

**Examining the tensions between queer desire, non-normative gendered identities and pseudo-traditional cultural practices in Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive* (2016) and Mohale Mashigo's *The Yearning* (2017)**

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Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive* (2016) and Mohale Mashigo's *The Yearning* (2017) explore the tensions between queer desire, non-normative gendered identities and pseudo-traditional cultural practices. Queer desire in *The Reactive* subverts binary oppositions to celebrate non-normative sexualities as a part of tradition. Luthando disrupts hetero-patriarchal masculinist traditionalism. Yet, Lindanathi's traditionalist performance of Xhosa male circumcision (ulwaluko) is also the site of "righting" sexuality in the novel. *The Yearning* similarly addresses the negative tenets of traditionalist masculinity but, through female initiation rituals into womanhood (lebollo) and the call to become a traditional healer or sangoma (ukuthwasa). Mashigo's novel presents silence as subversion to show how matriarchal structures exist and flourish within patriarchy co-existing in a relationship committed to continuity and community. These subversions suggest that the collective is embedded in the individual and offer a way to reframe "manhood" premised on notions of personhood as community.

Key words: queer desire; non-normative gendered identity; pseudo-tradition; sexuality

How does African patriarchy become synonymous with violence in South Africa? To what extent might traditional values be used to legitimate gender-based violence?<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe explains how in the postcolony the myth of African identity as homogenous, victimized and

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<sup>1</sup> Magadla and Chitando, "Self Become God".

culturally unique is mobilized in the pursuit of autonomy and sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the project of re-enchanting tradition has been deployed in South Africa to right past wrongs; as a vehicle for change in the discourse of an African Renaissance; and through the desire for economic regeneration, self-autonomy and the right to power.<sup>3</sup> However, as Kopano Ratele writes, attempts to return to this “fantasy of a precolonial, non-conflictual and homogenous Africa” in “a culturally heterogenous postcolonial Africa” is likely to “retraumatize many who identify with those very traditions.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Ifi Amadiume and Sylvia Tamale explain, rigid gender dichotomies are a Western European import and did not exist in pre-colonial indigenous African societies nor do they “resonate with any realities on the African ground.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, identity is “embodied, performed, relational and contingent” therefore, mining the past for anti-colonial identities to use in the present serves to exclude and mark (un)belonging.<sup>6</sup> Debates around gender relations in South Africa within the post-colonial moment, as Siphokazi Magadla and Ezra Chitando suggest, are divided between “preserving male hegemony versus liberal constitutional values” creating a binary where gender and sexual violence is prohibited publicly while, violence against women in the private sphere is prevalent.<sup>7</sup> The project of re-enchanting tradition in South Africa, therefore, requires our attention as tradition becomes conflated with traditionalism through pseudo-traditional or neo-colonial practices that perpetuate hetero-patriarchal (often violent) masculinities.<sup>8</sup> Masande Ntshanga’s *The Reactive* (2016) and Mohale Mashigo’s *The Yearning* (2017) enter into this debate through their exploration of the tensions

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<sup>2</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes”; Ratele, “Masculinities without Tradition”.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, “Emergence of black queer”; Mbembe, “African Modes”; Moletsane, “Culture, Nostalgia, and Sexuality”; Ouzgane and Morrell, *African Masculinities*.

<sup>4</sup> Ratele, “Masculinities without Tradition”, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Amadiume *Male Daughters*; Tamale, *Decolonization*, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ratele, “Masculinities without Tradition”, 145; Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30

<sup>7</sup> Magadla and Chitando, “Self Become God”, 190.

<sup>8</sup> Tamale, *Decolonization*; Ratele, “Masculinities without Tradition”.

between queer desire, non-normative gendered identities and pseudo-traditional cultural practices. Both novels evoke South African cultural practices and initiation rituals as a form of healing, and as a renewed sense of personhood and of belonging. Queer desire in *The Reactive* subverts binary oppositions to celebrate non-normative sexualities as a part of tradition. Luthando disrupts hetero-patriarchal masculinist traditionalism. Yet, Lindanathi's traditionalist performance of Xhosa male circumcision (ulwaluko) is also the site of "righting" sexuality in the novel. *The Yearning* similarly addresses the negative tenets of traditionalist masculinity but, through female initiation rituals into womanhood (lebollo) and the call to become a traditional healer or sangoma (ukuthwasa). Mashigo's novel presents silence as subversion to show how matriarchal structures exist and flourish within patriarchy co-existing in a relationship committed to continuity and community. These subversions suggest that the collective is embedded in the individual and offer a way to reframe "manhood" premised on notions of personhood as community.

### ***The Reactive***

*The Reactive* tells the story of Lindanathi and his gay younger brother Luthando (LT) who make a pact to be circumcised through ulwaluko, the traditional Xhosa male circumcision ritual. Traditional circumcision or ulwaluko is widely practiced in the Eastern Cape among the Xhosa. Circumcision initiates are separated from the community for a process of weeks after which they return and are reintegrated as "men" or "indoda."<sup>9</sup> In *The Reactive*, Lindanathi abandons his promise to be circumcised and Luthando dies during the initiation ceremony. Six years later, Lindanathi self-infects with the HIV/AIDS virus — to punish himself for deserting Luthando.

