Tensions and contradictions of being *African*, feminist and activist within LGBTI social movements: An autoethnographic account

Akinyi Margareta Ocholla

Supervisor: Dr. Redi Koobak, Gender Studies, LiU

Master’s Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change 2014

Master’s thesis 30 ECTS credits

ISNR: LIU-TEMA G/GSIC-B—14/003—SE
Contents

Acknowledgements 4
Abstract 5
Chapter One - Introduction 6
  Situating an African Lesbian Activist’s Kenyan-Swedish Perspective 12
  Locating some ideological tensions in African lesbian and bisexual activism work 18
Chapter Two - Theoretical and Methodological framework 24
  Pitting my memory-words against others 29
  Autoethnography as Methodology 33
  Material description and ethical concerns 39
Chapter Three - African Activism 44
  A Lesbian Activist’s positions in African and international LGBTI movements 44
  A foot in both camps - contentious simultaneous engagement in two working groups 45
  Clash of ideologies and ways of working in the African Lesbian Working Group 47
    Working processes 52
  The Calm after the Storm 53
  The contentious African 54
    The Maternal factor – genealogies and feminist principles directing working ways 55
    Disidentification and Re-identification 57
  The decolonising work 59
    Failure and unlearning. Oppression, subjugation and privilege 62
Chapter Four - Conclusions & Implications 65
References 69
Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks go to all the lecturers, visiting scholars, PhD and Masters students at the Tema Genus Department of Linköping University. It was through all your tireless and enthusiastic commitment, as well as openness and willingness to share a lot of your own writing and thoughts that I was able to not only complete this course. I was also able to enjoy my time at Linköping University immensely. A very big thank you to all other staff at Linköping with whom I had occasional but very important contact. Your contribution to making my study life easier and enriching, online and face-to-face, did not escape my notice.

My gratitude and warm regards go to my supervisor Dr. Redi Koobak, whose own creative, thoughtful, vulnerable and personal PhD thesis inspired my own autoethnographic work. Your critique, encouragement and guidance were immeasurably useful in my thesis, but also in thinking about other aspects of theory, academia and activism.

A special thank you goes to Rhoda Awino, with whom I shared and continue to share a lot of my own heartache, confusion, disappointments, joys and aspirations. Thanks also go to my brother Erik Ocholla, for your love and support throughout my settling back in Sweden and study period.

I give a special acknowledgement to the activists with whom I engaged intensively and extensively throughout 2013. Thanks go to Elizabeth Khaxas whose support, together with Liz Frank, gave me some of the courage I needed to produce this paper. Thanks also go to MB, whose provocative engagement with me, catalyzed the creation of this thesis.

In addition I want to give a very warm thank you to my second family with whom I have lived since I moved back here – Klara Schyberg and Ernesto Garcia and their lovable twin boys Elis and Lauri. Your presence and kindness have coloured and uplifted my life beyond what I could have hoped for. Finally a big thank you to my friends and extended family around the world, who have collectively contributed to the person I am today.
Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the tensions and contradictions of being African, feminist and activist within sexual and gender minority social movements. I ask how an African activist with multiple backgrounds negotiates the different personal and political landscapes, tensions she encounters, as well as the implications this has for activism work. This study is meant to complement the growing body of activism publications, which, though varied and rich, tend to shy away from depicting and critically analyzing the internal problems experienced in groups, because of differences of ideological perspectives, backgrounds and power differentials. Using an autoethnographic methodology I analyse how a lesbian feminist activist, engages in self-reflections on life outlook, belonging, art and contentious online African and international activism. My materials include extracts of email conversations within two online discussions, my own art pieces and memories of my experiences. The theoretical framework includes situated partial perspectives, disidentification and unlearning. My analysis shows that my situated Kenyan - Swedish backgrounds have affected not only my art, but my thought processes which in turn affect how I engage in different activist contexts. Tensions and contradictions with other activists show how ideological differences, situated perspectives, age and power differentials determine the outcome of some activism agendas. My findings also suggest that activism encounters can lead to partial affective distancing, disidentifications, multiplicitous and holographic identities. Furthermore our origins, and experiences matter a lot in shaping our feminism ideals and ways of working. These ways of working reveal various instances of oppression, subjugation and privilege, effected by maternal affiliations, online invisibility, ethnic and indigenous identities and language. In conclusion, I argue that much more self-reflection, self-revelation, accommodation for individual differences and analysis of our ways of oppressing is required, for activism work to be successful and mutually beneficial.

Key words: African, tensions, feminism, disidentifications, lesbian, situated-perspectives, autoethnography.
Chapter One - Introduction

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”

Audre Lorde (2007: 40)

This first chapter sets the stage for the thesis by showing how the topic for the study was conceived. I explore ideas and questions around tensions, contradictions, positions and what is means to be African doing sexual and gender minority activism work. I explain my own situated perspectives which I subsequently use as an analytical tool in relation to the perspectives of other feminist activists. I also review some literature and try to locate ideological tensions on the African continent amongst sexual and gender minority activists, with particular interest in lesbian and bisexual women. There has been much debate on the politics surrounding terms and acronyms like ‘LGBTI’ or ‘sexual and gender minorities’, their implications for advocacy work and how or whether they lend authenticity to African minorities. With this in mind, I will alternatively use the term ‘sexual and gender minorities’ and ‘LGBTI’.

Who is an African feminist activist and how does an African feminist activist think and position herself in relation to activism work within international and African movement building around sexual and gender minorities (or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex - LGBTI)? It may be one thing to be an indigenous African, believing very firmly in decolonising, self-autonomous work within a local African organization. It may be another thing to be European living in Europe and firmly believing in, say, the international work of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). There are also Africans living both in and outside Africa, actively engaged in ILGA’s work defending the rights of sexual and gender minority persons, and who do not think that their work is neo-colonial ‘missionary’ interference in indigenous cultures, as Joseph A. Massad terms it (Massad 2007: 161). Finally there is a kind of African with multiple backgrounds – such as heritages from both the South and the North. Such an African may be contentiously involved in not just international work but also find herself confronted with questions of decolonising ways of working. She may find herself simultaneously in different groups or positions that lead her to question whether she identifies or disidentifies with them. In what ways is such an
African activist enabled or curtailed in negotiating the contentious socio-political and cultural ideological differences that drive international, regional and local LGBTI social movements? This is one of the basic questions that I have managed to distill from my encounters within African LGBTI activism work.

I begin by giving an account of my activism story on the African continent – told from my situated perspective. My engagement in sexual and gender minority activism included volunteering for over seven years as finance officer, chairperson and executive director of a lesbian and bisexual women’s organization, which was part of a larger sexual and gender minority coalition in Kenya. I also volunteered as representative for the Women’s Secretariat of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) within the same period. Working in these capacities brought me in contact with the African regional branch of ILGA and other regional lesbian and bisexual organisations, to which I subsequently gave my time and skills.

What I learned was that our origins matter in our activism engagement with other Africans, partial or non-Africans. How they matter, however, is the salient point. Because of the varying and, for some people, painful or emotional histories with colonialism, African activists have a wide variety of understanding and practices of feminisms and activism. A number of them are actively set to decolonise their thinking, ways of working as well as knowledge production. And many expect other African activists to do the same. However, not all are willing or able to do it. Nor can the pursuit to decolonise oneself lead to complete decolonisation. Many still try though. Indeed just as Obioma Nnaemeka puts it, there is a pluralism of –

\[(\text{African feminisms})\] that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women’s activism/movements in Africa (which) … underscores the heterogeneity of African feminist thinking and engagement as manifested in strategies and approaches that are sometimes complementary and supportive, and sometimes competing and adversarial.

Nnaemeka (1998: 5)

In my activism I got the sense that to attempt to decolonise is to willfully act in ways that one hopes and believes will restore one’s autonomy and sovereignty of self and community. However, to me it appears almost unrealistic to attempt to reclaim all one’s original or traditional ways of life, especially in present day multi-cultural and multiple states
of being. I do not think I am the only one thinking this as I have seen many African activists simply move on with their work, quite aware that there are some aspects of one’s community and self that have possibly been irreversibly changed for better or worse. In addition, I have got the sense that some African activists understand their racial, cultural and ideological origins as singular and/or separate (or separable) from others, and that these need to remain as such, in order to avoid perpetuating neocolonial systems, knowledge production and thinking. However, what of those activists whose origins are multiplicitous such as myself? Whilst some activists may have thought that I should ignore certain aspects about myself and emphasize others in my work, I have thought differently. I have made deliberate efforts to not always choose one part of me over the other. My thinking has not always been well received and this has led to tensions in my interactions with activists set to decolonise themselves. In some cases it has led to tensions within myself as well.

In my activism around rights of sexual and gender minority (or LGBTI) persons, my most vivid discussions on activism have been around exactly how we as African activists should position ourselves in relation to research, donors, international NGOs, and non-African LGBTI movements, states and politics. More specifically, amongst lesbians and bisexual (LB) women activists, the discussions I have heard and been part of often explored how much visibility LB women should have and what political, social and personal implications this would have. Other issues include how LB women can create safe, comfortable, expressive and nurturing virtual and physical spaces for themselves. These discussions happened in the embedded context of the larger LGBTI social movements. In a nutshell, a lot of my encounters with LGBTI issues, other than love and relationships, have been quite bluntly about the activism work. However, what has struck me, is the lack of information I feel there has been about who people are or feel they are, what makes them ‘tick’, what world views, ideologies, perspectives they have and how these influence what they consider priorities and in which ways these priorities should be actualized.

I have, for instance, wondered about the matter of multiple backgrounds of the individuals who are activists. To what extent do activists rely on two or more of these backgrounds, in their reasoning and ideologies? Or do activists on the African continent, simply ascribe to a singular identity, namely, African, or a nationality and perhaps more specifically to singular ethnic identities? Do they also affiliate themselves with other categories of identification and what might these be? When they conduct research, are they content to use
research tools and theories irrespective of who produced them, or are they more critical of their colonial past and aware of postcolonial rational and decolonising methods? Do they even care about the colonial past and neocolonial systems? Why would LB activists who are deeply critical of eurocentrism and capitalism, still apply for and accept funds from the West? Does it appear contradictory or is it self-explanatory to these activists? What about those activists whose identities consist of two or more racial and ideological backgrounds? How do they negotiate the knowledge that they are products of multiple and sometimes contradictory ways of thinking? These are also some of the questions, tensions and paradoxes I have thought and experienced within activism and with different African activists.

What seems to be fuzzy or elusive is what motivates the tensions and even abrupt disagreements within activism work. It appears that often there is the question of ethnic affiliations and historical injustices or conflicts especially within the Kenyan context. If one looks at not only the membership composition but also the intrapersonal dynamics of many Kenyan LGBTI activist organisations the ethnic factor is fairly clear. However, if one looks at more regional and international organisations and dynamics, things become somewhat more difficult to decipher. For instance, are people based in Northern Africa, more African or more Arabic and which sexual and gender minority discourse and ideologies of activism, do they follow? How may and should their activism be made more collaborative with sub-Saharan activism? How is it that even though Portuguese speaking Angola, for instance, has similar criminal laws against homosexuality as other African countries, it has a vibrant soap opera television show that features gay African characters and Titica, an openly transsexual woman singer and dancer?

I could see that Africans living on the continent do not all ascribe to the same ideologies, feminisms and ways of working. Rather, differences amongst African activists arise from their economic, socio-political, historical contexts and personal experiences within a country, between countries and depending on whether they were representing a regional African organization or an international one. How do activists from different countries and socio-political histories and with different ideologies effectively work together? Can an activist manage to effectively and uncontentiously work simultaneously in two organisations with strained working relations? These issues probably have many answers but I wonder if there are some fundamental aspects of what it means to be an African sexual and gender minority activist.
and if so, what they are. At several points I felt that the question of being *African, feminist* and LB activist was very complex and nuanced.

The gap, not only in discourse but in documentation and publications of African activism was the tensions experienced by activists in intrapersonal working relations within the LGBT movements more specifically. How activists’ backgrounds influenced their choices for activism discourse and strategies, how they used them to negotiate the political landscape from personal stand points. This is the key issue that I want to explore and this is why I chose to write this thesis with a focus partly on my own perspectives and partly reflecting on activism work with others. The main research questions, of this thesis are: How does an activist with multiple backgrounds negotiate the personal and political tensions and paradoxes in local, regional and international spheres of activism? What are the implications for activism and knowledge production as in the case of a feminist lesbian activist? By local spheres I mean national contexts such as Kenya. Regional context means the African continent in this thesis. And international spheres can mean any context in which African activists meet each other, or other activists from outside the continent, whether face-to-face or online.

I present here an autoethnographic account of my work within the context of African activism. The reason I chose the autoethnographic method was because it allowed me to situate my perspectives within the analysis of the local, regional and international contexts. This way I provide my subjective world view or feminist ‘objectivity’ (Haraway 1988).

The autoethnographic method has also provided me with ways of articulating my identification and *disidentification* with what it means to be an African LB feminist activist. By identification I mean the social processes where “individuals define themselves in relation to other entities (…)”, creating “one’s sense of self concept, which is linked to one’s connection with a group” (Tajfel and Turner 1985: 6). Whilst I agree with this definition, I want to add that these social processes go on throughout one’s life and can result in numerous identifications to a variety of groups but also, inevitably, to disidentifications as well. In addition, the processes are two-way, with feed-back from groups to the individual and vice versa, taking place. Linda Alcoff, (1997) and Franks Myfanwy (2002), for instance, explain positionalities in terms of identities and affiliations of an individual and that these may be ascribed, selected or enforced, usually by others. For me, ascriptions or identities can have such a variety of meanings to different people that they can create an obstacle in communication.
Individuals either accept or reject their assigned positions. Sometimes they both accept and reject different parts of these positions or disidentify (Muñoz 1999).

Attempting to unlearn parts of my colonial heritage, if that is possible, would be an interesting (?) process and result of my autoethnographic analysis. This might be in line with what Judith Halberstam calls undisciplinarity, untraining and unlearning what we think we know (Halberstam 2011: 1-11; 2012: 9-16). It might provide room for ‘border thinking’ (or border epistemology) which is the anti-imperial epistemic response to colonial difference and as such a de-colonial project (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006: 208). A question to myself, though, would be, whether border thinking might be useful even in the positioning of oneself in relation to fellow African activists. In some ways I think it could. For whilst I believe in defending human rights, in producing knowledge and being in control of much of the work we do, I have not always accepted concepts like African, feminist and coloniality unquestioningly. To me they are not concepts with obvious or clear meanings and implications. My reasoning around these concepts perhaps places me on the periphery or in a different space from more mainstream thinking and in this way I am at the borders of different understandings.

My autoethnographic analysis is based on extracts of email conversations that I had with activists in an African Lesbian Working Group in 2013. I have analysed a few of my own paintings as a way of providing a visual presentation of the production of myself and my identifications, the individual who joined the activism scene. For me, this is an important aspect in situating my perspectives. Art is after all always about identification (Jones 2012: 2 in Koobak 2013: 74). Art can show the viewer the external influences on the artist, the priorities of the artist and what touched the artist deeply. The art hints at factors that built up the person that is the artist – stories, personal history, geopolitical relations, emotions. It gives the artist’s self-representation both in portrait form and in the motifs depicted. It is a communication to the outside world as much as it is a reflection back to the artist.

