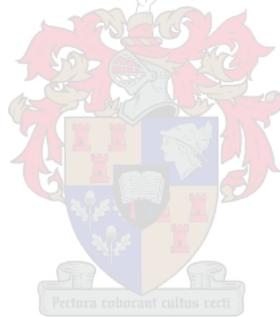


# **Queering gender: The life histories of gender counter-normative students at Stellenbosch University**

by

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Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University



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March 2020

## **Declaration**

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March 2020

## Abstract

In March 2016, members of *The trans\* Collective* student activist group at the University of Cape Town brought to light the erasure of gender counter-normative students' contributions to the success of the RhodesMustFall movement in 2015. Equally important, the *Trans University Forum (TUF!)* released a report in 2017 that compiled the experiences of gender counter-normative individuals at seven South African higher education institutions. The report evinced that universities are sites that marginalise and alienate gender counter-normative staff, students and workers.

In this thesis, I explore the experiences of three gender counter-normative Stellenbosch University students as they navigate the university environment. I employ life history research to document the range and the richness of the students' daily lived experiences. In contemplating the challenges that the students as gender counter-normative individuals face, their resilience in negotiating these challenges become apparent. The students proactively resist the manifestations – and proponents – of the gender hegemony that endeavour to negate and invalidate their existence.

The present research thus addresses the gap in scholarship that does not consider gender counter-normative individuals in higher education, especially within the South African context. The thesis also departs from past literature that has, whether deliberately or not, framed the lives of gender diverse individuals as altogether burdensome.

Certain details of the students' narratives affirm that the structural design and institutional culture of Stellenbosch University reinforces the marginalisation and alienation of gender diverse individuals. Drawing on queer theory, the thesis suggests

tentative recommendations for how Stellenbosch University can work towards affirming gender diversity.

## Opsomming

In Maart 2016 het lede van *The trans\* Collective* studente-aktiwis groep aan die Universiteit van Kaapstad dit aan die lig gebring dat gender teen-normatiewe studente se bydrae tot die sukses van die *RhodesMustFall*-beweging van 2015 heeltemal geïgnoreer was. Ewe belangrik het die *Trans University Forum (TUF!)* in 2017 'n verslag uitgereik wat die ervarings van gender teen-normatiewe individue by sewe Suid-Afrikaanse hoërondewysinstellings saamgestel het. In die verslag blyk dit dat die universiteite hul gender teen-normatiewe personeel, studente en werknemers marginaliseer en vervreem.

Die huidige tesis ondersoek die ervarings van drie gender teen-normatiewe Universiteit Stellenbosch studente soos hulle die universiteitsomgewing navigeer . Ek maak gebruik van lewensgeskiedenisnavorsing (*life history research*) om die omvang en rykheid van die studente se daaglikse lewenservarings te dokumenteer. 'n Ondersoek van die uitdagings wat die studente as gender teen-normatiewe individue ervaar dui op hul veerkragtigheid met betrekking tot hoe hulle hierdie uitdagings onderhandel. Die studente weerstaan proaktief die manifestasies en voorstanders van die huidige gender hegemonie wat poog om hul bestaan te negeer en ongeldig te laat.

Die huidige tesis spreek dus die leemte in navorsing aan wat nalaat om gender teen-normatiewe individue binne die konteks van hoërondewysinstellings in ag te neem. Dit is veral die geval binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks. Die tesis wyk ook af van bestaande literatuur wat, hetsy doelbewus al dan nie, die lewens van gender teen-normatiewe individue as totaal en al neerdrakkend uitgebeeld het.

Sekere besonderhede van die studente se vertellings bevestig dat die strukturele ontwerp en die institusionele kultuur van Universiteit Stellenbosch die marginalisering

en vervreemding van gender diverse individue versterk. Met behulp van *queer*-teorie (*queer theory*) stel die tesis tentatiewe aanbevelings voor oor hoe Universiteit Stellenbosch te werk kan gaan om gender diversiteit te bevestig.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my gratitude to and appreciation for the following people:

My supervisor, Professor Dennis Francis. I am immensely grateful for your invaluable guidance and inspiration, and your unwavering support and patience, throughout this research journey.

To the participants: I am incredibly appreciative to you for your indispensable contribution to this study. Thank you for your trust and confidence in sharing your life stories with me. This accomplishment would not have been possible without you.

Heartfelt thanks to Genay Dhelminie. Thank you for your kindness and your genuine willingness in assisting me towards the finalisation of this study.

All of my love and my profound gratitude to my parents, Wendy and Eugène Beukes, and my sister, Zariah Beukes: for your steadfast support and encouragement throughout my years of study, and through the process of completing this thesis. Your wisdom and patience throughout the highs and lows of this research journey is greatly appreciated.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Following the first democratic elections in 1994, post-apartheid economic exclusion has remained a reality for most South Africans attending higher education institutions (Ndelu, Dlakavu, and Boswell, 2017). Relatedly, and consequently, protests against economic exclusion from higher education institutions have constituted a trademark of post-apartheid South African politics. Annual fees protests, for instance, became a feature of institutions like the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Tshwane University of Technology, Walter Sisulu University, University of Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape, and University of KwaZulu-Natal throughout the 1990 and 2000s (Ndelu et al., 2017:1).

In March 2015, a group of predominantly black students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) engaged in protest demanding the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the university campus (Ndelu et al., 2017). The statue represented a symbol of the lack of transformation at higher education institutions, a symbol of continued colonial and apartheid legacy at higher education institutions, and the institutional racism present at UCT in particular (Nyamnjoh, 2016). The successful removal of the statue initiated an entry-point for the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement to make broader demands of decolonisation, which included

...the removal of offensive artworks that celebrated colonisation from campus, in-sourcing outsourced university workers, transforming a predominantly white professoriate, and decolonising the university curriculum to centre Africa and African knowledge systems across the disciplines (Ndelu et al., 2017:1).

According to the movement's mission statement, the RMF initiative comprised "an independent collective of students, workers and staff who have come together to end institutionalised racism and patriarchy at UCT" (Ndelu et al., 2017:1). For this reason, the RMF initiative adopted intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as a central tenet constituting its movement. The movement inspired the formation of similar decolonisation initiatives at other South African Universities, such as Open Stellenbosch at Stellenbosch University (SU) and the Black Student Movement at Rhodes University. Eventually, however, the RMF movement at UCT began to prioritise the issue of "race" as the primary form of oppression. A focus on issues of gender parity, gender diversity, sexual diversity, class, and their intersections were therefore neglected (Hodes, 2016; Andestad, 2018). The self-proclaimed "intersectional" movement was therefore instrumental in and responsible for the disintegration of an intersectional approach to transformation efforts.

An equally important, related initiative to RMF was the FeesMustFall (FMF) movement that originated at the University of the Witwatersrand in October 2015. The catalyst for the FMF movement comprised the proposed 10.5% fee increase for the following 2016 academic year (Ndelu et al., 2017; Andestad, 2018). The FMF movement

...sought to remedy the lack of access to universities for the vast majority of black South African youth due to the prohibitive costs of higher education... [and] manifested across almost all of South Africa's 26 university campuses in multifarious ways (Ndelu et al., 2017:2).

Students participating in the initiative across the different South African higher education institutions engaged in protest demonstrations. The protest demonstrations primarily comprised the disruption of classes, the successfully demanded shutdown of campuses, and the occupation of university administration buildings (Booyesen, 2016).

The nation-wide protests resulted in “a government directive” (Ndelu et al., 2017:2) for 0% fees increase at universities in 2016. The provisional victory led to a resurgence of the movement in 2016 as they demanded free and decolonised education for all students across higher education institutions.

Chapter 3 of the present thesis describes the emergence of incidents of heterosexism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia in various degrees and to various extents within the movements across the different higher education institutions. Heterosexism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia also comprise the characteristics that impaired the FMF movements. Tension ensued between black, queer, and genderqueer student activists on one side, and the student activists who identified more explicitly with patriarchy on the other side of the FMF initiative (Ndelu et al., 2017).

As it relates to the preceding paragraph, below I attach an image (Image 1.1) of a student activist holding a placard. The image speaks to the intersectionality of the normative systems that the activists, in participating in the RMF movement, experienced as oppressive. The placard and its accompanying message serve as an illustrative example of the prolonged disregard, censorship and underrepresentation that individuals with marginalised identities endure in navigating their lives. Given the particular context, the prolonged alienation of individuals with marginalised identities relates to their contributions to civil protests.



Image 1.1: RMF UCT student activist bearing poster, by unknown, 2015

Following the FMF and RMF movements, gender non-binary and transgender students at several South African universities have communicated alarming experiences of their participation in the aforementioned student movements. Their accounts comprise experiences of harassment, social rejection, and direct and indirect discrimination as a result of the prevalence of especially gender diverse oppressive systems. In March 2016, transgender and gender non-binary activists at UCT protested against the harassment, exclusion, underrepresentation and censorship of gender counter-normative students during the RMF movement (Wagner, 2016).

Members of *The trans\* Collective* activist group at UCT prevented the opening of an exhibition as they expressed that they were “systematically side-lined in RMF structures” (Omar, 2016). The exhibition was jointly curated by the RMF movement and the university’s Centre for African Studies, and featured photographs from the student led RMF protests. According to *The trans\* Collective*, the exhibition failed to

reflect the contributions of gender diverse students to the RMF movement, and also did not reflect their “unique struggles” as gender diverse students. The protestors covered their bodies in red paint, smeared red paint over the photographs and posters displayed at the exhibition, and lay down on the ground in the gallery where the exhibition was held. Whilst laying on the ground, the protestors challenged onlookers to “walk over” their bodies. This was done to illustrate their right to affirm their gender diverse identities in spaces that operate to “walk over”, or otherwise marginalise them.

