

**QUEERING UBUNTU: THE SELF AND THE  
OTHER IN SOUTH AFRICAN QUEER  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

**BY**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, BARRINGTON MARAIS, HEREBY DECLARE THAT “QUEERING UBUNTU: THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN SOUTH AFRICAN QUEER AUTOBIOGRAPHY” IS ENTIRELY MY OWN WORK, THAT ALL THE SOURCES THAT I HAVE USED HAVE BEEN PROPERLY REFERENCED AND THAT I HAVE NOT PREVIOUSLY SUBMITTED ANY PART OF DISSERTATION AT ANY OTHER UNIVERSITY FOR A DEGREE.

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BARRINGTON MARAIS

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DATE

AS THE CANDIDATE’S SUPERVISOR I, PROFESSOR CHERYL STOBIE, HAVE APPROVED THIS DISSERTATION FOR SUBMISSION.

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PROFESSOR CHERYL STOBIE

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DATE

## ABSTRACT

The research presented in this dissertation examines South African queer autobiography. The primary texts that I have chosen to analyse are four recent collections of autobiographical accounts by queer-identifying individuals, which I believe to represent a current trend in queer life writing in the South African context. These four texts are *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* (Hendricks 2009), which is a collection of short pieces of writing by queer Muslims; *Yes I Am! Writing by South African Gay Men* (Malan & Johaardien 2010), a collection of writing by gay men; *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters Out in Africa* (Diesel 2011), a collection of lesbian writing; and *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2011 [2009]), a collection of writing by transgender individuals. I have isolated a number of chosen narratives from each collection and engaged in a critical exploration of the construction of autobiographical selfhood through the theoretical lens of collective identity and the African humanist concept of ubuntu. I begin by individually examining the major concepts relating to queer theory, ubuntu, collective identity and autobiography, and then charting the manner in which they intersect in the primary texts. I illustrate the relational nature of autobiographical self-construction by examining how it is constructed in various social locations and the interactions in these locations, including: community spaces, family spaces and spiritual/religious spaces. I foreground how the community is represented as shaping the family structure, and how each of these two institutions contributes to the manner in which the autobiographical subject views and presents the self textually. In terms of ubuntu and spirituality/religion I explore the Ubuntu Theology of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. I consider how it offers new modes and progressive ways of positioning the queer autobiographical self in terms of spirituality/religion, especially when one considers the often discriminatory manner in which monotheistic religion views the position of queer-identifying individuals. I conduct my analysis in this dissertation in a manner that not only seeks to engage with the literariness of each of the primary texts, but also highlights the socio-political value inherent in the texts, as well as how they function as vital tools in the struggle for equality that the queer minority is currently engaged in.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (translated as: a person is a person through other people)

(isiZulu proverb)

In the spirit of ubuntu I humbly acknowledge the fact that the completion of this project would not have been possible without the support of so many people. Firstly to my supervisor, Professor Cheryl Stobie, I cannot thank you enough for your support, patience, encouragement and the phenomenal expertise you offered me throughout the writing process. This project would not have been possible without the financial assistance received through Professor Stobie from the NRF, as well as the UKZN School of Arts.

To my mother, father and sister, thank you all so much for the love and encouragement that you bless me with each day. Justine, thank you for everything. Tryston, I love you, always. My Giambi, I love and miss you.

Lastly, I would like to extend a huge thank you to all my friends who have offered to me a shoulder when things got tough – you are all phenomenal human beings.

## **DEDICATION**

A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has the proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.

(Tutu1999:35)

I would like to dedicate this project to those who have endured violent discrimination and abuse because of their gender or sexual expression. I salute each individual who bravely shared a part of themselves, their struggles and triumphs, in each of the primary texts.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

South Africa's most notable human rights battle has been for the realisation of a democratic society: one premised on non-discrimination and equality for all citizens. Issues of race, racism and apartheid dominate human rights discourses and debates in South Africa, as the country is hard at work in attempts to realise its goals of transformation. South Africa's supreme legislation takes the form of a codified Constitution, and as a direct result of the apartheid regime and its many atrocities, the Constitution provides that no individual shall face discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or religion. Recourse is also made available in cases of what is deemed 'unconstitutional discrimination' by South Africa's independent judiciary and the institution of the Constitutional Court, which serves as the ground on which numerous human rights issues have been successfully resolved. Although vitally important, such documents, institutions and legislation do not necessarily reflect the attitudes or dictate the actions of society, and thus discrimination does not automatically disappear because legislation deems it illegal. In 2006 the current state president, Jacob Zuma, while speaking at a political rally was reported to have stated: "When I was growing up, an *ungqingili* [homosexual individual] would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out" – a comment which he later retracted and apologised for ("Zuma Apologises" 2006). However, despite the existence of similar attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT<sup>1</sup>) community on various levels of South African society, in line with its non-discrimination clause the Constitution makes provision for the protection of the rights of transgender individuals and sexual minorities who may or may not fall within the identity categories of the LGBT acronym.

The Civil Union Act (2006) allows that individuals of the same sex may enter into legally recognised civil partnerships, and as a result this piece of legislation places

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<sup>1</sup> This acronym is sometimes expanded to include an "I" and a "Q", *i.e.* LGBTIQ. These two additions denote the identity categories of "intersex" and "questioning". The Intersex Society of North America describes 'intersex' as "a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of male or female" ("What is Intersex?" n.d.). "Questioning" individuals usually identify as heterosexual and are said to be in a process of exploring their own sexuality, and they do not identify as a part of the other categories in the LGBTI acronym.



South Africa far ahead of a number of countries in terms of gender- and sexuality-based rights. Most notably, South Africa is the only African country that recognises civil unions between partners of the same sex. Many other African countries legally condemn homosexual behaviours. For example, in Uganda there is a proposal for the death sentence for the ‘crime’ of homosexuality, as was explored in the BBC documentary film entitled *The World’s Worst Place to be Gay* (Alcock 2011). The film reveals the terrifying effects of institutionalised homophobia on LGBT individuals in Uganda. The 2007 documentary film *Jihad for Love*, directed by Parvez Sharma, chronicles the harsh realities faced by LGBT people in Islamic African States such as Egypt and Morocco. Many LGBT individuals in Africa are thus subject to repeated and gross mistreatment, hatred, violence and discrimination. As far as South Africa is concerned, despite forward movement in terms of legislation, the rights of individuals who fall outside of the hegemonic heteronormative and gender-normative belief systems of the majority of South African society have often been violated. In recent times various news sources, including *Mamba Online* (“Gay South Africans Protest Against Traditional Leaders” 2012), have reported that the House of Traditional Leaders of South Africa has called for the removal of the provision for protection of rights based on sexuality from the Constitution’s Bill of Rights (Chapter 2: Section 9). This issue represents just one facet of the numerous debates surrounding gender and sexuality that are taking place within South African society at present.

Recently there has been a slew of highly publicised hate crimes against LGBT individuals in South Africa. It has been documented that lesbians in many townships, such as Gugulethu in the Western Cape, live in fear of ‘corrective’ rape, and the BBC (Fihlani 2011) reports that 31 instances of the crime have been reported in the years between 2001 and 2011. This form of hate crime sees the perpetrators physically and verbally attack lesbians in the belief that they can ‘cure’ the victim of the ‘illness’ of homosexuality through sexual acts with males and thus, inevitably, through the act of rape. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation certain issues relating to the LGBT community have taken centre-stage in the media, and I will reference these events in terms of their relevance and relation to my analysis of the primary texts. As I begin this project, most recent in my memory is the brutal murder of Kuruman

(Northern Cape) resident, Thapelo Makutle, a twenty-three-year-old self-identifying transgender and gay man. *Mamba Online* reported that Makutle was brutally mutilated and killed after an argument about his sexuality and gender took place at a local tavern (“Kuruman Murder Gruesome Details Emerge” 2012). Speculation still exists around whether or not his murder was a hate crime; however, for the LGBT community of Kuruman there is no doubt that Makutle was killed due to a high intolerance for LGBT individuals within their community. With the rights and lives of LGBT individuals in South Africa at risk, I believe it to be necessary that discussions related to these issues enter the academic sphere. My concern with LGBT issues and personal attachment to the form of autobiography and various autobiographical works presented the starting point for the research contained within this MA dissertation. I am a Coloured male whose life and personal identity have been strongly influenced by staunchly religious and patriarchal expectations in terms of dominant collective identities. Beyond this, I empathise with the feelings of otherness often expressed and represented in the primary texts. As a Coloured individual I am acutely aware of the problematic nature of engaging with definitions relating to race, and also identity as a whole. Notions of identity are tenuous for not only the LGBT community but also for the extended Coloured community. For these groups identity is often negotiated in environments of exclusion and rampant stereotyping. Various quests to ascertain a sense of belonging in terms of my personal identity have dominated the experiences of my life. Autobiography and the opportunities its form allows to establish kinships in terms of identity have been useful tools in my attempts to establish and explore my many identities. I share a connection with each of the short autobiographical accounts that this dissertation explores and analyses. I approach my writing with what I hope is a tangible sense of sincerity, and not a pretentious attempt to present a reductive understanding of the people’s lives as represented autobiographically in the texts that I am analysing.

The primary texts that this project will be examining are four collections of life narratives concerned primarily with the South African queer<sup>2</sup> experience. These are: *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* (Hendricks 2009), which is a collection of short

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<sup>2</sup> I use ‘queer’ here as an umbrella term for forms of gender and sexual expression that do not conform to hegemonic heteronormative and/or gender-normative expectations of society. I will explore this concept in greater depth later on in this chapter.

pieces of writing by queer Muslims; *Yes I Am! Writing by South African Gay Men* (Malan & Johaardien 2010), a collection of writing by gay men; *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters Out in Africa* (Diesel 2011), a collection of lesbian writing; and *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Morgan, Marais & Wellbeloved 2011)<sup>3</sup>, writing by transgender individuals. I will hereafter refer to these texts as *Hijab*, *Yes I Am!*, *Reclaiming the L-Word* and *Trans* respectively. I have chosen these four texts as the primary texts to be examined in this dissertation mainly because I believe that they collectively represent a notable trend in the area of life writing and its intersection with LGBT issues in the South African context. Each of the primary texts is fairly new: all emerging in an interesting time in South Africa's history. The country has very recently reached critical milestones in terms of the legal rights of LGBT individuals, especially when one considers the forward movement in terms of legislation such as the Civil Union Act (2006) and The Implementation of The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act (2004). The oldest of the four texts were both initially published in 2009 (*Trans* and *Hijab*) and the two most recent were published consecutively in 2010 and 2011 (*Yes I Am!* and *Reclaiming the L-Word* respectively), thus the stories contained within each anthology are reflective of current attitudes and discourses regarding the lives of LGBT individuals and related issues.

As a result of the relative newness of each of the primary texts, critical material regarding these four collections of autobiographical works is limited. This limited availability of critical material gave way to an initial apprehension on my part to address these texts in a project of this nature. However, what presented itself as the encouraging force that resulted in my eventual decision to critically examine these texts is the fact that they have all been noted for their importance in foregrounding queer issues in the current social climate. The socio-political value inherent in each the primary texts is thus necessary to acknowledge and explore, especially in the light of relevant academic discourse. The primary concern of this dissertation involves providing critical insight into the manner in which South African queer individuals construct versions and representations of the autobiographical self in the primary texts. I intend to do this through the theoretical lens of collective identity and by considering the African

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<sup>3</sup> The first impression of the text appeared in 2009 and the second in 2011.

humanist concept of ubuntu as presented by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. Ubuntu and collective identity as concepts entered my consciousness after reading the foreword of *Reclaiming the L-Word*, in which Dr Devakrakshanam Govinden writes:

In a time of increasing fundamentalism in every sphere, and of narrowing definitions of the Other, we are constrained to address again our common humanity and connectedness. The struggle for human dignity, equality and justice is neither divisible nor partial. It is certainly not selective. (2011:vii)

The research presented in this dissertation is primarily based on a cultural studies style literary analysis of the four primary texts. In my writing, I also intend to consider the theoretical concept of “narrative enquiry”, a concept that is sometimes employed in certain psychological and sociological studies. My intention is not to focus in too much detail on the narrative enquiry approach, but rather to consider its merits and functionality very generally, in order to add depth to the overall literary analysis. The narrative enquiry approach acknowledges the value in the practice of storytelling regardless of the form it may take. Narratives such as autobiographical accounts capture the social interactions, emotions, thoughts and difficulties inherent in life events. In doing so they allow the researcher the opportunity to critically engage with the broader consequences that certain acts or events may produce in relation to current socio-political climates, time and space, and thereby assist in ascertaining certain important levels of meaning.

Each of the four primary texts represents the ongoing efforts of many organisations and individuals to highlight the battles faced by people who do not identify themselves within the constraints of the gender-normative and heterosexual majority. With regard to the stories contained in *Hijab*, Pepe Hendricks emphasises the fact that the “stories illustrate the oneness of being, and [reflect] on how a lack of knowledge around queer issues leads to condemnation of many homosexuals” (2010:ix). In the foreword of *Trans* Anthony Manion and Liesl Theron also draw attention to the fact that “many of the people who tell their stories in the book speak of the need to provide the public with accurate information from the perspective of transgender people, to counter negative stereotypes and reduce discrimination” (2011:3). Books such as *Hijab*, *Trans*,

*Reclaiming the L-Word* and *Yes I Am!* are unfortunately not readily and easily available to the public, in retail bookstores for example, and this presents the primary difficulty in projects of this nature reaching mainstream audiences and becoming useful aids in the foregrounding of queer issues.

Each story presented in these life narratives grapples with the common issues relating to love, desire, acceptance and isolation that feature prominently in the lives of all human beings regardless of the boundaries formed by sexuality, nationality, race, religion or ethnicity. There are undeniable intrinsic truths about the human condition and experience contained in the sharing of a particular life experience or story. The value in autobiography stems directly from its nature as a reflective account of a life lived or a particularly significant life experience. The sharing of an autobiographical account holds as much value for the individuals who share their stories as it does for the larger audience who may engage with the account. Judith Coullie and Stephan Meyer stress how “the personal identity we create is connected to issues of time, meaning and action [...] and guided by the question *who am I?* we interpret ourselves in the hope of gaining some clarity about what our present identities and needs may be” (2006:1).

Placing emphasis on the individual who relays his/her life story in an autobiographical account, Victor Marsh observes the positive and self-affirming effects that autobiographical story telling has had in his personal construction and view of the self. Noting his own experiences he concludes the following:

Writing autobiographically has allowed me – as moral outcaste [*sic*], legal outlaw, and general ontological misfit – the freedom to recognize more positive potential energies that had always been working in my psyche and also to reconfigure the meaning of my experience in ways that have been life-enhancing, rather than self-destructive; to stage [...] otherwise “unforeseen and unsanctioned” possibilities of identity. (2012:252)

During apartheid, censorship ensured that literature – autobiographical or not – including subject matter regarding gender or sexuality remained, for the most part, outside of the realms of publication. The Afrikaner nationalist government regarded as taboo discourse on many issues involving sexuality, and even more so homosexuality

and the exploring of transgender identities. A few pieces of literature referring to homosexuality were published in English and Afrikaans during apartheid, as is highlighted by Cheryl Stobie (2007:6-7). Only a few of these texts are explicitly autobiographical. During and after the apartheid era in South Africa there has been an emergence of life writing in the form of autobiographies and biographies. Coullie and Meyer explore the idea of how during apartheid the need for and value of “truthful personal narratives” grew immensely (2006:26). Victims of racial discrimination and segregation found solace in the autobiographical accounts of other victims in similar circumstances. Thus, life writing served as a tool in mobilising and connecting people through the commonality of their struggle and experiences. Furthermore, Coullie and Meyer note that

when we address an audience – testifying about our personal and collective identities through auto/biography – we enter into communicative relations in public spheres and engage ourselves in struggles for justice. (2006:2)

Thus, whether intentional or not, the activist element inherent in autobiography cannot be ignored.

In 1993 a collection of critical material, fiction, interviews and short autobiographies entitled *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse and Kim Berman, was published. In 1994 a similar collection entitled *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, was published. These two texts were fundamental in foregrounding the experiences of LGBT individuals in South Africa. The most prevalent human rights discourse at this time was most obviously race-centred as South Africa had only recently held its first democratic election, in 1994. As South Africa progressed towards a new human rights awareness these two texts then sought to bring into the human rights discussions and debates the position of the LGBT minority. This was achieved primarily through the acknowledgement of the existence of LGBT communities across South Africa, and then through the provision of a necessary platform for the telling and sharing of their stories and experiences. There is thus a definite value in such collections

which seek to connect the struggles and triumphs of queer individuals and present them in juxtaposition with each other.

Like *Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto*, a number of short autobiographies that concern themselves with LGBT issues (presented in collections) have appeared recently in various parts of the world. In a similar manner to the primary texts that I am examining, most of these texts premise some of their primary goals on presenting transgender- and sexual minority-related issues/identities in a light that aims to combat stereotypes and discrimination.

In 1989 a collection of stories and accounts entitled *Lesbians Over 60 Speak for Themselves*, edited by Monika Kehoe, was published. This text aimed to foreground the experiences of self-identifying lesbians over the age of 60 years old in the United States of America. Although not the first of its kind, this anthology was a crucial point in terms of the collection of experiences of a marginalised group of individuals who self-identify outside of hegemonic heteronormative boundaries. Throughout the 1990s similar texts began to emerge, and in 1999 a collection entitled *Longtime Companions: Autobiographies of Gay Male Fidelity* (Lees & Nelson) presented autobiographical accounts of male same-sex relationships in an attempt to counter what one of its editors, Alfred Lees, describes as “the grotesque misrepresentation of gays as being incapable of stable, committed relationships” (18). In 2009 *Miriam Dancing: Women Who Love Women* (Van Wyk), which featured the stories of South African lesbian women, appeared (it has also been translated into Afrikaans). In the broader African context, Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa initiated the African Women’s Life Story project in the early 2000s, in an attempt to find “women who were interested in collecting personal narratives on a range of issues related to sex and secrecy” (Morgan & Wieringa 2005:11). This then resulted in the publication of the book *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa* (2005). This text considers the relative silence regarding queer issues and women on the African continent, and presents the stories of various women and their experiences with sex, sexuality, gender and identity. This text will form a significant component in my analysis of the four primary texts, as it is rooted in various African discourses.

With *Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto* as core historical texts, I have chosen to focus the research contained in this dissertation on autobiographical projects of a similar nature. *Defiant Desire* is described as a “celebration of gay men and lesbians in South Africa” in the opening lines of the text (Gevisser & Cameron 1994:3). The collection contains stories of the “South African homosexual experience”, both real-life and fictional (3). The stories contained in the collection do not solely confine themselves to what is termed the “gay experience” as “that of white, middle class, urban men”, but they move into numerous aspects of the South African experience, from ghettos to suburbs and everything in between (3). *The Invisible Ghetto* follows a very similar format in an attempt to ascertain the place and position of LGBT individuals in South Africa, beyond the boundaries of race and socio-economic standing, without denying the existence of these boundaries. Nira Yuval-Davis, quoted in Van Zyl (2011:340), places emphasis on the fact that “collective identities such as race, gender, class, or age speak about social and economic locations”. Collective identities in this respect describe positions along various axes of power in various social hierarchies and in this manner, a dominant urban white subjecthood has been ascribed to the LGBT community in the South Africa. *Defiant Desire*, *The Invisible Ghetto* and the primary texts that I will be examining are successful in challenging this dominant view of the LGBT experience by presenting diverse collections of life narratives, with a focus on individuals from varied racial, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Deborah Amory (1997:6) draws attention to the fact that *Defiant Desire* was published at a crucial time for queer issues in South Africa. Most notably, the publication coincided with the election of Nelson Mandela as the first president of the democratic South Africa. Also significantly, the publication of *Defiant Desire* and *The Invisible Ghetto* roughly coincided with the first Conference for Gay and Lesbian Studies in Africa, which took place in South Africa, and the country had also just had its first Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (Amory 1997:6). All these events marked a new visibility for queer issues in South Africa, and as a result the country has served as an important site for developments in terms of LGBT issues on the African continent.



## Exploring Concepts

In this section of this chapter I will foreground the four main theoretical concerns of this dissertation, namely: autobiography, queer, ubuntu and collective identity. I will begin by exploring the ideas related to autobiography and the concept of queer respectively, and then I will examine how these two intersect in an attempt to shed some light on the idea of ‘queer autobiography’. Subsequently I will focus my discussion on the concepts relating to ubuntu and collective identity respectively, before proceeding to conclude this introductory chapter.

‘Autobiography’ and the exploration thereof is an important concern of this dissertation and for this reason, as both a term and concept, it cannot be accepted and adopted without critical consideration. Autobiography falls within the general category of life writing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offer a definition of these terms, stating that

[life writing] is an overarching term used for a variety of nonfictional modes of writing that claim to engage with the shaping of someone’s life. The writing of one’s own life is autobiographical, the writing of another’s is biographical; but that boundary is sometimes permeable. (2001:197)

This definition provides a general and useful understanding of what constitutes life writing and autobiography; however, the concept of autobiography and its functioning is not entirely this simple. In considering the construction of selfhood as represented textually in autobiographical accounts, Smith and Watson position it as typically comprising four collective “I’s” (2001:59). They present four possible and interlinked versions of the autobiographical “I”, namely: the real or historical “I”, the narrating “I”, the narrated “I” and the ideological “I” (59). The real or historical “I” presents to the reader the actual material individual who is living or has lived and whose story the autobiographical account is concerned with. Although we as readers are given privy to parts of this version of the “I” and his/her experiences through the autobiographical account(s), this “I” is often inaccessible to readers (59). The narrating “I” is the “I” that is directly available to readers, whereas the narrated “I” is distinguished from the narrating “I” as “the agent of discourse [and also] the object and protagonist of the

narrative” (60). Lastly, the ideological “I” is described as the “concept of personhood available to the narrator when he tells his story” (61). The ideological “I” represents the version of selfhood as it is influenced by factors such as culture and relationships with others (60). These concepts of selfhood, represented by Smith and Watson, regarding the autobiographical subject are useful in understanding the manner in which identities are constructed in the autobiographical form. Throughout my analysis of the primary texts in the chapters that follow, I will maintain awareness of these various versions of selfhood inherent in the autobiographical “I” in relation to the experiences and relationships that they detail.

In recent decades autobiography has met with much criticism by authors and commentators such as Susan Stanford Friedman, for what one can term its Western and white male bias. Thus, a critique and attempted understanding of autobiography centred in gender and African discourse is a necessity. In the introduction to *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography* Judith Coullie and Stephan Meyer (2006:10-38) offer a useful survey of the history of auto/biography in the Southern African context. They note that auto/biography as working concepts exist in Southern Africa, encompassing forms such as oral accounts in the form of “praise poems”, for example (11). These “praise poems” (or *izibongo* in isiZulu and isiXhosa, and *lithoko* in Sesotho) sometimes constitute scripts of long-deceased individuals, and these scripts are performed and function to “communicate important aspects of community’s history and value systems, and thus to shape both individual and collective identities” (11). The relational aspect of Southern African autobiographical storytelling is further emphasised by Coullie and Meyer when they consider the form in the context of the apartheid regime. Autobiographies, such as that of Es’kia Mphahlele (*Down Second Avenue* 2004 [1959]), were useful in presenting the harsh realities experienced by those who faced oppression under apartheid, and thereby these autobiographies were pivotal in lobbying for change (21). Furthermore, an important thematic concern of Southern African autobiography is that of individualism and collectivism (39). In terms of the interviews carried out and featured in *Selves in Question*, it is noted that there exists a strong

possibility that auto/biographical practice can thrive in collectivist cultures. This is reflected in the responses of authors who experience

identity in relational terms, those who have been persecuted as members of a collective, those who draw on collective identity as a source of support, and those who see their auto/biographical accounts as an extension of their engagement with collective struggle. (2006:39-40)

With the above firmly in mind, I will consider the relational aspect of autobiography in terms of the four primary texts that I am examining. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that “autobiographical acts involve narrators in ‘identifying’ themselves to the reader. That is, writers make themselves known by acts of identification and by implication, differentiation” (2001:52).

Susan Stanford Friedman’s (1988:34) idea of relational autobiography criticises ideas that autobiography is best described as being primarily concerned with the singularity of an individual, and posits women’s and minority groups’ constructions of the self in autobiographical accounts as interdependent on the community in which they exist. Friedman strongly rejects the ideas of Georges Gusdorf in his pivotal work entitled *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* (1980 [1956]). His main theories are premised on the idea that autobiography cannot exist where individuals do not view themselves as existing as separate in many ways from the whole that is represented by society at large, and thus for him autobiography is emphatically individualistic. Friedman, in her critique of Gusdorf’s model, highlights that his “concept of autobiography is premised on a model of the self that he identifies as endemically Western and individualistic”, and she accuses him of believing that for autobiography to exist every man must first be “an island to himself” (1988:35-6). Friedman also foregrounds how “individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the collective and relational identities in the individuation of women and minorities” (1988:35). Through this idea, Friedman’s main aim is to dispel the view that for something to constitute an autobiographical account it should be entirely individualistic. Friedman explores and uses studies in developmental psychology and sociology by Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow as the foundation for her work (Eakin 1999:48). For the most part, feminist scholars in autobiography have been successful in dispelling the rigidly confined notions of what constitutes autobiography, entrenched by theorists such as Gusdorf.

The work of Friedman was crucial in developing the field of “women’s autobiography”, a sector within autobiographical studies that contributed to the growth of feminist studies in its entirety. However, very importantly, Paul John Eakin emphasises that feminist scholars in the study of autobiography not only served to dispel Gusdorf’s ideas of individualism, but they also aided in keeping Gusdorf’s ideas in place by arguing that they did not apply to women, although they did nothing to suggest that these ideas did not apply to men either (1999:49). Thus, unknowingly, feminist scholars perpetuated the view of men as individualistic and isolated in the telling of their life stories, and thereby upheld numerous stereotypes related to the male/female binary. Eakin describes the binaries that were created in autobiographical theory and storytelling as “autonomous, individualistic, narrative if male and if female relational, collectivist and non-narrative” (50). The field and study of “women’s autobiography” cannot be discredited for these reasons alone; however, conceiving relationality in autobiography as existing solely in the autobiographies of women and minorities is undeniably problematic. I therefore align myself with the argument made by Eakin that selfhood is in fact relational, and therefore all representations of selfhood involve relationality in many respects. In various fields of psychology and sociology, for example, this is a commonly accepted and self-evident fact, but it is still on some levels a contested idea in the field of autobiographical studies. This view does not discredit individualism and individual identity, nor is it a direct attack on individualist discourses; instead, it acknowledges the fact that relationships and experiences actively work in shaping certain aspects of selfhood.

