Centring healing: reflexivity, activism and the decolonial act of researching communities existing on the margin

Abstract

This paper introducing innovative, creative, and decolonial research methodology is part of the ongoing reflexivity of a PhD currently underway. I provide insight into the development of the research through which I reflexively present my thoughts, as a decolonial feminist psychology researcher conducting research with African LGBT individuals seeking asylum in the UK. I engage with concepts of reflexivity, activism, decolonisation, and autoethnography, as they are played out within the research process. The paper reflects on three integrated theories underpinning the study, Trauma Theory (Mollica, 2006), Structural Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Brotman 2013), Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory (Sharif "Herukhuti" Williams, 2016), and the decolonial methodologies proposed for the PhD research. The theories used are a deliberate effort to depart from a Eurocentric way of conducting academic research. Foregrounding reflexivity, I offer my research as a deeply political, ethical, moral, and decolonial act that can remedy researched communities. It is uncommon for PhD scholars to offer, for journal publication, meditations about a PhD project that is still underway. Yet such knowledge is also valuable. Thus, the reflexive paper serves as a demonstration of a social justice agenda for conducting the doctoral research, a decolonial act in itself.

Bepa iri rinotungamidza humhizha nekuvheneka hutsva hwakatingwarei uye hunoboponora nekuongorora fungiro nemaitiro avapambepfumi. Asi pfungwa dzacho idzi dzehudhokotera dzichiri mubushi mekunyorwa. Ndinochingamidza njere dzakadzika mukuumbwa kwetsvagiridzo umo mune chiratidzwa memafungiro

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Keywords

angu semunyori weruzivo rwesaikoroji hunokurudzira kodzero nehuenzaniso hwevakadzi nevose vanodzvanyirirwa kutenderera pasirese, uye rudzidzo rwunoongorora fungiro nemaitiro avapambepfumi. Tsvakiridzo yangu yakanangana nezvevana veAfrika vanomirirwa neboka reLGBT, vachirarama vari ngochani avo vanotsvaga hupotereri muUK. Ndinoshandisa hufungwa, miriro yekodzero dzevanhu vakadzvanyirirwa, kuboponora nekuongorora fungiro nekuitwa kwevapambepfumi uye kuvhenekera nekuratidza nhoroondo neruzivo hweupenyu hwangu semutsvakurudzi. Bepa iri rinovheneka dzidziso nhatu dzinovandudza tsvakiridzo iyi, dzidziso yeTrauma theory (Mollica, 2006), Structural intersectionality Theory (Crenshow, 1989; Brotman, 2013), Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer theory (Sharif "Herukhuti" Williams, 2016) uye nzira yekuboponora nekuongorora fungiro nekuitwa kwavapambepfumi, yakasarudzirwa tsvakiridzo dzehudhokotera rino. Nzira idzi dzakasarudzirwa nemaune nechivimbo chekuti tibve kunzira dzetsvakiridzo dzakarerekera nenzira dzinoshandiswa nevemhiri kwemakungwa, mukuita tsvakiridzo. Hufungwa hwandiri kushandisa kutsigirisa tsvakiridzo iyi hunopa hutongerwo hwematunhu ese hune hudzamu, hunhu, tsika, nekuboponora nekuongorora fungiro rekuitwa kwevapambepfumi uye tsvagiso rinokwanisa kurapa. Izvi hazviwanzoitwa mutsvakiridzo mukushambadzwa nekuparurwa kwemapepa ariko mazuva ano. Asi ruzivo urwu rwakakosha zvikuru. Naizvozvo, bepa rehufungwa urwu rwune basa rekurakidza kodzero dzevanhu dzakaenzana mumaitirwo etsvakiridzo dzehudhokotera. Ichi chiito chisina pfungwa dzevapambepfumi pachezvazvo.

Introducing the doctorate project

Centred on the 'migrant crisis', the scale of immigration detention and mistreatment of individuals seeking asylum in the UK has increased extensively in the last two decades (Bachmann, 2016). In particular, the UK has one of the largest detention centres in Europe and detains more migrants and persons seeking asylum than the majority of Europe (Bachmann, 2016; Green, 2019). It is not surprising therefore that in the recent years, the UK media, Home Office whistle blowers, immigration solicitors and independent organisations such as Stonewall[1] organisation have exposed the mishandling of one of the most vulnerable groups within the asylum-seeking process – LGBT[2] people (Lyons, Thone, Baumard and Ghalarrage, 2017). An MSc in Forensic Psychology thesis I completed in 2014 titled, "He was treated like a criminal". Evaluating the impact of detention related trauma on LGBTI refugees (Chirape, 2018), explored the idea of constructive alternativism in LGBTIQ[3] individuals experiencing

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[1] Stonewall campaigns for the equality of lesbian, gay, bi and trans people across Britain.
[2] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender persons.
[3] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Intersex and Queer persons. Historically, the term queer has been used as an epithet/slur against people whose gender, gender expression and/or sexuality do not conform to dominant expectations. However, some people have reclaimed the word/term queer and self-identify in opposition to assimilation. For some, this reclamation is a celebration of not fitting into social norms. Regardless, not all people who identify as LGBTIQ use the term queer to describe themselves (adapted from the LGBTQIA Resource Centre, August 2020).

the UK process of asylum seeking. Participants in the research expressed feeling victimised by the UK justice system (Chirape, 2018). Some of the prominent constructs that emerged from the research included *humiliation* and *shame* LGBTIQ persons experienced when forced to 'prove' their sexual identity (Chirape, 2018). Participants also described how *insecurity, powerlessness* and *helplessness* had characterised their experience of seeking asylum, as well as how being marginalised under the temporary protection status reinforced many aspects of these experiences (Chirape, 2018). It was this MSc research, the 'migrant crisis' rhetoric, the violent media discourse on migration and my own experiences with the UK migration process/policy, which became a catalyst for the current research. As an activist-scholar whose identities are constantly marginalised, my research interests have, over the years, intentionally focused on responding to social issues that impact communities I belong to. The objective has not only been to undertake feminist research and practice that is guided by my political activism but conduct research and practice which contributes to social change. Subsequently, the doctorate project is being steered by similar principles and ways of being and thinking.

