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Mourning and haunting in remembering, resistance, and a reimagining of South African queer Black life

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This article explores how haunting and mourning in creative productions—states signifying "sitting with" rather than moving on—create queer potentialities of being in the face of homophobic violence and black death. The enduring legacies of racial and sexual violence, alongside calls for decolonisation, shape the work of queer black artists in South Africa. Although religion plays a significant role in shaping attitudes toward race and sexuality, its presence in creative works by queer black artists remains relatively underexplored. Through an analysis of South African producer, director, and actor Enrico Hartzenberg's film and theatre work, I explore how engaging with the Gothic through depictions of death, grief, and revenge—expands the sacred resources available in navigating queer Africanness. By challenging Christian-centric, reconciliation-focused narratives, Hartzenberg critiques the post-apartheid nation-state's emphasis on reconciliation. His invitation to sit with queer grief and trauma reimagines queer black futurity decoupled from colonial modernity's notions of progress.

Keywords: Gothic, Queer grief, futurity, violence, religion, haunting

Introduction

'*In veneration of Elizabeth Hartzenberg'*[i]

In post-apartheid South Africa, the narrative of national healing has often relied on ideals of reconciliation and forgiveness, rooted in Christian-centric discourses which cohere in the vision of the rainbow nation. First articulated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the concept of rainbow nationalism envisions unity in its racial diversity, primarily through a commitment to "reconciliation, non-racialism, liberal democracy, and a respect for universal human rights" (Mogomotsi 2023, 172). However, this depiction of a post-apartheid South Africa has obscured the ongoing realities of racial, sexual, and structural violence, particularly for Black queer individuals. This article argues that performance art, specifically within the Gothic genre, offers a powerful

medium for critiquing these persistent legacies and imagining alternative queer Black futurities. Focusing on Enrico Hartzenberg's *Die Lug is Blou*[ii] and *Sister Dinges*[iii], I explore how his work uses horror, trauma, and religious symbolism to narrate and complicate understandings of lived experience of being Black[iv] and queer in South Africa. Drawing on interviews with the artist and conceptual framings of mourning (Butler 2004; 2009; Sharpe 2016), haunting (Gordon 1997; Tuck & Ree 2013; Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2013), and queer utopia (Muñoz 2009), I show how Hartzenberg's art resists linear narratives of progress and instead embraces a futurity grounded in the affective present. I argue that Hartzenberg's invitation to 'sit with' queer grief and trauma disrupts a post-apartheid national narrative centred on Christian normative ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness. In so doing, this critique challenges the construction of the 'new South Africa', creating space to imagine queer Black futurity that resists colonial modernity's emphasis on linear progress and erasure of trauma. The article proceeds by first contextualising the limitations of rainbow nationalism for imagining futurity and its co-optation of LGBTQI+ rights, then turns to discuss the gothic as a genre with queer sacred potential, before analysing Hartzenberg's work in detail.

Rainbow Nationalism and Queer Futures

Despite the formal end of apartheid and constitutional protections for sexual orientation, the lived experiences of Black queer South Africans remain marked by exclusion, violence, and marginalisation. This vulnerability is neither monolithic nor evenly distributed. It is mediated by intersecting factors such as class position, gender identity, and transness, as well as the lived realities of Black lesbian women, whose exposure to harm is shaped by both patriarchal and racialised structures. These intersections produce layered forms of precarity, where some bodies are rendered more intelligible and protected than others within queer and national imaginaries. Such

differentiated vulnerability underscores why the promise of inclusive belonging embedded in rainbow discourse has failed to materialise for many.

There has been a general disillusionment with the rainbow nation ideal, in large part as Olerato Kau Mogomotsi (2023) explains, because it has been promoted as the current ontological state of a post-apartheid South Africa rather than a utopian ideal that needs to be worked towards. Therefore, what is seen now as a rushed move to celebrate rainbowism has been critiqued for being built on the obscuration of systemic trauma. This is perhaps best exemplified in critiques of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), headed up by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and widely celebrated as one of the key processes which ushered in a peaceful transition to South African democracy. The commission, established in 1995 as a court-like process, encouraged perpetrators of apartheid-era human rights violations to confess to both the committee (and sometimes their victims), in order to apply for amnesty and achieve some form of reconciliation. The TRC was widely informed by Christian principles of forgiveness, confession, absolution, and reconciliation and a move towards stability (see Shore 2016). It was a process based on truth telling but carried with it the danger of implying a completeness to the process of ushering in a 'post' apartheid state (de Kok 1998, 61). Whilst religious diversity and the marking of new sacred sites was an important part of the post-apartheid agenda, these discourses and memorialisations have largely been appropriated for the marking of national healing (Chidester 2012, 102). LGBTIQ+ rights have also been coopted in this narrative of completed forgiveness and realised utopia.

