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Ivana Onubogu
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Queer Spaces, Future Places:
Conversations with 3 Black Capetonian Femmes on Embodying Liberation

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South Africa: Cape Town
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Abstract

Black femme bodies face multi-axial oppressive forces resting on their racialization, gendering, sexuality and possible other factors like socioeconomic status and ability. I interviewed 3 queer-identified Black femmes between the ages of 18 and 35 that are based in or work out of the Cape Town area. Femmes is defined as trans womxn, nonbinary femmes, femme lesbians and femme bisexuals, effeminate mxn, or any other femme-identified queer person. The purpose of this project is to investigate the possibility of a liberated Black queer future as an embodied practice within the context of the Black Capetonian queer community. Participants were selected through a ‘snowballing’ method of sampling. The method I selected was one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 3 participants. The 3 participants described a synthesis of compassion and conversation coupled with drastic changes in how gender roles are normalized as methods for achieving a liberated Black queer future. Their embodied practices for achieving this liberation range from merely educating the individuals around them about queerness to curating healing-oriented spoken word spaces for queer subjects. Additional areas of research would include redoing this study with a more diverse population or, more generally, further investigation into Black queer futurity in Cape Town.

KEY WORDS: Queer, Black, Femme, Futurity, South Africa, Cape Town, Queer Epistemology, Queer Temporality, Embodied practices

Dedication

To Chizoba, who is the flint, and Joseph, who is the steel

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Introduction

LOOKING BACK WHILE STEPPING FORWARD

The task of consolidating national identity proves especially difficult in countries wrought by the legacy of white colonialism. As 1994 ushered in a new South African democracy, the term ‘rainbow nation’ was cemented as part of a nation-building effort popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Baines 1998). Being one of the first constitutions in the world to have explicit laws prioritizing the civil liberties of the global community’s most at-risk members—including LGBTQ+-identified folks, black people, and disabled people—Tutu’s use of ‘rainbow nation’ was an attempt to consolidate a national identity around a racial multiculturalism premised on the very ideals that the new Constitution was constructed (Baines 1998). Thus, the construction of South Africa as a rainbow nation was a bid to disrupt an internalized characterization of South Africa around race politics as well as an opportunistic redress of the national psyche as one perpetually locked in forward motion so as to “[inform] and [reinforce] the vision of nation building” (Baines 1998, p. 1). The necessity of nation-building was a direct result of the legacy of the apartheid state, a sociopolitical system named after an Afrikaans term that means ‘separateness,’ that was institutionalized by the National Party government—a white Afrikaner ethnonationalist political party—in order to instill a structured system of racial subjugation. Consequently, in its inception, the new South African Constitution was written to be the most progressive constitution of any independent state in the world; however, given the racial divisions remaining from the newly dismembered apartheid state, the new Constitution also bore the impossible weight of dismantling centuries of white settler colonialism and violent racial subjugation that preceded the establishment of the apartheid state (von Lieres & Robins 2008). Moreover, the writing of scholars and activists alike throw a

wrench in the glossy veneer crafted by the birth of the new South African democracy in 1994 (Alexander 2005, Nwadeyi 2017). While the new constitution is, in words, progressive in its inclusion of not only racially minoritized groups, but also on the basis of gender and sexuality, it fails to recognize and grapple with the de facto forms of marginalization that are perpetuated not only in individual biases but by lower level policies that do not permit for a restructuring of South African citizenry ““from below”” (von Lieres & Robins 2008, p. 56). While it is no longer illegal for black people to move throughout the country, extreme poverty and homelessness, high unemployment rates, and unchecked racial prejudices—all vestiges of the apartheid regime—are evidence of the perpetuated subjugation of black people in South Africa.

Before, during, and after the apartheid regime, a series of acts, laws, and policies were passed in order to cement racial segregation throughout South Africa (Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s, 2011). The apartheid state intervened in matters of land ownership, employment and wage distribution, domestic movement, immigration, citizenship, sexuality and much more—overwhelmingly to further racial subjugation (Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s, 2011). These acts left black life categorically below other (acknowledged) members of South African civil society. Not only did these acts constrict black South African life, it empowered those that benefitted from racial subjugation—mainly, but not only, whites—to capitalize on the unearned privileges that accompany their racialization.

Acts that exemplify a critical form of racial subjugation are the Land Acts, passed in 1950, 1954, and 1955. Through these acts, black South Africans were no longer considered citizens of South Africa and were relegated to designated areas of the country to live as members of independent states (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). The implication of this is not only that Black people, who comprised an overwhelming majority of the country’s

population, had access to less than 15% of the country, but that Black people were relegated to less than noncitizens within the confines of their own country (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). While these laws were just a few of the many anti-black laws and measures to exclude and racially subjugate black people in South Africa, it exemplifies the nuance of futurity studies in the South African context. Specifically, what does the equitable citizenship promised in the new South African constitution ratified in 1996 mean for black people that have historically never been afforded basic civil liberties, or even citizenship (von Lieres & Robins 2008)? In the same vein, despite the purported progressiveness of the constitution, the problems that presently frequent Black communities in South Africa—poverty, violence—are directly intertwined to the legacy of the apartheid state. Moreover, the populations that the effects of these social plagues fall heaviest on tend to be Black and female (Erasmus 2008, Moffett 2008).

The history of the racio-gendered victimization of black women in South Africa is both extensive and unchartable. The most historically available example is Saartjie Baartman, who was taken from her village in the Eastern Cape and paraded as a part of several racist anthropological exhibitions during her lifetime (Sara “Saartjie Baartman, 2013). After her death, her remains were dissected by Georges Cuvier and displayed as part of an anthropological exhibit; the findings from her posthumous examination were formally published in justification of his polygenist beliefs—ultimately contributing to a long history of scientific history (Parkinson 2016). The effect was clear: Saartjie Baartman’s body was not only made to be little more than a zoo attraction, but an object of sexual anomaly and desire. Post-mortem, myriad communities—including Black diasporic students and the post-apartheid state—have adopted her iconography to further their own presentist aims (Catanese, 2010; Gordon-Chipembre 2011). Baartman, like many black women in South Africa today, existed within structures that

attempted to dictate the breadth of her life experience (Baderoon 2011). Whether she cultivated some sort of autonomy, whether she had a voice in any aspect of her life is something that is lost to the archive. As Pumla Gqola offers in “(Not) representing Sara Baartman”, the ambiguity of her life presents an avenue for restoring her humanity (Gqola, 2010, as cited in Baderoon, 2011). The illegibility of her life, nonetheless, lies in the problematic structures that interlock and constrict the lived experiences of black women in South Africa (Gqola, 2010, as cited in Baderoon, 2011). These structures—patriarchy, racism, compulsory heterosexuality—are merely the brutally embedded vestiges of white colonialism that ensure the multiaxial oppression of black women in South Africa.

As such, for this South African woman, and for the many more presently that that recovered history represents, gendered violences are inextricably bound up in their racialization. Not even just that, but these violences are duly intertwined in class, sexuality, and many more so factors that only begin to suggest the fullness of lived experience. In the present, the corrosive nature of heteropatriarchy is so indelibly bound up in the socialized treatment of women, that even ‘culture’ can be invoked as valid reasoning for sexually or physically violating a woman (Gouws 2013, Judge 2018). As such, it does not make sense to extricate these violences as a result of individual marginalization(s), but it *does* behoove us to understand the axes of oppression that compound and directly affect Black female life (Crenshaw 1989, hooks 1981). While the implications of this line of inquiry can be unfolded beyond imagining, several scholars have further extended this line of reasoning to Black queer people (Judge 2018, Muholi 2012).

As Melanie Judge writes in *Blackwashing Homophobia* (2018), homophobia-related violence is produced to reinforce structures that ensure inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. Specifically, Judge discusses the ways that homophobia-related violence is merely a symptom of

deeply entrenched problematics that are contingent on the “raced, classed, sexual, gendered and political locations” that all South Africans exist in (Judge 2018, pg.1). For Judge, lesbians in South Africa are “constructed as an identity rooted in injury” such that “violation [is reiterated] as a foundational myth of lesbian subjection” (Judge 2018, 26). This subjectivity, she argues is constructed around the apparent “sexual and gender subordination/subversion...that situates the lesbian as a double troublemaker” (Judge 27). The formation of lesbian subjectivity thus becomes a process of upholding existing heterogendered hegemony through the process of homophobic violence (in its emotional, psychological, and physical forms) (Judge 2018). To borrow Judge’s language and implementing Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Black lesbians become ‘triple troublemakers;’ not only do they upset heteropatriarchal structures but they—as a population—exist within their racial subjugation as well (Crenshaw 1989). This is not to compound different forms of marginalization to build an argument of oppressive ‘competition’ but to underline the specific ways that axes of oppression converge and become inextricable in the ways they affect minoritized bodies. However, surmounting these minoritizations is complicated not only by individual ideology but by anti-blackness ingrained in South African society. Both within and outside the Black lesbian community, homophobic violence becomes something that is intrinsically placed in personal character, rather than extrinsically placed in corrupt structures.

Analyzing a focus group she held, Judge argues that white and Coloured people distance themselves from homophobia-related violence by situating this violence as a product of blackness (Judge 2018). This attribution of violence to blackness is inextricably intermingled with class, sexuality, and gender such that homophobia-related violence becomes a problem in which the oppressive social structures that propagate this form of violence place accountability

onto the very subjects that suffer most (Judge 2018, p. 47). In other words, placing homophobia-related violence within a language of racialized blackness becomes a very sinister, yet effective form of victim-blaming.

WHAT ARE BLACK FEMME FUTURES ANYWAY?