The PhD project proposes to deal with questions of borders and migration, responding to migration issues in the UK. The research specifically centres African LGBT persons seeking asylum in the UK, investigating broader issues around structural violence and the ongoing conversation on the politics of migration, borders of gender and sexuality and the treatment of African LGBT individuals seeking 'refuge' in Europe. Across the African continent, a majority of rhetoric has argued homosexuality as un-African. This narrative, driven by religious and political leaders, has led most African states to claim to protect an African identity, from an assumed western import of homosexual conduct (Kaoma, 2018). These moves have steered a rise in restrictive national legislations sanctioned under the guise of protecting African culture, religions, and children (Kaoma, 2018). This socio-political environment – factors, attitudes and beliefs undermining human rights have led to the persecution of LGBTIQ persons. Consequently, many LGBTIQ people are forced to escape their countries of origin and seek refuge in other countries (Grungras, Levitan & Slotek, 2009). Documenting experiences of African LGBT persons seeking asylum in the UK, from their perspective and locating these experiences in the wider context of structural violence and political discourse on migration, the PhD research draws together all the larger issues of the migrant crisis – the role of colonialism, criminalization, homophobia and homonationalism. It draws out links between individual experiences of African LGBT asylum seeking individuals, their treatment and, the macrosocial experiences of the migrant population at large. The study aims to, not only amplify voices of African LGBT asylum seeking population, but turn the focus onto coloniality, homonationalism and their implications for the treatment and psychosocial realities of African LGBT persons seeking asylum.

African LGBT individuals seeking asylum are positioned as experts of their lived reality in this study, an approach that is particularly important to me as an activist, activist-scholar, a decolonial feminist researcher and as an African who has continuously negotiated displacement and issues relating to migration in the UK. The western and colonial ways of conducting research rarely speaks to the needs of marginalised groups nor solve any of their social problems. It is important therefore to not only recognise LGBTIQ+ identifying persons seeking asylum as persons who hold expert knowledge, but to re-centre their knowledge and experiences whilst allowing them to theorise their lived experiences. I am invested in the practice of humanising knowledge production and rethinking the production of knowledge with the objective of making it more useful and pertinent to lived experiences of marginalised groups. This means reimagining the production of research.

It was partly this necessity to reimagine knowledge production about Africa and or persons of African origin which motivated the decision to produce my PhD research from an African university site. As a result, interrogating conditions of UK based African LGBTI individuals seeking asylum as a topic of enquiry for my PhD, in a South African academic institution, was a deliberate act. This act was also driven by my positionality, personal experiences, histories and the need to veer away from contributing to a project of knowledge accumulation controlled by the West. Intentional as this decision was, it was also particularly encouraged by decolonial work happening in South African universities. I am drawn to the highly visible decolonial project by black African academics on the African continent. I was particularly drawn to the quality of questions and discussions psychologists in South Africa continue to ask, about psychology, about decoloniality, about liberatory work and about studying psychology in colonial institutions (See Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Boonzaier, 2019; Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019; Ratele, et al, 2018; Kiguwa, 2004). Even though previously my psychology and activism has employed decolonial practice, the work was driven by my positionality and, lived experiences of existing on the margin of society. None of my academic training, BSc degree in Psychology or the MSc in Forensic Psychology, in the UK, invested in the critical task of decolonising Psychological science.

In the lead up to undertaking the PhD project I approached at least half a dozen academic institutions and almost 30 potential PhD supervisors in Europe. The responses I received were laced with conditions and a research critique which conflicted with the sort of decolonial work I intended to engage in the research. Overall, many of the academic supervisors were not open to and or supportive of my clear intention to position the research within decolonial thinking and practice – to ask what de-colonising truly means, looks like and implies. Their responses drove me to an institution in South Africa, to study a phenomenon in Europe, and in turn *reversing the*

gaze – questionable as it is whether such a thing as *reversing the gaze* is even possible when the *gaze* itself is a thing that is colonial, Euro-american and patriarchal.

I am now towards the end of second year of PhD studies at the University of Cape Town, also an undeniably western institution continuing to be coded in coloniality. However, I was drawn to the Psychology department – specifically the *Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa*, founded by Professor Floretta Boonzaier and Professor Shose Kessi – whose work and praxis centres decolonial thinking in ways that speaks to my work and activism. In addition, the African continent is home, an ancestral home and the thought of generating and contributing to knowledge production that centres African values and standpoint – whilst physically being located on ancestral land – is a thought that makes sense for the type of psychology research I intend to conduct. Regardless of the westernised and or colonial institution one is affiliated with, there is often an expectation for scholars to meet institutional requirements of a colonial model. As a result, it becomes particularly important to continue disrupting the standard qualitative methodologies, research practice and writing that continues to be a part of a system of such knowledge production – knowledge production and accumulation steeped in histories of oppression.

