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van Klinken, A. (2024) In/decent black theology in South African poetry: Reimagining Jesus Christ, sexuality, race and HIV. In: van Klinken, A., van den Brandt, N. and van den Berg, M., (eds.) *Blasphemous Art? Religion, Gender and Sexuality in Arts and Popular Culture*. Routledge Critical Studies in Religion, Gender and Sexuality. Routledge, pp. 43-61. ISBN: 9781032593371.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032623887>

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This is the author-accepted manuscript of a book chapter, to be published in *Blasphemous Art? Religion, Gender and Sexuality in Arts and Popular Culture*, edited by Nella van den Brandt, Mariecke van den Berg, and Adriaan van Klinken (Routledge 2024).

In/decent Black Theology in South African Poetry: Reimagining Jesus Christ, Sexuality, Race and HIV

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Abstract

Discussing two poems by South African writers, this chapter shows how poetry can be a means of religious creativity as well as theological critique and imagination in relation to sexuality and race. The first poem is ‘Bearing the Stigmata’, by the feminist academic and writer, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and the second is ‘Jesus Thesis’, by the queer performance artist and writer, Kopano Maroga. The imagery used in both poems could well provoke certain religious sensitivities, through the literary association of Jesus Christ with HIV and AIDS and with kinky queer sex respectively. Locating the poems in South African traditions of poetics of resistance and black theology, the chapter employs Marcella Althaus-Reid’s notion of indecent theology to explore how the poems engage in a critique of white, colonialist and heteronormative Christianity while simultaneously reimagining the figure of Jesus Christ in ways that liberate and affirm sexually and racially stigmatized bodies. Arguing that indecency, like blasphemy, is in the eyes of the receiver and that the boundaries of in/decent are not fixed but dynamic, the analysis explores the different poetic and theological strategies – of subtle subversion and radical transgression – used to question social and religious norms and to negotiate potential accusations of blasphemy.

Introduction¹

There is a long history of creative arts ‘playing’ with themes of gender, sex and sexuality in relation to the central figure of Christianity, Jesus Christ, and of the artist and their work subsequently being seen as insulting and/or blasphemous. As the religion scholar, Yvonne Sherwood, puts it pointedly: ‘Blasphemy has been in bed (so to speak) with sex for centuries.’ Yet, she continues, ‘Only the limits of the thinkable – and what has been counted

¹ I write this chapter with deep gratitude for Anne-Marie Korte’s mentorship, which has formed my own scholarship. This chapter allows me to return to some of the issues I started working on, early in my academic journey, under Anne-Marie’s watch. As an MA student at Utrecht University (2005-2006), I took her module ‘Religion and Gender’, and the essay I wrote – about Jesus, masculinity and homoeroticism – developed into my first published article. I ended up writing my MA thesis, co-supervised by Anne-Marie, on the work of Southern African feminist theologians addressing issues of gender and HIV/AIDS. Later, as a PhD student, I participated in Anne-Marie’s postgraduate seminar ‘Religion, Gender and Interdisciplinarity’, and in that context I encountered the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid. Ever since these early years, Anne-Marie has been a constant source of advice and encouragement, and an inspiration for doing inter- and transdisciplinary work across theology and religious studies, gender and queer studies, creative arts, and the broader humanities.

as sexually scandalous – have changed’ (Sherwood 2021, 31). Especially from the 1960s, riding on the waves of the sexual revolution, women’s emancipation, gay and lesbian liberation, and more recently trans and queer activism, artists working across various genres have used their work to spark debate and cause controversy with hitherto unthinkable, unspeakable and/or unimaginable representations of gender and sexuality. Given that the Christian church, in the Western world (and beyond), was and still is a major institution establishing and policing social, cultural and religious norms regarding gender and sexuality, the figure of Jesus Christ has been a popular and effective symbol deployed by artists seeking to challenge those norms, break taboos, and imagine new gendered and sexual possibilities. Particularly well-known examples of creative art works that have caused, to use Sherwood’s term, sexual scandal, in relation to Jesus Christ include the poem ‘The Love that Dares to Speak its Name’, published in *Gay News* in 1976, in which the writer James Kirkup wanted ‘to see Christ anew in terms of modern sexual liberation’ (Kirkup, quoted in Levy 1993, 537); the bronze figure *Christa*, of a naked woman on the cross, which the sculptor Edwina Sandys created in 1975 ‘to portray the suffering of women’ (Sandys, quoted in Reynolds 2015); and more recently, performances by popular cultural icons, such as Madonna who famously included a crucifixion scene in her 2006 show, *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, and the lesser known, but equally provocative, 2017 performance by Spanish drag artist Borja Casillas (stage name: Drag Sethlas) that included a sexually transgressive scene of the crucified Jesus coming off the cross. Anne-Marie Korte has extensively studied the latter, more recent cases. In various publications she has read these creative, transgressive and allegedly blasphemous representations of the figure of Jesus Christ in contemporary Western contexts as part of, and as contributing to, culture wars that reflect ‘a particular social and cultural shift in modern and predominantly secularizing societies regarding the public meaning of both religion and sexuality’ (Korte 2018, 112; also see Korte 2009, 2020).