Before I discuss the scope of this project, I find it necessary to define critical terms and their uses within this research project. Within the scope of this project, I am using the term femme to refer to all queer-identified femme folx. This includes, but is not limited to, nonbinary trans femmes, trans womxn, femme lesbians, effeminate mxn and femme bisexuals. The use of ‘x’ in terms like ‘folx,’ ‘womxn,’ and ‘mxn,’ is in reference to a historical effort to center queer people in the casually gendered language used to sort humanity (Key 2017). When I use blackness, with a lower-case b, I am utilizing a Biko’s black consciousness form of blackness (Biko 1978). When I use Blackness, with an upper-case B, I am referring to a synthesis of afropessimist and afrofuturist approaches to Blackness as understood through foundational texts of U.S. diasporic studies (Spillers 1987; Butler 1987; Fanon 1952).

In this research project, queerness is being used to refer to people that, given global hegemonies that normalize heterosexuality and heteronormativity, are Othered in their identification with nonheteronormative sexuality or gender (Butler 1990; hooks 1981). As an epistemology, I use queerness to refer to non-white people exclusively, understanding that affiliations with whiteness cannot permit a critical entry point to queerness (Bennett 2018). This reasoning is filtered through the theoretical framework of this project which understands that Black queer lives must be privileged in order to construct a liberated future (Keeling 2009, 2019; Stanley 2011). A liberated future, in this instance, can be defined by a future in which

heteropatriarchy and white supremacy do not determine the subjectivities of racialized bodies in South Africa.

I am using Afrofuturism to discuss queer futurity; Afrofuturism can be defined as an attempt to consolidate and redefine Black identity that encourages speculation beyond the parameters of known reality (Butler 1987; Jackson & Moody 2011).

Futurity, or futures, refers to a queer temporality that is embodied (Keeling 2009). In the article, “Looking for M--: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” Keeling (2009) describes a way in which academics and cultural students ascribe a meaning to history that is fixed in making sense of their own present. While looking to the past and identifying ancestors is a valid and necessary process, the result is also that the past is visibilized in a limited scope, “leaving...everything that does not ‘further the action.’” (Keeling 2009, p. 570). In other words, looking forward by looking back has reductive elements due to the impossibility of speaking to another’s lived experience. This impossibility is only amplified under a presentist analytical lens which can often ascribe certain language or experiences that are not true to the experience of that which is being studied. At the same time, this unintentionally limiting view of experience works to assign value to what should be visibilized and what shouldn’t, and passively replicates some of the initial erasure common to Black history.

The focus of Keeling’s article is M--, a subject of the documentary *The Aggressives*, that literally vanishes in a single on-screen line regarding hir military service. Keeling underlines questions of M--’s relationship to prison and military industrial complexes-- and by extension, other Black and/or queer people-- in a bid to understand the implications of hir disappearance during military service as a Black, poor, queer person (Keeling 2009, p. 577). Specifically, Keeling asks us to premise our thinking with the understanding that “the first question that must

be asked of M-- is not where is s/he, but when might s/he be (Keeling 2009, p. 577). In terms of my research project, Keeling's suggestions point to exactly my objectives in painting a Black (or black) future that is surely bound to the past but is expressed through the future.

CARVING BLACK FEMME SPACES

The brutal murder of 19-year-old Zoliswa Nkonyana was quickly revealed and unfolded as a homophobia-related hate crime. The international attention it attracted was largely based on the implications it bore for the so-called 'rainbow nation' and the case itself set a precedent for legal actions in response to raciogendered violence. It took over half a decade for Zoliswa's assailants to be brought to any sort of justice and it is unclear whether those involved were all punished for their actions (Majola 2013). Zoliswa's death was horrible, not only in the event itself, but in the way that it echoed a familiar story of the way that queer-identified Black folks have been and continue to be brutalized, before and after their death.

The horrible manner of her murder, however, is not unique; in fact, South Africa represents a femicide rate that rests at a staggering 4.8 times the global average (WHO Global Organization, 2015). The question then becomes why was Zoliswa, and by extension other Black femme-identified folx, so close to peril? A literature review conducted for Soul City, an intersectional feminist organization based in Johannesburg, explains the background for gender-based violence, citing any number of reasons including but not limited to social learning, biology and sociopolitical reasonings (Mpani & Nsibandé 2015). This literature review might've included a critical lens for how gender performance and sexuality intersect with the rates of gender-based violence represented. Nevertheless, the information presented offers a much-needed study regarding violence against female-read bodies in SA.

However, my focus is not necessarily the impetus for gender-based violence, but the response of the most likely victims to the ongoing threat against their bodies. Those people are South Africa's most historically disprivileged populations, which tend to be queer Black femme-presenting folks (Davids & Matebeni 2017). For that reason, I zoom in on Black femmes who, given the South African historical context, are more likely to be poor and more likely to be a vulnerable population (Mpani & Nsibande 2015). In this research project, I understand Black femmes to be queer-identified, femme-presenting people which can include but is not limited to femme lesbians and bisexuals, nonbinary femmes, and trans womxn. Black femmes are endangered by heteropatriarchy and violent, racist heteronormativity. The same literature review by Mpani and Nsibande (2015) illustrates that women and children are the most likely victims of sexual and physical violence. Moreover, experiential and situational factors invariably contribute to this threat of victimization, with the most prevalent correlation drawn by Mpani and Nsibande lying between the effects of poverty and alcohol abuse.

Given that present social systems are inscribed with inhibiting a liberated queer femme future, I am investigating the uses of queer epistemologies, specifically queer temporalities, to ground Black femme futurity and future imaginings outside the realm of the easily perceived.

WRITING ABOUT BLACK FEMME FUTURITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In Africana Studies, queer epistemologies can serve as a route to contextualizing queer, Black experiences along nonlinear conceptions of time and space. Scholars that center the importance of queer epistemologies in Queer and Africana Studies tend to argue that futurity is contingent on the capacity of Black and queer experiences to be contextualized as impervious to normative time constructions (Keeling 2009, Muñoz 2013, Thomas 2018). In other words, futurity is thus underlined by a circuitousness in time produced by being of queer and/or Black

experience. José Estaban Muñoz (2013) repeatedly suggests that queer world-making can arise from a ‘disidentification’ with one’s experience as a queer person of color. The political potency of this, Muñoz (2010) offers, is that this queered positionality is a performance that transforms the present to a ‘then and there’ that promises liberation. The queer of color performance, according to Muñoz, thus presents an opportunity to subvert normalized structures of lived reality in favor of queer ‘disidentifications’ that make living livable. While Muñoz primarily discusses art performance, there is an inherent legibility between Muñoz’ intended discussion and lived performances of minoritized bodies. For my purposes, performance can thus be extended to race, gender and/or sexuality performances. Though Muñoz points to a shade of the power that embodied practices or ‘performances’ lend to imagining Black, queer futures, there isn’t necessarily a speculative aspect that permits imagination that exists beyond present reality. Conversely, Eric A. Thomas (2018) argues that, discursively, queer epistemologies foreground a possibility, an imagination of the future that is linked to body and spirit—an ‘erotohistorography’ that is derivative of all temporalities rather than a link between the past and the present. Even the pluralization of epistemology suggests that there is not one inherent future that is achievable by Black queer bodies. Moreover, the use of the body and spirit as interrelated concepts offers an infinite number of collaborative futures that are not only mere possibilities but fluid as well. Kara Keeling (2009) complicates the suggestion of a multiplicity of futures, offering instead that futurity is an embodied practice, and thus more than a reflexive interaction with the past and present, but a figuring of oneself as a temporal location.

The framework that can thus be extricated from this conversation between scholars is one in which futurity is an embodied practice taken up by Black queer bodies to imagine a

multiplicity of possible liberated futures that may coincide, cancel out, or morph to produce something alien to mere present imaginations.

In the context of South Africa, some scholars have taken up the work of concretizing these theoretical claims in the practical, daily lives of Black queer youth. In a study of Black queer students at the University of Cape Town, Boonzaier & Mkhize (2018) emphasize that despite efforts to include students in the institutional hustle and bustle, the institution's present structures aimed toward creating identity-based communities often doesn't account for the interconnectedness of oppressed experiences. For Black, queer students at UCT, they not only deal with the course load and other academic rigors, but the work of forging community spaces that are not offered through the institution itself. The researchers then discuss the ability of individual responses to power structures to snowball into a collectivized response that, at the least, produces spaces of kinship and, at most, can actualize true institutional change (Boonzaier & Mkhize 2018). Simply, despite the institutional structures that replicate the multifaceted oppression they tend to face off-campus, Black queer students form community through resistance. This speaks to not only a resistance to an institution that implicitly writes their unwelcome, but a larger present that does the same. Ann Phoenix (2009) echoes Boonzaier & Mkhize's point, underlining the oppressive structures that infiltrate higher education that force students with racialized, gendered experiences to contend with an internal exchange of their lived realities on campus and their imagined and/or desired realities off-campus. Between these two studies, there is a consensus that oppression can be subverted into a source of communal empowerment; however, the mechanism of truly overturning oppressive structures at the level of college institutions is neither named nor fully explicated. Regardless, as Muñoz offers in his theory of disidentification—and what I understand both Phoenix and Boonzaier & Mkhize's

respective studies are pushing towards—there is an embodied political possibility that lies in the act of queer of color folx disidentifying within oppressive structures.

