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Ancestors, Embodiment and Sexual Desire:

Wild Religion and the Body in the Story of a South African Lesbian Sangoma

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Abstract
This article explores the intersections of religion, embodiment and queer sexuality in the autobiographic account of a South African self-identifying 'lesbian sangoma', on the basis of the book *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. The article offers an intertextual reading of this primary text, first vis-à-vis David Chidester's *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, and second, vis-à-vis some black lesbian feminist writings, specifically by Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Gloria Wekker. This intertextual reading foregrounds the embodied and in fact queer nature of the wild forces of indigenous religion in contemporary South Africa, and it illuminates how embodied and erotic experience is grounded in the domain of the sacred. Hence the article concludes by arguing for a decolonising and post-secular move in the field of African queer studies, underlining the need to take the sacred seriously as a site of queer subjectivity.

Key-words
Indigenous religion, sangoma, South Africa, embodiment, sexuality, queer studies

This article intersects three major analytical themes: religion, sexuality and the body. Existing scholarship on these themes tends to be 'unashamedly … Western in its starting-point', as Sarah Coakley confesses in her introduction to the landmark volume *Religion and the Body* that she edited, which is further illustrated by the subtitle 'Rethinking the Western Body' of Gerard Loughlin's collection *Queer Theology*.[2] Equally unashamedly, in the present article we move beyond this narrow concern with the western (and supposedly, but of course unmarked white) body and the related preoccupation with typically western questions, such as the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. We

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[2] Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997; Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Malden: Blackwell 2007.

explore the intersections between religion, sexuality and the body by focussing on a phenomenon that has begun to be documented in recent years: how embodied African indigenous religious healing practices, specifically but not only among the Zulu people in South Africa, allow for diverse, non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual practices.[3] We do so by offering an analysis and commentary of an autobiographic account of a *sangoma*, a Zulu traditional healer. At the beginning of her book, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde introduces herself as 'a Zulu woman, a lesbian, and a sangoma' who was born in the famous township of Soweto on 7 December 1975, during the heydays of apartheid.[4] She received her name from the ancestor, Nkunzi (meaning 'black bull'), who called her to become a sangoma, a healer and diviner in Zulu indigenous religion. Indeed, the book opens and ends with a praise poem to Nkunzi in isiZulu, with a line-by-line translation into English, which functions as 'the framing device of the narrative' and suggests a 'sense of Zulu identity and pride'.[5] One line in the poem states, '*Abe sengingu Nkunẓi Emnyama*', translated as 'Lo! I am now Black Bull'.[6] This alludes to the major theme in the narrative: Nkunzi, as the ancestor who called her, is also Nkabinde's dominant ancestor, his spirit inhabiting her body and defining her personality as well as, it turns out, her sexual desire.

Nkabinde's account has been subject of academic discussion, mainly from scholars working in the fields of English and postcolonial literature.[7] Building on this body of scholarship, this article offers a two-fold intertextual reading of *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*. First, we focus on David Chidester's book *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, enabling a contextualisation of Nkabinde's account in the broader religious dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa. This intertextual reading reveals three ways in which *Black Bull* can be read as a narrative of wild religion in South Africa: the blending of Zulu indigenous religion and Christianity; the blending of lesbian and sangoma identities and of the underlying notions of tradition and modernity; and the transgressive gendered and sexual effects of ancestral possession. Through these three steps we are able to examine the question: How does Nkabinde's account enable a rethinking of what Chidester calls 'wild religion' as being an embodied and in fact fundamentally queer phenomenon? Second, we explore how Nkabinde's life-narrative aligns with a tradition of black lesbian feminist theorising that sheds light on the entwinement between the erotic, sacred, and embodiment. Albeit an autobiographical text, Nkabinde's life narrative reads much like the works of Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Gloria Wekker that ground embodied and erotic experiences in the domain of the sacred, where the spiritual is in constant exchange with the corporeal. Hence we contend with the question: How does Nkabinde's narrative coterminously function as a black lesbian feminist intervention that refigures the queer erotic as a sacred site of embodied transformation amid rigid conventions of heteronormativity and notions of the secular? Finally, we conclude by suggesting a decolonising, post-secular intervention in the emerging field of African Queer Studies that so far has not taken the sacred seriously as a site of queer desire, embodiment and sexuality. We

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[3] See Gina Buijs, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity among Zulu Diviners," in *Medical Identities: Healing, Well-Being and Personhood*, ed. Kent Maynard (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 84–100; Lindiwe P. Mkasi, "African Same-Sexualities and Indigenous Knowledge: Creating a Space for Dialogue within Patriarchy," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37/2 (2016), 1–6; Ruth Morgan and Graeme Reid, "'I've Got Two Men and One Woman': Ancestors, Sexuality and Identity among Same-sex Identified Women Traditional Healers in South Africa," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 5/5 (2003): 375–391.

