,” Outrightinternational.org.

going to jail often means facing unchecked violence from other inmates, arrested individuals often pay a bribe to be released, and officers frequently do not record an official charge.⁹⁶ These circumstances, although different from the incident of the book fair, exhibit the complex nature of animosity against homosexual individuals in Zimbabwe. The LGBT community in the country often must face a variety of discriminative actions and attitudes. Because all countries have their particular issues concerning alternative sexualities, Zimbabwe is not unique in its discrimination. However, this background of anti-gay atmospheres is pertinent in understanding and analyzing literary and social responses made by fellow Zimbabweans.

Listed as one of the ten best contemporary African books by *The Guardian* and shortlisted for the 2014 Caine Prize, *The Hairdresser of Harare* serves as a creative response to the manifestation of this exclusionary atmosphere solidified by President Mugabe and his homosexuality-condemning followers. For the LGBT community, reading about literary characters and plots that have stakes in one's life is important to self-development and acceptance. Instead, this novel constructs and focuses on a "moral of the story" for readers who identify with the homosexuality-condemning character of Vimbai, rather than with the homosexual character of Dumi. Huchu's novel is written to the normative and hateful community rather than the non-normative one. The reader's connection with Vimbai guides them more easily through a process of reconsidering their anti-gay sentiments as Vimbai navigates the same progression. This literary approach is especially effective as the sexually non-normative community is not responsible for excluding themselves from the national and ethnic history. The social and political exclusion occurs because of the views and ideals of some heteronormative people. Some of the discrimination even comes from other non-normative individuals who still

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *More than a Name*.

identify as normative. In spite of these societal condemnations, however, GALZ creates programs and initiatives as social responses to these exclusionary actions.

While Huchu depicts and criticizes the connection between some Zimbabweans and Mugabe in his novel, organizations like GALZ take a more practical approach to contesting the political relationship and effects of those political connections—a move that literature often cannot make. GALZ, and similar organizations, must be cautious when critiquing governmental processes for fear of being accused of treason. Therefore, the group's responses to parliamentary measures and violent crowds cannot rely on the court. Instead, the GALZ executive board creates programs, organizes public protests, and sponsors allied events that challenge the hetero-patriarchy. GALZ's responses to social and political censure are, overall, more practical than literary creativity because funding requires it to be so. According to the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA),

While GALZ carries out a range of programming designed to meet the varied needs of the LGBTI population in Zimbabwe, advocacy for the recognition and defence of LGBTI rights, when violated, has always been central to its work. At the regional level, GALZ often plays a key role in articulating the case for LGBTI rights. GALZ also plays an important role in supporting emerging organisations in other countries in the region.⁹⁷

GALZ is a pillar of support for the gay and lesbian community and a source of information for the public. GALZ illustrates both purposes (support and information) through its four programming initiatives: gender, health, skills for life, and safety net. Among other things, GALZ publishes a women's health pamphlet to inform the public on the health issues of lesbian and bisexual female citizens. The organization also created GALZ Positive, a psychological

⁹⁷ "Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)," Osisa.org

support group for HIV/AIDS-affected members in response to the population's being "ignored in all government-led national health programming."⁹⁸ In response to the anxiety of reconciling with an alt-sexuality as well as "real fears of being evicted from home, dismissed from work and being verbally and physically abused," GALZ has professional counselors to provide therapy for coping skills. Finally, because "family members who are discovered to be lesbian, gay or bisexual, are less likely to be evicted from home if they are income generators," GALZ provides vocational training courses for its members.⁹⁹ While GALZ makes similar moves as Huchu via his text, especially with challenging stereotypes, the central goal for GALZ is to support the individual at risk—i.e., the homosexual individual. Literature such as Huchu's, in its more subtle and metaphoric effects on change, serves as a complement to this very individualized and identarian work of advocacy organizations.

For instance, Huchu's story focuses not on Dumi, the homosexual character, but on Vimbai, the protagonist who aligns with Mugabe's anti-homosexuality statements and falls victim to the tendrils of a phobia produced by the (post)colonial government and some of its citizens. Indeed, Huchu has confirmed this focal point, confessing that the inspiration for the story came in the form of Vimbai's voice "swirling around [his] head," exclaiming the first sentence of the novel: "I knew there was something not quite right about Dumi the very first time I ever laid eyes on him."¹⁰⁰ This line and confession positions Vimbai as the central focus of the book. In addition to Vimbai's centrality, readers only receive her internal voice; all of the perceptions detailed in the story are filtered through her. This focalization does not lessen Dumi's significance but adjusts the intended audience to view homosexuality through

⁹⁸ Galz.org

⁹⁹ Galz.org

¹⁰⁰ "Interview with Tendai Huchu," *Freight Books*.

heterosexual eyes. Huchu's narrative lends itself to the heterosexual populations that are biased against non-normative peoples because these biased readers are the majority and thus possess the demographic power to change the anti-gay climate and laws. Huchu's choice of protagonist and that character's political orientation reveal both the persistence and fragility of political/social leanings. He shows that although views against LGBT groups may permeate the nation, those opinions can also be belittled.

The opening line of Huchu's novel introduces and effectively complicates the view of intuition, as the author establishes the possibility of Vimbai mis-intuiting. Again, the story starts with Vimbai stating, "I knew there was something not quite right about Dumi the very first time I ever laid eyes on him,"¹⁰¹ which acts as backward-looking apprehension. This perception sets up the expectation that the protagonist's intuition will play a part throughout the narrative, although her insight itself is incorrect. The initial suspicion suggests that Vimbai has gay-dar which designates the sense as an intuitive observation. Thembe Sachikonye's illustration of the powerful spiritual enlightenment attached to felt experiences may have allowed Vimbai such an insight: "intuition can reach a point where you seem able to foretell events or interpret them at a supposedly higher or more mysterious levels that we commonly operate on."¹⁰² This process of knowledge is explicitly shown as Vimbai directly links Dumi to heterosexual desires. As he looks around the salon, she notices that he begins to stare at "fat Matilda" and states that she is not surprised since "men want their women big and round."¹⁰³ The production of intuitive knowledge, as outlined by Mawere and Sachikonye, involves Dumi being heterosexual as she notices his gaze and makes assumptions based on that perception. From the very instance of

¹⁰¹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 1.

¹⁰² Thembe Sachikonye, "The Battle Between Intellect and Intuition," *NewsDay.co.zw*.

¹⁰³ Munyaradzi Mawere, *African Belief and Knowledge Systems*, 109.

seeing Dumi, before making a conclusion about his identity, Vimbai relies upon her intuitive perceptions instead of attempting to ground him into a historical position. In other words, she is not concerned with his geographical origins or the role he plays, or has played, in national history.

The indulgence of the first line and interaction of the novel—its implications, inconsistencies, contextual developments—demonstrate the start of a pattern of intuitive awareness and epistemological trials. The first time that Vimbai sees Dumi, she observes that “the man had an afro.”¹⁰⁴ She initially thinks that he has come into the salon to have it shaved off and expresses her disappointment in seeing the beautiful hair destroyed. Like her portrayal of Mrs. Khumalo, and unlike her illustration of Minister M.—as I will demonstrate later—Vimbai begins and inevitably sticks with Dumi’s physical appearance which, as suggested above, leaves room for intuitive connection and self-implication. She soon observes that he is “pleasing to the eye” and looks like a professional in his “black trousers and short-sleeved white shirt.”¹⁰⁵ Because Vimbai does not attach Dumi to national history in her description of him, her understanding of Dumi as a human being is more open-minded and is not bound by a predesignated category of identity.

Sachikonye, in her assessment of the gut and intellect in the context of Zimbabwean popular culture, explain that while intuition operates as a mode of comprehension, it does not function alone and it is merely one path of gaining knowledge. Huchu exemplifies this multitude of knowing in his first sequence detailing Vimbai’s first view of Dumi. As seen in her immediate reactions to Dumi, Vimbai does not indicate that there is anything out of the ordinary. While this realization does not contradict her supposed strange feeling about Dumi conveyed in the first

¹⁰⁴ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 6.

line, it does suggest that her gaydar was perhaps only one part of that conclusion, perhaps a function of memory that allows a personal reconciliation of negative events.¹⁰⁶ Vimbai's feeling of the unusual concerns societal expectations, in addition to intuitive sensibility. When Dumis states that he wants a job at the salon—not too long after Vimbai notices his staring—she laughs at his statement. She thinks to herself that “these were difficult times and jobs were scarce but I'd never thought that men might try to get a woman's job. A male hairdresser, who'd ever heard of such a thing?”¹⁰⁷ Now this response to Dumis's attempts of being hired does not satisfy Vimbai's claim at the beginning of the novel because the reaction is associated neither with initially seeing him nor with intuition. Instead, it relies upon a logic related to familiarity of her own culture. In this scene, Vimbai reacts to the contradiction in societal rules. According to those conventions, women style other women's hair in a salon while men have their own barbershops. This concept of gender roles, paired with Dumis's request, challenges Vimbai's experience with gender roles. After Dumis proves that he can, in fact, do the “woman's job” better than most women, she must then rectify her previous expectations. Instead of insisting that men cannot do women's hair, she submits to his being an exception to that rule—a better alternative to not acknowledging the change at all. In fact, she describes his working as “an artist working on a living sculpture.”¹⁰⁸ Dumis, for the first time of many, confronts Vimbai's ways of thinking about the world around her. In this circumstance, he defies her knowledge of gender roles. Vimbai's perceptions of, and reactions to, Dumis and the world around her predict the epistemological and cognitive dissonances that will occur later. With that said, her understanding of national figures plays a significant role in her initial responses to Dumis's journal.

¹⁰⁶ See Jonathan Boyarin's “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory.”

¹⁰⁷ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 7.

History manifests in Huchu's novel mainly as Robert Mugabe—president of Zimbabwe since 1987 and current global figure because of his anti-gay commentary and measures. Huchu connects Mugabe's name to the Minister through the design of her dress. For instance, when the Minister first enters the salon, she wears a scarf with Mugabe's face on it and asks Dumini to style her hair. In this scene, Dumini tears the scarf, straight through Mugabe's face, while he decorates the woman's hairstyle with little pieces of it. Dumini, having already experienced national violence because of his sexuality, literally and symbolically rips through Mugabe's face, which can imply an expressed frustration with Mugabe's anti-gay system. Huchu also links Mugabe to Dumini's family when the "president's wife" appears at a social gathering held by Dumini's parents. In fact, Vimbai is taken aback when she realizes that she is conversing with the "president's wife" at a social gathering at Dumini's family home. Finally, Huchu attaches Mugabe to Vimbai when she explicitly aligns herself with Mugabe's ideals on homosexuality after finding Dumini's journal. Revealingly, all of these connections work against Dumini because Mugabe himself condemns alternative sexualities, and all three of these instances not only associate with the president but also align themselves with those anti-gay beliefs. In other words, Huchu takes the anti-gay commentary of the president and warps it into a form of national history that enacts violence on the homosexual individual, illustrating the physical harm done by the spoken metaphors.

Interpreters of history must allow for intuitive knowledge and interpretations, which bring a more open view to the inclusion of sexually non-normative citizens. The times when history plays a smaller role in Vimbai's insights reveal a heightened consideration of her own position in relation to the person or event. Intuition often emerges when historical insight takes a back seat, as seen by the portrayal of the Minister and Mrs Khumalo. When Vimbai describes a character predominantly by their national background and historical implications, she often

remains emotionally separated from that character. However, when Vimbai starts an explanation with a physical description and how she feels towards a character, she often also includes her own stakes in that character's personality and habits. In other words, instead of the isolation that occurs with historical understanding, intuitive comprehension encompasses personal stakes.

The comparison in the description between Mrs. Khumalo and Minister M serves as a good example of this difference. Mrs. Khumalo owns the salon where Vimbai works; she is the boss to all the salon workers. First, readers receive the owner's physical appearance: "Wearing a green Nigerian bou bou, which hugged the contours of her amply fed body, Mrs. Khumalo came in later that day kicking the dust off her feet."¹⁰⁹ Vimbai then explains Mrs. Khumalo's association with the government: "The government had given her a few hectares on a farm..."¹¹⁰ However, this connection between the owner and the government is one-sided, as Vimbai says nothing of what (if anything) Mrs. Khumalo does to receive that land. Instead of representing history, Vimbai describes Mrs. Khumalo as being acted upon by history while Minister M—to be discussed—enacts history itself. After sharing that Mrs. Khumalo also receives a farm house, Vimbai returns to physical description: "Whenever she spoke, it was so loudly that I assumed she thought we were all deaf. Behind her puffy eyelids, her tiny eyes surveyed the salon and seemed disappointed that there weren't more customers in the queue."¹¹¹ With this physical description, Vimbai can intuit the emotions presented by the woman without her having to say anything. The fact that the historical position of the owner acts as a minor facet in Vimbai's connection to the woman highlights Vimbai's intuitive perception of the woman, a comprehension that implicates Vimbai in Mrs. Khumalo's identity and actions.

¹⁰⁹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 4-5.

¹¹⁰ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 5.

¹¹¹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 5.

This emergence of intuition further illustrates the criticism of history as being inflexible. Vimbai could not “read” Mrs. Khumalo with a purely historical understanding of the woman. Through the intuitive conception and expression of the owner, readers see how Mrs. Khumalo’s qualities references Vimbai’s own position. She states, “Mrs. K. never forgot any of her customers’ names, a trait that I wished I shared,” which references Vimbai’s treatment of her own clients.¹¹² While Vimbai has the highest number of and most prestigious clients, here she admits that her relationships with those clients are not as deep as those of her boss. She places Mrs. Khumalo on a pedestal, one on which she also strives to eventually place herself. Additionally, Vimbai admires Mrs. Khumalo’s integrity in the job search: “This was something else I admired about her. Had it been another person, they would have looked for a relative to fill the position, but not Mrs. Khumalo. She wanted the best people working for her.”¹¹³ Vimbai includes herself in the pool of “the best people” and, although a bit self-indulgent on her part, this observation indicates a stake that Vimbai holds in Mrs. Khumalo’s values: Vimbai connects to Mrs. Khumalo by illustrating how she embodies or hopes to embody Mrs. Khumalo’s values.

The structure of observation changes with Minister M.; instead of the essential connection shown with Mrs. Khumalo, Vimbai demonstrates a disconnect from the Minister. Before we receive any physical description of Minister M, we learn her historical position—her family origins and her actions that affect history. Vimbai begins with the Minister’s familial origins, recalling the woman’s hometown: “She had grown up in rural Chivhu.”¹¹⁴ After this placement, Vimbai explains the Minister’s effects on and position in recent history: “Minister M__ had joined the liberation struggle when she was only fourteen. She had trained in Zambia

¹¹² Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 5.

¹¹³ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 5.

¹¹⁴ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 16.

with ZANLA and had fought bravely against the Rhodesian Army. After independence, she entered politics...”¹¹⁵ This information is then followed by a thorough description of the Minister’s progress into politics—from schooling, to deputy minister, to full minister—before Vimbai finally physically describes the woman: “she wore spectacles and had a gap in her teeth, which made it sound like she was whistling when she spoke.”¹¹⁶ This progression of personal description highlights Vimbai’s understanding of the Minister: she is defined by her historical position, both past and present. Thus, according to Vimbai’s ordering of description, what is most important is not the physical appearance of the Minister but the way she is grounded in national history. Through these two pages of describing the Minister, as well as Vimbai’s interactions with her, readers see that Vimbai does not connect with the Minister. Indeed, the Minister’s political background is isolated, it divorces the woman from Vimbai as well as others. Vimbai’s compliments of the woman exist in its own vacuum, demonstrating that Vimbai has no perceived stake in the Minister’s qualities: “It amazed me the way she remembered our names although we were nobodies...I liked the way she whistle-spoke and carried herself. There was a down-to-earth quality about her; she felt like one of the girls, even though we all knew she was loaded.”¹¹⁷ Vimbai cannot see herself in the Minister. She sees the Minister as an inaccessible entity that graces plebeians with her presence. Ultimately, history-based knowledge of a person or event is not flexible enough to allow for individual integrations. Instead of the inflexibility and isolation that historical awareness can incur, intuitive comprehension encompasses self-reflective analyses—as we see when Vimbai analyzes her own client relationship after assessing Mrs.

¹¹⁵ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 16.

¹¹⁶ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 16-17.

Khumalo's client relations. This suggests that historical constructions can limit how individuals understand and improve upon themselves and their own relationship to the world.

The novel has two scenes where homosexuality, intuition, and history interact: one with the war veterans and the other with an epiphany. These moments are dedicated to significant shifts in the story: the moment when Dumi first meets his lover and the moment when Vimbai realizes that Dumi is a homosexual. Interestingly, the scene with Dumi and the veterans is the only time when history and intuition interact to *produce* knowledge (about Dumi). The epiphany scene, on the other hand, brings history and intuition together to *challenge* knowledge (about homosexuality).

History and intuition converge to produce knowledge only once in the entire work: Dumi's confrontation with the war veterans. The references toward "the vets" link to national history because the veterans are those who fought in the Rhodesian civil war, those who still actively involve themselves in protecting their nation from white intruders. This scene illustrates the complicated tension between Rhodesians and many Zimbabweans in the aftermath of the war. The first time that Vimbai mentions the veterans coincides with the first time that the reader sees Trina, the only white character, enter the salon. Trina regularly trades materials with Mrs. Khumalo so that the salon obtains service supplies and Trina obtains everyday objects, as she prefers not to take and carry cash. In this introductory transaction that the reader observes, Trina exchanges boxes of salon hair products for bottles of cooking oil. As we see with many other characters in the story, Vimbai positions Trina in a historical situation before giving a physical description. Because Trina is white, she may be taken to represent the colonizing forces but Vimbai explains her historical situation in a manner that emphasizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Trina, along with her husband, owned two farms, one of which they

willingly surrendered after the civil war—a gesture that had “seen them through the first wave of invasions.”¹¹⁸ The government allowed Trina to keep her other land. The installed governmental officials challenged that decision but lost in a court lawsuit over the territory—“But then the war vets arrived.”¹¹⁹ Those who had fought in the war caused Trina and her husband to flee the land by beating their workers, killing their livestock, and raiding their home. While the salon benefits from Trina’s ability to access many high-quality resources that are otherwise inaccessible, her presence also triggers the memory of invasion and oppression.

Dumi steps in the middle of this strained historical relationship when the Minister happens to see Trina in the salon one fateful day. This interaction between Dumi and history produces an intuitive reaction in Vimbai. The moment that she sees Trina, the Minister shouts a national slogan and forces the other Zimbabweans in the vicinity to chant it after her before she states, “If I’d known that this salon catered for Rhodesians, I would have closed it down a long time ago.”¹²⁰ The Minister and Trina begin arguing over the rights of Rhodesians before Dumi steps between the two women, gesturing for Trina to stop talking and telling the Minister, “If you persist in insulting other clients I shall have to ask you to leave.”¹²¹ Vimbai notes his stance and his statement, perceiving “the way in which Dumi conducted himself.”¹²² This perception later contributes to her conclusions made during his interaction with the vets. After Dumi defends Trina’s right to be at the salon—although not defending her right to stay in the country itself—and the mandatory peace, the Minister makes a phone call that instructs the war vets to come to the salon. With a bit of persuasion, Dumi convinces Trina to leave before the vets arrived

¹¹⁸ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 45.

¹¹⁹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 45.

¹²⁰ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 105.

¹²¹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 105.

¹²² Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 106.

“singing revolutionary songs.”¹²³ With the Rhodesian now gone, the Minister tells the vets that Dumisani is in allegiance with the Rhodesian side of the country’s history, thus making Dumisani the target of the armed group.

The moment when the “whistling and chanting” vets encircle the silent Dumisani represents the clash between a clamorously violent history and the homosexual individual.¹²⁴ The veterans arrive with a purpose and Dumisani faces their determination, “staring into space defiantly. Standing in the middle of this ring of death, Dumisani was calm looking like a lion amongst jackals.”¹²⁵ Dumisani asks the fighters, “What are you waiting for?” as he stands, still staring not at them but beyond them.¹²⁶ This interaction, along with the perception of Dumisani’s mannerisms in the previous scene, moves Vimba to recognize Dumisani as a lion. She does not describe him as brave or elegant but instead connects him to the strength of the lion. This link is an intuitive moment for Vimba as no adjectives can describe the gut knowledge gained from Dumisani’s reaction to the situation. Not only does Vimba realize just how much she cares about Dumisani’s well-being, but she also apprehends the unshaking resolve that Dumisani holds. Vimba’s intuition leads her to create truths about Dumisani being strong and brave, which furthers her idea of his masculinity. However, her rationalized truth of his masculinity is compromised later in the epiphany scene, a section that produces an interaction between national history and her intuition-based knowledge of Dumisani.

Vimba’s discovery of Dumisani’s sexuality causes history and intuition to converge to *challenge* knowledge. The moment that Vimba finds out that her potential lover Dumisani is a homosexual, she states, “Even the president had called them worse than pigs—I might have

¹²³ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 107.

¹²⁴ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 108.

¹²⁵ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 108.

¹²⁶ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 108.

disagreed with a lot of what he has done to this country but I had to agree with him there.”¹²⁷

Vimbai aligns herself with Mugabe and his ideas on homosexuality, but her alignment is soon disturbed as she continues to read through Dumi’s journal. In the moments after uncovering Dumi’s sexuality via his journal, Vimbai attempts to reconcile her own perceptions of homosexuals with what she knows of Dumi via her previous intuitions. This proves difficult for her: “He spoke like a man, wore clothes like a normal man and even walked like a normal man. Everything about him was masculine.”¹²⁸ This thought process is not a new revelation for Vimbai as she has previously discussed Dumi’s masculinity with the girls in the salon. Earlier in the story, Vimbai informs the reader that “whenever he nipped out there [were] comments on how cute he was, how great his body was.”¹²⁹ She further comments that “he would chat with the girls and feel like one of them. A man so comfortable with his own masculinity was hard to find.”¹³⁰ From watching him hold casual conversations with the other females in the shop, Vimbai intuited Dumi’s comfort with the task of conversation as a form of masculinity in itself. From this assertion, readers can assume Vimbai’s beliefs that men do not usually talk casually with females because they do not want to be deemed too feminine. Dumi does not follow this belief. He can talk to the women about safe sex, popular music, and politics without being protective about defending his gender. These actions and principles manifest in how Dumi carries himself as he talks with the women, causing Vimbai’s intuition to record Dumi’s comfort amongst the opposite gender. Vimbai rationalizes this perception of his relaxed state so that her intuition leads to a conclusion of solid masculinity.

¹²⁷ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 167.

¹²⁸ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 166.

¹²⁹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 38.

¹³⁰ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 38.

After reflecting on her own understanding of Dumi, Vimbai recollects other truths established outside of the intuitive moments with Dumi, social and political “facts” associated with the conception of homosexuality. She recognizes that her understanding of homosexuality contradicts her intuition when she asks, “Didn’t homosexuals walk about with handbags and speak with squeaky voices?” She goes on to ponder other aspects of her knowledge base, “Which one of them was the man and which was the woman anyway? The journal did not shed any light on this.”¹³¹ If we consider that Vimbai’s stereotypical beliefs about homosexual individuals stem from her national affiliation, especially in connection to Mugabe, then her intuitive truths work against those supposed historical truths, effectively challenging her ideas of homosexuality. As shown, she starts with her understanding of Dumi, the comprehension gained from various intuitive moments. She then places these facts against her historically-constructed opinions by asking questions. In other words, the contradiction between intuition and history forces Vimbai into an attempt to understand the disconnect between the two forms of knowledge. This is not to say that the disconnect can be remanufactured or even purely defined but instead that the disconnect in and of itself serves the goal of that relationship. In other words, Huchu creates a dialogue that forces mental negotiations but resists established answers in order to guide readers into a practice of critical thinking. The progression moves very quickly from questioning what she thought of as facts toward desiring more information that undermines other sources of information. She actively looks through the journal for the answer to her gender questions. She does not find those answers. Therefore, Vimbai’s intuition about Dumi inspires her to question what she knows about homosexuality but also to actively look for answers to those inquiries.

