

**QUEERING THE QUEER: ENGAGING BLACK QUEER CHRISTIAN BODIES IN
AFRICAN FAITH SPACES**

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**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Theology (Gender and Religion) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal**

DECLARATION

I, Tracey Maswazi Sibisi, declare that this dissertation titled; *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces*, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is the result of my research and that all sources used have been acknowledged using complete references.

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28 January 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have several people and institutions that I would like to acknowledge within this paper because I am aware that I could not have done this alone. I would first like to thank God for the opportunity, the strength and the favour that has been shown over my life during this process. Extending my gratitude to an angel He sent my way when I least expected it, Prof. Charlene van der Walt. I would like to thank you for believing in me and giving me an opportunity that I thought was beyond my abilities, it has been a pleasure working with you.

I would like to thank my family for the love and support, especially my parents, Mr Raphael Mandla Sibisi and Mrs Virginia Sibisi. You have never doubted my abilities and for that, I am forever grateful. I would also like to thank my partner Nkululeko Gumede for seeing me through since I started my studies, your support and love has been amazing until this day. Not to mention all the times Lindiwe Maseko and I tested your patience. Thank you, Princess Maseko, for the love, the late nights at the library and for seeing a friend in me the first time you saw me. Because of this friendship, I have achieved things that I could not have imagined on my own. You have been and continue to be an amazing friend.

I would also like to thank the Church of Sweden for this opportunity, as well as the family they have provided for me through the Gender, Religion and Health Cohort. Without them, this last push would not have been possible. Depression and anxiety became a real challenge for most of us during this pandemic and I cannot be more grateful for their support. I would also like to thank the Gay and Lesbian Network for allowing me the opportunity to study and for supporting me during this time, for all the resources they have provided and for backing my dream. An appreciation that I would also like to extend to Lifeline Pietermaritzburg and the staff at the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics. I am grateful.

Lastly, to all my friends that supported and motivated me, I am so grateful and appreciate you so much. You kept me from falling into depression and kept me going even when I felt I could not do this amidst all the challenges faced during the pandemic. I am forever grateful.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the Gay and Lesbian Network, as well as the Ujamaa Centre for all the great work that you have started to help create safe and inclusive environments for the LGBTI+ community within the African faith landscape. It is through you that we can work as activists in this field and stand firm in who we are and what we believe without fear.

I would also like to dedicate this to the participants of this study. Your views have given me faith within this field. It is through you that I understand the radical love of God and what it truly means to include and to belong amidst the challenges facing the LGBTI+ community within this context. You are a blessing in this field and may your views continue to change lives for the better and to bless others within the church.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“After my resignation and coming out to the church leadership, the church did not offer me pastoral care, the faith community where I worship and have fellowship exiled me because they were uncertain how I would fit in.” – Autobiography (Davids, 2020:305)

This reflects the many narratives shared by queer individuals within the African context as they try to become visible within the faith landscape. Projected in the way in which the Christian church responds to queer bodies within spaces of faith, through this narrative we are made aware of the systemic realities that inform the experiences of queer bodies within the Christian church. An experience which is also reflective of the context in which queer bodies find themselves located in, as it is informed by systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy. Systems that continue to pervade the lives of many queer individuals as they try to find places of belonging with others within this landscape, informing "dominant constructions of gender" (Davids et al., 2019:25). Determining how one should act, feel, and perform concerning others, leaving queer bodies at the margins as "the sexual orientation, gender identity, expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) of LGBTIQ persons are seen as *UnAfrican*" (Davids, 2020:301).

This is no different within South Africa, which is known as one of the most religious countries in the world, led by norms and values that continue to place queer bodies at the margins of Christian faith (Palm, 2016:9). Within this landscape “religion plays a critical role in the rejection and acceptance of LGBTI+ persons in South Africa” (Gunda, 2017:16). In this thesis I will use Oman’s understanding of religion in which he states that “religion connotes especially the organised and institutional components of faith traditions, as opposed to the more inward and personal sides” (Oman, 2013:26), and within this paper I refer to the broader faith landscape, however, giving a special and in-depth focus on Christian faith, church, and processes. This is because the Christian church continues to hold a great amount of influence on how people understand gender and sexuality. Which is an understanding promoting the idea that the "biological gender of the child determines the future partner, and this is always the opposite gender" (Mkasi, 2013:14). Pressuring bodies within this landscape to conform to a "compulsory heteronormativity" (Mkasi, 2013:15), creating a norm through which the other is seen as abnormal. Homosexuality and gender diversity are a "controversial and divisive topic

for many in Africa" (Bongmba, 2016:15), and as such, continue to be a topic of great debate within theological discourses on gender and sexuality. Even though churches are leaning towards actively speaking about issues of sexuality, "stereotypes about African sexuality persist...in every day imagining of identity" (Milani, 2014:81). Which are issues that continue to contribute to the alienation of queer bodies within the church, contributing to queer individuals moving from heteropatriarchal faith spaces to *queer spaces of worship*.

“The greatest need for LGBTI Christians is acceptance in their families, communities, and churches. Christian churches should be promoting acceptance, making church accepting of all children of God” (Gunda, 2017:43), which is not the case. Therefore, some queer bodies have moved towards creating their own spaces of worship, building a safe space of inclusion and acceptance for all bodies within the presence of God. Working towards providing an environment that is free of discrimination, prejudice, and violence. A space in which all individuals are invited to come as they are. However, after conducting research looking at the development of queer churches and the contextual realities that brought them into being, I found that Queer churches had also conformed to these normative systems of oppression within the church. Heteronormativity became the foundation through which, the processes of the church had been structured (Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis), which meant that systems of patriarchy had pervaded this space and only bodies that existed within the binaries informed by heteronormativity had been recognized within this context (Mkasi, 2013:51; Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis, Sumera, 2015:307).

This is an intriguing phenomenon that sparked an interest in this research in which I wish to explore the possibility of queering queer spaces of worship, engaging black queer Christian bodies within the African faith space. Through this, I would like to work towards understanding the systemic realities informing this phenomenon, engaging the experiences of black queer Christian individuals as the starting point of theological reflection. While exploring a gap in which queer bodies within the African faith landscape could become instrumental in queering spaces of faith, such as the church within this context. Through this study I wish to contribute to literature within the field of gender and religion, engaging the lived experiences of nine queer bodies within the South African queer faith landscape. Queer individuals who are members of various queer churches in the KwaZulu-Natal context. As they share their stories in the hopes of helping me find ways in which we could create inclusive spaces of worship for all bodies within the African faith landscape.

1.1. Background

“A useless body, defeating the means of nature, disrespecting mankind, challenging tradition by loving another just like me” – Mercury Duma (Unpublished poem)

Queer bodies continue to reflect the reality of homophobic violence committed against “abnormality” in society. Considered a crime committed against the laws of creation; queer bodies continue to be silenced. With their wounds exposing societal systems that police the acceptable “norms” of gender and sexuality in society. The bodies of those living outside of the norms of heteronormativity and acceptable gender binaries are displaced and struggle to find a welcoming environment of becoming. The violation of queer bodies has become abundantly clear in South African news headlines:

Portia Simphiwe Mtshweni found murdered with multiple stab wounds and breasts removed. Raped because of her sexuality, a victim of hate crime. – (Mambaonline.com, Dec 2019)

Transgender Activist Nare Mphela found murdered, her decomposing body found with multiple stab wounds, a victim of hate crime. – (News24, 9 Jan 2020)

LGBTI+ Activist Lindokuhle Cele, stabbed 21 times, found with a knife stuck in his left eye, believed to be a hate crime. – (News24, 11 Feb 2020)

The topic of homosexuality and gender diversity (terms found under the umbrella term ‘queer’), continues to be a conflicting dialogue within the wider society, with such bodies viewed as taboo. This is a view that has contributed to the understanding that queer bodies are a threat to societal development, as well as the existence of humans and a danger to social cohesion, which is why they are pushed to the margins (Bongmba, 2016:18; Gunda, 2017:23; Mkasi, 2013:10). This is a reality that has been reflected in the lived experiences of most queer bodies within the South African context. Positioned at the centre of activism within the LGBTI+ community, working at the Gay and Lesbian Network as a queer activist. I continue to witness the visible gap within the implementation of our progressive constitution, between the legal right of equality regardless of sex, gender, as well as sexual orientation and the lived realities of “multiple rights violations” towards the LGBTI+ community. With the church being at the centre of the problem, actively participating in the exclusion of queer bodies within the South African Faith landscape (Davids et al, 2019:19; Oliver, 2011:1; Palm, 2016:1).

1.1.1. Shift within the African Landscape

However, there has been a visible shift regarding conversations on queered gender and sexuality within the South African landscape, although opinions remain divided over the inclusion of queer bodies within the church (Bongmba, 2016:15; Ward, 2013:415). With the Dutch Reform Church ruling in favour of and affirming the dignity of the LGBTI+ community in 2015, and the Anglican Church in South Africa leading in the advancement of LGBTI+ rights within the past two decades. We have witnessed a clear destabilization of conservative traditions in which churches have begun to move towards a culture of inclusion regardless of sexual orientation (Davids et al, 2019:19; Davids et al, 2019:21). However, this has also been met with hostility, with the Methodist Church of South Africa engaging in discussions on homosexuality and gender diversity (terms under the umbrella term 'queer'). Through which homosexual ministers have been acknowledged, although when visible are met with stigma and shame. With church leaders viewing homosexuality as immoral, a sin and behaviour against nature. Opinions that are also shared by leaders within the African Traditional Religion, African Initiated Churches, and the United Reform Church. Placing heterosexuals at the centre of these discussions, the church continues to play a role in the discrimination and violence against the LGBTI+ community, labelling queerness as "unbiblical" and unethical (Davids et al, 2019:20; Mkasi, 2003:17; Sithole, 2018:14; Ward, 2013:415).

With "patriarchy being the underlying assumption of Christianity" (Reuther, 1993:214), the church continues to justify the exclusion of queer bodies within the African faith landscape, from a "theological perspective" (Oliver 2011:11). Preaching the old conservative traditionalist ideology that sexual intercourse is for procreation, which then validates biological consummation between a man and a woman. Reinforcing heteronormativity, drawing the lines between what is normal and an abomination within biblical scripture (Bongmba, 2016:23; Davids et al, 2019:26). Causing a divide between hetero-patriarchal churches and black queer Christian bodies, forcing them to find "*alternative spaces of worship*" (Sithole, 2018:17). Contributing to the move towards the establishment of *Queer Churches* within the African context as a response to the hostility towards queer bodies within the African faith landscape.

1.1.2. Defining Queer Churches

It is important to note that there is no clear definition of the *Queer Church* within the literature. However, within this paper, I would like to use Patrick Cheng's (2011) third definition of Queer theology as the bases for understanding queer churches. In which we will define queer churches as a space where queer individuals talk about and worship God in a manner that challenges and deconstructs the "normal" binary categories of gender and sexual identity as defined by heteropatriarchy within Christian founded churches (Cheng, 2011:9). Queer churches are established to worship and talk about God in a way that affirms all sexualities and gender identities. Creating a space of worship beyond the binaries of gender, deconstructing systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity, welcoming queer diverse persons within the church (Sithole, 2018:17).

However, within the process of conducting my Honours research, I found that queer churches had failed to provide inclusive spaces ensuring the safety of LGBTI+ and affirmation of all bodies within the church. Resurrecting heteronormative patterns within their engagements within the church. They had reconstructed a patriarchal system in which dominant masculine queer bodies had gained systematic authority over feminine queer bodies who had adopted a culture of submission. Recreating gender binaries that exclude those who identify outside of the norms of heteropatriarchy (Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis). Black queer Christian bodies re-established a hierarchal system of dominance within the church (Sumera, 2015:307).

Through this study I seek to engage this phenomenon, taking the opportunity to engage factors contributing to the way in which queer bodies conform to normative systems of patriarchy within queer churches established within the South African context, in KwaZulu-Natal. With the construction of black queer Christian identities as the focus, I seek to explore the lived experiences of these bodies in meaning-making and becoming. To understand the contextual realities that influence the failure of queer bodies to live outside of the systems that contribute to the oppression of their identities. Formulating questions that engage ways that we can begin to destabilize systematically groomed queer bodies resurrecting patriarchy within their own queer spaces. Using Queer Theology as the lens through which we can engage this. Engaging black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape, contributing to the growing literature in the field of Queer Theology. This study works towards filling the gap in which we can begin to engage the queer body as a destabilizing tool within the church, queering heteronormative faith spaces for the full inclusion of queer diverse bodies within the church.

Introducing key terms and locating the research

Queer Theology, black body, queer, Christian, queer church, sexuality, gender, heteropatriarchy.

1.2. Research Questions and Objections

Research questions that will help in guiding the data collection process to answer the main research question; **Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces** are as follows:

Main Research Question

What are the ways, if any, through which queer bodies might destabilize hetero-patriarchal construction of gender and sexuality in the *African faith landscape*?

Sub-research Questions

1. What are the lived realities of *black queer Christian bodies* within the African landscape?
2. How do ideo-theological ideas of *queer church* perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa?
3. Can *Queer Theology* provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context?

In conducting this study, I seek to fulfil the following **objectives**:

1. To explore the lived realities of *black queer Christian bodies* within the African landscape.
2. To investigate how ideo-theological ideas of queer church perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in *selected churches* in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

3. To explore ways in which *Queer Theology* could provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context.

1.3. Research Methodology

The research methodology to be used to engage this study is that of qualitative research, which is described by Creswell J. (2012) as a “process of research flowing from philosophical assumptions, to worldviews and through a theoretical lens, and a procedure involved in studying social or human problems” (Creswell, 2012:36). The approach that will be taken under qualitative research is that of *Phenomenological Research*. An approach allowing me to discuss in detail the experiences that the participants have within the church in the way in which they discuss their positionality, as well as understandings of gender and sexuality concerning others within the queer church (Creswell, 2012:54). Discussing my positionality within this study concerning that of the participants within the process of this study. Noting a visible limitation within the study as it is conducted during the lockdown regulations put in place to help decrease COVID-19 infections.

1.4. Outline of the study

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter will outline the literature that has been done to feed into this project. Helping the reader understand the available literature, as well as the gap which this research is attempting to address within the field of Queer studies. Firstly, engaging *The Pervasiveness of Patriarchy* as the underlying system contributing to the daily realities of individuals situated within the African context. Feeding into the understanding of Heteronormativity – ‘The Predicted Norm’, through which the sexualities of all bodies are predetermined. Leading us into discussion engaging three main themes exploring the reality of *Queer Bodies within the African Landscape*, *Heteronormativity as a Life-Denying System*, as well as *Queer Theology as a Method* through which we could destabilize oppressive systems within the church.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework

Within this chapter, I will reflect on three theoretical frameworks that will be used in approaching this study. Engaging *Body Theology* as the lens through which I will view the queer body as the starting point of theological reflections. Examining the South African faith landscape through the experiences of black queer Christian bodies as they become visible within this context. Further exploring *Queer Theology* as a lens through which we begin to understand the contextual realities informing the identities of black queer Christian bodies within this context. Finally engaging *Indecent Theology* as a tool through which we destabilize heteropatriarchal systems within the African faith landscape from the bodies of those cast to margins of Christian faith.

Chapter 4 – Research Methodology

This chapter will describe the qualitative approach to be used in approaching this study. Exploring the idea of a *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Research Methodology* as a steppingstone through which I examine the lived realities of bodies at the margins of Christian faith. Queering traditional data collection methods, using a *Focused Group Discussion* to explore *A Collective Engagement* on the experiences of the church. Guiding me into conversations delving deeper into personal experiences through *Individual Interviews*. Further exploring the use of a *Research Diary* as a vital tool in the process of reflection and analysis. This will also acknowledge the sampling method used in the process of collecting data. Ensuring that the reader understands the number of views and factors that informed the information collected, which will give an understanding of the measures taken to ensure that the study is reliable and has a degree of validity in the way in which it is to be carried out.

Chapter 5 – Presentation of Data Collected

Within this chapter I will engage the data captured within the field, stating the processes followed in the data collection process. Giving an idea of *my situated-ness* within the project, capturing my experiences as a researcher as recorded in the Research Diary. Sharing my observations as I engaged in conversations with the participants of this study. Noting the key themes that were identified using *Thematic Analysis* as my main tool in the process of analysing data.

Chapter 6 – Analysis of Findings and Discussion

This chapter will describe the themes that will be identified in chapter 5, through the data collected. Bringing the literature, data presented and theory into a conversation as I reflect on the aim of this project, as well as the key research questions guiding this process. Sharing the observations made in the process of conducting this study, describing the documented contextual realities of black queer Christian bodies within this context. Identifying gaps and areas for further research or engagement.

Chapter 7 – Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

Within this chapter, I will *share a reflection of my journey* as I come to the end of this project. Giving a summary of the work done to fulfil the objective of this study, as I note the steps taken to respond to the main research question. Through this I will discuss the gaps noted in the process of collecting data, which will allow me to share my recommendations, leading to the conclusion of the work done.

1.5. Conclusion

Within this chapter, I gave a brief description of the narratives that informed my interest in conducting this study. Giving a background of the contextual realities that inform the experiences of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Not only quoting the alarming headlines within this context but also reflecting on the literature observing this phenomenon. I then acknowledged the visible shift within the African faith landscape in terms of theological discourses erring towards conversations discussing the issues of sexuality within the church. However, identifying the gap through which queer bodies do not feel welcome and have therefore moved towards creating their own spaces of worship, leading to the main purpose of this study.

This led me to a discussion through which I defined Queer Churches and their reasons for coming into being to help the reader understand the reason for this project being carried out. Sharing my research questions, objectives and well as the research methodology to be used to fulfil the purpose of this study. Finally, outlining the chapters that will be discussed, guiding us to the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Within the previous chapter, I laid out the purpose of this study and the phenomenon that I wish to engage in conducting this research. Paying attention to the narratives shared in mass media and scholarly literature that expose the contextual realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape. Revealing the relevance of this research within the field of Queer Theology in this context. In addition to this, I identified research questions that will help guide the process of this research project, giving a brief description of the methodology to be used, as well as the theoretical frameworks that will inform the literature to be engaged and the analysis of data.

To give an understanding of the term queer, I engage Patrick Cheng's (2011) definition of queerness, in which queer bodies in their gender performativity and sexual engagements, erase the normative binary differences such as man/woman and barriers of sexuality and gender that are informed by patriarchy and heteronormativity within their existence (Cheng, 2011:1). However, within their own spaces of worship and engagement, black queer Christian bodies have often resurrected structural practices and belief systems mimicking those informed by patriarchy within heteronormative faith spaces. Therefore, resuming a culture of oppression, marginalization and ultimately exclusion within these spaces.

In this chapter, I will proceed to explore the contextual realities informing this phenomenon, examining literature engaging the realities of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. First and foremost, engaging patriarchy as the underlying system for which human relatedness and gender performativity are determined. Further engaging heteronormativity as informed by patriarchy, predicted based on one's identification at birth. Which will then guide our discussion as I engage three main thematic areas. Firstly, I will examine the realities of *Queer Bodies Within the African Faith Landscape*, focusing on *Scripture as a Tool of Oppression*. As well as the idea of *Un-Cultured and Un-African* as a response to homosexuality within this context. Leading to an exploration of *Alternative Spaces of Worship – The Queer Church* as a solution to oppressive heteronormative structures of worship. Finally, I will engage the idea of *Negative Heteronormativity* as the second main thematic area. Essentially leading us towards

the third thematic area in which I explore *Queer Theology as a possible Method* through which we could potentially begin to destabilize social constructions of gender and sexuality as informed by heteropatriarchy within the Christian church.

2.2. The Pervasiveness of Patriarchy

Patriarchy has manifested itself in many ways, however within these differences, it has been common and consistent in its main agenda, which serves to privilege the male body over the “other” (the woman, child and queer individual). “Penis-centered”, it is defined by Izugbara (2004), as a system put in place to “glorify and idolize traditional imageries of masculinity and male sexual prowess and encourage the objectification of women” (Izugbara, 2004:2). Therefore, privileging the dominance of men over women or feminine bodies, solely based on biology at birth (Maluleke, 2009:31). Further defined by Madlala-Routledge (2009), patriarchy can simply be observed as “a hierarchal system of social organization whereby men hold positions of power over women” (Madlala-Routledge, 2009:4).

This system in its bias has created a culture of oppression within the history of humanity, in which male bodies, identifying themselves within the traditional notions of masculinity, have gained power and dominance over those that have been viewed as the "Other" (those that are feminine or queer). The "other" which has been noted by Izugbara (2004), as women and "men who step out of or challenge the traditional male roles" (Izugbara, 2004:2). Pervasive in its nature, patriarchy continues to live on in various ways. Embedding itself in various structures, some equally maintained by those which it has been successful in taming through patriarchal practices demanding the submissiveness of those who do not benefit from its ultimate agenda (Madlala-Routledge, 2009:4). Structures that are embedded in tradition, religion, culture, and the law; and are further endorsed within social institutions such as the family, schools, church, the workplace, and tertiary institutions (Francis et al, 2019:25; Msibi, 2011:71, Madlala-Routledge, 2009:4).

Patriarchy has been seen to be powerful in that it does not only control the hierarchal relatedness of human interaction, but also acceptable sexual interaction within intimate relationships. In which it “prescribes roles, values, expectations and responsibilities” (Judge, 2009:12), to male and female bodies through which the traditional male identifying as a man, is seen as the “dominant, active” half to the “passive” half which is the female who identifies

as a traditional woman (Judge, 2009:12), this is known as the “heterosexual normative” (Seidman, 2001:321).

2.3. Heteronormativity – ‘The Predicted Norm’

Enforced by the pervasiveness of patriarchy in its quest to maintain the power biases within society. Heteronormativity then becomes a notion further imposing the binary difference that promotes the separation of male versus female bodies as determined at birth. It is the social construct that does not only predict gendered roles at birth but also determines a person's predicted sexual interactions according to their biological make-up (Mkasi, 2013:46; Msibi, 2011:71; Williams, 2011:708). Maintained and passed on through culture, religion, tradition, and media. Heterosexuality then becomes the norm through which all bodies should conform to a gendered idea of sexual relationships. In which individuals are groomed into the belief that all sexual associations in which they engage in should be with the opposite sex. Heteronormativity becomes a social construction in which "appropriate sexuality and sexual behaviour" are determined, privileging the male counterpart (Punt, 2007:242; Schneider, 2000:211; van der Walt, Nd).

However, with the idea of heterosexuality being founded based on patriarchy, the imposed construction of heteronormativity does not determine the underlying feelings of those it is forced on, nor does it consider bodies who do not wish to be validated by its agenda. Having said that, the heteronormative agenda fosters ideologies that do not only exclude but also oppresses those that are seen to deviate from the norm in which it tries to box and control. Policing bodies that do not reflect gender "appropriate" performativity or mimic its characteristics within sexual relationships. An "instability" seen in queer relationships, through which "those who do not conform are constructed as outsiders and regulated through exclusion" (Judge, 2009:12; Msibi, 2011:71; van der Walt, Nd). This “deviation” then creates a sense of "otherness", in which an individual is "constituted in a manner that it appears as a foreign body in a dominant culture, and therefore needs to be removed if culture is to be healed" (Sithole, 2015:195).

This culture of “otherness” shown towards queer bodies, then leads to an environment of hostility for those that are seen as “alien” to the systems maintained through cultural, traditional, economical, or religious practices within varied contexts. Leading to

discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of bodies that do not conform to the norm informed by heteropatriarchy (Judge, 2009:14; Msibi, 2011:600; van der Walt, Nd). This is the reality I wish to engage further within the lived experiences of queer Christian bodies, leading into my first thematic area, in which I explore the lived realities of *Queer Bodies Within the African Landscape*.

2.4. Queer Bodies Within the African Landscape

The history of African literature, and old folklore (generational storytelling) has revealed a great deal in terms of how society deals with difference. This has been seen in the way in which it treats minorities, as well as those that have been viewed as foreign to what it considers the "norm" within a certain context. Investing a great deal into instilling and maintaining systems protecting their sense of comfort in the face of the unknown. This is no different especially within the African context. Which has been seen in the way it treats amongst others, sexual and gender non-conforming minorities. Identifying them as "alien" to the African "norm". Forcing queer individuals into experiencing life in a context deeply informed by pervasive systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Queer individuals are born into hostile environments in which their sexuality and gender identity have become the "center of public and political controversy" (Msibi, 2011:60; van Klinken, 2015:24).

Monitored by systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity, embedded in our daily lived realities, queer individuals have found themselves in a space of displacement within the African faith landscape. Becoming more "opposed and denounced by African leaders" (Msibi, 2011:55), gender and sexual minorities have found themselves in positions of vulnerability, in which they have been forced to navigate their daily realities in uncertain environments within their process of becoming and meaning making. With heteropatriarchy continuing to silence "sexuality and negate 'homosexuality as un-African' and against religion" within the African landscape (Msibi, 2011:55; Williams, 2011:708). "Western sexual categories are increasingly being questioned within the African contexts, given the failure of these categories to capture the varied ways in which same-sex engagement is understood and performed within these contexts" (Msibi and Rudwick, 2015:53). Discrediting the act of homosexuality and gender non-conformity (found under the umbrella term 'queer') as a Western import. The single most engaging narrative within the African context, is one that emphasizes the abnormality, illness,

and demonic possession of queer bodies within the African landscape, "a threat to the purity of the nation" (Epprecht, 2005:140; Reygan, 2014:708; van Klinken, 2015:259).

Although there has been a positive shift in conversations engaging the contextual realities of sexual and gender minorities. The pervasiveness and persistence of heteropatriarchy remains consistent within structures and institutions in which we socially interact. Rooted at the very core of social interaction, heteropatriarchy continues to thrive from the very beginning of an individual's life. Embodied in the way we are taught to dress, speak, engage, and perform our identities concerning others. Found even at the level of primary education, gender and sexual minorities find displacement within the schooling system (Francis et al, 2019:21). In *'A five-country study of gender and sexuality diversity and schooling in Southern Africa'*, including countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, as well as Swaziland. Findings revealed that queer students experience bullying, not only from their peers but also from their educators (Francis et al, 2019:21). Creating hostile environments for young bodies living outside of the barriers of heteronormativity (Francis et al, 2019:21). This study continued to expose a "severe neglect in the areas of learning, teaching and support" for queer students (Francis et al, 2019:33), not only in the institution itself but also from family (Francis et al, 2019:33). Reflected even at the level of tertiary education, a study investigating the *'Challenges faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students at a South African university'*, revealed that because of hetero-patriarchal discourse, queer students continue to find themselves alienated within the South African education system (Sithole, 2015:200). Facing rejection from peers, as well as "academic instructors", failing to "embrace diversity" (Sithole, 2015:200).

Exposing the fear of "anxious masculinities", queer bodies have been powerful in that they reveal the instability of masculinity and heteropatriarchy within their very existence. In which they destroy the heteropatriarchal idea of masculinity, as well as femininity that is threatened by the "other". Destabilizing historical norms that have been put in place to maintain "social order" (Msibi, 2011:55; Reygan, 2011:716). However, this potential ability to destruct social order becomes the grounds through which queer bodies are made vulnerable within a context informed by heteropatriarchal systems such as religion (especially relating to the Christian church within this thesis), culture, and tradition; in which sexuality and gendered bodies are policed (Msibi, 2011:57; van Klinken, 2015:259). Even though there has been a shift within the African faith landscape in terms of discussions on sexuality within the Christian church.

Religion, or in this case Christianity as the dominant religion within the African context, is still largely used to show forms of intolerance and violence towards LGBTI+ individuals. Individuals within the African faith landscape view queer bodies as aliens and foreign to the African context, basing most of their arguments on biblical scriptures, as the main source of Christian faith as worship, as a tool of oppression and the belief that homosexuality is uncultured and un-African (Bongmba, 2016:15; Gunda, 2017:1; West et al, 2016:5).

2.4.1. Scripture as a Tool of Oppression

"The patriarchal system is not merely a structural and a mechanical system, it is ideological, theological and spiritual. It cannot be combated on at the levels of structures and processes. It is at its toughest when it poses as a spiritual and cultural system" – Prof. Tinyiko Maluleke (Maluleke, 2009:34)

Scripture, in its gospel of "good news", has largely been used as a tool of oppression and exclusion within theological discourses, enforcing hegemonic heterosexuality through "sexism, homophobia and other prejudices" (Judge, 2009:13). Various theological interpretations of scripture have contributed greatly to the isolation of queer bodies within the African Christian landscape, leaving sexual and gender minorities at the margins; excluded, isolated, and neglected (Gunda, 2017:8; Msibi, 2011:69; van der Walt, 2017:20; West et al, 2016:4). Even though a minority of Christian religious leaders continue to advocate for the inclusion of sexual minorities and gender diverse bodies, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu who continues to stand firmly against homophobia (Gunda, 2017:27; Ward, 2013:415). The voice of discrimination, exclusion and queer phobia remains louder within the African Christian faith landscape (Gunda, 2017:27; Ward, 2013:415).