In *Selves in Question* Coullie and Meyer highlight the following:

The collective identities we create through weaving our auto/biographical accounts into those of others are tied to issues of association and dissociation, power, and social action. In situating ourselves in relation to others, we associate ourselves with them or distance ourselves from them. Through auto/biographical accounts we establish and cement relations to significant others, friends, colleagues, citizens, and comrades and dissociate ourselves from strangers, adversaries, opponents, and enemies. In this manner we construct social realities that open us up or close off certain forms of collective existence. (2006:3)

Furthermore, Coullie and Meyer note how “through the collective identities [auto/biographies] constitute and the status hierarchies they affirm or question, our auto/biographical accounts mobilize collective action” (2006:2). In mobilising a level of collective action these accounts in some ways take on an activist stance. I believe that collaborative autobiographies, such as those that this project is concerned with, are possibly even more activist in their nature as they rally together the experiences, realities and struggles of a marginalised community in the common cause to dispel stereotypes and preconceived ideas of the queer community. When considering the large-scale discrimination against queer individuals, I believe there to be undeniable socio-political value in foregrounding and analysing such autobiographical texts.

The concept ‘queer’ can be regarded as an umbrella term that describes individuals who exist outside of the traditional categories of a gender-normative and heteronormative society; more generally, individuals may consider themselves to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. However, this view of what constitutes queer is not absolute as the term ‘queer’ presents a number of difficulties with regard to defining or restricting who and what is ‘queer’ and who and what is not. Before further exploring the concept of ‘queer’, it is necessary to understand what underlies heteronormativity and gender-normativity, and presents them as the dominant, favoured and expected modes of behaviour in society. Judith Butler notes that

the institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender and desire. (1990: 22-3)

Heteronormativity and gender-normativity can thus be understood as being based on models of behaviour that function through the categorisation, firstly by categorising individuals according to their biological sex (signalled by the presence of penis or vagina). Then from this point these individuals are assigned specific and rigid gender roles, gender identities, and expected behavioural characteristics; all with significant emphasis on heterosexuality as the ‘normal’ mode of sexuality and the marginalisation

of alternate gender and sexual expressions. I will proceed by exploring queer as a concept, and how it becomes useful in deconstructing the biases inherent in heteronormative and gender-normative expectations of society.

Historically, queer was viewed as a derogatory term used negatively in describing individuals who belonged to sexual minorities. However, as time went on the term was 'reclaimed' and its usage became more positive. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s queer theory began to emerge with the works of authors such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet* 1990), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* 1990) and Michael Warner (*Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* 1993). Queer theory is concerned with issues surrounding identity, gender and sexuality. It challenges and problematises normativity in terms of gender and sexuality and the boundaries it creates, while also at the same time attempting to avoid the creation of new boundaries and restrictions that may arise from the LGBT category. For example, Judith Butler suggests that "gay and lesbian" signify somewhat redundant and problematic identity categories; categories which have collectively and incorrectly been assigned a common identity (1990:3). Furthermore, these categories also ignore important overlapping and varied differences in the areas of class, race and ethnicity (1990:3). Tamsin Spargo offers a general, but nonetheless useful, idea of what constitutes queer theory; she interestingly begins by stating what queer theory is not, as opposed to what it is:

Queer theory is not a singular systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. If queer theory is a school of thought, then it's one with a highly unorthodox view of discipline. (1999:9)

Through identifying and acknowledging the problematic nature of discourse which finds its foundations in theories of categorisation, my intention in this dissertation is to move away from attempting to create or reinforce pre-existing categories of gender and sexuality. Rather, through acknowledging the inherent complexities of 'queer', I will be enabled to explore how it effectively calls into question and destabilises the dominant and normative categories of gender and sexuality. With this being said, it is also

unrealistic to completely ignore identity categorisation, and one must thus actively seek to re-imagine and attach possible positive modes of functioning to such constructs. Jean Bacon draws on the ideas of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who notes that identity categories become a useful tool, “especially for groups who depend on the definition as a distinct minority population” (1998:252).

Bacon explains that

in order to create a world safe for same-sex relationships, gays and lesbians must ‘come out’ and fight the legal system which discriminates against them. At the same, the assertion of an identity based on such same-sex attractions can be both life threatening and politically inexpedient. (1998:253)

The above quotation by Bacon highlights the potentially positive, as well as negative, possibilities in assuming a collective identity, in terms of the categories relating to queer identifications. Collective identities are by implication political, and are thus useful in serving the ongoing human rights struggles of the queer minority who are drawn together collectively through the similarities in their experiences. In this manner queer becomes a useful site in which not only issues related to gender- and sexuality-based rights might be addressed but by implication human rights overall.

Queer as a term is activist and anti-identity in nature, and in as much as it signifies LGBT, it also deems it inadequate. Annamarie Jagose explores the idea that one of the primary functions of ‘queer’ is to resist the model of sexual and gender discourse which claims heterosexuality as its origin and focuses on the mismatches between gender, sex and desire (1996:73). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes ‘queer’ as

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender or of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. (1993:8)

What Sedgwick foregrounds here is the complexity of what queer can and cannot be assumed to constitute, as it aims to include what is often indefinable by mainstream and

normative standards, and thereby she acknowledges how any attempt to define queer is problematic.

The work of Michel Foucault has played a significant role in the development and establishment of queer theory; the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* appeared in translation during the 1970s. Spargo poses the important question of whether “sexuality has always been waiting for us to free it and, with it, ourselves from sexual restraint?” (12). She asks this question as the starting point for highlighting the basis of Foucault’s ideas with regard to human sexuality and sexual identity:

A vital feature of Foucault’s argument is that sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather than biological origins. (1999:12)

Furthermore, Jagose underlines Foucault’s view of sexual identities as the discursive effects of available cultural categories, and with this as a central component of his ideas he then “challenges commonly held understandings of power and resistance.” She describes his work as having been

more explicitly engaged in denaturalising dominant understandings of sexual identity. In emphasising that sexuality is not an essentially personal attribute but an available cultural category [...] Foucault’s writings have been crucially significant for the development of lesbian and gay and, subsequently, queer activism and scholarship. (1996:82)

In Foucauldian theory ‘discourse’ can be viewed as a “historically situated material practice that in its complex functioning works to produce and foreground various power relations” (Spargo 1999:73). Butler, quoted in Fuss (1991:14), suggests that in his work, Foucault assumes a viewpoint that positions discourse as existing as “both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” This idea of discourse as the beginning of an “opposing strategy” results in Foucault’s representation of discourse “as a mode of resistance, not to contest its content but in order to particularise its strategic operations” (Jagose 1996:82). Discourse, by its very nature, relies primarily on the existence of various rigid constructs such as binarism. Binarism exists as a violent



hierarchy and operates primarily through the attempted exclusion and condemnation of one side of the binary. An example would be racism and the exclusion of certain races in the form of racial segregation – with the white side of the racial black/white binary in the position of favour. Similarly, within sexuality-related discourses a binary such as heterosexual/homosexual restricts the fluidity of individual gender and sexual identification.

The term ‘queer’ has been an especially useful tool in mobilising various thinkers and commentators aiming to foreground the need for research in terms of gender- and sexuality-related issues. In light of this ‘queer’ has moved away from interpretation of the term as a form of hate speech, and consequently it presents the ideal space to address issues related to sexuality and gender that are not represented as heteronormative or gender-normative. Butler expresses the desire that queer and studies into the queer do not ever become an area that is static or stagnant, but rather she foresees that:

If the term is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. This also means that it will doubtless have to be yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively. (1993:228)

The individuals who relay their life experiences and/or stories in the primary texts exist in the commonality of the fact that they are in some ways marginalised by mainstream society. This common space of marginalisation then becomes the ground on which queer can effectively function, and heteronormativity and gender-normativity can subsequently be called into question, through queer theory and activism. Queer as a term is used throughout the primary texts that I have chosen, primarily as a signifier of shared identification and experience beyond whatever limits may exist in the boundaries of LGBT.

A number of theorists and commentators, such as Marc Epprecht (2008) and Mikki van Zyl (2011), have consistently noted the existence of queer subjecthood across the

African cultural landscape. In his article entitled “Freeing South Africa: The ‘Modernization’ of Male-Male Sexuality in Soweto” (1998), Donald Donham closely examines the short autobiography of a founding member of the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), Linda Ngcobo, entitled “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi” (directly translated as “Those Who Fuck Me Say I’m Tasty” (written in collaboration with Hugh Maclean). Ngcobo’s autobiographical account appears in *Defiant Desire* (Gevisser & Cameron 1994). Parts of Ngcobo’s story illustrate what may have existed as a need for sex/gender/sexuality categorisation in townships. Donham foregrounds that, for example:

In black township slang, the actual designation for the effeminate partner in a male same-sex coupling was *stabane* – literally, a hermaphrodite. Instead of sexuality in the Western sense, it was local notions of sexed bodies and gendered identities – what I shall call sex/gender in the black South African sense – that divided and categorized. But these two analytical dimensions, gender and sex, interrelated in complex ways. (1998:7)

In the above context, the word *stabane* was used to describe men who took part in any sort of same-sex relationship despite the biology of their genitalia or how they self-identified in terms of gender. In Ngcobo’s autobiography he acknowledges that with the arrival of the ‘new’ and ‘free’ South Africa and the acknowledgement of Western ideas of sex/gender/sexuality identity categories, LGBT individuals in townships were then able to claim new and varied identities that did not force them to adhere to the strict gender/sex categorisations that they were previously subject to. This offers a perspective on the difficulties and complexities present in the gender/sex/sexuality categories, and in this manner queer can offer a useful space to address African and South African sexual and gender identities without placing a substantial focus on any form of strict categorisation. Queer allows the movement towards a wider destabilisation of rigidly defined sexual and gender subdivisions and the removal of structures that result in the marginalisation of certain individuals.

The focus on categorisation in the primary texts is evident and is an especially significant issue to spotlight when one considers the scope of each text as, for example, *Yes I Am!*, *Reclaiming the L-Word* and *Trans* specifically present stories of either gay

men, lesbian women or transgender individuals respectively. *Reclaiming the L-Word* is described in its foreword as being strongly influenced by feminist ideals and it is positioned as a collection concerned with the issues of women, specifically lesbian women who are termed “sister outsiders” (2011:ix). In *Yes I Am!* Ashraf Joahardien thanks his co-editor Robin Malan “for identifying texts in which gay male South African writers dared to dream this impossible dream” (this “dream” being the realisation of the completed project which was eventually published as *Yes I Am!*) (201:10). In a similar manner to *Reclaiming the L-Word* the focus of the stories shared in *Yes I Am!* is strictly in line with identity categorisation in terms of gender and sexuality, namely: gay and male. In *Trans* the focus is also specifically on the stories of transgender individuals. Thus, these three texts in many respects solidify and separate the identity categories in the LGBT acronym. Such categorisation is difficult to avoid and the texts do not lose merit because of their focus on categorisation; instead, what this categorisation results in is the realisation that categorisation does require some level of examination and critique.

Significantly, *Hijab* presents the stories of “queer Muslims”, and in its introduction the editor, Pepe Hendricks, defines “queer” as a term used in describing “sexual orientation or gender expression that does not conform to heteronormative society” (2009:ix). Although *Hijab* is concerned with ‘queer’ issues as opposed to lesbian or gay issues, categorisation occurs on the level of spiritual identity. The decision to separate the texts in the manner that has occurred in the case of *Hijab*, *Yes I Am!*, *Reclaiming the L-Word* and *Trans* is clearly not in effort to confirm and encourage binarist ideas of gender and sexuality. Rather, it appears that motivations are often related to the ‘politics of identity’<sup>4</sup>, as in *Reclaiming the L-Word* for example the adverse effects of patriarchy serve as a motivation to gather and collectively foreground the experiences of lesbian women. I will consider these and other issues that arise in greater depth in the coming chapters.

Terming a piece of life writing a ‘queer autobiography’ is inherently problematic as it deems the queer facet of an individual’s identity as the most defining. Furthermore,

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<sup>4</sup> Spargo offers the following definition: “[Identity politics is an] affirmative political strategy based on the assertion of a common cause through shared characteristics” (1999:73-4).

considering the complex nature of both ‘queer’ and ‘autobiography’ as terms, it is certainly not easy to decide what ‘queer autobiography’ is. Any attempt to simplify or prescribe a definition for ‘queer autobiography’ would be near impossible. The collections that I have chosen to examine almost all explicitly identify the writers whose stories are contained in the respective collections in terms of the LGBT categories. Thus, I am not favouring the author’s queerness or implying that it be deemed the most defining trait of their character in using the term ‘queer autobiography’. As I have outlined in the preceding paragraph, each of the texts I am examining in this dissertation concerns itself with a specific identity category within the LGBT acronym. However, what are clearly absent in each of the primary texts are the accounts of individuals who self-identify as bisexual. I will explore the significance of this and the textual representations of attitudes towards bisexuality in forthcoming chapters of this dissertation.

Margaretta Jolly presents the argument that queer life writing itself presents a contradiction in terms (2001:474). She notes that “autobiography in the postmodern era has established the self as a fiction or construct, discontinuous, performative, parodic, expressed in the third person, written collectively or collaboratively” (474). This quotation stresses the difficulties inherent in any attempts at specifically labelling and defining any piece of life writing – autobiographical or not – as queer, mainly because understandings of queer itself are varied and constantly evolving. Therefore, my intention in terming the four primary texts ‘queer autobiographies’ is not an attempt to reduce the term ‘queer’ and thereby perpetuate gender and sexual binaries, but rather my intention is to utilise ‘queer’ as a signifier of vast diversity in terms of identification, and also to foreground its usefulness as a vehicle of change. There are common threads that run throughout the narratives of the individual stories: issues such as ‘coming out’ as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender to family and friends, sexual intercourse and sexual experiences, issues of belonging to the LGBT community, religion, and romantic and familial relationships. The term ‘queer’ in this regard is useful in connecting the experiences and accounts of individuals in each of the primary texts to the experiences and accounts of a larger collective, thereby aiding not only in amplifying a common cause but also symbolising the mobilisation of collective action. The concept of ubuntu

functions in a similar manner, by collectively drawing together individuals in terms of the commonalities inherent in the human experience.

The concept of ubuntu is an African humanist concept which proposes the idea that the experience of an individual is related to those that surround him/her, as all human beings are believed to be connected. Ubuntu is introduced as the foremost belief in African ethical conduct by authors such as Johann Broodryk (2002:4), with the largely individualist Western notions of existence being alien concepts. Ubuntu is based primarily on ideas of communality, sharing and interdependency. Mikki van Zyl offers the idea that in ubuntu “freedom is circumscribed by belonging in a community, primarily referenced through kinship” (2011:337). The South African Constitution finds its foundations in the humanist concept of ubuntu. Ubuntu is mentioned in the final clause of the 1993 interim Constitution of South Africa, and is one of the values that the “new” South Africa is premised on. The Constitution thus allows for basic rights for all South African citizens, and posits these rights in terms of the existence of reciprocal duties and responsibilities. Es’kia Mphahlele argues that in contrast to Western individualism, “the African begins with the community and then determines what the individual’s place and role should be in relation to the community”, and furthermore he presents the idea that “man finds fulfilment not as a separate individual but within family and community”, quoted in Gaylard (2004:268). I am interested in exploring the functionality and outcomes of beliefs such as these in relation to ideas of collective identity and the construction of the queer autobiographical self in the primary texts.

Rob Gaylard draws attention to what Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye terms “radical communitarianism”, a form of African humanism that he deems problematic if it seeks to posit the formation of identity or personhood as “wholly constituted” by community or family to which the individual belongs (2004:269). In this way ubuntu may serve as a model of exclusion which favours the majority, and possibly discriminates against minorities within the community and any existing variations in terms of sexuality and gender identity, especially if, as Mphahlele suggests, the individual’s place is determined solely in line with the greater collective *i.e.* the extended community. The critical exploration of the concept of ubuntu is thus

undeniably necessary and useful in ascribing belonging and understanding the position and place of queer individuals in various sectors of South African society.

With regard to the rights of queer individuals an African humanist perspective and a concept like ubuntu allow the researcher to explore uniquely African ideas and attitudes regarding queer identity. Although my focus is primarily on the South African experience as represented in the primary texts, colonialism and its effects demand that Africa as a whole is considered to some degree. Theorists and commentators, such as Marc Epprecht (1998, 2008), have noted that homosexuality and transgender identities are not as ‘un-African’ as has become the general belief over time. Epprecht underscores the fact that Africans have engaged in same-sex practices and relationships in the past and still continue to engage in these practices and relationships in the present (2008:6). Mikki van Zyl presents the interesting view that scholarship in African identities suggests that “homophobia and not homosexuality is the actual colonial export” (2011:338). Despite this knowledge being presented by academics and researchers, discrimination against LGBT individuals is a reality throughout South Africa and Africa at large. In the introduction of his book, entitled *African Intimacies* (2007), Neville Hoad relays a general history of the development of attitudes towards homosexuality in Africa. Of interest is his concern with present discriminatory and condemnatory attitudes towards homosexuality and queer-identifying individuals in Africa. Hoad notes the link between these attitudes and post-colonial politics. He makes mention of Robert Mugabe’s notorious comments regarding homosexuality: “If dogs and pigs don’t do it, why must human beings? Can human beings be human beings if they do worse than pigs?” (xi). Es’kia Mphahlele, quoted in Gaylard (2004:259), argues that African humanism may have been “challenged, fragmented, even devastated” in South Africa, but for him it still exists. I am thus interested in the meeting point of ubuntu and the various Western ideologies to which South Africans are subject – specifically monotheistic religion.

*Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* deals explicitly and primarily with the contrasting of spiritual/religious identity against queer identity. Exploring this idea will form one aspect of my analysis of the primary texts, and in doing so I will draw on the ideas of David Marsh as expressed in his piece entitled “Writing the Spirit” (2012:251). Marsh

comments how in his own life there has been a strong desire to locate a common ground on which his sexual identity and religious/spiritual identity can co-exist. Issues of this nature do not only dominate *Hijab* but are also clearly visible throughout the other texts. My initial intention was to exclude *Hijab* from my list of primary texts; however, I later realised that it in fact symbolised a dominant feature that was evident in the other texts as well. Ignoring the spiritual/religious aspect inherent in the autobiographical accounts would have presented a far less complete picture of what I believe this project should represent. Furthermore, it has been reported that Statistics South Africa estimates from the 2001 nation-wide census that roughly 85% of South Africans consider themselves religious or spiritual, with an overwhelming 79.8% identifying as Christian, 1.5% as Muslim, 1.2% as Hindu, 0.2% as Jewish, 0.3% as practicing traditional African religion and 0.6% practicing other faiths (Kane-Berman *et al.* 2004:28).<sup>5</sup>

I do not intend that issues of spirituality or religion dominate this dissertation; however, as the vast majority of condemnation against LGBT individuals is often based on religious/spiritual beliefs, I believe it to be necessary part of my intended discussion. I am also interested in contrasting the idea of ubuntu with monotheistic religion. In doing so I hope to explore how ubuntu may serve to offer new perspectives on how traditionalist monotheistic religion operates, and sometimes discriminates against those who exist outside its binarist restrictions. In this regard, I will consider the “Ubuntu Theology” of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and the reforms it offers in realising uniquely African forms of mainstream religion in the primary texts I will be analysing. Tutu’s “Ubuntu Theology” bases itself on the humanist ideals of ubuntu – working together and existing symbiotically with monotheistic religion. The result is the reverence for God that religion foregrounds as vital, but also a deeper respect for humanity and human life. “Ubuntu Theology” aims to dissolve the alienation and oppression that has been institutionalised in certain quarters of monotheistic religion and theology, and replace it with an appreciation for the interconnectedness of the human experience. Tutu’s “Ubuntu Theology” encourages the appreciation of commonality in many life experiences and the interconnectedness of life, as opposed to a focus on difference.

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<sup>5</sup> I have used these statistics as the full details of the 2012 South African Census are not currently available.

Collective identity assumes an overarching position encompassing the concepts I have discussed above: queer, autobiography as relational and ubuntu. Marilyn Brewer and Wendi Gardener foreground the fact that psychology and sociology concerned themselves with the “individual self concept” for much of the twentieth century (1996:83). However, globalisation and cross-cultural perspectives demand that when construction of the self is examined and studied it becomes imperative that social aspects of the self are explored as well, *i.e.* exploring the extent to which individuals define themselves in relation to those that surround them. I will concern myself with what Brewer and Gardener term the “social self (those aspects of the self-concept that reflect assimilation to others or significant social groups)” and “personal self (those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the self from all others)” and the levels on which the two interact (83).

The above-mentioned ideas will obviously be explored in relation to the lives presented in the primary autobiographical works that this dissertation is concerned with. I will examine how versions of the queer personal self are constructed and how individuals are then able to find ways to successfully exist, find a place and ascertain a sense of belonging within broader hegemonic societal structures. I will also examine instances when such assimilation is not possible. The exploration of issues relating to assimilation results in discourses regarding issues of belonging arising as well. Belonging and the desire to belong have been noted as a key motivation for human behaviour. Nira Yuval-Davis shows that belonging functions on three levels: these concern social locations, individuals’ identifications and emotional attachments to various collectives and groupings, and lastly ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others’ belonging (2006:199).

Thus, I have chosen to separate the forthcoming chapters of this dissertation in terms of an exploration of queer autobiographical selves and how they may be constructed specifically in relation to the common spaces (and the people directly encountered in these spaces) that queer individuals may exist in, namely community spaces (Chapter Two), the family and home unit (Chapter Three), and lastly spiritual places (Chapter Four). I am not suggesting that experience and construction of the self are limited to these spaces; however, through engagement with the primary texts I have found these to



be places of common reference. In the chapters that follow, I will consider various stories from across the four primary texts in an attempt to interlink and highlight similarities and differences in respect of the experience of each individual who has relayed an autobiographical account. The intent is not to generalise but rather to maintain respect for the uniqueness of each experience while also acknowledging the activist element inherent in each publication, exhibited through presenting each account within a collective.

Linda Caporael, quoted in Brewer & Gardener (1996:84), developed a model that renders the social attachments which result in the construction of the self as existing in terms of four configurations, which are: dyads (two person relationships), teams (small face-to-face social and working groups), bands (small interacting communities) and tribes (macro-bands characterised by shared identity and communication but without continual face to face interaction). The relationships formed within the above fundamental configurations all play a role in how the personal self is then constructed. Constantine Sedikes and Marilyn Brewer note that the individual self is constructed through differentiating from others, whereas the relational self is constructed through “assimilating with significant others” (2001:1).

I undertake the task ahead firmly in the belief that the autobiographical construction of the self is relational, and identity is formed and constructed through various social interactions and relationships. Sedikes and Brewer also draw attention to the idea that the “collective self is achieved by inclusion in large social groups and contrasting the group to which one belongs (*i.e.* the in-group) with relevant out-groups” (2001:2). Exploring the construction of the self in this manner is also useful in attempting to uncover the different levels and workings of structures such as patriarchy and religion. I will attempt to foreground how these ideas of collective identity and relationality reveal themselves in the four collaborative life narratives this dissertation is concerned with.

Collective identity does not position the ‘personal self’ as solely a construct or product of communal-based collective and relational interactions, but instead it appreciates the complexity inherent in constructing and representing the self. Furthermore, collective identity does not function to dissolve the intricacies and unique details inherent in all

individual life experiences, even in cases where two individuals may have experienced something strikingly similar. Instead it acknowledges the autonomy of the ‘personal self’ as well as the details of the individual experience, but at the same time acknowledges the relationality of certain elements of the human experience. With regard to the relational nature of autobiography, Seyla Benhabib, quoted in Coullie and Meyer, reflectively offers the following:

When the story of a life can only be told from the perspective of the other, then the self is a victim and the sufferer who has lost control over her existence. When the story of a life can only be told from the standpoint of the individual, then such a self is a narcissist and a loner who may have attained autonomy without solidarity. A coherent sense of self is attained with successful integration of autonomy and solidarity. (2006:3)

Considering the complex nature of auto/biographical accounts and the construction of the self, Coullie and Meyer spotlight how through using “self representation [through auto/biography] to question and define our notions of self, we relate earlier to later selves, thereby constituting collective identities. Moreover, in addressing others through our auto/biographical accounts we enter the public sphere and situate ourselves in relation to an audience” (2006:1). Thus, construction of the “real-life” self becomes based on a number of complex social interactions between this “real-life” self, the autobiographical self and the collectives in which they exist, and lastly the audience who engages with the autobiographical account.

In this manner autobiography, like other forms of literature, develops as a tool of social change and reform. Autobiography cannot be dismissed as being solely a self-indulgent relaying of one person’s life, as it in fact presents something much more complicated, something intentionally or unintentionally concerned with ‘lives’ as opposed to a ‘life’. It is important that the above is spotlighted as it functions hand in hand with the fact that one of the key hopes and expectations in the publishing of *Hijab, Trans, Reclaiming the L-Word*, and *Yes I Am!* is that each individual text translates into a tool for social change through the combating of ignorance and the fostering of understanding. For this reason these texts can be considered in terms of their contribution to discourses of identity politics and the exploring thereof. Although this project is concerned with the value of

each text in terms of literary analysis, the present state of affairs in South Africa in terms of queer issues necessitates that some consideration is placed on the texts' contribution to social discourses.