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<sup>9</sup> Mfecane, "Ndiyindoda"; Moletsane, "Culture, Nostalgia, and Sexuality"; Ndangam, "Lifting the Cloak".

Lindanathi's self-infection happens in Cape Town where he meets Cecelia (Cissie) and Ruan. The trio spend most of their time taking homemade drugs. They also sell Lindanathi's anti-retroviral treatment (ARVs) for money. Following pressure from his uncle (Bhut' Vuyo), Lindanathi returns to Du Noon to complete ulwaluko to honor his pact to become a "man". He leaves Cissie and Ruan behind in Cape Town. Ronit Frenkel reads ulwaluko as a transformative psychological form of healing in the novel.<sup>10</sup> The ritual triggers Lindanathi's decision to abandon his drugged-fueled lifestyle in Cape Town and to settle in Du Noon with the community and his girlfriend, Esona. For Frenkel, ulwaluko allows Lindanathi to "synthesize his past and present temporalities in order to decide on a future temporality"; this offers him a form of "restoration and redemption in a post-apartheid context."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Frenkel suggests, ulwaluko gives Lindanathi a new start by fusing his past with his present. At the end of the novel, Lindanathi claims to be "ready to react for us" as if to accept his part in his brother's death and to prepare for a positive future.<sup>12</sup> Lara Buxbaum reads Lindanathi's transformation in terms of "somatic risks": the brothers embrace an "ethics of risk as a mode of becoming."<sup>13</sup> Lindanathi, as Buxbaum argues, self-infects to force the experience of vulnerability upon himself, to give himself something that his body "couldn't flee from."<sup>14</sup> "Somatic risks", therefore, draw the boys closer together and transform their sense of self.<sup>15</sup> These two critical accounts of *The Reactive* focus on embodied temporality and entangled subjectivity as if the collective is embedded in the individual; however, neither critic engages with how the tensions between culturally accepted

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<sup>10</sup> Frenkel, "Post-liberation Temporalities".

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Buxbaum, "Risking intimacy", 533.

<sup>14</sup> Buxbaum, "Risking intimacy"; Ntshanga, *Yearning*, 141.

<sup>15</sup> Buxbaum, "Risking intimacy", 533.

norms of heterosexual manhood and queer desire delimit personhood for some men.<sup>16</sup> In a context where uncircumcised males are not seen as “fully human and cannot be regarded as capable of moral behaviour and moral responsibility”, at what expense does Lindanathi regain his personhood?<sup>17</sup> If Lindanathi achieves the status of “indoda”; does this make Luthando the text’s “failed man?”<sup>18</sup>

Lindanathi and Luthando spend much of their youth in a village setting. However, as a young gay boy, Luthando does not fit in. Even Lindanathi is afraid of Luthando’s sexuality:

I also knew that, really, I was scared of being close to LT. The rumors about him had spread and he’d been set apart. I didn’t want people to mix us up, to look at me the same way they did him. When the Mda house came under pressure to make a man out of its sissy son, I kept away — I crossed my arms in Cape Town.<sup>19</sup>

As Lindanathi explains, the community reject Luthando’s sexuality and pressure him to undertake ulwaluko with the hope that it will turn him into a “man”. The assumption, in this instance, is that homosexuality is “un-African”: a Western invention used as a way to control, criminalize or pathologize seemingly non-normative sex/gender performances as problematic.<sup>20</sup> So, Luthando goes to the mountains “even though he didn’t believe in what they said — what you had to do to become to be a man”.<sup>21</sup> The community’s version of ulwaluko draws on notions

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<sup>16</sup> Mfecane, “Ndiyindoda”.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent, “Boys will be boys”, 443–40.

<sup>18</sup> Dlamini, “Transformation of Masculinity”, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Epprecht, *Hungochani*; Stobie, “He uses my body”; Butler, *Undoing Gender*; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

<sup>21</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 3.

of masculinity and femininity that, following Nonhlanhla Dlamini's arguments, are "based on defining the self in contrast to the 'Other'" through "'appropriately' sexualized male and female bodies that fit into the patriarchal system and its hierarchy of gender."<sup>22</sup> This discourse perpetuates a problematic image of ulwaluko. For example, as Amadiume explains, gender roles in African "were not rigidly masculinized or feminized"; "manhood" in the context of male circumcision, therefore, should not rely on hetero-patriarchal male symbols of power.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as Ratele writes, in an African context "non-conforming desires may not always be referred to as lesbian or gay."<sup>24</sup> As such, Luthando's death is shrouded in controversy; the community, for example, claim that Luthando "fought them and that's what killed him" and at Luthando's funeral, even Lindanathi admits that the village elders were guilty of malpractice but, does little further to challenge the elders' authority.<sup>25</sup> This reaction speaks to "certain codes of silence about (failed) circumcision."<sup>26</sup> Read as complicity, Lindanathi's silence about Luthando's death seems to perpetuate "culturally sanctioned secrecy" to reveal the "pervasiveness of hegemonic power and the consensus created between dominant power and the oppressed".<sup>27</sup> The expectations placed on Luthando (and Lindanathi) further illustrate how, as Judith Butler explains, "the body has a public dimension" and that "the bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dlamini, "Transformation of Masculinity", 41–9.