There are, of course, many activists, writers, and artists beyond the college level working toward achieving a Black queer liberated future. In *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, Ashley Currier (2012) presents an expansive case on the history and relationship between the two LGBT organizing efforts in both countries, while offering conclusions based on this well-hashed out history. Most notably, Currier concludes by identifying that LGBT activist strategies “will continue to metamorphose in unexpected ways” as often as “the political horizon continues to shift and expand” (p. 160). In this way, Currier offers a response to the question of queer temporalities, though she never offers that terminology in her discussion. She speaks to the response of queer-identified and queer-allied activists to shifting realities and while the ‘political horizon’ is grounded in the present, it is inherent that this present reality is grounded in the script of the past and the desires of the future. The metamorphoses thus undertaken by LGBT activist-strategists are reminiscent of the queer of color performances of disidentification that Muñoz references. Andrew van der Vlies (2012) further contextualizes the subversive power of queer of color performances, using renowned South African artist Zanele Muholi as a case study. van der Vlies speaks to the way that Muholi’s artistry argues that “[Black, queer] images enable cultural revision, cultural gain, and aesthetic production...that offers a new archive of affect and affiliation” (p. 152). In this way, Muholi probes at a slightly different relationship between queer folks and queer temporalities; rather than synthesize a queer futurity that is an exchange between multiple temporalities, van der Vlies suggests a revisionist historical project that privileges Black queer experiences. This would necessitate a more immediate result—affecting the present, rather than the (imagined) future—but nonetheless has

bearing on the future given a queer epistemological lens. Thus, while the speculative, or necessarily fantastical, approach to queer temporalities is not centered in the approaches of these mentioned scholars, there is an undeniable future orientation built into their paradigmatic approaches.

In an effort to figure imagination as a motivating factor in producing Black Queer futures, I turn to speculative fiction and autobiographical narratives that are produced by or feature Black South African queer people. In the preface of her collection of short stories *Intruders*, South African writer and artist Mohale Mashigo (2018) makes the claim that “Afrofuturism is not for Africans living in Africa,” explaining that Afrofuturism is constructed around the fantasies of the West and thus erases the diverse and specific effects of colonialism on the African continent (p. x). While Mashigo does not attempt to name this true ‘African’ futurism, her suggestion that Africans coin an afrofuturism born outside Western ideology predicates an essential texture to the meaning of futurism in South Africa. In the same vein, Clio Koopman (2019), a Black South African trans man, offers an “Trans-Afro-Futurism” in which he imagines transness as a fluid element of a fluid temporality (p. 64). He quickly negotiates the past, imagining Steve Biko as a trans man; the present, with an insistence that Black struggle inherently include gender; and the future, postulating a transness that is filtered through his South African identity rather than through Western rhetoric. These liberal imaginings, which read as almost a cathartic stream of consciousness, conveys the possibility of queer temporalities for Black, queer-identified people. Moreover, unwittingly undertaking Mashigo’s charge to identify an afrofuturism ‘for Africans living in Africa,’ Koopman proposes a ‘trans-afro-futurism’ that is both highly personalized and resistant to the intrusion of Western power into self-making and community building processes. This only speaks to the ability of ‘regular

people' to articulate their own experiences, though Koopman does admit to having several years of higher education under his belt. Moreover, though the 'trans-afro-futurism' proposed is hyperpersonal, it is undergirded with an interest in the liberation of all Black people and predicated on the world-making possibility for Black, Queer communities in South Africa. Thomas (2019) speaks to something similar regarding the discursive possibility of queer temporalities in reconfiguring pasts marked by erasure and visibilizing queer folk as a fixed surety of the future. He does so by connecting two terms 'Sankofa,' an Akan term meaning the practice of moving forward while looking back, and Elizabeth Freeman's theory of 'erotohistoriography,' which claims that contact with historical materials can elicit bodily responses that are even pleasurable. He further argues that this pleasurable connection with the past thus enables Black, Queer people to "create alternative futures that include new ways of being community, practicing dignity, and making visible histories and hurts that have been hidden (or sealed)" (p. 93). Simply, Thomas offers that Black, Queer futurity is a two-stranded process of weaving a reflexive approach to the past with an embodied engagement with temporality. Thus, he speaks to the same ideas that Mashigo and Koopman are contending with, of cementing a futurism born out of communal identity and of building community that is oriented toward a Black liberated future rather than pressed out of the iron grip of white colonialism.

Contending with the conclusions offered through this scholarship draws out a plaintive desire to create a Black Queer future. While Phoenix and Boonzaier & Mkhize's studies emphasize the importance of identity-oriented individual action in forging community, scholars like van der Vlies envision revisionist histories as a source of empowerment from the individual level to the undefined, broader Black Queer community. Indeed, the metamorphosis Carrier

references in her study of LGBT activist strategizing is bound up in acting as a chameleon: changing the colors of approach with the environment but maintaining the essence of itself.

While van der Vlies makes perhaps the strongest argument engaging queer temporality, each of the aforementioned studies work to privilege Black Queer experiences in a present that is not conducive to that effort. Moreover, they operate in a queer/normative binary that necessitates that queerness must be—and more harmfully, always is—a nonnormative epistemology.

However, the ideas foregrounded by these studies might also be expanded by Carleton University professor Alexis Shotwell's (2016) concept of 'open normativities' (p. 139). Shotwell defines open normativities as "collectively crafted ways of being that shape subjectivities oriented toward widespread flourishing" (p. 139). She offers this in order to trouble the stereotyping of queerness being an opposition to the normative and, in doing so, identifies a method by which to elevate voluntarist conceptions of identity politics and identity activism to a collective politic founded in an interest in upsetting normalized oppressive structures. For the scholarship mentioned, the concept of open normativities become normative structures that provide a hearty foundation in deconstructing the queer/normative binary reified in their writing. In this discussion, it is also important to underline that Stockwell does not deny the ability of normative structures to infringe on others; she stresses that the character of open normativities is that "holding some ways of being open may well close down others" (p. 143). What open normativities offer, then, is a multiplicity of ways of being that are susceptible and responsive to change. When figuring Black queer futurity from oppressive, fixed systems this way of thinking seems a hopeful, yet achievable route for liberation.

Other scholars entertain more fluid imagining of Black, queer temporalities, suggesting that there is something to be gained from embodied engagements with temporality (Keeling

2009, Thomas 2018). Thomas offers that embodied remembering can change interactions with the past and make envisioning the future a more promising investment. Keeling further probes at the implications of embodied remembering, speaking specifically to the implications of drawing from the past. While looking to the past and identifying ancestors is a valid and necessary process for Black, Queer people, Keeling argues that the result is a past visibilized in limited scope, “leaving...everything that does not ‘further the action’” (Keeling, 2009, p. 577). Otherwise stated, looking forward by looking back becomes doubly reductive: in both attempting to realize another’s life experience and under the presentist analytical lens that often ascribes language and/or experiences untrue to that which is being studied. Keeling articulates the prevailing question of her work through a case study of the documentary *The Aggressives*, and more specifically the subject named only M—. She tells us, “the first question that must be asked of M—is not where is s/he but when might s/he be” (p. 577). In response to forging a Black Queer liberated future from oppressive systems, Keeling offers that these futures are held by the Black, Queer community yet to come and yet living amongst us all. Given this, the question that remains is how to bridge this conceptual imagining of Black Queer futurity as an embodied practice and the physical manifestation of this practice in queer people.

In short, hopeful imaginings of future Queer Black life are premised by a necessity for coalition. The literature available does not fully investigate the possibilities foregrounded by Queer Black life, not to speak of the embodied futurity that is suggested through a synthesis of these scholars’ thoughts. In engaging these scholars, questions arise about molding this temporality under the burdensome weight of oppressive structures and the methods that would be undertaken to accomplish such a feat. However, figuring Black Queer persons as embodying

temporal locations lends a diverse pluralism to liberation that holds promise for a similarly diverse, pluralistic community.

The question I am probing is: How do Black femmes in Cape Town carve queer femme-inclusive spaces in white heterosexist society through embodied practices? Data collected in an attempt to answer this question is representative of the ways that those select participants think about their futures. In interrogating this research question, I would also hope to understand how, for these select participants, futurity can be an embodied practice rather than solely a discursive one.

Methodology

SAMPLING METHOD

Within the parameters of the SIT South Africa: Multiculturalism and Human Rights study abroad program, the research project was expected to be carried out and formally written up over the span of 4 weeks. Before the beginning of this independent study session of 4 weeks, all study abroad students were involved in formal classes and had stayed in various areas around South Africa (Langa, Johannesburg, Tshabo (Eastern Cape), Stellenbosch, and Bo Kaap). For the participants I sought, there were not many opportunities to organically meet people that might participate. At the same time, my research question demands a specific population be engaged; only forms of non-probability sampling could be considered for selecting participants. Therefore, the most efficient strategy for finding participants, given these limitations, was snowballing. Snowballing proved effective because, even if the person who reached out on my behalf elected not to participate, they were still, in a sense, sponsoring my project in suggesting it to someone else (Denscombe 1998).

CHOOSING AN INTERVIEW METHOD

The research question at hand is: How do Black femmes in Cape Town carve queer femme-inclusive spaces in white heterosexist society through embodied practices? In this question, the principle avenue of investigation is set in participants' identities, which are then set in relation to structures of systemic oppression. The question itself interrogated the realm of the hyperpersonal and will likely produce qualitative data that is duly hyperpersonal, experientially-based information (Denscombe 1998). Thus, this research question, in being driven toward understanding Black femme subjectivity, is best understood through the personal experiences of participants, which is best relayed through some form of qualitative process. As opposed to other

survey strategies (questionnaire, document analysis, etc) that privilege impersonal forms of explaining experience, an interview allows me—as a foreign researcher carrying my own biases and frameworks—an opportunity to engage with individuals best equipped to explain their experience, in detail and intimately. Given the aforementioned time and resource limitations, I chose semi-structured interviewing as a qualitative method.

