

**Creator God Most Beautiful:
A Contextual, Feminist Theological
and Aesthetic Look at
Women's Creativity, Spirituality and Theology
in South Africa**

by

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Abstract

Asking the question ‘What does beauty have to do with justice?’, I am concerned with women’s encounter, experience and expression of the Divine through their creativity, as well as the theological significance of women’s aesthetic expression and creativity in the contexts of their lives. As a potent, authentic locus of women’s spirituality, theology, and revelation of God, the aesthetic has critical implications for doing theology with women in South Africa. This thesis addresses concerns of full life for women in South Africa, and the Beauty of the Divine, as it is encountered and revealed through their creativity.

Against the backdrop of multiple life-denying structures and circumstances, and in light of liberating theologies for women, I discuss the power of Divine creative energy to promote full life for women in South Africa, as it is unleashed through their human creativity. Stories of women artists and crafters from different socio-economic contexts are analysed from theological, spiritual, psychological and ethical perspectives. The creative process and work are seen to bear significant fruit in their lives, with personal, spiritual, practical, communal, social and ethical implications for themselves and others.

Their creativity is then discussed in terms of the aesthetic in theology as a whole, an area called theological aesthetics. This includes ontological considerations of the Beauty of God, the encounter with beauty and its effects on the person who beholds it. Art is seen as a theological source as it reveals insights about being. I engage with key scholars such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, John W. de Gruchy, Michelle Gonzalez, Matthew Fox, and Susan A. Ross. Works of aesthetic scholars such as Elaine Scarry and Paul Crowther inform the deepening of my analysis, as do psychologists Anton Ehrenzweig, Rollo May and Graham Lindegger, and art historian Juliette Leeb-du Toit. Liberating theologies for women is a central nerve of my analysis and the works of scholars such as Mercy Oduyoye, Musimbi Kanyoro, Susan Rakoczy, Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar have been invaluable.

Among my conclusions is the prioritization of the aesthetic to the theological task in South Africa. Beauty is the ‘why’ of ‘why the good must be carried out’, and aesthetic expression is an interlocutor of women’s marginalized voices. At the same time, this research indicates that concerns, voices, and insights of women and feminist thinking have been marginal in the discourse on theological aesthetics.

The thesis formulates a feminist theological aesthetics rooted in women’s creativity in South Africa, in response to a gap in both theological and aesthetic discourse in this country. A new dimension is introduced that contributes to the ongoing debate in the field of theological aesthetics.

The thesis connects concerns of full life for women in South Africa with Beauty’s embodied presence, seen through women’s personal and spiritual growth, moral agency and confidence, self-care and dignity, healing and economic well-being, community and interrelatedness, life-affirming drive and vision, and the consequent effects on others as well the social order.

I argue that Beauty has everything to do with justice.

DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Programme in The School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Karen Buckenham

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Gabisile Nkosi (1974 - 2008).

Chapter One: Introduction, Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Glory of the Lord is living human being
and human being lives for the vision of God.¹

I came that they may have life and have it in abundance.²

This thesis aims to address dual concerns of full life for women, and the beauty of the Divine - against the backdrop of multiple oppressions for women in South Africa. Asking the question ‘what does beauty have to do with justice?’, I look at ways in which the artistic creating process contributes to unfolding full life and entails encounter with the Beauty of God, specifically relating to South African women creators from different contexts. The study interfaces with three interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks - liberating theologies for women in South Africa and Africa, creation theology and spirituality, and theological aesthetics – together with the experiences of creating women from South Africa.

The title of my thesis was inspired by one of Dina Cormick’s paintings, called *Creata God Most Beautiful*.³ This is a painting of an exuberantly joyful feminine God, surrounded by and taking delight in all that She has made, saying “...It was good”.⁴ The imagery - a theology of joy and delight in creation - contrasts sharply with the messages of a judgmental God. For me, there is no better word for the experience of encounter with the Divine than Beautiful.

And there are more meanings. One is that creating, as a divine activity, characteristic of God and carried out by God, is also a sacred activity participated in by human beings. And that when human beings create, somehow we encounter the Beauty of God which is both separate from us and within us, similar and dissimilar.⁵

¹ ‘*Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*’ found in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.20.7 quoted in A. Garcia-Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Books,) p. 11. He refers also to M. A. Donovan, ‘Alive to the Glory of God: A Key Insight in St. Irenaeus’, *Theological Studies* 49, no. 2 (1988) 283-98.

² John 10:10, NRSV.

³ The title was inspired by a painting by artist Dina Cormick called ‘Creata God Most Beautiful’, part of her *Heroic Women* series. The enlarged reprint can be found in many homes in South Africa. See Figure 1 in the Appendix.

⁴ Genesis 1:12b, 25b, 31b. NRSV.

⁵ Medard Kehl, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Portrait’ in M. Kehl and W. Löser (eds), transl. K. Daly and F. Lawrence, *The von Balthasar Reader* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 19-

Thirdly, through creating and the encounter with beauty, we are somehow lead into a deeper fuller, more abundant life - in Elaine Scarry's words, to 'aliveness'.⁶

If, as Ireneaus said, the Glory of God is humanity made fully alive, then the well-being and fullness of human life is God's glory. The human being fully alive both reflects and embodies God's own self, God's own glory, *doxa* or beauty.

Abundant life means basics like food on the table and physical health; it means survival is assured and children are born. It also refers to human needs such as freedom from oppression, and spiritual, psychological, emotional and healing and wellness. It refers to our needs for safety, acceptance, and love, and recognition of the equal sacredness of our humanity. It means to live a life of dignity and purpose, to claim and become who we are, to live as responsible, self-determining people in the world, as persons of worth, with value and a contribution just by being. It means recognizing the divinity in oneself and in others as human beings, recognizing and claiming the beauty that we are and that we participate in as creatures made in the image of God.

In Africa, where basic needs are not met for the majority of people, Mercy Oduyoye explains the meaning of full life and wholeness very concretely.

Wholeness is used here to mean all that make for fullness of life, and makes people celebrate life. Well-being...for most of Africa implies the possession of the powers, graces or attributes that call for the celebration of life and demonstrates the integrity of the human body, good eye-sight, hearing and speech and the wholeness of mind and limbs. Africans consider human beings as enjoying full life when they have good health and powers to procreate...Fullness of life is defined as a state of prosperity, victory over evil and death-dealing forces. Rains and harvest, harmony with nature, all call for

24. Balthasar explores this similarity and dissimilarity in his theological aesthetics, which draws on the concept of analogy of being or *analogia entis*. See chapter seven.

⁶ 'Aliveness' is a term used by Elaine Scarry to describe the effects of encounter with beauty on a person. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p 89.

thanksgiving and celebration. When such a state prevails, life is whole and the whole creation enjoys [it].⁷

Yet 'full life', 'life in abundance', or 'aliveness' is diminished for women in Africa and South Africa by multiple oppressions that cut short their lives, degrade their dignity and do not recognize their humanity. Against the backdrop of harrowing life stories and situations for women, children, and the vulnerable, this fullness of life is buried under layers of human oppressions, external and internalised through civil, political, religious and familial socialisation and structures.

If the Glory of God is humanity made fully alive, then the suppression, degradation, violation and diminishment of full life for women in Africa means that the Glory of God is suppressed and rejected.

It is my thesis that where women are struggling for justice and full life – such as in theological movements for liberation, and through the discovery, expression and affirmation of their being and reality in creative work – the emancipatory Spirit of God is blowing. The beauty or glory of God is recognized, encountered, participated in and released. And fullness of life unfolds.

Background and Motivation for the Research

Like most contextual theology, the roots of this research lie in my own experiences and questions. As a naturalised South African woman, an artist, a searching Christian person, a theologian and an activist, issues of liberation, justice and full life are deep commitments and imperatives. As an artist, I have experienced the creative power that we have access to, that in the process of creating, entails encounter with both fear, and something beautiful, joyful, pervasive and welcoming. I have seen how aesthetic creating is a method that is being used by women to explore and express who they are, what they hope for, and what they envision. It provides a space for the expression of the fullness, integrity and weight of who they are, uncensored, and without apology. As they do this, it unleashes a great energy in them and reaches out to others,

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 34.

affirming others and inviting them to journey together. In South Africa, handwork meets physical, social and spiritual needs of thousands of women's groups.

A poem written by Devrakshanam Betty Govinden called "Women-Searching in South Africa", is one example which particularly struck me with its power, integrity and vision many years ago, as she tells the story of her life as an Indian woman in South Africa and her spiritual searching.⁸

I am originally from Canada, born and raised in a simple middle-class home. I immigrated to South Africa twenty years ago and have settled here with my Zimbabwean partner and two small children.

As I was growing up, the church was centrally important to our family life and values. Through the people, the teaching and worship there, I lived and learned about community, compassion, and justice.

I imbibed a sense of justice from my parents, and as I grew, I wondered that people on the margins in Canadian society – those on the lowest rungs of society in my life, like immigrant cleaners, old people, and refugees – seemed to know something about life, something deep and real. It seemed to be a knowing that, I interpreted as a young person, came from a mixture of displacement, struggle, suffering, and love. Those who had endured such experiences through their faith somehow *became* compassion and wisdom, though not unscarred.

My own stability disappeared during a dark lonely decade of grief, and what felt like an absence of God. Then, surprising and unbidden, an overwhelming experience of grace returned to my life during the latter years of tertiary study and work. Several significant events coincided, including personal friendships with devout people of integrity who were asking similar questions, theological books that seemed to leap off the shelf, wonder at the complexity of who we are as people seen in what is revealed

⁸ Devrakshanam B. Govinden, 'Women-Searching in South Africa', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 89 (1994), pp. 3-18.

and not revealed through understandings of the brain, and my encounters with marginalized people in my inner city neighbourhood.

At that time, I was working in the area of psychology at the University of Toronto. My undergraduate, honours education and several years of professional research work specialized in neuroscience, an area of psychology that seeks to understand the physiology and function of the brain. Over time, my fascination with the brain, its beauty and human behaviour began to extend to theological questions. I sought more direct interaction with people, trained and taught English as a Second Language with University students, then more vulnerable people who had fled to Toronto seeking better lives, as refugees or survivors of torture.

As my spiritual search deepened, I became increasingly involved in social justice issues in my city of Toronto, and ecumenically with the churches. In 1989, I came to Pietermaritzburg as a volunteer with African Enterprise. It was a tumultuous time in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, during the dying gasps of the apartheid regime. Predominantly internecine political violence, known as the *udlame* engulfed the townships. I was involved with the Imbali Support Group, helping people in the crises.

From 1993, I began working on issues of social justice with churches and ecumenical organizations in Pietermaritzburg, with an organization called PACSA.⁹ It was while addressing human rights questions within the public and political spheres that I began to see the invisibility of the depths of violation of women, and the silence surrounding it. For years - in both Canada and South Africa - I had heard stories from women, told casually, in hushed voices, in prayer or in friendships, of abuse and violence at home, sexual violence and trauma. When I heard such stories, I had felt sorry for the women, but saw their experiences in the realm of private struggles and sorrows, a situation they should somehow disentangle themselves from. In many cases, there were limited choices in life because of economic vulnerability and intense religious and cultural pressure, not to mention psychological entanglement in the abusive relationship.

⁹ Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness

In the early nineties, a legal workshop was held in Pietermaritzburg by Lawyers for Human Rights to contribute to amending the law on domestic violence and rape. Here I learned not only of the many faces of violence against women locally and globally, but their entrenchment in the structures of society – law and the rights of women, education, workplaces, family, culture and religion – and more deeply in the hearts, norms, values and hierarchy of society. I began to reflect in a different way on what I had seen and heard, and what I had been taught and experienced as a woman in Canada and in South Africa. It began to be clear that the private face of violence was just as much a political issue as the public face. Listening to women’s experiences in this workshop and the multisectoral approaches by women of all walks of society and professions as they shared their experience and strategised to address the oppression, the atmosphere was electric. A light went on in me that began to illuminate how our religions are interwoven with this, and how layers of belief contributing to the oppression of women, especially those that are promoted as being ‘in the name of God’, need to be deconstructed and reconstructed. I began to study feminist theology.

Theologians Denise Ackermann and Susan Rakoczy had prepared a document for the South African Catholic Bishop’s Conference Theological Advisory Commission on these issues of sexual violence against women.¹⁰ It addressed the range of endemic violence experienced by women and the role of the churches and theology in perpetuating the violence and oppression, while at the same time providing succour, hope and courage to women. They pointed to ways for change for the church.

While it is widely acknowledged that the church – especially women’s groups such as *manyanos* - plays an important role in the strengthening of women in South Africa, I have not seen ecclesial institutions to be very in tune with the lives, hopes, gifts, vibrancy and yearnings of women.¹¹ In the hierarchical and patriarchal context of

¹⁰ D. Ackermann and Susan Rakoczy ‘Sexual Violence in South Africa: A Search into its Causes: a paper for the Theological Advisory Commission of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ conference, 1992’, in S. Rakoczy (ed) *Silent No Longer: The Church Responds to Sexual Violence* (Pietermaritzburg: Lumko Institute, Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, National Justice and Peace Commission, SACBC, Theological Advisory Commission, SACBC, 2000).

¹¹ African women’s prayer unions called *manyanos* is an “indigenous expression of African women’s spirituality.” The movement is intertwined with both colonialism and missionary activity. They developed in to sites of resistance against oppressive forces from patriarchy, colonialism and culture. The word seems to have its origin in the Xhosa verb *ukumanya* which means ‘to join’. Haddad, Beverly,

South Africa, in church and society, when women turn to the church for nourishment for the deepest places of themselves, they are ushered into a male-shaped tradition and version of Christ, presented to them in a context of sexism and restriction - about their lives, their worth, their possibilities and their being that is absorbed unconsciously as being normal and right.

How does God's Spirit speak to women in such contexts? The aesthetic is one way, a powerful way that women listen to God, encounter God and express the movements of God in their lives. In the aesthetic, God's Spirit is encountered, sung with, danced with, listened to, expressed and set free. Women's creative journeys, and their life journeys find expression in the aesthetic and behind the aesthetic – in the reasons why they do it and the fruit it brings to their own and others lives. Spaces are being created by women both within and outside of the formal institutions of the churches. Women are creating environments that are receptive to the expression of their inner lives and outer reality through their prayers, songs, poems, artwork and writing. These are extremely powerful expressions of women's spirituality and emerging theologies. The spaces created by the aesthetic hold the integrity and weight of women's spiritual searching in South Africa. God in South Africa is being revealed in these spaces and through these methods.

Creating

As will be seen, in the creative process, women encounter themselves, the world and something other, and experience through it a deep joy, centredness and courage. Their consciousness shifts and they become more of who they are.

Psychologist Rollo May writes that creating both heals and enlarges human

'The Mothers' Union in South Africa: Untold Stories of Faith, Survival and Resistance,' in I.A. Phiri, D.B. Govinden and S. Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), pp. 101-117. See also M. Brandel-Syrier, *Black Women in Search of God* (London: Lutterworth), and D. Gaitskell, 'Praying and Preaching: The Distinctive Spirituality of African Women's Church Organisations', in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 211-232.

consciousness.¹² It involves an intimate encounter with the world – including oneself - and a contemplative awareness of the world achieved through paying attention. Creating transforms consciousness - both of the artist and collectively of society - and enables new visions. Through recognising our fears in creating, we can come up against our illusions and limits. It involves seeing oneself, other and the world in a new way. Creating uncovers the beautiful in a person. It opens us up to our highest and best selves, draws us into something bigger than ourselves, bringing us closer to the Divine. Creating, in this research, is seen as a divine power and sacramental act. It is a means by which the divine beauty, the glory or *doxa* of God is participated in.

The beauty of God is encountered, attracting, affirming and transforming the person and others who are witnesses. Evidence of this is very tangible - when basic needs are met, when women see themselves and are seen as people made in the image of God, when they heal from deep wounds, when their full humanity is promoted and protected, when they find solidarity instead of isolation and depression, and when they reach out to others.

The insights of women and artists are generally on the margins/outside of mainstream theology and church practice, yet there is so much life going on there - in who they are, what they intuit, how they listen for guidance, how they interpret or make sense of their inner urge or passion to create, how they grow as they create, why they create, in the content of what they express in their art and craft, and the contexts from which they come.

Listening to peoples' insights into spirituality through the lens of creativity offers a many layered way of viewing theology. By listening to their lives and creative journeys, and/or studying their works of art, craft, poems and literature, a window is provided into better understanding our own country and era, the people and movements of God. These women creators offer expression of South African women's reality, in enormous diversity, in a time and culture where women are still struggling for their dignity and voices to be known (even to themselves), expressed

¹² Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1975).

and heard. Their words reflect and embody the social context we live in, and express women living with, listening to and/or searching for God.¹³

Beauty

In this thesis, the meaning of beauty is much more than appearances. It stems from recognition of the source of beauty as God. Beauty refers to the divinity, and sacredness in all of creation - including in the person. It is a rigorous, vital, powerful, fragile, sacred and necessary life-force that calls us to relate to others and our world with care and justice.

In my discussion of beauty, I engage with the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who sees beauty as a fundamental characteristic of God, together with truth and goodness. The beauty, glory, or *doxa* of God attracts and allures, it is the fire in the heart, a shining forth, an invitation, something that requires a response and reception. Receiving it, the person is affected, called to respond and is taken up into it, transformed.¹⁴

Beauty encountered, participated in, revealed and shared through women's creating bears fruit in their lives and the lives of others, with implications for theology, justice and transformation of our South African society.

Theoretical Framework

¹³ Marian Arnold, *Women and Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1996), p.15. Arnold introduces women's place in art in post-apartheid South Africa. "Since the early 1990s the collapse of apartheid has not changed the authoritarian nature of South African patriarchy but it has made it visible in a way not possible when almost all debate and all versions of history focussed on racial issues and conflicts. The visual arts permit the expression of many visions, and the woman's vision, often suppressed, can now be assessed critically. Whatever the social repercussions of feminism in post-apartheid South Africa and whatever forms it finally assumes in an accommodation of black and white needs, feminist viewpoints offer positive ways of focussing on women artists and representation."

¹⁴ "Balthasar is not concerned primarily with the light in the mind...but with the fire in the heart..." Noel O'Donoghue, 'A Theology of Beauty', in J. Riches (ed), *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 10. See Aidan Nichols, 'Balthasar's Aims in the Theological Aesthetics', in E. Block, *Glory, Grace and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (NY, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2005) pp. 114-115, for an overview of Balthasar's ideas of reception and response to beauty.

I utilise intersecting theoretical frameworks in this research all of which are themselves interdisciplinary areas of study.

Firstly, the contexts of women in Africa and South Africa are examined in light of the interpretations of feminist theologians and African women's theologians. In chapter two, questions of full life for women in Africa and South Africa are addressed against the backdrop of life-denying forces. With a vision of transformation, healing and full life for women and all of society, I look at theological responses to women's oppression, from select feminist and African women's theological perspectives. The unique history and context of South Africa, its history of colonialism and migration, the social engineering of apartheid, the struggle for justice, the recent transition to democracy and nascent steps to reconstruct a nation and deal with the trauma of its people, all contribute to forming women's experience, their understanding of themselves and their faith in South Africa. They are formative in women's understanding of themselves, their worth, role, potential and God. So too are religio-culture, patriarchy and tradition. Prophetic movements for liberation on the continent are looked at before turning to those of women. I refer to work by women theologians in Africa and South Africa, such as Denise Ackermann, Musimbi Kanyoro, Sarojini Nadar, Mercy Oduyoye, Isabel Phiri and Susan Rakoczy, as they and others seek to uncover and dismantle multiple forces burdening women. In African women's theology, this means deconstructing culture and death-dealing paradigms for women, affirming that which is life-giving, and constructing new paradigms that affirm the full humanity and aspirations of women in Africa, in relationship with others and creation. This includes a significant role of the aesthetic to women's emancipation, spirituality and theology in Africa, especially South Africa.

Creation theology and spirituality is a second dialogue partner. Recognizing human creativity as a Divine creative energy, creation theology and spirituality provides a theological foundation, and offers interpretive insights into inner processes occurring within women as they create - spiritually, psychologically and ethically - and the importance of this to the wider society and theology. Theologians such as John W. de Gruchy, Matthew Fox, Dolores Leckey, Sara Maitland, and Albert Nolan contribute

to this discussion. Additionally, I look at insights on art, creativity and the aesthetic from philosopher Paul Crowther and psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Anton Ehrenzweig, Rollo May and others to gain understanding of what unfolds within a person while they are creating, as well as its immediate and long term fruits in the life of the person, others and all of humanity. These themes are presented in chapter three.

Based on this intersecting dialogue, the insights of creating women in South Africa are then examined in chapters four, five and six, as they reflect on their experience of their creativity in light of their spirituality. Interviews with women from two vastly different contexts – individual artists, and women in crafting groups – reveal the significance of their creating to their spirituality. Individual artists do art from internal motivation and crafting women begin artmaking as a response to very difficult socio-economic contexts to meet basic needs for themselves and their families, but for both of them, the creating process bears significant fruit in their lives.

Key areas emerge from the discussions - around their faith experience, their reflections on their creativity and spirituality and the creative process, their growth as persons, and their concern and solidarity with others. This is interpreted, analyzed and discussed in terms of the theoretical frameworks of liberating theologies for women, and creation theology and spirituality, under the themes of spirituality and psychology, ethical processes, and insights emerging for theology.

Holding this in one hand, in the second half of the thesis, I then turn to unpacking a discussion on arts and the aesthetic in theology. I discuss how and why the aesthetic matters to theology, and how beauty relates to God. In chapter seven, perspectives on beauty, beauty in theology and the aesthetic expression of theology are introduced, particularly as they relate to liberation theologies. I introduce theological aesthetics – a multifaceted interdisciplinary area of theology that is concerned with the interface between the arts and theology, as it both reveals and entails encounter with God. I engage with the work of Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (more below) , aesthetic philosopher Elaine Scarry who examines the relationship between beauty and justice, theologian Alejandro Garcia Rivera whose theological aesthetics emerge

from the experiences from marginalized communities from Latin America, and South African theologian John W. de Gruchy. De Gruchy's book *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics and the Struggle for Justice* is concerned with arts and creativity in the ongoing transformation of South Africa. The work of feminist theologians Michelle A. Gonzalez and Susan A. Ross provides further insight, as they are amongst a handful of theologians who have engaged explicitly with the areas of theological aesthetics or beauty and liberation theologies and ethics from a feminist perspective, bringing the three into the same conversation.

Critical to the present work, and common to the discussions of all of these theologians is the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar.¹⁵ Credited with retrieving beauty into contemporary theological discourse, his massive work *Glory of the Lord* is recognised as the most comprehensive and convincing work in contemporary theology calling for the return of beauty to theology. Balthasar felt that beauty is the heart and fire of God, the revelation of God and the encounter with God, revealed in great art, culture and nature, and ultimately in Jesus Christ. His insights on beauty, its revelation in the natural world, pointing beyond itself toward the Divine as its source, suggest what may be happening with South African women through their creating. Because of its foundational nature, and the importance and influence of his thought, aspects of Balthasar's massive work on theological aesthetics and some of the influences behind it are introduced and engaged with here. His work is highlighted and engaged with in chapter eight.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982). As John W. de Gruchy points out, there are scholars who find Balthasar's theological aesthetics to be unhelpful in working out the relationship between Christianity and the arts. One reason is Balthasar's locating his thought within the philosophical framework of transcendental characteristics of God. A second is the suspicion directed at the whole of his theology as it has been appropriated by neo-conservative causes in the Catholic (and Anglican) Churches (John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6). Third, Balthasar's exclusively Christocentric view does not lend itself to engagement from contemporary pluralist views of religion and culture. A fourth limitation related to this present project is the focus on the dyad between the beholder and the beheld, not so much the one creating. Fifth, from the perspective of feminist thinkers, his work is objectionable because of his essentialist views on sex and gender and how they have been appropriated by conservative causes in the Churches to form their theology of sex. I engage with his thought in this thesis because his insight into the Divine as the source of beauty revealed in the natural world, including human life, and the effects of its banishment, as well as the life-changing results of encounter with Beauty, all have relevance to what may be happening in South African women as they create and its importance for theology.

Because, from a feminist theological perspective, Balthasar is an objectionable figure, the introduction to his thought is followed by engagement and critique with aspects of his wider theology from feminist theological scholarship. I extrapolate some of the strengths of, and objections to, his theology and theological method and implications of this specifically to his theological aesthetics.

As this thesis is primarily concerned with the interface between creating, the arts and aesthetic, liberation for women and theology, I examine ways in which the arts reveal the emancipatory Spirit of God. In chapter nine, I look at perspectives in liberation theologies that link the aesthetic to the ethical in situations of marginalization, poverty and struggle.¹⁶ These include feminist philosophy and theologies, Black, womanist and Latino/a theologies from the US, Latin American liberation theologies and Asian theologies. For liberation theologies all over the world, the aesthetic has been a rich and provocative alternative resource that expresses the faith and lives of marginal people. Literature, painting, sculpture, ritual, song, dance, poetry, the blues and rap, storytelling and folktales, for example, have been listened to and interpreted for what they are expressing about peoples' aspirations and God's movements in their lives. With this background, I turn examples of aesthetic expressions of theology in African contexts and specifically South Africa, and the tradition of religious art of KwaZulu-Natal.

The interpretation, analysis and discussion of the South African creating women's experiences in this research is returned to and looked at in the framework of theological aesthetics. In chapter ten, I situate the process of discovery, the theologies and spiritual journeys of creating women in South Africa within this theory, and contribute to it. From a feminist theological perspective, I explore how theory in this area can relate practically to issues of justice and full life for women in our African context. I begin to construct a creating feminist theological aesthetic in South Africa, bringing together the questions of full life, justice and beauty. The nascent discussion on theological aesthetics in South Africa reflects on the struggle for justice,

¹⁶ de Gruchy makes the point that while aesthetic expression and awareness clearly existed outside of Europe, the debate around aesthetic theory, especially in relation to Christianity, was initially located in the West and has become an issue of discussion more recently in post-colonial Africa. (de Gruchy, *Christianity Art and Transformation*, p. 6).

transformation and nation building, but has not yet referred to issues of gender justice nor drawn on the work of feminist theologians or women in Africa.¹⁷ As far as I can find, the present work is the first to do so. Conclusions from this research are presented, with questions for further research.

Methodology

In this interdisciplinary study, various methods are used to uncover the meanings and significance of women's creating in South Africa, especially as it relates to theology. Primary data of interviews with women doing creative work is interpreted in relation to the contextual and theoretical information from secondary published sources in books, journals, periodicals, newspaper articles and internet sources.

Primary Research – Interviews with Artists and Crafters

Interviews with creating women and their subjective experience, insights and reflections form the primary data of the research. The research was qualitative, with the purpose of learning from the women's own stories and perspectives. Inductive methodology of feminist and women's theology is used in the analysis, where the findings are organised according to themes arising from their own stories and theory related to what they have said.

Interviews were conducted with two different categories of creating women in South

¹⁷ See for example, de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation* and Peter Barrett 'The Quest for a Uniting Vision in South Africa - A Question of Beauty?', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 119 (July 2004), pp. 15-31. Barrett explores beauty as an organising principle for nation-building. de Gruchy is concerned with the arts, justice, beauty, ugliness, transformation, redemption and the church, referring to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. His discussion on theological aesthetics and justice does not engage with feminist theology and justice issues around gender in South Africa. However, before turning his attention to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts on embodiment and aesthetic existence, de Gruchy does acknowledge that "Feminist theologians, far more than others, have brought to the fore the sensual dimension of Christian theology, drawing fresh attention to the affective and physical, and reminding us of the centrality of the body" (p.6). Bernice Stott's Master's thesis makes a significant contribution to this, though she does not explore theological aesthetics *per se* in any depth. 'The Reconstitution of African Women's Spiritualities in the Context of the *Amazwi Abesifazane* (Voices of Women) Project in KwaZulu-Natal (1998-2005)', unpublished Master's dissertation, Durban Institute of Technology, Durban, 2006.

Africa, which I have termed artists and crafters.¹⁸ For the purposes of this research, the distinguishing feature between who I have called artists and who I have called crafters is not about aesthetic judgement, education or critical recognition and fame. It relates to the internal motivation of the person. The artists interviewed for this work began their art from an inner impulse to create, something they knew they had to do, even a sense of vocation. Crafters in this thesis have come together in groups to do their handwork as part of development initiatives to generate income and empower women, and to support each other.

Artists

I held extended interviews with thirteen women artists, whose names are listed in Appendix I. As this has been an interest of mine for some time, several artists were known to me already, as people who create and who reflect on their creativity and spirituality. With the exception of two (one who declined because of issues going on in her life, and one who had originally been interested but who became very ill over the months I was interviewing) all said they were open to be interviewed. Other artists were suggested to me by my supervisors, or were suggested by the artists themselves whom I had interviewed already. There was also a trend related to culture and socio-economic factors: the majority of artists that were easily accessible to me - those I knew and those being suggested - were white middle-class women. I made deliberate efforts to meet black women who were following their artistic calls. Three artists (two black women) were suggested to me by the director of the African Art Centre in Durban, Anthea Martin, after I explained my research question to her and asked whether she could put me in contact with women artists in KZN, particularly black

¹⁸ Arnold, *Women and Art*, pp. 15-16, refers to the distinction between art and craft from a feminist perspective. "Feminist criticism, adopting a generous interpretation of the word 'art', engages with female creative expression without categorising it hierarchically by medium, materials or genre, or arbitrarily decreeing that training, exhibitions and practice differentiate professional 'fine' artists from craftspeople. Confusion about the merits and inherent qualities of 'art' and 'craft' have been exacerbated by the language of art criticism. The term 'decorative', used pejoratively in the West to imply that content is sacrificed to visual embellishment, is another way of imputing profundity to cerebral art statements and triviality to the sensual use of formal language. But decoration is integral to much craft, where it is often both symbolic and the means of beautifying utilitarian form, and it also serves art that reveals content by delighting the eye."

women.¹⁹

Crafting Groups

I had interviews with groups of women and individuals from four crafting groups. Forty-two women are from *Kopanang Women's Group*, a cross-cultural group from the township areas of Tsakane and Geluksdal in the East Rand in Gauteng. I interviewed these women initially in groups of five to seven people, then twelve women individually and at greater depth. Over the course of two extended visits, I participated in and observed their different projects and Annual General Meeting. The first visit entailed getting to know the women and the project, with short group interviews with thirty-six women. During the second visit, longer interviews were held with twelve of the women, with six of them new to the group. A second project was a group of nine women from the rural village of Enhlahleni near Underburg in KZN, called *Ikhwezi*, who do beadwork with the *Women's Leadership and Training Programme* located at the Catholic mission station Reichenau. They preferred to meet as a group to answer the questions rather than individually. A third project, where I interviewed nine women individually, is *Church Agricultural Project (CAP)* from Mdukatshani in rural Msinga, KwaZulu-Natal. Fourthly, I had an extended interview with one woman from the *Realeko Women's Group* in Pietermaritzburg. The names of all the women are listed in Appendix I.

I also spoke with the facilitators or other community art project coordinators separately from the groups of crafters, and learned of the inception, history, structure or contexts of a wide range of crafting initiatives. Facilitators include Creina Alcock of *CAP*, Sheila Flynn of *Kopanang*, Marilyn Aitken of *Reichenau/WLTP*, and Chup Taylor of the *Underberg Sewing Project*. In Pietermaritzburg, I had interviews with Bheki Mcambi of the *Msunduzi Arts and Cultural Centre* and Julia Buss of the *Tatham Art Gallery Outreach Programme*, as well as meetings with Betty Naude of *Basani Arts Centre*, Jabu Dlamini of *Jambo Arts and Crafts Centre* in

¹⁹ The African Art Centre in Durban nurtures black artists and has a long history of doing so. See Jo Thorpe, *It's Never Too Early: African Art and Craft in KwaZulu-Natal 1960-1990* (University of Natal Durban: Indicator Press, 1994). I had also contacted KZNSA and Artspace Durban with the same query but they did not respond.

Pietermaritzburg, and Gill Williams of the *Underberg Rehabilitation Centre*.²⁰

Crafters were chosen in a similar way to the artists. Several groups were known to me through their work in Pietermaritzburg and beyond. Other contact people were suggested to me by my supervisors. I had contact with the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg and met people involved with their initiatives to encourage the development and exposure of crafting groups. Julia Buss, who worked in the Mentorship programme, gave me a list of groups that participated in the annual Echo Craft Bazaar of KwaZulu-Natal Crafters, and I used this as a contact early on. Mary Kleinenberg also from the Tatham Art Gallery, put me in touch with Creina Alcock and the *Church Agricultural Project* in Weenen/Tugela Ferry.

Unlike the process of arranging interviews with artists, I contacted many more crafting groups and spoke with more facilitators of groups, than would eventually materialise into interviews. These discussions gave me a greater understanding of the diverse nature of arts and crafts in South Africa, and some of the motivations, issues, rewards and difficulties. Additionally, unrelated to the actual making of the craft, there are dynamics with crafting groups that are not part of the equation with artists who are working on their own and can make immediate decisions about being interviewed - including deciding on dates, time and place. For development projects involving many people, there are matters of group consultation, administration and organisation, facilitation, conflicts, and decision-making processes that precede the organisation of interviews. In addition, for several crafting groups I contacted, imminent or actual disintegration of the group was a factor. This was related to group dynamics, such as conflict and power struggles, or other cases, declining motivation resulting from a lack of training, skills, innovation, marketing and/or income. Interviews with one group of women were postponed for several months as they worked through internal issues that threatened the project. The interviews did eventually take place as this group emerged stronger.

Membership of groups shift and change as women find new opportunities, or move

²⁰ I learned that both Jabu Dlamini and Bheki Mcambi have since died.

away for other reasons. Some women stopped because of ill health. In two of the groups, members have died.

For all the groups I interviewed, there was a key contact person. This person – the gatekeeper - either set in motion the process of consultation and decision-making with the group, or stopped it from happening.²¹ After promises fell through following several attempts with some contact people, I focused on working with those who did respond.²²

Location

The interviews were conducted in the homes, workplaces or vicinity of the artists and crafters. Sometimes with individual interviews, we met in a coffee shop or under a tree for one or two hours. I travelled to different parts of KwaZulu-Natal to speak with the artists. They were in and around Pietermaritzburg, including Hilton, Howick, Lion's River District, Curry's Post and Durban. For the crafting groups, I travelled to Tugela Ferry/Weenen (Mdukatshani) and Underberg. One group was located in the East Rand of Gauteng. Originally, the facilitator of this group was working in Mpophomeni in KwaZulu-Natal near Pietermaritzburg, and I had learned of the group ethos that encompasses art, spirituality and human development. I made two trips to that project to study it more closely.

Translation and Transcription

Translation between English and Zulu was used in interviews with the crafting groups, though not all of the women needed a translator, particularly those from the urban

²¹ This is a term borrowed from community development language and refers to a person in a position of power as it relates to access to the group or community. The gatekeeper can say whether an outsider has permission to meet with the group, when, how and for what purpose. It can be a person with good leadership and vision, or alternately, it can be a person who holds power to themselves, for whatever reason.

²² Not amongst the groups mentioned already, interviews with some groups did not materialise because the key person was not able to follow through to arranging the interviews, though initially indicating the interest and availability of women in the group. This included not returning calls or email correspondence, or not keeping appointments, making it impossible to confirm a plan to see the group and arrange interviews.

townships. The translator was appointed by the crafting group itself. While I was prepared to bring a translator, I was told by each of the contact persons, for different reasons, that the groups would prefer to provide a translator themselves. For one rural group of women who are not formally educated, I was informed that the women feel threatened and inferior when an educated Zulu woman from the urban areas comes to translate for them. Also, they would not speak openly if it were a man translating because of the patriarchal and hierarchal structure of their society. They preferred to use the woman who is a facilitator from their own group, who is educated and fluent in Zulu and English. In another group, many of the women were fluent in both English and Zulu. As part of their ongoing process of empowerment and taking responsibility for their project (including hosting visitors), one person from amongst them took on the role of translator in the small group interviews. Similarly, ownership and empowerment of the group was the reason behind the third group appointing their facilitator from within the group. Younger, and fluent in English and Zulu, she was appointed by the older women to do this, although she did not seem to be the leader of the group and her confidence wavered. Other interviews with both artists and crafters were conducted in English, either with native English speakers, or people who were fluent in English (having a first language as Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho or Afrikaans). The names of the group translators are listed in Appendix I.

For the individual long interviews, I recorded the conversation and transcribed it. For reasons of logistics, interviews with crafting women would not work with my tape recorder. I took notes which I then transcribed.

Interview Process

The interviews were held in a conversational manner to make it as natural as possible, to put people at ease as they talked about their own lives, their creating and spirituality, and to give a context for the somewhat difficult topic of discussion. Most of the interviewees had not talked about questions of their spirituality and creativity, and found themselves to be very keen to do so, but also expressed their feeling that they were fumbling with how to articulate it.

The interviews covered several basic questions. Usually, in the long interviews, within the context of the first question asking people about their spirituality and creativity, the other questions were answered before I asked them. For the shorter group interviews, the questions were asked one by one. The questions used can be found in Appendix II.

Further observations about the interviewing process should be noted. It was far easier for me to interview the individual women artists than it was the crafting groups. The artists had thought about the questions under discussion quite deeply as part of their personal life journey. These questions have influenced who they are and the choices they make. While struggling to find words to articulate what is difficult to put into words, they talked at length and very deeply about it with little prompting. For the women in the crafting groups, they generally struggled to grasp what I was asking if the questions were open-ended and conversational. After my first attempts, I changed my method and began asking very specific and concrete questions about their creating and spirituality. These elicited succinct responses.

There were many significant areas of common ground between the artists and myself that helped to make the interview a relaxed open space for sharing. Important commonalities include language, economic class, education, and a western cultural familiarity through their background, upbringing, education or working context. With the women in crafting groups, there was a greater distance. I was able to see what they were doing in their creative work, and learn from them how their involvement with the creative group affects their lives. At the same time, the cultural, linguistic, educational differences, and the fact that they did not know me from other contexts are distancing factors. Similarly, as the researcher observing and interpreting their reflections, I see, listen, empathise, and have respect for how the women cope creatively with very difficult contexts, histories and struggles. However, I feel an acute limitation in my understanding of the fullness of their experience, and thus my capacity to do it justice in my interpretation. It would be very rich research to study the spiritual, psychological, economic and theological significance of South African

women's creating in crafting groups, from the inside.

Analysis of the Data

I used a qualitative approach to gathering and interpreting data from interviews. The Nvivo programme helped in identifying common themes emerging from the interviews.²³ The data was analysed inductively and manually, with themes emerging from the women's own experiences and insights, and interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks of liberating theologies for women, creation spirituality and theology, and theological aesthetics.

When I began this work, I did not know what it was exactly that I was looking for. I knew only that something important, something beautiful, was going on with women's creating, creativity, art and craft in South Africa, relating to their spirituality as individual persons and as communities, and to the vision, spirit and seething passion of God for women's full humanity to be realised in South Africa. The following chapters dive into these waters of creativity and life.

²³ The Nvivo programme is very good, but should be mastered prior to initiation of the research as it takes a great deal of time to learn and use. It provides a guiding framework for the asking of the research questions, research methods, the storage of data and the analysis of it.

Chapter Two: 'Six Mountains On Their Backs': Doing Theology with Women in Africa²⁴

Introduction

To do theology in Africa today is to do theology among a people with much suffering. There is so much death on our continent that reality makes a mockery of the bravery of Job, the biblical giant of tribulations.²⁵

The theological significance of women's artistic creativity in South Africa needs to be understood within the context from which it emerges. In this chapter, I begin to build a foundation for understanding South African women's creating and creativity by surveying contexts, within the milieu of their faith traditions in South Africa and African as a whole. Specific contemporary issues such as the ongoing effects of apartheid, poverty, violence, HIV and AIDS are referred to before looking at the effects of these oppressions on women's sense of self-worth. I reflect on the patriarchy of the South African church and theology and messages that many women are internalising as the ground from which their understandings of God and their sense of themselves emerges.

Against the distressing and unacceptable landscape of the 'six mountains on their backs' that many women in Africa and South Africa carry, women not only survive, but make meaning of their lives, claim their full humanity as made in the image of God, and grow toward liberation and full life. After looking at some of these 'mountains', I begin to examine the resources and the creativity that women draw on. This includes their faith, spirituality, community, the history of political struggles for liberation and prophetic theological movements of Africa and South Africa, black and feminist theologies, and solidarity with other women. These are sources to resist oppression, gain strength, affirm, protect, nourish, and claim theirs and others'

²⁴ 'Six mountains on their backs' refers to multiple oppressions of women in Africa. M. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994) cited in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'African Feminist Discourse: A Review Essay', *Agenda* 58 (2003), p. 33. The phrase 'women doing theology' is intentional. It is "...a conscious statement which describes the method of action-reflection out of which theological reflections arise, rather than simply applying existing theological insights to present situations." Furthermore, "This method invites communal theology. It is in a group where the action and reflection take place and where the religious experience finds its communal experience." M.R.A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (London: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2002), p.1.

²⁵ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, pp. 24-25.

humanity, lives and aspirations. I discuss ways that African women theologians organised in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (including South African women of all races) are critiquing that which oppresses. They are giving voice to their own experiences and yearnings, listening to marginalized women, and applying theology practically with a vision of justice and healing. Propelled by the energy of the liberating Spirit of God, full life in the African context as promised by Jesus Christ (John 10:10) entails the transformation of women's lives in Africa, their communities, and more widely the continent of Africa.

Finally, I begin to argue the central importance of creativity and the aesthetic in this – a theme that is looked at in greater detail in later chapters. In Africa, creativity and the aesthetic are never absent - it is a heritage and an art, a language of many idioms. For many women in Africa and South Africa, creative expression is a source of courage and blessing, a prayer, a spiritual experience and a sustainer of community. Especially to marginalized people, the aesthetic embodies silenced inner realities. It is a sacrament and process that finds voice for their yearning and visions. For theologians concerned with promoting the full humanity of women in Africa, the aesthetic is an important primary revelatory source of theology and language for theology - as encounter with and incarnation of the Divine.

African and South African Contexts

The stories of women's theology in Africa emerge from many harsh realities of life on the continent. They also reveal the emancipatory spirit of God. Africa has struggled, and still does struggle for liberation from a host of evils and suffering. For women in Africa, as they work to create and sustain life, there are additional roles, restrictions, risks and violence levied on them - because they are women - from beliefs about women emanating from religion, history, culture, tradition and family. Women's stories of theology in Africa embody a creative struggle to survive, sustain and celebrate life, including their own full humanity, in a context of immense burden and risk.

Even though isolated for many years, women in South Africa share a similar context as the rest of Africa in many important ways, including the power of patriarchy as an overarching structure. In every culture, men are seen as the 'norm', the leaders, the centre and authority, more important and even somehow more human than women. In other ways, in South Africa, the stories of women are starkly heterogeneous and their distinct experiences of gender oppression inseparable from economic, religious and racial constructions of identity.²⁶

The significance of South African women's forms and expressions of artistic creativity emerge from their differing histories and experiences in South Africa. In this chapter I focus on particularly the social and political dynamics that extended racial domination from colonialism and entrenched it in this century in the policies of *apartheid*.²⁷ While apartheid was finally dismantled with the first democratic elections held in 1994, women's experiences of life in South Africa are still inseparable from issues of race, class and gender.²⁸

The devastation wreaked by European colonialism and the apartheid system is well known.²⁹ The entrenchment of apartheid deepened the alienation and denigration of African culture already visited upon the continent through colonial domination, and western cultural beliefs and methods imported with missionary Christianity.³⁰

²⁶ See for example, C. Walker (ed), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990); C. Landman, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women: Diaries of Guilt* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1994); D.M. Ackermann, E. Getman, H. Kotze and J. Tobler (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality* (Cape Town: EFSA, 2000).

²⁷ *Apartheid*, meaning separateness was the policy of separate development instituted by the National Party when they came to power in 1948, and visited untold misery on millions of black people. Apartheid was theologically upheld by the Afrikaans NGK and passively by much of South African Christianity.

²⁸ I. Phiri and S. Nadar, 'What's In a Name?' *Journal for Contextual Theology* 12, 2 (2006), p. 19. South African theologians writing on these issues include, D. Ackermann, B. Haddad, C. Landman, M. Masenya, S. Nadar, I. Phiri and S. Rakoczy, for example.

²⁹ Between 1893 and 1910 at least 48 laws affecting Africans were passed, such as the Masters and Servants law in 1896 (p. 69). Following the 1913 Land Act which informed state policy on land and labour, and the 1916 Beaumont Commission report, it became almost impossible for Africans to buy land (p. 73). J. Lambert and R. Morrell, 'Domination and Subordination in Natal 1890-1920' in R. Morrell (ed), *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal* (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996), pp. 63-96.

³⁰ See for example N.A. Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835-1850. African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), J. Haynes, *The Role of Religion in Third World Politics: Issues in Third World Politics* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993), N. Majeke, *The Role of the Missionaries*

Enforcing policies of racist social engineering that kept populations grouped together and isolated according to culture and colour, both colonialism and apartheid privileged white people, Christianity and Western-rooted cultures while at the same time dispossessing ‘non-white’ peoples.³¹ Identity, possibility and value depended on one’s colour group. This had devastating consequences to the lives of millions of black people, causing severe human suffering, and a legacy of both privilege and guilt for white people.³² Fifteen years since the end of apartheid, life is better in many significant respects. Yet the wounds to economic life, family systems, self-value and confusion around identity, are still fresh.

For African women under colonialism and apartheid, in addition to economic and racial oppressions, they were particularly on the receiving end of a collusion of patriarchies - by colonial, business and traditional authorities. The legal status of African women in South Africa gave husbands total authority - women were legally minors.³³ This has changed in the law, though customary practices remain entrenched. Now the Constitution and Bill of Rights enshrines equality and human rights of all people, including women. The official and political changes with regard to rights for women have proceeded at a much faster pace though than in hearts, tradition and religion.³⁴

From diverse contexts, South African women experience and search for God in their lives and in themselves in different ways, individually and as communities of people,

in Conquest (Cumberwood: Apdusa, 1952; reprint 1986).

³¹ See J.W. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: David Philip, 1994), J. W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 2004), C. Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid* (Cape Town: David Phillips, 1988), P. Walshe, *Prophetic Christianity and the Liberation Movement in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995) on apartheid’s policies, effects and rule of force, the Church in it, and the resistance of the prophetic church.

³² The racial categories used by the State were White, African, Indian, and Coloured people. I use the term ‘black people’ as it was used by many activists - an encompassing term, referring to African, Indian and Coloured people not as separate and disparate groups, but as a segment of society dispossessed because of colour.

³³ Siphokazi Koyana, ‘Womanism and Nation-building in Sindiwe Magona’s Autobiographies’ in *Agenda 50* (2001), p. 66. Finding ways to survive was difficult. Historians have documented varied responses of black women to these restrictions. See essays in Walker (ed), *Women and Gender*.

³⁴ There is an anecdote told of a meeting that a delegation of Church leaders had with then-President Nelson Mandela soon after liberation and elections in 1994. Citing his Cabinet - which had a 60/40 representation of women in top positions - Mandela questioned the male Church leaders about their representativeness and challenged them on lack of women leadership in the Churches.

reflecting their heterogeneous histories. The multicultural and multi-religious milieu includes backgrounds of African heritage, European, North American, and Asian heritages, indigenous populations, voluntary settlers, indentured labour and slaves. Particularly in the inner cities, the post-apartheid changes in demographics, employment and economic possibilities for black South Africans, and the influx of immigrants from other African countries make visible some of the real changes for the better. However, there are significant areas that have not improved for many. These include situations of poverty and disenfranchisement. For women of every culture in South Africa, their vulnerability is manifested starkly in endemic violence against them and the linked spread of HIV and AIDS – with the greatest risk to the most marginalized - poor black women.

Poverty, Race and Women

Race and class were and are still significant determinants of how life is lived in South Africa and remain important variables in discussions of South African women's experience, their experience of gender oppression and their theology.³⁵ In terms of the present research, these differences are reflected in the opportunities, education, contexts, economic class, and assumptions and aspirations of creating women from different cultures whom I interviewed. For the artist groups interviewed in chapters four and five, it was easy to find women to speak with who were middle class and white. Their artistic journey – though not without struggle - nonetheless reflects their access to resources, space to move and dream, and encouragement to pursue their inner creative impulses, ultimately employing their art skills in self-motivated work. For the crafting groups interviewed in chapter five, most of the women were black, coming from backgrounds of poverty. Heavily burdened, without financial resources, their primary reason for undertaking handwork was to find ways to survive and support their families. Context and backgrounds become apparent as motivating factors in the kind of creative projects undertaken by women in the present research and the significance of it to their lives. This will become evident in later chapters as I explore more fully the interviewed women's reasons for creating, their experience of

³⁵ Economic power is emerging as the primary factor in determining quality of life and opportunity in South Africa. This is still related to gender and race.

creating and their reflections on their creating.

Fifteen years since the first democratic elections in 1994 and liberation, South African women's realities continue to reflect the history. There are vast educational, cultural, religious, and class differences. As Phiri and Nadar note "...experiences of white women are markedly different from black women",³⁶ so generally are their struggles, reflections on their experiences, and expectations. While individual women's stories vary, in general, white South African women have had greater access to education, employment, resources and economic privilege. The majority of black women remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and suffer the worst forms of economic exclusion and deprivation. For many, not much has changed since Wilson and Ramphela documented their findings two decades ago.

Millions of black women suffered as a result of migrant labour, influx controls and forced removals. Many now live in shacks and literally bear the burden of fetching water and fuel. The highest levels of illiteracy are found amongst women. There can be no doubt that poverty, hardship, malnutrition and intense suffering are experienced more by black women and children than any other group in our society.³⁷

While all black people can now vote in post-apartheid South Africa and more black women count in the numbers of middle-class, urban, educated and upwardly mobile professionals, the majority of African women still live in impoverished rural areas, townships or informal shack settlements, struggling to meet the demands for day-to-day survival of themselves and their families. In KwaZulu-Natal, it is estimated that 54 percent of the population live in rural areas, and 84.9 percent are black.³⁸ Often this

³⁶ I.A. Phiri and S. Nadar 'What's In A Name?', *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 12 2 (2006), p. 9.

³⁷ The work of Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge* (Cape Town: David Philip Publisher, 1989) is referred to in Louise Kretzschmar, 'Gender, Women and Ethics' in Louise Kretzschmar and Leonard Hulley (eds), *Questions of Life and Morality: Christian Ethics in South Africa* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 169-185. One of the first books allowed to be published uncensored in South Africa, it explicitly uncovered and criticised what apartheid-induced poverty and suffering of black people looked like.

³⁸ Association for Rural Advancement. 2009. Facts and Figures on KwaZulu-Natal. *Association for Rural Advancement*. <http://www.afra.co.za> (Accessed 20 November 2009). A 2007 report indicates that nationally, 60 percent of the population is urbanized. UNICEF. 2007. Report - South Africa – Statistics. *UNICEF*. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/southafrica_statistics.html (Accessed 20 November 2009).

is with few resources, as the sole breadwinner in a fatherless household.³⁹ Many black women are the primary caregivers for sick family members and children orphaned by HIV and AIDS while their own needs remain unmet.

Violence

Violence continues in the psyche of South Africans.⁴⁰

It is dangerous to be a woman in South Africa. It is dangerous to be a woman in KwaZulu-Natal.⁴¹

Violence against women, HIV and AIDS and the vulnerability of women are represented in the activism and artwork of several women artists interviewed for this work. These realities are revealed in the stories told to me by artists and crafting women about their own lives and sorrows, and how they create a life for themselves and their families. For other women, though not their firsthand experience, they are aware of the increased risk they face from violence and illness because they are women, and are committed to working for justice for themselves and others.

Violence is manifested in the appalling ‘normality’ of domestic abuse and sexual violence perpetrated against women and children, especially by people they know and trust. In 2008, Gabisile Nkosi, an artist interviewed for this thesis work, was shot in the head and killed by her ex-boyfriend, before he killed himself. He was not the first ex-boyfriend to try to kill her. She had been attacked before when she was a young student.

South Africa is an extremely violent country, with much of this directed toward women and children. A significant factor in this is machismo culture and the construction of male identity, where the man is seen as lord and owner of women – a

³⁹ Questions around fatherhood, the historical dissolution of family, roles and contemporary issues around masculinity in South Africa are addressed in a good collection of essays in L. Richter and R. Morrell (eds), *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2006).

⁴⁰ Rev. Smadz Matsepe, ‘Reading Deuteronomy 22:28f in the Context of Rampant Sexual Abuse of Girl Learners in South Africa’ at the Interdisciplinary PhD Conference of the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 7 November 2006.

⁴¹ Bernice Stott, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 1 December 2006 at her home in Durban. See also Bernice Stott, ‘The Reconstitution’.

view that is supported by much religious teaching and tradition and across cultures.⁴² Fatherlessness, anguish, woundedness and experiences of trauma, feelings of victimisation and entitlement, and the experience and perception of poverty in relation to others are contributing factors to South African violence.⁴³ In post-1994 South Africa, increasing individualism, greed and corruption are not unrelated. There exists a multiple woundedness in many South Africans which has distorted the value of human life.⁴⁴

South Africa has been said to have one of the highest rates of rape in the world for a country not at war.⁴⁵ Women are raped during crimes of housebreaking, robbery and hijacking, and as they go about their daily tasks. Women are beaten and raped by husbands and boyfriends, and many perceive this to be normal behaviour of love, though they do not like it (it is now illegal). Girls are raped by boys at school, gangs, teachers, uncles, fathers and brothers. Children and infants are raped. The people who do these things to women and children are usually those within their own homes or relationship circles.

All of this has direct implications for the spread of HIV and AIDS in South Africa. Though young women (of all races) and poor women are more vulnerable to contracting the HIV virus than young men, it is found that male sexual behaviour is most responsible for its spread. High rates of rape and sexual violence against women

⁴² R. Morrell (ed), *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal: Historical and Social Perspectives* (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996).

⁴³ This analysis was made by Prof Beaty Naude, Professor of Criminology at UNISA, at the Annual Congress of the South African Missiological Society (SAMS), Crime and Violence Seminars, St. John Vianney Seminary Pretoria, 20-22 January 1999, which I attended.

⁴⁴ While political and economic life has moved into a globalised 'fast lane', NGOs, artists, spiritual leaders, caregivers and healers of many kinds continue to address what they refer to as the 'multiple woundedness' of all sectors of South Africa. They see the ongoing necessity for healing of memories - of the past, as well as traumas continuing to be inflicted on people everyday. Fr. Michael Lapsley runs the Institute for the Healing of Memories in Cape Town. In KwaZulu-Natal, faith-based NGOs form a Consortium for Healing of Memories through the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council (KZNCC) in Pietermaritzburg.

⁴⁵ During the tenure of President Thabo Mbeki (2000-2008), the extent of rape and violence against women was denied and statistics suppressed. A recent study released in June 2009 by the Medical Research Council (MRC) found that 1 in 4 South African men admitted to having raped a woman or several women. R. Jewkes, Y. Sikweyiya, R. Morrell and K. Dunkle. 2009. Understanding Men's Health and Use of Violence: Interface of Rape and HIV in South Africa. June. *Medical Research Council*. http://www.mrc.co.za/gender/violence_hiv.pdf. (Accessed 20 October 2009).

fuel the epidemic.⁴⁶

The spectre and experience of violence against women, the link with HIV and AIDS, empowerment of women, and the call and struggle to claim their full humanity and affirm their lives, are themes that lie behind artworks and motivations of some of the women artists and crafters in this thesis. These themes are explicitly and metaphorically represented in the artwork. For some, they are traumatic events personally experienced, worked through in the artmaking process.

HIV and AIDS

The KwaZulu-Natal uMngungundlovu district (Pietermaritzburg and surrounding areas) has the highest rate of HIV infection amongst pregnant women, and the highest number of children who are orphaned because of AIDS.⁴⁷ Supported by norms, culture and religion, and sanctions and consequences such as the threat of violence, women of all cultures in South Africa are directly or tacitly taught to defer and submit to men. Many women believe they do not - or even should not - have control over their sexual lives. They are often forced or coerced into sex. Even if a married woman knows that her husband is not faithful in this era of HIV and AIDS, most will not say “use a condom” because of fear of accusations levelled at her of being unfaithful or then being beaten or raped by her husband or boyfriend.

Much sexual trading (abuse) goes on particularly between older men and young schoolgirls. There might be a “Mr. Shoes” or “Mr. Cellphone” or many men who finance different things. Described as sugar-daddies, money earned from sex with these men is for luxury items, for some. For many, it is also to feed the family, and

⁴⁶ Gennrich (ed), *The Church in a HIV+ World*, p. 8. In South Africa, women between the ages of 15 and 29 have the highest rate of HIV infection: 17.7% compared to 12.8% of the men in the same age group. Some other risky male behaviour includes: the norms of multiple partnerships and infidelity for men; the history and practice of migrant labour which has meant for many men keeping a ‘city’ family and a ‘rural’ family or girlfriend and wife; and sex trafficking with long-distance truck drivers who travel through all of Africa to and from port cities such as Durban.

⁴⁷ N. Naidoo, 2009. District is HIV Hotspot, *Natal Witness Online*, 9 October. <http://www.witness.co.za> Path: Nalini Naidoo (Accessed 21 November 2009).

despite the risks, sometimes the families turn a blind eye.⁴⁸

These are just a few of the practices that put women at risk and fuel the epidemic. Until recent years and efforts to educate people on HIV and AIDS, sexual exposure or experience of young people normally has preceded sexual education.⁴⁹ As awareness campaigns educate on sexual matters, rights and dignity, they also make the link between domination of women, violence and HIV and AIDS. This, importantly, includes critique of oppressive religious understandings on gender.

The recent history of apartheid, poverty, sexual and other forms of violence, and vulnerability are formative in women's experience and who they are in South Africa. These oppressive contexts prescribe to girls and women what they can and cannot do. It influences their understandings of their innate value or lack of it. This web of factors overlap in influencing the self-value and self-care of women, particularly as it relates to theological belief and church teachings.

South African Women's Value and Self-Care: 'The Prison Inside Your Head'

All persons are 'the image and glory of God (1 Cor 11:7,8; Gen 1:27,28), but Jesus comes to remind us of what this means, to reawaken us to our beauty (*doxa*) and our responsibility for beauty. An image of God who is also beautiful is not passive and is not despising of one's self or of one's gifts. An image of God does what God does, which is to birth beauty in all its forms. This is what Jesus did. It is also what Jesus was. Christ was 'the beautiful one' about whom the prophets spoke.⁵⁰

Claiming and naming their stories and their voices, affirming women's humanity as made in the image of God, and standing in solidarity with women, are all important themes expressed and explored through the artmaking of women artists and crafters.

⁴⁸ Suzanne Leclerc-Madala, 2008. Sugar Daddies and HIV: Is It Really About Money, Money, Money? *HSRC Review*, 6:8, September. http://www.hsrc.ac.za/HSRC_Review_Article-106.phtml. (Accessed 21 November 2009).

⁴⁹ There are taboos around talking about sex, particularly in African culture. In South Africa, because of the disruption of family life from apartheid, migration and urbanisation, the traditional process of grandparents or aunts doing the sexual education was eroded. Another vestige of apartheid and its poverty is cramped living conditions. Often with several people in one room or bed, children are exposed to adult sexual behaviour and put at risk.

⁵⁰ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company Inc, 1983), p. 242.

Women's artmaking serves as an important process for discovering and affirming life for themselves and others. Across culture and economic class, this question of self-care arises.

Oppression of women in South Africa comes from both the external and internal sources, which feed one another. As Korean ecofeminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung once said: 'After political liberation there remains 'the prison inside your head.'⁵¹ Denial of self and failure to value and care for the self emanating from external oppression is internalised by many South African women, so that the effects of submission and self-denial last long after the outside force is removed. To illustrate this, I look at some stories of the inner life of women and their experience of God and themselves.

Gregory Lourens tells the story of Rose, a Coloured woman who came to him for spiritual direction. She was 'in a state of serious burnout and depression'. Her motivation for coming to direction was to seek God and God's assistance to overcome her 'lack of motivation to do his will'. Lourens writes of Rose's internal fragmentation wrought by apartheid and her family.

...her self-image and sense of self-worth were mostly dependent on how other people saw her, whether it was her mother, the bishop, or the people she was working with or for. She was driven to perform correctly, to be perfect in their eyes. In the same way, she was driven to please God. As a result, she had lost touch with her own physical realities and ended up in severe burnout and depression.

....her sense of self was very limited. At a primal level she could not accept who she was. This denial of herself was due to the interconnection of two factors: her family and how they failed to value her, which was made more problematic because of apartheid and how it had influenced her parents and their own sense of self-worth.⁵²

⁵¹ Chung Hyun Kyung visited the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA) and Diakonia Council of Churches in KZN as part of her visit to South Africa in 1996. This was during the World Council of Churches celebrations of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, held in Zimbabwe. Her PACSA presentations initiated and were published in the inaugural PACSA publication of *Women In God's Image* (1996).

⁵² Gregory Lourens, 'Finding Identity in South Africa's Apartheid Society', in S. Rakoczy (ed), *Common Journey, Different Paths: Spiritual Direction in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 134-142.

Lourens extends his observation more widely to many South Africans, describing the lack of value and care that they have for themselves. He says this is an internalised reflection of the lack of value incorrectly given them by the apartheid system. “Many people in South Africa knowingly or unknowingly are living out the identity that the apartheid system has given them.” They “...internalize the identity and self-value that the system incorrectly gave them...”⁵³

This story of Rose was written in the early 90's - a time of enormous change in South Africa - and illustrates the distortion of self that was wrought and internalised because of apartheid.⁵⁴ Both Rose and her family failed to value her because of their own distorted sense of self.

Echoes of this story - a damaged sense of self - are heard throughout this country by women in different circumstances. Without essentialising women's experience, in broad strokes, these are still marked by racial categories. For many black women, their self-value is distorted by layers of economic, racial and cultural forms of oppression. Many white women struggle with valuing the self because of socio-cultural and religious teaching which places them in the role of subordinate. Added to this are struggles with identity and belonging – an issue for South Africans from diverse contexts and histories - and wondering if they have a place and a voice.⁵⁵ Instead of seeing themselves as the beautiful image and glory of God that the Scriptures teach, Kretschmar writes how South African women “...often feel ‘stupid, helpless, inadequate’ either because they are made to feel this way by others, or because they lack the esteem skills, opportunities and experience to achieve any of their dreams.”⁵⁶

A significant public illustration of black women's denial of self was revealed during

⁵³ Lourens, ‘Finding Identity’, pp. 134-142.

⁵⁴ On the violence of colonialism and the psychological effects it engenders in the dominated, see F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Discourse on the construction of identity is a multifaceted and complex area explored by B. Benwell and E. Stokes, *Discourse and Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ D. Brown, *To Speak of this Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN, 2006).

⁵⁶ Kretschmar, ‘Gender, Women and Ethics’, p. 174.

the stories and testimonies shared at hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1996.⁵⁷

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Women were the ones who ‘broke the silence’ of the past and began speaking of gross human rights violations during the apartheid era, at the TRC hearings. But it became clear that their attention was not on themselves, their experiences, pain and suffering. They were ‘storytellers’, telling tales of horror about their sons, husbands, lovers and brothers.⁵⁸ Virginia Gcabashe, a commissioner with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, explained that women’s silence about their own violation and suffering was common. South African black women minimise their own pain because they accept diminishment and abuse as normal. In her words,

Women were not sharing their stories of violence and suffering...because it is normal for women to consider others before themselves. Within this patriarchal society in which we live, women have become accustomed to being placed secondary, are used to suffering and abuse as ‘normal’ - both at home and in society at large - and they don’t feel their own stories are important. Mentally and emotionally...most women, especially black women, are traumatised in this country. Yet, unless they are hurt physically, they don’t recognise the battering they experience in every sphere of their lives.⁵⁹

To researchers Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies, women’s refusal to tell their experiences, particularly of sexual violation during apartheid, was because of the

⁵⁷ It became so obvious and disturbing that women were not going to tell their own stories in the public forum that penetrating questions began to be asked about society and about women’s reality, by the Commission as well as those observing and counselling. They asked ‘why?’ Not only are women conditioned to minimise their own pain, but they did not feel safe. Gross human rights violations against women were often sexual, though the extent of this is shrouded in silence. Special Hearings for Women were finally set up - ‘in camera’ and more women came forward to tell their stories. But many had not told their stories to anyone - not even family or husbands - and were not ready to speak. They have remained with their stories in their hearts.

⁵⁸ Gloria Plaahtie, ‘Various Voices Speak’, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology*, 4: 2 (July 1997), p. 8.

⁵⁹ Interview with Virginia Gcabashe by L. Dlamini, D. Mabery and K. Buckenham, ‘Women and the Truth Commission’, *Women In God’s Image* 4 (1996), p. 13. Recognising the resounding silence of women telling their stories, the importance of their doing so and of these being heard, artist Andries Botha began a project with rural black South African women. They are telling their stories through embroidered imagery. Botha has archived thousands of these images and the stories they tell of their creators - and South Africa. The stories are very hard. The project continues. The works have travelled and are exhibited all over the world as a ‘living archive’. He sees this as an important healing, sacred and historical archive, affirming the full humanity of women.

discrimination, disadvantage and secondary status women are relegated to in almost every sphere of society.⁶⁰ Their concerns are not held as important - nor their stories sacred - by others and even themselves. Knowing this, and feeling it would not be a safe environment in which to share, women chose not to speak in the TRC hearings.⁶¹

Perceptively aware of this glaring omission and silencing of women's truths and traumas – specifically black women's marginalisation, abominable abuse and dehumanization – Durban sculptor and multi-media artist Andries Botha began a project to help black women to tell their stories, heal, and externalize them as an archive of the truth-telling to the world.⁶² Conceptualised as an alternative Truth Commission on a smaller and private scale, *Amazwi Abesifazane* project involves black women telling their stories orally, in writing, and in embroidered narrative panels. It is profoundly healing and empowering. He refers to it as a process of 'remembering' – putting oneself back together. The body of women's work is considered a living archive of truth-telling of life for black women under apartheid, and since.⁶³

For women in this thesis, their art provides this space to work through and heal their deepest pain. It is non-prescriptive, raw, honest, and safe.

In the communal context, South African women's crafting projects provide respect, understanding, reception and healing as women share their sorrows, and walk with one another in them. Their work does not have to explicitly depict their stories. South African art historian Brenda Schmähmann echoes this observation, referring to women of the *Mapula* embroidery project. "While embroidery provides women with a mechanism to articulate concerns that they would feel unable to express in everyday discourse, their works do not necessarily record their experiences and attitudes

⁶⁰ Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes, 'Dealing with the Aftermath: Sexual Violence and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Agenda* 36 (1997), pp. 7-18.

⁶¹ Andries Botha, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 29 November 2006 in Durban. See also Bernice Stott, 'The Reconstitution'. Stott looks at the healing process in theological terms, calls it the 'reconstitution of women's spiritualities.' This, as related to women's artmaking, will be looked at more in chapters four, five and six.

⁶² Pieces from the project have traveled and been displayed in many countries internationally.

⁶³ Andries Botha, same interview.

directly.”⁶⁴ Groups interviewed in chapter six demonstrated this. The joy and communal cohesion of the women in the Church Agricultural Project, and the commitment, self-affirmation and solidarity of the Kopanang Women’s Group provide evidence of the significance of these spaces and the aesthetic means through which to articulate themselves. Both groups were formed in response to poverty and distress in the women’s lives.⁶⁵ They hold each other and create space to hear, affirm and support each other.⁶⁶

Affirmation of women and self-value are important themes for women, expressed and explored in the artmaking of women artists and crafters interviewed. The very creative process of putting something out into the world that says ‘I am here, this is my own voice’ is affirming their existence. Making something explicit about their own story says ‘this is my truth’. By naming and claiming their own stories in artistic creativity, women begin to emerge to themselves and others as valuable human beings. For all the women, making something with their own hands and imagination is a self-affirmation that they are capable of creating something beautiful, and that beauty comes from somewhere within.

Politics and policy have changed, but at the level of the heart, many South African women carry deep wounds, and wounds continue to be inflicted. They need safe environments - such as in their projects and creative work - in which to tell their stories, to hold the sacredness of their lives, to risk paying attention and finding out their needs and ways to meet them, to care for themselves and receive care from others, to heal, and to claim their own humanity and agency.

Women’s faith and their churches are important in this, playing significant roles in providing meaning, nourishment, support and strength to women spiritually and

⁶⁴ Brenda Schmahmann, ‘Stitches as Sutures: Representations of Trauma and Recovery by women in the Mapula Embroidery Project’, in *African Arts* 38 2, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Kopanang has formed a smaller group within it called Dikeledi, where a small group of women (+/- 12) are journeying together in a more intimate way, telling their stories and embroidering them in panels.

⁶⁶ This is not an idealized picture of community. Development comes with many struggles. However, There is commitment amongst the women that undergirds the shared human brokenness. Shared values and commitment to communicate honestly, grounded in the awareness of dignity of self and others is specifically articulated by Kopanang.

practically. Yet, it is a confusing and contradictory double message that women get from institutional church teaching and practice. Promising liberation and life, it simultaneously undermines women's full humanity.

Women's Value, Christianity and the Church in South Africa

...only those who are involved in the struggle against what hampers God's reign should dare to speak God's message. To be involved in the struggle is to listen to the voices of the abused and oppressed. 'When abused women's bodies are the hermeneutic we use to read scripture, then our sermons and lives will be passionate about social, political and ecclesial change'.⁶⁷

How do the churches fare in the struggle against what hampers God's reign in women's lives in South Africa? While their faith formation and spirituality is very important to Christian women, the relationship with the institutional church and the Christian tradition as they have experienced it, is, for many, conflicted.

It is often said that the Church is a site of struggle, and certainly it has been so in South Africa, politically. In sections of the Church, the commitment was with the poor, abused and oppressed during apartheid and for some it still is. However, with regard to women, the struggle is fledgling, and resisted. Valuing women's full humanity and gifts - beyond stereotypical roles and positions - is still largely in the future. It is a struggle even for many women.

In South Africa, religion is formative, church organisations and their Christian faith is very important to women. The strength of black women's prayer groups, called *manyanos* play a significant role in their lives and spirituality.⁶⁸ Yet women's struggles to claim their own value is hampered in many ways and to different degrees

⁶⁷ C.J. Schlueter, 'Feminist Homiletics: Strategies for Empowerment', in O. Ortega (ed), *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Actions* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), p.139. Quoted in Janet H. Wooten, *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 79-80. (I have been unable to find the Ortega book).

⁶⁸ See B. Haddad, 'The Mothers' Union in South Africa: Untold Stories of Faith, Survival and Resistance,' in I.A. Phiri, D.B. Govinden and S. Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), pp. 101-117; D. Gaitskell, 'Praying and Preaching: The Distinctive Spirituality of African Women's Church Organisations', in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 211-232.

by church institutions, whose leadership, theology, teaching and practices remains patriarchal, androcentric and male. For most churches, there is still little interest, urgency or commitment to redressing issues of gender discrimination.⁶⁹ Sermons, prayers, liturgies or interpretations of scripture that are gender sensitive, or even related to women's reality are rare, never mind healing grace that touches the core of who they are as women. Women are astonished and set free when hearing of their reality, or a revelatory message about self-love.⁷⁰ The liberating power of affirming messages for women transforms when they are heard.⁷¹

In my experience, Church teaching about God in South Africa, across a range of denominations and churches, tends to be rooted in Old Testament, literal imagery. Interpretations of God's relationship humanity are too often misleading, particularly related to women. These conceptualise the Divine as a masculine judgmental and punitive God, a God of hierarchy, a God mediated through power, protocol, and prestige, who somehow must be appeased. People are told how they are lacking in relation to this male, distant, judgmental image of God.

Dwelling on repentance for selfishness and sin, the messages communicate a fundamental flaw in being who one is and the necessity of conforming to a prescribed role and tradition. Celebration of the goodness, abundance and beauty of creation - including humanity, being created as the beloved in God's image and God's glory,

⁶⁹ For accounts on the struggle and Movement for Ordination of Women within the Anglican Church, see D. Ackermann, et al. (eds), *Women Hold Up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991). There is an ongoing struggle for ordination of women in the Roman Catholic church, though the Durban-based activist group WOSA (Women's Ordination South Africa) was disbanded in 2008. A few churches have begun to think about formulating gender policies. See the churches' gender audit in C. Hall and D. Gennrich (eds), *Created In God's Image* (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA, 2008).

⁷⁰ Two women I interviewed - one a priest who preached on this, the other a person who heard such a message - both talked about the scripture "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself." Rather than focusing on what women need to give to others, these messages were about loving oneself, taking care of oneself, honouring oneself as being the desire of God. It is from this deep love that one is able to love others. The priest talked about how astonished people were. The woman hearing the message talked of how it changed her and freed her, as she had always listened to the Christian admonition not to be 'selfish'.

⁷¹ Special services, prayers and liturgies are occasionally created, organised and lead by women - usually by lay-women and NGOs. One example is the 16 Days Campaigns on 'No Violence Against Women' - that runs from 25 November to 10 December each year. In KwaZulu-Natal, PACSA organised campaigns with churches, and the UKZN School of Religion and Theology (SORAT) developed the Tamar Campaign, bringing together agencies from the province of KZN.

the Gospel message of love and its liberative core - all seem to pale in significance to a message of inadequacy, even loathsomeness.

For women in South Africa, such teaching of a judgmental 'ugly' image of God who does not really like them is compounded by their lower 'God-ordained' status confirmed through culture. Usually it is male leaders talking to a church full of women in the pews. Women are taught, through selective interpretation of scripture combined with patriarchal belief, that they have a secondary place and a God-ordained subservient role in life.⁷²

Within many churches, women are presented with a confusing double message. On the one hand their acceptance by God, even their equality in God's sight, is affirmed. On the other hand, their roles are restricted and their nature as equally God-created is denied in practice. Passages such as Galatians 3.28 are spiritualised (ie they are regarded as not applicable to historical, earthly reality) while passages such as 1 Timothy 2.12 are taken out of context and regarded as universally binding. Arguments based on questionable interpretations of "orders of creation" and male "headship" are usually advanced to perpetuate male domination in church and society. More often than not, women are silenced, excluded, ignored, laughed at, and marginalised within the Church. Understandably, this experience impacts negatively on the spiritual growth of women who, given their experience, find it difficult to actually believe in a (male) God who loves them and regards them as valuable and important.⁷³

For women in urban black townships, Plaatjie found that women did not seem to value themselves at all, or feel they needed to look after their own interests. Plaatjie defined self-care as being able to identify and express their hopes as well as sources of pain and pleasure, distinguish their own needs, and find resources for help and support in making sure these needs are met. This, she continues, is rooted in knowing oneself and living authentically as who one is, rather than hiding behind roles one fills. She expressed concern that not only was self-care missing, but because self-care fosters a sense of self and vice-versa, women seemed to lack a deep sense of self and their own value.⁷⁴ Plaatjie linked this to Church teaching and theology women

⁷² Kretzschmar, "Gender, Women and Ethics, p. 180.

⁷³ Kretzschmar, 'Gender, Women and Ethics, p. 180.

⁷⁴ Gloria Plaatjie, 'Various Voices Speak', *Bulletin for Contextual Theology*, 4 (2) July 1997, p. 8. These include the texts such as 1 Tim 2:11-14, Eph 5:21-33, 1 Cor 14:34-35, 1 Col 3:18ff, Tit 2:4ff, 1

received. Distorted social constructs of the 'nature of women' - who they are and who they are allowed to be - were presented as being willed by God.⁷⁵

Preaching, prayers, liturgies that image God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Christian life both within and outside of the Church largely remain in line with classical male Christian tradition. Many white South African women write how, as they become conscientised to the sexism in the tradition, it provokes enormous conflict in their spirituality, their church and their relationships. Awareness of its destructiveness is linked to their own identities, spiritual confusion, experiences of ideological domination of others based on race, and commitments to just, liberating and healing praxis.⁷⁶

The implications for unconscientised women are that, unaware of 'the evils of gender discrimination and sexism', many women in South African churches "...are unable to distinguish between the gospel of Christ and the male version of the gospel of Christ."⁷⁷

Swart-Russell recognises the security for women in the status quo, and the risks that awareness entails.

They accept sexist beliefs as an integral part of Christian teaching. They derive security from the stereotypes projected upon them, and willingly conform to these stereotypes. The self-denigration created in them by sexism causes them to admire and even adore the male leaders of their church. To break away from the old stereotypes is frightening to them; liberation demands *authentic self definition*, and offers little short-term security. It is easier to accommodate the expectations of the oppressor groups than to defy that group and enter the uncharted territory of self-knowledge and free self-identification.⁷⁸

Pet 3:1-7.

⁷⁵ Plaajtje, 'Various Voices Speak', p. 8.

⁷⁶ H. Kotze, 'Drought and Thirst as Companions on the Journey in Search of Water', in D. Ackermann, E. Getman, H. Kotze and J. Tobler (eds), *Claiming Our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality* (Cape Town: EFSA, 2000), pp 33-46; M. Nixon 'Belonging is a Journey Not a Place', *Claiming Our Footprints*, pp. 71-82.

⁷⁷ Kretschmar, 'Gender, Women and Ethics', pp. 173-174.

⁷⁸ P. Swart-Russell, 'Towards Our Liberation: A New Vision of Church and Ministry' in D. Ackermann, J.A. Draper, and E. Mashinini, *Women Hold Up Half the Sky* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), p. 299.

Those who have chosen the road to liberation embark on a risky and not at all secure journey. But the long-term rewards are profound, bringing a woman closer to full life. Value, authentic self-definition, liberation and healing - all of these are facets of a free moral person made in the image of God, fully human, fully alive.

The church, as a significant part of the lives of many South African women, has an integral role in both sustaining women and changing hearts. Yet, in belief, practice, tradition, doctrine and theology, many churches continue to teach and practice oppression of women, undermining their full humanity. This not only affects women's deepest self and their ideas of God, but undergirds oppression, denigration and dehumanisation in private, familial, social, political and economic realms.

Nonetheless, despite these contradictions and double messages, Christian faith and communal worship in churches continue to be important to women in South Africa, invested with meaning by them, and turned to for spiritual nourishment, support and power. It indicates the primacy of their relationship with the Divine to all of their life. Religious belief and spiritual practice sustains many women's efforts to be and live as fully human and to transform unjust orders. It roots their relatedness in family, community and society and provides security meaning and belonging. It energises, encourages and gives vision to their liberation, their transformation, their growth and new life - as promised in Christ. With the theological touchstone being liberation and full life for all, women are refusing to keep silent about their oppression, and are claiming this freeing spirit – for themselves and others. They are affirming their inherent worth and beauty, directing their energies toward that which is life affirming for themselves and others, including that which is in the Christian tradition.

In the next section, I look at aspects of women's theology in Africa and South Africa, within the context of converging theological streams of liberating theologies. After referring to the significance of religion and spirituality in Africa as a whole, I explore the emergence, development and influence of different prophetic streams of Christianity in Africa and South Africa. These include African theologies, African

Independent Churches, black theologies in South Africa, feminist theologies and African women's theologies. The prophetic streams that focus on the liberating core of the Gospel run parallel to - and emerge from within - the formal institutions of mission, colonial-instituted and patriarchal churches. In Africa, the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has been an important network of women to confronting oppressive frameworks from their particular contexts and write emerging theologies. Finally, I look at the significance of the aesthetic in the uncovering, naming, claiming, witness, embodiment and truth-telling of women's experience, their spirituality, and theology.

African Contexts – Religion, Culture and Liberating Theologies

African Religio-culture

South Africa shares with the rest of Africa a deep religious sensibility. Contrasting with much of the post-modern secular West, "Religion informs the African's life in its totality," writes Kwesi Dickson.⁷⁹ People from diverse cultures in Africa are aware of and believe in a spiritual world that is interrelated with all of life. This may be expressed through Christianity, or/and traditional African beliefs and practices including ancestor veneration, or through other world religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and others. The spiritual is rarely absent from everyday life.⁸⁰

While South Africa is a pluralistic country, the majority of people confess Christian belief.⁸¹ This subsumes an enormous variety of beliefs and denominations, including Pentecostal charismatic and evangelical churches, mainline denominations such as the Methodists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, and African Independent Churches

⁷⁹ Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London/New York: Dartman, Longman and Todd/Orbis Books, 1984), p. 29.

⁸⁰ An important shift is happening regarding personal religious belief. Data from South African censuses indicate that 'No religion' increased from 1.2% in 1991, to 11.5% in 1996, to 15.1% in 2001. Johannes C. Erasmus, Amanda Gouws and Willie van der Merwe, 'Changing Landscapes of Welfare, Religion and Gender: The Impact on the Role of Churches', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 133 March 2009, pp. 10-11.

⁸¹ This is related significantly to the missionary history and the Christian State formed under the National Party.

(AICs) such as the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC) or Shembe (Nazarite) Church. While some African people and denominations believe it is necessary to divorce themselves from African traditional beliefs and practices, other denominations, movements and theology have found common ground, or ways to marry Christian missionary teaching with African traditional religion, such as the AICs. They claim the integrity of the two together.⁸²

Oduyoye describes what she calls ‘religio-culture’ or religion-based culture of Africa.⁸³ While there are aspects that seem to have eroded dramatically in post-1994 South Africa, with increasing urbanisation and individualism, her interpretation of African culture and cosmogony as a whole is shared with many South Africans.

Oduyoye and others explain that Africans live in a ‘spiritual universe’ that is expressed in this religio-culture that “rules and directs life in Africa.”⁸⁴ It is the foundation of much African cosmogony expressed in social, political cultural, religious, and even economic life, where the sacred and secular are intertwined. For many, life is holistically inter-related, including nature, tradition, relationships among people, the living and the dead. “God, the Source Being, other spirit-beings (such as the ancestors), and human beings are in constant communication and inter-relationship.”⁸⁵

The inter-relatedness of life is seen in the values of wholeness and harmony, community, celebration of life, and hospitality. Wholeness is expressed as harmony with nature, human beings and the divine. Community is expressed in the saying, belief and value of *ubuntu* - I am because we are - ‘the personal is communal’, the group is more important than the individual person. A human being is born into a human community, and that is what makes him or her human. As Oduyoye writes, “African anthropology sees humans as beings who depend on life-in-community for

⁸² See for example, J. Kiernan, ‘The Impact of White Settlement on African Traditional Religions.’ In M. Prozesky and J.W. de Gruchy (eds), *Living Faiths in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995).

⁸³ Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 25.

⁸⁴ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, pp. 25-26.

⁸⁵ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 35.

their self-understanding,”⁸⁶ Amidst forces of suffering and oppression, together as community of living and dead, the fullness of life is nourished, protected and celebrated. “The spirituality of Africans is rooted in the fullness of life” Oduyoye writes.⁸⁷ She illustrates,

Life and more life is the prayer of African Religion, hence the belief that we attain immortality through our descendants. Every aspect of life is celebrated. All beginnings and endings are marked by ritual. All signs of abundance and renewed health are celebrated. Life is to be lived with full intent, lived forcefully and with power.⁸⁸

Within this African religio-culture, sharing, welcome and hospitality are key values.