¹³¹ Huchu, *Hairdresser*, 166.

Intuition repositions the queer black body outside of history to create space for criticism of purported historical truths. Ultimately, Vimbai's actions demonstrate that the intuitive relationship produced by her engagement with Dumi unsettles her historical ideas of the queer black body. Pitting intuitive knowledge against historical knowledge while also suggesting that there can be room for both, Huchu's novel complicates the very structure of how one comes to obtain knowledge of particular individuals. The characters that are not fully situated within the confines of a historical context are allowed more depth and complexity than others. These extra-historical characters are not bound by one form of truth; Vimbai can empathetically relate to these individuals while she can only objectively observe the others. The intuitive certainties both demonstrate the multiplicity of facts and challenge those alternative facts. Indeed, empathy inspires alliance especially when considering the exclusion and oppression of a community of individuals. The end of the novel suggests a slight contradiction to this alliance, since Vimbai's intuitive empathy directly causes Dumi's expulsion from the country. However, Vimbai knows—through previous conversations—that Dumi's exile would be the only action that would keep him alive but also keep him happy. Huchu, in ending his story in this manner, suggests that for some homosexuals the only option for happiness lies abroad, that perhaps there are limits on the ways in which intuitive or historical knowledge can solve that issue.

Huchu's book—along with its accompanying commentary—contributes to the larger cultural project of constructing a society conducive to the inclusion of the LGBT community. For example, four years after the publication of *The Hairdresser of Harare*, South African activist and Black Studies scholar Zethu Matebeni curated a queer anthology, *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*, as a response to anti-gay attitudes and their effects in South Africa. Matebeni and Jabu Pereira, the accompanying editor, express

the need for excluded communities to create an alternative space that both includes and embraces their existence—an Afrika. So that, similar to how Huchu writes a universe into existence that questions and alters anti-LGBT opinions, Matebeni’s anthology offers a way to subvert the current systems that work against the queer population. In the work’s preface, Matebeni explains how the difference in spelling Africa can function to liberate the minority, “We deliberately use ‘K’ in Afrikan to emphasize the need to reclaim our existence in this continent. As queer persons, we have been alienated in Africa. We have been stripped of our belonging and our connectedness. For these reasons, we have created our own version of Afrika.”¹³² The use of the *k* in place of the *c* in the original Africa highlights a visual difference so that one only *sees* the change rather than *hearing* it. Despite the visual difference, the word still refers to the same continent. In fact, the new spelling of that same space nuances the area in question by showing variety in construction, variety in the individuals who make up that space. Examined another way, visibility—a practical goal of representation—allows for sexual minorities to access public and private self-expression while also insisting upon cohesion with the majority identity.

Reclaiming Afrikan further questions the limitations and horizons of perception via photography, performing arts, and painting. In an attempt to compensate for the erasure of sexual minorities on the continent, the contributors force the audience to acknowledge and appreciate a queer space through forms that lend themselves to perception. For instance, Jabu Pereira’s photography uses the gaze as the trope unifying his featured collections. In his first photo, a naked woman stands at the center of a mountainous landscape, covering her face with her hand. Thus, the viewers cannot discern the facial expression of the photographed woman, a detail that “asks us to consider what it would take for deeply entrenched ways of seeing the world to be

¹³² Zethu Matebeni and Jabu Pereira, *Reclaiming Afrikan*, 7.

overturned.”¹³³ The inability to determine, or the avoidance of, the facial expression of the non-normative woman comes in direct contrast with Pereira’s *In a Queer Time, Monumental*, and *Loss Series*.¹³⁴ These later works use the gaze as a tool for interpellation, instead of ambiguity, by forcing a dialogue between the perceiver and the perceived. Each of the subjects in these photographs glare back into the camera, igniting an engagement with the audience. More than simply allowing an observation of the photo, the pictures return that gaze, returning that judgment.

Although legal protection acts as the starting point for many social movements, the goals for the various artists featured in the anthology extend beyond the law. In fact, Sibusiso Kweswa observes that the “imagination of a free and welcoming South Africa is tarnished as soon as [individuals] find themselves in our country” because trans-residents and immigrants, especially, still face limitations.¹³⁵ As illustrated in Kweswa’s writing, South Africa’s “progressive” laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexuality and gender identification do not dispel a culture of hatred and abuse. The trans community has a particularly difficult time changing their required identification—a process that limits their physical and financial mobility—and obtaining acceptance of their preferred pronoun.¹³⁶ This hindrance demonstrates that the “struggle for freedom and social justice” involves more than judiciary issues; the fight involves cultural

¹³³ Kylie Thomas, “The Transgressive Visions of Jabulani Chen Periera,” *Reclaiming Afrikan*, 41-42.

¹³⁴ I say non-normative because 1) the work appeared in a critically queer exhibition, 2) the woman has a shaven head which defies gendered norms, and has no clothes on to discern her gender identity, and 3) Thomas designates the photographed woman as a symbol for queerness inserted onto a natural landscape.

¹³⁵ Sibusiso Kweswa, “Negotiating personhood—What’s it like being Transgender in South Africa,” *Reclaiming Afrikan*, 68.

¹³⁶ As Sibusiso Kweswa notes, class plays a larger part of these limitation. Lower class individuals cannot afford the required therapy or even the base hormonal therapy required before obtaining reassignment surgery—if desired. Immigrants are not allowed to change their gender or names on their identification documents because the South African laws only makes that possible—although still very difficult—for South African-born residents. Lower class South African residents often cannot afford the replacements which cuts them off from their bank accounts, any contracts including employment contracts, etc.

advances as well because while the two affect each other, a change in the laws does not inherently translate into a change in cultural attitudes.¹³⁷ Matebeni's collection and Huchu's novel both aspire to alter these existing public positions against LGBT community members by suggesting that a reconfiguration of perception as a form of knowledge must precede any desired shifts in the societal mindset.

¹³⁷ Zethu Matebeni, "Preface," *Reclaiming Afrikan*, 7.

Chapter Two

Behind a United Front: Transcending Social Exclusion in Nkunzi Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*

*The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days.*¹³⁸

~Nelson Mandela

Nkunzi Nkabinde's 2008 *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* is a memoir and ethnographic study focused on queer black sangomas in South Africa. A sangoma is a "spirit medium whose distinctive feature is an emphasis on the ancestral rather than sorcery explanations of disease and other misfortune."¹³⁹ These ancestors are differentiated as either *amadhlozi* (ancestors tied to a family line) or *amathongo* (general ancestors to humanity); Nkabinde predominantly works with *amadhlozi*.¹⁴⁰ Through her engagement with the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA), one of the more popular and well-funded LGBT activist organizations in South Africa, Nkabinde is able to find and interview other lesbian black sangomas to establish a community of spiritual and sexual others. This chapter is interested in the ways in which Nkabinde's memoir encourages cultural change concerning the LGBT community's inclusion into societal conversations of national identity. If Nkabinde's work appears in academic scholarship, the memoir will most often appear as an archival reference—as a resource to gain knowledge of sangomas' trainings and/or as an ethnographic study. Most scholars do not consider her to work to be a creative contribution to the LGBT literary field. There are almost no literary analyses of her book. Cheryl Stobie is the only scholar who treats Nkabinde's work as a creative literary piece, full of symbolism, creative implications, and

¹³⁸ Nelson Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 1.

¹³⁹ Wim van Binsbergen, "Commodification in the sangoma cult of Southern Africa," 321.

¹⁴⁰ Wim van Binsbergen, "Commodification in the sangoma cult of Southern Africa," 321.

cultural references. Although I veer away from Stobie's insistence on using a "transgender" lens for reading the work, her analysis of the implications of embodying differently-gendered ancestors offers an understanding of the memoir as "the creation of an identity at odds with mainstream values."¹⁴¹ I agree with the assessment of the tension between Nkabinde's identity and national anti-gay morals. However, I hope to add to Stobie's scholarship by demonstrating how Nkabinde weakens exclusions grounded in beliefs that homosexuality counters nation-building efforts by dismantling the gap between her sexual identity and her national identity via the construction of her spiritual, sexual, and national self.

In order to challenge thoughts of queers being outside of South African identity, Nkabinde ignites a reconsideration of social acceptability of LGBT people by 1) proving an alignment with national struggles, 2) enforcing visual representation, and 3) proving spiritual transcendence. I will first show how the structure of the personal narrative incorporates Nkabinde and her family line into the struggle against the apartheid state, which redefines national belonging—from sexual identity to the fight against hierarchies. National leaders focus on this same common struggle in their nation-building efforts. Next, I will assess the visual representations of Nkabinde's work, the picture inserts, in order to reveal the ways in which visibility and visibility restructures the historical archive to include her queer black body. The visual engages the public gaze in order to challenge preconceptions attached to non-visual, often literary and ethical, theories. Finally, I will explore the spirituality in the memoir—the connection with and transcendence from gender- and sexuality-based exclusionary practices and beliefs in South Africa.

¹⁴¹ Cheryl Stobie, "He Uses My Body," 151.

The belief of homosexuality as UnAfrican appears consistently in conversations on the direction and common identity of the South African country.¹⁴² While there have been countless attempts to counter these perceptions—many of which were legal victories—literature is another effective instrument for destabilizing the reasons used to exclude LGBT citizens from national identity. Busangokwakhe Dlamini notes in his article on the history of and attitude towards homosexuality that there are “many instances of homophobia (often largely by Africans) against African homosexuals.”¹⁴³ In advocating for a way to combat anti-gay violence and attitudes, Thabo Msibi states that activists seeking to destabilize the prevailing issues must adopt an “approach that is *creative* and *Africa-centered*, and takes interconnections into account when addressing homophobia.”¹⁴⁴ In this suggestion, the word creative pertains to the genre of the activist endeavor, which implies that past anthropological works that document historical instances of same-sex relations are ineffective in today’s time.¹⁴⁵ The work by activists must be creative in nature—this means literature. Additionally, Msibi refers to Africa-centered approaches; I take this term to mean focus and creator—the work must focus on an African nation and the author must be from an African nation. Therefore, literature by and about a South African citizen serves as the best argument against exclusionary practices in South African society.¹⁴⁶

In this vein, Nkabinde’s creative contribution challenges anti-gay attitudes by using the lesbian black sangoma community, herself included, to affect cultural change in South African

¹⁴² This term appears in the first chapter on Tendai Huchu and Zimbabwe. The term was used initially by the Ugandan president and took hold and a variety of other African nations, including South Africa, thereafter.

¹⁴³ Busangokwakhe Dlamini, “Homosexuality in the African Context,” 135.

¹⁴⁴ Thabo Msibi, “The Lies We Have Been Told,” 72. Italics added.

¹⁴⁵ See for instance, scholarly tomes of Marc Epprecht and Neville Hoad

¹⁴⁶ I acknowledge that African identity does not necessarily include black identity. Msibi does not refer to his own requirements in the race of the activist; simply that the activist must be a national citizen. For the purpose of scope, I must table the arguments pertaining to whether or not white South Africans have the same clout when approaching national exclusionary tactics.

residents and readers. In other words, if the term “UnAfrican” separates black queers from South African identity, Nkabinde brings the group back into that collective. She uses herself as a tool to unravel public anti-gay attitudes and beliefs that position queers outside of the country’s group self-definition. In consideration of a possible solution to the exclusion experienced by black queers in South African, Dlamini states that the nation’s leaders must “mobilize all communities to promote respect, tolerance, and care in the context of equality and human rights.”¹⁴⁷ By integrating herself and other queer black sangomas into the national community, Nkabinde demonstrates a way of thinking about queers that veers away from cultural, religious, or gendered reasons for exclusion.

Since Nkabinde’s work does not adhere to a traditional structural form—combining personal memoir and ancestral explanations with an ethnographic study of lesbian black sangomas in South Africa—a traditional summary would undermine the tale because the narrative does not follow a linear form or cohesive topic of story-telling. This unstructured formation of the memoir is a potent demonstration of the fluidity and amorphousness of history itself.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Nkabinde’s personal narrative refuses to abide by genre rules nor the “rules” of recorded history. The rejection of traditional expectations of the memoir manifests in the varied nature of the chapters themselves, as we will see below. Instead of following a chronological structure, Nkabinde writes thematically, each chapter covering 10-20 years of her life—many of those years overlap, and many of those chapters focus on others outside of herself. The restructuring of the genre guidelines inspires a reconsideration of previously-held assumptions

¹⁴⁷ Busangokwakhe Dlamini, “Homosexuality in the African Context,” 135.

¹⁴⁸ This concept of non-linear time can be seen in Anne McClintock’s “The Angel of Progress.” This fluidity and amorphousness of history allows room for a reconsideration of the position of queers in the South African national identity.

about literature which in turn inspires other reconsiderations, such as the social position of the queer black citizen.

Chapter One illustrates the circumstances of Nkabinde's birth—the 1976 student protests as the national backdrop, the Zulu tradition of birthing twins (Nkabinde was “the first twin to live in her father's family”¹⁴⁹), and the history of her spiritual grandmother. Chapter 2 demonstrates how Nkabinde, living in both KZN and Meadowsland, had to reconcile the different cultural environments. Chapter 3 is the story of Nkabinde coming out to her mother, who accepted her as she was and protected her from the wrath of other family members. Chapter 4 chronicles how Nkabinde came to find out that she was being called to the sangoma tradition. Chapter 5 describes the history and characteristics of the primary ancestor Nkunzi as well as the sangoma training that Nkabinde went through. Chapter 6 discusses how Nkabinde lives with Nkunzi being ever-present—how he causes internal negotiations and personality shifts. Chapter 7 gives an introduction to GALA and covers the interviews of other black lesbian sangomas in South Africa. An insert of glossed pages of photographs also appears in this section, but the photos do not align with the content of the chapter. Instead, the photos are of her parents, her family, herself (young and old), and her community. Chapter 8 discusses the implications of spirituality on Nkabinde's sexual identity. Chapter 9 talks about the knowledge and experiences gained from Nkabinde working at Constitution Hill. Chapter 10 covers Nkabinde's experience with hatred in South Africa and an acknowledgment of her protection as a sangoma. And finally, in Chapter 11 Nkabinde explains how she navigates the intersection between culture, gender, sexuality, race, and spirituality, since “each of [her] different roles, as a Zulu woman, as a lesbian and as a sangoma, come with its own challenges.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 7

¹⁵⁰ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 150.

Nkabinde wrote this memoir after having gotten involved in the gay rights organization, Gays and Lesbian Archives (GALA). Founded in 1997 in South Africa “the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) were established to create and document our own history of same-sexuality.”¹⁵¹ The goal of GALA is to

“dispel prevailing societal misperceptions of same-sexuality generally and specifically within an African cultural context. [The] programmes focus efforts on generating educational and training materials; lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) issues and human rights awareness; advocacy and organizational capacity; and holdings that cross the racial divide.”¹⁵²

The organization approached Nkabinde in hopes of beginning a project on lesbian sangomas in the country. When they found that she was open about her sexuality, the group’s leaders asked her to take charge of the study.¹⁵³ Nkabinde acknowledges the power of preservation, as she writes, “the ambition to write a book about myself is a means of being remembered after death.”¹⁵⁴ GALA allowed Nkabinde to achieve her goal of memorialization by giving her the financial and inspirational means to write about herself and others. The independent organization is both a “resource of materials relating to lesbian and gay experience in Southern Africa” as well as an active agent in the collection and retention of LGBT archival materials.¹⁵⁵ GALA’s use of Nkabinde further authenticates their study on lesbian sangomas because the data-gathering and analysis stems from a fellow lesbian sangoma, which means less cultural bias.

¹⁵¹ Nkunzi Nkabinde, “Ancestral Wives,” 9.

¹⁵² Anthony Manion and Ruth Morgan, “The Gay and Lesbian Archives,” 29.

¹⁵³ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*.

¹⁵⁴ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 160.

¹⁵⁵ Neville Hoad, *Sex and Politics*, 228.

The post-Apartheid state became the most inclusive law system in the world, prohibiting discrimination against most identifying characteristics. However, Nkabinde and GALA's work recognizes that South Africa's gay rights "triumph" is actually misleading, as the LGBT community often faces anti-gay attacks on a regular basis. As the country's constitution states:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.¹⁵⁶

The constitution only increased its protective measures as the years passed. However, the laws ratified after the end of Apartheid did not necessarily reflect the social traditions of the people. For instance, after passing the marriage equality laws in 2005, "the Civil Union Bill faced almost outright rejection and opposition. Traditionalists, religious groups and everyone else who were already skeptical of the progressive nature of the constitution and gay rights, argued that same-sex unions would be against the order of nature and African cultural norms."¹⁵⁷ This tension demonstrates that socially constructed traditions of exclusion are wide-spread even throughout South Africa despite the constitutional developments. In fact, many members of the queer community within other African nations move to South Africa believing that they can live peaceful lives but are often met with open hostility, loop-holes in protective laws, and anti-gay violence.¹⁵⁸

South African national identity is created from the combination of blackness and anti-Western ideals—an amalgamation that the nation's leaders often encourage. The anti-West

¹⁵⁶ Brenna Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*, vii.

¹⁵⁷ Matebeni, "Sexual Minorities in South Africa," 746.

¹⁵⁸ Sibusiso Kheswa, "Negotiating Personhood-What It's Like Being Transgender in South Africa," *Reclaiming Afrikan*.

values held and enacted by the masses serve as a “manifest consciousness of a nation and the way through which the nation expresses itself.”¹⁵⁹ These national values developed into black-African-based standards because political leaders, such as Jacob Zuma, unraveled Apartheid’s insistence on racial hierarchies and brought all forms of blackness under one major notion: black pride must be prioritized and must resist white, Western ideals and practices. In other words, to prevent South Africa from falling into another Apartheid regime, the masses must resist white (Western) ideals and create a nation grounded in black African principles. Therefore, when leaders espouse homosexuality as UnAfrican they imply that queerness, a West-produced phenomenon, inherently rejects blackness and thus cannot participate in the citizenship of the black country. This understanding of national identity is an off-set of the Négritude movement of the 1930s—inspired by Césaire, Senghor, and Damas—that required an active rejection of Western, white ideals in order to develop a pride in the African ethnicity.

This projected model of a non-white South Africa focuses on the belief systems and customs that had been effectively suppressed during the era of racial hierarchies and rejects practices believed to have been introduced by white colonizers. Indeed, culture “evokes a sense of continuity between the past and present histories of a nation; it simulates a unique sense of a shared identity.”¹⁶⁰ The social practices that support this racial pride mission involve reviving traditions that pre-date European invasion, including cultural reclamation projects that attempt to create and celebrate a black, non-Western, and pre-white South Africa. Ultimately, the post-Apartheid racial unification attempts in South Africa deal with returning to a pre-colonized black identity that thrives in non-Western behaviors and philosophies. This racial reclamation project becomes the national narrative in an attempt to counter the white domination of the past.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Eze, *Intellectual History*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Eze, *Intellectual History*, 4.

However, exclusions are inherent in the creation of any identity category, including a shared blackness. Therefore, social discrimination against queer black individuals in South Africa is normalized through these identity politics that insist on a very particular racial performance. As Xavier Livermon posits in his work on queer black spaces in South Africa, “cultural politics consistently mark the black queer body as the constitutive outside of blackness and the queer body is subsequently racialized as white.”¹⁶¹ An example of these exclusionary politics can be seen in the statements and behaviors of the nation’s leader, Jacob Zuma.

Under the nation-building strategy, Zuma often insists that queerness goes against cultural and moral practices, even as the constitution explicitly protects the LGBT group. According to several South African channels, Jacob Zuma condemned homosexuality in 2006 at celebrations for Heritage Day, saying that homosexuality and same-sex marriages are “a disgrace to the nation and to God.”¹⁶² At that very instant, the government was in the process of determining whether or not same-sex marriage would be legalized in the nation. The LGBT community was understandably upset at the statement as it showed anti-gay attitudes in the midst of sexually progressive legislation. Indeed, LGBT organizations and communities argued that Zuma showed “ignorance” and “total disrespect” of the nation’s constitution.¹⁶³ Zuma demonstrates the common split between state and public sentiments on gay rights and inclusion.¹⁶⁴ His statements highlight the ever-present debate on the question, “Who is an African,” as he positions national identity against homosexuality.¹⁶⁵ In fact, Zuma appointed Jon Qwelane, “a self-proclaimed homophobe [who] equated homosexuality to bestiality,” to an

¹⁶¹ Xavier Livermon, “Queer(y)ing Freedom,” 314.

¹⁶² “Zuma Provokes Ire of Homosexuals.” *Independent Online*.

¹⁶³ “Zuma Provokes Ire of Homosexuals.” *Independent Online*.

¹⁶⁴ This split occurs in South Africa, but also in the majority of countries that overtly deal in LGBT legislation. Law scholars often separate de facto from de jure for a reason—just because a law changes does not mean that the public conception of and/or treatment towards a certain idea changes as well.

¹⁶⁵ Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*, 82.

ambassador position, which served to “condone [Qwelane’s] attitudes.”¹⁶⁶ Even the appointed South African minister of arts and culture publicly rejected the representation and celebration of lesbian sexuality, saying that homosexuality is “immoral and [goes] against nation building and social cohesion.”¹⁶⁷ Again, these public figures position homosexuality as a practice that undermines the development of a racial and national identity.

Alongside this overall racial exclusion of the LGBT community, the long history of racism and sexism that permeate South Africa’s political and social landscape affects black lesbians most tragically. As Zethu Matebeni points out, “stark racial and class divisions have symbolized Johannesburg Pride” as the white pride group often refuses to acknowledge racial differences and struggles. Black lesbians face continued hatred: “Among South African black lesbian women specifically, one is considered lucky to escape rape, or even murder before their 30th birthday.”¹⁶⁸ Matebeni observes that after the new millennium the “poor black lesbian and gays [became] the spectacle” so that only two narratives emerge from South Africa: “the visual display of gay and lesbian pride marches” and “the black lesbian who is the perpetual victim of male sexual violence and murder.”¹⁶⁹ Racism in the country keeps them outside of the white-based LGBT community while sexism keeps them in constant sight of “corrective” rape.

Matebeni notes that the black lesbian “occupies a peculiar space in South Africa and the African continent.”¹⁷⁰ Observing the pattern of attacks against black lesbians, Thabo Msibi states that “homophobia in South Africa has gendered undertones,” which is why “this violence is largely driven by gender, with men asserting their authority over women.”¹⁷¹ Indeed, the

¹⁶⁶ Thabo Msibi, “The Lies We Have Been Told,” 62.

¹⁶⁷ Thabo Msibi, “The Lies We Have Been Told,” 62.

¹⁶⁸ Matebeni, “Sexual Minorities in South Africa,” 747.

¹⁶⁹ Matebeni, “Sexual Minorities in South Africa,” 747.

¹⁷⁰ Matebeni, “Sexual Minorities in South Africa,” 747.

¹⁷¹ Thabo Msibi, “The Lies We Have Been Told,” 61.

patriarchal systems “encourage [heterosexuality]...[through] extreme sexual violence, such as rape.”¹⁷² Despite the fact that South Africa does not keep track of anti-gay attacks, scholars have already noted that black lesbians in South Africa have one of the highest violence rates in the world.¹⁷³ In addition to this statistic, a study conducted with South Africa police and LGBT citizens concluded that “gays/lesbians are used to the victimization that they experience and feel that incidents of victimization are not serious enough to report.”¹⁷⁴ This means that not only do black lesbians face extreme violence, but the community also avoids reporting the attacks, which in turn induces a sense of helplessness. In light of these circumstances, Nkabinde and her narrative work to empower the black lesbian.

