



Queer, Christian and Afrikaans: the libidinal, sexuality and religion in *Kanarie* and *Skeef*

Gibson Ncube

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Religion is often viewed as incompatible with queer sexualities and genders. In the Afrikaans-speaking communities of South Africa, Calvinist doctrine and dogma have been used to marginalise and ostracise those sexual and gender identities that stray from the heteronormative scripts sanctioned by cultural and religious practices. In this article, I examine how the libidinal is central to the way in which queer and faith communities interact in Afrikaans-speaking communities in two films: *Kanarie* and *Skeef*. The two films represent different filmic genres with *Kanarie* a fictional feature film and *Skeef* being a documentary. The two films, despite their different genres, broach the difficulty of being queer and religious. At the same time, the films show that it is possible to rethink religions/faith communities. Such rethinking creates accommodative spaces within faith communities in a way in which queerness is not viewed as a deviance or an abomination. I read these Afrikaans-language films against the conceptualisation of the libidinal offered by Keguro Macharia together with the ideas of queer agency proposed by Adriaan van Klinken. This queer agency marks not just a transgression of heteronormative Christian norms but also engenders expansive ways of understanding human sexuality and gender identities.

Keywords: Afrikaans film, queerness, libidinality, religion, *Kanarie*, *Skeef*.

Introduction

Afrikaans societies, contends Kobus du Pisani, were for a long time imagined as being entrenched in “an unyielding Protestant view based on pure New Testament principles, and rigid austerity and strictness in conduct and morals” (158). For Marius Crous, Afrikaner societies could be encapsulated in three words: “Puritan, God-fearing [and] heterosexual” (50). These statements by Du Pisani and Crous point to the centrality of religion in shaping lived realities in Afrikaans communities of South Africa. Religion especially had an impact in the way in which people experienced and expressed their sexualities. This was particularly the case for non-normative sexualities which religious dogma framed as “sinful, unnatural and abnormal” (Du Pisani 169).

The idea of the sinfulness and abnormality of non-normative sexualities, which I will refer hereafter as “queer sexualities”, was further bolstered by apartheid legislation which, in addition to policing races, was particular in its regulation of sexualities and sex-lives of South Africa citizens. Nicky Falkof explains pertinently in this regard that:

One of the many ways in which this system [apartheid] secured itself, alongside legislation, military force, racial and religious ideologies, and control of the economy, was through the willing compliance of the privileged white electorate, maintained by a set of behavioural codes that included injunctions around ‘appropriate’ gender performance. White men, women, boys, and girls were expected to behave in ways that were coherent with the rigid traditionalising structures of apartheid. (274)

Falkof further contends that as apartheid and its traditionalising structures began to collapse, diverse anxieties and moral panics gripped white communities of South Africa, especially the Afrikaans ones. In addition to the ‘black peril’ known in Afrikaans as the *swart gevaar* (see Durrheim), one other anxiety was embodied in the figure of the white Afrikaans gay man who through his very existence “suggested a possible weakness in the ideal of the white South African patriarch. Fears about this weakness were even more potent during the late

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apartheid period, when both the system and the form of masculinity that supported it were seen by whites to be endangered” (Falkof 274). Glen Elder also expresses a similar point of view and contends that, “[u]nlike the spatially-containable threat of black masculinity in the mines, white male homosexuality threatened the very existence of a patriarchal apartheid system. The predominantly white masculine parliament and legal system of apartheid, which had sought to categorise [...] the South African population as a form of control, found itself under threat” (56).

Against such a background, I set out in this article to examine how two films document and register the intersection of queerness, Christianity and Afrikaansness. Documenting and registering offer two important and complementary modes of representing lived realities. Documenting is involved in the processes of capturing and keeping record of realities. Registering, although similar, can refer to the diverse iterations and hues of the recorded lived experienced. I will focus on *Kanarie* (2018), directed by Christiaan Olwagen, and the documentary *Skeef* (2020) directed by Renaldo Schwarp.