Most churches continue to be negative about queer bodies, spewing hate from religious platforms. Contributing towards cases of hate crimes and abusive language towards queer individuals, becoming a place of discomfort and self-loathe for sexual minorities and gender diverse groups (Barton, 2010:465; Nelson, 1992:19). Quoting stories of creation and procreation, the bible has been used in theological arguments against homosexuality. Promoting marginalization and discrimination towards queer bodies, presenting arguments that condemn sexual minorities and gender diverse bodies, labelling them as "unnatural", "unwholesome" and "unethical" (Barton, 2010:477; Gunda, 2017:11; Judge, 2009:15; Mkasi,

2013:23; Obasola, 2013:80; West et al, 2016:1). Revealing the “need to reflect on the role of Christian scriptures as a key patriarchal narrative” (Barton, 2010:477; Gunda, 2017:11; Judge, 2009:15; Mkasi, 2013:23; Obasola, 2013:80; West et al, 2016:1).

Bible scriptures have been a weapon in the hands of patriarchy. While promoting supremacist ideologies of male dominance and heteronormativity, it has been the basis through which visible sexual minorities and gender diverse (queer) groups threatening and potentially destabilizing toxic notions of masculinity and social constructions of heteronormativity as informed by patriarchy, experience rejection and exclusion. With those in authority policing bodies within the African Christian faith landscape, not only regulating the bodies of queer individuals but those that have been seen to be inferior within a context dominated by toxic masculinities (Judge, 2009:13; Maluleke, 2009:31; Msibi, 2011:71). With scriptures quoted from the books of Leviticus and Genesis, biblical narratives have been used to support heteronormativity as the divine order of the family, demanding a "particular sexual system...a compulsory sexuality" (Judge, 2009:12). Therefore, labelling homosexuality (under the umbrella term ‘queer’) as "evil", "sinful" and against God's divine plan for creation. Allowing the church to use ancient narratives within the modern context to rebuke sexual minorities and gender diverse individuals, making it difficult for queer bodies to remain within the church (Barton, 2010:475; Dlamini, 2019:2; Gunda, 2017:21; Mkasi, 2013:35; Obasola, 2013:80; Punt, 2007:244; Stuart, 1997:79). An argument, however, that has been supported greatly by gatekeepers of culture and Christian faith within the African context.

2.4.2. Un-cultured and un-African

“History and struggles of LGBTI people in Africa only remain hidden to those who actively desire not to see them”. – Marc Epprecht (Epprecht, 2005:142)

Christian religious leaders within the African context have turned a blind eye to the historical realities of the context in which they engage discourses on sexual and gender diversity. Not only basing their arguments against queer bodies on biblical scripture but also rooting their reasoning based on culture and Christian faith. Spreading the idea that queerness is uncultured and corrupting the moral fiber of the African community, going as far as characterizing homosexuality (under the umbrella term ‘queer’) as a Western phenomenon plaguing the

African continent (Bongmba, 2016:17; Davids et al, 2019:10; Essien and Aderinto, 2009:122; Mkasi, 2013:1; Obasola, 2013:83; Punt, 2007:252; van der Walt, 2017:20; Ward, 2013:412)

According to literature engaged by Marc Epprecht (2005), in his article titled *"Hidden Histories of African Homosexualities"*, sexual minorities and gender diverse groups have always existed within the African context (Epprecht, 2005:138). However even with their histories being "substantially documented", their historical existence "continues to be marginalized in scholarship and activism around gender and sexuality" (Epprecht, 2005:138). Within this article, he goes on to note that "African cultures had ways to explain those men and women who did not fit the social ideal. These included a wide range of spirit possessions, most commonly a male ancestor inhabiting a living female person, and vice versa" (Epprecht, 2005:139). This also included various traditional practices such as those of "woman-woman marriages which were explained in spiritual, economic and political terms, rather than admitting the possibility of sexual desire that could potentially endanger the respect for patriarchal hierarchies" (Dynes, 1983:20; Epprecht, 2005:193). So according to Epprecht (2005), queer bodies have always existed within the history of Africa, however, they did not "identify themselves as such" (Epprecht, 2005:140). A reality that still exists to this day in which sexual identity and gender non-conformity have not found its identity within African language or culture (Msibi, 2011:55, 69).

Even though there is a lack of clear affirming term for homosexuality (under the umbrella term 'queer') within traditional African languages, historical words such as "ongqingili", "inkonkoni" and other derogatory terms such as "izitabane" used to discriminate and insult the queer community, have been evident of the known existence of sexual and gender diverse individuals within the South African context (Davids et al, 2019:10; Donham, 1998:7; Milani, 2014:78; Mkasi, 2013:32). This also includes documented evidence proving that same-sex relations have existed in the history of Africa and within the South African context. However, "the harsh homophobia that African leaders have voiced in recent years does not reflect traditional cultures of discretion and tolerance but echo Christian missionary propaganda and Islamic fundamentalism" (Epprecht, 2005:140). With the existence of sexual minorities and gender diverse individuals still viewed as "unnatural", "un-African", as well as a threat to the African "social order" and the survival of humanity. Purely based on patriarchal ideologies perceiving sexuality as a traditional method of procreation and not of desire (Donham, 1998:14; Essien and Aderinto, 2009:122; Epprecht, 2005:139; Obasola, 2013:79-85; Ward, 2013:410).

This belief by African and religious leaders has been instrumental in fueling political moral campaigns promoting hate crimes and hate speech against those that have been seen to deviate from the norm. Which is heteronormativity as informed by patriarchy, “in which sexuality has been made a cultural tool, through which Africanity is expressed as a marker of citizenship, claiming one’s rights and denying the other their rights” (van Klinken, 2015:260). Creating an environment in which queer bodies are treated as “invisible and intelligible” (Bongmba, 2016:18; Milani, 2014:83; Williams, 2011:708). Queerness is still viewed as a disgrace to the African culture and the “Image of God”, going against the heterosexual norm in which “social pressures are applied on men and women to ensure that ‘real men’ and ‘real women’ only exist” (Judge, 2009:12). It is considered as deviant behaviour, and therefore it is placed at the margins of African traditions, resulting in African societies showing resistance to the acceptance of queer bodies (Mkasi, 2013:9; van Klinken and Phiri, 2015). This intolerable, hostile environment fueled by Christianity, culture and conservative traditional beliefs has contributed to the migration of queer bodies from the hetero-patriarchal churches to the establishment of queer churches within the African faith landscape.

2.4.3. Alternative Spaces of Worship – The Queer Church

Created to provide safe spaces for those who are viewed as the "disruptive other", Queer Churches move queer bodies from the margins of Christianity to the centre of worship without being forced to conform to gender binaries to become visible in the presence of God (Cheng, 2011:8). Finding alternative spaces that are life-affirming to their existence concerning God. Reinterpreting biblical scripture in a manner that acknowledges queer diverse bodies in their journey of becoming in the presence of God (Sithole, 2018; West et al, 2016:3). Deconstructing gender binaries and creating a culture of acceptance and equality, a place of spiritual affirmation, engaging biblical narratives in ways that include and liberates all bodies (Potgieter and Reygan, 2011:71; West et al, 2016:3). Queer churches aim to create a level of justice, by establishing a theology of liberation for queer individuals within the African Christian faith landscape (Davids et al, 2019:1). Destabilizing systems that police the performativity of our bodies, becoming part of the body of Christ, accepting all bodies as different, belonging to God without being forced to conform to binaries of gender and heteronormative laws of sexuality (Mkasi, 2013:17). However, in the process of becoming visible within their own spaces, black queer Christian bodies resembling characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, have moved from

a position of vulnerability within heteronormative churches to a position of privilege and power within queer faith spaces. Conforming to the normative system of patriarchy within their own safe spaces of worship and allowing the oppression of one queer body by the other (Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis; Sumera et al, 2011:322).

A phenomenon encountered by Msibi and Rudwick (2015), in an article titled, '*Intersections of two isiZulu genderlects and the construction of skesana identities*', in which they analyze "same-sex relationships amongst men who speak IsiZulu and IsiNqumo" (Msibi and Rudwick, 2015:51). Where they found that male bodies engaging in same-sex relations had assumed gendered roles, in which male bodies who were the receivers had undertaken a passive and submissive feminine role; and those who penetrated had maintained an active role in which monetary stability and protection was mandatory (Msibi and Rudwick, 2015:52, 61). Within their analysis, they found that queer individuals within their interactions "perform their gender and sexual identities in the ways they do because their performance of gender and sexual identification is informed by the historical repetition of acts. As well as the constellation of their sexual, racial and gender identities, in a national context where patriarchy still strongly dominates" (Msibi and Rudwick, 2015:57). Queer bodies within their own spaces continued to express through their bodies, what was and is familiar to them. Through their engagements, queer individuals continue to embody the structures and systems informed by the environments in which they are brought up, exposing the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy even within the queerness of African queer identity.

This phenomenon has raised questions on the possibility through which we can fully exist outside of the fixed structures of heteropatriarchy (Sumera et al, 2015:307). Queer individuals within the South African context, have been seen to create a culture in which there is a move away from heteronormative Christian churches. Establishing and joining queer churches that have claimed to be accepting of all queer bodies, only to find that even within these spaces, only relationships between 'man' and 'woman' are recognized. Leaving non-binary individuals excluded, marginalizing various sexualities within the church, findings that have been evident in my Honours research (Mkasi, 2013:51; Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis). Literature has shown great depth in the experiences of queer individuals within heteronormative faith spaces within the South African context. Highlighting the shift in which queer bodies no longer seek validation within heteronormative churches but have moved towards creating their own spaces of worship, self-affirmation, and inclusion. Which ironically has led to the exclusion of some

bodies within the church, a gap within literature which has raised questions I seek to engage within this paper. Engaging factors that influence this phenomenon, I move towards exploring the contextual realities influencing the experiences of black queer Christian bodies, who are the main focus of this study, within queer Christian faith spaces, engaging the realities informing the identities of black queer Christian bodies, allowing them to conform to normative systems of heteropatriarchy within their own faith spaces.

2.5. Heteronormativity – As a Life-Denying System

Black queer Christian bodies have struggled to place themselves within the African faith landscape (Sithole, 2018:1). Displaced by the binaries of gender and sexuality, black queer Christian bodies struggle to place themselves within the South African faith landscape. Forced to conform to systems of heteronormativity and patriarchal ideas of accepted gender performativity concerning female and male bodies as identified by society at birth. With patriarchy at the root of Christianity within the African faith landscape, black queer bodies have struggled to find a sense of self against the "narrow constructions of race, gender and sexuality" (Hellman, 2018:57; Khumalo, 2018:202; Reuther, 1993,214). With self-affirmation found in the reflection of values instilled by religion and culture, black queer bodies conform to belong and exist without being labelled the "other" (Hellman, 2018:88).

Gender, one of the concepts through which black queer Christian bodies establish themselves and their position within the African context. Shaped by multiple dimensions, informing how we see and experience the world concerning others, constructed in different ways within different contexts (Butler, 1990:7; Davis, 2008:68; Johnson and Repta, 2012:18; Sithole, 2018:81). The concept of 'gender' plays a role in shaping how black queer Christian bodies construct their identities, with culture and religion found at the center of how we define and perform our gender to belong (Butler, 1990:7; Davis, 2008:68; Johnson and Repta, 2012:18; Sithole, 2018:81). Informed by the contextual realities in which the body is groomed, within the Zulu culture in KwaZulu-Natal, understanding gender as a social construct informed by the "pervasive construction of hetero-patriarchal systematic normalization of heteronormativity" (Davids et al, 2019:25). Guides our thinking in terms of understanding factors that contribute to the root of African queer identity. Their exclusion within heteronormative faith spaces and their longing for familiarity when navigating queer faith space, resurrecting patriarchy, highly linked to how we interpret gender within African cultures, as well as African religious spaces

(Milani, 2014:79). Within this study, I examine the foundation of Zulu queer Christian identities brought up within South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal. Understanding their exclusion within heteronormative faith spaces and their longing for familiarity when navigating queer faith spaces (Milani, 2014:79).

Cranny-Francis (2003) helps us understand the construction and importance of gender in the process of belonging and finding validation, a concept explored even before the birth of the child, gender shapes how we are identified (Cranny-Francis, 2003:65; Milani, 2014:79; Thatcher, 2011:9). The body becomes the text through which we experience our sense of being, met with hostility queer bodies blur the lines of gender binaries, living outside of the confinements of “acceptable” gender performativity. With female bodies performing masculinity and male bodies performing subordinate femininity, queer bodies have become a reflection of the radical body of Christ, understanding a love that is beyond the embodiment of physical genital identification (Schneider, 2000:209; Sithole, 2018:25).

Yet through their interactions within queer faith spaces, the chains and boundaries of heteropatriarchy have surfaced in the quest to find validation, displacing the non-conforming other within the church. Using queer theology as a lens through which I view this phenomenon, I seek to explore the lived realities of nine black queer Christian individuals brought up within KwaZulu-Natal. Engaging the possibility through which queer bodies can find validation outside of the hetero-patriarchal “norms” of gender and sexuality instilled by culture and religion. Finding ways, if any, through which black queer Christian bodies might destabilise heteropatriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality in faith spaces within the African landscape, an element of research contributing to the growing literature within queer theology.

2.6. Queer Theology as a Method

Van Klinken and Phiri (2015) explore not only the concept of queer theology but queer theology within the African context. Engaging the lived experiences of black African queer Christian bodies in shaping their understanding of the 'The Image of God'. Which is systematically groomed by their understanding of the context in which they develop. Viewing queer theology and African theology as contextual forms of theology, Van Klinken and Phiri (2015) help us explore theology from the experiences of the body as informed by the realities that shape and police bodies within the African context (van Klinken and Phiri, 2015:10).

Queer Theology helps in understanding that the body belongs to society and therefore does not exist on its own or shaped by its ideologies. Helping us understand that queer bodies "construct their identification along very fixed gender binary lines...informed by heteronormativity" (Msibi and Rudwick, 2018:62). Through this, we begin to understand how queer bodies are shaped by their understanding of God through their bodies concerning others, as they are shaped by systems within faith-based spaces. Not only engaging the idea of sexuality, but also culture, social standing, and historical systematic oppression of the context in which they reside and have been socially groomed (van Klinken and Phiri, 2015:10). The realities that groom us, shape how we see the Image of God, with black queer Christian bodies being in a context influenced by cultural norms of gender and constructions of sexuality. Queer Theology helps us engage the understanding of God's image concerning others within the queer community. Which then helps in understanding the main question, in which we ask if it is possible for queer bodies to view the "image of God" beyond sexuality and gender binaries. Is it possible for Queer theology to help destabilize the cultural and religious norms that inform the construction of queer bodies within queer faith spaces, helping engage ways in which we can begin to use Queer Theology to destabilize the systematically groomed black queer Christian body?

In engaging Stuart's (1999), perception of Queer Theology, we begin to understand this phenomenon, we cannot view queer theology as a collective experience, but an individual one in relation to others, which is a very important factor in this thesis. If we are to view the gendered validation of queer individuals within the church, we need to view the individual's personal experience of the church. How they find familiarity through the reading and interpretation of scripture, how they understand oppression within the church and the bodies that can oppress the other within the church, as well as belief systems within themselves allowing them to uproot systems of heteronormativity (Stuart, 1999:69). Engaging the contextual realities, exploring the cultural and religious factors informing the pervasive heteropatriarchal systems that queer individuals have been groomed into, maintained in their bodies, and reflected within their personal spaces (Milani, 2014:76). By engaging this we will gain insight into how we can begin to help queer bodies realize that they have become the "self" through which the "other" have been oppressed within their own spaces. Finding ways in which we can use Queer Theology to liberate all bodies within the church, doing and living theology in a way that affirms and validates all bodies within the church. Liberating queer bodies one body at a time from systems that stop them from experiencing the full radical love of Christ

within the church. A component in the literature that will be explored within this thesis. Contributing to growing literature in the field of Gender and Religion, informing studies exploring the move towards the liberation of queer bodies within the queer African faith landscape.

2.7. Conclusion

Black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape have actively worked towards creating spaces of “stability” for bodies living outside of the norms of traditional male and female sexual and gendered roles. Moving from a position of vulnerability within heteropatriarchal faith spaces in which queer bodies have found displacement, marginalization, and exclusion. To embodying characteristics of systems that continue to oppress them within their daily lived realities and spaces of faith. Showing the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy in the recreation of structures and practices instilled within alternative queer Christian faith spaces. In which they wish to find liberation from binary systems that serve to normalize and control the gender performativity and sexual interactions of black queer Christian bodies.

To explore the factors that inform this phenomenon within this chapter, I engaged and defined *The Pervasiveness of Patriarchy*, which informs and maintains male superiority, in which the feminine and queer other are passive and unstable. Which then led to an exploration of its persistence through Heteronormativity – ‘The Predicted Norm’, through which all bodies are traditionally, culturally, and religiously socialized into the belief that sexual interaction could and should only be experienced with those that are viewed as our gendered opposites. This then created the basis through which I engaged literature investigating the realities of *Queer Bodies Within the African Landscape*, surveying work within social sciences. Engaging the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within homosexual discourses, even embedded at the levels of primary education. This then allowed me to touch on three subheadings in which I examined ‘*Scripture as a Tool of Oppression*’, actively used to condemn and discredit queer individuals as bodies of Christ, leading to a discussion on homosexuality as ‘*Un-cultured and un-African*’, a Western import set to destabilize African tradition and purity. Leading to an exploration of ‘*Alternative Spaces of Worship – The Queer Church*’, as a solution to the liberation of queer bodies from heteronormative faith spaces. Which then exposed the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within the queerness of African queer identity.

Furthermore, I engaged the idea of '*Negative Heteronormativity*', as a system through which black queer Christian bodies are forced to conform to systems of heteronormativity and patriarchal ideologies of accepted gender performativity concerning female and male bodies identified at birth. A reality that I found to be pervasive within black queer identities and their social, as well as sexual interactions. Finally, I analyzed '*Queer Theology as a possible Method*' through which we could potentially examine the lived experiences of black queer Christian bodies concerning the contextual systematic realities through which their notions of gender performativity and sexual relatedness have been informed. Exploring ways, if any, in which queer bodies, with the guidance of Queer Theology, can start to destabilize hetero-patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality within the African faith landscape, liberating all bodies within the Christian church. A phenomenon I wish to engage further through the lenses of Indecent and Body Theology.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

3.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined literature expanding on the purpose of this study, exploring the systemic realities embodied within the identities of black queer Christian bodies, informing their positionality within the South African faith landscape. Identifying a possible gap within Queer literature in which we could potentially create platforms for black queer Christian bodies within their embodiment and knowledge of God, to guide discussions working towards destabilizing ideo-theological ideas informing and maintaining systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy within the church in the African context. Outlining literature exploring the experiences of black queer Christian bodies within this landscape, I began by engaging the systemic realities informing the contextual encounters of bodies situated within the African landscape. In which I defined and examined *'The Pervasiveness of Patriarchy'* as an underlying system embodied within African bodies and institutionalized within our daily social engagements. Which then led to a discussion on *'Heteronormativity – The Predicted Norm'*, through which all bodies are traditionally, culturally, and religiously socialized, with deviation from this norm posing a possible threat to bodies that are perceived as the 'other'.

This guided the discussion as I engaged three main themes through which I investigated the realities of *'Queer Bodies Within the African Landscape'*. Going as far as exploring the lived experiences of queer bodies through the work carried out in social sciences, engaging the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within queer discourses, even at levels of primary education. Further investigating *'Heteronormativity – As A Life-Denying System'*, through which disruptive bodies are excluded and marginalized, a reality found to be pervasive within queer spaces and social interactions. Lastly, I explored *'Queer Theology as a Method'* through which we could examine the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies and their embodied notions of gender performativity and sexual relatedness. Exploring potential ways through which we might start to destabilize hetero-patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality within the African Christian faith landscape.

"Experience must be interpreted" (Rakoczy, 2011:34) and for interpretation to be possible we must be able to understand the dimensions that inform the embodied realities of black queer

Christian bodies. Which is vital in that "experience is neither global nor neutral but is diverse according to race, class, education, social location, religion" (Rakoczy, 2011:35) and within this project, also according to culture, sexual orientation, and gender performativity. Within this chapter, I explore *three theoretical frameworks* through which this study is to be engaged and analyzed. Beginning from the body as the starting point of theological discourse, I start by engaging *Body Theology* as the main lens through which I explore the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the South African landscape. Examining their experiences as the starting point of transformative interventions destabilizing heteropatriarchy within the church in KwaZulu-Natal, giving them the full epistemological privilege. Further exploring *Queer Theology* as a possible tool through which we can begin to understand what informs the identities of black queer Christian bodies. Exploring their spiritual experiences and their located-ness within the South African context in KwaZulu-Natal, as "shaped by both internal and external factors" informing an individual sense of self (Pargament, 2013:274). Lastly, examining *Indecent Theology* as a lens through which we examine the systemic realities informing the ideo-theological basis of queer experiences within the queer Christian church. Which helps in terms of understanding how queer bodies can worship from the margins of Christian faith, as the basis for a transformative ecclesiology which will allow for the inclusion of all bodies within the church.

3.2.Theoretical Framework

3.2.1. Body Theology

The body is central to the experience of the effects of religion, to the experiences of God and the experiences of the contextual realities that inform the construction of identities within the African landscape (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:33; Davids et al, 2019:29). It is central to how we view God and the experience of God's presence concerning the context in which we are brought up and engage society around us (van Niekerk, 2012:369; Davids et al, 2019:30). With a sense of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight, it is the instrument through which we desire and seek the needs of the spirit within the Christian faith. It becomes the key to how we experience our vulnerability and spirituality within spaces of worship. Individual bodies are symbolic of the systems that uphold society, systems informed by culture and religion (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:10). The body becomes an important tool in the presence of God and if positioned at the margins of oppression, it "gives new ways to hear, new eyes to see and

new possibilities for solidarity" (Rakoczy, 2011:36), which is why Body Theology becomes an important lens within this study.

To destabilize systems of oppression, society needs to understand and hear the voices of those that are oppressed and pushed to the margins by those systems. There cannot be a transformation of spaces of Christian faith, nor a disruption of the systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy without the voices of the bodies that are not only pushed to the margins of Christianity but also bear the consequences of "rebellion" within their daily lived realities (Davids et al, 2019:12; Isherwood, 2003:144; Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:22). To engage the possibility of change within the South African faith landscape, we need to shine a light on the experiences of black queer Christian bodies, examining the way they encounter God and the church concerning their context, not as tools or instruments of transformation, but as the foundation through which we begin to question structures privileged by heteronormativity and patriarchy within the South African faith landscape, questioning the moral fibre of the church within the broader Christian faith landscape (Nelson, 1992:21; Davids et al, 2019:9; Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:143).

Body Theology then becomes an important lens through which we engage the lived realities of queer Christian bodies within the South African faith landscape. Used as a tool of analysis within this study, it is instrumental in engaging the experiences of nine black queer Christian bodies located within this context, in cities situated within the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Examining the context in which they have been brought up, exploring their individual bodily experiences concerning God. Understanding the contexts that inform this reality, we explore the experiences of the "other" as shaped by those who are seen as the true creation of God, the norm in which the "other" must strive to be (Schneider, 2000:209; Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:15). Examining their positionality within the queer faith landscape, engaging their experiences as black queer Christian bodies who have found alternative spaces of worship, within a context influenced and highly informed by the isiZulu tradition. Documenting my personal experiences as a body brought up within the isiZulu tradition, concerning their narratives, as a queer activist located within KwaZulu-Natal. Recording my journey in relation to their own, capturing the importance of the body in the experience of emotion and oppression in process of transformation and community reconciliation. Through this process, we will examine systems that inform our embodiment, our responses to the world and ways in which marginalized queer bodies become the sources of oppression within their own queer faith

spaces, working towards informing ecclesiological transformation within the South African faith landscape (Nelson, 1992:42-43; van Niekerk, 2012:372).

Through this lens I seek to capture ways in which vulnerable queer bodies can find fulfilment in the presence of God in their own embodied "imperfection", destabilizing systems trying to normalize sexual and gender minorities within the church, taking our bodies seriously in the way in which we experience our connection to God concerning our context and people within society (Nelson, 1992:9; Althaus-Reid, 2003:19).

3.2.2. Queer Theology

Like Body Theology, Queer Theology as a lens takes the experiences of the body seriously, creating spaces in which we can talk about God from a position of difference, vulnerability, and marginalization. With Queer Theory as its foundation, queer theology seeks to disrupt "stable" ideas of sexuality and gender identity, questioning socially constructed systems of heteronormativity and gender performance within society and the church (Schneider, 2000:206 & 2011; Cheng, 2011:6; Stuart, 1999:375). Queer theology fits well within this study because it is a theology that is "from and of the body" (Althaus-Reid, 2003:50), from a place of instability influenced and constructed concerning individual contexts and "configurations of desire" (Althaus-Reid, 2003:50).

"It makes a great difference where one "stands" and what one sees from that vantage point" (Rakoczy, 2011:35), so Queer Theology plays an important role as it becomes the lens through which we begin to understand the instability of queer bodies within their experiences concerning God and to each other. Queer bodies within the African context have been perceived from a negative view, seen as deviant individuals disrupting normative systems. With heteropatriarchy at the centre of what it means to be normal, queer bodies within this landscape have been perceived as the other and are forced to conform to systematically informed norms within the church and wider society. While being policed by systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy, as informed by culture, and maintained by religion. Using biblical narratives aimed at excluding, marginalizing, and alienating those that differ from what is perceived as "correct" gender performativity and sexual desire. Queer bodies face "multiple obstacles to the full enjoyment of their human rights" (Palm, 2016:56), especially as individuals situated within the body of Christ. This, however, presents an opportunity in which we can lay

a foundation within Christian thought that starts from a point of belonging for queer individuals, reading biblical narratives from the margins of excluded non-conforming bodies, reflecting on the experiences of black queer Christian bodies, understanding that "no experience is outside the presence of God" (Rakoczy, 2011:54), which will help lead to transformative action within the church (Rakoczy, 2011:50). With the assistance of queer bodies, we begin to understand how we can begin to disrupt the systemic realities informing the church from the margins of Christianity, as bodies at the centre of Christian thought and culture, reflecting the radical image of God (Loughan, 2007:9; Sithole, 2018:37; Cheng, 2011:9).

"South Africans are very religious people as an observable social artefact and churches, therefore, remain an important factor in society" (Palm, 2016:9), with around 80% of South African citizens identifying as Christian. Religious attitudes have a significant impact on the lives of individuals, where Christians have grown entitled to judge who is deserving of spiritual fullness in the presence of God, despite a constitution protecting the rights of dignity and respect for all its citizens (Palm, 2016:9). Black queer Christian bodies continue to find themselves at the margins of Christianity within the South African context and have carried the weight of difference, forced to conform to socially constructed norms of heteronormativity and patriarchy (Isherwood, 2003:144; Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:22). However, in the same breath, queer Christian bodies also carry the gift of difference in which the radical creation and love of God are reflected, understanding that "the only way one can be queer and 'called' is by understanding ones 'calling' through the lens of subversion" (Althaus-Reid, 2003:34; Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:23; Robertson, 2020:43). With their queer embodied gender performativity and sexual orientation, naturally destabilizing traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. Queer bodies disrupt historically fixed ideas of heteronormativity and patriarchy as informed by culture and religion. Challenging binaries that create the hierarchal authority of one body over the other. Carrying with them the ability to act, decide and shape their lives outside of the norms of heteropatriarchy (Cheng, 2011:1; Mkasi, 2013:13; Schneider, 2000:206; Sithole, 2018:34). Queer bodies help us envision the possibility of validation outside of the socially constructed systems of heteropatriarchy. Liberating bodies from fixed ideas of gender and sexuality. Creating a platform through which their agency must be explored and promoted to investigate the inclusive love of Christ outside of the systemic binaries of gender performativity and sexual interaction (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:23; Sithole, 2018:38).