Those who are blessed demonstrate their appreciation of their good fortune by being hospitable to others...Giving, to ensure life and to preserve the life-force or save the ‘face’ of others, is part of African culture. Sharing is built into communal existence, but it does not remain there. All strangers, living or passing through, become the responsibility of the host community. This principle of hospitality is based on honoring reciprocity.⁸⁹

It is particularly expected of and valued by women, involving in many instances great sacrifice without reciprocity and demanding resources in contexts of deep poverty. Western individualism has also challenged this value in contemporary Africa.⁹⁰

The well-being of the community and all of life is dependent on right relations between people, nature, the living and the dead, thus family, kinship, lineage and community are very important and powerful factors in African life. They carry the religio-cultural values, and they are the context in which the religio-culture is imbibed. This is also where the guiding voices of the ancestors are heard, those who influence the fortunes of daily life, and thus the well-being of the individual and community. As givers and sustainers of life, women hold all of this together. Therefore, marriage and childbearing, the means through which the lineage is perpetuated, are

⁸⁶ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 26.

⁸⁷ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 26.

⁸⁸ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, pp. 26-27.

⁸⁹ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 27.

⁹⁰ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, pp. 90-109.

foundational to women's image, value, social status and self-esteem.⁹¹

Even though these traditional understandings have given way to a diversity of experiences and values, with urbanisation, John Mbiti describes African people generally as 'notoriously religious', whether urban or rural, a professional or worker, educated or uneducated.⁹²

For many women in Africa, religion and spirituality are extant and expressed in all of life, especially in relationships. They dig deeply into religion to enable them to sustain life – particularly for black rural women.⁹³ Even if the teaching is oppressive, it is accepted. To pull one thread of the cloth might mean that the whole weaving unravels. And the price of such unravelling might be too high.

African Liberation Theologies

Different streams of African theological scholarship (in conversation with other disciplines) developed in reaction to this 'colonial mentality of the Church in its interpretation of Christianity to Africans'.⁹⁴ These included questions of cultural retrieval, inculturation and liberation. Cultural nationalism of the pre-independence era in Africa, criticised European culture, its domination in Africa and the denigration it wrought to African life. It affirmed African ways and 'extolled African traditions'. Central to this movement was literary work. Novelists such as Camara Laye and Chinua Achebe, anthropologists, theologians and other scholars looked at African traditions and institutions through a gaze of respect and saw a 'wholesome dignity'. Writing from this perspective, literature from this time captured the spirit and imagination of many African people, igniting an energy for transformation.⁹⁵

This was followed by 'a theology of inculturation' that was concerned with

⁹¹ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, pp. 25-26.

⁹² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heineman Books, 1969), p.1.

⁹³ Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 20.

⁹⁴ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 25.

⁹⁵ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 25. She refers to Camara Laye's, *The African Child* (London: Fontana, 1959); and Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

‘Africanising’ Christian theology through affirming African culture and bringing it into dialogue with Christianity.⁹⁶ Liberation was prioritised by others, such as Jean-Marc Ela. He saw that the immediate pressing needs and crises for most people were around food, health, shelter, poverty, lack of education and opportunity, conflict, war, displacement and other forces that take life in a global context of domination and imperialism.⁹⁷

These discourses around cultural retrieval and liberation stimulated new understandings, questions and foundations about what it means to be an African and a Christian. Amongst many, one key insight is that Jesus Christ and the Christian message of salvation reclaimed in the context of Africa means liberation, wholeness, and abundant life for the person, community, society, continent and world. Rather than individual spiritual salvation, the saving message of Christ is embodied and particular, removing oppression and death-dealing forces. It is interpreted in terms of relationship with self, others and creation. This understanding is shared by liberation theologians, feminist theologians and African women theologians whose theology is embodied and inductive, starting from experience and context.

Prophetic Liberation Theologies in South Africa

Questions on freedom from colonialism in Africa have echoed with and run parallel to South Africa’s struggles, even though South Africa was isolated from the rest of Africa. Here, a solid stream of liberation theology emerged in the apartheid era based on what has been called the prophetic tradition of the church. Theologian Gerald West often speaks of the Davidic and the prophetic streams within the Bible itself; the voices of power, force and affluence versus the parallel voices of the ‘lowly’ -

⁹⁶ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, pp. 25-26. These include for example: K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), S.S. Maimela (ed), *Culture, Religion and Liberation* (AACC Challenge Series; Nairobi: Initiatives, 1994), J.N.K. Mugambi and L. Magesa (eds), *The Church in African Christianity* (AACC Challenge Series; Nairobi: Initiatives, 1990), J. Parrat, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), J.S. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1979),

⁹⁷ Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, translated from French by Robert R. Barr. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986) referred to in Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra, Ghana: Legon Theological Studies Series Project + Asempa Publishers, 2000).

oppressed, dispossessed and powerless people.⁹⁸ In South Africa, articulation of the latter in terms of ‘black theology’, ‘liberation theology’ and ‘prophetic theology’ extends back to the eras of apartheid and the struggle against it by elements of the Churches. Simultaneously, parallel and earlier forms of resistance had been initiated by African Independent Churches (AIC), which emerged as a positive response to the spiritual needs, traditions and autonomy of African people.⁹⁹

In opposition to the policies of apartheid and rule by force that was justified and selectively supported by the Bible, the *Kairos Document* was written in 1986 by a group of theologians who opposed apartheid on theological grounds. It named three streams in the South African theology: 1) State Theology; 2) Church Theology; 3) Prophetic Theology.¹⁰⁰ State Theology represented the Bible as used by Churches to justify and uphold State policies - as with the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK). Church Theology referred to Church belief that represented the status quo, that Churches should stick to ‘spiritual matters’ and not choose sides. Prophetic Theology took a critical approach to theology in the apartheid era, and focused on the structures of sin in the society, while turning to the Exilic and liberative core of the Christian message to change things.

Important documents produced by the prophetic movement within the South African

⁹⁸ Gerald West has discussed this in various PACSA meetings and workshops. See for example, G. West, ‘The Bible and Theology’ in J.W. de Gruchy and C. Villa-Vicencio (eds), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: David Philip, 1994), pp. 15-23. Albert Nolan and others refer to parallel streams in the Christian tradition and history of the church. He calls this the ‘mystico-prophetic’ tradition of lay people, saints, artists and mystics listening freely to the spirit versus the mainstream institutional tradition with its concerns with power struggles, hierarchy and doctrine. This is referred to in more detail in chapter three.

⁹⁹ Kiernan enumerates reasons that have been suggested for formation of AICs, at the same time noting that explanations are shifting from those of resistance to seeing them as a “positive... response to the demands of an urban environment”. Reasons include: 1. Rejecting white control in both mission and multi-racial churches; 2. rejecting foreign European culture in favour of African culture in church; 3. disillusionment with so-called equality in multi-racial churches; 4. providing a forum for black leadership, including a desire for respect and power in a powerless environment; 5. providing a structure more on the lines of traditional tribal community structures of African society; 6. a reaction to ‘rice-Christianity’ where converts were enticed to missions by the promise of education; 7. disillusionment with the gap between the preached message and the praxis of white churches. J.P. Kiernan, *The Production and Management of Therapeutic Power in Zionist Churches within a Zulu City* (United Kingdom: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 75-77 in Stott, ‘The Reconstitution’, pp. 22-23. Stott cautions that most interpretations of the emergence of AICs have been done by white historians.

¹⁰⁰ *Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Cape Town: Skottaville Publishers, 1986). Emerging from an initiative from the Institute for Contextual Theology in 1986, over 160 theologians from different denominations endorsed and signed it.

Churches – such as the *Kairos Document* - affirmed that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed and that apartheid was a heresy.¹⁰¹ The prophetic movement in the churches, while a minority, included men and women, lay and ordained, from many different racial groups, economic classes, church denominations and ecumenical movements.¹⁰²

But amidst this concern for liberation from racial and class discrimination, issues of gender oppression were put on the back burner, as male activists asserted ‘it would split the race struggle’.¹⁰³ South African women theologians – both black and white - have taken strength from the liberation history, and they have also critiqued it while holding on to the liberative core of the Gospel. Seeking resources that address women’s experiences, they connect with feminism and feminist theology from around the world, and draw on these as they support the project of constructing liberating theologies for women in diverse South African contexts.

Feminism and Feminist Theology

...the God of Jesus Christ is a liberating God of life, not ...patriarchal-induced death for women”.¹⁰⁴

Feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women’s experiences should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being a human. It highlights the woman’s world and her world view as she struggles side by side with the man to realise her full potential as a human being...Feminism then emphasises the wholeness of the community as made up of male and female beings. It seeks to express what is not so obvious, that is, that male-humanity is a partner with female-humanity and that both expressions of humanity are needed to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of Be-ing [*sic*]. Feminism calls for the

¹⁰¹ *Kairos Document*.

¹⁰² NGO’s included the banned Christian Institute, the Institute for Contextual Theology, and the South African Council of Churches. In KwaZulu-Natal, Diakonia and the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA) kept the flame alive. See for example S. Kumalo, *The People Called Methodists in Natal* (Nashville: Upper Room Ministries, 2009) for a recent detailed overview of the history, development and controversies in the churches around apartheid, the prophetic movement, naming apartheid as a heresy, the creation of the *Kairos Document*, and later *The Road to Damascus*, and when Churches rather than only individuals came to decry apartheid.

¹⁰³ This kind of comment is not unique to South Africa. Kanyoro writes similarly of the response to women’s struggles in light of African political liberation from colonial domination. Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁴ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 17.

incorporation of what it means to be human.¹⁰⁵

While the aims of the above statements by Rakoczy and Oduyoye regarding feminism are not objectionable, feminism in South Africa is nonetheless a contested term within the realms of women's liberation theologies. The debate of "naming our liberation theology" centres on reluctance to name the work as feminist, by some.¹⁰⁶ There is a need identified by African women theologians to both "systematically and theoretically interrogate" the Western theologies that African women have been trained in, "...as to their meaningfulness within our context as African women."¹⁰⁷ Women theologians in Africa share a similar agenda as some feminists concerning liberation and the full humanity of women. However, feminism is perceived to be centred on concerns of Western, white and middle class women from contexts of Europe and North America.¹⁰⁸ Women's concerns in African contexts include racism, culture, identity, and the meaning of Christianity in Africa. In the sections below, features of both feminist theology and African women's theology are discussed. I delineate particular priorities and areas of common concern that have been identified and articulated by black and white women theologians of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle).

Feminism

The roots of feminism and feminist theology are found in response to prejudice and ideologies manifested in sexism, androcentrism, patriarchy and kyriarchy. Sexism is an ideology of prejudice joined to power that is directed at women, and undergirded by structures of patriarchy. "Patriarchy", defines Adrienne Rich, "is the power of the fathers; a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men (by force, direct pressure, through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, education, and the

¹⁰⁵ M.A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), p. 121, quoted in I.A. Phiri and S. Nadar, 'What's In a Name? – Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women's Theologies' in *Journal of Constructive Theology* 12 2 2006. p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Phiri and Nadar, 'What's In a Name?', p. 6. African women theologians are organized under the banner of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle), which will be looked at in a later section. The authors note that the debate is occurring in Anglophone Circle. The Francophone Circle members are less reluctant to name their work as feminist. p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Phiri and Nadar, 'What's In a Name?', p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Phiri and Nadar, 'What's In a Name?', pp. 6-7.

division of labour) determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”¹⁰⁹

Linked to this is androcentrism where the male is understood to be the norm and centre of human life, with women on the periphery, orbiting around the male, an object or the ‘other’ whose identity is defined by men.¹¹⁰ Kyriarchy, a term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, refers to male power on a global scale, linked to land ownership, imperialism, education and privilege, and thus includes dimensions of race and class.¹¹¹

Feminism is based on the conviction of the full humanity of women, and the importance of reconstructing human society - including religious institutions - to reflect women’s equality with men.¹¹² There have been three waves in feminism.¹¹³ Beginning with educated middle class white western women’s experiences of gender oppression, feminism was critiqued and deepened by voices of African-American women who showed the interlocking injustices of gender, race and class. They uncovered how and why black women are oppressed by all structures and layers of society, not only because they are women, but because they are black, linked to slavery and colonialism.¹¹⁴ Women in Latin American countries, Asian countries, and more recently on the African continent, dismantle hegemonic and universalising tendencies of experiences of women, widening, deepening and disaggregating

¹⁰⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born* (New York: WW Norton, 1976), p 57. Rakoczy continues that more than simply a division of labour or belief about how society should be organised, patriarchy is the scaffolding in all spheres of society, culture and religion. Further, it carries within it explicit and implicit hierarchies of value, where men are at the top. The implications are that “Women - all women, every woman - are inherently lesser value than any male human being.” Patriarchy, writes Rakoczy, “[strikes] at the root of women’s humanity” and finds it “totally deficient.” Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ In this perspective, the truly human is the male, females are inferior, a ‘divine mistake’. In androcentrism, “male interpretations of every aspect of life, including religion, are accepted as normative by men and often by women.” Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 11

¹¹¹ Literally it means the reign of the lord/master; ruling power is in the hands of elite, propertied educated freeborn men. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Copeland (eds), *Violence Against Women* (London and Maryknoll: SCM Press and Orbis Books for Concilium, 1994), pp. vii-viii.

¹¹² Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, pp. 11-13.

¹¹³ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 2001, 2002), pp. 16-28.

¹¹⁴ See D.S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993). Writer Alice Walker is credited with the term ‘womanism’, which emphasised the courage of African American women, p. 243. See A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. xi.

experience in relation to class and poverty, military oppression and war, globalisation, colonialism, religious oppression and culture and imperialism. The specificity of naming uncovers and foregrounds that contexts define women's identities. "It is to recognize that if experience is to be the cornerstone of our feminist theologising and feminist research the specificity and location of experience has to be taken into consideration."¹¹⁵

From its beginnings with a focus on political rights, then its emphasis on 'women's full participation in society', successive waves of activism, scholarship, struggle and insight have evolved feminism into "...an ideal of recreating humanity itself according to patterns of eco-justice, that is, of right relations at every level and in relation to all of reality."¹¹⁶

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is critical of the sexist, patriarchal, androcentric, and kyriarchal bias of the Christian tradition. Feminist theologians critique past and present theology and praxis, from the perspective of women's dignity and full humanity, challenging what has been considered the norms of the Christian life. Rakoczy points out that this is a new perspective for theology because in the past, theology has been written exclusively by men.¹¹⁷

Women's full humanity is the critical principle in feminist theology.¹¹⁸ Resonating with the promise of Jesus in John 10:10 "I came that they may have life and have it in abundance", feminist theology emphasises,

Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to

¹¹⁵ Phiri and Nadar, 'What's In a Name?', p. 8.

¹¹⁶ S. M. Schneiders, *With Oil in their Lamps: Faith, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Paulist, 2000), p. 8, quoted in Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Rakoczy, "Creating Space for Faith to Flourish" in P. De Mey, J. Haers and J. Lamberts (eds), *The Mission to Proclaim and to Celebrate Christian Existence* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), p. 336.

¹¹⁸ R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 18-20.

reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.¹¹⁹

Feminist theology shares the method of liberation theology, a term used by Gustavo Gutierrez in his ground-breaking work.¹²⁰ Liberation theology emerges from the experiences and oppression of the poor of Latin America. Its method involves “critical reflection on praxis in light of the Word,” centred on the biblical imperative of justice.¹²¹ Rooted in the multifaceted oppression of poverty, ‘non-persons’ ask questions about their oppression, look closely at it to understand it, and take action to change it, all transfused by the understanding that God’s intention in Christ is to set the captives free and to bring full life.¹²² Using this method, feminist theology searches for, claims and expresses the emancipatory spirit of God from experiences of injustice and oppression.¹²³

Like other liberation theologies, feminist theology is inductive. It begins with reflecting on the experience of and search for God in the particularity of everyday life, emerging from the ground up. Thus, feminist theology begins with the experience of oppression of women in society, and critiques the ways in which gender has been constructed. Its beginning and its goal are the liberation and transformation of men and women.

¹¹⁹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, pp. 18-19.

¹²⁰ The term ‘liberation theology’ was coined by Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation, revised edition*. Translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. xviii, p. 175, note 1.

¹²¹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p.11, and pp. 3-12. Gutierrez critically examines the meaning of theology, as well as his understanding of liberation in the perspective of faith, in the context of poverty, oppression and the struggle for dignity and justice in Latin America. Liberation theology begins with the experiences of ‘non-personhood’ of the poor and their struggles for life, as the site of God commitment, compassion and love. Gutierrez introduces the concept of God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’, while not excluding anyone from God’s love, describes the Biblical ‘predilection for the weak and abused of human history’ (p. xxvii).

¹²² “Feminism claims that *women too* are among those oppressed whom God comes to vindicate and liberate.” Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk*, p. 24.

¹²³ Marie P. Aquino, ‘Latin American Feminist Theology’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 14:1 (1998), 89-107. Kwok Pui Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle To Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (London: SCM, 1990), Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002),

Furthermore, feminist theology emphasises the significance of social location and experience, particularity, diversity and difference. There is no such thing as an 'objective' analysis or perspective. Perspective is shaped by experience - including gender, class, race, economic and educational background, demographic, sexual orientation - all the factors that make up who we are. It recognizes and affirms that women are not a homogeneous group of people, and prioritises the importance of hearing these differences and making space for voices to emerge.

As it is based on the experience of 'living one's faith in the Spirit', Rakoczy points out how "...feminist theology unites theological insights on the themes of Christian tradition with spirituality...Thus it ends the dichotomy between theology and spirituality which has permeated the Christian tradition."¹²⁴

Tasks, Methods and Sources of Feminist Theology¹²⁵

Similar to the larger feminist project, three basic tasks of feminist theology are: 1. to deconstruct and critique what has been received, especially regarding the misogyny, denigration, abuse and silence of women in the Christian tradition, looking at why this has happened, the causes of women's exclusion and the distortion of their reality; 2. to retrieve and recover the histories of women that have been lost, and; 3. to reconstruct and reformulate the teachings of Christianity.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Rakoczy, "Creating Space", p. 337.

¹²⁵ Three types of feminist theology that have emerged: 1. Revolutionary - which sees Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal and necessarily to be abandoned by conscientised women; 2. Reformist - which recognizes there are problems, sees changes needed like full inclusion of women, but are happy with the tradition; and 3. Reconstructionist - which believes the theological core of the Christian tradition is liberative, and it looks for this. There is a vision of deep transformation of the tradition, and its structures and institutions. And the vision goes further to the transformation of the whole of society. See Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, pp. 32-38.

¹²⁶ "...feminist theology engages in at least three interrelated tasks: it critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches for alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women's lives." (p. 29). Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 29-30. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's seminal model of feminist biblical interpretation contains a four-fold movement: 1. a hermeneutics of suspicion that is aware and critical of the androcentric and patriarchal formulation of biblical texts, 2. a hermeneutics of proclamation 'assesses the Bible for its theological significance and power for the contemporary community of faith', discerning, and choosing to proclaim that which is liberating rather than that which is oppressive in the text, 3. a hermeneutics of remembrance that reconstructs women's history, and 4. a hermeneutics of creative actualization that involves women in

Like traditional theology, Scripture and Christian tradition are sources for theology, but are looked at through a critical lens that rejects their patriarchal bias. Sources are not confined to academic or dogmatic texts, but reflection on the struggles and sacramentality of all of life, their experience and the mystery of God. This includes women's daily responsibilities, creativity, relationships and feelings. This fullness finds potent expression in language other than words – in art, dance, poetry, song and story.

As a liberation theology, the prophetic principle of Scripture is the primary hermeneutical tool for analysing these sources, with the understanding that Jesus Christ is the 'liberating God of life'. The vision and goal is liberation of the oppressed and full life.¹²⁷

Liberation and African Women

The African continent's history of colonialism and Western imperialism causes a dilemma for African women theologians and activists. There is always a struggle with how to relate to Western culture, indigenous culture and religious culture, coupled with the daily need to support life against all odds. The quest for justice for women is trivialized in favor of 'larger' issues such as national liberation, famine, disease, war, poverty and so on. Acts of individual resistance to injustice and inequality in the Church are seen as immoral rather than scriptural. Analytical women are accused of being in pursuit of Western ideals of feminist liberation rather than African and Christian ones. This often leaves women vulnerable.¹²⁸

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the imaginative articulation of women's biblical story. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 15-22.

¹²⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether names four themes that are "essential to the prophetic-liberating tradition of Biblical faith : (1) God's defence and vindication of the oppressed; (2) the critique of the dominant systems of power and their powerholders; (3) the vision of a new age in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God's intended reign of peace and justice is installed in history; and (4) finally, the critique of ideology, or of religion, since ideology in this context is primarily religious. Prophetic faith denounces religious ideologies and systems that function to justify and sanctify the dominant, unjust social order." R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), p. 22.

¹²⁸ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 85.

In Africa, including South Africa, it is often charged that the promotion of the full humanity of women - feminism - is a foreign Western construct that strikes at the roots and integrity of African culture. The liberation of black African women is a hotbed of controversy, hope and backlash as it stirs up fears of disruption of all levels of culture, economics, politics and religion. This quote by Kanyoro above encapsulates the thinking and accusations heard again and again against women scholars, activists and theologians who want change for women.

African women scholars, such as writer Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, prominent writer Ama Ata Aidoo, and gender activist Amina Mama, claim the name and principles underlying feminism as central to the liberation of the whole of Africa.

Over a period of three decades, Ogundipe-Leslie has written a foundational body of work on issues of gender politics and social transformation within Africa. She focuses on the nature of the multiple oppressions of African women ('the six mountains on their back') pressing from external forces, as well as forces and limitations that emanate from inside women themselves.¹²⁹

Ogundipe-Leslie makes this important observation around African women's responses to their oppression: While gender asymmetry existed in many pre-colonial African societies and their position deteriorated under colonialism, women have not just accepted it or moved within it and sought to survive - they have resisted and acted to change things. She refers to these resistance movements as *indigenous feminisms* and argues that unlike some popular perceptions and accusation, resistance to gender oppression is not an imported thing from the West. There is a long tradition of this resistance in Africa.

...there were indigenous feminisms' prior to contact with Europeans, just as there were indigenous modes of rebellion and resistance throughout the period of colonial domination. What this means is that the struggle for women's rights is not the result of contamination by the West or of simple imitation by African women of Euro-American values...in most cultures there have always

¹²⁹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'African Feminist Discourse: A Review Essay', *Agenda* 58 (2003), p. 33. See for example, M. Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1994).

been indigenous manifestations of ‘feminism’ that take various forms, albeit very different forms, in particular cultural contexts. An important task for African scholars has therefore been to identify, excavate and analyse these indigenous forms of feminist resistance.¹³⁰

African women scholars and theologians carry on this resistance in the face of much aggression. As an important part of the process and method, which will be looked at in a section below in relation to theology, women are telling their own stories and excavating the stories of their foremothers.¹³¹

Equally committed to feminism as a liberatory principle in Africa, is writer Ama Ata Aidoo, whose stories have been drawn on as a source for liberation and liberating theology for women in Africa.¹³² She has asserted the value of feminism as a liberatory politic for a new Africa, seeing the inseparability of women’s freedom, development and dignity and that of Africa.

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist - especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us this is the crucial element in our feminism.¹³³

While the many burdens on women and the ‘politics of survival’ do absorb much of their energies, African women aspire and struggle for much more, writes Amina Mama. They want change and opportunity in all aspects of their lives. She responds with incredulity to ideas that African women aspire primarily to maintain life. “...as if in being African, we forgo all the things... respect, dignity, equality, lives free from violence and the threat of violence, and all those other feminist aspirations. It seems

¹³⁰ Guy-Sheftall, ‘African Feminist Discourse’, p. 33.

¹³¹ Books published by the Circle of Concerned Africa Women Theologians tell and reflect on women’s stories of life, struggle and faith in Africa. See the Bibliography.

¹³² Oduyoye refers to Aidoo as well as other African women writers who inform her theology and new liberatory visions for women in Africa, such as Mariama Ba; Awa Thiam; Flora Nwapa; Buchi Emecheta; Nawal El Saadawi. M.A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 14.

¹³³ O. Nnaemeka (ed), *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), p. 47, in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ‘African Feminist Discourse: A Review Essay, *Agenda* 58 (2003), p. 31.

obvious to me that African women do have aspirations that go far beyond securing their survival: political, economic, social, intellectual, professional and indeed personal desires for change.”¹³⁴

African women may be consumed by the daily business of securing the survival of themselves, their families and their communities, writes Mama, but this is not the frontier of who they are and what they aspire to. She sees this entrapped life as “...merely symptomatic of a global grid of patriarchal power, and all the social, political and economic injustices that delivers to women, and Africa.”¹³⁵ To Mama, like Aidoo and other African women scholars - including African women theologians - the freedom of African women and the freedom of the African continent are inseparable.

Women’s Theologies of Liberation and Life in Africa¹³⁶

Frameworks of African theologies of inculturation and liberation from African male scholars have seldom spoken to or addressed black African women’s experience of culture, their hopes and understandings of life, or their oppression.¹³⁷ At the same time, feminist theologies’ patriarchal deconstruction, critical methods and visions of liberation and transformation hold important insights. However, the western cultural norms and experiences of the world that have generated much of this theory and activism are very different from those of African culture, and African women’s experience in a globalised world, and South African women’s particular contexts.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Elaine Salo and Amina Mama, ‘Talking About Feminism in Africa’, *Agenda* 50 (2001), p. 60.

¹³⁵ Salo and Mama, ‘Talking About Feminism’, p. 60.

¹³⁶ In this thesis, I refer to African women’s theologies to mean those that are ethnically black African, with shared overarching belief-systems. Women’s theologies of liberation for and by women in Africa includes white and black women - as organized under the banner of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle).

¹³⁷ Some African male theologians have begun to pay attention to African women’s theology, including John Mbiti, Tinyiko Maluleke and Ezra Chitando. Maluleke calls for a humble listening and agonizing to be practiced by African male theologians. See, for example, Tinyiko S. Maluleke, ‘The ‘Smoke-Screens’ Called Black and African Theologies – The Challenge of African Women Theology’, *Journal of Constructive Theology* 3:2 (Dec 1997), pp. 39-63; Tinyiko S. Maluleke, ‘African “Ruths”, Ruthless Africans: Reflections of an African Mordecai’, in Musa W. Dube (ed), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta, Geneva: Society of Biblical Literature, WCC, 2001), pp. 237-253.

¹³⁸ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, pp. 25-26.

Christianity is seen as a mixed blessing for African women, a double-edged sword. For African women, Oduyoye writes “Liberation through Jesus is a daily reality”.¹³⁹ “...women are able to proclaim the Jesus who breaks the chains of evil.”¹⁴⁰

It is important for all African, but especially women, that this person, born in someone else’s backyard, has lived the life of God on earth and continues to accompany all in similar circumstances to live their full humanity so that they too might reflect the God in whose image they are created. It was important to believe that Jesus is the anointed one of God, empowered and sent by God to show humanity what it means to live fully the image in which we are made. Living fully has come to mean resisting oppression, transforming potential death into life and believing that the resurrection happens every time we defeat death and begin new life.¹⁴¹

However, Christianity carries with it the norms of western culture. Edet and Ekaya write of its promise to elevate women’s dignity and equality with men, but its failure to do so.¹⁴² Oduyoye sees African women’s position deteriorating with Christianity and the culture it came in on. “It seems that the sexist elements of Western culture have simply fuelled the cultural sexism of traditional African society.”¹⁴³

African women’s theologising is characterised by its interpretation of theology through a worldview based on the communal living common in Africa, as contrasted with theology from a western norm of individualism.¹⁴⁴ In South Africa, while the context is increasingly urban and diverse, the value of community and solidarity underlies women’s liberating theologies as a whole. Like male liberating theologies in Africa, thinking about God, Jesus, and what the faith means is inseparable from the well-being, liberation and life of the whole community and continent, in a context of much injustice and hardship. It is not a focus on personal sin and individual salvation. African women’s theology arises from women’s groups in church and communities,

¹³⁹ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 65.

¹⁴⁰ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 64.

¹⁴¹ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 64.

¹⁴² R. Edet and B. Ekeya, ‘Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community’, in V. Fabella and M.A. Oduyoye (eds) *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 7.

¹⁴³ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 183.

¹⁴⁴ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, pp. 37-38.

and is accountable to and concerned with the well-being of the community groups from which it comes.¹⁴⁵

Cultural issues are recognised and engaged with, as these have been identified by African women as ‘a favourite tool of domination.’¹⁴⁶ All areas of theology are interpreted in relation to culture. Questions address areas such as “...religious anthropology, sin and evil, Christology, the Church, a ‘triad’ of spirituality, suffering and sacrifice”, and sexuality especially as related to marriage, family life and children.¹⁴⁷

Nasimiyu names the following as the tasks for African women’s theology: 1. To conscientise the community so that people become aware of their dignity and that of others; 2. To unmask the cultural bias against women; 3. To recover the basic, communal, and liberative thrust of Scripture; 4. To awaken people to critical reflection so they do not accept tradition as ‘given’; and 5. To critically undermine any ‘established sinful order’ and renounce all that dehumanizes people in African culture.¹⁴⁸

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Women’s theology in Africa has organised under the banner of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle). In 1989, sixty-nine women gathered at a conference in Accra, Ghana. With the theme ‘Arise Daughter’ where Jesus raised a girl from death (Lk 8.40-56), these women committed themselves to ‘arising’. They started to write and tell their stories and the stories of women in African communities, to correct the dearth of literature by African women on African religions and cultural issues, and to ‘narrow the chasm in the global knowledge about women in Africa’.

¹⁴⁵ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁶ Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 12. See pages 11-15 on cultural hermeneutics, as well as Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*.

¹⁴⁷ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 21-22.

¹⁴⁸ A. Nasimiyu, ‘Feminism and African Theology’, *African Christian Studies* 9:2 (1993), pp. 26-27. in Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 22.

Circle theology attaches great importance to bringing the voices of women in Africa to theology, and was conceived to encourage African women to write theology. African women theologians, at the same time, are accountable to women where the work is done, and many engage in some form of change.¹⁴⁹ The Circle is a multi-cultural and multi-religious body. The Circles are open to women in Africa concerned about the well-being and fullness of life for women in Africa. In South Africa, the Circles are multi-racial, including white women. It provides a network of communication among women and advocates for positive policies and practices that affect women in Africa.¹⁵⁰ Since its inception in 1989, hundreds of books and articles have been regularly published by the Circle, and about the Circle.¹⁵¹

South African women theologians in the Circle from diverse cultures seek a liberative hermeneutic that emerges from their specific experiences of history, culture, religion and community, and opens the way for a new order. In South Africa, women theologians come together in this task from disparate backgrounds, issues and histories. Economic, cultural, racial and communal concerns articulated by Oduyoye, Kanyoro and others reverberate with many South African black women. African women's theology bears the marks of the creation of a people whose human rights are trampled over".¹⁵² In addition, identity and belonging are issues written of by many South Africans. Complex areas of study in themselves, some of the issues for white women include questions around place and home, complicity and disillusionment, fear and guilt, and the sense of both belonging and not belonging in Africa.¹⁵³ As Ackermann reflects, "How do we belong as a white yet hybrid minority in a country which is overwhelmingly black?" She continues, relating white identity to current questions of Africanisation in South Africa.

As whites, we clearly cannot find ourselves in an exclusive, racially

¹⁴⁹ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 90.

¹⁵⁰ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 89.

¹⁵¹ See for example, I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

¹⁵² Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 24.

¹⁵³ Brown, *To Speak of This Land*, explores questions of culture and belonging from a range of contexts.

determined view of what it means to be an African. I also reject the description 'European'. When I am in Europe, I feel a foreigner. I am not European. When I come home I know that this is where I belong.¹⁵⁴

Afrikaans women theologians have written about the construction - then collapse and rejection - of Afrikaner cultural values, and identity based on fear, domination and guilt. Their spiritual task is to reclaim a new identity that not only breaks down ethnic walls, but rediscovers new values in their cultural heritage.¹⁵⁵

It is not unusual that the theology of African women in the Circle espouses praxis that is particularly concerned with the most vulnerable and marginalized, and seeks to transform that which oppresses and denies life.¹⁵⁶

In Africa, and South Africa, the liberating message of the gospel, with the promise of life and transformation of death-dealing forces, is a message of hope claimed by women. Specifically in South Africa, affirmation, the goodness, and promotion of the full humanity of women – indeed of all people - needs to be heard deeply, received and accepted by wounded hearts. There are many voices – including those referred to above - calling for life-affirming messages to be internalised by women in South Africa. It is a shift needed concerning theology generally in contemporary South Africa. Contrasting the theological focus on criticising sin in the society in the apartheid era with the present needs, Stuart Bate wrote that theology focussing on social and personal sin "...needs to be balanced in this time by a theology which seeks to affirm what is good in the human condition."¹⁵⁷ There is a parching thirst that women in South Africa feel - to hear of their goodness, their value, their dignity and call to full life, and to trust that the beauty and glory of God is within.

In this outline of the theological framework of women's theologies in Africa,

¹⁵⁴ D. Ackermann, 'A Letter To My Granddaughters on Matters of the Heart', in *Claiming Our Footprints*, p. 169.

¹⁵⁵ Kotze, 'Drought and Thirst', p. 38; Landman, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*.

¹⁵⁶ See for example, Denise Ackerman, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Glossderry South Africa: David Phillip Publishers, 2003); and M.R.A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

¹⁵⁷ S. Bate, *Serving Humanity: A Sabbath Reflection* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1996), p. 7.

including South Africa, one important aspect not yet looked at is the central method of storytelling – or narrative theology. Story is an important and accepted source for women’s theologising. Theology is not only done by formally trained theologians. In storytelling, voices of women in Africa that are often silenced or absent in formal institutions or unwritten are heard. For women from all sectors of society, their story and reflection on it forms their theology. Stories are expressed orally and through other creative means such as literature, dance, poetry, art, handcraft, drama. Stories are told in dialogue, approached with affirmation, looked at with questioning and reflection on tradition, and contribute to the creation of theology.

In this last section, starting with the method of storytelling, I begin to look at women’s expression of their spirituality and theology through their creativity and aesthetic means. Under the framework of theologies for liberation and life for women in Africa, women’s creativity and creating is a powerful source for theology. This assertion will be examined in greater depth in chapter nine on theological aesthetics and liberation theologies.

Liberating Theology for Women in Africa and Aesthetic Methods of Expression

Marginalized groups find a ‘language’ in which to speak, a way to express themselves with integrity, and spaces in which they are understood by others who seek to understand.¹⁵⁸ Frequently this is through the aesthetic. In Africa and South Africa, women create means and methods that nourish and express the integrity of their fullness and the emancipatory spirit of God moving in their lives. They do this with passion and energy, without hiding or minimizing or apologizing. One of the most commonly used and studied methods in women’s theologies in Africa is storytelling – orally, aurally, in writing, in visual representation, dance, song and drama.

¹⁵⁸ James C. Scott, writes of the ‘hidden transcript’ revealed in the interaction between dominant and subordinate groups. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990). Drawing on his work, Gerald West refers to ‘discourses of the dominated’ to define poor and marginalized people who are not part of shaping the dominant ideological apparatus under which they live. Both works explore resistance and expression of subjugated people against the dominant hegemony. G. O. West, ‘Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated’, *Semeia* 73 (1996), p. 21.

Narrative Theology or Storytelling

“...the risk of telling our stories is in itself a subversive act.”¹⁵⁹

Storytelling has been, and is, the central method for women theologians doing theology with women in Africa. It was the favoured biblical method, as well as the way Jesus communicated with people. In Africa, storytelling is both an art and an integral part of African tradition. The art of storytelling is seen not only in the content of women’s stories, but ‘in their texture’ and method - the way the writers construct them using myth, poems, dreams, song, dance and proverbs.¹⁶⁰ As an African art, it is also a means of finding a distinctly African women’s voice in theologising, writes Kanyoro. “Africans have inherited Western ways of theologising, and women have inherited masculine forms of theologising. The act of storytelling in itself begins to address these two problems.”¹⁶¹

In telling their stories, African women tell of their struggles, questions, the ways they have maintained life, their faith in God, hopes for the future, and their encounter with God. Theology from stories emerges from “...what we feel in our society, how we feel about our children, our families, what enrages us, what makes us laugh, what our lives mean to the next neighbor and how we experience God in all these.”¹⁶² Furthermore, because it is rooted in particular historic, social, political, economic, and geographic locations, storytelling moves theology out of the realm of ‘intellectual exercise’, and “challenges, rediscovers and renames the truth”.¹⁶³

For women in Africa, storytelling is a powerful method for understanding the context and forces that have shaped them, claiming their own identity, their values, aspirations, self-definition, power and agency. It is a healing and affirming process. Phiri, Govinden and Nadar discuss the importance of this, and illustrate its power

¹⁵⁹ Wooten, *Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*, p. 79.

¹⁶⁰ Phiri, Govinden and Nadar, *Her-Stories*, p. 10.

¹⁶¹ Phiri, Govinden and Nadar, *Her-Stories*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶² Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 23

¹⁶³ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 23.

through Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga's story *Nervous Conditions*, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa. Through her words, they explain the task of storytelling and women's agency in Africa.

...the main character, Tambudzai, looks back on her life and its many experiences, and reflects on a "process of expansion" that the writing experience afforded her.¹⁶⁴ In the process of coming into her own, of asserting her independence, Tambudzai has to understand the external forces (in her case, of colonial and cultural seduction, of violence) and the internal pressures from kith and kin to which she is subjected. Tambudzai has assessed the forces enmeshing her, denying her selfhood, and reaches deep into the resources within her. The telling of her story becomes a powerful medium through which her self-definition has been sought.¹⁶⁵

In South Africa, the importance of story in challenging and renaming truth was seen in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Both victims and perpetrators of gross human rights violations during the apartheid era told their excruciatingly painful stories as a way of healing, individually and as a nation. Like most of us, writer Anjtie Krog was deeply moved by the stories she was hearing, and reflected how the TRC storytelling process saw truth as "...the widest possible compilation of peoples' perceptions, stories, myths and experiences." The TRC process entailed a collective choice to uncover the hidden truth, 'to restore memory and foster a new humanity.' Krog muses that perhaps this is justice in its deepest sense.¹⁶⁶

"Telling our stories may possibly begin a great revolution, unleashing the power to turn the world's great order round", writes Carol Christ.¹⁶⁷ Women's storytelling overturns comfort, challenges norms, and allows 'the uncomfortable, discordant, challenging voices of Scripture' to be heard again, Wooten observes. "Women, like

¹⁶⁴ T. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (London: The Women's Press, 1988) referred to in Phiri, Govinden and Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 204; E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature - Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 225; both referred to in Phiri, Govinden and Nadar (eds) *Her-Stories*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶⁶ A. Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), p. 16. cited in Phiri, Govinden and Nadar, (eds), *Her-Stories*, p.8. This does not dismiss criticism around the TRC and the lack of accountability and criminal prosecution of perpetrators of apartheid atrocities. The South African negotiated settlement offered amnesty in exchange for truth and stories to be told.

¹⁶⁷ C. Christ, 'Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience' in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 2nd Edition, 1992), p. 243.

other groups marginalized from power, speak from the chaotic edges of the world known to powerful men. Therefore, their words and their stories, their use of Scripture tend to overturn the norms and disrupt cosy lives.”¹⁶⁸

Women are telling their stories in Africa, and South Africa. This has the power to change who they are and what they see themselves as capable of being. It changes their communities, and upsets the established order of things, including consensual silences on what has been taboo to talk about. In telling their stories and speaking about the unspeakable, they are overturning oppressions.

A Matter of Justice: Hearing Women’s Struggles and Stories of Faith in the Aesthetic

Kanyoro and others have emphasised the significance of storytelling in terms of the necessity to explore new theological methods to hear the struggles, the story of faith and the movements of God in the lives of women in Africa as a whole. It is a matter of justice for those who can write to “...explore new areas and new avenues for the works of our sisters to be heard beyond the ridges of our borders.”¹⁶⁹ Listening to the stories and other means of aesthetic expression is a key methodological component of this.

Creative aesthetic processes and methods have been powerful methods of expression and transformation in Africa. In apartheid South Africa, injustice, struggle, longings and new vision found expression in the arts.¹⁷⁰ Biblically-themed works, particularly, were a subversive language of liberation. Images of Christ identified with black suffering and the desire to be liberated from oppression. Artists such as Azaria Mbatha and Charles Nkosi used biblical imagery to illustrate the struggle and longings of African people. Theologically encoded messages were allowed to say things about resistance and liberation that were banned in other forums. Not only

¹⁶⁸ Wooten, *Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*, p. 78.

¹⁶⁹ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 31.

¹⁷⁰ See for example, S. Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillip Publishers, 1989); T. Sundermeier, *Sudafrikansche Passion: Linoschnitte von Azaria Mbatha* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1977).

were these used in some churches, but many people bought and used them for personal reflection.¹⁷¹ Theologically, some works of visual arts, poetry, literature, dance and drama were ‘read’ as revealing the emancipatory spirit of God.

It is just as critical to listen to the creative expression of muted, marginalized and silenced voices of women in Africa and South Africa, to hear the spirit of God. It is often mentioned that African women speak “... about their inner feelings and experiences of sorrow in songs, dances, novels, stories, tears, deep silences and through the stripes on their bodies.”¹⁷² “Songs are sung, dances are held and hope continues....”¹⁷³ While many women in Africa cannot read and write, “they sing, they dance and they speak.”¹⁷⁴

Women’s crafting groups provide such spaces and means for articulation of women’s realities through means other than written texts. Like the *Amazwi Abesifazane* project mentioned above, Wells, Sienaert and Conolly write how design and the aesthetic is a means for rural Zulu women – those most affected by the AIDS pandemic - to circumvent taboos around sexuality, personal intimacy and tradition (*ukuhlonipa*).¹⁷⁵ In the AIDS intervention project called *Siyazama* in KwaZulu-Natal, Zulu women from rural areas tell their personal stories through beadwork patterns and colours. The authors see this process giving women a voice and presence in the war against AIDS, a discussion in which they are all too often silenced and marginalized, yet acted upon. Further, the women’s self-image and the community image are changed as they challenge cultural, health and economic pressures that threaten their individual and community life. Through their communal work, mutual encouragement, sharing of stories and ‘articulation’ of their reality in the beadwork, they break consensual silences around that which has been deemed unspeakable, but which is a central part

¹⁷¹ J. Leeb-du Toit, ‘The Ideology of the Sacred Theme in Art from Kwazulu-Natal’ in *The South African Association of Art Historians*, Ninth Conference (July 1993), pp.102-103. While black consciousness was asserted in these works, gender consciousness was still in the future. Buckenham, ‘Women’s Experience, Spirituality and Theology’, p. 73.

¹⁷² N. Njoroge and M. Dube (eds), *Talitha Cum! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), pp. vii-viii.

¹⁷³ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 23.

¹⁷⁴ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 30.

¹⁷⁵ K. Wells, E. Sienaert and J. Conolly, ‘The Siyazama Project: Consensual Silences, Visual Metaphors and Socio-Cultural Transformation’ *Design Issues* 20:2 (2004), p. 73.

of who they are.¹⁷⁶

These are important spaces for African women. Fulata Moyo is one theologian who is using and interpreting song and dance with women as an important means of expressing their pain - especially as related to sexual abuse, harassment and sexual taboos on them as African women.¹⁷⁷ She sees that there are deep theologies that women have that have not found their way out to be shared with other people because of a lack of space and a lack of freedom of expression. African women, Moyo discovered, theologise and reflect on their understanding of God through how they move their bodies in dance, and in dramatisation.¹⁷⁸

There is an energy that flows through women's creating, Wooten evocatively writes. "Feminist narrative and artistic representations penetrate the veil of the silenced where only the powerful are heard, and 'ignite' a process of... *energia*."¹⁷⁹ This energy, the creative energy of God that made all of creation, is tapped into and unleashed in the artistic creativity of women in Africa.

Women artists and crafters in South Africa, whose stories are told in chapters four, five and six, tell of their lives and their stories of faith in their art. For some it is explicitly represented in their work. For others, it is more oblique, with their knowledge and stories only alluded to or uncovered in the product. The fullness of their stories is evident 'behind' the work – in the process, in the context, or in their reflections and motivations. It is evidence of their inward and outward growth. It reveals movements of God in their being, their lives, their communities, and in South Africa.

Women in Africa 'speak' in many ways outside the traditional methods of classical male Christian theology. If we want to hear their experience of God and the revelation of God through women's lives in Africa, it is critical to pay attention,

¹⁷⁶ Wells, Sienaert, Conolly, 'Siyazama Project', p. 75.

¹⁷⁷ F. Moyo, 'Singing and Dancing Women's Liberation: My Story of Faith', in Phiri, Govinden and Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories*, pp. 389-408.

¹⁷⁸ Fulata Moyo, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 7 March 2006 in Pietermaritzburg.

¹⁷⁹ Wooten, *Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*, p. 75.

respect and listen to these expressions. Song, storytelling, poetry, dreams, myth, proverbs, dance and art by women in Africa, and South Africa, tell the stories of women's lives. It is a spiritual process, theological expression, and a theological source. It expresses the movements of God in women's lives, and is a means of finding God within. It unleashes passion and energy, and is a conduit for the spirit of God.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

Women's theology for liberation and life in Africa, and South Africa, occurs within a context of marginalisation for many. Tradition and religion - looking specifically at Christianity - is often presented and interpreted in unacceptable ways as it applies to women in Africa. Informed by intersecting streams of liberative theologies, women theologians in Africa are formulating their own. These critique both the Christian tradition and culture to find the affirming, life-giving core of the Gospel that promotes the full humanity of women in Africa. Women are expressing their theology in Africa, including South Africa - as a marginalised people seeking liberation and life, and finding a voice that is their own. They are finding means and method to name and explore their own truths and larger truths for Christianity. In this, women's creative and aesthetic means are particularly important.

The imaginative and the aesthetic are central to spirituality and theology as they relate to women in Africa, including South Africa. A revelatory language of the life-giving spirit of God in women's lives, it also unleashes the divine creative energy of God that liberates, heals, and creates a new reality. This is the theme I turn to in chapter three.

¹⁸⁰ An early Circle book *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God* compiles the proceedings of the Circle's 1997 Pan-African Conference. It carries a section of selected poetry by members, called 'Theopoetics' that were presented in the conference itself. M.A. Oduyoye (ed), *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God*, (Accra-North, Ghana: Sam-Woode Limited for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, 1997).

Chapter Three - Creating and Creativity: Unleashing the Divine Energy

Introduction

In the previous chapter, South African women's creating and creativity were situated within the contexts of struggles of women in Africa and their journey of faith. It is women's struggles to affirm, protect, nourish and create life – for themselves and others - that informs the theoretical framework of liberating theologies for women in Africa.

In this chapter, I look at the tradition of creation-centred spirituality and theology as a larger theoretical framework for analysing women's creating in South Africa. Struggles for dignity, liberation and full life of marginalized people are critical pillars of creation-centred spirituality and theology. Within this framework, all liberating struggles – including feminist theology and African women's theology - are propelled by the creating emancipatory Spirit of God that loves them and seeks to create life in all its fullness and beauty. It is this creating spirit that energizes women in Africa to critique and break down rigid kyriarchal domination in politics and religion, custom, tradition, while simultaneously reclaiming relationship, community, humanness and sanctity of women's lives in a journey with the communities they come from - women, men and children alike. It is the energy that propels women in Africa to see and claim who they are. It empowers their efforts to lift the burdens on them. They envision and create a new just order in all realms of life in Africa, where life can flourish for all.

This chapter begins with a look at the suspicious stance of aspects of the Christian tradition and church, toward human creativity. I then explore the ground of creation-centred spirituality and theology. It begins with awe and wonder for the beauty, mystery, goodness and sacramentality of all of creation – including human beings – highlighting the importance of our image of God to our understanding of the nature of human life and our own spirituality.¹⁸¹ Turning to creativity and artistic imagination, I

¹⁸¹ As this is the starting place for thousands of years of theology and writing, my sections on these questions are modest. I mention the importance of these issues - especially as one's theological approach to human creativity relates to them. I do not delve into an in-depth look at images of God and

look at the perspective of creation-centred spirituality and theology that sees this as gift, an awesome power and responsibility to all of humankind that is respected and listened to as revelatory.¹⁸² Human creativity is seen as an intention and image of God's own creativity and being, an experience of God's own being - *doxa*, glory or beauty - that is in us as part of creation and gifted to us as the image of God's divine creative energy.

I then look at some theological and psychological insights on art and aesthetics, artistic creating and the creative process. These insights address questions of the significance of created artwork, why people create, and how creating and creativity enable awareness, and transformation of both the person and society. While this thesis is primarily interested in the meaning of women's creativity rather than a focus on the meaning of the art product, thought on the latter informs the former. Therefore, some thought on the meaning of art is discussed through theological, philosophical-psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives. It is important to mention here that as a theologian investigating an inter-disciplinary phenomenon, I am not an expert in the area of philosophical aesthetics or psychology. I present the work of several scholars from different disciplines that explore the aesthetic, art, artwork and creativity from diverse perspectives, though I do not claim they are definitive, nor exhaustive.

From a theological perspective, artistic products of human creativity can be seen as an analogy of the Incarnation, in the ways that the artistic process has parallels with God's *embodiment* in the person of Jesus Christ. From a philosophical-psychological perspective, the term *embodiment* is used differently, where art and creativity are seen to address human needs to affirm our existence. A psychoanalytic perspective understands the creating process as entailing profound encounter with the self and world, an encounter that shifts consciousness, breaks down and creates anew. The encounter simultaneously disturbs and challenges, affirms and leads to new visions and growth for both the person and society.

the purpose and nature of human life as is written on in the Bible, in various traditions, by feminist theologians, or in South Africa.

¹⁸² Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company Inc, 1983), p. 38.

I examine how artistic creativity and craftwork are ethical processes in that they demand and teach right relationships, not only with the materials, but with self, others and the way society is structured.

Lastly, I discuss the implications and links of artistic creativity with spirituality. Artistic creating and the spiritual awareness that accompanies it have the capacity to deepen, mature and profoundly change a person, contributing to their intellectual and spiritual growth. Attested to by mystics in Christian spirituality, this is also visible in the creating journeys of South African women.

Christianity and Creativity

A story was published in the *Mail and Guardian* of a man, Ntsikelelo Gum, who lives in the township of Langa, Cape Town. In Langa, like much of South Africa, unemployment is high. An electrician by trade, Gum was unemployed and unable to secure a job. After loitering around the township for two years with nothing to do, destitute and ‘on the verge of the abyss of alcoholism’, he made a decision to grow a garden, which changed his life.

He said that when he started his indigenous garden, “I was merely creating a friend to play with rather than going to the shebeens to drink myself into oblivion. It helped me to get in touch with my soul, and relieved my troubles and sorrows, stresses and strains, problems and pains of being unemployed in a manner that I have never imagined before.”¹⁸³ Gum said he sees himself as an artist and a poet working with plants, creating an ‘indigenous plant themepark’ in his matchbox garden.

This story of the transformation of Gum’s life is a story about the power of human creativity to bring new life out of deep nothingness, distress, despair and suffering. His story resonates with experiences of women in South Africa, especially black rural women – including many of those interviewed in this research - who know too

¹⁸³ Abel Mputing, ‘Mr. Gum’s Garden’, *Mail and Guardian Friday*, 14-20 July 2006, p. 2. He was invited to create a display garden at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show in England, and people now come from all around to see his place. At the time of the article, he was hoping to secure formal employment with a nursery.

intimately the despair of poverty. And it resonates with women's stories of courage, dignity, growth, hope and transformation - new life and the divine energy of God, unleashed through human creativity.

It is a paradox then, that rather than an "echo of God's creative goodness toward us", human creativity and artistic imagination has often been viewed negatively with suspicion and fear, neglected or superficially tolerated in much of Christian theology, tradition and the Church.¹⁸⁴ There is fear of it potentially leading to untruth and idolatry, or that it is an expression of rebellious human hubris. This extends far back to the iconoclasm of the seventh century, where sacred images were to be destroyed as idolatrous – an era that lasted six hundred years.¹⁸⁵ In the Protestant tradition, Trevor Hart writes, human imagination has been "shackled and subordinated to human reason and judgements". These are seen to be superior "necessary bulwarks against a tide of human fancy which might otherwise sweep us away into all manner of intellectual, moral and spiritual confusion or worse."¹⁸⁶

Issues of power and control underlie the fear and suspicion toward artists and creativity, by 'dogmatists of all kinds' in both religious institutions and society at large.¹⁸⁷ Theologian Nicolas Berdyaev argues that the creative impulse is feared because it cannot be controlled and emerges from searching or conflict - internally or externally - and challenges what is. It is "absolutely unique, unbidden and lawless. The stuff of art is inner conflict, conflict between man and the society in which he lives, man and his moral conscience."¹⁸⁸ He continues, explaining the controversy his views had provoked, that "Orthodox systems, whether social or religious, however, do not want to hear of these problems; their attitude to creative unrest, to the

¹⁸⁴ Trevor Hart, 'Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth', in J. Begbie (ed) *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ See for example, Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980). On the significance of the eventual rejection of iconoclasm, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 3f, in J.W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 21.

¹⁸⁶ Hart, 'Through the Arts', p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ Rollo May, *Courage to Create*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1975), p. 76.

¹⁸⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 218.

searchings and wrestlings of the spirit, is, quite consistently, one of suspicion and hostility.”¹⁸⁹ Theologian John W. de Gruchy concurs. He adds that this challenging of accepted boundaries is interpreted by the Church as being an example of human pride.

...traditionally the Church has frowned on creativity, for it suggests going beyond the boundaries of the orthodox and acceptable, trying to emulate God, the one and only creator of all that exists. What is esteemed is faithfulness, not creativity. The danger of creativity is that of hubris or human pride, the glorification of humanity at the expense of the creator.¹⁹⁰

But there is also a long tradition of the celebration of creativity in Christianity, such as the patronage of the popes who supported the works of great artists, and the tradition of icon painting in the Eastern and Orthodox churches.¹⁹¹ In more recent years, human creativity is being looked at anew theologically, as a divine spiritual power given to us by God. This is in light of many things such as the unfolding scientific understandings of the endlessly creating universe and the world we inhabit, our ecological interconnectedness and human impact on the earth, with the inadequacy and danger of beliefs in human separateness or superiority and our right to exploit it. It is emerging from our increasingly globalised world and awareness that what one does on one side of the world affects so many systems and people far away. New respect for indigenous wisdom and ancient religions, and attention to artistic, mystical and spiritual experiences of ordinary people relate to questions of creating and creativity. The spiritual power of creativity is raised in questions of justice posed by liberation movements, including feminist theological questions. This includes reinterpretations of theology rooted in the bringing forth, maintenance and protection of life, its web, awareness of the exiling of feminine realities and the consequences. Women doing theology expand scholarship to include their concerns, their knowing, and their values, and women’s experiences of ‘nonpersonhood’, struggle, suffering and oppression. Influenced by these and other factors, the meaning and significance of creating and creativity is being recognised more and more, drawing people to that

¹⁸⁹ Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 218-219.

¹⁹⁰ John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*. (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 194-195.

¹⁹¹ See for example, Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981); John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (London: SCM, 1986); G. Limouris (ed), *Icons: Windows on Eternity* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990).

which affirms life in the face of a plethora of life-denying beliefs and forces. It is being approached from different directions, theologically, with respect, wonder and celebration as a vital power wherein we participate with God.

Creativity in us is a divine force, the life-energy that flows through us. It is a force that is necessary to express, 'birth', understand, respect and steer. It is not an optional nor genteel thing, writes Matthew Fox, not a 'tip-toe through the tulips', but is so powerful, an awesome power that can be used for life, or death. We cannot suppress it. Its intention is not only birthing ourselves as images of God, but the world we live in. If, as humanity, we are not consciously aware of its power, reverencing it, loving it and employing it for the sake of life, it emerges nonetheless on its own for destruction. Denied, suppressed, mortified, abused or hated, Fox writes, our human creativity turns to withering of life, violence, destruction and death - within us and around us.¹⁹² Crowther writes of art, creativity and the aesthetic as being perhaps the most powerful means of affirming our existence – in making real our subjective experience.¹⁹³ Berdyaev calls the creative act “an ek-stasis, a breaking through to eternity.”¹⁹⁴

God and Creativity

The way we understand or imagine the basic power of the universe provides our efficacious idea of the holy, that with which we want to be aligned.¹⁹⁵

Many of the images of God that we inherit are, to say the least, hopelessly misleading: God as the punishing judge, God as the supreme male patriarch, God as the great egoist who imposes “his” will upon everyone, God as the all-powerful manipulator who sends us earthquakes, floods, and other disasters - a God who is very far away. No wonder some writers are suggesting that we abandon the word 'God' altogether. As a word it seems to them to be irredeemable. Hence we find people who will speak of the Absolute, the Divine, Transcendence, Being, Creative Energy (Thomas Berry), the All-Nourishing Abyss (Brian Swimme), or simply the Spirit (Ken Wilber...).¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 182.

¹⁹³ Paul Crowther, *Art as Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 6-7.

¹⁹⁴ Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 209.

¹⁹⁵ David Ray Griffin, 'Creativity in Post-modern Religion', in Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), p. 69.

¹⁹⁶ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books,

Much theological writing on creativity addresses this question of the image of God.¹⁹⁷ They see and experience an intimate association between creativity, God and the mystery of creation. While these views are diverse, they share many features.

First, creating is framed as divine activity. God creates, God's word, and/or embodiment is seen as 'divine creative energy'. God may be imaged *as* creativity. Creation, then, is an expression of this creating being or energy. Creation, creating or the 'birthing' is ongoing, whether in the souls of people, in the farthest reaches of the cosmos, or the smallest particles and vacuums seemingly emerging out of nowhere. Swimme describes the universe as mystery, an "all-nourishing abyss" seething with creativity.¹⁹⁸

The universe emerges out of all-nourishing abyss not only fifteen billion years ago but in every moment. Each instant protons and antiprotons are flashing out of, and are as suddenly absorbed back into, all-nourishing abyss. All-nourishing abyss then is not a thing, nor a collection of things, nor even, strictly speaking, a physical place, but rather a power that gives birth and that absorbs existence at a thing's annihilation. The foundational reality of the universe is this unseen ocean of potentiality. If all the individual things of the universe were to evaporate, one would be left with an infinity of pure generative power.¹⁹⁹

Creation was not made once and for all and is now static; it is growing and expanding into increasingly complex configurations of diversity and beauty.²⁰⁰

Flowing from this, secondly, there is recognition, respect, awe and celebration of the fundamental goodness, diversity, awesome beauty, wonder and continual growth of creation - including humanity. Human life is not approached as a cursed blot on creation for which we have to apologise and forever scale the hill of our sinfulness,

2006). pp. 139-140.

¹⁹⁷ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning...Creativity* (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); H.L. Bergson, *Selections from Bergson* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949); Fox, *Original Blessing*; Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture*.

¹⁹⁸ Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), p. 100, 93.

¹⁹⁹ Swimme, *Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, p. 100.

²⁰⁰ John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2000), pp. 128-132.

never able to appease a judgemental God, as is predominantly preached and taught to women – and men - in South Africa.²⁰¹ Human life is understood as something good, intended, celebrated and delighted in, and of God.²⁰² Infused with an image of God's own glory (*doxa* or beauty), human beings participate in the divine life. Like Jesus' image of the vine and the branches, we are one with God and God is one with us. "God became human that humans might become God", Irenaeus wrote.²⁰³ We are the beloved, divinised and deified.

Thirdly, creation is recognised as being one entity. Human life, all of nature, all of creation, and the cosmos are connected and participating in creative growth. Human life is part of this created order - in relation, not separate, not superior, not intended to dominate and subdue. A respectful, sacramental, 'subject/subject', even panentheistic approach is taken to creation, where everything is seen as infused with the divine.²⁰⁴ This is in contrast to relationships of domination and rape of creation that extends to human groups and individuals.

Fourth, as part of the growing, creating cosmos, humanness in a person is seen as a 'potentiality to be actualized' – an unfolding creative process.²⁰⁵ Humans are seen as

²⁰¹ The purpose, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is therefore not necessarily understood as a sacrifice to wipe away humanity's original sin and 'bridge the chasm' between the divine and the human creature. This is a wide area of reinterpretation that needs to be looked at in greater depth than is possible here.

²⁰² This does not deny the reality of evil in the world and human action, applying creativity to purposes of evil, nor brokenness, injustice and responsibility for sin. But creation-centred spirituality and theology gives sin a modest place, rather than primary place as the defining characteristic of the human being. It sees 'people as sinners because they sin' - whether through intention, omission or ignorance - rather than 'people sin because they are sinners' - born that way. Significantly drawing on feminist and liberation theologies, it explores beyond traditional malestream theological categories of what sin means in different contexts, for different people - especially related to justice and creation. Similarly, the meaning of salvation and the purpose of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection are fundamentally recast. The idea that he was a sacrifice to wipe away original sin is rejected. For example and other references, see Fox, *Original Blessing*. He refers extensively to others' writings along these lines in the text, in references and in Appendices.

²⁰³ Quoted in Nolan, *Jesus Today*, footnote p. 144 - no reference. Nolan is careful to distinguish between the ways of identifying oneself with God that is 'an ego trip of the worst kind.' He attributes this to identification with an image of God that is 'an egotistical dictator who dominates the world.' In contrast, he writes, "Jesus identified himself with a humble compassionate, loving and serving God, and he was bold enough and confident enough to speak and act as that kind of divinity - without qualification." p.144.

²⁰⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 91. Panentheism sees the world sacramentally, the presence of God in all, "...the deep with-ness of God."

²⁰⁵ Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), p. 1.

‘becoming’ who we are in the image of God the Creator (*imago dei*), through our creativity and creating. Human creativity is seen as sacred, a participating in the divine energy flowing through all of life. It is necessary to ‘birth what is in us’, using the word’s of mystic Meister Eckhart, or else we die; we are less, all of reality is less. This contrasts with religious attitudes that are afraid of the freedom of human creativity, and view creative thought and action as a threat to obedience, faithfulness, conformity to doctrine and a danger that must be squashed.²⁰⁶

Fifth, the theological views look at the mysteries being unlocked by modern science as well as those of artists of all kinds, theologians, mystics and prophets. They tend to turn away from anthropocentric and anthropomorphic conceptualisations of creation, the meaning of human life, and of God. With the birth of creation dating back at least fifteen billions years - and described as ‘good’ - they see no sense that the meaning of it all is then centred on the human creature that appeared four million years ago.

These perspectives remain marginal to mainstream theology and doctrine, thought and ecclesial practice. Why? Theologians writing from these perspectives trace and critique the historical development of two parallel and often-conflicting streams of Christian belief and tradition. Given various names, these are the traditional male institutional Christian religious doctrine or the ‘fall/redemption’ theology, and the ‘mystico-prophetic’ or ‘creation-centred’ tradition, to use the framework of Fox.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Not just religion - repressive relationships, workplaces, educational, social, cultural, economic and political systems do the same.

²⁰⁷ An account of this history is not possible here. Some of the struggle, key events and influential thinkers are highlighted in, for example, Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning...Creativity*. (Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004); Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company Inc, 1983); David Ray Griffin, ‘Creativity in Post-Modern Religion’, in Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), pp. 64-85, and Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2006). Kaufman traces anthropomorphic and anthropocentric understandings of God derived from selected metaphors and images in the bible, Christian developments and historical socio-political encounters with Greek, Roman and Jewish philosophy, traditions and thought. Parallel to this, he looks at the mystical traditions of negative theology, and more recent understandings of human life and power as well as limitations. These displace the medieval images, as do insights from feminist theologians and the sciences. Griffin writes of political struggles in theology and politics in the early Church and the times. Fox recounts the development of ‘fall/redemption tradition’ with its emphasis on original sin versus ‘creation-centred spirituality’ with its emphasis on original blessing. He links the former to pessimism, power and control back to the early church inheritance of the Roman Empire in the fourth century and the struggle to keep people in line. The latter he links to the Jewish tradition, Jesus’ Q community, mystics and prophets throughout

Aligned to social, political and religious power struggles as well as intellectual thought in the Western world, the one became dominant and the other suppressed.

Yet creation-centred spirituality and theology lives on in searching people, amongst oppressed groups and prophetic movements for a new order. It is seemingly rising from the ashes, on the margins, and in increasing spiritual awareness and questioning.

Though not usually articulated in this way, creation-centred belief infuses and overarches theologies of liberation for women in Africa and South Africa, as they affirm the full humanity of women, the connectedness of all of life, and are rooted in the fullness of “life and more life”.²⁰⁸ It too is apparent in the spiritualities of South African creating women interviewed for this work. Their spiritualities are attuned with, seek out and are responsive to that which is life-giving in themselves and their environment. For some, this is while carrying heavy burdens of sorrow and struggle for themselves and their families. Yet they seek out that which affirms life – physically and spiritually, for themselves and others - making a decision to move toward it, fiercely protecting it, and trusting its nourishment, like a sunflower to the sun.

God as Creator, God’s Divine Creative Energy, God as Creativity

The most common biblical image related to creating is God as Creator. God who existed before all else is the ultimate being, the one who made all of creation and made it ‘good’ - or ‘beautiful’. Somehow, creation which did not exist before, came into being through creating, creativity, this divine being. And it will be continued to

Christian history. Instead of centering on pessimism and fear, it is focussed on hope, awe, goodness, beauty, wisdom, wonder of creation, compassion, creativity, celebration, responsibility and struggle for eco- and social justice. Similarly, Nolan names an ‘institutional authority’ versus ‘mystico-prophetic tradition’. He sees a dual Christian history “...the history of the institution with its popes and power struggles, its schisms, conflicts, and divisions, its heresy hunting and bureaucracy; and the parallel history of the martyrs, saints, and mystics with their devotion to prayers, humility, and self-sacrifice, their freedom and joy, their boldness and their deep love for everyone and everything.” He attributes the repression of this stream to its threat to institutional power. “Mystics, like prophets, are not appointed by any religious authority to fulfill their role as mystics. The authority of saints, mystics, and prophets has always been based upon their holiness or closeness to God - their experience. And institutional authority has always found it difficult to deal with such freedom of the spirit.” (p. 73).

²⁰⁸ Odyoye, *African Women’s Theology*, p. 26.

be created until its fulfillment.

Some of the theologians who take into account creating and evolutionary understanding into their theology include Henri Louis Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Nicolas Berdyaev, Matthew Fox, Gordon Kaufman, Albert Nolan, Grace Jantzen and Catherine Keller. Bergson initially described God as creative, and creativity as something God does. He later affirmed that creativity itself is the divine. Coming from something that "...was not already implicit in the past...", he saw evolution itself as creative.²⁰⁹ The very process of creation - evolution, the unfolding and growth of the universe - comes from creating, or creativity. Thus the origin is creativity itself. Following Bergson, Whitehead described creativity and creating as the very essence of the ultimate reality; God is the embodiment of creativity where all things are instances of *becoming*.²¹⁰ For Berdyaev, creativity is an activity which 'is a flight into the infinite', an activity which 'transcends the finite towards the infinite'.²¹¹ Creativity lies at the heart of his thought and interpretation of Christian theology. To him, the fundamental reality that formed the world is 'uncaused freedom', rather than 'power and might'. Criticising ideas that the human relationship to God should be one of servility, dependence and obedience, he accused this of 'sociomorphism', where forms of human society are projected onto God. Rather, "What God expects from man [*sic*] is not servile submission, not obedience, not the fear of condemnation, but free creative acts...Sin does not lie in disobedience to the commandments and prohibitions of God, but in slavery, in the loss of freedom..."²¹²

Similarly decrying the starting place of understanding God and humans in terms of judgement and sin, Fox passionately advocates a creation-centred spirituality, where

²⁰⁹ Quoted in David Ray Griffin, 'Creativity in Post-modern Religion', in Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), pp. 68-69. No Bergson reference cited. Thinkers listed as 'heavily influenced by Bergson' include Samuel Alexander, Lloyd Morgan, Jan Smuts, Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, Nicholas Berdyaev, Henry Nelson Wieman, and Charles Hartshorne.

²¹⁰ Griffin, 'Creativity in Post-modern Religion', p. 69, and pp. 70-75.

²¹¹ Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, p. 209.

²¹² Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation* (Collier Books, 1962), p. 124, quoted in Griffin, 'Creativity in Post-modern Religion', p. 69.

“existence is loved for its own sake and beauty.”²¹³ Existence itself is seen as the word of God, rather than an assumption that human Scripture and tradition are the only revealed ‘words’ of God. There is awareness that one creative energy flows through all time and space, of which we are a part. “A certain divinity exists (scripture calls it ‘glory’ or ‘beauty’) in all that is, all that flows from a divine source.”²¹⁴ Creation itself is recognised as a source of truth and revelation, a ‘primary Scripture’, a mystery that “not only ‘addresses us’, but ‘loves us’”.²¹⁵

Fox counters the ‘necrophilia’ that dominates what he calls the institutional fall/redemption tradition in Christianity and its attendant dualism, hierarchy, and concerns with power and control. Starting with an interpretation of God’s *word* (Hebrew *dabhar*) as meaning ‘divine creative energy’, he explains how creation-centred spirituality starts from the point of loving life and its goodness - ‘biophilia’. This encompasses and includes such things as love of life, wisdom, ‘falling in love with life and its many beauties’, meditation, cleansing our perception, learning and celebration of the new creation story from science, ‘detoxing our souls’ from deathly teachings and ideologies inherited from religion, and the recovery of the mystical and prophetic traditions. He calls for ‘a great unlearning’ and proceeds to deconstruct then reconstruct Christian belief of the spiritual life, centred on the goodness of creation. He unfolds implications of this for how we see ourselves and others, how we live, the transformation of the world in terms of care and justice, and the unfolding of the cosmos.²¹⁶ Fox is a pioneering popular theologian – there are now others - who has written comprehensively on creation and God’s creativity. He extends his discussion, in light of this, to human creativity as an essential part of the spiritual journey and what it means to be human.

²¹³ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 39.

²¹⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 39.

²¹⁵ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 38. Here he mentions thought of ‘geologist’ Thomas Berry, and Gerhard von Rad. No citation.

²¹⁶ In the re-issue of his book *Original Blessing*, (p. 6), Fox writes of the response of then-Cardinal Ratzinger and the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to his book, its contents and his ideas. Fox was expelled from the Dominican Congregation. He also writes of the response of readers all over the world who resonate with it. Originally published in 1983, *Original Blessing* has had a quiet and enduring popularity amongst searching Christian women in South Africa. Despite his controversial status within academic theology, it is his pioneering work, the resonance with searching Christians, and the popular impact of this book that merits the use of Fox’s work in this thesis.

Discussing the centrality of image of God, Kaufman deconstructs the historical trajectories of Christian God-images/concept of 'creator, lord and father', and proposes a metaphor for thinking of God as *serendipitous creativity*. To him "It is no longer possible...to connect in an intelligible way today's scientific, cosmological and evolutionary understanding of the origins of the universe and the emergence of life (including human life and history) with a conception of God constructed in the traditional anthropomorphic terms."²¹⁷

Albert Nolan, referring to what he calls the mystico-prophetic tradition in Christianity, also contextualises the meaning of human life in terms of the sciences - new knowledge of the creation and evolution of the universe - as he explores who Jesus is today and what it means to be a Christian.²¹⁸ Life-giving - the creation and sustenance of life - undergirds Grace Jantzen's feminist philosophy of religion. She develops the metaphor of 'natality' - the birthing - to explain the purposes of God in creation.²¹⁹ Catherine Keller speaks of 'the womb of God' as a more appropriate metaphor for the universe; that nothing really is born out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), but all emerges from this life-giving, creating reality.²²⁰ It is in this reality that we live and move and have our being.²²¹ Similar views are explored by ecofeminist theologians.²²²

Human Creativity and the Divine

Co-creators with God: Unleashing the Power and Energy of God

Whether God is understood as Creator - as in Genesis - or creativity itself, the divine creative energy that forms the universe is the life-force that also flows through human beings made in the image of God. In his Letter to Artists, John Paul II called artists

²¹⁷ Kaufman, *In the Beginning*, p. 53.

²¹⁸ Nolan, *Jesus Today*.

²¹⁹ Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²²⁰ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

²²¹ Acts 17:28

²²² For an overview, see Heather Eaton, *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies* (London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2005).

the “image of God the Creator.”²²³ Co-creating with God not only applies to artists, I would add, but to all of humanity. Every person is born as a creative being, as co-creators with God in the image of God, and all have the need as well as the responsibility to create. Mystic Meister Eckhart called our creating and growth ‘the birthing’ and went on to say that this is not only the birthing of ourselves, but the birthing of God’s word, God’s own divine energy into the world.²²⁴

Feminist thinker and writer Sara Maitland grounds similar insights in her experience as an artist - a poet.²²⁵ She argues that “...a vibrant and serious attention to the creative arts, and a profound respect for their makers is a hallmark of a healthy Church...because we create in this particular and conscious way only in the light of the creative power of our God”.²²⁶ As an artist, Maitland also writes of the consequences of not treating the imagination with love and reverence, and her experience of artistic self-censoring which she has felt as a requirement, even sacrifice, for belonging to a church. “If poets want to stay within the cultural boundaries of faith, if they know that they need that succour, that nourishment; then they have to pay for it by accepting the often rigorous limitations that the priestly authorities choose to impose upon them. The trouble with compulsory grovelling is simple: it is nearly impossible for a halfway good poet to make anything while lying, while not feeling free to speak the truth.”²²⁷ With creativity and the creative arts treated with suspicion, without honor, and shut out, it denies and rejects a part of God because we do not understand it, and shuts down this enormous energy and power’s capacity to move in the world.

The real danger of not treating the creative imagination with real love is that this involves a rejection of God - or at least of a huge and magnificent dimension of God. Such a rejection seriously impedes the work of religion in the transformation of the world. Any movement for social change requires a

²²³ John Paul II, ‘Letter to Artists’, *Origins* 28, 46 (1999), p. 787 in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 45.

²²⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 202.

²²⁵ Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p. 109.

²²⁶ Maitland, *Big-Enough God*, p. 110.

²²⁷ Maitland, *Big-Enough God*, p. 142.

revolution of the imagination.²²⁸

De Gruchy picks up her thought, recognizing artistic creativity as “a sacramental act that moves both heart and mind,” and “...not only God-given but one of the main ways whereby the power of God is unleashed.”²²⁹ Puzzling that despite searching the Scriptures and classic texts on Christian spirituality, he failed to find a reference to ‘the gift or charism of creativity’, he nonetheless suggests,

Yet what if, as Irenaeus put it, ‘the glory of God is humanity fulfilled’, and what if ‘being made in the image of God’, who is creator, means that God intends us to be co-creators in making this world more humane and beautiful? What if honouring human creativity is a way of honouring God who enables us to be creative? What if creativity is not something to be frowned on, but something to be encouraged as a gift of the Spirit?²³⁰

Artistic creativity, as an ‘unleasher’ of the power of God, awakens “both a thirst for justice and a hunger for beauty,” de Gruchy writes. “Artists help awaken our awareness to the present reality in all its pain and hope, thereby enabling transforming vision. Such artists are not necessarily the professionals, but those of our own communities who can discern beyond the surface to the depths of being-in-the-world; indeed, to discern the Spirit at work in our midst.”²³¹ De Gruchy passionately calls for a recovery of artistic creativity in Christian formation, theology and practices of the Church in our context in South Africa, as the power that can be unleashed for hope, justice, transformation, and new fuller life.²³²

Creating as a Spiritual Process

If the divine energy of creation flows through our creativity and is released through us into the world in our creating, then the quality of our attention, our openness, respect, trust, care, reverence, love, nourishment and expression of our creativity opens this energy into the world. “If what we let out truly flows from our depths,”

²²⁸ Maitland, *Big-Enough God*, p. 143.

²²⁹ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 241-242.

²³⁰ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 195.

²³¹ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 200.

²³² de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 241-242.

writes Fox, “then it is flowing from God’s depths too, and the divine creative energy...that alone inspires the universe is happening through us.”²³³

Many artists see the source and inspiration of their creativity as Divine, and feel that they are participating in something sacred. As May observes, “ ...many artists feel that something holy is going on when they paint, that there is something in the act of creating which is like a religious revelation.”²³⁴ Some invoke awareness of the presence of God in what they are doing. Some call themselves a conduit or a channel of the Spirit.²³⁵

Mystics, religious people of diverse faiths, and many artists alike see creativity as a spiritual process. It both calls forth and emerges from deep inside. It is a language to express the deepest meaning of ourselves. Art is also a meditative process. Both art and meditation require paying attention, listening, centering and ‘a return to the source’, both leading to fuller living and deeper spiritual celebration of both pain and joy. Creative imagination and artistic activities are used in the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and other methods of spiritual direction.²³⁶

As a meditative process, artmaking also reminds people, writes Fox, that “...the most beautiful thing a potter produces is...the potter!”²³⁷ It is a process that involves openness to what is, and trust - trust that there is something inside of us that wants to emerge, trust that images will emerge out of the openness and chaos inside, trust that the chaos inside will not destroy us if we listen to it, trust of the images themselves, and trust that through the process, we will grow as a person, ‘becoming’ more fully who we are.

²³³ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 185.

²³⁴ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 69.

²³⁵ See for example, Julia Cameron, *The Artist’s Way* (London: Pan Books, 1994); *The Vein of Gold: A Journey to Your Creative Heart* (London: Pan Books, 1996). Meinrad Craighead, *Crow Mother and the Dog God: A Retrospective* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Art Books, 2003). This will be looked at further in interviews with women artists and crafters, in chapters four, five and six.

²³⁶ See for example, *Listen: A Seekers Resource for Spiritual Direction* 1: 3 (October 2007); Adriana Diaz, *Freeing the Creative Spirit: Drawing on the Power of Art to Tap the Magic and Wisdom Within* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

²³⁷ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 192. Fox writes that “Every church ought to have clay and paints, body movement and music, ritual-making and body massage and gardening as meditation.” p. 192.

Creating, like meditative or contemplative prayer, involves attentiveness, a heightened consciousness and awareness - a quality of presence and absorption - to the extent that even the experience of time shifts and bends.²³⁸

In creating we give expression to that which gives meaning or is moving in our soul. Creativity feeds the soul, say women artists in chapter four. At those moments of being totally involved in creating, we feel joy and the experience that we are, in that moment, more of who we are. In creating, we become aware of something incredibly beautiful in being - both an otherness, and oneself - who we are as the image of God.

Artistic creating is a space of encounter, an intimate conversation with images, inspiration, presence and process. It is an encounter with an energy other than oneself, that some say is God. Overcoming or forgetting the tension, fear and anxiety, letting go of the 'internal editor', and aside from the quality or kind of images that come up, being in the process and moment in creating is an experience of profound joy, transcendence, and love. The process is an intimate encounter with something deeply beautiful in the depths of oneself and the essence of the world.

Artistic creativity can be deeply healing to both oneself and others. Medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen wrote of how, in the throes of deathly illness, she felt she had to write and when she listened to this inner guidance and began to write, she found her health restored.²³⁹ Healing and blessing was brought to herself and others, even centuries after her death.

In creating, our life is renewed, reflects Fox, because in its very essence, creating means remaining a beginner, always learning, always beginning again. For the mystics Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhart, their journey was constituted by the need to create. Hildegard of Bingen called it our

²³⁸ These are insights shared by women artists interviewed in chapters four and five. Psychological studies with artists echo this. See for example May, *Courage to Create*, p. 44.

²³⁹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (Brussels, 1978), pp. 5f quoted in Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 190.

‘greening’.²⁴⁰ Meister Eckhart called it our birthing.²⁴¹

Art as Embodiment: Incarnation and Artistic Creativity

The very heart of the Christian message is ‘the Word made flesh’ (John 1:14) – God with us in the enfleshment and incarnation of Jesus Christ. This act, and the person of Jesus is an aesthetic expression, writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, of divine Being.

God’s Incarnation perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created Being. The Incarnation uses created Being at a new depth as a language and a means of expression for the divine Being and essence...it is not Sacred Scripture which is God’s original language and self-expression, but rather Jesus Christ. As One and Unique, and yet as one who is to be understood only in the context of mankind’s entire history and in the context of the whole created cosmos, Jesus is the Word, the Image, the Expression of God.²⁴²

Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love in created being – God’s aesthetic expression. This embodiment – as foregrounded by feminist theology in response to spiritualising tendencies in discussions of sacramentality - is material, sensual, messy and particular, occurring in human form in all its vulnerability and complexity.²⁴³

Human aesthetic expression in great art, can be seen writes de Gruchy, as a process by which ‘God’s eternal beauty’ finds embodiment.²⁴⁴ It is not just in great art that can disclose the mystery of the Incarnation “in all its wonder and uniqueness”.²⁴⁵ There are many ways that art and the creative process more generally (that is, without

²⁴⁰ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 198.

²⁴¹ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 186.

²⁴² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics, Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis, J. Fessio and J. Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, T&T Clark, 1982), p. 27.

²⁴³ Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 88. The concern of divine embodied beauty as it relates to South African women’s lives is discussed at length in chapter 10.

²⁴⁴ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 71-72. de Gruchy discusses, and resonates with the perspective of P.T. Forsyth (a pioneering British Congregationalist theologian in the exploration of the relationship between art and theology). Amongst other convictions, Forsyth insisted that great art reflects much more than the conscious intentions of the artist and their art, and that there is a moral core to beauty that refers to ‘the beauty of the holiness revealed in Jesus Christ.’ See for example, P.T. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), and P.T. Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911).

²⁴⁵ Begbie, *Beholding the Glory*, p. xiv.

judgement as to aesthetic merit) can be viewed as analogous, or function as a 'parable' that brings to life the meaning of some aspects of the incarnation. These 'parables' may help us "...to grasp the shape of the unfamiliar through the familiar, and yet in doing so hopefully deepen, rather than exhaust, our appreciation of and appetite for the mystery which remains."²⁴⁶

In setting the ground for his discussion on incarnation and the arts, theologian Trevor Hart reiterates some of the uniqueness of creative imagination and the arts - both the threat and responsibility - in the process of going beyond what is given. The artist "...sees more or otherwise than what is generally perceptible, and symbolizes her vision that others may share it. Her art grants 'eyes to see and ears to hear' to those whose seeing and hearing is otherwise less full, or differently focused and attuned.... There is no consensus on how or in what precise sense art does any of this."²⁴⁷ But the artist succeeds in rendering back 'something more than was given to it in nature as raw material'. This rendering back other than what was given has resulted in suspicion toward artists as discussed in previous sections. It also entails struggle for artists to try to embody their vision in their 'rendering back'.

As one who either discerns or is capable of calling into being meaning which exists now within some transcendent realm, some 'other world' than the one which confronts us in our daily lives, she must, nonetheless, work with the materials which this more immediate world affords: carving wood, daubing paint onto canvas, orchestrating tones, marshalling words into order, or whatever it might be. She cannot in fact escape the flesh and blood dimensions of what it is to be human in the world. But she faces the problem that this (literal) material is recalcitrant, inherently unsuited to her purpose, intrinsically incapable of bringing to expression the artistic *logos* as such.²⁴⁸

It is as if the artist must inevitably regret the inherent physicality of artistic manifestation in the world, and would prefer it if some direct transmission of the spiritual or intellectual opus between minds could be arranged, short-circuiting the messiness and crudity of mediation through fleshly realities altogether. That it cannot, that some sort of enfleshing of the work of art must occur, is a problem rather than something to be celebrated. The resultant

²⁴⁶ Hart, 'Through the Arts', p. 4.