Nkabinde’s memoir, mainly through her work with GALA, reveals the black lesbians that are often ignored by the national majority. Nkabinde notes that although her ancestors guided her in connecting to and accepting her sexuality, the sangoma community was not always supportive of her identity. She builds a community within the exclusive atmosphere of the heterosexual sangoma group. In fact, when Nkabinde first went into training, the elder sangomas were told that Nkabinde was a lesbian and the sangoma “said that I [Nkabinde] would be healed and get married to a man.”¹⁷⁵ This elder did not reject Nkabinde completely but did express the aspiration to lead Nkabinde into heterosexuality. Similarly, Nkabinde admits that “the elders said I should live my sex life secretly because lesbians are not part of African life.”¹⁷⁶ Their rejection inspired Nkabinde to actively seek out a more particular group to be a part of, the black lesbian sangomas. Indeed, Nkabinde notes that she experienced more disdain from the heterosexual

¹⁷² Thabo Msibi, “The Lies We Have Been Told,” 61.

¹⁷³ See Matebeni’s “Sexual Minorities in South Africa” and *Reclaiming Afrikan*; Amanda Swarr, “Paradoxes of Butchness.”

¹⁷⁴ Helen Wells and Louise Polders, “Anti-gay Hate Crimes in South Africa,” 27.

¹⁷⁵ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 51.

¹⁷⁶ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 121.

sangoma community than anywhere else, which is why she was so eager to assist in the GALA archival collection project: “I wanted to help other same-sex sangomas who were being judged and oppressed by the sangoma community.”¹⁷⁷ The elders insisting that Nkabinde not publicly display or discuss her non-normative sexuality are challenged by Nkabinde’s ethnographic study of sangomas that engage in non-normative sexual relationships. Her study proves that the spiritual community does have a history and prevalence of queer relations despite elders not wanting to acknowledge it.

Nkabinde integrates the lesbian sangoma into the heterosexual sangoma tradition by traveling around South Africa speaking with other lesbian sangomas to ask them how they conceive of and express their particular sexuality in connection with their spirituality. Through her memoir, she “shows herself establishing a supportive network of alternative traditional healers.”¹⁷⁸ Nkabinde recounts how she was first recruited into GALA’s project, noting that Mpumi Njinge first approached her at a ceremony and expressed shock when Nkabinde opened up to him about her connection between her sexuality and her spirituality. When GALA started this project, their members struggled to gather data because they were outside of the community—lesbian, black, and a sangoma. Nkabinde does not have that same problem. In fact, her requests for interviews are welcomed because they are seen as embracing and forming a stronger network of non-normative healers. After finishing an interview, Nkabinde comments that “I felt connected” when the sangoma extended an invitation to enter her home “whenever you like.”¹⁷⁹ Although their goal was not to benefit Nkabinde personally, GALA allowed her to join a community: “In six months I interviewed more than 30 sangomas and discovered that I

¹⁷⁷ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 122.

¹⁷⁸ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 152.

¹⁷⁹ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 83.

was part of a community of same-sex sangomas in urban and rural areas, from Soweto to all the provinces of South Africa.”¹⁸⁰ Nkabinde’s self-identification with the same category of the research subjects—an intentional strategy of GALA—gives her a strong sense of family, a sense that she is not an isolated entity.

While Nkabinde’s memoir follows a literary path to integrating the lesbian black sangoma community into discourses of nation-building, GALA takes an archival route of incorporating the group, which offers a more future-oriented focus. These two purposes supplement each other to improve the group’s social standing in the present and the future. Her interview work helps to “expand the community’s notions of spirituality, gender and sexuality, demonstrating that the sex/gender/sexuality matrix can profitably be seen as a variable continuum rather than a binary and hierarchical system.”¹⁸¹ In other words, Nkabinde’s study on and analysis of the particular group can challenge previously held notions of the immovability and permeability of identity.

Nkabinde reconfigures conceptions of national citizenship to incorporate queer black bodies. As I described in the previous section, public leaders’ goals to return to a pre-colonized nation involves a shared memory of the fight against Apartheid as well as a rejection of homosexuality. Nkabinde aligns the queer black body with the country’s black identity by 1) connecting with the Apartheid struggle—the struggle that serves as the foundation to the current nation-building discourse, and 2) demonstrating how black homosexuals can contribute to the establishment of a pre-West South Africa. The memoir illustrates Nkabinde’s engagement with the Apartheid resistance by showing her family’s associations with local protests and displaying how her Capitol Hill work memorializes the historical event. The memorialization of the

¹⁸⁰ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 83.

¹⁸¹ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 157.

Apartheid era acts as resistance to the system through its goal of exposing the almost irreparable harm done by the hierarchical classifications. Additionally, Nkabinde positions the black lesbian as more authentically African than most citizens despite the fact that some anti-gay citizens may “believe that being lesbian is not African.”¹⁸² The spiritual connections to Africa’s ancestors and the physical work done with Africa’s natural herbs executes a black South African identity outside of and before the context of white colonialism.

Nkabinde invites a conception of queers that focuses on their involvement with helping to dismantle Apartheid, which inherently makes the queer body a black body above all else, one identity never negates the other. The creation of a shared experience between a lesbian black sangoma and the nation allows Nkabinde to integrate the queer black body into an anti-gay atmosphere. As Neville Alexander asserts in his work on post-Apartheid South Africa, “it is not ethnicity, religion, language, or territory as such, but a ‘shared experience’, that gives rise to nations and nationalist movements.”¹⁸³ He even goes on to nuance the idea of a shared experience, insisting on its inherent variability—a multiplicity that is often forgotten. As Alexander explains, “We never have only one identity;”¹⁸⁴ therefore people must “be open to the extension of any of these identities, including the national South African identity.”¹⁸⁵ This multiplicity is vital to nation-building as it allows for change within the national and personal context. Nkabinde’s memoir demonstrates what Neville Alexander theorizes—the ever-changing flexible self, an identity that allows for additions to and subtractions of its different sides.

To do this, Nkabinde sets up her own identity within the framework of South African history, starting with protest activities in the midst of Apartheid. She tells the readers, “I was

¹⁸² Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 79.

¹⁸³ Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*, 89.

¹⁸⁴ Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*, 104.

¹⁸⁵ Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*, 109.

born in Soweto, six months before the students protested about Apartheid education and held the June 16th march in 1976. Soweto was tense in those days. There were police everywhere. Life was stressful and people were fed up.”¹⁸⁶ Here, she places herself in a township that was organized and closely monitored by police working at the hands of the colonizers. She acknowledges the environment in that marginalized community as she writes that “police were everywhere.” Additionally, in observing that “people were fed up” she positions herself in proximity to the thoughts and feelings of the people in that area during the time of oppression. Her people, the Zulu in Soweto, were tired of the oppressive system of Apartheid and were in the midst of toppling the systemic hierarchy. This revolutionary atmosphere and the people involved are operating in the time and area of her birth. In other words, just as Stobie notes that “Nkabinde indigenizes her narrative” to express a Zulu ethnic identity, I insist that the indigenization of her story also blends her identity as a same-gender-loving sangoma seamlessly with a black South African identity.¹⁸⁷

Even the home of Nkabinde’s family was a site of resistance efforts as she ties her family to the people’s struggles against Apartheid in an effort to identify with the larger community of oppressed people. As she states, “At night there was *toyi-toying* in the street outside the hostel in Meadowlands where my parents stayed.”¹⁸⁸ The term *toyi-toyi* references Apartheid protests. Although its origins are unclear, *toyi-toyi* is “an energetic civic protest form that combines song and dance.”¹⁸⁹ This form of protest was particular to the younger generations and the poorer communities that were oppressed by the apartheid systems—“*toyi-toyi* was like a weapon when

¹⁸⁶ Nkunzi Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 153.

¹⁸⁸ Nkunzi Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 4. Italics added.

¹⁸⁹ K. Kellerer, “Reinventing *Toyi-toyi*,” 201.

you did not have guns. It's a tool used in war.”¹⁹⁰ She intertwines national history with her autobiography, making the two inseparable—and thus sets her identity as more than a static concept of homosexuality.

Nkabinde's ability to connect with the country's ancestors establishes her South African blackness, especially as political discourse strategically incorporated the sangoma to revitalize a black national society. As Nkabinde explains, “Sangomas work with different kinds of ancestors: ancestors who share the same bloodline; ancestors from the village and the nation; ancestors that come from other parts of the world; and ancestors that are part of everything that exists.”¹⁹¹ Ancestors can derive from any part of the world but also any section of historical time. The sangoma's embodiment of ancestors creates a spiritual connection to a pre-West South Africa. The public presence of the sangoma has risen in South Africa since the end of Apartheid. South African leaders often bring the sangoma figure into public spaces to demonstrate a return to “African traditions,” restoring a black African pride project. The knowledge of sangomas manifesting African ancestors provides public figures a way of recouping a pre-colonial South Africa. This public presence means that Nkabinde, through her identity as a sangoma, acts as the means to effectively celebrate a culture untouched by whiteness. Because sangomas are often considered as alternatives to Western medicine and religion, some citizens consider the spiritual practices blasphemous and therefore do not approve of the use of the sangoma. However, as Gitte Postel observes in an article exploring the modern sangoma, after the end of the racial caste systems public officials focused on “indigenous knowledge” and put an “emphasis on cultural regeneration which made room for sangomas in several public spheres.”¹⁹² For instance, when

¹⁹⁰ K. Kellerer, “Reinventing Toyi-toyi,” 201.

¹⁹¹ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 60.

¹⁹² Gitte Postel, “Media, Mediums, and Metaphors,” 107.

opening new public buildings, the government often brings in several sangomas to cleanse the place of bad spirits and bless the space. Postel explains that these rituals involving the sangomas are cultural strategies to create locality, to create a new brand of community denied to black and brown peoples during Apartheid. Through this, Nkabinde demonstrates that sexuality does not exclude her from the construction of the national pre-West identity.

Nkabinde's spiritual connection also allows her to establish her position as part of the Zulu ethnic and cultural nation despite anti-gay sentiments advertised by the ethnic community. The leader of the Zulu ethnic group in the Kwazulu-Natal province of South Africa also places homosexuality in tension with the moral and biological progression of the ethnic community.¹⁹³ Indeed, "gays and lesbians continue to be denied cultural recognition and are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence."¹⁹⁴ At an annual ceremony, Goodwill Zwelithini, the reigning (then and now) king of the Zulu nation, stated that "homosexuality is a threat to the Zulu nation's rich moral teachings, that the new 'habit' was against African values."¹⁹⁵ King Zwelithini spoke to thousands of ceremony participants, saying that "The Zulu nation would not be this big, with millions of people, if there was the problem of gay people that we have today. This new behavior is quickly becoming a threat in our nation because it encourages people not to have proper families that have children."¹⁹⁶ He goes on to encourage children to "distance themselves from homosexuality."¹⁹⁷ In light of this anti-gay sentiment, Nkabinde integrates herself into the local ethnic grouping. While training to control and work with her ancestors, Nkabinde explains that one becomes a sangoma for the benefit of the cultural community: "You

¹⁹³ Bongani Mthembu, "Zulu King Slams Gays," *Independent Online*.

¹⁹⁴ Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told," 61.

¹⁹⁵ Bongani Mthembu, "Zulu King Slams Gays," *Independent Online*.

¹⁹⁶ Bongani Mthembu, "Zulu King Slams Gays," *Independent Online*.

¹⁹⁷ Bongani Mthembu, "Zulu King Slams Gays," *Independent Online*.

do this work for your clan, for all your ancestors.”¹⁹⁸ The sangoma stands for the entire community, for strength, for conservation, for prosperity—all of which counter the leader’s idea of homosexuality causing weakness, erasure, and degradation.

Shared grievance is not the only tool that Nkabinde uses to advocate for a reconsideration of the position and importance of the queer black body. Nkabinde also incorporates visual representation in order to express an existence that is often ignored or attacked in social and cultural settings. The photos of her, her family, and her community further connects the reader to her story and her sense of self—she is now undoubtedly a part of a local and national community. Nkabinde’s inclusion of the visual representation of queerness questions the gaze projected by anti-gay groups onto queer individuals. In other words, the preconceived notions of queerness and its intersection (or lack thereof) with blackness create a lens through which some citizens see queer bodies. This lens colors queer blacks as white queers who are corrupted by Western white values and practices. Ultimately, the anti-gay gaze steals black identity away from the black homosexual.

Nkabinde is not the first queer South African author to resituate the public’s gaze. Zanele Muholi is a world-renown photographer whose visual collections feature black lesbian bodies that challenge cultural notions of black lesbianism. Nkabinde’s inclusion of pictures operates in a similar fashion as the photographic projects of Zanele Muholi in that they both work toward visibility and re-imaging of the queer body as a black body. The memoir’s collage constructs a visual archive—whose purpose resides in the politics of visibility for the LGBT black community—to supplement GALA’s archive collection of stories. A visibility that challenges the anti-gay gaze of the national public also attempts to reimagine historical narrative and its

¹⁹⁸ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 59.

multiple manifestations by injecting queerness into established archives and by demonstrating a visual history as opposed to the traditional written or oral appearances.

The glossy insertion of pictures adds visual representation of queerness along with the family and community attached to that queer figure. The visual insert begins with pictures of Nkabinde's parents looking straight into and posing for an obviously professional camera. The next four photos show Nkabinde from age three to her as an adult—she is alone in two of the pictures and the other two show her with neighborhood children and her grandfather. The next two photos deal with scenery that has a tangential relation to Nkabinde herself: one is a still of a muthi market from the movie *Everything Must Come to Light*, and the other is of the mountain range in the KwaZulu-Natal province.¹⁹⁹ The next ten pictures deal with Nkabinde's practice and identity as a sangoma, from pictures of her traditional dress to pictures of her consultation room and traditional remedies. The next two photos show Nkabinde in the middle of activist work with two women from GALA. The captions do not indicate topic discussion of the image, but the visuals demonstrate her active engagement with the organization. Finally, the last shown photo is of Nkabinde at Constitution Hill, the capitol grounds of the country. This picture is the only one that fills an entire page, which emphasizes her work within a national context.

The combination of the written and the visual in Nkabinde's memoir unravels the "safeness" of the literary. It strives to detach the reader from a comfortable tolerance. The public reaction against Muholi's pictures provides an example of how and why literature can be considered safe while images can destabilize the literary comfort zone. During an art exhibit in 2009, Lulu Xingwana (the Minister of Arts and Culture) rejected the inclusion of Muholi's photography featuring black South African lesbians, citing the collection as "pornographic,

¹⁹⁹ Muthi is a tradition remedy. Sangomas frequent these markets to obtain herbs needed for their practice. *Black Bull*, 162

immoral, offensive, and going against nation-building.”²⁰⁰ The visibility of this marginalized community provoked outrage while written literature is generally accepted. Some scholars suggest that audience agency creates this difference in reaction:

“During the period of the apartheid censorship, the defense of literariness served in effect to exempt from proscription *some* provocative writing (including sexually explicit work), particularly after the adoption of the test of the *likely rather than the average* reader.”²⁰¹

Visual art, however, still seems vulnerable to narrow-minded suspicion and censure. One has to purchase and *read* a book; what unsettled Minister Xingwana was that one such as she could be made, unexpectedly, in a public space, to look upon photographs of lesbians.”²⁰²

Nkabinde’s readers are likely tolerant of queerness because they made the conscious decision to purchase and read a book with lesbian in the title. The memoir’s visuals force themselves into the consciousness of the audience as a way of, much like Muholi’s work, “rendering visible the complexity of lesbian lives.”²⁰³ In essence, visibility creates space for projecting the voice and appearance of silenced communities by returning the gaze of anti-gay, and sometimes even sympathetic readerships. The viewer’s gaze cannot force biased notions of appearance onto the photographed lesbian subject, as readers are able to do while reading the written word. The photographic insertion allows readers to see and understand that lesbians are still a part of the black community. Visuals serve a purpose—to further break down barriers to stereotypical ideas about the separation between black identity and queer identity.

²⁰⁰ Andrew van der Vlies, “Queer Knowledge and the politics of the gaze in contemporary South African Photography,” 140.

²⁰¹ Andrew van der Vlies, “Queer Knowledge and the politics of the gaze in contemporary south African photography,” 140. Italics added.

²⁰² Andrew van der Vlies, “Queer Knowledge and the politics of the gaze in contemporary south African photography,” 140.

²⁰³ Kylie Thomas, “Zanele Muholi’s Intimate Archive,” 422.

Nkabinde's photography also demonstrates the variety of history-telling/making—the ability to tell a separate narrative that can add to, without diminishing, the original account. The photographic saga creates an archival texture—the different formations and materials that can make up a history—that not only acts as an interruption to the traditional single-perspective narrative but also demonstrates the need for historical records that deviate from the dominant manifestations of story-collections. Nkabinde's purposeful deviation from solely written biographical form inspires a consideration of variants in identity expression—as in people can express black (or queer, or gender) identity in a variety of ways. The visual narrative tells a complementary but not altogether identical story. The glossed pages have no page number, nor do they supplement the story being told in that instant. In fact, Nkabinde is in the middle of conducting an interview of another lesbian sangoma when the glossed pages appear. The photographic interruption cuts right into a sentence that begins at the very end of page 86 with “I felt.” This partial sentence continues as if nothing happened on page 87 with “angry and upset.” If these pages were to be cut out, or if the reader were to skip over the visuals, there would be no documented evidence of its existence—no page numbers, no info added to or deleted from the story. A citation for these pages would have to be creatively done, perhaps referring to the memoir as a whole instead of particular page numbers. I recognize that publishing houses hold certain rules of practice when it comes to having photos added to a book so that the position and physical material of the glossed pages are possibly out of her control. However, Nkabinde did make a conscious decision to add in the visual narrative inside of a textual narrative.

The decision behind this photographic insertion can be seen as a response to the nation's use of historical record to exclude LGBT black individuals. The physical inclusion of pictures disturbs an oppressive use of formalized written history and reasserts those forgotten bodies back

into the narrative. Indeed, visual representation holds the possibility of attaining more recognition than written descriptions since “‘photographs as physical evidence re-anchor the subject in the physical world, and insist on the verifiable presence of an embodied and solid individual’.”²⁰⁴ This is not to say that all textual works within an archive are oppressive, only that the written has the potential to be used as a marginalizing tool. For example, if queers do not show up in the recordings of past civilizations, then that fact can be used as evidence for the lack of queers in pre-colonized African nations. The visual presentation of Nkabinde undermines the reliance on written testimony as the sole options for queer representation. As suggested in Stephen Mansfield’s work on life writing, pictures bear witness to the existence of the body captured which acts as a way of avoiding erasure. Historical exclusion relies on one static form of historical knowledge, dismissing any other formation of history. Similar to GALA’s project in collecting archival material, Nkabinde offers a visual contribution to the written archive. Her contribution can then create a more well-rounded display of existence because the archive will no longer be a one-dimensional representation. With the manufacturing of alternative forms of evidence, Nkabinde can then offer critiques of other misguided beliefs.

Nkabinde challenges set gender and sexual roles by explaining how ancestors affect gendered identity and its expression. She uses spirituality to explain the expression of her sexual and gender identity—embodied ancestors affect how her identities manifest. The memoir challenges preconceived notions of queerness by offering various constructions of the sexual self as well as presenting different modes of expressing the gendered self. As Stobie notes, Black Bull “heightens public awareness and promotes more understanding of the complex intersection between identity, gender, body, sexuality, spirituality and nation.”²⁰⁵ Nkabinde uses spirituality

²⁰⁴ Stephen Mansfield, *Australian Patriography*, 107. Quoting Linda Haverty Rugg.

²⁰⁵ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 161.

to help the masses reconceptualize sexuality, gender, and their intersections. The memoir destabilizes the “either, or” conception of non-normative sexuality whereby a person is “either” born as a lesbian, “or” a person becomes a lesbian through a general lack of morals (generally understood as hegemony originating from Western ideals).²⁰⁶ This dichotomy is shown in the anti-attitudes in countries all over the continent, as the Ugandan president commissioned an official study on whether or not gay people are born gay before he would pass any legislation against the queer community. However, Nkabinde challenges this understanding of sexuality by showing the complicated construction of the sexual self—affected by ancestor embodiment but also instilled at birth. This seemingly contradictory position blurs the binary understanding of the roots of sexual identity because her representation suggests that she is lesbian *because* she is authentically African, as opposed to the idea of being UnAfrican.²⁰⁷

Nkabinde’s display of the complex notion of personhood questions the anti-gay habit of making some identities mutually exclusive. Nkabinde demonstrates a queer personhood grounded in both birth and spiritual ancestors. Towards the beginning of her story, she says that Nkunzi did not cause her to be a lesbian but intensified her passions: “I feel my sexuality was with me from birth. It is not from my ancestors, but my ancestors supported me. My ancestors helped me to become who I was.”²⁰⁸ However, after successfully completing the sangoma training she insists that “If Nkunzi did not want me to be a lesbian I don’t believe I would have had these feelings. He would have given me a male partner and I would have been happy with

²⁰⁶ This binary is often voiced as the nature versus nurture debate. However, I hesitate to use this terminology because many African cultures have philosophies that focus on how the two are not split—that nurture via family and social environments are nature. See Chinua Achebe’s *There was a Country* and Leke Adeofe’s “Personal Identity in African Metaphysics.”

²⁰⁷ I say authentically African because she literally embodies an entity that is the pre-colonized African figure for which the government so often advertises.

²⁰⁸ Nkunzi Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 38.

that.”²⁰⁹ This projected tension breaks down the “to be versus to become” argument concerning the origin of sexuality in order to show that these two manifestations are not mutually exclusive. When Nkabinde states that the “ancestors helped me to become who I was,” she is not negating her insistence on being queer at birth; instead she is representing the development of sexual expression across a lifetime. Her point is the connection between her spiritual self and her social self—that if Nkunzi did not agree with her queerness then she would not have become so open and proud about her sexuality. In other words, “this autobiography reveals a gendered self and sexuality under construction.”²¹⁰ The work demonstrates an identity in flux, a self that is always being shaped by internal and external situations.

Nkabinde’s connection with her ancestors also allows her to express her gender more fully, which serves to “unsettle hegemonic masculinity” through a refusal to subscribe to impenetrable identity categorizations.²¹¹ Nkabinde embodies both male and female ancestors which affect her in different ways, as she repeatedly notes that she has “a male side and a female side.”²¹² Nkabinde celebrates the spiritual integration of the two genders in order to show the memoir’s transcendence beyond the confines of the normalized black female narrative. Indeed, as Matebeni notes, representations such as Nkabinde’s can help to challenge “the patriarchy and violence” of the victim narrative.²¹³ Although she notes that any of her ancestors can call upon her at any time, there are certain ancestors that regularly stay within her. Of course, Nkunzi is her dominant ancestor, as he most often appears and influences her behaviors and thoughts: “when he is around I want to dress in trousers and be a man.”²¹⁴ But Nkabinde also acknowledges when

²⁰⁹ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 67.

²¹⁰ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 160.

²¹¹ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 159.

²¹² Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 155.

²¹³ Matebeni, “Sexual Minorities in South Africa,” 748. Matebeni also notes “legal representations in court as well as advocating for legislations against hate-related crimes” to be important to challenging the tradition of hate (748).

²¹⁴ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 73.

the spirit of her ancestral wife, Jabulisile, appears within her: “Jabulisile gives me that feminine side and when she is with me I feel kindness towards people. It makes me feel love for my womanhood.”²¹⁵ She also speaks about the spirit of her twin brother: “If my twin brother’s spirit is in me, I feel like praising. He is full of joy and energy.”²¹⁶ These confessions show that at any situation, Nkabinde’s personality may change with whomever is dominant within her. On that note, she discusses her desires through and parallel to the desires of Nkunzi. She explains that sometimes her ancestors will want to have sex with a woman, and when that happens Nkabinde “will have the feeling of wanting that woman all the time.”²¹⁷ But although their objects of desire sometimes overlap, Nkunzi’s wanting a female does not force Nkunzi to want the same female. She can just sense his desire. This variety in spiritual identity allows her to embrace all formations of herself; her identity is not confined to one definition. This multi-dimensional self-construction challenges other forms of categorizations within a national and local context by demonstrating heterogeneity within the self.