I have explored in depth the four main concerns of this dissertation, namely: the form of autobiography, the ideas linked to queer theory, the African humanist concept of ubuntu and collective identity. This then allows me to address the issue of the title of this dissertation: "Queering Ubuntu: The Self and the Other in South African Queer Autobiography". Although this order of discussion may possibly appear to be a backwards approach, understanding the fundamentals of the main concepts functions to allow a clearer understanding of the intention behind the title of this dissertation. Tamsin Spargo suggests that "'queer' can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the 'normal' or 'normalising'" (1999:8-9). As I have previously highlighted in my discussions of queer in this chapter, rather than functioning to create the strictly defined category of 'queer autobiography', its usage has instead become valuable in suggesting that the primary texts that I am examining do not neatly fit into binarist views of gender and sexuality. Queer is a term that is not static but rather it remains in continual flux, thus it acts as a site of variance and difference, and also serves as a unifier in shared difference. The second usage of queer as it appears in the title of this dissertation is as a verb: through the intention and action of queering ubuntu. The act of queering consists of positively destabilising, disrupting and questioning what we think we understand. Charlie Glickman (2012) offers some useful ideas relating to queer and its usage as a verb:

To queer something, whether it's a text, a story, or an identity, is to take a look at its foundations and question them. We can explore its limits, its biases, and its boundaries. We can look for places where there's elasticity or discover ways we can transform it into something new. To queer is to examine our assumptions and decide which of them we want to keep, change, discard, or play with. This becomes a practice in transcending the habit of settling for pre-defined categories and creating new ones.

Thus in considering ubuntu, the intention is to explore something which is not only an isolated African humanist concept, but is the basis of the supreme legislation of the

land, the Constitution – a document which draws all South Africans together collectively. Ubuntu as represented in the primary texts is a site of shared community, and also in some instances shared identity.

Ubuntu also represents the core values of humanist values of compassion, respect, caring, and sharing (Broodryk 2002:32). As ubuntu is based largely in ideas of communality, what a queer ubuntu achieves is the active rethinking and reimagining of shared identity, communality, interactions in community spaces and what each of these things represents and means to individuals who exist outside the expectations of the hegemonic gender-normative and heteronormative expectations of society. As I proceed with my analysis of the primary texts, I have chosen to examine specific stories from each text in line with the thematic concern of the chapter in which they appear. In the final chapter of this dissertation I will provide a more general analysis of each text as it stands individually.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONSTRUCTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF AND IDEAS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN COMMUNITY SPACES**

In this chapter and the two chapters that follow, I am concerned with the direct examination and analysis of various autobiographical accounts taken from the primary texts, in light of the relationality inherent in self-construction. I will proceed in my analysis by investigating textual constructions and representations of the autobiographical self in light of collective identity and belonging in the context of ‘community spaces’. Tory Higgins and Danielle May note that

people do not necessarily use their unique and stable characteristics as the predominant basis for self-definition. Rather relationships or affiliations between the self and others can strongly influence the way in which one’s self-concept is construed. (2001:48)

Community spaces could relate to a number of social locations; however, in terms of this dissertation I will specifically consider community spaces as areas which individuals encounter once they exit the home space and family unit. I am in no way suggesting that the family and community exist on entirely separate axes, as it is inevitable that different levels of existence link in varied ways. For example, societal influences and structures become part of familial structures, and vice versa. In terms of an analysis of the autobiographical self framed by a theory such as collective identity, separating social spaces in this manner becomes a useful way of engaging with and critiquing the various structures independently and then collectively. Very simply, these community spaces could be neighbourhoods, places of learning (schools or tertiary institutions) and places of work. Spiritual places such as churches, temples and mosques are a part of these community spaces; however, I have chosen to consider spiritual places separately in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Religion and spirituality gives rise to a myriad of intricate and compound issues that I believe need to be considered separately.

I begin by exploring the relationships forged in community spaces such as the school environment and the army, and then I move on to explore interactions within the ‘queer community’ and the extended community, where I further investigate ubuntu and the

‘Africanness’ of identifying as queer. I will take into account the multiplicities present in the experiences of the individuals relaying their autobiographical accounts in relation to those that they encounter in various community spaces. These individuals could be work colleagues, teachers, friends, community members, peers and so on. It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of possible ‘community spaces’ or possible person-to-person relations in these spaces. Thus, I will foreground those spaces that appear most commonly in each text, and also those that may present any interesting variations.

Nira Yuval-Davis underscores the fact that

when it is said that people belong to a particular gender, or race, or class or nation, that they belong to a particular age-group, kinship group or a certain profession, what is being talked about are social locations, which at each historical moment, have particular implications *vis-a-vis* the grids of power relations in society. (2006:199)

With this in mind, I am interested in how certain social locations and areas of shared community space present the grounds for complex economic, social and political interactions that play a role in the construction and representation of versions of the autobiographical self in each text. Interactions on these levels are necessary to reflect on, as an important facet of construction and representation of the self is based on social comparison. For example, Marilyn Brewer and Wendi Gardener note that self-esteem and notions of self-worth are not based solely on the individual’s concept of self, but they also relate to comparisons and relations with others (1996:85).

Breyten Breytenbach, quoted in Coullie and Meyer, aptly states that

sense of (identity, I-ing of self, id-entity) is dependent on interaction with some thing or some body “out there”. “I am human through people.” We identify/situate ourselves in our interaction with and relation to cultural constructs such as language, religion, ideology, a shared narrative of history or destiny, adherence or resistance to specific values. In this sense, the shaping of identity and the resultant (self) identification is very much the product of a given society. (2006:7)

Breytenbach's focus on the community and culture as the basis for the construction of the self will form a crucial part of my analysis in this chapter. I will seek to investigate the light in which individuals in the primary texts consider the people and places that they encounter and relate to in their autobiographical accounts, and consequently how they view the autobiographical self. I will also investigate how the autobiographical self is placed in opposition with 'others' who may be represented textually as enemies, strangers, opponents or even friends and lovers. The 'other' is represented by the individuals who form a part of a larger collective represented by societal and cultural structures, and with this in mind I will examine the individuals' sense of self in relation to these structures. The intention of this dissertation is not to attempt to specify or prescribe an all-encompassing formula for examining autobiographical self-construction in 'queer autobiography'. Instead, I am interested in exploring the many facets of autobiographical self-construction that are in part a result of hybrid experiences and identities in South Africa's 'rainbow nation'<sup>6</sup>. Such an approach could lead to limitless observations and deductions, and for this reason I have decided to look specifically at collective identity and ubuntu to frame my analysis, as these two ideas maintain a strong South African relevance, which I will investigate in detail in both this and the coming chapters.

Communities are obviously formed through various communal practices, and also possibly through existing together in the same geographical space. The family unit exists within the extended community and is usually subject to moral and value systems of the community at large. These sorts of relations are difficult to break down and are particularly interesting to analyse when one considers apartheid and its blatant intention to separate individuals along racial lines through various laws and policies. This racialised division in living and community spaces is still visible presently, but is being slowly eroded as the face of South African communities begins transforming. The hegemonic subject in terms of queer issues in South Africa has been largely urban,

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<sup>6</sup> The term "rainbow nation" has its genesis with Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu who referred to South Africans as "rainbow people of God" during numerous public appearances. Essentially the term refers to the diverse cultural and racial landscape of South Africa. During South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy it symbolically represented newness, peace, hope and prosperity for the country's future. The idea of a "rainbow nation" has, however, been critiqued by many commentators for what is believed to be the purposeful neglecting of the genuine social and economic issues – such as crime and poverty – that face South Africans in post-apartheid democracy. (Habib 1996)

white and male, and this is perpetuated primarily through patriarchy and the effects of the apartheid regime.

Patriarchal systems are still deeply entrenched in the South African cultural landscape despite the divisions in geography, race, religion and ethnicity in the country. It is for this reason that queer individuals face discrimination in all sectors of the South African state, as is represented in the primary texts. Queer individuals are thus drawn into a collective by the fact that they are discriminated against for diverging from the heteronormative status quo. However, assuming a queer collective identity in this way does not neglect obvious differences and the uniqueness inherent in individual experiences and identities. For example, one may identify as a gay man, and thus one may identify oneself collectively with other gay men; however, one may also be Jewish in terms of spiritual identification and thus may see oneself differently from a Muslim gay man. Resultantly, these vectors of identity will then constantly intersect depending on what facet of one's identity is being considered. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson highlight this point:

Social organizations and symbolic interactions are always in flux; therefore, identities are provisional. What may be a meaningful identity, on one day or in one context, may not be culturally and personally meaningful at another moment or in another context [...] Because of this constant placement and displacement of “who” we are, we can think of identities as multiple and as “contextual, contested, and contingent”. (2001:33)

Bringing short queer autobiographies together collectively in the manner which the primary texts I am examining have done does not simplify each individual's story, but instead it offers an effective and useful collective identity in which numerous issues may then be effectively addressed. In speaking of racism, apartheid and the upsurge of black autobiography, Judith Coullie & Stephan Meyer draw attention to the following:

The experiences of one victimized individual can serve metonymically as a commentary on the lives of millions. In turn, this means that readers who belong to the oppressed masses will readily find their experiences echoed in the testimony of others. (2006:26)



This statement, I believe, holds some truth for autobiographies written by those who have been discriminated against because they may self-identify within the identity categories of a sexual minority, or are transgender. Drawing parallels between apartheid and current issues of discrimination against queer individuals is not without foundation. Although at present, progressive laws protecting the rights of LGBT individuals exist in South Africa, attitudes on the ground certainly do not reflect this. The minority status of queer individuals certainly does not diminish the need to be actively involved in discourses that encourage the movement away from hatred for and violence towards queer individuals, as is underscored in each primary text.

Different social locations allow for different realisations of self and different awakenings within the many facets of the self. Many of the individuals in the stories that I am analysing always situate themselves firstly in terms of the extended community from which they come. Although these stories are not specifically the stories of a place, they do in many ways relate numerous truths about the places they mention. In the anonymous autobiographical account entitled “Fair Share of Life” (2009), which features in *Hijab*, the narrator recounts several of his life experiences; most notably these are told in relation to the various social locations he has found himself in. In his reflections one can deduce that these spaces and interactions have formed an important component of how he views himself, portrays himself and reconciles different parts of his extended self in the text. The opening lines of his account read:

*Those were the days, a simple thought running through my head as I look back on my life. I sit and smile as I reflect. I believe that Salt River was a wonderful place to start out my humble life. Of course it had its challenges... (6)*

At the very beginning of his autobiographical account the narrator makes reference to the town in which grew up, and in many ways this presents a frame for the story that follows. The suburb from which he originates is for him an important site of self-identification. He then immediately makes reference to the primary school which he attended: the bullies he encountered there, his twin brother who protected him from these bullies and one of his teachers who had a conversation regarding his ‘artistic’

abilities with his mother (6). In the opening paragraphs the narrator immediately positions himself in terms of familiar surroundings and individuals that he encountered within these surroundings, and then throughout his story he relays his experiences in terms of specific spaces and people that he encounters in these spaces. He recollects experiences of religion/spirituality in various religious/spiritual spaces, and also details experiences within the Inner Circle (an LGBT support organisation in the Western Cape, also responsible for the publication of *Hijab*). My aim is not to produce a reductive summary of the narrator's life and experiences, but instead I want to draw attention to how his account of his life and view of himself are constructed in direct relation to others.

As the narrator reflects on the self and experiences in different locations, he actively engages in attempts to reconcile autobiographical versions of the present self with the current self, all in hopes of realising new versions of the self. There is an innate understanding of the self as evolving and a product of the present and the past, and autobiography provides the ideal site for such deliberations. People often speak colloquially of the things that have 'shaped them', and for the narrator in this story there is constant reference to these kinds of experiences. This acknowledges the fact that construction of the self is thus relational. As I have previously mentioned, these social locations of 'community space' are the grounds of complex social interactions, and these interactions directly influence the construction and representation of both the personal self and the social self.

The narrator in "Fair Share of Life" notes the following:

During my high school days the bullying increased. I was constantly subjected to their surges of testosterone and was more of a target than ever before. I attended a school that was outside of my immediate environment. To crown it all it was a boys' school, Spes Bona Senior Secondary. The school was held in high esteem because of its excellent academic record. There were always snide comments from

the broader community that implied it was an elite school. They also said that the boys who attended the school were *moffies*<sup>7</sup>. (7)

This quotation from the text emphasises a number of complicated social dynamics, as issues of gender, sexuality and class are presented to readers. The narrator is removed from his immediate and familiar surroundings in order that he may attend a boys' school in a different geographical area, and he is subsequently bullied in this school. This school presents an interesting social space in which to consider the narrator's construction of self. Earlier on in the text the narrator relates to the reader how he felt a special kinship with his female school-mates, as they always unconditionally accepted him, and for this reason his friendships remained predominantly with females. This is further compounded by the fact that he suffered different levels of abuse at the hands of his male school-mates. Thus, his attending a boys' school further contributes to the initial alienation that he felt by leaving the familiarity of his own community. It is interesting to note how the narrator refers to "their surges of testosterone", highlighting that he sees himself as very much separate from those that surround him in this setting. The narrator places himself in opposition to the majority in this specific social space, and this allows him to begin the process of introspection into who he is in terms of his social and personal self. The alienation and abuse that he felt and experienced at this school illuminate for him the ways in which he was 'different' from the boys who were his peers and school-mates. The narrator exclaims, "Yes I was different to the majority of the boys at the school, but I had a right to be who I was meant to be. I was unique!" (8). In terms of his construction and view of self, this school setting forms the space in which he recognises his 'difference' and begins internal debates around it, and thus his experiences in this setting are important in how he views and begins constructing the queer autobiographical self.

Dianne Tice and Roy Baumeister conclude that

health and happiness are strongly connected to belongingness and, indeed, people who lack social ties or are alone in the world fare

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<sup>7</sup> The term "moffie" is an Afrikaans word which is used to describe a homosexual and/or effeminate male. The word has derogatory connotations and has formed a part of hate speech. However, in recent years, just like the word "queer", it has become reclaimed and its usage has taken on positive connotations for gay men.

worse in nearly every category of physical and mental well-being, as well as social pathologies. (2001:73)

Similarly, in his isolated state during high school the narrator struggles with staging belonging as he does not identify with an extended collective in which he can experience the comfort of a shared identity. In response to these feelings of isolation and loneliness the narrator then finds kinship with a fellow school-mate named Nazeem – a self-identifying gay male – through the beginning of a romantic relationship. This relationship allows the narrator to develop and grow; he begins to grapple with and reconcile issues of selfhood and identity, noting, “it was a life-changing experience that made me feel good about myself. It showed me who I was and who I was going to be” (8). In finding someone who related to his feelings and experiences the narrator was then able to further understand and explore areas of the self in a positive manner. Marilyn Brewer and Wendi Gardener spotlight the fact that individuals attach positive emotions to the usage of the concepts “we” and “us” in the English language, and that these emotions are “activated automatically and unconsciously” (1996:87). A study such as this obviously has limitations if one considers non-English speaking individuals; however, it foregrounds the fact that human beings find pleasure and worth in having someone with whom they can share commonalities which draw them together in a collective.

We see this functioning in the life of the narrator in “Fair Share of Life”, as his view of the personal self begins to change positively once he finds companionship and is able to share and interrelate his experiences in a two person relationship or dyad. Thus, it is clear that a shared collective identity can have positive effects on the construction, representation and view of the self. In the isolation and loneliness he faces because of his ‘difference’ from the other individuals at school, the narrator experiences things such as lowered self-esteem (8); however, through a shared collective identity the relational self is validated, and he is then able to positively construct the personal self.

School is a place of constant reference throughout the four primary texts. As in “Fair Share of Life”, the school environment is one of the first places outside of the home and family setting where people engage with their collective identities, hence the existence

of so many stereotyped identity categories within the schooling environment. Schools bring together individuals from both different and similar backgrounds, making interactions in these spaces complex. In terms of observations I have made from the primary texts, the representation of school settings is often directly reflective of heteronormative and gender-normative values of South African society, and also dominant status and class hierarchies. For this reason many of those sharing their life stories in these texts find it difficult to exist within these institutions because of their 'differences'. The school setting is one of the first areas of interaction outside of the home where queer individuals are made aware of the fact that their identities, constructions and representations of the self are problematic, especially when set against the expectations of a society governed by heteronormative ideals.

In the primary texts schools are also places where queer individuals are able to meet and interlink with individuals in similar situations to their own, or in general people who aid in the understanding and growth of the different versions of the self. In his short autobiographical account, entitled "Sweet is the Night Air" (2010), featured in *Yes I Am!*, Robin Malan recounts his experiences with his Standard nine (Grade 11) teacher. The account details a deeply emotional and sexually tense relationship that obviously impacted on the author on different meaningful levels. The young Malan found solace in the companionship of the teacher, who in many ways appears to have assumed some level of a fatherly role in his life. Zackie Achmat also relays a similar experience in "Danny and Ida and Mr Jordan" (2010). In this account Achmat tells the story of a sexual relationship with a teacher during his Standard six year (Grade eight) in 1974. The significance of these stories in each author's life is tangible, and it is interesting to consider each story against the backdrop of a school setting. Schools and the education system metaphorically represent authority and restriction in general for young children and also extend to the restriction of sexual desire. These boundaries are evidently crossed in "Sweet is the Night Air" and "Danny and Ida and Mr Jordan" and these two stories may represent a fetishisation of the teacher as a figure of authority, because sex with such a figure is taboo and prohibited. Although this is necessary to highlight, my primary concern is, however, based on examining how the accounts by Achmat and

Jordan contribute to our understanding of the construction of the autobiographical self as it is represented in each account.

Firstly, I am interested in ascertaining what the significance of each individual's choice to relate these specific stories is. Are these stories solely accounts of a physical and sexual awakening, or does the kinship portray more about the autobiographical self? In a separate account called "A Boy Grows Up in Salt River" (2010), also in *Yes I Am!*, Achmat states: "in 1972 I turned ten. I discovered active sex and never turned back" (61). In both Achmat's short accounts he makes reference to a few people through whom he was able to understand his sexuality, and also engage in the exploration thereof. These important figures in his sexual awakening are: his uncle Ebrahim whom he kisses on the mouth, which gives Achmat an erection (60), a "beautiful" boy in his class and his sister Tanya (61), a friend named Danny (96) and Mr Jordan, a teacher (96). All these individuals and experiences are framed within his younger years, and they represent the remembered dawning consciousness of his sexual orientation. It is thus clear that Achmat considers the sexual facets of the self as an important component of who he is. The awakening and development of this part of the self is naturally quite important, and what Achmat achieves in presenting crucial contributing figures in his sexual awakening is that this part of the self is represented as a result of influences by experiences, with these people, at this particular stage in his life. Although Malan and his teacher do not engage in intercourse there are sexual connotations attached to certain experiences that they shared. Malan foregrounds that the relationship did not progress, noting: "things happened the way I guess they're supposed to. I left school, he moved away, we lost touch, I got married and had kids" (63).

In this manner, I believe that the relationship shared with his teacher allowed Malan to form a complex kinship with his teacher, a kinship based on a silent identification with parts of each other that might have been too taboo to explore further. Malan also wonders what would have come of that relationship had it gone further sexually after an intense embrace the two shared (65). The formation of relationships within these dyads reveals traces of the influences of collective identity on the autobiographical self as represented in each autobiographical account. Highlighting specific shared experiences in the manner which the two authors referred to above have done, foregrounds the

importance of certain kinships in awakening and validating different facets of the self and the representations thereof.

Although school forms a frame around adolescent experience and is an important part of the construction of the self in the adolescent years of the individuals in the text, it represents only one element of experience as represented in the autobiographical accounts I am examining. The 2011 documentary film by Lauren Beukes, entitled *Glitterboys and Ganglands*, chronicles the Miss Gay Western Cape competition and the contestants who are considered to be drag performers and/or homosexual and/or transgendered individuals (generalised categorisation is obviously problematic in cases such as this, as such categorisations do not provide detailed or conclusive identity descriptions for each individual in the film). This film's representations are useful to consider in the case of this dissertation as they trace these individuals within a queer collective – which they might or might not deem themselves to be a part of – one that seeks to connect them in the similarities of their experience in terms of gender and/or sexuality.

## **Collective Identity in the “Queer Community”**

The term ‘queer community’ categorises a sector of the community who are placed together collectively on the basis that they exist within, or possibly outside, of the LGBT categories of identity. Collective identity functions here specifically as an indicator of belonging to an extended collective. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006:199) describes one facet of belonging as “an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way”. In the four primary texts numerous sites are identified in which queer individuals can congregate together with others in a manner that acknowledges, celebrates and sustains queer identities. In environments like this the personal self becomes a part of a collective self based on ideas of identity and self-categorisation (Brewer & Gardener 1996:84). I will explore some of these social locations and the people that the autobiographical narrators encounter in a manner that contrasts their experiences in the confines of heteronormative sectors of society.

Individuals relate their experience to significant sites such as support groups, ‘gay bars’ and other meeting places (and also through identification with ‘similar selves’ in settings such as the community). In these places the autobiographical self is able to explore and grapple with issues of belonging and identity. Through kinships and finding relationships with people whom individuals consider themselves to be similar to, the self is further constructed. In Zackie Achmat’s account entitled “A Boy Grows up in Salt River” he speaks of his first identifications with homosexual males or what his family has labelled “*sis gamat*”<sup>8</sup> in his community (60). Of particular importance to Achmat is a gay male named Peter-Moffie with whom he identifies collectively, as he notes various similarities between himself and Peter-Moffie. Achmat places the personal self within the collective in which he views Peter-Moffie to exist – an outcast, homosexual male subject to discrimination from the community in which he lived. Achmat cites individuals like Peter-Moffie as important figures in the realisation that he himself was what one could call a “moffie”. Achmat is thus able to self-identify with regard to a category of sexual identity, through forming a collective identity with others. Steven Brint, quoted in Somers (1994: 635), places emphasis to the fact that certain kinships reflect the “belief that the experience of common conditions of life [...] makes people with shared attributes a meaningful feature of the social structure”. Exploring the differing forms of relationships that enable identities to take on meaning allows a more enlightened, conscious and critical look at the self and those that are interacted with. In this manner individuals like Zackie Achmat (as represented autobiographically in the text) are able to explore the self in more positive ways.

*Reclaiming the L-Word* presents poignant and moving short autobiographical accounts of South African lesbian women. In Heidi van Rooyen’s story, entitled “Pulled out of the Closet into my Family’s Embrace” (2011), she details that mentorship always came from older women in her life:

Throughout my life, primary school up until this particular point there has always been an older woman – a teacher, a guidance counsellor, lecturer, a supervisor – to whom I had an emotional connection and

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<sup>8</sup> Achmat defines the term by separating it. “Sis” is the Afrikaans word that describes something dirty or despicable. “Gamat” is the shortening of the name Mohammed/Mogamat that is commonly given to Muslim boys. Thus “sis gamat” refers to an abominable male (60).



attachment. These women gave comfort, support and a safe space, and it was to them that I took all that mattered to me. In my relationships with men I took on a different role. I was the one they came to and talked to, and brought their problems to. (3)

For Van Rooyen throughout her life a kinship with certain female figures that she encountered in her community was an important part in her growth and development as a person. It is through these relationships that Van Rooyen notes that she first realised what she terms a “knock-me-down, physical desire for another woman” (3). She further notes regarding this revelation: “This floored me. Completely! For the first time I was consciously aware that I was both emotionally and sexually attracted to someone of the same sex” (3). Through these nurturing relationships she was able to begin to uncover and work through different sides of her developing sense of self and sexual identity. Van Rooyen also makes reference to her community of Wentworth<sup>9</sup> in the Durban region, highlighting how it served as the social location encouraging the pursuit of many of her eventual achievements. Van Rooyen conveys to the reader how Wentworth presented an area of deep conflict:

Wentworth soon became synonymous with drugs, alcoholism and gangsterism – signs of a desperate people, with competing value systems and beliefs, thrown together against their will and trying to find a way of co-existing together. (5)

Like so many individuals who came together under the upheavals and movements of the Group Areas Act during apartheid, the situation faced by the people of Wentworth was complex and fragile. However, for Van Rooyen these things are what encouraged her to achieve more and do better in her own life. She notes that she is not “defined by deficits” (5), and in this manner the community and its struggles afforded her the opportunity to explore the self that she wanted to construct. She is not entirely a product of the shortcomings of her upbringing, circumstances or extended community, but rather an individual whose shaping was not disconnected from these things.

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<sup>9</sup> Wentworth is a township in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. It was formed under the Group Areas Act, which sought to divide communities along racial lines. Wentworth was inhabited by a predominantly Coloured community during apartheid.

Van Rooyen also speaks about the difficulty in reconciling her sexuality with the beliefs of her community – both moral and religious. For Van Rooyen her community is predominantly religious and heteronormativity is deeply embedded in the extended society's functioning. Most of the individuals whose stories I have examined note this specific site of contention. When a society is based largely on heteronormative and gender-normative modes of behaviour it is difficult for the sexual or gender other to ascertain belonging in these settings. Although feelings of alienation might arise, this alienation and otherness felt by the autobiographical self becomes a useful tool in the process of identity construction. It in essence becomes the force which motivates the autobiographical self to begin asking questions such as “who am I?” and thereby allows engagement with the self, and also deeper analysis of the self and how it is constructed.

Each of the autobiographical texts exhibits how the community in which a person exists can also be the site in which the greatest hardships are experienced. Queer individuals consistently report extensive discrimination at the hands of those in their extended community. Hate crimes and physical and emotional abuse are a daily reality for queer individuals who live in staunchly heteronormative and gender-normative settings throughout South Africa. Although these facts are very much common knowledge, my concern revolves around understanding what effects such experiences in a collective such as a neighbourhood or community have on the individual, specifically as explored in the primary texts. Can an individual be said to be a part of the collective in a social location (with its differing vectors of identity, race, gender, class etc.) when that individual cannot stage belonging in such a social location?