<sup>23</sup> Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, 185.

<sup>24</sup> Ratele, "Masculinities without Tradition", 143.

<sup>25</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Dlamini, "Transformation of Masculinity", 58.

<sup>27</sup> Ndangam, "Lifting the Cloak", 221; Dlamini, "Transformation of Masculinity", 54.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 21.

Lindanathi's closing statement, in the novel, reinforces hierarchised gender relations. After completing his circumcision, Lindanathi apologizes for his feminized name as if to reiterate how he has crossed over from boy to man:

My promise, what I told them then, is the same thing I'll tell you now. My name, which my parents got from a girl, is Lindanathi. It means wait with us, and that's what I plan on doing. So in the end, I guess this is to you, Luthando. This is your older brother, Lindanathi, and I'm ready to react for us.<sup>29</sup>

While "ready to react" symbolizes both Lindanathi's apology and brotherly love, the conditions under which Lindanathi speaks for his brother are troubling.<sup>30</sup> Speaking for his brother, Lindanathi seems to absorb Luthando into his own discourse of "manhood" — as if to erase Luthando or to (re)construct an "other against whom (or against which) [his manhood] is made."<sup>31</sup> This erasure can be read as a form of violence, one that reinforces gay men as "the inhuman, the beyond human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in comparison to Lindanathi and drawing on Dlamini's reading of Thando Mgqolozana's *A Man Who Is Not A Man* (2009), Luthando can be read as the text's "failed man."<sup>33</sup>

The limitations of this argument, however, is that pseudo-traditional (or traditionalist) Xhosa ideals of "manhood" in *The Reactive* are simultaneously disrupted by Luthando's queer identity. His decision to be circumcised — despite his disbelief — can be read as an act of self-assertion

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<sup>29</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 161; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>30</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Dlamini, "Metamorphosis of Xhosa", 45.



with the understanding that doing one's gender, as Butler explains, means to both reproduce and contest that reality; since, as Ratele explains, traditions revolve around "the regulation of sexual desire and the practices and relations which desire elicits": "sexual desire is inherent in accounts of tradition, and accounts of tradition are productive of desire."<sup>34</sup> As a queer Xhosa, Luthando represents "queer Africans [who] disturb the 'traditionalist' sexual and gender order because they are both part of normative, traditionally acceptable families, part of 'traditional communities', as well as having part of their lives disavowed"; Queer Africans represent the possibility "that 'we' can be 'us' and 'them' at once" making "space for women, lesbians, gays and other 'Others' of hetero-patriarchy in the 'Huvo' (form of community elders)."<sup>35</sup> He signifies the limit of the norm and its transformative possibilities: both as a "form of suffering and a potential site for politicization."<sup>36</sup> Intervening in the dominant framework through which manhood is articulated in the text, Luthando's death speaks to the deaths of many Xhosa boys who become victims of malpractice and cultural silence as well as those compelled to hide their sexuality.<sup>37</sup> These tensions haunt the novel's efforts to celebrate ulwaluko. As the "dissident voice, that of the 'failed' man", Luthando represents an urgent need for "alternatives or new ways of being and forging Xhosa masculinity that go against the prescribed script of becoming a man" towards an understanding that masculinity is "at once embodied, performative, relational and contingent."<sup>38</sup>

Ntshanga's portrayal of women, in the context of ulwaluko, is also not without tensions.

Lindanathi has a close relationship with his aunt, Sis' Nosizi. The two of them share a tearful

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<sup>34</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30; Ratele, "Masculinities without Tradition", 141.

<sup>35</sup> Ratele, "Masculinities without Tradition", 145, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*; Hlongwane and Mtshali, "Mentoring, masculinity"; Moletsane, "Culture, Nostalgia, Sexuality"; Jacobs, "Young South Africans".

<sup>38</sup> Dlamini, "Transformation of Masculinity", 45; Ratele, "Masculinities without Tradition", 145.

reunion in Du Noon before Lindanathi's circumcision: "when Sis' Nosizi returns, she looks at me for a long time. Then she embraces me and tears find their way down both our necks."<sup>39</sup> Their exchange — the silent look — may be read as an unconscious performance, a "bodily act" that signifies meaning beyond language or speech; theirs is an exercise in agency.<sup>40</sup> As Obioma Nnaemeka explains in her analysis of key feminist concerns, "one exercises agency when one chooses not to speak; the refusal to speak is also an act of resistance that signals an unwillingness to participate."<sup>41</sup> Sis' Nosizi's silence may signify an unwillingness to participate in pseudo-traditional performances of ulwaluko; or, perhaps, following Luthando's death, both Lindanathi and Sis' Nosizi hide their fears about ulwaluko. Earlier on in the novel, for example, Lindanathi admits that he is afraid of circumcision having heard many stories of malpractice, of the damage caused "by cultural practices that have become corrupted."<sup>42</sup> These are certainly his sentiments at Luthando's funeral Lindanathi's fears are characteristic of many Xhosa boys who, as Sakhumzi Mfecane explains, may be "forced to undergo ulwaluko against their will because of fear of violence and social ostracism that may follow if they undertake medical male circumcision or remain uncircumcised."<sup>43</sup> Looking "for a long time", Sis' Nosizi's stare also captures Peter Hitchcock's distinction between "the gaze (dominance) and the look (solidarity)": she locks eyes with Lindanathi as "a form of cultural resistance" and not of dominance.<sup>44</sup> Her loving stare is as an inversion and symbolizes a confrontation with pseudo-traditionalism as it opposes and confronts the hegemonic masculinist discourse embodied in Lindanathi's decision to be

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<sup>39</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>41</sup> Nnaemeka, *(M)Othering*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Jacobs, "Young South Africans", 2.