In developing the concept of rainbow-washing, Nyx McLean (2019) argues that the rainbow project has constructed ideas of a unified, homogenous queer group in post-apartheid South Africa in ways which have erased the enduring racial and socio-

economic legacies which uniquely impact Black queer people. In fact, despite the dissolution of the apartheid regime, and the constitutional freedoms provided based on sexual orientation in South Africa, Black queer people in particular have been shown to lack the economic and cultural capital to access those freedoms (Livermon 2012, 302) and continue to experience disproportionate amounts of homophobia-related violence (Judge 2018). As Melanie Judge (2018, 131) states, "much like the transition to democracy itself, LGBTI identity-based politics has relied on a promise of unity and solidarity that it ultimately cannot deliver." In addition, Pumla Gqola (2001) notes that the rainbow metaphor has been appropriated beyond race to encompass gender and sexuality, often in ways that obscure the lived realities of queer people of colour. These examples illustrate that while the original vision of the rainbow nation was primarily racial, its symbolic elasticity has allowed it to be mobilized in discourses of sexual diversity—albeit superficially and unevenly.

To find new ways of making sense of Black queer experience in South Africa, I turn to Utopian Studies and particularly the concept of concrete utopias as developed by Ernst Bloch (1986) and furthered by José Esteban Muñoz's (2009). This conceptualisation of utopia insists that alternative worlds must not only be imagined but created, and that future possibilities are contained in the affective and material conditions of the present (Shahar, 2024). Muñoz (2009) demonstrates how queer performance and aesthetics become sites where concrete utopias are enacted, in other words, where glimpses of the future can be found. In building on these ideas, I turn to the gothic as a queer performance that holds potential for a worldmaking that incorporates the present experiences of queer, Black people in South Africa into the continuous process of creating African queer futurity.

South African Gothic and its Sacred Queer Potential

The gothic has not traditionally been a label embraced by South African creators, writers, and artists. Here, I use *gothic* to describe a mode that mobilises the uncanny, the monstrous, and atmospheres of dread to give form to social fears and anxieties. While it is often associated with subtlety, ambiguity, and haunting, the gothic can also deploy overtly horrific or violent events—such as torture, bodily violation, or encounters with the monstrous—to expose what societies find intolerable or difficult to articulate. Closely related, *horror* tends to foreground visceral fear or shock, though the boundaries between the two are porous. Understood in this way, earlier South African literary works can also be reread through a gothic lens. As Rebecca Duncan (2014) argues, authors such as Zoë Wicomb and Nadine Gordimer have drawn extensively on the genre's resources namely, torture, terror and the representation of the unspeakable. Building on this, scholars have reinterpreted South African cultural production as participating in "postcolonial gothic" (Gaylard 2008) or an "Afro-gothic" (De Bruijn 2013). Gaylard suggests that the gothic becomes a way to express the unresolved violences and spectral legacies of colonialism and apartheid, while De Bruijn highlights how African experiences of fragmentation, ancestral presence, and embodied trauma reshape the genre into something distinctly local. Duncan (2014, 201) further notes that the gothic offers South African writers has been its ability deal with the anxieties of social and political change, a powerful means to grapple with social and political transition by portraying what is otherwise incomprehensible or intolerable in forms that are unstable and uncontrollably excessive. As I will show in relation to Hartzenberg's work, the gothic becomes a generative aesthetic for making visible the trauma and persistent anxieties shaping the lived realities of many Black queer South Africans despite the promises of a 'post'-apartheid future.

As the excess is, in Duncan's analysis, "always related to violence in some way" (Duncan 2014, 201), and as it features strongly in my analysis, it is important to unpick this characteristic of the gothic if I am to make the argument that any utopic potentiality is possible. For Duncan, this excess emerges from the violence of the colonial encounter and the processes through which the Other is produced. She shows how the gothic renders visible forms of violence that are foundational to South African histories yet often suppressed in dominant national narratives. Duncan (2014, 203) argues that gothic characters and themes in South African novels disrupt easily confined narrow histories by opening up new and alternative perspectives for telling history. As this revisionist history takes shape, the violence and oppression that were once hidden or treated as excess, like exploitation, displacement, and heteropatriarchy, are transformed. They become part of a new imagining of complex narratives that do not repeat the same exclusions and boundaries that caused harm in the first place (Duncan 2014, 203). This attention to excess and the unsettling of dominant narratives is echoed in other accounts of affect in South African cultural forms. Helen Strauss (2022, Introduction, para.6) positions this affective excess as "*wayward feelings* – defined broadly as those affective shifts that are difficult to control or predict, that fail to conform to publicly prescribed or sanctioned feeling, that reach beyond confinement and capture". As Strauss argues, the audio-visual forms she explores articulate these feelings and challenge dominant narratives of harmony and progress.