As it pertains to my thesis, the outline above provides insight into how gender counter-normative student activists have experienced two of the recent significant South African student activist movements. Both student activist initiatives sought to facilitate socio-political and socio-economic liberation for black higher education students. The movements’ championing for the prioritisation of indigenous African knowledge systems, and their initial prioritisation of intersectionality indicates that the movements intended to – with differing results – facilitate even broader liberation. This liberation encompassed both a liberation from the legacy of colonialism, and liberation for a multitude of marginalised identities from the systems and strategies that operate to oppress them.

Gender diverse student activists, however, revealed that the initiatives did operate to marginalise them, their voices and their contributions to the movements. Their accounts of marginalisation – correspondingly illustrated by the written message in Image 1.1 – insinuates a historical legacy of the exclusion, underrepresentation and silencing of gender counter-normative individuals.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Essentially, there is a gap in the knowledge as it pertains to the experiences of gender diverse students in higher education settings, especially within the South African context. The aforementioned gaps in knowledge pertaining to gender diversity will soon be explained in more detail and explored further in Chapter 3 of the present thesis.

Additionally, the present thesis considers that the hegemony of cisnormativity caters to and rewards the dominant cisgender group of people (Worthen, 2016). As a hierarchical structure with uneven power relations, hegemonic cisnormativity thus subordinates the group of people that are gender counter-normative. Similarly, the pervasiveness of gender conforming privilege occurs and operates at the expense of gender counter normative individuals. The aforementioned assertions will be justified in Chapters 2 and 3 of the present thesis. All the same, the experiences of the gender diverse student activists as recounted in the preceding introductory section already allude to how the students were excluded from the RMF movement – a movement seemingly dominated by proponents of the normative gender structure, and as such provides preliminary credibility to these aforementioned assertions.

Considering this, my research explores and documents the experiences of gender counter-normative students at Stellenbosch University.

## **1.3 Research rationale**

As it pertains to the realm of scholarship, to date, there are few studies addressing the experiences of gender counter-normative individuals, both internationally and especially nationally. On the whole, gender and sexuality studies have gravitated more towards issues pertaining to the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals and

communities. Gender and sexuality studies have therefore, and in comparison, been silent on issues pertaining to the experiences of bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals and communities (Francis & Hemson, 2010; Hines, 2006; Stobie, 2011). In addition, most of the studies that focus on gender diverse individuals are based in the USA and have for the most part “medicalised” particularly transgender individuals and their needs (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008; Galupo, Henise & Mercer, 2016; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2006; Scott-Dixon, 2009; Cruz, 2014). Although I do not wish to discredit the need for and contribution of such studies, the unintended consequence of this predominant focus is that it results in a single and narrow representation of transgender individuals’ experiences. Such representations too often frame transgender individuals’ lives as pathologized and altogether burdensome.

Although not within the medical frame, the previously outlined actions of the gender diverse UCT students provide an example of why single representations of life are inaccurate and disingenuous. For instance, a partial account favouring the burdensome aspects of their experience would only recognise the agony of the marginalisation that they were subject to. An impartial overview of their recounted experiences, however, reveals that they enacted their agency by pushing back at the oppression that they faced. In organising protest demonstrations that bring awareness to and condemn their past exclusionary experiences, they actively and unabashedly claim and affirm their gender diverse identities. As their actions display their resilience, it speaks to them as empowered individuals. Considering that they took part in collective action with the same motivations in mind, it also displays that they experienced support. Taken altogether, their experiences of resilience, allyship, empowerment and support, for instance, immediately negate a premature partial depiction of burden and distress. A comparatively impartial depiction of the events

therefore more accurately accounts for the complexities and intricacies of lived experiences.

Beyond a medicalised perspective, some international and local studies have articulated the need for educational settings to disrupt the binary gender system. These studies have suggested ways of disrupting the binary gender system and argued for the inclusion of gender counter-normative students and educators at educational settings. The studies have also explored the experiences of gender counter-normative individuals within their familial contexts, explored media representations of gender diverse individuals, and portrayed transgender individuals' life histories (Ngo & Kwon ,2015; Francis, 2014; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; De Palma, 2011; Toomey, McGuire, Stephen & Russell, 2012; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card & Russell, 2010; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2006; Beemyn, 2003; Ray, 2014; Renn, 2010; Schneider, 2010).

Be that as it may, only a handful of US-based studies have addressed the experiences of gender counter-normative students at higher education institutions (see Case et al., 2012; Schneider, 2010; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012; Singh, Meng & Hansen, 2014), and none have done so locally. Of the local studies that explore the experiences of gender diverse individuals, the participants have usually been relatively older transgender men.

Taking all of this into account, my study depicts a relatively new and distinct narrative within the realm of gender diversity studies that: departs from the relatively older, transgender man as the sole participant in the study; situates this study within the context of a South African university; reflects lived experiences and stories that seek to depart from partial, restricted accounts of being; and depart from the portrayal of

the gender counter-normative individuals as only facing harsh conditions and experiences. The thesis therefore undertakes multiple research and knowledge gaps within this field.

My study portrays the diverse experiences of individuals who are gender counter-normative within a currently unexplored context. My study thus also addresses the underrepresentation of studies dealing with gender counter-normativity. The present thesis therefore – in more ways than one – addresses and contributes to the limited existing body of knowledge, particularly within the field of gender diversity studies. As my research is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the research problem under discussion – and is thus essentially an exploratory study – my research answers the following primary question:

How do gender counter-normative students navigate Stellenbosch University?

The group of people, whose gender identities and expressions transcend cisgenderism, will for the purposes of this study be interchangeably referred to as gender counter-normative and gender diverse individuals. I use the term counter-normative – as opposed to non-normative for instance – to emphasise the agency that the individuals undertake in challenging the heterosexual matrix, and the gender essentialism represented by the hegemonic gender binary.

“Non-” implies that individuals are absent, negated, erased and invisible. Gender counter-normative or gender diverse individuals exist and are in our everyday lives and spaces. I therefore use “counter-normative” to refer to people whose gender identity or expression is different to that typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. This includes people who identify or live across, between and beyond/outside of existing gender categories (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman & Keisling, 2011).

Genderfluid, genderqueer, bigender, agender, non-binary and transgender individuals would therefore be identified as gender counter-normative individuals.

#### **1.4 Chapter outline**

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework as a practical synthesis of gender theory, queer theory, intersectionality theory and theories relating to the Global South. This is done to indicate how the theories and the implementation thereof in the present study complement one another to circumvent the drawbacks noted in each theory, and is deemed of value to the present study.

Thereafter, Chapter 3 presents the literature review. The chapter, overall, details the hegemonic structure of cisnormativity and its subsequent marginalisation of gender counter-normative individuals. Additionally, the way in which cisnormativity is embedded in higher education institutions – both locally and abroad – and how this affects gender counter-normative students is explored throughout. This chapter also provides examples of how gender counter-normative students have in recent years advocated for their inclusion and protection at higher education institutions in South Africa. Finally, the chapter outlines recommendations of how higher education institutions should be more inclusive of gender counter-normative individuals.

Chapter 4 of my thesis entails a discussion of the methodological considerations that shape the present research study. The present study utilises the qualitative research paradigm, case study research design and life history interview method for their corresponding orientations as they enable me to meet my research objectives. To restate, the research objectives are to explore and respond to the subjective perspectives and experiences of specific individuals (gender-counter normative students) within a specific location (Stellenbosch University). The study employed

thematic analysis and cross-case analysis to identify, analyse and report the (1) salient findings within the individual case studies and (2) general explanations across the case studies.

Chapter 5 comprises the findings as they emanated from the life histories of the participants. The chapter presents the findings as individual life histories – or vignettes (Kumashiro, 2002) – that take the form of individual narratives. The vignettes attempt to present certain aspects of the participants' lives, their experiences, the scope and depth of their experiences, their challenges and resilience, their anxieties and triumphs, their fears and hopes, and their happiness and sadness. The research findings primarily centre around accounts of “surplus visibility” and “counter-normative spaces”.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the collective analysis of the findings as presented in Chapter 5. The macro-themes that emerged from the analysis comprise *gender expression oppression*, *counter-normative spaces* and *agency and resistance*. The chapter also considers the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) and relevant concepts from the literature review (Chapter 3) and relates them to the aforementioned macro-themes. The chapter looks at how the heterosexual matrix operates to create gender expression oppression; how counter-normative spaces represent spaces of social inclusion for gender diverse individuals and relatedly constitute spaces that resist the heterosexual matrix; tentative recommendations for how Stellenbosch University can transform itself into a counter-normative space; and how the participants, on their own and in their relationships with others, actively challenge and resist the heterosexual matrix.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 7 that summarises the salient elements or findings of the present thesis. These salient elements address, or attempt to answer, the research question: How do gender counter-normative students navigate Stellenbosch University? The recommendations implicated by the salient findings of the present research project are also presented in Chapter 7.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The chapter engages with the ways in which gender theory and queer theory are integrated into the present study. Firstly, the chapter introduces and explores the specific tenets of gender theory that are relevant to the present study. The chapter also puts forth ways in which the present study prevents the drawbacks associated with gender theory.

Secondly, the chapter goes on to introduce and explore certain principles of queer theory that are of use to the present study. Queer theory and its relations to the theory of intersectionality, and the need for increased theory from the Global South are also explored. Msibi (2014), to illustrate, argues that scholars remain cognisant of the social, historic and systemic realities of African contexts. This should be done to circumvent the uncritical application of Western theories to contexts within the Global South (Msibi, 2014). The section on queer theory also considers the limitations of queer theory and how the study sets out to prevent these drawbacks.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a practical synthesis of the aforementioned theories to indicate how the theories and the implementation thereof in the present study complement one another to circumvent the drawbacks noted in each theory and, as such, is deemed of value to the present study.

### **2.2 Gender theory and hegemonic masculinity**

Gender theory explores the ways in which gender is constructed by society. Raewyn Connell, a gender theorist, defines gender as a social practice, and moreover positions gender as a relational structure. Her explanations of hegemonic masculinity and its related masculinities showcase how masculinities, as a set of social practices,

operates within a system of gender relations – i.e. both masculinities in relation to one another, and masculinity in relation to femininity. The aforementioned system of gender relations will be discussed in detail momentarily. For now, an exploration of the concept of gender follows as outlined by Connell (1995). Connell (1995:71) explains that

Gender is a way in which social practice is ordered. In gender processes, the everyday conduct of life is organized in relation to a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction. This arena includes sexual arousal and intercourse, childbirth and infant care, bodily sex difference and similarity.