Kanarie has previously been examined by different scholars. For example, Grant Andrews finds that “*Kanarie* is [...] decidedly camp, with the gay male characters allowed to embrace non-normative gender expression, and to find intimacy and camaraderie with other gay men even if they cannot ‘come out’ in their oppressive environments” (56). Annel Pieterse contends that members of the *Kanarie* choir are “insulated in a white, Afrikaans world” (380) and that through the film “the viewer is invited to read *Kanarie* as an excavation of the violence and trauma inflicted on young men by state apparatuses of control and compounded within the family unit and the broader Afrikaans community” (381).

Despite its critical acclaim, *Skeef* has not elicited any scholarly engagement. Be that as it may, the two films have fascinating parallels and points of similarity. For example, it is quite evident that the imagined target audience of these two films is similar. Because of the predominant use of Afrikaans in the films and their overarching themes, the presumed target audience is Afrikaans-speaking and gay. Andrews attests that with regard to *Kanarie*, the “imagined gay white audience is almost decidedly Afrikaner, due to the film’s cultural specificity and the lack of an English-speaking audience surrogate that would more easily appeal to international audiences” (57).

I seek to offer a new appreciation of *Kanarie* and *Skeef* by bringing the two films into conversation. Despite the differences in cinematic vision and genre, my interest is in the convergent ways in which they register the intersection of queerness, religion and Afrikaansness. I should point out that, for the purposes of this article, I use the term Afrikaans to refer to the language and to refer to the diverse people who speak the language and share its culture. I do not use the term ‘Afrikaner’ because the term remains largely contentious. Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren points out in this regard that originally, “the term ‘Afrikaner’ was more inclusive and could be used to refer to both white people and coloured people who spoke Afrikaans and were loyal to the South African cause. However, with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, especially from the 1930s onwards, the term ‘Afrikaner’ came to be associated exclusively with white Afrikaans speakers, who were culturally signified by strong religious Calvinism” (32).¹ Chris Broodryk contends that the appellation “Afrikaner” continues to be “a contentious and shifting notion” (6) with some experiencing discomfort in being identified as such. Given such a situation, I use the term ‘Afrikaans’ to capture the diversity of Afrikaans-speaking communities.

The two films that I analyse in this article give a sense of the changes and (dis)continuities that take place from the Border War up to the contemporary post-apartheid moment. In my analysis of *Kanarie* and *Skeef*, I want to highlight the changes that have taken place in how queerness is considered in the Afrikaans-speaking communities depicted in the films and especially how religion is central in how queerness is constructed, understood, and performed.

The libidinal and its intersections with theology and (queer) sexuality

In this article, I integrate two theoretical perspectives: Keguro Macharia’s theory of frottage and Adriaan van Klinken’s work on the intersection of theology and sexuality in the understanding of queer African realities and lived experiences. In conceptualising frottage as an analytical method, Macharia considers the place of the libidinal or “sex practice” in uncovering “the creative ways the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds” (4). Frottage as a method of the libidinal foregrounds relationality and the contact of rubbing of different bodies and surfaces. The libidinal, according to Macharia, has the potential of “leading, at times to pleasure, and, at other times, to irritation, and even possibly to pain” (5). My interest in evoking the libidinal is that it is often marginalised in the consideration of religion. When religion is evoked, in many instances, it is framed as chaste and spiritual.

Mainstream white Afrikaans-speaking churches are seldom associated with the libidinal. In fact, the libidinal is not only removed from traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches but it is cast as antithetical to religion, religiosity, and religious practices. I use the concept of frottage to show that religion is libidinal and that the libidinal should not in any way be marginalised in the consideration of religion.

It is precisely because frottage focuses on the libidinal that I also draw on and incorporate Adriaan van Klinken's intersectional work which looks at how religion converses with sexuality. Van Klinken's work focuses on how "religious beliefs and practices [are] negotiated, appropriated and transformed" (*Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* 13). He maintains that "queer theorists and scholars in the field of queer studies have generally not seen the need for, or demonstrated an interest in, thinking about religion". Such a disregard and ignoring of religion and its role is meaningless in contexts such as Africa, "where religion is a highly significant locus of social, cultural, and political power". Van Klinken further argues that religion by its very nature is queer in that "it is not reducible to one essence but is open to multiple interpretations, and it is therefore potentially disruptive of any established hegemony or normativity" (*Kenyan, Christian, Queer* 14, 15). I find these ideas by Van Klinken to be productive in thinking of the place of religion in how characters in the films *Kanarie* and *Skeef* negotiate their gender and sexual identities.