While authors and activists (not mutually exclusive) strive to challenge national and local anti-gay habits, Nkabinde’s privileged position as a sangoma allows her to already blur the lines between expectations for males and expectations for females. Stobie suggests that Nkabinde’s sangoma performance “enacts female masculinity with its positive and negative effects”²¹⁸ which “considers problematic aspects of the representation of gender, sexuality, and spirituality.”²¹⁹ The particular problem that Nkabinde approaches is the divide set between these categories. The memoir reevaluates the distinctiveness of the three areas—gender, sexuality, and spirituality.

²¹⁵ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 73.

²¹⁶ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 8.

²¹⁷ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 69.

²¹⁸ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 149.

²¹⁹ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 151.

Indeed, Nkabinde explains her navigation of the intersections between culture and gendered roles:

In traditional Zulu culture, a man must be a man and do male things and a woman must be a woman and do female things but with sangomas it is more flexible. I can dance like a woman and wear a woman's clothes and dance like a man and wear a man's clothes. I can do the work of a man, like slaughtering a goat or a cow, although in traditional Zulu culture a woman cannot slaughter. Sometimes I become too much of a man and people will look at me and say, 'Today you look like a man.' That is when I know it is Nkunzi's spirit in me. If I am just myself then I am not too much of a man, I am feminine too. That I know it's me.²²⁰

Although perceived masculinity often provokes corrective rape, the knowledge of her position as a sangoma in addition to the power received from ancestors protect her from violence that many black, especially butch, lesbians face on a daily basis. Indeed, "Black lesbian life in South Africa has become synonymous with rape and even death."²²¹ However, Nkabinde's memoir counters this unfortunate trend by using masculinity to demonstrate the need for a reconceptualization of black lesbians.

Nkabinde uses the culturally significant idea of masculinity to instill respect for black lesbianism by showing gender equity. This respect integrates the queer female into the social landscape, which can also reduce the probability of anti-gay violence against black lesbians. She says that "sangomas are always called 'baba,'" which translates as father.²²² Nkabinde notes that "being called 'father' is the highest form of respect in African culture. The greatest one is always

²²⁰ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 73.

²²¹ Matebeni, "Sexual Minorities in South Africa," 746.

²²² Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 83.

masculine.”²²³ This means that “women sangomas are viewed as honorary males and their spiritual power is inflected with masculinity—and identification conventionally associated with such attributes as strength, leadership, and agency.”²²⁴ The masculine takes precedence over other forms of respect, and sangomas are a part of that category. When contemplating the fact that men are responsible for the violence against black lesbian, she suggests that “men are scared of women being powerful.”²²⁵ If lesbians are seen as honorary males, then the reconsideration will question the need for violence against queer females. And, as Stobie notes, the sangoma faces fear and respect on both the national and the local levels: “Sangomas enjoy great power in the Zulu community. Although most are women, all are referred to respectfully as Baba, or father.”²²⁶ As explained by Stobie, Nkabinde’s “spiritual power” offsets the cultural aversion to lesbianism.”²²⁷ Stobie notes that Nkabinde’s spiritual identity “functions to socially validate Nkabinde’s lesbianism in a context rife with homophobia and sexism.”²²⁸ Stobie goes on to observe that Nkabinde is aware of her privilege as a black lesbian in South Africa, “Nkabinde is openly lesbian but feels protected from harm because of her spiritual power, significantly associated with masculinity.”²²⁹ Nkabinde does, in fact, admit her ties with masculinity and how it can operate in a way that offers her a significant social role in the community, thus showing the positive side of gender expectations.

Through networking with other lesbian black sangomas, Nkabinde sees that the sangoma privileges are not particular to her and her upbringing. The sangoma does, in fact, allow for the blurring between sexualities and gender expressions. For instance, the first sangoma that she

²²³ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 83.

²²⁴ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 157-158.

²²⁵ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 145.

²²⁶ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 150.

²²⁷ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 156.

²²⁸ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 156.

²²⁹ Cheryl Stobie, “He Uses My Body,” 150.

interviewed “had breasts and a beard like a man who has just shaved.”²³⁰ Nkabinde expressed her awe towards the woman’s presentation of gender, “I was impressed by her way of expressing the male and the female in her at the same time.”²³¹ Indeed, instead of switching presentations as Nkabinde does depending on the active ancestor within her at the time, Bongiwe (this lesbian black sangoma) conveys a non-binary gender to represent the various ancestors with which she connects.

Nkabinde’s expression of sexuality and gender is significant because, ultimately tied with sexuality perceptions, South African cultures often place constraints on gender. While some lesbians strive to meet the male gender expectation—“being butch means being in control, like in patriarchy where men are responsible for things”—sangomas often strive to blur the lines between gender expectations because they speak to and display different genders in their practice.²³² In fact, one lesbian black sangoma interviewed stated “I am not butch or feminine. I am in between. I do wear a skirt but underneath I wear tights. I do that so I do not have a problem when the ancestors want trousers.”²³³ Depending on the gender or sexuality of the ancestor, the sangoma must adhere to whatever makes that spirit comfortable in order to effectively connect to that ancestor’s spiritual knowledge. The use of the knowledge in the traditional healer’s practice involves bringing that ancestor’s personality to the fore, overshadowing the gender or sexuality of the actual sangoma.

Contrastingly, GALA’s attempt at expressing identity of those with non-normative identities is through preservation. Their efforts focus on the national and regional level; the archives are a community-based collection and presentation. This means that anyone can have

²³⁰ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 80.

²³¹ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 80.

²³² Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 126.

²³³ Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 127.

access to the materials and anyone can add to or be interviewed for inclusion into the archive. History-making through this organization is not for the select few; they place importance on “recognizing that gay and lesbian communities in South Africa are not homogenous [and] strives to reflect that diversity.”²³⁴ Indeed, “individuals are encouraged to donate personal mementoes, letters, diaries, scrapbooks and photographs to the GALA archives [to] form part of the larger tapestry of community history and cultural experience.”²³⁵ However, the caveat appears in terms of whom the archive benefits; the archive created by the present LGBT generation empowers future generations by displaying a reclaimed past that includes non-normative sexual practices and memories. In the end, the objective is to uncover, build, and disseminate historical information for the larger public.

Nkabinde contributes significantly to the archive of activist authors and works by integrating anthropological and ethnographic representations. While some LGBT activist authors write on the long non-fiction history of same-sexuality in the African landscape, others choose to represent the LGBT individual in literary form in order to begin a conversation about the homosexual black African. Nkabinde does both. Her work gives a account of her journey through one of the oldest African traditions, the work of a sangoma, while acknowledging the history of the sangoma engaging in same-sex love. However, her work also creatively incorporates cultural symbolism and artistic visualization. The combination of the factual and creative (although not mutually exclusive) allows her to offer an alternative perception of black queers in the South African social and political landscape, to integrate the LGBT community into conceptions of African citizenship.

²³⁴ Hoad, *Sex and Politics*, 228.

²³⁵ Hoad, *Sex and Politics*, 228.

Nkabinde's connection with, narrative of, and practice as a sangoma position her within discourses concerning national identity during a time when public leaders encouraged a return to African cultural traditions, with the sangoma falling within the category of a "cultural tradition." Ultimately, although some anti-gay citizens may claim that her sexuality puts her outside of the national norm—i.e., "UnAfrican"—her spiritual position integrates her into national attempts to reclaim a South African black history outside of a context of white invasion. As Thabo Msibi explains, "homosexuality has become more virulently opposed, contested, and denounced, particularly by political leaders, as UnAfrican, with the potential of destroying African traditions and heterosexual 'family values'."²³⁶ Nkabinde's spiritual connection challenges national anti-gay leaders who use "anti-hegemony" and "ethnic continuance" as reasons why homosexuality should be exterminated from the cultural and national landscape. Nkabinde and her connection to ancestors can be interpreted as having a direct connection to the nation. If the ancestors are considered to be a part of the nation's pre-West entity—as seen with the use of sangomas' spiritual essence by political leaders—then Nkabinde must also be part of the nation because the ancestors specifically chose her to carry out their will. In addition to accepting her own sexuality, she explains the cultural positives concerning her orientation, according to society: "traditional religions of Africa often see spiritual power in sexuality, with different types of spiritual power associated with each biological sex."²³⁷ Indeed, some "homosexual relations carry some religious and spiritual significance, as in the case of traditional healers."²³⁸ In other words, Nkabinde's practice and categorization as a sangoma aligns with the notion of sexuality being connected to spirituality, ultimately helping queerness to transcend the burden of social expectations.

²³⁶ Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told," 55.

²³⁷ Busangokwakhe Dlamini, "Homosexuality in the African Context," 129.

²³⁸ Busangokwakhe Dlamini, "Homosexuality in the African Context," 129.

Chapter Three

Revisionist Politics: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Internal Black Relations in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*

In science fiction you don't have to accept the world the way it is.²³⁹

~Walter Mosley

Using Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, this chapter will explore the social critique of marginalizing practices within the black community by assessing changes to traditional literary tropes—the vampire figure and the common hunger trope. Additionally, because of Gomez's particular black audience I use her novel as a means of rethinking genre classifications and analyses. While genres may shape texts, scholars often do not consider the ways in which the text acts upon the defined generic elements.²⁴⁰ Indeed, instead of discussing the black body as it is positioned within white America, per the established conventions of the speculative genre, her work focuses on the queer black body set within black America—an enclosed conversation. Interestingly, she creates a world in which dialogues about blackness does not require considerations about whiteness.

The arguments in this chapter are based on Gomez's literary revisionist work and will be subsequently compared to the social work of the advocacy group, Gays and Lesbians Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). Gomez's work allows for the insertion of marginalized voices into conversations about the black community, critiquing and providing correctives to traditionally exclusionary practices and beliefs. Her critiques and correctives of the African-American community consciously supplement the endeavors of GLAAD. Ultimately, this

²³⁹ Quoted in Libero Della Piana, "Under Strange Stars," 36.

²⁴⁰ John Frow, *Genre*.

chapter assesses her literary response, as compared to the advocacy response, to the treatment of black homosexuals and other marginalized groups, such as black women, within black America during the AIDS crisis (mid- to late 1980s). In order to investigate Gomez's perception of and retort to the treatment of this marginalized community during the AIDS crisis, I will also analyze the stasis and/or change in community attitudes *before* and *while* the epidemic was underway. Gomez's text was written throughout this time period—first in small vignettes, then as a published novel.

Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* is a "foundational Afrofuturist feminist tale of black counter-pasts and counter-futures."²⁴¹ The novel, first "published by the lesbian/feminist publisher, Fireband Books," is about an unnamed slave girl who runs away from her master in Mississippi.²⁴² She ends up hiding in a basement in a New Orleans bordello only to be found by the white female owner named Gilda (henceforth named Gilda Sr.). Gilda Sr. provides protection and education for the unnamed girl for years. The girl cooks, cleans, and serves drinks to the clients in the brothel while working beside women of different colors and backgrounds; however, the girl never becomes a sex worker. She learns how to read and write from Bird, a Native American woman intimately connected to Gilda Sr. The girl understands that Gilda Sr. and Bird are not like "normal" women and does not reject her saviors when she learns that the two women are vampires. Over the years she develops a strong connection to both Gilda and Bird, ultimately becoming a part of their family. On a trip away from the brothel, Gilda Sr. decides to turn the girl into a vampire, welcoming her to the supernatural family. After Gilda Sr. takes her own life that same day, Bird informs the girl that Gilda Sr. wanted to give the girl her own name, and the girl agrees to adopt the name (henceforth named Gilda Jr.). From 1850 to 2050, Gilda Jr. learns the

²⁴¹ Susana Morris, "More than Human," 41.

²⁴² Jewelle Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," *Blood Read*, 86.

culture and habits of being a vampire, how to avoid taking life while appreciating it at the same time. She travels the United States, visiting various other vampires who teach Gilda Jr. how to control her own power and adhere to vampire life's philosophies. By 2050, the human race finds out about the existence of vampires and extorts them for their strength and longevity. Gilda Jr. spends those years running from a different kind of captivity until she finally finds her promised land with those like herself.

Gomez's revision of the vampire figure and the hunger trope explicitly responds to the different ways in which the black community marginalizes women and homosexuals, through patriarchy, religion, and uplift rhetoric. The marginalization that occurred within black America during the AIDS era arose from the issue of viewing blackness as an offset of whiteness. In the early 20th century, whites had the power to define the meaning behind and characteristics of blackness; the mid-20th century saw black populations attempting to wrest power over their own racial definition.²⁴³ Although mid-20th century writers often create a defined blackness that appeals to the white masses, the late 20th century begins a self-contained trend of self-definition.²⁴⁴ The intra-racial definition of a bottom-up "authentic blackness" is a direct response to damaging inter-racial demarcations that strive for an "appropriate blackness" for white consumption.²⁴⁵ However, these internal constructions of race are wholly masculine and often work as accusations that middle-class black people "adopt white values."²⁴⁶ This creation, then, undermines black female issues and "links black homosexuality with inauthentic blackness" because its "dangerous desire" appears as an attempt to become white.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ See Rafiki Jenkins (2011) and E. Patrick Johnson (2003).

²⁴⁴ See Rafiki Jenkins (2011) and E. Patrick Johnson (2003).

²⁴⁵ Rafiki Jenkins and Martin Japtok, *Authentic Blackness, "Real" Blackness*.

²⁴⁶ Rafiki Jenkins and Martin Japtok, *Authentic Blackness, "Real" Blackness*, 28.

²⁴⁷ Rafiki Jenkins and Martin Japtok, *Authentic Blackness, "Real" Blackness*, 28. Also see Cathy Cohen, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks for more on black female issues.

The reasons and consequences of positioning the black body as a mirrored image of the white body has already been well documented by black scholars. For example, Gil L. Robertson begins his radical 2006 anthology, *Not in My Family: AIDS in the African-American Community*, with a line of frustration and tragedy: “Black America, we have a problem.”²⁴⁸ The problem upon which he expounds is how the black population often avoids speaking on the issue of AIDS because the disease is tied to black homosexuality and thus an inauthentic blackness. This avoidance signifies a necessary survival tactic against national marginalization that sits at the intersection of race, sexuality, and economic status. Indeed, the erasure of non-normative sexuality in black America stems from a history of physical and hegemonic oppression within the white national context.

Robertson solicits essays from black individuals, suggesting that understanding the community’s silence should be mostly documented by African-Americans. This is a position that Gomez picks up as she changes traditionalist tropes in order to deconstruct the dependence on white America. The black contributors give social critiques, political analysis, and even personal experiences about the fact that black men and women have a significantly higher risk and occurrence of HIV/AIDS than any other racial group in America. However, most of the writers consider the issue from the stance of black bodies within a white-dominated society. Robertson’s presentation of adversity serves not only to display the oppression of the African-American community toward their LGBT members but also to show the subjugation that the black community faces from white America. Robertson’s collection does more than simply present the history behind the issue or suggest remedies for the problem. He creates an archive of experiences with and activism against AIDS in the black community by exhibiting essays written

²⁴⁸ Gil Robertson, *Not in My Family*, 1.

by famous and ordinary people. Gomez's literary activism expands Robertson's social commentary, which serves a vital role in approaching the effects of the disease, by offering an internal perspective of the issue.

Gomez's literary commentary suggests that internal hierarchies could be deconstructed if black society did not frame its "issues" around relations with white society. To further illustrate this habit, consider racial work by Cathy Cohen. Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* uncovers the white framework in which black leaders express black concerns. Cohen explains internal black politics through her conception of "racial consensus issues," a strategy used by African-American frontrunners to engage with white America. Cohen demonstrates that the AIDS debate creates a "cross-cutting issue" within the black community, which designates a problem that black (predominantly male) advocates do not consider as a "racial consensus issue."²⁴⁹ She notes:

To discuss AIDS in black communities is to discuss a multiplicity of identities, definitions of membership, locations of powers, and strategies for the political, social, and economic survival of the community, because all these factors interact with a disease that divides and threatens ever-growing segments of these populations. To investigate the political response to AIDS in African American communities is to look closely at a much larger phenomenon threatening black and other marginal communities, namely, a changing political environment.²⁵⁰

A history of political and social oppression resulted in "a shared consciousness of linked fate," the fact that the progress or uplift of the African-American population is measured by the success

²⁴⁹ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 9.

²⁵⁰ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 8.

of an individual from the community.²⁵¹ She further illustrates the sexist divide in what is considered a consensus issue: “the needs, conditions, and actions of women, in this case young black women, may be recognized and deemed important to the private relationships within the black communities, but they are not seen as representative of the public struggle for survival.”²⁵² Black men act as the dominant symbol for what matters most to the African-American public. Patriarchal privilege contributes to the atmospheres surrounding the LGBT community especially in the time of the AIDS crisis.²⁵³ With a long history of marginalization and oppression, there is no one purpose behind attitudes and atmospheres within the black community. As Cohen suggests, the cross-cutting issue of AIDS highlights marginalization within the black community, oftentimes in women’s issues but particularly with the black LGBT individuals who were considered deficient. Gomez shows that if the “progress” of the race in the context of the white majority nation means the silencing and marginalization of various members of the black community, then there is no real progress. Gomez’s text challenges the internal relations of the black community during, and even before, the AIDS crisis—showing the process and effects of leaving whiteness out of dialogues about black progress and existence.

Gomez detaches the vampire from its religious and patriarchal roots in order to critique the misuse of religion and the dominating male sphere. Gomez’s conscious desire to strip away the need for religious symbols signifies her belief that religious practice cannot effectively contribute to a new queer black feminist lens of the black community. In addition to the religious revision, her conscious creation of a black queer feminist vampire protagonist demonstrates and praises the centrality of the black female within black society, which deconstructs the patriarchal

²⁵¹ Cathy Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 10.

²⁵² Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 11-12.

²⁵³ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 11-12.

tendencies that permeate the notion of black advancement. She engages in “beauty shop politics” to demonstrate the ways in which black women build and protect the black community.²⁵⁴ Ultimately, her vampiric creation corrects the marginalizing actions and attitudes within black society while her revision of the hunger trope offers alternatives to the current racial progress strategies.

Gomez’s alternative version of hunger offers a strategy for community improvement that mandates an inclusive and compassionate support system instead of a parasitic relation between privileged and marginalized members of black society. Previous manifestations of hunger feed off of white standards which reflect the uplift ideologies, hovering between “education as the key to black liberation”²⁵⁵ and class rankings that emphasize “self help, thrift, chastity, and patriarchal authority.”²⁵⁶ Gomez shows, through her revision to this trope, that the uplift practices are ineffective because it depends on a white-based definition of blackness that inherently must exclude various black members. Instead, she deconstructs identity hierarchies that permeate the community by offering a version of hunger based on an intra-group equality where all have access to progress. This deconstruction reflects an *empowerment* that appreciates and engages with self-determining aspirations.

Gomez’s use of hunger is especially significant since “a hungry body exists as a potent critique of the society in which it exists.”²⁵⁷ Gomez’s repurposing of hunger still speaks toward the very real issue of poverty and literal hunger within the black community, as “millions of blacks in the country are predisposed” to conditions that increase poverty and hunger levels.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ See Tiffany Gill’s *Beauty Shop Politics*.

²⁵⁵ Rafiki Jenkins, *Authentic Blackness*, “Real” Blackness, 16.

²⁵⁶ Rafiki Jenkins, *Authentic Blackness*, “Real” Blackness, 17.

²⁵⁷ Susan Honeyman, “Gastronomic Utopias,” 60.

²⁵⁸ Mickey Leland, “The Politics of Hunger Among Blacks,” 5.

As I will show later, many African-American writers reveal the presence and persistence of physical hunger on the black body. However, Gomez steps beyond the mere representation of black aspirations by reconstructing what it means to want but also how to satisfy one's appetite. Hunger becomes both mental and physical; as the vampire physically craves blood, she placates her "food's" mental desires. As seen, when Gilda satisfies her physical hunger for blood, she enacts a mental connection with the human to encourage their own aspirations. Ultimately, her novel exhibits the access to "food" as a means of community progress. This presentation of advancement is certainly not surprising considering her plentiful activist background. In fact, I've chosen to examine Jewelle Gomez's literary production not because of the elegance and beauty of her first name but because of her multicultural background, her consciously activist writing, and her advocacy interventions in American society.

Gomez's connection with, and blending of, her various cultural characteristics allows her to credibly celebrate and critique multiple areas of those communities. Born in Boston on September 11, 1948, Jewelle Gomez grew up in Iowa with her black and Native American great grandmother until she was 14 years old.²⁵⁹ She eventually made her way to a black neighborhood in NYC with her mother and grandmother. As she states in her essay collection, Gomez spent her life with the understanding of the inextricability of her identities: "Being a Black woman and a lesbian blended unexpectedly for me. The different faces came together as one, and my desire became my heritage, my skin, my perspective, my politics and my future."²⁶⁰ Her thorough integration contributes to efforts that encourage a more inclusive definition of blackness, a definition that accounts for other facets that affect oppressive life experiences. She also writes to

²⁵⁹ "Jewelle Gomez," *All American Speakers*, <https://www.allamericanspeakers.com/celebritytalentbios/Jewelle+Gomez/400982>.

²⁶⁰ Jewelle Gomez, *Forty Three Septembers*, 12.

her very particular black community: “I want my work to appeal to the people I grew up with, the women and men who were my friends. Those people struggling on a day-to-day basis with bottom-line issues like food, housing, racism, sexism.”²⁶¹ Gomez’s writing and advocacy work strives to support and enrich forms of identities and struggles that she and others face every day.

Gomez consciously incorporates all of these identities into her literature, allowing her to viably illustrate the communal experiences that arise from those formal categorizations. She writes about and for herself and those like her: “My character, Gilda, is a lesbian because I’m a lesbian.”²⁶² The combination of race, gender, and sexuality in Gomez’s written works stems from her consideration of Barbara Smith’s call to arms for critically assessing black lesbian writing.²⁶³

In fact, Gomez states that

it is now crucial to examine the work of out Black lesbian writers and discuss the many ways in which we approach the issues that affect us both as Black women and as lesbian. Such consideration assists me in assessing my own works and contributes to the development of other Black lesbian writers and of Black literature overall.²⁶⁴

Gomez works to enrich not only her immediate black lesbian community but also her general black community in terms of literature. Gomez also cites the late Audre Lorde as an inspiration to embrace all of her identities as one whole instead of separate entities. As Gomez explains in her “Passing of a Sister Warrior”—an homage to Audre Lorde published in *Essence* magazine—that because of her unapologetic embrace of “being seen for her whole self,”²⁶⁵ Lorde “refused to let one aspect dominate or obscure the others”²⁶⁶ Gomez goes on to hope for this same strength

²⁶¹ Jewelle Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 87.

²⁶² Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 86.

²⁶³ Jewelle Gomez, “Imagine a Lesbian, a black lesbian,” *Forty Three Septembers*.

²⁶⁴ Gomez, *Forty Three Septembers*, 131-132.

²⁶⁵ Qtd in Wendell Ricketts, “Gomez, Jewelle,” *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 310.

²⁶⁶ Wendell Ricketts, “Gomez, Jewelle,” *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 310-311.

of self in herself and her writing. Gomez's literary creations encompass her political beliefs and values surrounding these different but inherently integrated identities. As she states, "everything I write, and my activism as well, centers around creating community, the responsible use of power and the feminist understanding that we're all connected...and that includes our oppression."²⁶⁷ The social and political issues are merged into the production of her novel; i.e., because she is writing at the height of the AIDS crisis, the novel illustrates and potentially comments on the issues surrounding the disease in the black community. Due to this sharp awareness of how she manages her writing, I deem Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* activist in nature.

Gomez's essays that discuss the production of *The Gilda Stories* reveal the ways in which she organizes the novel's topic to fit distinctive manifestations of herself. When describing her pre-writing process, she explains that her brainstorming involved questions of "how I would recast the mythology of vampirism to fit my own lesbian/feminist philosophy."²⁶⁸ And even beyond this, she identifies that Gilda's story "focuses on her attempt to know herself as a black woman" which purposefully puts the story in conversation with black feminist rhetoric.²⁶⁹ This means that the intentions that birthed *The Gilda Stories* interacts with the black lesbian community via their internal cultural practices, their practices within black American society, as well as national experiences of racism and sexism. This chapter delves into how and why those various interactions manifest within the novel.