The goal for me has always been to be the sort of Psychologist who is of service to 'my people' and or communities I belong to. The people/my people/communities, like me, are a population of people who have been historically marginalised and minoritised by colonialism, and imperialism. This position and aim, to be of service to community, unifies me to Walter Anthony Rodney's idea of 'Guerilla Intellectualism' (Adeleke, 2000; Bah, 2020). As a guerilla intellectual, Rodney defined his purpose as that of using his knowledge in service of the (working) poor. He encouraged black scholars to put 'our people' at the centre of knowledge production and reproduction and taught us to rethink what it means to be a guerrilla against oppression, a guerilla against coloniality, a guerilla against systemic racism, a guerilla against colonial institutions, not just in arms, but in ways of thinking, in ways of seeing, in ways of being (Bah, 2020) and in ways of conducting Psychology research. It is also this strong desire to fight against oppression which has been the impetus for all my academic research.

As part of the process to understanding my research goals and enable me to work within a critical and feminist decolonial epistemology I constantly engage questions such as:

- Who is the PhD research for?

- To align my methodology with decolonial thinking, what anti-oppressive and African centred processes and practices should I be adopting?

- What exactly is Africa(n)-centred psychology and what does this look like for my research and practice?

- What theoretical frameworks can provide me with the language and tools for thinking about the narratives of LGBT African persons seeking asylum, holistically and in a way that individual experiences are connected and intersect with their broader contexts?

- How can I deviate from reproducing discourses and practices in the research machinery whilst continuing to contribute towards knowledge production that can make an impactful change in the lives of communities marginalised by society?

- What issues around accessibility should I be considering, and who do I want to be benefiting from and or have access to the research?

  i) Given that English is the colonial academic language in which we write, it is therefore important to think about who is fluent in their reading/ understanding of this colonial language and as a result make my writing language accessible.

  ii) When thinking about issues relating to dissemination – to think about how/where/why and who will have access to the research. In the past, as well as publishing my MSc thesis in an anthology[4] I also gathered some of the themes raised in the research, and in collaboration with a queer photographer[5], produced a series of images speaking to detention related trauma. The images were presented in a gallery exhibition[6] with engagement from the community.

- Is the research going to follow a collaborative approach which prioritises the needs of the community, and what might this look like? What role will the community play in the research process? Am I consulting the community and in what ways will I present their voices in academic writing without controlling their voice?

Theoretical underpinnings, and methodologies

Not only is western psychology problematic in its methods, choice of research problems, culturally myopic theories and samples, it is also problematic in its de-

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[4] The Colour Of Madness Anthology: Exploring BAME Mental Health in the UK published in 2018.
[5] Italy based photographer, Cloudy Moroni.
[6] ganda'Nga: weeping clay pot exhibition curated by Skye Skyetshookii Chirape and Priscilla Gurupira, and sponsored by Guest Project Africa, 2014.

spiritualisation. Yet still theoretical frameworks most scholarship use, continue to be strongly rooted in Euro-american ideals informed by Western knowledge systems (Chiumbi, 2017). These traditional and colonial ways of conducting research do not speak to the needs of marginalised groups such as LGBTIQ refugees. As an African scholar, it is important to critique, rethink and respond to the invitation by decolonial scholars (Chiumbu, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mbembe, 2016) to approach knowledge production from my own standpoint. Scholars have defined 'coloniality' as the uninterrupted practice, thinking and reproduction of colonial forms of domination after colonial administration has supposedly come to an end (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Chiumbi, 2017). Coloniality lives in the terrains of power, being and knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Chiumbi, 2017) and coloniality of knowledge is the way in which Eurocentric knowledge systems are advantaged above other knowledges and epistemes (Mignolo, 2007). The project of decoloniality adopted in my PhD research includes employing concepts of Africanity as theoretical lenses, drawing attention to the significance of working from the standpoint of Africa, and the African experience (Chiumbu, 2017). This concept demands that I consider the positionality of the people being researched, reflect on my position as the lead researcher and regard the positionality of the 'geopolitics of knowledge' (Mignolo, 2011; Chiumbu, 2017). In the PhD project, I make attempts to deconstruct some of the methodologies applied to research and which continue to (re)produce coloniality of knowledge (Chiumbu, 2017). In the process of rethinking various research practices, I was drawn to the liberatory potential of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies. Participatory Action Research methodologies provide a radical disruption from traditional research approaches (MacDonald, 2012; Chiumbu, 2017). It is a methodology which offers a solution to the contradictory goals between the academe and the researched community and the hierarchical relation of power that advantages academe over marginalised communities' knowledges (Chiumbu, 2017). A liberatory lens and praxis to the research encourages me to critique and reflect on some of these issues. I am forced to reflect on what it means to engage with liberation psychology (Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1996; Seedat, 1997; Hook, 2005; Watkins & Shulman, 2008; Afuape, 2011), *who is the liberator* and *who is being liberated* – and how does this sit with and or play into the white saviour narrative, if at all? As well as thinking about what it means in research context to be a feminist liberation psychologist (Lykes & Moane, 2009; Moane, 2010).