[4] Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2008), 4.

[5] Cheryl Stobie, "'He Uses My Body': Female Traditional Healers, Male Ancestors and Transgender in South Africa," *African Identities* 9/2 (2011), 153.

[6] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 1.

[7] Stobie, "He Uses My Body"; Chantal Zabus, *Out in Africa: Same-Sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Cultures* (London: James Currey, 2013), 232–250.

unapologetically leave it to the reader to contemplate the implications of our case study of religion, sexuality and the body in the text of a South African self-identifying black lesbian *sangoma* for their thinking about 'the western body' (if they happen to be interested in that question in the first place).

Reading *Black Bull* vis-à-vis Chidester's *Wild Religion*

In his book, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, historian of religion David Chidester explores the various manifestations of religion, particularly indigenous religion, in post-apartheid South Africa. His interest is not in the 'traditional uniformity or continuity' of indigenous religion, but on its 'wild, surprising creativity'; not in 'religious communities as conventionally defined' but in 'religion as an open set of resources and strategies for negotiating a human identity, which is poised between the more than human and the less than human, in the struggles to work out the terms and conditions for living in a human place oriented in sacred space and sacred time'.[8] The reference here to 'the more than human and the less than human' can be read as particularly meaningful in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, with its history of religion being a tool of dehumanization of the Other on the basis of race, and with its quest for religion being an instrument of reconciliation.

Chidester distinguishes three manifestations of 'the wild ambiguity of the sacred', as wild religion encompasses what he calls the bad, the good and the ugly. Elaborating on these he writes: 'First, as bad, the wild registers as antagonistic to human projects. … Second, as good, the wild registers as basic to human projects. … Third, as ugly, the wild is mixed and messy, anomalous or monstrous, a hybrid of order and chaos.'[9] In his book, Chidester discusses several examples of these different manifestations of wild religion. For instance, under the first category he examines the emergence of religious fundamentalism – 'the wildest of wild religion' because of its violation of 'the moral order of modernity' – in South Africa.[10] Among others, he mentions the way in which fundamentalism globally expresses an obsession with the 'intimate politics of gender, sexuality, marriage, and human reproduction'.[11] South Africa, like many other African countries, in recent decades has witnessed controversies over issues such as women's reproductive rights and same-sex sexualities fuelled by conservative religious groups with transnational connections. As an example of the second category Chidester examines how in post-apartheid South Africa, indigenous religion has been deployed for nation-building purposes, such as in the Freedom Park, an initiative of former President Thabo Mbeki, which is 'a wild space' incorporating 'the wild religious resources of indigenous healing, cleansing, reverence for ancestors, and community formation'.[12] Under the third category, Chidester discusses what he calls the 'wild religion of sexuality' that has emerged in South Africa under the administration of current President Jacob Zuma, where 'religion has been mixed into sexuality, sovereignty, and economy'.[13] Focussing specifically on the controversies over the sexual behaviour of Zuma himself, Chidester analyses how indigenous, Christian and modern (secular constitutional) notions of purity were evoked and became mixed up in public debate and political discourse.

Chidester's book does not include a single reference to the text under discussion, *Black Bull*, which was published four years earlier. In several ways Nkabinde's autobiographic text illustrates the wild and surprisingly creative dynamics of the sacred in South Africa. More than that, it also pushes

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[8] David Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), ix.
[9] Ibid., 3–4.
[10] Ibid., 73.
[11] Ibid., 85.
[12] Ibid., 11.
[13] Ibid., 4.

the understanding of wild religion. The account of this self-identifying lesbian sangoma draws attention to, and provides insight to an aspect that remains unnoticed in Chidester's book: the embodied nature of wild religion. Even when discussing the wild religion of sexuality, Chidester is concerned with the question how wild religion is manifested in the *discourse about* sexuality, rather than with how it manifests itself in embodied and sexual ways. An intertextual reading of both texts brings the latter dimension to the fore, and thus allows probing and queering the notion of wild religion. In what follows, three major ways in which *Black Bull* can be read as a narrative of wild religion in South Africa will be identified: first, the blending of Zulu indigenous religion and Christianity, second, the blending of lesbian and sangoma identities and of the underlying notions of tradition and modernity, and third, the transgressive gendered and sexual effects of ancestral possession.