Finally, Gomez's activism extends beyond the published page; her activism intervenes into the national public sphere. Early on in her life, Gomez "gravitated naturally toward the civil rights movement, involving herself with struggles against racism, sexism, apartheid, and the

²⁶⁷ Victoria Brownworth, "Freedom Writer Jewelle Gomez Writes Toward Social Change," 43.

²⁶⁸ Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," 86.

²⁶⁹ Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," 86.

Vietnam War.”²⁷⁰ Her tendency to engage in social movements followed her through to the present day, shown in her being “a founding member of GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination),” which aligns strategically with her using fiction as an activist platform for advocating social change.²⁷¹ The purpose behind GLAAD is to act as a corrective to the defamatory images of homosexuals portrayed in the national media during the AIDS crisis.²⁷² Gomez and her contemporaries “were angry with how the *New York Post* was covering the AIDS crisis.”²⁷³ Her fiction offers an alternative to deprecating attitudes of the black public towards black homosexuals. So then, while she writes particularly to appeal to her black community, her advocacy wants to change national discourses on homosexuality. Throughout this chapter, I discuss the ways in which her fiction provides the activism that GLAAD cannot deliver as well as how her fiction expands the advocacy that GLAAD already offers.²⁷⁴ In other words, I am interested in how her social commentary in fiction aligns with and diverges from social commentary via GLAAD, especially as it concerns black people in America.

I do recognize that GLAAD was perhaps not the most effective form of advocacy at the time, an observation seen clearly in the lack of book-length studies outside of Vincent Doyle’s recent *Making Out in the Mainstream*. This may be because of the fact that “GLAAD is not as radical or as aggressive as ACT-UP or Queer Nation.”²⁷⁵ However, I focus on GLAAD because Gomez helped to create the organization around the same time that she began to write *Gilda*. Both manifestations of her activism offer her different perspectives on how to tackle similar issues, anti-gay feelings and beliefs.

²⁷⁰ Wendell Ricketts, “Gomez, Jewelle,” *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 310.

²⁷¹ Wendell Ricketts, “Gomez, Jewelle,” *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 310.

²⁷² Vincent Doyle, “The Visibility Professionals,” 1.

²⁷³ Vincent Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream*, 3.

²⁷⁴ I focus on GLAAD because the group was birthed by Gomez which allows for an effective comparison of purpose.

²⁷⁵ Kevin Brass, “San Diego Spotlight: Gay Group Says that Progress Comes from Speaking Out,” *LA Times*, SDF2.

By comparing GLAAD to other black advocacy groups, I can assess effective approaches to localized issues such as anti-gay attitudes in the black community. Gomez keeps her activist efforts in independent spheres because they serve two distinct purposes—a black focus and a national focus. In her interviews about her fictions and their conversations with social and political circumstances, she never brings up how the writing supplements GLAAD advocacy despite her involvement. However, even though her activist endeavors speak to different parts of society, they are not irrelevant to each other. For instance, GLAAD’s connections with black social commentary can be seen in newspaper coverage from *LA Times* about the homophobia in the music industry. Both GLAAD and “black gay and lesbian groups” admonish music labels that allow anti-gay messages in lyrics, saying that “the industry consistently fails to react to performers’ homophobia the way it frequently does when presented with racial and ethnic slurs.”²⁷⁶

While GLAAD publicly condemns lyrics from rock bands such as Guns n Roses and The Police, BLK—a black gay and lesbian publication—publicly denounces anti-gay lyrics from rappers such as Ice-T and Slick Rick.²⁷⁷ The two groups converge in their reprimand of the industry for allowing homophobic portrayals but diverge in their focus on the musicians engaging in the defamatory representations—rock and rap, respectively. Additionally, GLAAD and BLK differ in how they approach dealing with the issue. While GLAAD continually pushes the industry to censor hateful lyrics, BLK encourages people to refrain from buying the albums that feature the artists. In fact, BLK states “I personally believe that artists should not be prevented from recording this kind of stuff. The appropriate response is for gays to stop buying

²⁷⁶ Chuck Philips, “Anti-Gay Message Goes Unchallenged,” *LA Times*, 76.

²⁷⁷ Chuck Philips, “Anti-Gay Message Goes Unchallenged,” *LA Times*.

products from companies that promote hateful messages.”²⁷⁸ However, although their activist methods differ, the tactics do supplement one another—one group attacks the institution from the inside while the other group affects the monetary outcome of the industry. Together, the two strategies place the businesses in a corner whereby LGBT advocacy affects all facets of the production—creation, marketing, and sales. Therefore, just as GLAAD and BLK supplemented each other’s campaigns to stimulate change, GLAAD and Gomez’s fiction can both help to restructure the ways in which black America views black homosexuality.

While blackness is predominantly discussed as a subordinate clause to whiteness, Gomez explores the possibility of discussing the forms and effects of marginalized race that are not predicated on its positionality to dominant groups. The speculative genre provides the space in which she can investigate that racial formation. There are three major tenets of black speculative writing: 1) the construction of an alternative space, 2) the reconstruction of time, and 3) a reconceptualization of black presence.²⁷⁹ In essence, the speculative deals with alterity—an alternative time, an alternative space, and an alternative existence. An issue that arises is the ways in which scholars use the notion of genre to discuss the works that fall within that generic category. The problem is not the genre conventions themselves, but instead how many scholars perceive the conventions as prescriptive.²⁸⁰ As seen in several arguments about black speculative texts, scholars understand “black presence” as black presence within white America, and often do not extend their arguments beyond that limitation. Consider the following examples: Nama

²⁷⁸ Chuck Philips, “Anti-Gay Messages Goes Unchallenged,” *LA Times*, 80.

²⁷⁹ See Sandra Jackson’s *The Black Imagination*, and Ingrid Thaler’s *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions*. Especially concerning the reconceptualization of black presence, Jackson discusses black speculative writing as a means for black freedom—“to lose the chains of conventional thought” (Jackson 2)—while Thaler discusses the ways in which black speculative writing “negotiate black cultural presence in the West as hybrid” (Thaler 3)

²⁸⁰ John Frow, in his *Genre*, discusses the issue with the creation and utilization of genre as classifications. He argues that often times, scholars focus on how the text fits into the generic box instead of considering the ways in which the text expands that generic box.

shows how T'Challa subverts American racial hierarchies; Pounds argues that *Deep Space Nine* positions black bodies as the explorers instead of the historical rendition of white adventurers; and Harper argues that Octavia Butler's *Dawn* detaches the black female body from white consumption and relinks the body with "vegan, nonviolent practices."²⁸¹ The point here is that because the genre calls for the repositioning of the black body, scholars analyze how the speculative authors reposition black bodies in white America. In this manner, many of those arguments are within the same vein of discussion.²⁸² As I will later show, Gomez uses the genre to focus on a more localized focus for her critique and alterity. I believe that Gomez's text is repositioning the black body within black America—more particularly, repositioning the queer black body in black society.

Ultimately, the speculative is an exploration of the 'what if' that would change black ways of being.²⁸³ And Gomez asks her own range of 'what if' questions: What if blackness were not defined by a positionality against whiteness? What if conversations about black identity did not require a consideration of double-consciousness? What if analyses of the black community did not inherently include dialogues about the white community? Directing genre analysis away from white frameworks offers an alternative representation of blackness that is not concerned with whiteness. Gomez shows how to achieve a black-enclosed exchange—hence, her conscious revision of the vampire and hunger trope to fit a wholly black framework. She also shows what that discussion would look like—the rejection of religion, patriarchy, and uplift methodology.

²⁸¹ Adilifu Nama, "Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers," 32-46; Michael Charles Pounds, "'Explorers'"—*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*," 47-80; Amie Breeze Harper, "The Absence of Meat in Oankali Dietary Philosophy: An Eco-Feminist-Vegan Analysis of Octavia Butler's *Dawn*," 111-129. These examples come from Sandra Jackson and Julia Moody-Freeman's edited anthology *The Black Speculative Imagination*.

²⁸² I do not want to directly state that the arguments are the same. But the arguments certainly do use the same formulae of analysis: A+B=repositioning of the black body in white America. So that although they are not all saying the same thing, they're all *doing* the same thing.

²⁸³ Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, *The Black Imagination*, 2.

Gomez is certainly not the first black author to combine multiple genres in an effort to deconstruct the current black hierarchies. In *The Black Imagination*, Sandra Jackson explains that “it is a common assumption that Black science fiction writers only emerged in the mid-twentieth century.”²⁸⁴ Gomez’s more particular genre combination (neo-slave and afrofuturism²⁸⁵) challenges internal hierarchies of power. In the novel, the one who holds the power is both female and queer. Like Sheree Thomas’s *Dark Matter* anthologies, she cites early twentieth century black speculative writers such as Du Bois and George Schuyler with “The Comet” (1920) and *Black No More* (1931). Gomez’s work is one text within a long tradition of authors—such as Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, and Martin Delaney—using and appropriating various genres. If, as Ashraf Rushdy notes, the neo-slave narrative offers nostalgia, healing, and thus validation, then Gomez uses afrofuturism to offer alternatives to black-on-black marginalization.²⁸⁶

Gomez’s genre amalgamation not only allows her to hold a conversation contained wholly within black society but also allows her offer correctives in addition to her praise and critique. I interpret Gomez’s novel as a conversation with black Americans about the ways in which they treat their own members. Afrofuturism and the neo-slave narrative are concerned with blackness and how blackness is internally defined. Genre-writing allows her the aesthetic venue through which she can comment on the black pariah condition. As Ingrid Thaler observes in her *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions*, Gomez’s novel “is situated between the Black Atlantic tradition (often concerned with the Past’s lessons for the present) and the more historically white-dominated genre of speculative fiction (concerned with the present’s

²⁸⁴ Sandra Jackson, *The Black Imagination*, 4.

²⁸⁵ Both of these genres fall under the umbrella of the speculative.

²⁸⁶ Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary form*. Rushdy characterizes the neo-slave narrative as nostalgia linked with critique.

implications for the future).”²⁸⁷ In other words, Gomez writes a combination of the neo-slave narrative and afrofuturism because white speculative genre writing often avoids the implications of the past on black Americans.²⁸⁸ In this manner, Gomez can present, critique, or praise current black customs and the effects that those customs have on more marginalized black members. She even goes as far as to provide correctives to her critiques—such as her demonstration of empowerment as a more effective alternative to uplift ideologies (as I will argue later in this chapter). The neo-slave genre helps Gomez to validate the black past; she does so by keeping a piece of the slave past—the cross that her slave mother gave her as a child—with Gilda Jr. throughout her lifetime. Finally, through afrofuturism, Gomez proposes “a potentially bleak [black] future”²⁸⁹ in which the marginalized of the black community separate from the privileged members in search of the utopias previously reserved for advantaged individuals.

Prior to, or perhaps because of, this bleak search for utopia, Gomez explicitly works within black queer feminism to allow for a renewal and restructuring of traditionally patriarchal and heterosexual black thought. Gomez strives to affect the black response to gender and sexuality by “subvert[ing] traditional male-female dominance hierarchies.”²⁹⁰ This intersectional approach to social commentary is significant because, as Patricia Hill Collins notes, for the black queer female, “we have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges.”²⁹¹ Although this quote from Collins refers to a heterosexual black feminism, the sentiment must also be applied to those at the crux of intra-

²⁸⁷ Mark Young, “Time-tripping the Black Fantastic,” 550.

²⁸⁸ In her “Why white people feel they got to mark us?” chapter in *The Black Imagination*, Marie-Louise Loeffler explains that genres such as the speculative “have historically largely ignored both issues of race and gender,” which is why black women have picked up the genre to appropriate it and incorporate the inextricable tie between racism and sexism.

²⁸⁹ Monty Vierra, “Ingrid Thaler (Book Review),” 173.

²⁹⁰ Monty Vierra, “Ingrid Thaler (Book Review),” 172.

²⁹¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 22.

racial oppressions dealing with sex, race, and sexuality. In order for Gomez to propose a “blacks-only” conversation, then the tropes steeped in a white history must shift to accommodate a wholly black context. In essence, black queer feminism directly shapes Gomez’s most prominent figure of commentary in the novel, her vampiric creation. Gomez, noting the vampire’s previous connections to religious condemnation and patriarchy, changes the vampiric rhetoric to fit a black lesbian feminist framework.

Gomez’s revisions to the original vampire figure reevaluate customs in the black community. For instance, her secularization of the traditional vampire critiques the community’s misuse of religion while her black feminist lens highlights the central position of black women in the black community. Gomez notes that her “political grounding as a lesbian/feminist makes it impossible for me to perpetuate the traditional mythology.”²⁹² The black queer female manifests as a vampire in *The Gilda Stories*, but not without creative deviations. In addition to this black feminist lesbian change to the original mythology, Gomez detaches Gilda Jr. from the religious connotations that the traditional vampire held in cultural folklore. However, not all of her interactions with the old folklore are changes.

Gomez’s vampire represents a way to escape death, an aspect that aligns with the original vampire figure, as a response to the common cultural connection between black Americans and death.²⁹³ As she notes, “Many ancient societies had vampire mythology, although different from that which produced the Count [Dracula]. Rather, their emphases were on the animals and spirits and rituals that imply there are ways to escape death.”²⁹⁴ She retains this death-defying trope because of the normalized conception that equates blackness to death. This connection is of

²⁹² Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 90.

²⁹³ As the basis for my vampire comparisons, I use only Gomez’s understanding of the vampire figure to create a fair assessment of changes. Because interpretations vary, the revision is only a change if she deems it to be a change.

²⁹⁴ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 87.

particular significance in the AIDS era because during the time that Gomez was writing *The Gilda Stories*, the AIDS epidemic was in full swing. Statistics at that time show that “a greater percentage of African-Americans [were] at risk of infection,”²⁹⁵ being “disproportionately affected since the very beginning of the epidemic.”²⁹⁶ In fact, by 1990, the AIDS count for the African-American community reached over 44,000, which gives substance to the (then) current notion of the race being inextricably tied to death.²⁹⁷ In other words, if blackness and queerness equal death, then Gomez’s vampire would counter this fate.²⁹⁸ Additionally, Gomez’s decision to overlap the brown body with the supernatural marks her position as a queer black female. Alexis Gumbs observes the spirit-based transcendence of those in marginalized groups: “our visionary interviewees have developed what we call spiritual superpowers both as a result of being excluded from dominant religions and as a creative survival practice to create positive energy, community, and strength in a dehumanizing society.”²⁹⁹ This suggests that the adoption of a mystical figure effectively reflects the experience of rejection but also the mental resilience, the power, of those like Gomez.

One of the major differences that Gomez implements in her rendition of the vampire involves disconnecting the figure from its original religious iconography. When explaining the process of executing her own interpretation and portrayal of the vampire, Gomez states:

Naturally the mythology we’ve grown up on here in the United states is steeped in Christianity, hence the fear of the cross or the lack of the mirror reflection which indicates the absence of a Christian soul. The challenge for me was to create a *new*

²⁹⁵ Ivory Toldson, “HIV/AIDS in the Black Community,” *Health Issues in the Black Community*, 364.

²⁹⁶ The Black AIDS Institute, “30 Years is Enuf: The History of the AIDS Epidemic in Black America,” 14.

²⁹⁷ The Black AIDS Institute, “30 Years is Enuf: The History of the AIDS Epidemic in Black America,” 44.

²⁹⁸ For more on the connection between queerness and death see Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queerness and the Death Drive*, and Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave.”

²⁹⁹ A. R. Gumbs and J. R. Wallace, “Something Else to Be,” 386. *No Tea No Shade*, ed E. Patrick Johnson.

mythology, to strip away the dogma that shaped the vampire figure within the rather narrow Western, Caucasian expectation, and to recreate a heroic figure within a broader, more ancient cultural frame of reference.³⁰⁰

The original vampire holds no soul because cultures believe the figure to be evil, a product of hell. The fact that the vampire often lacks a mirror reflection, and is negatively affected by the cross act as proof of godlessness. Gomez's Gilda Jr. is different from this norm. In fact, when Gilda Jr. sits in Sorel's bar for the first time, she takes note that "her face was there in the mirror, not banished to some soulless place. I was there just as it was for the others who lived here with Sorel, or for those who visited his gambling room and bar each night."³⁰¹ Every vampire in the novel still has a mirror reflection and has no negative reactions to the cross. There is no reference towards any character practicing any Christian religion or any other religion for that matter. Gomez does not create a vampire that finds solace or strength in religion, but instead completely erases the connection to religion.

Gomez stripping away the religious connotation of her vampire symbolizes a critique of its misuse in the black community during the AIDS crisis. Before the discovery of the epidemic, black politicians and voters were the strongest allies of gay rights petitions.³⁰² If religious discontent over black homosexuality was present, religious leaders were not leading the community with these words of hatred. This changed with the onset of HIV/AIDS, when some black ministers used the high number of HIV/AIDS in the community to begin proselytizing about the "social ills that are eroding an already fragile black family structure."³⁰³ These ministers often "used LGBTs to illustrate how the march toward impending moral decay, if not

³⁰⁰ Gomez, "Recasting the Mythology," 87.

³⁰¹ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 56.

³⁰² Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*.

³⁰³ Anthony Sanford, *Homophobia in the Black Church*, 79.

halted, would result in the doom of the black family structure and eventually all of black culture.”³⁰⁴ Religion within the black community was used as a tool for exclusion, degradation, and rejection of their own members. Because of this negative use of Christianity, Gomez makes religion itself irrelevant. In fact, the only religious symbol connected to Gilda Jr. represents a connection to family rather than a religious connection. Gomez speaks about Gilda Jr.’s cross, acknowledging that “She carries a cross with her always because it was something given to her by her mother in slavery. It holds little religious importance for her and it certainly doesn’t repel her.”³⁰⁵ So that instead of practicing a faith that can be condemning, she takes a faith-based symbol to refocus on familial connections.

In addition to the change in religion, Gomez creates a female-centered vampire as opposed to the traditional male-dominated figure and stories. In breaking the patriarchal tendency, because very few vampire novels focus on strong female figures, Gomez expresses her dedication to writing for and about the female: “One of the most important things in my writing career is to try to push boundaries outward for women, lesbians, and writers. Intensifying connections and pushing outward are the only way I can write, the only ways I can live.”³⁰⁶ In fact, she “contributes to a new, more feminist-grounded mythology” believing that “the vampire figure’s identification with both sensuality and power prove to be an ideal way to re-examine a black feminist relationship to those two issues which are at the center of our liberation.”³⁰⁷ Gilda Jr. is the black feminist lesbian vampire whose creation and focus stretch beyond all of the past vampire portrayals. Even Gomez notes the lack and problematic nature of females in vampire stories: “Traditional vampire fiction, both black and white, has been just that—traditional.

³⁰⁴ Sanford, *Homophobia in the Black Church*, 78.

³⁰⁵ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 88.

³⁰⁶ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 85.

³⁰⁷ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 92.

Women are victims or objects of desire.”³⁰⁸ And even when a strong female character arises, the patriarchal publishing and movie-producing systems erase those portrayals. For instance, Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* presented a strong independent female vampire but “despite her potential as a feminist vampire—or because of it—she disappears entirely from the film version of Rice’s work.”³⁰⁹ Gilda Jr. is what current culture would call an unapologetically black lesbian vampire, who not only survives through centuries of trials and tribulations but also offers others survival tactics for full and productive lives.

This feminist rendition of previously male-dominated portrayals highlights the strength and centrality of the black female within the black community. Through Gilda Jr.’s engagement in beauty shop politics, Gomez revalidates the importance of the black female—a positionality that patriarchal historical accounts often erase. As Tiffany Gill explains, “the black beauty industry since its inception has served as an incubator for black women’s political activism and a platform from which to agitate for social and political change.”³¹⁰ Gilda Jr. and a few other women engage in this form of black female activism, made possible by Gilda Jr.’s beauty salon in Boston’s black community. The conflict between a prostitute who wants out and her oppressive pimp acts as the major tension in this “South End” chapter. Fox, a cruelly violent pimp in charge of a group of prostitutes, sends his lackey out to look for and retrieve a missing worker. Toya, the missing prostitute who frequents Gilda Jr.’s salon, has run away from Fox in hopes of returning home. After the lackey asks for Toya at the salon with no luck, he leaves. Soon afterwards, Toya arrives at the salon’s back door in tears and fear. When Gilda Jr. answers Toya’s knocks, Toya explains “I didn’t know where else to go. He been following me

³⁰⁸ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 89.

³⁰⁹ Gomez, “Recasting the Mythology,” 88.

³¹⁰ Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 1.

everywhere.”³¹¹ The beauty salons were almost always the only options for respectable work for black women because domestic labor often included verbal and physical abuse, not to mention substandard pay.³¹² Like Toya expresses to Gilda Jr., the salon serves as a refuge for black women who have no other options for sustaining themselves socially or financially. Therefore, Gilda Jr.’s establishment, indeed, does “play a crucial role in providing black urban women with personal dignity they desired,” especially as Gilda Jr. helps to liberate Toya from the violent rampage of Fox.³¹³

Gilda’s engagement in beauty shop feminism allows her to destroy a major contributor to the patriarchal violence and oppression in the area, thereby creating a more harmonious community. As Gill notes, the black beauty salon “provides one of the most important opportunities for black women to assert leadership in their communities and in the larger political arena.”³¹⁴ Indeed, the women in this salon band together to defeat Fox, the pimp who also happens to be a stronger, outcast, and violent-natured vampire. Gilda Jr.’s beauty salon supplies the venue in which the women can plan their revolt but also provides protection from the enemy. In the novel’s context, the black women’s assertion of leadership culminates in the recognition that “the value of [Toya’s] life [mandates] the necessity of [Fox’s] death.”³¹⁵ Fox’s death would also liberate many more black women in their neighborhood, restoring personal dignity and financial stability to those black females who were previously under his thumb. This neighborhood deliverance, started and strengthened by black females, coincides with the centrality of black females in civil movements and even major national events, taking for

³¹¹ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 133.

³¹² Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 34.

³¹³ Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 33.

³¹⁴ Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 2.

³¹⁵ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 161.

instance the very recent acknowledgment and portrayal of black women's significance in the 1960s Space Race.³¹⁶ Gomez's inclusion of the salon event in the novel brings attention to black female significance and ongoing strength, which history often forgets.

Unlike Gomez's diverse commentary, on both religion and black female positionality, GLAAD rarely involves themselves in religious occurrences outside of media portrayals. However, GLAAD does draw attention to lesbian representations or lack thereof. During the late 80s, AIDS caused "a dramatic increase in representation as a result of the increased attention brought about" by the disease in popular media.³¹⁷ However, although the number of portrayals and positivity improved, lesbians remained a minority both within the organization's goals and within media. Despite the expansion of homosexual portrayals overall, concerns still existed over "lesbian invisibility relative to men," which suggests a persistence of patriarchy within GLAAD's endeavors. While GLAAD critiques both male and female homosexual representation shown in the media, the fact of the matter is that lesbians did not get as much attention from either media or GLAAD. Gomez's feminist renderings, then, start and structure a conversation that the world at that time did not want to entertain.

It is also important to note that while original tales about vampires involve a large amount of gore and explicit attention to blood, Gomez rarely shows the physical substance of blood in her novel. I posit that she uses the sight of blood sparingly because blood was a site of contention during the AIDS crisis. However, I do not consider this reservation as an element that works against her literary activism. In fact, I believe that the hesitation allows for her literary activism to become more potent. She acknowledges and strays away from areas that she believes require more substantive politicking. In other words, she understands the black community so

³¹⁶ Seen with the creation and worldwide success of Theodore Melfi's film, *Hidden Figures* (2016).

³¹⁷ Vincent Doyle, "The Visibility Professionals," 32.

well that she can pick out which battles give her more advantages. Just as Gomez revises the vampire to reflect her queer black feminist lens, she revises hunger because she recognizes that previous versions of the trope signify an uplift ideology that was no longer sufficient.