As an activist-academic with a commitment to furthering social justice, I aim to explore perspectives that contribute to humanise communities impacted by a socio-political world impregnated by anti-immigrant, discriminatory, heterosexist and colonial rhetoric. I am drawn to methodologies that are primarily anti-oppressive and decolonial in nature. I have spent time debating on how I can break away from

traditionally colonial ways of presenting and analysing data, and instead negotiate a space for collaboration between myself and the community being researched for the PhD project. This demanded that I adopt methodological choices and theoretical frameworks which not only speak to decolonisation, or merely consider co-researchers' sexuality, gender and immigration status, but frameworks which offer insight into how these identities intersect with other specific oppressions experienced by this population. As a result, to explore narratives that African LGBT asylum seeking population voice about the UK asylum interview process and how structural and institutional violence is implicated in these narratives, I am integrating three theories to underpin the research process. I was deliberate with each choice of theory applied. I was bent on engaging theories which promote the exploration and insight of the unique aspects of African LGBT's experiences of seeking asylum, as individuals with multiple identities and vulnerabilities. Each chosen theory is in turn guided by a decolonial research process and attempts to represent a departure from Eurocentric ways of conducting research.

I interrogated the numerous variations of Trauma theory available and was particularly drawn to Mollica's (2006) adaption of Trauma theory. I arrived at the conclusion that this particular theory speaks directly to the experiences of African LGBT refugees. Mollica's (2006) adaptation of Trauma theory is instantaneously linked to refugee trauma and proposes that persons who have experienced trauma have an innate capacity to heal themselves, side by side with medical psychological intervention. Refugees' capacity to self-heal and develop resilience through storytelling is a significant consideration not only for service providers and practitioners (Mollica, 2006), but also for researchers committed to understanding how African LGBTIQ persons experience the asylum interview process. This Trauma theory encourages practitioners to employ both indigenous interventions (as well as western medical ways of diagnosing) and concepts of cultural contribution (George, 2009). Globally, LGBTIQ persons are forced to take extensive routes to support their asylum process. This is a population that undergoes multiple traumatic experiences in comparison to other groups of people seeking asylum. This population's traumatic experience is also aggravated by the violence of the asylum-seeking process. It is necessary, therefore, to have insight of the layers of trauma faced, but without equating their asylum seeking or refugee background with trauma and pathologies. Mollica's (2006) Trauma theory allows for that. Mollica (1999) criticises medical practitioners for the overdependence on medication in treating trauma and emphasises the need for trauma survivors to not only play the active role of telling their experiences, but also of interpreting their own trauma stories (Mollica et al, 2001). The theory focuses on self-healing through factors such as, spirituality, humour, physical exercise, relaxation techniques, rather than depending on long-term *handouts* (Mollica, 2006). In addition, Mollica's (2006) Trauma

theory speaks to some of the constructs and experiences raised by participants in my MSc research on LGBT asylum seeking individuals who had experienced detention and a hostile asylum process. Participants in the MSc research perceived their situation as *restrictive*, *disabling, numbing, feeling in-limbo* and *losing control* (Chirape, 2018). These perceptions of losing freewill and autonomy as human beings equated to mental defeat often reported to occur when individuals experience helplessness, powerlessness, and uncontrollability (Frederick, 1986; Herman, 1992a, 1992b). Equally, post-torture individuals lose the ability to process, understand and articulate their experiences which in turn can result in numbing and mental death (Ebert & Dyck, 2004). The MSc research exposed refugees' consistent manner of construing self and the world around them to cope with detention and criminalisation by media and government control policies. Some of the constructs LGBT refugees developed also highlighted an ability to self-heal and self-sooth and this ability enabled resilience and a capacity to cope with their experiences. Since specific psychological reactions to trauma are shaped by cultural norms (Kroll, 2000), I also aim to consider whether a decolonial research will encourage self-healing and resilience, and how this will manifest. This is a significant aim of the doctoral research, to be a profoundly political, ethical, moral and a deliberate decolonial act. This is important as there is a crisis of political care and a lack of appropriate systemic care for LGBTIQ African nationals seeking asylum in the UK. There is a lack of care that is liberatory, transformative, and understanding of how oppression works, and the impact of oppressive social conditions on the body and the psyche. Thus, I think it important for research collaborators engaging with this PhD project also access concurrent care – care from multi providers – and most fundamentally, care (and holding of space) whose practice, and healing modalities are rooted in Africanity, in feminist liberatory care practices, in spirituality, in indigenous knowledge systems, in religious beliefs, and so forth. Consequently, when considering the important task of decolonising research, it was deeply important for me that the doctoral research attempts to act as a catalyst for healing for African LGBT persons collaborating on the research. Highlighted below are a few examples of how the PhD research can potentially act as that catalyst for healing:

- Research collaborators will have different options to choose from for sharing their experiences, including collecting their own *data*, by audiotape, writing/ journaling, and to be done at their own pace, in their time, own privacy and when they feel they have mental capacity for the task. Persons who have started the process, especially during lockdown restrictions with no privacy, have found this autonomy enabling process accommodating;

- Research collaborators will in part recruit each other and will be involved in the majority of the decision making on how data can be collected;

- The practice of a gathering circle is one that goes beyond the extraction of data. It will include creating a space set up for healing. A space that engages rituals and a ceremony, and where African LGBT persons can arrive as they are/bring all aspects of themselves;

- Research collaborators will be involved in the analysis process where they will have an opportunity to read the drafts and the fully written research before it is submitted to the department;

- There is also an aim for the research data to be disseminated as a moving image (cinematography) that would not only, potentially, feature in film festivals but provide something tangible that research collaborators can retain;

- The aim is for research collaborators to have an opportunity to engage with a range of well-being practitioners (and or holders of space) such as a forensic psychologist, a queer psychotherapist, a gay imam, a gay reverend, a gay spiritualist, a queer traditional healer, a queer bodyworker, a queer-centred massage therapist, a lesbian mentoring coach, an acupuncture practitioner, an aromatherapist, an energy worker, a breath worker, a vodou practitioner, a mental health worker, a tarot priestess and any other such healing practitioners willing to come on board. A large majority of these practitioners are black or persons of colour who also identify under the LGBTIQ label. The services will be presented as options to choose from, and alongside support systems research collaborators already access.