This chapter contributes to the tradition of scholarship on creative artistic representations of Jesus Christ in relation to gender, sex and sexuality that has been established by Korte and other scholars, yet it extends and broadens its scope by focusing on a different geographical context, namely South Africa. This is important, first, in the light of the widely reported demographic shift in Christianity worldwide, with the centre of gravity having moved to the Global South. Africa, in particular, has become a major site of contemporary global Christianity, which underlines the need for studying Christianity, creative arts, and cultural production in the multiple and dynamic social, political and cultural contexts of this vast continent. It is important, second, because a different context also requires a different theoretical apparatus. Where Korte deploys a postsecular theoretical framework to understand the workings of provocative and allegedly blasphemous art in Western contexts, such a framing is less relevant in Global South contexts where, by and large, postcolonial modernity has not equalled secularization but, instead, has stimulated religious innovation and vitality. Thus, there is a need for understanding creative arts, its engagement with religious imagery such as the figure of Jesus Christ, and its provocative and productive effects in relation to questions of gender and sexuality, within the social, political and theological context of ‘the postcolony’ (Mbembe 2001). This chapter offers a modest beginning to this major task, by focusing on one particular genre of creative arts, poetry, emerging from one particular locale, being post-apartheid South Africa.

The chapter discusses two poems by South African writers, each of which present a creative and critical literary representation of Jesus Christ in relation to issues of sexuality.

The first is ‘Bearing the Stigmata’, by the feminist academic and writer, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and the second is ‘Jesus Thesis’, by the queer performance artist and writer, Kopano Maroga. The potentially blasphemous imagery in the poems in question is the literary association of Jesus Christ with HIV and AIDS, in Govinden’s poem, and with queer sexuality, and kinky sex for that matter, in Maroga’s. Moreover, both poems can be read as associating Jesus Christ with black bodies, an association that historically has also been prone to accusations of blasphemy in Eurocentric traditions that equate Christianity to whiteness. As my analysis will show, both poems navigate the risk of potential accusations of blasphemy very differently, respectively seeking to escape and to embrace it. Adopting postcolonial queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid’s (2000) notion of indecent theology, I explore how these poems engage in a critique of white heteronormative Christianity while simultaneously reimagining the figure of Jesus Christ in ways that liberate and affirm stigmatized HIV-positive and queer black bodies. Attending to the different poetic styles and rhetorical effects in both poems, I will further reflect on the different forms that in/decent theology may take in a postcolonial context such as post-apartheid South Africa. Adding the slash to the word in/decent is a way to indicate that indecency, like blasphemy, as Sherwood (2021, 11) puts it, ‘is, by definition, in the eyes and ears of the receiver’. In other words, the slash allows exploring the instability of what counts as decent and indecent in a particular context, and to draw attention to the different creative strategies used to question norms of in/decent.

This chapter unfolds as follows. In the next section, I will provide some background to our discussion, by briefly exploring the distinct character of discourses about blasphemy in South Africa, and discussing how the figure of Jesus Christ has been deployed in the country for socio-political struggles, especially the struggle against apartheid. The subsequent two sections will respectively discuss Govinden’s poetic representation of Jesus Christ in the context of the HIV epidemic, and Maroga’s poetic account of Jesus Christ in relation to queer sexuality. I will do this with reference to the concept of indecent theology as coined by Althaus-Reid (2000). Developed in the context of Latin America, specifically Argentina, Althaus-Reid advocates for indecent theology as an intervention in liberation theology which, according to her critique, centred around an abstract concept of ‘the poor’ as a socio-economic category, without acknowledging their concrete embodied, gendered and sexual subjectivities. As she puts it: ‘Not only did “the poor” subsume women, it also subsumed lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual people. (...) The poor native Christian was conceived according to a restricted heterosexual model’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, 30, 32–3). South Africa, like Argentina and Latin America at large, has a strong tradition of liberation theology. In the South African context, liberation theology was primarily concerned with race, yet a similar criticism has been made (e.g. see Jodamus 2017; Nadar and Solomons 2022) regarding its reluctance to engage with categories of gender and sexuality and ‘to do theology from the perspective of the indecent poor’ (West 2018, 128). The two poems under discussion in this chapter can be seen as ‘in/decenting’ black liberation theologies in the South African context, although they differ in their poetic and theological strategies, as indicated by the slash in ‘in/decent’. I will return to these differences in the conclusion to the chapter.

Blasphemy and Theological Contestations in South Africa

South Africa has a unique tradition of religious debate and theological thought, where the notion of blasphemy has been used by progressive actors to denounce conservative Christian justifications of oppressive ideologies and structures, most notably, apartheid. Apartheid is the term for the formal system of racial segregation that was set up by the white minority government of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party (from 1948 to 1994), and that was theologically justified by the South African Dutch Reformed Church. From the 1960s, opposition against apartheid, and its increasingly repressive and violent policies, grew, both within the country and internationally, with progressive Christian actors and bodies taking a leading role. One famous and highly influential example is the 1985 *Kairos Document*, drafted by mainly black South African theologians. The document explicitly critiqued what it calls ‘state theology’, that is, the theology used by the Afrikaner government to legitimate the political ideology and system of apartheid. It critiques the preamble to the apartheid constitution for its ‘blasphemous use of God’s holy name’, stating that it presents an image of ‘a god who is historically on the side of the white settlers, who dispossesses black people of their land’. Similarly, one of the country’s most well-known black theologians and church leaders, the legendary Desmond Tutu (at that time General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches), had theologically condemned apartheid as a heresy, stating that ‘its most blasphemous aspect is ... that it can make a child of God doubt that he [sic] is a child of God’ (Tutu 1983, 46).