The original hunger trope is tied to the tenet of uplift through its aspiration of satisfaction—the desired object must be as good and as plentiful as objects possessed by whites, which inherently reserves progress for privileged members of the black community. Gomez rewrites this narrow view by creating a more communal-based hunger that relies on self-defined goals. Gomez’s version therefore espouses encouragement of personal aspirations rather than a comparative-based uplift. I will first reveal the ways in which Gomez refashions the hunger theme. Next, I will cover the context behind uplift in the AIDS era. Finally, I will demonstrate how her formation of hunger offers validation as an alternative to the traditional processes of racial uplift. I posit that Gomez changes the implications attached to hunger—who’s involved as well as the purpose—in order to illustrate empowerment as a more effective substitute during the AIDS era.

First and foremost, in order to connect her conception of hunger to the particularities of the black community, she refashions past versions of the theme. Previous manifestations of the prevalent trope of hunger within African-American texts focus on the physical object (or absence thereof) available to or obtained by black persons. The connection between the lack of food and black America symbolizes the problem of black agency. Doris Witt expounds on this relation with an example of food-based racism, referring to Fuzzy Zoeller’s 1997 commentary about Tiger Woods’ championship dinner: “...tell him not to serve fried chicken next year. Or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve.”³¹⁸ As Witt aptly points out, Zoeller grounds his racism in

³¹⁸ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, 3-4.

attacking black-designated foods.³¹⁹ If Tiger's success manifests in his honored dinner, then racists belittle the quality of the food and thus the quality of his success. The attack implies that Tiger does not deserve access to food (or success). Witt's example demonstrates the agency of an African-American to obtain privileged standing but that access also being undermined by those accustomed to owning the largest portion of perceived success. In other words, America's obsession with and symbolic use of food, especially in connection with the black community, determines who may attain the status of personhood.³²⁰ Just as this event occurred in cultural politics, African-American literature also illustrates agency and lack thereof through their focus on the desired object, food.

The focus on the desired object measures individual success—"success" being the attainment of food—through a comparison to white people. One is successful only if one can obtain as much food as white people. Indeed, as Mary Potori points out, activists use food as a tool to "politicize the urban poor" or other marginalized masses of people. For instance, the Black Panthers established a neighborhood food bank "[to] heighten the consciousness of the hungry poor and working classes to the various forms of their oppression, demonstrating that they too had power to affect the conditions in which they lived."³²¹ Nella Larsen illustrates this awareness and agency in her 1929 novel, *Passing*. Restaurants in the narrative acts as the means by which Irene inserts herself into white society: she eats food reserved for whites only. She manipulates the system by allowing those around her to perceived her as white and uses that misperception to gain access to her chosen object, her desired success, her preferred sustenance. The text's depiction centers on Irene's ability to obtain generally prohibited meals as the act that

³¹⁹ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, Prologue.

³²⁰ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, 7.

³²¹ Mary Potori, "Feeding the Revolution," 86.

establishes her high societal status. In other words, the portrayal implies that Irene is successful and highly regarded because she has a wider access to nourishment. Food, here, is a statement of and desire for power as a marginalized individual in American society.

Black authors also use food to illustrate the ways in which white society continues to assert their power over black people. *Native Son*, for instance, portrays this dynamic during Bigger's employment as a chauffeur when Mary and her boyfriend Jan force him to take them to a restaurant in a black neighborhood. The white intruders bring attention to themselves while in Bigger's black-owned diner by ordering rum and food that's originally made for the black inhabitants of the neighborhood. Under the guise of hunger, Mary and Jan insert themselves in the black community and take what is not theirs. Just as a lack of nutritious substance often symbolizes the black failure to obtain what Caucasian people possess and value, watching white people obtain what blacks often lack indicates the constant need for whites to actively maintain their high status. While these illustrations do not necessarily force a negative outlook on black success and failures, the focus on the object of desire creates measures that rely upon a comparison with white privilege instead of independent black self-definitions.

Because of this reliance on white ideals of physical food, Gomez insists on dismissing the attention on the desired object and modifies the lens to focus on the desire itself, thereby dismantling the necessary grasp that white society holds on black desires. This aspiration of dismantling can be seen in the scenes where Gilda Jr. learns how to be an effective vampire. Bird instructs Gilda Jr. "As you take from them you must reach inside. Feel what they are needing, not what you are hungering for."³²² As Bird continues, "It is through our connection with life, not death, that we live."³²³ The point of the hunger is not to focus on whether or not you've

³²² Gomez, *Gilda stories*, 50.

³²³ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 50.

obtained the object of desire, but instead on exploring the experiences and ideals that drive or satisfy that craving. In this manner, the shift away from feeling “what you are hungering for” destroys the link between hunger and food. Therefore, the satisfaction of hunger no longer relies on access white-determined values.

Additionally, the authorial predecessors’ presentation of hunger is isolationist in nature, relying solely on the desires of the individual instead of communal needs. This implication is seen in novels like *Black Boy* whose autobiographical manuscript was originally titled, *American Hunger*.³²⁴ Richard Wright’s text highlights the lack of food and therefore the persistence of continuing desire but this craving connects to personal desire. While deprivation may be felt by the entirety of the African-American community in his time, the novel focuses mainly on his own struggles in dealing with hunger. Wright is the only one directly implicated in the illustration of starvation and readers understand the extent of this construction of a very real physical hunger. For instance, Wright talks about drinking water in large amount in order to give a false impression of satiation.³²⁵ Throughout the text he composes hunger as desire—for books, for social mobility, for life—his young self working to provide himself with even the illusion of having gained the desire. What this all comes down to, however, is a focus on the self: unfulfilled appetite, for Wright, affects only himself.

Gomez’s refashioning of hunger—centering on the feeling rather than the desired object—refuses to stay within the isolating confines of experiencing deprivation. Her construction of desire forces a consideration of another person by structuring appetite as an

³²⁴ Andrews and Taylor, *Richard wright’s Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, 8. Wright’s publisher published the first section of the original manuscript and titled it *Black Boy*. In 1977, the publisher published the second half of his manuscript and titled it *American Hunger*. It was not until 1991 that the two sections came together into one full unabridged novel, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.

³²⁵ Richard wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.

exchange between two persons which centers on the desires of both parties. For Gomez, the deletion of one person's deprivation is dependent upon simultaneously satisfying the want of another. In the very first conversation that Gilda Sr. has with Gilda Jr. about being a vampire, she explains the exchange process for feeding on blood: "the blood, it is a shared thing. Something we must all learn to share or simply spill on battlefields."³²⁶ She goes on to describe blood as the key to vampires experiencing a non-violent and enjoyable life: "we who live by sharing the life blood of others have no need to kill."³²⁷ For Gilda Sr., as she explains to Gilda Jr., satisfying hunger allows the vampires to continue living, but the feeling also gives them the opportunity to offer humans satiation of their desires as well. Through the novel's portrayal, hunger does not lead to inevitable "violence, pollution, and corruption, but comes to represent communion and exchange."³²⁸ This "fair exchange"³²⁹ gives both parties motivation to live healthy and fulfilling lives: "There is a joy to the exchange we make. We draw life into ourselves, yet we give life as well. We give what's needed—energy, dreams, ideas."³³⁰ Hunger is no longer just about the individual. Desire now requires the satisfaction of both parties. Giving life, or "food," to the human is just as important as receiving the life from their blood. Hunger for Gomez is an exchange between two bodies rather than an individual circumstance irrelevant to others.

The old forms of hunger reflect the ideals and process of communal progress. As Touré Reed explains, past versions of racial uplift were "shaped by theories of assimilation," which served to counter notions of black deficiency.³³¹ Correspondingly, as shown above, manifestations of hunger in African-American texts relied on white standards. In essence,

³²⁶ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 44.

³²⁷ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 45.

³²⁸ Susana Morris, "More than Human," 39.

³²⁹ Susana Morris, "More than Human," 39.

³³⁰ Susana Morris, "More than Human," 39.

³³¹ Touré Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 5.

whiteness acts as the common thread between this formation of hunger and efforts of racial uplift. Both deal with the ability to demonstrate how well blacks could mimic white culture, social, and economic practices. Similarly, the isolationism that is seen in early manifestations of hunger connects to theories of uplift held by black leaders, which posit the need for a clear hierarchy or for individualistic advancements. Take, for example, Du Bois' Talented Tenth or Washington's economic uplift.³³² Just as hunger affects and is felt only by the individual rather than the community, racial uplift, as espoused by these two black leaders, focuses on having an individual black (usually) male strive for and enjoy success through "acculturation and self-help."³³³ This individual who would make more money or who would attain higher education would theoretically (but not necessarily) inspire others to follow suit. The end results would be individual pursuits rather than community movements. Although these uplift arguments extend back to the Reconstruction era, those two particular theories would inspire uplift efforts well into the AIDS era.³³⁴ The fact that Gomez works to change the conception of hunger from previous manifestations in African American literature demonstrates that she is also advocating for a change to the previous habit of uplift.

Gomez's purposeful change critiques an ineffective form of uplift in the AIDS era. Uplift during this time failed to accommodate non-normative identities and therefore fell short of effective all-inclusive activism because of the heightened focus on, and repression of, sexuality. An ethnographic study conducted by Cathy Cohen demonstrates this tendency within the black community. Cohen questions a few black women in charge of an AIDS clinic organized through

³³² Jacqueline Moore, *Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*.

³³³ Touré Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*, 2. Reed defines uplift as "collective self-help" which I see as something of an oxymoron. Self-help inherently excludes the collective. One can be taught self-help but the execution of self-help is isolationist in nature.

³³⁴ Touré Reed, *Not Alms But Opportunity*.

the local church, a space that often acts as the center of activism and advocacy. Working toward “the survival of [the] community,” these women offer hospice care to those suffering from AIDS while also incorporating an educative aspect to their outreach on the dangerous uses of drugs, even supplying clean needles to addicts.³³⁵ Cohen notes that although the women were “well aware that the AIDS epidemic was originally identified with gay white men,” the church created the program predominantly in the context of drug use.³³⁶ When pushed to discuss sexuality, the women present homosexuality and the care of that group as “an issue of class and privilege.”³³⁷ Their reluctance to acknowledge black homosexual victims further validates the dismissal of the marginalized group in the conversations on care and support. This also suggests that these black female activists hold a view that many black LGBT individuals are privileged enough to have insurance and a thorough knowledge of the disease—that those members of the community did not need outreach, which justifies their initial exclusion. Moreover, homosexual black victims internalize this exclusion as they accept a feeling of “invisibility and powerlessness” in order to sustain the “support and approval of the black community.”³³⁸ Ultimately, uplift is ineffective if it serves to erase certain people because of their identity.

Gomez’s hunger exchange reflects empowerment rather than uplift because empowerment relies on self-definition as opposed to comparison with white ideals. As shown above, the exchange that happens when Gilda Jr. satisfies her hunger for blood relies on the human’s understanding of him/herself. Patricia Hill Collins discusses the need to self-construct one’s identity, as she acknowledges the strength behind “the system of oppression” as “the

³³⁵ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 4.

³³⁶ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 3.

³³⁷ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 4.

³³⁸ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 2.

acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves.”³³⁹ However, she also explains that black women especially have always “maintained independent self-definitions” as a survival tactic.³⁴⁰ Taking this into account, then Gilda Jr.’s practice of “reaching inside” for the human’s image of him/herself—“what they are needing”—is a practice of finding the human’s original thoughts, independent from society’s stereotypes.³⁴¹ Once found, Gilda Jr. further encourages these thoughts, thus giving power to the self-constructions.

Gomez even goes so far as to insert a complication in her process of empowerment to acknowledge the differences in personalities. Gomez includes a scene of exchange that encounters an individual whose aspirations is based in dishonesty and greed—thoughts that inherently exist in any heterogeneous group. When Gilda Jr. first arrives in Yerba Buena, the location of Sorel and Anthony, she goes searching for an exchange. The man she finds concerns himself only with winning in his gambling pursuits “even if it meant cheating.”³⁴² Although she was “reaching inside” in search of a positive aspiration she “had never encountered such a void of desire in her life.”³⁴³ However, Gilda Jr. still works with this self-definition. She does not implant a new idea of himself in his mind, but instead suggest to him that cheating will “shorten the possibilities for his own life.”³⁴⁴ This suggestion makes the man “ambivalent about his dishonesty” which does not demonstrate a change in the man’s aspirations but allows for him to consider the consequences of his actions.³⁴⁵ Here, Gomez recognizes complications attached to empowerment while still illustrating that the process can be a positive one for each person.

³³⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 99.

³⁴⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 97.

³⁴¹ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 50.

³⁴² Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 57.

³⁴³ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 57.

³⁴⁴ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 57

³⁴⁵ Gomez, *Gilda Stories*, 58.

Gomez's scene showing corruption allows for an acceptance of all independent self-definitions (good or bad) while still offering a message that accepts authenticity.

Gomez's display of encouragement implies that the community should enable to person on his or her level rather than sustaining unproductive forms of uplift. In fact, empowerment being an effective alternative to uplift has a history in the black community, especially when dealing with sexuality. During the Black Panthers' reign of the 70s, STD treatment and prevention were common public exhibits of activism. Community outreach through the Black Panthers involved a "freeze list" that held the names of STD-infected individuals in the neighborhood for the length of their treatment. The public could call the center and ask about a particular individual before engaging in sexual relations with him or her.³⁴⁶ There were no questions asked about sexuality or intentions with the partner, the center simply assisted in preventing sexual contamination. This public association encourages any and all sexually-active peoples to take control of what they know about their sexual partners instead of assuming that the individual is STD-free or expecting the public to practice abstinence. Again, Gomez's focus on showing this form of progress denotes her support for returning to this discourse and efforts within the community to ease the rampage of AIDS.

GLAAD engages in uplift rather than empowerment because the organization focuses on correcting negative media images of the homosexual. If Kevin Gaines explanation of uplift involves an effort to "rehabilitate [an] image by embodying respectability,"³⁴⁷ then GLAAD's mission of "advocating for fair, accurate, and inclusive representation"³⁴⁸ of queer peoples on screen adheres to the idea of uplift because the standards are based on one group's definition

³⁴⁶ Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul*, 95.

³⁴⁷ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xiv.

³⁴⁸ Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream*, 181.

instead of surveying others'. Indeed, their tactics center on non-homophobic visibility and acknowledgement rather than fostering self-love or offering financial support. In fact, during the moments of the AIDS crisis GLAAD engaged less in “deconstructing identity categories and opposing heteronormativity,” like their peers ACT-UP and Queer Nation, and instead deployed mainstreaming strategies.³⁴⁹ According to Vincent Doyle, GLAAD’s mainstreaming allowed for the institutionalization of a “particular (normalized) version of gay and lesbian identity.”³⁵⁰ This focus on changing a previously negative identity-image means that the organization’s main purpose is uplift. This observation stems from the fact that the privileged executive team makes the decisions on what positive images look like and advocates for others to accept that image as well.

It is perhaps because GLAAD brings homosexual identity to the forefront of conversation that they are ineffective in the black community. As Gomez notes, “Given that most Black people would rather not talk about sex in public (that is, in front of white people) at all, is it any wonder that the gay rights movement leaves the black community trembling with fear and anger?”³⁵¹ According to the portrayal of uplift, the silence around non-normative sexuality is not simply avoidance but also a tactic for sustaining respectability in the eyes of the white public. If white gay activists attempt to start that conversation, then some within the black community would be even more suspicious and defensive.

Gomez and her engagement in a “Politics of Empowerment,” especially during and after the AIDS era, change the conceptualization of blackness and its effects on the community.³⁵² As Patricia Hill Collins explains, empowerment allows for a “self-defining and self-determining”

³⁴⁹ Vincent Doyle, *The Visibility Professionals*, 47.

³⁵⁰ Doyle, “*The Visibility Professionals*,” 48.

³⁵¹ Gomez, “Repeat After Me,” 938.

³⁵² Patricia Hill Collins coins this phrase in her *Black Feminist Thought*.

identity formation that will help to rethink both “unjust power relations” and “prevailing epistemologies.”³⁵³ Indeed, Gomez’s portrayal and promotion of empowerment allows for a concept of blackness that does not hinge upon the white gaze.

While GLAAD works toward a more thorough understanding of representation and identity, the organization cannot work well within isolated communities of discrimination. Essentially when it comes down to the local issues, GLAAD is not an effective tool at responding to the anti-gay atmospheres because its focus is too broad. GLAAD strives for a more general LGBT advocacy and often overlooks the inclusion of black LGBT members. This is similar to black America overlooking their more marginalized members in an effort to advocate for the entirety of the community condition. However, Gomez’s response to this history is not a lesson in how queer blacks construct their identity but instead on how blackness must include all forms of blackness. If not, then the black condition will never improve. Meanwhile, GLAAD simply critiques current representations of national media. In actuality, GLAAD’s focus on media almost inherently excludes black LGBT people because people of color are not often represented on screen anyway.

Although the organization was begat by a diverse group of individuals, it often has difficulty advocating for that same diversity. For instance, it wasn’t until 1999 that GLAAD criticized media for the lack of racial diversity in its representation of the LGBT community.³⁵⁴ The beginnings of the group were centered on the “dismantling of the closet, the rights to sexual privacy, the creation of a mass movement and of a gay public sphere.”³⁵⁵ However, this mission was soon framed through mainstreaming. Instead of aiming to deconstruct the systems that

³⁵³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 273-274.

³⁵⁴ Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream*, 180.

³⁵⁵ Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream*, 8.

created their otherness in the first place, the organization began to demonstrate how well the Other could assimilate and become just another American citizen (via marriage or economic status).³⁵⁶ But these aspirations were on a national scale—the group did not actively consider the racial differences that would inhibit their advocacy.

In conclusion, while GLAAD focuses on helping to create as well as critiquing media representations, Gomez pursues the creation of a literary representation. Gomez's literary activism offers ways of improving the condition of internal black relations while GLAAD offers a national visibility. In line with the purpose of the organization, Gomez's writing acts as a supplement to the goals of GLAAD during the AIDS crisis: how the homosexual individual is portrayed to the black community and the manner in which homosexuality acts as a divisive device. In other words, the advocacy organization attempts to control the image created and viewed by all levels of society but often has such a broad conception of representation that its methods are almost exclusive to white society. However, Gomez directly structures an image of black homosexuality that inspires an inclusive view of black America and speaks directly to the marginalized community.

³⁵⁶ Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream*, 6.

Chapter Four

Disrupting the Persistence of the Victim Narrative in Dee Rees' *Pariah*

Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.
~Audre Lorde³⁵⁷

*She saw him disappear by the river
They asked her to tell what happened
Only to discount her memory.*
~Lorna Simpson³⁵⁸

Instead of offering another isolated example of writing, this chapter will conduct an analysis of how gender affects activist writing. In particular, chapter four will narrow the focus of an observation made in the last chapter. In chapter three, I argued that Gomez uses beauty shop feminism to unravel patriarchal systems. In making this argument, I provided evidence from African-American feminists like Cohen, Lorde, and Collins to iterate the cultural significance, and inferiority, that black females hold in their communities. As illustrated in the previous section, they are held to certain sexual respectability standards while also being expected to carry of the burden of societal mothering which includes having a sexual relationship with a man. And even with the dominance in social upkeep, black males still hold a higher position within the nation. Queer black women are no exception to this sexist rule. I will add to Cohen and Collins' theses stated in Gomez's section by exploring how black lesbians fight damaging expectations from both inside and outside of the community. Additionally, my contribution features creative visual works to further expand the venues through which subversive commentary may occur. I want to begin with the hypothesis that queer African-American women are more aggressive in their critiques of cultural issues because of their

³⁵⁷ Dee Rees, *Pariah*, 2007/2011

³⁵⁸ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 98.

experiences with the sexism-racism-homophobia intersection. I do not assume that black men do nothing, but instead that they—because of their privileges within the American patriarchy—are less aware of the gender performances required to exist in the United States.

This conclusion will shift the conversation away from formal written literature and towards visual productions about and by queer black authors. Film is a creative form that can be just as potent in conveying alterity as the observations written and read through literature, "captur[ing] the texture of events and [animating] lived experience."³⁵⁹ The visual aesthetic provides a sensory-based understanding of a culture, the triumphs as well as its struggles. In other words, cinema separates itself from literary writings by "offering the possibility of direct communication" with audiences.³⁶⁰ This conclusion will compare Dee Rees' black lesbian in *Pariah* (2007/2011) to Barry Jenkins and Tarell McCraney's gay black male in *Moonlight* (2016), two award-winning films produced within the last 8 years. I aim to investigate the ways in which black lesbians' experiences are framed differently from gay black males' experiences. The ways in which creators construct the queer black character critiques societal issues faced by African-American homosexuals. However, Rees' depiction presents the black lesbian's life experience in a more complex manner because the portrayal operates against harmful racial, sexual, and gender beliefs. The differences in the films' representations reveal sexist stereotypes and anti-gay beliefs in black America, the combination of which compels black lesbians to live by contradictory expectations as a means of subscribing to citizenship in the black community. Furthermore, their inability to abide by conflicting requirements positions them as being culpable in their own oppression.

³⁵⁹ Lorraine Mortimer, "The Texture of Events," 268

³⁶⁰ Mortimer, "Texture of Events," 270.

Starting as a contribution to OutFest (a film festival dedicated to LGBT-produced works), Dee Rees' 2007 short film won the event's Audience Award and went on to be lengthened into the 2011 national feature film of the same name, *Pariah*.³⁶¹ The short film follows Alike through her journey to negotiate being herself and being what others want her to be. We see Alike's struggle to be comfortable in her own skin while around her family and around her lesbian friend. The short opens in a lesbian strip club where her friend encourages her to interact with other black lesbians. We see from the very beginning that Alike performs lesbian identity for her friend by wearing masculine clothes and boasting about conquests, a queer expectation held by Laura that Alike later reveals and condemns. However, Alike also presents normative sexuality for her mother by feminizing herself through clothing and accessories.³⁶² When her family finally finds out about her sexuality, her father beats her in anger at her sexual confession.³⁶³

The feature film allows for a much more thorough look at not only Alike but also those around her such as Laura and Audrey, her butch lesbian best friend and her feminine mother, respectively. We see Laura's struggle to financially hold herself and her sister afloat after being kicked out of her mother's home. She studies and obtains a GED, something that she assumes her mother would be proud of but she is disappointed when her mother does not validate the achievements. Throughout the entire film Audrey struggles with her tomboy daughter and her cheating husband in what seems to be an effort to cultivate the ideal black respectable family.

The pull between social expectations for black respectability and societal stereotypes that connect blackness with the non-normative eventually tears Alike's family apart. But, most significantly, the pressure of respectability separates Alike from the heterosexual black

³⁶¹ Kara Keeling, "Pariah and Black Independent Cinema Today," 424.

³⁶² For more on performing gender and sexuality, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

³⁶³ Dee Rees, *Pariah*, Northstar Pictures, 2007.

community, represented by her mother. After receiving verbal confirmation of Alike's non-normative sexuality, Audrey attacks Alike and refuses to even express love for her daughter after the fight. Ultimately, Audrey resigns herself to let go of the image of respectability, retreating into herself and God. In a roundtable on the significance of *Pariah*, Keeling notes that "the tensions that surround national belonging for black families and the stakes of compulsorily black heterosexuality produce a dissonance that is palpable in *Pariah*'s narrative."³⁶⁴ This film analyzes the conflicts between black communities and the nation that continuously challenge the validity of black American citizenship. And, as Keeling observes, Rees' work also assesses the tensions between LGBT black individuals and their black communities.³⁶⁵

By contrast, while *Pariah*'s main purpose is the presentation of navigating life as a queer individual, *Moonlight* demonstrates the effects that social norms have on someone positioned as an outsider, the difference being agency versus passive bystander. Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* is an adaptation of Tarell Alvin McCraney's semi-autobiographical play, "In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue," a project that McCraney produced for school.³⁶⁶ The movie itself was co-written and co-produced by a black man who identifies as gay. McCraney gives the story actual substance; this is his story. Meanwhile, Jenkins gives the narrative cinematic appeal. Split into three chapters, *Moonlight* follows Chiron as a queer black male in the midst of friends and family. The first chapter entitled "Little," his childhood nickname, shows Chiron's childhood and troubles with the other kids in school bullying him as well as the beginnings of his mother's crack addiction. He meets and connects with Juan and Teresa, a black drug dealer and his girlfriend, who take him in and act as surrogate parents. Chapter two, entitled "Chiron," shows

³⁶⁴ Keeling, "Pariah and Black Independent Cinema Today," 424.