I have also engaged in memory work as much of the knowledge and feelings that feed into this analysis are stored in my memory. Here I have chosen to engage “‘individual’ memory-work” perhaps similar to that of Hampl, Patricia (1996) who is mentioned by Claudia Mitchell and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan (Mitchell and Pithouse-Morgan 2014: 93). Whilst this ‘individual’ work is based on-, deliberately interrupted by- and conflated with the memories and words of activists I engaged with, it is not done in “a systematic, collective process of ‘editing’ each individual account” (Haug 1987 in Mitchell and Pithouse-Morgan 2014: 93). So
in this respect my memory work is not a collective memory work. But there is “productive ambiguity” and there certainly emerge “multiple perspectives” (Eisner, E.W. 1997: 8 in Mitchell and Pithouse-Morgan 2014: 94). And this makes it inextricably linked to autoethnography as well as “narrative research” which Sarojini Nadar describes as a “defining feature of African feminist epistemology” (Nadar 2014: 18).

To begin my situated perspectives, I provide a self-introduction. Thereafter I present my methodology, in which I explore autoethnography as used by feminist researchers. I interlace this with a review of some literature. Here I show that much of the documentation by women, whilst in the form of stories of selves (which sometimes feature activism) within the context of patriarchal oppression, rarely show tensions or paradoxes between activists. Hence the need to give this aspect the emphasis I do in this paper.

**Situating an African Lesbian Activist’s Kenyan-Swedish Perspective**

I am a Kenyan-Swedish lesbian-bisexual activist who lived in Sweden the first five years of my life, then another thirty years in Kenya, interspersed with several short and long visits to Sweden, and then tentatively settled back in Sweden to study. I worked on the African continent in local Kenyan contexts, in regional African contexts and on the international stage. It may appear somewhat contradictory for me to call myself lesbian and bisexual. To me, however, these identities have both been essential factors in my life and can exist simultaneously side by side or even overlapping. My bisexual identity is now latent and as such I do not use it in active identification. It is an identity that is lying comfortably and quietly in my consciousness, only emerging where and when it is needed.

The word *feminist*, whilst I feel that I am one, is not something I use in my everyday self-labelling. I think a lot of it has to do with its loaded and shifting meaning and value depending on how I use it, who else uses it, in which contexts, who the audience is and what political added value it gives to a conversation (as is also mentioned by Matebeni 2009 and Vasu 2004). It is a word easily misunderstood or misused by different people. The African Feminist Congress report 2003, that mirrors some of my concerns, lists a few of the feminist questions or propositions, namely “Not all self – named feminists are feminist?”, “Are some of those who don’t identify (publicity) as feminist, none the less feminist?”, “Widening the
feminist movement to include those that are feminists but do (not) define themselves”, “More than one African feminism?””, “Feminism as an organised identity.”

In some ways my ‘biracial’ heritage and dual nationality are simplifications of who I really feel that I am. For instance, whilst I may say that I am Kenyan, I acknowledge my inextricable paternal ancestry with the Nilotic people who supposedly originated in South Sudan (although looking even further back in history one could say that the Nilotic people also mixed with the early Southern Egyptians). The Nilotes dispersed southwards and eastwards into the surrounding East African region. One group migrated through Northern Uganda, some intermarried with a Bantu sub-group in western Kenya but most settled down in present day Nyanza province (the River Lake Nilotes) and along the Rift Valley (the Plain and Highland Nilotes). I also acknowledge that my maternal Swedish ethnic roots may be as mixed with possible lineages from different regions. My maternal grandfather’s extended family owned and tilled a farm as far back as the 16th century. And I can list many of the names from my maternal grandmother’s lineage all the way back to the middle of the 18th Century. I, myself, grew up in the capital city, Nairobi, where many ethnic groups mixed relatively freely, even if socio-political tensions between several of them were apparent to me from an early age. Indians often mingled with ethnic Kenyans and indeed some of them were second, third, maybe even fourth generation Kenyans themselves.

The languages I speak are English, Swedish, Kiswahili and a little French.¹ I also have a minor understanding of the Luo language (my father’s ethnic identity). Culture wise I am more conversant with Swedish and English than with Luo traditions. My knowledge of the Swahili culture (a mixture of mostly Bantu and Arabic, with minor Persian and Portuguese influence), is comfortable but not comprehensive. I learned this national language mostly in school and not so much the traditions associated with its people who are settled around the coast on the eastern coast of Kenya. English (and some German words) were incorporated into the Kiswahili language during the colonial era.

English, being one of two official national languages that Kenyans had to learn, became my first language when it displaced my Swedish mother tongue. At home, my mother and I spoke a mixture of Swedish and English – or Swenglish, as it is popularly known. I

¹ ‘Kiswahili’ is the indigenous name of the language Swahili. Swahili is also the name of the Kiswahili speaking people. I studied French purely out of interest and anticipating that it would be of help at future work places.
struggled to learn Kiswahili at school and it was not until my post-secondary years, that I finally felt comfortable speaking it with others. My father rarely spoke Luo to my brother and me, and yet we were somehow expected to pick it up. That did not work out so well. Perhaps people thought my brother and I were obstinate ‘wazungu’ who refused to learn. Maybe we were and maybe we were not. However, we did hear the language spoken intermittently around us by relatives, acquaintances and friends. So some components of the language and culture became integral parts of ourselves. English and Kiswahili were the languages I used in everyday work and play but various words from different ethnic languages entered our day-to-day speech and became natural components of our discourse. The family diet consisted mostly of Swedish and Kenyan dishes interspersed with morning and four o’clock tea – a popular remnant from British commercial ventures and now a large Kenyan foreign exchange earner.

I began painting at the age of three or four and continued doing so throughout most of my primary, secondary, undergraduate and postgraduate university years. Even though my first name is Akinyi and many of my friends refer to me by this name, I was in some official circles called Margareta. This was partly because in Kenya as in many other post-colonial countries, one’s first name is often an English name and the indigenous name is a middle or surname. So in high school and at my work places my names were almost always switched around. Partly for this reason, I would often use Margareta as my signed name in my paintings. However, I believe that another reason why I used it to sign my paintings was to leave my Swedish mark on my paintings which had to compete for attention with all the other paintings by my Kenyan colleagues and friends. My ‘English’ sounding name was not just another “Christian/colonial heritage” as with many of the people I know. My name was my actual heritage although few people maybe noticed or paid too much attention to that. I do remember, though, that there was an experimental phase when I did sign my paintings with Akinyi but it did not last for very long. The most recent paintings that I did in 2012 usually ended up sketchy or unfinished but were signed Akinyi M. Ocholla. By then it felt more natural somehow.

For the purpose of situating my partial perspectives further and to begin to show where sources of tensions between activists may come from, I present a portrait of my mother that I painted prior to her passing away (see photo below). The reason I want to expound on

---

2 Wazungu is the Kiswahili term for ‘foreigners’ or Europeans.
3 A quick look at the origin of the name Margaret gives English, Sanskrit or Persian sources. So it is debatable whether or not my name is a colonial one or a result of centuries of borrowing from various Germanic and Middle Eastern regions.
the maternal factor is because it became clear to me how important one’s ties to the maternal side are and how that influences future ideologies and cultures. Even as I acknowledge paternal ties and influences, the maternal ones seem to take some special precedence in this particular case.

It has been shown that dependency and bonding of child to mother can lead to various kinds of life-time kinships, cultural evolution, ideologies and network energy flows (Leonetti and Chabot-Hanowell 2011). “Kinship creates social ecological conditions, beyond those of kin selection (Hamilton 1964), that have the potential to act as evolutionary forces on human behaviour and biology (e.g., Heyer et al. 2005)” as stated by Donna L. Leonetti and Benjamin Chabot-Hanowell (2011: 17). Reiterating some of these points on kinship Silva Júnior et al. show how strong the emotional closeness to one’s maternal side is compared to the paternal one, although support and control systems do influence how one relates to various relatives (Silva Júnior et al. 2014).
The other aspect of ties to one’s mother and sometimes to an ancestral homeland, appears to be that these are necessary factors for integration into a destination homeland and that these are not contradictory processes but can instead be mutually reinforcing (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Åkesson 2011). One of the issues that I felt was core to some of the tensions I felt, particularly between one older activist, was that they seemed to stem partly from our maternal affiliations. The fact that our mothers were from two very different world regions to
some extent contributed to different ideological stands. I will return to this issue further in the thesis.

The portrait was one of the last major paintings I did. My mother suffered from cancer and was on steroids – hence the pink in her face. I had several conversations with both my mother and father about their geographical and cultural origins. To me, these were both fascinating and important in understanding who I was as a person. In the portrait of my mother, I chose deliberately not to use any black colour. In its stead, I used a mixture of dark blue and brown which gives a dark enough colour to pass for black. There is little or no stylization as with my phase in the early 2000s, in which I allowed inspiration from Picasso and Chagall to move my painting. What I do notice though, is that I seem to have the same sweeping, swirling brush strokes in the rendering of my mother’s hair, her sweater and face as I used in the rendering of my earlier skyscapes and other imaginative pieces. For me, this points to my love for Van Gogh’s work. It is a very emotive, free form of painting, but still shows, at least to me, that I understand and affiliate with half of my heritage.

I generally do not consider myself radical though I have mingled with lesbian activists who perhaps consider themselves radical. I have also read texts by persons some consider as radical feminists (such as Luce Irigaray). It is difficult for me to begin expounding on the concept *radical* since it has many connotations depending on context and audience. Some ideological thinking by radical persons may have rubbed off on me. Generally with regard to knowledge and spiritual ideas, I am quite happy to borrow from any source that seems reasonable and authentic. If I like an idea, I will take it. In many respects I consider myself a daughter of ‘border-lands’. The concept ‘border thinking’ appeals to me and is something I identify with (Anzaldúa 1987; Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009). But perhaps what makes even more sense to me is the concept of being more than the sum of my origins and parts. I am multiplicitous and sometimes I also feel that my essence is elsewhere – or holographic.

Having set the stage for the study by presenting how one African lesbian activist sees herself, I will delve into documented incidences of tensions and contradictions within sexual and gender minority activism. I aim to show that whilst these documentations do exist, they are not particularly easy to find, and are often embedded in larger social and political conversations that sometimes elucidate but more often conceal them.
Locating some ideological tensions in African lesbian and bisexual activism work

My engagement with ILGA since 2010, has shown me some changes in terms of African sexual and gender minority activist involvement and ideologies. During the 2010 ILGA World Conference, in Sao Paulo, there was a minor representation of African activists at the venue. While it was a source of dissatisfaction for the Africans present, it was a marginally better situation than the 1994 ILGA world conference in New York in which there were none (Massad 2007: 163). The 2012 ILGA World conference in Stockholm organized by the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Rights (or RFSL), saw not only the largest number of delegates from around the world – over three hundred, but also the largest from Africa - seventy in total.4

The ideological discourse within ILGA has also been in flux. As more African voices were heard, there was an increasing push for their involvement in decision making within the ILGA board and from the African Steering committee – a branch of the ILGA structure.5 At the 2012 world conference, there were speeches by African and Caribbean key note speakers, who advised the activists to find out where donor money was being directed and spent, thereby elucidating the imbalance in donors spending money on themselves versus on activists in the Southern regions. Following this, ILGA has subsequently titled its next world conference ‘Decolonising the body’. Whilst this shows that Southern and Subaltern voices or terminologies are progressively being used as part of the discourse and maybe also the work, one may still wonder what this could mean coming from an international organization. Could one say that ‘Gay International’ (as Joseph A. Massad calls ILGA and other international organisations) is being decolonised? If so, to what extent? Is the ‘decolonising’ focused on the Southern and Subaltern organisations or is it meant to be an intervention strategy also by European and North American organisations, and if so, how might that begin to look like?

Whilst these developments have been happening on the international scene, my focus now turns to what has been happening on the African continent. Tensions and arguments amongst same-sex and gender variant activists in African have always existed. Having been a part of these movements, I have often been embroiled in them myself, mostly between lesbian and bisexual women, sometimes with trans persons. However, what surprised me when seeking

5 I refer to this steering committee as the African LGBTI steering committee or Steering Committee in the rest of the text.
documented and analysed articles on these disagreements was how difficult it was to find more specific and detailed accounts of this contentious subject. One of the first articles I came across that spoke about disagreements and tensions was *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Visweswaran 1994). Kamala Visweswaran proposes that feminist ethnography could focus on women’s relationships with other women and the power differentials between them (1994: 20).

Looking further on tensions between women activists, colonialism and the African continent, the next issue I found was a description of Africa as a continent with multiple histories and origins. In her article *Subversion and Resistance*, Jane Bennett, states that histories of Africa are often documented as relationships with colonialism such as the Roman Empire; the Middle East; European powers; China and the United States (in Tamale, 2011: 79). Africa is far from homogenous, but rather a diversity of languages, cultures, environments and people. Indeed, Bennett continues “there is no such thing as Africa, except as such a space is highlighted and debated in opposition to the discourses that stereotype the continent (…)” (as cited in Tamale, 2011: 80). She further cautions people to speak of African-based activism in ways that respect the “depth and complexity of the political, social and historical realities of the continent.” In addition to this there is no such thing as ‘the African woman’ but rather, women whose reality and complexity needs to be analysed in each individual case (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Bryce 2008). Norma Alarcón adds another dimension to the woman, namely:

> that ‘one becomes a woman’ in ways that are much more complex than simple opposition to men. In cultures in which asymmetric race and class relations are a central organizing principle of society, one may also "become a woman" in opposition to other women.

Norma Alarcón (1991)

There have been African driven compilations of activists’ articles about women’s movements and the tensions therein. For instance, the Africa Feminist Congress (AFC) report 2003 points to conversations that took place around sexuality and sexual orientation, heteronormativity, difference amongst women, inclusion or exclusion, feminist values, power, ageism, definitions of citizenship and ideology, amongst other areas. Whilst the report captures some tensions amongst the mostly African women who were present, it would have been useful for it to elaborate on the tensions or disagreements. Indeed it requires some elucidation from someone who actually attended the congress.⁶ A few of the more explicit tensions covered by

---

⁶ This report was given to me by Elizabeth Khaxas and Liz Frank of the Women’s Leadership Centre in Namibia. Elizabeth provided me with extra insight into the tensions and disagreements that took place at the
the report included: “compromise by gender activists”, “fear of rocking the boats”, “definition and understanding of feminism”, “making the personal political”, “love/like for status quo”, “ideological starting points”, “types of strategies deemed appropriate” and “perceptions of superiority mediocrity”. Others included: “Who is African?”, “location of African women as rural”, “perception of African women as Rural”, “contestations over representative and authenticity”, “engaging African feminists in the Diaspora”, “recognizing and developing ‘South-South’ feminist engagement – issue based or interregional”.

Stories about the South African anti-Apartheid movement often depict the tensions, oppression and marginalization that black and coloured women experienced at the hands of their black and coloured male counterparts as well as the white Apartheid regime (as in *Agenda. Autobiographies, biographies and writing lives* 2014). However, little is mentioned about the tensions or paradoxes amongst these African women. Other articles, such as those on Kenyan LGBTI movement and advocacy (Ocholla 2010; 2011), whilst covering some of the tensions between LGBT activists in general, do not tackle the immediate tensions between lesbian and bisexual women activists in particular or on ideologies per se.

Some of the articles I encountered in volumes of the Feminist Africa Journal, presented research findings by feminist women, often in campus settings. The researches were sometimes studies describing how Southern African women students negotiated gendered and racialized spaces on and off campus. In these reports, the studies were presented as conducted by academic and student researchers, formulated to encourage the equity, agency, empowering and independence of the student researchers. The issue of power dimensions between students and lecturers or between students themselves, however, appeared under-analysed (as in for instance Bradbury and Kiguwa 2012).