Shortly after the end of apartheid, Tutu declared that the next ‘worthy moral crusade’ for the church in South Africa is ‘the fight against homophobia and heterosexism’. Interestingly, he again used the same language of blasphemy:

The church has joined the world in committing what I consider to be the ultimate blasphemy – making the children of God doubt that they are children of God. Lesbians and gays have been made to reject God and, in their rejection of the church, they have been made to question why God created them as they were. (Tutu 1997, x)

Clearly, for Tutu the quest for justice with regard to race and sexuality is driven by the same theological imperative: the fundamental dignity and equality of human beings as created in God’s divine image (see Van Klinken and Chitando 2021). Moreover, he cited the radically inclusive character of Jesus’ ministry as a key source of inspiration in the struggle against apartheid as well as against homophobia. In a similar way, the drafters of the *Kairos Document* invoked the Jesus of the gospel – specifically the Gospel of Luke (chapter 4) – as a model of protest for justice, and of solidarity with the oppressed in order to critique the mainstream theology of both the state and the church.

In addition to these formal theological discourses, there is also a tradition of cultural production in South Africa, where the figure of Jesus Christ is appropriated and re-imagined in the light of the country’s socio-political challenges, as a form of contextual theology through arts. Examples include the 1962 painting, ‘Black Christ’, in which artist Ronald Harrison depicted African National Congress leader Albert Luthuli as Jesus on the cross, being crucified by the Afrikaner nationalist leaders and engineers of apartheid, the then prime minister Hendrick Verwoerd, and minister of justice, John Vorster, who are depicted as Roman soldiers. The 2006 drama film, ‘Son of Man’, directed by Mark Dornford-May, puts the story of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection in an urban township setting in modern-day South Africa, against a background of oppression, violence, and civil war which

reminds the viewer of the recent history of the apartheid era. The 2011 novel, *Hear Me Alone*, by Thando Mgqolozana, imagines the birth and childhood of Jesus in a rural setting, with Nazareth being narratively represented as a Xhosa village, and with the story problematising patriarchal customs according to which women and their bodies are under male control.

The two poems discussed in the following section stand in, and further extend, these traditions, as they take part of their inspiration from black theologies while deploying the figure of Jesus Christ to address socio-political issues that the poets find pertinent in their respective contexts, roughly ten and twenty-five years after the end of apartheid. South Africa also has an established tradition of ‘poetics of resistance’ (DeShazer 1994), that is, the use of poetry to protest against social and political injustice, marginalization and discrimination. As far as I have been able to trace, neither of the selected poems has sparked public controversy and formal accusations of blasphemy – perhaps illustrating their relatively limited public dissemination and reach, and the potential of poetry, in the words of one of the poets under discussion, Kopano Maroga, to be ‘a safe place to think unthinkable thoughts’ (Simond 2023). Although both poems might be seen as (at least potentially) offensive or blasphemous by some, my analysis aims to explore the profound theological meanings embedded in their ‘unthinkable thoughts’, specifically in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

As much as the poems under discussion originate from, and reflect, the locale of post-apartheid South Africa, their significance is not restricted to that context. As literary expressions they are part of world literature; moreover, rooted in particular South African Christian traditions, they explore ‘the affiliative possibilities of global Christianity’ (Jager 2020, 440). Both poems, in different ways, make demands on their readers, inviting ethical, political and religious reflection and response. My interest in and reading of these poems is informed by my own complex positionality as a white European academic working on the intersections of religious, queer and African studies whose religious background, sexual identity and HIV status all create resonances with the themes centred in the poems. Originating from the Netherlands, I am painfully aware of the long and problematic history of colonialism and racism that Dutch settlers started in South Africa, culminating in apartheid. Through my academic and personal biography, I have developed strong intellectual, emotional and embodied ties to the country. Specifically in relation to the themes explored in this chapter – HIV, queer sexuality and race –, South Africa has shaped me deeply, as the place where I have been challenged to think about questions of racial difference from the moment that I was a visiting student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2006; where I encountered the devastating impact of the HIV epidemic at the same time and contracted this virus myself a decade later; and where I have developed friendships in both progressive Christian and queer circles (for a more in-depth autobiographical reflection on this, see van Klinken 2020). Thus, as far as this chapter is an exercise in queer religious thought, it also touches on my own embodied experiences and understandings, given that queer theology is by definition ‘a first-person theology’ (Althaus-Reid 2003, 8).