By using the theoretical work of Macharia and Van Klinken, I aim to demonstrate that religion is important in understanding queerness in the selected films. In fact, I want to refigure the place of sex, sexuality and the libidinal in religion and concurrently how in the context of *Kanarie* and *Skeef* religion can help us understand the performance of queer gender and sexual identities. In the selected films, queerness should not be understood separately from religion but with(in) it. I will show that the protagonists in the two films exercise their agency in rethinking religion and forging new ways of considering their sexuality. Van Klinken explains that queer agency is "located in acts (how-ever subtle) of resistance to, and transgression of, the norms of sexuality in a heteronormative, dominantly Christian society" ("Towards Humane Scholarship: Postsecular, Queer Theological, and Self-Reflexive Turns" 640). The new ways of considering queer sexuality depart from essentialising discourses. The films gesture, in generative ways, to how queerness and Christianity can be rendered compatible within Afrikaans-speaking societies of South Africa.

Negotiating guilt and shame: on the (im)possibility of coming out in *Kanarie*

Christiaan Olwagen's film *Kanarie* is a musical coming-of-age film which focuses amongst other themes on the negotiation of queerness, masculinity, and religion in apartheid South Africa. *Kanarie* is set during the apartheid era Border War, which is also referred to as the Namibian War of Independence. Before examining the film, it would be important to consider what it meant to be a gay Afrikaans man during the time of the Border War. Young white men who had matriculated from high school were conscripted into the South African Defence Forces (SADF) (see Baines 17). Ernst van der Wal explains that to understand the Border War is to understand the idea of the enemy (63). The main enemy was evidently racial: the black communist. The other enemy as pointed out by van der Wal was "often skewed towards sexual and gendered biases" (63). Glenn Retief clarifies that the two ideas of the enemy were embodied in apartheid legislation: "Racist legislation and iron-fisted rule have, since the earliest days of Nationalist government, gone hand-in-hand with an obsessive interest in sexual policing. This policing has been based on the values of Christian Nationalist apartheid ideology: the need to keep the white nation sexually and morally pure so that it had the strength to resist the black communist onslaught" (100).

Similarly, Glen Elder attests that male homosexuality, unlike the "swart gevaar" clearly defied the very fundamentals of Afrikaans domination. As Elder posits,

Unlike the spatially-containable threat of black masculinity in the mines, white male homosexuality threatened the very existence of a patriarchal apartheid system. The predominantly white masculine parliament and legal system of apartheid, which had sought to categorise (and in the postmodern terminology 'other') the South African population as a form of control, found itself under threat. The idea of white male homosexuality in turn objectified the apartheid architects and practitioners. The idea sent panic down through the trenches of an unassailable order. (56)

The idea of the space of the Border War being both racist and homophobic comes out quite clearly in another film, *Moffie* by Oliver Hermanus (see Ncube, *Queer Bodies in Africa Films* 101–4). During the initial parade, recruits are instructed by a sergeant who exactly the enemies were in the Border War: "communism, laziness, faggotry, kaffir sympathy and any kind of undermining will not be tolerated". After two recruits have been caught engaging in "the

most disgusting, revolting act”, they are instructed that “faggots do not belong with us”. The “us” in this instance refers to white Afrikaans people. In my book I explain in this regard that: “Behind this assertion is an intersection of religion and ideas of gender performativity. Religion intersects with gender and race in constructing queerness as an unacceptable way of being. Queerness is constructed as wayward to both Christian beliefs and whiteness” (*Queer Bodies in African Films* 104). To deal with queerness, aversion was used especially on conscripts who were suspected to be gay (see Jones 403). Aversion therapy was supposedly a way of dealing with deviance and “curing” those suspected of harbouring gay inclinations. This, of course, framed queerness as a pathological conditional from which one could be healed and cured.