In this sense, gender is understood as a social practice that “refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body” (Connell, 1995:71). In light of these aforementioned explanations, it becomes clear that Connell rejects an essentialist view of gender which conflates gender with biological sex. Connell (2009) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) furthermore reject the categorical models of gender that divide men and women into two separate or dichotomous spheres. Instead they argue that gender should be viewed as a structure of social relations. In other words, Connell (1995, 2009) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) distinguish between the “biological” and the “social” as it pertains to gender and gender relations. Connell (1995, 2009) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also establish gender as a relational social structure.

Along with emphasising the relational order between genders, the authors also focus on the hierarchical ordering within genders. In discussing masculinities, Connell (1995, 1996) recognises that different definitions and constructions of masculinity exist in any particular social setting, although some are exalted more than others. The most

exalted form of masculinity according to Connell (1996:209) is termed “hegemonic masculinity”. Although other forms of masculinity exist alongside it, hegemonic masculinity is the most dominant and at the top of the hierarchy in a given cultural setting. Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the most common form of masculinity, nor do most men hold or express hegemonic masculinity, but it is highly visible and regarded as exemplary (Connell, 1995:78-79). Hegemonic masculinity is not only hegemonic in relation to other forms of masculinity, but it is also hegemonic in relation to the gender order as a whole, as it enforces patriarchy and the subordination of women.

Other forms of masculinity that are ranked lower or inferior to hegemonic masculinity include complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinities (Connell, 1995:78-80). Complicit masculinity refers to the group of men who do not actively engage with or uphold hegemonic masculinity, but who benefit from the patriarchal system that privileges men as a collective at the expense of women. Most men participate in complicit masculinity. Subordinate and marginalised masculinities exist in opposition to hegemonic masculinity. Since hegemonic masculinity symbolizes such characteristics as physical strength and the suppression of emotions, subordinate and marginalised masculinities refer to physically weak, effeminate and gay men. Marginalised masculinity also refers to men who may possess characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, but are nevertheless oppressed due to other marginalised identities such as race and class (Connell, 1996:209, Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:847-848, Francis, 2014:3).

Although most men benefit from the dominance of hegemonic masculinity in relation to the gender order as a whole, not all men benefit from the hierarchical order of masculinities in the same way or to the same extent. According to Connell (1996:209)

“the hierarchy of masculinities is an expression of the unequal shares in that privilege held by different groups of men”. Even though complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinities are overshadowed and oppressed in comparison to hegemonic masculinity, most (if not all) men benefit from what Connell (1995:79) terms the “patriarchal dividend”.

### **2.3 Critique of gender theory**

The theory of hegemonic masculinity has been subject to critique. Whitehead (1999:58) in particular has asserted that a focus on hegemonic masculinity as a macrostructure consequently disregards the subjectivity of individuals. It moreover disregards the subjectivity of individuals as they position themselves within or in relation to the gender structure. Whitehead (1999:59) therefore argues that a post-structural stance is required to prioritise the individual identity of subjects when addressing hegemonic masculinity. A post-structural approach allows one to explore how individuals experience, participate in, resist and/or negotiate hegemonic masculinity. Such an exploration, according to Whitehead, involves raising pertinent questions surrounding power, resistance, agency, gender identity and identity formation. As summarised by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:842) “For Whitehead, it is preferable to concentrate on discourse as the means by which men come to know themselves, to practice ‘identity work’, and to exercise gender power and resistance.”

The present study addresses the gap in the theorisation of hegemonic masculinity as noted by Whitehead in the previous paragraph. The present study does so by invoking certain principles central to queer theory – to be reviewed at a later stage. The present study, with the help of gender theory, recognises that gender at the macro-level separates men and women into two opposing spheres. With this in mind, the present

study bridges the individual identity of subjects – as introduced by Whitehead – in relation to the gender structure. My study does this by recognising that an integral feature of the gender structure is the assumed notion that an individuals' gender identity can only align with one or the other – either man or woman. Gender identity is, furthermore, commonly and erroneously conflated with one's assigned sex at birth (Butler, 1990) and as such is assumed to be biologically determined. Connell and key theorists of queer theory rejects both of the aforementioned notions and therefore allows one to understand that the development of gender identity is social in nature.

My theoretical position therefore aligns with the body of literature that proposes that the development of one's gender identity is a social undertaking influenced by social systems and institutions. As much as seemingly gender conforming individuals are highly visible and gender counter-normative individuals are proportionally less visible in our society, the actuality of gender diverse individuals cannot be denied. I do not in any way assert or suggest that the validity of the actuality of gender diverse individuals relies on an academic study. I do, however, want to point out that my research sample – which consists of self-identified gender non-binary and transgender individuals – attests to this reality. Gender counter-normative individuals' existence as well as their expression of their gender identity demonstrates that gender is not essential. It, at the same time, demonstrates that gender is instead socially constructed, and thus also points to the fallible nature of the gender binary. An additional discussion on certain particulars and the fragility of the gender binary will follow in the section that centres on queer theory.

Taking the aforementioned considerations into account, the present study deals with the gender hegemony and the ways in which it operates and manifests in everyday life. The present study simultaneously prioritises the subjectivities of gender counter-

normative individuals. My study details the personal accounts of gender counter-normative students as they disclose:

- when they became aware of their gender identity,
- how they made sense of and negotiated the gender expectations that were presented to them in their early home and school life,
- how other individuals reacted to their subversion of gender expectations,
- how they have experienced and navigated the Stellenbosch University space,
- how individuals within the university space have reacted to their gender expression,
- and how they make sense of these reactions and the gender binary structure.

My study thus acknowledges that the gender hegemony hinges on subordination in the form of gender inequality and regulation in order for it to effectively hold power over individuals. The present study more importantly examines how gender counter-normative individuals in particular enact their agency in the face of oppression. This entails a consideration of the ways in which they express the gender identity that they have realised for themselves. The expressions of their counter-normative gender identity also manifest as a resistance to the power structure engendered by the gender hegemony. The present study therefore circumvents the possibility of merely being structurally deterministic and subsequently abandoning individual agency.

All in all, Connell's focus on masculinity provides insights into the social practice of gender and how the macrostructure of gender operates to regulate gender and produce gender inequality. Masculinity, as delineated by Connell, has particular relevance to my study. Masculinity is, on the one hand, comprised of a set of characteristic traits and behaviours that are understood to be "masculine". On the other hand, masculinity is enacted through social practice. Masculinity, therefore, is

not something that one intrinsically possesses but is instead produced when one engages in masculine behaviours or practices. Masculinity can therefore be produced by any individual regardless of their gender.

Connell's delineation of masculinity has particular relevance to my study as it explains how it is possible for one to identify with a gender disparate to the sex assigned to one at birth. Masculinity's relevance to my study underscores that one's gender identity is not biologically determined, but instead develops in relation to the social structure of gender. Connell's delineation also explains that one's gender identity does not obligate one to exclusively engage in the expected behaviours and practices associated with said gender identity. My study effectively complements and provides further evidence for the aforementioned explanations, as it specifically focuses on individuals whose gender identities and expressions challenge and transcend the normative gender structure. This normative structure enacts the gender binary and its related compulsory cisgenderism – the assumed natural inclination and obligation of individuals to identify as either a man when assigned the male sex category at birth, or a woman when assigned the female sex category at birth.

Connell establishes the gender structure as relational in nature. In other words, the social constructions of "man" and "masculinity" operate in relation to "woman" and "femininity". Connell digs even deeper by explaining that gender is not only relational between genders, but also within genders. She does so by outlining the diversity in masculinities as comprised by the gender practices of hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, subordinate masculinity and marginalised masculinity. Hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinities thus also operate in relation to one another. According to Connell, gender hegemony in the form of patriarchy relies on hegemonic masculinity in order for it to be sustained within society.

This is because hegemonic masculinity subordinates and marginalises not only other forms of masculinity, but femininity in its entirety as well, thereby explaining how gender inequality is sustained.

The operation of patriarchy and its production of gender inequality also rely on the regulation of gender. Congruence between assigned sex and gender practice is therefore essential for the continued operation of patriarchy. The regulation of gender thus operates in the form of punishment whenever an individual opposes the gender binary system. Opposition to the gender binary system is enacted by engaging in gender practices that are incongruent with their perceived assigned sex. Considering that the practices of men and women are conflated with masculinity and femininity (Schippers, 2007), an example of incongruent behaviour includes the practice of what is considered to be masculine behaviour by a woman. As such, the “masculine” woman will be punished in an attempt to coerce her into adopting “feminine” behaviour instead. As it relates to my study, gender counter-normative individuals by definition engage in gender practices deemed to be incongruent to their assigned sex. By averting cisnormativity in this way, gender counter-normative individuals effectively disrupt the gender binary thereby threatening patriarchy and its reliant mechanism of hegemonic masculinity. The regulation of gender in favour of patriarchy and the gender binary provides an explanation as to why gender counter-normative individuals may face marginalisation, exclusion, intimidation, violence, exploitation, human rights violations etc.

The current macrostructure of gender therefore is based on a gender binary, establishes patriarchy and consequently gender inequality, and regulates gender by means of punishment. Additionally, the macrostructure of gender arguably influences the way in which institutions frame, organise and regulate gender. As such, Connell’s

presentation of gender theory is relevant to my study as it investigates to what extent Stellenbosch University as a higher education institution enforces a gender binary and regulates gender. This investigation includes addressing how selected university policies frame gender diversity and whether the campus space adequately accommodates gender diverse individuals. The personal accounts provided by participants also shed light on their experiences on campus, highlighting instances of when their gender expression was challenged or regulated. More importantly, the participants' personal accounts disclose how they have been navigating such challenges or regulations and the campus space as a whole.