The autobiographical account, entitled “Lappies” (2010), of Damon Galgut in *Yes I Am!* is based on his conscription time during apartheid in the South African army. During apartheid all school-leaving white males were obligated to serve in the South African Defence Force for a specified period of time. The army as a social location presents a place of stereotyped hyper-masculinity and male collective identity. Galgut relays a meaningful friendship he forged with a young Afrikaner man named Lappies during his frontier time. The relationship eventually became sexual between the two men; however, the most notable facet of the relationship is the companionship shared between the two men on an emotional level. Galgut describes Lappies and himself as being more

sensitive and gentler in demeanour when contrasted with other soldiers in the camp. Galgut notes that before a rugby game:

The Commandant came up quietly to us. “You two” he whispered, smiling tightly, “are on guard duty”. So on that day, and on all rugby days that followed, we walked around the edge of the camp. It was a small camp, and from almost no point along the perimeter of the fence could we not see the game in progress. Our segregation confirmed what they had always sensed. The others kept their distance from us now. They treated us kindly, but also remotely; we weren’t a part of the team. We were apart. (110)

As in the case of Zackie Achmat, Galgut too seeks companionship in someone whom he considers similar to himself, while existing outside of the dominant hegemonic culture of the army camp. Galgut notes feelings of otherness and disconnection between himself and Lappies – whom he groups together – and the other soldiers. Further on Galgut mentions that “there was a brotherhood of men, I now clearly saw, to which I would never belong. My father, my brother, the boys at school – they knew things I didn’t” (110). The social location of the army is the space where Galgut clearly realises and is able to rationalise the general disconnection he feels between himself and other men. He draws males together as a collective to which he does not belong, and thus locations to which he describes a traditionally male identity become areas in which he feels othered. This presents contestations between various identities within the category “male”. An overarching, reductive and dominant view of what constitutes the identity of a male is exclusionist and problematises belonging for individuals such as Galgut. He illustrates his view of the societal expectations of maleness and male-bonding in the following manner:

There was something in their hands that helped them catch balls in flight. More than that: it was beyond me to participate in their rituals of kinship. I would never hunt animals in the bush, or stand around a fire with them, beer in hand, tugging at my moustache. I was pale, I was weak, my jokes made them blanch. I would never be part of their club. (60)

Galgut lists traditionally male activities that he struggles to identify a true desire to partake in. This struggle contributes to the autobiographical self’s feelings of otherness.

Galgut considers the absence of the desire to actively partake in these traditionally masculine activities as rendering his own sense of 'manhood' absent. These gender constructs of what it means to be a 'man' or 'male' become the determining factor in whether someone may ascribe to himself a male identity in certain social settings. It becomes necessary that the researcher questions whether a refusal of prescribed gender roles prescribes identity by implication. More specifically, does behaviour labelled as effeminate as opposed to self-identification determine whether a man is considered to be a 'true man'? Variants in identity within the identity category of 'male' problematise and disrupt hegemonic and cultural constructions of manhood, and thus those identities that go against dominant modes of behaviour become punishable through exclusion and discrimination. Judith Butler highlights the fact that:

the institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. (1990:122-3)

Thus individuals who are unable or choose not to operate within the binarist expectations of sex, gender and sexuality are problematic to a sector of society that functions within strict binaries, as is represented in the autobiographical account of Damon Galgut. In situations like the one represented in the text the othered individual has to undertake a journey to establish and stage belonging, thus politicising his attempts.

Nira Yuval-Davis notes that "as a rule the emotional components of people's constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they feel" (2006:202). In situations where people are subject to violence and hatred based on the differing ways they identify or represent themselves, individuals are forced into a space that forces them to engage in the politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis describes the politics of belonging as an attempt to construct belonging in particular ways, to particular collectives, through the exploration and engagement with certain levels of identity-related activism (199). Support groups and organisations that are concerned with queer issues become important grounds for the

construction of self in the autobiographical texts, and it is interesting to note that all four of the texts are linked with organisations working towards the ongoing human rights battles faced by queer individuals; by implication, the stories within each text assume some sort of political significance. I have constantly reiterated the importance of collectivism and relationality in the South African context, and thus it is important to understand where African forms of collective identity and queer identity intersect.

The “Africanness” of same-sex sexualities and sexual practices is continually debated in the present, with many post-colonial countries deeming it an abomination and endemically Western concept. Cheryl Stobie notes that “the appellation un-African is used as a means of controlling variant gender performances or sexualities” (2011:150). Despite the popular belief that same-sexualities and sexual practices are ‘un-African’, historians and anthropologists have highlighted the existence of same-sex relationships and transgender identities in the pre-colonial African context. Authors such as Neville Hoad (2007), Marc Epprecht (1998, 2008), and Carrier and Murray (in the 1998 collection of critical works entitled *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*) document this fact.

Current attitudes towards sexual and gender identity in the African context have been influenced by rigid Western concepts relating to the categorisation of sexuality and gender identities. Nigerian Igbo society, for example, exhibited fluidity in terms of gender identity. As a result women could become what is termed “female husbands”, as long as these women possessed the same status and wealth as a male individual in this society, who had intended to take on a wife and the responsibilities of a homestead (Carrier & Murray 1998:256). Thus, traditional gender roles and gender norms were upheld, and the performance of the roles associated with being male and female remained a societal expectation. Rudolf Gaudio (1998:116) reports that the Hausa people of West Africa acknowledged the existence of same-sex sexual relationships in their communities, but they did not place any particular importance on them. They viewed same-sex relations as an existing phenomenon, but placed substantial focus and emphasis on the need for individuals to assume procreative roles in society. Men often fulfilled the expectations of extended society by marrying women and having children; however, some men still maintained relationships with other men. Through the

upholding of the importance of reproduction, same-sex relations were seen as inferior to traditional relationships and the obligations of culture and community (117). Similarly, in the Southern African country of Lesotho, same-sex relationships between married “Mpho” women existed and were often not hidden (Epprecht 2007:7). These relationships were viewed as un-sexual, intrinsically different from relationships between men and women, and were conceived as being constructed in a manner that was different from traditional marriages. Thus, the expectations relating to procreation and traditional marriage were not directly threatened by these relationships. These examples present an interesting contrast to the homophobia that is present in present-day African societies as reflected in the monotheistic religions that dominate the continent as well the various political stances on the issue.

South Africa’s diversity presents a mild dilemma in understanding the place and position of queer identities in the country. In the four texts that I am examining, individuals are presented from varying racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds; however, what draws the various experiences together is the almost unanimous societal belief that transgender and homosexual identities are an abomination. This disdain for identities which do not conform to heteronormativity or gender-normativity arises from various cultural and religious beliefs.

In Zackie Achmat’s account entitled “A Boy Grows up in Salt River”, which I referred to earlier on this chapter (*Yes I Am!* 2010), Achmat notes a comment from a conversation between his grandmother and mother regarding his sexuality, in which one of the two women exclaims: “en die mans wat so van moffies hou. Jy kry nie ’n bruin man of ’n Native wat met moffies rondgaan nie” (translated as “And it’s the white man who likes moffies! You never see a brown man or a Native going round with moffies”) (60). This comment foregrounds a deep set of cultural beliefs within Achmat’s Muslim and coloured family as a direct result of cultural and religious beliefs within the extended community. For Achmat this presents a dilemma for the young self, who then internally attempts to understand the connection between his race and sexuality:

But what about me, then? I was not white, I was black. Could they not see? Moffies are not coloured or black; moffies, Fika [his sister] would say years later, are a different nation. (60)

The above presents a number of multi-layered issues and questions to be considered. Can one facet of identity not exist because of another? Can Achmat not be coloured and gay? Does self-identifying as gay exclude him from being able to call himself coloured? An inability to stage belonging to the race that he believes he belongs to, because of his identification as gay, is problematic for Achmat. These then become sites of major contention in an attempt not only to ascertain or stage belonging, but also with regard to the construction of self. Achmat in his search for belonging attempts to construct his identity by finding individuals who he believes are like him, specifically by attaching a collective identity to other non-white gay men. The strictness of identity categories as determined by the community that an individual exists in is exclusionary and stifling. Strict cultural identity categories are problematic in that they enforce convention and leave those who do not conform to the general norms alienated and existing on the margins of communities. However, such cultural expectations in terms of identity become useful in that they allow those who have been excluded in various spaces the opportunity to explore the complex nature of their identity as opposed to being assigned an overall culturally dictated identity. Bernedette Muthien (2005:42) uses the exclusion she has experienced on many different levels as a mode of exploring her many identities “and the ways in which these identities interact with race/ethnicity, culture, nationality, sexuality, class and spirituality, in an increasingly global world”.

The examination of the extended community as a social location presents the ideal area to investigate ubuntu in the autobiographical texts. In Chapter Three I will aim specifically to contrast ubuntu and religion, and thus in this chapter I will not relate ubuntu and its functioning to spiritual places. Johann Broodryk notes that the “African thinking of man differs from some European conventions where people are classified or appreciated according to a system of aristocratic and snobbish titles [...] In Africa all people are regarded as equals irrespective of wealth or background” (2002:67-8). This is an extremely sweeping statement that I believe deserves some level of criticism and contextualisation before it can be accepted. Broodryk accepts that, for example, in the working environment roles differ and thus hierarchies are inevitable; however, he

highlights that African thinking recognises the value in each individual and the importance of each contribution, and essentially considers all people as equal. When one considers this, I believe that Broodryk is suggesting that capitalism and classism are Western exports, ushered in by colonialism.

A viewpoint coloured by current attitudes results in Broodryk's portrayal of African value systems as potentially idealistic; however, what he is presenting to the reader is very much a pre-colonial concept of African value systems. I would imagine that these concepts are not as simple as is suggested, but Broodryk offers the researcher an important view into how concepts such as ubuntu at their purest are intended to function in society. Broodryk offers an interesting perspective of how an ubuntuist idea of democracy does not follow the Western belief system of "all vote and majority wins", but rather a more involved process of debate where the minority is considered in the same manner that the majority is (69-70). These ideas of ubuntu may be criticised as being naïve or, as I have suggested above, idealist. However, it becomes difficult to critique pre-colonial ideas of ubuntu because of a contemporary mindset that is jaded by a post-modern and capitalist environment. Therefore, my intention is to focus critique on ubuntu beliefs and how they are perceived and applied in the present post-colonial and post-apartheid setting. I will investigate ubuntu's presence in the primary texts and examine how it functions as a tool promoting the acceptance of queer identities, but I will also consider an ubuntu shaped by democracy and political agendas and how this version of ubuntu may or may not be exclusionist towards minorities such as the diverse queer community.

When one considers community in the South African context one cannot remove ideas of ubuntu from any related discourses. Ubuntu has been used as a tool for nation-building in recent times in post-apartheid South Africa, as I have mentioned in Chapter One, and it has formed an important part in the drafting of the country's supreme legislation – the Constitution. Ubuntu's emphasis on communality has been criticised for the fact that it may possibly seek to enforce or project specifically chosen or communal identity onto individuals, thereby drowning out individuality and the individual's sense of selfhood (Louw 1998). In situations like these the rights and opinions of individuals and minorities are often exploited and disregarded in attempts to



enforce and uphold group solidarity. Dirk Louw notes that in a contemporary democratic context, ubuntu's extreme emphasis on community might be wrongfully understood and abused as a tool that favours a particular party or individual's viewpoint (1998). Rather, the role of the community and concepts of ubuntu in African society are to foster positive and constructive interaction and sharing of diverse ideas and viewpoints. Although ubuntu is based on important humanist values such as sharing and compassion, the emphasis it places on consensus may also be seen as a potentially destructive concept (1998).

Louw also correctly spotlights the fact "that [ubuntu] may demand an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group, and thereby neglect the views of the minority" (1998). Nonetheless, it is vitally important to note that the process of nation-building through the use of ubuntu in present day South Africa does not necessarily require the problematic implementation of a "universal sameness", and neither should it require that we "advocate oppressive communalism" (1998). This fact is reflected directly in the Constitution, which is founded on the respect for and tolerance of difference; and for the purposes of this project, specifically in terms of religion, gender and sexuality. Concepts, understandings and implementations of ubuntu need to incorporate respect, not only for the community as a whole but also for individual rights. Present-day concepts of ubuntu need to foreground a system of honest and sincere respect for difference.

Broodryk draws attention to the fact that the core values contained within ubuntu are humanness, compassion, respect, caring, and sharing (2002:32). Wherever these values are present ubuntu is able to grow and flourish, as it is through these five values that human beings can move away from an individualist and capitalist mind-set towards one that ensures the best conditions for all human beings. Thus, ubuntu need not be considered as a strict African philosophical concept that is largely foreign to a post-colonial South Africa, but rather as a few core principles for the realisation of improved living.

In the autobiographical account entitled "Living Amongst the Queer" (2009) in *Hijab*, the narrator – cited only as Imraan – shares the hardship of being excluded from his

workplace and community because of his HIV-positive status. He notes, “I was an imam<sup>10</sup> and was rejected when [family and friends] found out I was HIV-positive” (33-4). The strict moral codes of his community and ignorance around HIV/Aids-related issues resulted in Imraan becoming a social outcast, and he relates the difficulty and hardships of an isolated life. Imraan self-identifies as heterosexual and admits his own ignorance surrounding queer identities and queer issues. For Imraan a turning point occurs in a coffee shop through the random meeting of a group of people from the LGBT community. Noting the acceptance that he felt in their presence, he says:

All I wanted at that moment was to feel that good and I wanted to bask in the feeling [...] They had no hang-ups about their friends, they accepted them for who they are, regardless of what kind of lives they have lived. (37)

In many ways this autobiographical account and Imraan’s experiences foreground Broodryk’s beliefs of what ubuntu should ideally represent. Imraan’s exclusion from his community allowed him to form a deeper awareness for people who faced exclusion and discrimination due to their gender or sexuality. He was able to find common ground and a shared identity with these people based on similar feelings of alienation and isolation, as opposed to directly identifying solely within identity categories. This is the major hope in terms of what ubuntu purports: essentially the drawing together of people based on the commonality in the shared human experience, as all human beings can relate to feelings of isolation, loneliness, loss and hopelessness, but also feelings of joy, fulfilment and desire.

In Yulinda Noortman’s autobiographical account entitled “The Dog, the Cat, the Parrot and the Pig and Other Tales” (2011), featured in *Reclaiming the L-Word*, the author relays an account of her life which is explicitly relational. She shares an account of her life that is deeply aware of her family, her community and her surroundings. Many of the events shared are told in detailed relation to specific individuals or places. I will consider this particular story in greater detail in Chapter Three; however, in the context of this chapter I would like to examine the manner in which community is represented in the text. Noortman details her move with her partner to a new place, Hilton in

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<sup>10</sup> “[A] Muslim scholar and leader” (202).

KwaZulu-Natal, from the busy city life of Johannesburg. Noortman is a lesbian woman and is in a relationship with a woman named Karen. The two decide to buy a house together in the small community of Hilton. With regard to this new place to which they have relocated, Noortman highlights the following:

Our small village “just outside of Pietermaritzburg” embraced us, and we were overwhelmed with goodwill [...] In such a small village of course tongues wagged, and we took the decision right from the start to be completely open about our relationship. For Karen in particular this was an enormous step as she was the one who categorically stated that *she definitely was not gay!* (29)

Noortman describes the experience of living in this new environment as deeply rewarding and enjoyable. Of particular importance is the manner in which the townspeople of Hilton react to the fact that Noortman and her partner decide to marry under the Civil Unions Act. The time drawing up to the wedding ceremony is represented as a shared communal affair, with definite ubuntu undertones. The wedding presents the opportunity for a community to come together in celebration. Celebration in ubuntu terms is deemed valuable as something that is rewarding for a community, as it furthers the sharing of joy within a collective (Broodryk 2002:41). The time leading up to the wedding and the wedding itself are described with a great sense of excitement and joy by Noortman. She details the involvement of the Hilton community in the wedding preparations:

Karen’s patients arrived early for their physio appointments and participated in the wedding garden project. We got advice from seasoned Hilton gardeners and most brought gifts from their own gardens. On more than one occasion I found a patient on hands and knees planting something *special* for this big event. We weren’t sure if we had our family buy-in yet, but we certainly had our community buy-in. (30)

Noortman discloses a particular scene that takes place in a fabric shop while she and Karen are shopping for fabric for their wedding garments:

Then the owner appeared and literally glided around the corner into our section of the shop. I stared. She was magnificent: a tall, regal Indian woman in a pale pink sari and turban. The troops all moved

into overdrive. “This is beautiful. Who chose it?” she asked. “It’s ours – we’re getting married,” we said in unison. Suddenly the ambience in the small shop changed with the collective dreamy sigh of all five women. Nothing like a wedding to unite women from different cultures. (31)

The descriptions in this scene exhibits the manner in which individuals can draw together in the joy of celebration, finding a common ground outside of the labels of race and culture. However, Noortman later shares how she and her partner do not disclose to the women in the shop that they are in fact marrying each other:

Even after all that quizzing we both knew that none of them for one moment contemplated the possibility that we were both brides about to marry one another! Perhaps it was the sombre black dresses and burka headgear that kept us at bay. (31)

Sadly, the common ground found through the possibility of celebration is lost for Noortman and her partner due to the fact that they are not heterosexual and the concept of two women marrying each other is remote and easily open to condemnation by the women in the shop that day. The above scene highlights the shared nature of multiple experiences of human existence. The joy associated with weddings and marriage was able to cross the lines of race, culture and religion, and ubuntu acknowledges this fact. However, identification as queer often presents the site of disconnection for many individuals due to ideas and views that are rooted in religion or culture. Ubuntu as a concept suggests that the focus remains on the similarities and commonalities inherent in experience as this champions, acceptance and tolerance.

An ubuntu approach deems the humiliation and degradation of one individual to be an assault on an entire community. Keba Sebetoane relates her short autobiography entitled “Who Are You to Tell Me Who I Am?” (2011) in *Reclaiming the L-Word*. Sebetoane’s story is a harrowing account of how she was raped by a close friend who intended to ‘cure’ her of her lesbianism. Her story reflects the harsh realities faced by lesbian women in South Africa. She recalls how both the medical fraternity and police treated the crime in a casual and negligent manner that ensured that her perpetrator was not tried for his crime. She notes how the doctor who examined her refused to file a truthful report of her examination because she advised him that she was a lesbian. Sebetoane

now lives with a general distrust for the institutions that are meant to protect the safety of South African citizens.

The autobiographical self, as presented in “Who Are You to Tell Me Who I Am?”, is thus disconnected from the state and views herself as alienated because of the fact that she self-identifies as a lesbian. It is her lesbian identity that compromises her general human rights to safety and dignity. This exhibits the failure of the constitutional and legislative measures to translate into tools for the protection of queer individuals. This occurs primarily because those enforcing the laws are subject to their own pre-constructed ideas of gender, sexuality and how individuals need to conform to heteronormative standards. This begs the question of whether queer individuals are excluded from the respect for human life and dignity that a democracy premised on ubuntu is supposed to provide for its citizens. The queer citizen is thus excluded and in some cases, such as Sebetoane’s, punished for a failure to adhere to the dominant modes of gender and sexual behaviour.

The autobiographical account entitled “Vanya’s Story: I’m a Full Woman” (2011) in *Trans* presents the story of a male-to-female transgendered woman who refers to herself as Vanya or alternatively as Azania. Vanya recounts numerous difficulties in attempts to ascertain belonging in the communities that she has found herself in. Her transgender identity has resulted in numerous violent attacks on her person, similar to those experienced by Sebetoane. Vanya is the victim of an attempted rape and attempted murder on two separate occasions, mainly because those around her are intimidated and sometimes affronted by her transgender identity. She also speaks of fears she has of the justice system and law enforcement, as her transgender identity excludes her from the gender-normative majority. In this way, Vanya’s position in relation to the extended society is problematised. Like Sebetoane, Vanya is excluded from the protection afforded to society by the law because of the queer facet of her identity, and thus the violent acts that she suffers represent a punishment for not living up to society’s gender-normative ideals. In this regard the construction of the self is inherently political and presents the autobiographical self in opposition to areas of the state that fail the individual, and prize personal or communal opinions and beliefs over the individual’s rights. The most important facet of ubuntu is how it is applied. Arthur Aron and Tracy

McLaughlin-Volpe discuss the dynamics of in- and out-group systems (2001:96). In-groups represent a collective of similarly identifying individuals, and the out-groups present groups of individuals who fall outside of such collectives and exist in opposition to the in-group. Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe note that in-group members are subject to positive treatment at the hands of the collective with which they identify, and out-group members are largely alienated and sometimes mistreated. Correspondingly, exclusionary models of ubuntu function in a similar manner, and punish and exclude those who do not follow the status quo. Thus, ubuntu may be used as a tool to exclude those who do not represent themselves in line with the dominant expectations of gender and sexual identity, as represented in the stories of Imraan, Keba Sebetoane and Vanya.

Community spaces can present a site for major contentions and heated debates in terms of construction of the autobiographical self, but most importantly they present space for the exploration of the self. The queer autobiographical self as represented in each text often relates identity and construction of the self to the surrounding environment where he or she exists, whether it is neighbourhoods, schools, or places of employment and recreation. Certain social areas are conducive to positive and affirmative views and constructions of the self, and others can be less positive and even damaging; however, each social space and those people who are encountered in these spaces are an important part in ensuring ongoing engagement with the self. As soon as individuals step out into society they are forcibly engaged in numerous complex acts of staging and representing identities and quests for belonging, which are necessary for the construction of the self. Harry Triandis and David Trafimow (2001:274) emphasise the fact that “culture provides a context, and that various cultural variables might play an important role in the extent to which either the individual or collective self is emphasised or deemphasised”. Thus, cultural constructs, as represented through sites of shared community space in the primary texts, are important in the eventual construction of the autobiographical self. The extended community and its belief systems are often what dictate the inner workings of the family structure, and thus I have chosen to begin by exploring the communal and cultural structures in some depth first in this chapter in order to aid a better understanding of the family structure and its own complex inner-workings in the next chapter. The family space is often subject to the patriarchal and

binarist workings of the society in which it exists, and in the next chapter I will investigate these issues and demonstrate how they function in terms of constructing the autobiographical self.

### **CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF AND IDEAS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN FAMILY SPACES**

In the previous two chapters, the relationality inherent in constructions of selfhood has been consistently noted as one of the primary concerns of this project. In Chapter Two I explored how relationality functions in terms of community and its influences on the constructions of queer autobiographical selfhood, and in this chapter I will explore the significance of familial relations in the construction of versions of queer autobiographical selfhood. Sociologists John Macionis and Ken Plummer offer a loose definition of the term ‘family’:

The family has been seen as a social institution, found in all societies, that unites individuals into cooperative groups that oversee the bearing and raising of children. Most families are built on kinship, a social bond, based on blood, marriage or adoption, that joins individuals into families. Although all societies contain families, just who is included under the umbrella of kinship has varied through history, and varies today from one culture to the next. (2008:580)

Macionis and Plummer (2008:583) also note that the primary functions of the family are to: aid in overall socialisation, regulate sexual activity, prescribe social placement and to offer emotional and material security. The above ideas relating to family form the dominant representation of familial structures within the primary texts that I am examining. Traditional notions of family, as represented in the primary texts, find their foundations lodged deeply in normative cultural constructs such as heterosexual marriage and procreation. The family is usually represented as a predominantly nuclear, heteronormative, gender-normative and patriarchal system. These modes of functioning present a complex site for the construction of queer identity in the texts. Different schools of thought within sociology and psychology are constantly debating and reworking the various definitions and limitations of what constitutes family.

The manner in which family is viewed is radically transforming at present in both the global and South African contexts, with changing ideas and legislation relating to same-sex relationships, marriage, modes of reproduction, parenting and adoption. Thus, definitions of family are constantly evolving. In South Africa the Civil Union Act



allows same-sex couples to marry, and allows them the same basic rights that heterosexual individuals who marry are afforded. Although this is important to note, in this dissertation my aim is not to detail the transformation of notions of the family in the texts, but rather to examine how familial influences contribute to construction of various versions of the self in the primary texts. I will critically examine how family is understood and experienced in the texts, in an attempt to gauge its usefulness as a tool in aiding the growth and development of the autobiographical self, and to explore how it may sometimes also act as a negative force in the process of autobiographical self-construction and identity formation.

Chapter Two of this dissertation foregrounds the representation of the communities in the four primary texts as being largely heteronormative and gender-normative social locations. The community in which a family exists thus forms the overarching body regulating family; the family is subject to communally placed and enforced cultural practices and ideals. For this reason I have chosen to examine the community first in Chapter Two and then family structures in this chapter. In this chapter I begin by examining representations of parent-child relationships, then I proceed by examining romantic relationships, and lastly I consider new ideas of family and how shared queer identity may also lead to concepts of family that differ from traditional and normative understandings of it. The family construct as a tool of regulation posits its primary responsibility in ensuring that its members are “well-integrated and contributing members of society” (Macionis & Plummer 2008:582). Family must thus actively work on instilling within its members the ability to function in an unproblematic manner that remains in line with the dominant hegemonic practices and expectations of society, especially in terms of its expectations regarding gender and sexual identity. Conversely, the family can also serve as a nurturing social location that allows for the acceptance of individuals who feel excluded from the extended society.

Understandings of family in the South African context are multi-layered as the country is a culturally diverse social location. However, the most common and dominant influences on the family, as represented in each of the primary texts, appear to be based on religion/spirituality and culture, inflected by the ethnicity or race of the autobiographical subjects in these texts. As Chapter Four of this dissertation deals

specifically with religion/spirituality, I will explore how concepts of religion/spirituality function in the family in the next chapter. In this chapter I will explore the relational nature of autobiographical self-construction and family in terms of various cultural constructs such as patriarchy and heteronormativity. I will also consider ubuntu in this respect.

An ubuntuist view of family is based heavily on the ubuntu ideals of communality and the interconnectedness of human life. These notions of the family are different from the Western notions of the nuclear family. Johann Broodryk foregrounds the following:

In African family life, a child has many fathers and mothers. The brothers of his natural father are also regarded as his fathers and the sisters of his mother are all addressed [as] “Ma” (mother). There are therefore no orphans in traditional Africa: if the natural parents of a child die, the fathers and mothers in the extended family automatically take over custody of the child. It is a natural deed and accepted by all. (2002:96)

Broodryk highlights the ideal functioning of the ubuntu concept within the African family. There is great emphasis on the extended family as being a vital part of the concept of family, and family thus extends into community. Broodryk presents a very pure concept of ubuntu and its functioning in the African family space. However, these ideas of family are presently influenced by Western concepts and ideas, and must be scrutinised in light of this.