Tanja Bosch and Susan Holland-Muter (2012: 87) appear to have considered this skew in power, class, age and race relations, and quote Daphne Patai (1991) and Judith Stacey (1991) in this regard. In addition Bosch and Holland-Muter document the tensions that were created in the course of the study, including differences in ideology, and identity. For instance one white academic researcher was ascribed by a student researcher as having a certain power on account of her race. In another example a student researcher identified herself as “coloured”

_Congress. Amongst them, were issues surrounding how dark skinned an African woman had to be in order to be accepted as African, and matters surrounding sexuality._

20
with specific connotations linked to this identity whilst a ‘coloured’ academic researcher self-identified as “Black” based on her experience working in the Apartheid movement. The focus of the study though was mostly on sexuality, patriarchy, race-relations and heteronormativity.

Some of the topics that are frequently covered in publications on African same-sex loving and gender variant persons include public policy matters, human rights abuses, the need for decriminalization and public litigation. These publications include: Pambazuka News and *The Outlawed amongst us* (2011). African Anthologies of activists’ articles include *African Sexualities* by Sylvia Tamale (2011) and *Outliers* (IRN-Africa 2009). Many of these articles speak of women’s or trans persons’ struggles against patriarchy, discrimination, violence, heteronormativity, and efforts of personal healing, empowerment and work. Some aspects of LGBTI African movements have been documented. Personal interviews such as Pumla D. Gqola’s interview with Wendy Isaack presents a lesbian’s experience and thoughts on discrimination, racism and class distinction in a broader context (Gqola 2006). There is, however, no in-depth analysis of tensions and disagreements within the lesbian movement. Others come in the form of short personal queer stories such as *Invisible. Stories from Kenya’s Queer Community* (Mwachiro 2013) and, poems, articles and blogs speaking of self-love, love for a same-sex partner, or accounts of painful events such as in HOLAA.⁸

A topic that appears to have been explored more in depth is feminism within activism. Bennett, for instance, provides an overview of the activism arena on the African continent, saying that the term feminist has been integrated in the complex web of “individuals, organisations and ideas” such as the African Feminist Forums. However, her analysis of this web appears to be too overarching, and she mentions only a handful of women activists. A few of these activists, namely Nawal El Saadawi and Awa Thiam within the contexts of Egypt and Senegal are presented as questioning and exposing the injustices of patriarchal structures and machinations (in Tamale 2011: 87). LGBTI activists are given a cursory mention within the context of Facebook, blog and website activism (88, 93).

Visweswaran mentions Judith Stacey’s assertion that it may not be possible to do innocent feminist (ethnographic) work because of the ‘delusion of alliance’ and the betrayal of feminist principle(s). Feminist innocence is betrayed by power relations (Stacey 1988 in

---

Earlier feminist perspectives of ‘sisterhood’ often fail to question differences and divides of women (also stated by Oyewumi Oyeronke, 2003 in Jane Bryce 2008: 51). The other non-innocence is our individual understanding of and ascription to what feminism means, as Donna Haraway says (in Visweswaran, 1994: 40). Kamala Visweswaran recounts her experience interviewing some individuals and observing how some betrayed others by imparting information about them, sometimes openly and sometimes behind their backs (1994: 47).

When Audrey Mbugua gives a brief indication of conflict between transsexual and LGB persons, she points to the “marginalisation and abuse” that transgender persons experience when they are lumped with- or referred to as- gays/lesbians, when they are referred to by their biological assigned sex instead of their preferred self-assigned genders or when their issues are sidelined (as cited in Tamale, 2011: 243-244). In her assessment of the tensions between cisgender heterosexual women, lesbian and transgender feminists, Zethu Matebeni describes how transgender men took issue with the definition of ‘feminist’ and related terminologies such as “African women” with a focus on “the lives of African women on the continent” in The Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (Matebeni 2009). The Charter mentions that “women’s organisations should be led and managed by women.” Transgender men protested against this and other coercive, oppressive, marginalising issues saying that they were resisting hegemonic forms of masculinities as they had previously been perceived as women. Matebeni further states that there was an “unarticulated rejection” by the Maputo Leadership Institute of butch-femme lesbians, masculine women, and female-to-male persons, who were perceived as perpetuating male patriarchy (Matebeni 2009: 352). The concept feminism was deemed problematic, contentious and would require further analysis as it is “heavily contextual, diverse and fluid” (353). The contentious nature of the feminism concept is reiterated by Vasu Reddy (2004).

Tensions, whilst not always written about, are palpable in the silent spaces of conversations and the invisibility of activists, as I have experienced myself. The issue of ‘the deviance of invisibility’ is elaborated by Jim Holmes (2009). Holmes provides various online examples of how invisibility of authors with mischievous or malicious intent, can seriously compromise not just personal reputations but also the credibility of various online sites. I see, for instance, its usefulness in my analysis of online communications, with activists, in which lack of a ‘face’ provides a partial invisibility even though one knows who is actually speaking
or not. There is, I would add, a ‘deviance of silence’ in which silence not only deprives information from others, but enforces power differentials in the political and social movements of LGBTI persons. I explore the aspects of the deviance of invisibility, the deviance of silence and silencing of the individual within collective work.

The aforementioned literature review provides a small snap-shot of different aspects of tensions within African LGBTI social movements - what has been said by activists, researchers and human rights defenders and how the information has been documented. The specific points that I look for in this review, is how women’s personal interviews, perspectives, articles, or blogs provide a critical self-reflection of the individual’s own tensions of ideology and situated perspectives in relation to other activists within African LGBTI social movements and how this impacted the work. There is reason to believe that documentation of tensions amongst activists and particularly critical autoethnographic self-reflections of one’s own situated perspectives as related to those of others, is lacking. Debates around epistemological matters and ways of activism work are not easily obtained, other than possibly in organizational reports. Furthermore, contentious discussions around these areas remain either poorly documented or selectively disseminated.
Chapter Two - Theoretical and Methodological framework

In this chapter I expound on theoretical and methodological concepts as well as the materials used (which include memories, emails and artwork) and ethical concerns. As I mentioned in the introduction of my thesis some of my tensions with other activists led me to begin thinking how I was identifying with other groups, positioning myself and in turn which ascriptions were being assigned to me. The resulting disidentifications, positionalities and ascribed identities are a few of the concepts I begin to focus on here.

To "disidentify" according to José Muñoz implies a political act that resists dominant ideology and also embodies "a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (Muñoz 1999: 31). His version of this theory of subjectivity is one that marks the differences between white normativity/heteronormativity and the queer-racialized body. In my thesis I have used this term “disidentify” not only in relation to white normativity but also as a partial affective distancing from some of my fellow queer African activists and/or organisations (Becker et al. 2011: 1106). Valorie Thomas, for instance, understands Muñoz’ disidentification as an exposure of “fissures and opportunities for reinvention, suggesting alternative readings of narratives, topics, and texts that might lead to social change” (Thomas 2012: 272). Fissures and opportunities for reinvention are precisely the kinds of positions I find appealing within my activism context.

I am also fascinated by Butler’s central question: “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (Butler 1993: 219). She views disidentification as simultaneously seeing and failing to see ascribed identifications. Indeed, as other authors have mentioned, disidentifications may take the forms of ‘ambiguous’, ‘ambivalent’ or ‘schizo-identification’ (Corley and Gioia 2004; Meyerson and Scully 1995; Elsbach 2001). Disidentifications can thus result in ‘shifts in self-categorization’ (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell 1987 in Becker et al. 2011). As my analysis will show, these ambivalent, ambiguous and maybe even ‘schizo’ shifts in identifications are what I myself experienced (or remember experiencing) in my progressive engagement with some activists.
Shifts in identifications are strengthened further by what du Bois calls *double consciousness* (1903 in Åkesson 2011: 227). This double consciousness manifests itself in the ways that individuals view themselves whilst simultaneously having to see themselves through the eyes of other people, always being aware of how others position them. It is also a position of being both on the inside and on the outside simultaneously (ibid). This double consciousness in a people of mixed origin is an important factor in the formation and perpetuation of transnational ties and mixed ideologies (Åkesson 2011: 228-232).

One of the cornerstones of my analysis is based on a concept by Nnaemeka, namely “no-ego feminism”, which is a similar perspective to positionalities as Thomas’ “reinvention”. In her article *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way*, Naemeka argues for a multiplicity of different yet related frameworks that allow a touching, intersecting and feeding off of each other, whilst accommodating different realities and histories. This is a part of what she describes as no-ego (nego) feminism or negotiating feminism (Nnaemeka 2004).

The other concept which I borrow from and which is linked to positionalities, is the concept of Feminist ‘objectivity’ or the use of *partial perspectives* in research (Haraway 1988). Haraway calls this a kind of seeing from below or *subjugated standpoints* (1988: 582-585). The issue, though, is *how* to see from these positions since they are far from innocent. According to Haraway, feminists should seek a “perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise (...) knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (585).

I explore the question of how a person with multiple backgrounds negotiates contradictory personal and political spheres and more specifically who an African feminist lesbian activist might be. Because of this I felt that it was particularly important to begin to look at myself from a subjugated standpoint with partial perspectives. I had to analyse how my positions were concurrently subjugated, non-innocent and privileged, as only then might I begin to more clearly see how my interactions and those of other activists were cross-influencing each other and what implications this could have. My autoethnographic analysis may therefore begin to show how one *reconstructed world* might look like.

As I think about other constructed worlds, my mind quickly turns to decolonising as a thinking and doing. And Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* immediately comes.
up (Wa Thiong’o 1998). But I am a bit troubled by the recipe that he presents as a solution to coloniality and colonised minds. Wa Thiong’o asserts that Africans who write in the colonial languages are not African literary writers but Afro-European literary writers (1998: 102). Furthermore by writing in their ethnic African languages they will restore the “harmony between all the aspects and divisions of language and (...) restore the Kenyan child to his environment” (1998: 103). Whilst I follow Wa Thiong’o’s reasoning, I find it a simplified solution to a problem whose complexity, many years after he wrote this article (manifesto?), has persisted. For instance, nowhere in his decolonising article does he take up the messy issue of ethnic geopolitical power relations in Kenya, of which ethnic language is one key aspect.

The other challenge, which Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o neglects to tackle is that of translation and the means to do it. After a writer produces an article in an ethnic language, is the writer then also supposed to translate it into English for a wider readership? It is time consuming enough to write an article or book, let alone translate it. Whilst Wa Thiong’o may have the time, capital and means to do it in the U.S, it is presumptuous to think that all writers can do it as easily in Kenya.

A few literary figures of Wa Thiong’o’s generation did write at least some of their literary works in their mother-tongues, such as Grace Ogot (1981; 1983). However the current Kenyan literary scene is predominantly filled with creative Afro-European speaking and writing personalities, who mix ethnic languages, Kiswahili and English. This generation of African writers want to reach everyone with their writing, not just their own ethnic group. They think, speak and dream in English, Kiswahili, Sheng, and also in their mother-tongues9.

Whilst it may seem that the current crop of African writers are unaware of their contribution to feeding or undermining the ‘neo-liberal literary machinery’, I want to posit that in fact some of these writers are quite aware of what they are doing. Some may be trying to decolonise themselves more than others or at least in different ways. Others may simply not care at all about the issue of decolonising themselves. And African LGBTI struggles are no different in these respects.

---

9 Sheng is slang consisting of Kiswahili and English.
Following up on coloniality, indigenous knowledge and the issue of understanding our place in this world, I explore, a little bit, knowledge as produced in the South. Here I problematize concepts such as ‘African knowledge production’, ‘African’ philosophy and ‘Southern’ people. In her forthcoming article *Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on a World Scale* (forthcoming), Raewyn Connell gives an analysis of theories on coloniality of gender around the world. She points to Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, who has analysed the global knowledge production machineries. Hountondji’s theory states that the (post)colonial world produces primary data or information which is shipped to the “Imperial centre” (or metropole) where it is analysed with Western theories (Hountondji 1997; 2002 in Connell forthcoming in Feminist Theory). It is a replicate of the earlier colonial system of shipping raw material to the West, where it was manufactured into the final products. And so it might follow that African LB activists may be producing knowledge that is used as raw material for theorising in the imperial world, although this same material may also be used for theorising by Africans themselves.

Henry Odera Oruka has categorized philosophical thinking such as Hountondji’s into “professional philosophy” which according to him is guilty of claiming that authentic African philosophy must be “scientific” and “written” philosophy (Oruka 1983: 49). I cannot agree or disagree with Oruka here. Rather I will say that perhaps the kind of knowledge that Hountondji fears will reach the metropole, is written knowledge. But of course it might just as well be visual, audio or tactile.

The other critique Oruka levels at professional philosophy is that it needs to “enhance its degree of self-criticism. Those involved need to intensify the debate among themselves and with others outside themselves” (Oruka 1983:48). His concept “philosophic sagacity”, is a critical reflection of and critical rebellion against “cultural philosophy” (or as I see it ‘indigenous’ and in this case ‘Southern knowledge’) whose, communal conformity and consensus can be “purely absolutist and ideological” (53). In some ways I feel that Oruka may be judging this school of philosophy unfairly and I do not immediately want to distance myself from it as he does. But it is precisely the issue of indigenous and Southern knowledge that I feel requires a little more reflection on.

My own concern about knowledge is not it being used and built on by others (as Hountondji alludes to), but rather ‘misused’ and its originators unacknowledged. As far back
as the 11th and 13th centuries, there has been knowledge exchange and translations between medieval Europe and the Islamic civilisation for instance. And between the Ottoman Empire and Europe from the 15th century (Morrison 2014). A more specific example was the Arab polymath Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad bin Ṭāhā bin Ṭāhā bin Ruṣd (commonly known as Ibn Rushd in Arabic or Averroës in Latin). He made significant contributions in commenting and explaining Aristotle’s work, and also Islamic theology and philosophy, Maliki law, Andalusian classical music theory amongst other things. Ibn Rushd is considered by some, as pro-feminist or feminist, and wrote about the subservient state of women and the misery it produced in society. He also commented on women’s intellect, virtues and value in society, even if he also sometimes valued Muslim women over non-Muslim women (Belo 2009; Read 1975).

Connell stresses the need for Southern Feminists to continue producing their own theories, methodologies, concepts of identities and colonial and postcolonial gender constructions from indigenous perspectives. She critiques the long standing tradition of importing ‘western theory’ (forthcoming in Feminist Theory). My main concern with activists’ emphasis on continuing to produce Southern theory, methodologies et cetera, is the implied notion of a distinctly separate people. Where is the discussion of knowledge exchange, translation and interpretation, or of holding two or more cultural contexts from which one derives knowledge in Africa? There has been long-standing debate about what constitutes African philosophy and effectively, knowledge production. To some people if the content of the philosophy and methods used involve African themes such as perceptions of time, space and personhood, then it is African. For other people African philosophy is any that is produced by Africans, people of African descent and others engaged in critiques and analysis of their work (Janz 2009). Dongchao Min, for instance, comes close to this issue when she states that even whilst the Chinese and Western contexts are different, many of her Chinese colleagues were nonetheless interested in keeping and exploring the term and concept feminism (and in effect producing contemporary Chinese knowledge) both from Western and Chinese perspectives (Min 2007).

I agree with Connell’s statement that the majority of women live in the rural agricultural parts of the world, and that the issue of land, for instance, is a major factor in gender constructs (and hence for some sexual and gender activism strategies). Whilst this may indeed be the state of affairs with regard to much or some of African feminist knowledge production, Connell herself admits that it is not as simple as this (Connell forthcoming in Feminist Theory). Migration to the North can lead to ‘assimilation or critique of feminists’ and the new formation
of what Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi call “expatriate” feminism (Beoku-Betts and Njambi 2005 in Connell forthcoming). On the other hand, some feminists from the North may live in the South and be influenced by it too. The discussion that the women delegates had at the African Feminist Congress in Zanzibar in 2003 appeared to question the perception that African women are only Rural or only from Rural areas. And so the activist with multiple backgrounds, sites of residence and the systems of information exchange, adoption and transformation deserve much more analyses.