To understand the specific forms of social and legal aspects of structural violence faced by African LGBT individuals seeking asylum in the UK I decided to apply Structural Intersectionality Theory. Structural intersectionality provides an insight into how, because of their intersecting identities (for example, race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, nationality, migration status, non-normative gender, religion and age) LGBTIQ refugees face structural injustices and are marginalised legally, socially and culturally (Crenshaw, 1989; Brotman & Ou Jin, 2011, 2013). Structural intersectionality theory will understand how, because of these intersecting identities, oppression manifests and in what ways it manifests. It will also help me examine any evidence of structural violence and discriminatory practices LGBTIQ persons seeking asylum face due to their intersecting identities and how this may or may not further-marginalise them.

Many of the studies conducted using intersectionality theory have tended to be in the field of gender studies, and largely focusing on the oppression of women. However, in the last decade, researchers have widened the extent of the theory by using other

points of departures in their intersectional analyses. For example, Brotman and Ou Jin's (2011, 2013) used intersectionality theory to frame the specific ways in which structural violence in the Canadian refugee system shapes the life of LGBTIQ refugees. As in the UK, Canada has required LGBTIQ persons seeking asylum to prove their sexual orientation during the asylum process, thereby forcing them to disclose and display their sexual identities according to western standards. This causes re-traumatisation, a form of structural violence (Brotman and Ou Jin's, 2011, 2013). As a structural, relational and analytic tool, intersectionality is important for this research. It demonstrates both the intersections of institutions, systems, and categorisations that produce oppression and the intersections of identity categorisations within individuals and groups (Runyan, 2018).

In the initial stages of developing the PhD proposal, Queer theory was suggested by fellow academics, as a potential theory to underpin the research. Queer theory focuses on analysing and critiquing societal and political norms as they relate to the experience of sexuality and gender. However, I was not convinced that queer theory sufficiently explains African genders and sexualities. Queer theorising tends to disrupt and politicise imagined relations between and among sex, gender, bodies, sexuality, and desire (Sapinoso, 2009). As long as sex and sexuality remain central characteristics of analysis within LGBT studies, there is a need for intersectional analyses which also constitute for gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, migration status, culture, religion. With Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory (Williams, 2016) I wanted to steer away from using Eurocentric frameworks to understand gender and sexualities of African LGBT persons seeking asylum in the UK and whose origins, cultural beliefs and experiences are located on the African continent, African history and experiences. Whilst decolonising theory is not about the exclusion of Euro-american thought we have to be cautious about adopting theories, tools and methods associated with western intellectual systems and history and applying these methods in a decontextualised way. Euro-american thought is often not useful for the study of marginalised and historically colonised populations whose contextual human experiences and problems may be different from those of dominant cultures (Alvares, 2011). During my search for a more appropriate theory, I stumbled upon Williams's (2016) Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer[7] Theory (ADKT), a tool for decolonising Black sex, sexualities, relationships, and their scholarship. Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory engages the topic of gender and sexuality from an Afrocentric orientation, consistent with the values of African intellectual thought. The theory places Africa at the centre of an analysis of African history, culture and experiences, and does not

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[7] Although is pronounced the same as queer, *kweer* is visibly different from *queer*. It is used by different black and people of colour activists and academics to challenge queer theory and queer studies' tendency towards white hegemony.

detach from other positions within African and or Black scholarship (Williams, 2016). The framework explores Black sexuality and gender identity using methods which are readily motivated to engage body, mind and spirit (Williams, 2016). In the past, queer black and people of colour scholars (such as, José Muñoz, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga) have critiqued the limitations of existing scholarship, the irrefutable whiteness of queer theory and called for attention to aspects of difference beyond sex and sexuality in LGBTIQ studies and queer theory (Sapinoso, 2009). Queer theory neglects to engage the multiple sites of difference evident between black, people of colour and white communities, and between persons of different nationalities. The imagined queer subject for queer theory is a white cis-gender gay man and lesbian woman, centring whiteness and overlooking other factors such as race and nationality as also being central to gender and sexual formations (Moussawi & Vidal-Ortiz, 2020). It is at the back of this lack of engagement with race and nationality that queer theory fails to be an appropriate fit for my proposed doctorate research. A research aiming to not only centre processes of racialisation, but to also decentre Whiteness. As a result, this research needed a fundamentally different approach, an approach that would also consider the dynamics of nationality and national belonging at play within a UK context of LGBTIQ identifications. As a theoretical approach and an intervention into queer theory, ADKT (Williams, 2016) attempts to disrupt queer theory's over-emphasis on whiteness and interrogates the hegemonic whiteness of LGBTIQ studies and queer theory. ADKT turns its focus to racialised subjectivities, centring the specificities of African American, black, African and migrant subjects, aiming at understanding the complexities of racial and cultural differences as they intersect with sexual and gender identities. Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory is a fairly newly developed theory that is still yet to garner application and critique. As a result my doctoral research will be one of the first research in which the theory provides structure and a guide to making research findings more meaningful.