While ubuntu forms an extended family through community, this idea of family being extended to community can either be problematic or useful in constructing identity, as I have noted in Chapter Two. Es’kia Mphahlele, quoted in Gaylard, posits African Humanism or ubuntu as being ideally concerned with a respect for other human beings:

Right and wrong depend on what you have done for and to your fellow human-being, not any abstract notion of sin against God.... When you have wronged someone... you talk to the wronged person, often through a mediator. You ask the ancestors to restore harmony. (2004:273)

The above-mentioned ideas relating to ubuntu place substantial focus on harmonious interaction with fellow human beings through a keen awareness of the right and wrong of direct actions, as opposed to problematising an individual's identifications. The identity politics of Western civilisations often actively work in penalising individuals in terms of facets of identities that are deemed problematic in the relation to the status quo. Thus, because queer exists outside the hegemonic expectations of gender and sexual behaviour, queer identities are often subject to discrimination and persecution. An ubuntuist view as applied to family would thus be a useful tool in understanding and positioning queer identity in the family space. Mphahlele's views of ubuntu as quoted above are represented in a very purist notion of ubuntu's functioning, but are nonetheless interesting to consider.

Gaylard, in his analysis of Es'kia Mphahlele's autobiography, entitled *Down Second Avenue*, which first appeared in 1959, notes specific devices employed in presenting a sense of community and ubuntu in and amongst the harsh realities of ghetto life. He notes the use of vivid realism in presenting images, as well as the richness in descriptions of common meeting places and shared conversations (273). Thus, for Mphahlele, community and ubuntu exist in his township even though the urban ghetto is far removed from the traditions of rural South African settings. The same can be noted in the primary texts that this dissertation is concerned with: though it has been influenced and changed by colonisation, ubuntu is imbued with various ideals, traces of which are evident in many of the autobiographical accounts shared. Due to the fact that ubuntu and family as concepts are so closely interlinked, it is difficult to isolate specific instances of its functioning in the family set-up. Attempting to locate instances of ubuntu in the stories that I am examining in this chapter would be a redundant exercise, as concepts of ubuntu do not function to separate one family from the next. Ubuntu is premised on universal ideals of kindness, compassion and sharing between human beings, regardless of the biological or adoptive ties that many concepts of family favour. Ubuntu functions to place humanity as a whole into an extended family. The value of ubuntu discourses as a tool in the family is undeniable, as an ubuntu viewpoint encourages individuals to maintain a reverence for the worth of all of humanity. Through ubuntu each individual's worth is seen as equal and interlinked beyond various

identity categories. As ubuntu calls into question issues such as discrimination in the extended society, so too does it call into question similar issues within the family.

Presently concepts of family do not function in the somewhat idealist manner that a purist concept of ubuntu may imply, as society is notably separated on numerous levels according to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and class. However, the ideals of ubuntu function as universal concepts that function positively on micro and macro levels of society. Thus the family space may benefit from balanced concepts of ubuntu that respect difference, and in the same manner the extended society may do so as well.

John Paul Eakin (1998:72) notes that “it is family that makes culture talk [thereby] training the child to speak discourses of the self”. Thus, children’s ideas relating to their individual sense of selfhood are deeply imbedded in, and influenced by, their familial interactions. For Eakin familial interactions represent something crucial in the construction and representation of the autobiographical self, and he links family narratives within autobiographical texts to overall identity formation (72-3). Eakin’s theories in this regard arise from his examination of the ideas of psychologist Jerome Bruner, who also highlights the family’s role as occupying a significant role in individual constructions of selfhood. In each of the stories that I am going to be examining, familial interactions form an undoubtedly crucial part in the construction of the autobiographical subjects’ sense of selfhood. Within the family environment key figures present certain significant influences on the autobiographical self and the representation thereof.

Psychology has continually examined the role of parents in the development of a child’s selfhood. I will begin my analysis of the primary texts with an examination of parent-child relationships, and I will explore how these relationships are important in the development of the queer autobiographical subjects’ construction of the self. Eakin (86) speaks of what he terms the “proximate other”, an individual who is a key component in the autobiographical subject’s construction of self. The proximate other can take the form of a sibling, lover, family member or any other key figure in the life of the autobiographical subject. In this chapter I am concerned mainly with the proximate other as family; whether through marriage, adoption or any other varied kinship in

which an individual is considered 'family'. In viewing the documentary film *Jihad for Love* (Sharma 2007), what stood out was the painfully glaring fact that most of the individuals whose stories were featured in the documentary were either exiled from their home countries or alienated from family because of the queer facets of their identity. As a result, issues relating to the intersection of personal identity and collective identities (represented through family identity) form a dominant theme throughout the film. The same can be observed in each of the four primary texts I am examining in this dissertation.

One of the individuals whose story is featured in *Jihad for Love* is Mushin Hendricks, a self-identifying gay man, and versions of his story also feature in both *Hijab* (91) and *Yes I Am!* (88). Of striking importance is the fact that Hendricks's story is always related with a substantial focus on his family. In *Hijab* his brother summarises the story of the Hendricks family's struggles with Mushin Hendricks's identification as gay in the account entitled "Queer Reflection" (2009). In *Jihad for Love* a very poignant and moving scene is presented in Hendricks's interactions with his young children, and in discussions relating to his sexuality and various views on sexuality. In *Yes I Am!* the focus is also predominantly on family, and Hendricks very interestingly relates his short autobiographical account through a letter to the editors of the collection, namely Robin Malan and Ashraf Johardien; the account is entitled "A Letter By Way of Explanation" (2010). Letters have been noted as an important form of life writing (Smith & Watson 2001:196). A letter is often thought of as a personal form of correspondence and sharing of information between individuals, and through publication it becomes something useful in terms of exploring the writer's view and construction of the personal self (196). The first lines of "A Letter By Way of Explanation" read:

I am the youngest son of nine children. I grew up in Waterloo Road, Lansdowne, in a very orthodox Islamic home. My grandfather was the Imam of the mosque which was literally a few steps away from our house. My mother was deeply involved in this mosque as a teacher and spiritual leader to many women. Our whole lives revolved around this mosque. (88)

Hendricks immediately places his personal identification and the personal self in relation to the three social locations that this dissertation is primarily concerned with,

namely: the family space, the community space and religious space. These spaces and interactions within them are introduced as significantly influential social locations in Hendricks's construction and representation of the autobiographical self. Eakin (1999:53) draws on the ideas of Carolyn Kay Steedman in which she contends that "children are always episodes in someone else's narrative [...] not their own people, but rather brought into being for particular purposes". This quotation from Steedman offers a useful perspective in analysing the influence of parents on their children, and also how the expectations parents place on their children are founded. There is often a disconnection in establishing and understanding that individuals do not only exist as the parent's children in a collective identity, but that they also exist as individuals, in terms of a unique and personal sense of their own selfhood. Hendricks's mother's and grandfather's deeply religious and spiritual inclinations present for him certain expectations and also result in a profound shaping on the religious path that he eventually chooses. Hendricks eventually becomes an Imam, gets married to a woman and has three children (89). He does these things in order to meet the expectations of his family, culture and community. However, Hendricks notes feelings of otherness from his family from an early age:

Being left handed was difficult enough, because in Islam we are taught to do everything with the right hand. I remember, my grandfather used to tie my left hand behind my back so that I was forced to eat with my right hand. As I grew older I discovered that I had another challenge to overcome and that was my sexual orientation. I was indoctrinated from a young age to believe that I was destined for hell and that I would be severely tortured in the hereafter if ever I should act upon the feelings that I had for other men. (88)

His left-handedness is the initial signal of his otherness, and his sexuality solidifies his difference and alienation from his family and its religious order. Hendricks highlights the fact that coming out to his mother was of particular significance, as her opinion was of paramount importance to him, over and beyond that of other people (89). Although Hendricks has established and accepted the existence of a queer facet in his identity, the placing of such importance on his mother's reaction and opinion exhibits a deep need for Hendricks to attain her approval.

After initial difficulty his mother eventually accepts his sexuality, allowing him the opportunity to begin grappling with other issues relating to it, such as reconciling religion/spirituality with his identification as a gay man. In “Letter By Way of Explanation” Hendricks remembers that before he came out to his mother he had a dream in which his late father told him that he had a place next to him in heaven regardless of his sexual identity, all by the grace of God. After the “miracle” of this dream he explains how he “positively leapt out of the closet” and proclaimed “to the world” that he was gay (89). Again this represents a longing he harbours for acceptance, in terms of his sexuality, from his parents. He seeks their blessing before he engages with attempts to stage belonging as a gay man outside of the family space. Jean Bacon describes the importance of coming out narratives, such that of Mushin Hendricks here, as:

narratives that both describe a process of identity negotiation while simultaneously enacting that identity construction with their very performance. They are living acts of identity politics that call essential notions of identity into question with their very performances. (258)

The process of coming out to his mother, and eventually the rest of his family and community, represents an attempt to position himself in terms of his immediate surroundings, and it also represents for Hendricks the movement towards establishing belonging. Through coming out to his mother, family and eventually his community he actively accepts, engages with and affirms his identification as queer through the process of speaking it. The act of speaking it extends the process of coming out as an act of ‘persuasion’, “in that queers must persuade the public world to accept their queer identities into the cultural imaginary” (Bacon 1998:251). This idea of ‘persuasion’ through coming out seeks to illuminate and validate the existence of queer identities; not to negatively contrast queer identities against heteronormativity and gender-normativity, but rather to reveal the complexities inherent in asserting queer identity in a society that favours heteronormativity as the ideal mode of behaviour.

The issue of coming out is an important one as represented in each of the primary texts and often forms a dominant part of the narrative concern in certain stories in the primary texts. For example, *Yes I Am!* dedicates an entire section of the text to stories related to

various issues of coming out. The autobiographical subjects often note an initial internal struggle with sexual or gender identity, followed by an attempt to publicly declare their 'difference' to their families, friends, colleagues and communities. Bidy Martin, quoted in Jolly, foregrounds the fact that

many coming-out stories are tautological insofar as they describe a process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned. (2001:479)

Margaretta Jolly (2001:479) mentions three American anthologies concerned with queer autobiographies (*The Lesbian Path*, *The Lesbian Crossroads* and *The Coming Out Stories*), noting that the major concern of these anthologies has revolved around the spectacle of coming out, and in this manner coming out has been a dominant narrative concern of queer autobiography in general. Coming out is an act which involves engagement with others regarding one's gender or sexual identity; whether family, friends or the extended community, Jean Bacon suggests that:

to come out is to move from the private secret into a public discourse. And the discourse is central given that queer sexualities are in many ways invisible until they are spoken into existence through the act of coming out. For gays and lesbians, 'coming out' is much more than a string of words, it is a shift in perspective. It is a shift from the private sphere to the public, and also a shift from silence to speech. (1998:251)

Bacon highlights the complexities inherent in the process of coming out. It is not simply the sharing of a facet of one's identity, but rather it represents the attempt to engage in multi-layered discourses in terms of the politics of identity and issues of belonging. The queer self is often seen as being in direct opposition to hegemonic practices of heteronormativity and gender-normativity, and Bacon suggests that the coming out narrative "represents at some level the struggle for self-determination among oppressed and silenced groups" (252). The act and process of coming out assumes numerous forms, as is represented in the primary texts. I am interested in exploring how coming out functions as something which may serve to liberate individuals or even at the same time present new and unexplored difficulties in terms of how they are viewed by others, and also how they come to view themselves.



The autobiographical account entitled “The Second Coming (Out)” (2010) by Pieter Fourie, featured in *Yes I Am!*, presents an interesting twist on both parent-child relationships and the coming-out story. Fourie is the son of a single mother, who is also a church organist at the Dutch Reformed Church in his rural Oudtshoorn<sup>11</sup> community. Like Hendricks, Fourie notes the importance of gaining his mother’s approval as important in his experience of coming out (34). He foregrounds the difficulty in the process of coming out and issues relating to his sexuality; however, his “great disclosure is accepted with grace and love” by his mother (34). The focus in this specific story falls on an account which Fourie labels a “second coming out”:

About ten years after I came out, my mother ‘came out’ to her friends, her colleagues at the church and her painfully conservative and repressive family. She came out not about her own homosexuality (my mother is rampantly heterosexual, albeit repressed because of my father’s violence); rather, she came out about being the mother of a gay son. (35)

This account not only presents the coming out of Fourie as a gay man, but significantly it extends the concept of coming out to his mother as well. Fourie highlights something that is very easily overlooked, and that is the position of the parent of a queer child in relation to a heteronormative or gender-normative extended community. Fourie’s experiences and hardships as a result of his queer identification are represented in the text as shared between his mother and himself. This short account not only chronicles his own coming out but it foregrounds something shared between a mother and son. Fourie’s mother is also represented as being someone who has sometimes gone against traditional expectations of how society may expect individuals to behave, and in this manner he forms a certain kinship with her. He relates how his mother was the first of her conservative family to attend university and also how she did the unspeakable by divorcing his abusive father (35). For Fourie, living in a very conservative environment and choosing to share the fact that her son is gay exhibits a definite bravery in his mother. The queer facet of his identity is thus not isolated and rendered alienating for Fourie, as his mother accepts a queer facet to her own

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<sup>11</sup> “A town in the little Karoo, Western Cape, South Africa, home to the world’s largest ostrich population on specialised ostrich-breeding farms”. (34)

identity through her role as a parent to a gay child. The autobiographical self is thus represented in a manner that foregrounds the relational nature of experience, as Fourie's mother exhibits a common ground with her son regardless of her heterosexual identity, and her heterosexuality does not exclude the existence of queer from her own identity.

In Chapter Two I briefly examined the story of Vanya/Azania in the account entitled "Vanya's Story: I'm a Full Woman" (2011), featured in *Trans*. Also featured in *Trans* is "Vanya's Mother's Story: Let Your Child Be" (2011). In this short autobiographical narrative Vanya's mother provides an account of her experiences as the mother of a transgender child. Like Fourie's mother in "Second Coming (Out)", Vanya's mother can also be said to have assumed a queer facet to her identity through that of her daughter. She says, "I told my family, everyone who was close to us, to accept her as she is. Because she is my child and I accept it. Now I go out to buy her make-up" (71). Fourie underscores the fact that:

if the parent [of a queer child] chooses to share the truth about his/her child's sexuality at the cost of social sanctions to themselves, this opens up a new layer of personal, social complexity. (35)

Both Fourie's and Vanya's mothers share in their children's experiences as queer individuals. Thus the identities forged by the autobiographical self, as represented in these stories, are represented through shared and relational experiences. Mushin Hendricks's brother shares a similar account in *Hijab* entitled "Queer Reflection", in which he shares his family's experiences with the sexuality of their son and brother. Hendricks's brother acts as a biographer of sorts, relaying certain experiences; however, this account is also the story of his own enlightenment regarding queer issues. This account and that of Vanya's mother can be said to incorporate what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson term a conversion narrative, and this "narrative mode is structured around a radical transformation from a faulty 'before' self to an enlightened 'after' self" (2001:192). Both Hendricks's brother and Vanya's mother begin with a lack of understanding regarding queer issues when confronted with their queer family members, and as time goes on their experiences with these family members allow for a more enlightened way of thinking to begin. Both Vanya and Hendricks are able to gain

a level of emotional strength in the understanding and acceptance they receive from their families in a similar way to which Pieter Fourie does in “Second Coming (Out)”.

Supportive and encouraging parent-child relationships can serve as a positive reinforcement of queer identification, as is illustrated in the stories referred to above. However, this is not always the case, and relations between children and their parents can sometimes be destructive and damaging to the construction of identity and the representations of selfhood in autobiographical accounts. Issues and themes relating to the bonds between parents and their children are recurring, and are explored on numerous occasions in the various autobiographical works that this dissertation is directly concerned with.

Eakin emphasises the fact that where a parent-child bond is represented as untroubled, “we are likely to get a memoir of a traditional sort, in which filial piety produces a memorial to a beloved parent” (1999:87). In *Reclaiming the L-Word* Zanele Muholi presents a moving short autobiographical work entitled “I Have Truly Lost a Woman I Loved” (2011). The account she recounts is a memorial and tribute dedicated to her late mother, Bester Ziqubu Muholi, who passed away in 2009. This particular account is interesting in that while it is the short autobiography of Muholi, it also functions simultaneously as the biography of her late mother. This account is profoundly relational and highlights the effect that the life lived by Bester Ziqubu Muholi has had on the life of her daughter, Zanele. Versions of Zanele Muholi’s present self are represented as being deeply connected to, and embedded in, the memories she has of her mother. Muholi speaks of her life as a queer woman and the acceptance and support her mother offered her in this regard. She begins the account by identifying herself as a “visual activist [and] artist” and she details her involvement in activism relating to queer issues (19). Muholi notes the fact that she has actively represented her adoptive family and the queer community, but also notes that she has not grappled with the identity and position of her biological family and how it has related to her own identity formation:

I have travelled and related experiences of my adopted family and community, but I feel an emptiness, a kind of guilt, about the lack of time I’ve spent on my own bio family, and this haunts me, because it is my family that defines much of who I am today. (19)

Thus, for Muholi, intertwining her mother's biography into the writing of her own autobiography appears to be an attempt to grapple with her feelings of shame and guilt she describes above, and also her collective identity in terms of filial and familial relations. She presents herself in a manner that places the autobiographical self parallel to the tribute she is presenting in dedication to her mother's life, a woman whom she describes as a strong woman who had worked for 47 years as a domestic worker. By telling her life story through and in relation to that of her mother, Muholi represents the construction of her present self as being a direct result of the birth, life and death of her mother.

Eakin goes on to highlight the fact that "when a bond is conflicted [...] the motive for memoir is likely to be more intense, and a great number of relational lives can be classed under the heading of 'unfinished business'" (1999:87). He notes that "these lives are set in motion by the existence of tensions and secrets; there is a disruption, distortion, or omission in the family narrative that must be repaired." The autobiographical account entitled "Lost" (2009) in *Hijab* chronicles a young lesbian woman's struggle to reconcile a number of issues: her sexuality, religion and the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father as a young girl and her husband as a grown woman. The narrator, Miriam Hendricks, notes: "My first experience that holds me back is my relationship with my father. Or was it a non-relationship?" (153).

After acknowledging her relationship with her father as a source of major blockage in her life, the narrator then immediately engages with a harrowing scene of abuse from her childhood at the hands of her father. As she remembers the violence of this experience she actually physically relives the events as though they were in her present. The narrator in "Lost" tells her story in terms of her material body and its experiences. The body is often neglected as a major analytical concern of autobiographical narratives, as the focus often appears to be on emotional or spiritual awakenings or experiences. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson speak of the body as an autobiographical zone placed in relation with other bodies and the environment in which these bodies live and interact:

The body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied. And life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects [...] The ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body. There must be a body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations and experiences of the external world. (2001:37)

The narrator appears to be actively working through an attempt to reconcile the experiences of the past self with the present self as represented in the text. The narrator makes a number of vivid descriptions relating to her body and its experiences in relation to others. When speaking of an abusive encounter at the hands of her father, she describes it as follows:

I feel a sharp pain as I feel blood dripping down my head. I start to cry and push myself to the floor [...] I find myself on the floor, facing the television. My hands are still covering my face and my body is arched into a protective shell. (154)

In narrating the experience of the material body in this manner the narrator locates herself in terms of identity and the politics of identity. She is placed at the mercy of her father in the dominance of patriarchy and physical violence, and “memories are created as the subject reconstructs a sense of identity while engaging with the world in symbolic exchange” (Smith & Watson 2001:38). The narrator also describes the violence experienced by her material body at the hands of her husband in a manner that highlights the ongoing cycle of this patriarchal dominance, and through this description her body becomes the symbol for the oppression she experiences. Later on in my analysis of this particular account I will examine how the narrator uses the positive experiences of the body as a symbol of growth and nurturing.

The narrator highlights the beginning of a disconnection from her family as she cedes relationships with her parents and her husband:

Why did I have to resort to terrible therapists when the answers lie in me and my Maker? I am finally free to look at myself as a completely free woman; ready to make mistakes, but on my own terms. No parents to haunt my decisions, no husband to break me down and no therapists to put me on a guilt trip. (160)

For the narrator a deeper appreciation of the self occurs through the process of remembering, through the ending of problematic relationships, and also through direct engagement with the hardships she has experienced in these relationships. Through engaging in remembering and reliving the painful abuse of her past she is then able to gain freedom from the limitations it has placed on her in respect of her current sense of selfhood. Subsequently she is allowed to prepare for new beginnings and actively engage in the realisation of more stable versions of the future self. Smith and Watson highlight the fact that memory and the process of remembering serve as the “source and authenticator of autobiographical acts” (2001:16). Autobiography and the process of remembering traumatic experiences become “a process through which a narrator finds words to give a voice to what was previously unspeakable” (Smith & Watson 2001:22). Through vividly reliving some of the trauma of her past the narrator works through a process of reconciliation of the past versions of the self with the possibility of a renewed present and future self. Her husband and father are defining individuals in the representation of the autobiographical self, as they both represent notable barriers in her attempts to positively construct her identity. The narrator must thus work towards breaking down these barriers, as well as locating and aligning herself with relational experiences that aid in the positive construction of selfhood.

The narrator establishes a kinship with a girl name Mariah whom she meets in her teenage years. The two share a romantic bond, until their parents discover the nature of their relationship, at which point Mariah is sent to a nunnery by her parents in an effort to ‘cure’ her homosexuality. Thus the narrator’s father, husband and Mariah form the most significant individuals in the construction of the self in the autobiographical account. Where the father and husband represent dominant destructive forces in terms of the narrator’s self-construction, Mariah is the proximate other who aids growth and provides a proverbial ‘safe place’ for the narrator. After the trauma of the abuse at the hands of her father and husband, and her subsequent movement away from these figures in her life, Mariah returns to the narrator’s life at a crucial stage of self-development. Bodily experiences with Mariah are always positive and come directly after violent experiences with the narrator’s father and husband. After the violent episode in which the narrator is physically attacked by her father, detailed above, she notes how she

leaves her house and goes to that of Mariah. While there she describes the following scene with Mariah:

We stand there for what seems like hours, and then she takes my bag off my shoulders, starts undressing me, and then leads me by the hand to the shower, where she starts rinsing me off. She starts to clean me. (156-7)

The description given here by the narrator illustrates the positive process of recounting a memory that provides comfort for her. It is almost as if her body is being restored through this physical interaction with Mariah after being physically broken down by her father. The body and spirit are damaged by the physical beating she experiences by her father, and similarly both body and spirit are restored by the tenderness and care she experiences at the hands of Mariah. As a married adult the narrator is physically and emotionally abused by her husband, and at this point Mariah comes back into her life and offers to the narrator a similar level of reassurance that she did when they were teenagers. At this stage the narrator has found a new and complete “freedom” and is ready to explore her identity in a manner that is disconnected from the patriarchal control of her father and husband (160). Mariah’s return is welcomed as a nurturing and positive relation, and Mariah assists the narrator in attaining a new and positive sense of family.

The family space, as represented in the primary texts, exists as one in which queer individuals can sometimes find support in the face of discrimination from society and the extended communities in which they exist. However, often this is not the case, and the family can present a harsh social location that problematises quests of belonging for the autobiographical self, as is illustrated in “Lost”. As I have previously noted, the family and its workings are often subject to extended cultural expectations as imposed by society and the community in which the family unit functions. The biological family is represented as a space where acceptance is continually sought. However, for many of the individuals in the primary texts, notions and ideas of what constitutes family begin to change as they struggle to find acceptance in their biological families. Family is sometimes found and experienced in different social locations through varied interactions, often through shared experience, rather than blood or adoptive ties.

Romantic relationships in the form of domestic partnerships and marriages are often also important family sites for the construction of relational autobiographical identities. In the primary texts such relationships often form a dominant aspect of the narrative concerns in many of the stories featured, and are also an important part of representations of the queer autobiographical selfhood in the accounts shared. Marilyn Brewer and Wendi Gardener consider the concept of the “extended self”, noting that often in romantic relationships individuals view their partners as an extension of the personal self, and thus a partner may become a part of an individual’s self-concept and personal identity (1996:84). In this manner partners in a relationship may possibly identify themselves as having character traits, shared goals and ideas that are similar to each other. Sometimes this may not be the case, and the involvement in a romantic relationship allows an individual the avenue to realise differing goals, ideas and viewpoints through placing their own in contrast with those of their partner. Thus, regardless of whether a relationship is destructive and uncertain or nurturing and fulfilling, it is evident from the primary texts that romantic relationships exist in many ways as an avenue for individuals to consider the manner in which they view, construct and represent versions of autobiographical selfhood.

The struggle for equal rights in queer politics, in terms of marriage and adoptions rights for example, has resulted in many theorists critiquing what has been identified as a movement towards homonormativity. The examination of romantic relationships forms the ideal area in which to critique and engage with homonormativity. Homonormativity functions in a similar manner to heteronormativity in that it upholds binarist models of sex and gender, and it endorses similar values pertaining to domestic partnerships, monogamy and familial structures. In doing so it works to marginalise those whose identities cannot be neatly categorised, such as pansexual<sup>12</sup>, bisexual or genderqueer<sup>13</sup> identifying individuals. Lisa Duggan offers a critique of the Independent Gay Forum (IGF), an American civil rights organisation that is active in the struggle for the rights of queer minorities in the country. She draws attention to a banner on their website

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<sup>12</sup> Pansexuality describes the potential for an individual to form a romantic or sexual relationship with other people regardless of their gender identity or sexuality.

<sup>13</sup> Genderqueer is a term that describes gender identity beyond the binarist definitions of male and female. For example, genderqueer individuals may consider themselves to be neither male nor female, or to exist in a combination of both male and female identities.



which she quotes as reading: “forging a gay mainstream” (2003:48). In noting this she suggests the following about their agenda:

The neoliberal politics of the IGF might be termed a *new heteronormativity* – it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (2003:50)

The idea of a “new heteronormativity” represents the movement towards a watered-down idea of queer activism and how it should function. The politics she refers to as the “new heteronormativity” is obviously not only limited to the IGF alone. In the worldwide context there has been a movement towards what Angela Jones calls the “normalising” of queer (2009). Jones writes:

While not en masse, there are many queer theorists and political activists that are engaged in an ongoing process of trying to fix a queer identity through discursive and political campaigns.

Thus, queer is in the process of losing its effectiveness as a site of deliberation and contestation through this “normalising”. I will not consider these ideas at great length; however, it is necessary to consider them to some extent when one is analysing the primary texts and considering their engagement with the politics of identity.