It appears then, that much of the African theories, and knowledge production would depend on who does the thinking, speaking and writing, even amongst Africans themselves. Writers, such as Tanja Bosch and Susan Holland-Muter (2012: 87) and Zethu Matebeni (2009), have illuminated some of the ways that researchers, students and activists actively create their positionalities or partial perspectives and disidentify with concepts from various ideological stand points.

**Pitting my memory-words against others**

In pitting my memories and words (or memory-words) against others I begin by providing a self-introduction, with accompanying images of some art pieces, descriptions of what inspired the depicted motifs and an analysis of their creation. This sets a backdrop of accountability for the situated perspectives that I write about in the rest of the thesis. The reason that I began with an analysis of some artwork, is because I felt that an individual often consciously and unconsciously portrays her or his true person in their artwork. It is in creative work that one can find aspects of self-perceptions and outlooks that point to who the individual feels she or he is. This provides hints to what their ideologies may be and how they prefer to work as well as where they feel priorities lie. Obioma Nnaemeka supports this when she says that we need “new and imaginative ways to view and conduct research, one of which is to globalize research from below with the force of an element usually identified with creative writing and the arts—imagination” (Nnaemeka 2004). ¹⁰

---

¹⁰ Nnaemeka says that this is not an “exclusivist strategy that shifts power and focus from the privileged to the subaltern. Rather, it should be an engagement in which privilege is diffused to allow for an interactive, multilateral flow of voices (from above and below simultaneously).”
My painting *The Flying Trunk*, done in 2001 for instance, depicts a children’s story by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen. It is a tale of a young man who inherits a magic trunk, flies to Turkey and is betrothed to a princess. He later loses his trunk in a fire caused by embers from firecrackers that he himself lights up to celebrate the occasion. Through his own vanity and negligence he loses his only means of transport and his chance to meet and marry the woman he supposedly loves. This was one Andersen’s many stories I read as I was growing up. Even though I read Kenyan stories as well, such as Abunuwasi (a funny, intelligent but lazy Swahili character named after the Arabic – Persian Poet Abu Nuwas) and the legend of Lwanda Magera (the Luo folktale of a warrior with supernatural powers whose only weakness lay in his shadow) amongst other stories, these did not leave the same lasting affect on me as Andersen’s or even Astrid Lindgren’s stories, whose sensitivity in narration appealed more to me.

Whilst the setting of the Flying Trunk may have been Turkey, I rendered the character in the painting African. My context was Kenya so it made sense to make my characters dark skinned. Whether this was a colonized or decolonizing way of producing art, I cannot tell. However, art often is more accessible to viewers, than what theory is to readers. Art was my method of communicating to the outside world who I was and what I was touched by in the story world, never mind the fact that my story world was not necessarily always a Kenyan setting. In this case, though, I felt that narrating the story would help the viewer understand the art piece.

This oil painting (*the Flying Trunk*) was rejected by the National Museum in Nairobi in the mid-2000s, despite my description of the story, because it was associated with the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, much to my indignation. I felt that the then curators, had not taken the time to understand the motivation behind my work, by reading the description of the story. Instead they had taken the painting at “face-value” and based on the political reality and discourse of the day, made a hasty conclusion and rejected it. Another curator from the same Museum later accepted it as part of the permanent collection in 2013.
Throughout this analysis I also write on issues such as what it means to be subjugated, privileged, having shifting stand-points/perspectives, what it means to unlearn or untrain one’s thinking or knowing, concepts of success in personal and political spheres and of failure (Halberstam 2011; 2012). What I appreciate about the concept failure is how it “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior (…)” and, “preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers” (Halberstam 2011: 3). Not only does one not have to discipline oneself along an ideological line, for instance, but one can also hold on to one’s childhood fascinations and not be afraid of being seen as a ‘loser’. Failure also recognizes that many alternatives exist within more dominant discourse and ideologies (88). To unlearn and untrain implies to begin to understand how to maneuver through the endless maze of ways of knowing and communicating (Halberstam 2012: 12).

As I was conducting a self-reflexive analysis of my engagement in relation to the LGBTI movements I felt that an autoethnography would not just be the appropriate method but also the end result of the thesis. Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges...
and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist (Ellis et al. 2011). The methods of my analysis therefore include memory work, autoethnography, close or empathetic reading of my own paintings, email conversations and feminist theories. It is a mixed methods approach.

In considering ethics I was conscious of the fact that I was and continue to be a part of a social network and that when I conduct research and write I inevitably implicate others in my work (Ellis et al. 2011). The ethics of entanglement which involves the possibilities of reworking the material effects of the past and the future (Barad 2012) provide me with opportunities to explore how entanglement provide possibilities for my work and my relationships with other activists. I considered how to protect persons and organisations whom I inadvertently or directly refer to in the thesis, and particularly those whom I still have some form of working relationship with. In one case I was politely informed to only mention the individuals whose quotes I had received consent from. I therefore decided that the organization would be anonymized and no mention of the persons would be done explicitly, apart from Elizabeth Khaxas who did give me permission.

I was also aware of the fact that there are many unanswered questions about the ‘drama that unfolded before the (I) came along, and unfolds long after (I have) left the scene of a particular conversation’ (Visweswaran 1994: 47). The act of pondering these incidences and what to do with the knowledge therefrom obtained is an act of “accountable positioning” or “situated knowledge” which exclude some elements and include others. It brings up “assumptions about the knowledge process and the relationship between the knower (in this case the I-narrator) and the known; how much and what the knower reveals about the knowing process and what is self-staged or fashioned” (ibid).

As much as possible I conduct empathetic reading of any materials I used (Norlander 2013) based on ‘close reading’ or ‘slow reading’ (Fletcher 2007; Andersson & Kalman 2010 in Norlander 2013:10). I choose empathetic reading because as a method it seeks not only to understand information in the text but also to understand other aspects that the author intended (consciously or unconsciously) to convey. Six guiding questions are used in empathetic reading, namely what, how, purpose, context, who and further (and by what). Norlander asks that a researcher or reader tries to understand what exactly was being shown, refuted, proposed, proven etcetera. By the how question, a reader is asked to understand how an argument is constructed, with which theories, methodological approaches, empirical data,
interpretations, and so on. By understanding the what and the how questions, a reader should then be able to decipher the Purpose of the text as well as the societal, cultural, political and academic contexts in which it was written. Who wrote the text is equally important to understand as this gives the reader knowledge of the influence of the background, the area of experience or expertise the writer presents but also for whom the text was written. The further question is an aspect of empathetic reading that allows the reader to give their perspectives on what they read.

**Autoethnography as Methodology**

In exploring autoethnographic literature my aim was to understand the choices of methodologies used by diverse researchers. This way I hoped that my own choice of an autoethnographic account and situated perspectives of myself within the social movements, would provide clarity about an individual activist as a multiplicity of constantly transforming aspects and ascribed affiliations.

Looking at the definition of auto-ethnography, I found that it is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739 in Skott-Myhre, Kathleen, Weima Korinne and Gibbs, Helen, 2012: xiii). Auto-ethnography is a form of research in which the researcher uses her personal experience to illuminate a particular culture, event and/or institution, reflecting back on self and deeply at self-other interactions (Ellis & Bochner 2000 in Skott-Myhre et al. 2012).

Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* is an autoethnographic book whose very expressive and innovative act of ‘welding things together’ is for me an example of what I wish to portray in my thesis, albeit in a different way. In her review article *Cherrie Moraga’s Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios: Auto-ethnography of the “New Mestiza*, Christine Cloud outlines her understanding of Moraga’s life narrative and message (Cloud 2010: 85). Cloud calls it a privileging of ‘a post-modern multiple, mutable and multifaceted collective self that exists simultaneously within a variety of communities rather than within one ethnic community, and (…) underscores the many multiple and shifting identities which simultaneously infiltrate our being and characterize our lives.’ It falls into the ‘out-law genre’ - one that breaks the basic rules of a genre (Kaplan 1998). Cloud describes
Moraga’s work as an ‘auto-ethnographic account of a collective coming to consciousness’ due to its connections between Moraga’s life and those of others (Cloud 2010: 86).

Whilst Moraga allows herself the possibility of inventing characters “Pesadilla” – a beige, cultural, ethnic, gender and sexual hybrid with or through whom she can hold multiple conversations, I do not attempt this creative method here, partly because I want to keep the narration simple and clear and to elucidate the tensions between African activists from different country-specific contexts. I do, however, show my own internal tensions and paradoxes.

Moraga’s narrative is one that outlines her status as güera (Chicana-Caucasian) without her indigenous language, and as lesbian, which inevitably culturally ascribes her as traitor or vendida and hence marginalizes her. For Moraga, dangers lie in our trying to rank oppressions, and not specifying them. It is important to name the oppression within and outside ourselves (Moraga 1983: 52-53, in Cloud 2010: 91). Furthermore for Moraga one’s self – or ‘collective self’, is never complete, but always transforming. In a way Moraga’s book is a “chance to write about alternatives to the dominant meanings that infiltrate life histories and cultural understandings” (Pratt, in Reed-Danahay 1997 in Skott-Myhre et al. 2012: xiv). I, therefore, believe that my auto-ethnography is yet another alternative story to the dominant meanings that my activism work has been embedded in. In many ways, I “gaze back and forth, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects” of my personal experience; then looking “inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Skott-Myhre et al. 2012: xiv). Whilst telling my experience I do not seek to “present the singular truth, but to show the complexities of lived experiences” (Skott-Myhre et al. 2012: xv). In auto-ethnography, the researcher is situated as the subject and is an active participant who is transformed in the process.

Providing an opposing perspective to Skott-Myhre et al., the collective auto/ethnography has been described as better than the “monologic voice” of one person, in explaining the co-generative dialogue (Tobin, Roth and Zimmermann 2001). According to Roth this is a better way of making sense of our lifeworlds. He speaks in the context of a school which is in the process of documenting lecturers’ and students’ interactive perspectives. Each person is given space to provide hir understanding of events and there is no privileging of any single voice (Roth 2009). Roth describes it as a “polyphony and multiplicity of voices – a
disorderly orderliness”. What Roth, however, neglects to explore is the underlying power dynamics even in the work of collecting and presenting many voices and perspectives. Also one might wonder why privileged and subjugated voices should be leveled such that they do not seem to be competing in any way. It makes invisible the layers of power imbalances rather than truly intervening and solving the problems. What happens after the telling of stories, when students and teachers go back to the teaching-learning schedule? Do things change and if so how?

This discussion of collective autoethnography reminds me a little of the article *Becoming Schoolgirls: the ambivalent project of subjectification* (Davies, Dormer, Gannon, Laws, Rocco, Lenz Taguchi and McCann 2001). It had me briefly wondering why I was writing a solo autoethnography and not a collective one. I did, however, see the difference in both the nature and intention of these two kinds of autoethnographies. Davies et al. aimed to explore subjectification, its process of becoming within discourse and self-regulation, mind/body binary and its deconstruction, the implicit coercion in shaping the schoolgirl subject and the illusion of autonomy (2001: 170-178). Furthermore the group of writers had the benefit of being able to live together and converse face-to-face over a specific period. Theirs was not an analysis of contentious arguments amongst themselves (as my autoethnographic analysis is) but rather a working contentiously at their “inscription of the appropriate subjects” (2001: 168). Even if they had contentious arguments about how these inscriptions might happen, they chose not to expound on it in this paper. Perhaps it might also have been difficult to come to some amicable agreement on how to present these tensions.

The collective authors intentionally used Judith Butler’s theories on subjection (Butler 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1997) and the processes of “talking, listening, writing and rewriting, so that their individual stories become blurred and no longer sealed off from others”. They say that this way any reader can recognise themselves in the stories or similar practices. Whilst this sounds fine and useful, I posit that an exploration of contentious engagement between two or more persons requires that an individual be allowed to provide her or his situated perspectives as opposed to merging and thereby obscuring them with those of others.

The methods of collective ‘graphy’ involved morning tea or coffee, informal bonding, use of essential oils to aid memory, awareness of body and to receptivity (Davies et al. 2001: 169). Perhaps these methods were all necessary seeing as the individuals in the group had such divergent backgrounds: Swedish, English/Australian, and Australian - some growing
up in privilege, others in poverty, rural and urban settings, temperate and extreme climates, co-
educational and single sex schooling, religious and public. However, when writing about
tensions between people in which there has been little or no physical contact, where all the
interactions have been on email, and where disagreements were never fully resolved, the
writing of a collective autoethnography would require some form of mediation to say the least.
The best case scenario would be that the opposing parties talked and came to some agreement
on not just the contentious issues but also how to write the paper. That process in itself would
alter not only the voice of the paper but also the specific understandings of the writers about
their individual perspectives. I would propose that this kind of reconciliatory paper be written
after each writer has written their own version of events.

Sarah Wall (2008) explains the challenges of autoethnographic research in Easier
Said than done: Writing an Autoethnography. Amongst them are the variety of interpretations
of what autoethnography may or should emphasize on. For instance it may be a personal
narrative (Ellis and Bochner 2000 as cited in Wall 2008) or a linking of the personal to literature
concepts (Holt 2001; Sparkes 1996 as cited in Wall 2008). It may be a way of critiquing
literature of importance to oneself (Muncey 2005 as cited in Wall 2008) or to “converse” with
the literature instead of attempting to fill a knowledge gap (Wall 2008: 40). Indeed Wall
bounces and reflects her experiential and thought processes off several literary works,
throughout her article.

Duncan cautions against being too emotional, being dishonest with oneself about
one’s motivations, not connecting the study with adequate theory and not being ‘rigorous and
and Jones (2011), on the other hand, encourage autoethnographers to share their experiences
of writing not only because it is a new field but because it brings up political, practical and
cultural issues that many people may feel resonate with their own. Keeping identities and
experiences in autoethnographies fluid and open to interpretation seems to be common thinking
amongst several researchers (Adams and Jones 2011: 110). Also making “ideological and
discursive trouble” seems to be the key point that a critical reflexive approach should do
(Denzin 2003; Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren 2000 in Adams and Jones 2011:
110).
Wall writes of experiencing persistent anxiety regarding how she was representing herself and how others might interpret it. She also says that she felt some ambivalence regarding how much to admit to having changed her mind after reading certain literature (Wall 2008: 41). The problem with any writing is that it also reduces “a person’s story to words on a page” and “robs it of complexity” (Kraus 2003: 284 as cited in Wall 2008). This I think is quite true. In any case one cannot write one’s life and thought processes in entirety and if one did, no-one would read it due to its length. How brutally honest can one then be (whether consciously or unconsciously) in writing an autoethnography, considering also that one cannot take back the words after they have been published (Ellis 2000)? Allison states that behind every story we read there is an untold one or one the author wished we would hear (1996: 39 in Adams and Jones 2011: 109). Perhaps it is true that self-representation is never completely self-aware or self-identified even if there is an attempt to it (Clough 1998). Wall’s endeavor to avoid being defensive to literature she encountered in her manuscript, meant that her rewriting of initial spontaneous thoughts became progressively longer, more apologetic and watered-down (2008: 44). In addition, following comments and suggestions from journal editors of her manuscript, Wall says that her writing became more ‘conventional’ (48).