Such personal accounts serve as evidence of the ways in which gender diverse individuals disrupt the gender binary. The diversity within masculinity which accounts for the nuanced differences within gender suggests that relations within and consequently between genders is quite arbitrary. Both the personal accounts of gender diverse individuals as produced by my study, and the diversity within masculinity as outlined by Connell, therefore corroborates the notion that the social construction of gender is more fluid in nature than is presupposed by the gender binary.

## **2.4 Queer theory**

Queer theory, as it pertains to my study and in some ways similar to gender theory, introduces the difference between biological sex and socially constructed gender. Queer theory also exposes and challenges the hegemony of heterosexuality and denounces the binary category of gender as either masculine or feminine.

As a field of critical theory – and derived from post-structuralism – queer theory grapples with constructs such as gender, power and the nature of identity. Queer

theory questions hegemonic, normative and oppressive systems and strategies. It questions how these systems and strategies have become normative or “normal”, and looks into who is oppressed by such strategies and systems. In doing so, queer theory sets out to resist normative social orders, systems and their related strategies.

Notable queer theorists such as Butler (1990), De Lauretis (1991) and Seidman (1994) challenge the normative social order that supposes that masculinity and femininity delineates a binary gender system. The aforementioned queer theorists additionally challenge the notion that masculinity and femininity exists in opposition to one another. According to queer theory, these conventions have no biological basis and are merely socially constructed. The rigid boundaries of masculinity and femininity and its conventionally assumed legitimacy become blurred, as queer theory exposes male/female, masculine/feminine, and man/woman binaries and configurations as fictitious and deceptive. Queer theory also exposes these binaries as hierarchical systems that have unequal power relations at their cornerstone.

Judith Butler (1988, 1990), in particular, challenges the notion of a universal and fixed gender identity. Related to this is the heterosexual matrix as introduced by Butler (1990). The heterosexual matrix refers to the societal

...institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality [that] requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine is differentiated from the feminine, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. (Butler, 1990:30)

Often formulated as the sex-gender-desire order, mainstream society tends to assume and expect that biological sex determines gender identity and gender identity determines sexuality or sexual desire.

In explaining her theory of gender performativity, Butler (1990:8) refers to Simone de Beauvoir's sentiment "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" to – much like Connell – reject the notion that gender identity is informed by an intrinsic essence. She instead argues that gender is informed by a predominant social structure that dictates how we should understand gender. Gender, in other words, is not something that one possesses but is instead constructed by one's body as an act of performance. Butler also asserts that one's gender identity is constructed throughout one's life. In light of this and with reference to the previously mentioned heterosexual matrix, Butler challenges the heterosexual matrix by contending that the assumed alignment between biological sex, gender and sexual orientation does not exist. Butler therefore asserts that gender and sexual desire or orientation is fluid and not biologically or otherwise fixed.

In exploring the cultural construction of gender, Butler (1990) refers to de Beauvoir to explain that the construction of gender relies on an agent that appropriates a gender. Although one "'becomes' a woman...under a cultural compulsion to become one" (Butler, 1990:8), this perspective points to the agency that individuals possess in navigating the social structure of gender. As such, Butler accounts for individual agency regarding the construction of gender as it relates to the predominant social structure that dictates how we should understand gender. She is, therefore, careful not to make the case for social determinism.

As it pertains to my study, the heterosexual matrix and Butler's subsequent rejection thereof makes it clear that gender does not equate to biological sex or sexual orientation. Additionally, Butler's work on gender performativity points to the social construction of one's gender identity. Gender identity also relates to the possibility of being able to construct a different gender, by performing acts culturally associated with

a different gender. This possibility accounts for the gender identity construction and associated gender expression of gender counter-normative individuals. Consider, for instance, bigender individuals who perform gender in ways culturally associated with both genders, and transgender individuals who perform gender in ways culturally associated with the opposite gender as understood within the context of my study.

Although certain gender counter-normative individuals still perform gender, their gender performance challenges the rigid gender binary and thereby subverts the cisnormativity that is pervasive in society. Gender counter-normative individuals furthermore construct their gender identity in a way that does not align with their assigned sex at birth, thereby also subverting the heterosexual matrix that operates to sustain the current gender hegemony.

Queer theory as a framework also recognises that the heterosexual matrix accounts for the organisation of a society with unequal power relations. As such, individuals with sexual and gender identities that do not align with hetero-cis-normative expectations tend to be marginalised. As it relates to my study, queer theory therefore recognises that the heterosexual matrix accounts for the organisation of a society that primarily caters to, benefits and rewards cisgender individuals. This often occurs at the expense of gender diverse individuals. In an attempt to combat this cisnormative strategy, my research positions this privilege as unjust. My research moreover disturbs the silence surrounding, and addresses the underrepresentation of, the perspectives and experiences of gender diverse individuals.

## **2.5 Critiques of queer theory**

Green (2002) prioritises a sociological stance on queer theory. With a primary focus on sexual identities in particular, Green (2002:539) has criticised queer theory for its

“underdeveloped analysis of the effects of the ‘social’ on the sexual”. Queer theory sets out to deconstruct the presumed biological essentialism of sexual identities and orientations. In doing so, queer theory may overlook the social significance of sexual classifications by ignoring the ways in which such classifications are embodied in institutions and social roles, and are thus crucial to social organisation. At the same time, queer theory’s adherence to deconstruction also has the consequence of reducing sexual identities – and arguably gender identities as well – to mere discourse.

According to Green (2002:540), queer theory may create the illusion that “sexual orientation by itself defines the totality of institutionalized identities that one may occupy.” Queer theory’s prioritisation of sexual identity may inadvertently neglect other social categories such as racial, gender and ethnic categorisations. “Regardless of their sexual orientation, women and men share the same ranges of socialization as children and young adults, and may share a multitude of social characteristics, ideologies, and experiences” (Green, 2002:540).

As previously mentioned, queer theory challenges normative social structures. In the exploration of such challenges queer theory may, according to Green (2002), be prone to radical subversion. The radical subversion of queer theory may have the undesired consequence of positioning sexual actors as an object of political or activist intentions. Green (2002) instead reminds queer theorists to prioritise the social significance of sexual classifications and identities in order to position sexual actors as the subjects of research enterprises. A focus of on the social identities and roles of sexual actors, as well as the shared social contexts of sexual actors, will also position social actors as individuals with their own subjectivities. Additionally, although queer theory acknowledges the subversion of normative social structures, it rarely prioritises subjects’ resistance and struggles.

In light of the abovementioned assertions, queer theory seemingly has the potential to reduce sexual categories to discourse whilst simultaneously overlooking other social categories, social realities, individual subjectivities, experiences and resistance. The use of gender theory and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) – to be discussed in further in the upcoming section – especially works to combat the aforementioned potential pitfalls of queer theory. According to gender theory, for instance, the macrostructure of gender is crucial to social organisation. This is because the macrostructure of gender predetermines common-held understandings of gender. The macrostructure of gender also infiltrates societal institutions to reflect these aforementioned common-held understandings. The construction of gender practices and our individual engagement with these practices therefore occur as a result of and in relation to the macrostructure of gender.

Unlike queer theory that has been criticised for exclusively prioritising sexual identities, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) acknowledges that an individual's personal identity is made up of different intersecting social categories of identity. Examples of these social categories of identity include race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. Additionally, the conflation of these social identities influence and shape an individual's everyday lived experiences. Intersectionality also acknowledges that different macrostructures – such as macrostructures of race, gender and class – intersect to create multi-layered experiences of marginalisation and privilege. Intersectionality, therefore, considers the diversity and plurality of social categories, experiences, individual subjectivities and experiences.

Furthermore, indigenous African research – also to be discussed at a later stage – that incorporates queer theory, gender theory and intersectionality is imperative. Such an approach to research is necessary to reflect and address the historical, social and

systemic realities and complexities unique to various African contexts. Such research also seeks to acknowledge the diversity and plurality of social realities, social categories and experiences (Msibi, 2014). The present study thus incorporates gender theory and intersectionality alongside queer theory to reflect and address the social realities and complexities of South African contexts. This is done to circumvent the previously mentioned potential pitfalls of queer theory.

## **2.6 Intersectionality and queer theory**

In her work, Crenshaw (1989) introduces the term “intersectionality” as she brings attention to how black women have historically been excluded and erased from traditional antiracist policy discourse and feminist theory. Both the antiracism and feminist movements are based on and organised around specific identity categories, namely the racial category of “black” with regards to antiracism movements and the gender category of “women” with regards to feminist movements. Although the antiracism and feminist movements have successfully addressed and challenged the marginalisation and discrimination that black individuals and women have respectively been subjected to, Crenshaw critiques these movements. According to Crenshaw, both movements and their corresponding discourses have failed to acknowledge the differences within their respective groups. In other words, antiracist politics have tended to overlook how gender has affected the experiences that black women have had to endure. Similarly, feminist movements have tended to overlook how race has affected the lives of black women.

Crenshaw (1989) argues that black women’s identities are simultaneously a combination of both the identity categories of “black” and “women”. On the one hand, black women’s experiences with oppression at times resemble that of all black people

(including black men) and all women (including white women). On the other hand, black women tend to experience racial oppression differently than black men as they, unlike black men, also encounter gender oppression and discrimination. Similarly, black women experience sexism differently than white women as they, unlike white women, also encounter racial oppression and discrimination.

Crenshaw (1989) explores three lawsuits based on employment discrimination that took place in the United States of America during the 1970s and 1980s. The lawsuits had black women as the plaintiffs. She notes that the legal system has framed racism and sexism as mutually exclusive categories of experience. The author's exploration (Crenshaw, 1989:145,147,149) of the lawsuits revealed that the court failed to acknowledge that the employment experiences of black women could be different than that of white women. Likewise, the court forced black women to narrow their class to black women only in cases where they bid to represent a larger class of all black people or all women. In light of this, Crenshaw argues that black women are seemingly at times harmed by being treated differently than others within a group that they are part of. This could constitute a group of black people, or a group of women, that black women belong to. At other times, black women are seemingly harmed by being treated the same as others within a group when they are actually different from them.