However, with literature uncovering the failure of queer bodies to live outside of the systems of heteropatriarchy. Queer theology helps us understand that queer individuals belong within society and therefore do not exist outside of this reality, they construct their “identifications along very fixed gender binary lines” (Msibi, 2018:62). This is a reality that has been reflected in the way in which they conform to normative systems of hetero-patriarchy within their own spaces of worship (Sibisi, Unpublished Thesis; Sumera, 2015:307; Althaus-Reid, 2003:50). With this study examining the realities of nine black queer Christian bodies located within the South African context, in KwaZulu-Natal, queer theology becomes the basis through which we engage the individual experiences of queer Christian bodies whose identity constructions have been informed by the isiZulu culture. With their understanding of God being shaped by their experiences of the context in which they were brought up in relation to their culture, to better understand this phenomenon. Placing their experiences at the centre of theological transformation, queer theology will help in engaging the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies as the starting point in understanding how we could begin to destabilize heteronormativity within the church in the South African context (Isherwood, 2003:142; van Niekerk, 2012:373).

However, "queer", defined by Patrick Cheng (2011), as an umbrella term for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, and transgender plus community (LGBTI+), presents a barrier in language within the South African landscape (Cheng, 2011:4). Misunderstood within this context, it is seen as a Western-imposed term, colonial within its origin. The term queer imposes a certain level of displacement within African culture and tradition for bodies that do not conform to dominant systems heteropatriarchy. Enforcing the idea that queerness is un-African and uncultured, leaving us with a challenge to re-define queer within our language. Which means creating meaning through historical knowledge of queer bodies within the African context. Building a new culture in which we begin to re-appropriate African terminology in a manner that positively defines queer bodies within this space. By using familiar derogatory terminology to find ways to engage 'queer' within the African context in a manner that is familiar, one that is recognized using the term 'isitabane'. A term that is rooted in African culture and enforced within African religious spaces, to not only start a process of visibility for Izitabane but one of belonging and inclusion (Bongmba, 2016:17; Davids et al, 2019:9; Milani, 2014:78, Mkasi, 2013:17; Sithole, 2018:41, Ward, 2013:412). Even though used as a derogatory word referring to sexual minorities and gender diverse bodies, 'isitabane' is better understood within the African landscape (Davids et al, 2019:5; Milani, 2014:78). 'Isitabane' presents an opportunity

to engage queer theology both from a cultural and religious perspective, exploring factors that contribute to the construction of the black queer Christian body (Davids et al, 2019:10; Milani, 2014:78). The term becomes a great starting point for theological engagement on sexual minorities and gender diverse bodies within this context. Providing an opportunity to bring queer and queer theology into the African context. A project reflected within an article discussing the appropriation of the term 'isitabane' for the liberation of all bodies.

'Stabanisation - A discussion paper about disrupting backlash by reclaiming LGBTI voices in the African church landscape' (Davids et al, 2019), is an article in which the authors propose a theology from the lived realities of queer bodies within the African context. Prophetic in its foundation, it helps us explore the possibility of liberation theology, creating an 'Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology' that is founded based on South African culture and religious discourse within this context (Davids et al, 2019:9). Presenting an opportunity in which we begin to destabilize socially constructed norms of gender and sexuality from a lens that is not only relatable but also draws on South African realities and history. Uprooting the core value of Ubuntu, seeking to understand the humanity of all bodies beyond their gender identity and sexuality. Challenging heteropatriarchy from the 'indecent' of queer bodies, providing tools through which we can re-imagine the church in South Africa and the structures that maintain it (Davids et al, 31-32; Sakupapa, 2018:8). This, however, becomes a challenge, one which queer bodies within their "disruptive" existence struggle to maintain within their own spaces of faith. Bringing up questions in which we try to explore how we could begin the process of unlearning systems that have been unconsciously instilled in us. Brought up from a heteropatriarchal perspective, how do we then work towards normalizing a new system seen as "un-normal" within the pervasive structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy that have been enforced through age-old traditions within African upbringing? How do we challenge queer bodies to begin to imagine a life outside of hetero-patriarchal validation? In what way can we begin to find belonging in difference, rather than familiarity?

This thesis provides an opportunity to contribute to the growing knowledge of work engaging queer theology and queer within the African Context. Finding ways in which we can begin to appropriate 'isitabane' as our own. Taking up space and taking on our queer identity within the African faith landscape, untainted by heteropatriarchy. Transforming ecclesiological ideas informed by heteropatriarchy within the South African faith landscape, creating spaces of inclusion from the margins of sexual indecency.

3.2.3. Indecent Theology

Marcella Althaus-Reid is a bisexual, Latin American born Contextual Theologian, who is groomed on the principles of Liberation Theology. Speaking about theology from the bodies of those that are systematically excluded, as the starting point of theological reflections. Using this lens to talk about that which we are ashamed of, addressing the desires within us that are reflected in others, openly discussing the "smell of her sex" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:4), a smell that triggers our urges. Althaus-Reid (2000) explores the realities of women and sexual minorities within faith spaces, examining the uncertainty of desire concerning God within the church. "Challenging sexual oppression behind traditional Christian concepts of decency" (Qspirit, 2020), introducing theology from the context of "people whose sexual freedom has been limited" (Qspirit, 2020).

Known for her radical theological engagements, she explores Indecent Theology to broaden the debate on sexuality and gender, using the lived realities of poor women within her context to address the reality of hetero-patriarchal constructions of sex, as well as its approved social and divine decency (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2). Looking into our desires to discover what it is that people want to keep hidden within ourselves through the oppression of those who openly share live their sexuality without fear. With a "feminist honesty", built at the "crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking", she engages a theology which questions heteronormativity and the structures of decency developed and maintained by patriarchy and other systems of oppression (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2). Analysing theological discourses on sexual decency and indecency within the broad faith landscape, trying to understand who determines what is decent and the basis for this. Engaging systematic realities informed by religion, that have placed the sexual experiences of the poor and marginalized at the centre of theological discourse, becoming an example of indecency within faith spaces (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2).

Indecent Theology becomes a tool of great importance within the analysis of data within this study. Because it is theology done from the margins and a "destructive body, problematizing layers of multiple oppression" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2). This becomes a lens through which we can begin to destabilize hetero-patriarchy within faith-based spaces from a place of indecency,

"destabilizing and challenging the orders of patriarchal decency" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:19) within society policing the "natural" order of sexuality and gender identity. Working towards understanding what the church fears about queer bodies by getting a deeper understanding of the indecency that they uncover in those who feel threatened by them. Placing the lived experiences of black queer Christian bodies at the centre of theological discourse within the South African context. Through this lens, I will engage the queer body as the starting point of "theological revolution" (Isherwood, 2003:142).

However, we cannot begin to destabilize heteropatriarchy from the indecency of queer bodies within the South African faith landscape, without questioning the very structures that have systemically institutionalize talk about God in spaces of worship. For black queer Christian bodies to disrupt heteronormativity and patriarchy from the natural "indecency" of their bodies and sexual difference within this landscape. We need to question the understanding of ecclesiology within this space, examining the church and the very purpose it serves. Scrutinising the church as the centre of negative theological discourse on sexuality and gender diversity, interrogating the very reason it has been established (Althaus-Reid, 2000:12; Althaus-Reid, 2003:107). Questioning the patriarchal foundations on which it is built on, addressing the oppressions that favour a heteronormative understanding of gender and sexuality within the church. Challenging the single story that continues to protect the egos of those who do not want to speak about the true desires of the human body. A single-story igniting a culture of hatred and exclusion for sexual minorities within the African landscape. There is a need to disrupt the systemic expectations the church continues to place on the sexual desires of those it serves. Engaging those who govern the structures that take away a sense of belonging from those who live outside of the norms of heteropatriarchy.

The church within the African context has been one of the most influential entities, with the power and authority to influence political conversations engaging issues of gender and sexuality. Using biblical scripture as a tool, it has been instrumental in discussions recognizing the inclusion and exclusion of homosexuality and gender diverse bodies within the African context. In its engagements, it has played a major role in the way in which we view homosexual and gender diverse minorities (Bongmba, 2016:18; Sakupapa, 2018:6; Sithole, 2018:20). Creating a culture of shame around the desires of the flesh, placing limits on what is decent and indecent sexuality to avoid speaking about the true self that cannot be separated from the body concerning the divine. Within the South African context, in KwaZulu-Natal, the church

has been active in supporting cultural norms policing queer bodies within this landscape. Actively policing “indecent” sexual desires, the church places queer bodies under constant abuse, violating the identities of those living outside the norms of heteronormativity and patriarchy, diminishing the potential of queer bodies to be fully included within faith spaces in the African context (Davids et al, 2019:31; Gunda, 2017:16; Mkasi, 2013:33; Msibi, 2015:55; Sithole, 2018:2; van der Walt, 2017:20). In its existence, it has failed to respond to the needs of the community in which it serves, as well as the needs of the vulnerable within its context. Founded based on heteronormativity and patriarchy, it has become a space in which individuals must pretend not to feel, to desire or to want. It has become a space of shame for those who live their truth and a space of hostility, enforcing binary ideas of gender and sexuality in which gender and sexual minorities have found themselves at the margins of religious discourse. Playing an influential role in the discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion of troubling sexual minorities (Barton, 2010:476; Davids et al, 2019:15; Nelson, 1992:3).

Indecent Theology as a lens then becomes a tool through which we engage the possibility of a transformative ecclesiology, one that destabilizes systems and structures informed by heteropatriarchy in churches within the South African faith landscape in KwaZulu-Natal. A context that is also influenced by the isiZulu culture which is dominant and known to be patriarchal (Msibi, 2015:55; Sithole, 2018:107). Indecent theology allows us to question the existence of the church, challenging its indecency, its innermost desires, and its fears to look inward, to discover what these systems try to hide and who it truly privileges in its multiple oppressions. Examining the "decency" of its structures from the indecency of queer bodies within the South African landscape.

"Appropriating the African notion of Ubuntu", "derived from Bantu languages dominant within this context" (Sakupapa, 2018:7), drawing from 'Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology', we can begin to imagine the church as a driver of ecumenical ecclesiology and social ethics, becoming a facilitator of honest social transformation and inclusion (Davids et al, 2019:9; Sakupapa, 2018:8). Through this, we begin to imagine a church founded based on honesty, humanity, kindness, and hospitality, serving the community beyond gender and sexuality, fighting for social justice and the rights of its members as an institution placed in the broader civil society (Sakupapa, 2018:8). Re-imagining the church as a transformative institution concerning itself with the lived realities of those at the margins and not with sexuality (Davids et al, 2019:29; Sakupapa, 2018:6).

Drawing from the indecency of black queer Christian bodies, this lens allows us to re-examine the purpose of the church within the South African faith landscape, as it "remains a public force listened to by many" (Palm, 2016:75). Questioning the ideo-theological ideas informing the structures developed and maintained in their daily practices, engaging black queer Christian bodies as the cord through which we establish a space of inclusion within religious spaces within the South African faith landscape. Examining the honesty of queer bodies as they accept their deepest desires concerning God and scripture, to delve deeper into the fears of the church to accept that which heteropatriarchy cannot limit or control. Using Indecent Theology as a tool, we begin to imagine black queer Christian individuals as the medium for systemic change, moving queer experiences from the margins of Christianity to the centre of theological discourses. "Coupling agency with resistance, negotiation, transformation and change", leading transformative action from their embodied realities "performing a particular queer identity, one which is inherently tied to a form of activism" (Robertson, 2020:43). Fighting against exclusion and marginalization within faith spaces located within the IsiZulu faith landscape, acting against structures and processes policing sexual minorities.

However, we need to recognize that "religion should not be understood as something which exists in the invisible realm of thought and belief, but it manifests in the behaviour and meaning-making of people's lives, even in seemingly secular contexts" (Robertson, 2020:45). Having said that, queer bodies from their embodiment cannot achieve this transformation of the church alone. "Multiple stakeholders need to find ways to take common responsibility...to make a difference to those who still live in the margins of power" (Palm, 2016:65). There is a need for stakeholders that will start to question the harmful impact of heteropatriarchy, destabilizing its structures and its need for people to become what is unattainable even to those accepted by its processes. Which means there needs to be an understanding that its "multiple abuses of power against those that are perceived to be dangerous, deviant, or weaker are not only endemic but often still socially normalised with...institutions failing to make effective inroads on prevention at a community level" (Palm, 2016:59). Systemic abusers placing queer bodies at the margins of Christianity "are not just state-related but need to be understood within the context of other powerful social systems" (Palm, 2016:59). Therefore, change within the church may start from the agency of queer bodies, but there is a need for shared responsibility in achieving this.

Indecent Theology then becomes the starting point through which queer bodies engage the conversations that we are afraid to have around gender and sexuality. Drawing this reality closer to ourselves to help us recognize how we can draw closer to God with the honesty of what we most desire (*if it is not harmful to another*). We need to address the language used within faith spaces to address non-conforming or different bodies within the church. Challenging biblical narratives and engaging those in positions of authority, working from the agency of queer bodies to challenge structural systems placing non-conforming sexualities and gender diverse individuals at the margins of Christianity. Indecent Theology places queer bodies in a position to educate and sensitize those who uphold invasive systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity within the church. Creating a shared responsibility in which there is a realization that “there is no full humanity without the other” (Palm, 2016:234). Like Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000), “liberating God from the closet of sex-negative Christian thought” and embracing “God’s role in the lives of LGBTQ people” (Qspirit, 2020). Therefore, liberating others from the limitations of a single narrative informing the exclusionary bias of the church as a social structure (Qspirit, 2020).

We need to engage the unpleasant lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within faith spaces to disrupt systems normalising a "factual" idea of sexuality and gender, using 'Stabanisation'. Creating a "platform to challenge exclusions...restoring dignity to those marginalised" (Davids et al, 2019:29, Milani, 2014:78; Palm, 2016:235). When working from the margins of Christian faith, there is a need to engage the honest voices of the oppressed sexual and gender minorities to uncover the "integrated, inter-structured dynamics of oppression" (Isherwood, 2003:143) within faith spaces. Giving queer bodies epistemological privilege, imagining ecclesiology "from the perspective of the margins, rather than the church reading out to the margins" (Davids et al, 2019:32; Nelson, 1992:21; Sakupapa, 2018:7; Townes, 2003:171). So where do we start? How do we then engage the queer body as a starting point of theological revolution? What realities do we need to capture to start the process of unlearning and relearning systems that oppress us to adapt to normalcy that does not fully exist as a potential "structure" of social engagement?

3.3. Conclusion

Queer bodies within the South African faith landscape bear the consequences of difference, with their mere presence becoming a conversation starter within theological engagements. Queer bodies have had to carry the weight of systematic exclusion. However, in their queerness, queer bodies carry the knowledge and the gift of God's radical love, a love that is untainted by systems informed by heteronormativity and patriarchy. They carry a love that is purely from a desire for another beyond genital binaries. A gift that presents an opportunity through which we could begin to re-imagine the church as a place of hospitality towards all bodies, founded on the principles of 'Ubuntu' and pure desire for the growth of all bodies in the presence of God.

Within this chapter, I explored three theoretical frameworks that I believe are instrumental in engaging the lived realities of nine black queer Christian bodies located within the South African faith landscape, in KwaZulu-Natal. Tapping into their queerness, examining the possibility through which we can begin to engage the realities of queer Christian bodies as the foundation of the theological revolution. Exploring Body Theology as the lens through which we engage black queer Christian bodies and their experiences as the starting point of transformative interventions within the church. Documenting their lived realities, the truth of their bodies become the springboard through which we begin to destabilize heteropatriarchy within the church within the South African faith landscape. Then engaging *Queer theology* as the tool guiding our understanding of the contextual realities informing the identities of black queer Christian bodies in the relation to God and society. Helping us understand their locatedness within this context. Further examining *Indecent Theology* as the lens through which we could begin to destabilize hetero-patriarchal systems within the African faith landscape from the margins of Christianity. Discussing that which we are afraid to talk about with regards to gender and sexuality. Engaging the lived experiences of black queer Christian bodies as the basis for transformative ecclesiology. Further drawing on 'Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology', to understand that this cannot be a task for queer bodies alone. Realizing that "one person's hand is not enough to stretch across the face of God" (Rakoczy, 2011:34), there is a need for shared responsibility in putting transformative measures in place.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

Queer bodies within the African faith landscape constantly try to find their way across "fixed" boundaries that have been put in place by systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity. With their bodies continuously finding themselves in the process of being and meaning making from the early stages of their lives, beginning from birth...they are born into "discursive practices that a society regards as non-negotiable" (Vorster, 1997:393). Which means their realities are predicted and therefore are expected to stay contained within certain boundaries created by heteropatriarchy. Queer bodies often find themselves in spaces that have predetermined their sexuality and gender identity, making it difficult to build an identity outside of the boxes defined by societal norms and unattainable standards of femininity and masculinity. Forcing queer bodies to find identities that are fixed within these norms. Which is uncomfortable and challenging for bodies that naturally destabilize these hetero-patriarchal ideas, that have been maintained by cultural and religious narratives that enforce the idea of "correct" gender performativity and sexuality.

Within the previous chapter, I investigated the possibility of destabilizing this pervasive systemic reality. Which is something I tried to accomplish by finding ways to examine the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the South African faith landscape. Achieving this by paying attention to three theoretical frameworks that I believe lay down the theoretical framework for exploring these complex realities. Firstly, engaging *Body Theology* as the frame through which we get the opportunity to exam the body as a site of struggle. Exploring the South African faith landscape from the perspective of bodies that are seen to be disruptive and have been pushed to the margins of Christianity. Viewing their experiences as the starting point of transformative theological interventions within the church. This then led me to an exploration of *Queer Theology*, which I believe is a tool that allows me to investigate the contextual realities informing the development of queer Christian identities within this context. Working towards understanding their positionality concerning God and others within faith spaces that have been dominated by pervasive hetero-patriarchal systems. Lastly, I examined the structural processes and practices of the church, which I found to be an enabler of queer exclusion. Using *Indecent Theology* as the lens through which I explored the possibility of

transformative ecclesiological processes, as well as practices that could be established from the agency of queer bodies. Further pursuing the use of 'Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology' as a destabilizing tool, that will assist in working from the margins to the center of Christian faith.

In this chapter, I will outline the research methodology used in the process of data collection, as well as the analysis method used for this study. I begin by discussing my research design, which I believe through its traditional methods, places the bodies of those participating within this study at the center of this project as an "epistemic source" (Vorster, 1997:389). Which provides us with insight from the bodies of those that have been oppressed. Allowing me to access a "more viable and fruitful – engagement – to understand religious practices as constituted by the body and its interaction with its realities" (Vorster, 1997:389). Using mixed methods, inspired by the idea of a *Queer Social Ethnographic Methodology* as a valuable steppingstone through which I explore the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies, as shared through their narratives to ensure that throughout this process "everything messy and chaotic about scientific inquiry" (Brim and Ghaziani, 2016:16) is considered and used in the process of data collection and analysis (Brim and Ghaziani, 2016:16). Firmly placing myself within this process by *describing my positionality as a researcher* which is fully immersed within this study concerning the participants and my own experiences within the queer Christian faith landscape within KwaZulu-Natal. This will be followed by an outline of the method of engagement which will allow the participants of this study to share their narratives. Using traditional methods that include a *focused group discussion*, several individual interviews, and a *research diary* as the main methods through which I capture these lived realities. Lastly, I describe my analytical method, defining and fully explaining the use of *Thematic Analysis* as a foundational method within a qualitative analysis, that will allow me to identify, analyse, organize, describe, and reflect on important themes found within the data collected within this project.

4.2. Research Design

To deeply engage this project, the research methodology used for this study is *qualitative research*. Which Creswell J. (2012) describes in his book titled, a '*Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*', as a study that emphasizes the "process of research flowing from philosophical assumptions, to worldviews, through a theoretical lens,

and procedures involved in studying social or human problems" (Creswell, 2012:36). I apply this approach to explore the lived experiences of black queer Christian bodies concerning the complex context that they find themselves situated in. Exploring the systemic realities informing their daily lived realities, which have also enabled them to continue to allow the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within their own spaces of worship. Recognizing through the ***embodiment and agency*** of queer bodies that "the body is not simply a site of inscription but also significantly, a site of performance, resisting and self-asserting" (Settler and Engh, 2015:132). Also acknowledging that "society is best analyzed in relation to the 'government of the body' which is affected through reproduction (patriarchy), restraint (incarceration), regulation (policing) and representation" (Settler and Engh, 2015:132). Which then makes examining the structural processes informing their experiences of God within the church concerning others pivotal to the process of this project.

Using the ***Phenomenological Research approach***, which according to Creswell J (2012), allows me to study the lived realities of participants, giving meaning to their experiences concerning this phenomenon (Creswell, 2012:53). Examining how queer bodies interpret their experiences, discussing in detail what they have in common, especially in the way in which they discuss their positionality within the ***South African Christian faith landscape***. This is in relation to their communities, the context in which they find themselves situated and in relation to a destabilized and appropriated image of God through which we find meaning and belonging (Creswell, 2012:54). Exploring their understanding of gender through their agency, engaging the depths of their embodiment, while narrating the realities through which they perform their gender, as well as their sexuality concerning others within the queer faith landscape.

This, however, cannot be done from the perspective of confined traditional methods alone, it requires a ***mixed methodology***. One that allows for greater engagement and consideration of the bodies at the center of research, as well as sharing from the perspective of the researcher within the process of study. Through the work of Alison Rooke as engaged by Brown and Nash (2010), as well as Megan Robertson (2020), I realized that it is vital to the method of data collection, that we recognize the importance of queer theory as a basis for the theoretical underpinnings of the methods used in the process of data collection (Robertson, 2020:58; Brown and Nash, 2010:29). Recording queer experiences through personally reflected narratives, paying attention to methods linking the queer body in its agency, to the structural and systemic realities informing their embodied experiences within institutions claiming to be

inclusive of all bodies within the church (Brown and Nash, 2010:29; Robertson, 2020:58). Methods used within the process of this study allows for this investigation, guiding the approach through which I engage and interpret these experiences through Queer theorizing when analyzing data collected. Firstly, engaging the possible use of a method which they describe as a '*Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology*', as a steppingstone in queering data collected within the field of queer data collection. Looking at different ways in which this method could add value and guide the queering of traditional methods. Erasing the boundaries of traditional data collection, destabilizing structured research processes by blurring the lines of time and space, as well as the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Brown and Nash, 2010:25; Robertson, 2020:60).

4.3. Queer Social Ethnographic Methodology – A Steppingstone

Alison Rooke describes the *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology*, as one that takes Queer Theory seriously, while also queering the traditional approach of ethnographic research (Brown and Nash, 2010:25). Helping us achieve this by exploring and destabilizing the “normative logics of ethnographic research and writing...interrogating the fictions of ethnographic time and space and the intersubjective nature of the field” (Brown and Nash, 2010:29). Which allows us to explore and to understand the full embodied experience of queer bodies within queer faith spaces.

Through this methodology, Alison Rooke and Megan Robertson, allow us to engage this methodology to assist in understanding and describing the cultural norms and systemic realities within a religion that inform participants' understanding of gender and sexuality. Making sense of the way that they try to position themselves outside of the somewhat fixed boundaries of heteropatriarchy. Blurring the lines of masculinity and femininity within queer faith spaces when relating to others within this context. While exploring the use of queer theory, as well as the idea of a *Social Ethnographic Research Methodology* as a steppingstone in examining this process of meaning-making. It is important to understand that *the body* is not just a passive receiver of the cultural structures that inform our contextual experiences. Meaning that "not only does the body provide us with insight into cultures, but it also functions as a powerful instrument in the maintenance, change and construction of social reality" (Vorster, 1997:391). Which is a realization that is also true of queer bodies located within the African faith landscape...who actively engage with the context and the community around them. As we find

our way through the complex systems around us, we actively engage with the "structure and practice – as well as the – historical, economic, political and cultural factors" (Brown and Nash, 2010:27) that inform our realities. With this realization, I am also fully aware *of my positionality within this study*. Understanding that I am an active body within this process, I recognize that I am also a body that "embodies its history – not simply being static within this engagement but – rather as a living process" (Vorster, 1997:394), within my right as a researcher. Which is something that I also recognize within the individuals participating within this research as well (Brown and Nash, 2010:27).

"As COVID-19 continues spreading in the world" (Huang et al, 2020), the environment has continued to see great disruptions, which has also contributed to a disruption in the field of study. Which means that possibilities for physically interactive and in-depth research engagements have also been interrupted, forcing research projects with field implemented methodologies to scale back a bit (Huang et al, 2020). This also meant that this project itself had to move from field implementation to traditional phenomenology as the main method of data collection. Sadly, with the hopes to curb the rate of infection and to "contain the virus, face-to-face" (Huang et al, 2020), engagements had to come to a halt as well. Indicating that all data collection methods to be implemented had to meet COVID-19 regulations, withdrawing from all physical interactions in terms of being in the same space for conversation. This queers the traditional understanding of time and space within the traditional methodology, as it forces researchers to record stories and personal histories through online platforms.

However, even though there have been disruptions in the field of research, this new norm also presents an opportunity that allows me to engage this study using mixed methodologies. Granting me the chance to use mixed methods, such as a focused group discussion, individual interviews, as well as a research diary, which is an aspect of *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology* that I have chosen to retain within this study. This aspect of research retained from queer methodologies helps in engaging the realities of those participating in the research project, while also recognizing my own body within this process. Which, however, this does not impose my own story onto their narratives. This method creates a platform for me, as a researcher and an activist, to give others a voice without drowning out my account of reality. Queering the lines of researcher and researched, this method of engagement and recording of stories helps create a conversation, "an encounter between people about the past – as well as present in which – each life, each story – is considered and is seen as – unique" (Denis, 2007:4),

in its own right. Through this process, I allow the reader to understand that in the process of liberating those within the project itself, you cannot exclude the personal experiences of the researcher. There is a need to disrupt the normalized silencing of the person telling the stories of others, to affirm the agency of the researcher as well in the process of affirming the agency of the research participants within these important conversations (Denis, 2007:4).

4.4. A Queer Activist Perspective – Positionality

Working not only as a Queer activist but also as a queer individual under the Gay and Lesbian Network, which is located within Pietermaritzburg, Scottsville. I am presented with the opportunity to engage this work as a community surveyor of queer exclusion and prejudice, as well as a strategic analyst of queer intervention methods within the South African faith landscape. Positioned within this project, as a black queer Christian woman presenting a few intersectional struggles.

Implementing the idea of a *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology*, I position myself within this study in various ways. Firstly, I enter this research project as a black body situated within a context of great racial historical conflict. In which my ethnic classification has previously placed bodies like my own in a position of vulnerability and economic oppression, with racial conflicts still somewhat placing me at a disadvantage in some areas of my existence (Settler and Engh, 2015:136). With "economies...built and sustained through the policing and containment of black people's bodily engagement within society" (Settler and Engh, 2015:136).

Secondly, I am positioned as a woman, in an environment where there is a "continuation of the shaming of women's bodies – as well as – their sexual activity...with...the association of their leaking bodies – compared – with dirt and mess, and the issuing of injunctions to silence them" (Murray, 2017:27). Which is also coupled with expectations where I am required to fulfil the role of pleasing the male body. Eventually expected to reproduce and be domesticated, with patriarchal understandings of a woman's role placing me at the margins because I am active in the field of work as a woman who is culturally expected to be "restricted to the home" (Settler and Engh, 2015:136). Which also finds relevance in the analysis of data collected within this study as well, because it displaces me within my cultural context in the process of interviewing cultural isiZulu bodies. Bodies who might also hold these perceptions concerning their gender performativity and internalized cultural norms informing their gendered perceptions.

Lastly, I am positioned as a queer individual, where my identity, as well as my sexual orientation, is defined as UnAfrican. Not only policed by men as a woman but also policed by other women, as well as queer masculinities. Which helps us understand the complexity and pervasiveness of patriarchy within itself. With those that are oppressed, finding themselves in positions where they help sustain and maintain the cultural systems that impose heteronormative understandings of individuals' sexual orientation, due to our biological make-up (Reygan, 2014:708). My identity is viewed as an "'infectious threat' or the polluting other – which is central – to the way structures – within – society is ordered and maintained, with an understanding that disruptive bodies have – to be disciplined in the name of decency, cleanliness and health" (Settler and Engh, 2015:141).

Also presenting a deeply informed isiZulu cultural identity informed by an intense Christian background as an activist. I have faced much criticism in terms of my assumed identity and my beliefs while working in the queer landscape for the past five years. It is with this reason, that I engage this study, not as a passive body within the process, but also as a body understanding the margins of social exclusion informed by various factors. Positioned in the field as a human rights activist and an emerging queer scholar formerly capacitated in the field of gender and sexuality. With experience in work engaging homosexuality and theological interpretations regarding queer realities. I position myself within this space as an epistemic source with the black queer bodies engaged within this study, giving them epistemological privilege in the process of engagement. However, not being ignorant of my own experiences and observations.