In the autobiographical account entitled “The Dog, the Cat, the Parrot and the Pig and Other Tales” (2011), featured in *Reclaiming the L-Word*, Yulinda Noortman narratively engages with a few defining experiences of her life. The account that is given begins with Noortman detailing the move she, her partner and their dogs make from the city of Johannesburg to Hilton, a community just outside Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal. What strikes the reader most about the opening lines of Noortman’s story is the fact they signal that the autobiographical account being related is explicitly relational. The focus is not placed on the autobiographical “I” as a sole focal point of the narrative concern of this particular account; instead, Noortman begins the account with a focus on “we”:

On a smog-filled afternoon in July we loaded our three dogs into our cars and drove out of Johannesburg [...] We were relocating to the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands after being in Johannesburg for the past 25 years. We had made the impulsive decision after a recent visit to the area. (27)

As the reader encounters the first few passages of Noortman's story it becomes clear that her partner, Karen, forms a critical component of the autobiographical account. Her partner is represented as the proximate other whose influence is a key factor in the manner in which Noortman views and then textually represents current versions of the autobiographical self.

The beginning of Noortman's autobiographical account is concerned largely with the present self and its experiences in the text. Noortman details the move she and her partner undertook together, their experiences in their new environment and the setting up of their life together in this place. Only later in her account does Noortman address past versions of the self as a young child, teenager and adult woman. Significantly, she chooses to address the pivotal autobiographical questions of origins in terms of birthplace and biological family after establishing the experiences of her present. Noortman does not allow the reader the "familiar and perfunctory beginning of so many autobiographies" (Eakin 1999:53). Instead, her short autobiographical account problematises the expected textual portrayal of a linearly placed trajectory of experience. She achieves this through what appears to be the conscious choice to represent past and present selves against the traditional formula of story-telling that suggests that biological birth signals the one and only true beginning of awareness. She textually portrays a keen awareness of and contentment with the self in the present. In no way am I suggesting that Noortman has deemed the experiences of her life before she met her partner as unimportant, as she exhibits a clear development of events and the value in the experiences she gains from them; but rather, in placing the focus on her present self and experiences in the text, she exhibits her success in negotiating the problematic issues of the past versions of the self with current versions of the self. Furthermore, she chooses to title the last part of her account "The Beginning", and it appears that for Noortman her true beginning took place at the point where she and her partner decided to begin living together:

So began the journey which finally, fifteen years later, brought us to the Natal Midlands. We both sold our properties and with a little trepidation rented a house together. We were both fiercely independent and a little fearful to be living together with someone in our personal space. But on a tsunami of love we stayed together only for three months before we bought a house that we registered in both our names. (42)

This is also the stage where Noortman establishes a sense of family with her partner, highlighting that “we began our family when I gave Karen a ‘pet shop special fluffy sort of Maltese’ puppy for Christmas” (42). It is evident that Noortman views Karen as somewhat of an extension of herself and inversely herself as an extension of Karen. She does not represent the two individuals as indefinable from one another; instead, important parts of both Karen and herself and their individual sense of selfhood are also highlighted. For example, her career experiences in the corporate world and those of Karen as a physiotherapist, as well their own individual interests, form an important part of the narrative. Noortman uses the metaphor of the “princess and the frog” in describing her search for love, chronicling a few failed attempts and experiences with different individuals she has met throughout her life (36). This metaphor is eventually extended to her relationship with Karen, and in the same manner that Noortman begins her autobiographical account with a focus on “we” as opposed to “I”, so too does she end in this manner, sharing with the reader of the following regarding her relationship with Karen: “we are constantly reminded that our lily pad is our throne. A throne on which sits two queens” (43).

This image may be critiqued as it portrays a commonly utilised heteronormative trope, only it is represented in queer terms as the male is simply exchanged for a female significant other. This constitutes a homonormative representation of the relationship, especially when one addresses the overall representation of Noortman’s domestic life. Although this may well be the case and is indeed a necessary critique, in terms of this project my concern is primarily with assessing how Noortman’s partner represents an important facet in the autobiographical subject’s sense of selfhood, whether the representation promotes homonormativity or not<sup>14</sup>. In many ways Noortman’s

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<sup>14</sup> What is notable is the focus on monogamous and arguably homonormative representations of relationships is *Reclaiming the L-Word* on the whole (see “Pulled Out of the Closet into my family’s

autobiographical account can be viewed as the story of family as experienced and established with her partner Karen.

In the primary texts the individuals who relate their stories often establish a sense of family within various organisations with different people who allow them to feel a certain sense of security. Interactions in these spaces as familial locations are also crucial in relational constructions and representations of the autobiographical self. Many of the autobiographical subjects in the primary texts that are examined in this dissertation often note substantial difficulties in the ‘coming-out’ process to family members. As I have highlighted above, some individuals receive acceptance from their families, whereas others are sometimes alienated from their biological family for extended periods of time. During this time they often establish belonging in new social spaces and form new understandings of family.

Traditional notions of the nuclear family have dominated discourse in identity politics in current socio-political climates (Lehr 1999:45). Family values, when explored in the traditional sense, are positioned very much in line with heteronormative, gender-normative and patriarchal ideals. Thus, the nuclear family comprising a mother, father and children has been the favoured form of familial representation. This then problematises the place of queer in family. For example, mainstream notions of family disfavour a family constructed of two gay men in domestic partnership with children. Similarly, queer children in the nuclear family are often sidelined for not meeting the expectations of heteronormativity, as they disrupt the hegemonic expectations of procreation. It is important to acknowledge the fact that procreation may take place through numerous methods besides heterosexual coupling, for example it may be achieved through medical assistance. Valerie Lehr draws attention to the fact that gay and lesbian individuals have often used the term ‘family’ to “describe others who have claimed gay or lesbian identity [...] This use of family indicates that despite whatever differences might separate those who are gay and lesbian, there is a common identity

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Embrace”, “A Comfortable Fit” and “Does Your Mother Know that You’re Out?”) It may be argued that, whereas *Hijab, Yes I Am!* and *Trans* all focus on the difficulties in assimilating, *Reclaiming the L-Word* addresses such topics but appears to favour stories that recount assimilation. As my analysis is aimed at showing how relationships aid in self-construction I believe that acknowledging homonormativity is enough. A critique of representations of homonormativity would result in my veering off the primary concerns of the project.

uniting them” (1999:43). The concept of family that Lehr presents extends into the realms of community, in a similar manner to the way that ubuntu does as well. For marginalised minorities, such as the LGBT community, notions of family often go beyond definitions that prize the existence of biological or adoptive ties as their sole signifier. Subsequently, family ties are formed on the basis of shared identity in terms of experience, as well as gender and sexual difference that falls outside of the expectations of the hegemonic norms of society.

My analysis will now proceed towards the exploration of how varied concepts of family are represented in the primary texts. I will examine ways in which these variations in the concept of family impact on how the autobiographical subjects view themselves in relation to family in its traditional sense, and eventually how this influences how they then formulate their own families, as well as an extended family identity. The autobiographical account entitled “Chantelle’s Story: Living Close to the Edge” (2011), featured in *Trans*, represents a number of variations in terms of traditional notions of family with regard to the manner in which parent-child and marital relationships are presented. Chantelle is a male-to-female transgendered individual, who has recently undergone a full sex-change operation. Chantelle’s story is very much the story of her body, as the body, its transformation and experiences remain the focal point of the narrative. The process of remembering is an embodied experience for Chantelle. John Paul John Eakin, quoted in Smith & Watson (2001:37), draws attention to the fact that “our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity”. Chantelle begins her autobiographical account by identifying certain aspects of her selfhood:

My name is Chantelle [and] technically I’m three and a half but in real-life terms I’m approaching the big five-oh. I was married twice. From my first marriage I have a son who is 24, and from my second marriage I have three children between the ages of ten and 13. I am 101% female. I was born with a medical condition that was diagnosed as gender identity disorder, but I was privileged enough to go to Thailand, where a wonderful surgeon cured me of my illness, and for the first time in my life I feel great. (103)

Chantelle, like so many others who share their life story through the autobiographical form, immediately situates herself in terms of various vectors of her identity, including

age, gender and geographical location. She mentions her family in terms of her two marriages, the three children from these marriages and also her adoptive parents and siblings. Chantelle was born in the United Kingdom to a seventeen-year-old mother, and she was then adopted by a South African couple. She describes her relationship with her adoptive family as being one that has been defined by a general emotional disconnection (104). Chantelle's sense of family and her position within the family structure assumes a prominent role in how the autobiographical self is constructed and represented in the text. As much as she feels disconnected from her adoptive mother as a young child, Chantelle presents her mother as an important figure in her gender identification. It appears that Chantelle is able to recognise and establish her female gender identity as a young child through that of her mother. Chantelle recounts how as an adolescent, who was considered a male named Steve, she would "pretend [she] was a girl and wear [her] mom's underwear" (105). This ritual of dressing up in her mother's underwear was also connected to sex for the adolescent Chantelle, as she would masturbate and only become aroused if she was wearing her mother's underwear. In the same manner that her mother was pivotal in assisting Chantelle in the issues relating to her gender (even if her mother was unaware of this fact), so too were the two women that Chantelle was married to.

Her two marriages have been to women, and the beginning of her medical transition from male to female began during her second marriage. Chantelle's marriages are represented in a manner that defies the expected norms of gender and sexuality. Chantelle and her first wife were married in 1981:

I was blessed when I met my first wife. I confided in her and told her how I felt about things [...] She painted my nails, bought me clothes, and helped me with make-up [...] I really think that during those years I was able to explore my feminine side more [...] I enjoyed wearing her clothes and she was very supportive. (106)

Chantelle also comments how her first wife assumed a very motherly role in her life, assisting and supporting her in a manner that was not judgmental (106). Her first wife is a significant part in Chantelle's journey towards her womanhood. Her first wife is the proximate other whose presence in Chantelle's life is represented as vital in her

movement towards her true female gender. The marriage ends tragically with Chantelle's wife's attempt on her life by trying to shoot her in the head; however, the bullet goes through her neck instead and she survives (106). Chantelle notes how she forgave her first wife for what had happened and they eventually divorced in 1985 (106).

Chantelle's second marriage follows a similar path to her first, as her second wife is also an important part in her transition. Her second wife is also described as a motherly figure who assists her in numerous ways through supporting the female aspects of her identity, for example, by allowing her to explore sexual fantasies through dressing up in women's clothing. In this marriage Chantelle makes the decision to begin her transition from Steve to Chantelle, as until this point she had lived as both. In a similar manner to the way her first marriage ended, her second marriage also ends disastrously as the relationship eventually disintegrates. However, each of Chantelle's marriages is represented as a vital component in her transitioning process. Both her ex-wives act as helpers, guides and a necessary support network in the journey through her transition. Thus the autobiographical account that Chantelle chronicles in her short autobiography is notably relational, as her own womanhood is realised through that of her mother and her two ex-wives. Chantelle's representations of her experiences of family in the text present to the reader concepts of the family that go against patriarchy and the binarist expectations of gender and sex. Although these relationships are not without certain difficulties, they function positively in assisting Chantelle to realise a positive sense of selfhood.

The family as a social location is consistently presented as being important in the construction of selfhood in the primary texts. Relationships with partners, parents, children, siblings, extended family and family experienced outside of marital, adoptive or blood ties, consistently present themselves as a key factor in how the individuals whose stories I have examined, identify and present themselves textually. Queer identity, as is represented in the primary texts, is consistently viewed as problematic for predominantly heteronormative communities, and those who identify as queer are often purposely excluded and alienated from the family spaces in which they seek to belong. A poignant scene is painted in the documentary film *Jihad for Love* (Sharma 2007),

when Mushin Hendricks is speaking of issues of sexuality with a senior religious leader in the Muslim faith, who categorically states that the only punishment for homosexuality is death, and the only deliberation is the form of execution. Hendricks is father to three children, and in a scene with his children he speaks of issues of sexuality with his children and asks them how they would feel if their father were killed because he is gay. It becomes evident that the thought of losing their father in such a manner is painful to consider for his children. At this pivotal moment one realises that a father does not lose his worth as a parent because of his identification as a gay man.

It is in similar moments that queer individuals are able to rationalise and engage with certain aspects of their worth, as self-worth is tied to significant others in many respects. Thus, the importance of the validation of family is necessary for all individuals, whether they identify as queer or not. This is continually evident in the autobiographical accounts that I have examined. The individuals who recount their stories in the primary texts often note a desire to establish a sense of belonging and acceptance in the family space. This desire for belonging is tied directly to issues of self-esteem and self-worth. Autobiographical accounts detailing familial relations represent attempts by the author to reconcile the difference associated with queer identification, with a need to function successfully in the family space.

This and the previous chapter of this dissertation allowed me the opportunity to consider the relational nature of family and communal life and its influence on autobiographical self-construction. Religion and spirituality form a remarkably dominant influence on family and community in the South African context, and this fact is explicitly visible in the stories featured in the four primary texts. In the chapter that follows I will frame my analysis of the relationality inherent in autobiographical storytelling, and concepts of ubuntu, specifically in the context of religion and spirituality.



## CHAPTER FOUR: CONSTRUCTING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF AND IDEAS OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN SPIRITUAL SPACES

In this chapter the focus is primarily on examining various autobiographical accounts in the four primary texts in an attempt to understand the influence that interactions in spiritual and/or religious places have on how the autobiographical self is constructed. Queer identity and spiritual/religious identity often exist in high contention with one another. Religion often takes a condemnatory stance on queer identity, and queer individuals often find it difficult to exist harmoniously as both queer and spiritual beings. I begin this chapter by exploring the intersection between queer identity and spirituality/religion, and I then proceed in my discussion by examining the Ubuntu Theology of Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu before beginning my analysis of the various narratives that I have chosen from the primary texts.

In his piece entitled “Writing the Spirit”, Victor Marsh speaks of his personal memoir, *The Boy in the Yellow Dress* (which is still under construction) and his quest to reconcile his queer identity with his Jewish beliefs. He notes:

The moral and ethical universe enshrined in the society of my early upbringing required that my type be cast as religious pariah (*toevah*) and/or a psychological specimen (deviant, homosexual, etc.). In order for that universe of meaning to remain stable and retain its power over me, I would have had to remain an obedient subject of the ruling discourses that held it together. These medical and religious discourses produced hostile narratives that positioned me as Other, a fugitive outsider to their clearly marked territory of moral rightness, and they mitigated against the very healing that would resolve the social and internal psychic split caused by my indoctrination; that is, of course, unless I would be prepared to repudiate my sinful ways. (2012:251)

Through engagement with the autobiographical accounts in each of my chosen texts it becomes evident that representations of Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Spirituality are the dominant religious practices in the primary texts. The above quotation by Marsh highlights the shared experience of many queer individuals in the texts that I am examining. Marsh poignantly presents the multi-layered meeting points of queer identification and religion/spirituality. Religion is usually represented as an

othering force by the queer individuals in the texts; they are constantly embattled, trying to reconcile their queer identity with the expectations and regulations of their religion. Religion is often presented as a hierarchical, patriarchal, heteronormative and gender-normative institution. The autobiographical subjects in the texts often acknowledge within themselves a deep desire for a connection and relationship with God, but religion as an institution often excludes them on the basis of their queer identity. This is not to say that religion is represented as a purely and entirely alienating force in the primary texts, as some individuals have been able to find acceptance and have forged nurturing relationships in spiritual places. Religious spaces are represented as important meeting grounds on which people forge personal and collective identities. Institutions such as the Christian church, for example, premise many of their beliefs on interconnectedness through religious kinship and communal practices.

Victor Marsh presents an idea of religion as:

referring to a sociological phenomenon, entailing inclusion/exclusion from socially and politically valorized faith communities that produce and support [...] “plausibility structures” that anchor the sense of belonging in community. (2012:261)

Religion is often portrayed as legalistic, staunch and specific in terms of what it deems to be right and wrong. In this manner queer identity often presents something problematic for religion and its expectations in terms of gender and sexuality. In the 2007 documentary film *Jihad for Love* (Sharma), queer identity is placed in direct contrast with practices of Islam. The film visits numerous countries around the world – including South Africa, Egypt and Morocco – documenting some of the struggles faced by queer Muslims. This film presents the departure point for the specific focus on religion/spirituality in this chapter.

In the South African context it may be argued that it is virtually impossible to separate queer identity and religion because the two consistently intersect on various levels. The collection of autobiographies, *Hijab*, deals specifically with the spiritual aspect of the lives of those who share their stories in the text. As in *Jihad for Love*, *Hijab* also contrasts queer identity with Islam, presenting sometimes painful yet moving and

empowering pictures of queer spiritual life. As I have noted in Chapter One, roughly 85% of South Africans identify as religious or spiritual, and this high statistic in many ways demands that queer identity be examined against religion to some degree in a project of this nature. Furthermore, in considering the four primary texts, I believe that a great disservice, in terms of a well-rounded examination of the texts, would be done if I did not consider an analysis based in religious discourses to some extent, as the issue of religion/spirituality consistently presents itself as a dominant narrative concern. Issues of religion and spirituality are encountered not only in *Hijab*, but throughout the other three texts as well. The autobiographical subjects in the texts often relate in detail the hardships and triumphs in their journeys as queer individuals and spiritual beings.

In order to give a general idea of how spirituality features in the primary texts, I believe that a numerical overview of the representation of spirituality/religion is useful. In *Reclaiming the L-Word* religion/spirituality appears in 10 of the 15 short autobiographical accounts that are featured in the collection. *Yes I Am!* comprises 36 autobiographical accounts, and issues relating to spirituality/religion appear in 13 of these accounts. In *Trans* issues of spirituality/religion appear in 13 of the 28 autobiographical accounts featured in the collection. Interestingly, in *Trans* a group discussion was held with all the individuals whose stories are featured in the collection, except two who could not attend. One of the issues discussed in this group session was the issue of spirituality/religion. Religion/spirituality appears to be a substantial concern of these individuals and Charl, one of those who is part of the discussion, makes a general observation from the group session, noting that grappling with these issues in relation to gender identity has resulted in an increased understanding of their religious/spiritual practices (2011:227). Regarding *Reclaiming the L-Word* Jessica Murray correctly highlights the fact that “a number of chapters in *Reclaiming the L-Word* refer to how sexuality and religion intersect” (2012:91). Murray foregrounds the fact that religion/spirituality are important areas of concern amongst gay and lesbian South Africans, drawing attention to a two-volume collection entitled *Aliens in the Household of God and Christian Faith in South Africa* (Germond & De Gruchy 1997) (2012:91). This collection features what are referred to as “testimonies” of individuals who identify as spiritual/religious and queer.

The research contained in this dissertation has been noted as being primarily concerned with investigating autobiographical constructions of queer identities in relation to ubuntu and collective identity. Thus, in this chapter I will also consider religious spaces and interactions in these spaces, in relation to how they influence and affect the autobiographical subjects' sense of selfhood, and how they aid in identity construction. I will also consider the concept of ubuntu in spiritual locations and how ubuntu may present itself as a useful concept in realising new ways of viewing religion as it is represented in the primary texts.

Dirk Louw, in a paper he gave at the *Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* in 1998, suggests that unlike Western forms of humanism, African humanism is often connected to issues of spirituality:

While Western humanism tends to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs, ubuntu or African humanism is resiliently religious. For the Westerner, the maxim “a person is a person through other persons” has no obvious religious connotations [...] However, in African tradition this maxim has deeply religious meaning. The person one is to become “through other persons” is, ultimately, an ancestor. And by the same token, these “other persons” include ancestors. Ancestors are extended family. Dying is the ultimate homecoming. Not only the living must share and care for each other, but the living and dead depend on each other.

Thus, ubuntu functions as a spiritual as well as a humanist concept. Traditional African spiritualities place a substantial focus on the living existing in harmony with both the ancestors as well as fellow human beings. Later in this chapter I will explore autobiographical accounts of individuals who acknowledge the queer facets of their identity as arising directly from connections with certain ancestors. Louw further suggests that “ubuntu inevitably implies a deep respect and regard for religious beliefs and practices”. Ubuntu's founding on concepts of interconnectedness extends this interconnectedness to a spiritual realm with the ancestors.

Traditional forms of African Spirituality and monotheistic religion often exist in contention with each other. Traditional African Spiritualities hold in high regard the role and place of the ancestors in the lives of the living, whereas Christianity, for example,

views such beliefs relating to ancestor worship as being problematic. The expectation in Christianity is that only the supreme God is venerated and worshipped. Similarly, traditional African beliefs systems, and their consideration of ancestor veneration as vitally important, may problematise the place of individuals who choose not to acknowledge their ancestors in worship. Even though these differences exist, many Africans live in a manner that balances their traditional African beliefs together with Christianity, highlighting the possibility for a meeting ground between African Spirituality and Christianity.

Ubuntu in many ways serves as this meeting ground as it “underscores the importance of agreement”; this agreement is only achieved through lengthy dialogue that considers the importance of each individual’s belief systems, and also that of the extended community (Louw 1998). The consideration of the importance of the extended community does not presuppose oppressive “sameness”, but acknowledges the necessity of functioning successfully on a personal level and also on a communal level. This understanding of ubuntu as a spiritual as well as a humanist principle will allow me to proceed in investigating the Ubuntu Theology of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

Over the years Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has acknowledged the need for uniquely African forms of Christianity. In the Introduction to *An African Prayer Book* (1995:xiii) Tutu retells the Biblical story of creation, relating how God, after creating Adam, and watching him enjoy the wonders of Eden, realised the need to create for him a companion:

This beautiful story tells a fundamental truth about us – that we are made to live in a delicate network of interdependence with one another, with God and with the rest of creation. We say in our African idiom: “A person is a person through other persons”. A solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. (1995:xiv)

This forms the basis for understanding Tutu’s Ubuntu Theology. It arises from the simple idea that human life is ultimately interconnected and independent through

oneness with God: “After all, we are created in the image of a God who is a diversity of persons who exist in ineffable unity” (xiv-xv).

With regard to Desmond Tutu’s Ubuntu Theology Michael Battle notes that:

Tutu tirelessly denied that the color of one’s skin can be an index of one’s value as a human being. Indeed his ubuntu theology can be understood in its entirety as a Christian rebuttal to such a claim. (1997:1)

This view of Tutu’s Ubuntu Theology is interesting in that it posits its functioning as a Christian tool against one form of discrimination, namely racism/racial discrimination. Battle’s suggestion that it should be understood to function in this particular manner in its absolute “entirety” is flawed, as it reduces the general applicability of Tutu’s Ubuntu Theology to issues beyond racism. Although much of Tutu’s life has been concerned with aiding the fight for a democratic South Africa that was free from apartheid’s evils, Tutu’s awareness of the issues relating to human rights in general is notable. Tutu has been an active figure in human rights battles in all forms, not just racism and the politics of racism. Tutu has been continuously and boldly vocal with regard to numerous human rights issues, including xenophobia and homophobia. During a 2004 sermon, excerpts of which are featured in an article on the Huffington Post website (“All Are God’s Children: On Including Gays and Lesbians in the Church and Society” 2012), Tutu said:

A student once asked me if I could have one wish granted to reverse an injustice, what would it be? I had to ask for two. One is for world leaders to forgive the debts of developing nations which hold them in such thrall. The other is for the world to end the persecution of people because of their sexual orientation, which is every bit as unjust as that crime against humanity, apartheid.

Thus, although racial discrimination may have been the starting point in realising an ubuntu form of Christian theology, it cannot be solely considered as being limited to these issues. Tutu’s Ubuntu Theology may be considered a “Christian rebuttal” to discrimination in all its varied forms (1997:1).

Battle places emphasis on the fact that Ubuntu Theology acknowledges the interconnectedness of human life through the individual's connection with a supreme God, thus humanity becomes connected through oneness with God (1997:64). Therefore in religious and spiritual spaces, where Western models of identity may neglect the relative importance of the relationality of experience, an ubuntuist perspective is a reminder that there is a shared identity in all individuals, despite the fact that human beings exist separately in many ways. Battle quotes Tutu who states, "God says, it is precisely our diversity that makes for our unity. It is precisely because you are you and I am me that [God] says, 'you hold on together'" (64). Thus, God becomes the area of common ground, and human beings can move away from discriminatory models of religion; this shift can be achieved through venturing beyond the singularity of each person, and what one would deem the shortcomings of another, and moving towards the God that sustains them all. Ubuntu Theology succeeds in that it works to break down hierarchies and binaries. For example, Tutu's involvement in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was based on a model of justice and forgiveness. Battle illustrates how Tutu's Ubuntu Theology as:

[a] theological model seeks to restore the oppressor's humanity by releasing and enabling the oppressed as peers under God. The relationship of oppressed and oppressor and the resulting definition of humanity through racial classification are broken through ubuntu, an alternative way of being in a hostile world. (1991:5)

The example of oppressed and oppressor in terms of racial identification used above can be applied to discrimination and the forms it takes across various identity categories. Ubuntu Theology does not favour those who share in a common faith as communal practices in many religions do; instead, it places focus on the shared nature of the human experience, not just the Christian or Muslim experience, for example. As the main priority of this project revolves around literary analysis, my intention is not to focus in unnecessary depth on explaining Tutu's Ubuntu Theology. For this reason I have chosen to give a concise overview of the manner in which Tutu's Ubuntu Theology functions, and the ideals on which it is based. Also, my intention is not to present a dominantly Christian view of religion. Instead, my intention is to illustrate

how ubuntu is effective in calling into question discriminatory practices within religion, regardless of the form they might take.

Attaching ubuntu ideals to the functioning of religion serves as a reminder that human beings exist in diversity. This diversity, however, should not be the cause of isolation and condemnation, as there always exists the intrinsic and shared experience of being human. Just as apartheid notions of religion favoured the white majority and had to be called into question, so too do patriarchal, heteronormative and gender-normative notions of religion need questioning. An ubuntuist approach to religion may provide the starting point for such discourses. I will explore the manner in which religion is represented in the primary texts in an attempt to illuminate the intersections it forms with queer and ubuntu.