‘Bearing the Stigmata’: Jesus in the context of HIV and AIDS

The poem ‘Bearing the stigmata’ by feminist scholar and writer, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, was written in the early 2000s, at a time that AIDS was ravaging South Africa. Undermining the dreams of liberation inspired by the 1994 democratic transition, the HIV epidemic was declared to be the most urgent ‘new *kairos*’ (Maluleke 2001, 125), in a direct

reference to the 1985 *Kairos Document*. Govinden's poem, which was a response to this *kairos*, was included in a 2004 collection with the telling title *Nobody Ever Said AIDS*. The poems and short stories collected in this volume, according to the editors, 'signal a movement away from silence, stigma and pain', and seek to offer words of despair, mourning and hope to a society tragically affected by the HIV epidemic (Thomas and Samuelson 2004, 11). The socio-political context is noteworthy here: in the early 2000s, the South African government led by President Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) became internationally known for its AIDS denialism, which is claimed to have cost millions of lives. Obviously, this denialism at the highest political level was informed by, and reinforced, a much wider culture of silencing HIV and AIDS, and invisibilizing people affected by it.

The inclusion of Govinden's poem in this collection is significant, for two reasons. First, Govinden is a writer of South African Indian descent, and as she has argued herself in her scholarly monograph, *Sister Outsiders*, Indian women's writing has historically been marginalized in South African literature which tends to be divided alongside a racial binary of black and white (Govinden 2008). The poem in question uses the phrase 'my black body', which is not necessarily autobiographical but can be understood against the background of a broader, political notion of blackness in South Africa, where the Black Consciousness Movement from the 1960s deliberately sought to promote a sense of solidarity among groups that, under apartheid, were classified under the different racialized groups of 'African', 'Indian' and 'Coloured'. Second, the poem is explicitly religious and can be read as a poetic piece of theology through which Govinden – a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (founded in 1989) – responded to the Circle's call, in the early 2000s, to make the realities of HIV and AIDS, in particular as experienced by African women, a major theme in their theologising. Indeed, the poem was initially published as part of a chapter that Govinden contributed to a volume titled *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities* that was edited by members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003). The inclusion of Govinden's poem, alongside a prose text by another Circle member, Musa W. Dube from Botswana, in *Nobody Ever Said AIDS*, demonstrates how feminist theological writings in the early 2000s entered and circulated in broader literary circles in Southern Africa.

Informed by her commitment to contextual theology rooted in community engagement, her quest for creative liturgical resources, and her praxis of contemplative spirituality, Govinden wrote 'Bearing the Stigmata' while reflecting on the story of a black female member of a discussion group she was part of, who had shared her experiences of rejection in church spaces (Govinden 2003). Thus, the poem addresses the culture of silencing and condemning people living with HIV in religious settings. The poem consists of four stanzas. The first two stanzas are written in the first-person singular, with the I-person narrating their experience of abandonment in the space of the church, their 'diseased black body' being despised, and with fellow congregants fearing to share the cup during holy Communion out of fear for transmission of the virus. They call the church 'my Holy Mother' who however denies them their 'birthright', which apparently refers to partaking Communion. The opening stanzas invoke biblical imagery, such as when the I-person describes themselves as a 'leper of this age', making a connection between the treatment of people with leprosy in biblical times, as they were seen as unclean and were socially isolated (Leviticus 13), and the stigmatization and exclusion faced by people with HIV today. In the second stanza, the I-person states to be 'stoned again / for adultery', which refers to the

biblical story known as ‘the woman caught in adultery’ (John 8:1–11). The accusation of sexual promiscuity this woman is targeted with, is familiar to many a person living with HIV. The stanza continues with the line, ‘stoned for my race’, suggesting that to be HIV positive *and* black results in a double stigmatization. After all, there is a long colonialist representation of black Africans as hyper-sexual – a narrative that gained new salience in the face of the HIV pandemic (Antonio 2010). These various themes are summarized in the closing lines of the first half of the poem, reading: ‘my cross of shame / uncleanness’. The way in which biblical references are woven through the poem is reminiscent of the creative ways in which African women theologians engage in biblical hermeneutics, reading and engaging biblical stories in the light of contemporary experiences of struggle and a quest for justice and healing, and vice versa (Dube 2014).

While the blackness of the I-person is explicated in the poem – as a reminder that HIV is a racialized pandemic, with black South Africans due to socio-economic inequalities both being more likely to contract the virus and having more difficulties in accessing medical treatment and care – their gender is not explicitly mentioned. The poem being written for usage in liturgical settings, this allows for people of any gender to identify with it. However, the intertextual reference to the bible story about the woman caught in adultery, the comparatively high HIV prevalence rates among women in South Africa, and Govinden’s involvement in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which sought to make a gender-based response to the pandemic, allows to imagine the poem as featuring a woman’s experience of living with HIV while simultaneously not excluding male readers.

The poem’s turning point is half-way, with the second two stanzas not being about ‘I’, but about ‘You’. Although this Other is not explicitly named, the obvious suggestion, created through phrases such as ‘stigmata in your palms’ and ‘alight from the cross’, is that it is Jesus Christ. While the I-person, according to the first stanza, is seated lonely and abandoned in the pews of the church, this Other appears at the altar, ‘bruised / head bent’. The stigmata (wounds resulting from the crucifixion) in their hand palms are perceived by the I-person as ‘balm for my spirit / hurt’. Associatively, the poem links the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS to the stigmata of Jesus Christ, suggesting that the latter are a source of healing for the former. South African feminist theologian Denise Ackermann has made a similar suggestion in an essay discussing stigma as ‘the most explosive’ dimension of the HIV epidemic, in which she deploys the Eucharistic remembrance of Christ’s suffering and death to argue that ‘we see in his very wounds the woundedness of his sisters and brothers who are infected and dying’ (Ackermann 2006, 228, 237).