As a researcher, one difficulty I was grappling with was the difficulty of asking the participant to bear their selves in such a personal way to someone that, given the inherent time limitations of this program, they will not have known for more than a month. Moreover, given my limited time in South Africa, finding participants ultimately required me to depend on asking other people that were better connected to the Black, queer Cape Town community. Given my ‘snowballing’ method of sampling, it made the most sense to conduct interviews as participants agreed to the process, pushing me toward doing interviews individually rather than in a group setting. In reflection of the factors outlined above, the one-on-one semi-structured interview seemed to be the most sensible method for interviews as it encourages the participant to direct the conversation in their responses (Denscombe 1998). In addition to giving participants some freedom to explore what is most comfortable, the ‘conversational’ format of the semi-structured interview compels me to share with the participant as readily as they share with me. This is less to instill a sense of transactionality than it is to say that semi-structured interviews grant space for a reciprocated vulnerability that other interview formats do not (Denscombe 1998).

In investigating this research project, I officially met with participants twice. The first conversation was an opportunity for each participant could get to know me (and I, them) and where we both decided if we were good matches for one another moving forward. For my project, this meant determining if they fit the basic demographic I highlighted for participation

and if they showed voluntary interest in participation. Participants had to be between 18 and 35 years of age, Black, queer-identified, femme, and living in or working out of Cape Town. This initial conversation happened remotely, via phone call or Skype. I discussed the nature of the study with participants, the goal of the research project, and inquired about whether they, with this information, were still interested in participating. We then discussed informed consent and I gave them an opportunity to select one of two interview formats (the formal interview and the artistic project session—which will be explicated below). Official informed consent forms were sent via email after the initial conversation. Each participant had at least 2 days' time to read the forms and fill them out before the formal interview. Hard copies were made available to the participant when the formal interview took place.

Insofar as the formal interview, participants were given the option to either participate in a one-on-one conversation or an artistic project session. The one-on-one conversation lasted only about an hour, but I explained to the participant that they could elect to end the conversation at any point. The conversation was a semi-structured interview. The artistic project session was meant to run for 60-90 minutes. Participants had the opportunity to undertake a creative project—write creatively, draw, make paper figurines, sculpt, or anything else that suits them. After, we were intended to have a short conversation, also mimicking a semi-structured interview format, about what they created and what it means to them, sharing whatever they're willing to share. No participant elected to do the artistic project session

This project provides an outlet for participants to talk about their experiences as Black queer subjects living in the Cape Town area. While their experiences are representative of only their individual entry points into queer futurity, they are contributing their individual stories to an area of literature that needs it.

Ethical Reflexivity

As a researcher, there is an overt power dynamic created by my relationality to participants, which is amplified by my Americanness as well as my position as a college student. In that way, I understand that, in this context, I will be perceived as a privileged body because of the aforementioned factors and perhaps others still unknown to me.

Despite these considerations, I thought that notwithstanding my Americanness, my presentation as Black and feminine (if not femme) would create some unconscious imagined community between myself and participants. While the participants I spoke with seemed *did* seem comfortable with me, I cannot be sure if the way I present is what eased any discomfort or if a participant situation is even something that would discomfit them. More importantly, the problematic of the wishful connection I drew between myself and my participants is that there are so many other parts of my identity (as well as their own) that alter the few tendrils of identity I believed would create a connection. For instance, like I have said, I'm an American college student from the United States, regardless of my experiences, I am read with privileges tied to my access to education and monetary resources that are just as—if not, more—present as my Blackness and feminine presentation. At the same time, I am a Black person, I am femme-read, and—until I open my mouth—people overwhelmingly assume that I'm from South Africa. As such, because I straddle the line of the insider/outsider dichotomy in my interactions with participants who bring a number of experiences that mere introspection cannot account for, it's important for me to hypervigilant and responsive to the tone of the interview environment (Maxwell et al, 2015).

In interviews, my participant pool was restricted to a driveable distance (around Cape Town) and further restricted by parameters laid out by my sampling method. With this in mind, I

constantly reminded myself that the participants I had were only an infinitesimal selection of queer communities that exist throughout South Africa. With reference to the interview process, I often started by explaining my personal relationship to my research question as a queer-identified Black femme and then feeding some of the ideas I presented into an open-ended question. Since my experience with South Africa is limited in the context that a project of this scope demands, I hoped that this manner of questioning would make that apparent and encourage the participant to feel that authority in their lived experience. However, regardless of my reasoning, the limited and highly filtered exposure to South Africa directly informs the approaches that I utilized in my research project. Moreover, even the ethical considerations I take are entrenched in a closed discursive system built overwhelmingly by those that have had the opportunity to influence such a system, i.e. other academics and researchers (Foucault 1971).

While carrying out the interview process, I kept coming up against language barriers that I perceived to lay in my use of sometimes overly-jargon filled language. I noticed this first when a potential participant seemed to hesitate in agreeing to participate because they were having trouble understanding the language I was using. I spoke with my advisor about how to ensure that the language I used was more accessible. I elected to break my language into simpler terms and, in testing this, called my 14-year-old brother and explained my project to him using the new language I had decided on. Not only was this a valuable lesson in humility, it also did seem to relieve some of the undue pressure I was putting on participants. Moreover, it revealed to me the ways that I have been socialized to think *and* talk about Blackness and queerness that I had not yet confronted. In formal interviews, I found myself hyperaware of the words I chose; given an opportunity to elaborate, I would take that space to also clarify any language that could possibly be overly academic or theoretical.

As mentioned earlier, and discussed in the section regarding my theoretical framework, my construction of Blackness and queerness are filtered through my experiences as a Black, queer person and as a student of Black studies in the United States. For instance, Erasmus (2017) offers the Indian Ocean “as an emergent epistemic space” because of its history of slave trade and relation to colonialism; the Atlantic as the Western site of “modernity” is thus challenged by this assertion (p.4). As a student of Black studies, Erasmus enters a previously untouched area of thought regarding Black subjectivity. While I can’t claim to have read all Western Black scholarship—nor is that the scope of my project, it thus becomes especially important that I remain conscious of the ways that my Blackness infiltrates the interview space and my resultant formal report. I can fairly assume that my ideations of queerness should be dealt with the same level of scrutiny. I don’t necessarily believe that the implicit schematic framework I’ve built over the 19 years of my life can be surmounted in a 1-month research project, but it is something that I can constantly interrogate in my analytical responses to what participants share. One thing that I do to keep myself aware of that relationality is that I refrain from making deductions about each participant’s relationship to Blackness and queerness. Given there is so much coded language in Westernized visions of queerness, I also will attempt to remain conscious of the impositions of queer identity that I operate within.

One thing that became a major ethical consideration during this project, was my affiliations with parts of my identity that may not necessarily show up in my body. As a student at Williams College, there is a way in which students are pushed to constantly critique ‘old’ work and to simultaneously produce highly original ‘new’ work. It is a subtle pedagogy of my institution—and not necessarily upheld by all faculty and staff—that drives a hyperfixation on work and production that I, in my 2 years, have unconsciously internalized. As a side note, this

critique does not run one way; as an enrolled student at the college, I am complicit in not only perpetuating its pedagogies, but in carrying its pedagogies beyond its bounds. Since I have only attended my college institution, I cannot speak to whether this is a small, liberal arts school problem or just the nature of U.S. college institutions at large, but I can speak to the way that this infiltrated both my academic involvement here as well as my research project. For instance, in listening to my first interview, I found myself deconstructing their words before I had a chance to digest them. After all, critique is what I've been pushed to do these last two years; I actively had to push away that instinct in order to begin to "learn to learn from below" and to "[work] without guarantees" as Kapoor (2004) suggests through a reading of Gayatri Spivak (p. 643-44). All in all, this speaks to an internalized affiliation to my college institution and, by extension whiteness, that was necessary to unpack as a U.S. researcher in this context.

Participation doesn't predicate any inherent risk, though I acknowledge that the subject matter, both existential and future-oriented, can often be set in traumatic parts of one's identity. As such, informed consent rests in the hands of the participant and I encourage them to make changes and ask questions that will ensure their interests are best represented.

Research Findings: 3 Conversations

I spoke with 3 different participants in 3 one-on-one semi-structured interview sessions. The first session with Participant A, Aqua, lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes. The second session with Participant B, Phelisa, lasted 1 hour and 7 minutes. The third session with Participant C, Kgabo, lasted 23 minutes, due to a time limitation created by her having to return to work.

PARTICIPANT A: AQUA

Aqua identifies as bisexual. She is 33 years old. She is a pan-Africanist and feminist. She has been an activist for 12 years, working in a range of service areas, but is currently based in Cape Town. I was able to get in touch with her through my advisor, Paballo Chauke and, after our initial conversation she seemed both interested and fit the basic criteria of my research.

I started by referencing a previous conversation we had about her activism in which she strives to bridge the gap between spirituality and activism. She introduced herself and gave some background on her name and her work. “The organization I work for is called Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) and what we do is catalyze faith communities in creating space that are inclusive for all to worship and not only inclusive but also affirming of persons of different gender and gender expression and identity and also of different sexual orientations. My activism cannot be divorced from who I am, I am a queer woman, a Black woman, and I am a bisexual woman (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Aqua then described what catalyzed her interest in working for IAM, specifically citing popular sayings of intolerant Christians to silence queer-identified people. “For me, it got to a point that I got irritated that constantly the Bible is used as if it has the right to discriminate people and exclude people. How it’s used as a full stop to any conversation or any form of

engagement or dialogue around sexual diversity and inclusion of people within a faith space. I strongly believe exclusion is not part of Christianity (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

In entering her role in IAM, Aqua described desiring to “learn more [about] what the Bible really saying about gay people, homosexuals, about women, especially how does the Bible relate to me as a person of color.