The abovementioned contradiction, according to Crenshaw (1989) is a result of the conceptual limitations of antiracism and feminist discourses. Both discourses, through their oversight of the experiences of black women, overlooks the intersections of identity categories and the intersections of racism and sexism. The mutual exclusion of racism and sexism as propounded by the antiracism and feminist movements assumes that black women's exclusion is unidirectional. Both movements therefore refuse to recognise that black women can experience oppression and discrimination

in a number of ways. To combat the conceptual limitations of antiracism and feminist discourses Crenshaw (1989:149) introduces “intersectionality”.

The notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) explains that black women at times experience discrimination in ways similar to that of white women. Black women also at times experience discrimination in ways similar to that of black men. However, black women also oftentimes experience “double-discrimination” whereby they face discrimination as a combination of both racial and gender discrimination. Crenshaw additionally mentions that black women at times experience discrimination for being black women, which does not necessarily rely on the sum of racial and gender discrimination.

Intersectionality therefore explains why black women experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from the discrimination experienced by black men and white women (Crenshaw, 1989:149). Crenshaw (1989:166) also argues that antiracism discourse and strategies, in an attempt to meet the needs of the black community and effectively overcome racial constraints, should incorporate intersectionality by including an analysis of patriarchy and sexism. Similarly then feminist discourse and strategies, in an attempt to express the ambitions of women of colour, should incorporate intersectionality by including an analysis race. According to Crenshaw (1989:166), “[n]either Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents.”

Crenshaw (1989) furthermore asserts that policies, discourses and strategies that are concerned with the alleviation of racism and sexism should adopt a bottom-up approach to discrimination. Such an approach ensures that the issues and needs of

the individuals that are the most disadvantaged in a given cultural setting are addressed first. In doing so, Crenshaw asserts that other individuals that are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit from this bottom-up approach. To her it seems that “...placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action.” (Crenshaw, 1989:167).

The work of queer theorist De Lauretis (1991), much like that of Crenshaw, opposes the notion that individuals within an identity-based group are homogenous and have homogenous experiences. This opposition is based on the central tenet of queer theory that advances the fluidity of personal identities. Another central tenet of queer theory recognises that personal identities are formed by intersections of different categories or markers of identity – such as identities of race, gender, ethnicity, class etc. De Lauretis in other words focuses on the intersections of identity. She therefore emphasises the diversity among individuals who share a marker of identity – or belong to an identity-based group. However, she also emphasises the importance of considering how one’s experience is informed by the conflation of more than one marker of one’s identity. These emphases point to the importance of considering intersectionality when exploring individuals’ lived experiences and understandings of their social world.

Msibi’s work not only situates queer theory within the South African context, but also explains how the use of queer theory and intersectionality as a framework would be useful to devise a more holistic approach to transformation scholarship in higher education institutions. Msibi (2013) observes that post-apartheid transformation scholarship in South African higher education institutions has tended to address and alleviate inequalities in terms of race and gender. Post-apartheid transformation

scholarship has thus failed to address the unfavourable experiences of queer students. Describing the aforementioned approach to transformation scholarship as “static and limited” and as maintaining a “superficial framing of power and oppression” (Msibi, 2013:65), Msibi advocates for a queer approach towards transformation scholarship that would highlight the “multiple, pluralistic ways in which identification is performed” (Msibi, 2013:65). Msibi furthermore asserts that queer theory

...locates the multiple, performed nature of identification beyond the category of sexuality to include other forms of identification such as race, class, disability and so on. Understanding how issues of sexism, racism and heterosexism intersect, for example, can be useful in interrogating issues of difference more deeply, thus reflecting society more fully. (Msibi, 2013:66)

The work of Msibi (2013) therefore not only recognises the intersectionality of identity, but also accounts for the intersectionality of different power structures and their related discourses. The intersectionality of power structures and discourses furthermore points to the influence that these systems may have on the subjective identity formations and everyday lived experiences of individuals. The limited and superficial framing of current transformation scholarship that mainly includes racial and gender inequalities should, according to Msibi, make way for “an inclusive and reflective approach that takes the intersections of discrimination into account” (Msibi, 2013:71).

As such, queer theory as a framework will address the ways in which different markers of identity intersect to influence the experiences of students and give rise to the discrimination of marginalised students. In light of this, Msibi asserts that a queer approach to higher education transformation scholarship “is crucial for addressing various forms of discrimination holistically, without privileging some forms of oppression over others” (Msibi, 2013:71). This assertion by Msibi reflects the

previously mentioned argument made by Crenshaw that states that marginalised individuals should be placed at the center of bottom-up approaches to policies and strategies that seek to combat oppressive and discriminatory structures.

Queer theory's inclusion of and emphasis on intersectionality enables me to acknowledge and be aware of the complexities often encountered in studies dealing with intersectional identities. It also allows me to understand that any one individual's everyday lived experience is influenced by the conflation of intersecting social identities. In other words, a life history should be approached, conducted and analysed with this sentiment in mind. This involves recognising that although gender identity is the primary focus of the intended study, it does not "exist" exclusively and independently of an individual's personal and social identity. The emphasis on intersectionality also serves as a constant reminder that intersecting identities, and their influence on and by lived experiences, would be at the core of a person's unique life story.

The framework of intersectionality is especially useful for my study as it allows me to, on the one hand, account for the intersecting social categories of identity of the research participants. Intersectionality, on the other hand, enables me to account for the connected predominant social structures of patriarchy, hetero-cis-normativity and systems of racism and classism that shape and inform the immediate Stellenbosch University and broader South African contexts.

The aforementioned social structures are structures of power that rely on the marginalisation of individuals and therefore create spaces of inequality. Intersectionality thus allows me to assess how these social structures intersect to create intersections of discrimination and privilege that in turn potentially create

multiple layers of disadvantage and advantage. Accounting for the intersections of patriarchy, hetero-cis-normativity, racism, classism enables me to assess how the resultant effects of the aforementioned social systems influence the subjective lived experiences of the research participants. This also requires of me to keep in mind that the participants are each also shaped by the intersections of their identities. The utility of queer theory with intersectionality as a crucial focal point therefore allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the university space, and a more well-rounded interpretation of an individual's lived experience.

## **2.7 The utility of queer theory in the Global South**

Authors Connell (2007), Rasmussen (2016), Comaroff and Comaroff (2012), Nyanzi (2014; 2015) and Msibi (2014) have addressed the generally held positioning of Western sociological theories as the true, original model and guideline to which sociological theories from the Global South – thus theories from Africa – are measured and compared. African theories are furthermore regrettably regarded as imitations of Western theories. Msibi (2014) and Nyanzi (2015) in particular propose the need for knowledge projects that prioritise African knowledge systems. Although these knowledge systems incorporate Western theories, the goal is to locate these theories within African contexts. Locating these theories within African contexts enables one to ascertain, question and queer the relevance of and utility of such theories to African contexts.

Msibi (2014) explores the sociological theories and related perceptions of same-sex desire within various African contexts. In doing so he acknowledges that Western sociological theories of same-sex desire have aided in the increased visibility of same-sex sexualities and desires of African individuals. However, Msibi (2014) contends that

the historic, social and systemic realities of Western contexts differ significantly from the historic, social and systemic realities of African contexts. Western theories, therefore, fail to accurately and sufficiently reflect African contexts and as such cannot be applied to address the realities and politics surrounding the same-sex sexualities and desires of African individuals within African settings.

The impractical application of Western theories to African contexts, according to Msibi (2014), indicates the need for indigenous African scholarship. Indigenous African scholarship should, on one hand, consider the history and legacy of colonialism and imperialism. On the other hand, it should consider the effects of the fundamental conceptions of religion and patriarchy as predominant social structures within African contexts. There is thus the need for indigenous African scholarship that accurately captures the “structural, cultural, historical and societal complexities found in the African context” (Msibi, 2014:5), and as such adequately accounts for and responds to the distinct views of same-sex sexualities and desires specific to the African context under research. Such African scholarship should also recognise that “Africa in itself is different from one country to the other” (Msibi, 2014:4).

Francis’ (2019) writing, for instance, speaks to the lack of indigenous (South) African research on same-sex sexualities that moreover incorporates intersectionality. More specifically, the author explores how racial identities and “same-sex sexuality identities intersect with South African learners’ experiences of schooling” (Francis, 2019:5). Francis (2019:12) argues for an intersectional framework that considers different social categories and the different forms of oppression to understand the experiences of queer youth in post-apartheid South African schools. The different forms of oppression, Francis (2019:2) contends, are rooted in the racial and heteronormative orders of the apartheid regime.

Msibi (2014) goes on to introduce queer theory to his discussions and asserts that queer theory tends to position an individual as separate from the collective that they form part of. Queer theory's preoccupation with individual agency neglects to consider the will of the collective that the individual belongs to, and as such ignores the organisation of African societies. Similarly, Francis and Reygan (2016:80) assert that much of the literature on sexual and gender diversity that originates from the West frames the notion of agency in individualistic terms. Framing agency in individualistic terms overlooks the reality of the individual's interpersonal relationships with others and neglects to consider that the individual belongs to a community.

Msibi also explains that same-sex desire is still regarded as an "aberration and taboo" (Msibi, 2014:5) in many African countries. Additionally, the public leaders of these countries seek to deny individuals who engage in same-sex relations their human rights. Both of these conditions are symptoms of the legacy of colonialism, as penal laws regulating same-sex relations were implemented by colonial authorities (Msibi, 2014:3). The experiences of those who engage in same-sex relations in these African countries are therefore characterised by homophobia. The work of Epprecht (2013) similarly affirms that the period of past colonial rule in African states introduced homophobic thought in such a way that, to this day, tends to be firmly lodged in African discourse. Furthermore, a resultant need for collective organisation that opposes the homophobia enacted by the oppressive state administration may arise. In such instances, queer theory's preoccupation with individual agency and related disregard of collective groups "does little in supporting those who need to respond to collective oppression in collective ways" (Msibi, 2014:5).