In between the third and fourth stanza, there are two separate lines, reading: ‘I hear your words resound through the nave / *Those who are whole do not need the physician*’ (italics original). The latter words are a quotation from the Gospel of Luke 5:31, where Jesus utters these words to rebuke the criticism that he is letting himself in with people perceived as sinners. The poem suggests that Jesus is on the side of the outcasts, including those stigmatized as immoral and sexually unclean due to their HIV status, and that his presence in their lives is an affirming and healing one. The poem is pastorally affirming of people living with HIV and AIDS, comforting them with the notion that ‘Jesus suffers with us’, and that his presence is a healing one (Govinden 2003, 259). Yet, Jesus appears to remain the ‘physician’. The poem does not make a more radical theological intervention, in which Jesus is imagined as a person living with HIV, or dying from AIDS, himself. This is significant, given that at the time there existed already a precedent for this. From the late 1990s, there was an

emerging discourse in Southern African theological and ecumenical circles deploying the metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ, and prophetically declaring the Body of Christ to be HIV positive (see Van Klinken 2008). Malawian theologians, Fulata Moyo and Dixie Moyo (2001:60), highlighted the controversial nature of this statement, when writing that the point has been reached ‘where it would not be blasphemous to say that the body of Christ has AIDS’. Even prior to that, by late 1994, the Anglican St George’s Cathedral in Cape Town found itself amid controversy because of the display of a painting, titled ‘Man of Sorrows’, by the American gay artist, W. Maxwell Lawton. The painting is a variation on the classical iconographic theme of the Man of Sorrows, or the Suffering Christ (*Christus dolens*). In addition to the traditional crown of thorns, the naked Christ in Lawton’s painting has dark red lesions all over his skin, instead of the traditional wounds of the crucifixion. His body is attached to an intravenous drip tube. Clearly, Lawton, who was openly HIV positive and who died in 2006, wanted to depict Jesus Christ as being in an advanced stage of AIDS, as reflected in the subtitle of his painting: ‘Christ with AIDS’. Displayed in the mid-1990s, when HIV and AIDS were surrounded by a strong culture of silence, stigma and taboo, and were often seen as a ‘disease of promiscuity’, the painting unsurprisingly sparked controversy, with people reportedly expressing their disgust, submitting complaints to the cathedral, and calling Lawton ‘a blasphemer, a heretic, a communist’ (AP 1994). Yet, Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town at that time, defended the painting, saying:

People have a stained-glass window image of Jesus – as Jesus with a halo, a kind of soup plate behind his head. That’s not how Jesus was. Jesus was an ordinary human being. And can you imagine what he looked like when Pilate produced him and said, ‘behold the man’, with a crown of thorns, with spittle on his face, with dried blood. He can’t have been a pretty sight, and this picture is saying: this Jesus is a Jesus who has solidarity with us, who has solidarity with people who have AIDS. And it is a wonderful picture! (AP 1994)

Tutu’s defence of the painting, and of its display in the cathedral, may not come as a surprise, given the track record he had established. In the years during apartheid, Tutu had made St George’s a centre of peaceful protest against white minority rule and the systematic injustices faced by South Africa’s predominantly black population. As outlined earlier, Tutu also has theologically condemned apartheid as well as heterosexism and homophobia as blasphemous ideologies.

Is Lawton a blasphemer, as some of his critics would have it, or is his work a prophetic denouncement of blasphemy à la Tutu – in this case, the blasphemous stigmatization of people living with HIV? Clearly, blasphemy is a concept that is ‘in the eyes and ears of the receiver’ (Sherwood 2021, 11). An artistic expression that one person considers blasphemous, can entail a profound theological meaning for another person. Yet, there is a strong likelihood that any expression associating Jesus Christ with the sexually transmittable disease of HIV is accused of being blasphemous. This likelihood is informed, of course, by the longstanding problem that Christianity has had in thinking about Jesus Christ as a sexual human being (Goss 2002, 113–69). It might have been her awareness of this problem that inspired Govinden to take a more cautious theological stance, choosing to present Jesus as a ‘physician’ bringing healing to persons living with HIV, rather than to

portray him as a person living with HIV himself. Doing so might also have been strategic: if this poem is part of what Ackermann (2006) has called ‘a feminist theology of praxis’ in the face of the HIV pandemic, concerned with bringing about change of attitudes in church and society, avoiding theological controversy can be tactical, given that the subject matter itself is already sensitive enough. To use a distinction made by South African theologian Gerald West (2018): Govinden’s poem can be seen as ‘improper’ for associating Jesus Christ with the taboo subject of HIV and AIDS, but is not necessarily ‘indecent’ as it avoids a direct association of Jesus with sex. Yet at the same time, the poem demonstrates West’s point that ‘the boundaries between the proper and the improper and the indecent were not fixed or stable’ (West 2018, 129).