²⁴⁷ Hart, 'Through the Arts', p. 5.

²⁴⁸ Hart, 'Through the Arts,' p. 14.

phenomenal object is not itself a ‘work’ of art. The *logos* finally refuses to *become* flesh.²⁴⁹

The artist struggles with the material as a means to translate something that is envisioned, something other than herself. “...the material artifact serves to translate us from the physical world into a spiritual one, to direct our attention quickly away from itself to some other, higher and more pure, object of consideration.” Though this is an imperfect process for the artist, there are parallels in it that point to the incarnation.²⁵⁰

Hart identifies two key issues regarding incarnation and the arts, relating first to art and creativity’s relationship to truth and meaning, and second, to the physicality of art.

First, while there is suspicion of what he calls ‘the inherent rebelliousness of art’, firstly identifies an inherent responsibility for humankind to exercise responsible creative freedom. God, made known in Jesus Christ, draws humankind to share in this creative dynamic. He sees this modeling of God’s creative freedom ‘and speaking to humankind in the life, death and resurrection of his Son’, as likewise laying upon humankind an ‘unconditional obligation’ to exercise responsible creative freedom. “Indeed we may go further, and suggest that it is not only a proper response to, but also and active sharing in (albeit in a distinct and entirely subordinate creaturely mode) God’s own creative activity within the cosmos.”²⁵¹

Second, the enfleshment of Divine mystery in human form is similar to art. This human form of Jesus Christ both contains the fullness of material reality, with all its flaws and limits, and yet God, transfiguring our broken humanity, assumes it. “...through a work of supremely ‘inspired’ (Spirit-filled) artistry, transfigures it, before handing it back to us in the glorious state which its original maker always intended it to bear. At this level, creation, redemption and re-creation are shown to be interwoven as activities of the same divine Poet.”²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Hart, ‘Through the Arts’, pp. 14-15.

²⁵⁰ Hart, ‘Through the Arts’, pp. 14-15.

²⁵¹ Hart, ‘Through the Arts’, p. 18.

²⁵² Hart, ‘Through the Arts’, pp. 20-21.

The choice to embody physical, messy, imperfect material, and wrestle with it, transfiguring the commonplace, and showing us more than what is immediately present or literally understood, reminds us of the incarnation, writes sculptor Lynn Aldrich.²⁵³

The very inertia of matter is just another embarrassing reminder to the sculptor of his won physical limits....A kind of wrestling with physicality also occurs within the 'dialogue' of the incarnation event, the Son on earth speaking with the heavenly Father...the potter's wheel turns and turns, through wrenching, painful, costly circles, before the completed form rises – Christ, in a body, but somehow awesomely transformed for eternity. The re-creation of our distorted humanity into its God-imagined perfection is thus made possible.²⁵⁴

Though this does not mean that what we are shown is simply equated with God, "We are granted fresh knowledge of that supreme engagement of God with matter, in which temporal, physical material was taken up, renewed and transformed."²⁵⁵

In different ways, artistic creativity illuminates the meaning of the Incarnation of God in Christ.

Psychology and Creativity

Psychological perspectives and studies contribute added dimensions to the understanding of human creativity. They attempt to explore both the 'how', and to some extent the 'why' of art and the creative process, through a framework of movements within the human psyche. Bearing in mind that as a theologian I do not claim to be an authority in this area, the perspectives below provide some provocative - though not definitive - insights on what may be happening to a person who creates.

The first perspective relates art to human need for a sense of affirmation of existence and belonging in the world. The second perspective examines work that explores

²⁵³ Lynn Aldrich, 'Through Sculpture: What's the Matter with Matter?' in Jeremy Begbie (ed), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (London: Baker Books, 2000), p. 104-105.

²⁵⁴ Aldrich, 'Through Sculpture', pp. 104-105.

²⁵⁵ Jeremy Begbie, 'Introduction' in Lynn Aldrich, 'Through Sculpture: What's the Matter with Matter?' in Jeremy Begbie (ed), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (London: Baker Books, 2000), p. 98.

psychological processes that seem to unfold in the creative encounter, and the transformative effects of creativity on a person and society.

Art: Affirmation of Being and Belonging

Art, artistic creativity and the aesthetic, writes Paul Crowther, affirm the self as a being that exists in the world. They meet a deep need for a feeling of belonging in the world; being at home with the self in the world of material things, and with other human beings.²⁵⁶ Crowther claims that art 'embodies' the human being's own subjectivity and interiority, making it real. This embodiment and recognition by others is in turn perceived and received by the self, as an affirmation of one's existence.

In his perspective, in order to be at home with the self, the needs of both the mind and senses must be satisfied. Art and the aesthetic is a means of satisfying these needs as it brings together the rational (one's own thoughts and intellect) and sensuous material reality in a relationship. As one senses and uses material things, there is a heightened awareness of the physical sensuousness of them. This awareness and manipulation of the material creates a sense of relationship between the person and the world of material things in which one exists. It creates a sense of 'feeling at home' and belonging among them. Further, Crowther continues, art satisfies the individual's need to belong, in its ability to create relationship with other human beings. Art enables a person to 'be at home' with other human beings as it facilitates identification with and appreciation of others. As others behold a created work, they can see, identify with and appreciate what is being expressed. Perhaps the artist has expressed something that resonates with the beholder's own reality and perceptions. In this way, art has the capacity to create free and non-coercive relationships.²⁵⁷

In the ability of the process, product and reception of creative artwork to satisfy these needs for belonging - needs of the mind and senses, and relations between a person,

²⁵⁶ Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

²⁵⁷ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, pp. 6-7.

the material world and others - Crowther describes artwork as 'a symbolically significant sensuous manifold'. This I interpret to mean that artwork is something that is made objective and tangible to the senses, able to express and hold meaning in itself and beyond itself. He terms this function 'embodiment', though employed in a different way than theological perspectives.²⁵⁸ While the theological embodiment centres on the divine – the embodied, material presence of the divine in human form and the parallel embodiment of human life as it occurs in creative work, as it reflects and points toward the divine – Crowther's term refers to subjective needs of the human person.

Thus, artwork is an externalised and embodied container of the self's subjective thoughts, feelings, senses, experiences and inner reality. It reflects a person's own 'embodied subjectivity'. Artwork reconciles human subjectivity with the human need to feel a sense of belonging to the world, by enabling externalisation of oneself, recognition from others, self-recognition through others.²⁵⁹

In Crowther's view, art and aesthetic experience are the highest form of practice that answers the needs of self to be aware of itself and to be at home in the world. "They enable the embodied subject to be at home with the world in the fullest sense by enhancing or reflecting structures essential to self-consciousness itself."²⁶⁰ Art makes 'real' an individual's internal subjective experience and being, as it becomes externalised or manifest into objective form. This manifestation, and recognition of the self in the created artwork by self and others, feeds back to the individual, affirming not only that they exist, but the truth of themselves and their potential.

As Crowther's use of the term 'embodiment' has a different focus than the theological significance of embodiment in art which centers on the Incarnation of God in Christ, in further discussions below, I will use the term 'self-affirmation' or 'affirmation of belonging' in reference to his perspective. This sense of affirmation is one that finds resonance in some reflections of creating women in this thesis.

²⁵⁸ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 7, 8.

²⁵⁹ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 10.

²⁶⁰ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 12.

Creative Encounter: Attention, Consciousness and Unconscious Processes

I believe that a thought system of a people is created by the most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds that society has produced: these are the few men and women, the supreme artists, the imaginative creators of their time, who form the consciousness of their time. They respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen.²⁶¹

Psychological analyses of the creative process itself suggest similarities between theology and psychology. In spiritual and theological perspectives, artistic practices are amongst the ways in which the wisdom of God comes to be learned and articulated. Art reveals what is there but is not noticed in the routine and mundaneness of daily life, in oneself and in the world.²⁶² Through the sensitivity, attention and awareness of artists, the world is encountered, revealed, disclosed, and opened up in unique ways – they give birth to a new reality.

In the psychological perspectives I present below, creativity is explored in terms of processes occurring within a person's psyche – their conscious and unconscious self. To Rollo May creativity is "...the encounter of the intensively conscious human being with his or her world."²⁶³ It is "...both the process of making or bringing into being and the way we express our being" bringing about intense encounter with oneself.²⁶⁴ Such an intense encounter with oneself engenders a process of emergence or becoming – a process psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung termed 'individuation' "a process of unfolding or unpacking the real resources within me, that give my life ultimate meaning."²⁶⁵ In creating, we encounter ourselves, 'unveil our faces', and let out our deepest selves in self-expression. Discovering more of who we are, we *become* more of who we are.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Okot p'Bitek, *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values* (Nairobi: Heineman, 1986), p. 39.

²⁶² Jeremy Begbie (ed), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), p. xii, note 2.

²⁶³ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 50. May distinguishes this degree of creative encounter with what he calls 'escapist creativity' that lacks encounter, and talent versus creativity. (p. 43).

²⁶⁴ Dolores Leckey, *Women and Creativity* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), p. 7.

²⁶⁵ Attributed to Jung in Graham Lindegger, 'Becoming a Whole Person: Personal and Spiritual Growth' *Grace & Truth*, 13:2 (1996), p. 25.

²⁶⁶ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 39.

How does this happen? It is related to both to attention - our consciousness – and our unconscious processes that we allow to emerge.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi compares our attention to a searchlight that decides what is in our consciousness.²⁶⁷ The importance of our attention, the quality of our attention and the ability to focus our attention is essential to our consciousness and how we experience life. Attention, presence, awareness and seeing what is within and around them is something the artists and many of the crafters in this thesis commented on. May sees attention as the catalyst for what he calls the creating encounter. The quality of attention and engagement, the degree of intensity is a form of contemplative awareness that shifts our consciousness.²⁶⁸

At the same time, May reflects, creativity goes on in varying degrees of intensity on levels not directly under the control of conscious willing. Unconscious processes and the willingness and ability to be open to them are integral to the creative process.

Like May, psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig sees two types of sensibility in art: conscious intellect with its precise visualisation, and unconscious intuition. These two are continually in dialogue and conflict.²⁶⁹ The creating person works very hard, applies their mind and attention with dedication and commitment, but ultimately cannot will or control their insights.²⁷⁰ Creativity in this view is “...the speaking of the voice and the expressing of the forms of the preconscious and unconscious,” a breakthrough from the unconscious.²⁷¹ “Creativity, writes Ehrenzweig, “is always linked with the happy moment when all conscious control can be forgotten.”²⁷²

This release of conscious control is illustrated in both the approach to life and spirituality, and the creativity of the artists in chapters four and five, and some of the

²⁶⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience - CD Adaptation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

²⁶⁸ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 41.

²⁶⁹ Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (St Albans, Herts: Paladin, 1970), p. 57.

²⁷⁰ May, *Courage to Create*, pp. 46-47.

²⁷¹ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 76.

²⁷² Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 57.

crafters in chapter six. They spoke of the importance and centrality of their inner guidance and intuition, the importance of their dreams for guidance and inspiration in their art. This is also seen in the aspect of ‘conversation’ that many talked about, between the artist, the materials, and the unfolding of a creative work. The included respect for the materials and the unfolding process - even ‘mistakes’ - as holding an energy and an intention that reveals even if it is outside of the realm of the artists own plans.

Looking at these unconscious processes through a psychoanalytic framework, Ehrenzweig explores what he calls the ‘hidden order of art’, wherein the unconscious finds form and expression in the creating process and work. What seems to be chaotic in the unconscious is ordered and expressed in the art.²⁷³ The work of art itself “acts as a containing ‘womb’, which receives the fragmented projections of the artists self.”²⁷⁴ His framework is helpful in understanding the fear inherent in approaching a creative work – beyond what many artist and crafters see as ‘performance anxiety’ – to deeper processes at work within the person. And it provides a helpful lens to see the power and processes underlying the use of artistic creating in healing, therapy, and overcoming trauma. As highlighted by the women artists and crafters in this thesis, artistic creating contributes to their well-being, growth, and healing.

Ehrenzweig examines and articulates the creative process and the artists ‘conversation’ with the emerging work of art through this psychoanalytic lens. He explains three stages of the process: an initial stage where fragments of the artist’s personality are projected into the work, including unwanted, rejected parts. The second stage involves intuition - an unconscious scanning where the whole of art’s substructure is seen and ordered, integrating all the unconscious links that are there. In these two stages, the artist is in a ‘near-oceanic state of consciousness’ – a state like the mystic feeling one with the universe - totally absorbed and seeing the whole. In the third stage, the work is subjected to the ordering of conscious analysis of the ego. He describes the first and third stages as provoking severe anxiety; the first because it means surrendering control and allowing fragments of self to emerge from

²⁷³ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 20.

²⁷⁴ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 185.

the unconscious. The third stage evokes anxiety, even depression and disgust in the artist, because returning to the 'ego' state of consciousness – conscious control - it is necessary to order what may seem as a muddy mess of fragmented parts that in the moment of pouring it all out seemed a coherent whole.²⁷⁵

Creative Encounter: Anxiety, Courage and Trust

Thus, in this framework, the creative process may engender anxiety and fear. The encounter with one's own unconscious – including pain, confusion, darkness and the parts we consciously repress and reject - and the world, implies breaking up of old patterns, thoughts, forms and conscious thinking and control. To the artist, and to the world, this is not a comfortable thing. Rather it entails profound displacement. Theologian Dolores Leckey images the intense encounter with oneself and one's world, and the shift in consciousness, as "...a form of 'annunciation'...like gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary beings."²⁷⁶

What breaks up? It might be that to which we cling most rigidly in our individual conscious thinking or it might be what a lot of people believe is essential to the survival of their intellectual and spiritual world.²⁷⁷

The effect of such an annunciation is "...that the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before." "And then," notes Leckey, "nothing is ever quite the same, as we see so clearly in the lives of mystics and inventors, artists and prophets."²⁷⁸

It takes courage to move forward in this tension, to move forward despite the resultant anxiety, fear or despair, courage to encounter what is pushing up for expression, courage to allow this shift in consciousness that "breaks up the house of our being", and courage to trust the messages and images that emerge. It may disturb,

²⁷⁵ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, pp. 117-119. The psychological terms he attaches to these descriptions are 1. projection; 2. de-differentiation; 3. re-introjection.

²⁷⁶ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 9.

²⁷⁷ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 9. Leckey credits the idea of the annunciation to critic George Steiner.

²⁷⁸ Leckey, *Women and Creativity* p. 41.

challenge the status quo, threaten ourselves, and others. They may be painful memories, untouchable things within ourselves. Through the images that emerge, we may be asking questions about the way things are, challenging and conflicting with the dominant reality. “Because the house of our being, individually and collectively is threatened by creative insight and application, both commitment and courage are needed to combat anxiety and guilt,” Leckey writes.²⁷⁹

With courage, commitment and trust the artist is able to move forward into the unknowing, distress, chaos, and come out the other side. Where does the courage come from? Leckey sees this in theological terms. The creative courage that accompanies such artistic processes comes from something that is deep, more constant and enveloping than the tension, fear, darkness and the wrestling. It is a trust, a centredness, a contemplative awareness of God as the source of which we are a part, as the inspiration, guidance, source and space within which the work finds form. It is in the awareness that not only is the artist a conduit, but the artist is held in safety and love in this divine mystery. She calls it “...that knowledge which inspired the writer of Acts to state the most fundamental fact of human existence: ‘In God we live and move and have our being’.”²⁸⁰

Women artists and crafters in chapters four and five articulate this inner centredness, contemplative awareness and feeling of accompaniment in different ways, as spiritual – as intuition, energy, love, mystery, guidance, God, Spirit, ancestors, participating in the divine. They feel an awareness that they are part of something bigger than themselves in their creating. This participation feeds them spiritually, affirms them in who they are, guides them in their lives and contributes to their well-being and growth. Additionally, specifically mentioned by women in the crafting groups, this accompanying Spirit meets them in their hands and at the point of their need, concretely, with income to feed their families, and emotionally in support and solidarity offered in the safe space of sisterhood of the crafting group.

Artist David Plante refers to ‘grace’ emerging through the creative process. He sees it

²⁷⁹ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 8.

²⁸⁰ Acts 17: 28, Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 9.

in the courage necessary to move forward, and in the hope that the process of artistic creating inspires. Like de Gruchy, he sees the centredness inherent in art playing a significant role in giving hope and a sense of possibility to a fearful and frightening world over which we do not ultimately have control. Art, he says, can give, "...a sense of possibility, because things are so out of control, and so uncertain. And by giving one a sense of the possibility of what there is outside of one's control, outside of one's intentions and in the darkness, it offers the possibility of grace. I believe grace is possible, and that writing and art can inspire grace."²⁸¹

Creative Encounter: Joy, Enjoyment and 'Flow'

The artist, at the moment of creating, does not experience gratification or satisfaction...rather, it is joy, joy defined as the emotion that goes with heightened consciousness, the mood that accompanies the experience of actualizing one's own potentialities.²⁸²

Joy is a word frequently used by women artists and crafters in this work to describe feelings while creating. Joy is distinguished from pleasure, happiness or satisfaction. Psychological studies attempt to understand what is happening, even how to try to bring such moments of deep enjoyment about intentionally.

May reports how physical and psychological changes that occur in the experience of creative joy resemble what happens when we are in a state of high arousal, like fear or anxiety. There is "...a quickened heart beat, higher blood pressure; increased intensity and constriction of vision, with eyelids narrowed so that we can see more vividly the scene we are painting; we become oblivious to things around us (as well as to the passage of time). We experience a lessening of appetite...now all of these correspond to an inhibiting of the functioning of the parasympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system...and an activation of the sympathetic nervous system." But, May goes on to say, "what the artist or creative scientist feels is not anxiety or

²⁸¹ Interview with David Plante in Suzie Gablik, *Conversations Before the End of Time* (London: Thames + Hudson, 1995), p. 164.

²⁸² May, *Courage to Create*, p. 45.

fear; it is joy.”²⁸³

For over thirty years, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has sought to understand human well-being by studying the ‘deep processes of joy’, in human creativity.²⁸⁴ He has coined the term *flow* to describe ‘a special feeling of deep enjoyment’ - such as that of the intense encounter in creating, “...the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”²⁸⁵ These are deeply positive experiences that lead to personal growth. Immersed in such experience, he explains how it feels.

We feel especially focussed, in harmony with ourselves, pursuing our goals, effective, totally ourselves yet forgetting ourselves, unselfconscious, not self-monitoring, totally in the moment and absorbed. We feel a sense of transcendence, becoming part of something bigger beyond the self. Time transforms. There is harmony with the world rather than a sense of being a separate individual, an exhilarating feeling of being part of the energy that operates in and around us. It is when we feel most alive. Self-esteem increases, and while simultaneously forgetting self in the moment, we feel we are most completely ourselves. We feel we *become* more strongly *who we are* and who we feel we are created to be than before the experience. This kind of enjoyment leads to personal growth and the development of a more complex personality.²⁸⁶

²⁸³ May, *Courage to Create*, pp. 44-45.

²⁸⁴ Hungarian originally, now living in the USA, Csikszentmihalyi lost many family members to war in Europe. He saw many people despair and become crushed by horrors while others buoyantly rose above tragedy. As a survivor, this sparked in him a quest to find out the key to differing resilience. Like Viktor Frankl, he, found it was meaning. Those who had made been able to make meaning in their lives in the desperate situation survived psychologically and emotionally. He went on to look for common elements in the ability to make this meaning and experience joy.

²⁸⁵ Csikszentmihalyi sees eight major characteristics of flow activities: 1. Clarity of goals; 2. Immediate clear feedback; 3. Challenges of the activity matches the skill level of a person; 4. Feeling focussed or concentrating; 5. With this focus, everyday frustrations disappear from attention. He calls it an ‘escape forward’ (differentiated from ‘escape backward’ of denial, dissipation, dulling the senses, addiction and so on). New knowledge, or a new reality is being created; 6. There is a feeling of control of one’s life. One is not a victim of outside circumstance; 7. One loses feelings of self-consciousness and self-monitoring; 8. The sense of time transforms. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience - CD Adaptation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). Quote M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, (London: Rider, 1992 + 2002), p. 4.

²⁸⁶ Pleasure is the feeling we get doing something programmed in us for survival and evolution of the human species, such as sexual activity and eating. It is automatic, requires no skills and does not help us to grow, and can stunt our growth if it becomes addictive. Enjoyment - what Csikszentmihalyi calls the flow experience - does not come from activities of satisfying our instincts. It is the result of paying attention, recognizing and meeting new challenges, and developing and mastering new skills we did not have before. Enjoyment leads to growth and higher levels of complexity of the person.

Creative Encounter: Growth and Emergence

Emerging from the development of personal abilities, personal skills, and their expression, Csikszentmihalyi says such intense experiences of enjoyment, joy, or ‘flow’ are the energy out of which a person evolves, and also which culture as a whole evolves. All art, new discovery, better and new human relationships emerge from this kind of experience. “Flow is like a magnet for growth. It pulls us to higher and higher levels of being, to increasingly more complex experiences.” The more experiences we have like this, writes Csikszentmihalyi, the better off we are. We become more and more who we are, evolving into a complex self.²⁸⁷

Consciousness is expanded, shifted, heightened or broken through in creative encounter. Like ‘the surface of the earth cracks when it quakes’, when consciousness expands we are taken outside of the ordinary domain of experience.²⁸⁸ It is a ‘quantum leap’ to ‘new levels of experience and insight’. Through such experiences, new dimensions of understanding and response are called forth, psychologist Graham Lindegger observes. He calls this ‘extraordinary personal and spiritual development’, that involves “transformed or expanded consciousness, and a new vision of self, world, other and God.” It is a development of the personality and spirituality that goes beyond obedience and conformity to the norm.²⁸⁹

These qualities of attentiveness, mindfulness, awareness, ‘keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality’, sharpening of hearing and seeing, give “...new eyes to see and ears to hear God in oneself and around one.”²⁹⁰ This attention, shift in consciousness and allowing the unconscious to emerge leads to both personal and spiritual growth, in an extraordinary way.

Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow - CD Adaptation*.

²⁸⁷ Csikszentmihalyi identifies five elements (‘C’s’) of a complex personality. 1. Clarity of goals, purpose, feedback; 2. The ability to centre; 3. Choice; 4. The ability to care and commit – a quality of attention; 5. Challenge and increasing complexity. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow - CD Adaptation*.

²⁸⁸ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 41.

²⁸⁹ Graham Lindegger, ‘Becoming a Whole Person: Personal and Spiritual Growth’ *Grace & Truth* 13:2 (1996), p. 26.

²⁹⁰ Denise Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Glossderry South Africa: David Phillip Publishers, 2003), p. 148.

Summary

Theological and spiritual insight and experience, along with psychological theory, both offer explanations - through different frameworks - the power and process of artistic creativity. Artistic creativity sheds light on the meaning of the central mystery of the Christian faith, the enfleshment of God in the human form of Jesus Christ.

In creating, a person becomes attentive and aware of the sensuous world in which we live, as well as one's inner life and guidance. Spirituality explains this in terms of awareness of God and the Spirit, while psychoanalytic frameworks explain this in terms of a person's consciousness and channelling the collective consciousness. In creating, a person's self and existence is affirmed as it is given form and witness outside of their own subjectivity. In creating, a person encounters their deepest self, including the unknown, their pain, fragments and darkness – in both their own psyche and those of society. Encountering these, and moving through the fear and unknown, entails courage and trust. In a theological framework, this is possible because of intimate awareness of God underneath and within the process. The fear and anxiety co-exists with deep joy in creating, a joy in the process that has a religious quality about it. Through these experiences – both facing the unknown and disturbing and moving through it, and experiencing the profound joy of focussed attention, employing their skills, and participating in embodying their existence through creating something outside of themselves - a person's consciousness shifts, leading to personal growth, affirmation and becoming more of who they are. Power and energy is unleashed – for both the individual and society – for hope, transformation and the creation of a new reality.

Creating as Ethical Activity

In this section, I examine the question of right relationship that is fostered in the creative process. Both spiritual and psychological perspectives of creating refer to the importance of the relationship between the materials, the artist and the process. This

is confirmed by the experiences of the women interviewed. The creative process is looked at as a conversation – a relationship of respect rather than domination. As such, the process of artistic creating is an ethical activity, teaching and requiring right relationship - not power-over, or power-under, but power-with.

There is a harmony that develops between the artist and the material that will not tolerate a subject/object relationship. “The holy matter with which all art interacts has a good opinion of itself...and as a result it demands relationships of equality.”²⁹¹ As opposed to imposing one’s own will or fighting the materials, one has to interact with the materials and the medium in a relationship of respect, observes Fox. “With clay and dance, music and painting, one actually learns the wisdom of fifty-fifty relationships of give and take, of action and receptivity. Nothing less holds together.”²⁹²

In an article reflecting on his hobby of woodworking, theologian William Johnson Everett looks at craft as an ethical activity that provides an alternative path to human development. He sees creating both requiring and calling forth a way of being in the world, “with a particular set of values and sensibilities that enlarge and revitalize us”.²⁹³ Creating espouses such values as building and contributing, of dignity and moral agency. This is clearly demonstrated in craft movements in history, as well as in South Africa at the present.

In South Africa, the creating process and the creative work of women - whether formal artists or untrained women in crafting groups - uncovers, expresses, and strengthens who they are in an environment of patriarchal and/or economic marginalisation – and under many oppressive forces that undermine their humanity. Creating develops confidence and dignity, returns moral agency, builds relationships and identity. It brings hurting, rejected, or traumatised people back to themselves, helps them to heal, restoring them to relationship. Particularly for women with no

²⁹¹ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 195.

²⁹² Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 195.

²⁹³ William Johnson Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality, and the Struggle for Justice’ in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 123 (Nov 2005), p. 6.

other economic possibilities, handcraft groups - such as sewing, beading, pottery, and embroidery – have been particularly important in sustaining families and communities. They build community, giving women courage, passion and energy to reach out to others in support and sharing to make a new reality beyond the isolating despair and dehumanisation they have felt trapped in, as poor people and as women.

In India, when Gandhi elevated the traditional work of the spinning wheel in response to the oppression of the British, spinning cloth became, in addition to an economic necessity, a religious ritual, and a national symbol. It was about identity and moral autonomy. It was grounded in the reclaiming of the dignity, autonomy and creativity of peoples' lives in response to domination, industrialization, ownership and cheapening of human life, and the removal of their livelihoods.²⁹⁴

In England, Europe and America in the late nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts movement emerged as a response to the dehumanisation of capitalism and the industrial revolution.²⁹⁵ Artisans had direct control over what they made, had face to face transactions, were rewarded for their work - not just with money but with the satisfaction and recognition of their work and themselves - and transmitted their skills through mentoring and apprenticeship.²⁹⁶ This contrasted with ugly, dehumanising and conditions of the industrial cities, the values of “insatiable economic growth, industrial domination of nature, and the reduction of relationships to finance.”²⁹⁷ Its principal value was community. Craft economies lead to other values in society.²⁹⁸

Further, personal virtues are promoted through craftwork. Everett names virtues of

²⁹⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 238.

²⁹⁵ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 88. William Morris was the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris, a designer, was training for the ordained priesthood. He then chose instead to work against social injustice in industrial England. See Eleanor van Zandt, *The Life and Works of William Morris* (Bristol: Paragon, 1995).

²⁹⁶ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 10.

²⁹⁷ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 10. de Gruchy writes how art critic John Ruskin saw such ugliness as ‘a sign and a symptom of human sin’. In contrast, beauty as seen in nature reflected the holiness of God, espousing values of truth and goodness. This potentiality also existed in human creativity that emerged out of ‘the moral virtue of the artist’. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 53-54. See J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol I (1843); George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

²⁹⁸ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 10, de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 53-54, 88.

patience, respect for the material one is working with (in his case wood), humility, care, honesty and integrity. In working with the wood, he writes, the crafter does not dominate but is invited to participate in a wider process of creation. The task of the crafter “is to let the inner beauty of the wood manifest itself, rather than for the crafter simply to impose an idea upon it.”²⁹⁹ Patience is cultivated in engagement with the material and the requirements of the work. Respect for the material comes from listening to it, its properties and qualities, its strengths and limits. Its intended use and the beauty of what is being made determine how long it takes to work with it, not the dictates of the clock. Humility is required as the impulse to wrestle with, subdue and subordinate the materials to ‘will or idea’ is curbed. Instead, the focus is not on one’s own ego and will, but on the work being produced. There is an awareness that “the crafter is a channel of creativity, not its source.”³⁰⁰

Through discipline, patience and commitment, a service is rendered in working with the craft - to the beauty inherent in the wood and to the community that derives pleasure and use from it. Care is fostered as attention and intention are focussed on the requirements of the wood and the purpose it is intended for. Care is evident in good craftsmanship even in those places that will not be seen, the parts that “only God sees.” Honesty follows, where the surface of what is seen is in congruence with its ‘inner reality’. And integrity is the congruence between the crafter and the materials and within the work.

Other virtues promoted with both women artists and women in crafting groups in South Africa include courage - courage to take steps for their lives in a direction that is new and unusual. There is discipline to show up and do the work, despite fear or anxiety inherent in the process. There is a new self-respect and pride that emerges, especially in crafting women, as they undertake their craft with care, and see their ability to create something excellent and beautiful. They take care to do it well. They learn to let go of self-consciousness, low-self value, and develop trust that not only will something emerge, but that they have something of value and significance to contribute to the world. This not only affirms them and builds their confidence, but

²⁹⁹ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 9.

³⁰⁰ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 11.

self-rejection is recognised as a distortion of who they are. As they accept themselves and are affirmed in who they are rather than degraded, this extends then to their relationships with others. Their creating creates community and brings joy to others.

The generation of such virtues, writes Everett, shapes a way of life that stands in contrast against values of mass production and economics that espouse domination of people and the earth. This ethos is the foundation of right relationship and community.

Furthermore, this requirement of right relationship seen in creating extends to oneself, the community and the world – thus it is related to issues of social justice. The ethos of right relation is extended to the way in which each part has its unique integrity, and yet fits together into a larger context of beauty and goodness. Social problems addressed through craft virtues seek resolution, shaping, and repair rather than domination and power struggles.

In contrast to values of production and greed, Everett sees craftwork as a kind of liturgy - an offering up of work that brings enjoyment rather than the alienating experience that many feel in their work. This is a kind of praying, a meditative offering, “a sacramental action that brings the creative power of God into tangible form as a protest against our alienation and an earnest [sic] of the joyful creation yet to come.”³⁰¹

To many women in South Africa, ethical values and virtues seen in the creative process include its contribution to advancing their moral agency, and transforming of the quality of life. This is through many ways, such as the tangible need to bring in income and being able to feed their families. It is also through establishing right relations between women with their own selves. Creating helps them to actively participate in uncovering and becoming who they are. It is something that gives them great joy and nourishes deep places in themselves. It involves finding out and expressing their deepest selves, knowing and desires, in healing those places of themselves that have been damaged or distorted by degrading messages and

³⁰¹ Everett, ‘Woodworking, Spirituality’, p. 15.

experiences, about who they are. These are imbibed through apartheid, patriarchy, religion, violence and trauma, poverty, and experiences of alcoholism, AIDS, rejection, isolation or silencing of the self. Their creative work builds community and sets them in free supportive relationships with other women. In their creating, women take responsibility for their own lives and decide for themselves what is good for them and others. Women uncover what they believe, what they can do. It builds confidence in women who had no belief in themselves, and enables women 'to live lives of dignity and justice.' They learn to act from 'their own centre of creative freedom.'³⁰²

Furthermore, creating in art and craft is ethical activity in that it helps women to move from being victims, to becoming, in Nyambura Njoroge's words "subjects of one's personal destiny and that of one's people."³⁰³ They claim agency in liberating from that which is unjust, dehumanises and oppresses. Through their commitment, self-determination and in relationship and solidarity with other women, creating through art and craft in South Africa helps women to see, resist oppression, work together to overcome life-denying forces, and transform their lives.

Learning to See: Our Lives as Works of Art

Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.³⁰⁴

Artistic creating develops such qualities of being in the world that are simple and yet transforming. They affect moral agency and self-determination, connectedness with others and the world. They contribute to a deepening level of sensitivity and quality of relationship with oneself, others, the world, creation and with God. They grow who one is as a person, psychologically, spiritually and in relation to others.

Spiritual reflection on qualities and experiences inherent in the creative process - of

³⁰² Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 275

³⁰³ Nyambura Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra: Legion Theological Studies Series, 2000), p. 153.

³⁰⁴ J. O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 142.

attention, presence, amazement, mystery, absence, and awe, centredness, playfulness and joy, awareness of mystery in and around – see these as a way of being in the world that is infused with the spiritual quality that is childlike, deeply joyful, holy and close to God. It is wonder.

Sally McFague describes wonder as a form of consciousness that takes in what we are a part of in a fresh new way, and on its own terms, so much so that we are inexplicably moved.

I see something or hear something or hear about something, and then I just stand there in awe, stunned and spellbound. Wonder isn't even a special kind of feeling or emotion. It is a profound experience, but, more important still, it is a form of consciousness.³⁰⁵

Nolan observes how usually we lose our sense of mystery, awe, amazement and wonder as we grow up and learn to cope with the practical demands of life. To be useful in a world that encourages us to achieve, we become pragmatic and our thinking becomes instrumental. But losing our sense of wonder, he writes, we might as well be dead. "...[Einstein] once said: "The most beautiful experience we can have is of the mysterious. The person to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead."³⁰⁶

"But there are people", he continues, "who never lose their sense of wonder (or regain it in later life): artists, poets, mystics, nature lovers, and scientific geniuses like Einstein."³⁰⁷ Jesus seems to have been like this, Nolan reflects, as he was 'enthralled' by the marvels and beauty of nature. "In all these marvels of nature, Jesus saw the mysterious hand of God. He was a mystic and a poet."³⁰⁸ Nolan suggests that perhaps it is children's sense of wonder that Jesus was referring to as the symbol of true spirituality. "Would that not have been what he meant by welcoming the kingdom like a little child (Mk 10:15 par), namely, with a sense of awe and amazement?"³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, p. 124.

³⁰⁶ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, pp.122-123.

³⁰⁷ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, pp.122-123.

³⁰⁸ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, p. 123.

³⁰⁹ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, p. 123.

Nolan continues that wonder is not something that can be achieved simply by hard work or switched on at will. It is something that we can allow to happen to us. He writes that “Faced with mystery of one kind or another, a natural phenomenon or a human phenomenon, you can let go and allow your sense of wonder to take over. What then happens is that you are swept away by your consciousness of mystery.”³¹⁰

Related to the capacity for wonder is play. True play is something other than what has been commodified in western culture and is offered up in the leisure industry. Drawing on a long tradition of play in the lives of mystics in their spiritual journey, Guenther writes of the ‘holy uselessness’ of true play.

Play is at once intense...and liberating. We are freed from our compulsion for right answers, freed from the need to acquire and achieve, freed from anxiety by the transitory nature of play. With imagination as the generous supplier of raw materials, we can be rich beyond belief. Everything matters tremendously - and not at all. Furthermore, since it is hard to be heavily defended when engaged in true play, it is also an excellent way of shedding our masks and letting ourselves be known, of *unselfing*, in the classical language of spirituality. Play stretches us and helps push out the boundaries;...³¹¹

Play breaks open fresh possibilities and perspectives, it leads us into joy. Wonder, awe, play, childlikeness are spiritual qualities inherent in a ‘wonderful’ way of being in the world that paradoxically does not occur through avoidance of pain and suffering but rather the opposite. It comes from awareness and attention, encounter and presence, experience, knowing and trust, with deep engagement with the world.

This is certainly so for some of the South African women interviewed in this thesis. Reflecting on the creating process, women artists and crafters speak of their attention, their experience and encounter with the world: seeing and being moved by colour, light and shadow, form and the whole, the right word or phrase, the essence of their subject and their materials, their inner guidance, their revelations, inspiration and images, their experience of ‘something else’ going on inside of them, their inner

³¹⁰ Nolan, *Jesus Today*, p. 124.

³¹¹ M. Guenther, *Holy Listening, The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), pp. 59-60.

struggle, and their joy. Many speak from situations of knowing much struggle and suffering. Yet they describe how their creating leads them to being more aware, surprised, moved and full of wonder even amidst this.

While giving it different names, theologians write about this adult spirituality that is simultaneously intimately aware of suffering and is deeply joyful. This quality is apparent in the lives of many of the creating South African women I spoke with. Alejandro Garcia Rivera calls this capacity for wonder amidst the alienation of modern life ‘wounded innocence’. He sees its recovery as essential to recovering the capacity to “see again that marvelous innocence that is the depth of the dignity of the human person.”³¹² To him, this is the very task of theology. De Gruchy refers to a similar concept Paul Ricoeur called a ‘second naïvete’. It is a state of being that is “honed and refined by experience, and yet childlike in its capacity for wonder, appreciation, creativity.”³¹³ He goes on to discuss Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘aesthetic existence’ and ‘hilaritas’, and Bernard Lonergan’s ‘conscious living’.³¹⁴ Sara Maitland’s ‘second naïvety’ entails a recovery of innocence:

The naïvty of childhood is the naïvety of ignorance; the second naïvety is to become innocent, knowing that while ignorance is an unfortunate fact of life, innocence is a demanding virtue: open-minded, simple-minded without loss of knowledge or integrity, becoming as a little child again without the security blanket of lack of data; with a determination to find the world beautiful, magical, wild beyond dreams, dancing its complex patterns of truth, weaving its multicoloured threads of discourse so that all things can be true and we can once more be ravished by the beauty of God as revealed by choice, by loving power, in the whole dense, disorderly, chaotic and joyful universe.³¹⁵

While most often attributed to artists, mystics and prophets, everyone has this capacity to learn how to see and be like this - looking and seeing, open to what is, contemplatively aware, amazed and full of wonder even in the midst of deep suffering. Artistic creating is a way that is part of it. South African women artists and crafters illustrate this in their lives. Becoming aware through the process of their creating –

³¹² Alejandro Garcia Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 15.

³¹³ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 131.

³¹⁴ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, pp. 157, 158.

³¹⁵ Maitland, *Big-Enough God*, p. 189.

and especially for African women, sharing this with other women – contributes to transforming how they see themselves, their capabilities, others and the world. They become more aware of the mystery in which they live and who they are within it. They are drawn into it, into the depths of its knowledge and wisdom, into its beauty. They become more alive and become more aware of themselves as responsible, essential parts of the whole of community and creation.

This, in Fox's creation-centred framework, is living life as a work of art. The consequence of this, he continues, is ultimately becoming instruments of the divine, bringing more beauty into the world by how we live their lives. Beauty is what our lives are about - the glory or *doxa* referred to in the scriptures, the beauty that attracts and allures us to God.³¹⁶ By contributing to the ongoing beautifying of the universe through their lives, South African creating women contribute to changing the world - cynicism dies, Fox observes, and hope, justice and harmony return.³¹⁷

Conclusion

As part of the sacred story of creation and becoming, human creativity is an awesome gift of the divine, imbued with power and divine energy, an image of the divine. It is an energy, and a process, that enables us to see, encounter, grow, enjoy, delight and bring new life - to ourselves, others and the world. Unleashing this power in freedom is a responsibility and an obligation; nonetheless, it is a fearful thing. It requires courage to risk the process of wrestling with messy, unyielding material – and to risk encounter - to face our fears and search, to risk what may be broken up and required for new growth, and to move ahead in spite of this. What one is creating may be misunderstood, it may profoundly disturb and shift the status quo; it may be seen as a threat to others' understanding of the world. It may challenge 'the powers that be', the way things are or beliefs about the way they should be.

In creation-centred tradition, God the Creator, the creating, or the divine energy,

³¹⁶ "Beauty has to do with seeing all of life as blessing, with returning blessing for blessing, with forging blessing of pain and suffering and tragedy and loss." Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 218.

³¹⁷ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 219.

wants people to live and grow and become who we are in the image of God's own glory or beauty or *doxa*. Creating is a means by which we make this new reality and contribute to the beautifying of the universe, and is therefore directly related to imperatives of women's theologies for liberation. Prophetic justice-making, compassion, passion, connectedness, transformation and new life - that which is characterised by the urge to create life for all - is part of beautifying of the world, thus fulfilling God's purposes.

Rooting this in the lives of women in Africa and South Africa, beautifying the world and fulfilling God's purposes must mean removing all that denies life. Indeed, the spring of African women's theology and spirituality is concerned with "Life and more life..."³¹⁸ It is about life in all its fullness - giving life, protecting life, nurturing life and celebrating life. It is about having enough to eat and drink, feeding their families, being free to find out, affirm, and be who they are. It means being free from oppression, violence, war and the threat of physical harm because of their sex. Their spirituality affirms the broken, the 'bruised reed', the non-person, the oppressed. Dualism and hierarchy are rejected. God is in their bodiliness and human needs and those of their families and communities. Their life and theology is concerned with the development of a mature moral person who is able to take decisions and affect her own life, a person who is in relation and solidarity with others, and is empowered, courageous and willing to transform that which is death-dealing in any way. Their creativity is an integral part of this.

In the next three chapters, I turn to hear the stories of South African creating women as they reflect on the creative process and their spirituality. In this, I employ the inductive methodology of African women's theology that prioritises women's experience as the starting place for interpretation and analysis. Their reflections and experiences are presented, organised into emerging themes. Then these are related to the frameworks of women's theologies of liberation in Africa and creation spirituality. Both are rooted in creating, protecting, nurturing and celebrating life in all its fullness and the relationships - with God, self, others, nature and creation - within which

³¹⁸ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 26.

these occur.

In chapters four and five, the insights and voices of individual artists are heard. While they are from diverse backgrounds – black and white - and work in different idioms, all create their art as a matter of inner imperative. The space to do so, while not without struggle, is possible because their basic needs for survival are met.

In chapter six, stories are heard from women who find themselves on the margins of the formal economy – primarily African women. They struggle to survive in contexts of high unemployment and impoverishment and the heavy burdens they shoulder. In crafting groups, these women come together to create beadwork, embroidered articles, paper, wirework, ornaments or decorative objects as a means of survival.

In chapters four, five and six, I examine how the creating process feeds and shapes these women's spiritualities, and how it is inseparable from the women's bodily, psychological, communal and spiritual needs. From analysis of their creating, spirituality and ethical issues, I then begin to identify emerging themes for creating feminist theological aesthetics in South Africa, and how it contributes to promoting full life for women in South Africa.

Chapter Four – Artists

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I looked at creation spirituality and theology as a framework for understanding women's creativity. Within this, I situate women's theological movements toward liberation and life in South Africa. Propelled by the creative energy and emancipatory Spirit of God, these are courageous and fruitful movements that affirm women, and reach out to others beyond their own lives. They are movements that seek justice, freedom from oppression, and full life - for themselves, others and all of creation, as a divine imperative.

Centred on this theme of 'full life', this chapter discusses the insights and experiences of thirteen women artists, as they reflect on their creating and their spirituality, within their particular history and experiences as women in South Africa. In line with feminist and African women's theological method, this chapter privileges the women's own voices and perspectives.³¹⁹ In this chapter, these are organised into themes that emerge from the reflections of the women themselves. In chapter five, I discuss their experiences and reflections, relating them to creation spirituality, ethics, and feminist and African women's theology around the theme of 'full life'.

Five overall themes are distilled, emerging from the interviews. First, is the faith background of the women and their reflections on this. Second, the relationship between their spirituality and their creativity is shown. Third, I examine their reflections on the creative process itself and inspiration. Fourth, I identify a movement that is happening in their lives toward self-definition, agency, integrity and trust. Fifth, I analyse their interrelatedness, solidarity, concern with and outreach to other women and wider society. In the following chapter, two case studies – the stories of Dina Cormick and Gabisile Nkosi - are presented as illustrations of these themes.

³¹⁹ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 11.

The thirteen women interviewed come from culturally and economically different historical backgrounds. Ranging in ages from 20-70 years, seven are English-speaking South Africans, one Afrikaans-speaking South African, two Zulu-speaking South Africans, one South African of German origin, one Malawian, and one English-speaking South African of Zambian origin. Three women are black and ten are white.³²⁰ While all would be considered middle class now in terms of their education and income, twelve of the women grew up under vastly different circumstances in apartheid South Africa, ranging from poor rural and township communities to working class, and middle class homes. Some were happy and others described their histories as dysfunctional and difficult, independent of income levels and culture. With the exception of the Malawian woman, all have resided in South Africa for most of their lives. Eleven are fine artists - four painters, one a printmaker, two fabric artists, and four multi-media artists. Two are writers, a scriptwriter and a poet. All of the women had some sort of formal education or have training related to their chosen art-form and went on to further develop this acquired medium

A central part of their spirituality relates to the joy of their creating, which is deeper and more pervading than their struggles in life or with their art.. It affects the entirety of their lives and how they interact with the world. They use rich, sensually descriptive words, of colour and texture, of words and spaces, speaking of their inner feelings when creating, how they feel about themselves, their being, and what they reflect on about God. The process of creating (not a focus on the product), the total absorption and joy, is a deeply nourishing and meditative process, much like prayer in awareness and presence. Stretching to find the words to try to approximate what they mean, they speak using words like love and grace, beauty, mystery, moving towards one's 'highest and best self', and 'participating in the divine'.

These women feel an inner impulse to somehow express what they are 'seeing' or 'hearing', experiencing and encountering in themselves and the world. The language of vocation is strong. Women talk of feeling compelled or called to create - they have

³²⁰ As discussed in the method section in chapter one, becoming an artist was not an option for many black women in South Africa, historically. There were only a few well-known individual black women artists prior to liberation in 1994, including Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Helen Sebedi and Noriah Mabasa. Fifteen years after liberation, this picture is changing.

to do it and decided they will. They trust their inner spiritual compass and show courage, agency, self-definition, freedom and maturity that centres on this trust.

Several of the women refer to the cathartic and therapeutic effect of processing trauma or sorrow through their art – giving it ‘voice’ or form in their art, putting something ‘out there’, making it more real, naming it as their story, expressing the events, interpreting their lives and working through to some healing. Their stories reveal much of the brokenness in South Africa. Healing and the freedom that comes with it, is both a motivation and an effect of their creating. Their healing encompasses personal and communal dimensions. Though healing is a benefit that many mention it, is not the primary motivation when beginning their art. Healing grace flows from the artmaking itself.

All of the women reach beyond their own lives to affect others. They have commitments to community, either through activism in church and society, community development, teaching and mentoring others, or forming bonds in groups. Six of the women actively challenge their churches and theology from a consciously feminist perspective to different degrees. All the women have strong commitments to the full humanity of women, and to the well-being of the people of their communities in South Africa. Four are social-political activists for justice in church and society particularly for women; eleven are teachers of art and creativity; eight speak of the importance of their work to contribute to healing - of themselves, others or society; and eight apply their creative teaching to develop the community, though all of these categories overlap.

Faith Experience

All the women had Christian formation as they grew up, through different denominations. The women have shifted and moved in different stages of their life, nonetheless, their Christian faith is both spiritually formative and important to them – even for the women who do not belong to churches anymore. The denominations and movements include Anglican (2); Anglican-Evangelical (1); Charismatic-

Evangelical/Anglican (1); Anglican/Quaker (1); Catholic (2); Catholic/Women-Church (1); Methodist/Charismatic-Evangelical/No Affiliation (1); Lutheran/Catholic/Methodist (1); Seventh Day Adventist/African tradition (1); *Kukhanyiso* (an African Independent Church)³²¹; Dutch Reformed/Presbyterian (1).

Four of the women's stories reflect overall comfort with conventional beliefs and understanding of Christian theology. These women find their spiritual homes, and deep nourishment, within the circles and theological teachings of their churches, and are involved with them in some way. They accept the doctrines they are taught concerning women - specifically mentioning male headship or male imagery of God and the Trinity - and find comfort in God as a powerful protecting male. One woman, though, struggles with questions such as why the church seems unaware of women's realities; why are women taught about selfishness and serving when they are already the suffering servant washing everybody's feet, and how can you be selfish when there is no self there in the first place? There is struggle and challenge, acceptance of some things and not others. At the same time, while not overtly challenging doctrine, teaching or practice of their churches as do women conscientised to the patriarchal construction of the church, all of these women are deeply committed to the dignity, liberation and full life of women in South Africa.

Seven of the women hold a strong Christian faith, and at the same time, their spiritual searching has led them quite far from the doctrines of their childhood and earlier adult years, which at one time they did find helpful and nourishing. Poet Joan Kerchhoff's story describes movements in her own life, religious understanding and spirituality and spiritual needs. Now in her seventies, Kerchhoff experienced solidarity within ecumenical church groups during the apartheid years. At first she and her family were rejected by members of the church as she and her family became aware of the evils of apartheid and spoke out about the injustice and suffering inflicted on black people. But mostly she had found meaningful support and fellowship from like-minded Christians. The theologies of liberation and feminist

³²¹ This is a small AIC located in KwaZulu-Natal, primarily in the rural Bulwer area in the foothills of the southern Drakensburg mountains. The women are very distinctive in appearance, wearing long bright red drapes of fabric and head-dresses to match, as their uniform. The interviewee indicated that it is a very strict church in terms of limits and rules.

writings she discovered , challenged her, changed her and undergirded her political responses. Now, concerned with the implications of power systems globally, in South Africa, and to herself as a woman, her spiritual journey is interwoven with self-discovery and justice as it is related to race, economics, gender, the environment and power. Her personal experience in her spiritual journey is leading her out of the institutional church, as she finds herself no longer able to accept the mediation of the spiritual through hierarchy, power, emphasis on sin, and distortion of the Gospel message. A serious Christian, she wants to be in the community of a church, but feels she cannot. She has been drawn to the Quaker discipline of listening to the Spirit within.³²²

One woman has left church involvement and affiliation behind completely, as a result of finding no connection any longer. For painter Deanne Donaldson, her Christian journey and involvement in church was a formative and an important part of her life for her first thirty years. This gradually changed for her when the questions that were accumulating inside of her had no space for exploration. These dovetailed with concern about experiences of callous treatment toward people whose lives do not ‘fit’ the prescriptions. She describes the urgency she felt, for the sake of her spirit and life, to move out of what she calls ‘boxes’.

I couldn’t be there anymore. It was kind of a knowledge...I knew that I had experienced things which were not happening in that place and I knew that that was no longer an option for me.³²³

While the seven women who speak of their searching have not left Christian spirituality or even the church behind, their experience of life and their growth is questioning and unsatisfied with the ability of the formal institutions of the church to relate to the fullness of who they are. For some there is profound internal dissonance, and questions that challenge presuppositions, doctrine, tradition, hierarchy, theology, beliefs and practices of a church denomination, or Christianity as they have experienced it as women, or as a caring person in society.

³²² Joan Kerchhoff, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 13 December 2006 in Pietermaritzburg. Figure 2.

³²³ Deanne Donaldson, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 9 March 2006 at KZNSA Gallery in Durban.

Dissonance with the Church and Christian Tradition in South Africa

Although areas of criticism and dissonance with the Church and Christian tradition were not a question in my interviews with women, I name the experiences they raise and take them seriously, as there are few spaces in which these can be told. The above stories demonstrate how their spiritual searching involves an attraction toward that which affirms life, and a distancing from what they experience as life-denying. Criticism of areas of church practice, teaching and doctrine relate to things that oppress, are experienced as untrue or even destructive. Tensions, and deep hurt came up in many of the conversations, related to the women's religious experience that contrast with their hopes and longings, and 'knowing'.

Ten of the women spoke about restrictive experiences in their churches, where they felt life and spirit were being suppressed. While several women specifically articulate their alienation related to oppressive teachings about women - patriarchy, hierarchy, androcentrism, invisibility of women, exclusive language and imagery - their criticisms are also embedded in a wider dissonance. The over-arching critique is of a closed, defended, fearful and controlling experience of church, including rigidity.

These women have not left Christian spirituality behind in their criticism and searching - though more than one has left church involvement. All have a deep Christian faith, though for many it is infused with anger, pain, confusion or resistance, and for many, is informed by sources outside of the accepted boundaries of their tradition. In their spiritual searching and journey, they have ventured more deeply into their own direct experience and knowing of God. By doing so, they are 'defecting in place'.³²⁴ Seeing the theology and church as needing correction, some of the women conscientised in feminist thinking and theology are living, exploring and putting in place creation-centred and women-centred theological paradigms that are centred on women's spiritual needs. Groups are created to affirm women in their lives

³²⁴ Rakoczy, 'Finding Space', pp. 346-347. Rakoczy attributes the term to M.T. Winter, A Lummis and A. Stokes, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 96.

and spirituality, exemplifying Rosemary Radford Ruether's Women-Church.³²⁵ "Women-Church says 'we are not in exile but the Church is in exodus with us' as women claim Christ's mission of liberation and wholeness for all, which is the mission of the church, and seek to make it real."³²⁶

Inner Guidance

Dream: I stand outside the door of my room and am disturbed to hear someone singing inside. My room, my space, is occupied. I open the door and a young man in unusual clothes welcomes me in with a smile I cannot resist.

He does not stand outside the door
and knock.

He does not stand *outside*.

I hear him saying
Welcome

As I enter
through the door.³²⁷

Several women directly juxtapose their experience of institutional religion and teaching with their spiritual experience and inner guidance. Inner guidance is experienced and expressed through their creative work, as it is in the choices and direction of their lives. Speaking emphatically and with conviction, Witty Nyide, who comes from what she describes as a strict religious background of an African Independent Church called *kuKhanyiso*, observes the power of religion influencing a person's life in either negative or positive ways - similar to the media. While belonging to and respecting her church, she reflects on what she sees as its

³²⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether coined the term *Women-Church*, describing communities created by women to meet their religious and spiritual needs. R.R. Ruether. *Women-church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), p. 62. in Rakoczy, 'Finding Space', p. 347. (The book is not held in our libraries). Schüssler Fiorenza writes of women-church not as exclusionary term, but as a political-oppositional term to patriarchy that is the center of feminist biblical interpretation. It is 'the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical religion.'" Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, p.xiv. Cormick has started a Women-church called Miriam's Circle; Moyo works with women in her theological work. Spies Coleman works with women in creative workshops. Stott runs workshops with women in groups to uncover their creativity and their gifts. Cassidy works with groups of poor rural women to make blankets and quilts. Pitout works with women to make liturgical vestments, uncovering their creativity and affirming them.

³²⁶ Rakoczy, 'Finding Space', p. 347 quoting Ruether, *Women-church*, p. 62

³²⁷ Joan Kerchhoff, 'Welcome' in *Three Journeys, One Life: Poems and Dreams, second edition* (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA Publications, 2009), p. 40.

‘brainwashing power’, leading people to fit into what is being said. Thus, she says, a person can lose their sense of self, and there is a potential for it to do harm. She contrasts this with her experience of her inner guidance and direction.

...that intuitive voice that is telling you that you are good, it’s more important...I think that our intuitions are God guiding us...I call it the intuitive spirit. Because it gives you direction. You just feel you are in the right place. You just know, without being told, that you are in the right place. Even if you feel it is against the church. I think it should be respected and you have to be flexible. It is God.³²⁸

Art, Artists and the Church

Three women say they belong to churches which embrace and display art (two Anglican and one Catholic) even though the artwork might evoke controversy and differing responses amongst the parish council and congregations.³²⁹ Liturgical artist Ann Pitout said that her artistic and musical gifts, once seen and understood by the church, are received, affirmed and celebrated.³³⁰

Three artists spoke of their experience with particular church denominations and the suspicion of artists as decadent, dangerous or immoral people.

While most of the women describe their spirituality and creativity as inseparable, Bernice Stott - who is an artist and a priest - has struggled all her life with a schism she has experienced between the two.³³¹ It has been on an ongoing journey to find ways to integrate them. These are both deep callings within her, but they developed along mutually suspicious lines in her history. At the age of fifty, she has begun to see herself as a priest/artist in the world, listening to her inner guidance, reading the signs of the times and depicting this in her art in strong and questioning ways.

³²⁸ Witty Nyide, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 31 March 2006 at Durban University of Technology, Durban. Figure 3.

³²⁹ Liz Speight, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 14 September 2005 in Howick. See Figures 4 + 5; Ann Pitout, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 7 March 2006 in Hilton; Dina Cormick, interview conducted on 9 March 2006 in Durban.

³³⁰ Ann Pitout, same interview. See Figures 6 + 7.

³³¹ Bernice Stott, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 1 December 2006 at her home in Durban. See Figures 8-10.

Contrary to much I have read about perceptions of artists and suspicion of human creativity from a Christian perspective, I did not find in any of the interviews that the creating was for the glory of the artist.³³² Rather, while respecting and acknowledging their gift, all of the artists look with awe and gratitude at the source of their creativity as something Other. There is a sense of responsibility to use this gift for the good of themselves, others and the honour of God.

Mystery and Unknowing

Several women refer to mystery - of being aware of an intimate presence - yet also aware of not knowing. The women are comfortable with this unknowing, and experience it as living and true. They do not look for certainties in their spiritual lives. They are tolerant of ambiguity and talked of being prepared to live joyfully within a world that is neither perfect, nor black and white.

The mystery requires a response, said Jutta Faulds.. There is expectation, challenge and the responsibility for humans to be and do what one is capable of, to live our utmost and highest. The sacred is not to be owned and brought down to our reality, rather we are challenged to be brought up, to challenge our comfort and understanding, to be all that we can be, to grapple with life's enormous challenges, to try to understand. She feels the mystery is avoided in popular church culture. In her own life, worship and art, she has these expectations, an awareness of the awesomeness and mystery of God, and that she is a very small part.³³³

Several women specifically try to use imagery or other oblique, metaphorical ways to image or evoke as sense of this mystery in their work. Similarly, experience of

³³² See for example Hart, 'Through the Arts', p. 2.; de Gruchy, *Confessions*, pp. 194-195. Others references on suspicion of human creativity are mentioned in chapter three.

³³³ Jutta Faulds, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 6 March 2006 in Pietermaritzburg. See Figures 11-17.

mystery is felt in their knowing, their intuition, dreams, guidance, inner sense of what is right, and a presence with them.³³⁴

Spiritual Nourishment and Perspectives

For those women who feel alienated from institutionalised Christianity but not their Christian faith or spirituality, their spiritual journeys have led them to search for, find, and embrace other things that nourish them, outside of conventional boundaries of their tradition. All the women are attracted toward that which affirms life. They listen to what is inside and outside of them as revealing of God. They are aware of a presence that guides them, and brings them to live in integrity with who they are.

Areas in their lives that spiritually nurture them include, and go beyond, specifically Christian spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, and meditation. In their artistic creating, they find encounters with other people and the detail and beauty of the world to be nourishing. Music and literature are important spiritual resources. Many embrace a spirituality that is much wider than what they see in the formal institutions, or exists in pockets on the margins - a wholeness that includes the universe, psychology, environment, and personal experience. Most of the artists spoke of an attitude of gratitude, worship and seeing the glory of God in what they do and how they live. Growth, learning, self-knowledge and self-love, and turning to the heart as well as the head for theological knowledge are important. Many spoke of the centrality of commitments to peace and justice, and the necessity of affirming people and helping them to discover their gifts, especially marginalized, excluded, and rejected people in South Africa, which includes women. The challenge of finding out what it means to be human is sought. Life is approached with a sacramental attitude that all is religious, holy and sacred, including the spirituality of religions other than Christianity - specifically mentioning African tradition and Hinduism. Important spiritual and creative practices include paying attention, being aware and listening,

³³⁴ Witty Nyide, same interview; Joan Kerchhoff, same interview; Gabisile Nkosi, same interview; Dina Cormick, same interview; Janet van Eeden, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 20 September 2005 in Pietermaritzburg; Hermine Spies Coleman, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 3 October 2005 in Curry's Post, KZN Midlands.

meditating, contemplating the presence of God, coming together in community, and reaching out to other people.

Imagery of God

Although this was not a specific question in our interview, most women did touch on how they image God. This encompasses both transcendent and immanent imagery. Some see God as a *who* - a powerful muscular male reaching down to humanity (“like the painting by Michelangelo”³³⁵), and use Christian imagery in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Some, still using personified imagery, spoke of God as the mysterious One. Others spoke use terms of not knowing, wondering, articulating questions about *mystery* or *what*. This seems to arise from an openness to being part of something infinitely bigger than who they are which cannot be known, and at the same time have intimations of knowing, from their own experience. They use terms like the inner voice, inner guidance, knowing, spirit, the universe, creativity, energy, nothingness, space. Some use the word God or Goddess or the Universe. Some use the word Other or Mystery.

Beauty

It is significant that while these creating women are open-eyed and intimately aware of human injustices, especially for women in South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal, their spiritual journeys and creating are full of hope and joy. Deeper than, and holding the suffering and pain, there is beauty and celebration. In the creation-centred spiritual understanding, they see people - including themselves - and creation, as part of something that is good, beautiful, vulnerable, growing, loving, to be protected, healed and affirmed. The words and imagery they use to talk about their experiences, beliefs and God are evocative and intimate.

³³⁵ Ann Pitout, same interview

The Relationship Between Spirituality and Creativity

All of the women speak of the inseparability of their art-making and ‘the sacred’ - in terms of their inspiration, reasons for art-making, or feelings of wonder at what they see and what happens in the process. For some it is articulated as the feeling they have while making art - an awareness of the sacred, a presence or energy, of God - that is experienced most intimately and intensely when creating.

Creativity as a Gift from God

Women refer to their creativity in different ways: as a spiritual process, as a gift from God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a charism, or a blessing, or inspiration from ancestral spirits, something they are guided by, which they trust. Stott describes it as ‘participating in the divine’ - that we are closer to our divine self and experience the excitement of our highest and best self when creating.³³⁶

They speak of their art in terms of gift, vocation or a call, or a sense of “this is what I have to do”. In response to this urging, their answer is ‘Yes’. Several women said that expressing the gift of creativity goes hand in hand with paying attention. Seeing God as the first creator, there is an inner urge many talked about, to repeat or represent what God has made.

The women express a sense of gratitude, and the belief that the gift of creativity is in everyone, and is given to everyone by God, even though many people think they haven’t been given this gift. It can be manifested in different ways for different people - more than the fine arts such as painting or sculpture - but in all of life, such as decorating and making the environment comfortable and beautiful, raising children, making clothes, making a good meal, making a garden. It is in the traditional things that women do, and the way one lives as a work of art.

³³⁶ Bernice Stott, same interview.

Expressing this gift and impulse to create is essential for their well-being. If they do not express their creativity, something is missing. Liz Speight put it this way,

Spiritually, I get very narky when I haven't been creating for a while, when the pressure of family or housework gets in the way. I start getting negative and then it just needs one hour of painting – like a quick fix – I feel better about myself and generally...³³⁷

The energy gets pent up, becomes an agitation or tension, a feeling that there is something there that is pressing for attention, as if something is missing. If not attended to, it can turn inward into a sadness and negativity, even life-threatening illness.³³⁸

Six women spoke of consequences to their feelings of well-being, physical and mental health, or their spirituality when they neglect, suppress, 'poison or dilute' the gift, or take what it demands on their own shoulders.³³⁹ This includes neglecting their art because of other pressures, or 'selling out' their creativity by taking on work that feels dissonant with an internal sense of what is right - usually for money, or feeling she must be in control of all the work, the process and the implications, rather than letting it go and trusting that God is carrying it all.

The creating gift and urge are experienced as something given in trust, so that as custodians of this world, the creative work expresses concerns and care.³⁴⁰

Giving Back: An Act of Worship and Glory

At the same time as responding to this sense of responsibility toward the creative gift, women spoke of the created thing being let go once it is made. Psychoanalyst Ehrenzweig says letting go not only recognises the integrity of the created thing itself,

³³⁷ Liz Speight, same interview.

³³⁸ Janet van Eeden, same interview. She experienced repeated bouts of illness when having no outlet for her creativity, or when she felt she has compromised its integrity.

³³⁹ Liz Speight, same interview; Janet van Eeden, same interview; Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview; Carol Cassidy, same interview; Jutta Faulds, same interview; Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

³⁴⁰ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview; Witty Nyide, same interview; Bernice Stott, same interview; Joan Kerchhoff, same interview; Dina Cormick, same interview.

but fulfils a deep need of the artist to “create his work like an independent being with a life of its own.”³⁴¹ The created work, why they are making it, and the process of making it, is released into the world. These women see it as an offering or sacrifice.

As well as the product, several women spoke of their creating process as an offering, an act or form of honour and worship, praise and glory. Their art is a response to awareness of God. It is a response to the gratitude that wells up in them.³⁴² Being given this gift of creating with one’s hands, then using it, and doing things with it to affirm and celebrate people, life and creation, is seen as affirming the gift and affirming God. Donaldson and Cormick both said that this kind of gratitude is central to their spirituality. For Donaldson, being present to what is happening in the moment, including the moments of creating and the quality of her encounters with those who pose for her portraits, brings her a new awareness. She becomes aware that it is extraordinary to be whom and where she is, to be doing what she is doing, to be alive. Acknowledging and being grateful, she says, changes what can happen, and makes her strong.³⁴³ For Cormick, using her gifts, using her hands in artistic creativity to affirm people, also affirms her gift, and affirms God - which she calls “an act of glory.” She sees that all of one’s life should be a form of worship. Referring to Gandhi’s words, she paraphrases “‘Unless every time you turn the tap on and off you do it for the praise and glory of God, the world will never be saved.’...every act is an act of honour and worship.”³⁴⁴ Others worship through expressing beauty and joy in their creating.³⁴⁵

Artistic creating is worship to Carol Cassidy. She reflects on this with a moving story about her young nephew, as he prepared for his death.

...before he died, it interested me so because the cousins around him were painting pictures of sickness and graves and churches, all sort of anticipating death. And funnily enough, this child, who was rather an untidy child, he put all his toys neatly away in suitcases and he started to paint. And he painted the

³⁴¹ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 98.

³⁴² Dina Cormick, same interview; Ann Pitout, same interview; Deanne Donaldson, same interview, Jutta Faulds, same interview.

³⁴³ Deanne Donaldson, same interview; Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁴⁴ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁴⁵ Ann Pitout, same interview.

most beautiful pictures - pictures of flowers and beautiful colours and pictures of going to the zoo. They're still framed and in his mother's bedroom but it's like he finished playing and he wanted to create. I still think about that with fascination. It's almost like he was getting close to God. Because I said to him once, "Richard, you know, is it a bad thing to die?" because he made me watch a video to watch someone dying. He said "no, it's going to be with Jesus. But it's hard for the people who stay behind." He was 9 years old. And for such insight for a little child like that and to draw those beautiful things it still fascinates me. Because he'd never done that before. It's a form of worship really, isn't it?³⁴⁶

The Creative Process: Inspiration

In creating art, writes psychoanalyst Rollo May, the artist encounters the world and her self in a very deep way, expressing what emerges from the deepest places of the self and the world. The world does not mean environment only, but, in May's words "...the pattern of meaningful relations in which a person exists and in the design of which he or she participates."³⁴⁷ This encounter requires a quality of attention, openness and participation. In psychological terms, openness implies relaxation of conscious control that allows deeper aspects of the self – in the unconscious, individually and collectively – to emerge, find form and expression. It is when 'creative breakthrough' can happen. Openness, writes psychoanalyst Ehrenzweig, and trust in their inner guidance are essential components of the creative process and creative encounter.³⁴⁸

The women's reflections on their inspiration reveal such a depth of engagement, openness and participation with what is happening both within and around them.

In their creative work, women express what they see and feel – the joyful and the beautiful, the sorrowful or painful - in events and relationships, their own lives and hearts, and the country of South Africa. Entering the depths of themselves has involved, for some women, entering into profound sorrow, void and trauma. Their artmaking has been a process of working it through, finding a voice and healing.

³⁴⁶ Carol Cassidy, same interview.

³⁴⁷ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 44, quoted in Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 7. (May book is now missing from our library).

³⁴⁸ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, pp. 78-79.

Inspiration as Response: Inner Self and Outer Experience

Beauty and Celebration

Celebration is a theme running through the work of both Cormick and Nkosi. At the time of our interviews, both had recently mounted exhibitions of their work around the theme of ‘celebration of life’ at the African Art Centre in Durban.³⁴⁹ Cormick’s woodcuts depict “aspects of women’s emergent feelings” expressed in images of dance – the dance of life, together, with friends, with lovers, with children, the bonding between people, and “the holding, the gently holding together, but still a separateness which I thought was important to celebration.”³⁵⁰ Nkosi’s work illustrates her gratitude, faith and life journey as she encounters who she is and what her life means.

Cassidy seeks to express her gratitude and joy by painting representations of the beauty she sees all around.

When I see something beautiful, I want to capture it, and I put it down and I create that in a way...Just being inspired by a little representation of it...I’ve been fortunate to have had a happy childhood and a happy marriage, so I do not want to express sadness through my painting. Its more to express beauty and joy.³⁵¹

For Pitout, much of her work is inspired by the awe and delight of the magnificent colours, vibrance, contours and landscape of South Africa which she sees revealing God – such as aloes as a symbol of the Holy Spirit – and which moves her to respond. She describes how she sees God in the natural beauty around her.

I can see how he shines his light onto those lemons for instance ...the sun is shining so brightly on the lemons on that tree...behind them is the dark background and I don’t know what’s in that dark bush there. But God’s in

³⁴⁹ Dina Cormick, same interview. See Figure 18. She said she changed the title of her exhibition to ‘Delighting in Life’ because Nkosi had just exhibited with the similar theme under the title ‘Celebrating Life’.

³⁵⁰ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁵¹ Carol Cassidy, same interview. See Figure 19.

there. God's made that dark bush...and some of those things are blooming in secret and only God knows. And I'm so privileged to see some of his secrets.³⁵²

Spies Coleman describes her latest series of paintings as a visceral response to the raw beauty and power of the stripped, skeletal landscape that had been charred by devastating fires that ravaged the Natal Midlands.³⁵³

Inspired and moved by the beauty and awesome power, these women seek to depict it in their art.

Sorrow, Struggle and Trauma

At the same time, as Spies Coleman reflects, all art does not need to be beautiful. It is often about 'putting guts on paper'.³⁵⁴ In their art, several of the South African women artists speak of wrestling with inner darkness and trauma. Such encounter with the self, writes Leckey, requires commitment, courage and trust to move forward.³⁵⁵ Working through their experiences, these women artists represent painful stories of women's lives. This is not necessarily depicted explicitly or even metaphorically in the content of the work, though it might be. In the process of creating, they grapple with areas of their selves that have been deeply wounded. The artist and her work engage in a conversation that is extremely demanding, and yet ultimately profoundly healing and fruitful to themselves and others.

For Nyide, creating multimedia visual portrayals are the means of finding her voice. Growing up in a traditionally structured rural African household and community, she was expected to keep silent and not talk about her questions or feelings, only to respect her elders - especially as a female in the patriarchal system. When her father died when she was small, she was not permitted to show her grief, nor grieve the

³⁵² Ann Pitout, same interview.

³⁵³ Hermine Spies Coleman, personal discussion during an informal visit in August 2007. See Figure 20. The Midlands was declared a disaster area.

³⁵⁴ Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

³⁵⁵ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 8.

dreams for her life that crumbled. Already poor, they now had no money and she had no possibility for further education.

When he died, I just lost hope...And I found that you're not even allowed to cry at home, to speak about the death. You're not allowed to do that. I've only been able to speak about it here at Tech, through my art – to express, to heal. In a way my art becomes therapeutic. I heal through my art...The influence of my background becomes very debilitating. You're not supposed to speak about things.³⁵⁶

Her artmaking has given Nyide her voice, and herself.³⁵⁷

Kerchhoff works through her observations and feelings through poetry. The events of much of her adult life are framed against the backdrop of apartheid and struggle against it. In poetry, she found words and spaces to express her anguish, compassion and vision. In poetry, she lamented the dehumanisation of black people, her husband's imprisonment, the assassination of an activist colleague in the apartheid years, and the violation of women. When her husband died suddenly and unexpectedly, her inner experience of this found form in her written poems and dreams.³⁵⁸

For van Eeden, deep grief and searching that she carried from a tumultuous childhood is expressed through her writing. Pouring out 'every ounce of sorrow' into her first screenplay, she grieved for her family and the unnatural deaths of both her brothers at young ages.³⁵⁹

Lastly, I mention Gabisile Nkosi's healing from an attempted murder. Through her art, she worked through deep trauma she experienced as a young student, when she and her child were attacked with a knife and almost killed by her ex-boyfriend, the father of her child. For years, she said, she could not talk about it. Finally, she started to struggle with her feelings of the attack and depict the scenes in her art. Her prints

³⁵⁶ Witty Nyide, same interview.

³⁵⁷ Witty Nyide, same interview.

³⁵⁸ Joan Kerchhoff, same interview. She has published these poems and reflections in her book *Three Journeys, One Life: Poems and Dreams, 2nd Edition* (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA Publications, 2009). See Appendix IV. Poems 1-5.

³⁵⁹ Janet van Eeden, same interview. She has written a screenplay about this.

evoke the brutal violence, her feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and inner muteness, and how she survived by fighting the man off with a chair. Her art helped her to cope, find her voice, and heal. Tragically, the story was repeated. In May 2008 Nkosi was murdered by an ex-boyfriend who shot and killed her before killing himself.³⁶⁰

Fragmentation in the lives of these South African women finds a way to be expressed and healed through their creating.

The pain is so personal and deep it is hard to deal with. Yet it is carried around, and tells a story to the person about who she is. Nkosi was not able to talk about her experience for a very long time. In the creative work, she worked with it bit by bit, telling her story, expressing her terror and feelings. In telling her story, over and over again, in words, in her art, to herself and to others, Nkosi, and the other women, were able to heal.

Healing, says Lindegger, whether biological, psychological, social or spiritual, is about "...facilitating the capacity of persons to function fully as persons."³⁶¹ The psychological and spiritual process of healing, he writes, enables people to come to a less distorted view of themselves and the world, enabling them to live in a more complete way.³⁶² He describes the narrative or story that each of us forms and lives with, about who she is and what the world is like. Healing occurs when that story is told, retold, reframed, reinterpreted. The person forms 'a new narrative' about herself and the world.

Each of us forms a narrative, or series of narratives, of life based on particular life experiences. The narrative, while based on historical events, is more than and sometimes different from historical events. Embodied in narrative is a set of beliefs about self, world, and others. Healing of memories is about rethinking or reconstructing the narrative within the parameters of given life

³⁶⁰ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

³⁶¹ G. Lindegger and S. Rakoczy, 'One Training Issue: The Psychological Competence of Spiritual Directors', *Presence* 3 2 1997, p. 21.

³⁶² Lindegger and Rakoczy, 'One Training Issue', p. 21

experiences, in terms of new beliefs about self, world and others, often in the context of new experiences.³⁶³

To these women having experienced debilitating challenges to their self, their artmaking facilitated the formation of a new narrative, new experiences and new beliefs.

Stott writes at length of the healing power artistic creativity in the lives of African women in relation to the narrative of their lives. In the *Amazwi Abesifazane* project, black women in South Africa tell their harrowing stories of trauma through needlework narrative panels. In the process of orally, aurally, writing and visually telling their stories, their bodies and their selves are re-membered', and their spiritualities 'reconstituted'. By this she means "...the act of constituting again the character of the body, mind and spirit as regards health, strength and well-being of women."³⁶⁴ Just as the trauma is inscribed not only in their minds but in their bodies, so the physical telling of their story to others and in their artwork helps to construct new meanings and new ways of seeing themselves, new stories of themselves, new guides, maps or metaphors for their lives.³⁶⁵

Furthermore, Stott writes, the artmaking is an agent of social and personal transformation, telling the truth about their lives and the structures and forces that hurt them. Though usually not articulated by the women themselves as an act of resistance to their oppression, it nonetheless can be seen in this framework.³⁶⁶

South Africa: Witness, Resistance, Challenge and Transformation

³⁶³ Lindegger and Rakoczy, 'One Training Issue', p. 22.

³⁶⁴ Stott, 'Reconstitution', p. iv. *Amazwi Abesifazane* is a project of Create Africa South, begun by artist Andries Botha in response to the silence of black women's realities in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The storytelling and visual representation involves both re-membering and healing for the women, and serves as an important truth-telling archive in South Africa. Botha says the hyphenated use of re-member is intentional, "to suggest both a psychic dismembering and re-membering of women's lives." To Stott, "Re-membering' implies the reconstituting of a corporeal body and a person experiencing self-actualisation; the re-integration of a person into a society or group an/or a re-ordering of a body politic." (p. 33)

³⁶⁵ Stott, 'Reconstitution', pp. 49-51.

³⁶⁶ Stott, 'Reconstitution', pp. 49-51.

The need to challenge and resist injustices in the political, social, cultural and religious contexts of South Africa, provokes an artistic response. For some women, their art is a way to protest, illustrate, witness to the truth of our lives in South Africa, as well as to advocate for a better way, and transform society. In their creativity, the women have illustrated or articulated the misery of apartheid, lamented the violence and poverty, and called for change.³⁶⁷ They are concerned with the treatment, care and protection of children, and the degradation, and sacredness of the environment. Oppression of women - in society and religion - and the artists own struggles as women, are wrestled with behind the creative process, and may be portrayed literally or metaphorically.³⁶⁸ Solidarity and the importance of affirming women in the sea of degrading messages directed at them by society and religion inspires and is reflected in the creative work; the violence, poverty and struggles to survive and care for others, the abuse of their sexuality and their consequent susceptibility to HIV and AIDS. In their work, the artists see and call for a better way, they look for hope, and they claim a new vision that is necessary, possible and a divine imperative.

The Conversation in Inspiration: Materials, Dreams and Prayers

Inspiration unfolds through the creative process, in the interaction with materials, ideas and inner self. This may come unbidden in times of relaxation and repose, or in dreams and prayer.

'Conversation' with the Materials

Ideas come in the doing, in the interaction or conversation between the artist and her medium. There is respect for the materials and awareness of their own integrity that women speak of, rather than one of domination and overruling. Cormick says that ideas often take shape whilst she is letting what is inside the materials unfold, like letting a piece of wood say what it wants to be, or what it wants to release.

³⁶⁷ Joan Kerchhoff, same interview; Dina Cormick, same interview; Bernice Stott, same interview; Gabisile Nkosi, same interview; Witty Nyide, same interview. Both Nkosi and Cormick's works are part of the Art for Humanity Project. www.afh.org.za.

³⁶⁸ Janet van Eeden, same interview, Witty Nyide, same interview, Bernice Stott, same interview, Gabisile Nkosi, same interview, Joan Kerchhoff, same interview, Dina Cormick, same interview, Fulata Moyo, same interview, Liz Speight, same interview.

If I try and impose a completely different thing, try and find the wood to suit it, I often battle. And the wood will define what I have to do. It will be changed somehow or other. So its much easier to ask the wood ‘What do you want?’, or ‘Who is inside’? That’s the sort of thing they used to say, that you’re releasing something from the wood.³⁶⁹

Ehrenzweig describes this as an unconscious conversation between the creator and her work.³⁷⁰ The person’s unconscious, writes Ehrenzweig, is projected onto the materials, fed back to their sense, and then ordered by the artist. There is an ongoing process of putting all the ideas, fragments and impulses ‘out there’, and ordering going on, finally coming to conclusion with the confirmation ‘Yes, This is it.’³⁷¹ This sense of confirmation, “the subjective conviction that the form should be this way and no other,” writes May, occurs in the breakthrough of creative insight into consciousness. He says those ideas that break through are those that are the “most beautiful”, in the sense of possessing “the harmony of an internal form, the inner consistency of a theory.”³⁷² This is where the sense of conviction comes from – that ‘of course, it should be like this.’

Cormick describes this process with her woodcarvings especially. The work is often begun and only then, after a few chops, does it becomes clear what it is supposed to be and where it is going. Along the process, she says, it can become a “Yes, that is what I want to do,” and it confirms itself, she says.³⁷³

Inspiration may flow unbidden while doing other things, not necessarily by sitting down and saying “OK, I think I’m now going to dream up an idea, she continues.”³⁷⁴ Sometimes the unfolding of the work seems to have a life of its own, and the artist is surprised at her own creation, wondering, “How did I do that? Really...it sort of just happened.”³⁷⁵ In her collaborative work with others, she gets inspiration, affirmation and confirmation of these ideas.

³⁶⁹ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁷⁰ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 72.

³⁷¹ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁷² May, *Courage to Create*, pp. 67-68.

³⁷³ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁷⁴ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁷⁵ Dina Cormick, same interview.

The process itself surprises and leads, Moyo reflects.

You can have one idea at the beginning, but the way the work progresses, you may end up having something that you didn't even originally think about...I always tell myself that from my art, from the flexibility of the artistic process, I should be able to learn something about it in my spiritual walk.³⁷⁶

Even so-called mistakes are part of this conversation. Ehrenzweig refers to them as fragments expressing themselves from the unconscious through the medium, catalysts intentionally thrown into the mix by the unconscious self that serve to frustrate the artist's purely conscious intentions. This "... allows him to contact more submerged parts of his own personality and draw them up for conscious contemplation."³⁷⁷ It results in what he calls a 'beneficial conflict' that uncovers the deepest parts of the artist's unconscious, leading to breakthrough of new understanding, growth and transformation.

Spies Coleman and Cormick agree that mistakes are not to be obliterated, but looked at, respected and incorporated into the work. Mistakes have something to say, to teach, and rather than closing oneself off and trying to control everything, a flexibility, openness and trust is required.³⁷⁸

All the artists expressed in different ways this attitude of openness to inner and outer inspiration, trust and willingness to let go of the reigns of conscious control. Purely conscious control is neither desirable nor possible in the creative process, writes Ehrenzweig. Creativity requires the ability to surrender the will to control in order to allow the conversation.³⁷⁹ It is in times of relaxing conscious control that breakthrough occurs. Creative ideas may come unbidden, as Cormick says, when she is doing something else. But that does not mean that conscious control is not necessary in creating, it is. The artist works very hard, applying attention and effort to the question or idea or artwork. And then the insights may come while one is in

³⁷⁶ Fulata Moyo, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 7 March 2006 in Pietermaritzburg.

³⁷⁷ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 72.

³⁷⁸ Dina Cormick, same interview; Fulata Moyo, same interview, Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

³⁷⁹ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 72.

repose - making lunch, driving the car, walking, taking a shower, relaxing, or dreaming. While retaining their own particular interests, plan and concerns, they allow a deeper 'presence' to emerge. This is apparent in the respect they have for their dreams.

Dreams

I did not ask about dreams, but the importance and power of dreams in the women's lives came up unelicited as they talked about their spirituality, inspiration and guidance. The dream process, writes Ehrenzweig, is similar to the creative mind. Both are the expression of the deep unconscious, seemingly incoherent and chaotic, yet having a 'hidden order' and finding form. The contents of the unconscious are revealed in their dreams.³⁸⁰ The ability to listen to the dream and take it seriously is akin to the capacity of the creative mind to surrender control 'to the powers of the deep'.³⁸¹ For these women, guidance in dreams was often linked to prayer, and responses to their prayers.

Seven women said their dreams are important messengers to be listened to, and a guide for their lives. Dreams speak to them of the spiritual, an inner presence, their own depths, and the spiritual journey. Very much part of who they are, the dreams are very personal in what they mean. The interpretation of them - the symbols, events, places, etc - are particular. Dreams are taken seriously as conduits of a message and communication with the woman about her life. Similarly, dreams inform their art. Pictures and ideas, images, symbols, colours, composition, stories and poems sometimes come to the women in dreams.

When Pitout is given a commission to do a job, she prays, reads the Bible - particularly the Psalms, which she sees as a 'journey of shape and colour' - and then,

³⁸⁰ C.G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* (London and Henley: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1966), p. 70.