“We have a process called reading together, we do contextual Bible studies where we allow people to engage with the Bible, so we read the Bible and say, well does it really exclude homosexuals? Does it really say homosexuality is wrong? What is the context? So, we promote more around understanding the context. We believe that [there are] many voices in the Bible, just as we know that the Bible wasn't written about one person, but it's a number of writers where all the writers were put together. It's about hearing the different voices within the Bible. We use queer theology as a lens of seeing that you actually, when you're looking at Christianity as a faith and its rituals, there are certain rituals that are not just based in a heteronormativity sort of spectrum. There are certain rituals that are queer, and faith and Christianity itself is very inclusive (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I asked about what kind of people tend to show up to fuse this perceived gap between spirituality and queerness in her line of work. Though she never quite answered my question (perhaps due to some miscommunication), she instead offered some thoughts about spirituality and queerness. Aqua said, “So, as a holistic being, spirituality is one of the parts of you that always needs to be nourished because it affects your own balance. For example, if you're not well emotionally, eventually it starts showing, you start having symptoms, so you get sick physically, [sic] spiritually. If you're not in a right space, it can lead to depression and that can

also manifest to you being sick. Spirituality is a component that every person has and that needs to be nourished.

“You go through a process of trying to establish what you like and what you don't like. From adolescence you start trying to figure out, do I enjoy kissing girls, do I enjoy kissing boys? Do I enjoy kissing both? Or neither? In that stage when you're sort of establishing who you are and what you stand for you find that parents are not as affirming and inclusive as you'd like them to be (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Aqua described the moment she came out to her mother, explaining that her mother was very disheartened by the news. It was only through her grandsister advocating for her that her mother eventually became more receptive. According to Aqua, her grandsister told her mother that “This has always existed. We'd be more worried if it was a boy dating other boys, but because she's a girl, she'll grow out of it. So, because of how my grans responded, it became more relaxed at home and although my mom has moments where she is a bit homophobic, she does certain things that I can see are her way of trying to process that I am bisexual (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Above all else, Aqua continued to highlight the importance of self-acceptance. She explained, “It is important for a person to accept themselves. Once you get to a point where you're saying this is who I am, and this is what I believe the spirituality component feeds into your holistic growth.

“When you get to a stage where you accept your body like listen actually, I have roll and I have cellulite, and say, you know, it's normal. When you get to that point of self-love there's also a thing of, you have to own it. And so too with your sexuality, it becomes part of your identity; you say actually I'm a queer black woman of faith. This is who I am. You reach that

point where you reconcile whatever differences you had, and those differences are coming from how you've been taught (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019)."

Aqua moved into a discussion about the problematic gender expectations that accompany hegemonic womanhood. She then pointed to cultivating one's spirituality as a route to becoming more confident in yourself as a holistic being, regardless of these expectations.

"The importance of reconciling your identity and spirituality is because having to establish for yourself what is Christianity, what is faith, whether you're Muslim or you're Jewish. What does your sacred text mean in terms of you living a purposeful life and being a good person and do you fit into that? And when you're still discerning for yourself what works and doesn't work it's that process where you're trying to reconcile and cutting out and reshaping it but you'll get to a stage where you're like this is who I am and it's that integration to becoming a holistic person.

"I had to discern for myself and say actually this is what is important to me and if the things that I see are important for myself don't fit into what has been communicated to be heaven then I guess I am not going to heaven. You interpret scripture to back up your own sanctions and ideas (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019)."

I offered that I was raised Catholic and related to a lot of the things that she mentioned. I then asked about why she felt the matriarchs specifically supported her queerness. She responded by talking about how in her gransister's community, houses would be set up around a kraal. A queer identified person will be placed in a house slightly outside that set-up, which allows that person to bring partners outside the gaze of the community. She then contrasted that with her mother's upbringing in the church—which does not have such provisions for non-heteronormativity—to explain why queerness would be more difficult for her to accept.

Along the way, she described a young “gay boy” that would dress in the clothing designated for the guild of young virgin women (isiphika). In the congregation, he would stand up and say, “I am a pure young man (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).” According to Aqua, this became a bit of a joke to the congregation because, “Of course you're going to stay pure, you don't have a vagina. Now when I come to think about it these were very homophobic statements, you know, homophobic jokes, but because in that context, I didn't have the language, I wasn't out, I hadn't explored the possibility that I could be bisexual. It was neither here nor there, it was a thing of ugh if you don't fit into this thing, now this guy is gay, gay people they just want to sleep with other men and that's it. So, it was different sort of perspective. So, with my grans because it was something they had seen within the community they understood it from that sense (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I asked her about the use of ‘queer’ to her or whether she even uses that term to describe herself. She responded, “I use the term queer because I’m comfortable—okay, so, the thing is I find there’s a lot of biphobia in the queer community.

“At one time there was a huge prevalence of correctional rape. I hate calling it correctional rape because you can't correct someone. Let's call it lesbiphobia rapes, so there was a lot of lesbiphobia rape. In the community, working in the community, a lot of butches and dykes would say, ‘Yes, it’s the bisexuals’ fault. They are the ones that are confusing men, giving men mixed messages that you can date a man and a woman. It's bisexuals that are setting up dykes to be raped.’

“It became hard for me to introduce myself as bisexual in the LGBTIQ community because then people would then come with this whole thing of Aqua that means she's a whore, she sleeps with both men and women. There's a thing of people thinking that I have an

uncontrollable desire to be with any woman or any man. It's hard to get a partner because people like ugh you're going to leave me for a man anyway. Or if you are in a relationship, the person's insecurities will play to, 'Oh, I know you're going to just leave me for a man' sort of narrative. So, I first used the term queer because it was neutral.

“As of now, I'm being more vocal around only being bisexual and being very visible, even on my social media, I do a lot of posting around bi visibility and around biphobia and things like that (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Aqua described how her current partner of 3 years was previously uncomfortable with her bisexuality and how she's grown to appreciate and encourage her identity, which she underlined was accomplished through a lot of conversation. She fed this tangential conversation back into the original topic of how she identifies.

“Within the community a lot of people still don't come out as bisexual. It would be seen as it's just a phase, just an intermediary phase.

“So, for me, calling myself queer it started from safety, then I just got used to it and I got comfortable with the term 'queer.' In certain spaces, I will not use queer, I will say I'm a bisexual woman, it also becomes a political statement thing within certain activist spaces. And then when I am training, whether I'm training theologians, seminarians, clergy, bishops, it depends in terms of what is that context. I will disclose or come out if I want to and if I don't, I don't (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I then asked, based on the biphobia she has experienced, about the possibility of a liberated future for femme bisexuals, and by extension other femmes.

“I know now they've introducing [sic] sex education curriculum with terms like being, I mean, like gay relationships, lesbian relationships are going to be introduced, well the

terminology at a younger age. It's just about language. I feel that it's important because then your process of self-discovery and of reconciling and knowing who you are will be achieved faster because now you have the language. When I was younger, I didn't have the language (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Aqua organically began to describe her relationship to her family and how people perceived her as she came into her queerness. She often had to remind those around her, “It's really not about the sex. I am attracted to the person (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).” She isn't particularly close to her relatives.

Sensing that this topic is something that is heavy for her to discuss, I shifted into a conversation about what her ideal future would look like.

Aqua responded, “An ideal world would be, we do not have a gendered lens in our community. We don't have gender roles, it's a thing of we are people, we accept each other because who we are. We come into relationship because of companionship and people want to grow together, as opposed to you're born a male child you have to be a man and you have to get married to a woman.

“I find a lot of our problems, or challenges, in our communities are because of that gendered lens and having to live up to certain expectations of a role. And you find that's why we have a prevalence of gender based violence and boys are most likely to react out in violence, emotional violence, even the language they use, and the manner that they treat their girlfriends, as a way of asserting power and because you're coming from a space there's really notions of if you're a man you need to be in control, you must be a leader.

“In my ideal world, we literally, there's a 360 turnaround in how we bring up our children and how we shape our society around gender roles and that is an ideal I know it's not going to happen in the next 30, 40, or 100 years (laughter). But I hope it will happen.

“What I look for in my future-- I always say, I will do as much as I can to help others open up and shift from the view they have been socialized. It might seem as if it's impossible, but I do believe, as we're going through the process of decolonizing, or decoloniality, there are certain principles before colonization that are slowly being brought back. If a person says, “Oh, no I'm different in this manner,” we'll stop, think 'Ok,' process it way faster, with less violence than we currently are. That is an ideal future I would like to have.

“In between where I am now and where I'd like the world to be, I will continually be an activist of change (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Aqua then discussed the cultural limitations that limit women's lives, despite constitutional provisions. She said, “I cannot just stand for a single issue. I have a number of intersecting identities within me, you know? I'm a mom, I'm a young mom, I'm a Black woman, I'm a queer woman. Until such time where things are dealt in a way of equity in creating a space, in addressing things, in giving people opportunities to be equal, I will forever be an activist. (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Feeling that that was a comfortable place to end, I thanked her for her time and concluded the interview.

PARTICIPANT B: PHELISA

Phelisa is a 21-year-old from the Eastern Cape. Phelisa identifies as queer. She lives in Mfuleni, a township just outside of Cape Town. She began her career as a spoken word

performer with CYPHER and then moved on to work with Lingua Franca. I met her through a mutual friend.

I started by referencing a conversation that we had while I was setting up; she simply talked about how her week had been. Specifically, I asked her about the Open Book Festival and how she had curated a spoken word performance for that event. I wanted to know how she got into that work.

She said, “It dawned on me, I should be doing this. As much as there is activism within being queer just existing as a queer person, there isn't much space held, even within these so-called safe spaces. There's not much space held for healing. When one comes, [they] share and feel held, so I wanted to create such a show.