First, typical of Nkabinde's wild religious narrative is the blending of Zulu indigenous religion and Christianity. The Zion Christian Church – one of Southern Africa's most well-known African independent churches, which history has been well-documented and which has been argued to present an amalgamation of Christianity, indigenous religion and elements of secular modernity[14] – plays a crucial role in her biography. Thus, she refers to her father as a member of the Zionist church who 'combined traditional beliefs and Christian beliefs'.[15] After she was born, a female Zionist prophet told her father not to show his baby daughter to his relatives, and instead bring her to his wife's family side (because of the belief in the Nkabinde clan, and traditional Zulu society more generally, that twins bring misfortune[16]). According to Nkabinde's account of this incident, her father took the prophet's warning seriously because 'he knew that it was the ancestors speaking' – a comment that illustrates her father's and/or her own conflation of the notions of Christian prophecy and indigenous ancestral revelation.[17] Like her father, also her maternal grandmother was a member of the Zionist church, where she was known for her healing powers and gift of prophecy. Nkabinde notes that her grandmother 'had that spiritual way about her, the same as me', implicitly highlighting the continuity and similarity between her grandmother's role as a Zionist healer-prophet and her own practice as a sangoma.[18] Raised in a 'family that believes in prophets and sangomas'[19], Nkabinde clearly does not draw any strict boundaries between Christianity and Zulu religion, but instead narratively suggests that they share the same religious worldview and provide access to similar spiritual powers. Although Nkabinde presents her own practice as a sangoma much more in the frame of Zulu divination, in the narrative about her calling the church features prominently: at least two times she finds herself in a church-like place, 'peaceful and welcoming', with a priest giving her clothes and food.[20] Later in her book she expresses agreement with the view that both ancestors and prophets receive their power from God, stating: 'It is even in the Bible that God gave the prophets power to help people. … We pray first to God and then to the ancestors. The herbs and everything we use come from God.'[21] Thus, as a truly wild religious narrative, her account deploys both Christian and Zulu indigenous resources for negotiating her identity as a sangoma in

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[14] Cf. Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Retief Muller, *African Pilgrimage: Ritual Travel in South Africa's Christianity of Zion* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

[15] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 25.

[16] Nkabinde's twin brother was born dead.

[17] Ibid., 7.

[18] Ibid., 10.

[19] Ibid., 42.

[20] Cf. ibid., 49–50.

[21] Ibid., 89.

contemporary South Africa and naturally embeds her belief in ancestors and divination in a Christian frame of God as the source of spiritual power.

Second, Nkabinde's blending of her identities as a sangoma and as a lesbian is another example of the wild manifestation of religion in South Africa. Her self-descriptive term 'lesbian sangoma' is, in the words of Chantal Zabus, an 'oxymoronic conflation of "lesbian", with its culture-specific redolence in the history of Western sexuality, and the Zulu word, *sangoma*, which points to the traditional art of healing'.[22] According to Cheryl Stobie, the tensions and contradictions inherent to the term 'lesbian sangoma' are shown throughout *Black Bull*, with the conflicts between tradition and modernity being reflected in Nkabinde's 'uneasy juggling act' when she discusses practices such as virginity testing and the payment of *lobola* (bride price).[23] Indeed, in both cases Nkabinde evokes the trope of having 'different sides' in her identity, including 'a traditional side and a modern side'.[24] She autobiographically explains her traditional side as influenced by her favourite uncle Vusumuzi, with whom she lived as a child and who taught her respect for Zulu culture, and also by her dominant ancestor Nkunzi. Her modern side, on the other hand, is associated with her lesbian lifestyle and by the progressive secular constitution of post-apartheid South Africa. The tension between both sides becomes particularly apparent when Nkabinde writes about virginity testing:

> For Nkunzi, virginity testing is a way of keeping Zulu culture alive. Nkunzi believes in keeping power in the hands of the elders because they are the ones who know what is best for everyone in the community. When I look around at the young girls of these days who are getting pregnant by different fathers at the age of 14 or 16 or 18, and when I see the way that AIDS is spreading like a fire in the youth, I understand what Nkunzi is seeing and I think that virginity testing could also be a good thing. Then on the other wide I understand that because of our Constitution, girls have certain rights and virginity testing stands in the way of those rights. Because I have these different sides in me I can see the traditional way and the modern way; I can see the way of a Zulu man and I can see why some women – especially gender activists – have a problem with virginity testing.[25]

Being in two minds about virginity testing is framed by Nkabinde as a strength, since she can see 'the light' and 'the shadows' in both arguments (which she associates with her specific ability as a sangoma to see truth). Interestingly, Chidester discusses virginity testing as part of 'the wild religion of the Zuma era', with the indigenous Zulu concern with (female) sexual purity having re-emerged and being intensified as a result of the HIV epidemic, giving rise to an invention of new 'traditional' practices. According to Chidester,

> Virginity testing has invoked tradition but has also involved the creation of new rituals, as in the case of one project that has revived the Zulu goddess or divine princess Nomkhubulwane as the divinity of female virginity. Virginity testing has major political ramifications, not only in its sexual politics of community healing, social mobilization, and collective purity, but also in the opposition it has provoked among human rights advocates, who have invoked constitutional principles of individual freedom, equality, and dignity to propose legislation outlawing it.[26]

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[22] Zabus, *Out in Africa*, 232.
[23] Stobie, "He Uses My Body", 158.
[24] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 155.
[25] Ibid., 17.
[26] Chidester, *Wild Religion*, 134.