Building on both Duncan and Strauss, I argue that the gothic's capacity to render excess visible also enables a confrontation with the forms of symbolic "washing" performed by rainbow-nationalism and mainstream LGBTQI+ rights discourses in post-apartheid South Africa. By bringing to the surface what these narratives smooth over,

the gothic allows for a re-engagement with the persistence of harm and the possibilities of imagining otherwise.

In arguing for this reimagining, I also turn to the gothic's potential to offer new possibilities of religious meaning-making. Religious concepts have not only shaped the narratives of completeness surrounding the rainbow-nation ideal but also continue to shape beliefs around gender and sexuality (Mthembu 2023). It is therefore increasingly important to find alternative affirming religious resources. In particular, in Africa, given the persistent discourse positioning homosexuality as unAfrican and unChristian, creative gothic productions have been shown to provide an alternative and queer resource.

An example of this queer African gothic framing can be read in Lindsey Green-Simms (2022, 42) analysis of a Senegalese and African Francophone film, *Karmen Geï* and the Ghanaian film, *Jezebel*, and focuses on "spectraphilic" characters. Green-Simms (2022, 54) demonstrates that characters in these films who are not of this world allow for transgressive possibilities of being. For example, the water spirit Kumba Kastel in *Karmen* by being a source of wealth, insanity and death by seducing both men and women while Mami Wata in both *Karmen Geï* and *Jezebel* is portrayed as a force that enables women to commit both good and evil acts. These spectral characters create space for African queerness which is more often hidden beneath the surface (Green-Simms 2022, 58).

Although Christian-influenced notions of "religious orthodoxy and rationality" in South Africa have tended to silence or pathologise spiritual presences outside their sanctioned cosmology (Wallace 2015), this article examines how the gothic in South African cultural productions reclaims such spectral and unruly forms for the purposes of queer religious meaning-making and the imagining of utopic possibilities. In doing so, it

contributes to broader conversations in cultural studies that explore the utility of various forms of art in making (in)visible[v] the narratives of queer persons in post-apartheid South Africa, and their potential to disrupt, undo and reimagine more just social worlds (Sonnekus 2024; Scott 2021; Sizemore-Barber 2020). It also engages the work of scholars of religion and sexuality in Africa who analyse how these themes are represented in and (re)constructed through diverse artistic expressions (van Klinken 2019; Azuah 2019; Ncube 2022). It highlights how performance art can serve as a tool for remembering, resistance, and the reimagining of queer Black life in South Africa. Ultimately, this work seeks to expand the resources available for thinking about queer futurity in African contexts, futures that are not deferred, but lived and felt in the now.

Approaching the Artist and the Texts

I now turn to Hartzenberg's theatre play and short film, situating them as sites of struggle for cultural and sacred meaning-making. My analysis of the play is informed by the script, images, and conversations with Hartzenberg, as the performance itself was staged (prior to my meeting Hartzenberg) but not recorded. The film, however, is accessible in recorded form and complements my discussions with Hartzenberg. I conducted two in-depth interviews with him in 2023 and 2024, each lasting several hours. These interviews explored his artistic journey and life history, including his upbringing in Kuilsriver, an area on the outskirts of Cape Town. These interactions play a significant role in shaping my understanding of the themes and motivations in his work, as well as the broader socio-political and affective contexts he navigates.

During our interviews, Hartzenberg repeatedly returned to experiences of growing up queer and Coloured[vi] within Christian-inflected moral worlds marked by silence and discipline. He spoke of early encounters with violence during which his mother's protection provided safety, but her eventual loss lingered in everyday life as an

enduring absence. These memories, he noted, continue to shape his attraction to the gothic and to figures of revenge and haunting. Such moments illuminate how his artistic practice emerges from lived engagements with the sacred, where ghosts, spirits, and ancestors are not metaphors but active presences.

I draw on a lived religion approach to position the artist, his lived experience and his everyday experience of the sacred as essential to the meanings generated through his work. I argue that the presence of ghosts, spirits, and ancestors in the cultural productions co-produce the meanings audiences and artists attach to their everyday experiences and understandings of the spectral. The everyday thus co-constitutes the affective and political power of these texts.