<sup>43</sup> Mfecane, "Ndiyindoda", 212.

<sup>44</sup> Hitchcock, "The Eye and the Other", 71.

traditionally circumcised — a discourse that endures despite the conflicting narratives around Luthando’s sexuality, his circumcision and his death.<sup>45</sup> The reader gets a glimpse of another strong woman, Esona, later in the novel who, like Sis Nosizi, locks eyes with Lindanathi. The couple meet at a music festival and as both lock eyes for the first time, “each of [them] refuses to step down, to be the one who moves away, and so we stay like that for a while, feeling as close as forehead to forehead.”<sup>46</sup> Like Sis’ Nosizi, Esona responds to Lindanathi “in the sense of the ‘looking back’ [as if in the form of a] challenge, response and counterdiscourse.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Lindanathi’s circumcision changes their relationship delimiting Esona’s agency and power. Instead, she becomes the object of his gaze inviting Lindanathi to “fuck [her] like a new man” and, as such, ulwaluko problematically becomes the site of “righting” sexuality in the novel.<sup>48</sup> Hers, therefore, is not necessarily an invitation but an obligation as “the right of access to sex [becomes] a primary marker of manhood” in the text suggesting that women must make their bodies available to men in service of their “manhood.”<sup>49</sup> Lindanathi, for example, casts his eyes down on Esona’s “flesh”, “the sticky underside of her breasts”; while Esona, no longer able to meet his gaze, as she previously did, is diminished — allowed only to look *up* at “the inflated flesh around the tip of [Lindanathi’s] penis.”<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that Esona has no autonomy. Esona’s and Lindanathi’s sexual exchange seems raw and honest; Lindanathi does not hurt her, and they are in love. Still, the image of Esona administering oral sex “on her knees on the kitchen floor” feeds into patriarchal objectifications of women, and sex becomes about

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Nnaemeka, *(M)Othering*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Vincent, ““Boys will be boys””, 441–44.

<sup>50</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 160–1 (my italics).

Lindanathi's pleasure and not Esona's as she holds his "inflated flesh" in her hands; later, while he orgasms, she allows him to "empty" himself on her chest.<sup>51</sup> This ejaculation resembles the release of Lindanathi's "boyhood" and worryingly, positions Esona (and women more generally) as the "submissive sexual [object] of the [man] of the tribe" evoking pejorative stereotypes about black men and sexual violence.<sup>52</sup>

Lindanathi's night with the two Czechoslovakian prostitutes (Ivan and Lenka) raises similar concerns. He spends most of the night watching the two of them have sex. Likewise, he ejaculates on Lenka's forehead after she performs oral sex on him. Lindanathi's ejaculations illustrate Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Linda Williams' *Hard Core* (1990): in the context of pornography, "the ejaculation shot is an externalisation of (the presumption) of her pleasure and not his."<sup>53</sup> Here, the reader is encouraged to believe that Lenka (and Esona) experiences more pleasure than Lindanathi. Or perhaps, that Lindanathi is giving these women great pleasure because he is a "man". Lindanathi's body fluids are, therefore, reduced to "the by-products of pleasure" in an attempt to distance himself from "the kind of corporeality — uncontrollable, excessive, expansive, disruptive, irrational — [that men] have attributed to women."<sup>54</sup> During sex, Lindanathi says that Lenka felt "like a delicate wound around the head of [his] penis, and as [he] felt her flesh widening, [he] pounded deeper into her, imagining [that he] could burrow [the two of them] through to something vast and embracing."<sup>55</sup> Here, he imagines that Lenka is a metaphorical wound around his penis. This image foreshadows ulwaluko as the ultimate expression of "manhood", then coupled with Lindanathi's assumed sexual prowess, their sexual

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ratele, "Masculinities without Tradition", 138–9.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, cited in Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 199.

<sup>54</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 200.