‘Bearing the Stigmata’ does not go as far as directly suggesting that Jesus Christ himself might have HIV or AIDS. Or perhaps, it does, but rather subtly. In the final stanza, the You-figure alights from the cross and comes down the aisle, approaching the I-person in the pews. Is he heading towards them to alleviate their loneliness, overcome their isolation, share in their suffering – or perhaps even to become one with, and one of, them? The poem leaves this open to the imagination of the reader, with the sparsity of words allowing for ‘subtle subversion’ (Fox 2008). Thus, in a context where there is a prevalent discourse around HIV and AIDS as a ‘punishment from God’, the poem does present not only an important pastoral but also a critical theological intervention. Its suggestion that Jesus Christ seeks the company of, and is in solidarity with, those assumed to be on the receiving end of God’s condemnation, and that their suffering because of social and religious stigma somehow bears upon his suffering on the cross, can be seen as theologically prophetic in itself – or indeed as blasphemous, depending on one’s perspective. Feminist theologian Musa W. Dube has consistently called for an ‘inclusive and liberating theology’ in the context of the HIV epidemic, which is concerned with breaking the stigma around this disease. In her words, this is ‘a theology that eradicates the demarcation line of “us” and “them”, the “infected” and the “uninfected”, by being one with PLWHA [people living with HIV and Aids]’ (Dube 2008, 137). Govinden’s poem is a powerful contribution to such a theology. It movingly imagines Jesus Christ eradicating this demarcation line by alighting from the cross, incarnating again in a world deeply affected by a devastating, racialized and gendered pandemic. Thus, the crucified Christ becomes a compassionate healer taking away what earlier in the poem is described as ‘my cross of shame / uncleanness’, and taking this ‘uncleanness’ upon himself, in an act of in/decency.

‘Jesus Thesis’ – talking obscenities to theology

In November 2019, St George’s Cathedral in Cape Town featured another artistic expression that had the potential to cause controversy and give rise to accusations of blasphemy. The black queer performance artist and poet, Kopano Maroga, staged their performance and literary work titled ‘Jesus Thesis’, which was part of their practice-as-research with which they completed their Master of Arts in Theatre and Performance at the University of Cape Town. Fragments of the performance are included in a podcast interview with Maroga (Boulle 2021), while the text of the work, with images of the performance, was published in book form as *Jesus Thesis and Other Critical Fabulations* (Maroga 2020).

Commenting on the choice for St George’s as the venue for the performance, Maroga explicitly highlights the progressive history of this sacred building in South Africa’s social, political and religious landscape. Referring to its record of anti-apartheid activism and its

continued legacy of being inclusive and justice-seeking towards South Africa's racially, economically, and sexually marginalized communities, Maroga concludes: 'All the inscriptions of this space, alongside the contestation of what a church represents in our contemporary society in relation to poor people, queer people, black people, made it like energetically but also scenographically right' (Boulle 2021). Further reflecting on how their work as a black queer artist is informed by their biography as a so-called 'born-free' growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, Maroga points out that 'a lot of my political education and my political awareness actually came through the church' (Boulle 2021). For them, their religious upbringing in a black Christian space actually instilled in them, not only a radical political awareness, but also a queer sensitivity. Referring to the experience of embodied worship and the sense of community and belonging, Maroga reflects that within Christianity 'there is a radical political potential and it's necessarily queer' (Simond 2023). In this context, they also came to understand Jesus as a 'very queer, compelling, and radical figure' (ibid).

Through the 'Jesus Thesis' performance, Maroga seeks to offer an imaginative account of how Jesus spent his teenage and adolescent years, which are glossed over in the gospels. Theoretically, the creative construction of this account draws on two concepts derived from African American scholars: Audre Lorde's notion of biomythography (Lorde 1982), and Saidiya Hartman's notion of critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). As Maroga argues in their MA thesis and have discussed in various interviews, inspired by these concepts they engage in a rescripting of the life of Jesus of Nazareth that draws on their own life experiences as a queer black person growing up in post-apartheid South Africa. In their own theoretical reflection,

The implications of this kind of fabulation process disrupts the hegemony of accepted modes of knowing, the veracity of historical narratives, which in the case of *Jesus Thesis* would be the popular representation of the story of Jesus, and makes it possible for minoritarian subjects to exist within the dominant canons that are understood to belong to majoritarian subjects. It is in this way then not a 'reimagining' of the story of Jesus but an alternative reading of the Jesus story that can sit alongside the popular narrative of Jesus as a narrative that is equally as possible. (Maroga 2019, 36)

Maroga's theorizing here is reminiscent of what Althaus-Reid (2000, 113) has called 'per/verted readings' which offer 'options along the road of interpretation'. The performance includes a prose text where Maroga takes elements from their own life experiences to re-narrate the teenage and adolescent years of Jesus, weaving in biblical phrases and resulting in a text that is simultaneously ludicrous, moving and recognizable.² For instance, it reads:

At the age of fifteen, Jesus came out as gay to a congregation of friends and mentors at bible study camp. The congregation wept and Jesus body became fish and bread, and everyone ate and everyone was fed. (Boulle 2021)