Nyanzi (2015) also addresses African scholarship and queer theory scholarship in her work. She suggests that African scholarship and queer theory need not be separate

undertakings. Nyanzi instead makes the case for a bridging or convergence of African studies and queer studies in an effort to develop the “synchronised zygote of Queer African Studies, or else African Queer Studies” (Nyanzi, 2015:127). Such a multidisciplinary body of Queer African scholarship necessitates a two-pronged approach that involves both the queering of African studies and the Africanising of queer studies. In this sense, Queer African Studies provides a solution for the critique of queer theory raised by Msibi in the previous paragraph. To explain, the Africanising of queer theory – which would consider the organisation of African societies and as such regard the individual as a member of the collective – would make the case for collective agency as much as it currently makes the case for individual agency.

Nyanzi (2015) characterises the existent scholarship that focuses on Africans with counter-normative sexual identities as being either anti-gay or pro-gay in nature. The anti-gay scholarship primarily claims that homosexuality is a foreign import historically introduced to Africans by colonial settlers, and therefore claims that homosexuality is essentially un-African. Public leaders of various African countries have and continue to proclaim the “un-Africanness” of homosexuality (Nyanzi, 2015). Nyanzi explains that the aforementioned rhetoric “diffuses into public policies, national programmes, legal reforms, service delivery and everyday practices of individuals as well as groups of people” (Nyanzi, 2015:126). African homosexual individuals are therefore alienated for engaging in what is considered to be non-indigenous practices. Nyanzi also mentions that many African scholars tend to regard queer theory as an exclusively Western theory. This assumption side-lines queer theory as an anomaly in the same way that African queer knowledge is marginalised as alienating.

The pro-gay scholarship is put forth by bodies of knowledge that summon a culturalist explanatory framework which study the histories and cultures of diverse groups of

Africans. These bodies of knowledge assert that African individuals with counter-normative sexual and gender identities are possessed by ancestral spirits (Nyanzi, 2015; Nkabinde, 2009). According to Nyanzi the scholars of culturalist explanatory frameworks “premise excavating mystical and ritualistic explanations believed to render the Africanness of queer individuals and communities” (Nyanzi, 2015:126). Although Nyanzi acknowledges the significance of the aforementioned bodies of knowledge, she asserts that “they are best limited caricatures which do not represent the diverse and multi-layered complexities of current queer African realities” (Nyanzi, 2015:127). She also argues that the agency of Africans with counter-normative sexual and gender identities are denied by claims that their sexual and gender identities are rooted in being possessed by “multi-gendered ancestors” (Nyanzi, 2015:126).

Nyanzi (2015) posits that Queer African Scholarship can be utilised as an effective structural strategy that would destabilise the homophobic rhetoric that is embedded in many African contexts. As such, the ignorance, misinformation and myths that inform homophobia would also be destabilised. Nyanzi asserts that Queer African Scholarship would also start to amend the paucity of indigenous theorisations about the multiple and diverse aspects of the realities, subjectivities, and experiences of queer African individuals. Queer African scholarship would also address as the issues that queer African individuals are faced with. Additionally, Nyanzi contends that it is crucial that Queer African Scholarship should be incorporated into the formal education and “knowledge creation industry” in Africa. This would be “an important requirement for the advancement of the recognition of the equal citizenship status, full human rights and dignity of same-sex loving individuals and communities in our continent” (Nyanzi, 2015:127).

As my research draws on theories with Western origins – namely gender theory, queer theory and intersectionality – Msibi and Nyanzi’s work as outlined above emphasises the importance of my research to be cognisant of the historic, social and systemic realities and complexities of the context within which my research is situated. To illustrate, the origins of Stellenbosch University, a higher education institution situated in South Africa, can be traced back to the colonial era. Stellenbosch University was instrumental in formulating Afrikaans as an academic language and relatedly influential in the development of Afrikaner Nationalism in the 20th century (Stellenbosch University, 2017). The university also had inextricable ties with the formulation of apartheid ideology and as such has a significant history of racial discrimination and exclusion that benefited white Afrikaans-speaking individuals at the expense of individuals of colour (Stellenbosch University, 2017; De Vos, 2013).

The legacies of the oppressive apartheid regime have, moreover, resulted in a contemporary South African society that is fraught with racial and socio-economic inequalities. South African individuals who do not benefit from white privilege and financial privilege would, therefore, likely be subject to forms of marginalisation and discrimination based on racial identity and socio-economic status. Additionally, the functioning of the predominant social structure of patriarchy embedded in South African society relies on the subordination of women and therefore results in gender inequality. The social structure of cisnormativity sets out to marginalise and discriminate against individuals with gender identities that diverge from cisgenderism.

Taking all of this into account, my research recognises that the historical, social and systemic realities of South Africa and Stellenbosch University reflect systems of white privilege, socio-economic privilege, patriarchy and hetero-cis-normativity (Msibi, 2014; Nyanzi, 2015). The utility of gender theory, queer theory and intersectionality in my

research will more accurately reflect the South African and Stellenbosch University contexts. My research, in other words, does not blindly utilise Western theories to explain South African contexts and the experiences of South African individuals. My research instead borrows from Western theory to generate indigenous African theory that is in accordance with the realities and complexities of South Africa. The present research furthermore serves as a platform for selected gender diverse South African individuals to voice and make meaning of their personal experiences and perceptions as they navigate their identities and lives in relation to intersecting predominant social structures.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Both gender theory and queer theory posit that gender is not biologically determined but is instead socially constructed. The social construction of gender takes form in (1) a macrostructure of gender that is instrumental in the organisation of societal institutions, and (2) the notion that one's gender identity develops as a personal social undertaking. The potential consequence of queer theory's deconstruction of the assumed biological essentialism of identities may ironically defeat this specific purpose by overlooking the social significance of gender identities. Gender theory, however, does not lose sight of how crucial gender is in the organisation of social life. Gender theory's incorporation into the present study therefore ensures that I do not the overlook social significance of gender when drawing on queer theory.

Conversely, it has been indicated that gender theory tends to prioritise gender as a social structure to the point that it becomes structurally deterministic. Here queer theory comes into play to acknowledge the individual agency and subjectivity of social actors. The present study reconciles the aforementioned tenets of gender theory (that

emphasises the macrostructure of gender) and queer theory (that emphasises the individual agency and subjectivity of social actors) to present the personal construction and development of gender identity as a process that occurs in relation to the macrostructure of gender as a binary system.

The theory of hegemonic masculinity – within gender theory – speaks to the hegemony of gender as a normative structure in general. The gender hegemony within mainstream society manifests as patriarchy that relies on the subordination of women and as such ensures gender inequality. Queer theory also considers the normative structure of the gender binary and introduces the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix accounts for the misleading notion that one's biological sex determines one's gender identity and one's gender identity determines one's sexual orientation. A consideration of the heterosexual matrix also acknowledges that it operates to sustain the gender binary.

Queer theory's assertion that gender identity is fluid, and both gender and queer theory's assertion that gender and sexual identity is not determined by biology, suggests that the heterosexual matrix and the gender binary as a structure is unreliable. The notion of the heterosexual matrix makes the case for my study which especially focuses on cisnormativity. To illustrate, cisnormativity involves the hegemonic assumption and expectation within mainstream society that people who are assigned male at birth will grow up to become men, and people who are assigned female at birth will grow up to become women (Bauer, Hammond, Travers, Kaay, Hohenadel & Boyce, 2009).

Connell, a notable gender theorist, explains that masculinity entails a set of gender practices that men are expected to engage in and relationally femininity entails a set

of gender practices that women are expected to engage in. Butler, a notable queer theorist, explains that an individual performs gender. In addition, and drawing on cisnormativity, we can conclude that individuals are expected to perform gender practices culturally associated with their perceived gender identity. As we do not intrinsically possess gender, it is possible for anyone to perform gender and engage in gender practices culturally associated with the opposite gender. Relatedly, it is also possible for anyone to perform gender and engage in gender practices culturally associated with both genders that do not favour one gender above the other. As such, it seems that anyone can perform gender in counter-normative ways and that we need not conform to cisnormativity and the rigid gender binary.

The normative hegemonic nature of cisnormativity, however, operates to regulate gender as a binary system. Any perceived transgression of binary gender roles and practices – whereby women, for instance, assume gender roles or engage in gender practices culturally associated with the gender roles and practices of men, and vice versa – poses a threat to cisnormativity and the patriarchal system as a whole. As my study has self-identified gender counter-normative individuals as research participants, understanding the operation of and regulation accompanied by cisnormativity becomes crucial. It is crucial insofar as the gender performance of gender diverse individuals challenges the rigid gender binary and thereby subverts the cisnormativity that is pervasive in society.

My study therefore captures the ways in which gender diverse individuals resist the power structures of patriarchy and cisnormativity. As such, the present study employs two of the central principles of queer theory that seek to, on the one hand, question who is oppressed by certain normative systems and strategies and, on the other hand, resist the legitimacy of normative social orders, systems and their related strategies.

Although the present study prioritises gender identity, the integration of intersectionality into my theoretical framework is crucial as different identity categories of race, religion, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation etc. intersect to form one's personal identity. Similarly, different existing power systems such as patriarchy and hetero-cis-normativity, for instance, intersect to benefit some while disadvantaging others.

Furthermore, our access, level of access or lack of access to white privilege, socio-economic privilege, gender privilege, cisgender privilege and/or heterosexual privilege also intersects to inform our subjective experiences. The present study, therefore, acknowledges that the intersectionality of our personal identities plays a role in our subjectivities and everyday lived experiences. Especially in terms of how we navigate and negotiate how we benefit from and are disadvantaged by interconnected systems of power.