<sup>55</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 124.

exchange represents his ability to “master (or appear to master) approved aspects of masculinity.”<sup>56</sup> Like Esona, Lenka is not granted “an autonomous and active form of corporeal specificity”; rather, Ntshanga’s female characters double as figurative vessels for Lindanathi’s “becoming man” or, quite possibly, the re-authenticated African nation and its citizen-subject.<sup>57</sup>

The text’s patriarch, Bhut’ Vuyo, plays a crucial role in Lindanathi’s transition to “manhood”. Andrew van der Vlies argues that Bhut’ Vuyo is the “voice of moral authority and mediated tradition in the text”; indeed, he calls Lindanathi home to complete ulwaluko where he is reunited with his Xhosa cultural heritage.<sup>58</sup> However, Bhut’ Vuyo’s apparent desire to be the patriarchal provider — through his homemade toilet — subjugates the image and the role of black women in the text.<sup>59</sup> Sick of sharing the communal portaloos, Bhut’ Vuyo builds a private zinc toilet for his family to improve a space that, as Rita Barnard explains, was designed as a “mechanism of social control” during apartheid but, post-apartheid became a place illustrative of the “transformative and creative capacities of human beings.”<sup>60</sup> The toilet seems to perpetuate the notion that men have a natural instinct or innate desire to provide for their wives and family members: Bhut’ Vuyo insists that a toilet is a “place a man’s wife must relieve herself” and so, he endeavors to build one.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, Lindanathi recognizes Bhut’ Vuyo’s assertion when he says that his uncle’s toilet is “more of a gesture than a necessity.”<sup>62</sup> However, when Bhut’ Vuyo’s toilet fails, the neighbors call the loo a “wreck” and describe Bhut’ Vuyo as a “fool”; his wife and children also reject his homemade loo choosing, instead, to continue to use the

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<sup>56</sup> Epprecht, “Gender and Sexuality”, 129.

<sup>57</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 14.

<sup>58</sup> van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 161.

<sup>59</sup> hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*.

<sup>60</sup> Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 148–9; hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*.

<sup>62</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 148–9.

communal portals.<sup>63</sup> That Bhut Vuyo appears to have failed as a man, perpetuates narratives of emasculation “based on the assumption that men find their identity through work and are personally fulfilled by acting as breadwinners.”<sup>64</sup> Emasculation, in this context, is problematic as it recalls the impact of racism on black men evoking, as bell hooks argues, “the image of the black male as effete, emasculated, crippled.”<sup>65</sup> The reduction of a man to “an effeminate state”, as hooks argues, assumes “that the worst that can happen to a man is that he be made to assume the social status of a woman.”<sup>66</sup> His family’s refusal to use his toilet also risks endorsing the idea that women are “the castrators of men”, possibly reinforced by Lindanathi’s feelings of “pride” towards his uncle.<sup>67</sup> Bhut’ Vuyo’s higher status seems based “solely on being a male” and it overlooks Sis’ Nosizi’s role as matriarch, sangoma and provider — a neglected discourse in the text that misreads her (and other women’s) perseverance for symbolic castration and glosses over the role of matriarchal units within patriarchal structures.<sup>68</sup> That Lindanathi keeps his circumcision promise to Bhut Vuyo elevates ulwaluko as a strategy of agency offering Bhut’ Vuyo a way to regain his patriarchal status.

Ruan, Lindanathi’s friend, provides another example of vulnerable masculinity and an interrogation into the meaning of “manhood” in contemporary South Africa. Although Ruan is not a Xhosa nor black, he disrupts hegemonic masculinities through his queer identity. Queer, as Stephanie Selvick explains, includes the refusal or resistance of “restrictive gender and sexual binaries” available and can be understood in terms of acts of defiance.<sup>69</sup> Ruan is a young South

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 76, 93.

<sup>65</sup> hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 88.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>67</sup> hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 103; Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 148; Nnaemeka, *(M)Othering*.

<sup>68</sup> hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 88–9.

<sup>69</sup> Selvick, “Beyond the binary”, 279.

African who, like Lindanathi, struggles to hold down a job and to find purpose in his life. Dependent on the charity of his uncle, Ruan seeks change and so imagines a figurative transformation of self through blood. Blood becomes symbolic, in this context, because of its parallel with Lindanathi's and Luthando's circumcision ritual: blood seems to punctuate the characters' transitions to new states of personhood. Ruan expresses his desire for change and his queer identity at his flat when he shows Lindanathi and Cissie that his fig plants are "splattered with his own blood."<sup>70</sup> Ruan says that he aims to "spread himself to the world through the different birds that ate" these plants.<sup>71</sup> However, unlike Lindanathi, Ruan's blood flows along a more hybrid path. Ruan fuses plant, human and bird to create an "other". Coupled with his wandering nature, Ruan's human-plant-animal hybrid confirms his place as an outsider. Drawing on the work of Butler, his performance looks beyond "the matrix of the 'masculine' or 'feminine'" to insist on alternative "permutations of gender" and avoid "the conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female."<sup>72</sup> He resists categorization and communicates a desire to transform the restrictive discourse on gender and sexuality — much like Luthando. His desire to "implant" a fig tree contrasts with how Lindanathi's "manhood" is marked by sex with women. Ruan's sense of self, therefore, implies an awareness of multiple belongings that contradict regulatory traditionalist (or pseudo-traditional) practices of ulwaluko. Still, his ambiguity strengthens Lindanathi's heteronormativity. Despite Ruan's fluidity, he seems lost — left to ramble futilely through Cape Town. Comparatively, Lindanathi finds a stable identity by returning "home" based on the "rehabilitation" of ideological categories of "origins and membership" that grant him claims of autochthony and belonging grounded in the

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<sup>70</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 139.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.