Other parts in this prose capture experiences of first love and sexual encounters, as well as depression and mental illness. Reflecting on the significance of these experiences in their

² This prose text is not included in Maroga's book *Jesus Thesis*. Quotations here are from the performance, as recorded in the podcast interview (Boulle 2021).

own biography, Maroga comments that they were beautiful, painful or traumatic, but each of them deeply formative: 'they have turned me in the person that I am today' and 'they opened up something in me, and I believe that it is divinity'. These autobiographical experiences of queer joy and trauma provide Maroga with a key to understanding the 'mystery' of Jesus: how did Jesus become the person he turned out to be, what 'activated' his divinity and what made him so 'fucking radical' (Boulle 2021)? In Maroga's reading, it appears to be the vulnerability inherent to embodied, relational and erotic human existence that, when radically embraced, has the potential to transfigure queer folks, like Jesus, into divinity.

In the title poem 'Jesus Thesis' that is at the heart of the performance, and which opens the book, Maroga proffers a highly sexualized alternative reading of the Jesus story. It is an attempt to disrupt the hegemonic historical depiction of Jesus as devoid of sex in the sense of sexual experiences and erotic desires. As queer theologian Robert Goss (2002, 113) has argued, 'for nearly two millennia, elite Christians kept Jesus and sexuality totally apart from each other in order to maintain their purity agenda.' An illustration of this is a recent complaint to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission in South Africa, regarding a scene in the TV series *Californication* about Jesus coming off the cross and approaching a young woman in a sexual manner, which according to the complainant was a case of blasphemy (see Nadar and Jodamus 2019, 13). Maroga's poem uses an abundance of sexually charged 'indecent' imagery, derived from the worlds of gay sex, drag culture, BDSM, and polyamory. Thus, it takes 'the path of obscenity, as a methodology, to find more radical per/versions of Christ' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 112). The poem opens with the lines: 'Jesus was a faggot / Jesus liked it rough / Jesus was a masochist / Jesus liked whips and chains (sometimes nails)'. It is as if Maroga has read and taken at heart Althaus-Reid's advice that 'indecent theologians should speak clearly for people who like things clear.' She continues by saying: 'To say "God the Faggot" is to claim not only a sexuality which has been marginalized and ridiculed, but a different epistemology and also a challenge to positively appropriate a word which has been used with contempt to humiliate people' (Althaus-Reid 2000, 95). Maroga's poem evokes an epistemology in which sexual practices considered as indecent according to what Althaus-Reid would call T-theology (patriarchal, heterosexist, white-supremacist) provide knowledge and understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, but also vice-versa, with the life of Jesus becoming a mirror for the experiences of people marginalized because of their sexual choices and gendered expressions.

In a particularly evocative image, the second stanza refers to Jesus as 'femme' and with a mere few lines draws a parallel between the crucifixion and contemporary conversion therapy through which sexually and gender divergent bodies are being corrected into heteronormative subjects: 'Jesus had wrists too limp / they had to nail them straight / send him to conversion therapy'. The limp wrists refer to the bodily gesture also known as the 'gay hand', which has become a stereotypical image in popular culture of effeminate gay and gender-queer men. Projecting this image onto Jesus, and imagining the crucifixion as a way to 'straight-nail' him, brings to mind the ongoing history through which the bodies of gender-queer people have been and still are violently forced to fit a heteronormative model of masculine or feminine bodily performance. The most recent chapter in this history is 'conversion therapy', a pseudo-psychological model popular in evangelical Christian circles that seeks to transform sexual and gender non-conforming persons into normatively gendered and desiring subjects. In a commentary on their *Jesus Thesis* performance, Maroga points out that in South Africa and elsewhere, this history of policing the gendered performance of

bodies has a strong racial dimension: ‘What was very present in my mind was the way in which black people like me, queer femme black people, are objectified, because often in history that kind of presentation of my body is for the purposes and extraction of joy of white people, of whiteness, to enjoy the deformity of my body, the grotesqueness of my body’ (Boulle 2021). Presenting the femme Jesus as a counter-narrative, and as a model of identification for gender-queer folks, the third stanza of the poem refers to Jesus as a drag queen. It is an image that captures the ambiguous, fluid and at times playful gendered representations of Jesus Christ in Christian traditions where, as Graham Ward (1999, 284) has put it, ‘the maleness of Christ’s body is constantly being displaced’.