³⁶⁵ Keeling, "Pariah and Black Independent Cinema Today," 424

³⁶⁶ "Director Barry Jenkins On Creating Empathy," *Vice*.

Chiron as a 16-year-old kid through a picture of his blooming sexuality but also the depths of his mother's addiction. He is still having to deal with school bullies. In this section, Chiron also experiences his first sexual encounter but also a heartbreaking betrayal from his best friend, Kevin. Lastly, chapter three, entitled "Black," a nickname his best friend Kevin gave him in childhood, shows a fully-grown Chiron out of jail but following in the drug-dealing footsteps of Juan. Chiron reconnects with both his mother, who has finally conquered her addiction, and Kevin.

I will read these movies through the lens of the victim narrative placed on the black population by white America. I acknowledge the danger of the single story.³⁶⁷ The victim narrative is a "creation of certain formulaic structures that are readily recognizable, that focuses on sources of suffering, thus [creating] sympathetic figures for the American audience which receives them."³⁶⁸ Dating back to representations in slave narrative, public depictions have positioned black women as passive victims of people, events, and history in an effort to counter black temptress descriptions.³⁶⁹ These females are acted upon by unfortunate circumstances instead of being agents in their own lives. These narratives often take agency away from the individual. In her article on the portrayal of female slaves, Frances Foster notes that "slave narratives presented black women as so completely victimized that their ability to survive such experiences placed them outside the normal sphere of women."³⁷⁰ In other words, these renderings offer an abnormally strong black female. However, this conceived strength of the black woman has promoted racist assumptions that lead to instances of abuse and death. For instance, the health-based notion that black women can handle more pain causes doctors to often

³⁶⁷ See Chimamanda Adichie's TedTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story."

³⁶⁸ Jessica Mayo, "Court-Mandated Story Time," 1498.

³⁶⁹ See Frances Foster, "Ultimate Victims."

³⁷⁰ Frances Foster, "Ultimate Victims," 846.

overlook vital health markers in black female patients.³⁷¹ Furthermore, Joao Vargas suggests that the victim narrative that is often put forth in order to portray a black individual as undeserving of his/her negative circumstances, “ultimately reproduce intrinsic anti-blackness.”³⁷² This victim narrative, persisting through the centuries and onto the queer black female body, helps to produce an anti-gay axis that crosses through the racism and sexism.

The victim narrative placed on black queer bodies also insists on passivity and readability to conjure sympathetic responses from their audiences.³⁷³ As a consequence of these markers of victimization, scholarship—in its study and understanding of queer black female identity—examines the queer black woman as a victim of multiple systemic oppressions around her.³⁷⁴ Although there is nothing inherently wrong with stressing victimization, the overwhelming prevalence of the narrative as the only lens through which to view the queer black body creates complications in allowing agency to black lesbians.³⁷⁵ These victim-based depictions only allow for certain stories to be told, for certain voices to be heard. While *Moonlight* uses this victimization lens to portray the homosexual black male, *Pariah* attempts to break through its hold by showing Alike as an agent in her life experiences. *Pariah* brings the narrative under the microscope in hopes of dismantling the persistence of this structure. I will argue that Rees creates three major frameworks to challenge this thread of identity construction: masked silence, conscious performance, and violence as interchange.

³⁷¹ See Ronald Braithwaite’s *Health Issues in the Black Community*.

³⁷² Joao Vargas and Joy James, “Refusing Blackness-as-Victimization,” *Pursuing Trayvon Martin*, ed Yancy,

³⁷³ bell hooks discusses white America’s need for readability when assessing the queer female body in *Art on My Mind*.

³⁷⁴ Matebeni discusses the fact that many Western scholars view queer women only as victims in her “Sexual Minorities in South Africa” and *Reclaiming Afrikan*.

³⁷⁵ Even the newer terminology of “victim-survivor” (Regine Jean-Charles, “Toward a Victim-Survivor Narrative”) implies a linear timeline in which agency is granted only after, and thus as a response to, the victimization of the body.

Portrayals of silence in *Pariah* reconceptualize the marginalization of queer black females by revealing the dismissal and manipulation of voice. Silence frames the queer black male in a positive light—i.e, innocence, emotional connections, sympathy—but silence for the queer black female illuminates an emotional and social detachment from the surrounding community as well as the dismissal of queer female expression. Scholarship behind the use and misuse of silence have long been developed and fine-tuned to comment on social positionality. Silencing (whether intentional or not) is a marginalizing tactic that further oppresses racial, gender, and sexual minorities.³⁷⁶ Taking voice away from racial/sexual minorities places them into a situation where they can be manipulated to benefit the majority; if not benefitting, then society will silence the minority in order prevent social interferences.³⁷⁷ Silencing acts as a regular occurrence in the marginalization of the LGBT black community, which is why both films portray silence in order to demonstrate queer experiences within hetero- and homo-normative social constructions. The silence in film can operate as a “technique to increase audience involvement,” which is particularly the case for *Moonlight*.³⁷⁸ Scenes of silence in *Moonlight* bring focus solely on the main character’s emotional positionality, which encourages the audience’s investment in his triumph. This portrayal helps to reinforce the strength of the black male as a means of reversing slavery’s suppression of the black man’s power.³⁷⁹ This is not the case with *Pariah*. While Alike’s silence can still operate to show her personality, her silence is often masked by varying elements that act as distractions. *Pariah*’s representation of black female silence brings light to the social trend of queer black female voices being overshadowed

³⁷⁶ There are quite a few scholars who integrate this focus into their studies. Some of the most distinguished of these academics include Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Gayatri Spivak.

³⁷⁷ Here, I bring to mind the situation dealing with suffrage. While petitioning for black male suffrage, the male majority silenced women’s attempts for similar rights in order to prevent women from interfering with male victories.

³⁷⁸ Andrew Ford, “The Sounds of Silence,” *The Sound of Picture*, 116.

³⁷⁹ See Shahrazad Ali’s *The Blackman’s Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman*.

or dismissed even in the midst of rights movements.³⁸⁰ In essence, *Moonlight* requires viewers to acknowledge Chiron's silence while the silencing in *Pariah* allows audiences to redirect their attentions elsewhere.

Both films convey performative strategies of queer survival in a world that requires normativity. The female version presents the limitations of heterosexual and homosexual communities. Alike socially enacts her gender and sexuality differently depending on the changing environment. *Pariah* depicts a conscious recognition of identity performances but also a way to come to terms with social expectations, which offers transcendence from that performativity. For instance, throughout her days both at school and at home, Alike must find the time and space to switch her outfits for both Laura and Audrey. At the end of the school day, Alike goes into an empty bathroom to change in the stall before being picked up by her mother. This clothing-based performativity requires strategies and thus an awareness and manipulation of the social mandates connected to both homosexual and heterosexual fashion expectations. By contrast, the male version demonstrates the acceptance of performativity into the self-constructed identity. Other characters tell Chiron who he is, rather than him expressing that himself. He always describes himself in terms of facts, like his name or where he lives, or in vague terms, such as "I'm me." Kevin and Teresa are the ones who often explain to him who he is, his personality, his aspirations, or his intentions. This establishes the queer male as being controlled by the surrounding society. Multi-marginalized individuals such as gay black men begin to embrace a masculinity that will be respected by those around them in order to integrate themselves into the heteronormative community. The survival tactics that Chiron practices evolve as he grows up, from isolation to assimilation, showing "performative strategies of black

³⁸⁰ See E. Frances White's *Dark Continent of Our Bodies* and Cathy Cohen's *Boundaries of Blackness*.

masculinity as [a] narrative.”³⁸¹ This strategy helps to protect him from the anti-gay violence that he once experienced as a child. In fact, the gender enactment establishes his masculine authority within the black male community, earning him the respect and fear of others. While Chiron thoroughly adopts and benefits from this masculine identity, masculinity acts as the damning evidence in Alike’s confrontations.

Gender and sexual performativity have a long history in academic scholarship.³⁸² More recently, scholars such as Judith Butler and Muñoz have described and explained this phenomenon of performing to expectations, both normative and non-normative.³⁸³ The gender of the non-normative subject does not seem to change the tendency toward performativity for survival in both the normative and non-normative worlds. To gain acceptance from any side, one must perform the identity that each side expects. Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and bell hooks are just some examples of scholars who focus on the performance of the intersected identity, or the triply minoritized individual.³⁸⁴ As bell hooks explains in her assessment of the realities of the black woman in America, “She is not herself but always what someone else wants her to be.”³⁸⁵ In the representations shown in these movies, both protagonists use an exaggerated form of masculinity but Alike must consciously code-switch from masculine to feminine for her audiences. In *Pariah*, Alike uses masculinity to express her queerness for Laura. Alike simultaneously must perform a femininity for her mother in order to hide her queer sexuality.

Both films use familial violence to mark the social position of homosexuality and its break with communal expectations. *Pariah* demonstrates patriarchal beliefs that undergird

³⁸¹ Michael Boyce Gillespie, “One Step Ahead,” 53.

³⁸² See Michelle Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*.

³⁸³ See Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and Jose Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*.

³⁸⁴ See Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and *Sister Outsider*; Barbara Smith’s *The Truth that Hurts*; and bell hooks’ *Art on My Mind* and *Ain’t I a Woman*.

³⁸⁵ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 97.

domestic aggression against women by showing the situation as a cause-effect. Rees marks the impact of the offender's gender by having Alike respond to the fights differently depending on which parent hits her, with her father's attack affecting her more significantly. This portrayal of viciousness brings attention to the male-dominated belief that females deserve the violence that they encounter. *Moonlight* represents familial hostility against the black gay male as unprovoked, thereby making him an innocent victim. Furthermore, in *Moonlight* the mother enacts the violence which, as we've already seen in *Pariah*, carries less weight in terms of life impact.

The silencing of Alike in *Pariah* is marked by distractions and thus a possible avoidance of the absence or misuse of black lesbian expressions. Comparatively, the silences shown in *Moonlight* mark Chiron's emotional strengths within himself and with others around him. In alignment with the epigraph from hooks, "They asked her to tell what happened, only to discount her memory," the black queer voice is either set up to support others' beliefs or the voice is undermined entirely. The female in the epigraph was given a chance to present facts but was then dismissed when the facts did not align with the views of those asking. In her analysis of the photographic work "The Waterbearer," bell hooks praises the ways in which the black female in the picture is "repositioned in a manner that disrupts conventional ways of seeing and understanding black womanhood."³⁸⁶ Likewise, *Pariah* often minimizes Alike's verbal expressions in order to focus on Laura, Audrey, or the significance of a contextual environment. *Pariah*'s masking of black lesbian silence demonstrates and critiques not only society quieting the marginalized lesbian but also society employing that silence into a self-serving convenience.³⁸⁷ Alike's muted voice is not only present, her muteness is also used to support

³⁸⁶ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 98.

³⁸⁷ The manipulation of silence reflects the concept behind Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern voice" in that the subaltern's inability to speak is often exploited by Western scholars who benefit from speaking on their behalf.

others, which reflects the public switching a victim narrative into a strategy to attain social power for the black majority.

The opening scene of *Pariah* depicts silence as avoidable which shows how black Americans mask the voices of queer female community members as well as how America in general readily avoids the oppression by using the marginalization as a means of focusing on other social matters. The movie opens with unclear, blurry bodies lining up to enter a club. Chatter fills the background and a voice clearly yells: “18 to party, 21 to drink.” The club is obviously a female-only club because the person collecting money and identification cards at the door only refers to “ladies” while shuffling females through. Paired with the upcoming scene that features a female stripper as well as flirtatious interactions in the background, audiences are to understand that the space is actually a black lesbian club. This space can be taken as a representation of the black lesbian community, as it is where the queer group members can congregate. This entrance scene fades to black and soon “My Neck, My Back” by Khia begins to play. When we finally meet Alike, amongst chatter and cheering for the black female stripper, she stands there silent and motionless. Alike’s isolation and silence in this queer space suggest that queer black females can also hold an outsider position within a queer black female community. The distraction of the stripper (visually) and the throwback music (aurally) diverts attention away from Alike’s silence. In fact, the music distracts us even before we can see Alike for the first time. Since this movie was released in 2010, this song (released in 2002) is a throwback, inducing nostalgic thoughts before we even see the main character.³⁸⁸ Laura, after glancing at her friend’s passive stance, places a bill in Alike’s hand and moves Alike’s arm to hold the money out for the stripper despite Alike’s protest. The point at which Laura physically

³⁸⁸ Shea Serrano, “Khia’s ‘My Neck, My Back,’” *LAWeekly*.

manipulates Alike's body demonstrates how Alike's silence serves as a contrast to the enjoyment and self-confidence of Laura. Laura uses her friend's reticence as an excuse to place her own expectations on the movements of Alike's body, quite literally.

The use of popular music, familiar moving bodies, and sharp scene-cuts detract from Alike's lack of voice, which makes her silence avoidable in *Pariah*. Meanwhile, the absence of speech is overwhelming in *Moonlight* as there is nothing else to look at or listen to when Chiron is speechless. After the physical manipulation, Alike retreats with a "sorry" to the stripper and goes to sit by herself in silence (the music still playing in the background). The scene cuts to the bar with significantly lower chatter and cheering. Then the scene cuts back to Alike where we see that she's fallen asleep in the same spot where she originally sat down. The jump in time that we see in this first sequence represents the distraction from Alike's isolation, as we assume that she slept throughout the queer communal experience but didn't see her actually fall asleep. The sleeping was not portrayed on screen as it did not effectively help to bring focus on Laura's enjoyment, the stripper's attractiveness, or any nostalgic music. The second club scene functions in the same capacity, but even with Alike joined by another female who admits to being attracted to Alike, she still sits still as her admirer joins the community. This furthers the point that the first situation was not simply because she had no romantic pursuits. Instead, her detachment from the group stems from a deeper understanding that she feels out of place, not quite herself, within these spaces.

Pariah's silences demonstrate Alike's negative position within the queer community while silences in *Moonlight* signify a positive connection to the queer and heterosexual black community by indicating a moment of mutual respect and investment between two characters as well as between a character and the audience. However, the gay black male portrayal falls in line

with stereotypes of the “refined, restrained, desexualized black male body,”³⁸⁹ as bell hooks describes. The depiction of Chiron adheres to the one-mate ideal subscribed to by the black community in order to present a morally and sexually restrained gay black male to white America.³⁹⁰ *Moonlight*’s beach scene where Juan teaches Little how to swim shows silence but within a connotation of character sympathy and investment. Without music or speech, the focus is on Juan’s fatherly actions and Chiron’s eagerness to learn from the paternal figure. The centering of Juan’s consideration of Chiron as a son reflects the community’s continued high valuation of the black male. Similarly, the very end of the film shows Chiron shyly talking with Kevin after years in prison. The silences mark deep emotional connections between Chiron and Kevin, just as it did between Chiron and Juan, but the silences also mark the innocence of the main character. Innocence is most obviously shown in the age of Chiron at the point of the swimming scene with Juan. In the ending scene with Kevin, innocence is marked by Chiron’s confession of only ever being touched by Kevin when they were teenagers. The deep silence that precedes and follows Chiron’s sexual confession signifies a deep connection with Kevin as his first and only love and sexual interest.

Pariah’s misuse and dismissal of black lesbian voice counters the victim narrative by discussing the creation and manipulation of silence by the black lesbian community. These intracommunal relations reflect the complex expectations amongst one category of people, perhaps along the lines of an authenticity as I will discuss later in this chapter. Additionally, the queer black female is no longer “readable” because aural and visual environments distort and distract from that readability. As seen from the comparison between the opening scenes of each of these

³⁸⁹ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 203.

³⁹⁰ See Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Feminist Thought*, Evelyn Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent*, and Toure Reed’s *Not Alms but Opportunity*.

films, silences are present but displayed and utilized in very different ways. *Moonlight* clearly adheres to established ideals that police non-normative identity and expression. *Pariah* masks the character's silence so that the body and voice of the black lesbian is obscured, which induces less sympathy and understanding than the gay black male character.

Pariah represents the black lesbian with a high consciousness of gender and sexual performance, which breaks from the innocent, passive victim narrative because the character actively engages in controlling how others see her. As seen today, the black female acts as the support system that others need.³⁹¹ This position means that the black woman must acknowledge and understand what others need from her. The black woman must be aware of how to perform that function for others. The queer black woman in America takes this unfortunate circumstance one step further, heightening their knowledge of this reality. The hyper-awareness of performance for the black lesbian allows her more control over her circumstances and thus more control to break free from the victim narrative because she is aware of the instances that align and depart from societal expectations. The main character in *Pariah* performs gender and sexuality in an effort to satisfy expectations for racial, gendered, and sexual identity. From clothes to speech, gender performances act as the organizing tool to hide, obscure, or even express queerness. To take a more particular look at gendered/sexual performance, let us consider the use (and misuse) of masculinity in *Pariah* and *Moonlight*.

Pariah positions femininity as a façade and masculinity as damning. Alike must consciously perform feminine gender and heterosexuality for her family throughout the films. She feminizes herself in order to please her parents and masculinizes herself in order to please her friend. Alike uses clothing as a form of gender and sexual performativity. On the bus-ride

³⁹¹ See Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* and *Zami*; Patricia Hill Collins' "Get your Freak On" and *Black Feminist Thought*; and Cathy Cohen's *Boundaries of Blackness*.

home from the club, Alike begins to change her appearance before facing her family. Initially, Alike is in an oversized polo with a white tshirt underneath, large cargo shorts, and a cap covering a du-rag. She removes the oversized polo to reveal that the white tshirt underneath—that viewers assumed was a plain white undershirt—is actually a feminine, chest-hugging shirt that says “Angel” across the chest in rhinestones. As she sneaks back into her home, her mother comes into her room to scold her for missing curfew but instead comments “at least you look cute” when Alike uses an excuse of losing track of time. Audrey is willing to completely let Alike off the hook for missing curfew because Alike presents feminine standards. Audrey comments on liking the chest-hugging Angel shirt—the most feminine piece of the outfit—saying that it “really complements [Alike’s] figure.” Audrey’s statement, “I really like that shirt, Angel,” as well as the use of the phrase on the piece of clothing might be taken to refer to the submissive and chaste “Angel of the House” concept of femininity.³⁹² The Angel shirt excites Audrey as she suggests going shopping for “ones just like it.” In the end, although Alike refuses the shopping trip, she knows that a shirt that complements her figure will not raise suspicion toward her non-normative sexuality.

The film does not change this expectation of gender performance when the lens is focused on the homosexual community, as Alike must masculinize herself and her clothing in order to please her best friend, Laura. Alike must show her best friend a “hard” form of male characteristics to gain respect and assuage suspicion of “fake lesbianism.” A major demonstration of the butch expectations appears in the short film when Laura finds Alike switching from masculine to feminine clothes in order to mask her sexual identity from her

³⁹² See Coventry Patmore’s poem, “Angel in the House,” that describes the ideals of white womanhood. See Shirley Yee’s “Black Women and the Cult of True Womanhood” for how black women fit into this ideology of female expectations.

family. After changing into more form-fitting clothes in the bathroom, Laura comes in and accuses Alike of thinking of the baggy jeans and loose tshirts as costumes: “What? It’s a costume to you? You take it off, you put it on?” Laura’s statement indicate that she ties the masculine clothing to lesbian sexuality, suggesting that since Alike is wearing feminine clothes she’s not a “real” lesbian, just performing non-normative sexuality for fun. Laura’s accusations also imply a consciousness toward performing sexuality. Alike responds, “how I dress has nothing to do with how I feel.” She doesn’t want to perform her sexuality in this manner but is pressured by Laura’s queer norms to dress the part of a dominating lesbian. Alike compares her parents’ expectation of performing feminine gender and sexuality to Laura’s expectations for performing masculine gender and sexuality. Alike is caught in a conscious need to perform for both audiences, and both audiences expect her to perform. When Laura denies telling Alike to dress any kind of way, Alike responds “Yeah, right” sarcastically, implying that the expectation did not have to be expressed verbally. This masculinity-expression scene shows that while heterosexuality must be expressed in normative ways, homosexuality must also be expressed in normative ways. One does not seem to be more open about personal expression than the other. In the end, Alike must perform a gender and sexuality for both worlds in order to appease the views that are imposed on her. At the very least, this necessity of being aware of one’s subjugation does not appear in male renditions of queer experience, as *Moonlight* illustrates gender and sexual performance as an unconscious reaction to external stimuli.

This performance burden on the female coincides with the expectation aligned with respectability politics for the black middle class to which Alike belongs. The respectability politics that we recognize today appeared during the rise of the black middle class, or the “racial uplift era.” This was a direct response to centuries of the white population deeming negative

attributes to be pathological in black subjects. In a podcast organized by Dr. Joy Bradford of Therapy for Black Girls, entitled “Respectability and Sexuality,” LMFT therapist Courtney Watson discusses the ways in which respectability politics impact that black female sexuality. According to Ms. Watson, “respectability politics are attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members and ensure that their social values don’t challenge mainstream values.”³⁹³ This policing came from survival tactics during a time that necessitated strategies for proving the community’s humanity. In order to show that black people held values that should be respected, they would adopt white understandings of female respectability. In today’s time, the black community still holds on to this tactic because of the legacy of slavery and the fact that black females are still not in a safe sexual space. Scholars and writers like Cathy Cohen and Audre Lorde further illustrate that the requirements of black womanhood mandates that black females prove their heterosexuality, a contradiction in the community’s value on virginity.³⁹⁴ The black female must either have a child or act as the property of a male in order to attain the status of an adult woman. Working within these contradictory lines, the black queer female faces an outsider, almost non-female, status which explains the high rate of violent deaths. This low status is seen in *Pariah* when a butch black lesbian enters a grocery store only to be ridiculed by a black male. The mockery from the straight black male in the store suggests that the black lesbian is a homosexual because males consider her undesirable, so she was forced to pursue other females. This treatment of the visually non-normative woman further demonstrates the limitations placed on how black females (queer and non) present themselves to the public.

³⁹³ Joy Bradford and Courtney Watson, “Respectability and Sexuality,” *TherapyforBlackGirls* podcast#29, Oct 17th 2017, <https://www.therapyforblackgirls.com/session-29-respectability-sexuality>.

³⁹⁴ See Cathy Cohen’s *Boundaries of Blackness* and Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*.

Alternatively, masculinity inevitably works as a safe space for Chiron as he learns to blend in and function “effectively” within his community. The masculinity in the film manifests as a violent and macho form that serves as a way for Chiron to establish his existence in a harsh and unforgiving society. His first mode of taking on manliness is adopting the violence attached to the performance, attacking and seriously injuring the bully at his school, no words or intimidating displays, just physical violence. He not only dresses the part but also speaks to his drug recruit in a domineering tone, as he teases the employee in order to scare him to establish his masculine dominance over the boy. Finally, when faced with his first love yet again, Chiron stands by his adoption of the hyper-masculine persona, stating “this is who I am.” He is confident within the confines of his performance and does not doubt the impact of the mask. Chiron performs heteronormativity through hypermasculinity but faces criticism from Kevin, the only other non-normative character in the movie. Kevin expresses the need for Chiron to just be himself, to act the way that he wants, to be his older shy and quiet self. Chiron is clearly not aware of his own adoption of a masculine performance, which further establishes the beneficial relationship he holds with the gendered enactment.