Clearly, Nkabinde finds herself caught in the conflict between tradition and constitution captured here. On the one hand, she appears to share the concern with sexual purity and to approve of the policing of girls' virginity, while on the other hand also demonstrating a sensitivity to the human rights concern the same practice evokes. While in the above quote she appears to adopt Nkunzi's belief in the wisdom of the elders and their role in safeguarding the purity of the community, later in her book she narrates to have resisted a group of elders that took issue with her public lesbianism – an act that challenges the belief that the elders always know what is best for everyone in the community. Interestingly, in an attempt to integrate her lesbian and sangoma identity, and to explain her sense of Zulu lesbian pride, Nkabinde invokes a notion of sexual purity that is related to the one underlying the Zulu invention of virginity testing. Although not claiming a status as a virgin herself (earlier she has narrated to have been raped at the age of eight), she draws a link between her purity as a sangoma and her body not being 'contaminated by sex with a man'.[27] As Chidester points out, indigenous Zulu notions of purity are layered, with 'extraordinary purity' being achieved through 'avoiding the heat of sexuality'.[28] Nkabinde's account suggests that this specifically applies to heterosexual acts, with same-sex activity apparently not affecting one's purity. Thus, from this perspective, being a lesbian sangoma for Nkabinde is not oxymoric but makes sense and is actually enabled by the wild religious deployment of a Zulu indigenous notion of purity. Wild religion, so to say, is a queer thing as it conflates the boundaries between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and enables the composite identity of being a lesbian sangoma.

Three, Nkabinde's deployment of the notion of ancestral possession to legitimate her same-sex desire demonstrates yet another manifestation of wild religion in her narrative. More specifically, it draws attention to the fact that, in this narrative, wild religion appears to be not just a queer thing but a highly bodily phenomenon with particular gendered effects. This becomes particularly clear from the way she narrates spirit possession, specifically by her dominant ancestor Nkunzi. While growing up Nkabinde turned into a 'tomboy' who hated wearing dresses but loved soccer and enjoyed playing rough boys' games, and retrospectively she concludes that 'Nkunzi was in this part of me even when I was growing up'.[29] Later, after her mother has passed away, she started hearing voices and getting visions through which the ancestors called her to become a sangoma. This had a profound bodily impact, with her body becoming 'heavy and sluggish'.[30] Shortly before she started her training as a sangoma, she received a vision of a snake wrapping itself around her body and telling her not to be afraid and to answer her calling. The snake appears again during the starting ceremony of the training – an experience narrated as follows:

> I heard the sound of the drums beating and felt the rhythm in my body. Suddenly the snake that I saw at my aunt's house appeared between my legs and wrapped itself around me. They say that a powerful man's voice exploded out of my mouth. It was the voice of my ancestor Nkunzi saying that he had come to claim his bag of bones. From this moment, I took my ancestor's name as my own.[31]

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[27] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 76.
[28] Chidester, *Wild Religion*, 133.
[29] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 23–24.
[30] Ibid., 49.
[31] Ibid., 51.

This account reflects a wider pattern in Zulu religion where it is common for ancestral spirits to manifest themselves in the form of snakes.[32] In Nkabinde's case, the snake also appears to play a central role in her divination practice, as she explains: 'I feel when the snake is in me. It takes over and I take the form of a snake and I move this way and that way until I can identify the cause of the sickness.'[33] Through snakes and in other ways, ancestral spirits communicate with Nkabinde and reveal themselves in her body. As she puts it: 'Our ancestors use different parts of our bodies to make us listen to them. Mainly with me it is the back of my body. I will feel something up my spine and then I relax, they will begin to talk to me.'[34] Whether Nkunzi's use of Nkabinde's spine is 'a parody of male same-sex intercourse', as Zabus suggests, is rather speculative.[35] What matters here are the effects of Nkunzi's possession of Nkabinde's body, which are highly gendered, physical and sexual. Nkunzi being her dominant ancestor, and being a dictatorial male character himself[36], his masculine spirit defines Nkabinde and controls her body. As already mentioned, Nkabinde retrospectively explains her rather tomboyish character in her youth with reference to Nkunzi's grip over her. After her initiation as a sangoma this grip became even stronger. Her gender performance, which could be described as 'female masculinity' or 'butch lesbian', is strongly masculine, although she also claims to have feminine aspects. Referring to her dress and dancing style, and doing certain things that in Zulu culture are considered typically male, such as slaughtering a goat or cow, she writes:

> Sometimes I become too much of a man and people will look at me and say, "Today you look like a man." That is when I know it is Nkunzi's spirit in me. If I am just myself then I am not too much of a man, I am feminine too. Then I know it's me.[37]

Nkunzi's spirit does not only change her gender performance, but also the physical workings of her body. As Nkabinde writes:

> Since I started to have the spirit of Nkunzi in me I hardly menstruate. I only menstruate when I have a female ancestor in me. With Nkunzi I can stay up to a year without menstruating. … Nkunzi has cut off my feminine, menstruation side. If I am menstruating then I know that it is because a female spirit is in me.[38]

Because of these narrated transgressive bodily and gendered effects of spirit possession Stobie suggests that Nkabinde's autobiography can be read as a transgender narrative. Although an understandable suggestion, it does not do justice to the fact that Nkabinde does identify as lesbian, and not as transgender. Instead of imposing another category on her, it may be better to acknowledge that her narrative renders the meaning of 'lesbian' messy and complex.

Last but not least, in Nkabinde's narrative Nkunzi is the one defining her sexual desire – or better, using her body to satisfy his own sexual desire. While in training to become a sangoma,

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[32] David Chidester et al., *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), D8, D40.
[33] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 76.
[34] Ibid., 54–55.
[35] Zabus, *Out in Africa*, 241.
[36] Nkabinde describes him as 'a dictator who made the rules and expected people to obey'. Ibid., 53.
[37] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 73.
[38] Ibid., 19.

Nkabinde has a dream in which she has male genitalia and is having sex with her female trainer. When she shares the dream with the trainer, the latter tells Nkabinde that it is Nkunzi who wants to sleep with her. Nkabinde is warned to be careful 'because if your ancestor loved a lot of women, you will end up doing wrong things'.[39] At that stage in the narrative, the reader has already been told that Nkunzi was a Zulu man who 'liked the company of women'.[40] Moreover, Nkabinde has suggested that her dominant male ancestor accepts and understands her as a lesbian because, in her words, 'Nkunzi knew he was going to use my body long before I did'.[41] According to Stobie, the trope, 'He uses my body', is invoked in the narrative as an 'ancestral endorsement' functioning to 'socially validate Nkabinde's lesbianism in a context which is still rife with homophobia and sexism'.[42] In Chidester's terminology, we could frame it as a creative deployment of wild religion as a resource for constructing a socially deviant sexual identity. Nkabinde narratively elaborates on this notion of Nkunzi using her body in a very literal way when writing about her sexual experiences:

> Nkunzi loves women, especially young women. If I am with a woman of 21 or 22, normally Nkunzi will want to have sex with her. I feel his presence as if someone is touching my shoulders and sometimes I see the legs and genitals of a man. This is one way he shows himself to me. I have more power when Nkunzi is in me, especially when we both desire the same woman. When this happens, I change. I become so strong. He takes control of my body and even the sounds I make are different. The woman I am with will tell me, "Your eyes are changing." Women I have slept with say my eyes become red or green and I become so wild and strong. Women tell me my body becomes very heavy and when I come my partner will say, "In that moment you were not yourself. What was happening?" I will make a sound like a lion roaring. That is how I know that Nkunzi is satisfied.[43]

In this quote Nkabinde uses exactly the same language as Chidester, when she says that her body becomes wild when Nkunzi uses it to have sex. Apparently the ancestral spirit is one of the 'wild forces' through which according to Chidester the sacred is being produced. Pointing at the 'duality of the wild', Chidester writes:

> On the one hand, the wild stands as obstacle to maintaining social order. The wild is untamed, undomesticated, uncultivated, unrestrained, unruly, and dangerous. … On the other hand, the wild stands as energy for creating social order. The wild is dynamic, natural, extraordinary, enthusiastic, ecstatic, and invigorating.[44]

At first sight, the wild ancestral spirit represented by Nkunzi seems to fit in the first category: when this spirit takes possession of Nkabinde, she becomes 'wild and strong', starts roaring like a lion, and the look in her eyes changes. This wild, unrestrained and lustful nature is potentially dangerous, as the trainer warns Nkabinde, and explains why the training as a sangoma focuses on learning how to control the ancestors. As Nkabinde puts it, 'If you can't control your ancestors, they can destroy your body.'[45] Whether Nkabinde has fully managed to control her dominant ancestor is