While poststructuralist critiques of authorship, notably Barthes' (1967) "death of the author", have offered valuable tools for textual analysis, they risk erasing the embodied, situated knowledge of artists whose identities are politically and epistemologically significant. In this analysis, divorcing the artist from the work would obscure the queer Black meaning-making that is central to the performance. As Basielier (2019, 998) argues, the performer's social position and intent are integral to assessing subversive potential. Thus, I intentionally re-centre the artist, resisting a depoliticised reading and instead foregrounding the epistemic agency of queer Black performers. In addition, I see my interactions with Hartzenberg as pedagogical and taking seriously a participatory approach to research.[vii] This does not mean I take-for-granted his explanations of the meaning of films, nor has he in his encounters imposed a particular meaning on my framing. Instead, we have encountered meaning in our engagements with each other, with his intention framing some of the ways in which I read the film. This co-reading provides an innovative methodological tool to uncover the liberatory potential of the arts and the role of artists in South Africa.

In my analysis to follow I first describe the storyline of the play and the film, each of which are followed by analysis of the role that the gothic resources of haunting, violence, mourning, and revenge might play in shaping imaginings of queer Black futurity.

Die Lug is Blou

Die Lug is Blou is set in Worcester, a town nestled in the interior of South Africa's Western Cape province, encircled by mountain ranges like the Hex River Mountains (literally "Witch River Mountains"). The Hex River's name originates from a local tale about a Dutch girl who went mad after her lover's death. She was locked away but died while attempting to escape, and her spirit is said to haunt the surrounding mountain ranges. With the foggy, eery aesthetics familiar to the valley and a history filled with spectral legends, this setting provides an apt background for Hartzenberg's ghost story.

Further adding to the gothic setting for Hartzenberg personally is his experience during a visit to Worcester of homophobic abuse, an incident which inspired him to write this play. In Hartzenberg's own understanding, the setting of the play, a valley overladen with mist, suggests a metaphor for "young [gay] boys…asking for freedom amongst [the mist]." While Hartzenberg does not suggest that homophobic violence exists only in rural and semi-rural settings, he gives rare attention to alternative contexts of queer life for people of colour (and specifically Coloured people who are featured in the play), outside of the urban hub of Cape Town. Cape Town dominates understandings of queer life in the Western Cape having been commercialised as Africa's gay capital (see Camminga and Matebeni, 2023).

The plot unfolds through interactions between Michael and his friend Samantha. Samantha, who overheard her parents arguing about her father's sexual affairs with

men, tries to understand her father's actions by asking Michael why he is homosexual. She reflects a belief that homosexuality is caused by abuse or rape, something which offends Michael. Samantha also seems to suspect that Michael had something to do with Claudine's death, which was a major news story in the town.

To elicit the truth, Samantha pressures Michael into playing a game of *Glasie Glasie*. Translated to "Glass Glass," this game has various forms in South Africa and is played most often by schoolchildren to contact spirits or ghosts. Claudine's ghost makes herself and her story visible to Samantha, albeit in fragmented ways through whispers, glimpses in mirrors, and rattling boxes.

Eventually, Samantha confronts Michael, who confesses that he killed his sister after she bullied him. He also admits that violence had become his means of surviving the bullying he experienced at school, home, in his community, and ultimately in response to Samantha's father who tried to sexually violate him the previous night. The play ends with the suggestion that Michael is about to be arrested for his murder, and Claudine's ghost finally exits the stage.

Violence, Haunting, and Queering Religion

Horror relies on contextually relevant devices (Cowan 2023), and in South Africa, beliefs in ancestors, spirits, and ghosts, as well as experiences of gendered, sexual, and racialised violence, permeate the everyday. Yet despite their familiarity, both violence and spectral presence tend to be obscured or strategically sidelined within queer political imaginaries. *Die Lug is Blou* is horrific because of the ways in which it showcases violence, a theme woven throughout the storyline, and the haunting of Claudene's ghost. I argue here that these devices work alongside each other to create more expansive understandings of Black, queer, African lives and to imagine these as part of futurity in new ways.

By the end of the play a number of characters are revealed to have been victims and perpetrators of violence. Claudine both inflicted violence on her brother and experienced violence and death at her brother's retaliatory hand. Michael reveals the full extent of the violence he experienced both at school and at home, and eventually by Samantha's father. He however, resorts to violence to survive, a resource he learnt at school to attempt to escape bullying, but which eventually leads him to murder his sister and best friend's father. Samantha's father is also a victim and perpetrator of violence. Michael reveals to Sam that he too was tortured (there is a suggestion that he was raped) by three white men when he was 13 years old, during the time of apartheid, and that this influenced his abuse of other men.

We see within these narratives Hartzenberg's attempts to make sense of the violence which surrounded his realities of growing up in Coloured neighbourhoods in South Africa, often characterised by gang and other violence. On first encounter, the play seems to merely feed into existing tropes which homogenise queerness and Blackness as evil and dangerous, particularly for women. In other words, spectacularising violence runs the risk of detaching it from the everyday, making it seem removed from normal experience (Judge 2018). This distancing allows violence to function as a spectacle that further marginalises already vulnerable bodies, presenting their suffering, and the structural forces behind it, as disconnected from society (Judge 2018, 83; Kiguwa 2020, 142). However, when read through a queer gothic lens, this portrayal of violent horror can do more than simply reproduce harmful narratives which marks the Black queer for murder.