It is against such a background that *Kanarie* must be understood. The film follows a military choir, affectionately known as the Kanaries (Canaries), which tours the country during the final years of the Border War. The film’s protagonist is young man named Johan Niemand (Schalk Bezuidenhout) and the film focuses on his coming of age as he is compelled to question many things about his life, things that he had come to take for granted: his race, his sexuality, his religion and ultimately his beliefs and his thoughts on the role he plays in the war. In his audition to join the Kanaries choir, he explains that his life revolves around his religion, his love for music which tied to the love that he has for his country: “Music is my life. And being a Christian and a South African are equally important to me. I see the South African Defence Force Church Choir and Concert Group as the ideal opportunity to live all that I believe, all that I love, all that I am, to the fullest.”

Johan is a young man whose identity refuses to conform to what is expected of him by the very conservative society in which he grows up. In the opening scene of the film, Johan is with two female friends. The friends dress Johan up in a mock wedding dress and apply make-up to his face. They then dare him to walk down the streets of their neighbourhood in the dress. This scene has diverse signs and symbols that point to how the film grapples with issues of contestation of the status quo and negotiation of gender identity.

Of note is the way in which religion infiltrates this process of identity formation and negotiation. As Johan walks down the streets, a reverend from his church who is driving out of his home calls for Johan to come closer. Johan removes the wedding veil that he is wearing and bows to speak to the reverend. The reverend looks sternly and in a judgemental way at Johan’s dress, and states: “I suggest you go and change, before your father sees you like this.” What is interesting in this scene is the way in which the camera angles shift between Johan’s view and that of the reverend. When the reverend looks at the young man, the low angle shot at Johan bowing suggests how his queerness will need to be subsumed to the power of religion, represented in this scene by the reverend. The reverend orders Johan to go and change insisting that his manner of dressing and being are incorrect and do not fit into what is required of him in that community. In this scene, as with others that I will examine, the expression of queerness is always in friction with religion. The friction often leads the protagonist to recede into the closet as he “assumes the scorn and shame that are heaped on queerness” (Ncube, “Queer Afrikaner Masculinities in Oliver Hermanus’ *Skoonheid* (2011) and Christiaan Olwagen’s *Kanarie* (2018)” 97).

At one point in the film, Johan reveals to a fellow gay character that when he was a child, he had wished that Boy George had openly declared that he was gay as this would have given him the strength to embrace his own homosexuality. However, his queer godfather does not openly declare his sexuality and the possibility of being openly gay vanishes for young Johan, whose only choice is to carry a poster of Boy George in his Bible. The picture of the gay icon placed in the Bible is symbolic and points to the continued friction and rubbing between queerness and Christianity. The friction in this instance is very literal, as the picture of Boy George literally rubs against the words of the Bible. As Macharia explains, such friction can be the source of irritation and pain (5). There is obvious pain in that the picture inside the Bible symbolises the way in which Johan is torn between the dictates of two diametrically opposed ideologies and discourses.

On the one hand, he wants to be free and to fully embrace his difference. On the other, his religion constantly tells him that his difference is not only undesirable but also morally wrong. Because it is a space used by Johan to hide his queer godfather, the Bible is transformed into a form of closet. The closet in this instance is not just a space of hiding, but also a space that accommodates difference. In fact, the very presence of Boy George’s picture within the Bible queers the holy book. As such, the closet that is the Bible is at once a space of accommodation and contestation. There is simultaneous accommodation of queerness and resistance of the heteronormative ideals that are propagated in and through the Bible.

Against such a sociocultural background in which Christian mores impose themselves on the diverse aspects of the lives of people, *Kanarie* follows Johan as he leaves his hometown of Villiersdorp in the Western