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[39] Ibid., 68.
[40] Ibid., 53.
[41] Ibid., 67.
[42] Stobie, "He Uses My Body", 156.
[43] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 68–69.
[44] Chidester, *Wild Religion*, 2–3.
[45] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 55.

questionable, as she tells that she usually gives in when Nkunzi wants to have sex with a woman she does not like. However, as much as the wild force represented by Nkunzi seems untameable, it does also contribute to social order as it allows Nkabinde to pursue her sexual desire in a way that is culturally acceptable and to perform a lesbian identity that is socially validated. Thus, in this narrative, ancestral possession gives rise to a creative and wild production of the sacred enabling Nkabinde not only to conduct her work as a sangoma at the service of the community but also to carve out a space for herself as an openly lesbian woman.

Stobie argues that *Black Bull* 'offers a view of sexual energy working in tandem with spiritual power', and suggests that such a view is enabled by the Zulu indigenous religious worldview but is 'diametrically opposed to the value system of Christianity, which often advocates sexual repression and sublimation'.[46] The problem of this suggestion is that it juxtaposes Zulu religion and Christianity, privileging the former over the latter, while in Nkabinde's account such an opposition is largely absent. Instead, Nkabinde literally claims, with reference to the Bible, that the spiritual power of sangomas – which in her case is a sexualised power – comes via the ancestors from God. Another problem with Stobie's formulation is that it associates Zulu religion with 'spirituality' as opposed to Christianity as a repressive 'value system', overlooking the fact that Zulu religion also presents a value system, and that this system appears to be equally negative towards Nkabinde's transgressive sexuality (as becomes clear from the story about the conflict with her trainer and a group of sangomas who take issue with her sexuality). Instead of juxtaposing Zulu religion and Christianity, with the risk of simply denunciating the latter in favour of a romanticised 'native' spirituality, the challenge is to understand how the sacred, more generally, enables erotic and transgressive embodiment.

A Black Lesbian Feminist Reading of *Black Bull*

Having entered the nettlesome worlds of Nkabinde, we imagine how her life complexifies simplified notions about the body's relationship to the erotic and the spiritual, domains that are configured quite often as incompatible. In a world dominated by white supremacist heteropatriarchal formations, the body of the black lesbian remains an absent presence both in black masculinist and white racialist imaginaries. Like African spiritual formations, understood in hegemonic Christianity as backward and primitive, the black lesbian body is constitutively an erotic dissident that constantly mediate the jeopardies inured by blackness, womanness, and non-normativeness. Black lesbian feminist thought, thus, offers an alternative reading to how queer black bodies subsist in conditions adjudicated by white supremacy and heteronormativity. Articulating experience as evidentiary, contributions from this corpus also compel us to rethink the body as a site for making theory, in other words, making the world of the sacred comprehensible without the encumbrances established by secular normativity.

Can Nkabinde's text be read as complicating secular theorisations of embodiment that evacuate the sacred? How is her personal narrative an iteration of what E. Patrick Johnson advances as a 'theory in the flesh', which conjoins 'theory and practice through an embodied politic of resistance'?[47] Theories of the flesh are akin to what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as 'pedagogies of the sacred'.[48] Drawing, then, on particular black lesbian feminist readings of the sacred,

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[46] Stobie, "He Uses My Body", 159.

[47] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare Studies', or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I learned from my Grandmother" in *Black Queer Studies: Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 127.

[48] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 287-332.

embodiment, and the erotic, we argue that the narrative plot offered by Nkabinde destabilises framings of subjectivity that sidestep the sacred as a fecund space for self-making.

In view of this, Nkabinde's account does not only present a formulation of subjectivity that is inherently queer, but lends insights into how she inhabits a flexible ontology. While the constitution of her subjectivity cannot be easily captured by secular framings, such subjectivity complicates the connections between the sacred and the secular. Hence, Nkabinde, it can be argued, animates what Gloria Wekker, in her description of same-sex desire among Surinamese women, describes as 'multiplicitous self, a self that is multi-layered, complex, integrating various instantiations of "I"'[49] Crossing over into the domain of the spirit world through interactions with Nkunzi, who from all indications was a recalcitrant Zulu man 'who made the rules and expected people to obey'[50] and was both abusive and violent, Nkabinde's subjectivity is made the more complex. To be able to manage the tensions that the selves she traversed triggered, she ponders how:

> A sangoma's training is about finding balance so that we can live with respect for all life. In the training we find our place in relationship with God, our ancestors and our family. We also learn how to work with the elements of air, water, fire and earth and with the four directions: north, south, west, and east.[51]

Nkabinde's allocution regarding finding the balance in the process of becoming a sangoma amplifies yet how the trainee's rite of passage opens them up to a world unbeknownst to them. These worlds can be perceived only through those pedagogies that recognise the sacred as a vestibule in which the secular is moored. There, the body is transfigured as that corporeal interstice in which the collusion and the collision of the sacred and the secular are ultimately experienced.