In her framing of the marriage-murder paradox Melanie Judge argues that racialised discourses around homophobic violence in South Africa have shaped a politicised imagination in which the lives of queers of colour are framed around murder,

while White queer lives are framed around marriage, "respectively marking those with and without futures" (Judge 2018, 132). The challenge in Judge's argument is not to obscure the very real death and violence experienced by Black queer people. Rather, she interrogates how homophobic violence is obscured by being naturalised as part of the Black experience alone. The task, then, is to expand our discourses and imaginations of futurity to include these realities alongside experiences of joy, frivolity, and mundanity. The idea of haunting, I argue, imagines such a futurity.

Violence is a central feature of the gothic, and it can be used by writers and producers not only to affirm dominant values but also to interrogate and unsettle them. In *Die Lug is Blou*, the ghost of Claudine becomes a hopeful figure, signalling representations of violence that move beyond the marriage-murder paradox. Her spectral presence reveals the truth behind the violence inflicted on various characters, offering a lens through which suppressed or unacknowledged social injustices continue to shape the present (Derrida 1994; Gordon 1997; Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren 2013; Tuck & Ree 2013). Haunting, in this sense, complicates the murder side of the paradox, where a future seems impossible, by imagining a temporality beyond and with death. As Muñoz (2009: 4) suggests, ghosts as metaphor encapsulate his idea of "concrete utopias" – visions of futurity that emerge by moving beyond the limitations of the here and now.

In *Die Lug is Blou*, connections with ghosts become a search for acknowledgment and mattering. The play suggests that violence and trauma do not cease to matter after death but continue to affect both the living and the dead in sensorial and affective ways. For Claudine, beyond death is when she come to recognise her past blindness to Michael's suffering and apologises:

En as ons weer ontmoet, Michael / *And if we meet again, Michael*

Ek sal jammer sê / *I will say sorry*

Ek het nie geweet nie / *I didn't know*

Ek was nie bewus / *I was not aware*

Ek het my oë toe gemaak. / *I closed my eyes.*

Yet, this is not presented as a neat resolution. Michael, while showing some regret, does not respond by apologising for murdering his sister, and in fact resorts to violence again when confronted with Samantha's father's sexual abuse. Claudine is not whisked away to a utopian afterlife despite the common trope associated with ghostly resolution. Instead, we remain in a liminal queer temporality, struck by the violence experienced by both Claudine and Michael, yet, invited to imagine a different future now that their traumas have been revealed and insisted upon as mattering. As Duncan (2018, 202-203) posits, "In the first instance, gothic exposes concealed violences, demanding that these be attended to."

While it may be uncomfortable to view violence as a form of resistance, Michael resists assimilation into the modes of forgiveness and liberation placed on the homogenising narrative of a rainbow-washed queer South Africa. As he says, "*Vergifnis is nie vir almal nie*/ Forgiveness is not for everyone*". Both Michael and Claudine seek to make their pain visible, to show how it constructs monstrosity. Their experiences of violence are not naturalised or dismissed but interrogated.

This is placed in tension with Christian motifs in the play where prayers and references to God evoke hopes of escape, redemption, and closure. Yet the spectral elements return us to a temporality where past, present and future collide. The open-endedness of the play warns that haunting will persist if systemic issues remain unaddressed. They do not want their pain glossed over, but heard, seen, and recognised as mattering. This can be read as a commentary on the making of monsters (both Black and queer) in South Africa, and as a form of unsettling resistance to systemic cycles of

violence. Hil Malatino (2025, 69) explores the uses of monstrosity in queer theory, arguing that to embrace one's status as a "made thing" is to reject the fallacies of autonomy, individualism, and self-sovereignty. Michael and Claudine's journey reflects this: a coming to grips with their status as made things and embracing the failure to assimilate to hegemonic modes of belonging. This is evident in a scene where Michael sits at the mirror and asks: "Ek wonder of die spieël deur ons kan sien? Sien vir wie ons regtig is. / I wonder if the mirror can see through us? See who we really are." Later, confronting the disturbing nature of his actions, he explains that he was driven to hurt and kill by the "stink" planted on him by others':

> *Ek het gestink van al die goed wat mense aan my gedoen het en die Lugte was regtig*
> *blou toe dit vir my sê 'Uit met jou!'* / I really stank from all the things people did to me,
> and the sky was really blue when it said to me 'Out with you!'
> *Dienkie – Ek het nie dit bedoel nie.* / Dienkie – I didn't mean to.