Alert to my own biases as a queer activist, I am aware that my positionality within the field presents both an opportunity for deeper engagement with queer participants within this study, as well as a limitation. However, being active in the field of queer visibility and inclusion, I have been through processes allowing me to engage with and interpret my own experiences in which trauma has been encountered within my past. With training allowing me to recognize signs of trauma, while understanding trauma as an embodied reality, enabling me to monitor changes in emotion, being aware of the shift in the intensity and atmosphere of the conversation allowing me to point out areas of deep pain inflicted because of systemic realities informing the experiences of queer individuals within the South African faith landscape. Being an “active

listener” in the process allowing for an atmosphere of open sharing, creating a safe space in which participants feel affirmed in the process of conversation (Denis, 2007:7).

Appreciating that working within this field also allows for a greater understanding of terminology when exploring the identities of various individuals, helping me to "be aware of language/words used when discussing the self or the church" (Robertson, 2020:60). While also being alert to the vulnerability of the participants within this process and the sensitivity to be acknowledged in communicating with the participants. Being fully aware of my own experiences within the process of study.

Using a *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology* as a steppingstone in queering this process, allows me to be aware of my process of becoming concerning the embodied experiences of others. Exploring their realities as *an insider* from a point of my historical engagements with the queer church, as a queer individual who has appropriated God in a manner that is accepting of my being, as well as an outsider, a researcher and an activist looking into the realities informing their experiences within the church. Becoming subjective to the "process of knowledge production" (Robertson, 2020:61), considering the fluidity of my own identity as a queer black Christian woman, as well as the "fluidity of the research participants" (Robertson, 2020:61).

4.5. Sampling

Participants identified within this study have been selected with the understanding that their embodiment and positionality within the queer faith landscape, as black queer Christian bodies, presents a possibility through which I could respond to the main research question. Through conversations with them, I try to establish possible ways, if any, through which black queer Christian bodies, within their agency, might destabilize hetero-patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality within the African faith landscape. With the criteria met in the selection, being that all participants self-identify as queer Christian individuals without this being imposed on to them. Have been members of the queer church within the KwaZulu-Natal context for the past 2 years; self-identify as a South African of isiZulu origin; and are within the ages of 18 to 60.

Within my work and in my personal experience, I have been able to attend queer churches several times and within this time I have been able to build relationships with some active members of the church. Through a snowballing method, I was able to reach out to three of these individuals and ask for assistance with identifying the "right" participants for this study, who then referred me to five other participants. With identified networks, I was put in contact with a pastor within the queer church, those that have been placed as elders, representing both genders in this regard, as well as members that have been part of the church for the past three years, with some members being in the church much longer than this. Presenting an interesting sample, in terms of marital status, level of education and economic standing.

All individuals agreed to participate, with some putting a limitation in terms of the use of one platform used for engagement. The participants represented a variation in terms of their gender and sexualities, presenting the idea of masculinity and femininity in complex and interesting ways, making the process of study a great process of reflection in terms of what is seen as the norm. The participants identified within this study range between the ages of 18 to 49, self-identify as queer and are of isiZulu upbringing. Even though they are not a complete representation of the overall number of black Queer Christian bodies within the South African landscape, or within the queer faith landscape in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants within this study help us in terms of gaining some insight into the realities of black queer Christian bodies within this context. Helping us get an understanding of some of the experiences of black queer Christian bodies within the church in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Raising awareness or sharing the practices of affirmation, as well as possible challenges faced by black queer Christian bodies within the queer faith landscape.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information shared within the interviews carried out, the names of the churches which they attend will not be shared, however, will be kept safe within my field records to help with the verification of these queer faith spaces. The anonymity of the participants will be maintained throughout the data sharing process, as well as the analysis of data using pseudo names unless permitted to avoid victimization.

4.6. Data Collection Methods

Taking the current COVID-19 context into consideration, I ensured that the process of data collection used, moved towards innovative methods to achieve the objectives of this study. The

coronavirus disease of 2019 has led us to an "unprecedented disruption of society" (Wigginton et al, 2020:1190), which has also affected the academic landscape. Putting all 'on-site' research to a stop, presenting a limitation in terms of physical research within the field. Leading us towards data collection online (Wigginton et al, 2020:1190).

However, even though this has presented some challenges, it has been met with a lot of expectation within the field of queer methodology. Queering the boundaries of traditional research methodology within the process of data collection, the queer methodology allows me to disrupt the predicted methods of data collection. Which means that I am presented with the opportunity to destabilize the idea of having the researcher be physically present within a research space. Using online platforms to conduct a focused groups discussion, as well as individual interviews, which are also seen as "intellectual efforts, that can produce a thick description" (Robertson, 2020:58) of queer experiences through this methodology.

The questions that I developed for these interview processes aim to explore the possibility of responding to two sub research questions within the project. Which were developed to explore the positionality of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Further, investigating the pervasiveness of hetero-patriarchy within South African faith spaces, examining the lived experiences of the black queer Christian body, with a focus on the ideo-theological ideas informing this pervasiveness within the queer faith landscape.

Questions that were noted as follows.

a) Sub-question one:

4. What are the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape?

This question allows me to examine the literature surveying the realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape, presenting me with the opportunity to engage the different lived realities. Giving me the chance to hear the stories embedded within the realities of those that are pushed to the margins of Christianity, because of their gender performativity and sexual orientation within the South African context. Creating a space through which they can share their narratives, acknowledging their agency in process of producing knowledge through their stories, in which their narrated realities become the main

source of data collection. Giving an in-depth perspective of life from the margins that are occupied by black queer bodies...bodies that are “always simultaneously fixed and flexible...fixed in its socio-spatial context – and yet – flexible in that they are bodies that can be modified” (Settler and Engh, 2015:128).

b) Sub-question two:

5. How do ideo-theological ideas of queer church perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa?

This question allows me to explore how black queer Christian bodies position themselves as bodies placed in spaces of marginal worship, with the hope to find affirmation in the body of Christ concerning others found at the margins of Christianity. Participants identified within this study become the main source through which I aim to possibly understand the factors informing this phenomenon, in which the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy finds space within queer spaces of worship. I do this by structuring questions in a manner that allows me to explore this phenomenon, "examining the symbolic significance of the body as a metaphor of social relationships that we can trace the meaning embedded within cultural representations of particular bodies" (Settler and Engh, 2015:131). Examining how they represent themselves within religious spaces, exploring their understandings of God and worship from the agency of their bodies. With an understanding that "the body can no longer be imagined as a fixed essence...we have become responsible for the designs of our bodies" (Settler and Engh, 2015:131), and therefore actively participate in the forming of our own identities and the sustainability of the environment in which we constantly engage.

To respond to these sub-questions, I developed two sets of questions, in which I examine the realities of the participants collectively in a focused group discussion and individually using individual interview questions. Questions that are listed as follows.

c) Focused Group Discussion Questions.

- 1) Please share a bit about yourself, please mention your gender pronoun.
- 2) What have been your experiences of the church growing up as a queer individual?

- 3) What terms have been used to refer to you within the church?
- 4) How have these experiences differed within queer churches?
- 5) What are the differences between how you understand gender and sexuality and how the church understands it?
- 6) As a believer, how do you imagine God's gender and sexuality in your understanding?
- 7) What knowledge or experience do you have about the exclusion and oppression of those who identify as LGBTI+ within the church? Please give an example from your own life or a friend.
- 8) How do you feel the church could respond in terms of creating safe spaces, for those who are?
 - a. Heterosexual?
 - b. LGBTI+?

d) Individual Interview Questions.

- 1) Tell me a bit about yourself. Please include your background, education, family, religion, relationship status and sexuality.
- 2) What have been your experiences as a queer person growing up in your community concerning gender roles and sexuality?
- 3) What have been your experiences within the church?
- 4) What experiences have you had that made you feel like you belong within the church?
- 5) What experiences have you had of participating in the church?
- 6) Please give an experience where you felt like your sexual and gender identity was affirmed within the church. Why?
- 7) How do you find validation (or belonging) concerning others within the queer church?
- 8) How do you reconcile your faith in Christ with your sexuality?
- 9) Many people use the bible to discriminate against queer individuals.
- 10) How do you relate to biblical scripture?
- 11) How do you relate to God?
- 12) How does your relationship or faith in God inform your sexuality or help you live out your life as an LGBTI+ person?

To respond to these questions and to collect data, I used a mixed methodology. Exploring the lived realities of queer bodies within the queer faith landscape using a focused group discussion, and individual interviews, as well as a personal research diary in which I actively engage my embodiment in the process of research.

4.6.1. Focused Group Discussion – A Collective Queer Engagement

In the process of conducting this research project, I use *Queer Theory* as the basis for capturing the narratives of black Christian queer individuals, thinking "about queerness less in terms of identity and more in terms of socially constructed systems of meaning and practice that implicate everyone" (Schneider, 2000:210). Giving the participants of this study epistemological privilege by questioning what has always been considered "normal in order to expose the voices of those who have been silenced or disempowered" (Sithole, 2019:36). Inviting all participants to "be moved and touched by the other" (Davids et al, 2019:29), through collective engagement, using a focused group discussion as the first method for collecting data, capturing the collective process of meaning-making.

I use a focused group discussion with the identified participants, engaging questions reflecting on the contextual realities informing the identities of each queer body within the South African landscape. Providing a space for queer bodies to share their narratives, intensely engaging their lived realities in a space of shared meaning-making and support. Making it "possible to understand – social change from the body as an agent of change, or cultural contradictions from the body as a source of conflict" (Vorster, 1997:392), in the engagements of their stories. Placing Queer Theory within this context to engage the traditional gender and sexual norms that displace queer identities, exploring the realities of marginal sexualities and gender roles (Mkasi, 2013:13). This then assists in gathering relevant information in responding to the main research question. Capturing participants' understanding of sexuality, gender, and gender roles, revealing participants' positionality concerning others in terms of gender and sexuality within faith-based spaces. Which then guides me in exploring participants' experiences of God, exploring the lived contextual realities that inform their understanding of God concerning others within the church, which includes an understanding of scripture from marginalized bodies, tying "the bible into the context of participants, drawing on their local knowledge and their analysis of and their interpretation of resources", acknowledging "their agency and dignity

as knowledge partners in this process (West, 2006:142). This allows for a space of honesty and a true reflection of the lived experiences of queer bodies within queer faith spaces, working towards identifying the commonalities shared in these experiences of the church concerning God and others, being fully aware of my positionality.

Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, a limitation of this study is that of physically being able to be present in a confined space with participants for engagement, however, this presents an opportunity in that it presents a level of comfortability for participants', using an online platform from a familiar space, using Zoom as the platform through which I communicate with participants. In the process of engagement, participants are contacted twenty minutes before the interview to provide space for the participants to familiarize themselves with the questions to be asked, allowing them to prepare themselves emotionally for the content to be discussed. Being aware that I cannot acquire signed written consent, I make means to ensure that recorded consent is sent before the discussion. Acknowledging that the process requires great sensitivity, as it places participants in a place of vulnerability, I am alert to the risk of uprooting past trauma in visiting the experiences of exclusion and victimization within the church, which also presents a limitation in that the process does not allow for immediate counselling within a confined space, however, this also provides a space of deep engagement through the stories of participants, which are "a unique tool for gaining insight and making sense of reality" (Van der Walt, 2017:7) within this discussion, finding healing through collective sharing.

4.6.2. Individual Interviews – A Fixed Frame of My Identity

Central to the process of this study is the appreciation of the contextual realities informing queer experiences from an individual perspective, noting that although we are queer bodies affected by similar structural processes informed by heteropatriarchy, we are bodies situated differently in terms of class, race, sexual orientation, and gender performativity, therefore making our experiences different, which is an important aspect noted within Feminist Theory (Clifford, 2002:25). "The body lies at the center of cultures and its study has become of special concern to the scholar of religion and since it functions so powerfully in the relationship of religious systems" (Vorster, 1997:389), it becomes a factor of great importance in terms of individual reflection of the social systems informing its identity. Helping us understand that individuals come from "different religious and cultural backgrounds, they have different issues and envision different resolutions to their issues" (Clifford, 2002:25), and this is a reality

highlighting the importance of personal reflection, which I have chosen to engage through individual interviews.

Using elements of Alison Rooke's approach of a *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology*, I queer research techniques and processes determining traditional ideas of time and space, considering the Covid-19 pandemic impacting the continuation of church gatherings. Taking into consideration that there is a limitation in which I cannot physically accompany queer individuals to their spaces of worship, nor build a relationship over a period, I moved towards innovative methods to help me explore the lived reality of each participant. Using WhatsApp as a platform for conversation, I explore their positionality within the church.

Taking the opportunity to carry out one-on-one interviews with each participant, I confirmed the times for engagement, sending through questions to be engaged twenty minutes before the interview, allowing participants to familiarize themselves with the questions to be discussed. Recognizing that "the body functions as a strategy of power because of the interaction between the body and discourse" (Vorster, 1997:393). Therefore, through the performativity of the body and how we present ourselves, we shape our positionality within faith spaces, determining the power dynamics concerning our embodiment. So, to understand the culture and the symbols affirming their church traditions and their positionality within the church, a picture representation is requested from everyone, in which I request that participants dress up in a way that best represents their usual church dress code, before the interview. The picture presented frames the body from the neck down to maintain anonymity. Allowing me to engage their positionality within the church and allowing them, within their agency, to describe their gender performativity according to their perception of gender and sexuality. Making meaning of how they position themselves concerning others within their church spaces. With an understanding that "culture inscribes itself not only on the bodies but also into our bodies, to such an extent that it becomes to us a matter of nature, of what is objective" (Vorster, 1997:395). So, with an analysis of these pictures, I get the opportunity to fully engage them on their church experiences, expectations, and their feelings of affirmation when talking and worshipping God within queer spaces of faith from a place of personal social reflection.

I am aware that written consent cannot be acquired physically, So I ensure that the consent form is distributed before the interview and verbal consent is recorded and is forwarded by the participants to maintain authenticity and validity of the research process. However, to prevent

any form of victimization due to the individuals' participation within this study, I will not include the pictures within the final draft of this thesis, which also means I will not include any information that might hint at the identity of the participant unless otherwise permitted to do so by some participants.

4.6.3. Research Diary – A Record of Personal Experience

An important theme in feminist scholarship is one where we are aware of our own personal lived reality concerning others, understanding that "human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle" (Rakoczy, 2011:34) when engaging the context in which we are situated.

Reflecting on queer methodology as a steppingstone in exploring these conversations, I get the opportunity to engage my personal experiences within the process of conversation with participants. Noting my fluidity as a researcher positioned within this field of study as a queer human rights activist, destabilizing the norms of patriarchy and heteronormativity within my work and my being, with that of the participants (Robertson, 2020:65). I am aware of my own biases and feelings in my engagement with the participants, but I am also honest about my thoughts and feelings. Using a personal research diary to explain my process, I note my feelings within this process. Understanding that I cannot be open to the fluidity of queer identities, nor the disruption of their embodiment, without being aware of my fluidity in relation to their lived realities. Being aware that "the body does not exist independently, but in interaction with other bodies" (Vorster, 1997:397), and therefore cannot be alienated within the process of empirical research (Rakoczy, 2011:35; Robertson, 2020:66).

To keep clear records during this study, a recorder and notebook are used to record participants' responses and a research diary is used as the main tool for recording observations in communicating with participants, recording my own lived experiences in the process of engagement, capturing my own emotions in conducting the study.

4.7. Analytical Approach

The analytical method to be used for this study, is the Thematic Analysis method, which is described as a foundational method within qualitative analysis (Nowell et al, 2017:2).

"Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions...further defined as...a method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Nowell et al, 2017:2). With my field of study giving epistemological privilege to bodies within the field of research, from a place of deep reflection and personal experience, Thematic Analysis allows me to produce trustworthy and insightful findings that have "credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to parallel the conventional qualitative assessment criteria of validation and reliability" (Nowell et al, 2017:2-3).

Within its implementation Thematic Analysis allows me to reach a level of trustworthiness through six phases through which we can deeply engage data, which include 1) *Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data*, which means that the "researcher must immerse themselves with the data to familiarize themselves with the depth and breathe of the content" (Nowell et al, 2017:5). 2) *Generating initial codes*, a phase through which the researcher produces codes from the data, allowing the researcher to "simplify and focus on specific characteristics of data" (Nowell et al, 2017:5). 3) *Searching for themes*, which then allows you to sort out and collate all potentially coded data into themes, which are "identified by bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Nowell et al, 2017:8). 4) *Reviewing Themes*, a phase through which the researcher reviews all relevant coded data extracts for each theme and reviews whether this form a coherent pattern, meaning they "accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Nowell et al, 2017:9). 5) *Defining and Naming Themes*, within this phase, the researcher determines "what aspect of data each theme captures" (Nowell et al, 2017:10), and identifies what is of interest, as well as why this is relevant for the analysis of data collected, within this phase the researcher may "consider how each theme fits into the overall story about the entire data set with the research questions" (Nowell et al, 2017:10). Then finally, we reflect on data through sixth and last phase which is, *Producing the Report*, which then shares the final analysis and writes up of the data collected, ensuring that it is "concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and – gives an – interesting account of data within and across themes" (Nowell et al, 2017:11).

4.7.1. Validity, Reliability and Rigour

Referring to Creswell's (2012), in his book '*Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*', validity is understood as the attempt to access accurate information

and ensuring that your findings are an accurate reflection of the data found in the field as described by the participants and observed by the researcher (Creswell, 2012:206). With the chosen analytical approach, the validity of the data collected reflects a true understanding of the phenomenon by the participants, sharing their lived experiences and ensuring that my position as a researcher is clearly stated concerning my experiences within this space as well as my experience of the phenomenon researched. Spending the maximum amount of time possible through Zoom as a platform for engagement to ensure that I understand the culture and traditions of the environment in which the phenomenon occurs, which helps in ensuring that the data analyzed is written from an understood position of the participants.

According to Creswell (2012), reliability can be observed in the way data is collected and kept and mentioned the importance of having tools such as good, detailed field notes, employing good quality tape for accurate decoding of information and accurate transcription and evidence to refer to (Creswell, 2012:209). In facilitating these discussions and observing participants, I ensure that the information shared is stored in a manner that allows for validation upon request. Providing detailed analysis and accurate interpretation of data as stated by the participants of the phenomenon in which they share. With the findings written in such a way that it tells the stories narrated by individual queer bodies, engaging the lived experiences of each participant within the queer churches.

A consent form is used to ensure that visible evidence reflecting consent is shown, revealing the agreement between the participant and the researcher. Within this consent form ensuring that there is clarity in terms of participation within the study, which is *voluntary and*. The form also states clearly that all information will remain confidential and should the participant want to stay anonymous; this will be respected fully.

4.8. Ethical Considerations

Working as an LGBTI+ Activist under the Gay and Lesbian Network since January 2015, I believe that I am well capacitated to engage with queer individuals. With training in monitoring and recording of hate crime cases from survivors of violence, I have been through a process of personal development allowing me to deal with my personal experiences in which trauma had been encountered within my past. I have been trained to recognize signs of trauma, enabling me to monitor changes in conversation and nonverbal expressions when engaging with

participants, which allows me to recognize when a participant needs to be removed from the conversation and be referred to the designated trauma counsellor.

With the support of Gay and Lesbian Network and Lifeline Pietermaritzburg, I ensured that measures are taken to ensure that participants have counselling available to them during the course of this process. These measures are put in place for the emotional wellbeing of the participants, should any traumatic experiences be brought up. The mental and emotional health of the participants is cared for and this will help with the start of the process of healing.

4.9. Conclusion

Within this chapter, I described the mixed methods used in the collection of data in the process of this study. Exploring the idea of a *Queer Sociological Ethnographic Methodology* as a steppingstone through which I examine the reality of marginalised bodies, representing the fluidity of sexuality and gender performativity using mixed data collection methods that make use of a personal research diary. Highlighting the importance of queering traditional methods when engaging queer narratives, while examining the systemic realities informing the embodied experiences of queer bodies within their own spaces of worship. Which then led to a description of my positionality not only as a queer activist, but also a black queer woman embodying a few intersectional struggles, situated within a human rights organisation as a surveyor of queer exclusion and prejudice. Noting my own biases as both a limitation and an opportunity for deeper engagement within the study, considering the fluidity of my own identity as a queer black Christian woman concerning the participants of this study.

This was then followed by a description of my sampling method, as well as data collection processes. Exploring the importance of shared experience using a *Focused Group Discussion – A Collective Queer Engagement*, further guiding us into the engagement of *Individual Interviews*, knowing that central to the process of interpreting queer experiences, is the understanding that we are bodies situated differently in terms of class, race, sexual orientation, and gender performativity, therefore making our experiences different.

Lastly, I described the use of a *Research Diary* as a vital tool in the process of reflection and analysis. Recognizing that in the process of engagement, I cannot silence my voice in the process of liberating the narratives of other marginalized bodies. Engaging my personal

experiences, observations, and emotions concerning others, understanding that human experience is the starting point of contextual and human engagement.

Chapter 5

Presentation of Data Collected

5.1. Introduction

Within the field of social sciences, there has been great value placed on individual experience. Whether this is shared within the collective or on a one-on-one basis. There is great value in understanding social phenomena through the perspectives of those that are either liberated, oppressed, or guided by a social phenomenon within the field of study. This gives us insight into the lived realities of individuals within the area of research for deepened understanding and meaning. “The body has come to occupy a central position within both social theory and contemporary media culture, particularly through its representational power and symbolism” (Settler and Engh, 2015:131). Considering this, my previous chapter placed a lot of emphasis on personal experience within its methodology. Understanding that “experience includes that of the divine, oneself, the community and the world” (Rakoczy, 2011:34), we recognize that we cannot begin to fully reflect on the realities of black queer Christian bodies within the South African faith landscape without engaging their narratives and accurately giving an account of their personal stories.

This chapter aims to share the narratives of black queer Christians that shared their reflections from an embodied positionality, allowing me to explore and examine their lived realities within the South African faith landscape. It is important to note that even though these narratives examine the realities of a sample of a greater community, they may not be representative of all queer experiences, but they do give us an understanding of a shared reality and help us make meaning of the experiences of those who find themselves in conflicting spaces of worship. To help us understand the data presented within this chapter, I will begin by giving a summary of my methodology as outlined in chapter four. Giving me the chance to share the challenges and opportunities that were presented within the process of data collection. This will then lead to a presentation of data collected through different traditional methods, mainly a focused group discussion, as well as individual interviews, allowing participants to share a picture reflecting their positionality within the queer faith landscape. Highlighting my journey within this process as noted within my research diary, using a Queer Social Ethnography as a steppingstone within this personal journey of meaning-making.

Using Thematic Analysis as my main tool of analysis, I will start by discussing data collected within a focused group discussion, in which I was able to identify *four main themes*. The first being that of being “*Alienated in Coming Out*” within heteronormative faith spaces, focusing on the consequences of being visibly queer within the heteronormative faith landscape through the narratives shared by the participants, highlighting the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within this space. Leading me to a presentation of the second theme identified in which queer bodies within the queer faith landscape feel “*Liberated and Allowed to Be*” within queer spaces. Highlighting noted freedom within the stories of the participants as they move from heteronormative faith spaces to queer churches, examining the different dynamics within these faith spaces that allow for their exclusion in the other and acceptance in the other. The third theme then explores an interesting contradiction in queer experiences within queer faith spaces within the KwaZulu-Natal queer faith landscape, in which we find that queer individuals feel “*Unified Yet Segregated*”. Investigating the collective understanding of gender and sexuality within queer faith spaces, versus individual expectations, this theme highlights the unity of queer individuals within the queer church through their narratives, as well as the practices that break that bond. With the last theme identified within the focused group discussion, I explore the “*The Church as a Place of Healing*”, presenting a collective reflection of what the ideal space of worship entails for black queer Christian bodies reflected within this research.

I will then go on to discuss the data collected within the individual interviews that were carried out within the second part of the process, highlighting four main themes that were identified using Thematic Analysis. The first theme identified within the process of data collection was that of *A Body Excluded*, which I found was consistent within the narratives of the participants, with the body becoming alienated and disruptive within the family, the church, and the community. The second theme identified is that of *Participation Denied*, in which the narratives of queer bodies highlight an important aspect of rejection and exclusion, where disruptive bodies become invisible. The third theme identified then presents the idea of *Socially Transitioning*, where the narratives of black queer bodies show a gap within the church and society's ability to not only create a safe and an accepting environment for queer bodies but to also transition with queer individuals in the process of becoming. Finally, I explore the fourth theme titled *Made in God's Image*, exploring how each of the participants found healing by redefining God and scripture for themselves, finding validation in God's presence by further defining their relationship to God and others.

5.2. Methodology

Considering the importance of personal experience, the methodology used for this study is that of *Qualitative Research*. Which places value on a deepened understanding of a social phenomenon. Placing value on the “understanding of philosophical and often sociological thought” (Mills and Birks, 2014:9), allowing for meaning making through individual narratives and shared stories. Using the idea of a *Queer Social Ethnographic Methodology* as a steppingstone, this study combines traditional data collection methods with a queered method of engagement. Placing a lot of its value on the lived experiences of black queer Christian individuals as the main source of knowledge. Giving the participants of this study epistemic privileges through shared meaning-making within a ‘*Focused Group Discussion – A Collective Engagement*’. As well as ‘*Individual Interviews*’, which highlight the importance of individual positionality within the queer faith landscape using individual pictures, as well as personal experience within a “unified” community. Queering traditional methods by allowing the researcher to share their personal experiences and observations with the use of a *Research Diary* in the process of data collection, giving the researcher a voice with that of participants.

The project aimed to interview nine (9) black queer Christian individuals who have been members of the queer church for at least two (2) years. Each participant had to self-identify as queer and Christian without this being imposed on them. All participants had to be of Zulu origin, born within KwaZulu-Natal, to allow for an observation of the effects of religio-cultural dynamics on the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the KwaZulu-Natal faith landscape. Finally, the individuals interviewed had to be between the ages of 18 and 60, to allow for full consent.

The data collection process included three (3) main methods of collection. First, the participants had to take part in a focused group discussion using Zoom as a platform for safety measures, due to the current pandemic, which allowed for a collective reflection of experiences within the church. Allowing me to explore the similarities, as well as the differences within their collective narratives. This also allowed me to examine the power dynamics that are present in terms of gender difference and sexual orientation within a collective discussion. The second part of the process required everyone to participate in an individual interview, which allowed participants to reflect further on their experiences of the church, exploring the shift from the hetero-patriarchal faith space to queer spaces away from a platform that might limit their

responses due to the power dynamics. Lastly, everyone was requested to share a picture of themselves, giving a reflection of their best church outfit. “Gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms (themselves historically and socially constructed, and consequently variable) which define ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (Cameron, 1998:329). These acts of gender performativity also include the way that we talk, the way we engage with others in our body language and the way we dress. So, presentation is very important in the way that we perform our gender even within the queer faith landscape. It reaffirms us and gives others an idea of our positionality within this space. This is a vital part of meaning-making within society.

5.2.1. Challenges in Data Collection

During the process of collecting data, I came across several challenges in terms of participation. Even though participants had been secured before the data collection process, the number of individuals present within the focused group discussion had dropped to three (3) and the number of individuals who participated in the individual interviews dropped to five (5). This means that there is an inconsistency in terms of the data I aimed to collect and the number of participants I reached. When asked to share their reasons for dropping out of the study, the following factors were noted.

5.2.1.1. Language

Within the introductory phase of the study, participants were sent an informed consent form, as well as questions to be engaged using WhatsApp as the preferred online platform. This gave a clear description of the process as well as the different elements that will be required from the participants within the process of engagement. Following this, one of the participants requested that all documents be explained to her in isiZulu for clarity, which I proceeded to do. As we went through the questions, I explained that all the questions will be asked in isiZulu to allow everyone present to participate fully, however she requested that she only participate in the individual interview and not the focused group discussion. She felt that an individual platform gave her the chance to fully reflect on the questions asked and therefore allowed her to discuss her experiences with depth. This highlighted the importance of understanding the participants' comfortability levels, which could prove to be both a limitation and a strength within the study. Denis (2007) notes that “an interview is a very specific type of interaction

between two persons...” (Denis, 2007:6), stating that “key to the process is the decision of the person who remembers to speak” (Denis, 2007:6), which also means allowing them to express themselves in a language and within a space that feels safest to them.