Reflections on methodology: a decolonial approach

African LGBT persons seeking asylum will contribute to the research as co-researchers or collaborators. I thought it will be enabling for collaborators to collect their own data, using various tools such as voice recording applications on their phones and through journaling. In addition to this, collaborators would also engage with gathering[8] circles and individual interviews. The plan was to begin fieldwork in the UK from May 2020. However, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and closing of borders I have had to revise the way I will go about collecting data and consider doing it remotely. The switch from face-to-face to virtual or telephone data collection is not particularly desirable, for practical or methodological reasons. Regardless, this will also provide

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8   Adapted focus groups.

me an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of collecting data in such unusual circumstances. I continue to reflect on what it means to conduct remote fieldwork – in particular when the population being researched is based on another continent – as well as thinking about what it means for the decolonial aspect of the research process.

Traditional focus groups are considered a feminist method and address the feminist analysis of traditional methods in psychology studies (Wilkinson, 1999). However, for this research I decided that it was merely not sufficient to apply focus groups without adapting them to the needs of the population being researched. I therefore adapted and developed the practice of focus groups to mirror the concept practiced in an African oral paradigm of storytelling. I am re-coining this adapted practice '*gathering circle'*. Gathering circles will be designed to be culturally responsive to the specific needs and cultural practices of LGBT persons seeking asylum in the UK, as persons of African origin. The use of indigenous pedagogies such as storytelling, language, ritual, ceremony and folk tale in Psychology research can allow us to exercise highly valuable and useful ways of thinking that could contribute towards the decolonial project. The main purpose of the *gathering circle* is to enable healing. It is a space where research collaborators will recreate rituals, a ceremony and share stories of their experiences. During the gathering circle, methodology and process of knowledge extraction and construction does not take priority over the well-being of research collaborators. I will use the cultural knowledge and experiences of the lead researcher and co-researchers to design *the circle*. It is during the gathering circle that oral stories about their experiences will be shared among the group. The stories will be audio taped and then transcribed to be analysed alongside content research collaborators would have contributed earlier in the data collection process. The possible challenge in using storytelling for a research of this nature would be trying to maintain the structure of oral story telling whilst directing focus on extracting content that speaks to the research questions. This research recognises and positions co-researchers' intersecting identities (including cultural beliefs/practices, religion and such) as being central to the research process. Oral story telling methodology, culturally sensitive gathering circle that centres healing in the form of culture-based treatment and directing co-researchers to collect their own data, are some of the decolonial practices that contribute to the decolonial narratives.

In a gathering circle, African LGBT asylum seeking persons will be encouraged to bring into the 'circle' all aspects of their Africanness. These aspects could be relating to spirituality, rituals, traditions, ancestral ways of knowing/being and practices they strongly identify with. These aspects of them will ground a safe environment and spiritual process of extracting knowledge, experience and feelings. The aim is for the practice to mirror that of an African oral storytelling methodological framework. I think

the use of an African oral storytelling framework, a framework which is a culturally responsive research practice, aligns with the intentions of the research (Tuwe, 2016). Storytelling is a form of a ritual (Tuwe, 2016) and a communal participatory experience where people of African ancestry congregate, listen, and participate in sharing narratives, stories and lived experiences (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1982; 1986; Utley, 2008). African oral storytelling, as a communal participatory experience can be used to examine and record meanings, feelings, attitudes and lived experiences of African research collaborators (Gbadegesin, 1984; Tuwe, 2016). The set-up of African storytelling is such that the storyteller and those present during the gathering, interact and all have authority and function (Soyinka, 1978; Vambe, 2001). Adapting focus groups, to birth gathering circles, is to adopt a holistic approach which creates a deconstructed and decolonised methodology. This form of a holistic approach strives towards balancing between the different aspects of lived life-experiences and not "*separate intellectual, social, political, economic, psychological and spiritual forms of human life from each other*" (Tuwe, 2016). Cultural practices and manifestation of expressions are emulated in ways in which research is conducted, in language, style, structure and methods (Kuokkanen, 2000). It is hoped that the use of oral storytelling will collectively enable and provide remedy for research-collaborators who are of African identity, are culturally connected to African oral storytelling and are physically separated from their ancestral homes.

I cannot deny the complexity of being African and do recognise that being African is not singular. I do not intend to essentialise 'Africanness', homogenise the experience of being African and add to the conversation that naturalises socially and historically constructed differences between those of African descent. It is however the shared history of colonialism, shared experiences of racism, oppression and shared cultural knowledge which also separates their experiences from Eurocentric experiences. As a result, the African African-centred decolonial paradigm invites us to centre studies on Africa and African communities and the diaspora, within Africa (Dastile, 2013; Asante, 1990; 1998; 2003; Keto, 2001; Nabudere, 2006). The African-centred decolonial paradigm is built on the history, lived and existential conditions and relations of African people without deprecating into 'analogues or analogies' (Dastile, 2013). The paradigm's invite for centring is based on the basis that, when research-collaborators are centred in their intellectual corpus, any solutions proposed will be culturally relevant to their communities and may result in not only continual problem solving in line with the pan-African ideals but solutions that motivate healing and restoration.

However, in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic and remote fieldwork I am now having to think about how gathering circles could look like, particularly when I am (physically) located in South Africa and the fieldwork is in the UK. I am also having to

consider on the criteria of people who could (physically) facilitate the environment for gathering circles, on my behalf, and as envisioned for the decolonial methodology.