 This form of resistance, while uncomfortable, challenges us to consider how violence is shaped by heteronormative and racialised forces of erasure. As Enrico said in our interview, "It's [violence] always around me, you know, and violence has also made me angry towards certain circumstances. Uhm, so I don't necessarily write so much about violence – I write ways to deconstruct violence."

Foregrounding that which is excessive and concealed—violence and ghosts—*Die Lug is Blou* contributes to queer of colour worldmaking by offering resources through which queer futurity can be (re)imagined. This is, as Green-Simms (2022, 61-62) describes, "a more slippery queer future, a future related to pasts where 'impossible Africans' might find kindred spirits."

Sister Dinges

Sister Dinges is a short film which Hartzenberg premiered in 2024 both as filmmaker and lead actor. The film follows the main character, Marshall, who embarks on a journey of revenge after being called "Sister Dinges", a derogatory term used to refer to a queer person as explained by an intertitle at the beginning of the film. Marshall's need for revenge is depicted as he confronts the antagonist who hurled the slur and who the audience learns is concealing his own queer sexuality by vilifying Marshall. This revenge narrative is depicted alongside Marshall's experience of grief, after recently losing his mother and trying to arrange the funeral with family members who reject his plans.

Marshall's narrative intertwines his quest for revenge against the person who demeans him and his grief for his mother, who once provided him solace from homophobic bullying. In our interviews we discussed how this echoes Hartzenberg's own relationship with his mother who had died a week before he filmed a scene where he grieves her while sitting in the bath. Here, as other Black queer films have done, the divisions between "imaginative meanderings and factual documentations melt away" (Price 2022). This blurring of personal and fictional narratives evokes the themes of haunting and unresolved grief prevalent in queer representations. The film challenges traditional models of grief, particularly Freud's linear stages from denial to acceptance. Instead, using cue cards throughout the film, Hartzenberg traces Marshall's journey from acceptance toward denial, emphasising that grief is not a linear journey but a continuous, unresolved process.

Mourning, Revenge and Incompleteness

The term "dinges" serves as a crucial motif in the film. *Dinges* can be literally translated to mean 'thing', used in South Africa by speakers of various local languages

when the name of something cannot be recalled, or "in place of a word which is considered indecent" (dsae 2023). In the context of Marshall's experience, being labelled "Sister Dinges" positions him as hypervisible in relation to heteronormative norms of masculinity yet simultaneously invisible, a 'thing' stripped of identity, too indecent to be remembered. This plays with ideas in literature on queer mourning where queer lives are, as Butler (2009) states, ungrievable – they cannot be remembered.

Mourning, particularly in queer of colour theory, resists the conventional trajectory of moving on. For Christina Sharpe (2016) mourning is not only a response to loss but a continuous engagement with the ongoing effects of racial violence and the afterlives of slavery, captured in her concept of "the wake." In this essay, I use mourning to refer to this lingering grief. It is a conceptualisation of mourning that "refus[es] Sigmund Freud's binary formulation of mourning as normal grief and melancholia as pathological, unresolved grief" (Clarke 2017, 96). Here, mourning becomes inseparable from Black queer life, a mode of survival and resistance in the face of persistent racialised and gendered violence. Sharpe's (2016) "wake work" asks us to remain attuned to minimised losses, acknowledging them as elements of structural violence. This reframing of mourning as a communal practice of bearing witness opposes the erasure often imposed on Black lives. I suggest that gothic forms can contribute to this "wake work" in the South African context. Rather than offering closure or resolution, the gothic opens space for mourning histories that resist being neatly archived or resolved. It does this in three significant ways.

First, Black queer mourning resists closure because it is inseparable from structural violence and denied futures. In Sister Dinges, Marshall grieves not only his mother but also the loss of familial love and protection, and the futures foreclosed by systemic exclusion. His grief is anticipatory and self-reflexive as he mourns the lives he

could have lived and the freedom he was denied. Something which Hartzenberg too experienced when he lost his mother. This challenges narratives that frame grief as something to "move past" because the loss is constitutive of identity and temporality. Black queer grief is distinctive because it negotiates intersecting exclusions and temporal ruptures. Hartzenberg's work exemplifies this by queering grief into a lingering and resistant practice, one that refuses resolution and imagines futures with our ghosts.

This refusal of closure is powerfully enacted in Sister Dinges, which opens with Marshall leaving a voicemail for his deceased mother. As images of Hartzenberg's real mother appear on screen, Marshall apologises for not being with her in her final days and promises to honour her wishes for her funeral, despite his family's rejection of him due to his sexuality. This intimate conversation with the dead echoes Blake Paxton's (2014) account of speaking with his deceased mother in *Queerly Conversing with the Dead,* where he explores the transformative potential of lingering in grief in this way. Paxton challenges the binary of either moving on or being pathologically stuck in mourning, suggesting instead that queering grief allows for immersion in sorrow as a means of connection, healing, and even wholeness.