“And I know when I'm inviting an artist, I'm asking a lot from them because first they have to create a silent video to match the theme of the show I'm doing and the recent one was, as I said, ‘Defining Queer.’ What is it? And the healing part of that is, once you define it, it becomes yours---and it changes. Mine is ever-evolving, allowing myself to constantly evolve. And for some, it's very different and that journey to find your own definition comes with you knowing yourself. And it's empowering, so I wanted to create such a space where not only are you breaking down yourself, but you also feel held, to rebuild yourself (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I related to her that I'm a writer and that her words hit something very deeply held for me. I explained that I would love to hear more about her process as a poet because of a personal interest in poetry. I asked about the possibility of being held in safe space, what they would look like and what that means to her.

She noted, “For me, being held, you can't even explain it, you just feel it. And for me, because I'm not a very protest kind of person, because I never feel held in that kind of space, I always feel belittled in some sort of way and for me, being held, it's all about feeling, I can't even find words. You just feel it.

“Whenever I'm creating a show, I don't know exactly what I am doing I can't pin it down to you. It's many things and I understand many of them are not in my hands, of sorts. It's just like, in order to hold another person, I know for sure I should hold myself. For me, when I'm choosing a lineup--because I'm featured in both shows--when I'm choosing poems I'm going to perform, it shouldn't be from a place of the others, the audience as much as I'm doing it in front of them. I'm holding myself.

“Because if I know a certain piece is always triggering me, why am I doing it? The intention should be more than just for the audience, I should also learn to hold myself. I don't know how exactly; it's just being careful (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I briefly paraphrased what she talked about and segued into asking how she would think about queerness and what she thinks her entry point is, or if she even defines herself through a queer framework.

She responded, “I have many entry points, I think, for me, the word--when I was thinking earlier within the week, I was thinking of how certain words came to me and why I reject some. Just touching, as we spoke earlier in the week, about femicide. There's been like, I call them femicide waves of sorts. And in this very tiny life of mine, I have experienced many tides of it, around me, within media, just around spaces, especially Cape Town.

“The first one was when I was 10, and it was that femicide wave. That one was around the lesbian killing around the townships. It was just around, like you switch on the TV, someone has been killed.

“It was always around Khayelitsha. This word was, lesbian, lesbian, all the time and, to this day, I don't identify--I don't like the word, being referred to as a lesbian because it's triggering for me. So, I remember telling a friend of mine, about this story, of this word, because I kept on rejecting this word. And she said, well, how about queer, she's an academic, brilliant one. And I was like, what is queer, well I'll give you some stuff (because she's not queer) I'll give you some stuff to read and she knows I'm a reader, that's like how you get me. And she gave me a bunch of reading stuff and I read this word and it was through academic writing that I met this word queer.

“Around 2018, it was like I was awakening to the spiritual light of me. It was from an entry point of spirituality that I met MY definition of queerness. I know the queer theories, all the academic stuff it was only when I started to sit down with myself, to listen, and to connect with the cells in me, that there's another way of this queerness, it's not—it's not—it's ever evolving for me. It's not still. How I move within the world, without even knowing this word, I am living it. My existence is my definition of queer (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

The conversation shifted back to her curating work. She explained, “I know many queer folks have wounds, they are walking around with wounds, some of them are actually-- themselves--are wounds. And creating a space where one feels held, affirmed, and not tied to this understanding, one understanding of queer and if one is not that, then it means they are not it (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I asked if she always performs in every show that she curates. She explains that she prefers not to at this point in her life because healing work can be draining, but she has performed in both shows she curated in the past. In the future, she hopes to cement her desire to move away from the stage because she feels that, “When you're backstage, there's a privilege in the sense you're both audience and the performer (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I slightly redirected the conversation by asking if her queerness is filtered through her spirituality or vice versa, or some synthesis of the two, or something else completely.

She offered, “It's definitely my queerness filtered by my spirituality. My everyday-ness is about that.

“There's something about [spirituality] that is out of this world, like it's in our dreams, just the feeling of it when you can't define something, and you get chills from it. It connects me to others, especially like queer folk. Most of them, whom I've invited through my show are people who, for lack of a better word, don't perform queerness. So, for me to be able to see that queerness in them is not only my doing, it's that of the spirit that's in me, around me, above me, below me (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

At this point, I interjected because I am so honestly moved by her words. After I told her so, I asked if she seeks out family in these performance spaces. She responded that she views these spaces as more of a liminal, 'between' space.

Specifically, she said, “Whenever I'm inviting someone, I feel it within me that that person needs this. We met, we shared this, we took this from each other, and we went our separate ways. We can be friends, we can not be friends, it's okay. But I am loving this part of you and I am working with you in creating this, defining this, going within for this and I am letting you go, and you do the same to me.

“You know when you're sad, sadness lingers even when it's gone. But happiness is like wind and you're able to feel it and then it goes, type of vibe. And you have other reasons, if your happiness is drawn from reasons, to be happy for something else. I think that's what I've been doing with this project where I'm able to say, we are here, but we are also air, so we are meeting, and we are passing each other (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I asked if the indescribable feeling she mentioned earlier is as fleeting. She responded it's not necessarily definable, but there are compartments of self that are more present than others at different times and places. There is a lull in conversation, and I used it as an opportunity to open up more about my research project and relate it to the things she's already spoken about. I then asked her, in an ideal world, what she imagines a future for Black femmes would look like where trauma is not a constant, where death is not a constant or expected or inevitable. Realizing how heavy of a question it is, I added that we can also move forward if it's too big of a question. She responded that she wants to attempt to answer.

“To understand moving in this current world we live in, it is understanding the brain of a white male. Meaning understand patriarchy, misogyny, understand it to the T that you are empowered that you can dismantle it around you first, for me. First calling it out, but not in the sense of how they do things, meaning violently, don't do it like that, do it in the sense that it makes sense to you. If it means calling it out, it's asking that certain person to step aside and say no, you did that, do it. Calling it out and creating a world around you, that's what I've been doing. Instead of imagining it, I may not even be alive by how things are going, I may not even be alive to be part of that imagination. But just creating it around you.

“I'm saying no, no, no, and staying by it, that's what I'm doing. That is part of holding myself and also being able to say I'm giving you this information; you can take it or not.

“For me--I imagine it for me, and maybe I'm just self-centered, which is one of the beautiful things about me--for me, I imagine it. When I see it, I am in the center of Africa, and I'm staying in a cottage next to a lake and I'm alone with books that's how it looks like. I don't have to explain myself. It's just like--again, it goes back to that feeling of not being able to explain it, but I am slowly living it (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Phelisa then segued into being raised in a religious home to continue talking about the possibility of liberation. She briefly remarked that “We know how Christianity can be...prison.

“I hope I'll be alive when that liberation comes, truly comes. But for now, I'm just faking it 'til I make it (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I opened up the conversation for her to speak about her relationship with her mother, just to see if that's something she wants to explore. She entered that conversation by comparing her spirituality to her mother's religiosity.

“Once you are able to communicate how wounded you are and understand it from my--like understanding my woundedness, I am able to see it, even from my mother. I am able to recognize it and not push. As much as I am asking her to love me as I am, I am also learning to love her as she is. Because sometimes being imprisoned by these systems works for others, there's like an easiness about it. You are not othered. You get to walk in this space, and you don't have to explain anything because it's deemed the norm.

“It's safe. And who am I to remove her from her safety or anyone else. Because it would be as violent as when someone is trying to remove me from this understanding of self if I'm doing it to them, how is it different (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I flipped the conversation again to ask more about how she came into spoken word and poetry writing. She talked about how her mom was the reason she started reading so much and

introduced her to Maya Angelou. In order to “untangle the stuff in [her] head” she turned to writing.

“I started writing from a place of soul. And that's where I was transitioning from Christianity, removing myself from it and creating this bubble of mine (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

She talked about how stepping away from creating for profit has been a good experience for her and her mental health. I referenced my research project again and mentioned that poetry is an interesting outlet for me because I want to incorporate it into my work. I related this to her frustration with people demanding her to produce work and how that becomes draining. She then inquired about why poetry seemed to be calling me. I explained that poetry has this immediate closeness for me, even when it's original work. She then explained that you can find poetry without 'working' for it; she remarked that poetry “pulls you”, you only have to listen (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). She specifically highlighted the importance of looking for a “feminine energy” (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). She referenced *Freshwater* as a book I should read. I explained to her that I have.

I then referenced a comment she made about how her mom is very feminine and that one could tell this because when she shows up you ‘see’ her. I was wondering if she felt the opposite was also true. She replies, “You're not overlooked, but there's a certain kind of gaze if you're in a female body and you don't show up hyperfeminine and a bit of classy feminine. Not overlooked, but a certain male gaze (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).” I followed up by asking about the uses of femme for her.

“I rejected those words, it's kind of like, I still get asked that question when I'm in that circle... As much as they use those words, basically it's the same as asking who's the man and who's the woman, to me. That's how I hear it.

“In my head, masculinity feels stolen. It feels like I'm stealing something when I am representing myself masculine or mixing the two or just gender neutral or third gender type of vibes when I just show up. It's still, because of that gaze, it feels like I'm in this body, but I am performing this gender that is deemed not mine. So, I don't like the word femme (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).”

Given this information, I was interested in what called her to the project, which I pointed to by first explaining how I am repurposing femme for this project. I then discussed how I don't buy into the butch/femme dichotomy either and then explained that my work is concerned with a larger concept of femme as an antipatriarchal initiative. She explained that she knew what she had signed up for and that's why she chose to do it.

I explained that I have no more questions and invite her to ask me anything. She asked again about I'm drawn to poetry. I explained why and then the formal interview ends.