If, for Nkabinde, sangoma training is about recovering relationships with the worldly and the otherworldly, then her point parallels Alexander's experience with the spiritual, which as she maintains, incited her to begin tentatively writing a history different from the hegemonic history inherited through Christian and colonial knowledges. 'The idea, then, of knowing self through spirit, to become open to the movement of Spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history', writes Alexander, 'are instances of bringing the self into intimate proximity with the domain of the spirit. It would make the processes of that intelligibility into a spiritual undertaking'.[52]

The moment when the self *qua* body are brought into the intimate vicinity of the sacred is instructive in that it denudes the fictions inherent to dualist conceptions about body and spirit, male and female, vernacular and universal, heterosexual and homosexual desires. Arguing instead for a more complex reading of her text, we suggest here that Nkabinde's narrative lends a poignant intervention that unfurls the ways in which oppositional formations are not always in tension but can sometimes be in conversation. Therefore, unlike Stobie, who presents Zulu spirituality as bristling against Christian religious values, we contend that these supposedly opposite religious formations be imagined as entwining and interacting with each other in ways that are irreducible. Hence, in the remainder of this article, we are interested in underlining the ways in which a narrative proffered by a lesbian sangoma opens a space from which to show how vernacular practices such as

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[49] Gloria Wekker, *Politics of Passions: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.
[50] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 53.
[51] Ibid., 53-54.
[52] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 294-295.

sangoma are located not in isolation but in relation to other social, political, religious and erotic forces.

Deploying vernacular advisedly, we maintain that sangoma and its practitioners embody palimpsestic subjectivities, shaped by and shaping a system that is the logical corollary of historical changes wrought by colonial apartheid and missionary Christianity in South Africa. To categorically reduce sangoma practice to a precolonial state will, then, be to evade the sheer complexity of the practices that make sangoma elaborate in the contemporary moment, as we learned from Chidester's account on wild indigenous religion. Reflecting on Santeria, Candomble, and Vodoun, Alexander portends that they constitute a tapestry of practices and rituals that are at once vernacular and transnational. To be clear, Nkabinde's rendering of sangoma practice resonates with Alexander's allusion that:

> African-based cosmological systems are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation. They are at the same time manifestations of locatedness, rootedness, and belonging that map individual and collective relationships to the Divine.[53]

We assert, in a vein similar to Alexander, that sangoma cosmology be viewed not as an authentic, untouched set of spiritual engagements in primordial form, but as a sacred practice in constant interaction with and other modalities of being and becoming. Chidester's deployment of 'wild religion' in his description of non-western religious practices in South Africa resonates with Alexander's formulation. Nkabinde's constant reference to her relationship to Christianity, even via her own family members reinforces the extent to which she both embodies and performs spiritual practices that are may be imagined as incompatible. Sangoma practice, as an aspect of Zulu religion, should therefore not be portrayed as unchanging, rather it must be construed as a religious complex that engenders relationships between a subject such as Nkabinde with other collective relationships that are invested in pursuing spiritual and divine realms. These relationships must not be marked as always cohesive and stable but as always dialectically and dialogically negotiated. It is evident that Nkabinde contended with tensions emanating from her lesbian identity. And that she loved women, not only because she self-identified as a lesbian, but because she was mounted by Nkunzi, her ancestral spirit. However, her erotic subjectivity somehow placed her in a dissident situation in relation to her trainers and some members of her family. This excerpt below reveals how her trainer invoked that she was going to cure her for being a lesbian, when the latter was told by Nkabinde's sisters that she was a lesbian:

> On a Saturday in May, my sisters took me to my trainer's house to begin my training as a sangoma. My sisters had told my trainer that I was a lesbian and she said I would be healed and get married to a man.[54]

All efforts to rid Nkabinde of her lesbian desire by her trainer, a desire triggered by Nkunzi, the Black Bull, proved futile. To this effect, she is again quoted at length:

> I was still a lesbian after I completed my initiation as a sangoma. My trainer told my family, "There is nothing we can do." When my memory started coming back, my trainer made me bathe in herbs she had prepared and she asked me over and over again if my feelings had changed. I told her my feelings towards women were stronger than ever. I would look at a

[53] Ibid., 290-291.
[54] Nkabinde, *Black Bull*, 51.