Second, inside/outside familial dynamics complicate this grief. Conventional mourning narratives rely on recognized heteronormative familial ties to authorize grief. Hartzenberg's film exposes how queer grief is delegitimized when relationships are silenced or erased. Marshall's conflict over funeral arrangements and his refusal to enter the funeral home dramatize this struggle for recognition. His mourning becomes a refusal to accept the violence of exclusion—a refusal to forget. This resonates with Michèle Pearson Clarke's (2017) framing of grief as an act of revolution, asserting the right to grieve and demanding recognition of Black queer humanity. At the same time,

like Clarke's work, Hartzenberg's depiction of the loss of a loving mother-son relationship challenges stereotypes of Black families as inherently homophobic, instead affirming the reality of Black familial love and the right of queer individuals to belong within it.

Third, Black queer sustained grief is not only disruptive but also productive. Scholars such as Muñoz (1999) and Ghassan Moussawi (2023) argue that melancholia for queer people of colour is not pathological but constitutive of everyday life. It sustains activism and community by transforming grief into creative practices such as storytelling, ritual, and art, that resist erasure. As Butler (1996) explains, melancholia involves internalising loss, allowing it to become part of the self and a way of holding onto the lost and deferring the full weight of grief, not to avoid activism, but to sustain it. Muñoz (1999) extends this further, framing mourning as a communal ritual that reconstructs identity. By carrying our ghosts into the present, we honour their memory and draw strength from them. Morrill, Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Qollective (2016, 2) describe this as "an aching archive"—a repository of grief and longing that connects the living with the dead, the past with the future. This archive fuels what Muñoz (2009) calls "concrete utopias," not only through cultural memory but through the presence of ancestors and spirits who guide present struggles. In many ways, the making of *Sister Dinges* illustrates this productiveness and resistance as we witness the lingering presence of Hartzenberg's real mom and his real-life lingering grief.

In a decolonial worldview that resists strict separations between past, present, and future, ancestors and ghosts are not metaphorical—they live with us, shaping our now and our not-yet. Hartzenberg's work invites us to "sit with" grief, to tarry with the spirits of the past. This is not merely a rejection of dominant narratives of forgiveness and reconciliation; it is an act of resistance. Hartzenberg's engagement with grief, hurt,

and loss becomes a way of reaching into the past to understand the present and imagine the future. This is what Nyamnjoh (2015, 12) calls "incompleteness as a state of being." In his framework, African modernity is shaped by "flexible mobilities and enriching encounters with incomplete others" (Nyamnjoh 2022, 598). Rather than seeking to vanquish ghosts or resolve grief, Hartzenberg's work invites us to imagine a future with our ghosts and with our losses. It is a call to honour the lives haunted by violence and to sit with the incompleteness of others, not as a failure, but as a generative space for becoming.

Marshall's journey in *Sister Dinges* is not only one of mourning but also of revenge, a form of affective resistance that emerges when grief is denied recognition. The slur "Sister Dinges" becomes the catalyst for Marshall's pursuit of revenge. This act of being made visible and invisible through this naming triggers a reckoning with the violence of erasure and the demand to be seen. In this sense, revenge functions as a response to the impossibility of mourning within normative frameworks. Tuck and Ree (2013, 651–652) argue that revenge narratives disrupt the cultural demand for resolution, forcing us to confront the consequences of unresolved injustices. Revenge, in their framing, arises when justice is delayed or denied, and becomes a way of asserting one's right to matter. It is not about retribution alone but about reclaiming agency in the face of systemic silencing.

The confrontation between Marshall and the antagonist, who is later revealed to be concealing his own queer identity, exposes the layered violence of homophobia and heteronormativity. Marshall's revenge is not only about retribution, rather, it is about reclaiming dignity and asserting his right to exist without shame. We also see this theme in Marshall's refusal to enter the funeral home, where his mother's memorial is being conducted in a way that erases her wishes and his identity. This too can be read as an act

of revenge. Not in the violent sense, but as a refusal to participate in a ritual that denies his grief, his belonging and his mother's fierce protection of her son. Duncan (2018, 116) offers a metaphor for this in the form of "cracked heirlooms", in other words, figures of impossible mourning that do not seek to bury the dead but to conjure them. Marshall's revenge is precisely this: a conjuring of his mother's memory, not through sentimental remembrance, but through defiance. In this way, mourning and revenge are not opposites but parallel modes of resistance. Both tarry with the past and both refuse to forget. Both conjure the dead, not to lay them to rest, but to insist that they still matter.