There has been a lot of discussion of “subjugated” individuals feeling oppressed particularly in western contexts. I would like to state that even the word “subjugated” is itself contentious and subject to shifting significance and meaning. It may not always be black Africans feeling subjugated in a white context. People of mixed background can feel as subjugated in white, black, mixed and other contexts. Such individuals may feel that they are ongoing and unresolved processes, or what Edward Said called “besieged identities” because of the assigning or pressure from people around them to ascribe to some particular identity (Said 2003: 54). Identities are a “troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound” (Said in Hoad 2007: 116). In many respects I feel that identities can be troubling and disabling precisely because they defy fixity and are hence divergent from various systems. They are instead distilled essences of “African cosmopolitanism”, where African signifies a “geographical specificity” whilst “cosmopolitanism aspires to a worldliness unbound by either geography or race and suggests that multiple specificities exist” (Hoad 2007: 113).

Furthermore, the feeling of being subjugated (perhaps intellectually more than physically) is accentuated when an individual is made to feel that they are too much of an undesirable thing such as too “colonized”. For instance in Reflections on my Journey towards
**Self, Identity and Purpose in the African Diaspora** (2012) Simukai Chigudu gives hir chronological perspectives on life in the UK as a young overseas medical student. Chigudu says that, hir worldview felt threatened partly because of the risk that a privileged western education might make zie ‘ill-equipped and ineffectual’ in the face of Africa’s problems. Chigudu simultaneously felt an isolation, alienation and inner turmoil amongst the predominantly white middle-class faculty and students, and began questioning hir sense of purpose. I posit, then, that a person with multiple backgrounds could also feel a similar kind of partial alienation even on the African continent or when engaging with African activists in an online context. In some ways this is possible. I agree also with Chigudu’s insights that “racial and ethnic identity was not considered clear-cut but rather an amalgamation of genetic, historical and cultural factors held together by unique life experiences” (126).

In terms of autoethnographic processes, how one uses visual memory images, narrative and analysis differs a great deal from one researcher to another. Béatrice Boufoy-Bastick in her *Auto-Interviewing, Auto-Ethnography and Critical Incident Methodology for Eliciting a Self-Conceptualised Worldview* (Boufoy-Bastick 2004: 4) explores her starting point with memory images.

In Boufoy-Bastick’s case, she began with a recollection of memories of wordless colourful images of different cultural phenomena she had experienced. Thereafter she “cristalized” the images by describing them. These two processes are what Boufoy-Bastick calls emic reporting. She thereafter states that this “drawing of a log of significant images” from her memories needs to be “shifted” from the participant observer’s ethnographic emic gaze to the subjective etic gaze (Siegesmund 1999 in Boufoy-Bastick 2004). She describes this shifting to etic gaze as “being aware that the subjective recollection of the event enhanced the event itself” (2004: 4). This enhancement, according to Boufoy-Bastick helps in “translating the events meaningfully into consistent spoken/written narratives” (Peshkin 1988; 1991 in Boufoy-Bastick 2004). I understand this to mean the resignification of the memory events by Boufoy-Bastick. However what I am a little wary of is her use of terms like ‘meaningfully’, ‘consistent spoken/written narratives’. Meaningful and consistent to who?

Whilst Visweswaran speaks at length about the relationships between western ethnographers/anthropologists and women from other societies (1994: 23) I began to wonder about the relations and power differentials between women who were from the same continent, but different countries. Women who were loosely and/or intimately linked to the same
movement(s), such as LGBTI social movements, yet had different perspectives on how activism should be done, what epistemology the group(s) should have etcetera. For instance, what differences might one find when looking at the interaction of younger and older women, coming from quite different socio-political contexts? Would one woman’s colonial past give her very differing perspectives from one whose past embedded in a postcolonial one? Might they find some mutual ground in their feminism, theorising and work? Or would they be mutually incompatible?

Further, Visweswaran mentions that there is a difference between ‘shoring up positivist science’ and scrutinizing one’s own “principles”, integrities and awareness of differences between self and others. Sometimes one reaches a limit to how much one can know, understand and like another culture (Visweswaran 1994: 27). Visweswaran reiterates Kevin Dwyer’s emphasis that “hermeneutics of vulnerability” is established when the “other” drops out of anthropology and instead becomes ‘subject’, participant and sole author. She likewise suggests that research (particularly experimental ethnography, and I would add all feminist research) needs to look at the politics of identification, the dynamics of autobiography and community (32).

In *Thinking Women’s Worlds* (Bradbury and Kiguwa 2012) the two researchers in collaboration with five women students conducted an ethnographic and auto-ethnographic study of the disidentification of students at Witwatersrand University in South Africa. Using visual autobiography (Squire 2011) or reflexivity photography (Schulze 2007) as methodology, the students proceeded to take photographs of select spaces of the university in which they interacted with other students.

**Material description and ethical concerns**

In my choice of materials, I concentrated on using memory, emails of conversations and my paintings. Memories may be contentious as material for analysis yet I do believe there to be ‘objective’ authenticity of memories. Wall herself quotes Yang (1945), saying that autoethnographies can be composed almost entirely of memories. The paintings that I use as material are primarily for the sake of strengthening and elucidating my self-reflection on my own situated perspectives, particularly with regard to multiple backgrounds.

The conversations I focus on in the emails are primarily from two online groups, the LGBTI Steering Committee affiliated to ILGA and the African Lesbian Working Group.
(whose executive director described it as a radical lesbian group). I was part of both groups simultaneously in 2013 and worked on both separate and conflated issues within the groups. For my material I picked out extracts of contentious conversation from certain emails and limited my focus on one particular conversation which was the climax of a long string of conversations. This contentious conversation happened in the African Lesbian Working Group and concentrated on issues of the African activist, feminism(s) and feminist values, knowledge production, decolonizing oneself, situated perspectives and solidarity work. Regarding the LGBTI Steering Committee, I speak about the international work that it was engaged in and which on at least two occasions overlapped with the international work of the Lesbian Working Group.

The ethical dimensions of auto-ethnography come “with responsibility for the ‘Other’ – one which both exceeds and is the same as responsible for the ‘Self’” (Roth 2009). Ethics, according to Roth, is about “human relations and the acknowledgement that knowledge production emerges from writing about people and self in a world that is co-inhabited by and co-constituted with others” (2009: 6). Subsequently even the most self-focused autoethnographic work, is an indirect acknowledgement and use of other aspects, such as language, and which also goes back to the “Other” (ibid.). Even as I understand what Roth says here, I get the sense that his point is that knowledge produced about self and others seems to preclude what knowledge the Self had about self, even prior to coming into contact with the Other. And this is what I have an issue with. There are many ‘others’ in one’s life. Some Others affect one in the earlier stages of one’s life. Some Others affect one in later stages of one’s life. But what Roth seems to be implying here is that Others are always a precursor or co-constituent to Self, whilst the Self may not be considered as precursor of Other – unless that is what he hints at by saying that we are ‘co-constituted with others’.

Some of my concerns or thoughts were that when I began thinking of using the email conversations I initially thought that I only needed those extracts which were diametrically opposed to my own perspectives. I anticipated a refusal from the activists who had proved to have very different opinions from my own and therefore I procrastinated in sending emails to them, seeking permission to use their quotes. I thought that probably the worst case scenario would be that I received no permission to quote from those who opposed my perspectives. Then I thought that it would certainly be useful to also look at those

---

11 The name African Lesbian Working Group is my anonymisation of the organisation’s actual name.
conversations of activists whose perspectives were similar to my own. Having decided on this, I then pulled up my courage to send the emails to both activists. I was surprised at the very quick response I got from one of them saying that she would look at my request over the coming weekend. In a way it filled me with both dread, and anticipation – a little bit like when one knows that something unpleasant is about to happen and one has to brace oneself. Having waited for a week, with no further response from either of the activists, I sent follow-up emails. Whilst I was hoping that I would get positive responses, I also felt that positive responses to use others’ quotes, would mean added responsibility and ethical implications that I was finding not only difficult to visualize but also grating on my nerves and irritating. Immediately after my follow-up email I received one positive response from the activist whom I had been on friendly terms with and her partner subsequently also sent additional documents that provided historical context for the quotes I wished to use and which she felt might be useful in my analysis.

I also approached the executive director of the organization within which some of the online conversations had taken place. I needed to explain what I intended to do, and whom I had approached from the conversation group. What I found was that my initial email, simple yet filled as it was with academic words (which I considered comprehensible) were not easy for her to understand. Phrases like ‘situated perspective’ and ‘tensions and contradictions’ may have been perceived as a threat or ambiguous somehow, because she politely suggested that I confine my references only to the individuals whose quotes I intended on using. I therefore concluded that I needed to anonymize both the organization and the context within which I had had some of the conversations.

One of the challenges I encountered was the issue of how to handle hurt and pain that I had felt in some of the email conflicts. When I opened the old emails, I experienced a flood of emotions that were so strong that I wondered how I would handle the analysis of the writings objectively. Irrespective of whether I quoted them directly or tried to paraphrase, there was a chance that I would possibly not give due attention and ‘empathetic’ analysis to the statements. This was more so due to the fact that quotes are not simply quotes taken from thin air. They are embedded in longer conversations, in which there are experienced build-up of tensions, marginalisations, frustrations, hurt and suppressed emotions as well as unexpressed anger. Reading through these emails even after many months have passed by, can cause an upsurge of the same feelings all over again. How does one create a balance between what one felt in the past, what one feels in the present, what one thought one could do ‘objectively’ when
first taking on the project and what one feels is realistically possible when analyzing in the present? These were some of the questions that came to my mind as I began compiling the materials, and contemplating who to contact and which materials to emphasize on.

Another issue that I was concerned about was the risk of robbing my story and those of the activists whose emails I quoted, of complexity (Kraus 2003: 284 as cited in Wall 2008). I did not want to give the impression that conflicts are static, that they never transform, fizzle out or reappear elsewhere. I also did not want to write something I would regret later (Ellis 2000). At the same time I did not want to water down my feelings and statements such that they finally meant nothing in the end. Of what use would that then be? It would be self-defeating in the ‘auto’, the ‘ethno’ and the ‘graphical’ sense of the words. Much of what I quote as material, was also embedded in much longer strings of much more complex conversations. I had to choose how much of it to include, keeping also in mind that I wanted to avoid causing unnecessary embarrassment not just to myself but to the people whose words I used.

Pondering now on the ‘auto’ part of my thesis, I will briefly comment on a few aspects of the paintings I made in the years 1999 through 2008. I acknowledge that many if not most, were direct depictions of strong impressions different phenomena had on me. And the depictions would take widely different presentations depending on time period and other influences (including from the art community around me). Between 1999 and 2006 I was a member of Hawa Women Artists which conducted art workshops and staged exhibitions primarily for women artists. The Group also did social outreach such as spending time with the girls of Rescue Dada Centre. I was in charge of the ten 3-7 year olds (see painting below). They were sweet but quite exhausting. By this year (2000s) I had developed a mixed style inspired by Chagall, Picasso and Van Gogh. I simplified the faces and bodies and caricatured them. I think there was much Kenyan influence too, because there appeared not to be too much emphasis on order and suggested some kind of freedom in painting yet an observation and an awareness of complexity of things. I also note the emphasis on multiple actions taking place simultaneously in the picture. This was a style I continued with for some months.
A comment I sometimes received during my years of painting was how much my styles shifted in the course of a year or even over a few years. I often had no proper response to that. I did what felt right, comfortable and inspiring to me, as and when it happened. However, this multiplicity and ‘lack of consistency’ seems to have followed me in other aspects of my life, for instance pursuing both an academic training in meteorology whilst painting on the side, or working in government whilst being an activist. With my cards laid on the table, I now proceed to explore what it means to be African and to engage in African activism, what tensions and contradictions I experienced, and the results that these contentions created. In addition I ponder on what implications these have for an individual’s positioning within working groups, working relationships, the development of ideologies and feminist principles.
Chapter Three - African Activism

In this section of the thesis I lay out my positions and simultaneous work within the different LGBTI movements. I show how intricately involved much of the activism work was and how this sometimes led not only to my experiences of tensions and clashes but also to questioning some concepts and sources of problems. Stand-point experiences and power structures are analysed together so as to avoid getting “stuck” in psychoanalytical discourse as mentioned by Lenz Taguchi (2005 in Jansson et al. 2008: 229) I unpack the work processes, by presenting the simultaneous communications, the challenges and benefits of the online working processes, whilst also analysing the maternal factors and results to my identification with the groups. Finally I delve into the sticky issue of decolonizing oneself, how one might learn to fail and unlearn different aspects all the while being conscious of the ways that one oppresses, is subjugated and privileged.

A Lesbian Activist’s positions in African and international LGBTI movements

In the year 2013 I found myself working on different levels within the African and international sexual and gender minorities (LGBTI) arena. I was a representative of the Kenyan lesbian and bisexual organization Minority Women in Action (MWA) and also active in two online working groups. One was the African Lesbian Working Group. The other was an LGBTI steering committee affiliated to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). MWA was simultaneously a member of a larger African Coalition, a member of ILGA and subsequently also a member of the African LGBTI steering committee affiliated to ILGA, in essence three memberships, both due to the geographical location of MWA within Kenya.

Part of the current ILGA structure consists of the Women’s Secretariat whose mandate is global but also flexible. This secretariat position, elected every two years, befell MWA, from 2011 till 2014 and I was its representative. The other part of ILGA’s structure was the African LGBTI steering committee, which I volunteered to work with to ensure the completion of two activities – a consultative meeting and an African regional conference. In summary then, I was not only a biracial activist situated within a Kenyan organization, but also situated in two international organisations and in a regional African organization.

I joined the Steering Committee out of a sense of responsibility as Representative of the Women’s Secretariat and as an ILGA member from the African Continent. I had hoped to be more of an observer but with time I noticed that few things got done if I did not also
contribute to the work. My contribution in it as member between January and December 2013, included working to fundraise, to plan and implement a regional consultative meeting and a regional conference for 2014. The Steering Committee’s work was closely related to the African Lesbian Working Group at several points in the course of the year. My multiple backgrounds in this regard were in terms of membership to these three organisations simultaneously. Whilst it enabled me to see the different kinds of political work and ideological reasoning from all three groups, it sometimes put me in positions where I was privy to information and conversations which members from a group preferred to keep within the group. It meant that I had to use my own discretion and judgment on what to say in different conversations in and outside the groups.

**A foot in both camps - contentious simultaneous engagement in two working groups**

Between March and September 2013, I was simultaneously involved in two working groups. I had been invited and volunteered my time in the online African Lesbian Working Group to develop a research strategy document. The strategy was meant to guide lesbian and bisexual organisations around Africa in its research. The working group itself consisted of lesbians from South Africa, Namibia and Kenya (myself). Simultaneously as this was ongoing, I was also volunteering my time on the online work space of the ILGA-affiliated Steering Committee.

In July 2013, a human rights resolution needed to be passed at the Human Rights Council, in Oslo and several international and African actors were eager to push their specific agendas. Some actors wanted a resolution passed that would create a Special Rapporteur for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). This rapporteur would visit all States and ask them to account for their human rights abuses or negligence related to LGBTI persons. Other actors wanted a resolution that was more encompassing and intersectional. By this the actors wanted that all Special Rapporteurs be held responsible for inquiring from States about SOGI status in all areas of human rights (economic, social, cultural and political). These actors felt that one special rapporteur was unlikely to be effective in holding all States accountable for human rights abuses towards same-sex loving and gender variant persons within those countries.

At this point the African Lesbian Working Group sent out a petition to all its partners to sign. This Sign-On document was lobbying for the second option, namely that all
Special Rapporteurs be responsible for inquiring of governments about the state of SOGI rights, through a more intersectional approach.