“I love working with the queer community, but there are questions that will always be difficult to ask. To ask people about their personal experiences is always one of the hardest things to do, queer narratives within my culture are always shaped by pain and fear. This is made a lot more difficult when your language does not even accommodate this kind of conversation well” - Diary entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

5.2.1.2. Anonymity

One of the most vital points highlighted in the introductory process was the importance of confidentiality. The right of the participants to stay anonymous should they wish to stay unknown within the presentation of the findings. I was fortunate to be permitted to document everyone’s narrative, with the unexpected permission given to use the identity of the participants, except for one individual who I will refer to as Ayanda within this study. Even though Ayanda was willing to share her individual story on WhatsApp, she did not feel comfortable participating in the focused group discussion for two main reasons. Firstly, she did not want to be recognized by the other participants in case they were known to her; and secondly, she did not feel comfortable being recorded. When listening attentively to her voice recordings, I also noted that she was outside in a quiet space, even though the interview had been conducted during the evening. This gave me the sense that she was not comfortable being heard within the household.

5.2.1.3. Power Dynamics

“There is no denying the capacity of power within the church” (Percy, 1998:16), its ability to pervade liberated spaces without the realization of those that are most affected by it. This is something I noted when a participant decided to withdraw from the study after agreeing to take part in the process. Within this process I was fortunate to be able to secure participants who occupy varied positions within their respective churches, giving rich information in terms of the dynamics of the church. The representatives included a religious leader, elders within the church, preachers, ‘AmaDwala’ (those who are recognized as women of prayer within the

church), as well as those who consider themselves general members, yet help in some of the weekly running's of the church programmes.

Being aware of these varied positions, one of the participants became a bit sceptical of the process. The first reason was that they needed permission from their church leader to take part in the study, which meant that the researcher had to write a letter requesting permission for the individual to take part in the conversations to be carried out. This is something that I had failed to succeed in due to the time, however, through this I was able to note the amount of power given to those in authority within the queer church. This then led to the participant mentioning that they were not comfortable sharing their stories on a platform that included one of their religious leaders. Which was interesting in that even though the participant and the religious leader come from different branches of the same church, this did not come as a form of permission to the participant to take part but became a fear of what the religious leader within their church would say should they possibly be aware of their participation in the study. It was interesting to note how power has "the ability to effect...command over others" (Percy, 1998:6), even in the absence of those that we give power to. An interesting development noted within the queer church, the ability to give power to certain individuals in such a way that it creates barriers that prevent us from sharing our personal stories. It is important to note that the individual withdrew from the study.

“Something is interesting about the way we choose to give power silently and without hesitation. The need to be recognized and to be seen seems to compromise the ability for us to be able to make our own decisions about our own lives. It seems that in the process of seeking validation, we seem to hand over the power of decision making to others over our own lives. It is an interesting thing to see.” – Diary Entry, 21 November 2020 (Not before FGD)

5.2.2. Limitations and Opportunities Presented

"I have come to realise that diary entries are not the easiest for me personally. I have become so used to recoding how others experience life and not so much my own life. Using online platforms did not make the task any easier.” – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

The study presented quite a few limitations in terms of how data was collected, throughout this process. To be honest, I would have been happier if I were able to physically follow all the participants within this study to their spaces of worship. Which would have allowed me to create a bond, to reflect on my own experiences in relation to theirs within the field of study and to share my narrative just to be able to create a relatable space which would have allowed the participants to share their personal experiences a bit more. An interview is more than just a data collection method, it is “a conversation...an exchange of information, but it is also a relationship.” (Denis, 2007:4).

“As much as I fear the emotional aspect of this process, I wish I had the opportunity to follow these stories in person. There is so much to share. I believe the beauty of queer individuals is in the way they bravely live their lives every day in a context that does not fully welcome them.” – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

It is not easy being able to record your feelings as a researcher while actively asking questions and at the same time trying to listen to the next recording before you could proceed to the next question. Even though the process was valuable in the sense that you could get good, recorded content in the interview process, it provided a limitation in terms of being able to fully reflect on my feelings. Which also applied to the emotions of the participants. Even though you could acknowledge a person’s feelings in the process of the interview, it became difficult to provide a space of counsel, because even though you can hear that the tone of voice has changed, and a person seems a bit more stressed and anxious. You are not able to fully engage those feelings because the individual is trying to give you the best possible response, they could share in the little time that had been allocated.

This, however, presented its opportunities in terms of the space created for the sharing of stories. The fact that participants were given the chance to agree on the time to communicate, within their own space, gave a sense of ownership over the process. It also allowed them the time to think about the questions and respond appropriately without their recording being timed or limited. Some of the individuals within the study chose to keep the questions overnight without any given reason and then proceeded to share several voice-notes the day after with responses that reflected the amount of time they had taken to reflect. The process, even though it was a bit impersonal, presented the opportunity for individuals to take the time to either

choose to be vulnerable or to share the gist of the experiences to create awareness of the realities that black queer Christian bodies are faced with within the KwaZulu-Natal faith landscape.

5.3. Focused Group Discussion – A Collective Queer Engagement

The first step within the process of collecting data was a focused group discussion that was conducted using Zoom as the preferred online platform. The three (3) participants present, represented varied positions within the church, as well as different sexualities and gender identities which made for an interesting conversation in terms of how they experience the queer church and its processes. We may all occupy the same space; however, our privilege and lack thereof determine our individual experiences even within spaces that are seen to be unified and collectively experienced.

This conversation aimed to focus on the collective engagement of queer realities within the South African faith landscape. Having a conversation around the idea of meaning-making in spaces that define sexuality as well as gender performativity in a manner that is not relatable to the queer body. Further examining the shift from heteronormative faith spaces to the queer faith landscape, exploring the difference in the way in which everyone experienced this move towards a more familiar space of worship and praise. Lastly, through this conversation, we were able to look at questions in which participants had the opportunity to define the church for themselves in a manner that affirms their identity and gives meaning to their identity concerning the divine and others. Participants present included a religious leader and two members that are assistants within their respective churches. When asked to tell us a bit more about themselves they gave interesting responses which were highlighted as follows.

a) Pastor Skhumbuzo Sibisi

Skhumbuzo Sibisi is a pastor within the queer church and currently leads within his community. He is 42 years old this year and his preferred pronoun is 'he'. Within his introduction, Pastor Sibisi stated that he identifies as a gay man, who has been “*married to a man for two (2) years, with an 11-year-old biological son*”.

b) Londeka Xulu

Is a member within the queer church who describes themselves as a “*human rights and health activist working towards realising the rights of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men)*”? Londeka within their introduction stated that they “*have no pronoun, they do not fit in a box and identify as outside gender*”. Which means that they do not identify themselves within the socially constructed boxes that have been put in place by society labelling gender differences.

c) Nkululeko “Mercury” Duma

Nkululeko, also known as ‘Mercury’, described himself as a “*writer, poet, playwright, a brother, someone’s son, someone’s voice, a ‘he’*”. Mercury is a transgender activist, who was born in a female body, but is affirmed and feels whole within the masculine gender role in which he identifies as a man.

“It was interesting to note how queer individuals find ways to affirm themselves within the introductory phase, outside of the validation of others. Through their introductions, I understood the emotion behind their firm affirmations”. – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020
(Note after FGD)

The first thing that I noticed within the introduction process, was the importance of one’s identity in the way in which they introduced themselves. Firstly, how Pastor Sibisi felt it was important to note that he is a man that has been married to a man for the past two years, with a biological son. Presenting a few elements that are not only shunned upon within our society but also widely not accepted within the African faith landscape. Through his introduction, he affirmed his own identity and presented it with a great level of agency. Secondly, as a queer activist, Londeka felt it was important to mention that they live outside of the norms socially put in place to box individuals into gender categories within society. Helping us understand that there is no need to identify within the masculine or feminine, but simply to be a person in conversation without conforming to gender binaries. Lastly was how Mercury, as a transman, emphasized and continued to affirm his gender identity through descriptions that highlighted not only his masculinity within himself but his position concerning others. Stating that he is someone’s “*brother, someone’s son, someone’s voice, a ‘he’*”.

After these interesting introductions, the discussion then went into a reflection on the research questions as noted in the previous chapter. Using thematic analyses as my main tool for data

engagement, I was able to critically engage their responses and highlight *four main themes* that I believe help reflect their collective narratives within this discussion and these were as follows.

5.3.1. Alienated in Coming Out

"The body is inscribed into the hierarchies, the inequalities, the roles, the norms, the dos and don'ts of society. As such, not the body itself, but what the body should or ought to be, shifts into focus" (Vorster, 1997:396), a focus that is notably visible in the narratives of the black queer Christian bodies within the hetero-patriarchal faith landscape. Engaging the first question in which queer individuals were asked to share their experiences within the church growing up, it was interesting to note that the issue was not in the sexuality of the individual at first, but it was in knowing. This became visible when Londeka stated that:

"I was a Sunday school teacher...I enjoyed being part of Sunday school with the kids because they do not judge. Someone found out about my sexuality and I was reported to the elders and they prayed for me. They did not chase me out, but they treated me differently. It changed the love of God for me, I became a demon, my good work did not matter, so I decided to leave". –
Londeka, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

The realities of black queer Christian bodies do not change because they are homosexual or identify with a gender outside of the norms of society, but they change and are alienated because they choose to become visible in a space that is defined by heteropatriarchal norms that do not require you to taint the church of God through what is seen as deviant behaviour. A reality that was also seen through Pastor Sibisi's story in which he goes on to say that:

"I grew up in a church. I was responsible for running the branches at an early age. The feelings were there but I did not date anyone...they gave me high positions until I came out. I couldn't live like that anymore, so in 2013 I left, they said I was attacked by demons." –
Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

Even though the church has tried to engage issues of sexuality within their varied faith spaces and claims to be more welcoming, this is still to be visible in the narratives of black queer Christian bodies. This gap is still "evident in many African countries, seen in the way in which

same-sex desire continues to be closeted and silenced" (Msibi, 2011:57), shaping even the narratives of those who do not identify themselves as belonging within the Christian faith tradition. A reality noted in Mercury's response in which he mentions that:

"I was not infused into Christianity. I did not like that women and men were separated. I had a huge issue with wearing skirts. I tried to conform but I could not conform. It was my questioning of the church that made me leave the church...I would pray for rain because I hated church. Humiliated because 'ngibhampa kwisketi' (I walk masculinely in a skirt)." – Mercury, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

The church continues to shape how we view our sexuality and gender identity, and often this is best reflected negatively in the language in which they choose to use to refer to queer bodies within the faith landscape. Which becomes a greater challenge when "labels attached to different sexualities in Zulu society have a negative connotation, compared to Western accommodative terms" (Mkasi, 2013:14), which then forces you to question everything you seem to understand about your own identity and sexual orientation, as well as its seemingly foreign nature. This is a reality that was reflected in Pastor Sibisi's story when he was asked to mention the terms that were used to refer to him within the hetero-patriarchal church. In which he responded by saying:

"They said I was attacked by a demon. I have also been praying. I was attacked on the church Facebook page. They called me isitabane and said we need to pray for him until he is healed". – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

It is interesting to see how queer bodies become demonic as soon as they become visible. By saying visible I am trying to avoid the idea of "suddenly becoming homosexual" because it is not that you were not homosexual when the church chose to find purity in you when your sexuality was not known. The issue is that you suddenly stepped out of the box that defined your purity, which then led to the love of God detaching from you. When the church lacks understanding...the church alienates. This was an experience shared by Londeka when they stated that:

“It was not the direct words; I was a bad influence. Possessed by the world, I was not Christian enough. The church founder was the only one who protected me, but he still saw me as a sinner.” – Londeka, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

A reality that was shared by Mercury as well, when he reflected on the fact that at times it is not the language that alienates queer individuals. The actions of the members of the church communicate that which they are afraid to address directly. This was evident when Mercury stated that:

“I was demonic, it was the evil eye look”. – Mercury, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

Queerness when discovered is shunned upon within most African faith spaces, which has left queer bodies alienated and detached from their spaces of worship. It becomes evident that even though faith communities are working towards changing the queer narrative within the hetero-patriarchal faith landscape, the narratives shared by queer individuals are still defined by pain and trauma, which has contributed to queer bodies moving away from the hetero-patriarchal faith space to the queer church.

“These stories are so familiar; they have become so exhausting to hear. The pain seems to overshadow the joy. I tried to smile and laugh throughout the conversation, but to be honest, it saddens me to have to listen to stories filled with such sadness”. – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

5.3.2. Liberation and Allowed to Be

As we continued to speak about everyone's experiences within the church, it was interesting to see the shift in emotion when we began to speak about the queer church, but above all, it was just as interesting to hear the contradictions that were presented. It is fascinating to see that those who have been detached from the love of God, seem to seek it most and continue to do so from the margins of Christian faith. Because even though queer bodies are demonized and alienated from the church, they find solace in each other and the love of God. This is the purpose of the queer church...to come as you are...to worship together in faith, in spirit and as yourself. This is the freedom expressed in the narratives of the participants, where one participant stated that:

"I was allowed to be myself, allowed to wear pants. Ababheki mina, babheka ukhoho lwami (they do not look at me but my faith). I am no longer hindered to be in His presence. I rejoice. There is a spirit of togetherness, I belong where I am." – Mercury, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

There seemed to be something beautiful about hearing the tone change in the way in which they described the feeling of being liberated in the eyes of God. At the same time, it was sad to see that we seek spaces to be validated to feel like we belong.

"I found it strange when Mercury mentioned that he was no longer hindered to be in His presence. It saddens me to know that being rejected within the church seems to pervade even your liberty to praise Him without affirmation. The church does not seem to realize the harm there is to the spirit and the mind when people are shunned." – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

I also found that it was not just the freedom to worship that was provided for queer individuals within the queer faith landscape, but also the freedom to participate and belong. This is an important aspect of being within the church that I noted within each individual, which is being seen and being allowed to provide a service to others through the sharing of God's word. Through them you begin to understand that being a part of the church is "not solitary and individual but communal and engaged with others" (Rakoczy, 2016:6), a form of liberation that was evident in Pastor Sibisi's response in which he shared that:

"I was able to preach the gospel without any fear, not being scared that I will be crucified because of my sexuality. I was free to say Jesus loves me." – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

This was further evident in Londeka's response when they said:

"I felt I was in church, I felt I was a member of something in the presence of God. It was my second home. I became the Christian that I am." – Londeka, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

For each person, it was evident that being within the queer church provides a sense of family, familiarity and some level of liberation that does not seem to exist for them as themselves within hetero-patriarchal faith spaces. Through this conversation, I noted the importance of being able to be yourself, the importance of belonging, participating and of being validated as a Christian regardless of your sexuality and gender identity. I come alive in spaces that affirm our identity and affirm our position in the presence of God.

5.3.3. *Unified Yet Segregated*

The conversation took an interesting turn as we began to delve deeper into the processes of the queer church and how it enables queer individuals to worship and praise outside of the gender and sexually defined boxes that have been shaped by societal norms. It became evident that the history that shapes us, seems to pervade into spaces that we try to escape to when we try to normalize queer spaces. The systems of hetero-patriarchy that alienate queer individuals from the hetero-patriarchal faith landscape have found their way into queer spaces, creating environments that *maintain order through "normalizing" queerness*. A realization that is best explained by Londeka when they state that:

“With the first church (queer church) there was no separation between gender. They did not call me something I did not want to be called. There was no patriarchy or heterosexuality within the church. We were all equal...even the setup wasn’t forced. It was LGBTI friendly, I was free. With the second church...I look masculine, but I do not want people to assume which box my masculinity should be in. I was forced to be in a box, forced to be ubaba (a father). The mistake made is when you are non-conforming, and you expect other people to be non-conforming. There is no need to have sexuality within the church. I want to be a part of the church, but I wish I could change the mentality. – Londeka, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

A statement referring to faith leaders within the queer church, in which Londeka believes that there has been a mentality adopted in which religious leaders want the church to conform to the sexuality or the gender identity which they identify with. In which case, the leader of this church believes in gender labelling within the boxes of masculinity and femininity that have been defined by systems of heteropatriarchy. Forcing members within a queer space to lean

towards “normalizing” queer identities, either falling into the categories of *obaba* (father/man) or *omama* (mother/woman). A mentality that Pastor Sibisi does not agree with, stating that:

“If it were up to me, I would rather people were called by their names. They have the mentality that we can do it better than heteros, they are forcing things. Uniforms are the problem. Uniforms are segregating people and force people to belong somewhere. Sexuality is more about the bedroom. It is good that I am here, so I can gain from this”. – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

Through this statement, Pastor Sibisi did not only address the hetero-patriarchal mentality that had been adopted by some queer church but also addressed the structural aspects of the church that create a segregated space. Highlighting something as simple as being trapped in the use of pronouns and being forced to identify yourself through clothing, wearing a uniform that forces “people to belong somewhere”.

*“I must admit, I was surprised to hear umfundisi (pastor) highlighting the fact that queer people within faith spaces **try to be better than heterosexuals**. When I heard Londi speaking I immediately expected him to become defensive. I became aware of my own biases at that moment and realized that agents of change exist within the leadership of these churches as well.” – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)*

Through this Pastor Sibisi, agreed with Msibi and Rudnick (2018) when they stated that “heteronormativity finds expression in the way queers perform their sexuality and the role of language in such expressions” (Msibi and Rudnick, 2018:62). Queer individuals within the Zulu culture struggle to find expression of their gender and sexual orientation within the isiZulu language and therefore refer to what is familiar to define their sense of “normality”. Which becomes problematic in the sense that “IsiZulu promotes African patriarchy within its language” (Msibi and Rudnick, 2018:55), and thus resurrects patriarchy if not redefined within a queer context. Through this conversation, it was evident that queer bodies seek to perform their gender and like the hetero-patriarchal church, if that gender is not performed in a way that is familiar to its authority, members of the church become alienated again. As we continued to speak it became clear that the queer church and hetero-patriarchal faith space had one major thing in common...they all seem to focus a lot more on a person’s identity and presentation or performativity, than on the spiritual needs of those who have come to find healing.

5.3.4. *The Church as a Place of Healing*

The church is a place of healing. It is a space where we come together to worship, to find meaning, to pray and to find a family in the presence of God. However, it seems it has become a space of performativity, judgement, and condemnation. This became evident even within this conversation, which Londeka agreed with when they said that:

“We should take the church as a hospital...healing sickness. Messages should go to a human being...they should build me up. Men and women should have the same teachings and values...not allow abuse.” – Londeka, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

While listening and making meaning of the conversation, I came to realize that we have lost the meaning and purpose of the church. The need to define faith has resulted in the church structuring and boxing spirituality within systems that have shifted the purpose from healing to performing spirituality. A common phenomenon which has resurfaced within the queer church. In the hope to find spiritual meaning and purpose in the presence of those that they identify with...queer individuals within queer faith spaces have lost the *essence of the church* and moved towards performing the systemic aspects of the church. This has become the challenge...the queer space has become a space in which queer individuals perform their identity...it has become a space in which we perform our purity in the hopes to find validation and affirmation in the presence of those we seek to find healing with. There is a loss in the understanding of Christianity...which is an important aspect of the Christian church that Pastor Sibisi felt needed to be emphasized when he noted that:

“The church needs to have Jesus's mentality, not ours. We need to be patient and love each other” – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)

He further stated that:

*“God is someone with no gender...it is for us and not for Him. He is what I need Him to be”
– Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 5 pm (FGD)*

The focused group discussion proved to be fruitful and insightful in that it highlighted the heteronormative and patriarchal realities that inform our experiences of church. Taking notice of the structures and the processes that coerce queer individuals into categorising their gender identities and sexual orientation.

“Even though I was not able to interview the number of people I had hoped to reach on this platform, I was lucky to have a group with such insight and showing such honesty. Being able to view the power dynamics in the conversation, yet with such relaxation in responses to questions. It was interesting to see” – Diary Entry, 22 November 2020 (Note after FGD)

5.4. Individual Interviews – A Fixed Frame of My Identity

Within the second part of the data collection process, each of the participants was asked to participate in individual interviews using WhatsApp as the preferred online platform. Each of the participants was required to respond using voice notes to allow them the space needed to elaborate on their answers in the language that was most comfortable to them. Unfortunately, I had lost Londeka as a participant within this section of the data collecting process, even though I tried to follow up several times, there was no clear reason and so I decided to respect their decision. Fortunately, five (5) participants were present within the second part of the process; each person representing a different position within the church and identifying differently across the LGBTI+ spectrum in terms of sexuality and gender. This helped in terms of understanding how different queer bodies experience the context in which they have located as well as the difference in experiences within the church.

The individual interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the lived realities of the participants, sharing their narratives on a platform that allows them to be vulnerable, honest, and open without the limitations imposed by the presence of others. Through this conversation I was able to explore their experiences within their communities growing up, their experiences within the church, following their stories as they moved from a place of exclusion to moments of affirmation within the church. This then led to an understanding of how they interpret the bible for themselves while finding affirmation in God and Christ.

The participants present self-identified as queer, Christian, of Zulu origin and as members of the queer church. Each of them holds a different position within the church, which includes a

pastor, preacher, AmaDwala (mothers of the church/ women of prayer) and an assistant within the church. In addition to the participants that had joined the focused group discussion, the following participants shared a bit about themselves:

a) Ayanda (Pseudonym)

A preacher within the church that asked to remain anonymous. Even though she was not ready to share her identity, she had a passion to share her story. Within her introduction Ayanda stated that she works “*as a church person*”, stating that she “*loves God*” and identifies as “*lesbian*”.

b) Nonkuthalo Mkhasibe-Ndadane

A woman of prayer within the church, Nonkuthalo introduced herself as a born-again Christian, who still today believes that “*uThixo useyinkosi nomsindisi*” (*the Lord is still the king and saviour*) of her life. She further stated that she is married into the Ndadane family, she is a feminine woman that has not changed in her appearance, but “*ulawulwa imizwa ukuthi uthanda omunye wesifazane*” (*has feelings that draw her to love another woman*).

c) Siphivosakhe Sthandwasenkosi Sazi Jali

Within her introduction Sazi went on to describe herself at length, with points that I believe should be shared as stated, with a great level of confidence and affirmation, within her introduction she shared the following:

“I am a woman of colour...I am a transgender woman born in South Africa. Not even knowing that there was a term trans. I found refuge in God and I became a reborn again Christian when I was young, so I am a child of God made in His image. I am the image of God because I am a human being. I am in my late 20’s, I am an activist, a mother, a sister, a friend, a child, a leader and just a human being like everybody else, regardless of my identity and sexual orientation. I continue to have my body that everybody has.” – Sazi, 16 December 2020, 8 pm (Individual Interview)

It was interesting to see that there was still a consistency within the introduction section of this conversation, in the way that queer individuals affirm their identities and positioning within

the South African faith landscape. What I found particularly fascinating is the way that Sazi described herself with such detail and affirmation, directly emphasizing her humanness. Queer bodies within the African landscape continue to find themselves fighting against discrimination and different forms of hostile acts, with queerness seen as “a dehumanizing act, a mockery of the divine image with which humans were originally made” (Obasola, 2013:85). Queer individuals have become conditioned to affirm their humanness in a context that denies them their human dignity, forcing queer individuals to validate their existence, as well as their positionality concerning God, in which she firmly states that “*I am the image of God because I am human*”.

5.4.1. A Body Excluded

Throughout the different conversations that I engaged in, I picked up on the similarities within the narratives shared, in which *the body became a site of disruption* within the community and the church. A narrative that remained consistent within the lived experiences of queer individuals when they became visible as themselves and open in the way in which they expressed themselves, as well as how they became open about their sexual orientation. Black queer Christian bodies are situated within a context that does not allow for a *true process of becoming if becoming is against the cultural and religious norms* regulating human expression and behaviour. So much so that "queer individuals continue to be denied cultural recognition and are subjected to shaming, harassment, discrimination and violence" (Msibi, 2011:61). These shared narratives affirm a statement made by Thabo Msibi (2011) in which he states that queer identity is seen as "an identity that troubles the pretence of heteronormativity" (Msibi, 2001:69), disrupting the "natural" order within cultural discourse. A reality that is made visible by Pastor Sibisi when he states that:

“I grew up in a rural community. A boy is a boy, male physically in terms of the private part, they expect that he must do things that boys do. Kuyihlazo ukuthi umfana ebukeya enza izinto esengathi ezamantombazana noma umfana engapheka. Abakholwa ukuthi ikhona enye into ngale kwento abathe bazalwa nje bevula amehlo beyibona about isexuality. Yiyo yiyo ayikho enye.” (It is a disgrace to see a boy doing things that girls do, even if the boy cooks. They do not believe that there is anything beyond what they were taught about sexuality. It is what it is and there is nothing else). – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 7 pm (Individual Interview)

Queer individuals within their process of meaning-making and becoming, embody an element in their identity that disrupts this fixed idea of gender and sexuality, questioning the heteropatriarchal structures that give order to the contexts which they have been raised in. through the process of becoming queer bodies become disruptive and are therefore seen as a threat within the home, the community and within a church, which then results in the exclusion of queer bodies. This was made clearer in a statement made by Nonkuthalo when she shared that:

“Akuzange kube lula kakhulu ebandleni nakuyo icommunity yami, amachallenges abemangingi, kubengcono kwifamily, kwicommunity into ebithanda ukubanzima kakhulu ukuthi I think abantu bebelekha iknowledge yokuthi noma ngabe sithandana nabantu besifazane uyumuntu wesifazane, but lokho akusho ukuthi usuthanda wonke umuntu wesifazana. Imost yabantu besefazane bebengasekho comfortable ukuhlala eduze kwami...bekungilimaza ngoba bengingasiboni isidingo sokuhlala ngizichaza njalo...bebengasangithembi. Amachallenges ekade ngibhekene nawo kakhulu ukuthi bebengihleba ukuthi why lo afike asindiswe for the longest time and then egcineni aqome umuntu wesifazane, kwenzekalani ngaye. Bekungekho lula.” (It was not easy within the church and the community. There were a lot of challenges, it was better in my family, in the community it was a lot worse because I believe that people lacked knowledge. They did not understand that being attracted to other women as a woman does not mean you were attracted to all women. Most of the women were not comfortable around me...it hurt me because I did not see the need to explain myself all the time...they did not trust me. the main challenge was the gossip, they wondered why I would date women after being saved for the longest time. It was not easy). – Nonkuthalo, 21 November 2020, 9pm (Individual Interview)

Within this conversation, Nonkuthalo picked up on an interesting yet highly noted challenge within the queer community, which is the idea that it is impossible to be queer and Christian. Homosexuality and queer gender identity have generally been viewed as an act against the will of God within the African context, viewed as uncultured and un-Christian, it has been the main argument against the queer community. This was noted in Sazi’s story when she shared that:

“At the age of 11 years old I got reborn again, I started thinking that the life I was living was a sin, so I changed the way I was living. Few years down the line I was doing grade 10 and I was the chairperson of the SCO, and it came out that I was dating the pastor and I was not

cis or a heterosexual person. Dating was a sin, but for me, it was even worse because I was causing adultery. After all, I was in love with another man. So, at church they punished me and banginquma (cut me off), I had to go to church every Sunday and they would pray for me, thinking I would change and everything, at school I had to stop being the chairperson. It became an issue for me that I could not identify myself in the queer spectrum because I was brainwashed. I felt like I wasn't human enough and I was being verbally abused everywhere I go because now I have changed from this perfect boy who was going from tent-to-tent preaching about Jesus coming...it was confusing for people looking at me as if I was possessed by demons.” – Sazi, 16 December 2020 (Individual Interview)

5.4.2. Participation Denied

"Talking to each person I realised that taking away the love of God also meant taking away all that you could do to show your love of God within the church. It seems insignificant, but it holds such importance in the lives of those stripped of this right.” – Diary Entry, 23 November 2020 (Reflection after Interviews)

One aspect of exclusion remained constant within the narratives of the participants, the right to participate is denied within the weekly processes of the church. For everyone it was not the fact that they were ignored, it was the fact that they became dirty and what they could offer to the church no longer added value. This included the right to pray in the same space with others, the right to preach and in more drastic situations it was even the right to give offerings to the church. A heart-breaking reality that was shared by Nonkuthalo when she said:

“Ngikhulele ebandleni elisindisiwe, so nami ngakhula ngisindisiwe, to the point yokuthi kade ngiwumphathi wabasha, abazali bengithemba ngengane zabo, bengakangitholi ukuthi ngithanda abanye abantu besifazane. The day bengibambile ukuthi ngithanda abantu besifazane, ila abazali belahlekelwa ukungithemba ngengane zabo, ngahlaliswa phantsi ebandleni nganqunywa...ngamiswa ebandleni ngayeka izinto ebengizenza. Ngayekiswa ngisho ukunikela, bengasadingi kwamali yami. Besengifana nento engekho kahle kahle, ngenxa yokuthi bengilithanda ivangeli bengihamba ngiye enkonzweni nginqunyiwe nginjalo, ngihlala ngedwa, esami isihlalo singathintwa ngoba shuti ngangingcole ngalolohlobo lokuthi akumelanga ukuthi ngidibane nabanye.” (I grew up in a born-again church, so I was also born again, to the point that I lead the youth service. The parents trusted me with their

children before they found out that I was attracted to women. The day they found out that I was attracted to women was the day they stopped trusting me with their children and I was stripped of my duties and cut off in church. I had to stop everything I did for the church, I was even asked to stop giving my offerings, they did not even want my money. I was like something that did not exist, but because I loved the gospel, I continued to go to church even though they had cut me off. I would sit on my own and no one even touched my chair because it seems I was so dirty I could not be in contact with others). – Nonkuthalo, 21 November 2020, 9 pm (Individual Interview)

This is also an experience shared by Mercury when he shared his story, in which he mentioned that:

“Being able to feel, being able to belong, being able to praise, that is what has been taken away from me, so being within the church and being able to find that for me has just completed the whole equation.” – Mercury, 23 November 2020, 4 pm (Individual Interview)

This is a narrative that was also shared by Ayanda when she mentioned that:

“The first (queer) church engaya kulona I felt like indlela abakwamukela ngayo it was very warm. As soon as I walked in, I felt like this is where I belong. I can stand up and sing like other people, I can even show ithalente lami, I can stand ngaphambi kwabanye abantu and motivate people. I can preach and until kufika esimweni ukuthi ngigcotshwe as a preacher, ingoba ngakwazi ukuziveza ukuthi what do I have esontweni lama gays and lesbians. Le engingeke ngikwazi ukuyenza esontweni Labantu abastraight.” (The first (queer) church I went to gave me a very warm welcome. As soon as I walked in, I felt like there is where I belong. I could stand up and sing like other people, I could even show my talent, I could stand in front of other people and motivate people. I could preach until it got to a point where I was anointed as a preacher because I could show what I could do in the gay and lesbian church. Something I would not be able to do in the ‘straight’ (heterosexual) church – Ayanda, 22 November 2020, 6 pm (Individual Interview)

Through this, I noted that the ability to take away from someone the right to stand before God and the ability to give this is the thin line between being able to welcome queer bodies within the church and the ability to exclude. An experience that is taken away from queer individuals

within the church based on the teachings of the bible and what the word of God says about the bodies of queer individuals within the church. When asked about his experiences within the church, Pastor Sibisi shared that:

“What I have experienced from the church is to use the bible incorrectly ukufeza inhloso zabo. Mangabe befuna ukukshaya bazothi the bible says so. Only to find out that ay man, the bible says nix ngalento abayishoyo. Ebandleni abantu benza ukuthanda kwabo more than ukuthanda kwaNkulunkulu, ngibone abantu becindezela abanye abantu, lokhu uNkulunkulu angakufuni besebenzisa izwi lakhe bethi uthe, engazange esho.” (What I have experienced from the church is to use the bible incorrectly to serve their agenda. If they want to fight you, they will say the bible says so. Only to find out that no man, the bible says nothing about what they are saying. People do as they wish within the church, more than the will of God, I have seen people oppressing others, exactly what God does not want, and they do this using His word stating that God said such when he did not say anything.) – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 7 pm (Individual Interview)

5.4.3. Socially Transitioning

“As a queer activist, we always work towards filling a gap between the visibility of queer individuals within our communities and the knowledge of queer individuals within these communities. In the process of coming out, queers begin to transition from assumed “heteronormativity” to their true selves, but the only problem that remains is the lack of ability of our communities to transition with us. Through this I finally know that this is called the process of socially transitioning.” – Diary Entry, 2 December 2020 (Reflection during transcription)

Through these conversations, I noted a very important aspect in the process of becoming as a queer individual, the element of socially transitioning from a position of purity within the family and the church to a position of exclusion and then finally of acceptance within the queer church. This is a narrative shaped by anxiety, depression, fear, confusion and finally acceptance of the self within a context that fails to fully transition with you. This is a process noted clearly within Sazi’s story as she shares that:

“I am a transgender woman, which means I was assigned male at birth and identify as a woman because that is how I see myself and that is how I view myself, so I am a woman. I started socially transitioning while I was in school, medically transitioned, legally transitioned, partly surgically transitioned but not yet fully, still living with dysphoria.” – Sazi, 16 December 2020, 8 pm (Individual Interview)

The process of becoming requires that the community transitions with you, it is not just a process for the individual. However, the process is made difficult in the sense that it also requires a transition in the systemic realities that ground people’s understandings of gender and sexuality. Systemic realities that also govern people’s understandings of each other and the social orders around them, which then requires people to destabilize and shift away from their only understanding of reality. An uncomfortable position that the family, community, and the church struggle to take. Within my conversation with Mercury, he affirmed this by stating that:

“It goes back to gender roles and sexuality and the minute you start questioning that, you start seeing underlying issues that have been swept under the carpet and no one wants to answer those questions.” – Mercury, 23 November 2020, 4 pm (Individual Interview)

A statement raising awareness of the idea that once society begins to transition with you as a queer body, they must begin to question the systemic realities that oppress you. Which means that society will begin to question patriarchy and heteronormativity as the underlying systems that govern their homes and the church, exposing themselves to the systemic realities that not only oppress queer bodies but also oppress women and children within the church and the community. They must begin to challenge the structures that partition one gender from the other, destabilising the use of language, the processes, and dress code. A simple privilege that has been denied within the heteropatriarchal church and reinstated within the queer church. A “privilege” that has been appreciated within the narratives of queer bodies within this study, with Ayanda stating that:

“With LGBTI people ufila leya freedom leya, ifreedom oyifilayo, hayi I cannot explain, you feel free, how you dress...you feel ifreedom eyisimanga.” (With LGBTI people you feel this kind of freedom, that freedom you feel, no I cannot explain, you feel free, how you dress. You feel this amazing freedom.) – Ayanda, 22 November 2020, 6 pm (Individual Interview)

This privilege has also been found in the ability to belong, to participate within the church, as well as in the presence of God. Through these stories, I realized that by taking away the privilege to be in the presence of God within the church, you take away the potential that one could be one with God. This is a crippling reality that has affected those that are seen to worship at the margins of Christianity, clearly noted by Pastor Sibisi when he shares his concerns, explaining that:

“At church ngike ngaba nama experiences amaningi amahle namabi. Kakhulukazi, ama experiences amaningi engingawathandanga is to see abazalwane coming at church with the mentality that they are already told that they belong to hell noma ngabe sebekhona at church.

I had to tell them that no, whatever they have been told is incorrect, uNkulunkulu uyakuthanda, but they are still having that mentality. Yenza noma besebandleni benze isinoma ikanjani benze nebandla lingahlonipheki ngenxa yokuthi emakhanda abo banaleyo experience.” (Within the church, I have had many good and bad experiences. Especially seeing members of the church coming to church with the mentality that they have already been told that they belong in hell even though they have come to the church. I had to tell them that no, whatever you have been told is incorrect, God loves you, but they still have that mentality. It makes them do as they please, stripping the church of its rightful respect just because of their experience.) – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 7 pm (Individual Interview)

The queer church has been left with the responsibility to heal what has been broken by the heteropatriarchal faith spaces. Even though black queer Christian individuals have found a space in which they belong and a space in which they are free to worship and praise God together, they seem to struggle to heal emotionally and mentally from the exclusion of the church, as well as the acts of hate that were shown towards them. Sazi best explains this within her story when she shares that:

“At first for me, it was hard, because getting back to the church that was full of queer people and what I have been brainwashed with for years is that these people cannot praise God because they are adulterers. It took me a year to start accepting that this was my church and funny enough I felt God, I felt love the first time I got there.” – Sazi, 16 December 2020, 8 pm (Individual Interview)

Through this conversation, Sazi went on to touch on a very important aspect of this research in which belonging and validation for the church meant to structure queer engagements in a heteropatriarchal manner, an aspect of the queer church that is slowly beginning to change in the process of healing. Sazi shares that:

It is a very queer-friendly church, really pro-trans and we have been fighting that trans narrative of saying it is either male or female. We are now trying to run away to saying everybody could be who they want to be, it is a queer space. God is not a sex and God is what we want God to be, so with that for me, I have learnt a lot from the church that accommodates queer people and I still feel they need to change other settings, but for me, it has worked wonders because I know how to communicate with my God, I know how to do things for myself." – Sazi, 16 December 2020, 8 pm (Individual Interview)

As I continued to have these conversations, I noted an important element of healing that came across all participants, was the **ability to define God and who God is for yourself**. This became an extremely important process of healing concerning the church, as well as the narratives that have been used to condemn black queer Christian bodies within the South African faith landscape. Nonkuthalo explains it best when she says:

“Labantu laba okuyibona abasijudgayo abantu abadalwe uThixo nabo, bayafana nathi, so ngiyadlula kubona angibanaki, ngibe nelelilungelo lokuthi lapho engikhonza khona ilungelo lami ukukhonza nami njengesidalwa saThixo. Munye umehluleli, omunye akanalo ilungelo lokuthi angehlulele...ngidalwe uThixo ngayilento engiyona.” (These are people that are created by God, they are just like us, so I do not pay attention to them, I have the right to praise and worship God as his creature. There is one judge, other people do not have the right to judge me...I was created by God and He made me what I am.) – Nonkuthalo, 21 November 2020, 9 pm (Individual Interview)

5.4.4. Made in God’s Image

As I went on to have these conversations, I came to realise that just as redefining God was vital to the process of healing, it was just as important for participants to define their relationship to God and biblical scriptures, to understand that we are all made in **God’s image**. Through this, I recognized that queer individuals have learned to make meaning of scripture in a manner that

best affirms them and in a way that provides a foundation for their relationship with God and others. Ayanda mentions a lot about this as she shares her frustration and solution to this problem:

“Isikhathi esiningi ngiyazi if befuna ukukujaja kahle abantu nokwahlulela, bayalisebenzisa ibhaybheli, ikakhulukazi meke bazi ukutho uwumuntu okholwayo noma osindisiwe. Bayakwazi ukulisebenzisa abantu ibhayibeli uma bejaja kodwa mase kumele belilandele they cannot. So, mina ngokwami, khona isikhathi le engike ngilibeke khona eceleni ibhayibheli, isikhathi esiningi nginakho ukungalisebenzisi but ngikhulume ngento eyenzakalayo, ebonakalayo, epractical ya every day. People get tired, sebezile ngoDavide a thousand times, batshele ngento ekhona, eyenzakalayo, eyenzeke izolo, eyenzeke kuwe, eyenzeke kumuntu oseduza nawe. Ingakho ngithi I do not preach, I motivate....so ibhayibheli limotivator mina ukuthi ngixhumane noNkulunkulo, ukuthi ngixhumane nomoya oyingcwele.”
*(A lot of the time people use the bible when they want to judge, especially if they see that you are a person of faith or reborn again. They can judge but they cannot follow it. So, for me, **there are times where I put the bible aside, a lot of the time I do not use it, I talk about things that are happening, things that I see and practical things.** People get tired, they have heard about David a thousand times, tell them about what is happening, something that happened yesterday, that happened to you or someone you know. That is why I say I do not preach; I motivate...so the bible motivates me to connect to God ad the Holy Spirit.” –*
Ayanda, 22 November 2020, 6 pm (Individual Interview)

This is something that was also shared by Pastor Sibisi when mentioned that for him it was to do the research to understand when the bible was written and in which context. He wanted to know what was happening, the laws of the place. He mentioned that:

“Helped me ngikwazi uku-relator and see ukuthi ngenkathi kubhalwa lesi-scripture kade befasana nalesisimo, so mina manje ngifasana nasiphi isimo, mina ngiphila ngaphansi kwamuphi umthetho, kungisiza kakhulu lokho.” *(Helped me relate and see what challenges they were faced with when the scripture was written, so now which challenges am I facing. Which laws did they live under and which laws are there now? This helped me a lot.) –*
Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 7 pm (Individual Interview)

Nonkuthalo also made an interesting comment when she said:

“Ibhayibheli alingenzi ngizizwe sengathi ngamukelekile kuNkulunkulu, kakade ngamukelekile kuSomandla...ubengeke angidale umangabe angamulekanga kuye. Kubiza ukuthi ube ne understanding ephelele, kubiza ukukhula enkosini ukuze uqonde ukuthi izwi lithini. Uma ngabe bethetha ngeSodom neGomorra abakhulumi ngathi, ngangengekho ngalesosikhathi...mina nakho ngiyaphila.” (The bible does not make me feel welcome in the presence of God, but I am welcomed by God...He would not have created me if I was not welcome. It calls for us to understand the word and it calls for us to mature in Christ for us to understand the word of God. If they talk about Sodom and Gomorra, they are not talking about us, we were not there...I am still alive.) – Nonkuthalo, 21 November 2020, 9 pm (Individual Interview)

A sense of belonging is defined for the self and by the self, whether this is in scripture, concerning others, about God or in understanding that you are made in God’s image. When asked to share images of themselves, some of the participants were not able to describe what this meant for them, but when engaging with them, some important elements of belonging in the presence of God came up.



As a transwoman Sazi mentioned that:

*“The reason why I find belonging...because God said let us form man in our creation and those creations were not one person, but different people sitting together that formed one human being, I believe that one of them represented me. We find Moses saying that I am that I am, meaning I am whatever you want me to be in any other situation. God to me is me because I am **Their image, I am her Image**. You can see yourself who is God to you. - Sazi, 16 December 2020, 8 pm (Individual Interview)*

What I found most interesting when Sazi made this statement, is how God's pronoun changed concerning what she perceived God to be. As a person in transition, you find that her image of God transitions with her. God becomes what she needs...God becomes the Father; She becomes the Mother and They become non-binary when the heart desires it.

Above we see Sazi wearing black and purple attire, which are the main colours of the church that she is a member of. Sazi does not go into details in terms of explaining this outfit, however, the gap is filled by Nonkuthalo when she explains her outfit and her position within the church.

“Ucolour wakhona ublack and purple, kodwa ungawufaka ublack kuphela. Ngigqoka kanjena ngoba ngiyidwala, igama elithi dwala limela umuntu wesifazane ongumama ebandleni, as ngikutshelile ukuthi ngishadile futhi. Ingakho ngibizwa ngedwala, ngiyidwala ebandleni, umama womkhululeko, ngishadile.” (The colour is black and purple, but you can wear black only. I dress like this because I am a mother within the church, as I told you, I am also married. Therefore, they call me a mother; I am a woman of prayer and I am married.) – Nonkuthalo, 21 November 2020, 9 pm (Individual Interview)



These colours for Nonkuthalo and Sazi do not only represent a sense of pride as women within the church but for them, it also defines their positionality within the church. It provides a sense of positive reaffirmation within the church, being recognized as women, even they are recognized outside of the acceptable norms of gender and sexuality. With both showing confidence in the way in which they find placement in the church of God as they are. Reflecting a resistance to patriarchal understandings of what it means to be a woman, and in the same breath resisting the “normalization of sexuality, moving out of the limits of heterosexuality” (Althaus-Reid, 2003:26). Through this, we can note an important aspect of belonging that Sazi had mentioned above, when she stated that the *queer church still accommodates some processes that draw the line between male and female within the queer Christian church*. However, at the same time, the uniform seems to affirm a person’s positionality and therefore validates their positionality within the church. Which is the same positionality affirmed by Pastor Sibisi when he explained his church regalia.



*“My outfit shows me as a pastor at the pulpit, ngale kwe-gender ne-sexuality yami ithini, I am still a pastor, I can still preach, I can still be at the church. UNkulunkulu uthe umangabe engenza ukuthi ngifana naye futhi yena wathi in His word akalenzi iphutha, so it means my sexuality is not a mistake, uNkulunkulu uyangithanda ngale kokuthini.” (My outfit shows me as a pastor at the pulpit, **regardless** of my sexuality or gender, I am still a pastor, I can still preach, I can still be at the church. God made me in His image and His word says he makes no mistakes, so it means He loves me **regardless**.) – Pastor Sibisi, 21 November 2020, 7 pm (Individual Interview)*

Pastor Sibisi within this picture wears a black suit and purple shirt, which are colours symbolizing power and frustration, but also colours representing the **uniformity of his church**. The most striking item within this picture is the white-collar which is worn by Pastor Sibisi as he stands at the altar as a gay pastor, married to a man, with an 11-year-old biological child. Which visibly queers the idea of sexuality concerning spirituality and to God, which creates a space of acceptance and welcomes those that have been pushed to the margins because they did not fill the ideal norm of Christianity. Within his agency, putting into motion the idea that we need to queer hetero-patriarchal understandings of the church in order allow others to find "liberation from cultural and religious oppression and discrimination" (Mkasi, 2013:16), within the church. With this we begin to understand that to become Christian and to be within the presence of God, does not mean to lose yourself, but to affirm yourself in His presence and His image. Which is something that Mercury emphasises when he speaks of affirmation as a black queer Christian individual.

“It is not so much about the other person for me, it has always been about where my spirit is and where I am at, at the moment because I feel like the moment you start shining the spotlight on people, you lose the purpose of why you praise, you lose the purpose of why you...why you have a king that you have to worship every day that can guide you. So, for me...I do not need validation from other people or the outside. I think I have done enough validation through myself because of what I have gone through.” - Mercury, 23 November 2020, 4 pm (Individual Interview)



Mercury identifies as a transman and he can better express his gender identity using masculine clothing, which he is the most comfortable representation of himself within the church and best shows his positionality in relation to others. In the above picture, Mercury wears a black masculine suit, which is also a colour of authority, with a dark purple shirt, which not only represents royalty and power but also combines the colours of the church which he represents. Through this image, Mercury presents a contradiction in terms of the accepted gender performativity for a female born individual. “Erasing and Disrupting boundaries with respect to gender and sex as set by society” (Cheng, 2011:8), visibly affirming his positionality in relation to others. Pointing out the ideal that gender is performed and is not fixed, giving us an understanding that it is a concept that a “significant minority people do not fit” (Sithole, 2018:26). To be born in a female body and be accepted as a masculine body within the church gives a liberation that Ayanda as a butch (masculine) lesbian struggled to describe earlier on in this chapter, however, one more quote stood out for me as she shared her picture.



“it’s easier, wonke umuntu uya understanda omunye, akekho obuka omunye ngaleyondlela engajwayelekile. Wonke umuntu uyazi what is going on, bayazi singobani njengoba silana, nothando esinikezwa lona lukhulu futhi kunalawa amanye amasonto.” (It is easier, everyone understands the other person, no one gives you that unusual look. Everyone knows what is going on, who we are in this space, even the love we receive is much greater than it is in the other churches. – Ayanda, 22 November 2020, 6 pm (Individual Interview)

In this picture Ayanda, identifying as a butch lesbian wears a black shirt, which is a colour symbolizing power, as well as light blue pants which in it shows femininity in terms of its softness. Portraying female masculinity which Milani (2014) views as the "production of masculine subjectivities by biologically female individuals" (Milani, 2014:80). A concept in which he believes shows a rebellion towards patriarchal systems portraying the perceived femininity that a female is meant to portray according to societal norms. Stating the "butch women should be seen and understood as a rejection of heteronormative femininity" (Milani, 2014:81). An aspect of Ayanda's identity that helps her find validation and belonging within the queer church, through which she can truly express herself with the freedom to wear what is comfortable.

Under her arm, we see a bible, which is quite symbolic when viewed with her outfit. Visibly portraying that she is proudly queer and at the same time religious. Within her agency, fighting against the idea that you cannot be queer and Christian, a narrative that is openly shared in the oppression of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Within this picture, Ayanda makes a statement through which she openly shows that the word of God, is one that is welcoming and in openly carrying it showing that it does not harm her but gives a sense of affirmation as a Christian in the sight of God. Putting into action the idea of Izitabane Zingabantu Theology, through which we begin to understand that the "bible contains diversity in perspectives and positions – revealing that – those who are marginalized and seek protection in the bible because they are vulnerable find that too" (Davids et al., 2019:34). Which then takes back the word and positions the bible in a place that is not harmful to those set to the margins of Christian faith.

5.5. Conclusion

Within this chapter, I discussed the data gathered during the data collection process. Starting with a summary of my methodology to help make sense of the data discussed. Making note of the challenges within the process, in which I discussed the challenges in terms of language in terms of understanding the questions asked, anonymity in which the identity of one of the participants became essential to the process, as well as the power dynamics within the focused group discussion. I went on to discuss the limitations of the study, pointing out the difficulties of noting *your* emotions in the process of collecting data online, alternatively sharing the opportunities offered by an online data collection process.

I then went on to present the data collected during the Focused Group Discussions that were held with three (3) black queer Christian individuals who are members of the queer church. Identifying four themes, using Thematic Analysis as my main method of analysis. Firstly, pointing out the common thread in which queer bodies were *Alienated in Coming Out* within the church and the community. Which then led to a discussion on the second theme identified in which queer individuals felt *Liberated and Allowed to Be* within the queer church, highlighting noted freedom in the church through the narratives of the participants. Also exploring an important observation made by the participants in which queer bodies are *Unified Yet Segregated*. Looking at how queer individuals create an environment of unity and yet ultimately exclude others through structural processes. Lastly, I engaged the idea of *The Church as a Place of Healing*, which explored the idea of the ideal place of worship for everyone.

This then led to a presentation of the data collected through five (5) individual interviews, using WhatsApp as the preferred platform for engagement. In which I pointed out four themes through using Thematic Analysis. Firstly, discussing *A Body Excluded*, which was a common experience within the stories shared, highlighting how queer bodies are viewed as disruptive within the church and therefore become excluded. Which then led to a discussion on *Participation Denied* in becoming visible. Pointing out a common link within the narratives of queer bodies, where exclusion meant being stripped of your right to participate. The third theme then explored the idea of *Socially Transitioning*, highlighting the gap between the queer body becoming visible and society transitioning with queer individuals in the process of becoming.

Finally, I examined the fourth theme in which participants share their process of healing, by redefining God and scripture for themselves, by finding affirmation within the self and understanding that they are *Made in God's Image*.

Chapter 6

Analysis of Findings and Discussion

6.1. Introduction

Working in the field as a queer activist for the past five years has been an interesting journey. Having to enter queer spaces with a human rights perspective has led to a lot of interesting observations, questions, and a lot of personal challenges, which have been the reason for my interest within this study. I started this journey not because I wanted to question the relevancy of the queer church, but because I walked into the queer church and I was reminded of a reality that we were trying to collectively escape. I walked into an experience that I was not expecting to encounter, an experience that even though unified all queer bodies within the church, had uprooted heteropatriarchy in its processes. I walked into a space that offered gendered baskets for giving and a space where uniforms distinguished women from men and there were no other options. I walked into a space where language confined you to a certain gendered box and a space where visitors became visible in their casual clothes and were allocated a spot to the left of the church. I began to question the queerness of this space and started to wonder if it was queer enough for those who identified outside of this norm. I expected to find a queer and diverse space, but instead, *I found a binary informed heteropatriarchy firmly established.*

Leaning away from my reality, I began a journey that would help me understand what I had experienced and one that would help me observe this reality as an activist and as a queer scholar. So, within my journey thus far, I have engaged literature opening my eyes to the realities of queer bodies within the African landscape. However, observing the pain I have encountered working with the queer individuals within my line of work, this did not come as a surprise, I just became a lot more aware of the enormous gap that exists between the lived realities of queer individuals and their rights as stated in the constitution. I belong to a community of people who are displaced by experiences of hate, prejudice and discrimination, marginalization, which has meant being "treated as invisible and intelligible" (Milani, 2014:83). Yet through purpose, try to find spaces of unity, love, and care; and this is what the queer church provides. A safe space that is free from pain, from judgement, segregation, discrimination, exclusion, and a heteropatriarchal understanding of God. However, supported by literature I found that this not always the case, I began to find literature sharing experiences like my own, which helped me realize the continued need to investigate this further.

Through *Body Theology* I began to observe the queer person as a very complex body. Not only living outside of the norm of heteronormativity but highly influenced by a very pervasive system of patriarchy. Touched by culture, traditions, and religion, I began to understand the phenomenon that I had walked into, I became aware of the fact that we are bodies that are not free of our surroundings. Using *Queer Theology* as a lens, I began to understand what defines a queer space for individuals that are not completely free of heteropatriarchal systems that inform their reality. Which is something that I further observed using *Indecent Theology* as a lens, questioning the very structures and processes that inform our experiences within the queer faith landscape. Through the observations made I began to question language, power, unity, understandings of gender and sexuality, as well as the understanding of God, scripture, spirituality, and the bible within the queer church. Questions that were engaged and observed through the narratives of six black queer Christian bodies located within various queer spaces in the South African faith landscape. Each of these participants presenting a different story, unique in their experiences and yet informed by the same prejudice based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. Helping me identify some key themes for reflection and engagement within this journey.

Within this chapter, I observe the data collected as informed by my process. Bringing literature, data presented and theory into the conversation, while keeping in mind the three main research questions that informed the structure of this process, working towards fulfilling the purpose of this study. The first question being, *what are the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape?* Offering insights into the experiences of black queer Christian bodies within the South African faith landscape as they journey through their process of becoming. Further observing this through the second question where I ask, *how do ideological ideas of queer church perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa?* Engaging my own experience within the queer church, as well as those of the participants as they move away from the heteropatriarchal faith landscape and find placement within the queer faith landscape. Using *Queer Theology* as my main theoretical frame, I examine the systemic realities that inform these experiences by exploring the narratives of black queer Christian individuals as they navigate their way through the South African faith landscape. Responding to the third sub-research question offering a theological reflection through which we *explore how Queer Theology could provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context.*

To achieve this, I start by discussing two observations made within the process of data collection. Firstly, examining the limitations presented by the isiZulu *Language* when discussing issues of gender and sexuality. Secondly, engaging the issues of *Power* which were noted from the initiation of these engagements to the end of this process. Which is followed by a reflection on *The Body* as a site of struggle, responding to the first sub-research question, noting key themes that were identified in which queer bodies were *Alienated in Coming Out*, a reality reflected in *The Body Excluded* within the processes of the church, with their right to *Participation Denied*. Which leads me to a discussion on *The Queer Church*, responding to the second sub-question exploring the ideo-theological underpinnings of the church. Engaging how queer individual feels *Liberated and Allowed to Be* in this space. Further reflecting on the idea of being *Unified Yet Segregated*, examining the gap in which queer individuals cannot fully *Socially Transition* into queer spaces of worship. Finally responding to the third research sub-research question, exploring ways in which we could begin the process of *Queering the Queer*. Reimagining *the Church as a Place of Healing*, regardless of gender and sexuality. Redefining the image of God and our understanding of scripture, as we begin to affirm all individuals as bodies *Made in God's Image*.

6.2. Language

One of the observations made was that of language as a powerful tool; its power to affirm those that are unsure of themselves and the ability to oppress those that are not positively made visible by it. This is one of the things that I took note of in the narratives of the participants of this study. Knowing that being able to tell your story allows one to start the process of healing and reflection and being able to tell that story in your language brings a sense of comfortability and confidence. *Sadly, being of Zulu descent, the main language used to engage in this discussion does not give that sense of affirmation when the language itself does not positively affirm your identity as a queer person.* "The relationship between language and gender has largely reflected how linguistic practices, among other kinds of practices, are used in the construction of social identities relating to issues of masculinity and femininity" (Williams, 2011:3).

Through this, we can see the ability of language to shape one's idea of gender concerning others and in relation to their understanding of sexual roles within relationships. With language, we

can understand the acceptable societal norms in terms of gender expression and sexual orientation, as well as what is shunned upon through the tone with which we express that language. Like many contexts, “South Africa is binarized in the way it thinks about sex and gender” (Reygan, 2014:713). *Which is no different within the Zulu culture in which the language itself creates the binary between what are the acceptable gender roles and sexual orientations through the explicit terms used.* Terms that not only show the unaccepting nature of the culture with regards to queer bodies but also the perceptions that are held by the members of its community within the derogatory language used (Reygan, 2011:714). In which homosexuality is understood through terms such as ‘Isitabane’ and ‘Skhesana’, which are labels “attached to sexual minorities...derived from dominant social discourses and meta-narratives” (Sithole, 2015:196), forming identities that are relational (Reygan, 2011:714; Sithole, 2015:196).