“exclusion of ‘strangers’.”<sup>73</sup> Ruan’s character, like Luthando, emphasizes how “the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.”<sup>74</sup> Even though Lindanathi may claim, at the end of the novel, to remember his promise to his brother and to “live through it each day”, Luthando can only live on through Lindanathi’s memories; Lindanathi’s performance of ulwaluko seems to suggest that traditionalism allows for fluidity of identities and of genders as long as they do not stand in opposition to hetero-patriarchy.<sup>75</sup>

### **The Yearning**

*The Yearning* tells the story of Marubini, a young woman who yields to the call to begin ukuthwasa. Ukuthwasa refers to the calling that an individual receives to become “an initiate or novice ‘unkhwetha’” and to train to become a traditional healer.<sup>76</sup> Traditional healers are commonly called sangomas derived from the Zulu isangoma or inyanga. People do not usually choose to become sangomas; rather, certain individuals are selected or called by ancestral spirits “who visit the chosen one with symptoms such as dreams, visions and hallucinations.”<sup>77</sup> The calling is usually a challenging experience: “in the form of ‘inkathazo’ or troubles” that “plague the life of the person with the calling until they acknowledge it.”<sup>78</sup> Marubini is a young black middle-class professional who is independent and focused on her career. She works at De Villiers wine farm and lives in an apartment in Cape Town. Marubini’s process of ukuthwasa

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<sup>73</sup> Mbembe, “African Modes”, 26; Geschiere, “Belonging”, 28.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Ntshanga, *Reactive*, 161.

<sup>76</sup> Xaso, “Meaning of Ukuthwasa”, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Stobie, “‘He Uses My Body’”, 150.

<sup>78</sup> Nkabinde and Morgan, “This has happened”; Stobie, “‘He Uses My Body’”; Xaso, “The Meaning of Ukuthwasa”, 2.



begins in adulthood with hallucinations and fits that cause her to pass out unexpectedly. The voices of young children, presumably her ancestors, torment her until she acknowledges her calling. Marubini journeys through her traumatic past to find healing: she was abducted and raped as a child by the school caretaker, Banzi. Her father, Jabu, is also a sangoma and after she is raped, he tries to heal her through a traditional ritual. When the ritual fails, Jabu fakes his death and travels to Cameroon to bury Marubini's painful past. Marubini later learns, with the help of her family and friends, that her father is still alive. Father and daughter reunite after Marubini confronts the trauma of her past; Marubini evolves from the women who — at the start of the novel — could only speak “as only half” of herself; she becomes a sangoma and gives birth to her daughter, Chari.<sup>79</sup> Like *The Reactive*, *The Yearning* confronts the negative tenets of masculinity and femininity lodged in traditionalist performances of African cultural practices and initiation rituals; Marubini, similar to Lindanathi, is healed through lebollo (an initiation into womanhood) and ukuthwasa. However, unlike *The Reactive*, Marubini's gender performance unsettles hegemonic masculinity to celebrate matriarchy.<sup>80</sup> *The Yearning* foregrounds the importance of African tradition and initiation rituals but, “failed” men — like Jabu — are not rejected; rather, they are enfolded into the collective. Additionally, Mashigo's portrayal of lebollo and ukuthwasa celebrates female agency offering strong women who work alongside men to bring about change in a violent landscape. From this perspective, the text recasts central feminist issues — “victimhood, motherhood, subjectivity, speech, silence, agency, power, gaze, knowledge and nation” — out of binaries urging the reader to rethink marginality by listening to peripheral discourses that manifest in the silences and patterns of articulation of the

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<sup>79</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Stobie, ““He Uses My Body””.

marginalized.<sup>81</sup>

Marubini's calling and her transition to womanhood is facilitated by strong women: Nkgono (her grandmother), the "old lady" who rescues Marubini from Banzi, Makosha (Marubini's mother), and Gogo Thoko (her grandmother). Marubini's rite of passage into "womanhood" — "lebollo" — is facilitated by her grandmother, Nkgono.<sup>82</sup> During lebollo, Nkgono's initiates are secluded from the community and their bodies are painted with "white ochre to symbolize contact with ancestral spirits."<sup>83</sup> Here, Nkgono acknowledges how patriarchal norms constrain female autonomy in the village. For example, she says that lebollo is "highly contested" in the village because "people don't see the use for something that makes women stronger" and goes on to say how each initiate

will have been told by misinformed people that this is where [women] will learn to be good wives and how to pleasure [their] husbands. [...] We let people believe this error because otherwise we would not be allowed to teach you what we do. So now you can never tell anyone what you learn here...ever.<sup>84</sup>

Nkgono emphasises the power of silence within patriarchal structures – silence is a choice, not an imposition, as Nnaemeka explains.<sup>85</sup> Nkgono, therefore, articulates agency, power and knowledge within patriarchal structures by choosing "not to speak; the refusal to speak is also an act of resistance that signals the unwillingness to participate."<sup>86</sup> The shadow of patriarchy may

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<sup>81</sup> Nnaemeka, (*M*)*Othering*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>83</sup> Padmanabhanunni et al, "Menstruation", 705.

<sup>84</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 182.