Cape and goes to the military camp of Valhalla in Pretoria as he prepares for his two years of military service in the Kanaries choir. From their very arrival at the camp, the corporal who oversees their military training informs the conscripts that his main objective is “to make men out of you Marys”. At the training camp, the intersection of hypermasculinity, whiteness, Afrikaansness and Christianity makes the camp a space that compels the juvenile protagonist to rethink his place in South Africa and the world. During their first parade, Dominee Koch, the chaplain who oversees the Kanaries, explains to them in Afrikaans that one of the main goals of them being at Valhalla is to instil the word of God in them: “We are here to equip you in the line of duty. Myself and Dominee Engelbrecht are your chaplains. Ministers who are familiar with the military and who know how to uphold the word of God in this situation.” He further points out that the conscripts need to each become a “singer, saviour, soldier”. Being singers means that they needed to fulfil their roles as musicians in the Kanaries choir. Saviour suggested that the singers in the choir were undertaking an evangelising mission as Christians. As soldiers, they were required to defend the ideals and interests of the nationalist party and state. Moreover, as soldiers, the conscripts were required to perform a particular form of “militarised masculinity” which thrived on “dominating women and also looking down upon other masculinities that were deemed inferior” (Ncube, “Gender and Naming Practices, and the Creation of a Taxonomy of Masculinities in the South African Soap Opera ‘The Queen’” 6).

It is within this hyper-masculine, hyper-religious and hyper-nationalist space of the military camp that Johan is compelled to come to terms with his sexuality and religious and political beliefs. I set out to examine three specific scenes in which there is an exploration of the irritation that is engendered by queerness encountering Afrikaansness, and Christian mores.

The first scene involves the first time that Johan kisses one of his fellow Kanarie members, Wolfgang. The Kanaries have gone to church where they are to perform. In a stolen moment, Johan and Wolfgang kiss. Afterwards, Johan is quick to point out that the kiss was the “grossest thing that has ever happened to me.” The camera moves from Wolfgang whose face expresses enjoyment and pleasure and offers a close shot of Johan’s face which conveys a combination of disgust, guilt, shame, and horror. The contrast between the pleasure in Wolfgang’s face and the disgust and horror in Johan’s speaks to Macharia’s postulation of the concomitant sensual gratification and irritation that accompanies the libidinal. It is fascinating that this scene is superimposed by the voice-off in which Dominee Koch offers a sermon in which he talks about fighting against an ‘onslaught’: “The onslaught is out there. It’s in our homes. In our streets. In this very building. Amongst us. Now is not the time for peace. Now is the time for us Christians to take up the sword, in order to defeat the power of darkness.” Although the sermon could have been a reference to the Border War and the fight against communism, Johan is convinced that the sermon is about homosexuality.

The fact that Johan and Wolfgang have their first kiss within the grounds of a church is itself telling of the ways in which the film articulates the idea of transgression. Sealing a nascent gay relationship with a kiss on church grounds directly challenges what the church represents. The nascent queer relationship challenges and refigures what Adriaan van Klinken and Martin Zebracki refer to as “moral geographies” (91). There is indeed a reframing of what is considered morally accepted and morally correct. In the moment that the two men kiss, there is a suspension of a particular Christian morality. If the Border War grappled with the panic generated by the *swart gevaar*, then the queer kiss certainly represents a moral panic in which queerness is seen as inconsistent with Afrikaansness, and Christianity.

The second scene that I will analyse involves another instance in which Johan and Wolfgang are intimate. After heavy kissing, Wolfgang masturbates Johan. Although during the masturbation Johan’s facial expressions reveal pleasure, his face transforms immediately when he orgasms. He appears to be overcome by guilt and shame. He tells Wolfgang: “What we are doing is illegal, Wolfgang, do you get that? We could go to jail”. In this instance, there is reference to the legal framework which criminalised queerness. If, as I have previously pointed out, the *swart gevaar* posed a moral panic in Afrikaans society, the fear of the male gay was a palpable threat to white Afrikaans masculinity. Theo Sonnekus explains that the male gay threatened the controlled, sanitised and compartmental notion of sexuality (29). Queerness threatened the hegemonic form of Afrikaans masculinity which as pointed out by Sonnekus was a manifestation of “Christian Nationalist ideology, buttressed mainly by the Dutch Reformed Church, which placed great emphases on morality, asceticism, industriousness and heteronormativity” (24). So, when Johan refers to the illegality of their affair, he is at once underscoring how queerness is considered wrong by their religion and the legal regime that was in place at that time.