Through the conversation held with the participants of this study, I began to recognize the *difficulties they were faced with when trying to share their narratives through their home language, isiZulu.* Noting the automatic shift to the English language when referring to gender and sexual orientation, for the lack of a better word within their language. There was an un-comfortability recognized as well within the harshness in their tone when using derogatory isiZulu terms to express their anger and pain. Which in agreement with Davids (2019) and his colleagues, highlighted a need for an embodied reclaiming of the term 'Isitabane' to reaffirm queer bodies within their language (Davids et al., 2019:9). Using the idea of 'Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology', to strip these terms of their shameful nature using 'Isitabane' to affirm the visibility of queer bodies within their own culture in a life-giving way (Davids et al., 2019:9). Reimagining the term 'Isitabane' so that "it might be used as a better conceptual tool to conduct radical and cultural, political critique when it comes to LGBTI in South Africa" (Davids et al., 2019:11). Creating safe conducive environments that do not only become accepting of black queer Christian bodies within the African culture but also raising awareness of the history of black queer individuals within the South African context. To affirm the humanity and dignity of queer bodies, *re-appropriating the term* “as a signifier of proud self-identification” (Davids et al., 2019:11-12).

6.3. Power

Within the process of collecting data, I came across several challenges, but the second factor following that of language that came as a surprise was that of power. A factor that may not be visible to those affected by it, as Percy (1998) notes that, "power is known only by its reification, which is ultimately an indirect but material way of inferring that power might be at work". Concurring with this, as an outsider looking in on the process, I believe I began to observe the indirect materialization of power in various ways within the data collection process. Firstly, observing it before the data collection processes when one of the participants agreed to be part of the process and then later became sceptical of the process and requested that I ask for permission from their religious leader to allow them to be a participant within this study. An interesting challenge within this process not because I was limited by time and could not fulfil this request, but because it indirectly *reflected the power dynamics within the church*, raising awareness of the amount of authority the leader had been given over the narrative of this individual. Which is something I observed as the participant became aware that a religious leader belonging to one of the branches of the church, would be present in the focused group discussion. Noting how the power dynamics would be a barrier to the participant sharing their story.

Through a statement made by Kearsley (2016), I became aware of the power given over the narratives of individuals within the church (Kearsley, 2016:10). Reminding me of the power held within heteropatriarchal faith spaces in which stories are silenced unless permission is given to share acceptable parts of those narratives. Opening my eyes to what Kearsley (2016) views as a complexity in observing power within the church, in which he shares that there are "contrasts between harmful and productive power – and sometimes it comes down to understanding the – relationship between 'power over' (power advantage obtained by one over another) and 'power to' (power as efficacy, or life-giving to the other)" (Kearsley, 2016:10). Which in reflecting on this challenge made me aware of the power dynamics uprooted in this engagement. Which leads me to question, *at what point does life-giving power become 'power over' without us being aware of this.*

This then led me to my second observation which was noted during the focused group discussion, in conversation with a religious leader within the queer church and those who ranked lower, in terms of being positioned as assistants in the processes of the church. In which I noticed that even though the conversation flowed incredibly well in terms of participants responding to questions, *there was an instance where one of the participants had to apologize*

to the pastor before saying something that could sound negative about the church. Even requesting that they do not mention the queer church in question as it is known to the pastor. This opened my eyes to the fact that calling out heteropatriarchy within the church, in the presence of authority will always remain a challenge. As noted by Percy (1998) when he states that "one of the difficulties of studying power is that it is not one thing to be observed" (Percy, 1998:9). Which is important in that within this process Pastor Sibisi made us aware of our biases in his calm demeanour and insights, but because of his position within this context, participants still felt apologetic about sharing experiences informed by these systems within the church. Raising awareness of the fact that power is complex and cannot be viewed through a single conversation.

Through this, I also recognized how we passively give away our power to those in positions of authority even within the queer church. Giving them control, handing over our sense of ownership over our stories to belong and be validated, which is something I found interesting within the queer space. Which is a phenomenon which I also viewed using Indecent Theology as a lens, realizing that we need to problematize "layers of multiple oppression" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2), within the church. Giving queer bodies the ability to view hierarchal oppression, not only within the heteropatriarchal faith spaces but also within queered spaces. Through this, we begin to question the systemic realities that inform the power dynamics within the church. Highlighting the need to claim back our stories and the power we wilfully give away, understanding that oppression is not only visible within the heteronormative sense and it differs for each of us. It needs to be clear that "oppression is something we cannot have in common because it is built on multiple contradictory elements depending on our contexts" (Isherwood, 2003:143; Townes, 2003:169), and it needs to be recognized in all forms. "There is no denying the capacity of power within the church to effect change, bring order, transform and challenge" (Percy, 1998:16). Because of this, we need to start creating spaces where we engage in conversations looking into what we could do to *reduce the life-denying effects of power within the church.*

6.4. The Body

To examine the first sub-research question which aims to investigate the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape, I engaged questions focusing on the experiences of the body in the process of becoming. Firstly, requesting that participants share

their stories of becoming by sharing their experiences as queer bodies growing up within a community of isiZulu descent. Further exploring this through questions engaging their experiences within the heteronormative faith landscape as they began to become visible within these spaces. Through this, I became aware of "the body as a site of oppression" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:15), through which belonging, and exclusion are reflected. Identifying three main themes through which the body becomes alienated in coming out, and in the process excluded within the church through the stripping of the right to participate. Within this discussion I focus on the body as a site of struggle, sharing theological insights using Body Theology as my main theoretical frame as "we find enlightenment from the denial of the body" (Van Niekerk, 2012:371).

6.4.1. Alienated in Coming Out

"The body is symbolic in human culture, it is the means by which the person and the community express themselves" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:10), and it is the starting point of theological reflection within the church. It is through this understanding that we realize that "queer experiences are central in the creation of theology" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:10), and therefore the body itself is central to the process of understanding the systems that inform queer realities. Through my engagements with the participants of this study, I began to understand "what it means to be human in a way that is no longer defined by dominant culture" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:22), to be the 'other' within a theological space that reinforces a norm informed by heteropatriarchy.

Queer bodies within the African faith landscape, have been viewed as the disruptive other within the church. Not only led to believe that they are a body overcome by sin, but also a product of colonial rule within the African context, meant to destroy "African traditions and heterosexual family values" (Milani, 2014: 83; Msibi, 2011:55). Which is an understanding that is also shared within the African faith landscape, viewed through an article by Obasola (2013), in which he quotes Archbishop Peter Akinola, as he stated that "In our African setup when we talk about a man cohabitating with another man, it is an abomination" (Obasola, 2013:78; Mkasi, 2013:3). A statement speaking to the existence of men and women who engage in same-sex relationships, further stating that "sodomy also involves the act of lesbianism, which has been condemned by various traditions and cultures, seen as an act which is seen to pervade various societies" (Obasola, 2013:79). Outbursts of hate speech that not only

show a lack of acceptance and disregard for sexual minorities, but also those who do not conform to the heterosexual ideal of gender expression and gender performativity. Which is viewed as an “act” that is punishable within various ways within Africa society, with “political leadership fuelling violence and hatred against the LGBTI+ community” (Sithole, 2018:14). Highlighting a need for urgent intervention within the African faith landscape. Where “Most of the African population is considered to be religious and mostly Christian” (Gunda, 2017:7; Sithole, 2018:16).

"Patriarchy determines how we see ourselves and the world" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:16), making the body central to the reflection of that which informs our reality. Because of this, "it is hard to talk about African queer bodies without talking about culture, spirituality and religion as they form part of who we are" (Sithole, 2018:18), as these shape our identity as well as how we relate to others. Assisting in terms of identifying "normative views about gender difference – prescribing – what we should wear, how we should speak and how we should sit or stand" (Milani, 2014:79). These are the foundations of African identity as they enforce our culture and our traditions, defining societal norms and expectations of individuals who are a part of our communities. Which then becomes a place of great disruption within the community when bodies do not conform to the norms that have been placed by society to ensure "societal growth". *It is within this perceived disruption that the body becomes "a site of oppression and rebellion" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:22), a reality that is made visible within the church and one that was consistent in the stories shared by the participants of this study.*

Through this I began to see a need, agreeing with Sithole (2018), through which we need to look at the Christian church and how they deal with sexuality, with a special interest on queer individuals (Sithole, 2018:16). Addressing the failure of the church to understand that "we are body-selves that are gendered biologically and sexually, who have varying social orientations, who need intimacy, who has conflicted feelings about what it means to be bodied" (Nelson, 1992:45). We need to open up theological spaces that understand that "masculinity, femininity and gender performance are interwoven in multiple and complex ways that ultimately disrupt the binary upon which normative assumptions of sexual difference are based" (Milani, 2014:83). A failure that has resulted in the exclusion and complete alienation of queer bodies within the African faith landscape, a reality that was also shared within the experiences of participants within this study. Made visible by Londeka when they shared that “*someone found out about my sexuality and I was reported to the elders and they prayed for me. They did not*

chase me out, but they treated me differently...I became a demon, my good work did not matter". Churches, schools and communities treat heterosexuality as normal, anything outside of this is seen as deviant" (Mkasi, 2013:9), and is punishable either by violence, harassment or exclusion.

6.4.2. A Body Excluded

"People break gendered and other norms all the time – nevertheless what seems to be of greater importance within the church and within society – is how we link bodily poses, facial expressions, haircuts, clothing and even drinks with either men or women" (Milani, 2014:79). Which is one of the greatest challenges within the queer community, in which bodies do not perform their genders in line with the expected societal norms, and do not conform to societal expectations of the type of relationship they should be in. Placing a focus on the body as a disruption, with the main struggle being that of understanding that "there are different bodies of the people of God in God's trinity, everybody could belong, without being forced to choose or assume a sexual identity" (Mkasi, 2013:17).

Seen as a site of rebellion, queer bodies are placed in isolation to avoid the corruption of other members of the church, which is something that we also noted when Nonkuthalo stated that "*bengihamba ngiya enkonzweni ngingunyawe nginjalo, ngihlala ngedwa, esami isihlalo singathintwa ngoba shuti ngangingcole ngalolohlobo lokuthi akumelanga ukuthi ngidibane nabanye*" (*I continued to go to church even though I had been displaced, I sat alone, they didn't touch my chair because I must have been so dirty that I was not allowed to be near others*). Through this, we see that "the church has done its fair share of sexually dehumanizing whole groups of persons, thus there are many sexual strangers in the land" (Nelson, 1992:23, Davids et al., 2019:32). Even though there seems to be a positive shift in terms of conversations regarding sexual minorities and gender diverse groups, there is still a **huge gap between theological discourses erring towards inclusion and the experiences of queer bodies within the church**. Which shows that "our images of God need rethinking" (Nelson, 1992:24) within the church as they continue to marginalize the bodies of those that are not seen to fit the description or ideal that we have of God.

Using Body Theology as my main theological lens in this regard, I began to realize that queer bodies have become essential to the way we talk about oppression within the church and how

we view the bible and its message of inclusion. Beginning with "the concrete – with the – fleshly experience of life, with bodies at the margins, with bodies that are tortured and raped" (Nelson, 1992:42), as well as excluded due to how we understand the body of Christ and the interpretation of God's word. As such, queer experiences have become "central in the creation of theology" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:10), as queer bodies have revealed how "the body carries a great weight under patriarchal theology" (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998:15). Revealing the systemic realities that continue to dictate what should be considered normal within society and the church, revealing the body as "a great source of anxiety – which we typically – want desperately to control that which we fear" (Nelson, 1992:37). Revealing the power of the body to disrupt the process of becoming queer or maintain systemic oppression in remaining silent.

We need to begin to rethink the "bias against the body as impure, sinful and distracting from the spiritual" (Van Niekerk, 2012:371), as we cannot experience the one without the other. We cannot make sense of the world around us if we refuse to realise the complexities that lie in the bodily experiences of spirituality and sexuality. "Our bodies are vulnerable, exposed to the powers of nature" (Van Niekerk, 2012:370), and it is through our bodies that we begin to make sense of the world around us, that we become and find belonging. Which means we need to *stop viewing the body as a prison for the soul and begin to view it as the main element through which we access the soul and find our relatedness towards others, God, and ourselves* (Van Niekerk, 2012:371). Which I believe is an element of faith that has been discovered by black queer Christian bodies within this study through their experiences. An element of affirmation that I found when Merc stated that *"for me...I don't need validation from other people or the outside, I think I have done enough validation through myself because of what I have gone through". These are narratives that show a sense of resilience, a reclaiming of queer identity and an agency within the church, fighting against "traditional Christian views of the body"* (Van Niekerk, 2012:371). Finding the Image of God in the "whole embodied human being...in the body and soul" (Van Niekerk, 2012:372), from the disruption of the body.

6.4.3. Participation Denied

Being awakened to this sense of agency, I began to pay attention to the ability of the church to take life in the way in which it excludes through its processes, an ability that has contributed greatly to the displacement of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Focusing on the

systemic realities that inform the experiences of the church for queer bodies that view themselves as members within the church. Experiences that have not been reflected as pleasant within the narratives of queer individuals within the African faith landscape. Drawing on the stories reflected by the participants of this study, in which Pastor Sibisi shared that *“I was responsible for running the branches at an early age, the feelings were there but I did not date anyone...they gave me high positions until I came out...they said I was attacked by demons”*. Which again addresses the issue of power within the church, in which it minimizes what it cannot relate to, revealing the power of the underlying systemic realities that strip away authority even from those in positions of leadership upholding these structures. Giving a clear view of the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within the systems and processes of the church, which demand that all bodies conform to what is deemed the “natural order” of the church to be able to belong and participate within the church.

"Normative heterosexuality is a social construction" (Schneider, 2000:211), that not only predicts the order of intimate relationships and the order of the church but also predicts one's positionality within the home and the community, therefore defining the place of the body within the presence of God. Through this, exercising a "natural splitting of the world into masculine and feminine experiences...thus creating a split between 'good' and 'bad' gender identity extending to sexuality with heterosexuality socially positioned as 'good', mature sexuality and homosexuality as 'bad', primitive sexuality" (Judge, 2009:12). Because of this, the church has been successful in convincing its followers the heteronormative is aligned with the will of God, while the 'other' conforms to the earthly needs of the flesh. A spiritual dualism that perceives sexual aspects of the body as sin, defining queer bodies as sexual deviants within the church (Nelson, 1992:30). A reality that became clear through Ayanda's story when she stated that *"Esontweni labastraight it was not easy, you are supposed to change indlela ogqoka ngayo if you are going there ngoba wafika ugqoke ngalendlela okwazi ukubonakao ngayo ukuthi you are lesbian, they can change indlela aba preacher ngayo and preach about you or something bethole ubufakazi ngawe"* (In the heterosexual church it was not easy, you are supposed to change the way you dress if you're going there because if you come dressed in a way that makes it apparent that you are lesbian, they could even change what they wanted to preach about or make an example out of you). Which ultimately results in the church stripping away people's ability to participate within the church to alienate, which I found within Nonkuthalo's story when she shared that *“ngayekiswa ngisho ukunikela, bengasadingi kwamali yami”* (I was even asked to stop giving my offerings, they did not even want my money).

These experiences show the power of patriarchy within the church in the African faith landscape through which religion reinforces and legitimizes these gender dichotomies, stripping those that are viewed as deviant of their right to be visible within the church. With each dichotomy position coming with its “prescribed roles, values, expectations, and responsibilities – dictating – socially appropriate ways of feeling, thinking, and doing...they tell us what to wear in the morning” (Judge, 2009:11). Heteropatriarchy continues to determine which bodies can fully participate within the church, putting processes in place to punish bodies that live outside of these norms. An “abuse of power against those that are perceived as deviant, weaker, or socially unnormalized” (Palm, 2016:58). Fighting against “genders and sexualities that contradict the patriarchy – through which queer bodies – are silenced, undermined and at times attacked” (Judge, 2009:14). This is a reality that has contributed to a need for alternative spaces of worship in which queer bodies can be free to worship and praise without prejudice or judgement.

6.5. The Queer Church

To explore the second sub-research question, which investigates how ideo-theological ideas of queer church perpetuate heteropatriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I engaged questions examining the shift in the experience of the church as the participants of this study moved from heteropatriarchal spaces of worship to the queer church. Through this, I wanted to understand what contributed to their affirmation within this space, a sense of belonging that they could not find within the heteropatriarchal church. Further examining their understanding of gender and sexuality concerning the queer church and how this could contribute to the oppression of queer bodies. This led me to identify three major themes in which the participants expressed that they felt that they were liberated within the queer church, unified in their purpose within this space and *yet segregated* by some of the processes informed by systems of heteropatriarchy that have been put in place. Revealing an important *aspect of transformation in which we need to socially transition within our understanding of the church to be fully liberated.*

6.5.1. Liberated and Allowed to be

Queer bodies within the African faith landscape have moved towards creating alternative spaces of worship in which all bodies are invited to come as they are. Creating spaces deconstructing “a moral order which is based on heterosexual constructs of reality, which organises categories of approved social and divine interactions” (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2). Creating spaces of liberation and acceptance for queer individuals within the church. An experience that I found was affirmed by Mercury when he shared that “*I was allowed to be myself, allowed to wear pants*”, *I am no longer hindered in His presence*”. ***Showing great freedom in the way in which the queer church challenges the systemic realities that contribute to the exclusion of queer bodies within the queer church.*** Presenting a ***transformative ecclesiology*** through which the church destabilizes structures informed by patriarchy. An observation made drawing on Indecent Theology as the main lens through which we view how queer bodies can challenge the patriarchal norms that alienate queer individuals within heteropatriarchal faith spaces (Althaus-Reid, 2000:13).

Written from the margins of sexual normality and at the bottom of Christian faith and, on the bodies of the oppressed whose sexuality has been brought into question, Indecent Theology becomes a great starting point for a ***transformative ecclesiology***. Making us understand that "when we are torn from our embodiment by those who know best (patriarchy), we become vulnerable and become the absence we are told we are" (Isherwood, 2003:143), which is a silence that we cannot accept. Queer bodies need to become visible within its processes, queering the heteronormative and the patriarchal ideologies that have become the foundation of our being within the church. Taking away the right of authority to strip away the right to belong and to participate within the church. We need to become visible and we need to fight against that which threatens us, becoming visible as indecent and unwanted to raise awareness and to shift that which belittles us. Actively challenging the “powers which control and dehumanize people’s lives” (Althaus-Reid, 2000:19). Which then becomes ***a reality that we need to challenge within the queer church as well.***

6.5.2. Unified Yet Segregated

Indecent Theology requires that we “problematize and address the mythical layers of multiple oppressions” (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2) within the church. Which also challenges queer bodies to ***call out processes that are informed by heteropatriarchy within their spaces, contributing to the exclusion of some bodies within the church when realized.*** Through my engagements with

the participants of this study, I found that there is a need to call into question the underlying processes that even within a unified queer space, segregate queer bodies, leaving them at the margins of Christian faith. An example is a statement made by Londeka when they mentioned that "I look masculine, but I do not want people to assume which box my masculinity should be in, I was forced to be in a box, forced to be ubaba (a father)". A statement that brings to light a challenge to the queer community, in which we become honest with ourselves. Noting that if we are going to be unbiased in our questioning of heteropatriarchy within the church, ***there is a need to be honest even within queer faith spaces.***

Even though there seems to be unity within the shared understanding that as queer individuals, we are bodies coming into this space to worship God as we are, without discrimination and being dehumanized, there seems to be a lack of understanding of what this fully means for all the members of the church. With gender roles and sexuality being brought into this space as the main foundation in terms of relatability within the church. The queer church goes against the purpose of a queer space. Which is why I agree with Judge (2009) when she states that "when interrogating sexualities in patriarchy, I believe it is imperative to bring heterosexuality as a social construct under scrutiny, for this is the dominant system that needs to be changed if we are to go anyway in addressing the continued marginalization of, and attack on, those whose sexualities do not conform" (Judge, 2009:11), which is also true of queer spaces.

6.5.3. Socially Transitioning

Within the previous chapter, I brought into question the lack of ability of the heteropatriarchal church to socially transition with the queer body, but in that, I did not address ***the lack of ability of queer individuals to fully transition into queer spaces.*** In this, I wish to highlight the lack of ability of queer bodies to fully transition out of the heteropatriarchal mentality of the order of things. Realizing that ***we cannot fully experience a queer environment while drawing on the heteronormative understanding of relationships, as well as the patriarchal understanding of hierarchal rule within the church.*** I was surprised when Pastor Sibisi mentioned that "if it were up to me, I would rather people were called by their names, they have the mentality that we are better than heteros, they are forcing things". Queer bodies will fail to find a full sense of belonging within the church if they continue to draw from that which oppresses them and does not recognize them. We need to move towards recreating a world in which queer bodies belong, a world in which we do not allow the pervasiveness of

heteropatriarchy to invade this space. Which is something that we can draw from Indecent Theology, to fight against this invasion as it “does not shield its eyes from unpleasant realities” (Isherwood, 2003:145). The unpleasant reality is that we have recreated that which does not recognize our full embodied sexuality and spirituality. Marginalizing those that have come to worship with us in a space that is meant to be inclusive and accepting of all sexual minorities and gender diverse individuals. Through Indecent Theology, we need to be truthful with ourselves, “finding an honest voice, *uncorrupted by theological necessities*” (Isherwood, 2003:147).

A voice that I believe we could also find using Queer Theology as our starting point through which queer bodies can begin to socially transition out of the heteropatriarchal mindset that allows queer individuals to recreate structures that marginalise and exclude. Drawing on Sazi’s statement in which she shares that “*it is a very queer-friendly church, really pro-trans and we have been fighting that trans narrative of saying it is either male or female, we are trying to run away to saying everybody could be who they want to be*”. A narrative that gives an idea of honesty that has already begun within the church in terms of gender roles and acceptable sexual roles, drawing on the real purpose of a queer space. Understanding that heterosexism– and patriarchy in part, name and frame our existence and our essence, and there is a need to break out of that and destabilize mentalities that continue to draw on this understanding (Townes, 2003:173).

Through Queer Theology we begin to challenge “the traditional notions about gender and sexuality” (Cheng, 2011:6), drawing on the understanding that “gender is a performative act constructed by patriarchy” (Cheng, 2011:8), and thus does not contribute to equal relations within a queered space. Which means we are challenged to “destabilize heteropatriarchal Christianity” (Cheng, 2011:8), that leads us to believe that we need to conform to heteropatriarchal norms to find belonging within the site of God, which starts with our mentality and how we view ourselves. As Pastor Sibisi stated that “*ama experiences amaningi engingawathandange is to see abazalwane coming at church with the mentality that they belong to hell noma ngabe sebekhona at church*” (*I have had a lot of experiences, and one of the experiences I did not like was seeing members of the church coming to church with the mentality that they have already been told that they belong in hell even though they have come to church*). We need to transition out of the mindset and the standards that have been defined by heteronormative faith spaces to find peace and belonging within the presence of God. Which

is a tool that we can find in the second definition of Queer Theology. In which Cheng (2011) defines Queer Theology as “talking about God completely aware of your sexuality and gender, challenging societal norms of gender and sexuality” (Cheng, 2011:8), being fully aware that you belong regardless of that which tells you that you do not.

This also means a full reclaiming of your position within the presence of God, fully worshipping and praising God with an awareness that you are *isitabane*, fully accepted in the sight of God. Using *Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology* to “remember our own experiences within faith communities” (Davids et al., 2019:9), to help us be aware of the bodies around us within queered spaces. Sharing our narratives to illustrate a “collective commitment of doing theology from the body” (Davids et al., 2009:9), to show an awareness of the oppressions of the bodies that we have come to worship and to serve with within the church. Creating an uncomfortable space for queer bodies through which we do not forget the reasons they have come to gather as one, by bringing up the term *isitabane*, being aware of “the offensive nature of the word – cracking – an open space for authentic conversation to destabilize neat gender binaries” (Davids et al., 2009:11), even within queered spaces of faith. Through which “*isitabanisation* unveils the uncomfortable ambiguities, complexities and looks at the intersections of race, and non-normative gender and sexual subjectivise” (Davids et al., 2019:11), allowing queer bodies to also call into question the cultural norms that define our identities as black queer Christian bodies within the African faith landscape. Recognizing that *fully socially transitioning into spaces of inclusion as queer bodies within the African context*, we must “destabilize these spaces by owning our spaces and destabilizing oppressive narratives” (Davids et al., 2019:31).

6.6. Queering the Queer

Reflecting on this journey, I found that there is a need to queer, queer spaces of faith. Which led me to the last sub-research question, which aims to explore ways in which Queer Theology could provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context. Engaging questions that revealed the ideal understanding of the church for participants within this study. Further exploring ways in which queer individuals relate to God from the margins of Christianity, engaging how they find affirmation in the word of God amidst the prejudices that they have experienced because of the interpretation of scripture. Finally, examining how queer individuals affirm their sexuality and their being concerning their

relationship with God, identifying the last two themes through which we respond to this question. Reflecting on *The Church as a Place of Healing* and the idea of being *Made in God's Image*.

6.6.1. *The Church as a Place of Healing*

Reflecting on the above we begin to realize that we cannot fully transition into inclusive spaces of worship, without **redefining our understanding of the church, God, and spirituality for ourselves**. Which also means that we have a responsibility to redefine what the bible positively means for us, by reading and interpreting it from its context. This is a lesson that was also learned when Pastor Sibisi shared that "ngikwazi uku-relator and ngenkathi kubhalwa lesi-scripture kade bsefasana nalesisimo, so mina manje ngifasana nasiphiso isimo, mina ngiphila ngaphansi kwamuphi umthetho, kungisize kakhulu lokho" (I relate to the bible by seeing what challenges they were faced with when the scripture was written, so now which challenges am I facing, which laws did they live under and which laws are there now).

It is important to be able to define scripture and the word of God in a way that is positive and makes sense to you, to redefine what the church means to queer individuals. An important aspect of Stabanisation which "calls for a radical way of reading, from our own experiences of exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation" (Davids et al., 2019:34). Redefining the word of God in a way that is untainted by heteropatriarchal reading and interpretation by reading the bible within its context, "creating a space for more bodies to matter" (Davids et al., 2019:35). Which is a realization that was made by Ayanda when she stated that "people get tired, sebezile ngoDavide a thousand times, batshele ngento ekhona, eyenzakalayo, eyenzeke izolo, eyenzeke kuwe, eyenzeke kumuntu oseduze nawe...so ibhaybheli limotivator mina ukuthi ngixhumane noNkulunkulu, ukuthi ngixhumane nomoya oyingcwele" (*people get tired, they have heard about David a thousand times. Tell them about what is happening, something that happened yesterday, that happened to you or someone you know...so the bible motivates me to connect to God and the Holy Spirit*).

6.6.2. *Made in God's Image*

Through my engagements with the participants, I found that spirituality is a personal aspect within religion, it is both social and individual in its relatedness to God, therefore calling us to

reimagine that relationship for ourselves. “Spirituality is seen as the essence of religion” (Belzen, 2009:205), and therefore does not hold the “negative connotations that religion has” (Belzen, 2009:206). Which removes the impurity that discriminates and marginalizes within Christianity, allowing queer bodies to redefine God for themselves and create a bond that is completely accepting of their embodied realities and spiritual needs in relation to sexuality itself.

This calls for a “celebration of our embodied love and desire that disrupts and destabilizes dominant heteronormative ideas about love, desire and relationships” (Davids et al., 2019:36). An important aspect found within a narrative shared by Sazi when she states that “*God to me is me because I am their image, I am her Image*”, an image that not only defines who she is as a queer body concerning God but also one that defines her relatedness to others. Further stating that “*today I can identify myself as a spiritual person*”, one that is untainted by societal norms of what defines that spirituality as a queer body, which agrees with one of the elements of re-imagining within the process of Stabanisation. Which states that there is “a need for reclaiming of our bodies and destabilizing that which is considered normal, proper and holy – challenging – the whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body” (Davids et al., 2019:37).

Which is a requirement of our ecclesiological processes within the church, highlighting the need for a ***transformative ecclesiology*** that focuses on strengthening the spiritual health of the members of the church, not one that forces conformation and fit into gender and sexual categories. Putting in place processes that invite us into a space of “more reflection. More conversation, more encounter and more embodied honesty as we truly believe the sum is more than the individual parts” (Davids et al., 2019:37). Through queer bodies we begin to see that a transformative ecclesiology calls for a disruption of systems within the church that shame those who do not conform to heteropatriarchal strictures of belonging, destabilizing identities, allowing for ***deeper, critical thought in religion*** (Schneider, 2000:212). Looking into the disruption of “heterosexuality as a benchmark for sexuality formations” (Sithole, 2018:35), creating spaces “intended to liberate everyone from contemporary constructions of sexuality” (Sithole, 2018:36). With izitabane assisting in terms of resisting “the binary understanding of sex, relationships and marriage” (Davids et al., 2019:37), within the church as they have begun the move away from the normative understanding of sexual and gender normality within the church.