³⁸¹ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, pp. 78-79, and p. 78.

she says she gives it to God and goes to sleep. Often the image of what she must do comes to her in a dream, and she'll awaken and write it down.³⁸²

I look at scripture first, always, and I try to find a starting place...I look at the Psalms particularly for shape and colour...And then the last thing I do before I go to sleep at night is offer the Lord what I am thinking about. I say 'I offer you Father Richard's stole and good night. Over and out.' And I often wake up at 3 in the morning and it is in front of my eyes, what I've got to do. And then I've got to work out how I'm going to do it, and that's another story.³⁸³

Nkosi spoke of her dreams about her deceased mother and feeling her spirit was speaking to her. She represented these in her art, and also followed up what these dreams were saying to her about her life. They were precious and sacred to her. She was exploring within herself, what they mean to her as an African; what the meaning of these things were according to African tradition, and listening to the ancestors.³⁸⁴

To van Eeden, dreams guide her in her decisions. Their guidance is intertwined with her sense of vocation, a calling to put her insights and memories into the world.

I believe in my dreams and because I believe in the messages that I ask for, I feel....I feel I have a vocation.... I'd have a dream saying "it must be said. It must be said and it must be written.' and I'd say OK fine. Thank you.³⁸⁵

Dreams have been a constant companion and important guide to her throughout very painful times in her life. They are filled with a loving presence and provide visions that are very clear and concrete, unambiguous answers to prayer concerning her life. Similarly, dreams inspire her creative projects and what she writes about.³⁸⁶ They provide confirmation along the way.

Prayer

³⁸² Ann Pitout, same interview.

³⁸³ Ann Pitout, same interview

³⁸⁴ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

³⁸⁵ Janet van Eeden, same interview.

³⁸⁶ Her first screenplay, the contacts and the courage to pursue screenwriting – though totally inexperienced in that world - all came to her in a dream. The dream was confirmed by a series of uncanny synchronistic events leading her deeper down her writing path. Janet van Eeden, same interview.

Two artists mentioned a specific and explicit practice of prayer as an important part of their creative work – invoking God to guide, and asking for help. For Cassidy and Pitout, this is a matter of regular practice, intentionally asking for guidance for ideas, or to be with them in the execution of their work.³⁸⁷

I realise I'm totally dependent on Him for producing anything. And that's why I ask every time 'God help me.'...I'm just thankful in the end when God's given me something to say, in a sense to paint. And it turns out OK. It doesn't always.³⁸⁸

For Cormick, while seeing an attitude of prayer and right living as important to all of life, she will sometimes specifically ask for help. "I sometimes pray madly when I'm doing something and I think its going wrong." In times of desperation such as knowing that something has to work out or is going wrong, or having only one piece of paper left, and can't make a mistake, she says "Help, help its got to work out!"³⁸⁹

Even if they do not offer such explicit prayers, for most of the artists, the whole process is described in terms of prayer, such as a contemplative awareness, or an attitude of gratitude within the context of the whole of their life.³⁹⁰ The artmaking, the joy and struggle, the energy, awareness, gratitude, worship and connection with others is described as spiritual practice, or prayer, as was seen in the previous section on creativity and spirituality.

Shifting Consciousness: Learning to See

A quality of engagement and encounter with the world emerges from the women's stories and reflections on their creating. They see, listen, observe and respond. It may be through paying attention outwardly - awareness of beauty, seeing the magnificent extravagance of colour, shadow and form, and mystery all around - 'a language of God' - or in listening to their deepest selves, their suffering and grief, confusion and brokenness. It comes through listening to the brokenness of the world, lived in our

³⁸⁷ Carol Cassidy, same interview, Ann Pitout, same interview.

³⁸⁸ Carol Cassidy, same interview.

³⁸⁹ Dina Cormick, same interview.

³⁹⁰ Dina Cormick, same interview, Deanne Donaldson, same interview, Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

specific context of South Africa. It comes through respect for and interaction with their medium, the process, dreams and prayers.

Donaldson spoke of the energy between herself and the person sitting for the portrait, the quality of attention being put into the process, and being present to it, like a spiritual discipline of meditation. She spoke of the quality of the energy that viewers have said emanates through her paintings, that as viewers they engage with. She attributes this to the quality of presence and attention that she puts into the specific moment and the process, and the quality of presence between her and her subject. She doesn't know how it works, but it is reflected in the finished product and it affects the viewer. She says, "They experience the air between the two people in that moment."³⁹¹

Several women commented casually that observing is not something everyone does and they feel incredibly privileged to be able to do so.³⁹² They see it as a gift of the Spirit to be able to see things. What they see and hear emerges in their art.

Because they are paying attention and respect what is being shown to them, more presents itself and they are drawn into a contemplative awareness of what they are a part of. All of these artists link, through their own experience, the willingness and capacity to enter into an intense encounter with themselves and with the world. They encounter that which is in front of them, within them and beyond them. The implication of this participation and engagement is not only the breakthrough of ideas and insights, writes Leckey, but the breakup of old patterns, beliefs, and forms. It is an 'annunciation', whose effect is that 'the house of our being is no longer habitable as it was before'.³⁹³ The result, attest psychoanalysts May and Ehrenzweig, is that consciousness changes – theirs, and our cultures', as the women artists bring to conscious awareness what they see. It enables healing and new growth of the person –

³⁹¹ Deanne Donaldson, same interview. Her most recent work takes a new direction. Donaldson, D. (dee@letni.co.za). 20 July 2009. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za). Archiving memories of her father who passed away in 2008, her work exudes the same energy and immediacy. See Figures 21-23.

³⁹² Gabisile Nkosi, same interview; Carol Cassidy, same interview; Ann Pitout, same interview, Deanne Donaldson, same interview.

³⁹³ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p.8.

psychologically and spiritually - and transformation of society as a whole, toward new possibilities and visions.

The Creative Process: How Do You Feel When You Create?

One of the questions I asked the women had to do with how they feel when they are creating. Many women articulate the fear, tensions and internal struggles of trying to put down what is envisioned, or what is inside, or letting it unfold. Simultaneously, they speak of the joy of creating, the sensuous pleasure, struggle, engagement and love in creating, and how this pervades and bears fruit in all of their lives.

Fear and Creative Struggle

Artists talked about positive feelings of joy being intermingled with anxiety, fear and struggle especially at the beginning of a work. Many spoke of having to motivate themselves to begin a project, like gently coaxing a child to do something they are afraid of. They see the fear as coming from expectations - their own and others. This includes not feeling clear about what to do, not being as good as they would like to be, not being able to express their vision, fear of making a mess, or a lack of confidence that they have anything worthwhile to say. The fear anticipates negative things people will think and say about what was made. The person questions herself. Fear - manifested in struggle with the process or in a debilitating way in 'artist's block' - is something most of the artists mentioned - either in terms of struggling with it personally, or observing it in others whom they teach. Faulds sees it in many who come to workshops at the Midlands Arts and Crafts Society (MACS) in Pietermaritzburg.

I've been teaching grownups for years and the number of people, mostly women, who would be willing to copy...They would rather copy a Mickey Mouse or something from a book that is possibly not sophisticated and complex and impressive than their own... It worries people, it scares people, it intimidates people. They haven't got the confidence to even make a mistake, if there is such a thing, which I don't think there is. They would rather go and copy something ...it's the fear... I can't see that fear and giving into it is more

rewarding than the adventure and the buzz that you get at the other end when you dig in and find your own. [Though] it is safer.³⁹⁴

Insights drawn from the artistic process have informed life in general and the spiritual process for some. Art has taught Fulata Moyo that when the art process, the materials or the inspiration takes her in a direction she did not originally expect, she works on the piece she is making to incorporate the changes – such as an errant line - or it could be a hole or a splash of colour. It becomes part of the whole. Life is viewed in a similar way.³⁹⁵

Several artists observed how overcoming fear in the creating of an artwork has had implications for the rest of their lives. It moves one out of self-imposed limits and contributes to a way of approaching life that takes courage and risk, inspiring confidence in oneself. “If you can conquer that white page, you can conquer other things.”³⁹⁶ It contributes to ‘growing one’s mind’, imbues one with self-love, changes how a person feels about herself and undergirds an approach to one’s life that is open, adventurous, and expansive.³⁹⁷

Artists need to have the capacity to open themselves to the seeming ‘disorder’ of the unconscious, says Ehrenzweig. And yet it is frightening and feels dangerous. The unconscious, he says, contains the individual’s self - impressions, experiences, unresolved issues, rejected ‘shadow’ parts, and fragments of the personality, collective memory, beliefs, myths and yearnings - in what may seem to be a chaotic mess. The artist, in opening herself up to this inner world, encounters and expresses what emerges in the encounter. The creative process, in different ways at various stages, entails the ability to see, connect with and make sense of fragments and collective experiences. This is anxiety-provoking.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Jutta Faulds, same interview.

³⁹⁵ Fulata Moyo, same interview.

³⁹⁶ Carol Cassidy, same interview.

³⁹⁷ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

³⁹⁸ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 117-119. As was seen in chapter three, Ehrenzweig sees essentially three movements of the creative process: an initial stage where fragments of the artist’s personality are projected into the work, including unwanted, rejected part. The second stage is an intuitive process involving an unconscious ‘scanning’ and ordering of the art, totally absorbed, and seeing the whole. The third stage requires emerging from this ‘oceanic state of consciousness’ to resuming conscious control of the process. The first and third stages are extremely anxiety-provoking

In this, a sense of compassion and self-love is necessary, to take care of themselves, to treat themselves with respect rather than negative judgement, reflects Stott.³⁹⁹

Spies Coleman has reflected on the creative process deeply, from her own experience and in teaching others. She says that what is inside is not something that needs to be conjured up. It is not up to the artist to 'be original' but to listen. The art-maker - and she refers to anyone who is creating - is a conduit. There is something that wants to flow through the person, and so it is not "all up to me". While this ultimately takes the pressure off, she suggests further that the initial fear is not just related to performance anxiety (will it be a lovely thing I create that people will like? will it be brilliant?) or about whether the ideas are accurate or good enough, but perhaps the fear is also related to the risk of listening to one's own insides, and the messiness of what is in there; the guts, the dark, ugly, painful, raw and tumultuous. The artist's struggle with anxiety and the process is actually revealing a deeper struggle with her unconscious self.

Similar to the experiences of mystics and theologians, the creative process entailing a spiritual perspective, says Spies Coleman. "It is so close to spirituality, to what you believe in, to what is really inside. Learning to listen, training to listen. Listen to your own little voice - be confident in yourself."⁴⁰⁰

The seed is inside each person. Listen to the little voice inside. Listen to that inspiration, and give permission to be the tool. A different, and more lonely perspective is "it all depends on me". But don't be afraid of making a mess. This goes to all aspects of life. There is a God or something out there. Open up that flow.⁴⁰¹

Facing and conquering the fear is linked to spirituality says Spies Coleman - because it entails paying attention, learning to listen, training to listen to the little voice inside

as they involve firstly, giving up conscious control, and lastly, returning to the conscious ego-controlled state, one has to order the unconscious stream of brilliance. What seemed coherent and whole in the first two stages, now may just seem chaotic and even disgusting. These stages occur over and over again in the creative process.

³⁹⁹ Bernice Stott, same interview.

⁴⁰⁰ Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

⁴⁰¹ Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

oneself, and being open to whatever comes up, trusting that there is something inside that wants to be heard and can be held. Believing that what is inside or what is heard is real, holy, trustworthy and will not lead you astray, the ability to move ahead while feeling the fear is part of a spiritual process. Discernment takes it further, but this is the beginning

As May, Ehrenzweig, and Leckey observe, such unconscious processes underlie both the power and the fear and anxiety inherent in the creative process. Leckey's image of the moments of creative breakthrough as simultaneously an 'annunciation', and the breakup of 'the house of our being' is a powerful one.⁴⁰² Through the creative process, courage and trust are required, that within the chaos, there is a hidden order, and this will become clear through the process of making it a real form in their art. The artist, and the artwork, will emerge out of the other side of the depths that feel out of control. In terms of the women's own interpretation, the insights and breakthroughs are experienced as God's Spirit speaking to them - an intimate, spiritual conversation with God in themselves, encountered and expressed through their artmaking.

With creating, there is struggle, and there is fear. The artists have learned to recognise it and to move ahead with it - not to let it drive them away from creating. The way to overcoming this fear is begin to create - to create as themselves with their own voice - and to uncover their own voice. Women's experiences of fear and anxiety in creating are indications of something transformative going on within themselves and society.

Creative Joy

All of the women spoke of the deep rewards and great joy of being in the moment of creating, and the benefits to all of life. Even if straining at the edge of her abilities, feeling frustrated by the outcome, or struggling with fear, this did not diminish their creative joy.

⁴⁰² Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 41.

In Cassidy's words, "It's a great joy to me. It brings a lot of joy in my life."⁴⁰³ It is nourishing to the soul and satisfying, particularly when following their own creativity, voice and unique expression. "I love it. I don't care about making money. I just like doing art", Nyide says.⁴⁰⁴ Women spoke of total absorption in the experience of creating, where time bends and the process flows.⁴⁰⁵

Colour and texture, shape and form, the sensuous smell and feel of the materials are all part of the joy. Reflecting on the pressures in society, especially for women, to just give and give, Faulds counters, "but, you cannot spread yellow on a crummy surface and not feel uplifted."⁴⁰⁶

Moyo spoke of the joy of playing with clay, the sensuousness and malleability of it, getting her hands dirty and shaping it into something new. She relates it to her own understanding of God.

The whole process of dirtying your hands, for me is part of the joy and beauty of art. And the joy that you can shape the clay into...anything...I find clay very captivating, especially for me, my whole understanding of how God created the world.⁴⁰⁷

To Donaldson, creating is like a state of *being* in love. She feels a shift in consciousness, a different state of being, when she is creating. Referring to a book by Alice Walker called *By the Light of My Father's Smile*⁴⁰⁸ she recalls a quote that struck her, where the writer says that there are two things in life when we feel completely engaged. One is when we are physically, sexually engaged with another person and the other is when we create. She says this is how she feels when she is painting, and wonders about it.

...I've always sort of queried the fact that when I'm painting at my best, when I'm creating, is that there's a sense of feeling love. A kind of, it's like being in

⁴⁰³ Carol Cassidy, same interview.

⁴⁰⁴ Witty Nyide, same interview.

⁴⁰⁵ Jutta Faulds, same interview; Deanne Donaldson, same interview; Dina Cormick, same interview;

⁴⁰⁶ Jutta Faulds, same interview.

⁴⁰⁷ Fulata Moyo, same interview.

⁴⁰⁸ Alice Walker, *By the Light of My Father's Smile: A Story of Requited Love, Crossing Over and the Sexual Healing of the Soul* (London: Women's Press, 1998).

love... In fact, it's this sensational experience ...And it is in those few moments when you are engaged, for me, that is, something else going on at that time.⁴⁰⁹

Observing this sense in artists, psychoanalyst May explains it in terms of the breakthrough from the unconscious.

This reminds us of what the Zen Buddhists keep saying – that at these moments is reflected a reality of the universe that does not depend merely on our own subjectivity, but is as though we only had our eyes closed and suddenly we open them and there it is, as simple as can be. The new reality has a kind of immutable eternal quality. The experience that “this is the way reality is and isn't it strange we didn't see it sooner” may have a religious quality with artists. This is why many artists feel that something holy is going on when they paint, that there is something in the act of creating which is like a religious revelation.⁴¹⁰

Theologically, creating is seen by many of the artists as essential to life - that we are meant to be creative as God is creative, that this is part of what God intended. To Stott, when people create, it is a spiritual experience in the sense of participating in something divine.

...what people get in touch with is...we are co-creators with God and we have the ability, which is a divine ability, to create. Something that God/Goddess has shared with us. And so I think that's what happens when people create. It's the excitement of that. It's the highest or best self, as it were. And they're closer to their divine self. ..I do experience that energy and that silent hand helping...⁴¹¹

Cassidy articulates it as food for the soul.

It feeds my soul. One feels closer to God when one is creating...So when I'm putting something on paper, I'm enjoying God by re-creating something God has created.

But I've always said that everyone needs to be creative to feed their soul and if they don't, they start to get agitated or not necessarily irritated, something's

⁴⁰⁹ Deanne Donaldson, same interview.

⁴¹⁰ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 69.

⁴¹¹ Bernice Stott, same interview.

missing. Hungry for it...Being creative is part of life. Its part of what God intended.⁴¹²

Women's expressions of profound feelings of joy and love in the creative process have a religious quality about them. Ehrenzweig and psychoanalytic theory posit this state and energy – akin to meditation and spiritual experiences of the mystics – as an 'oceanic state of consciousness' where a person feels at one with the universe, part of the universal picture, not experiencing the usual states of alienation and separateness.⁴¹³ Women describe their joy as a spiritual experience, a necessary and deeply transforming experience that feeds their soul, ensures their well-being, unites them with a presence bigger than themselves, giving them not only a sense of participating in the divine, but affirming and leading them to become their highest and deepest self.

Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi calls this deeply positive experience of joy, harmony, and expansion *flow*. There is a special feeling of focus, feeling in harmony with ourselves, effective, who we are and yet unselfconscious and not self-monitoring or feeling separate or alienated. We forget other concerns. We feel a sense of transcendence and part of something bigger than we are, part of the energy that operates in and around us. It is exhilarating and is when we feel most alive.

Self-esteem increases, and while simultaneously forgetting self in the moment, we feel we are most completely ourselves. We feel we become more strongly who we are and who we feel we are created to be than before the experience.⁴¹⁴

It is out of such deeply positive experiences of joy that we grow personally, and all culture develops.⁴¹⁵ Joy and creating are very similar in root meaning. Joy, writes spiritual writer, priest and psychologist Henri Nouwen, refers to ecstasy. The literal meaning of ecstasy comes from the Greek *ekstasis*. *Ek* means out, and *stasis* is a state of standstill. Thus, joy, or ecstasy, literally means to be outside of a static place.

⁴¹² Carol Cassidy, same interview.

⁴¹³ Ehrenzweig, *Hidden Order of Art*, p. 304. He attributes the term to Sigmund Freud.

⁴¹⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – CD Adaptation*.

⁴¹⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – CD Adaptation*.

Thus those who live ecstatic lives are always moving away from rigidly fixed situations and exploring new, unmapped dimensions of reality. Here we see the essence of joy. Whereas there can be old pain, old grief, and old sorrow, there can be no old joy. Old joy is not joy! Joy is always connected with movement, renewal, rebirth, change – in short, with life.⁴¹⁶

For the women, this experience of joy in the creative process extends beyond the work, pervading all aspects of their lives. Through these experiences of creative joy, the women are becoming more and more of who they are. And as they change, so the culture transforms and evolves.

Artmaking and Agency: Women's Self-Determination and Growth

Becoming an Artist

Most of the artists talked about knowing they had a gift or talent or interest or passion with their art when they were children. Socioeconomic and education differences in apartheid South Africa, and rural and urban differences influenced women's childhood exposure to art in the Western sense of art training in schools, art galleries, and access to expensive materials. Yet, even if she was not exposed to this world, it did not dampen her urge to create, the practice of making things, the joy of creating, or the observation that she had some special talent. What it did affect was the extent of awareness of career possibilities associated with art.⁴¹⁷ An environment of creative expression and having creativity as part of their family life was influential.

The most common diversion or discouragement for women involved money. There were pressures, usually by well-meaning loved ones, to train for, or take other more secure work to bring in money - to be more practical in their career orientation so that a job could be found. Pursuing art was seen as opening up few possibilities. With visions of their bright child eking out a living drawing portraits on the beachfront, or wondering why they would want to paint pictures when we now have cameras, parents were reluctant to foot the bill for education for this course of study.

⁴¹⁶ Robert A. Jonas (ed), *Beauty of the Beloved: A Henri J.M. Nouwen Anthology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 110-111.

⁴¹⁷ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview; Witty Nyide, same interview; Deanne Donaldson, same interview

Disapproval or even rejection by family was spoken of by several women, whose family counselled them to take a more secure and conventional career path for women at the time, such as teaching, nursing or secretarial work. Even with encouragement from her family, one woman self-selected out of art as a career because she didn't think she could make a living from it. Yet, whether formally trained and schooled in art or not, each of these women found their way back to art-making.

Roles for Women

Not unrelated to limited financial stability perceived with an artistic career, there was struggle around gendered expectations and roles - such as being a good wife and mother or an obedient daughter. The conflict here is many-layered and brings up deeper issues of female identity and personhood. How does she spend her time - is it perceived as valuable? How does she use her gifts? Does she really have any gifts, or a presence of substance, other than being a space for others? Isn't it a waste of money and resources to learn and train and use money to create her art?

When Nkosi told her father she wanted to study fine art at University or Technikon, he was not happy. He wanted her to be a teacher. He was worried and wondered where she would get a job. "And it's a waste of time because the photo, the camera can do the job...so it's a stupid idea to do fine art. And I'm a woman."⁴¹⁸ She went on to reflect on this perception.

It's the way we are brought up. You go to school. You find a job. So not the way...you create your own job...so you grow your mind...⁴¹⁹

Traditional female roles are valued - or perhaps understood - more. The women have this inner urging to create, but at the same time there are pressures and responsibilities to others that they themselves also value. So there is conflict. In the family, the role of wife and mother prescribes and expects that the woman is the one

⁴¹⁸ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

⁴¹⁹ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

to assume the majority of the primary care-giving and maintenance. These can be all-consuming. Speight in particular spoke of her struggle in her creating journey as she learned how to claim her space, without apology.

Speight came back to be formally trained in art through much interrupted training at various institutions, and achieved her Masters degree in fine arts at the age of sixty. She feels this is who she is - she is doing what she should be doing. Yet, she has had a continual internal struggle with the 'legitimacy' of being an artist in the sense of being unable or unwilling to invest her time and energies in more domestic expectations. Is it selfishness, or self-indulgence to give priority to her own inner desire and expression of her gifts?⁴²⁰ For her, it linked with her Christian teaching because 'Christ says you mustn't be selfish'. Yet, it was also her spiritual journey which provided a key to freedom - freedom from guilt in doing things that allow her to be most fully who she is, and freedom to take care of herself and her own needs. Referring to the commandment "You must love your neighbour as yourself" it struck her profoundly when her minister said "it means and implies that you must love yourself."⁴²¹

There was struggle, not because of rejecting domestic responsibilities, but because she wanted to be free to be present to love and raise her children - and still feel like a person in their her own right. She did not want to feel like a backdrop, or a space, to be someone who is always there but invisible. There is struggle for her and other women artists - with knowing and then protecting and asserting who she is - especially to herself and loved ones.⁴²²

Almost as a prior step to articulating this struggle and the feelings behind it, some women talked of their own interior struggle with seeing their gift as really real, something to be taken seriously, worthy of attention, development, and resources. The key was to see their creating as important - to themselves - first and foremost. Observing that some people think that making art is self-indulgent, Jutta Faulds says

⁴²⁰ Liz Speight, same interview.

⁴²¹ Liz Speight, same interview.

⁴²² Liz Speight, same interview; Janet van Eeden, same interview. See Appendix for their poetry on this.

that everyone makes art for their own reasons, and it is necessary to be convinced that it is important or nobody else will. If one is apologetic, one cannot expect someone else to think about it seriously.⁴²³

When they are able to affirm their own gifts and their need to 'put something out there', without apology, then others are more able to accept it as well. It is as if when they stop pouring energy into wanting to please others, they are set free to show others what they couldn't see before. Once they see the work, the response and what it is about, the objections stop. In fact, it turns to encouragement when they see the fruits.

Encouragement

Artists spoke of a significant person or people in their lives who encouraged them - a mother, father, teacher or mentor. Nkosi and Nyide had no exposure to the art world - art galleries or art schools - but had a habit, interest, passion and skill for drawing that was noticed by a significant person in their lives. They both mentioned the importance of the African Art Centre in Durban, an NGO that encourages and mentors young Zulu artists. Their outreach and training programmes opened doors for them, and exposed them to opportunities for further education as well as contacts. The African Art Centre has played a significant role in the development of African artists in KwaZulu-Natal for several decades.⁴²⁴ Other organisations and projects around the country focus on development of creativity and art of formerly disenfranchised black artists, such as the BAT Centre in Durban, Caversham Press in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, Gateway Project at the old prison in Pietermaritzburg, and outreach programmes attached to some art galleries.

The kinds of encouragement referred to above went together with the inner urging. While women followed their inner urging - often against some enormous obstacles - they met people along the way who helped. They went on with making their art and

⁴²³ Jutta Faulds, same interview.

⁴²⁴ For a history of the African Art Centre, see Jo Thorpe, *Its Never Too Early: African Art and Craft in KwaZulu-Natal 1960-1990* (University of Natal Durban: Indicator Press, 1994). See also www.afriart.org.za.

doing what they could, and opportunities were created. They risked, took courage and doors opened.

The Decision - Becoming Who I Am

I have to be the heroine
In my own stories

I want to become
The star I follow⁴²⁵

Many spoke of what I call “the decision”. This is a time when a woman knew she had to do what she felt she was meant to do, without apology to anyone. It has been described as something like a homecoming to herself and giving who she is into the world. This decision involves risk and courage. For some, this meant overcoming low belief in what she can do and who she is. For others, they struggled with the legitimacy of taking time, energy and resources to make art. But to each of them, the authenticity became absolutely essential to their lives.

It is interesting that most of the older women took roundabout routes to come back to their art. All of them had previous careers in something else - a secretary, a nursery school teacher, a librarian, a chemist, a high school teacher. Mothering small children occupied the youthful years of most of the middle-aged and older women, and they talk about juggling the love and needs of children and family with their own identity as a separate person. They not only met these expectations and responsibilities, they attached great importance to the role of caring for and shaping their children’s lives. It was a conscious choice made - often sacrificial - to delay their own desires until children were grown.

Women make the decision for different reasons: because they feel their voice needs to be heard; because they want to put something in the world that affirms women; because it’s what gives them the greatest feeling of meaning and joy; because to be

⁴²⁵ Excerpt from Janet van Eeden, *Dance for Four Women*, 2006. Weblog post 18 May 2006. <http://janetvaneeden.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 31 July 2006.

creative is what God made us to be; because they are expressing what they are hearing.

The strength of van Eeden's belief that her voice has to be heard - for herself and for other women - came to her with the birth of her daughter. It was a time of joy and fruitfulness for her. She recalls it as an epiphany. And not only could she write (a new belief in herself) but she needed to write. She felt that if she did not, she would die. At the age of 40, she started to write seriously - to take her writing seriously - and even though years of struggle followed, and especially struggle over compromising her gift, she never wavered or apologised for the decision to write.⁴²⁶

Faulds spoke of her artistic explorations, and how, as she grows older, the expectations of others have less and less force.⁴²⁷ This was echoed by other older women, where 'the decision' was made later in life, during middle age. The inner voice was more real, more important than outward pressure or expectations, even financial ones.

Their willingness to risk security, relationships, comfort, community and acceptance entails courage. In the confusion and wrestling with what doesn't feel right, or difficult choices that have to be made, facing alienation or rejection from loved ones, or feeling compelled to do something that seems too big for them, women spoke of a great deal of agonising and insecurity. But as they reflected, the decisions they took in alignment with their inner insistence was right. The deepest call and truth of where their journey is taking them, they say, is of God.

Solidarity, Interrelatedness and Community

All of the artists expressed a commitment toward others through their artmaking - many articulating this as a sense of responsibility toward making life better for disenfranchised people in South Africa. They feel solidarity with, and have commitments to work for upliftment that extends into other peoples' lives. Four of

⁴²⁶ Janet van Eeden, same interview.

⁴²⁷ Jutta Faulds, same interview.

the women have histories of activism in church and society, on political issues as well as oppression of women, and patriarchy in church and society. Eleven women are involved in community development in some way, mentoring and teaching others art, and enabling them to uncover the creativity within themselves. Below are some of the community involvements. I will look at two in more detail in the case studies.

Spies Coleman, a successful painter, well-known for her watercolours, found herself wondering about the meaning of the end product of her work. Like theologian Fox who sees that "...the most beautiful thing the potter produces is...the potter!"⁴²⁸, she feels that the purpose and meaning in art-making is the process the artist takes internally. She wanted to enable others to take a creative journey to accept and like themselves by making art, so began a centre in the KZN Midlands to do this, teaching creativity to groups of children and adults based at her studio called Giverny Creative Country Holidays.⁴²⁹ Seeing that adults get bogged down in their lives, she uses creating to take them to a different place, to get back into their own life, spiritually and creatively, and to focus more on the process rather than the product (though also to be proud of the product). The purpose of her centre, she says, is to develop the creative mind and help people to discover their own way of expression. Participants practice activities which help them to teach themselves how to let go of fear and play with exploring with art-making and more broadly, their lives. She envisioned the place to develop into a space for adult people to play with art - a Christian retreat centre – such as the well-known Buddhist retreat centre in Ixopo - that is accessible for all and where everyone is welcome from any background, and where creating is "...completely a grace thing, a grace experience."⁴³⁰ Thinking big, a few years ago she thought of organising a local creative festival where people can come together and create together, fostering encounter and reconciliation.⁴³¹ "In the creating together, it builds relationships where people can learn to understand one another."⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 192.

⁴²⁹ Spies Coleman has since closed the centre as she has moved. Spies Coleman, H. (mpv@mweb.co.za). 4 June 2009. *Exhibition Invitation and Correspondence*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za)

⁴³⁰ Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

⁴³¹ Propelled by its success, the organising and promotion was later taken over by the Midlands Meander. Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

⁴³² Hermine Spies Coleman, same interview.

Nyide, coming from a rural area in Bulwer, KwaZulu-Natal, said she is committed to passing on what she has learned through her creative process. Her art and creative impulses have been a source of deep guidance in her life, she says, leading her to the truth of who she is, and a more personal trust of who she believes God to be. Her creativity has led her out of poverty, to do what she loves, and through healing to find her own voice. Describing her community as very deprived - physically and in spiritual ways - and seeing herself as a product of this community who has succeeded, she is teaching art to young people there and other communities.⁴³³

Stott describes her concern with what life is like for women in South Africa, and her desire to contribute to women finding their authentic self. She created an exhibition on women's sexual history and sexual rights, pictorially illustrating the sacredness and the violation of women's bodies, especially in the South African context. The multimedia exhibition was about the denigration and celebration of women's bodies, women's health and well-being, all reflected upon from a social, psychological and spiritual perspective. Her images metaphorically explore these issues with the female condom symbolising women's sexual choices and self-protection at different levels of being.⁴³⁴ Stott runs workshops on creativity, affirmation and assertiveness for women.⁴³⁵

Cormick's commitments to justice and solidarity with other women has been a defining characteristic of both her artwork, and the way she lives her life, seen in her many involvements and initiatives to affirm women.⁴³⁶ For Nkosi, her passion and commitment to the power of creativity to transform one's self, life and that of the

⁴³³ Witty Nyide, same interview. Nyide is now working with the Caversham Centre.

⁴³⁴ Bernice Stott, same interview. See also Bernice Stott, 'The Reconstitution of African Women's Spiritualities in the Context of the *Amazwi Abesifazane* (Voices of Women) Project in KwaZulu-Natal (1998-2005)', unpublished Master's dissertation, Durban University of Technology, 2006. Stott, B. (bernicest@telkomsa.net). 5 December 2006. *Images from Master's Exhibition*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za). See Figures 24-27.

⁴³⁵ Bernice Stott, same interview. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way* (London: Pan Books, 1994).

⁴³⁶ Dina Cormick, same interview. I have participated personally over the years in two of these groups – Miriam's Circle which is a gathering for women's spirituality, and Women's Ordination South Africa (WOSA) dedicated to activism toward the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, as part of the international movement Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW).

community, led her to teaching creativity with young people in the deprived communities around her home.⁴³⁷

Conclusion

In this chapter, aspects of South African women's creativity and spirituality were described. In the next chapter, I look more closely at case studies of two women artists - Dina Cormick and Gabisile Nkosi. Their stories illustrate the inseparability of their artistic creativity from their spirituality and personal 'becoming' as they engage deeply with the world, in both its distress and beauty. The case studies are followed by analysis and discussion of creating women's insights, and their significance, through the perspectives of creation spirituality and psychology, ethics and theology.

⁴³⁷ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

Chapter Five – Artists – Case Studies and Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four discussed South African women artists' reflections on their faith experience, relationship of spirituality and creativity, the creative process, their growth toward self-definition, and their commitments to others. In this chapter, the discussion is deepened and analysed further. After a closer look at the lives and work of two women artists, creating women's insights are examined in relation to the question of 'full life' through theoretical perspectives of liberating theologies for women, and creation spirituality and theology.

Case Studies – Dina Cormick and Gabisile Nkosi

Cormick is well-known for her wooden carvings and commissions for churches, her reclamation and artistic renderings of the stories of women of the Bible – both named and unnamed - the creative expression of her justice-oriented activism and feminist theological commitments that inform them.

Nkosi was a 34-year-old Zulu artist, printmaker and community worker whose inspiring story and work stuck with me since I interviewed her in 2006.⁴³⁸ Tragically, in May 2008, she was brutally killed by a former boyfriend who shot her in the head before killing himself. For Gabisile, art and spirituality were both so integral to who she was, and lay behind her commitments to unfold the creativity in young people from impoverished communities. Her artmaking had also helped her to overcome the trauma of an attempted murder years before. That she would face such horror twice in her life and die this way is a scathing, telling indictment of the risks faced and the precariousness of life for many women in South Africa.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

⁴³⁹ See Appendix IV.II for newspaper article.

Dina Cormick

Dina Cormick is a well-known multi-media artist, activist, and feminist theologian. A single woman in her sixties, with one adopted child, she does freelance work from a studio in Durban. Cormick formally trained in art at Rhodes University and later the Natal Technical College. Her work includes wood-carvings, mosaic and ceramic panels, book illustrations and posters. These can be found in churches and ecumenical groups, and organisations across Southern Africa and internationally.

Cormick grew up in Zambia, in a Catholic household. While interested and gifted in visual arts she was not encouraged to pursue this as a career. Instead, she detoured to other more accepted professions for women, including nursing, before returning to study art. During fifteen years as a Carmelite nun, her art skills were discovered and put to use. And when she left the convent, she employed her art skills in taking on religious commissions.⁴⁴⁰

Cormick's spirituality and creativity are intertwined, not only in the inspiration, purpose and creative process itself that were discussed previously, but in applying her creative gifts to socio-political justice and feminist theological reconstructions of history and the Christian story.

Growing up, Cormick was taught that being Catholic was the only way, the one true religion. What she calls her 'rigid rigid' outlook changed when she was exposed to theological studies, and started to see a much more open and holistic picture of theology. In 1992, she completed a Master's degree in Theological Ethics with the University of South Africa, focusing on a feminist ethical interpretation of visual portrayals of Mary Magdalene.⁴⁴¹ Reading and studies in feminist theology and

⁴⁴⁰ Karen E. Buckenham, 'Women's Experience, Spirituality and Theology for Liberation and Life in Contemporary South Africa as Expressed Through Visual Arts with a Focus on the Lives and Work of Two Women Artists - Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali', unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2001, pp. 60-62. We did not repeat a discussion of her background in the present interview.

⁴⁴¹ Dina Cormick, 'The Visual Portrayal of Mary Magdalene: A Case Study in Feminist Ethical Issues', unpublished Master's dissertation, University of South Africa, 1992.

creation theology informs her life and her artwork. This is seen in the portrayals of women and themes of celebration of life, particularly in her self-motivated work.⁴⁴²

In her artwork and activist work, she asks questions about women in society. As a serious Catholic, this includes the Christian tradition, and the structures and the doctrines of the institutional church. Conscious of the didactic power of visual imagery to express religious concepts and present theological doctrine, she takes seriously the feminist theological imperative to deconstruct, then reconstruct Christian history, imagery and knowledge from a feminist perspective.⁴⁴³ Artistically, this is demonstrated in much of her work, including a well-known *Heroic Women* series of painted visual representations of Biblical women. These images remember, reclaim, name and depict the stories of women who have been rendered invisible, those that have been told from a male perspective, or stories that are horrendously violent and are rarely heard in churches. These stories were part of the lives of women in Biblical history, just as they are today.⁴⁴⁴

This is the spirit of the hermeneutic of remembrance in which Schüssler Fiorenza has asserted the importance of remembering the suffering and hopes of the oppressed women of the Scriptures. I consider that the primary task of these paintings is to keep alive the reality of the pain and injustices suffered by these women, who are our foremothers and sisters. This is not just to hold on to grievances. It becomes in the spirit of the Jewish Holocaust museums, a banner that reminds women what happens when the balance of equality is disregarded. History books are written mostly about the heroic deeds of men. I suggest there were at least as many unsung heroic women in the history of humankind.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Dina Cormick, same interview. There are a number of dissertations that refer to Dina's work, including: Buckenham, 'Women's Experience, Spirituality and Theology', 2001; Dina Cormick, 'The Visual Portrayal of Mary Magdalene: A Case Study in Feminist Ethical Issues', unpublished Master's dissertation, UNISA, Pretoria, 1992; M. Lewis, 'Natal Women Artists in a Feminist Frame', unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Natal, Durban, 1991; and A. Sooful, 'The Relationship Between Current Feminist Theory and Contemporary South African Women's Art: A Preliminary Investigation (a survey of the Natal region)', unpublished Master's dissertation: UDW, 1990.

⁴⁴³ Cormick, 'The Visual Portrayal of Mary Magdalene', p. 168. She refers specifically to Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's hermeneutic of remembrance. See Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1983).

⁴⁴⁴ See Figures 28+29 for images depicting stories of Biblical women from her important series of fifty paintings *In Praise of Heroic Women of the Scriptures*, commissioned by the Anglican Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW).

⁴⁴⁵ Cormick, 'The Visual Portrayal of Mary Magdalene', p. 168.

Out of these commitments, over ten years ago, Cormick began a women-church called Miriam's Circle, which continues to meet monthly in Durban.⁴⁴⁶ It is an open group for women to explore, in an informal setting, their spirituality as women, to feed, affirm and nourish themselves and one another. Unlike institutional church settings or groups, issues and events of women's lives are foregrounded in the worship and rituals. Women role models from the past or present are invoked, remembering and honouring them. This may mean women saints, women of the Bible, women in the tradition, forgotten or well-known, Goddesses from the pre-Christian era or from other beliefs and traditions in the world, or important people in women's lives. Many relate to sexuality and bodiliness, including the changing seasons of a woman's life. Liturgies and activities are created where women share about their lives at a level that is probably non-existent in daily life or normal interactions. These are meetings where all the participants are actively using their creativity to tap into that which is deepest in their experience as women, in the presence, and affirming spirit of other women and God - whoever they conceive of God to be. The space is created that is open and non-coercive, not controlling or intrusive or dangerous. Cormick reflects on this space of sharing and solidarity,

...perhaps our healing comes from our sisterhoods, from our groups. Where you feel safe to share and talk...one thing I find with the Miriam's is that there's a slow unfolding of people. We don't know each other all that well. But we know intimate parts of each other which perhaps none of their families even know. It's a safe environment in which to share. And to be affirmed.⁴⁴⁷

Through her artwork and her spirituality, Cormick feels that this is her purpose - to affirm women. Her themes and images honour women and celebrate them.

Increasingly, I know that for me the only purpose of my art and what I do with my interest in spirituality and with women is to affirm. The affirmation of

⁴⁴⁶ Rakoczy writes "Women-Church says 'we are not in exile but the Church is in exodus with us' as women claim Christ's mission of liberation and wholeness for all, which is the mission of the church, and seek to make it real." (p. 347 quoting Ruether, *Women-church*, p. 62. The original Ruether text is unavailable in the library). "Women-Church means neither leaving the church as a sector or group, nor continuing to fit into it on its terms. It means establishing bases for a feminist critical culture and celebrational community that have some autonomy from the established institutions." (Ruether, *Women-Church*, p. 62. cited in Rakoczy, 'Creating Space for Faith to Flourish', p. 347).

⁴⁴⁷ Dina Cormick, same interview.

each other. Because it's the most important thing. If we honour and respect each other...we wouldn't try to hurt each other.⁴⁴⁸

Reflecting on the need for affirmation for women - others and for herself - Cormick recalls an early exhibition she did in 1986 entitled *What Does it Feel Like to Be a Woman in South Africa Today?* The exhibition showed just after devastating floods that followed a month of rain in KZN. Cormick did a series of carvings as well as prints, of women in scenes, events and trials of life. The series included a woodcut of a woman with her child clinging to a branch of a tree with a rage of water sweeping past. The gallery was packed with women whom, she interpreted, wanted to see if she perhaps captured what they were experiencing. She saw the work as addressing a need for women to experience affirmation.

Not only does the work affirm others, Cormick says, it affirms her to have it received with such interest and support, and to get the feedback that she is providing that needed affirmation. The people who come and appreciate her work affirm her.⁴⁴⁹

At the time of our interview, Cormick had just had an exhibition of woodcarvings under the theme 'Delighting In Life', a series of sculptures of women in different modes of joyful dancing, with partners or other women, delighting in life.⁴⁵⁰ Her most recently exhibited work continues the theme of honouring women's stories and the 'hermeneutic of remembrance' of the *Heroic Women* series, in a series of icons of entitled *Celebrating The August Women*. In this work, she "...celebrates the solidarity of South African sisterhood, in memory of the 1956 August women's defiance campaign and march on parliament. The images of dancing, singing women honours the memory of those heroic activists who danced, and continue to dance defiantly in the face of injustice."⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ Dina Cormick, same interview.

⁴⁴⁹ Dina Cormick, same interview.

⁴⁵⁰ Dina Cormick, same interview.

⁴⁵¹ Cormick, D. (oeerhle@ukzn.ac.za). 30 July 2009. *Invitation to Dina Cormick's Exhibition*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za). 'Celebrating the August Woman', beginning 5 August 2009 at the African Art Centre in Durban. See www.afriart.org.za. In the Artists Statement, Cormick writes: "To date there is no publication which comprehensively records the names and stories of the women activists of South Africa. Each year we celebrate August 9 as our national Women's Day, yet few young people understand the significance of this "holiday. ..There is a need not only to acknowledge and honour these foremothers of our free country, but to ensure that future generations

In affirming women, in using her gift as an affirmation of a gift from God, Cormick extends the affirmation back to God.

I am trying to create stuff to affirm people. Which in a sense affirms God. Because if we, if I use my hands, that I can do things with, then I am affirming a gift. So I feel in that what I probably do is an act of glory.⁴⁵²

When asked what her artmaking has taught her about God, Cormick said “I’ve never thought of it like that before. Perhaps artmaking makes one aware of beauty, of creativity.”⁴⁵³

Cormick sees South African women’s longing and need for their personhood, stories and gifts to be seen, recognised, affirmed and honoured. In her spirituality and theology, its expression in her artwork, in her activist commitments, and her initiating and creating space with women-church, this commitment and imperative to affirm finds form. It is a response to what she sees has been shown and given to her by God. Reaching others, it touches them and contributes to the transformation of women’s lives, including church and society.

Gabisile Nkosi

Gabisile Nkosi worked as a printmaker and a community worker with Caversham Centre, and was becoming quite well-known locally and overseas.⁴⁵⁴ She was single and had one child, a boy, born in 1992. Brought up in a faithful Seventh Day Adventist family, Nkosi grew up believing and adhering to the doctrines of the church and held a strong personal Christian faith.⁴⁵⁵ In recent years, her artistic and

will be able to cherish their recorded memory. As South Africans are being catapulted into a capitalistic technological future age, so far removed from the culture of honouring the ancestors, there is the added urgency to gather these memories of our mothers and grandmothers before they are all gone.” Accessed 19 August 2009. See Figures 30-34.

⁴⁵² Dina Cormick, same interview.

⁴⁵³ Dina Cormick, same interview.

⁴⁵⁴ See Figure 35 of Gabisile Nkosi at Caversham Press.

⁴⁵⁵ Mtheku, J. (jabu@caversham.org.za). 21 August 2009, *Caversham Centre Feedback*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za). Nkosi’s colleagues underlined the centrality of her Christian faith, and saw it grow and become deeper in recent years.

spiritual journey was drawing her more deeply into her African heritage. Nkosi's art and spirituality were inseparable. She was a person who listened closely to her inner life and trusted guidance from within. Things of the spirit and religion were very important to who she was and how she moved in the world, and they showed up in her art.

When Nkosi was growing up, she was not exposed to art or art galleries. She talked about her peri-urban township home in Umlazi (outside of Durban), that was economically poor, and being raised in an environment where one is taught to accept what is there, and to fit into it. "It's the way we are brought up. You go to school. You find a job. So not the way....you create your own job....so you grow your mind..." She said "you go to school and get a job" rather than creating your own life.⁴⁵⁶ Her gift of creativity came, she said, from both the influence of the creativity of her mother, and by listening to her own inner soul. Her mother was a dressmaker and used to make things, without any training, and just because she wanted to. Nkosi wanted to be like her as a creating person. Her mother loved all of her drawings and childhood attempts, and found a school for her - far from her home - which had art subjects. When her mother died, it was a heavy blow. Her artistic aspirations were opposed by her father. Nkosi spoke of the pain of going against her fathers' wishes and counsel, and the concern of all the family. She was expected to be a teacher and simply refused. She said she would find her own way somehow (she didn't know how). It was not easy.

It was encouragement from her teacher that helped her to find her way. Her teacher was very important at various stages of her learning and her career, exposing her to the possibilities of the art world and telling her about art galleries, which she had never been in. Through these contacts, Nkosi met other people, learned new skills, exhibited in group exhibitions, sold some work and put money aside. She described what happened as 'really amazing'. From local people she worked with - people like Liz Palmer - one woman from England - Ros Share - took a particular interest in her work, commissioning her to create work for several exhibitions in England over the

⁴⁵⁶ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

years.⁴⁵⁷ Her work was received very well and paid for her tertiary studies in art for four years at Durban University of Technology.

Working in recent years under the mentorship of Malcolm Christian of Caversham Centre in the KZN Midlands, Nkosi was inspired to work with African young people from the rural communities around Caversham to uncover their own creativity.⁴⁵⁸ This was an important commitment to her, and part of her joy and spirituality.⁴⁵⁹ Seeing the young peoples' potential and aspirations, she took them through workshops on visual arts, poetry, song and dance, to find their own creative expression.⁴⁶⁰ Nkosi also wanted to expose them to art galleries, and planned to eventually set up an art gallery in her community. She wanted to help them to discover who they are, how they are so valuable, and what they uniquely have to offer to the world.

Nkosi's artwork - mostly prints - is personal in content and is imbued with her spirituality. In many of her prints, she explained, she used the metaphorical image of a sheet hanging on the line to symbolise a backdrop, like on a stage. This forms the background of the picture, which is then fore-grounded by another image. This symbolises both her spiritual and physical self, and how she would take herself out of the physical reality of her life, and look at it, look at herself and her life from a distance as if it were on a stage. In her words, 'the spiritual Gabi looked at the physical Gabi'. She practised this daily in her meditations, and during her walks

⁴⁵⁷ Mtheku, J. (jabu@caversham.org.za). 21 August 2009, *Caversham Centre Feedback*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za). I gave this section to Gabisile Nkosi's colleagues at the Caversham Centre and Nkosi's son via Caversham Centre, for their amendments and approval.

⁴⁵⁸ The Caversham Press was begun by master printmaker Malcolm Christian on the site of an old abandoned Methodist Church. It has developed into the multi-faceted entity Caversham Centre, hosting artist and writers exchanges and retreats, training of young artists, and outreach into communities around it with the CreACTive™ programme. The history, vision and work of Caversham Press and CreACTive can be found at their website www.cavershampress.com. Accessed 5 May 2009.

⁴⁵⁹ Caversham Centre is located in the valley of Caversham, on the path of the Midlands Meander, amidst the paradoxical mix that characterises South Africa - poor traditional Zulu communities and farm labourers dwellings, juxtaposed with predominantly white-owned farms and small-holdings, which host shops, upmarket restaurants and bed-and-breakfast establishments for tourists. The African homesteads in rural areas are historically economically poor and remain so in present-day South Africa, compared to developments in infrastructure, education, employment and economic opportunities in urban areas, and those of the surrounding tourist areas.

⁴⁶⁰ CreACTive™ is a term developed and trademarked by Caversham Centre to denote creative action combined with collaborative attitude.

down to the river flowing on the beautiful Caversham grounds. To her, these were sacred spots.

Every morning, I like to take a walk down to the river. I always reflect whereby I look at myself coming out from the physical. I look at the spiritual Gabi. By so doing, when I'm reflecting on myself, it's like I'm looking at another Gabi on stage...like on stage they have a sort of backdrop. Like coming out of myself.⁴⁶¹

In recent years, despite her deep personal Christian faith, and in contradiction to her strict Christian upbringing that eschewed African traditional religious beliefs, ancestral spirits and rituals, Nkosi began to hear her mother's spirit speaking to her in her prayers and dreams and in her art. She was afraid at first, but wanted to listen and feel her beloved mother, who had died many years before. Her listening and explorations were strongly discouraged by her family and her church community. Some felt that by listening, she was dabbling with evil spirits. But she listened to her dreams and what she felt her mother was communicating with her. It was a risk, possibly alienating herself from members of her family and her church, as she explored deep places in herself that she simultaneously was afraid of. She was listening to what she was hearing in her spirit, from her mother, the ancestor's voice, her faith and African traditional religious beliefs. She was listening to her deepest intuition, to her spiritual self, and trusted it. She said this was her guide.⁴⁶²

Nkosi created a series of prints depicting her mother's spirit speaking to her, and grappled with wider and deeper identification with her identity as both a Christian and an African, with African tradition and the ancestral spirits. Through her art, she worked through who she was, what she was experiencing, thinking and feeling. She

⁴⁶¹ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview. Nkosi spoke highly of the whole ethos of Caversham in encouraging this kind of reflection, and of its founder Malcolm Christian in influencing her self-development.

⁴⁶² Gabisile Nkosi, same interview. During our interview, Nkosi spoke about the day she tricked her sisters, and took them to visit her mother's grave. Since her death, they had not been there, and didn't know where the grave was, with all the grass and overgrowth. With the help of the gardener, they found it, cleared it and tended to it, all the time talking with their mother. It was a time of great trepidation and joy.

explored her spiritual search, and worked through events in her life as a South African woman.⁴⁶³

Through her art, Nkosi was able to heal from trauma of nearly being stabbed to death when she was a young woman. While she was still a high school student, her little boy was born. When he was about four years old, Nkosi was studying and working part-time at the BAT Centre in Durban. One day she received a phone call from a relative, telling her that her child's estranged father had come looking for her, was on his way, and intended to harm her. He knew that she was alone in the shop with her little boy and came to kill them. He attacked her, stabbing her and her son with a knife. Using a chair to hold him off, she was saved from a fatal stabbing. It took her a long time to work this through and her art was a forum for healing. After months of recuperation and not being able to talk about it, she began to draw, paint and talk about the experience. Her trauma of the event, her physical struggle with her enraged attacker, the life-saving chair, and her healing journey are depicted in her prints. She said that the art became a healing medium for her.⁴⁶⁴

For Nkosi, creating was a source of healing, an expression of what was going on in her life and her soul, a means of exploring more deeply who she was as a spiritual person, an African person and a woman, and a source of inspiration and upliftment to others. She saw the spiritual realm as the source of her gift and her inspiration. She said she felt she was not by herself, that there were ancestral spirits - even though she was trying to neglect them - that were living with her. She saw, she listened to her inner soul, and to her understanding. She did not know where this capacity to listen, or the things she heard came from, "but somewhere the Spirit is".⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶³ See Figures 36-38 depicting memories of her mother, and her response with her sisters to the call of her mother's spirit.

⁴⁶⁴ See Figures 39-41 of Nkosi's struggle with her attacker and the saving chair, and reflection of herself as a vulnerable sheep, mute in the face of death.

⁴⁶⁵ Gabisile Nkosi, same interview.

Discussion: Creating, Aliveness and Full Life

The very meaning of the word 'create' means new life. Creativity is life-affirming to all of the women artists interviewed. This is apparent in their reflections on the inseparability of their creating and their spirituality. They name creating's spiritual power to nourish, and see it not only as a gift from God, but an energy and process in which they participate in an intimate encounter with God. They experience it as a means of worship and giving back to God - a form of liturgy, as Everett writes, "a sacramental action that brings the creative power of God into tangible form." As a positive force for change and right relations between the person, themselves, the materials, others and creation, he sees it as a 'protest against our alienation' and a promise or glimpse 'of the joyful creation yet to come.'⁴⁶⁶ Several creating women in this research, including Nkosi, wrestled with areas of raw suffering and trauma. She found her voice, and came to a place of healing, a new story about herself and new life. She lived, as all these creating women live, in a way that recognised, encountered and celebrated the beauty of life – sorrow and joy - in a very deep way.

Theologically, these women try to articulate in different ways the fact that they are 'incarnating' what they see and hear in their physical, historical and internal worlds. They listen and struggle, and point beyond themselves to another spiritual reality from which their insights come.

Psychological insights interpret the means and power of the creative process in the encounter with one's deepest self and that of the world. The creative encounter, in a psychological perspective, leads to new growth in the person and society. Creators, writes Leckey, are "forever unsatisfied with the mundane, the apathetic, the conventional, they always push on to new worlds..."⁴⁶⁷ They are "engaged in this creating of the conscience of the race."⁴⁶⁸ In creating, women converse with and wrestle with unknown parts of themselves and the world, as it speaks through their interaction with the materials, with others, their dreams and prayers. Breakthrough

⁴⁶⁶ W. J. Everett, 'With the Grain: Woodworking, Spirituality and the Struggle for Justice', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 123 (Nov 2005) p. 15.

⁴⁶⁷ Leckey, *Women and Creativity*, p. 12.

⁴⁶⁸ May, *Courage to Create*, p. 26.

occurs that not only confirms what it is they are seeking to express, but challenges and disturbs the status quo in their own lives and the culture.

The encounter engenders fear and requires courage, as well as trust that in and through the creating, in encountering the anxieties, they will emerge on the other side, bearing fruit. This fruit is for themselves and others. They experience deep enjoyment in creating that pervades not only the creative process, but all of their life. The creative encounter, the process and breakthrough is interpreted by women in spiritual terms, as the voice and presence of God, something they are listening to, a conduit of, and participating in.

In their creating, they discover who they are, and courageously choose to be who they are, with integrity and a trust that their intuition and guidance is leading them in the right way. They pay attention, see, and witness to life in South Africa – especially women’s lives. They express awe and delight in the beauty all around and seek to represent this in art that celebrates life. Simultaneously, they confront oppression and envision a better way – a way of affirmation, self-discovery of their sacredness and dignity, and the gifts that they have to offer to the world.

In the following section, I look at these women’s experiences and reflections through the lenses of creation spirituality, ethics and feminist theology, highlighting specific ways in which they reveal a process of unfolding ‘full life’ and aliveness. I begin to uncover the relationship of ‘full life’ with ‘beauty’, ‘glory’ or *doxa* of God, as experienced and revealed through the artistic creativity of these women in South Africa.

Creating and Spirituality

Being and Belonging

Recall that art, creativity and aesthetic experience meet a very deep human need for belonging, to feel at home in the world, writes Crowther, by affirming our existence

outside of our own subjectivity. Art, he sees, is the highest form of practice that answers the needs of the self to be aware of itself, to make real, and externalise the self's subjective thoughts, experiences feelings and inner reality in material form.⁴⁶⁹ This provides a sense of existence and belonging.⁴⁷⁰ This sense of 'making real', affirming, and self-consciousness (in the sense of being aware of being, rather than the sense of self-monitoring), is something apparent in the creating women's stories.

When Kerchhoff talks of putting out into the world that which is moving around her as thought, impression, feeling and insistence, she says she is 'making it real' by articulating it in her poetry. Nyide finds her voice and herself in creating and the images she expresses. Van Eeden tells her truth in her writing, as does Speight in her painting. For Nkosi, her internal personal and spiritual journey are made real through her art. Her artwork affirms her own search and identity as a woman, a daughter, a sister, a mother, and as an African spiritual person and Christian. She was affirmed through artmaking, allowing healing and 're-membering' of her body and herself to take place.⁴⁷¹ It was no longer a subjective terrifying experience of paralysis, confusion and dehumanisation, but through the interaction of the materials with her inner struggle and traumatic experience, her inner self found form in the sensory world. Her story is told and retold by her, reclaiming who she is and becoming an affirmation of her existence and belonging.⁴⁷² Cormick's work does the same. The images she produces, the solidarity and concern for others that underlies them, and the feedback she receives are all affirming to herself, others and to God. Her sculptures and work not only affirm her ideas, feelings and self by becoming real objects, they affirm the subjectivity of other women by capturing their experience, their struggles, their existence and making these 'real' for others to identify with.

In their creating, these women are putting 'out there' what they are seeing, hearing and envisioning. They are affirming themselves, saying 'I am here. I belong. This is my home.' In creating, they are affirming their lives and others.

⁴⁶⁹ Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁴⁷⁰ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 7, 8.

⁴⁷¹ This is the term coined by Create Africa South (CAS) describing the healing purpose of the *Amazwi Abesifazane* project. Stott, 'Reconstitution', p. 33.

⁴⁷² Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, pp. 7-10.

Becoming

The stories above also illustrate the process of becoming. *Becoming* is a theme infused throughout the whole of creation-centred spirituality and theology – all things are seen as instances of becoming, including humanity.⁴⁷³ We are born with potential, and our lives are an unfolding creative process, a potentiality to be actualised.⁴⁷⁴ Through our creativity and creating, we are participating in a divine sacred energy.⁴⁷⁵ We are becoming who we are in the image of God. In creating, we can listen to and express our deepest selves, allowing God to flow through us. Meister Eckhart called the spiritual and psychological process of expressing what is deepest inside ourselves as our ‘birthing’. We become alive.

For women and other marginalized people who are socialised to silence themselves to fit into the dominant culture, the process of becoming entails finding out what they really know, believe, value and desire, rather than conforming to what they are told. It is a process of liberation and authentic self-definition, and a spiritual process to listen to her inner knowing.⁴⁷⁶ When Nyide speaks of the debilitating silencing she grew up with and says she finds her voice in her artmaking, it is an inward process of discovery that she takes - finding out what she knows, what she desires and where she is going. Nyide feels strongly that she is hearing God in listening to her inner voice. Her listening finds echoes in the discernment process that feminist theologian Kathleen Fischer advocates for women. The voice of God and guidance for her life, she writes, can be heard when a woman pays attention to her own deepest knowing and desires.

If a woman has become habituated to...the “silencing of the self”, the process of discernment calls for a freeing of her deeper self. She can begin by asking

⁴⁷³ David Ray Griffin, ‘Creativity in Post-modern Religion’, in Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), p. 69, and pp. 70-75.

⁴⁷⁴ Mitias, *Creativity in Art*, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁵ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company Inc, 1983), p. 185.

⁴⁷⁶ P. Swart-Russell, ‘Towards Our Liberation: A New Vision of Church and Ministry’ in D. Ackermann, J.A. Draper, and E. Mashinini, *Women Hold Up Half the Sky* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991), p. 299.

questions such as: What do I most fully know, but feel afraid to honour? What is my own deepest desire? It is here that God speaks to her and provides the wellspring of her choices.⁴⁷⁷

Knowing and trusting what is emerging from inside oneself is seen in the others women's lives as well – such as Nkosi when she decided she was an artist and would develop a career as an artist. Not knowing how she would do this, she nonetheless took courage to face family opposition, to go out into the unknown and move ahead with what seemed right for her. Similar was her decision to listen to her spiritual leading regarding African religion. It is seen as she fought for and sought to reclaim her life after the violent attack that left her wounded and traumatised in her body, mind and spirit. For Speight, Stott and van Eeden, they listened to their inner guidance, decided they must make their art. Claiming who they are, they decided that is what they must do. But it is not just in their decision to be artists. Their attention and discernment is seen in their spiritual journey and beliefs, their choices, values and commitments to reach out to other people to help them discover themselves and to grow. It is visible in the women's commitments to the transformation of society, their intolerance to injustice, as seen in Cormick's life and work.

Psychological studies of creativity that I have drawn on, tentatively, in this study, explain personal and spiritual growth in a different way than theological and spiritual insights. Ehrenzweig's analysis of the creative process, and May's idea of encounter – with self and the world - both entail a quality of presence, attention and engagement with what is around them and what is inside. Creating entails struggle with the individual's own unconscious, and society's collective unconscious. Such an encounter results in the breakthrough of new ideas and new ways of being. It means letting go of rigid conscious control so that the old can break up and the new can emerge. Consciousness shifts. Lindegger writes of the 'quantum leap' in personal and spiritual growth that occurs with such a transformed consciousness, leading a person to "a new vision of self, world, other and God."⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ K. Fischer, 'Spiritual Direction with Women', in R.J. Wicks (ed.), *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), p. 99.

⁴⁷⁸ Lindegger, Graham, 'Becoming a Whole Person: Personal and Spiritual Growth', *Grace and Truth*, 13:2 (1996), p. 26.

The creating women's reflections show this encounter occurring with the self and the world. It is seen in their observations and awareness, in the 'conversation' with the deepest parts of themselves, in the therapeutic effects of their creating, and in the interaction with the materials, dreams and prayers. In their life journeys and decisions, there is a sense of unfolding, trust, integrity and maturity.

Both the fear and the creative joy are paths and indicators of this transformative power. Anxiety and fear are an inherent part of the creative process, but seem specific to the situation – being faced with 'the white page'. The joy, on the other hand, is a deeper and pervasive state. As Nkosi's story shows, it affects their lives and way of being in the world beyond their moments of creating. In these women's creative lives, the joy of creating is palpable and deeply exhilarating. The deep enjoyment is a state of being that Donaldson describes as akin to love. It is through such experiences of deep enjoyment, Csikszentmihalyi sees, that people grow, becoming more and more of who we are, evolving into a complex self.⁴⁷⁹

This is not simply a private interior experience. The encounter, growth and becoming affects others, Csikszentmihalyi continues. Both Cormick' and Nkosi's stories illustrate how these women are deeply attuned to issues affecting South Africa. They actively reach out to others in solidarity, creating groups to help one another to find their voice, to be nourished, to overcome oppression and injustice, and create a new reality. The women's journeys, observations, ways of being, creative work and witness, reaching out to others, and solidarity, tell truths about South Africa and being a woman in South Africa. Their creative process, creative work, commitments and ways of being affect others and contribute to developing the culture in new ways.

In creating, women become more fully alive by becoming more of who they are. Their journey is not taken alone, but affects all of society. As they pay attention, listen, see, encounter, and become more and more of who they are, we as people and a society evolve as well.

⁴⁷⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – CD Adaptation*.

Ethics

Wholeness and Right Relations with Self and Others

Becoming fully who we are as human beings made in the image of God, has layers of meanings from an ethical perspective. It means being freed from all that denies life, and having our basic needs for survival met. It means having right relationships with ourselves, others and creation. For women – and people everywhere who have been marginalized, degraded and have internalised this – it means seeing and claiming one’s God-given identity as a worthy, precious, beautiful, valuable and unique human being, made in the image of God. The inward journey of these creating women has led them spiritually to a place of encounter with their own goodness, beauty, value, and sacredness. Creating both requires and results in self-love, care, and respect, says Stott. The internalised oppression is taken ‘out of their heads’.

Such a shift in understanding of themselves allows for their spirit to unfold and grow, as they experience a God who loves them and sees them as valuable and important. It contrasts with the silencing, exclusion, invisibility, or ridicule of women in South African churches. As these women have shown, where their inner knowing of their value and dignity is in contradiction to religious experience, they do not accept them. They critique them as destructive and controlling. Instead they turn to the inner guidance experienced in their creative encounter and spirituality that finds expression in this. Through her creating, Nyide hears her inner voice saying it is good to be who she is. She is good and she is loved. Even though that voice contradicts what she is taught, “It is God,” she says, and necessary to listen to it.⁴⁸⁰ Their encounters reveal life and guidance, affirmation, divine presence and love for who they are.

Justice, Resistance and Transformation

Right relation means taking responsibility to live as a moral agent, with dignity and power to determine one’s own life rather than being a victim. It entails finding out

⁴⁸⁰ Witty Nyide, same interview.

and claiming one's own identity and being, and having the courage to live with one's choices.

It also has social meanings of justice, resistance and transformation - resistance to all that oppresses internally and externally, and taking action that promotes healing, integrity, dignity, justice, and self-determination for self and others.

In creating women's lives, we see these kinds of choices being taken in different circumstances, and the fruits they bear. For most of these women, their resistance - as women in a patriarchal society, economically, racially, or religiously - is not obvious or even conscious, but it is there in their decisions and directions of their lives and energy.⁴⁸¹ Their resistance to life-denying forces is seen in their continual choices to create a new reality - that which does affirm, see and respect them - and other women - and sees God in them. Their resistance is seen as they emerge from socialisation that says 'this is the road for you', instead choosing to live and create a life that expresses who they are. They choose and struggle to be self-determining, visible subjects, 'the heroine of my own life' and not victims.

The creative work and lives of several women have entailed overt social and political activism for justice, resistance to apartheid oppression and oppression of women and the poor. In their art, their organising, their sacrifices and their commitments, their choices bear fruit for themselves and others. For van Eeden, it is seen in the decision she took and the courage required to write, choosing this way in the face of many obstacles, internally and externally. Speight knew that she is an artist. Her inner voice saying she has a vocation as an artist had to be honoured, even though there were parallel voices telling her it is self-indulgent and selfish. She had put it off for several decades to meet other peoples' needs and would not do so any longer. Nyide is

⁴⁸¹ Forms of resistance need not be obvious activism, but include the choices and strategies of everyday life that affirm life. B. Haddad, *African Women: Theologies of Survival: Intersection of Faith, Feminism and Development*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2001, p. 339. Haddad's work refers to contexts of survival for marginalized rural African women, where basic needs are not met and the choices and strategies used to make a way out of no way each day to affirm life are forms of resistance. Her work draws on Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, London: Routledge, 2000). Collins examines slave women's acts of survival as a form of resistance. I return to this theme in chapter six.

finding ways to be who she is, to claim her inner voice that says she is good, and to express the fullness of who she is without apology. She is listening to her inner guidance with integrity and trust. Donaldson moves toward that which affirms her, gives her meaning, energy and joy, and through which she can make her unique contribution. Other women say similar things. They refuse to be confined by the boundaries of what restricts their interpretations, beliefs, needs, desires, values or spirit. They are attentive, inquisitive, courageous and seek to live in integrity with who they are, to be well, and to bring about the same for others.

These women refuse that which negates and oppresses, whether it concerns their own struggles or other's struggles. They are saying 'No' to life-denying forces of oppression, rigidity and control in their lives, as they walk away from the terrain that says they have no voice, they do not matter or that something is wrong with them – or others. This relates to both religion and other spheres of their lives. In doing what is life-affirming, they are rather saying 'Yes' to what takes life forward for themselves and others, and they are mapping a new way forward.

Using One's Own Language

Belonging, becoming, resistance, emancipation and transformation inherent in the creating lives and work of these women also find form in the use of their own system of symbols, images or language to express who they are and what they hear and see. Their creating is a language that can be accurately read on the terrain of the artist. In encountering the work, one encounters the authentic voice of the person who made it. Their creating touches and contains their deepest selves. It unleashes energy and allows for the expression of their imagination, fullness, being and humanity in a way that is not possible in other terms. Using their own 'language' – whether paint or poetry, drama or woodwork – they claim themselves, and remain 'at home' instead of trying to communicate in the 'language' of the dominant culture to express that which is deepest and most important to them.

The power of language as a symbol to contain the fullness of one's culture and identity is well known. Njoroge writes of it literally, in relating how the use of the mother tongue unleashed the powers of imagination and creativity in the Gikuyu people of the Kamariithu Community in Kenya. As they sought to rebuild their ruined community in a context of dissipation, dispossession and depression ensuing from colonial domination, they had to confront their own alienation from themselves, their identity, culture and tradition and their responsibility in this. A powerful step in their rebuilding was to leave English behind, and learn to be literate in their own language. Using their mother tongue empowered them and gave them a sense of pride and rootedness in their heritage. Becoming literate and using their own language allowed them "to return to the African roots in languages, symbols, images and cultures."⁴⁸² Reading and writing in their own language enhanced the individual's creativity and imagination, and, exposing them to a variety of interpretations of reality, increased "their capacity to think for themselves and to struggle for resistance and transformation where domination and control prevail."⁴⁸³

Through their artmaking, the creating women in this research are speaking their own language, expressing what they know and who they are in ways that can capture their fullness. Using their own language, they affirm the fullness and integrity of their realities, longings, visions, dignity, moral agency and humanity, and their relationship with God. To the outsider or perceiver, the use of one's own 'language' both reveals and conceals, at the same time as it enables the creator to claim her power.

Not only is it their own 'language', but for these creating women in South Africa, it is a 'language' that occurs within a dominant patriarchal culture that does not hear women well. Women's lives and realities are interpreted, in the public discourse – including the Christian tradition - through the framework of male norms, experience, priorities, understandings and power. Women's realities, knowing, needs and desires are rendered invisible or minimised, misinterpreted, laughed at or dismissed. There is little space in the public discourse to express their fullness and integrity in ways it can be received. For some, it may even be dangerous. In their creating, and employing

⁴⁸² Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo*, pp. 151-152.

⁴⁸³ Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo*, p. 152.

their own language, they ‘speak’ a unique and creative reality within contexts where they are marginalized, dominated or oppressed. This reality is rich and full of life, but it may not be readily apparent if one is reading the public realm for information of what is really happening.⁴⁸⁴ In creating, the fullness and richness of their deepest selves finds external form, and in doing so, it resists the hegemony.

The ethical process in women’s – and all oppressed peoples’ – lives, writes Rakoczy, entails choices that bring about wholeness and life to both the individual and the community. “Each decision made by individuals and communities can be evaluated according to the degree in which persons and social bodies experience the fruits of a greater wellness and integrity of life.”⁴⁸⁵ In these creating women’s lives and work, we see wholeness emerging as they listen, create, resist oppression and reach out to others. Their creating leads to greater wellness, and integrity of life for themselves and others. In this process, we see the fullness of life unfolding.

Theology and Beauty

‘What does beauty have to do with justice?’ For women, in South Africa, this centres on the extent to which full life is enabled or denied. If, as Ireneaus wrote, ‘the glory of God is humanity made fully alive’, then the degradation, violation and control of women in Africa means that the beauty, glory or *doxa* of God is suppressed and rejected. Similarly, that which promotes the full humanity and full life of women contributes to realizing the unfolding beauty or glory of God in South Africa.

These South African women’s creating and creativity unfolds full life in theirs and others lives.

⁴⁸⁴ Theologian Gerald West, drawing on sociological work of James Scott, writes of the ‘discourses of the dominated’ where oppressed people break the silence of their oppression through ‘hidden transcripts’ – ways of expression, finding their voice and creating their own language, critiquing power, behind the back of the dominated. This is expressed through “rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the poor and marginalized or the more public infrapolitics of popular culture, to reveal forms of resistance and defiance.” G.O. West, ‘Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated’ *Semeia*, 73 (1996), p. 30. See also James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴⁸⁵ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 272.

The unfolding of life is seen in the way that creating enfleshes who they are, what they discern through faith, and the divine that they point toward in trying to express this through their art. It affirms their existence, their belonging and feeling at home in the world. Through their creating, they are *becoming*, growing and developing into who they are in the image of God, and experiencing, accepting and living the value and dignity of that sacred self. In their creative and spiritual journey, they have developed self-determination and agency, courage and trust. Creating has healed and brought wholeness to their lives. The experience of deep joy pervades all of life - even the deepest places of suffering and darkness - and gives hope and trust. Creating, as revealed in these fruits in their lives, is something divine participated in and responded to, engendering growth and transformation for self and others.

Like mystics and contemplatives, these women are paying attention, present to what is revealed to them - in their creating, in nature, in themselves, in their relationships, the structures and forces under which they live, and in reading 'the signs of the times'. They trust what they are hearing. There is a hunger, a passion and a determination to blow on the sparks of life in themselves and others. There is an attraction toward that which is life-affirming. This is evident in the choices they make in their lives, their faith and spirituality, in their relationships, in their solidarity with, concern and compassion for others, in their reaching out and creating connections.

They are attracted to affirm the Spirit within that loves life, gives life, protects life, affirms life, and nourishes it. Even in the context of pain and suffering, their spiritual leading, and their listening, is about 'Life and more life'. Their critique and moving away from destructive forces - including religious teaching which has promoted distorted ideas about God, themselves, women, humanity and creation - is a prophetic listening to the movements of the emancipatory Spirit of God that directs us toward full life.

In their artistic creating, we see the women becoming aware, experiencing, and participating in “a sacramental act that moves both heart and mind.”⁴⁸⁶ Revealed through creating and the unfolding life in these women’s lives, there are emerging intimations of the meaning of the Beauty of God in South Africa and how it relates to justice.

Beauty is much more than the appearance of something beautiful they create or their appreciation of the beauty they see in the detail of the world – though it includes that as these things point to the source of beauty. Beauty goes beyond perception – it entails a relationship of reception, transformation, response, and fecundity.⁴⁸⁷

Beauty is perceived, received and revealed in their unfolding self, their sense of belonging, their value and dignity and self-determination. Beauty is revealed in their self-acceptance and ‘at-homeness’ with themselves, and their affirmation of who they are. Beauty is seen in their attention, appreciation, contemplation, openness and willingness to encounter and receive that which wishes to reveal itself – from their deepest selves, from the world and from the Spirit of God. It is in their sense of connectedness with others and the world, and their desire to participate in it. Beauty is revealed in the exhilarating feelings, the grace of deep joy and trust that pervades their inner self - both in the moments of creating and its affect on all aspects of their life. Beauty is encountered as they discover and affirm the goodness, value, sacredness and dignity of who they are, in believing they have something to say and contribute.

It is responded to as they take courage to make their contribution, to discover their truth. Beauty’s call is responded to in expressing their deepest selves and vision, and in saying what disturbs the status quo – in culture, religion or social norms. It is responded to in facing their own deepest hurt and trauma and working through it, and in growing toward greater wellness and wholeness.

⁴⁸⁶de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 241-242.

⁴⁸⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Beauty is responded to as they assent to participating in the divine creative energy of the world, let it flow through them, and unleash it into the world as a force for transformation. They “help awaken our awareness to the present reality in all its pain and hope, thereby enabling transforming vision.” Like these women, “discern beyond the surface to the depths of being-in-the-world; indeed to discern the Spirit at work in our midst.”⁴⁸⁸

If, as de Gruchy says, artistic creativity is “...not only God-given but one of the main ways whereby the power of God is unleashed,”⁴⁸⁹ then creating women in this research are unblocking, opening and participating in unleashing the divine creative energy and power into the world, for justice and transformation. Their creative process and work, however small it seems, bears fruit in igniting an *energia* for transformation, overturning the established order of things.⁴⁹⁰

Conclusion

Looking at the stories of these women artists in South Africa as they reflect on their creativity and spirituality, we can see many ways their creativity is unfolding ‘full life’. Spiritually and psychologically, creating affirms their being and need to feel they belong in the world. It affirms themselves and others - in the process, the content and commitments behind their work. In paying attention and encountering the world, they are aware, moved by and conscious of its beauty and mystery, as well as its pain and suffering, including their own. In encountering and expressing their deepest selves in their creating, they become more of who they are. Creating nourishes them deeply and spiritually, giving them experience of enjoyment that pervades all of their life and results in both personal and cultural growth.

Ethical values and processes are promoted through their creating – courage, self-determination, agency, solidarity and wholeness – for themselves and others. Creating energises their resistance to silencing and oppression, and facilitates the process of

⁴⁸⁸ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 200.

⁴⁸⁹ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, pp. 241-242.

⁴⁹⁰ Wooten, *Practical Feminist Theology of Worship*, p. 75.

healing. In creating, these women listen to, discern and express the Spirit of God in themselves and in our midst, energising vision and commitment toward transformation and justice.

These women's artistic creating in South Africa facilitates the realisation of full life for themselves, others, and the country. It reveals beauty, glory or *doxa* of God.

The processes and fruits of creating enables encounter with beauty – in themselves, the world and God - in a very deep way – perceiving, receiving, being changed by and responding to what is revealed.

How do these insights on the significance of creating to full life apply to situations where food, work, shelter, education and health are not assumed, where women struggle to survive under layers of burdens, or where external disempowerment is echoed by little self-value? What are the fruits of creating in their lives? In chapter five, I look at this question, with South African women from contexts of much struggle, who come together in crafting groups to meet their basic needs.

Chapter Six: Crafting Groups

Introduction

In chapter five, the reflections of individual women artists in South Africa were discussed in terms of creating, spirituality, and ethics. Concerned with unfolding fullness of life, it was shown that artistic creating has profound implications for all aspects of the women's lives, for others, and for theology.

In this chapter, I look at the question of full life as it unfolds in the lives of women from economic and social circumstance that are very difficult. They reflect on creating, its fruits, and its relationship to spirituality in the contexts of immense hardship and vulnerability. These are just a few of the hundreds of women's groups all over Southern Africa who undertake handwork as a way to try to make a living. They come together in community projects to make handcrafts in order to feed their families and to support one another.⁴⁹¹

Women whom I refer to as artists are motivated by an internal push to express their creativity in art, citing it as 'something I have to do', even a call or vocation. The decision to follow this impulse can entail personal risk and sacrifices - financially, or with relationships with loved ones. Even if they had postponed their creating for

⁴⁹¹ As I wrote in the method section in chapter one, 'craft' is a contested term. The history of who decides what defines art and craft is rooted in modernist western conceptualisations of art and the art world. It has also been accused of elitism, dualism and hierarchy, and being a gendered construct. Related to gender, women artists and scholars have questioned the presuppositions, conventions and prejudices around 'true art' and 'craft'. Many view the creative handwork that women have been making - without much attention or celebration - throughout centuries, all over the world, in form and function, as part of their lives and to enrich the lives of others (for example quilting, weaving, beading, making clothes, decorating their homes, making functional pots, baskets, painting their houses with geometric patterns, etc) as art. Arnold writes that in South Africa, the rigid division between 'art' and 'craft' was largely abandoned with postmodernism, which sought ways to erode boundaries and acknowledge, include and embrace 'cultural creativity and diversity'. "South African revisionist art historians and exhibition curators, abandoning reliance on western definitions of art, expanded creative concepts of visual culture to accommodate African artefacts and aesthetics as well as objects defined as 'women's work.'" writes Arnold. This 'women's work', such as embroidery, beading and applique has brought economic and personal empowerment to women, especially black rural women. Recognition of its socio-political, ethnic and gender significance has lead to reassessment of this kind of work; "...their makers began to be identified by name. Individual black women became visible." Marion Arnold, 'Visual Culture in Context: The Implications of Union and Liberation' in Arnold, M. and Schmahmann, B. (eds), *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 13-14.

decades to work in other more financially secure careers, or to attend to other peoples' priorities and needs, such as domestic responsibilities and children, they returned to creating as a matter of inner necessity, well-being, and joy, or even life and death.

For the crafting women's groups discussed in this chapter, creative art and crafting projects occur within community development projects. These are begun or joined because, within a context of crushing poverty and the ravages of HIV and AIDS, they are seen as a lifeline of hope - a possible means to put food on the table and provide for their families. Most of the women in these groups live in areas with high unemployment and impoverishment. For many, especially the women from rural areas, their opportunities for education and even literacy are limited. For these women, the change in their lives and the rewards that unfold from the creating process are inseparable. These include income to provide basic needs, giving and receiving support in solidarity and compassion with one another, and the development of their own confidence, dignity and personhood.

I initially had discussions with the organiser/originator/facilitator of thirteen groups and in-depth interviews/discussions with five of these facilitators.⁴⁹² Their insights and interpretations of the histories, meanings and vision of the work inform the discussion below. But dynamics of growth, change and attrition in the community development process, facilitators' constraints in enabling access to a group, and my own time constraints meant some of the initial contacts and interviews with the

⁴⁹² The role or importance of the founder/facilitator of the groups is outside of the focus of this thesis. However, this person plays a key role. The importance of the facilitator should be the focus of an intentional study that draws on theological, community development and leadership theory, looking at: the vision, spirituality, values, commitments, characteristics, motivation, skills, processes and contacts that the facilitator brings to the group, and the success or failure of the group to motivate and empower the women in their inner selves, and practically bring income into their lives. Often, s/he is the person initiating or enabling the project together with disenfranchised women from the community, and comes from outside of the situation of the community. S/he may be approached by the women for help, or initiates involvement out of feelings of solidarity and concern for their well-being and commitment to doing something about it. The facilitator may be the spokesperson, main contact, the visionary, motivator, and the one who has the knowledge and power to negotiate the markets and administrative demands, and to facilitate the structures and processes on which the project hangs. S/he may be the one who conceptualises the designs, images, colours, materials and direction of the work. S/he is educated, has access to resources, finds the markets and is able to explain the bigger picture behind the project to those within the project and to those outside of the project.

organiser did not materialise into interviews with members of groups. In the end, interviews and discussions were held with sixty women from four different crafting projects, in groups or individually, with a second visit to one group over several days for more in-depth individual interviews.⁴⁹³

Themes arising from their stories are similar to those in chapter four, but are weighted differently in significance, related to the contexts of their lives and the purposes of their crafting. The first theme places their creating in the difficult contexts of their communities and the hardship they face. The second theme recognizes the importance of the solidarity, support and community of women in the crafting project. Third, the process of women's empowerment and moral agency through creating is looked at. Fourth, the creative process and how they feel while creating is described. Lastly, and in light of the above contexts and priorities, reflection on the relationship between the women's creating and their spirituality is presented. These themes are then anchored in case studies of two very different projects and contexts. Discussion and analysis of the women's experiences and reflections follows, in terms of the theoretical frameworks of women's theologies for liberation, creation spirituality and theology, and centred on the theme of full life.

The women had never been asked about their creativity in terms of their spirituality before, and were keen to talk about it, as the spiritual – God and the *amadlozi* (ancestors) - is a very real presence in their lives and how they see the world. At first, they seemed not to know what I was asking in relating creativity and spirituality. When informal, open-ended conversations such as I had with the artists did not work, I then began to ask questions in a direct way, more like a questionnaire. In most cases, with both individual and group interviews, the women's answers about their creating and spirituality were short and to the point, without much explanation around them. The answers were straightforward and personal, concretely linked to lived realities and hardships, how they felt about their work, how they felt within themselves, and their beliefs and experiences of God in their lives and in their

⁴⁹³ The initial interviews with these thirty-six women were very brief, and done in small groups of +/- 7 people, in a tightly limited time frame. The second interviews were held individually with twelve women.

work.⁴⁹⁴

For the majority of the women, their feelings about creating and the fruits of it in their lives, are inseparable from two other aspects of the project they are involved in: The first is financial reward and the ability to make a relatively meaningful income from their efforts; and secondly, the quality of their connection to others and feeling of ownership of the group. This includes the spirit of the group, relationships of trust, and solidarity and companionship with the other women. In two of the groups that will be looked at later in the case studies, the women talk of holding and supporting one another in community, and living out a commitment to grow together and care for each other. Other important aspects are self-development through mastering new skills and developing them, pride in making beautiful things with their own hands, creating unique products, and working to a standard of excellence. Applying their knowledge and skills in increasingly complex tasks, and responsibilities in the project (and beyond) builds confidence. Having the opportunity to uncover and use their own creativity in a meaningful way is deeply affirming.