To especially buttress the idea of their actions being wrong in the eyes of their religion, Johan is also quick to remind Wolfgang that he comes from a very strict and religious background: “My father is a church elder, my mother is the secretary of the Women’s Society.” He goes on to tell Wolfgang that their relationship has disrupted his life and that he no longer understands who he is: “I was fine until you came along and fucked everything up. I don’t know who or what I am anymore.” In this scene, it seems that religion appears to counter the expression of queer desire. The impression given by this scene is that Johan and Wolfgang cannot be queer, Afrikaans and Christian because queerness is diametrically opposed to being Afrikaans and Christian.

I move on to analyse one last scene in which Johan visits his sister, Marilette, during a weekend break. He talks to her about an infantile love affair that he had with a boy named Gavin when they were in primary school. He is at the point of coming out as gay to his sister when he reads in her countenance disbelief and shock. He quickly assures her that the time he has spent at the training camp has allowed him to appreciate that loving a boy was just a phase and that he had outgrown that phase. He leaves his sister’s house at night to return to the training base. We next see him in the car of a mysterious man whose face is never shown. This man comments on how Johan’s hands are beautiful and then goes on to use them to masturbate. Once this mysterious man has orgasmed, Johan storms out of the car and we next see him at the training camp where he has an emotional and psychological breakdown. This breakdown is represented by a sequence that combines flashing lights and loud rock music. During this sequence, Johan is in a trance-like state in which he dances. He thereafter goes to see Dominee Engelbrecht, covered in blood from wounds he sustains from his dance routine which involved throwing himself against objects and the floor. As he chats with the Dominee, he asks that he pray for him. The Dominee attempts to offer emotional counselling, but Johan finds a dictionary in which he asks the Dominee to read the definition of the word “homosexuality”. This is the first time in the film that Johan gives a name to his difference. Hitherto, all he has done has been to perform his difference without naming it. Once he has named his queerness, he explains that: “I’m just sick and tired of feeling shit about who I am and what I like.” Johan’s implosion at the end of the film stems largely from his failure to harmonise his desires with the expectations of his Afrikaans society and upbringing, as well as the Christian faith into which he was born.

The negotiation of queerness that *Kanarie* proposes takes place within white Afrikaans spaces. As alluded previously, queerness, as is certainly the case with blackness, was during the apartheid era considered a threat to the hegemony of white Afrikaansness. As the conscripts go through their training, they are taught to look down on and hate otherness. This otherness took the form of racial and sexual others. Queerness, in this instance, was viewed as not having a place within white Afrikaansness. When Dominee Koch suspects that Johan and Wolfgang might be having a gay relationship, he takes them on a ride in his car. During the ride he tells the young men of the importance of them knowing and distinguishing between what is wrong and what is right: “In our hearts we know the difference between left and right, true and false, right and wrong”. He does not state plainly that he is referring to their queerness but he accelerates the car and removes his hands from the steering wheel and asks the young men to choose what they think is right. This is a telling scene of how queerness is considered wrong within the space of white, Christian, and Afrikaans community. Andy Carolin contends in this light that “the normative power of whiteness mitigates the otherness of same-sex sexualities, while it simultaneously constructs an imagined transnational gay community that is blind to its own constitutive racialisation” (99). By setting up the young men to choose between right and wrong, Dominee Koch is interested in safeguarding the purity of white Afrikaansness by getting rid of queerness from the imagining of white Afrikaansness. This elision of queerness from the definition of white Afrikaansness, of course, is self-defeating in the film *Kanarie* because the protagonists do not shy away from embracing the diverse facets of their being. They accept that they are white, Afrikaans and Christian and acknowledge the privilege that this brings. They also assume their queerness, which they find to be an integral part of their being.

The film’s parting note is that of Johan coming to terms with the fact that the greatest acceptance that he can achieve is not from God, his society or even his family. Rather, it is his own self-acceptance which is of paramount importance. This self-acceptance requires that Johan liberates himself from the yoke of the cultural and religious beliefs which frame his queerness as a deviant form of being and experiencing his sexuality.

Queer within faith communities in the documentary *Skeef*

The documentary film *Skeef* also deals with the difficulty of being Afrikaans, queer and Christian. Renaldo Schwarp explains at the start of the documentary what his mission was in filming this documentary:

We all have parts of ourselves that we really don't like. I battled with my sexuality for the longest time. So much so that I had the realisation at a young age that being gay would make my life a tad bit more difficult and the fact that I grew up in a pretty conservative, coloured Afrikaans Christian household wouldn't make things any easier.