Reimagining Utopia with Ghosts and Grief

This article has argued for the importance of taking the so-called villains in Hartzenberg's work seriously as complex manifestations of Black queer desire to matter. In the analysis, revenge and violence emerge not as gratuitous or nihilistic, but as affective responses to systemic erasure and silencing. These expressions of desire, however uncomfortable, must be understood within the social conditions that produce them, shaped by enduring histories of racialised violence, homophobia, and exclusion in South Africa. Refusing this context reinscribes the very moral economies that render Black queer suffering unintelligible.

Taken together, the gothic aesthetics, hauntings, and unresolved grief that structure Hartzenberg's work compel a rethinking of what flourishing might mean for queers of colour. Rather than equating flourishing with healing, reconciliation, or joyful freedom, this analysis suggests that livable futures may instead be forged through sustained engagements with pain, rage, and loss. In this sense, Hartzenberg's work can be read alongside theological and feminist interventions, such as Marcella Althaus-Reid's (2000) refusal of respectable redemption and bell hooks' (2000) insistence that

love is a political practice rather than a sentimental resolution, which name flourishing as something lived within contradiction rather than beyond it.

If we are to imagine what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls "concrete utopias," then grief, pain, haunting, and even rage cannot be excluded from our visions of queer futurity. This is not an argument that condones violence, but one that insists on reckoning with the social and embodied realities of Black queer South African life. To imagine flourishing without violence, grief, or ghosts is to imagine a future that excludes those whose lives have been shaped by these conditions. Hartzenberg's gothic does not ask us to resolve pain or redeem it into progress; it asks us to make it matter – to sit with it, honour it, and allow it to shape our collective becoming.

By queering Christo-normative narratives of progress and drawing on sacred forms that resist linear temporality, Hartzenberg's work opens up new ways of imagining queer futures. In alignment with Muñoz (2009), I reject the notion that lingering with ghosts and grief is anti-utopian. Instead, I argue that these hauntings emerge as central to the work of building livable futures for those systemically denied futurity under white supremacy and heteronormativity. This is particularly resonant in African cosmologies, where ancestors and spirits are not confined to the past but actively inhabit the present and orient the future. Thus, mourning and haunting become powerful tools for examining the incompleteness of lived experience.

In conclusion, this article introduces a conceptual shift: framing queer Black grief and trauma not as detours from justice, but as central to imagining alternative futurities. It challenges the hegemony of reconciliation as a national ideal, suggesting instead that lingering with pain and the dead opens space for resistant political and spiritual imaginaries. Taken together, Hartzenberg's gothic aesthetics illuminate the gothic not merely as a genre or affective register, but as a form of religious meaning-

making that refuses redemptive closure and sustains a utopian openness grounded in haunting, grief, and unfinished justice. It does not offer "easy hope" (Stobie 2008, 41), but necessary hope, enacted through performances which disrupt the fantasy of national harmony (Sizemore-Barber, 2020). In this sense, the gothic becomes a mode of imagining utopia otherwise: a spiritual and political practice rooted in grief, rage, haunting, and the sacred labour of the unresolved.

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[i] Elizabeth Hartzenberg is the mother of Enrico Hartzenberg whose work is the central focus of this article. I venerate her here as an ancestor whose presence influences Hartzenberg's work as well as the analysis of mourning in this paper.

[ii] In Afrikaans this translates to The Sky is Blue. In the play it is the name of an elimination rhyming game which is played similarly to black Shoe, black Shoe which may be more familiar to international English speaking readers. The elimination rhyme of the game is "the sky is blue, out with you." This line is quoted in relation to the death of one of the characters in the play.

[iii] Directly translated to Sister Thing, but is used as a homophobic slur in parts of Cape Town.

[iv] I capitalise Black in this article as I use it to refer to a broader notion of racialisation as articulated by Steve Biko in which all people of colour could be considered politically Black. This is because, while Hartzenberg identifies as 'Coloured' a racial term and identity in South Africa, we both acknowledge that his experiences and the narratives he creates speaks to a broader experience of being Black and African.

[v] Sizemore-Barber and Ncube both critique the politics of visibility which are inscribed onto queer agency and account for how invisibility, citation and silence are productive in queer African performance.

[vi] 'Coloured' is the term used in South Africa to refer to people who are broadly mixed race. It is a cultural group formed of generations of forceful and consensual relations amongst

indigenous people, white colonisers, and slaves brought to the Cape from places like Madagascar, Indonesia, and Malaysia, and which have formed a culture made up of its mixed history and cemented in some ways as a distinctive racial category as a classification under apartheid.

[vii] This is highlighted in a film-screening which took place at the University of the Western Cape in March 2025 where Hartzenberg along with industry professionals, academics, students, and other artists engaged in a dialogue around *Sister Dinges* to make sense of the queer and decolonial potential of the film.