When the Working Group requested the Steering Committee for its signature and support, it took a while before the Committee signed it. This was because there were two points of view regarding this stand. Whilst the first sub-group of the Committee had strong affiliations to an international NGO, which supported the first option of a Special Rapporteur, the second sub-group of the Committee was convinced that the most important thing was the intersectional nature of the second option as well as to show support to the Working Group by signing on to its document. Still the first sub-group was not wholly against the second Resolution option, as it also wanted to show support for the Working Group. Eventually the second sub-group, of which I formed a part, managed to gain the support from most of the members within the Committee such that a signature could be appended to the document.

What I observed, however, and perceived from being part of this email conversation, was that there were ambivalent stands on this issue. On the one hand, showing solidarity with the African Lesbian Working Group was very important. On the other hand, as the Steering Committee was affiliated to larger international organisations – ILGA and others, it also wanted to show support for stands taken by its international partners. What also became clear was that members had personal ties with individuals from these international organisations, and the sign on caused some degree of tension and discomfort all round.

My feeling already at this point was that I had begun to disidentify with the Steering Committee, because I felt that it was an organization whose decisions could sometimes be tilted more in favour of international partners than African ones, which I could not always relate to, much like what José Muñoz (1999) and Judith Butler (1993) have mentioned. My feelings were ambiguous and ambivalent for the obvious reasons of my being not only part of different groups but also because I was beginning to understand why people chose the stands they did (Corley and Gioia 2004; Meyerson and Scully 1995; Elsbach 2001). So in a way this was the beginning of a partial affective distancing from different aspects of the groups (Becker et al. 2011).
Clash of ideologies and ways of working in the African Lesbian Working Group

Meanwhile, in the early parts of my long email conversation with the activists in the African Lesbian Working Group around March and April of 2013, there had been some discussion on the ‘standpoint’ of the working group, in which there appeared to be uncertainty about future inclusion of transgender members in the Working Group (there were no transgender members in this conversation). Another thing that I noticed was the lack of discussion around bisexuals and people of mixed race, which I later brought to the group’s attention, even though I knew that these were not new agendas for this (core) group that had been in existence for 10 years. I was further struck by the group’s dialogue around knowledge production ideals especially when I initially quoted some Western authors. I wrote about this issue in one of my reflection diaries. It read as follows:

(The reading of an article Veiling Resistance). coincided with my current discussion on lesbian feminism and a research strategy with the (organisation). Questions of how to define ourselves as a ‘lesbian’ movement (which had been discussed over and over in past forums) was brought up again and was peppered with ‘pullings’ and ‘pushings’ in different directions of terms like ‘gender’, ‘woman’ and identities of different forms. Much doubt or resistance exists as to the usefulness of even reading or regurgitating ‘European’ theories and concepts of feminisms. There is the feeling that African lesbians must and do have their own ways of defining themselves, their main cause/agenda. Yet when I look at the definitions, I see many similarities with some of the most complex ‘Haraway’ and ‘Butlerian’ theories and discourse. So much so, that I even wonder who influenced who, and whether they are even aware that the discourses are either parallel, similar or cross-influenced. In many ways influence is inevitable. Again Africans may choose to look the other way regarding people of mixed race, but that is simply postponing the inevitable – that of having to deal with issues that are race-intersectional and, in a like manner, issues of cross-cultural nature. There is a fear that as a large section of the African population is only educated to a certain level, ‘wordifying’/textualizing (turning research, discourse and communications into text, particularly highly abstract and analytical text) will leave a significant portion of the lesbian movement behind, to our detriment. (March – April 2013)

The working group started off with only five members but by August additional members had been coopted to contribute. I was not familiar with these new people. In August the members of the African Lesbian Working Group had chosen different sections within the strategy framework to write on. I had volunteered to contribute to the literature review section earlier in the year and had contributed a significant amount of information primarily on African lesbian health and sexuality that had been generated by both African and Western Researchers. I had also volunteered to work on the epistemological and methodological section – section 5. This was the beginning of a tug of war of ideologies which I at first did not recognize as a
potential problem. It however blew up into an argument. Perhaps I should have taken note of the impending clash in March, when I felt that the Group’s standpoint ideology was somewhat at odds with my own viewpoint.

During the period July and August, I had written and quoted feminist researchers whom I was familiar with, for the methodology and epistemological draft section of the research framework. These included Lykke, Alcoff and Potter, Haraway, Letherby, Harding, Ribbens and Edwards, Ramazanoglu and Holland, Visvesvaran, Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin and Lydenberg and Sandoval. I also listed the various feminist methodological principles and strategies, including: eliminating gender bias, making women visible, women’s interests and perspectives or overarching feminist analysis of society, feminist anti-methodology and feminist post constructionism. I shared my contributions with the whole group.

Two of the newer members had been involved with the core group for many years and I assumed must have shared at least some of their ideologies. I noted in the early August email conversation particularly from one of them (I will call her MB) in relation to the core group, that she was older, well known, confident and in my opinion, proud. Furthermore, what I perceived from the emails she sent to the rest of us, was that she considered herself immensely knowledgeable, talented and worthy of respect and remuneration for her time and work. Perhaps that already was a recipe for a personality clash between her and myself, since I found it difficult to follow her ‘instructions’ as to how I should work. Quite honestly, I was sometimes irritated and put off by what she said. For instance, I got the sense that she considered herself more ‘indigenous’ and more in touch with her African roots than perhaps other activists. I also felt a resistance to the way in which the activist, MB, was ‘pushing her publications at me’, such as her own Master thesis and insisting that I read them.

I questioned openly some of the decisions she and other group members made with regard to the work and payments for the research strategy. I received some support from one white activist. However, I felt that my (and sometimes her) thoughts were not always well received, and I sometimes got the sense that my contributions or questions were seen as unworthy of due attention. My resentment grew partly out of a frustration with the group’s physical inaccessibility coupled with their not including me, on Skype, for instance. This, to me, constituted a kind of ‘deviance of silence and invisibility’ and it weighed a lot on my mind. MB had waved away my question with some explanation, which felt insufficient and disrespectful. Perhaps the knowledge that I was residing and studying in Stockholm was
another factor that was contributing to how my responses and suggestions were received by some activists.

I felt that these tensions were building up, but I did not know, or perhaps underestimated, the importance that indigenous African knowledge and African standpoint was to some of the activists in the working group. I had earlier got the sense that at least one of them was white, at least two activists were of mixed heritage, and three others were black ethnic Africans. Somehow I figured there must have been some shared common acceptance of the cross- or intra-influence of knowledge production, irrespective of whether it was produced by white, black or other feminist women.

It was not only in the Lesbian Working Group that I felt the silence and invisibility from group members. Some members of the Steering Committee were particularly good at ignoring questions I asked directly to them. Others performed like cheer-leaders – popping up to say “kudos” or “well done!” after all the hard work had been done by myself and a few others. It was quite annoying but any attempts to get them to engage more seemed only to fall on deaf ears. It was no wonder I eventually got bored working within the Steering Committee. I saw myself as a work-horse whilst others sat back and enjoyed the ride and took no responsibility whatsoever. Of course this is my side of the story. Other members may have had their own understanding of events.

In September 2013, MB, chose to state explicitly that my contributions to the epistemological and methodological sections of the Research Strategic document were unacceptable because they were “Eurocentric” and that “we” needed to decolonise ourselves. She further stated that she wanted the group to hold a critical conversation surrounding how the ‘work’ was to be quantified and qualified and how people were to receive remuneration for it. My initial reaction was of disappointment and exasperation. I understood my contributions to be initial drafts with the potential for more work and made no pretense that anything I provided was a finished product and I said so to her, including that I also knew what “to decolonise” meant. This only seemed to anger her further as she immediately sent an email telling me off.

With special emphasis on the word “AFRICAN” which peppered most of her email, MB informed me that the Working Group was African and that we were trying to decolonize “ourselves” from “centuries of slavery and colonialism”, which were “still controlling our academic writing and discourse”. Furthermore we had no need to “regurgitate
“We would continue to produce ‘African knowledge’, as we had ‘done for centuries, despite horrendous sacrifices.’ I was informed that in any research we conducted as ‘AFRICAN’ lesbians, we should focus on ‘AFRICAN feminisms, and indigenous feminisms’. We must make ‘use of agency and take responsibility for our actions, knowledge and lack of it’, where we obtained our knowledge and how we did it. MB also informed me that her father was from India, and that her mother was a descendant of the San people (‘the first people of Southern Africa’). She said that depending on whom she worked with she did different kinds of work – ‘AFRICAN’ work with the Working Group, ‘South-South solidarity with India or Latin America, Global solidarity with Europeans’, all the while, remaining a ‘daughter of Africa, through her mother’s womb, the first people of the (African) continent and probably the world.’ Finally, I was told that we needed to work from that ‘deep womb place’, which was the only way that MB could work (quoted with permission from MB). I was temporarily unable to respond to MB’s reaction partly because it appeared so strong, heavy and filled with issues that, for me, required a lot of emotional and intellectual digesting.

Elizabeth Khaxas, Director of Women’s Leadership Centre (WLC) and a co-founder member of the African Lesbian Working Group had been a silent member since conversations had started. Upon reading MB’s email, she appeared to feel a very strong need to give her point of view. In her response she admonished activist MB for acting exclusionary, ‘superior’ and belittling of others’ work. Amongst the things she said were issues of who she considered was an African and who the working group should consider working with, as well as what feminist values the group ought to have:

For me everyone who lives in Africa is an African: Bantu, Khoesan, white, Indian, mixed race and others.”(…) In 2003 I attended the First African Feminist Forum on Zanzibar. There with the fellow African feminists I was not black enough; yet I am an indigenous woman from the part of the continent where some people are brown and not black. I was also excluded from being an African feminist because I was a lesbian. It was pertinently stated that only ‘black’ African feminists can belong to that space - that Indian and white women and lesbian women will not be allowed to be part of that space. I informed participants of that forum that I was a feminist lesbian who was in love with a white feminist - a white woman who in feminist solidarity was committing all her energies towards building a feminist lesbian movement in Namibia and in Africa. I told that meeting that I thought that feminism is about solidarity, is about kindness and creating peace, is welcoming all of us in our diversity of our identities. There on the island of Zanzibar I made a promise to myself that I will never be part of any divisive feminist politics. We have not one kind of African feminism - my kind of African feminism welcomes all other
lesbian women regardless of their race and ethnicity. (…) There is not one kind of feminism - instead we have various African feminist ideologies and spaces, policed by various gatekeepers. Some of these spaces you can only join if you are a certain degree of black and heterosexual. Other spaces you can join only if you are black and lesbian. (…) my assertion is that (this working group) is for all of us - black, Indian, mixed race, living in the diaspora, and that we need to treat each other as equals with respect for our dignity and contributions.(Quoted with permission from Elizabeth Khaxas)

I was quite touched by Elizabeth’s email as I had not expected any form of support. A few days after Elizabeth’s email I sent a response in which I said:

All I can say from Elizabeth’s extensive thoughts is that I am truly humbled. I too believe that African feminisms are many, and that we include the breadth and length of all women’s experiences - races, mixed-races, living on the continent (or having lived on/experienced it - I was born in Sweden, moved to Kenya at age 5, went to public schools and a public university, studied painting unofficially with local artists, was part of a local women artists group since 1999, was part of MWA since 2006, moved to Sweden to study in 2012, and was back in Kenya between July-August 2013 to work with MWA). Yes I know I am probably a minority in some ways.

(…) I agree that I asked you to continue editing it, (I had just started reading the documents MB had sent to me/us and I was after all struggling with a huge amount of other readings this week at the university), but I didn’t state that I would not be able to revise it. (Now it has been done, so it is overtaken by events).

Yes, I have indicated that I would be busy, but also that I still want to work (it may sound contradictory and it’s partly because I have been having ambivalent feelings/thoughts about when to work, how much work to put in, who is working, communicating and how they are doing it, how I should respond, how quickly/slowly people are working, which milestones they are at, what my role is, since it was first editor, then writer and now editor again, etc.). I have not yet seen the strategy draft since you/I sent out the initial version where only your and my/(…) texts had been included. My question still stands: which sections is the (…team) working on, and which can I contribute to? Or if the research strategy is almost finished, which sections would I be editing?

Or have we stopped working and are still reflecting on the Working Group's values, feminisms and ways of working..(maybe I am jumping the gun and not doing enough
reflecting myself). If I have caused some unnecessary confusions along the way, I apologize. (at a more convenient time, I would show you my paintings between 1999 - 2005 and you would understand how my mind functions..it isn't all that consistent :)

I have sometimes wondered why I chose to write this email, the way I did. I don’t really think I was completely ready to continue working in a business-as-usual fashion. The conversation had brought out so many issues, resentments, and direct clashes that I wondered how we could move forward. Indeed, after these and one additional email from yet another activist in which I was accused of being ‘inconsistent’ and ‘dishonest’, I felt even less motivated to work and strangely I did continue. I think people were pretty rattled because from what I observed, the conversations became dampened and there was no immediate feedback after that.

Obviously the communication did not end there but I choose to delimit my analysis here for the practical purpose of this thesis. For me, though, the stand-off signalled some kind of break from the group on my part. To continue working felt difficult and would have been unfulfilling. Furthermore, I began to feel that maybe I had outstayed my welcome. I chose to concentrate on protecting myself and sorting out this decolonising issue rather than volunteering for the group, at least for a while.

Working processes

As with many arguments which seem to blow up almost out-of-the-blue, once the conflict has happened, it is somewhat difficult to go back and analyse who the people were, and why they said what they said and where the misunderstandings were. Whilst we (some of the activists on the Working Group) had had prior shorter email conversations to introduce ourselves I do not think that there had been adequate exploring of our backgrounds. This was one of the limitations with Skype and email but also of trying to do feminist work amongst quite different personalities without giving ourselves enough time to really know and appreciate each other. To thoroughly interrogate our positionalities would have required a longer, more painstaking engagement and more trust from the beginning.

The other issue that I felt was problematic was that of process in constituting the African Lesbian Working Group. Whilst the nature of co-opting more members into the group was a spontaneous one (volunteers could join the group throughout the year), which in itself was rejuvenating, it did also cause some kind of tensions due to the ever changing dynamics
of relations amongst the ‘old’ and ‘new’ members. I put ‘old’ and ‘new’ members in quotation marks because whilst I was an ‘old’ member having been part of conversation from around March 2013, the ‘newer’ members who joined in August, had much more prior knowledge of all the personalities already within the group and in fact considered me the ‘new’ member. It seemed then that my way of engaging with each of the members had to change progressively, because I felt there were new aspects of my and their relationships that I discovered over time. At some point it felt that I was no longer part of the in-group, but a peripheral figure who had to struggle to find her place in the discussion. Maybe other members had similar feelings about the changing nature of the relationships.

The other issue was the nature with which the progress of the Research Strategy document was carried forward. It became clear to me that this document was something the group had not attempted before, even though the group clearly had some strong ideologies and a constitution to match. Members of the group were free to choose any section to write on. If my own ideological stand appeared questionable to some of the older members, why was I allowed to write the section on epistemology and methodology? Also if it was clear that the entire document was in draft form, why did some members take up perceived mistakes or wrong directions in the document so strongly? Was the urgency in getting the document finished dependent on reporting back to donors or were there other reasons for the clash in conversations?