Schwarp highlights above the intersection of numerous issues. This documentary sheds light on the lived experiences of a group of Afrikaans individuals who are marginalised owing to their race and sexual orientation. In South Africa, coloured identity, as argued by Mohamed Adhikari, has occupied a liminal space in which coloureds are considered as neither white enough nor black enough (168). Adhikari further attests that:

This claim has very rapidly become cliché, because it reflects popular sentiment within the greater part of the Coloured community and highlights key dilemmas Coloured people face in coming to grips with the post-apartheid environment. Besides accentuating their interstitial position within a transforming South African racial hierarchy, it very neatly captures their perennial predicament of marginality. (168)

Skeef shows that the marginality of coloured people is further complicated when individuals are also queer and they negotiate their queerness in societies that are entrenched in religious piety and practices. Schwarp interviews different Afrikaans people, some well-known and others just ordinary people. Through their shared struggles, Schwarp weaves together a narrative of the challenges that these queer Afrikaans individuals face in growing up and living in conservative Christian communities. Although the documentary film also focuses on the experiences of white Afrikaans queer people, I am particularly interested in the experiences of the coloured Afrikaans people who must navigate racial, sexual, gender and religious marginalisation.

One of the interviewees in the film is a coloured young man who was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. He is compelled to quit the church as he is unable to be ordained a minister owing to his sexual orientation. He explains: "I want to live my truth, I don't want to be a religious leader and a moral leader and not be able to be the person I really am inside the community." The unnamed young man decides to leave the Dutch Reformed Church because this faith community is unaccepting of his queerness. Jodi O'Brien explains that renouncing Christianity is the common reaction to the failure to harmonise queer sexuality and religion: "Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality. At worst, they are irredeemable sinners: at best, they suffer from problems or afflictions. Given this discourse of rejection, non-Christians might assume that the simplest path would be the renunciation of religion" (184).

The young man in *Skeef* does not take the route of renouncing his Christianity. Instead, he decides to practise his religion outside of the church in which he was born. He does not abandon his religious beliefs altogether. Rather, he seeks to forge and find a faith community in which he can experience his sexuality without having to struggle with shame and guilt. He accepts his sexuality and accepts that he cannot dissociate it from his religious convictions and beliefs. This young man is certainly different from the protagonist of the film *Kanarie* who is initially unable to accept himself for what and who he is. Instead of considering himself the problem, he locates the bone of contention as "the literal reading of the Bible." This minister highlights the need to reconsider Christianity away from the myopic readings of the Bible in ways in which there is no place for queer individuals.

The suggestion here is that it is possible to forge faith communities and spaces where sexual orientation is not a hinderance to full spiritual fulfilment. In this way, the libidinal and the sexual are not elided from the full human experience. Rather, the libidinal and the sexual form an integral part of experiencing human existence. The journey towards self-acceptance and acceptance by others is not an easy one. Van Klinken clarifies in this regard: "This [reconciling queer sexuality and religious faith] is not an easy process and it often involves a spiritual struggle, not only with the church but also with the God preached about in church—and both struggles are now always things of the past" ("Queer Love in a 'Christian Nation': Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities" 955).

Joe Forster, a singer, shares with Schwarp that he also struggled to come to a point of accepting himself for who he was despite his Christian upbringing which made him feel like a pariah and leper:

It was hard for me to deal with it, I didn't want to accept it. I didn't want to be gay, because I didn't want to live with the stigma, you kind of get treated like a leper, and I felt I was going to kick against it. I prayed and I hoped, and in this process I got very depressed. I lost myself in the process, my whole life was one big filter of darkness.