PARTICIPANT C: KGABO

Kgabo lives in Salt River and is from Limpopo. Kgabo identifies as queer. She is 28 years old. I met her through a string of participants and almost-participants. She expressed that she has to leave early to get back to work. Aware that we had less time than I had in previous sessions, I started by explaining my research project and asked if that sparked anything for her or resonated with her in any way. I offered that she might not have a response and she could opt to move forward without answering.

Kgabo answered eagerly: “I suppose that I’ve never really been crazy about the boxes. Even just like femme—I suppose that’s where I work towards, I work towards my sexuality not having to matter, like not having to be at the forefront of everything I do.

“But the reality is that it is and so I suppose it's about stepping into a space and whatever the purpose of the space is, making sure that that's louder than my sexuality. Like at work, it's about making my work speak more than anything else and so whether be it someone saying something offensive or insensitive the way I address it to just be a human thing, like let's not, like don't be a shitty person in general. Rather than making it, or making it seem as though I'm looking for a special way to be treated. So yeah, I suppose my biggest aspiration is just, my work and how I enter spaces and exist in spaces be bigger than--because, for me, it's just one aspect of my life and it's actually a private matter, if anything (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I reflected on her response, then explained my usage of femme, and asked her what it means to be human given that she foregrounded that as the ideal alternative to being categorized.

“For me to not have to preamble whatever it is I'm doing in that space with the fact that I'm a femme. For me, that's it.

“My mother still doesn't get it...When she was explaining to my aunt what I said to her [when she came out], she said, ‘Kgabo says she's a man.’

“I suppose in an ideal world, I wouldn't have to have that conversation. I'd like for it to be, for me to just be like, ‘Hey this is the person I love, and it shouldn't matter. But it matters, so... [laughter]. She's very religious, she doesn't understand how I can say, I'm a woman, but I don't like men. Her own way to rationalize it is, okay, she says she's a man (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I asked her what community she hopes to make the most change in or to describe the radius of the personal change she imagines enacting.

“We still have to be careful in certain spaces, like we can't just be free of will. Before we decide to hold hands or be affectionate in public, we have to consider the space we're in. Is it dangerous, is it safe, will we be met with violence in this particular space for behaving in the ways we're behaving? So, it's not just--that mentality is everywhere.”

“I generally say queer, just as an umbrella, but I know there are nuances even within that space that I couldn't care to define (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I then asked her to explain what called her to this project, given that she isn't invested in a lot of the language I used to explain it. She explained that it just sounded interesting and she wanted to be helpful. She implies that the language didn't bother her, she just isn't drawn to using it personally. I then described having similar experiences with the language commonly used to typify queer people and finding refuge in the language of queerness because of its ambiguity. Using her own explanation of her approach to queer identity, I again probed at what it means to human by her definition.

“It's just respect and consideration, literally, I don't think there's--it's not as deep as we might make it sound. I think it's just treat people with respect, that's all. If you respect me, there's just some things you naturally will do, or there's things you will naturally do. Just take people as people (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

She described understanding why older people struggle to understand queerness and is especially willing to expend that labor for family and people she cares for. I asked about how she balances the desire to maintain family and burden of explaining. She explained about how in South Africa you have to be aware that people may not always have access to information. If

she's aware of that inaccess, she has patience for them. Otherwise, she will encourage them to do that work themselves if they're truly invested in learning.

I referenced how she works to create queer-tolerant spaces in her own life. I asked her what routes she imagines people take to create and unite those little bubbles of queer tolerant space in society.

She stated, “I think we are on the right path as a society, we are technically on the right path. The thing is, society always needs government in terms of progressive thinking like it happens all the time where people are like this law needs to change. I think we're definitely on the right path to being more queer-tolerant, less policing, just letting people live as long as it's not harmful (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

To Kgabo, “ignorance is definitely the biggest problem (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019).”

I ended the interview by asking if she has any questions for me. She only asked about how Cape Town has been for me and the interview ends soon after.

Discussion: (Re)membering 3 Conversations

ANALYSIS

I will foreground the eventual discussion by teasing out salient themes that are apparent in individual interviews as well as across conversations. I felt this was necessary because of the volume and subjectivity of the information. As a note, any quoted lines in this section are directly referencing the speaker's direct language. Pushing toward understanding the complex experiences offered by the 3 participants, I have identified 4 major themes for study. These salient themes are the relationship between spirituality and queerness, the pervasive influence of controlling binaries, defining 'queer,' and the 'look' of individual action for systemic change.

queer spirit

The title of this section is borrowed from language that Phelisa used: she identifies that queer-identified people possess a 'queer spirit' that exists beyond the hegemonic parameters of gender performance. Specifically, she said that "for [her] to be able to see that queerness in them is not only my doing, it's that of the spirit" that is individually cultivated, yet communally felt (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).

Phelisa articulated an area of intersection that is referenced both explicitly and implicitly by other participants. Phelisa directly stated that her queerness is articulated through her spirituality and that by listening to that part of herself, she was able to more readily step into her queerness. Further, given that her spirituality is not a fixed articulation of self, this entry point further allows Phelisa to continuously grow into her queerness as she grows into her spirituality. As such, the way that Phelisa "move[s] within the world, without even knowing this word" 'queer,' presupposes that her queerness is an embodied, spiritual practice rather than a learned or otherwise socialized process (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).

Similarly, Aqua described at length the ability of getting to know oneself as a route for feeling more firm in one's holistic identity, also centering spirituality in this process. Early on in our conversation, Aqua explained that “spirituality is a component that every person has and that needs to be nourished” (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019). In her view, feeding the spiritual component of one's self allows you to “own” and come into all other aspects of identity, not for the purpose of organizing each aspect of identity into compartments but to nourish the “holistic” being (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019). Her articulation of her ‘queer spirit’ is directly accomplished through feeding her spirituality, speaking to that inextricability foregrounded by Phelisa's aforementioned assertion.

For Kgabo, the articulation of this ‘queer spirit’ is more implicit, perhaps due to the time limitations of our conversation. She relayed more apathy toward defining ‘queer,’ expressing that she identifies as queer, though she recognizes that “there are nuances even within that space that [she] couldn't care to define” (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019). Kgabo expressed a sentiment of wanting to exist as a holistic being, much in the same ways articulated by Aqua, but imagines that being accomplished in doing away with labels—or “boxes” as she puts it—altogether (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019). As such, she did not necessarily define the “nuances” of her queer spirit, though she is clearly aware of them (Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019). The importance of this is that she described a queer spirit that supercedes labels and directly complicates the implicit performances that LGBTQ+ labels often demand.

controlling binaries

All participants pointed to the influence of stipulated heteropatriarchal gender performance—established through colonially-derived articulations of gender and presently enforced through gendered violences—in infringing on their ability, or freedom, to actualize

themselves as ‘holistic’ beings. Though there are myriad ways that the presence of these controlling binaries can be teased out of the three conversations, I place a few examples at the forefront. Aqua understands the “gendered lens in our [South African] community” as a hindrance to social relations between those that make up her community (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019). She offered that the possibility of “com[ing] into relationship” with others shouldn’t be dictated by the imposition of arbitrary gender performances (as these performances currently appear under the hegemonistic male/female binary (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019). Phelisa discussed that her “masculinity feels stolen” when she is “representing [herself] masculine or mixing the two or just gender neutral” (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). Kgabo described feeling disheartened by her mom summarizing her queerness to be that she “says she’s a man”(Kgabo, Personal Communication, 2019). Kgabo attributed this to a prevailing attribution of the ability to love women to maleness; in other words, Kgabo’s queerness is thus being filtered through the inflexible binary of heteronormative maleness/femaleness.

While this does not nearly encompass the realm of their experiences as queer subjects in a heteropatriarchal hegemony, this does highlight the existence and prevailing presence of these controlling binaries—of male/female, of masculine/feminine, of heteronormative/queer—in the lives of these three individuals.

what is queer?

Every single participant offered their own entry point to queerness. For both Aqua and Kgabo, queer is a catch-all term to describe themselves; however, Aqua identifies specifically as a bisexual while Kgabo utilizes queer purely for its uses in navigating a label-obsessed society. For Phelisa, queer is so indelible to her self that her “existence is [her] definition of queer”

(Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). She is insistent, however, that this definition is bound to her self; everyone's entry point to queerness is entirely based on their own existence.

While I do think that these articulations of queerness—both in this section and throughout conversation—can stand on their own, I would only connect them in that that all their articulations of queerness strive to more expansive understandings of human relation.

carving space/future places

This section places into discussion the ways that the 3 participants theorized about their liberation and creating space for themselves.

All participants identified the potency of small, individual change in creating lasting systemic reform, if not change. Aqua spoke to her work with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries; by subverting classical uses of the Bible to “exclude people” that do not express themselves in heteronormatively, Aqua's activism functions to carve space for queer folks in locations typically weaponized to exclude them and to cultivate a holistic self in which one's queerness and spirituality can both be nourishes, as with the rest of their being.

Phelisa does not consider her work to be 'activist work' but recognizes that her involvement in curating spoken word performance spaces offers a healing space to participants. Though she is avid about curating performance spaces, she acknowledged that offering healing is “out of [her] hands” (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). To put her best foot forward in meeting this expectation though, she strives “to create such a space where not only are you breaking down yourself, but you also feel held, to rebuild yourself” (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). Phelisa carves queer spaces through her work, but also foregrounds the healing necessary to manifesting a liberated future. For those that might push back against her inherently queer existence, she said that while she might not agree, she understands. Phelisa believes that to

disrupt people's complacency with heteronormativity would "be as violent as when someone is trying to remove me from this understanding of self" (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019).