The Calm after the Storm

After I received permission to use Elizabeth’s words for my thesis, she and her partner Liz, sent me a report from the Africa Feminist Congress (AFC) that took place in July 2003 in which Elizabeth had participated. It showed the discussions and key points that were documented. There were many issues of contention reported in the document, and one of them was the ‘vilifying and attacking’ of certain feminist women, in particular Patricia. One section of the long AFC report (2003) read thus:

She (Patricia) started by stating that, she thought there were several tensions in the meeting. She spoke to the difficulties that she faced in the meeting and that she chose to stay on the side-lines since Tuesday because she felt very unsafe in this space. She said that she felt like there was a “lightening rod” that aimed at changing the agenda and ownership of the initiative. She felt vilified (that each time she spoke, she was attacked) and therefore withdrew and denied herself the right to participate.
She further spoke on two issues that were important for her:

1. Asked participants to remember the joy they felt when we all started this journey, i.e. political reasons that brought us here to Zanzibar. Disappointed that the notion/vision of the AFC was not consolidated in the fashion that she’d anticipated. She saw manipulation and ulterior motives instead of healthy contestations. She raised a key lesson out of this: stop competing for things that are ours collectively.

2. Where do we go from here? Learn from the loss. All feminists have the political obligation to protect sisters that are under attack. Her own lesson is to be harder, less open, less trusting, less naive. From now, she’s going to ‘protect Patricia.’!

The fact that I could see proof of previous contentious discussions documented within an African context, of which Elizabeth had been a part, to some extent gave me a little perspective of what I had been through. And in a way it was calming and reassuring.

**The contentious African**

With my research questions in mind, I turn back to the material I presented earlier and attempt to analyse various aspects of them. Elizabeth’s words and the AFC report were eye opening readings on the challenges of feminist movement building amongst women, in which coloured and lesbian women had to contend with often ‘invisible’ and sometimes explicit rejections from other black African and ‘indigenous’ women. It brought up questions about who exactly is an African and which common principles of feminism women need to ascribe to. In addition it brought up another issue, which I felt was not expounded on but which I somehow read between the lines, namely, perceived or real class- differences, often associated with various shades of skin colour or nationalities.

Visweswaran (1994:40) has stated that some feminist perspectives of ‘sisterhood’ often fail to question differences and divides of women. I understand this to mean that women ought to critically analyse how their own differences contribute or pose challenges not only in the daily practices of their own lives but those of others as well. Why the challenges occur and what misunderstandings arise because of them, causes the divides amongst women, also need to be questioned. For me, these issues have been emblematic of discourses that I have been part of amongst different activists. The other non-innocence is our individual understanding of and ascription to what feminism means (as suggested by Donna Haraway in Visweswaran 1994: 40). This has also been my experience in that women activists can form groups and hold lengthy discussions about how work will be done only to reach a point where they begin to ask
themselves what exactly their feminist values and principles are. Not being able to adequately and satisfactorily define and agree on what each ‘knows’ feminism to be, there is either a deadlock, or a skipping over the issue, in order to get the work done.

*The Maternal factor – genealogies and feminist principles directing working ways*

One of the tensions that I felt in the conversations, appeared to stem from maternal affiliations and genealogies. Whilst the mother of feminist MB was San and a source of great pride to her, particularly with regard to subjugated standpoints, genealogical and geographical origins, my mother was from the Nordic region and also a source of pride to myself. In a sense, both of us were holding on to our maternal origins, perhaps rightfully, but at the expense of finding some more meaningful shared feminist experience.

MB’s words about her mother being a descendant of the San People, even though mentioned as a final note, were quite loaded with meaning. By saying that she was “a daughter of Africa, through her mother’s womb”, that her mother’s ancestors were “The first people of Southern Africa”, “(…) of the African continent and probably the world” I got the sense that she sought to display her right to authentic African knowledge, authority and affiliation to the origins of human kind. It is not a little ironic that similar claims to evolutionary origins of human kind have been made by others about human fossils found around Olduvai Gorge and Lake Turkana in the East African region.12 My own claim to African soil through my father’s side didn’t seem to weigh as heavy at the time of this conversation maybe because the main focus was on women and their mothers. Instead I resisted by counter assigning one kind of African identity to people of mixed African descent and in this way incorporated and tried to justify using geopolitical perspectives from my own maternal side. And so these words of maternal affiliations confirm ideological and kinship ties explained by various researchers (Åkesson 2011; Leonetti and Chabot-Hanowell 2011; Silva-Junior et al. 2014).

The entangled issue of who is ‘more authentically indigenous’ based on skin colour as expounded on by Elizabeth Khaxas shows the strangely racialized views of who an African is supposed to be. However, given that Zanzibar island (where the AFC congress was held) had a long history of being colonized by the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries, then the Sultanate of Oman in the 17th Century followed by the British in the 18th centuries, it is partly understandable why some Africans would assume that all indigenous Africans were

---

12 See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_evolution.
once black and that some became brown due to intraracial mixing. Khaxas point about brown indigenous and white people, Indians and people of mixed race proves, though, that skin colour and simple racialized reasoning can be a shallow way of separating the authentic from the non-authentic.

Whilst I agree to some extent on the need to not always repeat Eurocentric knowledge in the African context, as MB said, I question how we might delineate all African from European information. For an activist with multiple backgrounds (or anyone for that matter) it would appear to require not only extra attention to detail, origins and processes of the knowledge produced and exchanged. It would also require some kind of acknowledgement that there are aspects that are historically and discursively inseparable. Whilst MB appeared to have the benefit of age and experience and more significantly had links to Southern, postcolonial societies on both her mother’s and father’s side, I had a partial postcolonial history. What was I to do with that part of me that came from the North? Was I to throw it away whilst on the African continent or working in an African context? To take it up again whilst in Sweden? It seemed neither practical nor morally correct. To pretend to a “homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood”, would have been to perpetuate an illusion and deprive me of all my integral parts (Lorde 2007: 116; 120). If my African feminism principles permit me to pick from knowledge and theories from my maternal geopolitical and feminist location, how do I work with an activist who insists on the same, but whose genealogical background appears to give her some political advantages over mine? Where can I find some commonalities with her? Why is it that some activists who have gone through similar colonial contexts, do not see the need to be as heavy-handed in their engagement with other younger activists? Are they using other feminist perspectives and values? Which would be the most useful, world-transforming principles with which a Working Group could engage? Or, as Redi Koobak states, how might we explore “aspects of difference and locatedness” (as a key to) “pluralist feminism and the diversification of frames of reference”? (Koobak 2013: 37).

That we should adhere to AFRICAN and indigenous feminisms and knowledge might appear straightforward on the surface of it, but African feminisms and knowledge are

---

13 Evidence also points to even earlier influence on the Swahili culture by Indian, Persian, Arab, Malaysian, Indonesian and Chinese merchants
varied. Indigenous feminisms and knowledge might mean those that women in the rural areas adhere to. It might mean those that various ethnic communities apply to themselves and their daily work and engagement. But what are they and are they essentially the same in foundation? Some may be considered as radical as the ones in Europe, the US, South America or Asia. Separatist is one way of looking at it. That in itself has its pros and cons. I want to make a connection between indigenous knowledge and cultural philosophy here. Indigenous knowledge consists of what Oruka has linked to poets, herbalists, medicine men, musicians and fortune tellers, who in turn may be known as cultural philosophers (Oruka 1983: 51). What Oruka is critical of amongst cultural philosophy is its absolutist stance on truth. To him whilst this philosophy consists of the wisdom and traditions of a people, it can also be fanatical, leaving little room for critical reflection (Oruka 1983: 51). Some feminisms and knowledge are conservative. Others are liberal. Some are a combination of various principles from different feminism or non-feminist backgrounds. Feminisms applied in rural areas may be different from those in the peri-urban and urban areas, or from one African country to the next. Women are after all shaped by the histories, the violence, the gender discourse and construction that they have been subjected to and these are not the same everywhere.

Nnaemeka has proposed nego-feminism (the feminism of negotiation; no ego feminism) as a term that names African feminisms (2004). She does this not to “occlude the diversity” but for “building on the indigenous”. Perhaps this is what as feminist activists, we ought to have done by interrogating our positionalities in ways that resulted in “active subject location of shifting reciprocity” where meanings about ourselves could be made over and over rather than essentialised once and for all (Nnaemeka 2004).

Disidentification and Re-identification

Peoples’ personalities and ways of articulating their thoughts (or not), determine to a large extent how one identifies or disidentifies with them and with their thinking, not to mention the work at hand. I question what identities I held and how they were transforming during my engagement with the activists. Whilst I worked with a foot in both working groups, I sometimes felt like some kind of medium. At one point I seemed to be transmitting radical questioning to the Steering Committee’s conversation and at other times I seemed to be giving moderate reasoning to the Lesbian Working Group. Was I acting of my own accord or was I inadvertently being influenced by the different discourses and relations in which I found myself? I often wondered whether the words I used, were mine or as a result of the things I was
What was a little disconcerting was that I was also beginning to imagine (or perceive) how members from the different groups saw me. It was a very strange feeling. And it made me feel oddly ambivalent about what I was contributing, what my own standpoint was but also what others thought I stood for, what I thought I could gain and how I wanted to be seen in the groups. Maybe this was a case of double consciousness. In some ways I was perpetually identifying and disidentifying with different aspects of both groups and at one point I really did not want to be part of either. I felt that they could work perfectly (within their own bounds and reasoning) without my input. I was a stranger sitting on an ideological border which I myself could not put a name to, looking in on the groups (Anzaldúa 1987; Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009). In a sense, I was re-identifying myself and with the groups on a different level from before. But what exactly was this new level? It was almost like a strange contradictory case of familiarity-breeding-contempt plus the heart-growing-fonder, all rolled into one. Whilst this may sound like an arrogant and patronising combination of feelings, there was something else it was covering up. It seemed like there were very bitter-sweet feelings of hurt, regret, insight, gratitude, rejection and acceptance of the way things were and of other things I could not even begin to name. I was visualising and contemplating new possibilities of engagement with some or all the members, even as I saw, what appeared to be, some very difficult or irreconcilable (?) differences.

I had caused ‘discursive trouble’ and unsettling feelings within both groups. It had not been my initial intention. Maybe it needed to be done, even if I could have done it differently. Causing trouble is also oddly satisfying. There is a kind of relief that comes from saying what one feels and hoping that one will not have to care (too much) what happens next. In fact some activists are extremely good at it. Somehow, though, I do not think I had managed to displace or trouble the ideological outlooks of persons within the group. It would be presumptuous of me to think that I had had that much of an impact. In any case I could not tell what the impact had been because I received little feedback afterwards.

What I understood from Elizabeth Khaxas’ email, from my own thoughts and even from MB’s words, was that an African is a contentious concept. An African is not a black
person per se, although many think so. An African or an African perspective does not always live on the continent, although many think or feel that it should be considered so. The diaspora African is not always in the diaspora, but on the continent. The African and her perspectives travel continuously back and forth in an expatriate-yet-not-expatriate manner. This multiplicitous African can have many shapes and colours, but the main essence is that she appears to carry nuggets of information and self-representations back and forth across continents. She does not always know that this is what she is doing. Hers is an information-transpositional process. She acquires new information or new perceived representations (as viewed by herself and others), brings these to a place, inadvertently testing the information and representations with the audience, to which she receives mixed responses. This African seems to leave her essence behind her when she departs. And when she is present somewhere it appears that she is seen as someone or something else, not unlike the double consciousness described by William E.B. du Bois and Lisa Åkesson (1903; 2011). She is holographic in a sense.

**The decolonising work**

Whilst I know that I may not fully and ‘objectively’ analyse MB’s words, I hope that empathetic reading will guide some of my thinking. One of the limitations I find is that I did not know MB as a person, her background and her personal experiences. I can say, though, that she did share her MA thesis with me in earlier conversations. Indeed she insisted that I should read it and get information for the Research Strategy document.

Based on MB’s thesis which spoke of the suffering of the KhoeSan people at the hands of colonisers and based on her age (I think forties or fifties) I assume that she had been through the Apartheid system in South Africa. I deduced that for her, her mother (who was KhoeSan) and her extended family on her mother’s side, the issue of having been colonized was personal and had been a source of mental and physical pain and suffering. Hence her strong feelings about decolonising.

The problem with the issue of decolonising is the assumption that all Africans are completely indigenous, which is incorrect since many are of mixed heritage. Furthermore, many indigenous people have been so exposed to other multiple influences – both indigenous and foreign that it is difficult to separate them. The issue of going back to ‘our roots’ i.e. our indigenous knowledge and ways of knowledge production and theories is fine. But the question would be which particular knowledge and theories do ‘we’ activists want to produce or acquire.
and for what purpose? What aspects about our traditions are useful in today’s setting? Furthermore, if activists want to remain influential in their communication and ways of advocacy, there are aspects of the capitalist system (the underside of colonialism) that cannot be ignored or escaped.

Should sexual and gender minority rights activists who are based in the urban areas be advised to do similar kinds of activism as those in the peri-urban and rural areas? There are different cultural and social systems in the different areas. One could ask oneself to what extent rural based sexual minority rights activists reach policy makers and what issues they bring to the table. Are they the same as those that urban activists present, often quite visibly, to policy makers, human rights advocates and government officials? I envision different sets of theories for activism work and knowledge production depending on geopolitical settings even within a single country, and within different African countries. Some of these theories will naturally borrow from ‘western theories’. The idea is to scrutinize, sieve, adjust, re-interpret, transform or build on them when it is convenient or useful.

Regarding decolonising ourselves, I want to talk about language. Let me make a hypothesis. Suppose I were to denounce English and choose never to use it again, in which language would I make myself understood and who would be my target audience? My second language is my mother-tongue - Swedish. I might then be accused of using yet another colonial language. Sweden after all played its part in colonialism between the 17th and 19th Centuries particularly of the ‘Gold Coast’ (present day Ghana), the Congo and South Africa (Nilsson, David 2013). Few people around the world would understand me and I might be confined to live in Sweden only.

My third language is Kiswahili. Some might say, that I ought perhaps only to write and speak (and dream?) in Kiswahili. Yet this language is from two ethnic/racial groups that are not really my own (at least not from a direct standpoint). Arabic was not my initial language, nor Bantu, which is a different linguistic and ethnic group from the Nilotic one. I have nothing against Kiswahili – if anything I enjoy speaking it to whoever knows the language. However, the degree with which Kiswahili is spoken and comprehended in the greater East and Central African regions, varies a great deal depending on which country and which people are speaking it. And outside these regions, communication again requires English, French or Portuguese. If I were to dedicate myself to my father’s ethnic language Luo, it would take me years to master and in the end, I would once again only be able to communicate to a select few Nilotic sub-groups. Or my life would have moved on to other places where belonging and understanding oneself required other skills. My conclusion then is
that, to decolonise oneself in terms of language is somewhat impractical and will have mixed results in terms of acceptance by one’s communities and feelings of belonging (Åkesson 2011: 229). I think that most people understand this. Which is why they persist in writing in, what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o critically calls, the *Afro-European literary tradition* (Wa Thiong’o 1998: 102). In order to communicate in African, South-South or Global solidarity work, we nevertheless need and choose to use the colonial languages. And so we are caught in an endless paradoxical loop.

Decolonial thinking needs to focus on problems by looking at them “from different perspectives in dialogue” requiring “complexity and relationism, complementarity and reciprocity”, a “learning-unlearning-relearning path” (Tlostanova 2009: 5), also espoused by Judith Halberstam (Halberstam 2011; 2012). I take it then that this is an ongoing process. I think it may be a perpetual process, for all postcolonial people whether in the North, the South, East or West. It will never really end. What it does seem to require, is a continuous engaged process of getting to know each other, of permitting oneself to be vulnerable, to be angry and hurt, to question and ask for answers and to say all these things out loud. The learning-unlearning-relearning path is one on which we may gain strength and productivity from our origins but also can take multiple other paths in activism, and other work.