For the most part, I seek to investigate the impact of structural and institutional violence through an intersectional and qualitative analysis of narratives collected from African LGBT asylum seeking individuals. An intersectional analysis encompasses all the issues around gender, class, race, immigration status, sexuality, nationality and geographical origin. Subsequently, an intersectional analysis can provide an exhaustive and elaborate counter-narrative to the reductive stereotypes used to legitimise oppressive policies, procedures and structures that are anti-immigrant and racist towards African LGBT persons seeking asylum. Consequently, the data African LGBT asylum seeking individuals will collect will be analysed using the Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis (DINA) (Boonzaier, 2019). There are several reasons why Boonzaier's (2019) Decolonial, Intersectional Narrative Analysis is an appropriate analysis tool for this particular research. The analysis centres decolonial, black and African feminist theory and practice (Boonzaier, 2019). DINA is consistent with the approach and intention of the research to decolonise the research process. In practice, DINA humanises African LGBT asylum seeking persons whilst centring questions of social justice. Additionally, research collaborators whose narratives will be used in the research have multi-identities including being African, LGBT and having colonial English as a second language. DINA pursues to consider and understand these multi-identities, within the African context and emerging from histories of imperialism and colonisation (Boonzaier, 2019).

Inclusion and exclusion of research collaborators, on account of mental health

Continuing on the deliberate act to decolonise the research process I am also making a conscious decision not to exclude research collaborators on account of (active) mental health difficulties. Traditionally, protecting research participants from harm was closely aligned with excluding them from research and or requiring that they are stable for at least six months. It however begs the question of whether such exclusion, out of ethical concern may, in fact, be harmful (Welch et al, 2015). Vulnerable individuals, and communities are often excluded from clinical research on the basis of scientific, ethical and practical reasons. Although the intention is generally to protect vulnerable populations and maintain research integrity, exclusion of vulnerable communities from research through use of standardised exclusion criteria may not always be helpful and crucial. In fact, such exclusion could further invisibilise marginalised communities. In addition, exclusion is not only steeped in colonial histories but may also lead to findings that are actually not applicable (Welch et al, 2015).

Considering the correlation between mental health and migration process (Bhugra, 2004; von Werthern et al, 2018), I am aware that persons who are to participate in the doctorate research are highly likely to present with active mental health challenges. From my previous experience of engaging individuals seeking refuge, I know how difficult it can be to recruit LGBT asylum seeking individuals, who at the time of fieldwork, may not be facing issues of trauma and the psychological consequences of migration. Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have also heightened challenges of mental health, particularly for people on the margin of society, including LGBT persons seeking asylum. Some persons will be able to access support services during their asylum process journey and during the pandemic. However, with limited resources and restrictions to what individuals seeking asylum can access, in the UK, it means that research collaborators recruited for the research will most likely be vulnerable to mental health difficulties.

I cannot be certain therefore that the research process will not cause harm. However, I think benefits of including neurodivergent individuals far outweigh the risks (Woods et al, 2018). Research has shown that vulnerable individuals, such as those seeking asylum, are disproportionately diagnosed with mental health difficulties (McGuire & Miranda, 2008; Alang, 2016; Lehigh University, 2016). Excluding neurodivergent individuals from research which centres vulnerabilities reproduces certain responses to oppression as pathological (Acevedo, 2018). Practices of diagnosis, the criteria and history of diagnostic tools are embedded in colonialism and other dominant modes of control. Excluding individuals from research, based on these diagnostic criteria perpetuates colonial and capitalist practices of isolating and taking agency away from neurodivergent individuals. As a result, it would be more ethical to fully inform individuals of any possible risks and allow them to make the choice to participate with full agency. During the *University of Cape Town* ethics review committee, questions and concerns around exclusion and inclusion were raised. These concerns encouraged me to reflect on the implications of my decision to not exclude any persons to participate on basis of mental health. Individuals wanting to contribute to the research would be encouraged and supported to exclude themselves from the research on the basis of active mental health symptoms. However, if individuals do not exclude themselves then the issue of increasing risk still remains. There is a need therefore to mitigate possible negative repercussions and or minimise risk. As a result, I aim to devise a distinct plan, such as a 'self-harm protocol' on how I will handle situations if reportable information (such as active trauma symptoms) does come up. I am committed to the well-being of research collaborators. Therefore, extensive efforts will be made to minimise risks and maximise benefits of participation. In particular, I aim to seek the support of services such as, Imams, counsellors, LGBT church leaders, spiritualists, traditional healers, body workers, massage therapists, mental health charities, LGBT

counselling services and such, to support research-collaborators during the research process. Research can be a healing modality and this PhD research, as discussed elsewhere in the paper does aim to enable healing through the process of decolonial practices undertaken in the research. The research aims to be of service to African LGBT community and deliberate in applying decolonial practices. This not only places African LGBT persons seeking asylum in the UK at the centre of knowledge (re)production, whilst prioritising their healing, but the research adopts Rodney's concept of Guerilla Intellectualism – being a guerilla against coloniality and a guerilla in the ways of doing Psychology research.

Situating the self: embracing autoethnographic practices

It is impossible, for me, to investigate this doctorate research question without situating myself in the research. I am not emotionally detached from the African LGBT population seeking asylum in the UK, investigated in the research. As previously highlighted, the PhD research draws upon my extensive personal, professional and activist experiences. It involves the weaving of both my lived experiences and the experiences of research collaborators whose circumstances I will be drawing from. My positionality is such that I have experience of navigating the UK asylum process, including the asylum interview, detention and representing myself in an immigration tribunal court. The identity(ies) I inhabit, woman, African, black, *ngochani*[9]/*ancestral*[10] *wife*, Zimbabwean and refugee, who has been located in the UK for almost 18 years has shaped my activism and epistemological preferences. It was these experiences and level of awareness on these issues, which shaped my research interests and regulated the need and steps taken to enable and magnify voices of African LGBT population seeking asylum. Whilst my own experiences do not provide definitive proof, I think adding realities and lived experiences of practitioners and academics, alike, will only add to the richness of understanding and depth of meaning. Using myself as a research subject is also what it means to decolonise and disrupt Psychology and contribute to the research's aim to be decolonial and deliberate in its process and practice. Although historically, psychology as a discipline has accommodated objectivity over and above subjective voices, psychology could benefit from incorporating autoethnographic practices and processes. Accordingly, to add my voice and personal experiences to the issues being investigated I situated myself in the research and chose to use an autoethnographic approach for this. Autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. This approach will allow me to employ reflexivity and hindsight (Freeman, 2004),