<sup>85</sup> Nnaemeka, (*M*)*Othering*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

rest on Nkgono's initiates; they form a "long snake made up of ochre, bare-breasted, bald-headed female bodies" evoking the image of Jabu the "Water Snake"; however, their refusal to divulge the secrets of lebollo to the uninitiated is not an acceptance of male dominance.<sup>87</sup> Rather, Nkgono and her initiates resist binary oppositions and rigid gender roles to illustrate that "agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways."<sup>88</sup> Nkgono, for example, emphasizes how the initiates will arrive home as "their own wives", an "elite group of women" who "belong to themselves."<sup>89</sup>

"Mother's talk" punctuates other key moments of change, in the text, foregrounding female authorship to promote a discourse of survivorship.<sup>90</sup> Those who listen to "the power, and knowledge-in-wisdom of mother's talk", in *The Yearning*, become survivors who transcend patriarchal violence as they listen, remember and learn from "mother's talk" and "foremother's storytelling."<sup>91</sup> Nkgono is the first important storyteller in the text. Her tale starts with Marubini's name which means "abantu."<sup>92</sup> "Abantu" speaks to collective personhood and to Marubini's ancestors — a discourse of person-in-community that continues through the birth of Marubini's daughter Chari.<sup>93</sup> Through storytelling or "mother talk", Nkgono tells of her ancestors: "one of the biggest movements of a single group of people in Africa", "the movement of Batho or Bantu."<sup>94</sup> She disrupts colonial assumptions about rigid gender roles in black African

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<sup>87</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 183, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–3.

<sup>90</sup> Nnaemeka, (*M*)*Othering*, 13.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 179.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

societies lamenting “the loss of [black African] identity and history” and subverting notions of difference: “those white men came” and “they told us that we were different from each other and that all the practices that kept us connected were barbaric.”<sup>95</sup> The narrative around Marubini’s name also symbolizes this counter-discourse emphasizing the role of female leadership in pre-colonial African societies. Nkgono, for example, takes pains to emphasize how Marubini looked like “a queen from an ancient civilisation, so regal and certain” and how her name means “where our past lies, the place of old from where we once came.”<sup>96</sup> Mashigo’s female figures choose not to identify themselves with masculinized neo-colonial symbols of power but, find agency through community.<sup>97</sup> This insistence on the power of the collective rests in the co-operation of matriarchal and patriarchal structures — a co-dependency that is also central to Jabu’s personhood. To release Marubini from the trauma of her past, Jabu must return to the place of his ancestors:

I must go back to the place where we abantu were once kings, queens and wise scholars of the stars and moons. That’s where I have to bury your darkness if we’re ever going to be together. I’m going to walk to the source of abantu and let our beginnings take this burden from me. That is where the strongest ancestors are. Only they can take this burden from me.

[...]

I had to. I was carrying that black blood of yours with me everywhere I went. I was too afraid to leave here. It was weighing all of us down. I carried it in a bag with me day after day, under my shirt. I was the guardian of your pain, Marubini.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 179; Amadiume, *Male Daughters*.

<sup>96</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 179.

<sup>97</sup> Amadiume, *Male Daughters*.

<sup>98</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 148, 177.

Jabu's community-centered journey — cognizant of the visible and invisible worlds — reinforces the wisdom of Nkgono's "mother's talk" reiterating female power.<sup>99</sup> A co-operative and willing male figure is also found in Simphiwe, Marubini's brother, whose dreams guide Marubini to her father. Simphiwe becomes the vessel for Marubini's personhood inverting, in some ways, the Mother Africa trope that traditionally "exploits the male-female power relations of domination and subordination."<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, Simphiwe is not subordinate to Marubini. The siblings work together to reunite the greater collective.

Mashigo's female alliances delink motherhood from victimhood making visible "matricentric unity, the basic structure of African matriarchy [...] common to all African social structures."<sup>101</sup> The sacredness of maternity (or motherhood), as Amadiume explains, exists in the traditions of all African societies and can be found in "even the most patriarchal African societies today."<sup>102</sup> In *The Yearning*, this matriarchal unit extends beyond blood ties to include the nameless "old lady" who rescues Marubini from Banzi, her childhood rapist.<sup>103</sup> The "old lady" is herself a victim of patriarchal violence: the reader learns that after witnessing her husband sexually assault their baby, her in-laws ostracize her as "a liar, a witch."<sup>104</sup> While her in-law's reactions illustrate "interlocking forms of oppression" faced by many black African women, the "old lady" becomes a survivor.<sup>105</sup> Recognizing her husband's "darkness" in Banzi, the school caretaker, she commits

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>100</sup> Stratton, *Contemporary African*, 53.