The elements of love and negotiation as foundational feminist praxis and evinced by Elizabeth Khaxas and Obioma Nnaemeka is also found in Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*. The *hermeneutics of love*, which is part of the decolonial option, is also found in critical Western postmodern analysis (Sandoval 2000 in Tlostanova 2009: 5). Indeed Sandoval is critical of “hegemonic feminism” of which two are “supremacist” and “separatist” (Sandoval 1991: 3). Supremacist is “the belief is that this group has evolved to a higher state of social and psychological existence than those currently holding power, moreover, their differences comprise the essence of what is good in human existence”. For Sandoval radical and cultural feminisms fall into this category. Separatist is a mode whereby feminists are more interested in nurturing and protecting their perceived differences and strengths as women and feminists than in developing an equal rights agenda. Their interest lies in creating women-only spaces.

I wonder, though, if Sandoval’s notion of radical would resonate with say the African Lesbian Working Group’s concept of radical. There do seem to be some similarities but there are also differences. For one thing, having been part of some its conversations, I know that there are members who take a gracious, thoughtful, open and accommodating approach. Then of course there are those who do not, or to be fair, they take a mixed approach – sometimes
hard, sometimes soft, although never quite relenting. And thus the ideological stance of this group seems to be in continuous flux.

When MB states that her only way of working is from the “deep womb place” and that “we” should do the same, I had to look at the statement again. Was she saying that we should work from the exclusive view as women? If so, might she have been expressing what Eisenstein called “woman-centred” feminism, where the unique expression of the essence of woman was to be explored (Eisenstein and Jardine 1980)? Was the ‘deep womb place’ quite literary to be understood as having a womb with the ability and fertility to reproduce? I do have a womb and I do experience those monthly discomforts of period cramps but, it is not like I go around every day thinking constantly about my womb. Suppose I were a female, who did not have a uterus, or who was infertile, or who was a Trans man or Trans woman, or an intersex person who never even knew he or she had a womb. What would I do with this statement? Suppose I looked at the deep womb place as metaphor for a more sacred, ‘feminine’, metaphysical state. Maybe I would still come up with a different interpretation of the term than what MB had intended.

Nnaemeka states that the Igbo people denounce chameleon-like behaviour in humans—“ifu ocha icha, ifu oji ijie (when you see white, you turn white; when you see black, you turn black)”. Walking like a chameleon, however, is a whole other thing, she says. I do not want to liken solidarity work (with its multiple ways of engaging depending on the part of the world that is in question) with chameleon-like behaviour. I instead want to suggest that perhaps we should walk like chameleons. We may want to take slow, measured and careful steps in one direction to see if it works out in our activism, and another slow measured step in another direction depending on shifting circumstances and identifications.

_Failure and unlearning. Oppression, subjugation and privilege_

To be conscious of ones privileged positions requires not only to know in which ways one is fortunate in life. It also requires one to think about where the privilege lies in relation to people whom one interacts with or is indirectly linked to. Likewise, being subjugated is not always obvious and one often needs to revisit this concept – to see how this position exists and works in relation to others. Or as Audre Lorde, inspired by Freire, points out:
The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each us, and which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships.

(Lorde, 2007: 123)

The question then is this: to what extent was and am I in subjugated and privileged positions in the contexts of the online working groups. To some extent I could say that I am in a privileged position as I am writing this thesis, situating my perspectives first and foremost. I am also using the texts of others to analyse the concepts of being an African activist in contentious relations with other activists. On the other hand, when I look at the position I held within the online groups my so-called privilege becomes less evident. For instance, I often felt quite powerless when activists (in both groups) chose not to respond to questions on email or when they discussed issues and came to agreements without my input. Even though I sometimes questioned those decisions, this was met with resistance or explanations that I did not find satisfactory. I sometimes asked myself if this was what it meant to work in a collective, where power seemed to be exercised sometimes in disregard of my and others’ opinions, or where I had to use my intuition to understand what was going on behind the scenes.

To what extent was I oppressing people in the online working groups and what forms had the oppression taken? I sometimes felt that I was being too vocal, having opinions about everything. I do not know how much authority my voice carried in some discussions, for instance in the Steering Committee. I was not a co-chair or even an alternate co-chair but I was amongst the older persons in the group. Maybe my age, together with my regular opinions, may have been interpreted as oppressive. Of course members were free to state their stand as well. I often felt, though, that the cover of working online, meant that the silence or statements of others were protected by the distance that the internet provides. In the Lesbian Working Group, on the other hand, I was the new comer, who had to progressively contend with activists who were not only older than me, but who also had prior inside information and relationships with others in the group. There was clear use of power to attempt to control discussions and the work. Negotiating this space proved much more difficult with time.

To learn to be less vocal and give others online space, was something I had to practice. And sometimes my silence provided me with more time to think things through, to better understand what I actually wanted to achieve or obtain from contributing to the
conversation. The other thing I began to learn was that silence could also be used to indicate dissatisfaction, indecision or to give others cause to ponder on my inaction. Was my sporadic inactivity or that of others a kind of new way of working? Was it a failing to work in order to work better? Were we unlearning old modes and patterns of communication with each other? Were we attempting alternative ways of engaging? The thing with failure and unlearning, is that it is not always clear where one has failed or succeeded, or what new things one is learning.

What about an attempt to fail or unlearn to be my mother’s daughter? Suppose I were to temporarily lift off my mantle that says ‘I-am-Kristina’s-daughter’ and offer it in exchange for another activist’s mantle. I do not mean that I would be giving up my birth-right. I mean that it would be a ritualistic metaphor of temporarily sappropping mothers in order to unlearn how we see our individual place in the order of things and to let go of some of our historical ‘burdens’, including our mothers’ burdens. It could also be an exchange of alternative life-outlooks, and of many other things that activists could imagine, name and conjure. And how might we do this mantle-switching? It would require a leap of faith. And a willingness of activists to accept and reciprocate. A willingness from all of us to engage in acts of forgetfulness of that which once was, and to absorb visualisations, sounds, smells and tastes of parallel existences.
Chapter Four - Conclusions & Implications

In this thesis I set out to investigate how an activist with multiple backgrounds negotiates the personal and political tensions and paradoxes in various activism arenas, and what the implications could be for work and knowledge production. The person with multiple backgrounds has numerous layers of linguistic, cultural, sociopolitical and economic affiliations, some more prominent than others. Some of these affiliations are naturally or decisively acquired, others are obtained through collaboration with systemic linguistic, socio-economic, cultural and political administrations. In many, if not most cases, maternal genealogy plays a huge role in the shaping of an activist’s character, sensitivities and sensibilities. But so do life experiences, accumulated feelings of longing, belonging or rejection, as well as eye-opening events or happenings that profoundly affect a person. There appear to be continuous strains and tensions in the moulding of the individual even as they move through adulthood.

The multiplicitous person partly co-constructs, is constructed by and subjected to forces of geopolitical locatedness, working processes, real-time and historical conversations, situated perspectives and egos. She is a part of forces of material, emotional and intellectual gain and loss. She can be a creature of good intention and compliance whilst also enacting willfulness, retreat and, reattempts at willfulness - she is one who possesses many loyalties but not flippant, irresponsible disloyalties. These forces sometimes appear oppositional to those of other individuals, but more often they appear to act in rhizomatic patterns, sprouting offshoot engagements of changing nature. These are some of the forces lying behind activism and ideologies, and the way an activist negotiates the contentious work. The African activist relies on not only backgrounds related directly to herself, but on those which are interesting, relevant and intellectually stimulating, even if indirectly related or sometimes not related to her at all. These (and others) all form parts of the knowledge production process. Whether to include and invoke some aspects and not others is a matter of individual choice and personal acuity and for whom or what purpose the information is meant. African and international ‘activism work’ has never been straight forward, so delaying the work a bit more, in order to find richer, more nuanced, expressive and diverse components, should not be seen as a problem. It may rather be seen as engaging in ‘activism living’.

The concept African (and hence the African activist) needs to be looked at from both obvious and not so obvious angles and layers. I looked at the African activist who has
multiple and sometimes conflicting or contradictory characteristics, motives, and ways of working, and uses these ‘tools’ of engagement with mixed feelings and results. Hers is a self-representation and an ascription by others that can shift with or without her conscious awareness due to its spontaneous information-transpositional process, effectively making her holographic. Engaging in two or more quite different groups simultaneously, whilst politically and intellectually stimulating and beneficial, can sometimes lead to the ‘medium’ effect in which an individual watches herself transmit information this way and that, and eventually develops not only a double consciousness but an affective distancing or disidentification with other activists. The activist can feel like a stranger on an ideological border, feeling uncertain affiliations to either side.

African identifications and feminist perspectives are varied. Indeed it seems insufficient to simply call Africans as people from the South. The term ‘South’ is a convenient categorization of (a people in) ‘geopolitical’ spaces that are presumably ‘not North’. But it is insufficient and befuddling to label a group as ‘people in the South’ because geographical location and even postcolonial history are not sole prerequisites or parameters for identit(ies) or politics. The multiple, past and ongoing interactions, origins, migrations, cultural exchanges make an African (and an activist) simultaneously multiplicitous and holographic. Representations of an African depend largely on the kinds of information the individual holds, shares and how others perceive her. And people do hold a lot more information, contentious internal debates, dilemmas and affiliations than some labels give them credit for. This then means that concepts such as ‘south-south’ and ‘global’ work require more analysis. African identities can be seen as distilled essences of “African cosmopolitanism”, bound partly by “geographical specificity” and a worldliness unbound by either geography or race which do indeed suggest that “multiple specificities exist” (Hoad 2007: 113). This resonates with Jane Bennett’s thoughts about the depth and complexity of not only the continent but also African-based activism (as cited in Tamale 2011: 80).

My own personal battles with how to identify, whilst also disidentifying, with the groups in which I worked, based on the ways of working, the conflicting ideological stand points or perspectives, egos, and other factors, contributed to some of the contentious conversations and actions that took place. Whilst I certainly acknowledge that my questioning and resistance within the work, may have been perceived as disruptive to some degree, I think that some of it was necessary. All activists within the groups had their part to play in the
dynamics – even though I focus on only a few of them here. Whilst it slowed down the work considerably, it may have contributed to other more meaningful results. I am, however, unable to tell what these were, as I stand a little too close to the phenomena in question. Working processes seem to require extensive engagements that allow members to get to know each other, but also to sort out misunderstandings and reconfigurations of power differentials and feminist principles. And much of the reconfigurations must be done individually as well as within the groups. There is nothing wrong with causing discursive and ideological trouble in conversations since it simply opens up the groups to consider alternative ways of working.

As a methodological approach, autoethnography is not only a highly challenging means of analyzing data, but can also lead to some insights and depth in understanding of oneself as well as others. In some ways it is also a liberating approach which lends itself to expressiveness and rich layering of information. One of the limitations I find with it, though, is that one has to be particularly careful with how one situates oneself in relation to others. But at the same time it allows a vulnerability, openness and feminist ‘objectivity’ (or subjectivity) which may prevent positivist, absolutist and relativist pitfalls.

My emphasis in this thesis is on self-awareness (situated perspectives) and power dimensions/dynamics of people working within the African sexual and gender minority (LGBTI) social justice movements. I also express the need for mutual understanding and even more importantly respecting and acknowledging each other’s understandings of the world and how it works. I feel that much more can certainly be written on the contentious concepts African, African knowledge production, transfers, exchanges, translations and interpretations, as well as on feminist principles which seems to be a topic that comes up ever so often. A lot more can also be done on tensions and contradictions of being of African descent, living on or off the African continent. Other areas that require further study could be the power differentials amongst activist factions on the African continent. Even more interesting would be to see many other situated perspectives and autoethnographic accounts of and by other activists.

In retrospect I would posit that a person with multiple backgrounds and more specifically identifications as an African individual and activist are ongoing and unresolved processes, or “besieged identities”. The identities are a “troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound” (Said 2003 in Hoad 2007: 116). An African lesbian activist is a troubling identity because she lays claim to identities, affiliations and thinking that puts her at odds with what many perhaps feel an African should be doing. She is disabling because she sometimes
makes the activism cogwheels bump and falter but also disables the mechanism which built and held up the notion of an African. She is a destabilizing secular wound because she presents an open sore that oozes secularism, conflicting ideologies, different dreams, histories and representations in ways that present a headache for all concerned. Origins do matter, but how one origin matters is not the same as how another origin matters, or even when or where they matter in discourse, in work, in knowledge production or when putting perspectives to how knowledge comes about and how it circulates.

I hope that this thesis will contribute to a better understanding not just of the kinds of individuals that are African feminist lesbian activists with multiple backgrounds but also of what thought and systemic processes drive the activism work. I hope that it complements the documentation that already exists on African sexual and gender minority movements by providing more personalized accounts of work and interactions. It is the nuances or explicit differences that fuel tensions and disagreements, which ‘we’ should be bold enough to lay out on the table. But in addition, ‘we’ need to take a long, honest and engaged look at what these nuances and differences mean for people, for groups and for the work.

It is also my hope that this thesis can benefit activist and non-activist persons since it provides lessons around situated perspectives, and mutual acknowledgment. Ultimately there is so much more to be unlearned and relearned, much to be received and given, and many questions about subjugation, privilege, partial perspectives and oppression to be answered. And what could one say about the concepts of unlearning and relearning? If one is to reformulate one’s set of opinions and partial perspectives by learning new ones, which should they be? Even though I feel that these processes are constantly being questioned and engaged with in activism, their documentation is a little difficult to find. I would venture to say that there should be no permanence or limits to the ways we opinion or perceive things, whether it be our own or new ways of thinking. And with this in mind, we can let go of earlier conceptions, pick up new ones, use and reformulate them and replace them as the situation demands.
References


Clough, P. T. (1998) *The end(s) of ethnography*. New York: Peter Lang


Holt, Nicholas L (2001) Beyond technical reflection: Demonstrating the modification of teaching behaviors using three levels of reflection. Avante, 7(2), pp. 66-76.


Decolonial Option and its ramifications. Department of Culture and Identity. Roskilde University.


## Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the tensions and contradictions of being African, feminist and activist within sexual and gender minority social movements. I ask how an African activist with multiple backgrounds negotiates the different personal and political landscapes, tensions she encounters, as well as the implications this has for activism work. This study is meant to complement the growing body of activism publications, which, though varied and rich, tend to shy away from depicting and critically analyzing the internal problems experienced in groups, because of differences of ideological perspectives, backgrounds and power differentials. Using an autoethnographic methodology I analyse how a lesbian feminist activist, engages in self-reflections on life outlook, belonging, art and contentious online African and international activism. My materials include extracts of email conversations within two online discussions, my own art pieces and memories of my experiences. The theoretical framework includes situated partial perspectives, disidentification and unlearning. My analysis shows that my situated Kenyan - Swedish backgrounds have affected not only my art, but my thought processes which in turn affect how I engage in different activist contexts. Tensions and contradictions with other activists show how ideological differences, situated perspectives, age and power differentials determine the outcome of some activism agendas. My findings also suggest that activism encounters can lead to partial affective distancing, disidentifications, multiplicitous and holographic identities. Furthermore our origins, and experiences matter a lot in shaping our feminism ideals and ways of working. These ways of working reveal various instances of oppression, subjugation and privilege, effected by maternal affiliations, online invisibility, ethnic and indigenous identities and language. In conclusion, I argue that much more self-reflection, self-revelation, accommodation for individual differences and analysis of our ways of oppressing is required, for activism work to be successful and mutually beneficial.
Keywords: African, tensions, feminism, disidentifications, lesbian, situated-perspectives, autoethnography.