The use of the metaphor of the leper is particularly telling of how Foster considered himself and points to the kinds of discourses that pathologize queerness. Gregory Tomso offers an apt comparison of queerness and the disease of leprosy and argues that “gay desire itself as a form of contagion, a continually circulating form of bodily ‘corruption’ whose origin, like the origin of leprosy, can never be definitively located in time or space” (747). In thinking of himself as a leper, Forster internalises Christian mores which deem queerness to be a corruption of what was intended by God. Moreover, the leper, as is the case with the figure of the queer, evokes in other people feelings of hatred, fear and uneasiness. The internalisation of Christian beliefs by queer individuals is itself pivotal in how they embody self-hatred, loathing and shame. David J. Allen and Terry Oleson find such a reaction to be normal and expected given that “[a]s a result of developing and living in an environment of hostility towards homosexuality, homosexuals inevitably internalise anti-homosexual views. This anti-homosexual bias in the homosexual psyche has been termed ‘internalised homophobia’” (33–4).

What is, however, worth noting is that the people interviewed in *Skeef* do not dwell much on the internalised homophobia. Instead, they accept themselves and set out to live their lives the best way that they see fit. This then compels others to accept themselves as they are. It is on this point that *Kanarie* ends where the individual has grappled internally with the shame, self-hatred and loathing and comes to a space of self-acceptance. *Skeef* presents individuals who identify as queer who have accepted themselves and are living their truths. The mostly coloured people who are interviewed in the documentary film do not grapple with the idea of race, per se. Instead, the main issue for them is that their sexual identities are diametrically opposed to the religious beliefs. In a way, coloured Afrikaansness appears to be relieved of and from the burden of race with which white Afrikaans characters such as Johan in *Kanarie* must deal. In *Kanarie*, the protagonist is compelled to rid himself of queerness because he is white, Christian and Afrikaans.

More than highlighting the diverse ways in which *Kanarie* and *Skeef* offer innovative ways of understanding how queer individuals negotiate their gender, sexual and religious identities, the main intervention that I have made in this article is to show that the libidinal should not be imagined outside of religion. In fact, (queer) sex and sexuality can be imagined within Christian dogma. The films register the diverse ways in which it is possible to rethink Christian mores in the Afrikaans communities of South Africa in ways in which there are capacious considerations of difference and otherness. *Kanarie* and *Skeef* show that queerness can be liberated from the conservative religious and cultural practices of Afrikaans communities. As shown by the interviewees in *Skeef*, it is possible to find spaces away from the traditional contexts such as those of the Dutch Reformed Church and imagine new spaces where queer people do not have to struggle to harmonise their sexual identities with their religious beliefs. One character in *Kanarie* tells the protagonist Johan that he should embrace and fully live his difference: “As soon as your cage door opens, you fly away. Away from this God forsaken country, with all its sirs and madams and rules and regulations and all its hate and its bullies, its fucking bullies.”

Conclusion

Kanarie and *Skeef* are part of a growing body of Afrikaans-language films which broach queerness in the Afrikaans societies of South Africa. These films are important for the ways in which they discuss the question of queer agency and how queer individuals can exercise this agency in forging communities, especially faith communities. *Kanarie* and *Skeef* demonstrate that queerness and religion, especially as they intersect in Afrikaans societies, do not necessarily have to be antithetical.

In the two films, the characters rethink and negotiate their sexualities not from outside their religions but from within them. Johan in *Kanarie*, for instance, struggles with his sexuality within the faith community in which he has been born and raised. He questions his faith and especially what it says about his sexuality. His conversation with Dominee Engelbrecht shows him that he can in fact accept his sexuality despite what is stated and implied by the religious mores.

This article has demonstrated that it is possible to harmonise how queerness, Afrikaansness and Christianity intersect. Instead of viewing libidinality as irreconcilable with how Christianity is performed and practiced, it can be imagined as part and parcel of how religion is understood and enacted. Whilst shame and guilt seem to be the common and initial reaction, it is also possible to envision futures and spaces where being queer is not antithetical to being either Christian or Afrikaans.

Films such as *Kanarie* and *Skeef* are crucial in opening discussions on what it means to be queer and Afrikaans in South Africa. These films show that although religion is often a hinderance to queer individuals accepting their

sexual identities, it is possible to realise freedom within faith communities and rethink the place of libidinality within the practice of religion.

Notes

1. In this article, I use the terms 'black', 'white' and 'coloured', not because they have any scientific or genetic basis, but because of how South African society has been saddled with apartheid categories that continue into the present.

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