The heteronormative norm of monogamous sexual relationships is challenged in the final part of the poem. The last-but-final stanza reclaims orgiastic and promiscuous sex as something positive and life-giving: ‘Jesus was a cum slut / a holy ghost covered in semen / Jesus let so many men inside of him / he became an ocean’. The sex positivity, as reflected in the reclaiming of the word ‘slut’, that speaks from these lines would have been unimaginable in the context of the HIV pandemic reflected in Govinden’s poem, where sex was associated with risk of disease and became a ‘deadly desire’ (Antonio 2010). As such, ‘Jesus Thesis’ can also be seen as a product of the post-AIDS era, where – thanks to the availability of anti-retroviral treatment and pre-exposure prophylaxis – HIV has become a preventable and manageable disease. The poem speaks back to the moralizing message of HIV prevention campaigns from the 1990s and 2000s, which encouraged people to ‘Abstain, Be faithful, or Condomize’ – and it radically owns the stereotypical narrative of gay sexuality as promiscuous. Through its explicit, non-vanilla but kinky sexual images, Maroga’s poem pushes the boundaries of the conversation about sexuality in religious circles. In South Africa and elsewhere, as far as some Christian denominations have hesitantly come to recognize same-sex relationships, it is on the basis of a heteronormative expectation of relationships of fidelity and exclusive love. Yet, Maroga disrupts this discourse, especially in the final stanza which imagines the *kenosis* (sacrificial self-giving) of Christ as a radical polyamorous act: ‘Jesus practiced ethical polyamory / he gave until there was nothing left of him’. Although the poem does not directly link Jesus to God, Maroga in a commentary about the *Jesus Thesis* performance has made this connection, expressing their interest in the divinity of Jesus Christ. With that in mind, the image of Jesus’ love as being polyamorous can be seen as what Althaus-Reid (2003, 57) has described as a ‘theological presentation of God as an immoderate, polyamorous God, whose self is composed in relation to multiple embraces and sexual indefinities beyond oneness, and beyond dual models of loving relationships’.

Kopano’s ‘Jesus Thesis’ not only pushes the boundaries of the conversation about sexuality in Christian circles, but also of the emerging discourse of queer theology in South Africa. In recent years, several South African theologians, especially of a younger generation, have engaged in the development of a queer theology for the South African context, building on traditions of black, feminist and liberation theologies in the country (e.g. see Davids 2020; Thyssen 2022; Van der Walt 2020; West 2016). Yet, perhaps because many of these authors have ongoing commitments to the church and seek to bring about change within those institutional settings, their theological interventions are not always as radically transgressive as Maroga’s. Through the creative freedom of poetry and performance arts, the latter ‘talks obscenities to theology’ (Althaus-Reid 2000, 87), and doing so, raises fundamental questions about which bodies, experiences and desires are part of the queer theological conversation, and which are not. Thus, they contribute to the ‘broadening [of] our conceptualization of

queer Christian subjectivities in Southern Africa’ and help to ‘imagine new possibilities of queering religion and sexuality’ (Robertson 2021, 9).

Conclusion: In/decenting theology

The two poems discussed in this chapter both invoke the figure of Jesus Christ in relation to issues of sexuality, building on South African traditions of black theology and politically engaged Christianity. Where these traditions have historically been primarily concerned with justice and liberation for racially marginalized communities, the poems in question push the boundaries by specifically representing the experiences of black people that are further marginalized in the church and society because of their HIV status and sexual preferences. Extending the history of contextual appropriations of Jesus Christ for concrete socio-political struggles in South Africa, the poems make creative connections between Jesus and people living with HIV, and between Jesus and queer folks, respectively. Both associations have the risk of being seen as offensive and potentially blasphemous, exactly because the groups in question are widely seen as sexually transgressive, which is the cause of their experiences of stigmatization and exclusion, and because dominant Christian traditions might acknowledge the humanity of Jesus Christ but detach this from sexuality. The two poems navigate this risk in very different ways. Govinden’s poem seeks to escape it, by avoiding a direct identification of Jesus Christ with persons living with HIV, yet while more subtly suggesting that the demarcation line between them is being eradicated. Maroga, on the other hand, appears to embrace this risk deliberately and wholeheartedly, using the most sexually explicit imagery in relation to Jesus Christ, in the tradition of queer art that seeks to push boundaries by causing offence. These differences between the two poems can be explained by various factors, such as the generational difference between the two writers, their different theological orientations and varying investments in the church as an institution, their different political objectives, and the different contexts – of HIV advocacy, and of queer politics – in which they operate and aim to contribute to.

It may be tempting to simply argue that Govinden’s poem is rather ‘decent’, and Maroga’s deliberately ‘indecent’. However, earlier in this chapter, I quoted Sherwood’s comment that blasphemy is in the eyes and ears of the receiver, and I have suggested that the same applies to indecency. What is in/decent for one person and in one context, may be different for another person and in another context. Indeed, in South Africa and elsewhere, the boundaries of in/decent are not fixed but dynamic, and they are shifting among others as a result of the HIV epidemic which has opened up space for conversations about previously unspeakable issues of sex and sexuality (West 2018). In/decenting theology is about including the experiences, voices and perspectives of those hitherto excluded from, or marginalized in, mainstream religious circles and dominant theological traditions, and doing so in ways that interrogate the ideologies and structures that maintain and reinforce racism, patriarchy, HIV-stigma, heteronormativity, queerphobia and sex negativity. In different ways, both Govinden’s and Maroga’s poetry make creative and critical contributions to this project in the South African context. Either through subtle subversion, or through radical transgression, they continue and extend the tradition of ‘poetics of resistance’ in this country. Doing so, they demonstrate the diverse forms that resistance of gender and sexuality norms

can take, and the diverse ways in which poetry can be a means of religious creativity as well as theological critique and imagination.³

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³ I am grateful to my South African colleagues, Megan Robertson and Johnathan Jodamus, and my co-editors Mariecke van den Berg and Nella van den Brandt, who provided insightful feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.

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