<sup>101</sup> Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>103</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 146.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature*, 7, 15; Mashigo, *Yearning*, 146.

her life to protecting the local school children.<sup>106</sup> She sells food outside the school gates every day to keep a watchful eye on Banzi. Her desire to protect generates certain moral values that constitute “the basis of affective relationships so badly needed as an alternative to the present political [and social] culture of violence” in South Africa.<sup>107</sup> After the “old lady” rescues Marubini from Banzi (stealing into his room to set her free), she, later, takes pleasure in watching Makosha burn down Banzi’s house with him in it.”<sup>108</sup>

Marubini’s claim, at the beginning of the novel, that motherhood is a woman’s purpose — “a new mother knows her purpose when she holds a baby within her” — comes full circle with the birth of Chari.<sup>109</sup> Born out of wedlock to a mother who seems reluctant to marry her boyfriend, Pierre, Chari’s birth goes further to unyoke binary tendencies within patriarchal structures revealing the complexity of womanhood.<sup>110</sup> Mashigo’s portrayal of motherhood in the text is based “not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but motherhood as an experience (“mothering”) with its pains and rewards.”<sup>111</sup> Mashigo rejects prescriptive gender norms to embrace “motherhood as mothering”; in the final scene of the novel, for example, Pierre looks after Chari while Marubini takes the afternoon off to share a few alcoholic drinks with her friends.<sup>112</sup> Motherhood, for Marubini, is about choice and what she learned from childhood: when Jabu left, Makosha become the breadwinner leaving Ntatemoholo (her grandfather) to care for Marubini; in later life, “mothering” continues through Gogo Thoko who facilitates an indigenous healing ritual that allows Marubini to travel to the past to understand the truth about

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<sup>106</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 146.

<sup>107</sup> Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 146.

<sup>109</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Nnaemeka. (*M*)*Othering*.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

her father's disappearance.<sup>113</sup> This family dynamic celebrates matriarchal and patriarchal units working together for community well-being. Ntatemoholo becomes Marubini's confidante and friend. The two spend most of their time together; he nurtures and comforts her like a stereotypical mother figure. Marubini's worries post-rape reveal the depth of her bond with Ntatemoholo. As she escapes from Banzi, she thinks to herself: "Ntatemoholo is waiting for me. He will think I don't love him anymore. The streets are empty and there's nobody home in the houses. What if they all moved away and left me because I let Banzi take me?"<sup>114</sup> Marubini's thoughts reflect the deep connection she feels for her family and her community suggestive, perhaps, of the notion of ubuntu: "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" or "I am a person through others", understood, in part, "as a commitment to our shared humanity".<sup>115</sup> Though it may be difficult to define ubuntu as Leonhard Praeg explains, Mashigo's emphasis on female authorship employs community or shared humanity — ubuntu — in such a way as to reconfigure "masculinities and femininities disrupted by the violence of colonialism"; in short, drawing on the work of Magadla and Chitando, *The Yearning* reimagines "what it means to be a man and a woman in the postcolonial moment and how we should 'do' the relations between men and women."<sup>116</sup> Judging by the novel's outcome, Mashigo emphasizes "the emancipatory possibilities of Ubuntu" by withdrawing notions of the collective from hegemonic (often violent) masculinized frameworks into feminist lenses where matriarchy and patriarchy are co-

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>114</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 144.

<sup>115</sup> Praeg, *Report on Ubuntu*, xiii. Ubuntu, as Leonhard Praeg explains, has been "reappropriated and reinvented by Africans as both a sign of authenticity and the building block for emancipation" conceived, in part, through processes of nationalism and of re-enchanting tradition in post-apartheid South Africa. Leonhard Praeg explains, ubuntu can be framed in terms of a "critical humanism" where "the 'human' is the secondary concept" and "a more fundamental or primary concern is with the relations of power that systematically exclude certain people from being included in the first instance." (Ibid., 12, 63).

<sup>116</sup> Magadla and Chitando, "Self Become God", 177.

operative.<sup>117</sup> This discourse of ubuntu is embodied in novels end: that Chari is “the name of a river in Cameroon where [Marubini] met [her] teacher” connects each character to the past, present and future reiterating Mashigo’s opening comments that “The Yearning never stops till we embrace everything that brought us here. In our quiet denial, The Yearning devours us.”<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

These two texts raise epistemological questions — of how we construct knowledge about indigenous cultural practice and rituals in contemporary South Africa — paying specific attention to how normative gendered and sexual politics delimit individual performances of tradition; and, in this context, these two novels are also important because they problematise ontological hierarchies of (un)belonging.<sup>119</sup> Certainly Luthando, in *The Reactive*, symbolises the wider need to talk about new ways of shaping Xhosa masculinity and of doing “manhood” through ulwaluko. *The Yearning* seems to suggest that “respect for women [and queer performances] must be intertwined with respect for community and nation, as opposed to being seen as a stand-alone issue.”<sup>120</sup> Mashigo emphasizes the value of matriarchal structures within patriarchy. Therefore, without ignoring the culture of violence against women, girls and queer people in South Africa, it might be possible to rethink “manhood”, as Magadla and Chitando suggest, through “an ethic of care that culturally defines manhood as a function of personhood —

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Mashigo, *Yearning*, 185, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Nnaemeka, (*M*)*Othering*; Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*.

<sup>120</sup> Magadla and Chitando, “The Self Become God”, 184.



that is, premised on the community, as opposed to self.”<sup>121</sup> This proposal or argument comes across more forcefully in *The Yearning* as it insists on community first and on self as second. That said, both novels encourage the reader to consider how the transformation of violent masculinities may indeed lie in a community ethic or collective ontology that is performative and embodied.<sup>122</sup>

### **Disclosure statement.**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>122</sup> Magadla and Chitando, “The Self Become God”, 185; Ratele, “Masculinities without Tradition”; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

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