Kgabo communicated that she does not want her work to be viewed through a queer lens; specifically, she aspires to a reality in which her contribution to any given space is treated for its merit, rather than read with her queerness foregrounded. Despite that, in navigating her queerness in a society perhaps not prepared to meet her in those aspirations, Kgabo doesn't flinch away from explaining queer identity to those that might not be as informed as her. She places conversation and consideration as paramount to combatting intolerance. Similar to Phelisa, Kgabo expressed an understanding for the reasoning behind intolerance, rationalizing it as being a symptom of ignorance.

ENGAGEMENT

I intentionally forefront the thoughts shared by the 3 participants before again engaging with the literature. Not only are those that participated the most capable of explaining their experiences, many of them articulate their experiences in the same language of the academics I engage with, further cementing the truth that lived experience holds immense discursive power. In this discussion, I strive not to somehow 'justify' the vulnerable truths offered by my participants but to draw ties between the things they have shared and the framework through which I articulated this project. More importantly, I will tease out the tensions that arose due to my own constructions of queerness and Blackness and through which I arrived at the principle investigative question. If anything, this discussion is a dialectical offering, an ever-evolving meditation on the questions I have already posed and the questions that arose through my conversations with participants.

Much of the friction that the 3 participants described coming up against arises not from the existence of prevailing binaries but the systems of control that exist to sustain these prevailing binaries. As Melanie Judge (2018) writes, those that fall outside heteronormative structures of male and female are disciplined by gendered and sexuality-related violences. The implication of this for building liberated futures is tantamount: how can Black queer liberation be actualized from within existing systems that perpetuate the oppression of those seeking liberation? Keeling posits embodied futures as a course of imagining Black queer liberation, rather than looking to the past or operating within present constructions of possible life (Keeling 2009). She describes looking to the past as an opportunity to derive the “poetry of the future,” citing an abrupt divergence from within history to create something that is more expansive than what the past can offer (Keeling 2009). In urging us to ask ‘when’ Black queer subjects might be, Keeling offers that Black queer subjects embody the liberated queer futures that we desire (Keeling 2009). The ‘divergence from the past’ becomes the existence of those queer subjects; they are the imagined ‘when’ for queer liberation. Perhaps this speaks to a possibility trajectory of the ‘queer spirit’ referenced in my conversation with Phelisa.

None of the participants spoke at length about their racialization, which I attributed to the inextricable nature of race and the other embodied identities. Aqua did echo some tried and true language of intersectionality when she asserted that she cannot be an advocate “for a single issue,” highlighting that she is a ‘young mom, a Black woman, and a bisexual woman’ (Aqua, Personal Communication, 2019; Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1981; Judge 2018). Therefore, she echoed an articulation of the inextricability of her racialization with the bundle of all her other lived experiences. This racial undertone can also be perceived when Phelisa mentions the first wave of femicide she experienced because she specifically referenced Khayelitsha, a

predominantly black township, as the epicenter of that wave of gendered violences. Even without that deduction, the implication of a persecution of queer folks during the formative years of her life—being a queer subject—predicates the anti-intolerance and queer-prioritized initiatives that Phelisa is presently involved in. In a country wrought by the conditions of racial subjugation upheld through the so-recently abolished apartheid state, an especially critical lens might be undertaken to piece out the ways that racialization infiltrates language. Without misconstruing the language of participants, it is at the very least evident that there is a racialized tone that infiltrates our discussions. The nature of racist powers to place violence as something that is ‘inherent’ to black communities also complicates the themes that arose from these conversations; specifically, if, as Judge (2018) suggests, “trajectories of racist, homophobic and misogynist power are mutually reinforcing and are central to the workings of violence,” the statements of the three participants become evidence of at least 2 other interlocking colonial structures of oppression (Judge 2018, p. 48). Perhaps it was the nature of the questions that did not allow for this to be fully explicated. At the same time, perhaps rooting out the specific character of racialization is not as important as understanding the ways that oppression is compounded at multiple axes for queer Black femmes. Nevertheless, the racialized nature of gendered violence among queer populations remains a subject for further investigation.

Participants all described very personalized entry points to their queerness, as discussed in the previous section. Aqua articulated her bisexuality as interlocking with her necessarily intersectional activism, which arose from her experiences as a marginalized subject (being queer, being a young Black mother, and likely other lived experiences that I am not privy to). Phelisa described her queerness as being sparked by a combination of experience: with the ‘waves’ of femicide she has witnessed; her spirituality— by learning to “listen” to the “cells in [her]” that

sung out her queerness; and by identifying a ‘queer spirit’ that lives within her and duly sings out from other queer folks that she meets (Phelisa, Personal Communication, 2019). Kgabo offered that her queerness transcends the fixed language of what is known; she understands herself, even the parts she cannot give language to, and utilizes the language of queer to navigate a category-obsessed society. Above all, she wants to be treated like a human, which to her looks like a reflexive interrelationality that responds to the needs of shared—no matter how brief or infinitesimal—community.

With white-centered politics dominating popularized Western conceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, i.e., “love is love” and yearly rainbow collaborations with major corporations, it was refreshing to hear the critical ways that the 3 participants thought about their queerness (Spade 2013, Farrow 2004). In South Africa, the white-centered conceptions of queerness often fail to recognize the very tangible, or perhaps more heightened, repercussions of queer sexual or gender expression for marginalized bodies—so much that Jane Bennett (2018) states that “there is no political language in which queer may co-exist with the interests of whiteness” (Bennett 2018, p. 112). Through this assertion, I have come to appreciate the diverse forms of queer politics that the 3 participants have offered not only for their specificity and originality, but for the location of these politics in a highly experiential entry point of understanding queerness. This is not to dismiss white people that affiliate with the LGBTQ+ community, but to push toward an understanding that aspirational whiteness directly impedes a critical entry into queerness as a lived politic.

To probe further at Kgabo’s assertion that she would like to be treated as human, I wonder what the implication of pushing toward humanity when being ‘human’ has always been defined with the same systems of heteronormativity and whiteness that push Black people, queer

people, and many others to the margins (Anzaldúa 1987). Regardless, the potency of Kgabo's assertion is the possibility for expansive ways of thinking about humanity; specifically, Erasmus states that "there is no one way of humaning" (Erasmus 2017, xxii). Perhaps what Kgabo is speaking to is a combination of Erasmus' ideation of humaning as well as a Shotwell-derived "open normativity" that stands to make the state of being human a reflexive, evolving practice rather than a fixed definition (Erasmus 2017, Shotwell 2016). In other words, the practice of being human becomes scaffolded process of acting, reacting, and interacting. Kgabo's call to be treated as human opens up the possibility of what humanity hegemonically looks like. This, along with much of the powerful claims of the 3 participants, ultimately speaks to the aim of my project in underlining the embodied queer liberated worlds that these 3 individuals carry within themselves.

In pushing toward a critical understanding of queerness, and toward a critical placement of queer futurity in beyond the bounds of what is known, it must be understood that we, as humans, are living history. Conceptions about past, present, and future are not fixed, and, especially for queer subjects, these demarcations are ever more so blurred (Keeling 2009, 2019). From this standpoint, I offer that the efforts of these participants to create queer-tolerant spaces—whether it be through activism, conversations with loved ones, or merely nurturing their identity in all its aspects—directly points to the 'rupture from within history' from which Keeling imagines the strands of queer liberation will stem. Despite this, weaving these strands into something that can tether and sustain queer liberation speaks to an effort that surpasses the scope of my project, both due to time limitations and my position as a foreign researcher.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project offers that these 3 Black femme Capetonians are the best source to articulate their stories. It would be remiss for me to place any analytics before the theorizations of those that participated. However, these thoughts offered by the Aqua, Phelisa, and Kgabo speak to several contextually derived queer analytics that are resounding in their meaning for beginning to position the future as a lived, embodied practice.

I intended to understand the manifested realities that queer-identified Black femmes create in pursuit of a liberated queer future, given the constrictive nature of white heteropatriarchy as a system that controls the way that all racigendered subjects move through the world. Given that my exposure to South Africa has been limited to just about four months (and the locations of interest as dictated by SIT South Africa: Multiculturalism and Human Rights), this research is concerned with creating a conversation between the working theoretical framework of this project with the theorizations of participants.

Through conversations with 3 Capetonian queer-identified folks, I found that their liberated queer futures are produced through some combination of conversation and compassion, creating queer spaces around oneself (as queer subjects), and redefining the implication and social authority of gender roles. Though I'm sure there are myriad other factors each participant may consider relevant that my brief conversations did not cover, the suggestions offered still seem promising. Shifting to the implications of this for my own theoretical framework, their words spoke to an embodied futurity, or the prospect of locating a queer liberated future within queer subjects living in the present, rather than digging through the limited possibility of the past or floating through arbitrary imagined futures. This project may also speak to the task of commemorating and celebrating queer lives in the present as well as the ones that have since

passed. Like Phelisa points to, there exists within queer subjects a ‘spirit’ that carries more weight and influence than perhaps might be perceived at first glance.

One of the limitations I identified within the scope of this research project was that Black queer futurity did not seem to have much available literature from writers living in South Africa writing about South Africa. While this might speak to a failure on my part in reviewing resources, I would at least suggest that more scholarship undertake the study of Black queer futurity in the South African context. Given that I spoke to 3 participants under very structured and regimented circumstances, I do not doubt that much more can be said and investigated about this topic. In saying this, I am not privileging my own understanding, but referencing a gap in existing literature that affected my critical engagement as a U.S. college student lacking historical and experiential context. As humbled as I am to have spoken to Aqua, to Phelisa, and to Kgabo, their musings on queerness have only reinvigorated my interest in the impossible possibility of founding a Black queer liberated future simultaneously produced from within and yet without the past.

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