Looking specifically at the creative process itself, women spoke poignantly and positively about the relationship between their spirituality and creativity, their experiences and feelings while creating, and the effects creating has on their lives. They experience expansiveness and joy, describing it in terms of feeling happy and bigger in themselves, and a good spirit flowing in them and amongst the group when they are creating together. In the face of heavy challenges, sorrow or loneliness, life

⁴⁹⁴ Because we were both speaking through a translator most of the time, I wondered whether the brevity and concreteness of the women's responses was related to the questions - whether the questions made sense and were clear, and whether we were connecting despite language and cultural differences. I explore thoughts around this in the method section in chapter one. Artist Gabisile Nkosi, whom I had interviewed earlier, echoed similar difficulties when asking questions of a group of Zulu women from rural Nongoma whom she had worked with. She spoke of the fantastic artistic images these women were developing and trying to explore with them questions of their creativity and where they thought it came from. They spoke of dreams, and Nkosi was not sure they meant literal dreams, or images coming from within their soul or the ancestors, or exactly what they meant. It was difficult for them to put words to the process. Nkosi's description of the Nongoma women's struggles to articulate internal processes and her own struggle to articulate questions that could probe the processes, was similar to what I encountered. It suggests that my difficulty was not just the translator's choice of words, or the structured encounter and power dynamics of an interview with questions asked by a stranger who was white and educated. Although that may be part of it, there was real difficulty in finding verbal 'form' for the concepts, impressions or feelings.

becomes hopeful and possible. Women feel wonder and joy at seeing the beautiful things they and their sisters in the projects make. In one group particularly, women feel accompanied by God and the *amadlozi* (the ancestors) in what they are doing, not feeling alone, but guided and inspired. The creative work is seen by some women as a gift given back to God, an act of worship. Others spoke of being co-creators with God, doing in a small way what God has done. One woman who makes very little income from her work, describes the process of doing her creative work as a meditative, prayerful space and time, a time to listen to God quietly and undisturbed, which she loves. She would continue whether or not she made much money.

In multi-dimensional ways, doing this creative handwork transforms their lives.

Community Contexts

The women's groups are from different geographical and economic environments. Two are from townships - Edendale near Pietermaritzburg in KZN and Tsakane/Geluksdal in the East Rand of Gauteng. Two are from rural areas - Underberg near the Drakensburg Mountains in KZN, and Msinga in the north/central interior of KZN. The groups were formed in economically deprived or impoverished communities. For three of the groups, their project work is part of much larger development projects in their areas that address issues such as employment and skills development, HIV and AIDS education and home-based care, care for orphans and vulnerable children, food security and nutrition, agricultural development and land issues, environment and environmental tourism, as well as heritage, history, memory and identity as African people.

Economically, two of these groups are successfully marketing their work and able to make a living. Two of the groups struggle to sell, and the lack of steady income and sense of possibility affect the attitude toward continuing with the work – for one particularly, causing ambivalence about their project for some of the members.

For almost all of the women in the groups, creativity has been a positive force for

change and transformation in the inner landscape of their lives - from feelings of inadequacy, or hopelessness and despair to hope and new confidence; from sorrow, suffering and isolation, to healing and being held with dignity and love by other women in solidarity, bearing one another's pain, and affirming the promise that they are not alone.

Rural Groups

The rural groups are from Msinga and Underberg, both areas in KZN. For the Church Agricultural Project (CAP) in Msinga, there are enormous challenges. These include poverty and HIV and AIDS, the effects of political violence in the 1990's, along with criminal and tribal violence. Death, loss and grief are deep traumas that are talked about by the women as forming the context of their creative work. The violence, sickness and death shatter hearts, lives, and livelihoods.⁴⁹⁵ Trauma and loss has formed a deep and common bond between the women, a bond forged of shared hardship, suffering, grief and support. This bond underlies their group and their palpable spirit of hope, even joy, as they come together. Some of the women have been together for over thirty years. They know one another very well and support each other through hard times. Despite their remote location, their creative, unique, attractive and precise work of wire weaving with beads has developed markets all over the world.⁴⁹⁶

For the Ikhwezi group near Underberg KZN group, their village of Enhlahleni, and the area of the southern Drakensberg has few opportunities for employment. In recent years, the nearby Catholic mission has begun extensive work to develop the communities and the area as a Drakensberg tourist destination focusing on the people (African identity, culture and heritage) and the environment (the mission and restored mill, rock art, birding and hiking) with specific programmes for employment, development and women. Markets for the traditional Zulu beadwork items remain

⁴⁹⁵ KZN violence monitor Mary de Haas, commenting on the murders, threats and intimidation in Msinga leading up to the elections on 22 April 2009 said that historically Msinga has been, and is still a "lawless area [plagued] with high levels of violence." *The Witness*, 17 April 2009.

⁴⁹⁶ Since the interview, the worldwide economic recession has resulted in a 95% drop in orders of their main customer in the United States. Alcock, C. (khonya@yebo.co.za). 10 May 2009. *Letter from Creina*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

scarce for these women, depending primarily on the tourist trade to the region that might visit the few outlets where their work is being sold.

Both Msinga and the rural Drakensberg regions are traditional Zulu areas. Authority, roles and responsibilities are structured along traditional patriarchal lines of authority, and traditional African religious beliefs and practices inform identity and life - both the living and the dead are part of daily life.

As in all of Southern Africa, HIV and AIDS afflicts and devastates families, and communities. Entire households have been decimated, with economic, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual repercussions on the women's lives.⁴⁹⁷ Two of the groups spoke of the members who have died. In some cases women interviewed were sick themselves. Women are the main caregivers of the family, to the husbands, the children, the elderly and the sick, and many carry emotional burdens from loss. They carry all of this on top of their heavy daily and seasonal domestic responsibilities, such as walking distances to fetch water and firewood and carrying it back home, preparing food, cleaning their homes and caring for children, preparing fields, planting, watering and harvesting crops. Often the women do not have independent income, and are dependent on their husband, who may be employed in an urban area, living far away from home, and sending money home when they have it.⁴⁹⁸ Women head families and raise children on the income they earn from

⁴⁹⁷ Cultural beliefs are intertwined with economic consequences of HIV and AIDS in Msinga. For one week after a man dies, and two days after a woman dies, there is a mourning period where farmers will not work their fields. As people are dying everyday, this means fields are left fallow for long periods of time, no planting or harvesting is done, and vast tracts of land are not producing food, leading to further economic hardship in an already impoverished area. Seeking traditional explanations for the disease, families sell their livestock for rituals to appease the ancestors or pay the traditional healer. Large amounts of money are spent on funerals and tombstone unveiling ceremonies. Cattle herds have shrunk, and many men are not able to pay lobola. As subsistence farmers have died from AIDS, essential knowledge and skills about agriculture are being lost. Women become primary care-givers and have little time to work the fields or generate alternate sources of income. Children are taken out of school to save money, or do chores or care for the sick. Interview with Rauri Alcock, manager of CAP (Churches' Agricultural Project) in Msinga in: Kristin Palitza. 2005. Culture Stronger Than Death, 9Feb, *Mail and Guardian Online*, <http://www.mg.co.za>. (Accessed 16 April 2009).

⁴⁹⁸ Brenda Schmahmann has painted a picture of handcraft in the context of the hard life for rural women that is shared throughout Southern Africa. In her description of Weya women crafters in rural Zimbabwe (before the economic meltdown), she observes that they work 'exceptionally hard' with their domestic responsibilities, but gain no income of their own, being dependent on their husbands. Handcraft has become an important and flexible way for them to earn much-needed money. Brenda Schmahmann (ed), *Material Matters*, p. 2.

handwork.

Handcraft provides important possibilities for rural women to earn income for rural women. As Brenda Schmahmann observes “...it is work that women can undertake in between their many other commitments.” Even if there is full time employment available, it is very difficult to fit it in amongst their heavy domestic responsibilities. Handwork “...has therefore offered them a means of securing an income to upgrade the quality of their own and their children’s lives.”⁴⁹⁹ The significance of women’s handcraft is an important source of income and means of poverty alleviation throughout South Africa, even though the gains are small.⁵⁰⁰

Township Groups

A small township-based group called Realeko is from Edendale, a peri-urban/semi-rural area outside of Pietermaritzburg. The group consists of elderly pensioners who, motivated by their priest, began a project to supplement their pensions, rather than remaining alone at home ‘idle or gossiping’. They have been supported in training by the Anglican Church. With tired eyes, they struggle with the detail of beading work (some have dropped out), and energy or initiative for marketing is low, but they find it very good to be doing the creative work, and to be part of a group.

The other township-based group of women interviewed, called Kopanang, lives in the Far East Rand of Gauteng - outside the major metropolitan area of Johannesburg. Here in Geluksdal/Tsakane, communities of African and Coloured people were

⁴⁹⁹ Schmahmann (ed), *Material Matters*, p. 2.

⁵⁰⁰ Craft programme director for the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park Authority, Bronwyn James, said that many government bodies and donors have identified crafts as the best means of poverty alleviation in South Africa. However, like the women basket weavers she works with in Maputaland, women throughout the country are paid a pittance for their work. “In the past 30 years, selling craft on the side of the roads, at pension day markets or at local agricultural shows has provided their only vital, but minuscule, income. In 1999, just before the authority’s formal craft programme began, women earned between R50 and R170 per month. Prices at the markets remained low. For example, a large picnic basket sells for just R14. The price has not changed in five years.” This is attributed to poor product design and quality. Prices are also pushed down by competition between crafters, selling identical products at the same locations. The cost of materials is more than the price of the product in many cases. *Natal Witness*, Nov 19 2005. A pioneering collaborating initiative in South Africa has begun between crafters in Maputaland and retail giant Mr Price, to design and produce housewares. Crafting women are being trained in design and quality control, producing marketable items for the store.

established to provide labour for the mines and factories.⁵⁰¹ These have since closed, leaving a large population of people unemployed, poor in pocket as well as spirit, and a desolate, scarred landscape of massive mine dumps which rain down dust onto the township, hostels and informal shack settlements. Many of the women in the group interviewed are single mothers and breadwinners for the family. Loved ones have been lost to HIV and AIDS, including parents, spouses, children, and group members. The graveyard on the edge of Tsakane township is full of fresh dirt mounds, the burial places, I am told, of mostly young people. Each weekend, more are buried. The deprivation and impoverishment of the communities they come from is mirrored in how they feel about themselves.⁵⁰² For these women, being part of the creating group has touched their lives in profound and positive ways.

Faith Contexts of the Groups

Women in the groups interviewed come from the overall traditions of Christianity and African traditional religion. While the particular Christian denominations and practices of each woman was not asked, many of the women did talk about their churches, suggesting that the religious affiliations - especially in the large township group - are diverse, with quite conservative understandings of their faith. Denominations mentioned are Pentecostal, Gospel of God African Independent Church, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and the Church of the Nazarene. For women in Msinga, both Christianity and African traditional religion are expressed as part of what they believe and practice, with God, Jesus and the *amadlozi* (ancestors) invoked, present and active in all aspects of their lives. For the women in all four of the groups, their faith and spirituality are part of every aspect of life - including their work, their hopes, and how they experience themselves and the world.

On an organisational level, all of these projects have some church connection.

⁵⁰¹ Like Arnold, 2005, p. 27, I use the term 'Coloured' even though it was a term of racial classification by the apartheid system. Many people in South Africa, sharing a distinct cultural and historical identity, define themselves as 'Coloured'.

⁵⁰² Sr Sheila Flynn, personal conversation with Karen Buckenham at Geluksdal, 28 October 2004. See also Sheila Flynn, 'Creativity as a Vehicle for Hope - 6th April 2006', paper given at the 10th Anniversary CINDI Conference 3-7 April 2006, Pietermaritzburg.

Reichenau is affiliated with a Catholic mission station. CAP began as an agricultural project with Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran farms, moving to new headquarters in Weenen in 1975 and becoming independent. In its new location, the project became concerned with tribal land. Kopanang is affiliated with a Catholic religious community of Dominican sisters, and the Catholic parish churches. Realeko is affiliated with the Anglican Church.

Ability to Gain an Income

Recalling their lives before they started with the creating work, many women describe sitting at home, stressed and depressed, ruminating on their problems and seeing no way out. Some were grieving loss. Many could barely feed their children, and others wondered where they would get food from at all. The ability to gain an income from their creative work is therefore very important for these women, in light of their contexts. It is the primary reason they began the handcraft in the first place. Kamasoka Dladla's feelings are shared, "I was so poor and so sad when I first started to make this craft. I prayed God help, I want my children to grow up."⁵⁰³ There is a deep sorrow that comes through the women's words, in not being able to feed their children, not knowing if they are going to grow up. Often the woman is the sole breadwinner in the family - the husband is not working, or is sick, deceased or absent for various reasons, or the woman has always been a single mother. Through the craft, the women are able to support their family against a backdrop of immense hardship and, for some, tragedy.

Solidarity and Interrelatedness of the Creating Community

Women speak about the importance of the group to their feelings of well-being. Many describe their life before joining the project - feeling depressed, sitting at home, unemployed, isolated, having children and family to support, and thinking about their problems. They wondered about heavy questions, such as where would the money come from, how they would have strength to face another day if they were ill, or how

⁵⁰³ Kamasoka Dladla, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga.

they would deal with the grief at losing a husband.

Most of the women had little idea of what they were capable of. Linked to the empowerment of learning a new skill, making something beautiful, being paid for it and putting bread on the table, and working with their hands, a very important aspect of the creating groups is the healing that comes from community, belonging and love. They feel the Spirit of God closely when they are together.

Mandlela Mvelase speaks about her worries and her grief at the shooting of her mother-in-law and her son. These thoughts pressed in on her at home. In the group, in working with her hands, making friends and being able to live, her life changed, the pain healed.

I was so sad...Because I was staying at home, I felt sad all the time. Working together, I started to feel better. When I arrived at home, I was worried. At work this thing went out. When at home, I think of my craft, and discussing with other women....Even at home, I am coming right.

As I was doing craft with my hands, it was helping me with my spirit. God sees what I was doing. At home I have things I had not had before – money, women friends, God is helping me...

I believe that all I am doing is coming from God. I say “Please God help me. I don’t know where to start.” God I trust because I didn’t know the pain was going to go away. Nobody can do that, only God.⁵⁰⁴

The support women enjoy, being with other women, the relief from isolation and ruminating on their own thoughts, the sharing of burdens, and the ability to contribute to the well-being of others and the entire community are extremely important, and is discussed by most women in the same breath as any comment on their creative process and work. One woman said doing the craftwork in her project “...helped me to clean up my brain, seeing what I can do for the people and for myself.”⁵⁰⁵ Another reflected

⁵⁰⁴ Mandlela Mvelase, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga.

⁵⁰⁵ Caroline (surname unknown), interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 29 October 2004 at Kopanang, Geluksdal. She has since died.

God showed me that I am here for a purpose. At times, when I was sitting at home, I felt “I’m useless. Nobody cares about me. I have no family or friends.” God was caring for me. I’m here to help people. I can teach somebody else and give my all.⁵⁰⁶

The communal nature of the work is spoken of as one of the most important features of their work. Women in the crafting groups come together in the group regularly, even though much of the actual beading or embroidery or sewing or wire-work is done individually at home in between their other responsibilities. Women repeatedly confirm the importance of the groups for fellowship, support, encouragement, learning and personal spiritual development. This related to their art-making, and more widely to their lives.

Healing

Thus, the crafting groups not only create employment opportunities and develop the person’s skills, they are spaces of support and healing. Women share very hard life situations that they are surviving or have survived. Their stories are imbued in the materials, in the process of stitching and sewing, in the careful placement of beads and colours on each strand. Their stories are worked through as they create and share. While not obviously depicting their stories and sorrows, the final craft product in fact holds their stories, and is a visual, tactile container and representation of the life behind it.

For the women of CAP, sharing their stories and taking their suffering out of their own heads seems even more important to them than the financial gains of their handwork. Hard times come and go, and through it all, coming together in the group lifts their spirits immeasurably.⁵⁰⁷ Their group provides for inseparable needs – support and solidarity for their lives, space to mourn and heal, income, and creative work that touches and brings out something deep within themselves.

⁵⁰⁶ Beatrice Esau , interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵⁰⁷ Alcock, C. (khonya@yebo.co.za). 23 May 2009. *Second Letter from Creina* . email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

As a personal healing journey, Kopanang project has begun an intentional initiative of storytelling with a small group of women, called *Dikeledi* who come together once a week. Women tell their stories to each other and visually represent them through embroidery. Sharing the stories of their lives more deeply over many weeks, they are collaboratively embroidering a narrative cloth wall-hanging - a memory cloth, “..a container of sorts to carry their tears - the result of breaking open the stories of their lives week by week - so often fraught with appalling suffering” says facilitator Sheila Flynn.⁵⁰⁸ She describes the process of sharing as ‘sifting stories for the touch of God, for the touch of each other.’ “Through exploring their stories visually, these women affirm the sacredness of life and death, and treat both with exquisite dignity - shared sorrows are borne collectively, with deep dignity, emerging as a physical document of beauty.”⁵⁰⁹

Studies with other women’s crafting groups in South Africa who tell their stories through methods that depict their concerns and stories visually, interpret the process similarly. Stott sees this with the *Amazwi Abesifazane* project, where harrowing stories from black women’s lives are told on embroidered panels. Kate Wells sees

⁵⁰⁸ Sr Sheila Flynn, same conversation, and Kopanang project visit 14-16 March 2006. See Flynn ‘Creativity as a Vehicle for Hope’, p. 2.

⁵⁰⁹ Flynn, ‘Creativity as a Vehicle for Hope’. p. 2. Similar processes of story-telling through creativity, healing and transformation are undertaken in other women’s projects in Southern Africa. For example, the *Amazwi Abesifazane Project* introduced in earlier chapters entails storytelling of ‘a day I will never forget’. Black rural South African women invariably tell of trauma experienced in their lives in embroidered narrative - an artistic Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In telling their stories, making them ‘real’, and holding them as sacred, healing is possible. In making them visible and putting them out into the public realm, society is challenged and changed by their truth. They are an archive. Personal interview with Andries Botha, 29 November 2006. Botha is a reknowned Durban-based sculptor whose work engages socio-political and, less obviously, spiritual issues in South Africa. His NGO, Create Africa South (CAS), includes the *Amazwi Abesifazane* and *Ubamama Projects*. See also Stott, ‘The Reconstitution’, p. iv.; To her, through the therapeutic affects of their creativity, destructive forces are resisted, their selves and spirituality are ‘reconstituted’. Bernice Stott, same interview. See also Carol Hofmeyer, ‘AIDS-inspired SA Altarpiece begins U.S. Tour’, *The Witness*, 24 August 2006. Hofmeyer is facilitator of the *Keiskamma Project*, a group of women from the district of Hamburg in the Eastern Cape. They have embroidered an enormous work (7x4 metres) adapting the idea of Matthias Grunewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece of 1515. His work depicts the ravages of a horrifying disease called St. Anthony’s Fire. *Keiskamma* tells the story of their own village and the ravages and responses to AIDS. Their first massive work shows the epic journey of South Africa’s history in the Eastern Cape and is displayed at the Constitutional Court. Similar smaller projects tell stories of rural life in KwaZulu-Natal. In September 2008, women from 12 different communities created tapestries of the lives in their communities, displayed at the Tatham Art Gallery. ‘Tapestries Telling Stories’ *The Witness*, 16 September 2008. Looking wider in Southern Africa at Zimbabwe, see Brenda Schmahmann, *Material Matters* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2000). Also Schmahmann, Brenda, ‘Stitches as Sutures: Representations of Trauma and Recovery by women in the Mapula Embroidery Project’, in *African Arts* 38 (3).

this with the *Siyazama* project, where concerns, especially around AIDS, are expressed – circumventing the taboos of sexuality - in the ‘language’ and colours of beadwork. Brenda Schmahmann writes of this in terms of the embroidery work of the Mapula project. The process, writes Stott, provides women with a ‘voice’ for their experience, “...and the opportunity to reconstruct the fabric of their lives.”⁵¹⁰

While the bulk of the handwork of the women in the groups interviewed for this thesis does not explicitly visually represent their stories (with the exception of the Dikeledi group), their stories live behind, and are infused throughout the very materials and process of their creating.⁵¹¹

The opportunity to emerge from that isolation, to enter into a safe space with other women, to tell their story and to share both the burdens and sorrows with others provides healing and hope to the women. In the creating and articulation of their lives ‘behind’ and ‘through’ the materials and crafting process, the crafting serves as an agent of transformation of their own lives. It also serves as “...an agent of social transformation” by witnessing to their lives.⁵¹²

Affirmation, Confidence, and Hope

Women take pride in the beauty of their work, and get deep enjoyment from doing it. Their confidence increases through their creating. After beginning the work by not believing they have any creativity, nor any gifts, never seeing themselves in terms of their own value, they develop new confidence. The creating work entails a profound journey of self-discovery.

Women from the two rural groups describe the affirmation given them by developing their beading. Both say they already had skill and knowledge in this work as it is a

⁵¹⁰ Stott, ‘The Reconstitution’, p. 47.

⁵¹¹ Kate Wells observes this behind the creative process and work of women in the *Siyazama* project near Durban. It was formed by women in response to the devastation wreaked in their lives and communities by HIV and AIDS. The beadwork holds their stories, especially unnameable issues around sexuality, silenced by taboo and decorum in Zulu tradition. She sees design as an agent of social transformation. K. Wells, E. Sienaert, and J. Conolly, ‘The *Siyazama* Project: Consensual Silences, Visual Metaphors and Socio-Cultural Transformation’ *Design Issues* 20:2 (2004), pp. 83-89.

⁵¹² Wells, Sienaert, and Conolly, ‘The *Siyazama* Project’, p. 73.

traditional African art. The new thing was to develop it and learn to apply new methods, designs and adaptations of it so that they could sell to others. Before, they did not attach much value to it, and did not see how it could contribute to improving their lives. Not only does it now bring them income, Lindiwe explains how it encourages them to go back into their culture; to learn, practise, develop and affirm the traditional Zulu women's art of beadwork.⁵¹³ Doing beadwork was expressed as an affirmation of their African heritage.

In the context of the township group Kopanang, affirmation, care for one another, the development of confidence and the discovery of hope in the women is part of their core vision. Different women describe their feelings about themselves the discovery of their capabilities. For Beauty Zwane feelings of happiness and courage have developed together by being with the group and learning quilting and embroidery.

When I was at home, I was thinking about problems. I have a new mind, new method to face things. To take it out and gain something. God showed me the light. God created me for a purpose. Do not give up. Face difficulties and then you'll reach your goal."⁵¹⁴

Silindile was sitting at home after she had finished school, not knowing what she was going to do. Learning how to create things when she joined the project opened up a new confidence. Taking control of what she is making spills over to all aspects of her life and identity. She says "[Now] I can create things on my own. I am very proud of myself. I am also studying. This opened doors - I grow stronger, feel independent, and have learned how to be a woman, not a teenager."⁵¹⁵

The product and the skill are secondary to what they are as the human person, says Flynn. As part of the project work, personal, spiritual and relationship growth are prioritised. Workshops and reflection take place on who one is, made in the image of God, exploring such questions as 'What does that mean to each person and to the

⁵¹³ 'Lindiwe' (not her real name), group discussion conducted by Karen Buckenham on 5 April 2006 at Ikhwezi, Reichenau Mission, Underberg.

⁵¹⁴ Beauty Zwane, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵¹⁵ Silindile Twala, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham 29 October 2004 at Kopanang, Geluksdal. She was the youngest person in the group at that time.

group identity? What does it mean to the identity and purpose of the group in the wider community?' Flynn describes the women entering the project with low expectations from life, "just the merest scrapings to feed their children if they were lucky", often at the neglect of themselves.⁵¹⁶ Through their work and their experience of personal and communal transformation, they have new hope. They believe in themselves and that a better life is possible, and they are the ones to make it happen. The deep sense of dignity and sacredness of the person and relationships spills over into the way they work together. There is a spirit of joy in one another's learning and in what another person can create.

The Creative Process

When asked how they feel when they are creating, many of the women struggle with fear, having few ideas, and generally little confidence in themselves. Some began with no knowledge of the skills required and so have to learn. Others speak of the fear or frustration or anger they feel when making something and it is not turning out. Despite this, there is a joy they feel in their spirit when creating, and feelings of pride and wonder in seeing what they can make from their own hands. Working with their hands is articulated by some as a site where God is present, and by others as a time and activity where God is felt very closely.

Creative Fear, Struggle and Motivation

Many women became involved in their project and handcraft from a place of despair and depression. Flynn observes how women in the Kopanang project are used to living moment by moment, often in a very dark place. Commonly, they do not start off believing they possessed creativity, nor any gifts at all. They approach the creative work with trepidation. Most have not done this kind of work before and lack confidence. They speak about the difficulties and their fear when beginning, not having the skills, struggling to learn, and finding it hard. Feelings of anger, frustration or feeling heartsore when they cannot achieve what they want to do are close to the

⁵¹⁶ Kopanang Women's Group information sheet, 2004.

surface. Still, they keep going and ultimately find they can do it.

It is not surprising then, that women also mention feelings of fear that what they make will not be good enough. All the women want to do good work, they want the colours and forms to work together, the design to be attractive and desirable, for the craftsmanship to be good, and for their work to sell.

Women describe other struggles relating to the work. Women who are elderly and doing beading find the minute detailed work very difficult because their eyes are not strong anymore. Still, they carry on doing it because it brings them a little bit of money and they hope it will get better. For others, when there is pressure to complete orders in a short space of time, this is a source of frustration and stress if they are unable to give time because of domestic responsibilities. They have considerable demands on them and work to do in the home.

Anna spoke of feeling quite stressed and depressed to the point of sickness because of having to meet competing demands. The crafting causes conflict with her husband, whose needs come first. Because the work is done at home and fits around what has to be done for him, the family and the household, it is not seen by the family as a priority. There is a lack of understanding at home. If she is under pressure from the project to finish an order and her husband wants his tea while she is doing the beads, she says there is conflict. When there are project meetings or it is necessary to put aside time for their beading, there is pressure at home for wasting time.⁵¹⁷ This

⁵¹⁷ 'Anna' (not her real name), group discussion with Karen Buckenham, Ikhwezi, Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April 2006. I did not ask about, nor hear stories of gender-related conflict or envy arising from the new-found independence, income, confidence and authority of women within the patriarchal family, but undercurrents might be read into some women's stories - including the conflicts experienced by the women above, and the murder of artist Gabisile Nkosi by her ex-boyfriend. Schmahmann related conflict and envy occurring toward some successful women crafters in groups she interviewed. With women in positions of authority, and achieving acclaim for their work, men felt uncomfortable or threatened by their success and the authority linked with it. In some cases, the men left the projects. In the case of Daina Mabunda of Xihoko, her husband completely took over the project, reduced her income, claimed her work and ideas as her own, and getting rid of her completely, sent her back to live at her parent's home when she was sickly (in the traditional setup, she had to passively accept this authority and wait to see whether he would come and get her rather than challenge his actions or return on her own). Interestingly, the women crafters she worked with sought her out, to continue working with her rather than the husband. Brenda Schmahmann, 'On Pins and Needles: Gender Politics and Embroidery Projects Before the First Democratic Election', in M. Arnold and B. Schmahmann, *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*

changes when there are tangible fruits for the family. When the work grows and has sustainable markets or commissions, steady income, affirmation and acclaim toward the work of their group, it is seen as something valuable - and the crafters are seen as important people to emulate in the family and community – even if there was lack of understanding in the beginning.⁵¹⁸

Embarking on a new project, or learning and practising a new technique is anxiety-provoking, not only because of a lack of confidence. It is also because of the quality-control test that it has to pass. In two groups, work that does not pass the quality-control stage is sent back for correction and the woman is not paid until it is up to standard. When it passes, this also contributes to the sense of accomplishment and pride. Work that is of high standard, demanding excellent effort, and that rewards craftsmanship and originality provides deep satisfaction, and affirmation. It encourages her sense of dignity. The women feel encouraged to take on more complex tasks, and to teach others. Such work also tends to do better in the marketplace.

It is apparent that the ability of women to do the work at the skill level required of them, hand in hand with the challenge to produce their best and for it to be top quality are very important, not only for income but how the women feel about the creating work, and how they feel about themselves. It is very important to the women to be able to do the work at the skill level required of them. To meet the challenge of producing top quality work is vital firstly for producing income and also for increasing their self-confidence.

Work that connects with the women personally is the most satisfying and enjoyable

(Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 152-173.

⁵¹⁸ Portia (surname unknown), interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 15 March 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal. She thought 'these people are playing', until she started to do the work and benefited from it. Both artists and crafters spoke of this. Gabisile Nkosi, while initially not getting support from her family for her aspirations and artwork, became very respected when it started selling well, there was interest from all over the world, she earned income from it, and the family started to understand what it was about. In recent years, her early sketches and rough drafts of things - which were thrown away as scrap when she was small - were carefully saved by her family. She talked of feeling grateful, happy and embarrassed by their respect, as her main interest was in the well-being and happiness of her family - especially her father - not in becoming a celebrity. Gabisile Nkosi, same interview

for them. When their own ideas of items to create, of images, drawings, patterns and configurations are used in the work, it becomes immensely encouraging and motivational. This brings the sense of pride, ownership and connection to a successful project. A project and work that is meaningfully connected to deeper concerns of their lives and identity is important. These are critical features of those projects that are doing well, with implications for the women's involvement, and the ultimate sustainability of the project.⁵¹⁹

Work done in groups that does not seem to have a vision connecting it with deeper meanings for themselves, their lives and their contexts, or where excellence and originality are not so important, or who lack a facilitator who can facilitate that kind of guidance, training, context, direction, and marketing outlets, or where the ownership of the project lies outside of their own responsibility and vision, these do not do so well. The work does not bring them income, and does not contribute to uplifting their morale much. Such groups tend to dwindle in number and commitment over time.⁵²⁰

Creative Joy

As was seen, many of the women begin their handcraft work not knowing anything about it. Sewing, embroidering, paper-making or beading are new skills, and are learned on the job. With slow and steady progress, they are amazed and surprised at the beautiful things they are now able to make. Several spoke specifically of using their hands as a locus of the divine - it is the activity of using their hands to make

⁵¹⁹ A crucial factor in the success of craft-based projects in South Africa is the element of local ownership from the beginning, finds Professor Jackie Guille, a craft and design specialist. She elaborates that this entails such things as people collaboratively using their talents, using entrepreneurial skills, giving attention to quality control, investing in people, and "embrace the conditions in which people live." J. Guille, 'Key Issues for the Development of the Craft and Design Sector in South Africa', UNESCO/NORAD report. January 2005, quoted in K. Wells. The Siyazama Project presentation from Kate Wells. www.siyazamaproject.co.za. Research. (Accessed 24 June 2008).

⁵²⁰ I heard this from the groups, and from facilitators I spoke with. One group that originated from the home of a white farmer's wife, (not reflected in the above discussions as I spoke with the facilitator only and observed the project briefly), started out with sixty women and has dwindled to three members over eight years. The woman said she did not have the same motivation, expertise, ideas, markets, contacts or relationships with the women on the project that the original founder did ten years previously when the project was started, before she and her husband bought the farm and inherited the project. In addition, she did not speak Zulu and the women did not speak English. It is now a venue for sewing, rather than a project.

something that is the medium through which they can live, and God and happiness were felt. “We like to use our hands. Our hands are used for our craft. Our hands enable us to get money, to support our life.”⁵²¹

Feelings of joy while creating are expressed in different ways.

I have this feeling, a fulfilling happiness. Its hard to describe – a good feeling.⁵²²

I feel joy inside me – in my heart.⁵²³

Amazed, surprised. Its me who did it!⁵²⁴

When I start, I feel like going on and on to see how it will turn out.⁵²⁵

I feel happy when I’m doing something then its so beautiful.⁵²⁶

I feel so good because I like handwork and I’m so proud of what I’m doing... If you like something, its easy to reach it because you love it.⁵²⁷

Patience Ford put it this way “When I’m creating sometimes I’m deeply touched by the creation I’m taking out.... I feel great. Special.”⁵²⁸ She was interested in sewing work but initially did not know how to use a needle and thread. After she had mastered the skill, she began to enjoy it. When things are stressful in her life, either at the project or at home, she finds the needlework a good thing to do. She describes how the whole process helps her as a person: “It helps me. My inside. It’s like something is speaking to me.”⁵²⁹

⁵²¹ Mathemba Dladla, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, CAP, Weenen, Msinga, 21 March 2006.

⁵²² Caroline (surname unknown), interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal. She has since died.

⁵²³ Dora Dlamini, short interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵²⁴ Flora Phiri, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal. She has since died.

⁵²⁵ Yvauna Liesering, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵²⁶ Emily Kgomo, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵²⁷ Noluthando Sandlana, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵²⁸ Patience Ford, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, 29 October 2004, Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵²⁹ Patience Ford, same interview.

As the bulk of the work in these projects happens at home, it is done in the women's own time and according to their own motivation and interest.⁵³⁰ Several women talked about the protected space it affords them, how they will set aside a time where they will do their work, quietly and undisturbed, at night - even by candlelight. For one elderly woman, her beading and sewing time at home is a joyful peaceful time, when she feels comfortable, talks and listens to God. It is a time when she doesn't want to be disturbed. Her handwork is like a quiet time of meditation and communion. "You can talk with God because you are alone. Even at night, I do them. I do them, I pray and then I go to sleep...When I'm making them, I feel comfortable, I talk to God."⁵³¹

Others are aware of God's presence and accompaniment in what they are doing, speaking to God and the *amadlozi* of their happiness when creating - in companionship and as an acknowledgement and 'thank you'. For Sandlana, the good spirit that flows through her when creating motivates her to give more time, energy, patience and love to the things she is making.⁵³²

Seeing what they were capable of doing comes as a surprise to most women. Women remember their first days and first painful efforts. They relate how they learn, and the process of discovery when they apply their efforts and creativity to their craft. This process uncovers something joyful in themselves. The self-discovery of being able to do something creative, to produce something beautiful made from one's own's hands, is deeply satisfying, and helps to instil confidence in themselves. The sense of accomplishment and happiness that these women feel goes very deep, contrasting as it does with their impoverished beginnings, depression, isolation and for many, very low self-esteem.

Creative joy comes from the process of creating, and the wonder at the beautiful products they make from their own hands. Samantha Jones learned the skill of

⁵³⁰ Frequency of meetings varied across the groups from once a month to three times a week, depending on the project.

⁵³¹ 'Janet' (not her real name), interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, Realeko, Pietermaritzburg, 27 October 2005.

⁵³² Noluthando Sandlana, same interview.

embroidery stitch by stitch, graduating to ever bigger pieces of cloth. At first, working on a massive group tapestry called ‘Cosmic Creation’ she wondered how she was going to do it, and felt certain that she could not. “When I finished, I could not believe what I have done. I do something and then its beautiful. It keeps bringing out the best in you”, she reflects.⁵³³ Jones articulates how women feel moved by a new self-confidence, esteem and pride. They speak of the good feeling they get when others recognise and praise their work and the sense of accomplishment in learning and mastering new skills that they could not do before. Some say they are inspired by the creativity of someone else, and try to improve their own work. Creating brings out the best in themselves. One woman put it this way “I didn’t know I had it in me. It has helped me to grow spiritually and in confidence. I feel very proud – BIG.”⁵³⁴

The Relationship Between Spirituality and Creativity

Inspiration and Invocation

Questions of spirituality and creating are addressed, for many, in terms of invoking the help of God and/or the ancestors (*amadlozi*) in their work. Women say they pray for guidance so that their work is good, and accepted through the quality-control stage. Or they pray for someone to buy it so that they have means to care for their children and families. Women ask God to be with them specifically in their hands when they are doing their craft.

Please God help us when we are making this work. God help me with it. Go to my hands. Help me. Help *amadlozi*. I want to get the money to feed my family.⁵³⁵

Dependence on God is spoken about in all things, with an awareness of being helped in the work. Madlala Mbatha calls to her deceased husband to help her, trusting that he, the *amadlozi*, and God are with her in what she is doing. “God helps me. If the

⁵³³ Samantha Jones, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, Kopanang, Geluksdal, 29 October 2004.

⁵³⁴ Grace (surname unknown), interview conducted by Karen Buckenham, Kopanang, Geluksdal, 29 October 2004.

⁵³⁵ Kamasoka Dladla, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP in Weenen, Msinga.

work is coming right, I see God is helping. I call to my husband ‘Please help me in this work I am doing.’ By myself, I trust what I’m doing, trust *amadlozi* and I trust God.”⁵³⁶ Mamvelase Ndimande comments “All things are coming from God. I can see God helping me.”⁵³⁷ This trust and confidence in being accompanied in what they are doing is felt especially if the work is flowing and coming out well. At the same time, if the work is difficult and she is struggling, then God is also felt as present to help her, in response to her prayers and needs. For Ndimande, her needs include strength to get up in the morning. She struggles to find the strength to carry out even mundane activities, as she is not well.

Always I pray ‘Please *amadlozi*, help me, please God help me.’..I want to help my family, my children...I am the breadwinner. I am sick all the time but if I go to bed, I ask ‘God wake me this morning’. I use these words ‘God help me. If I am sick I can’t work.’ God is with me so I can work. Always my prayer is to better do my work.⁵³⁸

God and the *amadlozi* are intimately with her, strengthening her so that she can get up, do her handwork and feed her family.

Women ask for inspiration and help to do good work. The skill and handwork is often attributed to God and/or the *amadlozi* working in them, enabling the beauty of the work, and enabling them to gain an income.

Dreams are also a source of inspiration. Dladla shared a vivid dream she had, in response to her prayer to God to help her. She said she was so poor and so sad when she first started to make this craft, and prayed for help, so that she could see her children grow up. That night, she had a dream where the colours and patterns, and how to mix them were clearly shown. When she made the item as the dreams told her, her work was perfect. It was accepted without having to be reworked and she got the money she needed. She reflects, “I can see God is helping me and loves me. My children grow from this craftwork. They are going to school from the work of my

⁵³⁶ Madlala Mbatha, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP in Weenen, Msinga.

⁵³⁷ Mamvelase Ndimande, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP in Weenen, Msinga.

⁵³⁸ Mamvelase Ndimande, same interview.

hands.”⁵³⁹

A Gift from God, and Co-creators with God

Empowered by God to create, women speak about creating as God does because of God’s strength, ideas and opening of doors.⁵⁴⁰ One woman said that by creating, as a creator, she sees God in herself, and herself as an image of God.⁵⁴¹ There is a feeling of blessing, appreciation, and respect for the creating, and a love for it. “God gave me the knowledge and love for what I am doing and the respect for what I am doing” says Sophia Mpye.⁵⁴² For (Auntie) Dora Dlamini who embroidered a commissioned banner on the Islamic religion for a Church in the United States – a beautiful, complex and intricate piece - she sees that God gave her a gift, and a talent.⁵⁴³ Not having done anything with such complexity before, she is grateful and proud of this gift. Similarly, Nana Kieva attributes to God her creative gift of drawing and embroidery. She is asked to do drawings for ideas for the group, and clearly has a talent, though she did not go to school. She thanks God that she is able to use her mind to think and to do things that can bring her life, food and clothing.⁵⁴⁴

Giving Back: An Act of Gratitude and Worship

Some women describe giving something back to God while they are creating, thanking God for the gifts of creating - their hands, mind, eyes and talents. Many expressed this together with gratitude for the thing they have made, and that they are going to have something to sell. One woman talked about investing more of herself in what she is making, in terms of her time, energy and patience, as a form of giving back to God what she has been given in being able to create and make a living.

⁵³⁹ Kamasoka Dladla, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP in Weenen, Msinga.

⁵⁴⁰ Beatrice Esau, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal, East Rand.

⁵⁴¹ (name unspecified), group discussion with Karen Buckenham, 5 April 2006, Ikhwezi women’s group at Reichenau Mission, Underberg.

⁵⁴² Sophia Mpye, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006, at Kopanang.

⁵⁴³ (Auntie) Dora Dlamini, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal, East Rand.

⁵⁴⁴ Nana Kieva, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal. She has since died.

Another spoke of thanking God while she is making something because creating makes her feel so happy, and during it she feels the spirit of God and the *amadlozi* with her.

Learning to See

In terms of their artwork, some women describe being more aware of colour, shape, form, texture, patterns and composition because of their artistic creating. They see differently, have new eyes for perceiving the world, and think about how to intentionally manipulate and fit these features in the creation of their craft.⁵⁴⁵

Learning to see extends to the women's view of themselves as well. They learn to see themselves as worthy people, through their creating in the project. Just as women become more aware of the beauty in the world, they become aware of it in themselves. For Mary Tshabalala, the creating work has changed the way she sees herself. "I just feel great – confident – I am going to do this. I've learned that I believe in myself. I was not a person who knew that."⁵⁴⁶

The facilitator of Kopanang, Sr. Sheila Flynn, observes how the creative act taps into and explicates what is in the women's being already. She sees women becoming aware, and free to accept themselves; simultaneously unselfconscious and joyful at what they are discovering. "Looking at and exploring 'what I can do' frees a person" she says. "It inspires a sense of wonder. Women are freed not to judge or compare themselves alongside others."⁵⁴⁷ They see what they can do and are happy to learn and grow, and see their sisters do the same.

Case Studies

In this section, I look in greater detail at two of the projects from very different contexts. The first is the Kopanang Women's Group, a fluid group (in terms of

⁵⁴⁵ Beatrice Esau, same interview.

⁵⁴⁶ Mary Tshabalala, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 15 March 2006 at Kopanang, Geluksdal.

⁵⁴⁷ Sr. Sheila Flynn, same personal conversation.

membership) which brings together women representing twelve different cultures from historically divided communities, from the townships of Geluksdal and Tsakane on the Far East Rand (Brakpan area) in Gauteng. The second is the Church Agricultural Project (CAP) Women's Group, a group of traditional Zulu women who have been together a long time, located at Mdukatshani, a deep rural area in Weenen, Msinga, in the interior of KwaZulu-Natal. Both of these groups demonstrate an inseparable relationship between the women's wellbeing, sense of life and affirmation of their human dignity, their support and solidarity with other women, their creating and handwork, and their ability to gain some income.

Kopanang Women's Group

Kopanang Women's Group is a vibrant and successful crafting project. There is energy in the group - a positive attitude, respect, and truth in how they deal with one another - reflected in the explosions of colour in their embroidered work. I spoke with forty-six women over two visits, one-and-a-half years apart. The first visit was arranged through Sr. Sheila Flynn, and I stayed with the Dominican sisters in Geluksdal for three days, visiting the project during the day. While my contact was with Flynn, the second visit was arranged by the women in the project. I stayed in Tsakane with the family of Mary Tshabalala for three days. My second visit was meant to deepen the interviews, but it was postponed for over a year as the women worked through some issues in the project. When I returned, many of the old members had left and there were new ones. The twelve longer individual interviews thus include some new members whom I had not spoken with before. Where necessary, Tshabalala translated.

Kopanang is part of 'Sithand'izingane' - we love the children - a project that cares for children orphaned by AIDS.⁵⁴⁸ It was formed when a group of women from St. Paul's Catholic Church in Tsakane and St. Martin's Catholic Church in Geluksdal came together to reach out and care for needy children. Kopanang Women's Group took

⁵⁴⁸ The project is multi-faceted, including a daycare centre for AIDS affected children and their mothers, a food garden project that teaches men how to create a backyard garden to grow their own healthy food, a counselling centre around HIV and AIDS, rape crisis and accompaniment to those who are in the last stages of AIDS, and the women's income-generating project Kopanang.

shape in 2003, at the request of women from the community who were looking to create employment. Sheila Flynn, a Dominican religious sister and a formally-trained artist, shared her own gifts and began to train some of the women in embroidery.⁵⁴⁹ Sewing and needlework was something some of the women already had a familiarity with, so it started there.

Women from Kopanang come from two historically divided communities - Tsakane, a black township of approximately 72,000 people from different cultural backgrounds, and Geluksdal, a coloured township of 7,000 people. Both townships were set up during the apartheid era to provide cheap labour for the mines and factories in Johannesburg, about 55 km away. These have closed down, escalating the poverty and unemployment. This area, called Brakpan, has the highest rate of unemployment on the East Rand, with approximately 80% of the people unemployed.⁵⁵⁰ “Most people lack the ability to get an education, obtain healthcare, and learn skills to find a job. Employment opportunities are not available and poverty and hunger are the norm,” worsening the impact of HIV and AIDS.⁵⁵¹ Many people are dying, and orphaned children are abandoned to the streets.

The environment reflects the harshness, and the lack of respect extended to the dignity of people’s lives. It is seen in the ugly landscape of mine dumps all over the flat plains - enormous dusty mountains of earth left over from gold excavation in other parts of Gauteng that have been dumped in this area.⁵⁵² The overflowing graveyard on the edge of Tsakane is a daily reminder of the lives lost to AIDS. While there is formal housing, the thousands of shack-homes people have erected are not serviced by any infrastructure. Even the lack of easily available fresh healthy affordable food reflects the poverty.⁵⁵³ It is an area of South Africa which has

⁵⁴⁹ See Figures 42 + 43. As an artist, Sheila Flynn believes that artmaking is holistic, that it brings everything together in a person. She has a deep and living spirituality which undergirds her commitment to the women. She takes courage from them too, their sacrifices for their children, and their ability to go on, to carry on for the sake of their children. She says that there is a difference between an attitude or belief in needing to ‘fix it’ versus being present with and accepting pain. Sheila Flynn, same personal conversation.

⁵⁵⁰ From the Kopanang/Sithand’izingane pamphlet, 2004.

⁵⁵¹ Kopanang Information Sheet 2004.

⁵⁵² See Figure 44.

⁵⁵³ There is a massive warehouse-like shop that serves the communities of KwaThema, Duduza,

experienced much violence.⁵⁵⁴

Coming from a context of despair, diminishment, poverty and depression, most of the women arrive at the project with very little self-confidence or belief in themselves. Often neglecting themselves, they make sacrifices in order to feed their children. They carry a great deal of pain.⁵⁵⁵

The group is described as an environment of care and human development, first and foremost, with skills development secondary. Their work is about relationships. The project "...allows women to share life experiences while acquiring new income generating skills," the Kopanang pamphlet reads. "It is about wonder and creativity in the midst of struggle and poverty."⁵⁵⁶ In the context of mutual support, and employment, a space is created in which women share their life stories, faith and cultures. They pray for the spirit of love. Their work is infused with prayer. Communication and right relationships are very important to the growth of the women and the functioning of the group, so conflict resolution and communication training are part of the programme. They talk about what is happening inside them, as women. They share experiences that are hard on them, in their lives and in the group, and learn to speak such difficult things such as "I was feeling rejected" instead of acting out the pain to the destruction of the group. Flynn reflects, "It is not an easy road."⁵⁵⁷

Development is fraught with frustration and setbacks. The grind to get beyond

Langeville, Tsakane. Stocked floor to ceiling with processed foods, there are no fruit and vegetables available. These we found after a 10 km drive to another township, and the cost was very high. Urban poverty is reflected in the kinds of foods that are both accessible and affordable. It also shows the importance of the lush vegetable gardens attached to the Sithand'izingane project. The food is grown to assist families and children from the community who are destitute, and to assist the children who are HIV positive so that they get proper nutrition.

⁵⁵⁴ This area was the site of horrendous political violence in the 1990's between supporters of ANC and IFP. Centred in hostels for migrant labourers, the conflicts spread throughout the townships. Flynn said that people/services do not come out there even today as they are afraid. Services such as computer repairs, locksmiths, and so on, are 'do-it-yourself'. A visitor to the Project was warned by her city host and about 20 other people they visited during their trip that they would be hijacked, raped and killed in the East Rand. While her husband stayed behind, this woman from Germany came, and was moved to tears by the welcome and hospitality she received. Sheila Flynn, same personal conversation.

⁵⁵⁵ Sheila Flynn, same personal conversation.

⁵⁵⁶ Kopanang pamphlet 2004.

⁵⁵⁷ Kopanang Women's Group information sheet 2004.

the concept of entitlement which is corrosive to the spirit and culture of individualism, so closely aligned to the negative spirit, or to develop the structures of a sustainable future in the project, are experiences which need to be met head on. They are used to only being able to live in the moment, often a very dark one. Also, the sheer hard work and commitment it takes to move beyond the boundaries of endemic despair or the experience of worthlessness common to township life, is daunting. Yet Kopanang women are determined to shape the future of their lives and their families.⁵⁵⁸

They are a heterogenous group, culturally, linguistically and geographically, reflecting the migration of communities for work. In the project, the women cross cultural boundaries and prejudice. As women encounter each other, get to know one another, and care for one another, they create a new kind of community. As they accompanied members with AIDS, women speak of learning how to do so with love with compassion instead of fear. They learn about themselves and their own patterns, strengths and weaknesses in relating to people and how to handle conflict honestly and constructively so it doesn't poison the group. Others spoke of the joy of building relationships across apartheid cultural divides and having a fuller experience of life as a result.

Kopanang women learn to develop their art skills and create products for sale, primarily through embroidery, quilting, papermaking and wirework.⁵⁵⁹ The artwork is done with care - people are expected to make excellent work, and quality control is ensured. Specific women have the task of checking the quality of work submitted. The women are paid according to the work done, and work that does not meet the standard is sent back to do again. Most of the women start out as beginners. With little exception, they spoke of having no belief in their own skill or creativity at the beginning. It was a struggle to learn their craft, and yet, little by little the competence and confidence develops. Embroidered bags, stoles and pillow covers have designs that are created by two of the women, and each woman decides the kind of stitching and colours she will use. In addition to the crafts, the women learn leadership and management skills and take turns in different leadership positions, elected by their peers. The learning programmes lead to nationally accredited certificates.

⁵⁵⁸ Kopanang Women's Group information sheet, 2004.

⁵⁵⁹ See Figures 45-53.

This group is a ‘best practice’ model of how things can work, and members are now often asked to share their experience and learnings with other groups, even across Africa. This cross-cultural sharing with others has become an important part of their vision.

In addition to their ‘bread and butter’ work, women in *Kopanang* have completed large tapestries that have been exhibited around the world. Their first group tapestry depicts the story of the Universe called ‘the Universe Canticle’. A massive body of work measuring over 35 metres long, it toured the US for over six years, eventually with a view to being housed in a museum. Another important commission was to embroider eight large banners representing all of the world’s religions for the First Universalist Church of San Francisco in the USA. Women who had never even picked up a needle and thread years before, designed and embroidered the banners.⁵⁶⁰ They are outstanding works of art, inspired and colourful in design, with excellent craftsmanship.

Attractive in colour and composition, these banners are described as ‘a witness to hope’ as they required more of the women than they thought they were capable of. Meeting these demands and creating this beautiful work brought out a deep confidence and joy in the women, contributing to their sense of dignity and possibility. None of these women ever thought they would be able to do something like that. Flynn explains how, from the women’s contexts of being deprived of full education by poverty, both bodies of work “demanded stretching their boundaries of knowledge and creativity ...and learning new ways of looking at our world.”⁵⁶¹

This group has fostered a way of working together that instils a deep sense of dignity. The belief in the sacredness of each person and practice of this in their relationships with each other spills over to the way they work together. They take to heart the principle of celebrating their own creativity and that of their companions, with a

⁵⁶⁰ See Figures 54-60.

⁵⁶¹ Sheila Flynn, ‘Creativity as a Vehicle for Hope - 6th April 2006’, 10th Anniversary CINDI Conference 3-7 April 2006, Pietermaritzburg.

conscious awareness that comparing or judging themselves, their skill or level or product alongside another, blocks the openness to creativity and blocks learning. They approach the creative work with a sense of wonder. They take joy in one another's work and in what another person can create.⁵⁶²

Through their project, Kopanang women develop their identity as women made in the image of God - as individuals, in their families and a community. It is not so easy because they come from different cultural backgrounds and there are conflicts, but they confront issues and support each other. As they tap into their creativity and develop their skills through the process of creating, they develop their identity and confidence, self-esteem, initiative, and dreams for themselves and their children. Through the work of their own hands, the transformation of their lives from their own endeavours, and engagement with others, they become more fully alive. They believe in themselves and the possibility of a better life, restoring hope and beauty to their lives and future. They are a witness to the power of creating, and community, to bring about transformation and new life out of brokenness and despair.

Church Agricultural Project (CAP)

This women's crafting group, located in a deep rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, has been working successfully together for over 30 years. While they are very poor and come together to make handcraft, the strength of their project is the mutual support and relationships they share. The women's group is part of the larger Church Agricultural Project (CAP) in Msinga, an NGO that works with communities on tribal land on agriculture, development, and in recent years, AIDS education.⁵⁶³ I met with nine women - five who had been with the group from the beginning and four who were newer to the project.

⁵⁶² Sheila Flynn, same personal conversation.

⁵⁶³ According to Rauri Alcock, manager of CAP, Msinga has fallen through the cracks in HIV awareness. People live at such vast distances that programmes, like those originating from the Church of Scotland in Tugela Ferry for example, can reach only some of the people. CAP initiated its own actions, integrating AIDS education into its agricultural programme. K. Palitza. 2005. Culture Stronger Than Death, 9 Feb, *Mail and Guardian Online*, <http://www.mg.co.za>. (Accessed 16 April 2009).

The only person in the area with a landline telephone is Creina Alcock, the founder and facilitator of the group. She arranged the visit with the women, welcomed us and made introductions. She shared background information about the project, including how she came to be there, and some of the context of the women's lives. The interviews were translated by Natty Duma, a member of the group who is educated and speaks English fluently.⁵⁶⁴

The region of Msinga and the history of the area have the reputation of being a turbulent, violent and lawless place - known for gun-running, marijuana trade and high levels of crime. It is a conservative area controlled by six tribal authorities. For generations, it has experienced family or tribal feuding, and then political violence at the end of the apartheid years. Being a deep Zulu rural area, at the time of political transition in the 1980's and 90's, if people had any political leanings at all, they tended to support Inkatha.⁵⁶⁵ The history is reflected in the wild and powerful geography and vegetation - a landscape of hills, valleys, aloes and the mighty Tugela River. It is a dry, rocky and hilly region, with a population of 160 000 people spread over 1800 square kilometres.⁵⁶⁶

The project is located on the site of an old farm - an area spanning 2500 hectares - between Tugela Ferry and Weenen, both traditional areas intermixed with white farms - most of which have been abandoned.⁵⁶⁷ It is quite isolated and it would have been very difficult for me to find the farm had I not been met and accompanied from Tugela Ferry. The CAP centre consists of a large hut with two rooms - one part is for the land work done by CAP (coordinated by Alcock's son Rauri Alcock), and the other room is used for the beading group.

CAP began in 1965, working with Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran farms. In 1975, the Chairman's Fund of Anglo-American purchased the farm in the Weenen area to provide a headquarters for the project. Creina and her husband Neil Alcock moved

⁵⁶⁴ See Figures 61 + 62.

⁵⁶⁵ Alcock, C. (khonya@yebo.co.za) 23 May 2009. *Second Letter from Creina* . email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

⁵⁶⁶ 'Culture Stronger Than Death'.

⁵⁶⁷ 'Culture Stronger Than Death' .

there. The move to Weenen meant that CAP's focus changed from church land to tribal land.⁵⁶⁸ Neil Alcock died during their time there, and despite being alone with two young sons, Creina stayed on.⁵⁶⁹

Most of the families in Msinga struggle to live. There is little employment in the area - 45 % of Msinga's economically active population is unemployed, half of the households have income less than R18 000 per year, and 70% of the population are illiterate.⁵⁷⁰ The main breadwinner often works in a city - such as the mines in Johannesburg or in Durban or Pietermaritzburg. The wives left behind - sometimes more than one wife in a polygamous marriage - have no employment. Wanting to do something to support themselves and their families, the women approached Creina Alcock to help them. Beading is a traditional craft, and together with Alcock - who has contacts, ideas about design, marketing, and quality - they began the beading project to earn some income.

The norms, religious practices and family arrangements reflect traditional Zulu custom and culture. The *amadlozi*, who are present in all aspects of life, are invoked for protection, good health and well-being, good harvest, for means to live, and provision to feed and educate their children. In the context of the art-making, both the *amadlozi* and God are experienced as present, and are offered prayers by the women for help, success, and gratitude - to be in their hands, guiding them in the making of their craft, for ideas and inspiration, health, energy and well-being to do the work, for good craftsmanship, income and commissions, and for fellowship and care amongst the women in the group. The *amadlozi* include three women of the group who have died. Their photographs keep them present to the group; they are talked to and their help is requested as if they are present in body as well as spirit.

They do not often accept visitors to the project for reasons of temperament and

⁵⁶⁸ Alcock, C. (khonya@yebo.co.za). 23 May 2009. *Second Letter from Creina*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

⁵⁶⁹ Mandela Mvelase comments "If Creina didn't arrive with work, I don't know what we would do. Creina came to help and opened my eyes. Creina stayed when her husband died. We were so worried that she'd leave. She is a brave woman and believed God." (Mandela Mvelase, same interview).

⁵⁷⁰ 'Culture Stronger Than Death'.

security, Alcock explains. When visitors come, it gives the indication that there are sales and therefore money on the premises, and they have had robberies and burglaries because of this. The other reason relates to their way of being together. Alcock sees NGO's easily becoming oriented toward visitors, outward-looking and entertaining people who want to learn. CAP is more inward-looking, as the women feel a need to have time to be amongst themselves.⁵⁷¹

During my day-long visit, they extended an extraordinary spirit of welcome and hospitality, and I experienced the sense of community, simplicity, peacefulness, joy and solidarity amongst the women. They have known one another for a long time - over 40 years some of them - and have lived through much suffering and hard times. Through this, they know and carry one another's stories, and are very close. Being together lifts their spirits immensely. There is a spirit of respect, openness and life blowing naturally through how they relate to one another, and even how they shared their stories with me. They are bonded together, Alcock explains, by the common experience of violence and tragedy.⁵⁷² This became apparent during the interview discussions. All of their reflections on creating and spirituality are in terms of the circumstances and events of their lives. The women relate stories of hunger, accidents, political or criminal violence, or AIDS.⁵⁷³ They have lost husbands, children, brothers and sisters, friends, parents, and members of the extended family.

The women make beautiful items out of copper wire and beads.⁵⁷⁴ They have come up with original, creative concepts to use the traditional crafting knowledge in new ways, making ornaments and bowls. It is detailed work that has commissions locally and from all over the world.⁵⁷⁵

Many of the women spoke specifically about using their hands - that the process and

⁵⁷¹ Alcock, C. (khonya@yebo.co.za) 23 May 2009. *Second Letter from Creina*. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

⁵⁷² Creina Alcock, personal conversation with Karen Buckenham, CAP, Weenen, Msinga on 21 March 2006.

⁵⁷³ HIV and AIDS, together with cultural beliefs, has had devastating consequences to families, agriculture and the economy in Msinga. See footnote 8.

⁵⁷⁴ See Figure 63-64.

⁵⁷⁵ A pot was bought on behalf of former President Thabo Mbeki by the Department of Foreign Affairs as a gift to a foreign head of state.

ability to use their hands to make these beautiful things that enable them to live is a joy and a blessing. Gosi Mvelase, a young woman, put it this way

When I am holding my craft, God must be with me with my hands. When I am doing my work, I say 'God I am so happy when doing my work.' My work is beautiful. When I do my work, God is with me. At the end I can get the money to feed my family.⁵⁷⁶

The women do most of the work at home. Alcock gives instructions, and the women decide on their own colours and designs. They come together regularly from the vast distances where they live, to bring in their work. The quality is checked by Alcock, and the women are paid accordingly. If there are commissions, they get income. If there are no orders, they do not. Yet even if there is no money, coming together in the project lifts all of their spirits, and has created greater meanings that reach deeply into all of the women.

All of the women speak of overwhelming tragedies that have touched their lives. Maduma Dladla has endured much sorrow, as seven of the nine people in her family - her mother, sisters, brothers - all became sick and died.⁵⁷⁷ Gosi Mvelase's mother - a founding member of the group - was struck by lightning, and her father died after succumbing to illness.⁵⁷⁸ Magizela Dladla's husband was shot.⁵⁷⁹ Mafastela Mdlolo lost her husband and two children, all of whom died of AIDS.⁵⁸⁰ Violence has taken Kamasoka Dladla's loved ones - her friend was shot, and then her son was shot.⁵⁸¹ Mandlala Mvelase lost three of her nine children. Two died from illnesses, and another was shot together with her mother-in-law.⁵⁸²

Mamvelase Ndimande, a long-time member of the group, describes how being

⁵⁷⁶ Gosi Mvelase, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga.

⁵⁷⁷ Maduma Dladla, same interview.

⁵⁷⁸ Gosi Mvelase, same interview.

⁵⁷⁹ Magizela Dladla, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga

⁵⁸⁰ Mafastela Mdlolo, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga.

⁵⁸¹ Kamasoka Dladla, same interview.

⁵⁸² Mandlala Mvelase, interview conducted by Karen Buckenham on 21 March 2006 at CAP, Weenen, Msinga

together has helped her through much shock and grief. Four of her children became sick and died. Her husband was shot and killed in the Shell House massacre, one of the nineteen IFP members who were killed by ANC security guards when they marched to Shell House, home of the ANC in Johannesburg on 28 March 1994. The massacre reflected the rising tensions between the ANC and IFP that started in the 1980's in KwaZulu-Natal, spreading to the other provinces in the 1990's during the transition to democracy.⁵⁸³ Up until a few days before the elections on 27 April 1994, the IFP was refusing to participate, and tense negotiations were going on. Tensions were extremely high in the country, especially in KwaZulu-Natal. Ndimande remembers that time and the fear she felt as April was coming. She had made preparations for the long-awaited arrival of her husband when she heard the terrible shocking news that he had been killed. She reflects,

...if you hear the husband has died, you can't hear, you can't see. I was waiting for my husband to come home. He wasn't sick. It was so painful...On 1 April I got the message in the morning. I was all ready, cleaned the house, was sitting outside doing the work...My husband died at Shell House.⁵⁸⁴

Being with the other women in the crafting group helped with her spirit and restoring her life. She said that working together with the other women, the pain starts to go away. It is possible to grieve and cry, to take it out of oneself.⁵⁸⁵

Madlala Mbatha, an older woman, is also a long-time member of the group. AIDS has ravaged her family. She lost her husband, two sons and a daughter-in-law. When her husband was sick, her involvement with the project and the income it brings her helped her to take care of her husband and get him to doctors. Through all of this sorrow, belonging to the group gives her relief from her thoughts and depression.

[When my husband died] my son was also sick with AIDS and died. At home, I stayed by myself and was worried and when I came to work all the time I could feel this thing going out. I lost two sons and a daughter-in-law. I was thinking very deeply at home...I started to get BP [high blood pressure], alone

⁵⁸³ South African History Online. 19 Die At Shellhouse Massacre. *South African History Online*, www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/thisday/1994-03-28.htm. (Accessed 5 May 2009).

⁵⁸⁴ Mamvelase Ndimande, same interview.

⁵⁸⁵ Mamvelase Ndimande, same interview.

thinking and thinking with all the problems...With other women, the spirit is coming near.⁵⁸⁶

Working together, being together, sharing with the other women and caring for one another helps them to cope and to heal. Being together is the most important thing they spoke about. The heart becomes able to bear the pain, and the sadness, depression, confusion, miserable isolation and feelings of being crushed lifts. Even if there is no money, even if there is sickness and grief, because they are together, they say, the heart is able to feel happiness and joy, “the spirit returns”.

When we discuss, the spirit comes back. If you work with your hands, working and are speaking with other women, this spirit is working. What is bad is to stay alone - you never stop thinking.⁵⁸⁷

Being with others brings solidarity and awareness that they are not alone. “When we are together, all the things that have been happening to my family come off my shoulders. I believe and think of God and spirit and *amadlozi*”, says Mdlolo.⁵⁸⁸

The women all spoke of the shock, despair, and heaviness of their sorrow, and how being with the other women helped to bring them back to life. In the group, the sadness is held, the depression is lifted, the spirit returns. Their creative work is made and interwoven with these three realities – the deep human suffering, the transcendent spirit of joy and love, and solidarity in sisterhood. This is in the work and behind the work. Together, they are creating work and ways of being that are life-affirming and transforming.

Discussion: Creating, Aliveness and Full Life

In this section, I look at several aspects of the creative process for crafting women. First, as discussed with artists, the very act of creating is a sort of ‘incarnation’, as it embodies their lives, struggles, visions, and points to the source of their creating, God. It relates to their spirituality, and ethical issues of the development of right

⁵⁸⁶ Madlala Mbatha, same interview.

⁵⁸⁷ Kamaso Dladla, same interview.

⁵⁸⁸ Mafastela Mdlolo, same interview.

relations - with themselves and with others. The crafting community is discussed as a 'bearer of the beautiful', a locus and witness of the divine.

Creating: Theology, Psychology and Spirituality

Incarnation and Embodiment

As with the artists in chapters four and five, the creativity of women in crafting projects can be seen as a pointer toward the meaning of the Incarnation. They wrestle with the materials and find physical form to contain the particularity of what they are living. In each stitch or bead, their contexts find form, or embodiment. The very artwork points to something deeper and transcendent to what is literally apparent in the product.⁵⁸⁹

Being and Belonging

The artmaking can be seen through the lens of meeting needs for being and belonging, proposed by Crowther.⁵⁹⁰ The act of creating something through the interaction with the material world, and making a tangible, visible object that contains something of who they are, is an act that affirms their existence. It is received and interacted with by others, recognised as an artefact that comes from their being and their hands.

There is something that is unique to art-making, or creative work done with the hands. As was seen, many women spoke about the significance of using their hands to make something new. It seems to be something very intimate. Even in community, it is a personal thing. Ford describes how it opens and intimacy with someone or something inside of her. "It helps me. My inside. It's like something is speaking to me."⁵⁹¹ While it is difficult to interpret objectively her subjective experience, the creating affirms her, communicates with her and brings her to a new place in who she is.

⁵⁸⁹ Hart, 'Through the Arts', p. 3.

⁵⁹⁰ Crowther, *Art as Embodiment*, pp.7-10.

⁵⁹¹ Patience Ford, same interview.

In the creating and articulation of their lives ‘behind’ and ‘through’ the craft, the crafting embodies the women’s lives and realities. While not necessarily obvious unless the context of their lives is communicated, it is a witness - a tactile physical object - that is made visible to others about the truth of their lives and being. It contains their being and the whole context of their lives.

Becoming

Recalling that perspectives in creation theology see all things in the process of becoming, creativity and creating are part of the process where human beings are participating in this divine creative energy. In creating, we are participating in the process of becoming and actualising the potential that we are. We are unfolding the life within us.⁵⁹²

For women in the crafting groups, accustomed to much hardship, dehumanising circumstances, and mental and emotional depression, the process of becoming entails finding a way out the darkness to a place of hope. It means finding out more of who they are and what they are capable of. In the lives of the women interviewed, their creating has guided them into a new world, new images of themselves, new confidence and a new spirit of life.

Developing themselves as creators who can make a difference and as leaders responsible for their project has shifted many of the women out of feeling like passive victims sinking under the weight of their burdens, to feeling they can actively affect their own lives. Through the ability of their work to bring in income, together with the acclaim it has garnered and the new spirit they carry within them, many of the women have gained new respect for themselves as well as from their families and their community.

Creative Fear and Joy

⁵⁹² Griffin, ‘Creativity in Post-modern Religion’, p. 69, and pp. 70-75. Mitias, *Creativity in Art*, p. 1. Fox, *Original Blessing*, p.185. See chapter three for a full discussion.

Trying something new, facing the fear within and overcoming it, challenging themselves to do a new thing and sticking with it despite fear or lack of confidence, has had a ripple effects for all aspects of their lives. It has opened up feelings of possibility and accomplishment, and the experience of making life-giving choices that affect their own lives and those of their families.

Developing their capabilities and seeing that they can create beautiful things from their own hands has built confidence, self-esteem, self-determination, and affirmation of themselves and others. They discover their own creativity and giftedness, their own value and ability to provide for themselves and those they love. They come to a new consciousness about who they are, what their life is about, what they are capable of. It is linked to love - a slow process of learning how to love oneself, where one has been broken and dehumanised.

Creative joy is evident in the women's reflections. They experience an expansiveness and confidence in working with their craft. Reasons for this are multi-faceted - it brings income, is something beautiful made by their own hands, it is pleasing to others, is a skill they have worked to master, and it is made in a space and place of encounter with God. The joy is there, and together with other aspects of the project, it changes them, encourages them and gives them strength. In the context of these discussions, it is difficult to separate feelings of joy in creating from the 'stake', of their relationships and solidarity in the project.

As discussed in chapters four and five, Ehrenzweig's psychological theory of the creating process sees both fear and joy occurring as the result of deep encounter with oneself and the world.⁵⁹³ Fragments of the personality, even unrecognised and unwanted parts are projected into the work, made conscious. And then the conscious mind needs to order the ideas that have been brought out from inside. Even though the work of these women seems to be routine in some ways, and the conceptual ideas are generated by the group or facilitator, the creative process of encounter with self and with the world is in their process. This is seen in areas such as openness to

⁵⁹³ Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art*, pp. 117-119.

inspiration, the feeling that something is ‘speaking to me’ from the inside, in their feeling of the presence of the Divine in the creating process, and that their hands are a locus and vehicle for manifesting this presence.

There is an added dimension, too, in that this encounter occurs within a communal context. The medium and the ‘container’ for the encounter and struggle is three-fold: self, the materials, and the community of presence, love and support.

The Crafting Community as a Locus for Healing

As was seen, the opportunity to be with other women is deeply affirming. The crafting context and work provides a safe space to tell their story and to share both the burdens and sorrows with others. It is a healing space, changing perceptions, thoughts and spirits. Hope returns.

Working together with other women, and helping others to grow has had an enormous impact on their emotional, psychological and spiritual lives. Many women talked about being pulled out of a destructive darkness, where they were feeling crushed by their problems. In the process of their creative work, sharing their stories, they find hope, healing and solidarity with other women.

Through the creating, the sacredness, dignity and fullness of who they are unfolds in their lives. It is in this process that we see some of the healing power of the creativity that psychoanalysts such as May observe - that it heals and enlarges human consciousness.⁵⁹⁴ Development does not fix pain and suffering, creating does not end it. But perhaps what happens as these women create together and encounter what is within and pressing in on them in the world, and being present to one another in this encounter, the brokenness can mend, even if the outer forces and circumstances of struggle and hardship seem to remain unchanged or beyond their control.

Nonetheless, their crafting does affect outer forces, I suggest, though not obviously

⁵⁹⁴ May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1975).

nor immediately. It is a witness to their lives, a witness to what needs to change, and a witness to possibility and hope.

While for the artists, creating is predominantly a solitary activity motivated by internal impulses and images, for the crafting women the initial motivation is the need to have their basic needs met and for support for their lives. As they come together in groups to create, this solidarity is pivotal element of their creating experience. This solidarity and community is not only a space of encounter of one another - and a space where their harsh encounters with life can be held and woven into the creation of something new and beautiful – it is a space that fosters new awareness of who they are, the forces pressing in upon them and what they can do about it. This is an ethical process.

Ethics

Wholeness: Right Relations with Self and Others

In the introductory chapter, Oduyoye describes wholeness in terms of “all that makes for fullness of life, and makes people celebrate life.”⁵⁹⁵ This includes good health and integrity of the body, powers to procreate, needs to live, and victory over death-dealing forces.

The crafting process and involvement helps these women grow toward wholeness in many ways – first, as they become aware of their dignity, worthiness, sacredness, capabilities and potential. Second, they resist the dehumanisation of poverty, oppression, low self-value and ill-being. They move from being crushed under their circumstances with the paralysing depression and isolation of being victims. Forms of resistance need not be obvious activism, but in the context of survival, they include the choices and strategies of everyday life to make a way out of no way.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁵ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 34.

⁵⁹⁶ Haddad writes how marginalized black women's struggles for survival are as important forms of resistance as organized political movements, and indeed, these acts of survival ensured the survival of families and communities. Haddad, 'African Women's Theologies of Survival', pp. 339 – 340.

Third, they organise together to create something new – not only the product, but ways of being a community of personal and social transformation. They become self-determining in their belief in themselves, their ability to care for themselves and their loved ones. They become aware that they are made in the image of God, are valuable, with a unique creativity and contribution to make to the world. They are able to effect their own lives and the lives of others.

This is an ethical process, a process whereby they become self-determining subjects in their own lives. “Women and all oppressed people become subjects when they recognise the ropes of subjugation which bind them and work to break their power,” writes Rakoczy.⁵⁹⁷ This process enables and “...empowers women to reclaim their God-given identity and moral agency.”⁵⁹⁸

The Crafting Community as a Locus of Resistance and Transformation

For the crafting women, their community ethos and solidarity with other women is an important part of this. The community is a place where the women experience and extend *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* conveys a way of relating amongst people that is about humanness and wholeness of the person in relationship with other people.⁵⁹⁹

Undergirded by this religio-cultural value, in Africa, women’s organisations serve as “... a source of strength for women and of sustenance for the rest of the community...”⁶⁰⁰ Church women’s groups in African communities have played an important role in women’s personal, familial, community and spiritual survival.⁶⁰¹ In

Drawing on Haddad, Stott sees the storytelling, embroidery and healing of women in the crafting communities of *Amazwi Abefazane* as forms of resistance in their survival. ‘The Reconstitution’, p. 3.

⁵⁹⁷ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 279.

⁵⁹⁸ Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, p. 280.

⁵⁹⁹ Julius Gathogo, ‘African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu’ in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 130, March 2008, pp. 39-53. Gathogo disaggregates meanings and outworking of *ubuntu* in response to different contexts and conflicts in Africa. For example; how it relates to power, patriarchy and oppression of women; ethnic conflict; poverty, and corruption. He suggests that *ubuntu* is primarily a value that is shown toward people in one’s own group.

⁶⁰⁰ Mercy A. Oduyoye, ‘Foreward’ in Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo*, p. ix.

⁶⁰¹ See foreexample, Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo*; B. Haddad, ‘The Mother’s Union in South Africa:

South Africa, women's groups, guilds, or *manyanos* regularly meet, sharing their lives and concerns, strengthening each other, nourishing one another in Christ, and exploring their experience of God. They pray, care for the sick, orphans and vulnerable people, organise, strategise, educate, and seek to change things for the better. These groups play a significant role in resisting forces of oppression and subjugation – such as colonialism and patriarchy, apartheid, pressures of poverty and unemployment, political violence and HIV and AIDS.⁶⁰² They are powerful agents of personal and social transformation.

The crafting groups are a similar locus. They demonstrate an African women's ethic of resistance and transformation.⁶⁰³ This is an ethic that reflects women's perspectives, experiences and moral agency against a social context of oppression, domination, discrimination, control and dehumanisation. It is an ethic that "...aims to bring life into the concrete, everyday experience, and to discover what it means to be human."⁶⁰⁴ The ethical process in the creating women's lives in this chapter is demonstrated in how they come to a new understanding of their situation and themselves, growing to resist and transform forces of oppression and destruction in their lives.

Theology and Beauty

Returning to the question 'what does beauty have to do with justice?', in these women's stories, we see Beauty being revealed in many ways. Beauty is revealed in the work they produce, particularly in the witness of it to the sacredness of their lives, in their encounter with the dignity and holiness within themselves and their movement toward bringing more of this into the realities of their lives. It is revealed

Untold Stories of Faith, Survival and Resistance," in Isabel A. Phiri, Devrakshanam B. Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2002), pp. 101-117.

⁶⁰² Haddad, Beverly, 'The Mothers' Union in South Africa', pp. 101-117. In Zimbabwe, my mother-in-law heads the *manyano* women's group at the Lutheran church, and their Gwai Grandmother's Group who care for orphans and child-headed households in the vast rural area of Mberengwa. Ten grandmothers search for, visit, feed, cloth, school and provide emotional, psychological and spiritual care for hundreds of children from the village. Inspired by their work, twelve other grandmother's groups in the region have formed.

⁶⁰³ Njoroge, *Kiama, Kia Ngo*, p. 156.

⁶⁰⁴ Njoroge, *Kiama, Kia Ngo*, p. 156.

in the communal spirit, joy and way of relating that changes their lives, enables them to live, opens new visions, and affirms that they move forward in life with others who care about them and have a common vision of the possibility and right to dignity, freedom from oppression, and life.

Encountering Beauty Within

The women in these crafting groups encounter and reveal the Beauty of God in themselves, one another and in their groups. This is seen in the development of their dignity and self-determination, their ability to emerge from feeling like victims to provide for their own needs and those of their families, their courage, self-value and confidence, and their joy. Creating in these groups heals their lives in many ways, bringing them to a new wholeness and fullness of life. It contributes to their physical, psychological and spiritual well-being.

The Crafting Community as a Bearer of the Beautiful

As a locus for resistance, liberation and transformation, Alejandro Garcia Rivera's perspective of the struggling, justice-seeking and life-seeking community as a bearer of the beautiful is compelling. Anchored in the theme of 'uplifting of the lowly', he contemplates the human condition of suffering, yearning, solidarity and community in the context of Latin America, a people struggling to come out from under oppression and suffering, and transform their lives and those of others.⁶⁰⁵ The resistance, hope and faith of the people as a community - accompanied by God in this - are bearers of the beautiful, revealers of the Beauty or Glory of God.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁵ Alejandro Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), pp.187-196. Garcia Rivera refers to the Magnificat.

⁶⁰⁶ Garcia Rivera interprets the story of the suffering people of Latin America in terms of the biblical story of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego. The trio are a faithful community of people who resist the edicts of the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar, and are thrown into the fire for their resistance. And yet in there, in their commitment to their struggle for good and resistance to the coercive powers, they claim who they are. They are in the fire, yet there is freedom, there is visible joy. They find too that they are accompanied and protected by an angel of the Lord. Lifted up by God, they discern and experience divine Beauty in the experience of the 'lifting up the lowly' in the fire. They are deeply affected. But not only them. The vision disturbs and changes King Nebuchadnezzar - the outsider, the one with the worldly power. His eyes and imagination - the spiritual senses - are opened through the movement of God, and his heart is moved. He too discerns the truly beautiful, the divine Beauty

...the Glory of the Lord is a community that has caught sight of a marvelous vision, a universe of justice emerging from a community's experience of divine Beauty, the 'lifting up of the lowly'.⁶⁰⁷

The community discern, encounter and experience divine Beauty amongst them and in them, as they are 'lifted up' amidst the destructive forces of their lives. As witnesses to the solidarity, joy, hope and faith of this community, the powerful are disturbed and changed, their eyes are opened, the spiritual senses awakened by this revelation of God.⁶⁰⁸

In this perspective, South African women's crafting groups interviewed in this research are communities of the beautiful, communities that are bearers of the Beautiful. As 'lowly' communities, they experience the divine beauty in their own experiences of resistance and transformation, in their upliftment, and as bearers of this vision of the beautiful to others. This challenges and changes unjust orders, unleashing a creative divine energy that compels those with power to recognize the humanity, dignity and right to a life where needs are met and women are freed from the multiple oppressions that steal their lives.

revealed in this event of lifting up the lowly. It changes Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego, it changes Nebuchadnezzar, and it changes the entire cosmic order. Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, pp. 187-191.

⁶⁰⁷ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 195.

⁶⁰⁸ Garcia Rivera calls the movement of the imagination in the direction of the good intention (*yetzer*) "anagogical imagination." It is through the 'spiritual senses' that we discern and interpret the spiritual dimension of this world. Origen came up with this doctrine that a general sense for the divine exists, which before the Fall had been an "original and richly abundant capacity to perceive God", discernable through the five sensory senses. But this degenerated into a lower, material set of five senses and a higher, but greatly diminished, spiritual set of five senses in the Fall. They are not distinct senses for distinct experiences, but different aspects of the same senses for the same experiences. Garcia Rivera goes on to elaborate how spiritual discernment can happen through the application of the senses, such as in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. In these, the retreatant applies their senses in order to 'feel' the mystery of faith of each exercise - which is the object of the exercise, "for it is not much knowledge which fills the soul and satisfies it but feeling and tasting things from within." ([2:4] of *Spiritual Exercises*). Agreeing with Balthasar, Garcia Rivera writes of the 'something spiritual that takes place during the application of the senses' as a spiritual experience happening through the spiritual senses. "As such, it is neither an 'ordinary' nor a 'mystical' experience but an experience of the full spirituality and materiality of the creation." (Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 173).

Conclusion

Looking at the process and effects of crafting in these women's lives, the creating transforms their lives in many ways: practically in terms of the circumstances of their lives, and spiritually in terms of the nourishing of life within, and with others, a new belief in themselves and a pervasive joy.

Ethically their lives and those of the community are transformed – they claim who they are, put something out there into the world, build relationship and stand with each other.

Reading this theologically, one sees a theology of life being lived. As is seen in the cases of Kopanang and CAP, in contexts of survival, the spirituality and experiences of the women in the crafting groups reaches beyond immediate physical needs and realities. Women are doing something that maintains their life, brings something new into the world, creates a new way of being for themselves and others that is deeply nourishing and hopeful. Having intimate experience with crushing poverty and despair, their creating is an act of resistance to poverty, degradation and death. And it physically embodies the sacredness of who they are in each stitch or bead or loop. Behind, and in the created work, lies their dignity and hopes, a new vision of something good and beautiful.

In creating in these crafting groups, the women are opening, encountering and revealing the deep human dignity and beauty of who they are – the glory of God inside of them. Their suffering is held with respect, with the hands and prayers of others who know similar reality. Their relationship as a bonded community of women is a witness to hope and witness to another way of being that gives life. Not only are they expressing this through their creativity and creating, and their creative work, but in doing it, they are unleashing the transformative energy of God into their own lives and into the world.. They are becoming aware of the beauty of God inside themselves and are participating in releasing this beauty to affect the lives of others. This Beauty calls for justice-making and the overturning of life-denying orders.

In the next chapter, I look at this question of beauty as it concerns theology - the Beauty of God, encounter with Beauty, the emancipatory Spirit of God, and the privileged expression of this encounter and revelation in art, the aesthetic and creating processes. This broad interdisciplinary area of theological enquiry is called theological aesthetics. I begin to make connections between Beauty, justice and full life for women in South Africa, through the lens of their artistic creating.

Chapter Seven:

Theological Aesthetics - Encounter with Beauty, Experience of the Divine

Introduction

The glow of the true and the good irradiating from every ordered state of being is always the gift and call of Beauty Itself, of the loving and joyful Creator, to the fullness of life in communion. Beauty Itself calls us to be fully alive together with all others in that self-giving love and joy that lasts forever. The beauty of all things is even now a promise of that love and joy. It awakens our expectation of beauty that no eye has yet seen nor ear heard (1 Cor 2:9).⁶⁰⁹

In chapters four, five and six, I examined the power of creating and creativity of South African women artists and crafters as it unfolds fuller life for themselves and others. This was in light of women's theologies of liberation, and creation theology and spirituality. In this chapter, I begin to lay the groundwork for talking about the significance of South African women's creating in terms of the area of theology called theological aesthetics. This centres on recognition of God as the ultimate source of beauty, and the belief that in the aesthetic, there is encounter with and revelation of God in a special way. I present different perspectives of beauty in theology, the response of the perceiver to beauty and its effects, and how beauty and the aesthetic have been marginalized areas of theology. With this basis, I turn to presenting a fuller introduction of the relation between theological aesthetics and the experience of creating.