Lesbian black films reveal the contradictory expectations put on black lesbians by showing performance of both masculinity and femininity as a burden for the female in any community that they inhabit. The ways in which characters use or are affected by masculine performances in the films demonstrate the marginalizing effects of both masculinity and femininity on queer black females. Alike and Chiron both display masculinity but Alike is also trapped into performing femininity for her mother. While both *Pariah* and *Moonlight* approach masculinity in a mainly negative manner, the male benefits from the performance by making it a safe space for queer existence and black cultural respect. Chiron remains in the closet while

simultaneously performing an acceptable masculinity for the public. This strategic movement through the black community allows Chiron to avoid the violence attached to perceptions of him being gay. Alternatively, masculinity is detrimental to the females on both intra- and inter-cultural fronts as Alike's masculinity sparks confrontations with both her queer friend and her heteronormative family. Performativity is a normal part of any identity. However, the sexual presentations from these characters are framed differently in order to show that black lesbians are more aware of the expectations placed upon them by the heterosexual American (both black and white) public.

Familial violence in *Pariah* shows society's patriarchal and hypocritical views on violence against queer black women in two major ways, through traumatic effects and justification. The film, in its two versions, portray violence against the black lesbian by both the father as well as the mother. The differences between the two depictions demonstrate disparities in how America (both white and black America) views events of violence against queer black women. When Alike's father is the source of the fight, the trauma afterwards is shown as intensely depressing, perhaps even insurmountable, until a reconciliation with the parent occurs. Meanwhile, Alike's fight with her mother ends with a decision to pursue professional development. In fact, after making the choice to leave for early college, Alike approaches her mother again hoping that the accomplishment will change her mother's outlook on sexuality, implying a more positive outlook on the experience. The traumatic event inspired personal and academic growth in Alike, these effects seen as benefits, as she began to work harder to please her mother. In other words, the movie shows that America understands male-on-female aggression as more devastating than female-on-female fights, which are seen as more inspirational. Additionally, the undertones featured during the familial violence depict the victim

as culpable in her own victimization. The film's construction of the situation as a cause-effect event represents an axis of sexism, racism, and anti-gay attitudes that most black lesbians face on a daily basis. *Pariah*'s portrayal of these intersectional "-isms" underlines the complexity of reality for queer black females, facing the contradictory belief that black lesbians do experience more violence but that they both deserve and benefit from that violence.

The film's representations demonstrate America's understanding that queer black women face higher instances of verbal, psychological, and physical violence from immediate family members. However, the film also presents society's belief that violence from black females and especially toward queer black females is less damaging, more forgivable, and sometimes even placed in a positive standpoint. This presentation stems from black society understanding black women as community builders³⁹⁵ while simultaneously seeing queer black women as individuals "in conflict with Black culture where it is considered a risk to the entire community" to express a non-normative sexuality.³⁹⁶ Queer African-American women are policed more frequently and more harshly because the image and social progress of black society rests on female shoulders. Alternatively, males are more likely to face physical violence from those outside the family although they can face negative verbal and psychological interactions with family. Ultimately, the virtual dismissal of the black mother in *Pariah* shows the roots of disdain for the black lesbian. If society undermines the social position of the black female, then society takes the response one step further with queer black females by demoralizing the lesbian and her life experiences.

³⁹⁵ See Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and "Get your freak on" for more on contradictory and oppressive community expectations on black women.

³⁹⁶ Jewelle Gomez, "Because Silence is Costly," *Forty Three Septembers*, 169.

Dee Rees changed the family violence scene when she adapted the short film into the feature film. While the short film ends with Alike's father beating her, the commercial film has her mother hitting her. In the short film version, masculinity works against Alike with her father beating her in order to show how "men" are beat. For him, being a lesbian means that she wants to be a male; her father equates masculinity with physical violence. To further demonstrate the seriousness of the matter, 5-7 minutes of the film are dedicated to showing her traumatic mental state. Until she meets with her father after the fight, Alike cries in a dark room with Laura comforting her. Therefore, Alike cannot move forward until she makes peace with her father. The portrayal with her mother hitting her does not extend into a long intermission of a slight depression. Instead, the slaps from the mother act as a catalyst for Alike to move forward in her identity expression and her creative passions. After the aggressive interaction, Alike applies to and attends a prestigious creative writing program. The only form of trauma that Alike faces in the movie is when she goes to tell her mother "I love you" but does not get a response back. This sexist idea of inspirational rejection can also be seen in Laura's relationship with her mother. When she separates from her mother, due to her mother's rejection of her sexuality, Laura decides to continue her education and financially assist her sister. Alike mentally and creatively flourishes after her mother hit her but halts after her father hit her. The differences in effect suggests that a mother's acceptance of her child's sexuality is not nearly as important as the father's opinion. The dad having more clout on the impact of the LGBT child's future still ties into society's placement of superiority onto the male figure.

Because the violence doesn't simply happen unprovoked, the film portrays the situation as a cause-effect circumstance whereby the violence is caused by Alike's outing confessions. Meanwhile, LGBT African-American films depict queer black males as innocent victims of

abuse. The familial violence, from either of the *Pariah* versions, is sparked by Alike officially coming out to her parents, confirming her parents' suspicions. Although the sexual self-proclamation from Alike is merely identity expression, her conscious declaration implicates her in the violence. In other words, the scene allows for an option to believe that if Alike had not come out, she would not have experienced the violence. The scene begins with her mother finding a dildo hidden in her closet. When Alike gets home, Alike's father confronts her with the device while Audrey observes. Alike could have given a masturbatory excuse for having it, but instead she decides to stop hiding her non-normative sexuality. This portrayal of familial violence coupled with identity expression complicates the process of coming out for black lesbians.

This expression process actively intersects sexual performativity with racial familial politics by revealing damage that stems from views on gender, race, and sexuality.³⁹⁷ The intersection critiques the view of deserved violence or black lesbians benefitting from violence. Indeed, as Cheryl Neely observes, "One unsettling reality about society's view of crime victims is that there are times when victims are blamed for the violence committed against them."³⁹⁸ She goes on to separate "perceptions of undeserving (the victim did not deserve or *provoke* his or her death) [from] deserving (the victim asked for it) victims" in order to demonstrate trends in who attains which label.³⁹⁹ In order to unravel the main character from the victim narrative, the attack against Alike is portrayed as a result of a declaration. Now from a homophobic stance, like that of her father in the short film or her mother in the feature, Alike's confession of homosexuality

³⁹⁷ For more on sexual performativity, see Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Butler's *Bodies that Matter*. For more on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, see Smith's *Truth That Never Hurt*, Collin's *Black Feminist Thought*, and Cohen's *Boundaries of Blackness*.

³⁹⁸ Cheryl Neely, *You're Dead, So What?*, 17.

³⁹⁹ Cheryl Neely, *You're Dead, So What?*, 17. Italics added.

positions her as deserving the assault. However, I posit that this “provocation” is actually Alike reclaiming her voice as a minority. Alike’s refusal to stay silenced provokes the hetero-majority towards violence. In this light, Alike steps beyond being a mere victim and finds her own agency in the situation at the cost of familial relations.

Meanwhile, *Moonlight* presents any emotional or physical abuse that Chiron faces as separate from his desire to express homosexuality. The problem always lies with the negative mentality of the attackers. For instance, the violence that Chiron experiences from his mother occurs when Chiron is a child. The portrayal of violence against a child, no matter the child’s gender or sexuality, will inherently place fault solely on the parent. Furthermore, the scene where his mother yells “faggot” at him happens in a setting where she was unprovoked. Chiron stands there quietly as his mother returns to her room with another male in order to engage in illegal drug activity. As he watches her retreat back into the hallway, she looks back at his stare and screams at him, “faggot.” At this age, he does not understand what this word would mean, which makes the violence against him even more sympathetic. *Moonlight* encapsulates the innocent victim narrative which further simplifies the treatment of the gay black male in society, a product and victim of his environment.

Not only is queer black female violence viewed as less important (or even as more positive), but also allows audiences to implicate both parties, perpetrator and victim. This same perspective can be seen in the ideas behind corrective rape seen in South Africa. Women are automatically incriminated in the event, which slows any understanding of the situation and often leads to a more lenient penalty on the perpetrator.⁴⁰⁰ This attitude between violence and black women (whether queer or not) is also prevalent in American society where the female is seen as

⁴⁰⁰ See Zandele Muholi’s commentary on corrective and “curative” rape of black lesbians in South Africa—Andrew Van der Vlies, “Queer knowledge and the Politics of the Gaze,” 142.

being at fault for sexual attacks.⁴⁰¹ Queerness only furthers this statistic because women face more instances of violence over their lifespans.⁴⁰² Meanwhile, gay black men are simply victims of their circumstances. And if these men do happen to engage in something negative, such as hyper-masculinity, then they do so without full consciousness of their actions which makes them free of fault (especially by court standards).

This chapter, in its prioritization of *Pariah*, is a vital contribution to the literary as well as the cinema fields because there are very few internationally-known movies written and directed by a black lesbian that also feature a black lesbian. Most queer black females in film are side characters or are produced by someone who does not identify as black or lesbian. For instance, *Set It Off* gave the world a memorable side-character, a black lesbian, played by Queen Latifah but was directed by a heterosexual black man and written by a white woman. *Watermelon Woman* features a black lesbian, was written and directed by a black lesbian, but was not a popular film, hitting a little less than fifteen percent of its overall budget, meaning that very few actually viewed the film.⁴⁰³ This lack of representation is a significant observation because this dissertation focuses on how works can change public attitudes. This result is unlikely if the only consumers of the film are cinema, queer, and black scholars. *Pariah* made a seventy percent profit worldwide, which means that the film can be considered a largely successful presentation of a queer black female.⁴⁰⁴

Pariah's portrayal of the queer black female reveals, questions, and dismantles the common victim narrative within both the heterosexual and homosexual systems of identity by

⁴⁰¹ See Roxane Donovan and Michelle Williams' "Living at the Intersection," *Violence in the Lives of Black Women*, ed. Carolyn West.

⁴⁰² See Amorie Robinson's "'There's a Stranger in This House,'" *Violence in the Lives of Black Women*, ed. Carolyn West

⁴⁰³ "The Watermelon Woman (1997)," *The Numbers*.

⁴⁰⁴ "Pariah (2011)," *Imdb*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1233334/>.

resisting simplistic readability and representing complex experiences of the black lesbian. A quote from Audre Lorde begins Rees' film (both festival and feature versions) as an introduction into Alike's journey through identity expression, "Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs."⁴⁰⁵ The epigraph effectively foreshadows the struggle that the black lesbian must face within multiple identity-based communities. Rees places this line at the beginning of the films because, as she explains in an interview with *IndieWire*, "that means she has no place and there is no place for her. And that's what Alike's journey is about. She feels like she doesn't have a place."⁴⁰⁶ The misshapen bird with no place to plant its non-existent feet signifies a body, perceived as non-normative and thus rejected, that searches for resources that are built to deny accessibility for such bodies. Rees attributes her own queer experience to this concept of being without an effective support system: "I could really relate to her experiences about fitting in and always being the 'other.'"⁴⁰⁷ Her personal connection to the main character does not suggest autobiographical aspects but does assign private stakes in the depiction. Rees' investment in the presentation of the black lesbian expresses an inherent desire to break from the confining categorization of the victim narrative because Rees has lived through that required narrative most of her life. Meanwhile, Jenkins does not hold such strong stakes in what's being shown because he has the privilege of the hetero-patriarchy.

Indeed, the gender and sexual identities of directors and writers act as significant factors in these representations in, and analyses of, the films. I would never suggest that films that portray a certain identity can only ever be produced by those who share the same identity. That would be an absurd and extremist approach to culture creation and scholarship. However, I will

⁴⁰⁵ bell hooks, *Art on My mind*, 98.

⁴⁰⁶ Melissa Silverstein, "Interview with Dee Rees," *IndieWire*.

⁴⁰⁷ Melissa Silverstein, "Interview with Dee Rees—Writer and Director of *Pariah*," *IndieWire*.

suggest that academic explorations of those works must consider the identity (indeed, identities) of the creator in its overall analysis to attain a more proficient understanding of the implications behind characterizations. The directors' personal identifications affect how the characters' gendered and queer identities are constructed and represented. Because Dee Rees' identities match her main character's, *Pariah*'s portrayal of the black lesbian is both a thorough exploration into queer soul-making as well as a vital critique and subversion of the victim narrative placed on black female bodies. Because Barry Jenkins does not hold the queer identity of the character, his directorial pursuit highlights the victimization of the gay black male by American society. From various interviews, Dee Rees admits to wanting to protect her characters because their identities connect directly with her. She likes writing non-homogenous characters that are not normally seen on screen, characters whose struggles are internal while focusing less on the world throwing stones.⁴⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the heteronormative Barry Jenkins discusses wanting to expand and dissect his characters.⁴⁰⁹ He connects most with the mother figure in the movie because he did have a mother who struggled with addiction. While this difference in perspective may only suggest a difference in directing styles, one must note that Rees reacts according to her sexual identity, which suggests a reflection on the trials and tribulations that she endured as a sexual minority in addition to being marginalized based on racial and gender categorizations. Jenkins does not face barriers like homophobia and sexism although he may face racism. These considerations of the directors' identities may then integrate themselves into the representations of Alike and Chiron's experiences of sexual identity.

These contrasting films reveal purposeful pursuit by a black lesbian filmmaker of breaking the expectations of a victimization narrative when portraying queer black bodies. The

⁴⁰⁸ "Dee Rees Talks *Pariah*," *MakingOf*, YouTube.

⁴⁰⁹ "Director Barry Jenkins Creating Empathy," *Vice*, YouTube.

thorough illustration of gay black male victimhood can certainly be deduced from these gendered portrayals. Males are products of their negative environments while females are implicated in their unfortunate circumstances. Males are more likely to be portrayed as victims of their situations, victims of society while females are portrayed as more human, containing integral character flaws that further complicate their experiences. The insistence on the male being a victim can also be seen in the very fact of most queer black male film representations begin with (or at least include flashbacks of) childhood in order to show the full innocence of the male before society corrupts him. Meanwhile, queer black female movie portrayals almost never begin with or even include portrayals of childhood before the teenage years, thus skipping the establishment of an inherent innocence.

Finally, Rees and Jenkins' films inspire considerations of how the different portrayals affect levels of sympathy and activist desires in the audiences. Victimhood acts as a very potent aspect of convincing consumers to respect and celebrate sexual and gender variety in their communities. This implies that if viewers do not see the queer black female as victims, then they are less likely to accept political or social protections for queer black females. Queer black female portrayals necessitate active viewing in order to comprehend the dynamics of gender, sexuality, and society. The films attempt to train audiences in thinking critically about the systemic oppressions. The goals include understanding the plight of the queer black character as well as the complexity of the operation of oppressive structures. The ability to recognize marginalizing constructions also allows the viewers to apply that thinking to other groups of marginalized communities. These critical films about the black lesbian, therefore, inspires less sympathy because the undertones involve associating the privileged audiences with oppressive symbolisms. However, this form of representation is vital in changing the epistemological

understanding of the necessity of changing social anti-gay atmospheres that harass black lesbians on a daily basis.

Conclusion

Stakes and Implications: Comparative Considerations

*I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.*⁴¹⁰

~Toni Morrison's Sula

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I took care not to engage comparative analyses. As I stated earlier, Western ideas are often seen as an affront to African values. And, taking inspiration from Sula's quote in the epigraph, incessant comparative movements can limit the time, space, and power dedicated to empowering and building the self. While I do not oppose demonstrating thematic threads—in fact, there are times in which connections are necessary in the creation of a solidarity—the goals behind this academic pursuit insist on localizing views of political and social rights for queer black citizens. However, in this conclusion I will consider the national differences and similarities that affect political landscapes and, therefore, writers' literary creations. I will also acknowledge the historical contextualization of racial formations across the areas.

In the end, there must be some thread that connects these understandings of race since this project does focus on queer *black* authors and lives. The legacy of subjugation can act as the link between all of the works and chapter arguments. The communal memory of existing as the racial antithesis of whiteness, and the effects thereof, creates a color association between Zimbabwean citizens, black South Africans, and African-Americans. This recollection manifests in all of the texts as tensions between white and black characters: between Minister M and Trina, between Nkabinde-in-training and all white people, and between Gilda Jr. and Eleanor.

⁴¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Sula*, 92. Inspiration behind using this quote comes from Alexis Pauline Gumbs' essay, "Something Else to Be."

Awareness of past traumas also inspires these creators to invest in local social and political narratives in order to reverse historical erasure. This thread functions as one way of building a global solidarity between Africa and its diaspora.

However, while colonization can act as a common background it is not so convenient when discussing citizens' understanding of their race within national boundaries. For instance, for African-Americans a focus on African roots is integral in a space where dark-skinned individuals are outsiders to the white-dominated society. Black Americans do not have the luxury of connecting their blackness to the physical space of habitation or even to the conception of nation. Therefore, they must find other ways of establishing a group identity. Some have tied black society to food while others emphasize music as the cultural heartbeat, both of which stem back to traditions brought over from the ancestral homeland. Meanwhile, scholar Christina Sharpe insists that water acts as the main force behind racial definition in America. According to her *In the Wake*, community is built upon the roots, or routes, that carried ancestors away from Africa and to the current area. Sharpe explains this phenomenon best in her exploration of blackness within the diaspora.⁴¹¹ Sharpe states that “one might approach Black being as a form of consciousness” that continuously operate in survival mode in order to reconcile the “paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity.”⁴¹² From Sharpe’s wake theory, this minority group in the States defines itself as a consistent struggle against the labels of non-being that were placed upon them before, during, and after the period of forced labor.

This is not the case for those in Zimbabwe or South Africa, where black skin inherently positions itself as national identity. The racial constructions in South Africa and Zimbabwe are

⁴¹¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*.

⁴¹² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 14.

connected to the physical land, with all others being invaders. Now this means that those from the diaspora often will not integrate well with local groups. For example, the Shona in Zimbabwe create a “political and social divide between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. From the very outset, local Africans considered immigrant blacks as culturally distinct outsiders and closer to whites than themselves.”⁴¹³ Even within the category of an indigenous blackness, the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe have a complex system of ethnic hierarchies that “use clan names, origins, and castes in a practice that differentiates them into different categories.”⁴¹⁴ However, these smaller units of racial groups still derive from migrations within the African continent. This means that the brown aesthetic of the body is not the only contributing factor that allows one to belong to an African nation, race, or ethnicity.

Since cultures within geographical areas manifest as variances in how authors express homosexuality and critique social conditions, it is also vital to consider the ways in which the contexts of the authors featured in this work diverge from, or converge with, each other. The main aspect that the texts in this project share is a propensity in unveiling the heteronormative requirements of citizenship. Additionally, the featured female writers uncover the gendered implications in societal values. However, that convergence aside, Huchu and Nkabinde write in very different anti-gay atmospheres and thus must approach expression and critique in ways that appeal to their particular national audiences. Meanwhile, Gomez and Rees have similar national and familial backgrounds and thus share critiques of heterosexual, racial, and patriarchal frameworks in the United States.

⁴¹³ James Muzondidya, “Race, Ethnicity and the Politics of Positioning,” 161. *Burdened by Race*, ed Mohamed Adhikari.

⁴¹⁴ Bjorn Lindgren, “The Internal Dynamics of Ethnicity,” 174.

South Africa, unlike Zimbabwe, has legal protections for its citizens which shapes an environment that allows Nkabinde more creative freedoms than Huchu. South Africa's formal protections create a different context surrounding the creative expression of homosexuality and outright critique of anti-gay atmospheres. Alternatively, Zimbabwe's institutionally supported anti-gay sentiments foster a possibly violent reaction from the public. Indeed, a co-writer of the ground-breaking report on "state-sponsored homophobia in Southern Africa" comments on the dangers attached to this political backing, "when Southern African political leaders like President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe make speeches saying that gays and lesbians are 'worse than dogs and pigs,' it should be no surprise that violent attacks follow."⁴¹⁵ This difference in climate for the LGBT populations creates necessary variety in how Huchu and Nkabinde construct expressions of queerness and critique. Indeed, Huchu's novel dwells upon homosexuality sparingly. Instead, he consciously masks queerness with heteronormativity. In fact, the only moment when Huchu displays same-gender-loving actions is at the very end with the bloodied Dumi and his lover saying goodbye, and this occurs only after Vimbai has accepted Dumi's non-normative sexuality. This authorial decision generates a space that gives the hetero-majority the power, but also the moral obligation, to defend a sexually-marginalized individual. While this somewhat-problematic approach limits Dumi's agency, the narrative implicates those in the Zimbabwean population who do not speak up for the LGBT citizens. Thus, Huchu's activism gears its efforts toward featuring moral responsibilities to loved ones instead of encouraging sympathetic responses for an isolated group.

Meanwhile, Nkabinde writes in an environment that is more welcoming of queer expression and critique as the government allows for that space. Therefore, she is quite able to

⁴¹⁵ "State-sponsored Homophobia in Southern Africa," *Sister Namibia*, 37. Title also doubles as the book-length report compiled by the HRC, IGLHRC, et al.

not only feature a queer protagonist but also depict an entire community of lesbians in addition to being comfortable enough with the South African readership to position herself as the primary character of queer expression and a voice of critique. This divergence in the authors' strategies of communication with the heterosexual black populations naturally unveils different oppressive logics operating within their particular spaces. While Nkabinde's work highlights the spiritual connection to Africa's history of queer sexuality, Huchu offers alternative, intuitive epistemologies that challenge anti-gay attitudes.

On the American side of this comparative consideration, Gomez and Rees are much more analogous in their works' dispositions since they hail from the same nation and similar backgrounds. Both assess the position of the queer black female in black America. Gomez critiques both academic and social tendencies of equating black progress with the meeting of white expectations while Rees enacts the activism integrated into the black queer female mode of existence. The chapters detail different contexts and logics of anti-gay attitudes only because I chose to use a different thematic focus for each. To be clear, I do not want to suggest that works written by Western authors are replications of the same argument. In fact, Gomez and Rees display their arguments in entirely different forms and genres which hold varying implications on the messages offered to audiences. Ultimately moving forward, I want to iterate that although these comparisons are not plentiful, they do all hold investments in the progression of institutional assessments of sexual and racial outsiders.

This dissertation holds stakes in the futurity of queer African and African-American scholarship. The intellectual gains of my argument, the modes of literary activism, involve acknowledging the necessity to continuously modify approaches to minority literature in an effort to keep up with the presiding cultural trends that operate against the LGBT population.

The risks of dismissing my project include sticking to an outdated discourse that does possible harm to oppressed subjects. Respectability politics, politics of visibility, and queer globalization have begun to develop normative practices and ways of being that further isolate and silence LGBT community members. Today's xenophobic habits further solidify this idea of homogeneity. However, as I've shown throughout this manuscript, authors' counter-discourses disrupt attempts at conformity. Ultimately, I aim to expand on Cathy Cohen's politics of deviance by including activism into her focus on subjectivity. In her essay exploring an alternative analytic for Black Studies, Cohen states

It just might be that after devoting so much of our energy to the unfulfilled promise of access through respectability, a politics of deviance, with a focus on the transformative potential found in deviant practice, might be a more viable strategy for radically improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable in Black communities.⁴¹⁶

The "transformative potential" that Cohen observes can be found in the activist lens through which I read the works in this document, and the "defiance" within the texts themselves as well as their complementing advocacy organizations. The direct investment in and challenge to the immediate social environment empowers writers to integrate forms of difference into conceptions of community. This creative movement changes the parameters in which individuals are considered members, but does not insist on sameness, sympathy, or assimilation as the basis for that endeavor. In showing this, my scholarly undertaking positions queer black citizens less as passive victims of exclusion and more as active agents for "improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable."⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁶ Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance," 30.

⁴¹⁷ Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance," 30.

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Vita

Jewel Williams was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri where she attended elementary and middle schools. After moving to Charlotte, North Carolina, she graduated from East Mecklenburg High School with the intent to be the first in her family to attain a graduate degree. During her years at North Carolina State University Jewel studied abroad for one semester in France before graduating with a bachelor's degree in English World Literature and French Language and Literature. She then went on to obtain a master's degree from East Carolina University where she studied Multicultural and Transnational Literature. And finally, after 12 grueling years of schooling, she defended and attained her doctorate in Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Jewel plans on pursuing a career in community development.