When projects invoking queer theory fail to acknowledge the social significance of personal identities, as previously mentioned, it reduces said projects to impractical discourse. Its impracticality manifests in its failure to consider the transformative potential of individual agency in its ability to challenge oppressive structures and systems and resultant forms of marginalisation and discrimination. Since both gender theory and the theory of intersectionality prioritise the social significance of identity formation and macrostructures, I utilise these theories alongside queer theory to position gender counter-normative students as individual social actors belonging to collective networks. The gender counter-normative students are accordingly positioned as sources of insight into how taken for granted systems and strategies can result in marginalisation and discrimination, and privilege.

The present study has Stellenbosch University – a higher education institution in the Western Cape town of Stellenbosch in South Africa – as a research site. The present study additionally has gender counter-normative South African students as the research participants. My research therefore recognises that the historical, social and systemic realities of South Africa and Stellenbosch University culminate to create various systems and strategies of advantage and disadvantage. The present study thus considers how these complexities shape and influence the subjectivities and experiences of gender diverse students as it assesses how they navigate their gender identity within the campus context.

My study furthermore serves as a platform for selected gender diverse South African students to voice and make meaning of their personal experiences and perceptions as they navigate their gender identity within the particular South African university campus space. The present study also recognises that it is crucial for local higher education transformation scholarship and policies to destabilise the rhetoric of cisnormativity prevalent in South Africa. Taking the aforementioned explanations into account, my study is a form of indigenous empirical theory that addresses and captures the diverse aspects of the realities, subjectivities, and experiences of selected gender counter-normative South African individuals. As a form of indigenous empirical theory, my research also addresses the issues that selected gender counter-normative South Africans have faced and are faced with. The present study, as such, contributes to the expansion of queer theory in the Global South.

## Chapter 3: Literature Review

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the literature relevant to the present thesis is discussed. The chapter introduces the hegemonic structure of cisnormativity and its subsequent marginalisation of gender counter-normative individuals. Additionally, the way in which cisnormativity is embedded in higher education institutions – both locally and abroad – and how this affects gender counter-normative students and staff members is explored throughout. This section also provides examples of how gender counter-normative students and staff members have in recent years started advocating for their inclusion and protection at higher education institutions in South Africa. Finally, the chapter outlines recommendations for how higher education institutions should be more inclusive of gender counter-normative individuals.

### 3.2 Cisnormativity, gender diversity and gender conforming privilege

Bauer, Hammond, Travers, Kaay, Hohenadel and Boyce (2009) introduced the term *cisnormativity* to describe the hegemonic assumption and expectation within mainstream society that people who are assigned male at birth will grow up to become men, and people who are assigned female at birth will grow up to become women. Cisnormativity therefore assumes that it is “normal” to be cisgender – a label for individuals whose personal gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. At the same time, cisnormativity overlooks, ignores and silences gender identities and expressions that transcend the rigid gender binary of masculinity and femininity (Worthen, 2016).

Cisnormativity furthermore represents a hierarchical system of dominance and subordination in which cisgender or gender conforming individuals are regarded as

superior to gender diverse individuals. The implications of this are that prejudice and discrimination may be directed toward anyone perceived as gender counter-normative. Worthen (2016:31) introduces the term *hetero-cis-normativity* to further account for the negativity, prejudice, and discrimination that individuals perceived as both “noncisgender and/or nonheterosexual” may face. In this way, cisnormativity also represents an aversion to and punishment of anything that resists the normative conventions that hold that “there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is ‘natural’ or acceptable” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Worthen, 2016).

It follows then that cisgender individuals – as the dominant group of people who conform to socially endorsed “gender appropriate” ways of being – are in a favourable position whereby they generally experience and benefit from gender conforming privilege. Gender conforming privilege is deeply embedded in social and cultural norms and refers to unearned benefits awarded to those individuals whose gender identity, perceived gender, and/or expressed gender matches cultural gender expectations for their assumed biological sex (Case, Kanenberg, Erich & Tittsworth, 2012; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Lucal, 1999).

As individuals who transcend the hegemonic gender binary and related cisnormativity, gender counter-normative individuals are disadvantaged in a sense and not awarded the same benefits associated with gender conforming privilege. Without this privilege, gender counter-normative individuals face potential harassment, social and familial rejection, workplace discrimination, denial of parental rights, physical and sexual assault, and institutionalized discrimination from those who abide by and enforce a narrow definition of gender and sexuality (Case et al., 2012; Beemyn, 2005; Burdge, 2007).

As of 2016, gender non-binary and transgender students at several South African universities have communicated their accounts and experiences of such harassment, social rejection, and direct and indirect discrimination. As already illustrated in the introduction of this thesis, in March 2016 transgender and gender non-binary activists at the University of Cape Town (UCT) protested against the harassment, exclusion, underrepresentation and censorship of gender diverse students during the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement the year prior (Wagner, 2016).

In another newspaper article (Collison, 2016), a student at UCT reflected on the FeesMustFall (FMF) movement of 2015 and expressed that queer and gender counter-normative students – especially black queer and gender counter-normative students – who participated in the movement have faced institutional violence, violence perpetrated by police officers, violence perpetrated by other students, and sexual harassment. As a result, the number of queer and gender diverse student activists that participated in the FMF movement of 2015 significantly declined upon its resurgence in 2016.

Similarly, queer and gender diverse students at Rhodes University, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and the University of the Free State (UFS) echoed comparable sentiments of distressing experiences and marginalisation during the 2015 FMF movement at their respective university campuses. Although the student-led initiative aimed to prioritise inclusion and intersectionality at its inception, it eventually devolved into a reassertion of patriarchal dominance. A student at Wits University added that queer and gender diverse students were left exhausted having to campaign for their inclusivity in the movement (Collison, 2016).

As previously explained, the normative gender structure – or the patriarchal structure – presupposes and reifies a predetermined gender binary and gender essentialism. Patriarchy therefore relies on heteronormative and cisnormative structures and attitudes. Hetero-cis-normativity – which refers to the hierarchy in which heterosexual and cisgender individuals are regarded as superior over queer and gender diverse individuals – accounts for the negativity, prejudice, and discrimination that may be directed towards queer and gender counter-normative individuals. It follows then that individuals who benefit from patriarchy tend to, in one way or another, have heteronormative and cisnormative attitudes. According to Worthen (2016:34), homophobia and transphobia are intertwined with heteronormative and cisnormative attitudes, as both phobias are symptoms of hetero-cis-normativity.

Arguably then, the notable existence, unapologetic expression and activism of the queer and gender diverse students at UCT, as discussed earlier, challenged and rejected the hetero-cis-normative (patriarchal) structure. The individuals who benefitted from patriarchy and held hetero-cis-normative attitudes responded by engaging in homophobic and transphobic behaviours in an effort to sustain the patriarchal order and its accompanying privileges. In other words, the homophobia and transphobia enacted within the student protest movements in response to queer and gender diverse individuals serve as examples of how hetero-cis-normativity and patriarchy continue to be sustained.

Furthermore, although the students who participated in the RMF and FMF movements were joined by their protests against systemic financial disadvantage and exploitation, and the aftermath of colonial oppression, they had alarmingly disparate experiences of the movements. Queer and gender counter-normative students were subjected to discrimination, harassment, violence and exclusion in a manner and to an extent that

was comparatively more severe than that of their heterosexual and gender conforming counterparts. Evidently, the pervasiveness of the hetero-cis-normative structure eventually infiltrated and thwarted what was intended to be an inclusive civil movement.

Even though the issue of safety was a concern shared by all students – as retaliation by police was likely to occur (#ANCMustFall is next target, 2015; Hollands, 2015; Malingo, 2016) – queer and gender counter-normative students had the additional burden of being potential and/or actual targets of homophobic and transphobic harassment and violence. Considering the climate of the protest movements, perceived heterosexual and gender conforming students therefore, in a sense, had the relative privilege of not having to fear being subjected to hate crimes. Furthermore, unlike the attempted erasure of gender counter-normative student activists, gender conforming activists were acknowledged for their participation in and their contribution to the protest movements. Gender conforming student activists were exempt from particular forms of marginalisation that gender counter-normative student activists had to endure. This serves as a specific example of how gender conforming privilege operates within a given social setting.

### **3.3 Gender diversity and higher education in the Global North**

The majority of the literature on gender diversity originates from the Global North. Furthermore, a substantial amount of research within the context of North America has addressed the experiences of gender counter-normative students at higher education institutions. Authors such as Beemyn (2005) and Schneider (2010) for example note that many faculty, staff and students in higher education have a minimal understanding and knowledge of transgender individuals' experiences. They relatedly tend to engage

in trans-exclusive practices. Additionally, the authors argue that most higher education institutions provide little-to-no transgender-specific facilities and services and transgender-supportive programs. Transgender-specific facilities and support services would include gender-neutral housing, locker rooms, bathrooms and transgender-specific counselling and healthcare. The authors moreover express that campuses should in fact make these aforementioned transgender-specific facilities and support services available to transgender students.

As previously mentioned, gender counter-normative individuals are likely to experience discrimination in spaces that privilege gender conforming/cisgender individuals. Beemyn (2005), for instance, argues that traditional institutional policies in higher education enforce the status quo as it relates to gender conforming privilege. This simultaneously involves discriminating against individuals that are gender counter-normative. Furthermore, Beemyn (2003:33) and Rankin and Beemyn (2012:2) identify both the absence of gender diverse students in higher education literature, and students' and educators' ignorance about gender diverse students as playing a role in the overt and unintentional discrimination that gender counter-normative students may face.

In light of this, she and others argue for a change in institutional policy, specifically non-discrimination statements, to be gender diverse inclusive and to provide the same protections for gender diverse students as they do gender conforming students (Beemyn & Pettitt, 2006; Case et al., 2012). Similarly, Ray (2014) expresses that gender identity and expression rarely, if at all, appear in the non-discriminatory policies of educational institutions. Besides the non-discriminatory policies, there are several other policies and practices that institutions of higher education also need to change to help create a gender inclusive environment. This would necessitate the

implementation of gender neutral housing, gender neutral bathrooms, and gender diverse inclusive institutional forms (Beemyn & Pettitt, 2006; Case et al., 2012).