What is Beauty?

What sort of beauty will save the world?⁶¹⁰

Beauty has been the subject of thought and discussion throughout the ages. What is beauty and what does it do? To explain what I mean by beauty in this thesis as it relates to creating women, I briefly present some thinking about it.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁹ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 5-6.

⁶¹⁰ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Penguin Classics, trans. David Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 394.

⁶¹¹ There are many books on beauty from philosophical, theological, artistic, scientific and cosmetic

For Aquinas, Beauty was centrally important to theology. God is the source of all beauty, and Beauty is the purpose of creation:

Aquinas, in his commentary on the Divine Names of Pseudo-Dionysius, claims that divine beauty is the motive of creation. Because God loves the divine beauty, God wishes to share it as much as possible by communicating this likeness to creatures. God is the cause of their radiance. Each form imparted to a creature is a beautifying participation in the divine radiance; and since being (*esse*) comes from form, Aquinas affirms that beauty is the course of the existence of all things. Out of love for divine beauty God gave existence to everything, and moves to make it beautiful for God's self by reflecting this same beauty. God, Beauty Itself, intends everything to become beautiful in the fullness of the divine beauty.⁶¹²

A definition of beauty is more ambiguous. There is no satisfactory definition in my readings that embraces what beauty is about in its entirety. A popular, common refrain is that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". It is a comment that really relates to the human perception of beauty as a subjective experience rather than anything about beauty itself. The phrase reflects a historical shift in thinking that separated beauty from an objective source - that is, Divine Beauty. Those writing in theological aesthetics - and many thinkers from other disciplines - hold that beauty can be perceived because Beauty as an objective reality exists. Its ultimate source is a Divine Being.⁶¹³ Whether articulated in personal terms as the Divine, the purpose of the universe, or the *anima mundi*, an Ultimate Reality is seen as Beauty itself and the source of worldly beauty.

An experience of beauty is something that I hope we have all encountered and been moved by, even if it is difficult to articulate, analyse or explain. As Mother Theresa compassionately embodied in sharing her life with destitute and dying people on the streets of Calcutta, Beauty can shine through, be recognized, transform, and move the

perspectives, though a comprehensive survey on ideas and debates is beyond the ambit of this thesis. One recent summary from European history is Umberto Eco (ed), *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*, translated by Alastair McEwen (London: Secker and Warburg, 2004). Others are listed in the Bibliography.

⁶¹² Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, p. 26.

⁶¹³ Writers use different terms, including the Universe, God, the Divine Reality, the cosmos, and other terms.

human heart even within the most dire of situations. It is demonstrated in countless scenarios in South Africa. The astonishing, unexpected breaking through of beauty in the dignity and vulnerability of human life calls us and reminds us of who we are. Beauty is not merely a matter of appearances, carefully cultivated and managed. In fact, as many writers below will show, beauty lifted from the depths of its meaning, unconnected with what is true and good, is not real beauty at all - it is just a mask. It leaves a bad taste. It deceives and betrays.

Different writers below attempt to explain beauty from scientific, theological, philosophical, or artistic perspectives. They offer insights from that part of the whole. One common approach taken is to look at instances of the experience of beauty and then to explore characteristics of the encounter and extrapolate meanings from that.⁶¹⁴ Many commonalities, as well as particular insights, emerge.

Maximisation of Beauty: An Aesthetic-Evolutionary Perspective

Probing the inception and developments of the universe or discovering the infinite intricacies of matter, it should be no surprise that many scientists and theologians interested in science share an eschatological vision of beauty. In what he calls an 'aesthetic-evolutionary' perspective, John Haught proposes that "...there is a divine principle at work in the creation that may be summed up as 'maximisation of beauty'."⁶¹⁵ Furthermore, he writes that this is observed in the evolution of the universe, that there is "... a 'deep and ageless evolutionary straining toward an intensification of beauty'."⁶¹⁶ Not only does he see the maximisation of beauty as the motivation of the divine creation, he suggests that human behaviour and morality work to contribute to the creation and expansion of this beauty of the universe.

⁶¹⁴ See for example, E. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); S.A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality and Justice* (Paulist Press: New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2006).

⁶¹⁵ Barrett writes that 'Haught noted physicist Freeman Dyson's suggestion that the emergence of huge cosmic and biological variety indicates perhaps, the operation of a 'principle of maximum diversity' and extrapolated this to the idea of a 'principle of maximum beauty'. John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2000), p. 42, 128-132., cited in Peter Barrett, 'The Quest for a Uniting Vision in South Africa: A Question of Beauty?' in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, July 2004, 119, p. 26. (the book is missing from our library).

⁶¹⁶ J.W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 131.

An awareness that our own conduct can contribute at least something to the ongoing creation and expansion of cosmic beauty can give our moral lives what they have often lacked, a sense of being connected meaningfully and creatively to what is going on in the universe at large.⁶¹⁷

Extending Haught's views to moral theology, de Gruchy sees his ideas as providing "...a firm basis in evolution for ethics, consisting as it does 'in the view that the cosmos is a restless aim toward ever more intense configurations of beauty'..."⁶¹⁸ For de Gruchy, the coupling of Beauty with belief in a moral universe is part of his belief in 'an infinite and unique beauty named God'.⁶¹⁹ He comments, "If one's experience of God's redemptive grace can be described, as it was by C.S Lewis as 'being surprised by joy', it can equally, and perhaps even more be described as being overwhelmed by beauty."⁶²⁰

Kala, Kalon and Kalonkagathon: Beauty, Goodness and Fittingness

The Greek word *kalon* used in the Bible, encompasses the meanings of the good, the beautiful, and the fitting. In Genesis 1, the word appears in its adjectival form 'And God saw that it was *kala*'. South African physicist Peter Barrett suggests that *kala* may refer in part, to a universe that is beautifully arranged, 'for God saw all that God had made and it was very *kala*'. Barrett looks at the word from the perspective of the sciences, exploring the concept of 'fittingness' in relation to beauty, and its different roots and meanings, including fittingness in physics, principles of rightness, logical rigidity, and simplicity. Referring to the value that sciences attach to elegance and beauty, he observes how the proportion of something, and its 'fittingness' can move us.⁶²¹ He then extends the application of fittingness in *kala* to morality, and being in the world. Quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, he explains,

It is the right, the fitting, the good, that which is appropriate to a being, that in virtue of which it possesses its integrity, its health, its security; only insofar as

⁶¹⁷ Haught, *God After Darwin*, p. 133, quoted in de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 131.

⁶¹⁸ Haught, *God After Darwin*, p. 128, in de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 131.

⁶¹⁹ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p. 131.

⁶²⁰ de Gruchy, *Confessions*, p.132.

⁶²¹ Barrett, 'The Quest', p. 27.

it embraces all this, is *kalon*, by way of confirmation and proof, the beautiful.⁶²²

Resonating with Aquinas, Balthasar, de Gruchy and Haught above, Barrett sees beauty/*kalon* as an explanation for the ultimate purpose of all being - what he calls the cosmic drama. It is about "... the creating and sharing of beauty on every scale of its wide variety of expressions...beauty is perhaps the single most apt word to apply to the created order itself - seen as an immense dynamic work of art."⁶²³

Feminist theologian and mystic Dorothee Sölle refers to how medieval theology taught that "...God touches us through beauty, changes us, and draws us Godward."⁶²⁴ Reflecting on the Greek concept of *kalonkagathon* or 'beauty-good' - a word where aesthetics and ethics exist 'in the same dish' - she notes how this thought is not only a part of the Christian tradition, it "... meets us in many a tradition of mysticism, including those of Islam."⁶²⁵

Beauty as Anima Mundi: The Sensibility of the Cosmos

For me, art is dedicated to beauty; it's a way to let beauty into our world by means of the artist's sensibilities...⁶²⁶

To psychoanalyst and artist James Hillman, beauty is absolutely fundamental to life. He sees the sensory experience of Beauty - the touch, sound, smells, textures - as an encounter where "...the gods touch our senses, reach the heart and attract us into life." It is the 'inherent radiance of the world.' Beauty calls us to care for our world, ourselves, and one another. On the other hand, if beauty is repressed, if beauty is not valued or sought after and 'is not given its full place', he says, "... we will probably not survive...It is only love for the world, and a desire for rich, sensory contact with the beauty of its sounds and smells and textures that will save us."⁶²⁷

⁶²² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merkakis, Joseph Fessio and John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), in Barrett, 'The Quest' p. 27.

⁶²³ Barrett, 'The Quest', p. 27.

⁶²⁴ Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999), p. 152.

⁶²⁵ Sölle, in Theissen (ed), *Theological Aesthetics*, p. 245.

⁶²⁶ In conversation with James Hillman, Suzie Gablik (ed), *Conversations Before the End of Time* (London: Thames + Hudson, 1995). p. 195.

⁶²⁷ Hillman in Gablik, *Conversations*, pp. 179-180.

To Hillman, the sensibilities of artists - the awareness, consciousness, reflections and creativity - is a way to let beauty into the world. At the same time, he feels that beauty has been 'ghettoized' in his American culture - sequestered into the world of art - and that it is necessary to move it out of that sphere. The reason is "...because they posit beauty into an instance of it, when in fact, beauty is the manifest *anima mundi*, the very sensibility of the cosmos..."⁶²⁸

Some Key Features of Beauty

Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living...it is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach: all unease, aggression, indifference suddenly drops back behind one, like a surf that has for a moment lost its capacity to harm.⁶²⁹

These are the words of aesthetic philosopher Elaine Scarry as she observes the effects of beauty on the beholder. In this section, I turn from the more ontological perspectives on beauty to looking at what it actually does, how we experience it as beholders, beauty's characteristics and some ways that it affects us.

Beauty calls inexplicably to the human heart, changing one's experience of reality and who one is. An encounter with beauty affects how one interacts with oneself, others and the world. Scarry explores how and why this happens, in a poetic and vivid way, in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*.⁶³⁰ She distils characteristics of beauty - its generosity, greeting and welcome; its lifegivingness; its sacredness; its call to care, respect and protect; its capacity to draw us out of ourselves; and its intrinsic relation to justice. Her descriptions fill the imagination and evoke a sense of the experience.

She names four key attributes of beauty.⁶³¹

⁶²⁸ Hillman in Gablik, *Conversations*, pp. 179-180.

⁶²⁹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, pp. 24-25

⁶³⁰ Scarry, *On Beauty*

⁶³¹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, pp. 23-30.

1. Beauty is *sacred*.
2. Beauty is *unprecedented*.
3. Beauty is *lifesaving and lifegiving*.
4. Beauty *incites deliberation*.

Beauty's Sacredness, Generosity, Greeting and Welcome

Describing something she calls beauty's *greeting* and welcome, Scarry illustrates beauty's generous and accepting presence. When it is perceived, she says, it is as if it has been waiting, like an experience of grace.

At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you...It is as though the welcoming thing has entered into, and consented to, your being in its midst. Your arrival seems contractual, not just something you want, but something the world you are now joining wants.⁶³²

Not only does beauty exist and is waiting, it is evidence of something otherworldly and wonderful which we have been unexpectedly and fortuitously drawn into. It changes everything in perception and consciousness, unveiling new life beyond what is immediately visible or understood.

The moment of coming upon something or someone beautiful might sound ...like this: "You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, lifesaving, something that deserves from you a posture of reverence or petition. It is not clear whether you should throw yourself on your knees before it or keep your distance from it, but you had better figure out the right answer because this is not an occasion for carelessness or for leaving your own postures wholly to chance. It is not that beauty is life-threatening (though this attribute has sometimes been assigned it), but instead that it is life-affirming, life-giving; and therefore if, through your careless approach, you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life."⁶³³

Allied with truth and goodness, beauty is connected to and points to the sacred. Worldly beauty searches for something beyond itself that is larger, or of the same

⁶³² Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 26.

⁶³³ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 27.

scale, 'with which it needs to be brought into relation'.⁶³⁴ If it is cleaved from these depths, and exists as an appearance or as a selfish glory that points only to itself, it is experienced not only as false, but as a deep betrayal. Without this sacred connection, beauty lacks depth, meaning, truth and life. If the sacred is 'no longer believed in or aspired to', there is a feeling of bereavement and even betrayal.

...if the metaphysical realm has vanished, one may feel bereft not only because of the giant deficit left by that vacant realm, but because the girl, the bird, the vase, the book now seem unable in their solitude to justify or account for the weight of their own beauty. If each calls out for attention that has no destination beyond itself, each seems self-centred; too fragile to support the gravity of our immense regard.⁶³⁵

Perception, Care and Protection: Beauty's Distributional Nature

Linked to its greeting, sacredness, and lifegivingness, beautiful things "...always carry greetings from other worlds within them... the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world."⁶³⁶ Beauty is a powerful force that opens the door and leads to more generosity, care and justice in the world.

Scarry's work directly confronts and deconstructs political complaints against beauty that say it leads to less care. For instance, some argue that attention to beauty is an escapist luxury that distracts, causing us to become inattentive and indifferent to important issues. Conversely, attention to beauty, gazing on a beautiful thing - especially a human face or form - is accused of objectifying and reifying an object and therefore destroying it. She disentangles these arguments, demonstrating an incoherent and contradictory logic in them. Far from distracting or damaging our capacity to pay attention to problems of injustice, Scarry argues, beauty is a means of intensifying 'the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries', by *increasing our perceptiveness*. Second, that which we notice as beautiful increases the likelihood that *it will be handled carefully*, as it provokes an urge to protect it. Third, what Scarry

⁶³⁴ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 29.

⁶³⁵ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 47. In a similar vein, Balthasar articulates the consequences of contemporary society's fixation on appearances of beauty at the expense of its depths. Not only is there bereavement and betrayal; he saw the long-term result being the destruction of the values of truth and goodness.

⁶³⁶ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 48.

calls beauty's 'distributional pressure outward' causes us to *extend our perception and care to things other than the original beautiful thing*. "...[By] noticing and caring for one thing that is beautiful, the thing I involuntarily react to, I voluntarily begin to notice other things and care for them."⁶³⁷ The consequences are care and protection of the well-being of the world and other people and things in it, whether or not we directly benefit.

It is as though beautiful things have been placed here and there throughout the world to serve as small wake-up calls to perception, spurring lapsed alertness back to its most acute level. Through beauty, the world continually recommits us to a rigorous standard of perceptual care: if we do not search it out, it comes and finds us.⁶³⁸

Aliveness

Then, looking at 'enduring objects of aspiration' - goodness, truth and justice - Scarry describes what she calls a continuity, between an 'object of aspiration' and the person who values it. This means that a person values goodness, truth and justice because they seek to be like it.⁶³⁹ So, pursuing goodness, a person wants to make themselves good. If a person seeks justice, the person hopes to be a just person. If a person pursues truth, the person hopes to become knowledgeable. While for beauty this is not so obvious, Scarry sees a deeper continuity. Recalling that beauty is, for the beholder, lifesaving or life-restoring, a direct reciprocal relationship exists between the beholder and the beheld, centred on the quality of *aliveness*. The beautiful thing beheld bestows on the beholder 'a surfeit of aliveness'. By this she means that the object of beauty, even if inanimate, is seen as something of value, fragile and needing to be cared for and protected. "[It] may be lent the aliveness of the person's own consciousness..."⁶⁴⁰ It is a making aware, and an increasing awareness of one's own, and others aliveness. "Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or ...quasi-aliveness of our world, and for entering into its protection."⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁷ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 65.

⁶³⁸ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 81.

⁶³⁹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 87.

⁶⁴⁰ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 89.

⁶⁴¹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 90.

Beauty is then a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver. As the beautiful being confers on the perceiver the gift of life, so the perceiver confers on the beautiful being the gift of life. Each “welcomes” the other: each - to return to the word’s original meaning - “comes in accordance with [the] other’s will.”⁶⁴²

The fundamental features of beauty - its greeting, sacredness, lifegivingness, distributional care, and this ‘reciprocal pact’ to aliveness by the beholder and the beheld, lead, Scarry points, to commitment to justice. Not only do the beholder and the beheld affirm one another’s ongoing existence, but as a beholder of beauty, we affirm our own responsibility for ensuring that its existence continues.⁶⁴³ Perceiving, valuing and accepting responsibility for existence, the beholder of beauty seeks to care, protect and nurture aliveness in oneself, others and the world.⁶⁴⁴ This un-self-interested level of care is what Scarry refers to as ‘radical decentering.’

Radical Decentering

Scarry looks at how beauty removes us and our egos from the centre of existence, giving up “...our imaginary position as the center...”⁶⁴⁵ and allowing us to turn outward to care for others and the world, a ‘decentering’. Drawing on the mystical writings and life practices of Simone Weil and the work of Iris Murdoch, Scarry grounds ‘decentering’ in experiencing beauty. This is more than an intellectual or emotional experience, it is deeply somatic.

⁶⁴² Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 90.

⁶⁴³ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 92.

⁶⁴⁴ Interestingly, and at some length, Scarry explores ideas of fairness, fittingness, equality, pressure toward distributional attention, and care in light of specific technological and ideological developments in history. She looks at how principles inherent in beauty have called democratic principles into being through balancing of force. Beauty pre-exists justice, she writes, and its visibility serves as a call toward what is possible. “The equality of beauty enters the world before justice and stays longer because it does not depend on human beings to bring it about: though human beings have created much of the beauty of the world, they are only collaborators in a much vaster project. The world accepts our contributions but in no way depends on us. Even when beauty and justice are both in the world, beauty performs a special service because it is available to sensory perception in a way that justice (except in rare places like an assembly) normally is not, even though it is equally material and comes into being because of the fragility of the material world. By now we can begin to see that the equality of beauty, its pressure toward distribution, resides...in it generously being present, widely present, to almost all people at almost all times... a distributional availability that comes from its being external, present (“prae-sens”), standing before the senses.” Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 108. Crispin Sartwell writes similarly in *Six Names of Beauty* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 103-104.

⁶⁴⁵ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 111.

When we come upon beautiful things...they act like small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space⁶⁴⁶, or they form “ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world,⁶⁴⁷” or they lift us (as though by the air currents of someone else’s sweeping), letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.⁶⁴⁸

The consequences of the encounter with beauty are equally embodied - they lead to commitments to justice as our consciousness shifts. Scarry refers to Murdoch view of this as an ethical process, a shift in consciousness that influences how we make choices and how we act. Murdoch calls the move in the direction of ‘unselfishness, objectivity and realism’ a virtuous ‘unselfing’. It is an unselfing, she says, that can most easily and obviously occur through an encounter with beauty because it is all around us in our surroundings.⁶⁴⁹

In the presence of the beautiful then, Scarry suggests, we undergo a decentering of self, where we cease to be the centre. Beauty has the capacity to ‘dethrone’ us. Our place in the universe, in relation equally with everyone else, is put into perspective. It is humility. But this does not happen through degradation of the self, nor through violence or force, nor grudgingly. Rather, this displacement, she writes, - this ‘adjacency’ - makes us feel acute pleasure.⁶⁵⁰ We are transformed. We see more clearly. New visions break through. Unselfconscious and moved out of the centre, we are more able to care about others and the world. Our care for reality and others than ourselves leads to transformative action.

This idea of radical decentering or humility as a result of an encounter with beauty is compelling. Indeed, it has the ability to turn us outward to choices of more involvement and care of others and our world and is an essential element in being a

⁶⁴⁶ Simone Weil, ‘Love of the Order of the World’, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd, introd.

Leslie A. Fiedler (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), p. 163. in Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 112.

⁶⁴⁷ Weil, ‘Love of the Order’, p. 180, quoted in Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 112.

⁶⁴⁸ Scarry, *On Beauty*, pp. 111-112.

⁶⁴⁹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, p. 113. Scarry attributes these terms to Iris Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts: The Leslie Stephen Lecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

⁶⁵⁰ Scarry, *On Beauty*, pp. 112-114.

moral person in the world. The virtue of humility is a common theme in traditional Christian theology, especially as it relates to the view that pride, arrogance, and egoism are humanity's chief manifestations of brokenness or sin and separation from God. As these concepts relate to women's socialisation, identity, lives, moral agency and theology, they have been reinterpreted by feminist thinkers in light of women's different realities and contexts. The virtues of selflessness and self-sacrifice assume there is a centred self to give up. Finding and claiming self is a critical spiritual, ethical and theological question for women. I return to the theme in chapter ten.

Beauty's Marginalization and Presence in Contemporary Theology

Recall that for Aquinas, the Divine is seen as the source of all beauty. God's love for the divine beauty motivates God to create and to share this divine beauty with creation. The existence and being of each creature in its particular form is a participation in the divine radiance, intended to intensify, magnify and increase that divine beauty. To Aquinas, beauty is the way and purpose of the existence of all things. "Out of love for divine beauty God gave existence to everything, and moves to make it beautiful for God's self by reflecting this same beauty. God, Beauty Itself, intends everything to become beautiful in the fullness of the divine beauty."⁶⁵¹

Like Aquinas, French Jewish mystic and activist Simone Weil considered beauty in the world, in nature, to be a manifestation of the beauty of God. In her view, natural beauty is revelation. It is "the attribute of God under which we see and experience him', whether or not we acknowledge God's existence."⁶⁵² Criticizing Christianity for having so little to say about the beauty of the world⁶⁵³, Weil wrote that "...the beauty of the world is almost the only way by which we can allow God to penetrate us."⁶⁵⁴

... a sense of beauty, although mutilated, distorted and soiled, remains rooted

⁶⁵¹ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegetown, Minn.:The Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 26.

⁶⁵² Quoting Weil in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 51, 69 in Barrett, 'The Quest', p. 24. (Sherry book not available at our libraries).

⁶⁵³ "...we might say that the beauty of the world is almost absent from the Christian tradition. This is strange. It is difficult to understand. It leaves a terrible gap. How can Christianity call itself catholic if the universe itself is left out?" Weil, 'Love of the Order', p. 116.

⁶⁵⁴ Weil, 'Love of the Order', p. 117.

in the heart of man as a powerful incentive. It is present in all the preoccupations of secular life. If it were made true and pure it would sweep all secular life in a body to the feet of God, it would make the total incarnation of the faith possible. Moreover, the beauty of the world is the commonest, easiest and most natural way of approach....The soul's natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high.⁶⁵⁵

Referring to Weil's views, Patrick Sherry observes that theologians have discussed beauty primarily in terms of the moral and spiritual beauty of Christ and the beauty of the Gospel, rather than natural beauty as revelation. Looking at the implications of Weil's views - that beauty is the attribute of God through which we see God - he sees this as very important for theology because "...it would seem that both natural and artistic beauty might be what was traditionally referred to as a theological 'source' - a term usually restricted to Scripture, Church doctrine (and tradition) and so on."⁶⁵⁶

Seeing natural and artistic beauty as a theological source, 'the attribute of God under which we see God', by extension, leads to the possibility of seeing the artistic and creating process that brings forth art also as a theological source, revealing something of God, God in the person and God in the world.

The Banishment of Beauty in Theology

Many of the twentieth century scholars writing on theological aesthetics in contemporary theology lament what they see as the loss of beauty in theology.⁶⁵⁷ Different and overlapping ideas look at the reasons for this loss. These include philosophical, intellectual and historical movements that reduced Beauty to subjective opinion, Christian dualism with its fear of the body and embodiment, and wariness of Beauty's power, attraction and ability to lead into error. There is a common view that as beauty has been exiled, "...theology has sacrificed its heart."⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁵ Weil, 'Love of the Order', p. 118.

⁶⁵⁶ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, pp. 69-70, 160, quoted in Barrett, 'The Quest', p. 24.

⁶⁵⁷ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 155-156.

⁶⁵⁸ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.182.

From his context and experience, Balthasar explained the loss of beauty in terms of human pride and hubris, attempts to control, utilitarianism, the mechanisation of society, and these priorities seeping into the values and ways of thinking about (or not thinking about) God. He saw utilitarianism and secularisation as attempts to separate nature and grace, and thus the way we perceive and engage with the world and one another. He lamented,

Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. Beauty is the disinterested one, without which the ancient world refused to understand itself, a word which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world ...leaving it to its own avarice and sadness.⁶⁵⁹

In his view, the consequences of this separation could only be degradation and dehumanisation

But whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed..., then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of “knowledge,” and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation - a world in which power and the profit margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated.....⁶⁶⁰

When beauty began to be associated with desire after the Cartesian revolution and enlightenment, writes Edward Farley, aesthetics began to be sidelined to the realm of emotion and pure subjectivity. Regarded as a human sensibility rather than an objective reality in mid-eighteenth century England and France, beauty diminished in importance.⁶⁶¹

And there are other reasons relating to discomfort with, or fear of beauty. Scarry

⁶⁵⁹ Balthasar. *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p.18.

⁶⁶⁰ Balthasar quoted in Schindler, D.L., ‘The Significance of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the Contemporary Cultural Situation’, p.17, in Block, E. (ed) *Glory, Grace and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005), pp. 16-36. From Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968, fifth impression, 1992), pp.114-115.

⁶⁶¹ Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), p.38, cited in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.157. (Farley book not available in our libraries).

writes of the suspicion of beauty related to fear of its real power to lead into error. Yet she asserts that this potential is not a fault of beauty, but more a consequence of human error in discernment and judgement, precipitated by the desire to possess what is beautiful. When beauty is allowed to be, and is constellated with its partners goodness and truth, (rather than isolated or separated from these ethical values), it is properly seen.⁶⁶²

Theologically beauty is seen as potentially leading into error - or sin - because of the desire it provokes in the human to possess it, writes Carol Harrison. Because humans turn away from Divine beauty in order to possess embodied worldly beauty, she sees the marginalisation of Beauty as associated with Christian issues with the body.

... beauty allures the fallen, who want to possess it. A beautiful landscape or a beautiful piece of music may speak unambiguously of the divine source of beauty; but a beautiful painting, a beautiful woman...may provoke not just wonder but the desire to possess.... Moreover, they can easily be the occasion for actually turning man away from ultimate Beauty and can even be the occasion of his sin. Again, why is this? Is it because, of the three transcendentals, beauty is the most *embodied*, the most *incarnate*, the one which is virtually inseparable from matter?⁶⁶³

Similarly, Christian dualism separating the body and soul has led to suspicion of Beauty, because of Beauty's embodied nature and the association of the body with physical desires, attraction and the downfall of humanity, writes Frank Burch Brown.⁶⁶⁴

This fear of beauty and embodiment, as feminist theologians have pointed out, goes further than suspicion of the body, it is also linked to a *denial* of the body, especially the female body. Referring specifically to Tertullian and Jerome, Ross reviews a litany of beliefs held by the church fathers throughout history. These reveal the vilification of female beauty and the body, with restrictions on adornment, colours,

⁶⁶² Scarry, *On Beauty*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁶³ Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 270-271, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 157- 158. (Harrison book not available in our libraries).

⁶⁶⁴ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 3, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.157. (Brown book not available in our libraries).

and clothing, presence, and the association of women with male sin, where “The beauty of women is... a hindrance to holiness.”⁶⁶⁵

Because of their link to this denial of the body, Gonzalez suggests that both the body (and I add, the female body), and the arts (especially the visual arts) have been interpreted as idolatrous and as distractions from one’s life of faith.⁶⁶⁶ For many in the Christian tradition, a life of faith has meant a divorce from the body, beauty, the imagination, the senses and sensuality.

‘The Divine Imperative’ or ‘the Divine Delight’?: Liberation Theologies and the Loss of Beauty

But this has not been the case for everyone and all of theology. In liberation theological movements arising from struggles against oppression and marginalisation – especially women’s theologies of liberation - the arts, the aesthetic, beauty and ugliness have been powerful, even subversive, means of expression and vision. They have been a vitally important source of awareness, courage, yearning and moral agency, as well as being an important source for theology, as will be seen in a later section. And yet, in some liberation theologies, while the aesthetic has been a vibrant vital force, the *importance* of beauty has simultaneously been unrecognised, minimised, if not entirely dismissed - intentionally or unintentionally - as irrelevant, unnecessary, and diverting from ‘hard’ ethical and moral concerns for justice.

From our South African context where contextual, liberation, post-colonial and reconstruction theologies had, and still hold primacy in different forms, Beauty was nowhere to be seen in the theological discussions of the prophetic church in the years of the apartheid struggle, even though aesthetic representations of struggle, lament, hope and aspirations powerfully embodied the seething for liberation. Concern with beauty was seen as lacking relevance, or teeth, and was aligned with concerns of the elite and powerful.⁶⁶⁷ Theologian John W. de Gruchy writes of the marginalisation of

⁶⁶⁵ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp.18-19.

⁶⁶⁶ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 158.

⁶⁶⁷ Scarry counters what she calls ‘the political suspicion of beauty’ in a good discussion about

beauty to ethics in those years.

For some reason, the connection between aesthetics and social ethics, between beauty and transformation, was not apparent to those of us who were engaged as theologians in the struggle against apartheid. We were concerned with truth and goodness rather than beauty, about theology and social ethics rather than aesthetics.⁶⁶⁸

De Gruchy emphasises that there was indeed interest in the arts from a theological point of view in South Africa, and there was richness and drama in the liturgies, architecture, music, and symbols of the Church. But, he writes, there was a lack of critical reflection on these issues. He goes further to insist that “This requires urgent attention if we are serious about doing theology in post-apartheid South Africa, or anywhere for that matter.”⁶⁶⁹

The reason for this call for attention might be seen in de Gruchy’s paraphrase of one of Balthasar’s important insights on beauty. Beauty being the ‘graced form’ that conveys the whole of goodness and truth, de Gruchy reflects on the consequences of separating beauty from these principles, summarising the distortion that happens when beauty, goodness and truth are separated. He underlines the importance of beauty and the aesthetic to the theological task.

Truth without goodness and beauty degenerates into dogmatism, and lacks the power to attract and convince; goodness without truth is superficial, and without beauty - that is without graced form - it degenerates into moralism. Alternatively, we could say that truth and goodness without beauty lack power to convince and therefore to save.⁶⁷⁰

Latin American liberation theologian, ‘theopoet’ Rubem A. Alves, echoes these observations from his context. He lamented the loss of beauty and its marginalisation

attention and care, in her book *On Beauty*, pp. 58-86.

⁶⁶⁸ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 2.

⁶⁶⁹ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 2.

⁶⁷⁰ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 107. Giving a concrete example of how he sees different forms of theology being distorted because of the lack of connection to beauty, de Gruchy criticises the emphasis on power in some Western theology. Power distorted, reflecting ‘ecclesiastical and dogmatic triumphalism’ or the interests of ‘God’s representatives (hierarchy or elect people)’, it contrasts the ‘glory of the Lord’, which is “...the redemptive beauty of God as the power to save and restore humanity and creation.”(p. 107).

in theology, and reasoned its loss was due to the primacy of ethics in liberation theology.

Have we separated goodness from beauty? Is this the reason why our theological discourse has been dominated by the ethical motif - the divine imperative - as opposed to the aesthetic - the divine delight?⁶⁷¹

Alves sees the ethical as the means to and end, not an end in itself. "The goal of all heroic struggles for the creation of a just and free world is the opening of spaces for the blossoming of the garden,"⁶⁷² where the garden is "the visible image of the divine beauty."⁶⁷³ He warns of the consequences of separating beauty and ethics in liberation theologies. If the aesthetic is ignored, it leads to people becoming objects in the struggle for justice. Gonzales writes how he saw the ethical process in liberation theologies as emphasising 'works' at the expense of 'grace'. "An ethics that is not grounded in beauty will result in a 'heartburn' that leads to bitterness."⁶⁷⁴

With the aesthetic grounding and informing the ethical, Alves says that political action should be based upon Beauty. "I am trying to suggest that human beings are moved by beauty. If we want to change the world, we need first of all to be able to make people dream about beauty. This has been totally forgotten by the Church."⁶⁷⁵ His observations resonate with Balthasar's feeling that while peoples' well-being and justice is a sound motivation (goodness and truth), without beauty as the catching force and the vision, this motivation becomes disconnected from love, loses the *why* of 'why the good should be carried out', and can have a tyranny of its own.

In a world without beauty - even if people cannot dispense with the word and constantly have it on the tip of their tongues in order to abuse it - in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why *it* must be done and not rather its alternative, evil....In a world

⁶⁷¹ Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 127.

⁶⁷² Alves, *The Poet*, p. 127.

⁶⁷³ Alves, *The Poet*, p. 126.

⁶⁷⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 171.

⁶⁷⁵ Rubem A. Alves, 'From Liberation Theologian to Poet: A Plea that the Church Move from Ethics to Aesthetics, from Doing to Beauty,' *Church and State*, 83, 1993, p. 23 in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 171-172 (Journal unavailable at our libraries).

that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency.⁶⁷⁶

These writers suggest that power, grace and call to the Divine is revealed and experienced through beauty. And the vision of beauty is the - the 'why' - where the ethical is the means to the achieving the vision.

And, as de Gruchy points out, beauty is also a means to the ethical. "The true and the good are not primarily perceived by the rational faculties as propositions and principles; they are experienced through hearing and seeing, through intuition and imagination. Hence the fundamental importance of the arts for Christian faith and life."⁶⁷⁷

'The Divine Imperative' and 'the Divine Delight': Liberation Theologies and the Revelation of Beauty's Presence'

De Gruchy asserts that the emphasis in the theologies of the prophetic ecumenical struggle against apartheid was primarily concerned with 'the true and the good' and that critical reflection on the aesthetic was lacking, even though it existed in abundance both within and outside of the Church. I have observed the same. Artists, writers, poets, songwriters and others were producing works that were profoundly theological in the apartheid years, as they gave expression to the emancipatory spirit of God within people and the yearning for life. Some artists' liberation concerns were expressed through explicitly religious or spiritual motifs - such as Azaria Mbatha, John Muafangejo, Dan Rakgoathe, Dina Cormick and others.⁶⁷⁸ Artists work that was not overtly religious, and their lives, can be 'read' theologically as they reveal the

⁶⁷⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p.19.

⁶⁷⁷ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 107.

⁶⁷⁸ South African art historian Juliette Leeb-du Toit points out that such biblically influenced art was particularly powerful during the years of repression. More than an expression of religious culture and a missionizing 'tool for religious institutions', she quotes Hackett in saying this art was "an agent of reflection, critique and transformation in its own right." (p 14). This was in a context where the State banned other resistance art. Juliette Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualizing the Use of Biblically Derived and Metaphysical Imagery in the Work of Black Artists from KwaZulu-Natal: c1930-2002', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2003. She refers to R. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa* (London: Cassell, 1996). The research by Leeb-du Toit reflects the fact that there were few black women artists, hence the expressions of their realities, concerns and aspirations are underrepresented.

emancipatory Spirit of God, while their content or intention may not be explicitly 'religious'.⁶⁷⁹

It is interesting to look at the invisibility of beauty from the concerns of the prophetic church during the liberation from apartheid from a gender perspective. As I recall the prophetic ecumenical movement in South Africa from the late Eighties, and the heady post-apartheid years following, men and women involved in the liberation struggle were fighting primarily for liberation from racial and economic oppression. Patriarchy and the destructive effects of sexual oppression were named in some key documents and meetings as part of a triad of evils to be overcome,⁶⁸⁰ but when it came to the practical working out of what it meant in all its depth, there was no consensus on how to deal with sexual oppression; because it is rooted in much theology, religious tradition and social custom. For men, the importance for liberation from the effects of unquestioned patriarchy or kyriarchy was clearly not well understood. It was seen as a non-issue by many, as secondary or divisive or threatening by others, or something that could be dealt with once liberation is achieved, if at all. It was seen as vitally important by a few. For many women in the struggle - especially black women who bear the triple burdens of racial, economic and gender oppression - these were and continue to be inseparable concerns. Nonetheless, some women still saw patriarchy as the natural order of things, even God-ordained, and did not want to threaten the cohesion and stability of either their relationships, or the larger aims of the liberation struggle by asking questions about it, no matter how it affected them. So liberation from gender oppression was put on the back burner.

In those days, prominent theologians in the struggle were predominantly male.⁶⁸¹ Like Latin American and Black theologies, the voices forming liberation theologies in South Africa primarily articulated male concerns, ways of experiencing life, ways of thinking, and their priorities. Similarly the sources and expressions of theology reflected what they saw as important. There were very strong and outspoken women

⁶⁷⁹ See S. Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).

⁶⁸⁰ See *Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Cape Town: Skottaville Publishers, 1986).

⁶⁸¹ These include such well-known figures as Allan Boesak, James Cochrane, Mvume Dandala, John W. de Gruchy, Wolfram Kistener, Simon Maimela, Itumaleng Mosala, Beyers Naude, Albert Nolan, Gabriel Setiloane, McGlory Speckman, Desmond Tutu, Charles Villa-Vicencio.

at the forefront in the liberation struggle and in Church and women's movements and organisations - a major force in ending apartheid - but there were few South African women in positions of Church leadership, in ordained ministry, and fewer theologians and so their concerns were marginalised. Thus, women's perspectives, or concerns specific to women, while articulated by some vocal individual women and groups, were seen as 'other' even in the liberation struggle. They rarely set the agenda, rarely got an airing, were a point of enormous contestation and they were minimised.⁶⁸² Nor did many women feel comfortable to speak. This was not only because some of the issues concerned such very personal - and taboo - subjects such as sexual and domestic violence, sexual abuse of children, sexual and economic rights and decision-making, and questions about patriarchy in culture and religion. It was also because by tradition and religious belief, women were deemed secondary to men's headship and leadership in the hierarchy of South Africa, like minors, even non-persons. These beliefs are internalised and take active awareness to overcome. This is still the case, though now more voices are challenging the structures and beliefs by naming old evils and new visions.⁶⁸³ There continues to be a struggle for liberation from gender oppression in the church, theology and society in South Africa.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸² Sheena Duncan commented on the Nov 1990 Rustenburg Conference, a National Conference of Church Leaders, where 300 representatives of 80 denominations and 40 Christian organisations gathered at this historic meeting to deliberate on the state of the nation and the church at the time of transition. "Almost all of the 300 were middle-aged men. Most of the women present were, as usual, staff persons oiling the wheels of the conference and serving men (p. 386)." At a late stage in the planning, noticing that women had been excluded from the agenda, women were given a late-afternoon hour. After they'd taken up their places on the platform, "a delegate took up the floor microphone and addressed the assembling crowd to the effect that this session was a waste of time of the conference and not a priority at a gathering such as this." (p. 386). Most delegates agreed and the women walked out. Duncan reflects on their subsequent return, the ensuing confession of the conference of sexism and patriarchy and how it impoverishes the church. Calling for the deeper act of repentance, Duncan emphasises that church impoverishment is not the most important issue at stake, rather that sexism, patriarchy, misogyny and all their outworking "...is a heretical denial of the wholeness of creation." (p. 390). Sheena Duncan, 'Some Reflections on Rustenburg', in Ackermann et al. *Women Hold Up Half the Sky*, pp. 386-390.

⁶⁸³ Younger generations of women who are privileged to grow up with economic means and good educational grounding in post-apartheid South Africa have more freedom of choice and opportunities than their predecessors. Some are very vocal about gender issues and their expectations. There has also been backlash against such 'freedoms', for example, the killing of two lesbian women on 8 July 2007. Sizakele Sigasa, 34, and Salome Masooa, 23, were found tortured, raped and brutally murdered in Meadowlands, Soweto (Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) Campaign Against Rape (no date). Recent attacks, humiliation and stripping of women wearing miniskirts at a Johannesburg taxi rank (*Mail and Guardian*, 19 February 2008), or trousers in Umlazi T section (*The Mercury*, 25 July 2007). Not to be intimidated, women's groups, human rights groups and groundswells of concerned people, as well as government bodies have decried these actions and the attitudes behind them.

⁶⁸⁴ The visionary South African Constitution based on the ANC Freedom Charter has enshrined equal rights for men and women. The recently revised Sexual Offences Act criminalizes various forms of

Thus, liberation theologies in South Africa contained and contain many layers of struggle.⁶⁸⁵ Women's theologies of liberation and life developed alongside, intertwined, and marginal to the 'mainstream' liberation theologies of the prophetic church.⁶⁸⁶

Though many of these voices were marginalised from traditional academic or ecclesial circles that discussed and shaped theology, women's faith journeys, aspirations, inspirations and incipient theologies were and are being expressed through the aesthetic.⁶⁸⁷ The aesthetic was and continues to be a powerful way marginalised people - including women - understand and express their spirituality and theologies in South Africa. It emerges in big and small meetings, in protest and lament, celebration and searching. It finds expression in song, poetry, dance, painting, sculpture, embroideries and beading, liturgies, prayers, and literature. Beauty is not missing in theology in South Africa - it has always been there, as de Gruchy points out - but I stress that it has found expression and has burgeoned in areas of theology and life that have not been part of the mainstream theological discourses.

Gonzalez makes a similar point strongly with reference to the theological work of Black and womanist theologians in the United States. They do not express any awareness or grief over the loss of Beauty in theology. This is because the theological

sexual abuse and rape against either sex, and children. These provide necessary structures and law to protect women and children. Hearts, traditions, beliefs, knowledge and practices take longer to shift, in all sectors of society, including the police services and criminal justice system.

⁶⁸⁵ It is often mentioned that the church is 'a site of struggle'. This is seen repeatedly and many ways in South Africa. There are hundreds of different Christian denominations in South Africa. In addition to doctrinal, historical or preference differences, apartheid created colour, demographic and culture-based divisions in the church. African Independent Churches were formed in reaction to the denial of African ways, beliefs and dignity by the missionary churches; Pentecostal and Charismatic fellowships with a focus on spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit formed in reaction to structured, hierarchical liturgical traditions. There are endless examples. With the exception of 'Women-Church' groupings, one common denominator in all of these 'breakaway' churches is their gendered structure and content. Women form a majority of congregants while the leadership is primarily male, and the theology, language and symbolism remains unquestionably patriarchal and androcentric.

⁶⁸⁶ In South Africa, women's theologies are not uniform, as seen in chapter two. Religious heritage, cultural, economic, demographic, social, psychological and spiritual worlds are diverse. There is a gaping, and growing, gap between rich and poor. Amidst these differences, common ground for all women includes the overarching patriarchal set up in Africa.

⁶⁸⁷ Gerald West, 'Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated', *Semeia* 73 1996, pp.1-41.

method of womanist and Black theologians has used literature, poetry, music, art, rap, dance and other arts as sources. Gonzalez explains, “These scholars immerse themselves in historical research and contemporary interdisciplinary studies whose goal is the articulation of a theology that emerges from the Black community in the United States.”⁶⁸⁸ As a part of this process, aesthetic resources are incorporated as what she calls ‘central interlocutors’ for Black and womanist theologies.

For Black theologians there is no lament for Beauty because, in their uncovering of historical Black sources, Beauty’s historical presence is revealed. While European philosophers were picking away at the foundations of aesthetics, slaves were singing spirituals, finding their theological voice in music.⁶⁸⁹

Black and womanist theologians are unapologetic in their use of aesthetics. They do not spend chapters defending their use of spirituals, literature, and narratives. Instead, these sources are understood as central to the theological task.⁶⁹⁰

A lesson can be learned here, especially for other liberation theologies. The assertion of Beauty’s demise must be situated in its appropriate context, within academic European and Euro-American theologies.⁶⁹¹ To deny the presence of theological aesthetics throughout the ages is to silence the marginalized voices of those who continued the tradition of seeing aesthetics as central to theological expression.⁶⁹²

The contemporary discussion that uses the term theological aesthetics has reflected social, political, economic and theological priorities, norms, pressures and reflections of certain groups and contexts. The lament for the demise of beauty in theology - including liberation theologies - must be set in those contexts.

The aesthetic is abundantly evidenced in different theologies of marginalised people - by women, in Black and womanist theologies, in Latino/a and Latin American theologies to name a few. It has served as a voice for their realities, hopes and visions – as interlocutors, revealing the emancipatory Spirit of God. All that needs to be done

⁶⁸⁸ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 182.

⁶⁸⁹ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 182.

⁶⁹⁰ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 182.

⁶⁹¹ Gonzalez includes the work of John W. de Gruchy within the category of Euro- and Euro-American theologies. *Sor Juana*, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁹² Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 182.

is to read it for how and what it is revealing. This is also the case in South Africa.

Theological Aesthetics

Theological aesthetics recognizes in the experience of the truly beautiful a religious dimension.⁶⁹³

The term “aesthetics” in its contemporary meaning of the philosophy and science of the beautiful, was coined in 1735 by Alexander G. Baumgarten. He was describing what he called “the science of sensory cognition” - how beauty is experienced. The meaning has been expanded to include questions about art, what it is, how it comes about, and its effects - encompassing questions of the philosophy and psychology of art.⁶⁹⁴

The use of aesthetic sources to form and articulate theology is not something new to theology. As Garcia Rivera points out, what is happening now in the development of the area of theological aesthetics is actually the recovery of an ancient theological method used by the first theologians of the Church, as they looked at symbols, imagery, and music of their living church.⁶⁹⁵ However, this way of doing theology had fallen on hard times in post-Enlightenment modernity, when analytic thinking became prized, theology sought to become a scientific academic discipline, and beauty and the aesthetic, as a way of thinking about, talking about and seeking to understand something of the Divine, fell out of favour in theological thinking and teaching. This has been felt deeply by some as a dessication of theology. As has been mentioned, many of the pioneering twentieth-century writers on theological aesthetics begin their discussion lamenting the demise of beauty in contemporary theological discourse and teaching. They look at reasons for and consequences of the banishment

⁶⁹³ Alejandro Garcia Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 9.

⁶⁹⁴ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁵ Garcia Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, p. iix. See Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (ed), *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2004) for a sampling of the theological discussion of beauty throughout Christian history and a good bibliography for further reading in the subject. On the history and controversy of visual imagery especially in the Protestant churches, and a look at iconography, a comprehensive summary as it relates to theology and theological aesthetics is offered in John W. deGruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics and the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

of beauty, and seek its recovery.⁶⁹⁶

Noting that aesthetics has existed since the first human heart was moved by the influence of the beautiful, Garcia Rivera suggests that aesthetics be recast as “...the science which asks the more profound question: *what moves the human heart?*”⁶⁹⁷ He explains: “Asking the question, *what moves the human heart?*, I believe, brings us closer to the mysterious experience of the truly beautiful, an experience that transcends geological space and prehistoric time, and experience that holds the most persuasive claim to being what has become an *aporia* in our day, the real universal.”⁶⁹⁸ Furthermore, being moved by the influence of the beautiful speaks of a religious experience. Asking the more profound question “*what moves the human heart?*”, Garcia Rivera explains, allows aesthetics both a philosophical approach and opens the possibility of a theological approach - a theological aesthetics.⁶⁹⁹

Beauty is a result of divine initiative, writes Garcia Rivera. He sees that Beauty, for the human, is always something that is received, and thus exists in relationship. Beauty emerges from the divine and then is *received* and *responded to* by the human person. Grounded in the divine as the source of Beauty, the task of theological aesthetics is to explore this reception and response within the human heart.⁷⁰⁰

The area of theological aesthetics explores these questions of divine initiative and human reception - and more - grounded in the divine as the source of Beauty’. It includes reflection on the arts and the aesthetic dimensions of life and faith as sources of both theology and revelation. A very broad definition by Gesa Thiessen suggests that “...theological aesthetics is concerned with questions about God and issues in theology in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts.”⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁶ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 16.

⁶⁹⁷ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁸ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁹ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 9.

⁷⁰⁰ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 158.

⁷⁰¹ Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics*, p. 1, paraphrasing Richard Viladesau’s definition. Viladesau, Richard, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

A definition by Gonzalez is more immediately experiential, highlighting the qualities of encounter and experience - the encounter with beauty and encounter with the Divine.

Theological aesthetics holds that in the *encounter* with Beauty there is an *experience* of the Divine. An emphasis on the aesthetics is based on the belief that within the realm of symbol, imagination, emotion, and art one finds a privileged expression of the *encounter* with the Divine and its articulation.⁷⁰²

There is a common concern for Beauty, and a belief that Beauty is a fundamental characteristic of God or being which is met with through the aesthetic realm.

The range of contemporary journals in this field shows the wide spectrum of interests, writes Thiessen.

[It] will comprise critical writings on aesthetic theories and commentaries on current projects in visual art, music, literature and church architecture. There are also articles on theoretical and practical aspects of the relationship between theology and the arts written by theologians, pastors, musicians and artists, reviews and announcements of art exhibitions, music festivals, poetry readings, reproductions of images of works of art and of poetry, etc. This shows that theological aesthetics would generally imply a broad, inclusive term rather than a narrow concept, especially as it includes the dialogue between theology and the arts, rather than being limited to a theology of beauty.⁷⁰³

Methodological Approaches

Consequently, different methodological approaches or typologies employed in theological aesthetics depend on the perspective and starting place, and include both theologies of beauty and the dialogue between theology and the arts. Gonzalez has grouped these approaches into three wide categories: 1. Ontological, 2. Methodological, and 3. Both.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰² Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 14.

⁷⁰³ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 2.

⁷⁰⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 16. There are other more nuanced or complex categorising systems depending on the writer's perspective. Stephan van Erp goes further, naming four typologies in his

1. *Ontological* perspectives look at the metaphysics of Beauty as a transcendental, that is, Beauty as a characteristic of the Divine Being. Gonzalez observes that many theologians concerned with Beauty have expressed concern over its demise as a central category in theology. And they seek its recovery.
2. *Methodological* perspectives include the incorporation of the arts within theologies or as sources for theology. Many liberation theologians, including feminist theologians who will be discussed later in this chapter, fall into this category.
3. *Methodological and ontological* concerns are emphasised by some theologians, including Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose theological aesthetics seeks to recover Beauty as both a transcendental and as the aesthetic form of theology, though he is not so much concerned with a theology of art.⁷⁰⁵

There has been a huge expansion of the area of theological aesthetics in recent years, and a wide spectrum of recent writings in the twentieth century, as attested to by Thiessen's survey and choice of readings for her introductory book *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*.⁷⁰⁶ The few comprehensive works written on theological aesthetics have been written in the last thirty years.⁷⁰⁷ While many historical writings do refer to beauty and have a concern with aesthetics (especially in the patristic and medieval writings), Thiessen points out that in most of these, the discussion on aesthetics tends to arise here and there *within* larger subjects, such as in writings on the nature of God, the Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, or on Genesis and the Song of Songs. "Thus we find theological aesthetics in 'snippets' rather than in

analysis and critical engagement with theological aesthetics. His categories are: 1. Theologies of Art; 2. Aesthetics in philosophical theology; 3. Transcendental theological aesthetics; and 4. Theological aesthetics and redemption. See S. van Erp, *Art as Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and the Foundations of Faith* (Tilburg: Peeters, 2003), p. 57-67.

⁷⁰⁵ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 16.

⁷⁰⁶ I agree with her comment that a Reader incorporating writings by artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, etc would be of great interest. "It is at times highly illuminating to read what artists have said about their spirituality, or about the relationship between faith and art." (p. 3). There are quite a few recent initiatives and books from these perspectives, for example musician Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Toward a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1991), and *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000) and his Institute; artist Meinrad Craighead, *Crow Mother and the Dog God: A Retrospective* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Art Books, 2003); Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2000); Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way* (London: Pan Books, 1994); Suzie Gablik, *Conversations before the End of Time* (London: Thames + Hudson, 1995). Further references are listed in the Bibliography.

⁷⁰⁷ Thiessen writes that "Lengthy, systematic writings on this subject are quite recent, with a few notable exceptions, such as Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names* or the medieval Eastern treatises on the theology of the icon." p. 2. More recent writers include Jonathon Edwards, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Richard Viladesau, Frank Burch Brown, and Edward Farley.

extensive works devoted to the theme.”⁷⁰⁸ While, historically, there has been interest and reflection on the aesthetic in theology, it has not been a central organising category for theology.

Ecumenism, Crossing Borders and Creating Community

Interest in theological aesthetics is emerging simultaneously from different denominational traditions, contexts and disciplines. Thiessen sees this ‘unintentional ecumenism’ engendering a wide range of benefits for the church. I agree that there are many exciting, fruitful, life-giving implications - not only for the church, Christian unity, ecumenical relations and theology - but for social transformation.

The first area of ecumenism Thiessen names relates to the renewed interest in beauty in theology being shown by all the major denominations and the contributions being made to the conversation from their diverse perspectives. Traditionally, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans and Orthodox churches have been foremost in the dialogue between theology and the arts, as imagery, ritual and symbolism are integrally and intentionally part of these traditions. Now, moving away from the traditional suspicion and eschewing of imagery, there is also a shift in attitude happening in the Reformed tradition.

...scholars of the Reformed tradition increasingly engage with questions including the role of the visual image in places of worship, distancing themselves from some of the Calvinist iconoclast polemics of the past. This field of theology therefore is ecumenical, i.e. without having consciously set out to achieve such aims. One would suggest that this can only be of benefit to theology, ecumenical relations and the wider search for Christian unity.⁷⁰⁹

John W. de Gruchy in South Africa is one of those reformed scholars who has engaged with the arts, including ‘the role of the visual image in places of worship’. He has recently written a book on this, entitled *Icons as a Means of Grace* (Wellington: Lux Verbi, 2008).

⁷⁰⁸ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 2.

⁷⁰⁹ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 3.

Secondly, the ecumenical trend is manifest in the *content* of theological aesthetics. Thiessen emphasizes how the aesthetic pertains to all areas of theology, from fundamental theology and the areas of revelation and faith, to dogmatics, scripture, church history, pastoral theology and ethics.⁷¹⁰

Thirdly, Thiessen highlights the dialogue between theology and the arts as ‘ecumenical’ in the sense that it is *interdisciplinary*. From her location in a post-modern and secular context in Europe (Ireland), she sees this as a significant response to increasing fragmentation and specialization that has characterised late modernity. The quest for unity and a more holistic worldview has been increasingly evident in moves to build bridges between academic disciplines. In theology in the last three decades, Thiessen sees the quest for unity in the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches, such as in liberation, feminist, and ecological theologies which relate to justice and the whole of life. Other areas that theology is widening to include are the sciences, arts, and technology.⁷¹¹

The holistic thrust behind interdisciplinary work like theologies of liberation, ecological concerns, and theological aesthetics, is a manifestation of the value these theologies place on the person and community, and listening to peoples’ stories as method for doing theology. Commenting on the strength and appeal that “... these recent theologies and their hermeneutics give primary attention to human experience...”⁷¹² Thiessen proposes that theological aesthetics, as an ecumenical, interdisciplinary and connected-to-human-experience way of doing theology, is an area with potential to give new life to theology, a conversation through which theology becomes more connected and relevant to other academic disciplines and the wider public forum.

In a vivid personal illustration of this multi-faceted ecumenism, Garcia Rivera writes of Beauty creating connections, crossing boundaries and creating community. Movingly and with humour, he recounts his experience as a Lutheran pastor, tasked

⁷¹⁰ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 3.

⁷¹¹ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 3-4.

⁷¹² Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 3.

with setting up a Hispanic ministry in a Pennsylvania Dutch town in the United States. The Hispanic (very poor) church worshipped upstairs at the small auditorium of the host English-speaking Lutheran church. Soon, he writes, conflict began to surface between two very different cultural traditions - around Christmas decorations of the 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' churches - the ornate, colourful, flashing coloured lights and tinsel that hung from 'every inch of available surface' of the former, versus the spare, simple style preferred by the latter (called 'gaudy' versus 'lifeless' by their respective adherents). He writes of the lovely paradox of the name chosen by the Hispanic congregation for their Lutheran Church, a Dominican mulatto from Peru named St. Martin de Porres.

It is here that I first experienced what I call the Community of the Beautiful...It was Beauty at her most beautiful. Subversive, yet gracious, ever hoping and fresh, Beauty crossed barriers and created community. Beauty's call made possible the impossible and made visible the invisible. Beauty could cross differences made long ago. Indeed, Beauty loved difference. Beauty revelled in the contrast between the "upstairs" and the "downstairs" Christmas decorations. Beauty loved the Moravian star hanging in the midst of a Catholic Nativity scene. Beauty loved a Lutheran church named after a Dominican saint.⁷¹³

Garcia Rivera explores what he calls 'the community of the beautiful', with its crossing of boundaries and love for difference, its lifegiving connections, its lifting up of the lowly and its creation of community.

Beholder and Beheld: Where is the Creating?

Another introductory note on theological aesthetics relates to themes. While noting that the diversity and overlapping themes in writings on theological aesthetics makes it difficult to categorise them, there are two important and interrelated threads that have been primary in theological aesthetics.⁷¹⁴ These are: 1. the beauty and vision of God, and; 2. the theology of the image.

⁷¹³ Garcia Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, p. 3. He points out that it was Dominican priests who persecuted Martin Luther.

⁷¹⁴ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 4.

Thiessen highlights these two threads as primary themes in the discussion on theological aesthetics through the ages. Indeed, I confirm this from my experience, having found that most writings on theological aesthetics focus on what is essentially a dyad. That is, they look at first, the beautiful thing - *the beheld* - as it appears or emerges or shines forth, such as the glory of God, creation, a person, nature or artwork, and second,. the beholder's *perception* or *reception* of it.⁷¹⁵

However, there seems to be an element lacking in much of the literature on theological aesthetics that relates to creating and human creativity. Because my research questions do not focus so much on the *product* of the artistic process nor the *reception* of it by others, I experienced this as a gaping and frustrating omission, but at first it was not clear why. While my concern is indeed partly about listening to artists' and crafters' encounter with Beauty, Beauty in themselves and their perception or reception of Beauty in an ontological sense, it is also about their creating as a means to this encounter. I am interested in the person creating, the spirituality, learnings and consequences to the artist and the wider society emerging from the process of creating. This includes the creating process and its multiplicity of fruits in life (not just the artwork) as a spiritual and theological source for the creating woman and others.

The reason for my frustration with the readings on theological aesthetics became clear as I was negotiating the massive terrain of Balthasar's theological aesthetics and secondary sources. Balthasar's work is complex and nuanced, comprehensive, deep and insightful, and resonates with some of my primary research questions about Beauty, but then it stops short. Balthasar's work is about the life of Christian faith, the shining forth of God's Beauty (the glory) as revelation and invitation (and ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ). It includes the capacity for human perception, reception, response and enrapturement in Christ upon perceiving and receiving this Divine Beauty. The Beauty of God in Christ is analogously mirrored by revelation of God in the natural and artistic beauty of the world, and human beings' perception of it and response to it - all of it involving the senses and the heart, not just the head.

⁷¹⁵ Thiessen, *Reader*, pp. 4-5.

These are important insights which do apply to my work. But his work stops short because it is not really about art and creativity, or about a theology of art and creating, which are also main concerns of my work.

Whether we are looking at theological aesthetics from an ontological perspective, or rooted in the created beauty of the world or in artistic work, there is always a triad - the creator, a created thing and a perceiver.⁷¹⁶ However, in Balthasar's work and secondary sources about him, and more generally in the writings on theological aesthetics, I found little that referred in an in-depth way to the creating person, and the creative process itself. I wondered how I could speak about my research with creating women and the significance of the creative process to their spirituality and to theology in terms of theological aesthetics, especially the theological aesthetics of Balthasar, when it does not appear to be part of the existing conversation. Then, with the 'sickness' came the 'cure', when I came across a footnote in the work of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera concerning Balthasar's theological aesthetics which confirmed the very thing that was puzzling me. Garcia-Rivera wrote:

I was one of those theologians moved by von Balthasar's call to a theological aesthetics. I came to realize later, however, that aesthetics addresses only one side of an essentially triadic relationship. The experience of art involves the artist, the beholder, and the work of art itself. This three-way relationship, however, is one in the experience of art. Aesthetics addresses only the relationship between the work of art and the beholder and as such does not do justice to the inextricable three-part relationship that is art. Thus, a theological aesthetics needs to be expanded from its dyadic relationship between beholder and work of art into the triadic experience which includes the artist. Such an expanded theological aesthetics is the stuff of a theology of art. In other words, a theology of art explores the entire triadic structure of art. Thus a theological aesthetics that does not include a theology of art is incomplete."⁷¹⁷

Garcia-Rivera embraced Balthasar's insights, but then suggested that a theological

⁷¹⁶ This was also the conclusion of aesthetic philosopher Michael H. Mitias. From a philosophic understanding of a work of art as an aesthetic object, the artwork and the context are both essential. "Artistic activity, or the activity in which an art work is fashioned, is the birthplace of the artistic as such; hence if a philosopher seeks an understanding of an art work as an aesthetic object he cannot ignore the conditions under which this object is produced, for unless we know the identity and mode of being of this object aesthetic appreciation and criticism would be infested with vagueness, arbitrariness, and indeterminacy." Michael H Mitias, "Creativity and Aesthetics" in Michael H. Mitias (ed), *Creativity in Art, Religion, and Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), pp. 53-54.

⁷¹⁷ Garcia-Rivera, *Wounded Innocence*, p. 20 (footnote 9).

aesthetics needs to go further than looking at the shining forth or revelation of Beauty and its reception and response by the human. It is helpful to look at Balthasar's work as contributing to the foundation of the discussion, and build upon it. In his book *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, Garcia-Rivera set out to do just that. He begins to look at specific artists, their creative process and spirituality, through the eyes of a theologian, to see what it reveals.⁷¹⁸

The present research, then, draws on and engages with the some of the conversation on theological aesthetics, and contributes to expanding it from a feminist theological perspective, in the African context, and with a focus on the third part of the triad - the creating.

Conclusion

As has been shown in this chapter, beauty is not a luxury. The writers on beauty articulate in their different ways and words, how and why beauty moves the human heart. Allied to truth and goodness, beauty is the 'graced form', embodying a depth and substance that attracts and calls, adrenalises, greets, welcomes and waits. Beauty is sacred and necessary, abundant, extravagant, generous and wild. It is life-giving, life-saving. Beauty draws our attention, awareness and consciousness. It inspires care, protection and respect in all its vulnerability and fleetingness. It reminds us of who we are in its intrinsic generosity and plenitude, its ability to astonish and provoke wonder. And experience and encounter with beauty calls us to awareness of aliveness - our own and others. Yet it also has the capacity to root us in a reality where we are shifted out of the centre, and still remain an important whole-being and participant. Beauty breaks boundaries and forms community. It is embodied and functional, sensuous and spiritual. Beauty has been called the ultimate purpose of the universe, the *anima mundi*, forever increasing in complexity and magnificence. And what if, as Haught and de Gruchy suggest, the ever-expanding beauty of the Universe is

⁷¹⁸ A significant point from feminist theology about the 'perspectival nature of human knowledge' relates to a gap in the discourse on theological aesthetics. At the intersection of theological aesthetics and feminist theological method is the importance of the situation of the person creating - their life, their context, their struggles, their being and their learning through the creative process. The finished artwork they produce is just one fruit. There are many fruits to creating, for the spiritual and psychological development of the person and for society.

something that we not only participate in and can become more conscious of, but that we effect through our own moral actions? Coming from God as the source of Beauty, our experience of beauty is a glimpse; an encounter with the One that is also in us and in the world.

Beauty is not an extra, it is essential to all existence. Truth or goodness without beauty become dull, lifeless, boring, formalistic and cold. It is beauty - sensuous and spiritual, spiritual in the sensuous, and sensuous in the spiritual - which excites and nourishes human feeling, desire, thought and imagination. It is the splendour of beauty that makes the true and the good whole. The magnitude of beauty in nature and in all human creation, wherever it is experienced, gives us a glimpse of the beauty of God, therein lies its saving power. In this way beauty becomes a way to God and a manifestation of God at the same time. God's beauty is what draws us to God, and this includes the mystery and glory of Christ on the cross, the utter distortion of divine-human beauty and yet its complete fulfilment. This paradox is the basis of Christian faith and cannot be overlooked, not even and especially in a theological aesthetics.⁷¹⁹

These meanings, characteristics and implications uncover a deep and sacred substance to beauty. They speak about Beauty's existence as an objective reality, its sacredness and pointing beyond itself, its life-giving quality, its welcome and greeting, its 'fittingness', both its simplicity and complexity, its expansiveness, the pleasure and wonder it evokes, how it moves the human heart, its embodiment, sensuousness and tactility, its particularity, its inseparability from goodness and truth, its connection with moral behaviour and creativity, and even its centrality to the vision and ultimate purpose of life and the universe.

In Christian theology, the ultimate form of God's Beauty is seen as the shining forth of God's self in God's embodiment in Jesus Christ - his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. Developing a theological aesthetics around the centrality of Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression of God's beauty, it is fitting now, in chapter eight, to turn to look at the ground-breaking work by the 'theologian of beauty' Hans Urs von Balthasar.

⁷¹⁹ Thiessen, *Reader*, p. 6.

Chapter Eight

Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Recovery of Beauty in Theological Discourse: “Beauty as Form and Analogy of the Divine”⁷²⁰

Introduction

“...what has happened to us, as human beings first of all, and then as Christians, that we do not see it as something sublimely obvious that the biblical revelation...is somehow related to *beauty*.”⁷²¹

“... the fire in the heart becomes the light of the mind: the whole object of theology is the form of the beauty of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, especially Jesus Christ crucified.”⁷²²

As was seen in the previous chapter, many theologians and faithful people writing about Beauty were and are critical of the effects of Western rationalism produced by the Enlightenment, with its scientific and rationalist worldview and the consequences to theology. Among these was Hans Urs von Balthasar, who was passionately repelled by the theological teaching he received as a young Jesuit student.

Balthasar felt that the concept of beauty should have a central place in theology.⁷²³ With his magnum opus of the *Glory of the Lord*, he articulated a theological aesthetics that engages with almost everyone in the history of ideas of western culture.⁷²⁴ He drew on patristics, saints and mystics, philosophers and theologians, and includes resources of poetry, music, theatre, and literature. He is largely credited with being the person who brought back the discussion of beauty into theology in the twentieth century and is often called “the theologian of beauty.”⁷²⁵

⁷²⁰ The subtitle comes from Stephan van Erp, *The Art of Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and the Foundations of Faith* (Tilburg: Peeters Studies in Philosophical Theology, 2004), p. 54.

⁷²¹ Aidan Nichols. “Balthasar’s Aims in the ‘Theological Aesthetics’” in E. Block (ed), *Glory, Grace and Culture: The Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), p. 108.

⁷²² Noel O’Donoghue, ‘A Theology of Beauty’, in J. Riches (ed) *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 10

⁷²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merkakis, J. Fessio and J. Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p. 18.

⁷²⁴ van Erp, *The Art of Theology*, p. 75.

⁷²⁵ van Erp, *The Art of Theology*, p. 138. van Erp notes that Balthasar does not clearly define the

This chapter introduces Balthasar, some of his ideas, and a critique of his ideas from feminist perspectives. His thinking is foundational to the discussion on theological aesthetics, and is central to my understanding of what may be happening in the lives of South African creating women as they create.

Balthasar has been called a traditional theologian in the same breath as a highly idiosyncratic thinker.⁷²⁶ His body of work is enormous, his complex theology highly influential, and given its history, has paradoxically helped to shape the development of contemporary Roman Catholicism.⁷²⁷ His ideas have influenced Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger⁷²⁸, now Pope Benedict XVI. Some of his theology has been appropriated by reactionary causes in the Catholic Church - a cause for much criticism and concern.

Engagement with the entirety of his work, details of it, its influence and the body of critical analysis that it has generated over the years, is impossible here. Even a

concept of beauty, and does not develop a theory of beauty. Instead he builds on the status given to beauty as a transcendental by the church fathers and the medieval scholastics. However, van Erp says, this becomes a problem in modern theology because the experience of reality as a whole is neither beautiful, or even good. "If the beautiful is indeed regarded as a gift and therefore completely independent from human perception, then at least one should acknowledge that human perception often seems to be inadequate to receive this divine gift"(p. 138). At the same time, he continues, if beauty is dispensed with as a transcendental, it would become impossible to see the world as creation, a place where the divine is at work. The latter is the attitude that Balthasar saw in theological and philosophical approaches of the time. "Nothing expresses more unequivocally the profound failure of these theologies than their deeply anguished, joyless and cheerless tone: torn between knowing and believing, they are no longer able to see anything, nor can they therefore, be convincing in any visible way."(HI 167-168) in van Erp, p. 138.

⁷²⁶ David Moss and Edward Oakes, 'Introduction', in E. Oakes and D. Moss (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 2.

⁷²⁷ Balthasar was seen as a controversial figure. First as a radical seeking to tear down the traditional boundaries that formed a *laager* for the institutional Roman Catholic church as he saw it (pre-Vatican II), then as a conservative thinker who felt the centre - the mystery of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection - had lost its place in theology. While his ideas and contribution were amongst those of the *ressourcement* movement that influenced the Second Vatican Council (with Rahner, de Lubac and others) Balthasar himself was not invited to participate as one of the theological advisors. Furthermore, having left the Jesuits, to form his ecumenical institute St. John's with doctor Adrienne von Speyr, he was refused incardination (a formality in which he is recognised as a priest and is able to work in a parish, give sacraments, etc) and spent many years as a 'sacerdotal Ishmael' (Moss and Oakes, 'Introduction', endnote 7, p.8). In later years, his work was widely recognized. Just days before he was to be appointed as a Cardinal, he died. He had said that it was not his work that had changed to make it more received, but the world around him.

⁷²⁸ S. Caldecott, 2001. An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Catholic Education Resource Centre*, 6p. www.catholiceducation.org . (Accessed 1 April 2008), p. 1.

detailed discussion of his theological aesthetics would take us into a depth into Balthasar's theology that is far beyond the purposes of this thesis. I attempt here a brief synopsis of why Balthasar was concerned with Beauty, philosophical and theological concepts that informed his thought, and some of the important things he said. Given the criticism of his theology from feminist theologians and my attempts to apply his insights in theological aesthetics to my research findings, I then give special attention to the gendered vision of his wider theology.⁷²⁹ I explain why his theological aesthetics is critical for the present project.

The 'Theologian of Beauty'

Balthasar (1905-1988), a Swiss German Catholic, was from an aristocratic background, gifted in music, and educated in German literature. During his university years, while on retreat, he heard a thunderbolt call to become a priest. Following this call, he joined the Society of Jesus, and went to study theology in France.⁷³⁰ Balthasar found both the environment and the Catholic theological method used in Europe during his instruction as a Jesuit in the 1930's - neoscholastic Thomism, based on St Thomas Aquinas - to be agonisingly dull and dry. These anecdotes are telling.

It was so boring that he eventually resorted to stuffing his ears during lectures in order to read something much more thrilling: the writings of St Augustine

⁷²⁹ Beyond the fifteen volumes of the English translation of *Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar's theological work is vast and some say obscure. Feminist theologians object to its essentialist perspective on human anthropology, violence and even misogyny (See Tina Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama: A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *The Way*, 44, 4 (Oct 2005), pp. 160-176). American theologian Susan A. Ross rightly points out that it is important for feminist theologians to engage with Balthasar's theology, and theological aesthetics particularly, as the feminist scholarly perspective is missing from the conversation (S.A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality and Justice* (Paulist Press: New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2006), pp. 19-20). Belgian theologian Georges de Schrijver raised a similar concern from a perspective of liberation theology and Balthasar's criticism of it. He further commented that Balthasar's theology has been widely embraced by neo-conservative Christians and is helping shape official doctrine of the Roman Catholic church from a narrowed perspective. The discourse and interaction with it needs to be wider. (Georges de Schrijver, 13 September 2006 in Belgium. See also Chapter 5 Georges de Schrijver, *Recent Theological Debates in Europe: Their Impact on Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004)).

⁷³⁰ There is an abundance of biographical and autobiographical material on Balthasar. See for example, the biography by Balthasar's nephew Bishop Peter Henrici, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life' in D. L. Schindler (ed), *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp. 7-43; and Medard Kehl, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Portrait', in M. Kehl, and W. Loser, (eds), *The von Balthasar Reader*. Translated by Robert J. Daly, S.J. and Fred Lawrence (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 3-54.

and the early Church Fathers. What had gone wrong with theology to make it so boring?⁷³¹

The theology and method used was, he felt, rooted in secular rationalism, designed more to dialogue with those outside the faith than rooted in the incarnational event of God in Christ, and entirely unbecoming of the subject matter it sought to convey. He was deeply disturbed that he should find the study of God to be presented in such a reductionist, rational and logical manner, without life or beauty or attractiveness to the senses.⁷³²

My entire period of study in the Society was a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had made out of the glory of revelation. I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God and wanted to lash out with the fury of a Samson: I felt like tearing down, with Samson's own strength, the whole temple and burying myself beneath the rubble.⁷³³

To Balthasar, theology "...is supposed to be the study of the fire and light that burn at the centre of the world."⁷³⁴ "This fire is enkindled by the encounter with the beloved as beloved, by the God of love as love....the fire in the heart is the result of an encounter, the encounter with God in the call and enchantment of his absolute beauty."⁷³⁵

Beyond his critique of many aspects of theology, he was critical of the modern worldview, which he saw as essentially dualistic, hierarchical, and mechanistic.⁷³⁶ He saw a danger in the artificial separation of matter and spirit, form and content, idea and history, especially when value is then assigned to one part at the expense of the other.⁷³⁷ Such a sterile reduction of life contrasted sharply with a worldview that

⁷³¹ Caldecott, 'An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar,' pp.1-2.

⁷³² Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics*. (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. xii.

⁷³³ Moss and Oakes, 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁷³⁴ Caldecott, 'An Introduction to Hans Urs von Balthasar,' p. 2.

⁷³⁵ O'Donoghue, 'A Theology of Beauty', p. 9.

⁷³⁶ This included the historico-critical method, liberation theologies, feminist theologies. Moss and Oakes, *Introduction*, p. 2. See for example, E. Oakes, S.J. 'Balthasar's Critique of the Historical-Critical Method' in E. Block, Jr. (ed), *Glory, Grace and Culture: The Works of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2005), pp. 150 - 174.

⁷³⁷ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 106. de Gruchy writes of Balthasar's identification with Goethe's struggle against the strictures of Newtonianism.

embraced natural beauty and wonder, a view that he found in the works of some musicians, poets, artists, saints and mystics. Balthasar went back to the foundations of Christianity, to rediscover and recover from history the ideas, insights and passion of the early fathers of the Church, centred on the beauty, or glory of God.⁷³⁸

In his massive work *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar aims to explore “...the ultimate and objective ground which lies in the biblical revelation, as it gives shape and form to theology.”⁷³⁹ This ultimate and objective ground is the splendour and glory of God, or Beauty.⁷⁴⁰ He places Beauty as a characteristic of God - its shining forth, attraction, call, sensuousness, its fire and light, its kenotic self-emptying, and its ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ - at the centre of his theology, and emphasises the human perception, reception, and response and enrapturement to its revelation.⁷⁴¹

*The Transcendentals*⁷⁴²

Balthasar roots his theological aesthetics in traditional Catholic metaphysics from Aquinas. He referred to three transcendental properties of Being - Beauty, Goodness

⁷³⁸ French Jesuit Henri de Lubac's *Nouvelle Theologie* and his idea of *ressourcement* of theology had an important influence on Balthasar's theology. *Ressourcement* refers to “the reading and interpreting of the work of the church fathers and adapting their spiritual reading of scripture as a way of doing theology instead of taking the ‘perennial’ neothomist philosophy as a starting point...” van Erp, *Art as Theology*, p. 79. Neoscholastic Thomism sought for a unitary theological method along rationalistic philosophical lines. In contrast, Balthasar felt this was a wrong approach, because God cannot be encountered through a secular rationalistic means, nor through one perspective only. Nichols, ‘Balthasar's Aims in the Theological Aesthetics’ in Block (ed), *Glory, Grace and Culture*, pp. 116-118. Balthasar was amongst many theologians such as Karl Rahner, Jean Danielou, Yves Congar, Louis Boyer and Henri de Lubac who sought to reform Catholic theology by returning it to its roots in the writings of the church fathers. They sought to retrieve the wisdom of ancient Christianity's sacramental and liturgical sensibility (K. Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p. 1.

⁷³⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol. 2, p. 14 in de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 103.

⁷⁴⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol I, pp. 9-11.

⁷⁴¹ Steck, *The Ethical Thought*, p. 1; Nichols, ‘Balthasar's Aims’, p. 115.

⁷⁴² The use of these three transcendental properties are not contested in this thesis, although there is a long history behind both their selection and even their ordering, going back to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Amongst other medieval scholars and prominent church fathers, Augustine and Aquinas developed the transcendentals in theological discourse. Kant's philosophy looked at these and other transcendental properties of being, with beauty at the last – reason, ethics, aesthetics. Hans Urs von Balthasar reacted to Kant's analysis, and purposely and intentionally re-ordered the articulation of the three transcendentals with Beauty at the beginning, indicating its primacy as a characteristic of the Divine and an integrating principle for being. Mongrain, *Irenaean Retrieval*, p. 67.

and Truth.⁷⁴³

To Balthasar, Beauty as a transcendental is a fundamental characteristic of the Divine Being, along with the true and the good.⁷⁴⁴ It is Beauty that attracts and gives life.⁷⁴⁵ He emphasised that these three transcendentals must occur together because it is at their meeting place that the true God is to be found.

In a world without beauty – even if people cannot dispense with the word and constantly have it on the tip of their tongue in order to abuse it – in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world, the good also loses its attractiveness, the self evidence of why it must be carried out.⁷⁴⁶

...in a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency.⁷⁴⁷

“Without Beauty, the True and the Good become obscured. Without Beauty, the Good ceases to be attractive, Truth stops being reasonable.”⁷⁴⁸ If Beauty is separated from its divine origins and made into something admired for its own sake - mere appearance - it is bereft of meaning, and power. Separated from the triad - the good and the true - all suffer. Without Beauty, the true and the good lose their attractiveness, their joy, generosity and their meaning. The deepest reasons for doing good are eradicated. There is no reason to choose good over evil.⁷⁴⁹

Balthasar wrote that something appears beautiful because it radiates and reveals the inner depth of reality of Being. Something is beautiful to us because we sense the infinity, value, goodness, and truth - the mystery behind it.

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation

⁷⁴³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 11.

⁷⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 11.

⁷⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 19.

⁷⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 19.

⁷⁴⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 19.

⁷⁴⁸ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 177.

⁷⁴⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 19.

and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating.⁷⁵⁰

The ‘form’ which we perceive to be beautiful, is beautiful because it simultaneously embodies, reveals and conceals the presence of the depths of the Divine.⁷⁵¹ It points beyond itself to this Divine mystery. “The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths.”⁷⁵²

Analogy of Being and Imago Dei

Balthasar’s idea of the beautiful form holding ‘the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality’ and at the same time pointing beyond itself to these depths, is informed by another key philosophical concept fundamental to his theological aesthetics - the doctrine of *analogia entis* - the analogy of being.⁷⁵³ As he uses it, it refers to the relationship which exists between God and creation which allows the human creature to recognize and move towards God, “a doctrine of participation, of a sharing in the divine life”.⁷⁵⁴

In this view, Beauty in the natural world is related to divine glory but it is not the same; it is an analogy of the Beauty of God. It has as its ultimate source, God as

⁷⁵⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁷⁵¹ His idea of the form does not refer to a clearly defined object but to the active presence of the beautiful, a presence that exists and emanates from within, radiating outward. It is something that affects the perceiver as they receive, respond and are taken up into it (rapture). Ultimately this is seen in Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. L. Dupré, ‘The Glory of the Lord: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetic’ in D. Schindler (ed), *His Life and Work*, pp. 183 – 206. He explains at length Balthasar’s idea of ‘the form’, pp. 183-191.

⁷⁵² Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁷⁵³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama, Vol III, Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), pp. 220-228. Balthasar drew on, and amended the thought of his mentor and friend Erich Przywara. The concept of *analogia entis* as used by Przywara was a point of fundamental difference from Balthasar’s contemporary Karl Barth and the concept of *analogia fidei*. Balthasar and Barth had a rich dialogue, and the development of Balthasar’s ideas of *analogia entis* were influenced through it. See for example, Medard Kehl, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Portrait’ in M. Kehl and W. Löser (eds), *The Hans Urs von Balthasar Reader* translated by R.J. Daly, S.J and Fred Lawrence (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 1-54. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

⁷⁵⁴ Nichols, *The Word has been Abroad*, p. xiii.

Beauty, and is similar - yet more dissimilar - to God's ultimate Beauty.⁷⁵⁵ "Every created object, humanity included, partakes to some extent in this beauty. Hence the inherent potential of all creation to express the beauty of God..."⁷⁵⁶ The infinite and great Beauty that radiates from God (glory), is able to be perceived, received, participated in and responded to by the human creature, at least partially, because this Beauty of God exists within the human and nature by grace, ultimately through the revelation of God in Christ. Perceiving and being taken up into, or enraptured by this beauty is analogous to faith, as the appearance of beauty is analogous to grace.

Both things, the ontic and the experiential dimensions, go together, and (as we have said in connection with the light of faith) this unity henceforth deepens the in-formation of the person, thereby allowing the aesthetic side of Christian experience truly to emerge. Before the beautiful – no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful – the whole person quivers. He not only 'finds' the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it...Such a person has been taken up wholesale into the reality of the beautiful and is now fully subordinate to it, determined by it, animated by it.⁷⁵⁷

Balthasar's theological aesthetics sees the human ability to perceive and receive beauty as analogous to the human ability to perceive and receive the divine. He builds on the concept of *Imago Dei* - that human beings are made in the image of God and constituted by the image of God. There is a similarity between the human creature and the creator, but a greater dissimilarity. The essential presence of God in the human creature is there as part of creation.⁷⁵⁸

While there is a chasm between the God and the human creature, a chasm that cannot be closed by the human creature, the divine nonetheless exists within the human, orientates us toward God, allows us to recognise God and move toward God, because of God's love and grace. Balthasar sees this chasm not as a curse that can only be

⁷⁵⁵ See for example, Balthasar's discussion of this similarity and dissimilarity in *Balthasar, Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, pp. 430-431. "...everything which is said of God – his divinity, his eternal might and glory, his power as Creator – constantly underscores the ever-greater difference between him and creatures." (p. 431).

⁷⁵⁶ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 103.

⁷⁵⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 247.

⁷⁵⁸ Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, pp. xii-xiv. Kehl, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar', pp. 19-24. Many of these concepts discuss the relationship between nature and grace, which I will not go into here.

bridged by faith but as an invitation and opportunity to move toward God, through God's own drawing.⁷⁵⁹

In the world, then, there is evidence of God, revealed through the natural beauty of the world, and through great art.⁷⁶⁰ The experience of worldly beauty reveals - it is like God's beauty, but dissimilar. It is an *epiphaneia* that points to something greater beyond itself.

If everything in the world that is fine and beautiful is *epiphaneia*, the radiance and splendour which breaks forth in expressive form from a veiled and yet mighty depth of being, then the event of the self-revelation of the hidden, the utterly free and sovereign God in the forms of this world, in word and history, and finally in human form itself, will itself form an analogy to that worldly beauty however far it outstrips it. In Jesus Christ, to whom the revelation in creation and history leads, the 'yet greater unlikeness' of God over against all that is not divine is not simply inferred as it were from certain 'signs', nor simply known (in a *docta ignorantia*), but - no matter how strange the manner of its appearing - read off from the form of the revelation and from nowhere else.⁷⁶¹

The beauty we encounter and experience in art or in the natural world – and recognised within the depths of ourselves as the image of God - is an expression and self-revelation of God's own beauty or glory. And it is in Jesus Christ that the greatest and ultimate form of God's beauty is revealed.

Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Form of Beauty

To Balthasar then, Beauty is much more than a matter of appearances. Beauty is not a subjective judgement of taste, but is a transcendental characteristic of the divine. "Beauty is part of the nature of God; it is the essence of God's glory (*doxa*)."⁷⁶² The perceiving, open and receiving subject gets taken up into it, enraptured, away from

⁷⁵⁹ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae*, Vol III, p. 228; and Kehl, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar', pp. 19-24.

⁷⁶⁰ The question of what constitutes 'great art' is a contested one. Balthasar did not include all art, literature or music in this category. He was selective and had specific criteria as to what kind of art was revelatory. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 179.

⁷⁶¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, Vol. II, p. 11.

⁷⁶² de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 103.

oneself.⁷⁶³

Beauty attracts those who are encountered by it, drawing them to the true and the good. Being drawn to the true and the good engages one, and moves one to action, as Gonzalez and Oakes point out. “Beauty by its very nature always elicits a response: one simply cannot experience a form or a phenomenon as beautiful without responding, without assenting.”⁷⁶⁴ De Gruchy and others emphasise that it reveals Beauty’s redemptive power.⁷⁶⁵

Balthasar’s theology - and his theological aesthetics - is centred on Jesus Christ. To him, the ultimate *form* of Divine Beauty is seen in the kenotic self-emptying love of Jesus Christ’s incarnation and his death on the cross.

Jesus is the Word, the Image, the Expression and the exegesis of God...He is what he expresses - namely God - but he is not whom he expresses - namely the Father. This incomparable paradox stands as the fountainhead of the Christian aesthetic, and therefore of all aesthetics!⁷⁶⁶

To Balthasar, Christ is the ultimate form of revelation of God’s glory or beauty, and all is taken up into him.⁷⁶⁷ This includes all of culture and history. Art finds its “...true meaning and goal when brought within the orbit of Christian faith and made subject to Jesus Christ.”⁷⁶⁸ It is God’s revelation which enables God to be known through beauty.

Beauty, then, is much more than that which pleases the senses. It is a transcendental, a characteristic of God that is known through God’s revelation. Beauty is “...the manner in which God’s goodness (*bonum*) gives itself and is expressed by God and

⁷⁶³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, pp. 32-3, 119, 125-126. van Erp, *The Art of Theology*, p.139.

⁷⁶⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 177.

⁷⁶⁵ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*; van Erp, *The Art of Theology*; and Christopher W. Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroads, 2001) are some who explore Balthasar’s ethical thought on beauty as related to redemption.

⁷⁶⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 29.

⁷⁶⁷ From the Foreword to Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol.1*.

⁷⁶⁸ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 102.

understood by man as truth (*verum*).”⁷⁶⁹

Brief Summary of Balthasar’s Main Points

To Balthasar, theology is ‘the study of the fire and light that burns at the centre of the world.’⁷⁷⁰ Together with the transcendental properties of Truth and Goodness, Beauty is a characteristic of God, emanating from God as self-revelation, the splendour that points to the depths of being. It is at the meeting place of truth, goodness and beauty that the true God is found. Without beauty, truth and goodness lose their attractiveness, their purpose and reason. If beauty is separated from these divine origins, and is turned into something admired for its own sake, it is bereft of meaning and power, becomes just a ‘mask’.

Thus, Beauty is much more than appearances – it is a real presence of the depths and points beyond to the depths. Perceiving and encountering the Divine Beauty, the beholder is changed and taken up into it. We are able to recognise beauty because we participate in and are an expression of this Divine Beauty. The Beauty of God, God’s splendid glory, or *doxa*, is revealed and encountered in worldly beauty, in art and the aesthetic, in the human being and ultimately in the ‘form’ of the *kenotic* self-emptying Jesus Christ.

Gender, Feminism and Balthasar’s Theology

It is very interesting that Balthasar’s theological aesthetics does not seem to explicitly refer to gender, and, as far as I have discovered, most of the secondary sources that explicate, engage or draw on his theological aesthetics seldom relate his theological aesthetics to gender.⁷⁷¹ However, as revealed through his other publications and short

⁷⁶⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 11. This perspective drew on and extended the thinking of Balthasar’s Jesuit teacher Erich Przywara.

⁷⁷⁰ Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, p. xii.

⁷⁷¹ Exceptions to this include Susan A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality and Justice* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2006) and Michelle Gonzalez, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology’, *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), pp. 566-595.

Responding to his wider theology and perspectives on gender, see Tina Beattie, ‘Sex, Death and Melodrama’ in *The Way*, 44, 4 (Oct 2005), pp. 160-176; Lucy Gardner and David Moss, ‘Something

papers, Balthasar's views on gender are fundamental elements of his thought and theology, and must underlie his theological aesthetics almost as an implicit interpretive lens.⁷⁷² It is useful and revealing to look at gender issues raised in his wider theology, and then to return to theological aesthetics.

Just as Balthasar's theological aesthetics has been groundbreaking in retrieving a way of looking at God through the lens of beauty, his gendered views have been highly influential to the development of the Catholic Church's theology of sex since Vatican II.⁷⁷³ Even so, as is often noted by feminists who do engage his theology, most feminist theologians choose to ignore it. Possibly this is because like many male theologians, they do not care to plough through the profusion of volumes of his dense, poetic and seemingly unedited thought.⁷⁷⁴ More probably, it is due to his conservative reputation, his stated opposition to the aims of feminism, and his theology of sex which is objectionable to feminist thinkers in many ways. This includes the rigidly essentialist perspective he applied to human anthropology; his interpretation of sex roles and human characteristics; his view that the priestly office is ordained only to men because they, like Christ, are male; and the way in which he has employed dualistic, hierarchical, essentialist sexualised metaphors, and even violent rhetoric, to explain the relationship between God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church and humanity, as represented by Adam, Eve and Mary.

Theology of Sex in the Catholic Church

Tina Beattie's perspective on the need for feminist engagement with Balthasar's

Like Time: Something Like the Sexes - An Essay in Reception,' in L. Gardner, D. Moss, B. Quash, G. Ward (eds) *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); Corinne Crammer, 'One Sex or Two? Balthasar's Theology of the Sexes' in E.T. Oakes and D. Moss (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷⁷² Gonzalez writes "...gender permeates every aspect of Balthasar's theology...gender is a central analytic category in Balthasar's work. ('Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology', *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), p.568. John O'Donnell, S.J. writes "... Balthasar's understanding of sexuality is central to his vision and sheds light on every facet of his theology." ('Man and Woman as Imago Dei in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,' *Clergy Review* 68, 4 (1983), p.117).

⁷⁷³ Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama, p. 160.

⁷⁷⁴ Balthasar began his own publishing house with the Community of St John. The style of his work is repetitive, florid and seemingly unedited prose.

theology as a whole is presented with a note of alarm and urgency. In the Catholic Church, she notes that a growing number of Catholic thinkers have been turning to Balthasar's theology of sex, and Pope John Paul II's appropriation of it, as the Church's answer to feminism, most notably in a movement that calls itself 'new Catholic feminism'. This movement, she says, cites an indebtedness to Balthasar's theology, is highly antagonistic toward the aims of feminism, and adds female voices to an already significant number of conservative male theologians who have uncritically appropriated Balthasar's theology.⁷⁷⁵ Particularly as it applies to the Church's understanding of human sexuality, Beattie sees the uncritical use of Balthasar's theology as potentially disastrous. His writings on gender and sexuality, Beattie cautions, are full of contradictions and tensions; tensions that find expression "...in a violent rhetoric of sex, death and sacrifice".⁷⁷⁶

Beattie notes a fundamental problem, not with his theology *per se*, but with the language and imagery he uses. For example, writing about his account of Holy Saturday - which she says is regarded as one of the most moving and original aspect of his theology - he links Christ's descent into hell with female sexuality - totally passive, powerless and dependent upon God. Balthasar refers to the Book of Revelation to express this being in the abyss, where "...the 'pure evil' of hell, the 'quintessence' of sin, is the harlot - the sexual female body exterminated in the fires of hell."⁷⁷⁷

While noting that this association of the female sex with chaos, hell and death is hardly new, Beattie sees Balthasar adding new life and potency to misogyny in the Church. There is a 'deadly' cumulative consistency to his ideas that Beattie sees, with his essentialist perspective, his idealised vision of woman, who, like Mary, surrenders her identity, and her being, to the male, the Church and God. Added to this is his imagery of the earthly Church as a harlot, a wayward bride who must be

⁷⁷⁵ Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', p. 160. She refers specifically to a collection of 'new feminist' writings edited by Michele Schumacher entitled *Women In Christ: Toward a New Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). See also T. Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁷⁷⁶ Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', p.161. She refers to a much fuller and nuanced presentation of these ideas in her book *New Catholic Feminism*.

⁷⁷⁷ Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', p. 170.

subdued.⁷⁷⁸

It is with you, my Body, that I am forever fighting the great, apocalyptic battle....I, the strong God, have betrayed myself to you - my Body, my Church...I surrendered to the temptation of ...delivering myself up to the obscure chaos of a body, of plunging below the shiny surface of the flesh; the temptation of passing over into this world - this simmering darkness, opposed to the Father's light...I dared to enter the body of my Church, the deadly body which *you* are....No wonder you realised your advantage over me and took my nakedness by storm! But I have defeated you through weakness and my Spirit has overpowered my unruly and recalcitrant flesh. (Never has woman made more desperate resistance!)⁷⁷⁹

Beattie is particularly disturbed at the failure of those who engage with Balthasar to question the violence of his sexual rhetoric. She rightly wonders "...to what extent male theologians remain oblivious to the denigration of female sexuality which informs much of the theological tradition, and which is given new life by Balthasar, particularly in his reclaiming of the medieval idea of the Church as *casta meretrix*."⁷⁸⁰ Here, not only is the Church pictured as the Bride of Christ, but a monster whore "...of terrible deformity and ferocity."⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁸ It is no coincidence, Beattie believes, that Balthasar describes the struggle between the Church and Christ in terms of a violent sexual struggle. The overall tone of Beattie's reading of Balthasar is ridiculing and condemnatory, linking such writing to his meeting with Adrienne von Speyr and his own struggles. Beattie sees this illustration as "...the celibate priest's violent psychological struggle to overcome the power of his own sexual desire [that is] projected onto Christ himself, so that it becomes a cosmic battle between God and the flesh. 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', p. 171. Balthasar had a long and intense spiritual relationship with Dr. Adrienne von Speyr, a woman who was very influential in his life and to his spirituality and theology. His theology, he said, was very influenced by her, though some theologians dispute this and rather see her influence in a negative light. He was her spiritual director, witness to her mystical experiences and together they started a lay community called St. John's with a new vision of being church in the world. Beattie sees that "...her presence needs to be borne in mind in any discussion of his sexual theology. One might question the eagerness of recent theologians, including Pope John Paul II, to embrace von Balthasar's sexual theology when it is informed by this rather bizarre relationship, which surely has more than a whiff of symbolic adultery about it." ('Sex, Death and Melodrama, footnote 17, p. 169.) For a positive account of this relationship, see Johann S.M. Roten, 'The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar', in D. Schindler (ed), *Hans Urs von Balthasar, His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991).

⁷⁷⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, translated by Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979 [1954]), pp.194-197 quoted in Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', pp. 171-172. Beattie comments in the footnote "There is surely something sickening about this image of a rapist Christ."

⁷⁸⁰ Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama, p. 172.

⁷⁸¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Casta Meretrix' (1948), translated by John Saward, in *Explorations in Theology: Volume II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp.193-288, here p. 196. He turns extensively to the writings of thirteenth-century Bishop of Paris, William of Auvergne on this. In Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', p. 172.

Like J. Cheryl Exum⁷⁸², Beattie sees passages of ‘prophetic pornography’ in the Old Testament (examples are Jeremiah 3:3, Isaiah 21:4, Hosea) and violent sexual imagery as used by Balthasar - Christ raping the Church and *casta meretrix* - as directed at a male audience, the male office-holders of the Church.

Like the prophets of old, von Balthasar seems to think that the best way to describe men’s infidelity to God is through metaphors of wanton female sexuality. Thus his Christ humiliates sinful men by casting them in the role of whores who must be raped and conquered so that he can purify them. The female flesh, meanwhile, is the abyss, the non-being, onto which this fantasy of rape and denigration is projected.⁷⁸³

Beattie does not see much that can be retrieved from Balthasar here, particularly in the formation of a theology of human sexuality informed by feminist insights. But she reiterates the importance for feminists to undertake critical readings of his work - because of its growing influence among Roman Catholic, and some Anglican theologians. His ideas must be deconstructed, as they are often poisoned, she says, by violent, abusive rhetoric. But in her fruitless search for a role for his theology, she finally suggests a purpose that it can serve.

In his writings, the Church’s theology of sex, historically accumulated over two thousand years, internalised by countless men and women in their battle against their own sexuality, reaches an apotheosis - in no small part because of the pressure of twentieth-century feminism and the issue of women’s ordination. Von Balthasar’s theology brings to light a flaw that runs through the Catholic theological tradition with regard to sex.⁷⁸⁴

Beattie suggests that consciously forefronting, recognising, and understanding where he (and the Church) is coming from - and I would add, critiquing and deconstructing it - could help in the development of a more healthy and life-affirming theology of sex and understanding of the human being.⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸² J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), p. 102.

⁷⁸³ Beattie, ‘Sex, Death and Melodrama’, p. 174.

⁷⁸⁴ Beattie, ‘Sex, Death and Melodrama’, p.174.

⁷⁸⁵ Beattie, ‘Sex, Death and Melodrama’, pp. 174-175.

An Uneasy Alliance with the Aims of Feminist Theology?

While also explicating contradictions and tensions in his theology with regard to sex and gender, a different approach is taken by Michelle Gonzalez. She engages with Balthasar in a less scathingly critical way than Beattie, employing a method of dialogue, and finding instead what she calls a surprising ‘uneasy alliance’ between the aims of feminist theology and Balthasar’s theology relating to the role of gender and theological analysis.⁷⁸⁶

Gonzalez affirms generally, his use of *gender as a central analytical category*. This is an analytical lens largely missing from the work of his western male contemporaries, and that it is a significant category of analysis shared with feminist theologians who emphasise the importance of sexual embodiment and social location in theology. To Balthasar, gender is not just an anthropological category. Rather, in addition to revealing something about human nature, he uses it in his theology as revelatory of God and Christology. Female and male are presented as analogical to the difference between the world and God.⁷⁸⁷ To Balthasar, the female is primarily receptive and the male active-giving.⁷⁸⁸ This analogy permeates all of his theology.

A second point where Gonzalez sees a strength and point of resonance with feminist theology is Balthasar’s emphasis on the *relationality* of God’s nature, and that both Jesus Christ and humanity are constituted in relation. In relationship, the male and female are giving and receiving, initiating and responding. To him, this also characterises the Trinity - the relationship between God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is linked to his concept of God, and his Christology that centres on the *kenotic* self-emptying of God in Christ.

The self-giving and pouring out manifested on the cross and on Holy Saturday are identical to the inner-trinitarian relations of giving and receiving. God’s nature is thus relational and constituted by action. This, in turn, leads to a Christology that understands Jesus Christ, and consequently humanity, as

⁷⁸⁶ Gonzalez, ‘Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,’ *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), pp. 566-595.

⁷⁸⁷ Gardner and Moss, ‘Something Like Time’, p.78.

⁷⁸⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 373.

constituted *in relation*. Relationship and action are foundational to our understanding of God and of humanity.”⁷⁸⁹

His understanding of God and humanity as relational, Gonzalez notes, “...echoes the insights of various contemporary feminist theologians who see a relational anthropology as central to undermining individualistic and hierarchical understandings of the self.”⁷⁹⁰

While she commends his *overall* attempt to understand the human person and God’s being and activity in the world in terms of embodied sexuality, and relationship, Gonzalez is critical, like Beattie and others, of the *content* of Balthasar’s views on sexuality.

Underlying Balthasar’s theology is an implicit belief that women and men have a fixed essence that is shared by all women and men at all times.⁷⁹¹ Balthasar’s essentialist and complementary understanding of the sexes views human anthropology in terms of an essential male way of being and a female way of being that is related to their sexual embodiment.⁷⁹² Here, bodily sexuality determines sexual identity and social roles. Mary Aquin O’Neill defines complementarity in a way that echoes Balthasar’s views, as she goes on to explain how women’s movements are reacting against this version of both women’s and men’s destinies.

This anthropology of complementarity, as it came to be known, posits a theology in which the sexes complete one another, not only on the level of reproduction, but in the full range of human existence: social, intellectual, psychological, spiritual. There is a male way of being and a female way, and these can be known from an examination of bodies of the two and given a fair degree of specificity. Thus men are supposed to be, by nature, active, rational, willful, autonomous beings whose direction goes outward into the world; women are to be passive, intuitive, emotional, connected beings whose natural inclination is inward. This bipolar vision of the sexes leads to an equally bipolar understanding of their respective places, namely, the world and the home.⁷⁹³

⁷⁸⁹ Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, p. 569.

⁷⁹⁰ Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, p. 569.

⁷⁹¹ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, pp. 283-290.

⁷⁹² Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, pp. 283-284.

⁷⁹³ Mary Aquin O’Neill, ‘The Mystery of Being Human Together,’ in C. Mowry LaCugna (ed),

Balthasar maintains that male and female are equal but different.⁷⁹⁴ However, Gonzalez sees contradiction and ambiguity in this assertion, because throughout his writing and explanations, the male has priority.⁷⁹⁵ The woman is not primary, she is a response (*Antwort*), an answer to man's word (*Wort*), designed to bring forth man's fruitfulness.

If man is the word that calls out, woman is the answer that comes to him at last (in the *end*). The two are ordered and related to each other...the second account of creation shows that the word that calls out only attains fulfilment when it is understood, accepted and given back as a word. This clearly shows us the way in which man can be primary and woman secondary.⁷⁹⁶

Balthasar continues,

Man and woman are face to face. Here their equal rank is given even more emphasis: man looks around him and meets with an answering gaze that turns the one-who-sees into the one-who-is-seen...⁷⁹⁷

Woman's role is defined in relation to the man.

Thus the woman, who is both 'answer' and 'face', is not only man's delight: she is the help, the security, the home man needs; she is the vessel of fulfilment specially designed for him. Nor is she simply the vessel of his fruitfulness: she is equipped with her own explicit fruitfulness. Yet her fruitfulness is not a primary fruitfulness: it is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man's fruitfulness (which in itself, is helpless) and bring it to its 'fullness'. In this way she is the "glory" of the man (1 Cor 11:7).⁷⁹⁸

Her purpose issues from his being and her relation to his being. "...the woman's *missio vis-à-vis* Adam can be described as the extrapolation and continuation of her *processio* from Adam."⁷⁹⁹

The male is depicted as the initiator and purpose, the important one, the one for whom the woman is designed - even at the same time as Balthasar emphasises

Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 149.

⁷⁹⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 373.

⁷⁹⁵ Referring particularly to priesthood and such functions, he, as others before him and since, give as self-evident the fact that Christ was incarnate in male flesh. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), p. 411, in Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 570.

⁷⁹⁶ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 284.

⁷⁹⁷ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 285.

⁷⁹⁸ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 285.

⁷⁹⁹ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 285.

equality of the two. He extends this analogy to the relationship of God with humanity. In relation to God, all humans are feminine in that they receive and respond to God's action. This view has further implications for women, as Gonzalez comments: "The human as the created feminine creature remains responsive and receptive to God's revelation, while women take on the role in regard to men in human relations. This leads, inevitably, to masculine activity becoming equated with divine agency..."⁸⁰⁰

This yields an analogy between God and creature. We have already indicated that the creature can only be secondary, responsive, 'feminine' vis-a-vis God....However, insofar as every creature - be it male or female in the natural order - is originally the fruit of the primary, absolute, self-giving divine love, there is a clear analogy to the female principle in the world.⁸⁰¹

The male-female or masculine-feminine dynamic he assigns to humans is analogous to his view of the human-divine relationship, as well as the three persons of the Trinity.⁸⁰² He uses gendered imagery to describe the kind of relationship that occurs: the initiating-active and receiving-responding, and the dynamic of self-giving for the sake of one another. His relational vision of the Trinity is mirrored by the relationship between the sexes. In their mutual self-giving (*kenosis*), they image the divine. But the problem is that Balthasar constructs woman's purpose in a biological framework, as reproductive fruitfulness, whose orientation is toward serving the male.

Since it is women's essential vocation to receive man's fruitfulness into her own fruitfulness, thus uniting in herself the fruitfulness of both, it follows that she is actually the fruit-bearing principle in the creaturely realm....⁸⁰³

Here, Balthasar is careful to repeat that he does not equate man with 'spirit' or 'heaven', and woman with 'nature' or 'earth' in some hierarchy of value, before elucidating the gift that woman gives back to man.

In the most general terms, this means that the woman does not merely give back to man what she has received from him: she gives him something new,

⁸⁰⁰ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', pp. 570-571.

⁸⁰¹ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, pp. 286-287.

⁸⁰² Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 287. "...the creature can only be secondary, responsive "feminine" vis-à-vis God."

⁸⁰³ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 286.

something that integrates the gift he gave her but that 'faces' him in a totally new and unexpected form....She responds through reproduction.⁸⁰⁴

In Balthasar's theology, the woman is 'doubly secondary' - in relation to the human male, and in relation to God, even though Balthasar defines man and woman as equal. If woman is understood as man's answer, 'designed for him', responsive, serving and constituted by her relationship to man, then "...her sense of self is defined in terms of the male and is thus secondary."⁸⁰⁵ Woman is seen as the other, designed to complement the male. Yet though the relationship is construed as complementary, the imagery of the man complementing the woman is not the norm.

Crammer models Balthasar's views in terms of a Venn diagram, where normally two concentric circles would intersect, depicting the two subjects and where they overlap. Rather than intersecting, she suggests his model would consist of one circle, where the woman is defined as the man's boundary. The circle consists of the 'I' and the 'Not-I'. He is subject, she is other. She exists for him, but does not exist as a self other than in relation to him.⁸⁰⁶ This sense of 'I' and 'Not-I' or 'the other' posits the male as the norm and the centre, with the woman being defined by attributes that are projected on to her - attributes that are excluded from the construction of masculine identity.

Essentialist views are regarded as 'anathema' by many feminists. Not only does essentialism tend to paint all women (and men) with the same brush, effacing their diversity, dissimilarity and contexts, it is too often related to the "...stereotyping that has been used so often to restrict, discriminate against, and otherwise oppress women."⁸⁰⁷ It is inaccurate to define humanity in a univocal way, in terms of rigid polarities of active/passive, reason/intuition, emotion/will, initiating/receiving and correlate them to male and female attributes.

⁸⁰⁴ Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae, Vol III*, p. 286.

⁸⁰⁵ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 572. She refers to Moss and Gardner who write that woman is "chronologically, temporally, historically, accidentally second ('Something Like Time', p. 86).

⁸⁰⁶ Corinne Crammer, 'One Sex or Two? Balthasar's Theology of the Sexes' in Oakes, E.T. and Moss, D. (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 102-103.

⁸⁰⁷ Crammer, 'One Sex or Two?', p. 103.

Unlike feminist scholarly approaches and insights, Balthasar does not approach his task with suspicion of inherited teachings of sexuality to critically deconstruct centuries of essentialist views on sex and power. He does not go beyond centuries-old stereotypical attributes in defining “women’s nature” or men’s, with the insights that accompany sensitivity to human diversity and difference, insights “...born in pain that a monolithic position inevitably works to the disadvantage of somebody, usually the most powerless.”⁸⁰⁸ And neither essentialism nor Balthasar discriminate between natural traits and socialisation - sex and gender, nature versus nurture - in describing what is deemed feminine or masculine characteristics, positions or proclivities.⁸⁰⁹

Balthasar’s views spill over into his understanding of the theological task, writes Gonzalez. Men and women’s voices are seen to have distinct contributions based on their embodied sexuality - the feminine mystic (spiritual) is seen as the spiritual source for the male academic theologian (theology). She looks at and affirms the value that he placed on his relationship with Adrienne von Speyr and the credit he gave to her visions and insights in his writing and introductions to hers; she affirms his *ressourcement* of the voices of the ‘desert mothers’, as he drew on female mystics in his theological aesthetics. Gonzalez notes it as significant, however, that he did not turn to any women theologians amongst his choices of the ten theologians in his theological aesthetics. So, while Balthasar calls for theology to turn to more aesthetic and spiritual resources for theology, Gonzalez sees him also applying gender complementarity to a spirituality/theology categorisation, intentionally or unintentionally isolating women’s contribution to this mystical realm, downplaying their rational, academic, and theological voice.⁸¹⁰

While Gonzalez, like others, critiques Balthasar’s model of gender complementarity, she affirms his attempts to use gender as a central analytical category for theology.

⁸⁰⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 10.

⁸⁰⁹ Anne Fausto-Sterling (*Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2002)) recognises a continuum rather than a dichotomy of sexual difference, based on contemporary scientific knowledge. Cramer, ‘One Sex or Two?’, p. 104.

⁸¹⁰ Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, p. 592.

She also commends the centrality of embodiment to his theology - that there is theological significance to male and female sexual beings and their bodies. Gonzalez raises an interesting point here, suggesting that Balthasar's theology "...challenges feminism to discern how one can emphasize one's embodied existence while simultaneously denouncing that it results in any gendered distinctions between men and women."⁸¹¹

Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics: Transforming and Expanding Sources for Theology

A last key area of dialogue with feminist theology brings us back to his theological aesthetics. Balthasar desired to transform and expand the sources that inform theology to include the aesthetic. He was trained in literature, and studied the German classics. This intellectual background has profoundly shaped his theology, and his method of textual and theological interpretation.⁸¹² Beyond examining the arts, particularly literature, in order to find religious or theological themes within them, he sees literary (and other artistic) sources to be theological because they reveal something about *being*, writes Gonzales.⁸¹³ She refers to John Riches' observation of Balthasar's engagement with the arts.

Balthasar's theology is marked out, that is, by his own conviction that in the great works of art, literature and music we do indeed perceive something of the truth and reality of *being*. Thus it is clearly of great interest to enquire after Balthasar's own understanding of an indebtedness to the great figures of the German tradition of letters with which he is engaged....It is not simply questions of the formal similarities between literature, art and music, and theological perceiving that interest Balthasar (though such questions do concern him in Vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord*) but of the *content* of such widely varied visions.⁸¹⁴

Balthasar's approach to literature is interlinked with his Christological vision of

⁸¹¹ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 592.

⁸¹² Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, p. 73.

⁸¹³ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p.593. Not all literature is uncritically accepted by Balthasar as theology.

⁸¹⁴ John Riches, 'Afterword', in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1986), p. 182. quoted in Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 593.

human life. In his view, because of the incarnation of Christ, all human culture has been transformed, and thus can be read as sources for theological expression of God.

The content of literature and the arts reveal something about being, in a similar fashion to theological elaborations. This view must be seen in light of Balthasar's contention that through the Incarnation, Jesus Christ transformed the very nature of human culture and cultural expression. Because all of human culture has been transformed, literature is a vital resource of human expression of divine Glory.⁸¹⁵

The use of aesthetics and cultural expression as a theological source is an area of dialogue and critique between Balthasar's theology and feminist theology. His use of gender as a central *analytic category* for theology, and his use of female spiritual experience and aesthetic sources as resources for theology is affirmed. However, the *content* of Balthasar's gendered theology is the main problem, as it posits an essentialist and hierarchical perspective where the feminine and masculine are presented as 'separate but equal', with the male being the priority and the woman his completion, or answer or mirror.

Furthermore, while not portrayed as occupying a position with regard to man or to God as a 'self', women are cast by Balthasar in an idealised role, in his discussion of Mary. In his view, Mary is portrayed as the supreme example of human self-giving and receptivity (which is always feminine) in relation to God (always masculine).

He employed this idealised view of the receptive and self-giving female, at the same time using highly objectionable language and symbolism with regard to women to describe theological tensions. Women and their sexuality symbolise chaos, sin, hell, the cause of man's temptation and fall, the unfaithful church. An uncritical metaphor for sin, she is an unfaithful whore for whom he enters hell. In order to redeem her, he has to rape and subdue her sexually.

⁸¹⁵ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 593.
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Feminist Theology and Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics

What then, if any, is the significance of Balthasar's wider theology, especially his views on sex and gender, for his theological aesthetics? What issues does it raise for feminist theology regarding theological aesthetics, and particularly the present project? Below I suggest a few theological, contextual and methodological responses.

Theologically, even if not explicit, Balthasar's gendered analysis of human anthropology, and the relationship between human and divine must implicitly underlie his discussion of beauty. In his theological aesthetics, Balthasar puts forward a theology where Beauty is a fundamental characteristic of God, inseparable from the other two transcendental properties of truth and goodness. He explores how the Beauty, the glory, the splendour of God is revealed analogously in the beauty of the world, in art and nature, and is ultimately and most perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. The perception, reception and response to divine and natural beauty by humankind are key themes.

Yet, in his gendered theology, it is the feminine principle in humanity that is receptive to God's (the Father) initiating (masculine) action, embodied most significantly by Mary's obedient 'Yes'.

In terms of this model, there are implications in Balthasar's way of seeing, particularly relating to his theology of sex and the connection between women and beauty. Susan Ross calls them 'interesting but troubling':⁸¹⁶

For von Balthasar, the ultimate beauty of God is perceived by humanity in the form of Jesus Christ. This, I would say, is as it should be, because from a Christian perspective, human beings come to God through Christ. Yet, when Balthasar describes the human response to God's beauty revealed in Christ, it is through the 'Marian form' - that is, modeled on the Virgin Mary - that human beings are understood: ideally as feminine, receptive, obedient, virginal. Balthasar writes that the "feminine...is especially adapted to the sensory realm." This is very much in line with his 'nuptial vision' of the divine-human relationship, where the feminine is equated with the human, and

⁸¹⁶ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 19.

where God is always the Bridegroom and never the Bride. The feminine is always the Beholder of true and divine Beauty, always the receptive waiting one. And even the beauty that is possessed by the feminine is always pure, spotless and virginal.⁸¹⁷

I would agree with Ross, that from a Christian feminist perspective, Balthasar's aesthetic form of theology, and his identification and exploration of the Divine as Beauty is moving and profound, with Jesus Christ as the ultimate expression or form of this beauty as revealed to human beings. A problem arises however, with both his actual and harmful stereotyping of the feminine as it relates to this. As he associates the feminine with the human, in relation to God, this is troubling because his perspective on humanity was fundamentally quite negative, and pessimistic.⁸¹⁸ Coupled with the misogynist legacy of the church, as highlighted by Beattie, Balthasar's association of the feminine with the sin of humanity is metaphorically imaged as wanton female sexuality.

On the other extreme, the feminine is associated with receptivity, obedience, and purity. The idealisation of beauty is equated with what Ross calls 'the Eternal Feminine' as personified by the Virgin Mary. Self-emptied, the feminine is receptive, not initiating or creating, and is ideally without motive except to obey and respond.⁸¹⁹ Both stances about women have been critiqued and deconstructed by feminist thinkers in all fields of scholarship, including theology, because they remain disconnected from the reality of women's everyday lives, as selves with human flaws and gifts, concerns, contributions and aspirations, notes Ross.⁸²⁰

This portrait of beauty - of the 'Eternal Feminine' is an idealized construct which places women on a pedestal and away from the nitty-gritty of everyday

⁸¹⁷ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 19-20.

⁸¹⁸ Yves de Maesoneer, personal conversation with Karen Buckenham on 13 September 2006 in Leuven, Belgium.

⁸¹⁹ Balthasar's idea of receptivity was not a passivity - he saw it as something active. His ideas of Mary are very complex, devout, experiential and highly influenced by his relationship with Adrienne von Speyr. See Johann Roten, S.M., 'The Two Halves of the Moon: Marian Anthropological Dimensions in the Common Mission of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar', in D. Schindler (ed), *Hans Urs von Balthasar, His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp. 65-86.

⁸²⁰ Women in the visual arts have criticised ideal representations of women in art particularly, such as the female nude body through the male gaze, and for the male gaze.

life. It is so different from the experiences of everyday women.⁸²¹

From our African context, it is particularly misleading. Many women in Africa carry the burdens of society and seek its continued existence even under circumstances that are impossible; yet they are expected to give their lifeblood without question or appreciation until they die of exhaustion, illness or at the hands of someone else. While these qualities of obedience, self-emptying, hospitality and unending self-sacrifice are advocated as virtues by many, in women's lives in Africa, they need to be carefully and specifically interrogated.

Beauty is embodied in the lives of real people, in the lives of real women. Spiritualised images of women's beauty, as idealized, or as evil "...leave us without positive models to bring beauty realistically into our lives, to recognise and affirm the beauty that women contribute to the world, or to use beauty in such a way that it opens us up to the beauty of others and of the world itself."⁸²²

From a feminist theological perspective then, the beauty of God, revealed in the natural world, in human art and creativity and ultimately through the form of Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection, are theological concepts from Balthasar's thinking that are helpful to take forward. In Ross' view, his theology does not help in creating grounded positive models for women, with which to bring beauty realistically into their lives. Ross identifies the need for women to look theologically at women's contributions to the world in terms of beauty, and to articulate how they find beauty in others and in the world.

A *contextual* response to Balthasar that I want to highlight is related to a concern raised in different ways by Beattie, Gonzalez, and Ross. They uncover distortion or skewedness in the background, identity, norms, assumptions of thinkers, and imagined conversation partners discussing theology and theological aesthetics. In reference to Balthasar's theology of sex, Beattie wonders why male theologians in the Catholic Church have neither objected to nor even picked up on the misogyny and

⁸²¹ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 20.

⁸²² Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 20.

violence in his thinking. She conjectures that it is rooted in the long religious history of thinking about women by men, the projection of male fears onto women, and that in the conversation about theology and sex in the Catholic Church, it is still largely men talking to men *about* women. Gonzalez observes in her work, that the lament for the demise of beauty and the aesthetic in theology as articulated by male theologians from what she calls Euro-American and European backgrounds was not an experience shared by everyone. She notes how banishment of the aesthetic is not the experience of Black, feminist and womanist theologians whose traditions have a long history and experience of drawing on the aesthetic as both sources for and interlocutors of theology. Ross questions why it is that the scholarship of the mostly male theologians who have shown renewed interest in ideas of the beautiful in theology, has taken little notice of women's perspectives on beauty and women's scholarship. She notes how those writing on theological aesthetics, by and large, have not drawn on feminist ways of analysing, critiquing, extrapolating from and understanding human experience, commenting that "Even though feminist scholars have contributed to nearly every discipline imaginable, their ways of rethinking scholarly discourse have not had a noticeable effect in the field of theological aesthetics."⁸²³

Feminist theologians' perspectives on beauty need to begin to inform the discussion on the role of beauty in theology and the wider area of theological aesthetics. Feminist theology already contains "...an explicit although undeveloped theological aesthetics, as feminist theologians' scrutiny of the multiplicity of images of God and of humanity is at the same time a focus on the ways in which men and women respond both intellectually and emotionally to the symbols and metaphors of the tradition."⁸²⁴

Secondly, Ross notes that while women's analytical frameworks and rethinking of scholarly discourse may have been ignored in theological aesthetics, at the same time, women's *being* has been employed as an *icon* in the discussion of beauty. That is, women may not be being spoken with, but women are being spoken about. Because

⁸²³ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. ix.

⁸²⁴ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. x.

women are culturally most often identified with beauty, and are seen to concern themselves with it, in most theories of beauty, women have been used as a symbolic *icon* of beauty rather than the *perceivers or makers* of beauty.⁸²⁵ Beyond the religious or theological questions raised above, implications for this include ideas of beauty and women that have been commodified and distorted, with results that are extremely harmful and immoral. Ross rightly argues that this use of the feminine needs critical examination and critique.⁸²⁶

Thirdly, women's ecological and artistic contributions to the beauty of the earth, as feminist art historians have observed, have gone unnoticed and unappreciated. "Although there have been a few references to women's "crafts" - often not credited as "art" - much more needs to be done to retrieve and restore women's works of art as way of glorifying God."⁸²⁷ Ross observes women caring for and beautifying the earth with global concern, in their appreciation, protection and ecological awareness of the resources of the earth, the integrity of creation, and hospitality, care and concern for the well-being of others.

In different ways, Beattie's, Gonzalez's and Ross' work collectively challenges scholars in theological aesthetics. They critique ways in which theology and Beauty have tended to be discussed by theologians from certain contexts. With Balthasar's theology as an example, (perhaps an example from a different generation), it seems women are not assumed to be the primary conversation partners about theology and beauty. It is noted that where women are implicitly in the discussion about beauty, it is rather as an object - demonised or idolised. Ross recognises beauty in women's real lives in different contexts, advocating and beginning to uncover and value meaning behind women's ways of seeing, being and doing in real life. She names these real-life examples of beauty as sacramental, emphasising that "It is both appropriate and just to value women's ways of seeing and doing with regard to God's hidden-yet-revealed presence in the world."⁸²⁸ Her work offers a refreshing and correcting

⁸²⁵ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 4.

⁸²⁶ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. x.

⁸²⁷ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. x.

⁸²⁸ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. xi.

perspective on beauty and theology. She connects beauty to the real lives of women - and to the ethical - as issues of justice, dignity and full life are uppermost concerns in the real lives of women all over the world. This is the embodied Beauty that we see unfolding in the lives of creating South African women in this thesis..

Lastly, here I mention one *methodological* significance of Balthasar's work for theological aesthetics as it relates to feminist theological method. Balthasar's massive body of work and the depth of it, has provided for contemporary theology the most significant impetus, theological reasoning and comprehensive justification for the expansion of sources for theology to include the aesthetic. While others have shared a similar interest and have written on the theme before and since, Balthasar's work and insights on Beauty have been an important catalyst and a touchstone for theological aesthetics.

Conclusion

The theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar retrieve the centrality of Beauty to the theological task. Beauty, as one of the triad of transcendentals with Truth and Goodness, is the catching force that allures and attracts. It is the 'why' of 'why the good must be carried out'.⁸²⁹ The encounter with Beauty in the human form, the world, and history is cast as *epiphaneia* of the depths of splendour and being of the Divine self-revelation. In the encounter with this Beauty, the beholder is called into and participates in a relationship, and is taken up into a new way of being and seeing.

Even though his perspectives on gender are not life-affirming for women, Balthasar's theological aesthetics is a critical resource for my interpretation of the women's artistic experience. The content of Balthasar's work illuminates the depths of what I suggest is happening within women as they create, in the different contexts discussed in this thesis. In the creative process, women encounter, participate in, and recognise the Beauty within themselves. This is evidenced in a new consciousness and growth, dignity, self-determination, and transformation of their lives. Their encounter with the

⁸²⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 19.

Beauty within is both a 'real presence of the depths' and at the same time it is 'a pointer beyond to the depths at the heart of the world'. His theological aesthetics argue that Beauty, Truth and Goodness are inseparable. One without the other is distorted, with negative consequences to all of life.

Methodologically, Balthasar expands the boundaries of theology to recognise aesthetic sources for theology. In contexts of oppression and for marginalized people, the aesthetic is a potent means of expression of liberation, an 'interlocutor for marginalized voices'. To the extent that it contains and represents peoples' suffering, yearnings and being, it is both a theological language and a theological source. In the next chapter, I examine this with regard to liberation theologies and the struggle for full life for women in Africa.

Chapter Nine: Theological Aesthetics and Theologies of Liberation

Introduction

Literature, music, and art become theological interlocutors in the recovery of marginalized voices.⁸³⁰

All liberation movements, whether of women or men, of Third World or First World, of blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, gays, or lesbians, share this energy in common: they are made up of persons who were instructed by those with power to be at home without power. And they are saying, “No! I can, *we* can, express ourselves and our ways.” In this sense every liberation movement is about the release of the artist within people, that part of us which expresses our deepest self.⁸³¹

Why was solidarity in South Africa so often expressed in harmonious song during the years of oppression? Among the many reasons, I suggest, is that when crowds met to sing - in camps, townships, churches, marches - the music provided a taste of authentic freedom, when in virtually every other sense they were not free.⁸³²

In the previous chapter, the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar was introduced. His thought is foundational for the study of beauty in theology, for he saw Beauty as a characteristic of God, emanating from God and communicated in relationship with the human creature. Supremely, in the ‘form’ of Jesus Christ, God’s beauty, glory or *doxa* is revealed, as Jesus Christ’s person, life, death and resurrection points both to himself and beyond to the Source of all Being. As we encounter this Beauty, we are changed and taken up into it. As all things in the natural world are transformed by him, this beauty is evident and can be encountered in the world and in great art.

In addition to this primary aim of his work, Balthasar advocates and engages with alternate sources for theology – including aesthetic work and experience - as a locus for and privileged expression of the encounter with the Divine. While feminist critique of the content of his theology as a whole objects to his anthropology and essentialist views on gender, it nonetheless affirms Balthasar’s theological method.

⁸³⁰ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.154.

⁸³¹ Fox, *Original Blessing*, pp 233-234.

⁸³² J. Begbie, ‘Through Music: Sound Mix’ in J. Begbie (ed), *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 151-152.

His perspective and method resonates with feminist theologians. They recognise creative means such as stories, literature, art and dance, poetry and song - and the content, context and creativity of women's lives - as legitimate, important expressions and sources for theology.

In this chapter I look at theological aesthetics from the perspective of aesthetic work as a means of theological expression and a source of theological revelation. Attention is paid to contexts of marginalisation and oppression, where aesthetic expression is concerned with justice, liberation and transformation.

For oppressed and marginalised people throughout history, there is a struggle to make space to live, to make space in which to articulate life's joys, struggles, values, aspirations and challenges. The frustration of making one's voice heard or understood within the arena or paradigms of a dominant group can entail great risk, pain and even death to oneself and others. Nonetheless, all over the world, human history has shown an insistent force pressing for the real story to be told, removing the silence forced on people in situations of oppression, human misery and injustice. Whether there is little space in mainstream, or in dominant cultures for alternate expressions of reality, or whether there is active suppression of dissenting voices in a repressive regime, the emergence and expression of alternate realities is not entirely squelched. Lament, resistance, survival, aspiration, hope and vision find a voice.⁸³³

In South Africa, we are aware of the enormous power of such expression, as seen most recently during the political struggle for liberation from *apartheid*. We see it as women in Africa tell their stories. Frequently it has been and is through the aesthetic - through poems, proverbs, prayers, praise, liturgy, song, dance, music, art, storytelling, drama, literature, imagery, ritual, symbol and metaphor - that reality and longings of the heart are made conscious, given voice, take root, and new visions sought. These are metaphorical languages that come from and touch the deepest places of the heart.

⁸³³ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*; Gerald O. West, 'Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated', *Semeia* 73 1996, pp. 1-41. K.E. Buckenham, 'Women's Experience, Spirituality and Theology for Liberation and Life in Contemporary South Africa as Expressed Through Visual Arts with a Focus on the Lives and Work of Two Women Artists - Dina Cormick and Bonnie Ntshalintshali' Unpublished Master's Dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2001, pp. 54-56.

And, as Begbie suggests in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, these provide spaces of authentic freedom.

The retrieval of marginalised or silenced voices through the arts is very significant for theology.⁸³⁴ Though it has not been named as theological aesthetics, aesthetic expression has played a central role in theologies of liberation and life. The aesthetic gives expression to living theologies that have yet to find conscious articulation, space or acceptance in the mainstream of theological, institutional religious practice and belief, or textbook documentation.⁸³⁵ And it is another ‘language’ of speaking of God, even perhaps, as some suggest below, the only appropriate language for theology as it is immediate, ‘first order’ language that reveals and attracts, drawing people to deeper realities of truth and justice.

In Africa, women’s lives, spirituality and theology find rich nourishment and expression in the aesthetic. While a variety of methods are named, it seems that the most well studied and perhaps most accessible form is narrative and literature in Africa. In South Africa, overtly religious art has also been studied. As is seen in the present study, for women from diverse contexts, both artistic creating and handcrafting are significant bearers of women’s spirituality and theology. They are keys in the reconstruction of theological symbols and practices by women in Africa.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the aesthetic in feminist theology as it concerns the reconstruction of theological symbols in the tradition. In the second section, I interpret the aesthetic as ‘first order’ language of God. Then I turn to a survey of different contexts where the aesthetic is used and emphasised in liberation theologies, before returning to our African context. In assessing African experience and analysing the aesthetic expression of theology, I highlight the role of literature in African women’s feminism and theology, and religious art by black artists in KwaZulu-Natal. Lastly, I focus the question of the aesthetic as a locus of spirituality and theology for women in South Africa.

⁸³⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, pp. 153-189.

⁸³⁵ West, ‘Reading the Bible Differently; Garcia-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, p. viii.

Feminist Theology, Theological Aesthetics, and the Reconstruction of Theological Symbols

Feminist theology, writes Ross, contains an explicit although undeveloped theological aesthetics, demonstrated in feminist theologians' "... scrutiny of the multiplicity of images of God and of humanity, ...[and their focus] on the ways in which men and women respond both intellectually and emotionally to the symbols and metaphors of their tradition."⁸³⁶ Indeed, the theme of aesthetics is integral to the task and method of feminist theology and its tasks of deconstruction and reconstruction of Christian history, tradition and theology.

As was seen in chapter two, these two main tasks of deconstruction and reconstruction involve three main steps. First is the awareness, engagement and critique of the role of power, marginalisation and oppression in the inherited Christian tradition as well as current theological discourse. The second step is to recover the lost and silenced women's voices, their wisdom and suppressed history. Third, new theological constructions are created in light of the two previous steps - imagining, envisioning and "[risking] new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women's lives."⁸³⁷ Here, the aesthetic plays a powerful role in shifting paradigms on thinking about God, and in articulating or expressing women's experiences of the Divine, in their lives and in the world.⁸³⁸ Theology is reconstructed in a liberating framework.

An important step in reconstructing theology in a liberative way for women is through shifting paradigms and systems of thought. Gonzalez discusses how Rebecca Chopp examines the symbolic function of language as it relates to the Christian tradition. She describes how, historically, women's voices were neither allowed to speak of God, nor have they been received as voices of authority in speaking about God.

⁸³⁶ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. x

⁸³⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 29.

⁸³⁸ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 163.

Chopp stresses the significance of language, symbolism, and meaning – and asks questions about who shapes the ‘social symbolic order’. Access, or lack of access, to the shaping of symbols that represent the underlying social order has power to both exclude and marginalise, or power to transform. She emphasizes the importance of women speaking of God. Women “...speak of the Word, and speak to proclaim this Word to and for the world,” from their diverse backgrounds, from ‘the margins of social, political, linguistic and theological order’, in their way, and with authority.⁸³⁹ Speaking of their experience of the divine will shift the ‘social-symbolic order’, thereby rupturing the way theology is conceptualised, presented and discussed.⁸⁴⁰

In Africa, women theologians emphasise how women *are* indeed speaking of God, and for the most part it is not written down in formal theology. Particularly for rural women who have been unable to go to school and are not literate, Kanyoro and others call for ways of doing theology that listens to their voices in forums other than the written word.

For a long time, print media have marginalised the voices of African women. African rural women are singing songs; they are creating poetry, proverbs and dirges. Their reflections should challenge us to do theology in a different way.⁸⁴¹

Together with other women, the task of theologians is to see, recognise, and interpret what they are saying through these aesthetic means. Aesthetic means express women’s spirituality and theologies, and are a critical source and catalyst for the paradigmatic shift in theology that Chopp writes about. Because they are significant means for accessing the semiotic - meanings that are unspoken – they have the potential to transform Christian discourse and the social-symbolic order.⁸⁴²

The aesthetic is a means and a ‘language’ to access that which is unspoken, not yet

⁸³⁹ Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language and God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 3, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 166. Chopp engages with and builds on the work of feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva. See for example,.

⁸⁴⁰ Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, p. 3 in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 166.

⁸⁴¹ Kanyoro, *Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p. 30.

⁸⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1974), in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, pp. 163-166.

symbolised in discursive language and yet is real. As seen in chapters four, five and six, this is confirmed by the experiences of the creating women interviewed. Their aesthetic creating, and creative work, is described as a 'language' or a 'container' of their lives, their understanding of their lives, the context of their lives, and of their experience of God.

South African poet Joan Kerchhoff illustrates this. For her, poetry is the only possible means to speak of the eternal. It is the best means of articulating some moving experience, an observation on her inner life - what has happened, how she has changed, what she accepts now which she maybe didn't before - and of God. She says she writes poetry, "Because it reaches into some deep part of me."⁸⁴³ For her, poetry is especially powerful in trying to express the mystery of life and God. The spaces in her poetry symbolise the eternal God, and the few words she uses are 'a tiny aspect of that space.' She says,

I can't describe God...Well, in oblique and metaphorical ways, it's all God...mystery. But I can't describe mystery; that which is mystery....These are little keyholes into something vast and mysterious and all I can manage is the keyhole.⁸⁴⁴

The creative process and work of women in crafting groups contains who they are – the immense suffering, and yet the joy in their lives and the creativity with which they construct their lives – in each stitch, or bead or wire. While not obviously so, the work of these women represents and contains their personal growth, solidarity, hopes and transformation of their lives.

The importance of this to women's agency, self-determination, envisioning a new world, and transformation cannot be underestimated. Gonzalez quotes the work of Audre Lorde, who writes of the importance of the process and product of the aesthetic – in her case poetry - to women's emancipation and full life.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.

⁸⁴³ Joan Kerchhoff, same interview.

⁸⁴⁴ Joan Kerchhoff, same interview.

It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more intangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.⁸⁴⁵

It is not only poetry, but the range of aesthetic creating that provides that space, means, light and ultimately the ‘articulation’ or expression of the dreams and action. Women in South Africa have shown how the process of creating and expressing their lives and aspirations through art and handcraft gives ‘name to the nameless’. The aesthetic acts as a means of truth, a language of freedom, an embodiment of existence and dignity, and a means for envisioning - and bringing about - a better world. This is in the here and now, and for the future. Art and the aesthetic, concludes Gonzalez, combine truth and beauty.⁸⁴⁶ And, as Lorde articulates with regard to poetry, it provides the vision and the drive behind justice.⁸⁴⁷

‘First-order, Revelatory, Metaphorical’: Aesthetics as the Only Appropriate Language for Theology’

Not only does the aesthetic have a unique power to reconstruct theological symbols in a liberating way for women, it is seen by some as the only appropriate language for theology, for a number of reasons. It reveals the truth in a non-coercive way that leads the perceiver or beholder to discover something about themselves, others, life and God.⁸⁴⁸ It contains the fire and immediacy of the subject matter it seeks to understand and convey. And it was the method used by Jesus in his teaching.

Jesus’ parables, writes Nolan, are works of art - unauthoritative, revealing - whose purpose is to lead to discovery of something within the listener. “They are not illustrations of revealed doctrines; they are works of art which reveal or uncover the truth about life.”⁸⁴⁹

⁸⁴⁵ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, pp.166-167.

⁸⁴⁶ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.167.

⁸⁴⁷ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p.167.

⁸⁴⁸ Crowther, *Art as Embodiment*, pp. 6-7.

⁸⁴⁹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 122. Crowther (*Art as Embodiment* in chapter three), posits this about the aesthetic generally and how it contributes to the

In his teaching, Jesus told stories and used secular language to portray religious themes, observes TeSelle. Parables, and genres such as poems, novels, storytelling and autobiography are themselves functioning as embodied symbols or metaphors of something else, something deeper; "...metaphor is a way of knowing, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor knowledge and its expression are one and the same...."⁸⁵⁰ Explaining their significance to theology, Gonzales writes "...the poetic, the metaphorical and the narrative are a means of 'saving' theological discourse"⁸⁵¹ because they bring to life and awareness the vibrant reality and fire of Christianity which has been flattened by 'second-level language'. While TeSelle's speaks primarily about the written word, her concerns are extended to the creative imagination more widely.

For many of us the language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative; no longer revelatory; no longer metaphorical; no longer meaningful. Much of it has become tired clichés, one-dimensional, univocal language. When this happens, it means that theological reflection is faced with an enormous task - the task of embodying anew. This will not happen, I believe, through systematic theology, for systematic theology is second-level language, language which orders, arranges, explicates, makes precise the first-order revelatory, metaphorical language. How the renovation of basic Christian language will take place...will be through the search for new metaphors - poems, stories, even lives - which will image to us, in our total existential unity, the compassion of the father, the bright wings of the bird, the trustworthiness of a world in which parents keep promises to their children. Contemporary poems, novels and autobiographies can serve as imaginative re-creations, "deformation," of the old, allowing us to see the old in a new setting and thus seeing it anew.⁸⁵²

It is the creative imagination that is "that which uniquely allows us to see and say the

feeling of belonging in the world.

⁸⁵⁰ Sally McFague TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 4. TeSelle examines metaphor, parable, poetry, story and autobiography. Recent work by South African theologians Denise Ackermann and John W. de Gruchy both employ an autobiographical approach. Ackermann uses the form of letters to loved ones. See D. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Glossderry South Africa: David Phillip Publishers, 2003) and J.W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁸⁵¹ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 169.

⁸⁵² TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables*, p. 23.

conceptually imperceivable and inexpressible.”⁸⁵³ Critical of the reduction of the Christian mystery to ‘tired cliché’ and ‘univocal language’, to TeSelle, the future of theology and theological expression is in rediscovering ‘first-order revelatory, metaphorical language’. From this, Gonzales concludes that “Aesthetics becomes the only appropriate language for theology.”⁸⁵⁴

Sölle has a similar view. Theology is more of an art than a science, she writes, as it attempts to communicate God. “It has to understand itself as an attempt to cross the bounds of everyday language, oriented toward art rather than to the abstract, rational and neutral.”⁸⁵⁵ Like TeSelle, she believes “In order really to do theology, we need a different language.”⁸⁵⁶

Aesthetic Expression and Theologies of Liberation

Having established the significance of the aesthetic to theology, in this section, I turn to look at specific contexts of oppression and liberation – Latin American, African American and Asian women’s - and the use of aesthetics in their theologising.

Latin American Liberation Theology

In Latin American liberation theology, the use of aesthetics and emphasis on its importance is not new, writes Gonzalez. However, the heavy emphasis on ethics has sidelined Beauty. In response, some Latin American theologians have expressed an urgency to recover Beauty in theology, emphasising the importance of the contemplative, poetic, prophetic and the expression of the deepest desires, attraction and aspirations of human existence. Social justice is seen as futile without a corresponding vision that emerges from the expression of desire and attraction.⁸⁵⁷

In contrast to abstract, rational and detached thought, the power and legitimacy of

⁸⁵³ TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables*, p. 24.

⁸⁵⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 170.

⁸⁵⁵ Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind, Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 152.

⁸⁵⁶ Sölle, *Against the Wind*, p. 151.

⁸⁵⁷ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 170.

emotion and desire are claimed for theology.⁸⁵⁸ A different, larger metaphorical language is needed. “[T]he language of poetry, play, and symbol becomes an appropriate way of expressing the understanding and wisdom of the faith, because it is the means of expressing the human person’s deepest and most genuine aspirations and desire.”⁸⁵⁹ Others concur that ‘the desire that dwells at the deepest level of human existence’ must form a new sort of systematics in theology, returning the poetic dimension of human life to theology, taking the place of ‘the cold circumspection of purely scientific inquiry’.⁸⁶⁰

For these Latin American theologians, the aesthetic is central to the theological task and an understanding of the fullness of what it means to be human. It is the only adequate means for expressing the human’s deepest desire, emotion and faith.

African-American Theology

Literary sources have been significant for womanist theologies in the United States. Theologians who have drawn on the work of black women writers as theological sources include Delores S. Williams, Katie Geneva Cannon and Dwight N. Hopkins.⁸⁶¹ Gonzalez points out the significance of Katie Cannon’s use of the literature and life of Zora Neale Hurston as a ‘key interlocutor’ for womanist ethics. It was groundbreaking and a significant development to black women as it affirmed black literature as a central source for social analysis. Further, it posed a challenge to conventions of power as held in the norms and assumptions of white male Christian ethics.⁸⁶² Cannon saw black women’s literature as fundamental to womanist ethics, in that it is the best protected and valued collection of work available that enables understanding of ethical values of Black women.⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁸ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 170.

⁸⁵⁹ Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p. 111, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 170.

⁸⁶⁰ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, pp. 170-171.

⁸⁶¹ Black women writers include Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, p. 593.,

⁸⁶² Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, p. 593.

⁸⁶³ Gonzalez, ‘Balthasar and Feminist Theology’, pp. 593-594.

Black theologian Dwight Hopkins drew on the novels of Toni Morrison as they reveal poor black women's spirituality. He saw Morrison's novels as a source for enlightening the reader to 'God's spiritual involvement in human affairs'.⁸⁶⁴ He went on to use this as a source for constructive black theology of liberation, where "an immortal, thus divine, spirit of liberation incarnated in poor African American women's values and traditions" reveals a powerful God of liberation who is manifest with the poor, and whose concern with justice is boundless. Morrison's novels "provide one source for broadening our openness to God's spiritual involvement in human affairs."⁸⁶⁵

...to do theology from black women's literature is precisely *theology*. Why? Because the God of justice and love presented and discovered in African American religious values, tradition, and contemporary witness is the same God who freely chooses to reveal an emancipatory spirit in black women's stories.⁸⁶⁶

This is the same Spirit that was apparent during the struggle against apartheid, evident in the 'religious values, tradition and contemporary witness' of the prophetic South African churches and the ecumenical movement. It is the same Spirit that is revealed in the creating processes, creative work, contexts and visions of the South African women artists and crafters. Their art is a way of accessing their lives, cultures and worldviews. As it reveals their spirituality, it is a theological source. It is a stretching toward the light of freedom, integrity, dignity, voice, agency and life. It is a yearning motivated by the sacred emancipatory spirit that is within.

Asian Theology

In Asian theology, aesthetic means are used by Korean women to struggle against and release themselves from the state of despair, powerlessness and abandonment called *han*. It is experienced by women and poor men because of injustice and oppression,

⁸⁶⁴ D.N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), p. 82

⁸⁶⁵ Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*, p. 82.

⁸⁶⁶ Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*, p. 83.

and encompasses feelings of not being able to make anything different.⁸⁶⁷

There are two ways that Koreans deal with *han*. One is passive acceptance and resignation to a life of suffering and oppression – supported by religious beliefs of Buddhism and Hinduism in Asian culture. This is not the only response, however. Chung Hyun Kyung writes of the anger that Korean women carry about their *han*-ridden lives, and their fight against it. There is a Korean tradition of resistance and survival called *han-pu-ri* that is manifest in both gentle and militant ways. “Gentle ways of *han-pu-ri* have been through songs, dances and rituals; and militant ways of *han-pu-ri* have been developed by farmers, workers, slum dwellers and women’s organized political movements.” aesthetic provides a language and energy for this task.

Chung writes of the work of Lee Oo Chung, a Korean professor of New Testament studies who was coerced by government to be removed from her position because of her political activism. Lee’s work looked at women’s suffering and resistance as expressed in traditional Korean songs, proverbs, folk songs, and myths. She found that women were not only passive victims overwhelmed by injustice and oppression, but “they have also been the active agents of liberation”, through humour and satire.

Through folktales and songs Korean women have satirized the greed of political authorities, the foolishness of aristocrats and intellectuals, the hypocrisy of male priests and their religious institutions, and the brutality of the patriarchal family.⁸⁶⁸

Such aesthetic means are utilised herself by Korean Chung Hyun Kyung. In a controversial presentation, she succeeded in ‘rupturing the social-symbolic order’ of theology in 1991, at the seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra. Kwok Pui Lan recalls the energy and power of that event.

⁸⁶⁷ “Chung Hyun Kyung of Korea describes Asian women’s experience of themselves in language of great suffering. The experience of oppression leads to “separation of self” and a “most severe split” within the woman. Asian women are divided between what they wish to be and what their patriarchal society demands of them. This produces “continuous, prolonged shame, guilt and self-hate” which lead to the strategy of ‘numbing oneself for survival’. Asian women name this numbing as ‘separation sin’ since they also take responsibility for obeying the oppressor and not affirming their personal dignity and goodness and that of other women.” Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, pp. 258-259, referring to Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 41- 43.

⁸⁶⁸ Chung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, p. 43.

The icon of that Assembly was a young woman theologian from Asia, Professor Chung Hyun Kyung of Korea, burning a scroll after she had invoked the spirits of people who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in gas chambers in the Holocaust, in Kwangju, Tiananmen Square and Lithuania. Professor Chung was one of the plenary speakers invited to address the Assembly theme, 'Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation.' Accompanied by music, slides, dance, drums, and rituals, Chung powerfully told the stories of the *han*-ridden spirits of the Korean people. '*Han*' means resentment, anguish, bitterness, and brokenheartedness as a result of injustice. In her passionate and spirit-filled presentation, Chung freely employed religious symbols and concepts from her culture to articulate her deep anguish as an Asian and as a woman.⁸⁶⁹

Through the aesthetic, Chung gave expression to the deep anguish and nameless suffering of Asian women. The 'syncretism' of her vision and challenging method raised an enormous amount of controversy - even resulting in death threats levelled against her. But the controversy is a testament to the symbolic power implicit in what she did.

Aesthetic expressions articulate the groanings, longings, questions and celebrations of marginalised people, the human condition of suffering, and the search for full life, freedom and dignity, and God. The aesthetic has an immediacy and passion that unleashes the emancipatory Spirit of God.

Theological Aesthetics in Africa

Clearly, the aesthetic is a central means of expression for emerging theologies, incipient theologies, and theologies on the margins. It is important for expression of the human condition and our relationship with God.⁸⁷⁰ It touches and reveals the passion and fire at the heart of the world; the love and Beauty of the Divine. It can be seen as 'first order language' for theology, if not the only appropriate language for theology as some assert.

⁸⁶⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, 'The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective' in Ursula King (ed), *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (Maryknoll, New York: SPCK/Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 64-65.

⁸⁷⁰ Garcia-Rivera, *Wounded Innocence*, p. 4-5; Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2000).

Just as most African-American theology that draws on the aesthetic as a source, and the creative work that has resourced these theologies have never used the term *theological aesthetics* to describe what they do, similarly, I had not heard the term *theological aesthetics* used with reference to African theologies at all, until my research found South African theologian John W. deGruchy's book *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics and the Struggle for Justice*.⁸⁷¹ A recent article by University of KwaZulu-Natal physicist Peter Barrett relates issues of nation-building and pluralism in South Africa to *theological aesthetics*, in terms of the common human uniting experience of Beauty.⁸⁷²

Yet African life is aesthetic. The aesthetic is central to African life and religion. It is in the way daily life is articulated and interacted with, in how people pray, the way people dress, the abundance and love of colour, artistic expression, the landscape, and the way people relate to one another. In cave paintings, San poetry and songs⁸⁷³ in coming of age rituals, in narratives and oral history, folk stories and proverbs, in music and dance; in communal works of art such as truth-telling embroidered panels, and the magnificent epic tapestries by women's groups in South Africa,⁸⁷⁴ in individual crafts, literature and poetry and sculpture and painting, African experience overflows with aesthetic expressions. The religious and theological significance is not necessarily obvious or overtly depicted. Yet these works are intimately linked with the journeys, worldviews, lives, hopes and suffering of the people who created them, and the contexts in which they live. As such, God is being revealed through these 'non-textbook' sources in an important way - through the creative work and lives of people who make them. This is something that bears respectful, wondering, curious and humble attention from theology.⁸⁷⁵

⁸⁷¹ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*. His work is mentioned in both Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, and van Erp, *Art as Theology*.

⁸⁷² P. Barrett, "The Quest for a Uniting Vision in South Africa - A Quest for Beauty?" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 119 July 2004, pp. 15-31.

⁸⁷³ Anjtie Krog (ed), *The Stars Say 'Tsau': /Xam poetry of Dia!kwain, Kweiten-ta-//ken, /A!kkunta, /Han=kass'o and //Kabbo* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004).

⁸⁷⁴ Andries Botha's *Create Africa South (CAS)* project with women called *Amazwi Abesifazane* (Voices of Women) Project in KwaZulu-Natal; Keiskamma AIDS Tapestry; Sheila Flynn *Dikeledi* project.

⁸⁷⁵ Garcia Rivera distinguishes between what he calls textbook theologies and living theologies,

Women's Aesthetic Expression of Liberation and Life in Africa

While many writers explain that African women's theology is lived and expressed through song, dance, myth, proverb and other means, it seems that women's narrative and literature are the areas that have been analysed most thoroughly from a feminist theological perspective in Africa. Women's writing has been very significant to the liberation of women in Africa, and to their theology. Perhaps because it is more accessible in meaning than other media such as poetry, painting or drama, for example, literary sources seem to be the most documented of the aesthetic theological sources in African theologies.

African Women's Literature as a Liberatory Theological Source

Like African male cultural nationalism and Black consciousness, African-American Black consciousness, womanism, Latin American and Asian cultural and women's liberation movements, the creative work of African women - especially literature - has played a significant role in the context of the development of African feminisms.

Guy-Sheftall traces how the earliest scholarship related to African feminism used the fiction of African women writers as their source. Gender dimensions of life were reflected and explored - either implicitly or explicitly - in the writings.⁸⁷⁶ Many early writers were 'implicitly feminist' in how they depicted life for women. She refers to Wicomb, who demonstrates this in the work of Bessie Head. The writer and her work, says Wicomb, should be looked at "...in terms of 'the fissures in her discourse' where meanings which are considered to be unacceptable 'percolate through'...", underlining a message of freedom, life, dignity, capability, audacity and courage for African women.⁸⁷⁷

textbook aesthetics and living aesthetics in *A Wounded Innocence*, pp. viii-ix.

⁸⁷⁶ Guy-Sheftall, p.36. Fiction writers include Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, and Bessie Head. Feminist literary criticism included writings by African women scholars such as D'Almeida, Chukwuma, Nnaemeka, Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, Kolawole, and Ogunyemi.

⁸⁷⁷ Rizwana Habib Latha, 'Feminisms in an African Context: Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter', *Agenda* 50 2001, p. 24-25. Habib Latha refers to Z. Wicomb, 'To Hear the Variety of Discourses', in MJ Daymond (ed), *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism*, 1990-1994 (New York and

Applying this method to dynamics of race, class, gender, religion and personal experience, Habib Latha looks at the work of Muslim Senegalese writer Mariama Ba. Habib Latha analyses Ba's semi-autobiographical short story/novella *So Long a Letter*, using the Wicomb-method of looking at 'the fissures in her discourse' and the liberatory meaning 'percolating through', and finds that Ba's writing depicts women's struggles to overcome injustice in a male-dominated society. Ba's story is a "cry from the heart of all women, firstly Muslim Senegalese women."⁸⁷⁸ It is a cry that she as a woman writer takes as a responsibility to express on behalf of other women in the face of institutional, social, familial and political injustice. Literature, to Ba, is a non-violent, powerful weapon.⁸⁷⁹

Oduyoye is one theologian who frequently engages the aesthetic in her work. She writes that this is because she finds African women creative writers to be provocative and powerful sources for theology.⁸⁸⁰

...creative writings of African women have furnished a rich source of women's views on life as lived in Africa, thus providing the theologians with other perspectives on the context in which they theologize as well as how women from other disciplines interpret contemporary Africa.⁸⁸¹

Creative writings by African women highlight much of what needs re-imagining in African culture. Through their poems, novels and drama they have offered analyses and critiques of African cultural practices.⁸⁸²

Oduyoye draws on other aesthetic expression as a source for theology as well. She unpacks the power of myth, proverbs and folktalk in African culture, as a carrier of the culture and its meaning to the education and socialization of women.

Proverbs, maxims and other wise sayings with which Africans lace their daily

London: Garland Publishing, 1996), p. 28.

⁸⁷⁸ Habib Latha, 'Feminisms in an African Context', pp. 23-24.

⁸⁷⁹ Habib Latha, 'Feminisms in an African Context', p. 33.

⁸⁸⁰ Oduyoye mentions some of the writers who have grappled with the dual aspects of critiquing what dehumanizes and devalues women in African culture while also maintaining national and ethnic traditions. This includes work by Ama Ata Aidoo; Mariama Ba; Awa Thiam; Flora Nwapa; Buchi Emecheta; Nawal El Saadawi.

⁸⁸¹ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 11.

⁸⁸² Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 14.

speech are carriers of these cultural expectations. They are the pegs on which the community hangs its mores. They are treated as truisms to make people adhere to the style of life that custom has come to expect of them because of gender or other status-specific differentiations.⁸⁸³

She underlines how the critique of such norms of womanhood are a central part of women's theology - and women's creative literature - in Africa.⁸⁸⁴ A significant book by Oduyoye that illustrates her engagement with the rich creativity and aesthetic expression of African women's theology for liberation, transformation and life is *Daughters of Anowa*.⁸⁸⁵ It is an evocative book that interweaves scholarship on African history and her own Akan and Yoruba cultures with stories and reflection on the harsh pressures on women in Africa. Oduyoye emphasises women's vulnerability and yet lack of self-pity, the sacramentality and dignity of their lives, their celebration of life and her own vision for 'the new woman in the new Africa'. This is told through story, imagery, and poetry, with reference to myth, proverbs, literature, art, and song.⁸⁸⁶

Opening the book with her own poetry that images her life as an African woman beading, Oduyoye continues with the imagery, presenting and constructing the narrative of the book poetically and cyclically, using the imagery of African women stringing beads. African women are cast as artists in their own lives, creating their lives as works of art. "[T]he artists, who sort and thread beads, envision creating

⁸⁸³ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 30.

⁸⁸⁴ Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology*, p. 31.

⁸⁸⁵ Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁸⁸⁶ In the content of the book, Oduyoye explores how African 'folktalk' - proverbs, myth and folktales - socialise women and preserve the norms of patriarchy in both the church and African communities. An overarching characteristic is its use of aesthetic sources for theology, and its aesthetic imagery. The concept and title *Daughters of Anowa* serves as a metaphor for women in Africa and is the unifying theme of the book. "Anowa is the mythical woman, prophet, and priest whose life of daring, suffering and determination is reflected in the continent of Africa." (p. 6). Drawing on myth and literature by Ama Ata Aidoo (*Anowa*) and Ayi Kwei Armah (*Two Thousand Seasons*) Oduyoye refers to Anowa as the representation of Africa itself. "...if there is anything that characterizes the continent it is love and respect for life, of people and of nature." And yet, Africa is used, plundered and raped by those within and without who leave it desolate. *Daughters of Anowa* - African women - are expected to capitulate, to not to say anything, keep things going, keep things calm, be supportive, tend the festering wounds, even hide them from outsiders, but, 'for their own good', not to engage in the fight themselves. "So they stand by, shaking loosened wrists in desperation, powerlessly watching their brothers flounder." (p. 10). Oduyoye goes on to vividly use this myth as an parallel of the stories of women and men in contemporary post-colonial Africa. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 6-10 and footnote 6. See Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (London: Harlow, 1970; Longman-Drumbeat, 1980); Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (East Africa Publishing House, Nairobi, 1973).

something beautiful.”⁸⁸⁷ The different kinds of beads parallel values in Africa - traditional handcrafted ones, themselves full of meaning and symbol, precious solid rock beads, glass mass-produced European beads.⁸⁸⁸

As I look at the world of African women today and reflect on that life..., I think of beadwork. When I look at the variety of beads, I think of the changing being of the African woman: my grandmother, my mother, myself, my nieces, and my grandniece: different beads from the same pot, different shapes, sizes, colors, uses, ever changing patterns strung on new strings. I hear the deliberate, gentle instructing voices of the older women evoke the rhythm of *sam-sina*, the action of drawing a bead off the thread or pulling the thread through a bead. Women threading beads. I watch the different colors and I see a pattern emerge as they reject some beads and pick up others. Deliberate choices and delicate handling, for every bead is precious and none must be lost. Even those not needed at the moment will go back into the pot along with those we have not chosen. We appear only in beads of our choice, strung on strong strings in patterns of our creation.⁸⁸⁹

The creating imagery shifts to women weaving cloth - their effort, and rhythm, the concern with bringing together and tying different threads and colours to form a whole, the challenge, and the joy. “I think of a whole being who mothers the universe and clothes it with love”. She sees women weaving and beading, bringing to maturity a vision of a new world based on the old, a ‘new woman-beingness in a new Africa’.⁸⁹⁰

The method of the book uses storytelling as the vehicle for contextualising the situation of African women, and the theologies of African women. The narrative is contextual and particular, with Oduyoye drawing on personal stories from her own experience, and connecting them to the larger relevance of observations on African life generally. With a vision of liberation and life for all African people in this globalised world, she unapologetically draws on myth, proverb, folktalk, literature, beadwork, weaving, song, homecraft and the sacramentality of women’s lives as theological sources.

⁸⁸⁷ Kanyoro ‘Beads and Strands: Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle’, *Her-Stories*, p. 16.

⁸⁸⁸ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, pp. 208-209.

⁸⁸⁹ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 209.

⁸⁹⁰ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, pp. 209-210.

Aesthetic Expression of Liberating Theologies in South Africa

As was seen in chapter six, in South African liberation theology the aesthetic was marginalized, with an emphasis on the ethical.⁸⁹¹ In the following section, I survey ways in which visual art nonetheless served as a locus of resistance and theology in the apartheid (and early post-apartheid) years, particularly religious art by black male artists. They used biblical themes as metaphors for the suffering and hopes of African people. Then I present examples of aesthetic work and forms through which South African women give expression to the emancipatory Spirit of God in their spirituality and theology.

Religious Art in KwaZulu-Natal

The theological significance of the aesthetic in South Africa, particularly in visual art, has arguably been recognised and studied most closely with regard to overtly religious art.⁸⁹² There is a long tradition of spiritual art in South Africa with an impetus developing in the twentieth century in KwaZulu-Natal through Christian missionary endeavours.⁸⁹³

⁸⁹¹ de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 2.

⁸⁹² Paul Tillich distinguishes between religion in large and narrow terms. The larger sense is "...being ultimately concerned about one's own being, about one's own self and one's own world, about its meaning and its estrangement and its finitude." The narrow sense includes "...a set of symbols...divine beings, ritual actions and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to us." With regard to visual art, the larger sense of religion is communicated through style, and the narrow sense is communicated through subject matter. He sees four categories of religion and art: 1. A style expressive of no ultimate concern and a content without religious subject matter, 2. Religious in style and non-religious in subject, 3. Non-religious in style but with religious subject matter, and 4. Both religious in style and religious in subject matter. See D. Adams, 'Theological Expressions Through Visual Art Forms', in D. Apostolos-Cappadona (ed), *Art, Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art* (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 311-318, and P. Tillich, 'Existential Aspects of Modern Art' in C. Michelson (ed), *Christianity and the Existentialists* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1956).

⁸⁹³ There was considerable theological attention to the work done in KwaZulu-Natal at mission stations. Leeb-du Toit suggests it was largely in service of acclamation of their missionary endeavours. See Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualizing the Use of Biblically Derived and Metaphysical Imagery in the Work of Black Artists from KwaZulu-Natal: c1930-2002', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2003, p. 247. A number of books have been published by German scholars on Southern African linocut artists, with interest in their prophetic Christian perspective. These include; T. Sundermeier, *Hoffnung für Namibia: Linoschnitte von John Ndevasia Muafangejo* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1991); T. Sundermeier, *Sudafricansche Passion: Linoschnitte von Azaria Mbatha* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1977); B.G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); J.F. Thiel and H. Helf, *Christliche Kunst in Afrika* (Berlin: Reimer, 1984). More recent writing includes Dina Cormick, *Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu; Christian Artists of Natal* (Pretoria: Academica, 1993); Buckenham, 'Women's Experience, Spirituality'; Stott, 'Reconstitution'.

In recent years, art that was formerly been labelled ‘sacred art’ or ‘liturgical art’ is now seen as an important and legitimate contemporary art form in KwaZulu-Natal. South African art historian Juliette Leeb-du Toit has done extensive research on the religious art of KwaZulu-Natal.⁸⁹⁴ She and others have documented the development and work of art training centres in South Africa, and the artists who were trained there. Many of these centres were set up by Christian missionaries. In the time of apartheid, these were not only centres of training in skills (to provide employment) or producers of liturgical art for churches, but the artworks also illustrated longings for justice, articulating peoples’ lament and outrage, the absurdity and suffering caused by colonialism, poverty, religious domination, racial segregation and oppression. Resisting oppression, they envisioned the hope for liberation – many through a liberating vision inspired by biblical stories in the Old Testament, and Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

Rorke’s Drift in the heartland of Zululand was set up by the Lutheran Church. In Richmond near Pietermaritzburg, there was the Methodists Ndaleni training centre,⁸⁹⁵ and in Mariannhill, there was a Catholic training centre. Some now-famous artists emerged from these places, including linocut artists Azariah Mbatha, John Muafangejo, Charles Nkosi and Dan Ragkoathe, to name a few. Sculptors Ruben Xulu and Bernard Gcwensa trained at the Mariannhill diocese.⁸⁹⁶

In other parts of South Africa, self-trained sculptors and spiritual prophets Jackson Hlungwane and Noriah Mabasa interpret their dreams and visions from God into wood and clay. Artist Mmakgabo Sebidi depicts women in rural and urban settings, with the underlying themes of dislocation, cultural belief and practices and the humiliation of apartheid.⁸⁹⁷ Her work also affirms her and realises who she is.⁸⁹⁸ As

⁸⁹⁴ Leeb-du Toit, ‘Contextualising’; Juliette Leeb-du Toit, *Spiritual Art of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: Tatham Art Gallery, 1993a).

⁸⁹⁵ Ndaleni training centre was a teacher-training centre, not strictly an art school.

⁸⁹⁶ D. Cormick, *Bernard Gcwensa and Ruben Xulu: Christian Artists of Natal* (Pretoria: Academica, 1993).

⁸⁹⁷ J. Nolte, ‘Narratives of Migration in the Works of Noria Mabasa and Mmakgabo Sebidi’, in Arnold and Schmahmann (eds), *Between Union and Liberation*, pp. 174 – 195.

⁸⁹⁸ J. Leeb-du Toit, *Taxi – 014 Mmakgabo Mapula Mmankgatho Helen Sebidi* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Krut Publishers, 2009).

was seen in chapter four, Durban-based sculptor, painter and feminist theologian Dina Cormick represented the suffering and lament of poor black women during apartheid in much of her work, as well as reclaiming and uncovering the hidden stories of women in the Bible. The impact of a series of prints entitled 'Heroic Women of the Bible' touched something deep and resonated around the country for women and men alike. Ceramic artist Bonnie Ntshalintshali represented and reinterpreted Biblical stories through her rural Zulu context in the Drakensburg Mountains.⁸⁹⁹ She sculpted powerful plinths with clay. From the whimsical to the prophetic, one of her most powerful and moving pieces is 'God is Angry'; expressing the horror and sadness when many were killed in political violence in KwaZulu-Natal in 1990.⁹⁰⁰

Drawing on Biblical stories as inspiration, the imagery of these artists goes beyond prescribed representations of stories of the Bible for pietistic, decorative or didactic purposes - they are reinterpreted through their own culture and cosmogony, and their experiences as oppressed people. As an example, Azaria Mbatha's 1967 linocut *Crucifixion/Reconciliation*, depicts a black male (himself) and a white man under the crucified Christ. At that time in the country, tensions were very high. Black expectations were ignored and Mbatha felt helpless to contribute to their realisation, writes Leeb-du Toit. He also felt, at that time, that things would be resolved and there would be peace if all South Africans became Christians. This was a view he later revised and lost hope for.⁹⁰¹ Nonetheless, his work revealed both the tension and the hope for community, unity and justice, at the same time acknowledging their shared humanity. This kind of visual commentary was subversive at the time.

Other images are equally powerful and prophetic. Weavings done by women at Rorke's Drift depict the life of African people within a Biblical narrative. In contrast to the dehumanisation wrought by colonialism and apartheid, they communicated the message that people of Africa are made in the image of God, blessed, loved, valued

⁸⁹⁹ See Figure 65.

⁹⁰⁰ See Figure 66. Buckenham, 'Women's Experience, Spirituality and Theology.' Ntshalintshali and other artists of the Ardmere Ceramics project have died of AIDS. Ardmere, where Ntshalintshali honed her skills and worked, has set up a trust for the artists and their communities. They raise awareness and aim to lessen the economic impact of the disease on families and communities in the Drakensberg from where the artists come.

⁹⁰¹ Figure 67.

by God, even if the political powers and teachings said otherwise. These images moved people. They gave expression to their reality, engaged the imagination, envisioned a better way, and moved the heart. Contrasting with the lies of a deluded, distorted, destructive, evil and ugly political hegemony, these images depicted the truth of oppression in all its horror (often through the imagery of the persecution of Christ), the vision of right human relationship, and the dignity of African life.

In her work, Leeb-du Toit explores the development and significance of this religion-inspired art in South Africa, particularly KZN, and how it reflects historical and cultural developments in the interface between indigenous culture and beliefs, the function and purpose of the art.

Originally, traditional work was functional and was inspired by sacred belief. It was appreciated for its function, embellishments, aesthetic value and meaning. Often the work was communal, though this changed with the imbibing of the coloniser's individualistic values. The artmaking became more individual and made for a white patronage base, which was often religious.⁹⁰²

Examining the cultural and religious encounter, 'hybridization', acculturation, assimilation and resistance expressed by black artists, and their aesthetic expression, Leeb-du Toit observes that in the art world, such work was not initially embraced as a valuable contemporary art form. It was marginalized to the status of 'sacred', liturgical or ecumenical art – of interest primarily to missionary endeavours, and to show their success in their Christianising mission. But in art circles, it was viewed as coerced and not a true reflection of the artists' own motivation and identity, and was kept at some distance.⁹⁰³

This perspective has since been revised, says Leeb-du Toit. Much 'belief-inspired' black art, while no longer rooted in liturgical prescription of the church, continues to reflect religious and other beliefs – morals, values, cultural norms – with the purpose to conscientise and remind people of their priorities. The function of the 'belief-

⁹⁰² Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 239

⁹⁰³ Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 243.

inspired' imagery, in a secular context, Leeb-du Toit sees, is 'neo-religious'.⁹⁰⁴ In light of religious and historical changes in the region, Leeb-du Toit sees it now having a 'quasi-secular position', whose function is the 'visual equivalent to moralizing oral tradition'.⁹⁰⁵

Such art reflects the emergence of a new culture of value and belief which has shaped the consciousness, identity and values of communities throughout the region.⁹⁰⁶

These visual expressions of values, priorities and beliefs, she continues, often come before written texts and verbal debates. Leeb-du Toit shows how these artists' images conscientise people on their problems and values – both individual and social, and contends that,

The imagery "reflects a new wave of post Contextual theology in which the energies that emerged in the 1970's to the mid 1980's in resistance practices, has now been revised and channelled into new strategies that address basic human right, needs, mores, and values."⁹⁰⁷

Many of these images, such as the work of Trevor Makhoba, directly address issues such as sexuality and relationships - issues that are otherwise not acceptable to raise in a public forum because of 'taboo and decorum'. These are nonetheless formative and underlay some of the most pressing social problems in South Africa. Leeb-du Toit sees this visual imagery reflecting or 'articulating' a new wave of (post-apartheid) post-contextual theology that reflects the needs, values and concerns of contemporary life.

The visual art of these black (mostly male) artists of KwaZulu-Natal remains religious in content and function, while not necessarily depicting doctrinal or overtly Christian themes. In a 'quasi-secular' context, Leeb-du Toit sees it continuing to reflect 'neo-religious' sensibilities. Bringing the values, problems and priorities to

⁹⁰⁴ Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 239.

⁹⁰⁵ Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 238.

⁹⁰⁶ Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 238.