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[9]   *Ngochani* is a shona/Zimbabwean term which translates to gay/homosexual/kweer.
[10] Wife chosen by the ancestors, an African framework in which same sex and or kweer relationships can be understood.

as well as assemble experiences drawn from my archived asylum interview scripts, and documents. As a methodology autoethnography involves a socio-political analysis, disrupting traditional and Eurocentric norms of research practice and representation (Holman Jones et al, 2013) and aids the decolonisation processes (Chawla & Atay, 2018). When reflecting on what decolonial autoethnography might look like, Chawla and Atay (2018: 3) pose the question: *What does it mean to write the self in and out of colonial historical frameworks*? Writing the self in the research is not just a self-indulgent meditation of oneself, for me, at the expense of the wider issues being interrogated. It is a vulnerable position to place myself in. Indigenous and people of colour scholars (Masta, 2018; Pham & Gothberg, 2020) have previously illustrated how autoethnographic research could be used to assist decolonisation and promote social justice. My own experiences of seeking asylum inform and frame the research practice. I explore these experiences and draw parallels between the experiences, to the recent experiences of co-researchers. As an *insider* doing research *about* and *for* my own community, this adds a critical perspective to research on this particular issue/population often carried out by *outsider* scholars (it be, white, heterosexual or scholars with no experience of seeking asylum) (Dung Pham & June Gothberg, 2020). The deliberate use of my personal experiences of seeking asylum in the UK is an intersection of the personal, the political and the societal, offering a standpoint from which to make a distinctive contribution to the research (Laslett, 1999). I will approach autoethnography with the aim to engage this experience to the literature and theoretical frameworks underpinning the research, treating the research as a political, socially just and socially conscious action (Adams & Holman-Jones, 2008).

When meeting with potential UK organisations to participate in the research, my own personal experiences with the asylum process and the plan to situate myself in the research excited, influenced and motivated organisations to support and participate in the research. As a result of these unifying factors (race, African, refugee, LGBTIQ) and research methodology, organisations I approached expressed trust in the aims of the project and shared some of the challenges they had faced when cis-heterosexual white academics had previously accessed African LGBT persons in their organisations, for research. On the whole, my research journey has been one of learning and unlearning, that I will continue to reflect, read and converse on all the issues I raised in this paper. I am drawn to qualitative research and have noted how, in many ways, conducting qualitative research continues to shape me as a feminist researcher. The act of locating myself in the PhD project, intrusive as it is to disclose my own personal characteristics/experiences demands that I apply reflexivity, self-awareness, a certain level of consciousness and understanding into how my positionality, multi-identities and feminism affect the research process.

Research is a learning journey and reflexivity is an important part of the journey and often constitutes part of the research findings (Palaganas et al, 2017). In their paper, Palaganas and colleagues (2017) wrote about how research and specifically fieldwork changes the researcher and therefore the importance of personal reflexivity on how one shapes and is shaped by their research. I think reflexivity forces me/us to ask difficult questions, about myself, about the research, about the intended researched population, about the research aim, about the community the research is being undertaken, about the institution(s) where research is located, about positionality, researcher's influence of the research process and more. Spotlighting a critiquing eye on one's research, and on yourself as the researcher, though necessary, is also an uncomfortable task. Regardless it is crucial to commit to reflexivity from the onset of research process and depending on the quality of questions we ask ourselves, actually allow ourselves to sit in/with the discomfort that may result from the process.

In conclusion, my doctoral research contributes to the understanding of human mobility across frontiers. It adds to the ongoing conversation on borders and migration – specifically centring the experiences of African LGBT population seeking asylum within the broader issues of migration and borders of gender and sexuality. These are issues of great importance not only for science but for global society at large. The theoretical approaches highlighted earlier will allow me to address a gap which exists in knowledge of LGBT migration and critically examine the policies that are presently guiding the asylum-seeking process in the UK. The research will provide an as of yet unexamined perspective and a particularly unique contribution to academic research. Overall, the narratives of African LGBT individuals seeking asylum in the UK will contribute to the telling of global homonationalism and forms of movement that try to make space for sexual orientation, against the backdrop of racism, homophobia, homonationalism and coloniality. Due to the nature of the doctorate research, including my positionality and feminism/politics it will be impossible not to be a reflexive researcher. As a result, as the research progresses, it is crucial that I continue to apply critical reflexivity. This paper, therefore, is a presentation of a social justice agenda for conducting the doctoral research, a reflexive offering examining the choices and processes guiding the doctorate research. I noted that rarely many scholars have published meditations of their PhD research processes. This paper is beyond just foregrounding reflexivity but is shared learning. Using my research process, as an example, the reflexivity demonstrates that research is not just a neutral act, but a deeply political, ethical and moral act which has the ability to be restorative and remedial. Meditations that engage critically with the important task of decolonising research practices and knowledge production can be valuable knowledge, for other scholars. I hope this paper is an invitation to more conversations, critique and documentation of the process of doing research.

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