> woman getting dressed and find myself wanting her, wanting to hold her. I couldn't express my feelings because I was still in training and the women were my elders but I was attracted to them. If Nkunzi did not want me to be a lesbian I don't believe I would have these feelings.[55]

The engendering of desire within sangoma practice, as evoked by the text, remains ambivalent. On the one hand, the trainees as well as other relatives of Nkabinde appear to endorse her non-heteronormative subjectivity. And yet there are instances when her queer sexuality is subjected to reprobation by particular social relations. How to render the ambiguity that emanates from such situations? And can Nkunzi's formidable desire to have Nkabinde get to know herself through him (the ancestral spirit), be read alternatively as opening up the erotic resource in her? The masculinisation of the social organisation of the sacred, as Alexander elucidates, need not, however, 'carry the immediate presumption of women's subordination'.[56] Thus, Nkabinde's fervent and vehement affection for women, one that remains unresolved by the inflexible conventions of heteronormative cure magnifies the power inherent in the erotic.

In her famous essay titled "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", the black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde writes about the erotic as:

> A resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppression that can provide energy for change. For women this has meant a suppression of the erotic as considered source of power and information within our lives.[57]

Lorde's evocative allusion clarifies the struggles Nkabinde has with negotiating, as well as navigating the planes of the spiritual and the erotic in a context adjudicated by powers that refuse the expression of transgressive desires. Here, it can be imagined that the political, sociocultural, historical, and racial milieus in which Nkabinde is nested complicated her desire to assert her non-normative sexual and spiritual identities, that is her lesbian and Zulu spirituality respectively. It is significant, then, that we recognise that the entanglement between Zulu spirituality and Christianity also functions to effectively suppress any turn to the erotic as a source of empowerment for Nkabinde. The erotic, in these religions, and in society writ large, Lorde maintains, is all too often misnamed by men and used against women. Speaking about her own experience, Lorde offers the following reflection:

> In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self effacement, depression, self denial.[58]

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[55] Ibid., 67-68.

[56] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 324.

[57] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 53.

[58] Ibid., 58.

It can be concluded here that Nkabinde's narrative exemplifies a refusal to submit to the rules of heteronormativity that stifle her access to the erotic capital that proffers her with the ability to constitute her queer subjectivity.

Conclusion

Ugandan queer studies scholar Stella Nyanzi starts her essay, "Queering Queer Africa" by stating that 'Queer Africa is much more than Michel Foucault and Judith Butler'.[59] This may sound rather self-evident, but in fact one is sometimes surprised by the number of writings in the emerging field of African queer studies, and the broader field of African sexuality studies, that rather uncritically adopt Western theories as the main analytical framework. Nyanzi suggests that in order to queer the study of queer Africa, 'one must simultaneously reclaim Africa in its bold diversities and reinsert queerness', and that a good starting point for this may be the 'cultural and indigenous understandings of gendered spirits of ancestors who may possess individuals' since these 'offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities'.[60] Following this suggestion, at the end of this article we propose that Nkabinde's autobiographic text not only provides crucial insight in the embodied and queer nature of 'wild religion' in contemporary South Africa, and in the sacred as a key site of erotic and queer embodiment but that, moreover, *Black Bull* is part of the African queer archives that enable a decolonisation of African queer studies. Such a decolonisation entails, we suggest, making a post-secular move. Western queer theory is largely underpinned by secular thought and subsequently struggles to take religion and spirituality, or the sacred, seriously as sources of queer erotic subjectivity.[61] Overcoming this problem is crucial, in our opinion, as it allows for a more critical, insightful and nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which African queer identities, subjectivities and bodies are enabled, inspired and produced through the sacred as a sphere of spiritual power. In the case of *Black Bull* it is the indigenous religious practice of ancestral spirit possession that shapes African queerness, but in other contexts it might be charismatic forms of Christianity, or Islamic traditions, that provide an enabling space for African queer embodied subjectivities.[62] This calls for further, comparative research into the dynamics of sexuality, embodiment and the sacred in African contexts, for which African queer studies can fruitfully learn from black lesbian feminist scholarship as argued above.

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[59] Stella Nyanzi, "Queering Queer Africa", in *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*, ed. Zethu Matebeni (Athlone: Modjaji Books, 2014), 65.

[60] Ibid., 65, 67.

[61] Adriaan van Klinken, 'Queer Studies and Religion in Contemporary Africa: Decolonizing, Post-secular Moves', *The Scholar & Feminist Online* 14/2.

[62] For instance, see Nathanael Homewood, "'I Was On Fire": The Challenge of Counter-Intimacies within Zimbabwean Christianity," in *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*, ed. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 243–59; Rudolf Pell Gaudio, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

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