⁹⁰⁷ Leeb-du Toit, 'Contextualising', p. 247, quoting M.G. Speckman and L.T. Kaufman, *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology. Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), p. 6.

conscious awareness, even before written texts and verbal debates, they serve as a visual expression of, and source for, contemporary contextual theology.

While this art was originally of little interest to the art world in South Africa – it was primarily liturgical art – the pendulum seems to have swung the other way. Now, Leeb-du Toit observes, such art is seen as an “...integral and sanctioned part of contemporary art production,” though it is “...seldom produced for a specific church or sacred context.”⁹⁰⁸

South African Women’s Aesthetic Creating and Work as Theology

South African creating women’s aesthetic work and lives reveal their spiritual journey and understanding of God. It contributes to the unfolding of who they are, the trust in their inner guidance and images, and their physical, spiritual and psychological well being. It transforms their lives. The sacramental presence of the emancipatory Spirit is visible in their art. It is the Spirit of the God of justice, love and new life.

While art, and even religious art such as that discussed in the prior section, remains of little interest to the church, art, creativity and the aesthetic are important sites for women’s theology, as was seen in chapters four, five and six.

On a personal note, in the early 1990's my work brought me into contact with diverse women’s initiatives and groups around the country. Many were related to the churches, and others, more widely, to other religions, social justice issues and human rights. I soon began to feel very excited as well as agitated by what I was seeing and experiencing, and by what women were telling me. Things were happening that had no space for expression within the churches - their stories of domestic and sexual violence, their spiritual searching for identity in post-apartheid South Africa, their struggles to know and live their gifts, to be agents in their own lives. These were finding explosive expression in poetry, painting, prayers, liturgy, songs and stories.

⁹⁰⁸ Leeb-du Toit, ‘Contextualising’, p. 247.

Women's passionate, nourishing, creative, genuine, rich, embodied, agonising, rooted spirituality and theology was alive, vibrantly alive and absolutely penetrating, though not in formal institutions of faith.

The exclusion of their realities and gifts from the institutions of faith is an area of struggle and pain for many women. Some tolerate the tensions and find ways to cope because they love aspects of the worship (such as the Eucharist, music, community and fellowship and so on). Others, if they can, look for another church to worship in that includes them and meets their needs better; and others, if there is no choice of parish, either endure and suffer or do not attend at all because it is so painful. And they feel and suffer because of their exile.⁹⁰⁹

Summarizing some of the many struggles women have with the Christian tradition and experience of the Christian community Rakoczy wonders then "how shall faith be celebrated?"⁹¹⁰

Women are creating ways to fully express their faith with other women, as seen in a sociological study of women's experience of church and alternative feminist spirituality groups in the United States. Many women are 'defecting in place'. Committed to their faith communities and congregations, they continue with their churches and set up alternative spaces in which to share and "...affirm the truth of our search and experiences of God."⁹¹¹

Such creative spaces are demonstrated in the lives and work of creating women in chapters four, five and six. Cormick facilitates the regular coming together of a Women-Church, that has been meeting for well over a decade. The internal space created by women while making art, and the physical space and solidarity of handcrafting communities are others.

⁹⁰⁹ In the context of the Catholic Church, (though many of her comments are applicable to other denominations), areas of pain to women are around their exclusion: the presider is usually male; exclusive language is used; preaching may be unrelated to their lives; and women may be excluded from other liturgical roles. S. Rakoczy, 'Creating Space for Faith to Flourish', pp. 346-347.

⁹¹⁰ Rakoczy, 'Creating Space for Faith to Flourish', p. 346-347.

⁹¹¹ Rakoczy, 'Creating Space for Faith to Flourish', pp. 346-347. Rakoczy refers to Winter, Lummis, and Stokes, *Defecting in Place*, p. 96

With a similar vision to begin to provide such an “...alternative space in which to share and affirm the truth of our search and experience of God”, and to share what was a vital yet hidden resource of rich spirituality and theology made by women in South Africa, in 1995, we began a magazine at PACSA called *Women In God’s Image (WIGI)*.⁹¹² The vision is to create a public, creative space where women can share experiences of their encounters with God as expressed through their stories, poems, artwork, reflections, interviews, experiences, questions, and searching. In recent years, it has included workshops with marginalized African women to affirm the creative expression of their lives and experience of God in their lives. It is a forum for a diversity of the living spirituality and theology of women in South Africa, as made in God’s image. Here, the movements of God’s spirit in women’s private journeys, group reflections, liturgical rituals and prayers find a medium. It shares too, resources from women across the globe, serving to nourish and affirm women. Recognising the isolated, even banished energy and richness of women’s spirituality from the institutions of worship, the magazine aims to develop a space, a forum, and a community of inspiration, challenge, and nourishment for women - and the wider Christian body. *Women In God’s Image* recognizes the privileged expression of Divine beauty in women’s creativity. It honours the sacramentality of women’s lives, their creativity, longings and aspirations, and the Divine Presence.⁹¹³

Conclusion

...theological aesthetics redefines how one can speak authentically about the religious dimension of humanity.”⁹¹⁴

In this chapter, I have stressed the importance of aesthetics to theology, particularly in the struggle to be free from oppression. A diversity of perspectives suggests that the aesthetic is a powerful means to ‘rupture the social-symbolic order’ and reconstruct theological symbols. It is a language of immediacy and passion, that reveals God,

⁹¹² *Women In God’s Image*, (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA Publications, 1995-present).

⁹¹³ Some of the powerful works done by South African women for *WIGI* are reproduced in Figures 42 + 68. See Appendix IV for poetry.

⁹¹⁴ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 183.

attracts and invites. It expresses the sufferings, longings and spirituality of marginalized people. It is a theological source.

There is an important relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Beauty, truth and goodness are related, intertwined, and inseparable. If one is emphasised alone, unconnected from the other, there are distortions and consequences to life. In South Africa, the importance of this interconnection is self-evident. Discourse on theological aesthetics from the perspective of women doing theology in Africa must relate to social justice issues of transformation of society, culture and religion in terms of gender, and women's agency as a human being made in the image and likeness of God. It has to address practical concerns for enabling and bettering life for the person, the community and the world.

In the next chapter, bringing together the concerns and insights that have been discussed in the previous chapters, I begin to formulate a creating women's feminist theological aesthetics in South Africa.

Chapter Ten: Toward a Creating Feminist Theological Aesthetics – Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

In chapter nine, theological aesthetics and the aesthetic expression of the liberating Spirit of God were discussed through several lenses of analysis. As a hermeneutical principle of the feminist theological method of deconstruction and reconstruction, the aesthetic is a heuristic tool to reconstruct theological symbols, a ‘first-order’ language of theology, and an ‘interlocutor of marginalized voices’.⁹¹⁵ It reveals something about *being*, and yearnings for justice and full life. The literary arts have arguably garnered the most attention as expressions of women’s lives in the African context, and there has been some theological analysis of these writings. In South Africa, the work of contemporary religious-inspired art of predominantly black male artists has had some theological attention. However, the theological significance of women’s art, aesthetic expression, and creativity in the contexts of South African women’s lives, is not so well explored, though it is a potent, authentic locus of women’s spirituality and theology, and revelation of God in South Africa.

Throughout this thesis, I have asked the question ‘what does beauty have to do with justice’? I have addressed this question in terms of full life for women and the beauty of the Divine. This is against the backdrop of the heavy burdens on women in Africa, especially South Africa. Here, the patriarchal order affects all women, black and white, of all economic classes. The most severe suffering and multiple forms of oppression are carried by poor black women. Their experiences of injustice and oppression diminish life. This study has examined ways in which the artistic creating process is an encounter with Beauty and contributes to unfolding full life. It has specifically focused on South African women creators – artists and crafters - from different economic and cultural contexts. Three different interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks - liberating theologies for women in South Africa and Africa, creation theology and spirituality, and theological aesthetics – have been employed to analyse

⁹¹⁵ Michelle Gonzalez, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), p. 154.

the theological significance of experiences of a select number of creating women from South Africa.

In this chapter, I bring together insights from the previous chapters and begin to formulate a creating feminist theological aesthetic in South Africa in three parts. The first part grounds their experience in the Beauty of the Divine, as explored in chapters seven and eight. I argue this Divine Beauty is encountered by women through their creating. Secondly the encounter and experience with Beauty is rooted in the particularity of their lives. It is an embodied Beauty. It is a Beauty that is evidenced in the fruits that creating engenders in their being and in their lives – psychologically, spiritually, ethically, materially and communally. These were areas examined in detail in chapters four, five and six, in the analysis of artists and crafters experiences. Thirdly, this Beauty, blowing as a spirit of liberation through women’s lives, finds form in their aesthetic expression, and is the reason - the ‘vision’ - behind the quest for justice.

This encounter, embodiment and expression of Beauty encompasses the sacredness, inexhaustibility, welcome, the distributional nature of beauty, and the aliveness it bestows on the person who enters its realm, as explicated by Bathasar and Scarry. It shows the inseparability of Beauty and justice. Both are revealed in the lives of these creating women in South Africa.

Creating Women and Encounter with Divine Beauty

In their creating, I contend that the women whose experience has been analysed in this thesis, encounter, experience and recognize the Divine Beauty - in themselves, in others and in the world. This is the Beauty, that in Balthasar’s view, is the fire and light that burns at the centre of the world.⁹¹⁶

⁹¹⁶ Noel O’Donoghue, ‘A Theology of Beauty’, in J. Riches (ed), *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 10.

He stresses that Beauty, together with truth and goodness, are fundamental characteristics of God.⁹¹⁷ Something appears to be beautiful because of ‘the delight it arouses in us’.⁹¹⁸ This delight arises because ‘the truth and goodness at the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed’.⁹¹⁹ Thus, the encounter with something that is authentically beautiful (distinguished from the mere appearance of beauty that has no substance beneath it and only points to itself) reveals “something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating.”⁹²⁰ It indicates ‘both the real presence of the depths, the whole of reality, and points beyond itself to the depths’ - to the Source of all Beauty, the Divine.⁹²¹ This encounter with Beauty entails relationship and participation. In the encounter with beauty, the perceiver receives, responds and is taken up into it. In Balthasar’s Christology, the ultimate form of beauty – the incarnated, self-emptying love - is Jesus Christ.

The Divine Beauty – the fire and light that burns at the centre of the world - is enkindled in the hearts of the creating women, as they encounter and participate with the Divine through their creating. “The fire in the heart is the result of an encounter, the encounter with God in the call and enchantment of absolute beauty.”⁹²² The women recognize the Beauty flowing through who they are and what they are participating in, though they do not name it in these terms. They experience it as a mystery. They attend to it, listen to it and trust where it leads them. It is an intimate relationship that grows and deepens. It changes them and energizes their lives in a direction of integrity, with even more openness and confidence in what they are hearing inside. This fire in the heart is the energy, power and love behind the women’s creating.

This fire in the heart - the result of the encounter and experience of Beauty - also underlies the ethical, psychological, spiritual and material fruits from creating,

⁹¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merkakis, Joseph Fessio and John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p. 19.

⁹¹⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁹¹⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁹²⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁹²¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p. 118.

⁹²² Noel O’Donaghue, ‘A Theology of Beauty’, in J. Riches (ed), *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), p. 9.

evident in the women's lives. Creating is a means to this encounter with Beauty.

Recall that creation spirituality and theology see that all of creation is participating in the process of becoming. Human creativity is a God-given gift given to all of humanity. When we create, we create in the image of this creative Source, and participate in the Divine creative energy. Creating unleashes this Divine creative energy. The artists say that by participating in the divine creating, their highest and best self is called forth and experienced. They feel a deep pervasive joy – *flow* - of creating that feeds the soul. In creating art and aesthetic work, they are affirmed in their existence. They become more of who they are.

In their creativity and creating, women encounter themselves and the world. Women bestow their attention and presence on the world, their inner being, and their art, leading to a shift in consciousness. This involves an encounter with the deepest places of themselves, including fear and pain, trauma and brokenness. Yet this deep encounter in the creating process also engenders healing and joy. This leads to both personal and spiritual growth, and the growth and transformation of their social context.

Other fruits are ethical. As we have seen, art and craft provides the women with a language – creative means, methods, materials, media, symbols, colours, and metaphors - and a voice that is their own. In their aesthetic work they wrestle with life. In their art and craft, they express the fullness of their reality and the integrity of their being. Even if not consciously aware or articulated as such, in creating they resist life-denying forces. They assert and affirm life, their experience and their understanding of it, as well as their aspirations and visions.

For the crafting women, creating in their crafting communities provide safe spaces where the stories of their lives can be shared. Their capability to create something functional or beautiful from their own hands, to make a difference and make others happy, gives them confidence, agency and self-determination, perhaps for the first time. It enables care for self and family. Their handwork enables them to meet basic

material needs to survive. All of this increases their self-value, self-love, and returns dignity, hope, and new visions. Women in crafting groups are liberated from the dehumanisation of poverty and victimhood, depression and isolation, turning instead to live out the principles of commitment, self-determination and solidarity with others. These ethical values undergird the power and vision to resist oppression and transform their lives and that of their communities.⁹²³

Creating, in the context of women's lives from different socio-economic and cultural settings, is a means of encounter with the Beauty of God. It is seen in the 'good and true' fruits of the creating in their lives. In this encounter, the liberating Spirit of God is revealed and unleashed. It transforms personal lives, unjust realities and social orders, unfolding 'full life'.

Encounter with Beauty - Embodied and Particular

Traditional (male) ideas of religious beauty are spiritual ideas of beauty, and real physicality detracts from the beauty. Yet, there is no beauty without the body; beauty is always connected with its temporality and materiality. In the home and in a good relationship with one's own person, a love for beauty includes the joy of tactility and connecting, an appreciation of fantasy and the extravagance of the way nature operates, and overflowing generosity toward oneself and one's family and friends. Real beauty is embodied, involves the senses, facilitates connections, and, in nature, overflows with excess. To love ourselves, then, is to love the finite, (fluid, rounded, soft) realities that we are, not the false ideals (clear, pristine, untouched) that we can never imitate.⁹²⁴

The women's encounter with Beauty is embodied and revealed in their lives. From a feminist theological perspective, theological aesthetics has been criticised for its exalted nature, and its focus on spiritual aspects of beauty – such as that put forward by Balthasar.⁹²⁵ For women, as Ross writes, this is a distortion and is problematic because while women are often cast as icons of beauty, at the same time, a disembodied, idealised view of beauty is removed from the realities of women's lives.

⁹²³ Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), p. 279.

⁹²⁴ Susan A. Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality and Justice* (Paulist Press: New York/Mahwah, New Jersey, 2006), p. 25.

⁹²⁵ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 28.

Beauty, spiritualised, removes it from the realm of sensual, tactile, ‘finite, earthy and particular’. And yet, this is where beauty lives and is revealed.

As has been seen through the stories of women presented in this thesis, women assert their dignity, defy soul-killing oppression, express their devotion and worship, heal and transform themselves and society through their art and craftwork.⁹²⁶ Their creative work is imbued with attention and care. Beneath this work lies considerable joy and pain. Women artists and crafters overcome enormous hardship and sorrow, heal, and find voice through their artmaking. Both personal and universal, their work resonates with, and reaches out to others. Women crafters, drawn together and bonded together from shared hardship or tragedy, find hope, dignity, agency and new life.

Beauty and An Ethic of Care for Self

“...beauty is to be shared...creating beauty is a statement that one cares about others and one’s self...that they are worth the time and effort to be cared for, with attention to details. Ultimately, beauty’s power to draw us in and beyond ourselves is a significant element - indeed a necessary element - in our moral development.”⁹²⁷

One of the key ideas about beauty relating to women is the interconnection between beauty, generous self-love and women’s moral agency. Too often, women experience a deep lack of self-love and beauty in themselves, their lives and their social situations. In South Africa, as seen in chapter two, the denigration and cheapness of

⁹²⁶ Ross looks at the value, significance and sacramentality of personal and domestic beauty, as these are most often seen as concerns of women. The sensuousness of touch of clothing, the communal aspect and ‘bonds of sisterhood’ that are formed through being together, sharing intimacies and knowledge of each other, the ‘transport and transformation’, the ‘exercise of freedom’ and the imaginative play to ‘imagine unreal possibilities’, all as forms of sensuous, embodied pleasure and beauty experienced with clothes. Other examples are women’s care in their homes, or ‘behind the scenes’ and unseen in churches, doing necessary work and caring for the beauty of the sacred space even where they have been excluded from formal aspects of liturgical expression or service. Related to this is the ways women explore symbolism, ritual and re-imaging God outside of traditional patriarchal constructs in feminist theology, the creation of liturgies that are rooted in the experiences of women, and the use of rich inclusive language are life-giving and promote the dignity of all people. These are specific created embodiments of the beautiful in women’s lives. Ross refers to Iris Marion Young, ‘Women Recovering Our Clothes,’ in *Female Body Experience: ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ and Other Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63-74, in Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 21-23.

⁹²⁷ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 5-6.

human life experienced by black people as a result of colonialism and apartheid, the lack of access to education and opportunity or work, endemic violence especially targeted at women and children, inform their sense of self. Patriarchy in religion - with distorted religious messages of a punitive male God, a male symbolic universe, and a focus on human sin, unworthiness, and suffering as saving or redemptive - all work to batter women's selves. Patriarchy affects all women regardless of culture and is operative in both religious traditions and social norms. Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye writes of African women's socialisation in this regard, and the consequences to oneself and others, of 'voting against the self'..

We African women have been brought up, and folktalk has been part of our education, to be devoted daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, to always love others more than self. It seems to me that in this process we have also learned to vote against the self, always preferring others and loving them more than we love ourselves, doing for them what we decline to do for ourselves because we consider ourselves unworthy of such attention. We have been content to work for, rather than with, children, spouse, and other relatives. We have declined to exercise power over others...but in the process we have also given up power over our own lives. The result is that we are in the process of losing our voices...we should seek to accrue dignity and respect for our persons and personalities. I often ask myself why women should be placed in positions where we have to feign submission to men. Where are dignity and respect for oneself and for others? This abdication of autonomy is exalted in many cultures as a hallmark of "the virtuous woman." ⁹²⁸

If beauty is a fundamental characteristic of God and all of creation reveals this beauty, then it is in us and we participate in it as human beings. And if, as we experience it, beauty is characterised by its intrinsic generosity, excess and abundance, in its greeting and welcome, its plenitude and excess, its distributional tendency, its extravagance, inexhaustibility, depth, and freedom, then these life-giving attributes should be a central part of how women in South Africa experience themselves, others, the world, and God. ⁹²⁹

The faces and expressions of God, love, grace and beauty are related to this claiming

⁹²⁸ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 195-196.

⁹²⁹ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 27-29.

of self.⁹³⁰ Women knowing and claiming their selves enable their moral agency; their ability to see, to judge, to act, to *be*, to develop and direct their lives, to make choices, to participate in transforming evil, sin and brokenness in themselves, their lives and the world, and to see new visions.⁹³¹ Women claiming their lives and potential - a moral and ethical issue – is a revelation of embodied beauty. For women, recognizing and developing the ability to *see* beauty in themselves and their lives is an essential aspect of generous self-love. It calls them to care for the self, others and the world.⁹³² Ross describes this process:

The ability to appreciate beauty comes from a generous heart; indeed, beauty itself enlarges the heart. The sense of beauty from which I suggest we learn is akin to nature's beauty and generosity where there is always enough.... If...there is an intrinsic generosity in beauty, an openness, an invitation, then a theology of beauty that is incarnate and grows from our sense of beauty in the natural world is also a theology of generosity; to oneself and others.⁹³³

Living generously with beauty, acknowledging and appreciating beauty, not only of nature, and of others, but of themselves, enlarges the heart.⁹³⁴ For women, this is extremely crucial. Noticing, appreciating and living more generously with the beauty

⁹³⁰ In a pioneering work, feminist theologian Valerie Saiving responded to writings of Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr - representative of contemporary theology - that described "man's predicament as rising from his separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it and to identify sin with self-assertion and sin with selflessness." (pp. 25-26). She wrote that male conceptualisations of sin, love and redemption were man's experience (not universal nor generic) and did not relate to women's experience. (V. Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', in C.P. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979, originally published in the *Journal of Religion* April 1960 by the University of Chicago), pp. 25-42. Pride was not their problem but lack of self-love, failure to develop a self, putting others and their needs before themselves, diffusiveness, and self-sacrifice. Since Saiving's work, women from all over the world have articulated the faces of brokenness, evil and sin - both personal and social – and faces of salvation, love and grace - from their contexts. They have emphasised the necessity for women to develop their self, and self-love. Not having a self has particular consequences; See, for instance, Judith Plastow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980); Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, 'Agape in Feminist Ethics' in Lois K. Daly (ed) *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 146-59).

⁹³¹ For a survey of writings from Latin American, Asian and African women theologians on women's experiences - personal and social - of evil and sin, the presence of God, healing and wholeness, and women's moral agency see Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, Chapter Seven, pp. 255 - 298.

⁹³² Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 25. Seeing beauty is not only awareness of the eyes - it includes all of the senses of taste, touch, smell, sight, sound, and an attunement of the spiritual senses. It is an uncovering, an awareness or a consciousness of what is already there. Creating plays an important role in the development of this awareness and shift in consciousness.

⁹³³ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 25.

⁹³⁴ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 25.

in themselves and others, trusting it, opening themselves and others to it, allowing it to *be* in their lives, calls them to follow the lure of Beauty.⁹³⁵ It leads into new life and hope, for themselves and others.

Women's creating processes, their creative work, and their expressions of beauty, are linked to the valuing of self, healing and love, the ability to sustain life. They are able to make decisions about their own lives, and feed and clothe their children. They create a just community, and offer a vision of this to society and world.⁹³⁶

They become communities of solidarity, of sharing burdens, encouragement and presence that witness to the power of the beautiful to uplift their lives. These 'communities of the beautiful' witness to the Divine Beauty embodied in their context, as they heal, resist and transform all that oppresses. In their creating, as we have seen in chapters four, five and six, women move from being victims to "...being subjects of one's personal destiny and that of one's people."⁹³⁷

Beauty in this kind of creativity and created work is not about critical acclaim or recognition, uniqueness or originality.⁹³⁸ Beauty revealed through this creating and created work is about the depth of meaning behind the creativity, the context of the women's lives, the purpose of the work and the fruitfulness of it to themselves and their community.

These are the values that form a context for the paintings and sculptures, poems and wall-hangings, embroideries, beadwork, wirework and weavings of the women whose lives and work have been described in this thesis. These are forms of embodied

⁹³⁵ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 25.

⁹³⁶ Ross refers to environmental protection work of Wangari Maathai in response to deforestation, degradation of the natural and life-giving resources in Kenya, where the women and children are most vulnerable. Beauty as seen in nature is not merely ornamental or theoretical. Its purpose is the survival of the earth and all its creatures. Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 65-66.

⁹³⁷ N.J. Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation* (Accra: Legion Theological Studies Series, 2000), p. 153.

⁹³⁸ Ross relates this to Rwandan women who work together across ethnic groups to weave baskets – bringing reconciliation and healing. "Women whose husbands and sons had been murdering each other years before found solace and strength in their joint endeavour of basket making. The money from the proceeds of the sale of the baskets is used for the women and children" (Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, pp. 70-71).

beauty and a model for uncovering the unity of beauty and justice - the unity of goodness, truth, and beauty embodied in women's lives. For the women artists, their creativity reveals their growth as persons, their spiritual search and integrity, and the journey of women finding their voice. They express the social context we live in, in both its depth of joy and sorrow. They reach out to others. It embodies beauty as they unfold as fully human persons.

For the crafting women's work, created amidst the enormous burdens that they carry with heavy domestic responsibilities, raising families, pressures of poverty, surviving amidst the crisis of HIV and AIDS, political problems, and maintaining life under the most difficult circumstances, the beauty and creativity should evoke awe and wonder. This beauty revealed in the artists and crafters lives is, in Balthasar's words, "...both the real presence of the depths, the whole of reality, and points beyond itself to the depths."⁹³⁹

The veracity and depth of beauty is situated in and revealed through the context of the lives of those who make it. It is seen in the unity of beauty, truth and goodness. Beauty is created in care and value of the self, in sustaining community and life, in welcoming and generously celebrating one another. This is evidenced in the artwork made by women and women's groups in South Africa.

These dimensions of beauty that incorporate the body into ideas of beauty - generosity, love, care for oneself, and the community - are important dimensions of beauty which have not been explored in spiritual discussions of beauty, asserts Ross.⁹⁴⁰ They are revealed through the lives and creating of South African women artists and crafters.

Aesthetic Expression, Liberation and Justice

⁹³⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol. I*, p. 118.

⁹⁴⁰ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 25.

Balthasar saw literature and the arts as theological sources because they reveal something about 'being'.⁹⁴¹ He saw that all of culture can be read as theological expressions of God because it has been transformed in Christ. The aesthetic, then "...is a vital resource of human expression of divine Glory."⁹⁴² Recognizing how the aesthetic can powerfully express the encounter with the Divine, sources for theology are expanded and transformed.

This is important as women seek for liberation and full life. As was seen in chapter eight, the aesthetic is a powerful means by which marginalized people articulate the suffering and struggles, understandings and aspirations, contexts, solidarity and yearnings for liberation. The aesthetic, demonstrates Gonzalez, has been central to aspects of theologies of liberation - such as womanist and black theologies in the United States - which use literature, music and other arts as legitimate and profound sources for theology. Similarly, the aesthetic is central to women's theologies in South Africa and Africa although its importance has seldom been acknowledged. It is a central 'interlocutor' of women's theologies - through song and proverb, art and poetry, literature and narratives, liturgical groups and crafting groups and many other means.

As it expresses the deepest longings, realities and movement of the emancipatory Spirit of God in the lives of people, the aesthetic, Gonzalez says, serves as a 'central interlocutor' of theology.⁹⁴³ As marginalized people find their theological voice through the aesthetic, she continues, Beauty's presence is revealed. Thus the aesthetic is critical to the task of theology.

However, as women's voices have been marginalized, so too political liberation theologies have marginalized the aesthetic with the emphasis on the ethical. Latin American theopoet Rubem Alves and South African theologian John W. de Gruchy both express from their different contexts similar concerns about the absence of Beauty from liberation theologies - viewed as irrelevant, or luxurious.

⁹⁴¹ Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 593.

⁹⁴² Gonzalez, 'Balthasar and Feminist Theology', p. 593.

⁹⁴³ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 154.

However, Alves says, human beings are moved by beauty. “If we want to change the world, we need first of all to be able to make people dream about beauty.”⁹⁴⁴ The ethical is only the means to achieving the beautiful vision. As we deal with issues of truth and goodness without beauty, they can degenerate into dogmatism and moralism, and become superficial. De Gruchy continues that “Truth and goodness without beauty lack the power to convince and therefore to save.”⁹⁴⁵ Without beauty, there is a danger that people become objects in the struggle for justice. “An ethics not grounded in beauty will result in a ‘heartburn’ that leads to bitterness.”⁹⁴⁶

It is the vision of Beauty that is the force and the allure behind the commitment to justice. In Balthasar’s penetrating observation, Beauty is ‘why’ behind ‘why the good must be carried out’.⁹⁴⁷

Conclusions

For women in South Africa, as they yearn, struggle for and envision full life for themselves and others, the aesthetic is an important means for this expression – as a language, a process, an embodiment, a means of communication, a process of solidarity, community-making, an ethical process of transformation, and a way of beautifying the world. The aesthetic - as the manifestation of inner creative processes – involves the encounter, discovery and embodiment of the subjective reality and deepest places of themselves as they encounter their world.

The aesthetic, then, serves as an interlocutor of women’s theological expression in South Africa that is deeply revealing of God in their lives. As such, it is a critical source for theology in South Africa. Similarly, though perhaps less obviously, the creative process and contexts involve encounter with, and revelation of the Beauty of

⁹⁴⁴ Rubem A. Alves, ‘From Liberation Theologian to Poet: A Plea That the Church Move from Ethics to Aesthetics, from Doing to Beauty’, *Church and State* 83 (1993), p. 23, in Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 172. (Journal not available at our libraries).

⁹⁴⁵ De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, p. 107.

⁹⁴⁶ Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, p. 171.

⁹⁴⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord, Vol I*, p.19.

God, the Beauty of God within, and the embodied witness of the Beauty of God in the earthy, visceral and particular contexts of South African women's lives.

Human creativity, as a divine gift and energy, is a means through which the Beauty of God is encountered and recognized within. It is personal and direct. We have seen this through the stories of creating women narrated in this thesis, and how they experience the Divine in the process of their creating. In listening to their stories, we see ways in which this encounter leads to the unfolding of full life for women.

The unfolding of 'aliveness' is seen in the way their being, relationships, agency and well-being are nourished, and their lives transformed in the creating. This unfolding of new life is reflected in the artists' stories of their trust in themselves and their inner guidance, their self-determination, their self-value and love, their courage and joy in creating that pervades all aspects of their lives, their healing and personal and spiritual growth. In the crafting women's lives particularly, it is seen in their moving from ill-being to well-being, the hope and restoration of relationship with themselves and others from a place of despair and internal darkness, the affirmation of their worth and dignity, the meeting of their physical needs and the ability to feed their families, their interrelatedness, community, and affirmation of their selves and capabilities. For all the women, it is evident as they reach out to others in solidarity and care, and it is seen in the delight they create for others through their work. In these women's creativity and the diverse contexts of their lives in South Africa, Beauty - Divine and embodied - is revealed in women's lives.

Ross, in her criticism of exalted discussions of Beauty in theology, calls for a feminist theological aesthetics that is rooted in the embodied beauty in women's lives.

Although theological aesthetics as it has been done in mainstream theology has emphasized the glory of God and the human attitude of reverence before and obedience to God's glory, my suggestion is that a feminist theological aesthetics and ethics are done 'from the ground up', and are rooted in careful attention to the ways in which women's artistic and craft work weaves together creativity, practicality, and community. Such attention involves an awareness of the source of this work and the means for creating it; its place in the lives of women, men, and children; and its role in maintaining the lives of

not only individuals, but their communities as well.⁹⁴⁸

In the stories of South African creating women, this thesis has uncovered this very rootedness of Beauty.

A creating feminist theological aesthetics in South Africa is inseparable from the human condition of suffering and efforts to overcome it. It is inseparable from ethics – to justice, goodness and truth. And these must relate to praxis – to efforts to transform our society. It seeks to bring life in abundance for marginalized people – including women, and especially black women who remain most vulnerable and disenfranchised. From my perspective as a feminist theologian in South Africa, these are necessary and concrete elements of the conversation on theological aesthetics.

This thesis has brought together ideas from several disciplines into one conversation. An implicit concern has been the reasons ‘why’ creating and artistic work need theological attention in South Africa. This has been done by focusing on women’s creating. The depths of peoples’ aesthetic work and creative journey, the contexts of their lives, and what they might be saying theologically deserve further research. Such potential areas of enquiry include research with specific kinds of women’s creative work and specific artists in greater depth. Each of the artists and groups in this thesis could have been a full study on their own. Similar research needs to be done with male artists and crafters, people from different cultures and economic classes, from different religions, with people in creativity classes who call themselves ‘non-artists’, and with churches who incorporate different forms of artistic creating into their rituals and prayer.

Further study is not confined to overtly religious expression in the aesthetic, or even the work and lives of artists that proclaim Christian faith. It includes research with artists of other religions. Balthasar’s assertion can be applied here, in that all of culture, because they have been transformed in Christ, can be read as theological expressions of God. Encompassing a wide range of creative work - including the metaphorical, the oblique, and the diversity of media, styles, genres and content - it

⁹⁴⁸ Ross, *Beauty of the Earth*, p. 83.

can be read for what it reveals about *being*. Through a theological lens, specific kinds of art, the aesthetic and creating can be researched, asking ‘What is she saying?’ ‘What is this person’s life and creative expression saying to us about being, about God, our times, and the meaning of our lives?’

Media, researchers and critics have looked at the work of artists and crafters in this country, and have written rich, detailed analyses of their contexts, content, and motivation. Reading any of these works – about painters and poets, playwrights and dancers, embroiderers and basket-makers, novelists and sculptors, hobbyists and professionals – theological questions arise. This is a rich and deep area for South African theology to begin to widen its paradigm, to hear what people are saying through aesthetic means and their encounter with the embodiment of life-giving Beauty.

In the women’s lives that were examined and shared in this thesis, they began to answer the question ‘what does beauty have to do with justice?’ In both the encounter with Beauty in creating, and the rooted particular embodiment of Beauty behind their creating, these women’s lives reveal the Beauty that is the ‘why’ of ‘why the good must be carried out’. Beauty has everything to do with justice.

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Appendix I

List of Individual Interviews, Long Group Interviews, Short Group Interviews, Personal Conversations and Translators.

Individual Interviews:

Botha, Andries. Multi-media Artist and Founder of Create Africa South (CAS). 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Durban, 29 November.

Cassidy, Carol. Painter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Hilton, 10 March.

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Dladla, Maduma. Church Agricultural Project Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Mdukatshani, Weenen, 21 March.

Dladla, Magizela. Church Agricultural Project Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Mdukatshani, Weenen, 21 March.

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Donaldson, Deanne. Painter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Durban, 9 March.

Esau, Beatrice. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 15 March.

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Moyo, Fulata. Multi-media Artist. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Pietermaritzburg, 7 March.

Mvelase, Gosi. Church Agricultural Project Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Mdukatshani, Weenen, 21 March.

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Nkosi, Gabisile. Printmaker. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Caversham, 8 March.

Nyide, Witty. Multi-media Artist. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Durban, 31 March.

Pitout, Ann. Liturgical Artist. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Hilton, 7 March.

Sandlana, Noluthando. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 15 March.

Speight, Liz. Painter. 2005. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Howick, 14 September.

Spies Coleman, Hermine. Painter. 2005. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Curry's Post, 2 October.

Stott, Bernice. Multi-media Artist. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Durban, 1 December.

Tshabalala, Mary. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 15 March.

Van Eeden, Janet. Writer. 2005. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Pietermaritzburg, 20 September.

Zwane, Beauty. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 15 March.

Group Discussion

Mathini, Freda. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Ngubo, Mildred. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Ntshiza, Locretia. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Qwande, Phumzile. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Qwande, Tilly. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Zondo, Silva. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Zuba, Nomasonto. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Zuma, Gladys. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Zuma, Teresa. Ikhwezi Crafter. 2006. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Initial Group Interviews

Dlamini, Dora. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Esau, Beatrice. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Ford, Patience. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Grietjies, Maria. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Jones, Samantha. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Kgomo, Emily. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Khiba, Jeanette. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Kieva, Nana. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Liesering, Yvauna. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Mathonisi, Phindi. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Mbatha, Ntombi. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Mtabela, Belina. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Nefe, Nomonde. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Patterson, Marigold. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Peterson, Colleen. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Phiri, Flora. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Phiri, Nthabiseng. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Sandlana, Noluthando. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Simelane, Sarah. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 March.

Tabane, Felicity. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Tshabalala, Mary. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

Twala, Silindile. Kopanang Women's Group Crafter. 2004. Interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October.

The following women from Kopanang Women's Group were recorded by their first names in the initial group meetings. They were all interviewed by Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 29 October 2004. They have either left the project or have died. Records of their names were lost when the project computer crashed when they did not have backup. (Sheila Flynn sheilaflynn@ymail.com) email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za) 30 October 2009.

Hermina, Grace, Caroline, Portia, Voni, Winile, Mpho, Prudence, Busisiwe, Phumzile, Sana, Jeanette, Cecilia.

Personal Conversations:

Aitken, Marilyn. Women's Leadership and Training Programme - Programme Director. 2005. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission near Underberg, 28 September.

Alcock, Creina. Church Agricultural Project Women's Group - Organiser. 2006. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham at Mdukatshani, Weenan, 21 March.

Buss, Julia. Tatham Art Gallery Outreach Coordinator. 2005. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham in Pietermaritzburg, 26 June.

Dlamini, Jabu. Jambo Arts and Crafts Organiser. 2005. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham in Pietermaritzburg, 12 October.

De Maesoneer, Yves. Balthasar scholar. 2006. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham at University of Leuven, Belgium, 13 September.

de Schrijver, Georges, S.J. Balthasar scholar. 2006. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham at University of Leuven, Belgium, 13 September.

Flynn, Sheila. Kopanang Women's Group – Facilitator. 2004. Personal conversations with Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 28-30 March.

Taylor, Chupp. Underberg Sewing Group Organiser. 2005. Personal conversation with Karen Buckenham in Underberg, 28 September.

van Erp, Stephan. Balthasar scholar. 2006. Personal conversations with Karen Buckenham in Tilburg, Netherlands, 1-16 September.

Translators

Duma, Natty. Church Agricultural Project. 2006. Interviews with Karen Buckenham in Mdukatshani, Weenan, 21 March.

Tshabalala, Mary. Kopanang Women's Group. 2006. Interviews with Karen Buckenham in Geluksdal, 15 March.

Qwande, Phumzile. Ikhwezi. 2006. Interviews with Karen Buckenham at Reichenau Mission, Underberg, 5 April.

Appendix II

Interview Questions for Artists and Crafters:

1. Please tell me something about yourself, the kind of art you make, and how you got into art making.
2. How do you feel when you are creating/making something?
3. How do you get your inspiration?
4. Have you ever thought about your creativity and spirituality? What do you think about it?
5. Where do you think your gift comes from?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say?

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- Figure 26. *Image from Master's Exhibition*, Bernice Stott, 2005, multi media installation (Source: Stott, B. (Bernice@telkomsa.net). 5 December 2006. Master's Exhibition, email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).
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- Figure 39. *'Gida Nami' Dancing Chairs*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50cm (Source: field photograph by Karen Buckenham).
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- Figure 44. *Mine dump near Tsakane*, 2004 (Source: field photograph by Karen Buckenham).
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- Figure 55. *Kopanang commission banner*, Artist not named, 2004 (Source: www.kopanang.com. Accessed 1 November 2005).
- Figure 56. *Kopanang commission banner*, Artist not named, 2004 (Source: www.kopanang.com. Accessed 1 November 2005).
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- Figure 60. *Kopanang commission banner*, Artist not named, 2004 (Source: www.kopanang.com. Accessed 1 November 2005).
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Figure 66. *God is Angry*, 1992, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, painted ceramic ware, approximately 320 x 850 (Source: *MZK Missions Calender featuring the work of Bonnie Ntshalintshali*, Netherlands, 1997).

Figure 67. *Crucifixion/Reconciliation*, 1967-68, Azariah Mbatha, linocut on paper, 375 x 400 (Source: W. Eichel, *Azaria Mbatha: In the Heart of the Tiger: Art of South Africa* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1986), p. 56.

Figure 68. *Mother God*, c2005, Karen Poltera (Source: photograph by Karen Buckenham. Published in *Women In God's Image*, 11+12, April and September 2005, front cover and p. 13).

Appendix IV – List of Poems and Articles

- I. Poems by Joan Kerchhoff, (Source: *Three Journeys, One Life: Poems and Dreams, Second Edition*, (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA Publications, 2009), pp. 15, 20, 19, 27, 54.)
 1. A Silent Farewell.
 2. Re-Creation
 3. The Women Came
 4. After His Death
 5. Lamb

- II. Tribute to Gabisile Nkosi (Source: *Natal Witness*, article by Margaret von Klemperer, 4 June 2008, p. 9.)

- III. *Motherhood*, Susan Britton, 2004 (Source: *Women In God's Image*, 11+12, April and September 2005, p. 3).



Figure 1. *Creatura God Most Beautiful*, Dina Cormick, 1990, watercolour 20 x 17 cm (poster image from Dina Cormick).



Figure 2. *Joan Kerchhoff at home, 2006* (Source: field photograph by Karen Buckenham).



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Figure 6. *Ann Pitout at Jubilate workshop, 2006* (Source: field photograph by Karen Buckenham).



Figure 7. *Liturgical cloth and vestments, Ann Pitout, 2005, fabric* (Source: Pitout, A. (apitout@mweb.co.za). 17 March 2006. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).



Figure 8. *Bernice Stott at home*, 2006 (Source: field photograph by Karen Buckenham).

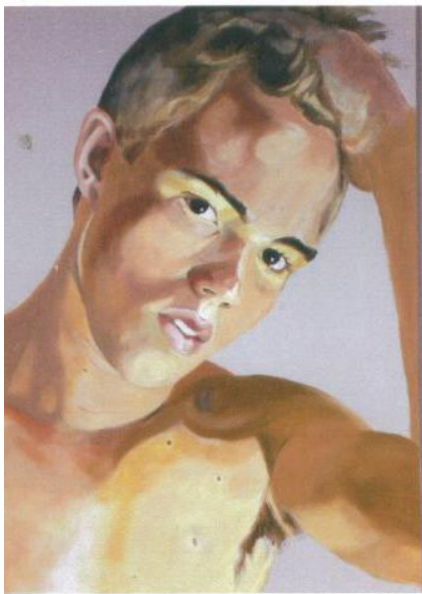


Figure 9. *Portrait of eldest son*, Bernice Stott, approx. 200 x 500cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 10. *Portrait of youngest son*, Bernice Stott, approx. 200 x 500cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 11. *Jutta Faulds at home, 2006* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 12. *Easter Cross, Cathedral of the Holy Nativity, Pietermaritzburg*, Jutta Faulds, various fabrics, approx. 6 x 3 m (Source: photograph by Dziva, D. (ddziva@kzncc.org.za). 8 December 2008. email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).



Figure 13-17. *Images from Jutta Faulds Exhibition at Jack Heath Gallery, UKZN, 2007, fabric and felt, various dimensions (Source: field photographs by K. Buckenham).*



Figure 18. *Delighting in Life*, Dina Cormick, 2005, wood carving (Source: postcard from Dina Cormick).



Figure 19. *Carol Cassidy at home*, 2006 (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).

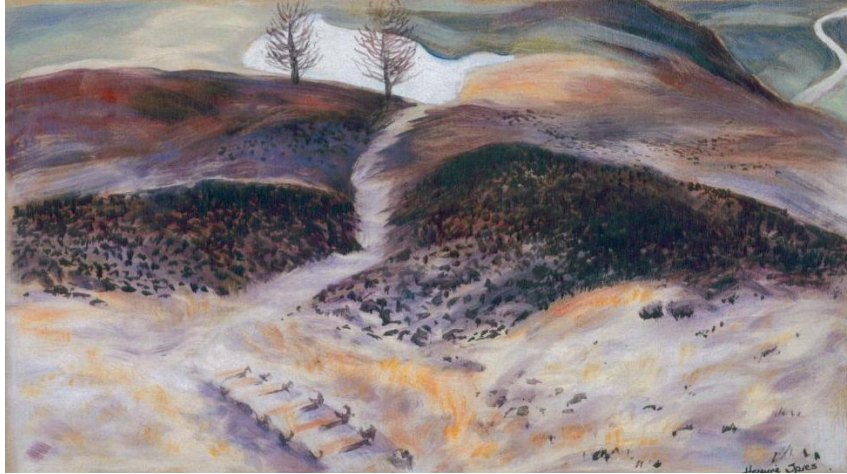


Figure 20. *After the Fire: Down at the Dam*, Hermine Spies Coleman, 2007, acrylic on canvas (Source: postcard from Midlands Arts and Crafts Society, 2008).

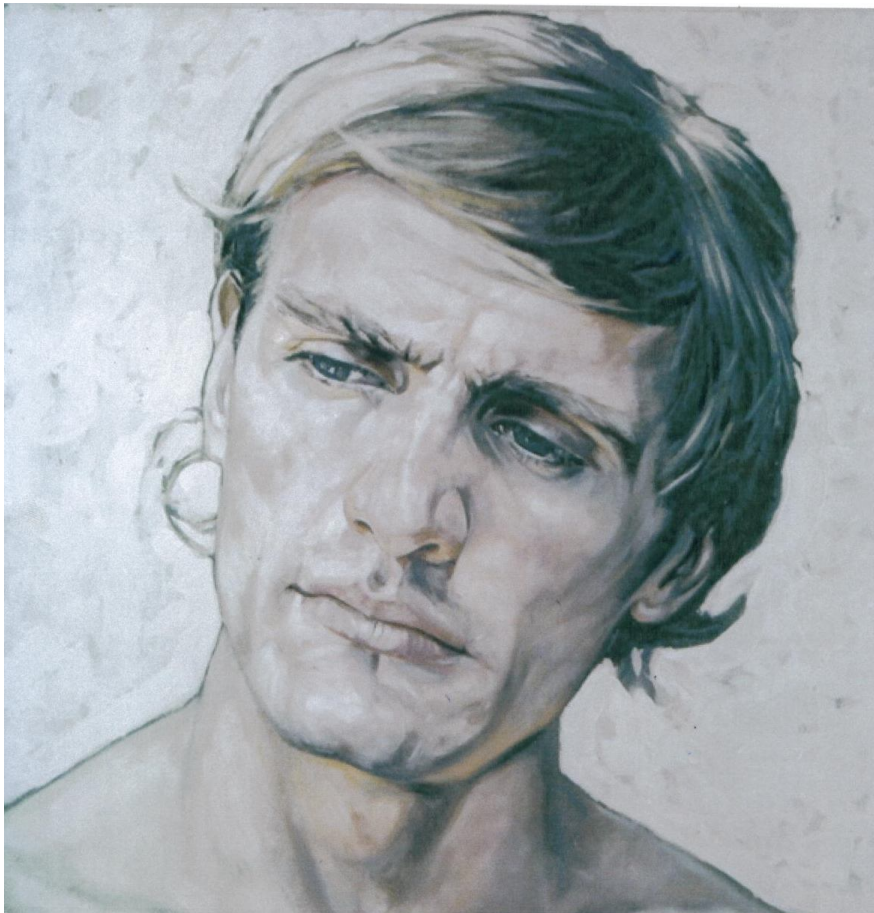


Figure 21. *Vaughn*, Deanne Donaldson, 2006, oil on canvas, approx. 1x1 m (Source: ArthroB website, www.arthroB.co.za/06feb/reviews/kznsa.html. Accessed 12 October 2006).

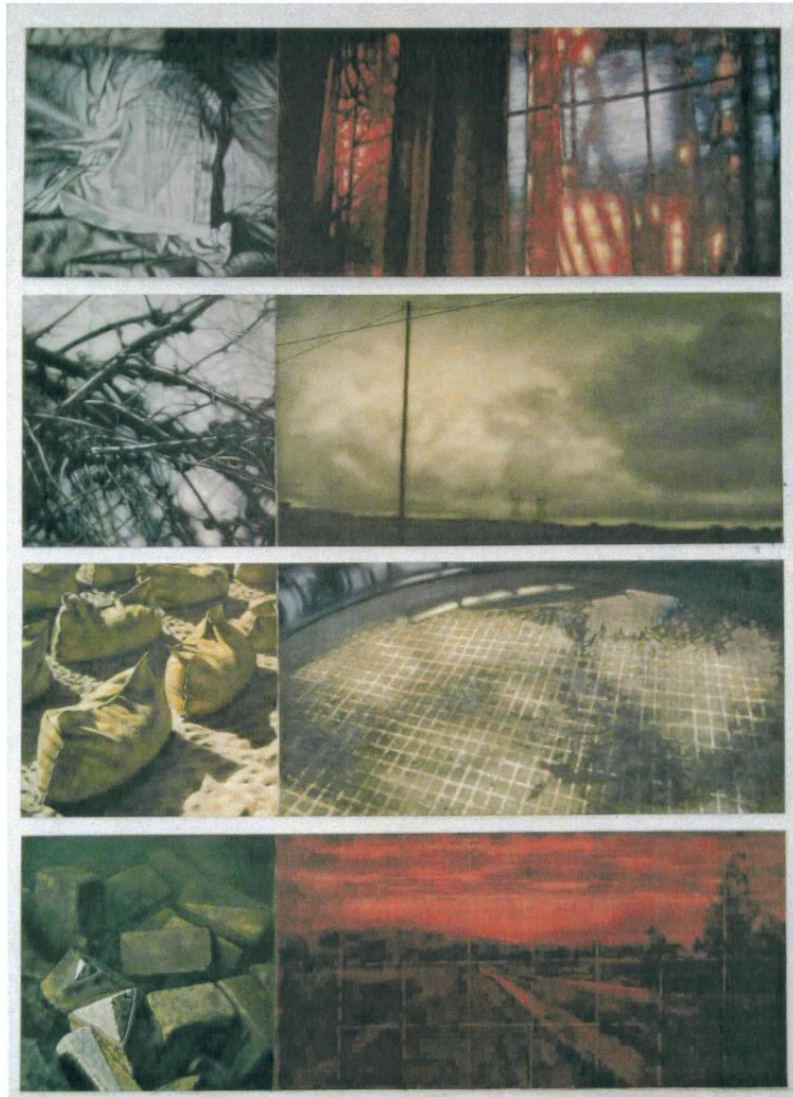


Figure 22. *Left of November – Formation*, Deanne Donaldson, 2009, 2.10 m x 70 cm
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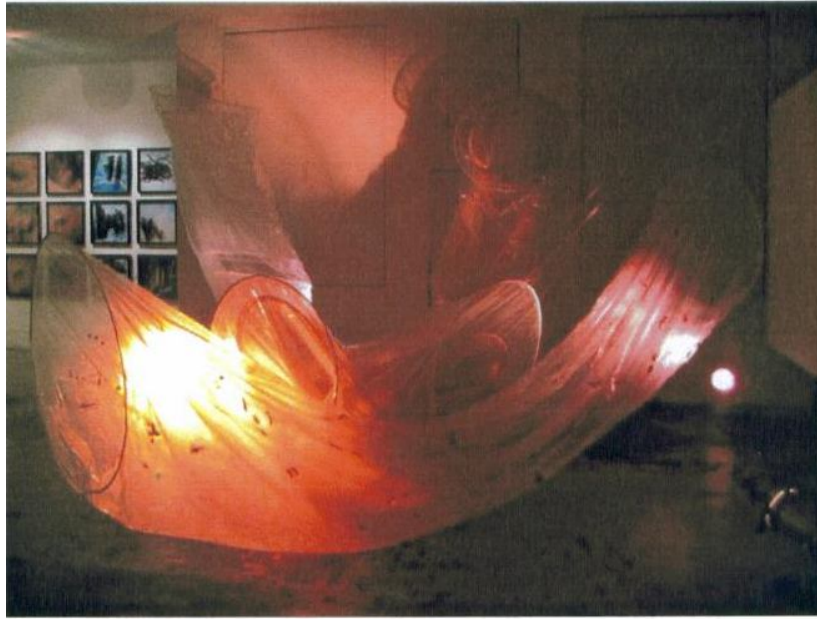


Figure 24 + 25. *Images from Master's Exhibition*, Bernice Stott, 2005, multi-media installation (Source: Stott, B. (Bernice@telkomsa.net). 5 December 2006. Master's Exhibition, email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za)).



Figure 26 + 27. *Images from Master's Exhibition*, Bernice Stott, 2005, multi-media installation (Source: Stott, B. (Bernice@telkomsa.net). 5 December 2006. Master's Exhibition, email to K. Buckenham (kbuckenham@mweb.co.za).

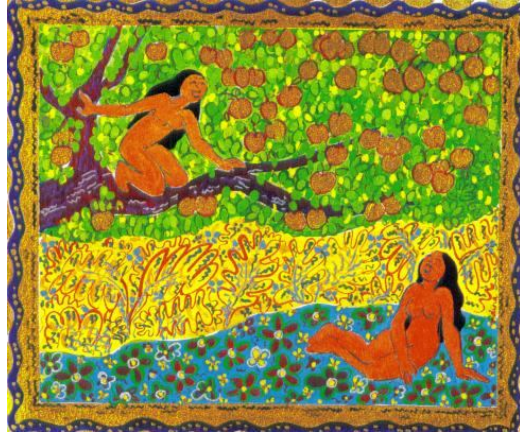


Figure 28. *Lilith and Eve (Rabbinic tradition)* – Image from *Heroic Women Series*, Dina Cormick, 1990, watercolour, 20x17 cm (Source: card print from Dina Cormick).

A Rabbinic tradition: Lilith was Adam's first wife, who flew away because she could not live with him. A group of Jewish and Christian women have re-mythologized the figures of Eve and Lilith to express a truth about their own lives) "In the beginning the Lord God formed Adam and Lilith from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. Created from the same source they were equal in all ways. Adam, being a man, didn't like the situation and looked for ways to change it. He would order Lilith to wait on him, and he tried to leave to her all the daily tasks of life in the garden. But Lilith wasn't one to take any nonsense and she uttered God's name and flew away. Adam then complained to God he was lonely, so God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and out of one of his ribs created for him a second companion, Eve. Adam was happy, he had a wife and helper who did everything he wanted her to do.

After some time Eve began to wonder if life was not something more than what she was experiencing. One day as she wandered in the garden pondering these ideas, she noticed how the apple tree had grown into a large magnificent tree with its branches stretching over the garden wall. Spontaneously she climbed up and looked over the wall. "What is your story?" And they sat and spoke together. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together and cried together, over and over till the bond of sisterhood grew between them. Meanwhile back in the garden, Adam was puzzled by Eve's comings and goings and disturbed by what he sensed to be her new attitude to him. He talked to God about it, but God was having his own problems with Adam and was a little confused too. And God and Adam were expectant and afraid of the day when Eve and Lilith would return to the garden bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together." (from printed card, copyright Dina Cormick)

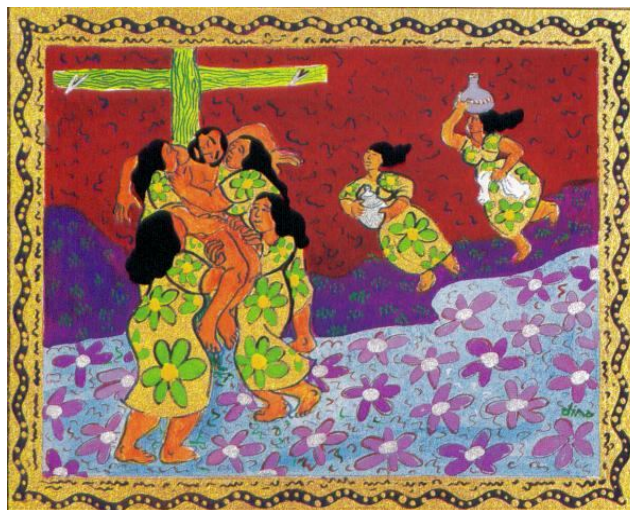


Figure 29. *The Women Disciples (Mark 15:40)* – Image from *Heroic Women Series*, Dina Cormick, 1990, watercolour, 20x17 cm (Source: card print from Dina Cormick).



Figure 30. *Makhosi! For the dreamcatchers: Sangoma Ikon* – Image from *Celebrating the August Woman*, Dina Cormick, 2009, carving, 15 cm diameter (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za Path: Exhibitions. Accessed 19 August 2009).

iSangoma Ikons

This is a tribute and celebration of the traditional women healers, the Sanusi, who mediate between the Spirit world and the Natural world, who help us pay heed to the voices of our ancestors. Early in the '90's I watched a 20 minute documentary made by Gugu Ngobese "Calling the Zulu Goddess Home". This deeply moving account of a 3 day festival in KwaZulu-Natal to revive an ancient ritual to celebrate Nomkhubulwane inspired me to attempt to image the ecstatic dance of the iSangoma and celebrate their attunement to the powers of nature. These few ikons are offered in reverence to the bearers of the wisdom of the Ancient Ones. (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za . Accessed 19 August 2009).

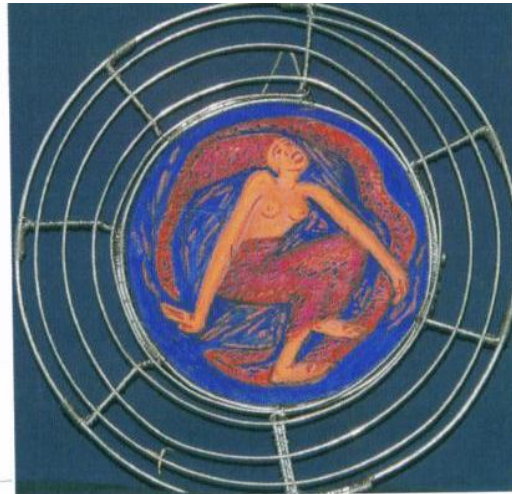


Figure 31. *Makhosi! For the healers: Sangoma Ikon* – Image from *Celebrating the August Woman*, Dina Cormick, 2009, carving, 15 cm diameter (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za Path: Exhibitions. Accessed 19 August 2009).



Figure 32. *Leaders from 1956 L. Ngoyi* – Image from *Celebrating the August Woman*, Dina Cormick, 2009, carving, 15 cm diameter (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za Path: Exhibitions. Accessed 19 August 2009).



Figure 33. *M is for Mary* – Image from *Celebrating the August Woman*, Dina Cormick, 2009, raku 12x16x19 cm (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za Path: Exhibitions. Accessed 19 August 2009).



Figure 34. *O is for Owethu* – Image from *Celebrating the August Woman*, Dina Cormick, 2009, carving, raku, 21x11 cm (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za Path: Exhibitions. Accessed 19 August 2009).

The Ceramics.

This is a very personal series – about middle-aged women’s bodies! How, why, do we eventually get to look like that! But there is also a celebration of defiance here. The figures stand or sit, unembarrassed, naked, hiding nothing of the lumpy adipose that has accumulated over the years, the tired used breasts undisguised by uplifting bras. The risk factor in Raku firing epitomizes the vulnerability of middle-aged women’s bodies – if we get through this passage of time, the results can be incredibly rewarding. (Source: African Art Centre website, www.afriart.org.za . Accessed 19 August 2009).



Figure 35. *Gabisile Nkosi at Caversham, 2006* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham)

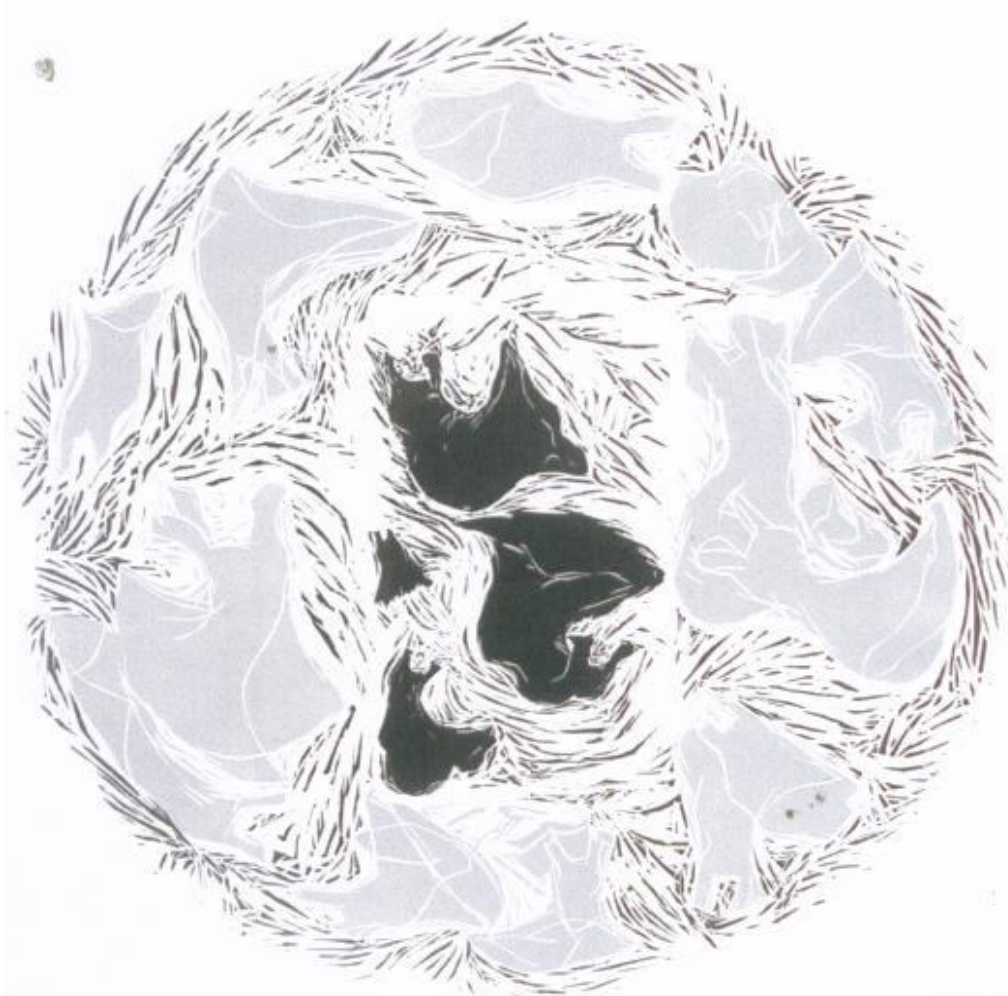


Figure 36. *Print of her mother's favourite dress (title unknown)*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 37. *Visit with sisters to mother's grave (title unknown)*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham)



Figure 38. *'Wandile' Someone I know*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



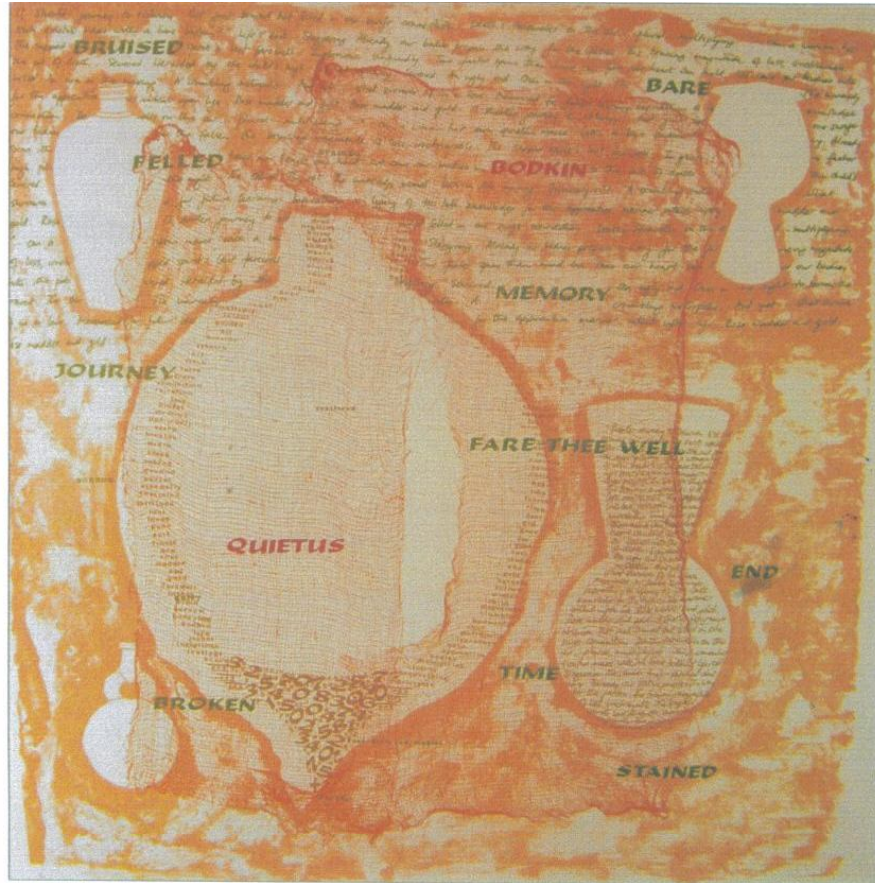
Figure 39. *'Gidi Nami' Dancing Chairs*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 40. *'Obusisikile' The Blessed One*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 41. *Title unknown*, Gabisile Nkosi, 2006, linocut on paper, approx. 70 x 50 cm (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Phepisa – Print by Sheila Flynn

Phepisa = Zulu for “be comforted, be consoled” (Isaiah 40:1)

A shorter journey to oblivion.
 Not just bruised but felled in one swift connection.
 Death's farewells' on the air...plural...multiplying.
 “Can a woman her own quietus make with a bare bodkin?”*
 Life's exit. Staggering.
 Already our bodies prepare the way for the fallen.
 The bruising magnitude of loss, irretrievable.
 The sapped spirit's last farewell, “unglorious”.
 Unfriendly.
 Time faster spins than mind can take
 Nor heart can hold.
 We cave our bodies into the pit of death.
 Severed.
 Heralded by the child's high-pitched obituary.
 An ugly end. Cries in the night.
 The vessel an urn in the making.
 A crumbling metropolis.
 And yet... what survives of us is love.
 Memoried for future learning,
 Bequeathing a legacy of too-late knowledge
 For the apprentice mariner intent upon life.
 Rose madder and gold.
 Rose madder and gold.

* The quote is from Hamlet.

The vessel is used to symbolise woman's body, the ability to contain life and birth life, and the reality that her vessel/body also harbours the HIV virus. An urn represents a coffin. The boat represents a journey. The crumbling metropolis represents the city overtaken by disease. “Too late learning” represents HIV/AIDS education that is not internalised into life choices and direction, and a cavalier attitude to life – partly the legacy of apartheid. Rose madder and gold is lifeblood and precious life respectively, memoried in 8 year old Fatsho. This poem was a result of being at his funeral.

The numbers surrounding one of the vessels symbolise the 20 million people who have died of AIDS since the disease was clinically diagnosed in 1980, most of them in Africa. The words surrounding one of the vessels are from spontaneous journal work, words which came to consciousness as a way of trying to deal with loss. The printed gauze area covers every vessel – it is the symbol of hope, of healing, even in the midst of death.

Figure 42. Phepisa Print and Poem, Sheila Flynn. 2004, (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham. Published in *Women In God's Image*, 11+12, April and September 2005, p. 16).



Figure 43. *Sr. Sheila Flynn at Geluksdal, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 44. *Mine dump near Tsakane, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham)



Figure 45. *Kopanang women sewing, 2006* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 46. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 47. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 48. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 49. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 50. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



Figure 51. *Members of Kopanang Women's Group, 2004* (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).



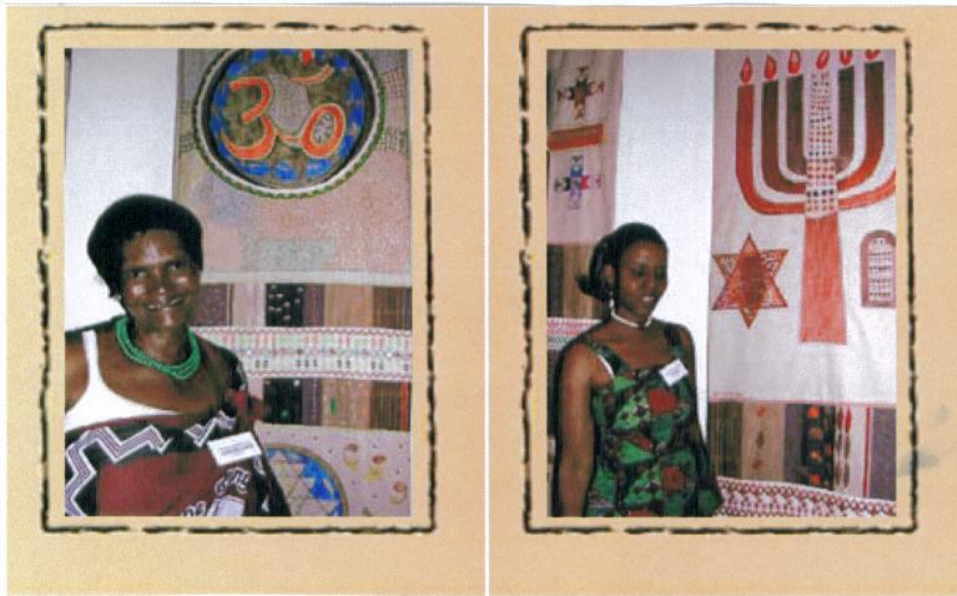
Figure 52. *Kopanang banner*, 2004 (Source: photograph by Hildegard Lenz for K. Buckenham)



Figure 53. *Kopanang stole*, 2004 (Source: photograph by Hildegard Lenz for K. Buckenham).



Figures 54 – 57. *Kopanang commission banners*, Artists not identified, 2004
(Source: www.kopanang.com. Accessed 1 November 2005).



Figures 58 – 60. *Kopanang commissions banners*, Artists not identified, 2004
(Source: www.kopanang.com. Accessed 1 November 2005).



Figure 61. *Members of Church Agricultural Project women's group (with Creina Alcock, K. Buckenham and children), 2006 (Source: field photograph for K. Buckenham taken by D. Dziva).*



Figure 62. *Natty Duma and Creina Alcock (CAP) (with D. Dziva and children), 2006 (Source: field photograph by K. Buckenham).*

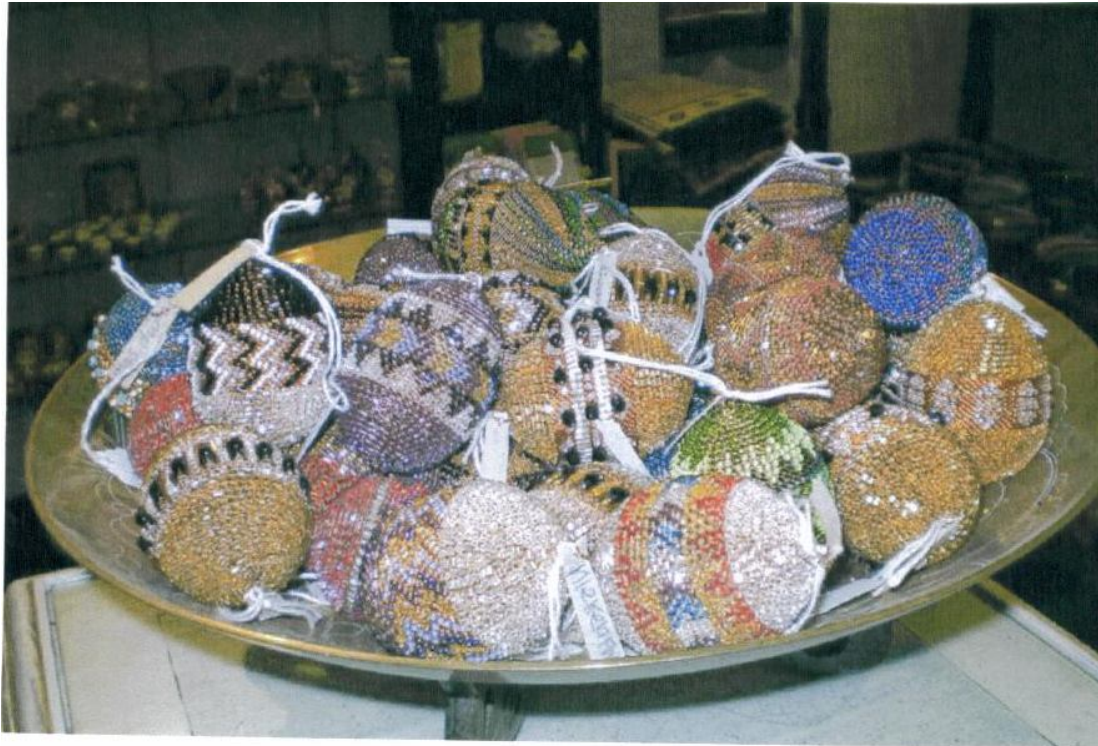


Figure 63. *CAP handwork – Faberge eggs, 2009* (Source: photograph by H. Lenz for K. Buckenham).



Figure 64. *CAP wire baskets*, 2009 (Source: photograph by H. Lenz for K. Buckenham).

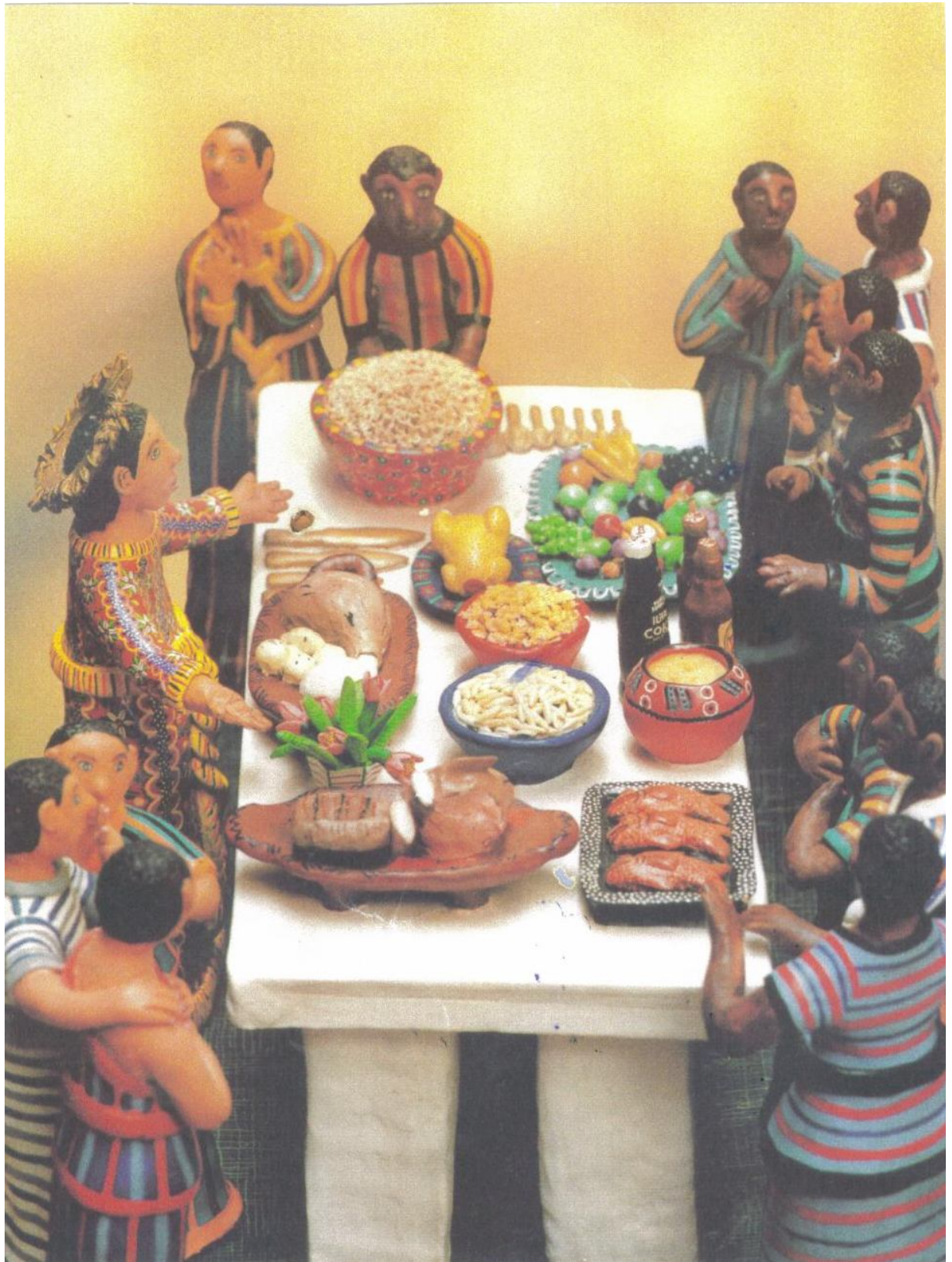


Figure 65. *The Lord's Supper*, 1990, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, painted ceramic ware, 52 x 32 x 55 cm (Source: *MZK Missions Calendar* featuring the work of Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Netherlands, 1997).



Figure 66. *God is Angry*, 1992, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, painted ceramic ware, approx. 320 x 850 cm (Source MZK *Missions Calendar*, Netherlands, 1997).



Figure 67. *Crucifixion/Reconciliation*, 1967-68, Azaria Mbatha, linocut on paper, 375 x 400 (Source: W. Eichel, Azaria Mbatha: *In the Heart of the Tiger: Art of South Africa* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1986), p. 56.



1. Mother God

This painting is about the welcoming embrace of God the Mother.

She invites us to come to her eternal embrace...to be held, comforted, and listened to.

As we begin to tell our story within the safe confines of her lap, we start the journey of inner knowledge along the labyrinth...a path we walk with all our outer weariness, until we can rest in the centre, then return refreshed to a re-birth once again.

She sits on a nest of leaves and her hair is the silvery colour of the moon. The snakes are symbolic of wisdom and re-birth.

Figure 68. Mother God, c2005, Karen Poltera (Source: photograph by K. Buckenham. Published in *Women In God's Image*, 11+12, April and September 2005, front cover and p. 13).

Appendix IV – Poetry and Articles

1. Poems by Joan Kerchhoff (Source: Three Journeys, One Life: Poems and Dreams, Second Edition (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA Publications, 2009).

A Silent Farewell

Words, words,
a torrent of words, tears, cries,
exclamations, proclamations,
explanations
flood the small space left
within me,
threaten to drown
the silent farewell.

For what I remember
is silence –
the silence of the moment
he stood beside me,
ready to leave;
the silence of his leaving.

What I remember
is stillness –
the stillness of the aftermath
under the trees.
He lay
in light and shadow,
silent.

We hardly breathed,
my friends and I,
in unspoken sympathy
with that stillness.
I sensed its proportions
in my inmost being,
and I knew
its meaning.

And I could only
stand
in silence.

PACSA staff member Sikhumbuzo Ngwenya was assassinated in February 1992, immediately after leaving a gathering of PACSA members and overseas visitors. This poem was published in *Comrade Lost: A Life to Inspire Us*, edited by Karen Allsopp, 1992.

Re-Creation

A woman asleep

Suspended on this airy plane
her grief evaporates.
Where stripes of pain
have coursed
and brokenness has maimed,
creation's wholeness
heals and soothes her.

And she is not divided
as in her waking hours.
No alienating forces
tear her apart..
she dreams of the round moon's rise
on field's of home,
and sees herself –
beloved –
a new creation.

The Women Came

Crucifixion and Resurrection

First there was the agony
that covered all the skies,
and soured the seas,
and crushed the stones
to rubble.

And then there was the silence,
the dark, still silence
of fullness emptied out
of gutted human life.

And then the women came
and tended,
as women do.

And then they came
a second time,
and trembled
in the garden –
as though suns and moons
were bursting deep within them.

as though
they knew

they lived,
they really lived.

After his Death

My warm breath
clouds the glass.

I no longer sleep
in our cold bed
where memory
grows.

Time,
like stone,
encases
the unbearable.

Lamb

I find myself in a dim grey church. The only source of light comes from under a heavy wooden door set on one side. It is the door into my room, my space. I push it open and there I see, curled up in my armchair, a small white lamb – so real, so unexpected, that I am enthralled.

Little lamb
so intimately present,

do you design
the galaxies,

and weave
the ever-changing
tapestries
of being?

Tribute to Gabisile Nkosi

She was a magician at transforming
the awful into the beautiful

MARGARET VON KLEMPERER

FOLLOWING the tragic and brutal murder last week of Gabisile Nkosi, many tributes have been paid to the 34-year-old artist and printmaker who was also the programme manager and community co-ordinator at the Caversham Centre. Nkosi was shot in the head by a former boyfriend who broke into her Lidgetton home. After killing her, he shot himself. Nkosi leaves her 13-year-old son, Sandile.

Speaking at her funeral in Umlazi on Sunday, Malcolm Christian, founder and CEO of the Caversham Centre and a close friend of Nkosi, said: "We know that Gabi would want us to smile and transform the awful into the beautiful and that is what we must do. She was a magician in doing this through her creative spirit, her extraordinary ability to find lyrical ways to influence and affect people of all ages and walks of life. Her humanity transcended language, culture and gender and we are charged with the responsibility not only to celebrate a life of a wonderful woman artist and mother but to find tangible ways that her unique spirit, vision and inspiration may resonate beyond these tragic times.

"Last year I asked Gabi what her vision was and she answered very simply, 'Beyond'. We must learn from this profundity and move beyond this event."

Another close friend, Vulindlela Nyoni from the Centre for Visual Art on the local university campus, had this to say: "We were all devastated by the loss of Gabisile. Again we are reminded of the scourge that is male violence against women in this country. Gabi died at the hands of a man with a gun and it is we men who should be ashamed of the example this one man, among many others, has made true in our lives. Our society's obsession with patriarchal and phallic power is a dead-end road. It leads to violence and death, and it is usually the death of people who are pure in heart, like Gabisile.

"I knew her as a colleague, a counsellor, an artist and fellow printmaker whose lino-cutting skills not many can hold a candle to, a teacher and a friend. She was also a mother, a daughter and sister. Gabisile was a printmaker of the highest calibre and many of us are in admiration and awe at her ability in achieving the most lyrical, poetic and honest depictions of the things that mattered to her most."

In 1996, in her early 20s, Nkosi attended art lessons at the African Art Centre in Durban, a venue where she would later exhibit her work, most recently last year in an exhibition entitled *Ukwelapha* (healing). Centre director Anthea Martin writes: "I met her in 2001 at an outreach pro-



Artist and inspiration Gabisile Nkosi photographed the day before she was murdered.

“ THROUGH THE
SUPPORT OF MY
METAPHORICAL SISTERS,
I FOUND JOY AND
STRENGTH. INSTEAD OF
BREAKING UNDER THE
PAIN, I DECIDED TO
CONFRONT IT AS A
CHALLENGE FOR A
BRIGHTER FUTURE. ”

gramme called the Velobala Group that the African Art Centre runs. She taught the classes in 2001. She had exhibited twice at the African Art Centre and her last exhibition was entitled *Ukwelapha: Healing*, as she was passionately interested in how art could be used as therapy, especially for women who had been abused and damaged through domestic violence.

"In her own words: 'Through the support of my metaphorical sisters, I found joy and strength, instead of breaking under the pain. I decided to confront it as a challenge for a brighter future, for all children have the right to a happy mother no matter how much heavy baggage may weigh.' She wanted to use her talents to change lives; 'to heal, inform and educate, emancipating the innate potential and unique capacity of all human beings'."

Interviewed in 2006 in *The Witness* as the subject of a Life Story article, Nkosi spoke about working at the Caversham Centre, where the garden is an old graveyard. "Working here makes you realise that tomorrow you will be one of the graves — and it isn't a frightening thought. It makes you think about what you would like to leave as a legacy, about your contribution to the world while you are still alive."

III. *Motherhood*. Susan Britton, 2004 (Source: *Women In God's Image*, 11+12, April and September 2005, p. 3).

Motherhood

panting
sweating
relaxing
pushing

frustration
pain

creation is stuck
neither backwards now forwards
impossible to stay here

the seed in the womb
in the fruit
in the genes

we cannot be alone!
we need the other!
we need to be mother!
cries the wo-man
cries god

but how to bring to birth the unwilling
the unready?
where will the unborn find the courage to be?

the motion of the waters seduces
too comfortable, too generous
no effort, no struggle
leave me alone!

mother god struggles giving birth to the
universe
and then –
scattering stars in a great generous
gesture
striking lightning into the muddy soup
of
chaos

no turning back!

creation springs forth
breaking the bounds of inertia, unwillingness,
comfort, apathy, death

life is born!
in a bog an amoeba stirs
on a bed the shriveled barely-human
waits
for the strong hand of warm
encouragement
for the warm breast of strong
nourishment

mother creates an embryo process
motherhood nurses, nourishes, nurtures
and then lets go

and the amoeba slips away, to grow
and the grown child asserts independence

god alone once more
unneeded
loved by those who re-member their lonely
struggle for life
cherished by those who learn to give life in
their
turn

lonely, beloved mother, grandmother, god