John-Raphael Staude suggests the following:

Spirituality involves connectedness to oneself, others, nature and to larger meaning. It is associated with creativity, play, wisdom, faith and a sense of oneness. Writing and reflecting on one's autobiography enhances spiritual growth and can be therapeutic, freeing people from outlived roles and self-imposed images. (2005:249)

In terms of spiritual issues autobiography presents itself a useful site in which the author may engage with the self as spiritual. The interaction in spiritual places is not only with God; in whichever form worship may take place, the spiritual experience is embedded in collective identities through religion and religious practices. Thus the manner in which the autobiographical self as spiritual is constructed in the texts I am examining is inherently relational. It is influenced by spiritual leaders as well as peers. Staude highlights the fact that autobiography and issues of spirituality have consistently intersected over time, citing the stories of Abraham, Moses, Joseph and Solomon in the Hebrew Bible as examples of attempts by human beings to begin grappling with issues of the soul (2005:257). Spirituality is a concern that presents itself numerous times in the texts that this dissertation is concerned with, and although it is seldom presented in line with the traditional spiritual autobiographical form, it is portrayed as an important part of the autobiographical subjects' sense of self. Staude highlights the fact that



classic spiritual autobiography concerns itself with issues of confession or conversion in terms of narrative concerns and structure (258). Although these elements do feature in the primary texts, they are not necessarily dominant concerns. Thus my intention is not to discuss and analyse each autobiographical account as a spiritual autobiography, but rather to investigate the overall place of spirituality in the narrative. I will also attempt to understand how the collective identities forged under spirituality and religion contribute to the manner in which queer autobiographical selfhood is constructed.

A prominent theme that arises within the various texts is related to leaders within the religious body attempting to reconcile their sexuality with their spirituality. Imam Mushin Hendricks, whose life stories I have examined in Chapter Three, has dedicated his life towards positioning the queer minority within the Islamic faith. As the founder and director of The Inner Circle – a Cape Town based organisation concerned with queer Muslim issues, also responsible for the publication of *Hijab* – his battle is not solely a personal one, as he has assumed a leadership role within the queer Muslim community through his extensive work. In the foreword to *Hijab* he notes:

I have always felt a deep sense of obligation to the struggle of Queer Muslims. Is it a good Muslim practice to disregard someone who is different from the mainstream simply because they are not fitting in with our interpretation of Islam? (2009:vii)

The sense of obligation he feels towards the struggle of queer Muslims presents the position of the queer religious leader in an interesting light. Through religious leaders speaking publically about their own queer identity hierarchies within religion are actively broken down. In the Afrikaans autobiography *Daar's 'n Gay Pastoor in My Kop* (2008), Phillip Liebenberg recalls the story of his own struggle as a well known pastor who was married to a woman, had a child, but was hiding the fact that he was a gay man. Liebenberg leads the congregation of the liberal church, Die Kapel, in Johannesburg. As a pastor and religious leader, who grew up in a deeply patriarchal Afrikaner context, Liebenberg's decision to openly disclose the truth about his sexuality through an autobiographical text positions his autobiographical act as a tool in terms of identity politics, and it also delegitimatises the dominant heteronormative expectations of religious social orders. The existence of queer identities in religious spaces, and the

refusal of individuals like Liebenberg to denounce their vocation as religious leaders, results in the arousal of certain tensions for religious communities. These areas of tension become sites of deliberation in which religion can be questioned, explored and ultimately re-imagined. Victor Marsh positions autobiographical accounts by queer individuals as providing “multiple sites of resistance to dominant prevailing myths”, as these accounts call into question the heteronormative and gender-normative models that religion often favours:

Instead of following preordained scripts that would reserve spiritual research to folk privileged by heteronormative models, nonconformists feeling the “urge to merge” have written new scripts rewriting the life in texts of resistance to religious homophobia, producing affirmative narratives that reconfigure the meaning of the queer experience as it is lived, and as it can be inscribed as texts, to open up new fields of knowledge and awareness, being, and becoming for people previously regarded as “beyond the pale”. (2012:263)

In my analysis of the primary texts I will keep the above firmly in mind. I will explore the manner in which bringing together discourses relating to queer and religion problematises prevailing views of queer identity. It is important to note that my intention is not to examine the texts solely in terms of the manner in which they politicise queer identity. However, it is necessary to consider, as the act of placing queer identity in contrast with a dominant social concern such as religion makes the autobiographical act in these cases inherently political. I will begin by situating my analysis of the texts in relation to the autobiographies of leaders in various religious orders.

Rowan Q. Smith presents the autobiographical account entitled “Who Told You So?” (2010), included in *Yes I Am!*. In this account Smith reveals a small part of his journey as a gay man and a pastor. Smith acknowledges a vocation for the priesthood from a young age, and he then pursues it through study in England (92). He highlights the fact that he maintained an awareness of his sexuality; however, it always became a secondary concern in relation to a number of other concerns (91-2). What is most notable about Smith’s sense of self in relation to his identity as a gay man is that he does not separate it from his identification as a Christian and a priest: “coming out only

really happened when I took responsibility for my own parish in 1972 and began to explore what being gay meant to me as a priest” (92). During this time of “coming out” Smith acknowledges the support of friends as being pivotal and resulting in his rectory providing a safe place for others who were grappling with issues of sexuality. In this manner he is not isolated and is thus able to stage belonging, and through his own sense of belonging he actively works in providing a space for others in his position to find comfort through shared experience.

Furthermore, Smith highlights the fact that during apartheid his identification with the Black Consciousness Movement and the fight for a democratic South Africa allowed him the insight to grapple with issues relating to his sexual identity; he explains: “to be able to claim my identity as black was the spur to claiming my identity as gay...” (92). Smith’s oppression in terms of his racial identity creates a strong desire in him to engage with his sexual identity and the othering he may experience due to it. ‘Struggle’ forms a dominant motif throughout Christian teachings: O’Brien terms struggle the “definitive trope of Christianity itself” (2004:189). For Smith existing as a black man in apartheid symbolises one form of active struggle, and in a parallel manner existing as a gay man in the church symbolises another form of struggle. Thus, the two are brought together with the claiming of his black identity, and he is then able to claim his identity as a gay man. The autobiographical self is represented as highly politicised in “Who Told You So?”, as Smith must not only negotiate the politics of racial identity but also sexual identity simultaneously.

Smith foregrounds the preaching practices of many churches that condemn homosexuality as a sin and an abomination, noting how:

many Christians continue to struggle with their faith and their sexual experience, believing that God does not love us as we are, and again we have to ask: “Who told you so?” (92)

Smith is suggesting the questioning of dogmatic hierarchical preaching practices and messages in the church, and he suggests that they be exchanged for versions which are premised on love and unconditional acceptance. In religious spaces those in authority – preachers, pastors, spiritual leaders and Imams – are in a unique position that affords

them the opportunity to either positively or negatively affect the development of an individual's spiritual self. Smith notes the affirming and supportive teachings of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, on whose staff he served for five years, as helpful in constructing a positive sense of both his spiritual and queer identities. Thus religious leaders are the proximate other whose influence is a necessary part in how the autobiographical self is constructed and presented.

In a short reflection entitled "Gay in the Image of God" (2010), featured in *Yes I Am!*, Laurie Gaum makes a note of his thoughts just before his ordination as a pastor was revoked by a church committee, because he had been involved in a relationship with another man. Although abstract and short, this reflection by Gaum presents an interesting insight into the manner in which the author is able to create an understanding of the queer self and the spiritual. In his reflection, Gaum uses the images of God's creation of human beings in Genesis in an attempt to rationalise his queer identity. He considers his own version of the Bible verses in Genesis 27 and 31, from the first chapter:

On the sixth day God created humans to be like God's self, God made men and women. God looked at what God had done. All of it was very good! (94)

He then presents the following thought process:

I am created in the image of God.  
I am created gay in the image of God.  
God created me gay – looking like God.  
Perhaps God created you straight – looking like God.  
God created you a man – in his image.  
God created you a woman – in her image.  
We are all people who look like God – irrespective of our differences.  
(94)

The above highlights Gaum's attempt to analyse the origins of his identification as queer. He acknowledges the fact that the Bible narrates that all individuals are made in the image of God, and in this manner he deduces that all individuals, as God's creation, are brought together through their oneness with God. Gaum begins to realise that his

sense of selfhood as a Christian is linked only to his identification with God and not the rules and opinions of society. The ideas reflected on in this short account are similar to Desmond Tutu's Ubuntu Theology and its focus on a relationship with God as opposed to a focus on the various differences in the human experience. Gaum's reflections in this piece indicate a deep ubuntu awareness, whether conscious or not. He actively rejects the hierarchical nature of religious order as he spotlights the fact that "there are so many negative connotations to ruling in an abusive, discriminatory and violent way. To take care of the earth, of each other, of the cosmos which we have been created a part – that is the approach we need" (95). Gaum's representation of his queer identity as arising from God is interesting in that it does not separate the queer facet of his identity from his identification with God: "God created me gay – looking like God" (94). The self as gay does not become separated from the self as identifying with being created in the image of God. Instead of questioning himself and condemning his sexuality, Gaum instead questions the belief systems of dominant religious orders as well as society's reaction to the fact that he is gay. The self, for Gaum, is seen and represented as being deeply in touch with God and reflecting God's purpose, even through queer identity.

Laurie Gaum's identification with the queer aspects of his selfhood as being created in him by God, represents a bold statement in that he actively acknowledges that queer identity and religious identity are not separate. However, this is not always the case, as many individuals in the primary texts chastise themselves with regard to the queer facets of their identity. The fact that they may identify as queer is often seen and represented as ungodly and an abomination. In the anonymous account "A Road Less Travelled" (2009), which features in *Hijab*, the narrator recounts:

I had started relating to my homosexuality and religion as an affliction that I would not be able to shake off. For God's sake, I was a born-again Christian and homosexual! What would my mother say?! I believed that I was surely going to hell. Since I could not marry these two aspects of myself, let alone exist within a duality of this nature, I chose to forego and disavow the God of my mother. I was alone. (55)

The narrator acknowledges the fact that he views his religious identity and sexual identity as not being able to coexist together, mainly because his identification as a gay man was something morally reprehensible in light of religious expectations. The above

quotation presents a poignant picture of the struggles of the autobiographical subject to find worth as an individual who desired a relationship with God but who was also queer. His experiences relating to religion position his sexual nature and identity as sinful and ultimately problematic. For the narrator the only option for him is to denounce religion in attempts to grapple with issues of his sexuality and establish some sense of belonging. The autobiographical subject thus exists in a state of alienation from God, and Victor Marsh suggests that, “alienated from the dominant cultural and political models, the queer self – destabilized by its bruising encounters with homophobic ‘cultures of insult’ – may be forced into ontological doubt” (262-3). Thus, in journeying away from the site that problematizes and condemns his queer identity, the autobiographical self as queer begins an attempt to locate meaning and acceptance in other places away from the condemnation of religion.

The narrator’s mother represents the most notable proximate other in his religious journey. In general he feels a deep emotional disconnection from her, and recalling various experiences of his childhood he foregrounds the following:

Growing up, I wasn’t told I was good enough just the way I was or encouraged to express my ideas, my feelings, my perspectives. I was told to be like other boys. Mother continually reminded me that I was a disappointment and an embarrassment to my family. It was because of my shameful nature that I was kicked out of my home. (56)

His mother’s condemnatory attitude towards the narrator’s sexuality arises from her staunch Christian belief system. Peter Burger, quoted in Marsh (2012:262), emphasises the fact that “we obtain our notions of the world originally from other human beings, and these notions continue to be plausible to us in very large measure because others continue to affirm them”. In relation to this idea, the narrator’s experiences with religion through his mother form a dominant influence of his outlook on religious practices and doctrines. He goes on to recount a difficult time away from God, a time in which he engages in prostitution and drugs and becomes severely depressed. In writing of his search for healing and newness, he remembers:

My methods of old weren’t working anymore. I was exhausted. I was only twenty-three years old and I was exhausted [...] To whom could

I turn? To the God I had abandoned many years ago? No! I couldn't. I couldn't go back to the God of my mother, for look what kind of mother she had become, and yet she was an ardent believer. (56-7)

Although the narrator acknowledges a desire and need for God in his life, his view of the "God of his mother" has been tarnished because of her condemnatory and harsh manner. What becomes evident in engagement with and analysis of the above quotation is that the narrator's sense of religion is explicitly relational. He experiences the concept of God through his mother, and for him his mother's actions directly mirror her God. His mother represents the dogmatic and discriminatory side of religion that he prefers to distance himself from.

The narrator later approaches an organisation that assists him in his journey as a gay man and also affirms his desire for a relationship with God as being valid and achievable (57). It is through this that he actively begins a journey towards a renewed relationship with God. Most notably he leaves behind Christianity (the religion of his mother) and begins to engage with Islam (the religion of his father) (57). The narrator does not include any information regarding his relationship with his father that would suggest a positive and affirming connection with him and Islam. However, what is clear is that the negative experiences of Christianity through his mother's oppressive and dogmatic ideals have resulted in his desire to understand God in new ways. "A Road Less Travelled" exhibits the fact that for many the view of God and religion is in many ways directly dependant on others in the religious order, whether it be leaders or peers. People often come to understand God through other believers and the image of religion that they relay. This short autobiographical account represents religious experience as profoundly relational, and interactions in terms of religion are represented as the starting point for the autobiographical subject's journey with God.

In the 2011 documentary film *Glitterboys and Ganglands* (Beukes), a scene that stands out in particular is one that is filmed in Saint George's Cathedral, a well known church in Cape Town which presents an inclusive and non-discriminatory Christian message. In this scene each of the contestants of the Miss Gay Western Cape pageant lights a candle and says a prayer for someone who they know has been a victim of hate crime, violence or abuse due to their queer identity. This scene is particularly poignant as the

church collectively welcomes the contestants of the pageant into a religious space, without any discrimination or judgment; instead, they are welcomed into this religious social location with a profound awareness of the numerous human rights issues faced by the queer minority. Religious institutions are not always represented as condemnatory in the texts. Many of the individuals who have referenced the religious aspects of their lives in their autobiographical accounts have noted religion as a positive force in their perception of the self as queer.

In the autobiographical account entitled “Prier’s Story: For a Short Time I Seemed to be a Woman, My Face Felt Soft” (2011), which features in *Trans*, the narrator notes the positive influences of religion and the religious community in her life. The narrator consistently notes the difficulty of attempting to understand her transgender identity, and details the many painful experiences she has encountered at the hands of the medical community, for example. She attends the Hope Metropolitan Church in Cape Town, an inclusive church that welcomes the LGBT community, and details part of her experience in the church:

Suddenly I was with people who accepted me for who I was and understood that wanting to be the opposite sex or wanting to be homosexual was natural and normal. The church has been a useful contact and I find myself invited to different places and activities, even though I am in my eighties. (37)

The narrator does not share any particular details about her relationship with God or her view of religion; however, her story provides an interesting contrast to the view of religious social spaces as areas that discriminate against the queer minority. However, what remains interesting about religious spaces such as the Hope Metropolitan Church is that they are categorised as ‘liberal’ churches, thus the queer community often remains excluded from the religious mainstream. What this does however achieve is the movement towards the queering of spirituality and religion, which in effect offers a contrast and thereby a site in which the often staunch and discriminatory practices of mainstream organised religion can be questioned.



In the account entitled “Charl’s Story: Back In the 70s There Was No Support” (2011), also featured in *Trans*, the narrator, like Prier, also describes a view of religion that has aided him in understanding and accepting his queer identity. “Charl’s Story” presents the short autobiographical account of Charl, who identifies as a “trans man”<sup>15</sup> (27). At the beginning of Charl’s account he situates himself in terms of the place he was born and his family, locating them as important proximate others. Charl then immediately goes on to situate himself in terms of his spiritual identity, noting:

I grew up in a very religious home where we followed the traditional Christian doctrine – you were created in God’s image and your body is the temple of the Lord. I had to suppress whatever I felt before I came out because I believed that my feelings and my thoughts were wrong. I went through a lot of guilt because of it, because everything I was brought up to believe didn’t feel right to me. (27)

Although Charl’s account cannot be specifically labelled a spiritual memoir or autobiography, the importance of religion in his construction of the queer autobiographical self is evident. Christianity, as taught to him by his parents, as well as his experiences as a Christian, are a few of the first things that result in his questioning the place and moral “rightness” of his identification as queer. Jodi O’Brien suggests that “doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality” (2004:184). Although O’Brien refers specifically to homosexuality and Christianity, I believe that what she proposes may be extended to queer identity and religion (specifically as represented in the primary texts) to a larger extent.

Charl notes that before he began his transition, he identified as lesbian, and recalls: “I did not have girlfriends because, to me, this was wrong as it’s not Christian” (28). Charl’s understanding and experience of Christianity is that it condemns queer identity as being unacceptable and aberrant, and this fact is further asserted by his mother’s reaction to a relationship he was in with a woman he met during his time in the town of Port St Johns (Western Cape). He writes a letter to his mother in which he mentions

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<sup>15</sup> The term “trans man” describes a mode of identification that refers to a female-to-male (FTM) transgendered person. The glossary in *Trans* offers the following understanding: “an FTM starts his life with a female body; chosen gender is male. Always uses male pronouns” (5).

Mary, the woman he has met, and the fact that he would like to visit his family together with her. Charl recalls how his mother immediately wrote back, saying that she would prefer if they did not come to her home, because in having them as a couple in her home she feared that she would be punished by God – as it would appear as if she was condoning his homosexuality (28-9). This presents a crisis for Charl, as he must consider the prospect of not just being an outcast in his family, but also consider the prospect of being a religious outcast. The family space and the religious space are two important sites in Charl's construction of his identity. It becomes apparent to him that his queer identity has alienated him from both family and religion and he thus cannot stage belonging in both family and religious spaces. As a result, Charl has to begin actively grappling with new and varied attempts to understand religion and the meaning it assumes in his own life.

Charl highlights the fact that he lived with the guilt of his queer identity for an extended period of time and only later, through an exchange with a visiting pastor to Port St Johns, was he enabled to reconcile his Christian identity with his sexuality:

I went to him one day and said "Father, I'm a lesbian. Is it a sin?" [...] He said, "Are you hurting anybody?" I said, "Well, my folks." He said, "No, no, no, you're not hurting them they are hurting themselves! You are making yourself happy! If they are hurt by your actions, that is their choice". He added, "Anything, anything that you do to deliberately hurt someone is a sin – and that includes yourself".  
(29)

The visiting pastor is represented as an important religious figure for Charl, in terms of how he begins to understand and construct his varied identities. This encounter with the pastor serves as an awakening for Charl, one that does not necessarily remove all the blockages and difficulties he encounters in terms of queer identity and religious identity; but instead, it aids him in attaining a certain level of peace regarding the conflict he has experienced at the intersection of his queer and religious identities. Charl desires a Godly life, but is only able to rationalise the co-existence of his queer identity and spiritual identity through the realisation that he cannot attempt to live his life in accordance with the standards and expectations of others that ultimately compromise his personal truth and his multi-faceted identity.

Jodi O'Brien significantly spotlights the fact that the "rejection discourses" of Christianity relating to queer identity often result in non-Christians assuming "that the simplest path would be the renunciation of religion" (2004:184). For example in a short account featured in *Reclaiming the L-Word*, Ashika Maharaj, who was brought up Hindu, points out the fact that "religion limits and constrains" the individual, and thus she has chosen to forego identifying with religion (2011:66). However, this is not entirely the easiest route for many individuals in the LGBT community, as many experience the need to exist simultaneously as both religious/spiritual and queer. O'Brien's observation presented above may be extended to individuals across different religions, as similar themes arise within the primary texts across varied representations of religion. The short autobiographical account entitled "So Far, So Good", featured in *Hijab*, is testament to this fact. This particular autobiographical account (2009) presents the often painful struggle of the narrator, Raoul, as he attempts to position himself as both queer and religious in terms of his identity. For the narrator, contention is not only present between his queer identity and religion, but also within religion itself, as he sways between Christianity and Islam.

The narrator is a self-identifying gay man, and early on in the narrative he notes the fact that he was born into a conservative Christian family, one that was not open to discussions of sexuality, let alone homosexuality (140). Thus, the family structure serves as the proximate other who are represented as the teachers and enforcers that actively shape his understanding and experience of religion. The narrator recalls how his identification as gay was difficult to grapple with, especially in terms of his fears about how it would be viewed on a social and religious level and this resulted in him being extremely unhappy and perpetually nervous and anxious (142). Religion, namely Christianity, represents one of the first sites which problematise his queer identity, and thus he decides to journey into its spiritual teachings in the hope that some light would be shed on his situation. The narrator notes a strong relationship with God, and he recalls a particular experience where he prays to God for direction and answers regarding his homosexuality. After engaging in heartfelt worship and prayer the narrator recalls:

I got this strong feeling to open the Bible up at Luke 8 verse 10. I was immediately gripped by a good feeling in my heart. I stopped praying to open the bible. It read: "*Aan julle is dit gegee om die geheime van die koningryk van God te ken, maar aan ander bly dit gelykenisse sodat hulle kyk sonder om te sien en hoor sonder om te verstaan*" (some of you will know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but others will look without seeing and hear without understanding). (144)

This deeply spiritual encounter serves as an answer directly from God, for the narrator; a confirmation that his homosexual identity is not an abomination as religious teachings have caused him to believe.

Through this encounter the narrator finds a profound sense of peace regarding the contentious debates around his sexuality and religious identity that he has been emotionally and spiritually embattled with. However, when he takes his findings to some of his peers, and shares with them what he has uncovered, he is immediately condemned by them as a liar, who had in fact been influenced by the devil, and not God (144). When homosexuality is so intrinsically sinful and wrong, how then would God affirm the gay identity of one of his children as valid and acceptable? This particular passage represents the sometimes condemnatory beliefs of many individuals as they stand together collectively in their shared religious dispositions, and remain unquestioningly staunch in their belief systems. The narrator's peers have pre-established ideas regarding homosexuality that stem directly from homophobic doctrines of Christianity that are consistently perpetuated through condemnatory preaching practices. Thus these individuals remain firm in their beliefs and refuse to engage in any dialogue that may result in the possibility of their seeing things differently. The narrator in many ways exists as a side-lined minority who, out of fear of alienation, must choose to believe and act in accordance with the beliefs of the majority, even at the cost of his own happiness and fulfilment. The narrator who has found kinship with these individuals is made acutely aware of the fact that even though he exists collectively with them as Christians, the manner in which he views himself as Christian and gay is ultimately problematic for them.

In this set of circumstances the options that remain are to either denounce religion, resulting in an existential crisis in terms of his spiritual identity, or to "bend the rules"

of Christianity at the risk of eternal damnation in the afterlife (O'Brien 2004:185). Interestingly, the narrator does not choose to forego religion entirely, and neither does he choose to exist as a moral outcast within Christianity. Instead, he chooses to explore other forms of religion, specifically Islam. He acknowledges that his decision was not based on the idea that Islam would provide him with a religious site to stage belonging because it accepts homosexuality, but rather his choice is based on his belief that Islam is the "one true religion" (145). Despite this contention made by the narrator, it becomes evident in the text that his journey and identities as gay and religious are inextricably linked. He recalls: "I enjoyed learning about my new [Muslim] faith until the imam started speaking about how sinful and accursed homosexuals were in the eyes of God" (146). The narrator recalls how he moved back and forth between Islam and Christianity for a number of reasons, such as the ridicule he faced from Christians in his decision to become Muslim (148-50). However, what commonly presents itself in the numerous times that he decides to change his faith is the fact that he has a notable awareness of the condemnation that religion places on him as a queer-identifying individual. For the narrator, a renewed awakening takes place when he actively begins to positively accept his sexuality and the queer facets of his identity, even in the face of harsh religious condemnation. His experience and view of God had, up to that point, been lived through his religious peers. His peers' view of religion did not favour any form of identity that was not in line with their heteronormative and gender-normative expectations, and thus queer identity always existed in high contention with their beliefs. The narrator had to locate a deeply personal relationship with God and a renewed understanding of what God meant to him, in order to feel peace as a gay man who also identified as deeply spiritual.

Monotheistic concepts of a supreme 'God' in the primary texts have dominated my analysis up to this point. I will now proceed by considering African Spirituality and how it relates to queer identity as represented in the primary texts. The intersection between African Spiritual identity and queer identity also presents itself as a common thematic concern in the primary texts. As I have noted in my discussion of Ubuntu Theology earlier in this chapter, African spirituality greatly values the role of ancestral spirits and the interactions that the living have with them. In the autobiographical account entitled

“Tebogo’s Story: My Ancestor was Living Through Me” (2011), featured in *Trans*, Tebogo, who identifies as a “FTM transsexual”, briefly chronicles his journey in overcoming issues related to his transgender identity (119). Tebogo recounts his journey in coming to understand his transgender identity, recalling how he initially identified as lesbian until he was able to understand and grapple with his transgender identity. Tebogo notes that at the age of 12 he, very strangely, began to suffer from an illness that was later diagnosed as a calling from his great-grandfather to become a traditional healer (sangoma) (121). Tebogo spotlights his identification as a Christian at a particular point in his life:

Before the calling I was a Christian who used to pray and preach to other pupils during break time. At the time, I believed that it wasn’t possible to be a Christian and a sangoma at the same time. (121)

Tebogo later comes to realise that he has a desire to be Christian, despite his vocation as a traditional healer, and is able to effectively reconcile the two. What is most notable about Tebogo’s spiritual journey is the fact that his transgender identity has been attributed to the presence of the ancestral spirit of his great-grandfather in his life:

My parents accepted me, because they could tell that perhaps my ancestors were making me play the role I played. My ancestor was living through me because he is male. They weren’t aware of my relations with females. They didn’t think I’d reached that stage, but they accepted my lifestyle. “It’s his ancestors, let’s just accept it”, they’d say. (121)

Tebogo notes how this line of thinking, relating to his transgender identity, was perpetuated by his family, friends and his community, resulting in him also adapting the opinion that his queer identity was a direct result of his spiritual connection to his ancestors (121).

In Chapter Seven of the book *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* (Morgan & Wieringa 2005) Nkunzi Nkabinde (with Ruth Morgan) carries out a number of thought-provoking interviews with lesbian and transgender sangomas regarding same-sex practices and homosexual identity. Nkabinde’s own autobiography, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, appeared in 2008. Nkabinde, in her

autobiography, and many of the interviewees in *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives*, like Tebogo, also maintain the belief that their sexual/gender identity is often a direct result of their spiritual connection with a specific ancestor or ancestors. One of the interviewees, Hlengiwe, who is in a same-sex relationship with a woman, named Nomsa, states the following with regard to their relationship: “Muzi chose her; I didn’t have anything to do with it” (242). Muzi is Hlengiwe’s dominant ancestor; his spirit is described as being male. Nkabinde explains Hlengiwe’s statement, noting the following:

The dominant male ancestor, who is often unmarried at the time of his death, usually chooses a wife whom he instructs his female sangoma to marry. Hlengiwe feels that Nomsa was chosen for her by her ancestor and that she had no choice in the matter. (2005:242)

The above example of Hlengiwe and Nomsa’s relationship presents an interesting dynamic in terms of spiritual identity and sexuality, in that Hlengiwe’s spiritual identity intertwines her physical existence with her ancestor to the extent that it shapes her sexual relationships. Thus, the relational nature of her spiritual identity with her male ancestor, Muzi, is what determines the nature of her romantic and sexual relationships. In these circumstances the traditional categories of gender and sexual identity as prescribed by Western discourses become problematic as Hlengiwe cannot be specifically categorised in terms of her gender or sexuality, and neither does she desire to be.