6.7. Conclusion

Queer individuals within this study, helped in terms of identifying the gap that exists within queer literature. A gap in which progressive theological discourse within the church in terms of sexuality and gender has not become visible within the lived realities of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. At the same time revealing a gap in terms of the ability of queer bodies to fully transition from heteropatriarchal faith spaces into queered spaces of worship away from the systemic realities that oppressive sexual minorities and gender diverse individuals within the African faith landscape.

Within this chapter, I gave an idea of my positionality, making clear my purpose for conducting this study. I then discussed and analysed the data collected within the process of this study. Firstly, speaking to the challenges presented within the isiZulu language in the process of having discussions of gender and sexuality. Highlighting a limitation in terms of being able to address issues of gender and sexuality if we do not have the words to help us engage the discussion, shifting into a Western language to make sense of our identity. Which then led to an analysis of the power dynamics within the process of data collection. Reflecting on how we freely give of our narratives to those that we place in positions of authority. Speaking to the need to receive permission when we need to share our stories, as well as how we become apologetic as queer individuals within a queer space when questioning the systemic realities that feed into the exclusion of queer bodies within the queer faith landscape.

Thereafter, I went on to engage in the data collection process. Firstly, focusing on The Body as the main point of reflection, giving an analysis through the first three themes engaging the reality of the queer body as the 'other' within the church. Discussing the idea of queer bodies being *Alienated in Coming Out, A Body Excluded, and Participation denied*. In which we view the queer body as a site of struggle in the process of becoming within heterosexual faith spaces. With their embodiment being viewed as disruptive and alien to the systems of heteropatriarchy, fighting against the natural order of relatedness within the church, using *Body Theology* as the frame through which we view this phenomenon. Within the second part of this discussion, I explored The Queer Church as the main point of discussion, reflecting on ideo-theological underpinnings of the queer church. Drawing on themes that engaged the queer church as space where queer bodies felt *Liberated and Allowed to Be and Unified Yet Segregated*. Which then

led to a focus on the struggle of queer bodies to fully *Socially Transition* into queer spaces of worship, using *Indecent Theology* as the main theoretical frame within this engagement.

Using *Queer Theology* as the link through which we begin to queer the mentality of queer bodies within the church. With *Queering the Queer* being my main area of focus within this part of the discussion, I then explored the idea of a transformative ecclesiology by engaging the idea of spirituality through a link found in data collected. Through which queer bodies view *The Church as a Place of Healing* while reimagining a relationship with God where queer bodies are *Made in God's Image*. Realizing that we cannot fully transition into inclusive spaces of worship, without redefining our understanding of God, spirituality, and the church for ourselves. A realization that is noted with the assistance of queer bodies as they have begun the process of destabilizing normative understandings of God.

Chapter 7

Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

“We find God saying to Moses that I am that I am. Meaning I am whatever you want me to be in any other situation. So, he could be Jehovah the Father, Jehovah the Yahweh, Jehovah Nish...She could be a Woman, she could be a Feminist, she could be a Man, he could be whatever They want to portray to you”. – Sazi, 16 December 2020 (Individual Interview)

Within this journey, I realized that to be Christian and queer is to be liberated from all the fixed understandings of who God is. It is the ability to redefine the Divine in a way that frees the spirit and affirms the person in you. Through this process, I was able to interview six individuals that taught me to live outside of the expectations of who Christ is supposed to be and what scripture is supposed to mean to me. I found that their minds are liberated within themselves, but structurally they are bound as a collective. Most individuals find peace in the presence of God, but it is the structure of the church that disturbs that peace in the processes of finding a sense of belonging in the presence of others. We have built a culture in which we are spiritually stronger as individuals than we are together and this defeats the purpose of union within the church, as well as the queer space of worship.

Within the previous chapter, I reflected on my positionality as a researcher engaging in this process. Sharing my interests in this journey concerning the participants of this study. Revealing a concern in terms of the limitation presented by the isiZulu *Language* when discussing issues of gender and sexuality as pertaining to the LGBTI+ community. Recognizing the difficulties, they were faced with when trying to share their narratives through their home language. Noting the automatic shift to the English language when referring to gender and sexual orientation, for the lack of a better word within their language. I also noted observations made around issues of *Power* within the queer faith landscape. A phenomenon that I viewed using Indecent Theology as a lens, realizing that we need to problematize "layers of multiple oppression" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:2), within the church. Giving queer bodies the ability to view hierarchal oppression, not only within the heteropatriarchal faith spaces but also within queered spaces of worship.

This was all carried out to help fulfil the main aim of the research project, which worked towards discovering ways, if any, through which queer bodies might help to destabilize hetero-patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality in the African faith landscape. Focusing on this with the guidance of the three main sub-research questions identified at the beginning of this project, through which I tried to explore the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape. While investigating how ideo-theological ideas of queer church perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Further examining how Queer Theology could provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context.

To achieve this, I conducted a qualitative study with the approach being that of qualitative research, through which I interviewed three queer individuals within a focused group discussion, using Zoom as the preferred online platform, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic. This helped in terms of working towards gathering a collective shared experience of the reality of black queer Christian bodies within the African context, shedding a light on the challenges faced by queer bodies within the South African faith landscape. Leading to conversations engaging the experiences of each participant within the queer church, discussing ways through which everyone has been able to find affirmation in the presence of God and concerning others within the church. This was further engaged within individual discussions with five black queer Christian individuals, using WhatsApp as the preferred online platform for engagement. Participants included individuals that self-identified as black, queer and Christian, of isiZulu descent and have been members of the queer church for at least two years. They varied in terms of positionality within the church, which included a pastor, preacher, assistants within the church and amaDwala (mothers or women of prayer), everyone identifying differently within the LGBTI+ spectrum.

7.2. The Body

To help me respond to the first sub-research question, I reflected on questions identifying the body as a site of rebellion within the African context and the church specifically. Noting that queer bodies are constantly placed at the center of theological discourse as a disruption and as flesh corrupted by sin, as well as bodily temptations. Doing a theology from the body, I reflected on the narratives of black queer Christian individuals as bodies informed by religion

and culture. Identifying three main themes through which the body projects systems of oppression and exclusion within the church.

7.2.1. Alienated in Coming Out

When exploring the first theme, I realized that the body reflects the community in which it is located. Through the body we reveal the systemic realities informing religion and culture within this space, with queer bodies uncovering the consequences of living outside of these norms. Through these narratives, I found that the queer body is still viewed as a product of colonial rule within the African context, with queer individuals perceived as bodies sent to destroy "African traditions and heterosexual family values" (Milani, 2014:83; Msibi, 2011:55). Through this, I began to explore the body as the starting point of theological reflection and saw the need for a transformation in theological engagements concerning issues of sexuality, with a special interest in queer sexualities. Recognizing that there is a need for us to open theological spaces that understand that "masculinity, femininity and gender performance are interwoven in multiple and complex ways that ultimately disrupt the binary upon which normative assumptions of sexual difference are based" (Milani, 2014:83).

7.2.2. A Body Excluded

I noted that even though there has been a visible shift in terms of conversations regarding sexual minorities and gender diverse bodies within the church. Findings within this study suggest that there is a gap between theological discourses erring towards the inclusion of queer bodies within the hetero-patriarchal faith spaces within the African faith landscape and the experiences of queer bodies within the church. With findings suggesting that "our image of God needs rethinking" (Nelson, 1992:24), as our understanding continues to marginalize those that are found at the margins of heteropatriarchy. Revealing the need to rethink the idea of the body as a prison for the soul, viewing it as the main element through which we find relatedness to others, God, and ourselves (Van Niekerk, 2012:371). Understanding the need to do theology from the body to help fight against "traditional views of the body" (Van Niekerk, 2012:371). Finding the image of God in the "whole embodied human being...in the body and soul" (Van Niekerk, 2012:372), changing the theological discourse from the agency of disruptive bodies.

7.2.3. Participation Denied

Through this, I was also able to examine the ability of the church to take life in the way that excludes. Paying special attention to the processes of the church as they are informed by systems of heteropatriarchy, contributing to the displacement of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Giving a clear view of the pervasiveness of heteropatriarchy within the systems and processes of the church, which continue to demand that all bodies conform to "normative heterosexuality" (Schneider, 2000:211). Exercising a "natural splitting of the world into masculine and feminine experiences" (Judge, 2009:12), with rebellion resulting in the church stripping away the right to participate within the church to further alienate that which they do not agree with. Which is a reality that was affirmed in the narratives shared by the participants of this study. This is a reality that has contributed to a need for alternative spaces of worship in which queer bodies can be free to worship and praise without prejudice or judgement.

7.3. The Queer Church

An element of this research that I investigated in response to the third sub-research question, through which I engaged in conversations examining the shift in the experiences of the church as the participants moved from heteropatriarchal churches to queer spaces of worship. Exploring how queer individuals find affirmation within the church, examining their understanding of gender and sexuality concerning the queer church. Identifying three main themes through which queer bodies revealed contradictions within these spaces as they found a space of liberation, as well as unity and yet segregated within the processes of the church. Uncovering an urgent need to find ways in which we could fully socially transition out of the systemically informed spaces of heteropatriarchy into queer spaces of worship on a psychological level.

7.3.1. *Liberated and Allowed to Be*

I found that the queering of heteropatriarchal systems proved to open welcoming spaces for queer bodies within the church, which was observed in the narratives of the participants as they expressed the joy in being allowed to come as they are, which provided a sense of liberation. Presenting a transformative ecclesiology through which the queer church has begun to destabilize some systems of patriarchy within queer spaces of worship. A phenomenon which

I analyzed using Indecent Theology as the basis through which we could begin to call out patriarchy within the church (Althaus-Reid, 2000:19). Showing a need for queer bodies to become visible within its processes, queering the heteronormative and the patriarchal ideologies that have become the foundation of queer relatedness within the church. Identifying a need to actively challenge the "powers which control and dehumanize people's lives" (Althaus-Reid, 2000:19), with queer narratives sharing a reality informed by heteropatriarchy that needs to be challenged within the queer church as well.

7.3.2. Unified Yet Segregated

This led to conversations questioning the underlying systems that inform processes that even within unified queer spaces surface, segregating queer bodies, leaving those who do not conform at the margins of the queer Christian faith. Which brought to light the need to destabilize heteronormativity as the norm within the queer church. Moving towards fighting against a mentality that openly shows that "we have become displaced, removed from our bodies by an invasion of our minds" (Isherwood, 2003:144). Which shows a need to fight against systems that marginalize and oppress queer bodies even within queer faith spaces. Using the foundations of Indecent Theology as the lens through which we find an "honest voice, uncorrupted by theological necessities" (Isherwood, 2003:147), that exclude.

7.3.3. Socially Transitioning

Which is a voice that I also found using Queer Theology as a lens exploring a possible framework through which we could start the process of socially transitioning out of the heteropatriarchal mindset that allows queer bodies to recreate systemically informed structures, as well as processes that marginalize and exclude. Challenging "the traditional notion about gender and sexuality" (Cheng, 2011:6), within the queer church as defined by heteronormative faith spaces. "Talking about God completely aware of your sexuality and gender, challenging societal norms of gender and sexuality" (Cheng, 2011:8), using *Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology* to "remember our own experiences within faith communities" (Davids et al., 2019:9).

7.4. Queering the Queer

So, to respond to the third sub-research question, I reflected on the abilities of queer bodies to find affirmation outside of the systems informed by heteropatriarchy. Looking at ways in which queer individuals could assist us in terms of queering, queer spaces of faith. Exploring Queer Theology as a possible lens through which we could achieve this. Engaging questions that reveal the ideal understanding of the church for participants of this study. Identifying two themes reflecting on the *Church as a Place of Healing* and the idea of being *Made in God's Image*.

7.4.1. *The Church as a Place of Healing*

This is a realization that finally led to the understanding that we cannot fully transition into inclusive spaces of worship without redefining what church means to us. Without redefining our understanding of God and spirituality for ourselves. Which also means taking the responsibility to redefine what the bible positively reinforces in us. Which is a lesson learned from the participants of this study, through which they highlighted the importance of redefining scripture and the word of God in a way that speaks positively and makes sense to you. An aspect in Stabanisation that “calls for a radical way of reading, from our own experiences of exclusion, discrimination and marginalization” (Davids et al., 2019:34).

7.4.2. *Made in God's Image*

Through this is found that this also means a “reclaiming of our bodies and destabilizing that which is considered normal, proper and holy – challenging – the whole story of creation, incarnation, and in our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body” (Davids et al., 2019:37). Which is something that I also found is a requirement of our ecclesiological processes, highlighting a need for a transformative ecclesiology that focuses on strengthening the spiritual health of the members of the church. With IZITABANE assisting in terms of resisting “the binary understanding of sex, relationships and marriage” (Davids et al., 2019:37), within the church. As they have begun to move away from the normative understanding of sexual and gender normality within the church.

7.5. Recommendations

Through this process, I identified a need for research engaging possible interventions in terms of the gap found in the process of socially transitioning out of the heteropatriarchal faith spaces into queer spaces of worship. Examining how queer bodies can leave heteropatriarchal spaces of worship, recreate their own spaces of faith and within that recreating systematic processes that are informed by heteropatriarchy, allowing for the exclusion and marginalization of some bodies within the church. This also includes a need to develop possible interventions through which we could begin to queer queered faith spaces for the full inclusion of all bodies within the church. Possibly achieving this through the assistance of izitabane within the church.

Through this, I also identified factors within the queered understanding of God and the church, through which we could create processes through which all bodies could be welcomed within the body of Christ. Looking at the idea of a transformative ecclesiology through which we could begin to queer systemically informed processes within the church that has proven to include and to exclude those who cannot conform to the normative heteropatriarchal understanding of the church. With the main aim being to develop *transformative interventions*, which will help guide various members within the church towards destabilizing ideologically informed by heteropatriarchal systems allowing for the policing of queer bodies and those that are perceived as inferior within the church. Combining methods informed by academia with strategic interventions that have been implemented in my line of work within the NGO landscape engaging issues of hate crimes, violence, and the vulnerability of queer bodies within the African faith landscape.

With this, I also noted a gap in which there is a need for research identifying ways through which we could begin to discuss the idea of sexuality and gender within our native language isiZulu. Possibly finding ways through which we can begin to appropriate the negative words used to positively affirm queer bodies in their conversations about gender diversity and sexual orientation, using Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology as the starting point for this research.

7.6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to discover ways, if any, through which queer bodies might destabilize hetero-patriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality in the African faith landscape. Identifying six black queer Christian individuals within the queer church, to explore the realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape, as previously noted

in literature collected within the field of social sciences and theological discourse. Also investigating how ideo-theological ideas of queer church perpetuate hetero-patriarchy in selected churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Further examining how queer theology could provide resources for capacitating queer churches to tap into their queerness within the African context. Using qualitative research as a preferred approach for collecting data, using Zoom and WhatsApp as preferred platforms for engaging with participants considering the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this research, I found a contradiction in the experiences of queer bodies within the African faith landscape. Noting that the stories shared reflected similarities in terms of their experiences within the hetero-patriarchal faith landscape, revealing feelings of displacement, rejection, marginalization, and exclusion in the process of coming out and becoming. Which led to a shift within the move to queered spaces of worship, in which everyone experienced a sense of belonging, a freedom to be and to participate within the church. Revealing a gap between the positive shift in theological discourse erring towards inclusion and the realities of sexual and gender diverse minorities within the African context. However, through these narratives, *I found that this feeling of displacement resurfaces within queer spaces of worship through which some queer churches in the quest to normalize queer spaces, reinforce processes informed by heteropatriarchy.* Through this, creating spaces that are unified in the quest to worship God without discrimination and exclusion, yet segregated in its systemically informed structures and processes.

However, through these narratives, the study suggests that queer bodies in their understanding of the image of God, spirituality, as well as their understanding of the ideal church, could become the starting point of theological discourse erring towards inclusion within the African faith landscape. With the assistance of izitabane, using Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology, a possibility is revealed through which queer bodies could redefine the church, helping us identify a transformative ecclesiology resisting the binary understanding of Christian worship. Creating faith spaces erring towards the inclusion of all bodies within the church by beginning the process of destabilizing hetero-patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality in the African context, by helping us rethink how we view God, scripture, and spirituality.

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Addendum 1



15 April 2019

University of KwaZulu-Natal
School of Theology – Gender, Religion and Health Department

To whom it may concern

The Gay and Lesbian Network (GLN) has received an application from a Master's student, Tracey Sibisi, Student number 219 085 177, at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg Campus, to conduct her research at the Gay and Lesbian Network.

Her research topic is, *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces*. The research aims to engage lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender individuals on the understanding of gender, sexuality, as well as gender roles in relation to God, as well as others within queer churches. Which takes into consideration the experiences of queer individuals within the church.

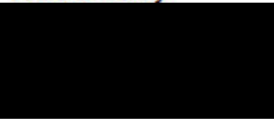
The objectives of the research are: 1. To explore the lived realities of black queer Christian bodies within the African landscape, 2. to investigate systems constituting the queer church, informing the experiences of black queer Christian bodies within the African queer faith landscape, 3. to explore Queer Theology as a helpful tool in capacitating black queer Christian bodies to tap into their queerness.

We have read her application letter and the ethical considerations the student aims to cover while conducting her interviews. This letter serves to confirm permission from the Gay and Lesbian Network for the student to conduct her interviews at GLN with the number of participants she requires.

In light of the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, the Gay and Lesbian Network will offer full support to the participants and the researcher during this process, ensuring that there are measures in place supporting the mental and emotional well-being of the participants, offering psychosocial support through the process of research and follow-up sessions after research has been conducted, should it be required. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, we understand that face-to-face counselling may not be feasible, however, telephonic counselling will be provided at no cost to the participant.

We thank you for considering the Gay Lesbian Network, it is always a pleasure having a helping hand in discovering new knowledge pertaining to issues regarding the LGBTI+ community and society as a whole.

Yours sincerely



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The Gay & Lesbian Network is a registered Non-Profit organization which is tax exempt and has Section 18 A (1) status.
All donations to the Network are tax deductible in terms of Section 18 A (1) at the Income Tax Act 1962, as amended.

Addendum 2



Changing Narratives – an African approach to enabling community level change

1
1

The Gay and Lesbian Network (GLN) is a registered non-profit organisation based in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa.

GLN was founded in 2003 and, for most of the past 16 years, it has worked primarily with, and in the interests of, young, black, unemployed and marginalized, LGBTI people living in and around Pietermaritzburg.

In the **early days**, our orientation was strongly around service provision to this community: providing safe spaces, addressing health issues and challenges of secondary victimisation within government facilities, promoting positive community activities. This people-centred, community work led to our emphasis on:

- ▶ **Working with the self.** We recognize that healing work and personal development often *has* to precede effective skills development, economic development or other kinds of 'outward' action; we also believe that people are the main instruments and initiators of change in communities and other human systems – thus our emphasis on developing our own and others' capacity as facilitators and change agents.
- ▶ **Including and connecting to the wider community.** LGBTI people do not exist in a vacuum; they come from families and larger communities. Therefore, these larger communities need to be involved and, ultimately, to benefit from our work for it to have been sustained and make a lasting impact.
- ▶ **Working in partnerships to augment our strengths and those of others.** There is value

in remaining humble and willing to learn, and in recognising the strengths and complementary skills and knowledge that partners can bring to the table.

In **recent years**, we have begun to expand our reach beyond Pietermaritzburg. This was done partly through partnerships with emerging LGBTI organisations and other partners, but also by finding ways of working directly with rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal.

Most of the stronger LGBTI organisations across the continent are based in cities, and they tend – by default, or because of the dangers associated with moving out of the city – to work primarily with urban constituencies. At the same time, it is clear that LGBTI people in rural and peri-urban spaces are largely unheard, under-served and often experience extremes of isolation alienation and trauma.

We felt challenged to find ways of moving beyond (relatively) safe and familiar urban spaces, and to work directly in rural areas within traditional Zulu culture, religion and governance. Learning to do this, has given rise to some new and exciting practices. Together with the foundations laid over the previous decade or more, these begin to constitute a coherent approach – a **methodology** – for producing change from *within* the paradigms and life worlds of traditional African culture.

Why does our approach matter?

Most of the discourse around LGBTI, gender, sexuality and human rights is framed in Western terms and spoken in colonial languages. In spaces like rural Kwazulu-Natal – and many others – these ways of speaking produce almost automatic resistance.

Whether or not people articulate it in these terms, these ‘outside/foreign interventions’ – and the imposition of human rights and SOGIESC¹ jargon (and the worldview/s which they encode) – is often experienced as encroaching on a culture already under siege by the tides of modernity and post-modernity. So, well-meaning efforts at change are often seen as the alien impositions of a white, English hegemony, regardless of whether they are imparted by local, black, isiZulu speakers or not. This in turn feeds the old lie that ‘homosexuality is unAfrican’ – a myth that persists in many places, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

This kind of resistance slows the process of attitudinal change, and makes it much more difficult to build a human rights culture in our communities and our society as a whole.

GLN’s approach to addressing issues of sexuality, gender and human rights, sidesteps much of this resistance by starting from a place of deep respect for local people’s cultures and beliefs. We have found that connecting to what *is* – and really acknowledging, understanding and valuing it – is often a necessary basis for change at depth, i.e. real impact. There is practical value in an approach that starts from, and builds on, indigenous knowledge, that expresses itself in the local language and dialect, and that positions itself as supportive, rather than inimical to, local cultural practices and belief systems.

To frame it differently:

- ▶ It is true that change involves disrupting systems, shaking up old ways of thinking

and being, and reexamining beliefs and assumptions about the world.

- ▶ However, before this is possible, one needs to be accepted and invited in... Seen as a friend, a neighbour, someone who is ‘like us’ and values what we value; not as an interloper, a threat, or a foreign missionary.
- ▶ The most effective disruptions arise from authentic relationship – friendship, mutual respect, love. When these conditions are not present, any challenge to deeply held beliefs is likely to harden people’s positions, rather than opening up new possibilities.

In a sense, building this kind of ‘friendship’ with communities and their leaders is at the heart of our approach to change – and, a critical aspect of what we aim to articulate in this paper.

Further, we believe that this approach to supporting cultural change and building healthy and inclusive communities has value beyond the spaces in which we work directly. We offer it for the consideration of practitioners and organisations committed to social justice, equity, community development and human development in other contexts – especially rural contexts where traditional belief systems play a powerful role in organising people’s live and interactions.

Our own application of this approach – addressing issues around LGBTI and human rights, and supporting change in communities from *within* their traditional cultural framework – convinces us of its value. We are seeing the beginnings of significant personal, cultural and systemic change as a consequence.

Communicating how our approach works is the primary purpose of this paper.

¹ Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

Secondly, GLN is at a point in its development when we seek increased investment that will

enable us to refine and deepen our practice, and better document its impact. This paper makes the argument for why this is worth investing in.1

1

What is our work? | The change we seek

GLN's broad purpose is to promote equality, respect and acceptance, and so, enable all people (including LGBTI people) to realise their human rights.

Our immediate focus is on the communities with whom we work directly, but over time, we hope to expand this influence further into KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and beyond, by sharing knowledge, insights and our approach. We also hope that our practice might have value on a wider stage – to practitioners and agencies working elsewhere on the continent.

Since we are LGBTI people, we have a special focus on the rights and realities of our own community, but we aim to undertake this work from an inclusive, whole-systems perspective within the broader communities with which we are invited to engage.

Some of the specific changes our work aims to achieve include:

- ▶ Greater acceptance and support for LGBTI people within themselves, their families (microsystem), their local communities, and key institutions (traditional leaders and healers, police, religious organisations, the health and education systems, etc.)
- ▶ A stronger, more resilient, better organised and networked LGBTI community (locally, and at a national level)
- ▶ Improved physical, emotional, mental and financial well-being for LGBTI people and the communities within which they live
- ▶ A reduction in incidents of discrimination and violence against LGBTI people, and, in general, in the communities with which we work

- ▶ Positive shifts in community-level discourse and cultural norms around LGBTI people and wider human rights issues

From a strategic and methodological perspective, the final bullet is the most critical of these. What is considered normal/acceptable/human/valuable is encoded in the language that people use and in the stories that frame and give meaning to their lives. This is both ephemeral (i.e. hard to grasp and pin down) – though easy to experience – and fundamental. Human existence – and certainly human existence within the African worldview – takes much of its meaning from the community or communities in which it is lived out.

Everyone who lives in a community or culture is implicated in its norms: its stories about what's OK and what's not; about how life *should* be; about who is worthy of respect (or not); about what it means to be a good man/woman/child.

Every child, adolescent, adult and senior's life is shaped by these stories – and their life possibilities are, to a significant extent, determined by them. To change the culture is to change the possibilities, and the nature of the system: the extent to which it supports development and flourishing, or produces misery and dis-ease.

This work cannot be done with a sledge hammer, or by imposing a set of new values, ideas and paradigms. Change has to be negotiated, and indeed, it needs to be discovered, learned and owned by the people who will live it out. Enabling this dynamic conversation to unfold, is the work we are committed to.

Addendum 3

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants**

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 25 May 2020

Greetings

My name is Tracey Sibisi, student number 219085177, a Masters candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Theology under the Gender, Religion and Health Department at the School of Theology. My supervisor is Prof. Charlene van der Walt, who is located at the School of Theology – Gender, Religion and Health Department at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She can be contacted at VanDerWaltC@ukzn.ac.za.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study titled *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces*. I would like the opportunity to interview you in a focused group discussion and spend a day observing your reality, as I am interested in the way in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender individuals define gender, sexuality and understand gender roles in relation to God, as well as others within the church and I believe that as a consistent member of the church, you are a great candidate for this research. I would like to get an understanding of your own experiences as a member of the LGBTI+ community within the church, so this means that there are no right or wrong answers as it is all based on your own understanding and experiences. The study is expected to enrol 9 participants, in 2 sites within KwaZulu-Natal. The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be two consecutive hours. The study is funded by the School of Theology under Gender, Religion and Health program.

The study may involve the sharing of past experiences, therefore uprooting past trauma and may bring discomfort in the process of research. In light of this a qualified social worker has been appointed to offer psychosocial support in the process of research to allow for closure and healing with continued support. Through this process I hope your story and your experiences will serve as a foundation in the process of healing, acceptance and engagement of LGBTI+ experiences within the church.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (_____).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact me at 0787077752 or email me at maswazisibisi@gmail.co.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001 Durban 4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Please note that:

- Your information will be used for scholarly research only and your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this focused group discussion, as well as observations captured, will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form within this study.

- The Focused Group Discussion will take an hour and the one-day observation will be determined by you and within your boundaries.

- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.

- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

Declaration/ Consent

I _____ have been informed about the study entitled *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces* by Tracey Sibisi, Student No, 219085177.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tracey Sibisi, at 0787077752 or alternatively email her at maswazisibisi@gmail.com.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001 Durban 4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Video-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Witness Date

(Where applicable)

Signature of Translator Date

(Where applicable)

Addendum 4



Building Community Heart

Incorporating Rape Crisis
LifeLine Pietermaritzburg
14 Princess Street
P.O. Box 2075
Pietermaritzburg
3200
Tel: 033 342 4447
Fax: 033 3453946
www.lifeonline.co.za

1 st Floor
Site Office 1 : Amajuba DM
ABSA Building
2 Whyte Street
Newcastle
2940
Tel: 034 312 8080

12 May 2020

University of KwaZulu-Natal
School of Theology – Gender, Religion and Health Department

To whom it may concern

Lifeline Pietermaritzburg has received an application from a Master's student, Tracey Sibisi, Student number 219 085 177, at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg Campus, requesting support for participants during the process of her research.

I understand that the topic of her research is, *Queering the Queer: Engaging Black Queer Christian Bodies in African Faith Spaces*. Which aims to engage lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender individuals on their understanding of gender, sexuality, as well as gender roles in relation to God, as well as others within queer churches. Taking into consideration the experiences of queer individuals within the church. A topic engaging sensitive issues that might bring up feelings of distress or trauma during the interview process.

In light of the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, LifeLine PMB would like to offer full support to the participants and the researcher, offering psychosocial support through the process of research and follow-up sessions after research has been conducted, should it be required. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, LifeLine will be able to offer counselling through their trauma crisis lines and online counselling services accessed through our website: www.lifelinepmb.co.za.

The social work professional assigned to this project is Sinikiwe Biyela, Council no: 1020474, should there be any queries, you may contact her at 033-342 4447.

Yours sincerely

NPO: 002-128 VAT: 4170240388 PBO: 390 003 027

rape crisis

Director: Mrs S Biyela Chairperson: Ms N Mkhize



Sihlkiwe Biyela
DIRECTOR LifeLine PMB

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, located in the bottom right area of the page.

LifeLine Pietermaritzburg
NPO 002-128