Interestingly, in Tebogo’s case he has assumed an understanding of terms such as lesbian and transgender. These terms are commonly used and encountered in the urbanised setting of his community and have been helpful in assisting him in grappling with issues of identity. His first encounter with a term denoting queer identity was with the slang word “transie” – which he believed was used to describe an intersex person, and he learnt the word “lesbian” in “standard 5 or 6” (120). For Tebogo his spirituality, as represented in the text, is positioned as being vital in his understanding his queer identifications, and it acts as a reference point in constructing the identity of the autobiographical self. This particular account presents a variant understanding of the relationality inherent in identity construction, in that it positions it as existing across the

spiritual and natural realms *i.e.* from his ancestor in the spirit world directly to him in the natural world. Although Tebogo has acquired terms to label his queer identity, terms that might be foreign to someone like Hlengiwe for example, the nature of his queer identity is not only rooted in his spiritual beliefs and convictions, but also his understandings of his personal identity. With regard to Nkabinde's autobiography Cheryl Stobie underlines the fact that:

Female embodiment and possession by a male spirit is also problematic, as it brings to the fore a conflict between Nkabinde's reverence for tradition and her feminist, urban, modernist beliefs in the provisions of the South African Constitution. (2011:150-1)

Similarly for Tebogo, the awareness of Western models of gender and sexuality categorisation provide him with a mode to identify himself, and this is at odds with his spiritual beliefs, which claim the queer facets of his identity as not being entirely his own, but those of his ancestor which have manifested through him. Moreover, Stobie foregrounds the following in regard to Nkabinde's autobiography:

The book thus offers a view of sexual energy working in tandem with spiritual power, a worldview diametrically opposed to the value system of Christianity, which often advocates sexual repression and sublimation; however, it simultaneously reinforces the stereotype of associating sexuality with masculinity. (2011:159)

In a similar manner to Nkabinde's autobiography both Tebogo's and Hlengiwe's stories actively problematise a number of mainstream religious discourses regarding sex and sexuality which aim to separate the spiritual from the sexual, in that it positions their sexual and gender identities as being divinely conferred and experienced. However, as Stobie highlights, what also occurs is the reinforcing of stereotypes which strips feminine identity of the ability to act autonomously in terms of sexuality. Tebogo's spiritual identity is also at times at odds with his own decisions, and at the expense of his autonomy. Tebogo formed part of a discussion group held by the editors of *Trans*, and in this group he draws attention to a number of issues. He notes that his African traditional beliefs allow him the opportunity to change whatever is believed to be wrong with the body:



In my culture it is believed that when something is wrong with the body, you need to correct it. There is nothing wrong with correcting your body. It is just a body which will make you happy. The person is really inside you. (229)

However, when he chooses to begin transitioning, his failure to alert his ancestors to this fact results in him becoming ill shortly before one of his surgeries (229). The body is obviously an important site of being for Tebogo as he attempts to change the physical body to match his identification as male, but at the same time he asserts the relative insignificance of the body in spiritual terms. What this primarily exhibits is the complex working of Tebogo's sexual and gender identity in relation to his spiritual identity.

In many ways one is aware of the conflict it presents for him. He acknowledges the following:

This body is something that contains me, it is not me. My ancestors called me through spirit and that is how they will get me if they want me. That is my personal belief. (229)

The contradictions are evident as he attempts to negotiate the importance of his transition against the relatively insignificant manner that the body is perceived in terms of his spirituality. The body is necessary for Tebogo as he inhabits it in the material world, but he is acutely aware of the fact that his major goal is towards existence in the spiritual realm as a spiritual body. Tebogo's story, like the stories of others who have related their experiences in the autobiographical accounts that I have examined, presents the complexities that are unavoidable in terms of the intersection between queer identity and spiritual/religious identity. What these texts achieve is the creation of awareness of the multi-layered manners in which identity is negotiated, and thereby they actively promote discourse in the hope of fostering understanding.

Individuals often find their queer identity being called into question or being condemned in religious spaces; however, regardless of this fact, the individuals in the texts often note a deep desire to successfully engage with their identity as religious/spiritual beings. Relationships in spiritual social locations are vital in the process of constructing versions of the queer autobiographical self, as often individuals

in the texts do not view their relationship with God as being based on condemnation of their queer identity. Instead, it is religious leaders and peers who perpetuate condemnatory and discriminatory stances on queer identity in religious social locations. In her study of homosexuality and Christianity Jodi O'Brien highlights the fact that:

within a heteronormative culture, lesbians and gays are (often painfully) aware they are social cast-offs. Within Christianity, active homosexuals are also aware that in addition to their being social cast-offs, their souls have been cast-off as well [...] To experience homosexual desires, and certainly to pursue fulfilment of these desires, will result in being cast off from the cosmology which one makes sense of one's life. (2004:185)

Extending O'Brien's observations noted above to queer identity and religion/spirituality in general, it can be observed from the primary texts that the autobiographical subjects are consistently embroiled in such tense deliberations of whether their queer identity is morally and religiously right or not. Religion or spirituality is often the site on which individuals make sense of the overall importance of their existence, and condemning them from these spaces often leaves individuals in a state of deep existential anxiety. Autobiographical writing can be observed as a powerful tool in assisting individuals as they actively work through their fears and concerns, and it also aids them in understanding their position in regard to the dominant cultural belief systems of society.

Victor Marsh observes that:

first-person testimony, in the form of memoir or other autobiographical texts, challenges the "discursive colonization" that would position queer folk at the margins of a full humanity, and reconfigures the myths that sustain the hegemonic control of dominant and homophobic religious ideologies. (2012:263)

Thus, these autobiographical texts assume an inherently politicised element in that they question and force a reconsideration of the manner in which queer identity is viewed in religious discourses. Each of the short autobiographical accounts discussed here represents the problematic stance of religion on queer issues and the need for changed perceptions regarding the queer minority. Religion itself is often not entirely foregone or abandoned by the autobiographical other; instead, the individuals and encounters

which the autobiographical self experiences in religious spaces need to be spotlighted, examined and critiqued. Through this process, the individuals in the primary texts are then able to move towards establishing their own understanding and connection to religion, sometimes with the support of forward-thinking religious leaders, peers and organisations, and at other times at the peril of a religious experience that is not entirely relational but rather more personal in nature. Traditional religion is often experienced through collectively drawing individual people together into a collective based on the shared nature of their religious identity, and for this reason exiting the collective is often a difficult experience for the autobiographical self. This is, however, sometimes a profoundly positive experience, as the autobiographical self is able to forge new understandings of God as well as their queer identity in relation to this new-found concept of God.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

My primary concern in this dissertation has been to investigate the construction and perception of selfhood in the autobiographies that I have examined through the lens of collective identity and the African humanist concept of ubuntu. My analysis has considered the queer-identifying autobiographical subject in relation to areas of shared space such as family, community and religious/spiritual spaces. Thus, in the previous chapters of this dissertation I have focused primarily on isolating and analysing individual autobiographical accounts from each text, drawing the texts together only in terms of the thematic concern of the chapter in which they appear. In addition to offering a conclusion to the main issues I have dealt with in the body of this work, I will also focus my analysis on an examination of each primary text in a general sense to avoid neglecting the unique nature of each individual collection.

Each collection of short autobiographical accounts represents a division in terms of the various identity categories within the LGBT acronym. Exploring this fact is necessary in order to gauge whether any significance can be attached to this separation in terms of the LGBT identity categories. In *Yes I Am!* Robin Malan addresses the reasons behind the decision to feature the stories of gay men only in the collection:

Why only men? The experiences of lesbian, transgender, intersex and ‘questioning’ people are vastly different from those of gay males, and a ‘mix’ could easily end up a ‘mish-mash’. If anything, each of those areas of ‘different’ sexuality needs a separate collection. (2010:11)

Malan’s assertion that the experiences of gay men are unique is not without basis. Throughout *Yes I Am!* the gay men whose stories are included in the collection often depict difficulties which arise out of attempts to negotiate and reconcile their identification as both gay and male with the patriarchal norms of society. Issues relating to what constitutes ‘manhood’ as well as machismo and how they affect gay men are explored in the text. *Yes I Am!* separates the various accounts in terms of five different thematic strains, namely: “Coming Out”, “Finding Out and Speaking Out”, “Encounters”, “Hate” and “Love”. The result is that the accounts of each individual are unique, addressing varied issues from sex and relationships to family relations and also spiritual identity. Notably, many of the individuals whose stories feature in the

collection are from or reside in the Western Cape, which might result in some disparity in terms of the expected country-wide representation of gay men that the book purports to represent. The text is nonetheless of great value as a social tool in terms of presenting the autobiographies of a marginalised collective and opening up discourse around the issues that they face. Malan's suggestion of a "separate collection" for each identity category is not isolated as we see with *Hijab*, *Trans* and *Reclaiming the L-Word* which also utilise various identity categories to separate the respective content of the collection.

In *Reclaiming the L-Word* the intention in separating the experiences of South African lesbian women clearly stems from concerns relating to identity politics, as lesbian-identifying individuals represent a collective which is represented as othered on the grounds of both their gender and sexual identities. Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa highlight the fact that African lesbian women face a double oppression due to the deeply patriarchal roots, as well as the discriminatory practices in terms of sexuality, of many African countries (2005:11). In the foreword to *Reclaiming the L-Word* Dr Devarakshanam Govinden notes of the collection:

As a woman of faith, I am continually compelled to ask in new and daring ways, "who is my neighbour?" *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters Out in Africa* assists me in this ongoing journey, expanding my many understandings of "community" and "sisterhood". It makes me appreciate that there are many permutations of "the woman-identified woman". (2011:vii)

Many of the individuals whose stories are featured in *Reclaiming the L-Word* are from or have lived in the Pietermaritzburg and surrounding areas region. The editor, Alleyn Diesel, is from the area, which might explain this fact. Although the interviews are not balanced in terms of a country-wide representation of lesbian women there is some attempt to do so. Although this is an area in which critique might be levelled against the project, it is still a pivotal text in terms of exploring relatively uncharted territory relating to sexual identity in the South African context. In Chapter Three of this dissertation I presented criticism of *Reclaiming the L-Word* for what appears to be a focus on homonormativity. Relationships that are represented in line with the dominant and largely normative ideals of society are apparent in the text. However, this is not to

say that the text has an explicitly homonormative agenda, as its primary concern seems to be highly politicised. This is evident in the final chapter of the collection, entitled “Thinking through Lesbian Rape”, in which Zanele Muholi addresses the difficult issue of lesbian rape in South Africa.

The working of identity politics is also evident in *Trans*, and the isolation and lack of representation of the transgender community are cited as some of the primary motivations behind the realisation of the project. In a review, Tracy Morison notes of *Trans*:

From a scholarly perspective this collection concretely demonstrates the impossibility of existing as a social agent outside of gender. “Gender is performance with clearly punitive consequences” and the disciplinary consequences of gender non-conformity reverberate throughout these stories ranging from familial rejection to unlawful detention and violence. (2012)

This quotation by Morison highlights one of the prevailing themes within *Trans*. The often violent othering of the transgender community, as well as the difficulties inherent in being faced with such difficult odds, motivates the decision for such a collection to position itself in terms of identity politics. In the foreword to *Trans* the following is highlighted:

[T]he lesbian and gay community in South Africa has seen a significant increase in visibility (although we do not mean to suggest that there is not still a great deal of work to be done). But, even as this shift has taken place, transgender issues have continued to be a taboo subject for discussion. The media either ignore transgender issues, or cover them in a way that is invasive, insensitive and sensationalist. (2011:3)

*Hijab* draws together the experiences of ‘queer’ individuals, but under the identity category of religion, specifically Islam. Again, the suggestion is that the experiences of this collective are unique, and correctly so. Interestingly, the stories of gay Muslim men dominate *Hijab*. Out of 22 stories featured in *Hijab* six of them relate to lesbian women, and only one of the stories regarding a transgender individual appears in the collection. This is possibly representative of the marginal position of women in Islam and the

heavily dominant culture of patriarchy in Islamic communities in which women are silent on so many issues. Thus, one would expect even more silence in terms of a taboo subject like homosexuality. Furthermore, *Hijab* represents the stories of individuals who are often Coloured and reside in the Western Cape, this possibly resulting in a one-sided representation of queer Muslim identity in the country. Nonetheless, material that juxtaposes queer identity and Muslim identity is noticeably scarce, and *Hijab* presents a forward-thinking and somewhat daring concept.

What each of the varied reasons motivating each individual collection of autobiographies represents is the varied nature of the struggles and issues faced by individuals within the LGBT community. Although many of the issues are common amongst all the identity categories within the LGBT community, such as hate crimes, discrimination and hate speech, certain issues are unique to certain individuals in terms of the specific identity category they assume. For example, a gay-identifying male may not necessarily be able to empathise with the experiences of a transgender individual who has undergone gender reassignment surgery. Thus, in addressing queer issues in this dissertation I precariously attempt to balance the task of ensuring that, firstly, stereotyped categorisation is not reinforced, and secondly, that I am not offering an analysis that incorrectly generalises by ignoring the uniqueness of individual experience. Despite the obvious differences in experience queer identity can be regarded as a collective identity drawing individuals together on the basis of a number of common experiences. It is sufficiently evident that members of the LGBT community as a collective suffer similar levels of discrimination as a result of stifling social constructs such as patriarchy and the normative expectations of society in terms of gender and sexual identity. Even though a lesbian woman is subject to the harshness of the heteronormative patriarchal system, so too is a gay man.

Andre Grace *et al.* position queer theory as “a theory of survival that remembers a history of erasure, denial, dismissal, and violence” of a marginalised collective (2004:302). Thus, in as much as there is division within the LGBT community, the mere fact that those identities are collectively placed together in this dissertation exhibits a shared experience and an undeniable common ground. This common ground becomes a useful space in terms of identity politics, and as I have mentioned in Chapter Three,

Valerie Lehr (1999:43) spotlights the fact that queer individuals have often assumed the collective of ‘family’ through the commonness of identity and experience.

As I consider this idea of family and how it extends into the realms of community, and specifically as it functions in the queer community, foremost in my mind is a widely reported incident at the 2012 Joburg Pride celebrations. During the parade members of the One in Nine Campaign, a collective which campaigns against gender violence, stood directly in front of the parade requesting that it stop and the LGBT community comprising the parade observe a minute of silence for individuals who have been brutally raped and murdered due to their gender and sexual expression (Schutte 2012). The protesters were mainly black lesbian women requesting that the Pride gathering collectively acknowledge the plight of victims of sexual and gender violence, specifically the victims of corrective rape in South African townships. This act by the members of the One in Nine Campaign was met with large scale contempt by those who were part of the Joburg Pride parade, resulting in the campaigners being verbally and physically abused (Schutte 2012).

A Pride celebration is historically thought of as a show of collective solidarity amongst the queer community towards the realisation of a society that does not discriminate against individuals based on gender and/or sexual identity. Ironically, this incident at Joburg Pride exhibits numerous factions in the queer community, as despite gathering under the guise of solidarity founded in a collective queer identity, this incident served to highlight numerous underlying issues relating to class and race. Racism is notably South Africa’s most dividing force; even amongst queer individuals who collectively exist as a marginalised minority knowing too well the painful and damaging effects of being othered, racism is not absent. It has been reported that members of the parade shouted insults at the One in Nine campaigners, such as “go back to the location!”, “get out of here” and “drive over them” (Schutte 2012). It has been reported that the organisers of Joburg Pride maintain that the reaction would have been different had the One in Nine Campaign properly requested permission to be a part of the parade (Schutte 2012). In an official statement which features on the *Mamba Online* website the organisers of Joburg Pride have apologised for the “racial furore” which erupted during the incident, but maintain that members of the One in Nine Campaign are equally guilty



of contributing to the violence that occurred on the day, and they also maintain that they support organisations such as the One in Nine Campaign (“Joburg Pride Responds to 1 in 9 Incident, Backs the Group” 2012).

What this incident represents is the depoliticisation of the message of collective gatherings such as Pride, and it highlights the predominantly capitalist focus and profit concerns of Joburg Pride specifically. Thus, the actions by the members of the One in Nine Campaign represent acts of civil disobedience which problematise and confront the normalisation of Joburg Pride (Schutte 2012). The first Joburg Pride took place in 1990, and in relation to its timing in South Africa’s history, it was a highly politicised affair, calling into question not only gender and sexual discrimination, but also racial discrimination. Ironically, the Joburg Pride website notes the following: “while the event has become less political and more celebratory in nature, Pride remains, at its core, a call for gay and lesbian equality and recognition of our nation’s rich diversity” (“History of Joburg Pride” n.d.). In a YouTube video entitled “LGBT Activists Disrupt Joburg Gay Parade” (Shelver 2012) which documents the incident, the narrator of the video notes that:

Pride has stopped being a movement that charters new futures and has with a few exceptions been stripped of all political content. The depoliticisation of most Prides has allowed old racial apartheid to be translated into a new economic apartheid, which is clearly evident in many Pride celebrations.

What this incident represents is the need to question and examine notions of community and family in queer spaces. Queer spaces such as Pride celebrations should serve as places which unite individuals by igniting discourses that reject not only gender and sexuality based discrimination, but discrimination in all its forms. Pride should be a space for the sharing of the stories and realities of queer experiences, and thereby serve to open discourse that questions and critiques dominant hegemonies relating to sex and gender. Bidy Martin, quoted in Bacon (1998:252), highlights how such discourse is useful in that “telling these stories is linked to the perceived importance of countering representations that have rendered [queer identity] invisible, perverse, aberrant, or marginal”.

With regard to unified representations of issues in each text and issues of community, the stories of bisexual individuals are noticeably absent from the four collections that I have chosen. This could be a direct result of the division of the texts along the various identity categories, or it could be looked at as an indicator of the marginal positioning of bisexual identity within the LGBT community.

Cheryl Stobie notes a relative silence with regard to bisexuality and the study of bisexual identity historically in the South African context (2004:37). Stobie attributes this to the fact that South Africa's engagement with issues relating to race and racial politics did not allow the country to actively partake in the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960s that saw issues of sex and sexuality enter mainstream discourses (38). Stobie's research has successfully sought to foreground a number of issues relating to bisexuality and its representations in literature (see *Somewhere in the Double Rainbow: Representations of Bisexuality in Post Apartheid Literature* 2007). Stobie comments on the observable trend of bisexual identity in literature featuring prominently in the post-apartheid age, citing the works of Nadine Gordimer, Mark Behr, K. Sello Duiker and Tatamkhulu Afrika, who all address issues of bisexuality in their respective works (2007:9). However, few autobiographical accounts can be isolated in terms of positioning bisexual identities (although Afrika's 2005 autobiography *Mr Chameleon* deals with his Muslim and bisexual identifications). Stobie notes:

While an umbrella term such as LGBT may sometimes be used in an initial reference the usual practice is for the BT elements to disappear. Typically, in a strategy consonant with racial discourses, known in the US as the "one-drop rule", whereby people with "one drop" of African American blood are considered black, people who behave bisexually are described as gay or lesbian. (2007:63)

With the strategic goal of each of the primary texts I am examining to position the accounts of individuals as either gay, lesbian or transgender, this too could be a reason for the absence of stories of bisexually-identifying individuals.

Each of the texts features stories of individuals who acknowledge bisexual behaviour, but the identity category "bisexual" is never applied; instead, shared relations that may be termed bisexual are often represented as something which aids the realisation of

‘true’ gay or lesbian identity. This is so especially in the case of lesbian women, as represented in the primary texts (see “Pulled Out of the Closet into my Family’s Embrace”, “The Dog, the Cat, the Parrot and the Pig and Other Tales”, “My Journey” in *Reclaiming the L-Word* and “Finding Love” in *Hijab*). In each collection there is also the occurrence of individuals who enter into heterosexual marriages and relationships through societal and familial pressure or in order to hide, or in an attempt to ‘correct’ homosexual identity (see “Lost”, “Daddy’s Boy” and “Happiness” in *Hijab*, and “Coming Out to my Wife” and “Letter by Way of Explanation” in *Yes I Am!*). Bisexuality is often represented as a proverbial ‘stop in the road’ to fully indentifying as either gay or lesbian. In the anonymous account entitled “Daddy’s Boy” (2009) which features in *Hijab* the narrator comes out as bisexual to family and friends in order to ‘ease the blow’, as it were, regarding his identity as a gay man (116). The narrator also uses bisexuality as a tool to comfort himself with regard to the denial he harbours surrounding his sexuality, and after much deliberation eventually he is able to accept that he is gay and not bisexual (117).

Peter Krummeck’s short autobiographical account entitled “Nineteen Sixty-Seven” (2010) features in *Yes I Am!* Notably the author rejects the idea of categorisation in terms of sexuality:

It is my conviction that sexuality cannot be categorised. I reject all sexist definitions. I am not “gay”, “straight” or “bi” – I am simply Peter. This is not in denial of my nature, but in acceptance of my God-given wholeness. (19)

What Krummeck’s assertion results in is the questioning of identity categorisation and the possible favour it affords those who position themselves in line with a certain identity category. Thus, in as much as *Hijab*, *Yes I Am!*, *Trans* and *Reclaiming the L-Word* utilise identity categorisation as a useful tool to foreground the issues relating to a specific collective, one needs to ask what then is the position of individuals who do not ascribe to any specific identity category? Do they then exist in the margins of an already marginalised society? Is the fear of what Malan calls a “mish-mash” of experience enough to warrant exclusion? Queer itself should be characterised by a “mish-mash” of experience.

Separation according to various ‘neat’ categories is a ‘useful’ way to deal with identity issues, but it is unfortunately neglectful of a wide array of identities which exist and need to be acknowledged. Queer also offers the necessary site of empowerment to marginalised gender and sexual identity categories that were previously unspeakable. Thus, queer identity continues to exist as a contested area in which binarist models pertaining to gender and sexual identity serve only to limit the possibility of expansion within the LGBT identity categories. The value of queer theory is that it actively destabilises normative models of behaviour – whether homonormative or heteronormative – and it suggests valuable ways in which the marginalised subject positions of the LGBT community can be investigated and reconfigured. In the South African context the Constitution has been formidable in providing the space for the exploration of discourses that seek to remove queer-identifying individuals from the margins of society.

As ubuntu is the concept that underlies our entire Constitutional framework, the queering of this concept, I believe, is the best place to begin rethinking various dominant ideologies. Although the Constitution provides a framework that outlaws discrimination in all forms, this certainly is not reflected in the four collections of autobiographies that I have examined in this dissertation. Queer individuals in the texts are often represented as still occupying the margins. Natalie Oswin positions the South African Constitution as having created:

a consultative and just political framework where there was once conquest and dispossession, about fostering international relations characterised by mutual cooperation and benefit where isolation and suspicion previously prevailed, and about calling into being a new South Africa for South Africans. (2007:103)

As Oswin correctly notes above, the intention behind the Constitution is towards creating an inclusive environment in which all South Africans can claim freedom, and the most difficult challenge in realising this is the battle towards reforming thinking on ground level. Such a proposed shift is not in an effort to dull queer and strip it of its power as a destabilising force, or to perpetuate new ways of normative thinking; instead, it would allow for the realisation of a society that does not marginalise and

other variant gender and sexual identities. Oswin also further underscores the fact that the:

state's queer discourse cannot be the only queer discourse unless we are satisfied with the formal recognition of rights for sexual minorities within which they are granted looks all too much the same as it did when homosexuals were disenfranchised [...] We have been keen to explore the performativity of queerness when the division between resistance and oppression seemed clear. Parodic repetition continues when the dynamics of power shift and these categories become obviously blurred. (2007:108)

Thus, collections such as *Hijab, Yes I Am!*, *Trans* and *Reclaiming the L-Word* are a necessary and clear gauge of where the state and society are positioned in terms of queer issues and politics. These collections represent the voices of a large part of the queer community and represent a number of important issues faced by this sector of the South African population. Many of the short autobiographical accounts featured in each collection may be termed testimonies (or *testimonio*). Of *testimonio* Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that the “primary concern is sincerity of intention, not the text’s literariness. And its ideological thrust is the ‘affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode’” (206). These texts, like so many others, then exit the realms of being considered on their literary merit alone, and enter the arena of social discourse, becoming tools in the greater battle towards equality. Furthermore, Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw suggest that testimony actively “records a movement from individual experience to the collective archive, from personal trauma to public trauma” (2002:13). Through foregrounding experiences and pertinent issues relating to patriarchal dominance, heteronormativity and gender-normativity, and through highlighting their devastating effects on the queer self, through *Hijab, Trans, Yes I Am!* and *Reclaiming the L-Word* the reading public is able to begin imagining the subversion of these dominant and constricting entities.

Due to constraints of space I have been unable to engage with analysis of all the accounts featured in each collection. There is also an undeniable need for studies that position and validate the experiences of queer individuals who exist in the margins of the queer community. The texts I have chosen to examine in this dissertation bring into

public discourse the silenced and marginalised queer community, acknowledging their existence in all aspects of extended society – in suburban areas, in staunch communities as well as religious spaces. Through highlighting the relational nature of autobiographical self-construction I have attempted to foreground the important observation that experiences and relations with other people are vital in how individuals perceive the self, and by extension also how they perceive their self-worth in terms of matters such as self esteem.

Each of the stories that I have examined poignantly exhibits how the isolation and discrimination that queer individuals face often either works in negatively impacting self-construction and perception, or works to allow the self to explore new ways of being, thereby encouraging a more acute awareness of self. As I conclude, again I assert the important fact that each text is thus not only valuable in terms of its literary representations of the experiences of queer individuals but also offers important socio-political commentary on the position of queer individuals in the South African cultural landscape.

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