In the Australian context, Jones, Smith, Ward, Dixon, Hillier and Mitchell (2016) investigated the school experiences of transgender and gender diverse students. In reporting their research, the authors recommended that teachers and school leadership be trained in exhibiting and employing appropriate, supportive behaviour and language towards transgender and gender diverse students. They also suggested that teachers and teacher educators adopt a nuanced approach in responding to students, as they found diversity and complexity in the gender identities of gender diverse and transgender students – and in their needs as students.

The authors also noted that transgender students reported a lack of structural support and inclusion in sexuality education. In addition to other deficiencies, the authors recommend a holistic rethinking of how schools operate, both structurally and in the curriculum, in relation to gender diversity. Jones et al. (2016) also assert the possibility to frame gender diverse students as empowered individuals who, in being able to advocate for themselves, take charge in promoting their own well-being. Additionally, by advocating for others, gender diverse students also fulfil a sense of social duty. All in all, the authors call for the need for schools, community and health service providers to provide support to transgender and diverse youth over time (Jones et al., 2016:168).

### **3.4 Gender diversity policies: South African higher education institutions**

Since South Africa's transition from apartheid to a system of democracy in 1994, institutions of higher education became part of the national political transformation process aimed at shaping a more integrated and just society (Gouws, Kritzingler & Wenhold, 2005). Although there has since been an increased diversification of student

bodies in terms of gender and race (Cloete, 2002), there is a need for further examination of issues surrounding sexual identity, especially in interaction with other identities (Francis & Msibi, 2011). Correspondingly, Nduna, Mthombeni, Mavhandu-Madzusi and Mogotsi (2017) have argued that higher education policies view transformation through a generalist lens that obscures the distinct nature and form of the institutional alienation experienced by gender counter-normative staff and students.

*The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (Department of Education, 2008:9) set out to “investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion”. Although the report emphasises racial discrimination in public higher education, it does address other forms of discrimination – in terms of ethnicity, disability and gender for example.

The committee responsible for the report agreed that gender discrimination (or sexism) should also be a, although not the primary, focal point in their investigation. This is ascribed to both racism and sexism being ideological phenomena based on unequal relations of power, both non-racism and non-sexism constituting foundation values in the country’s Constitution, and both non-racism and non-sexism being central to the issue surrounding transformation in higher education (Department of Education, 2008).

Msibi (2013:65) has remarked that transformation scholarship in higher education in South Africa has primarily focused on race and gender, with “parity in terms of race and sex” being the main priority areas for both researchers and institutional

administrators. The ministerial report is an example of such transformation scholarship. Although the report addresses gender with reference to transformation strategies in higher education settings, it only does so in terms of discussions surrounding gender equality. The report therefore does not address the question of gender diversity in higher education settings.

The Higher Education and Training Health, Wellness and Development Centre (HEAIDS) – in consultation with several organisations including technical teams within the United Nations – have recently developed a policy framework document. The document, titled *Policy Framework to address Gender-Based Violence in the Post-School Education and Training System* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019), addresses the persistent issue of gender-based violence at South African higher education institutions. The policy framework accordingly provides guidelines to ensure safer campuses by, among other things, outlining the minimum standards that higher education institutions have to adhere to and enforce in order to combat and prevent gender-based violence (Doke, 2018; Mbude, 2018; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). Upon completion of the present thesis, the final draft of the policy framework has yet to be finalised and subsequently presented to Cabinet for approval (Nzimande, 2019).

Dr Ramneek Ahluwalia, chief executive officer of HEAIDS, spoke on the prospective introduction of the policy framework during the initial stages of its development in August 2018 (Doke, 2018). The policy framework was then titled *The Higher Education and Training Gender-based Violence Policy and Strategic Framework*. Dr Ahluwalia asserted that gender-based violence is the most common threat to student safety. Additionally, Dr Ahluwalia acknowledged that violence against individuals who are

LGBTIQ<sup>1</sup> is also common at higher education institution campuses. He furthermore asserted that sexual and gender diverse individuals are “substantially more vulnerable to the psychological effects of targeted violence” (Doke, 2018). In light of this, Ahluwalia contended that the prospective introduction of *The Higher Education and Training Gender-based Violence Policy and Strategic Framework* – the first of its kind in Africa – will “pave the way for a similar policy, specifically for the LGBTIQ community” (Doke, 2018). South African campuses will conceivably therefore be restructured into gender inclusive, and not gender-specific, spaces. The recognition that a policy framework aimed at ensuring the safety of gender and sexual diverse students is lacking, further emphasises that there is a need for transformation scholarship to address gender diversity in higher education settings.

### **3.5 Gender diversity experiences: South African higher education institutions**

Correspondingly – and in comparison to North American research – the body of knowledge surrounding the experiences of gender counter-normative individuals at higher education institutions in South Africa is significantly restricted. Hames (2007:68; 2016:186) argues that the heteronormative nature of South African higher education institutions creates a campus climate that is not welcoming to, nor is it adequately prepared to meet the needs of lesbian, gay and transgender people. A study by Cornell, Ratele and Kessi (2016) set out to explore students’ experiences of transformation at UCT. The authors found that students who are LGBTQI, as well as black, women and working-class students, were frequently subjected to instances of both physical and symbolic violence. *Symbolic violence* introduced by Bourdieu, cited in Cornell et al. (2016:100) refers to “non-physical violence or ‘power which manages

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or Questioning.

to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force”.

One of the student’s interviewed described the discourse at UCT as positioning their “ideal student” as white, male, cisgender, able-bodied and middle class. For them, this was a form of symbolic violence, as any student who diverges from the token “ideal student” could be subjected to alienation and marginalisation. Other forms of symbolic violence for gender diverse students included many of the UCT residences that endorse cisgendered assumptions about gender and are segregated along the lines of a gender binary. Most bathrooms on campus are also segregated in terms of the gender binary. A lack of notably visible and easily accessible gender-neutral bathrooms is another form of symbolic violence that targets gender diverse students (Cornell et al., 2016).

In their study on learners’ experiences of bullying in the toilets of a secondary school outside Durban, Ngidi and Moletsane (2018:S2) draw on Newman’s (1973) “defensible space” theory to explain that

...the risk of violence occurring in a particular space is determined largely by the physical layout of that space and the sort of hidden curriculum it conveys about the extent to which such violence is tolerated or punished.

Considering this, Cornell et al. (2016) concluded that the heteronormativity and cisnormativity embedded in the residence culture and represented in the structure of most campus bathrooms render the students who are perceived to transgress those norms to be subjected to scrutiny and abuse. The authors, however, emphasise that students that diverge from the abovementioned “ideal student” have disrupted – and are able to disrupt – instances of especially symbolic violence. Students have

disrupted instances of symbolic violence by “using their own bodies or identities as a site of resistance or physically changing campus spaces” (Cornell et al., 2016:115), notably in the form of protest movements.

A report (Ndelu, 2017) compiled by the Trans University Forum (TUF!) reflects the experiences, needs and wants of gender counter-normative students and staff members at seven South African universities. TUF! comprises a collective of gender diverse university students, staff and workers. The report aims and intends to

...give a voice to the experiences, needs and wants of gender minorities at South African universities...evaluate the state of (trans)gender diverse affirming and inclusive infrastructure across South African universities...be a catalyst for (trans)gender diversity advocacy interventions at public institutions of higher learning going forward (Ndelu, 2017:2).

It should be noted that Stellenbosch University is identified as one of the universities included in the report. The quotes provided by SU students as presented in the report disclose experiences of misgendering and other trans-antagonisms in classrooms. At the same time, the students were deliberate in affirming their gender diverse identities – and gender diversity in general – in the classrooms, thereby subverting the gender binary prevalent in curriculum. The SU students’ experiences outside of the classroom spoke of incidents of discrimination, alienation and violence. In addressing university support services, SU students express that the support services fail to affirm gender diverse students and consequently adequately address their needs, as

The collapsing of the specialist needs of (trans)gender diverse students, workers and staff members into generalist bodies has left universities chronically under capacitated to service their (trans)gender diverse patrons leaving them without the aids and services required to self-actualise (Ndelu, 2017:19).

The experience delineated above also contributes to feelings of exclusion and alienation, resulting in disillusionment with SU's institutional structure (Ndelu, 2017:20). These aforementioned accounts and experiences were, for the most part, shared by all of the students, across the seven South African universities, who participated in the study compiled in the report.

To quote Castricum (2018), the “public bathroom has become a battleground for transgender rights; a discussion that is largely imposed on upon the trans and gender diverse community by cisgender interest groups”. The aforementioned quote relates to the report under discussion as it emphasises that the public bathroom has been one of the contentions regarding gender counter-normative individuals. This contention relates to the absence of gender neutral-bathroom policies intended to accommodate gender counter-normative individuals, as it has received much public and media attention in recent years (Matthyse, 2017:117). The quote also reveals that the issue of the public bathroom represents and is utilised as a mechanism to regulate and marginalise gender counter-normative individuals.

To return to the report by TUF!, and in a similar vein as Connell et al. (2016), the report found that many of the bathrooms across all university sites remain gendered in binary terms. Whereas gender counter-normative students have to navigate their use of gender-specific bathrooms with a multitude of other predominantly gender conforming students, gender counter-normative staff members navigate gender-specific bathroom usage within a departmental setting. In this sense, the experience of navigating gender-specific bathrooms for gender diverse staff members is comparatively less demanding than it is for gender diverse students. When navigating bathroom usage, gender counter-normative students have to consider the possibility of discrimination,

direct or indirect harassment, and violence that comes with being a gender counter-normative individual making use of a gender conforming bathroom (Ndelu, 2017).

The report found that universities failed to make specific provisions for transgender healthcare. Additionally, the students interviewed expressed that their experience with campus-based psychologists and counsellors were unsatisfactory. The psychologists and counsellors in question had an inadequate grasp of transgender subjectivities, the interactions between being transgender and mental illness, and issues pertinent to transgender individuals. The report surmises that the “lack of inclusive healthcare seems to be closely related to the lack of capacity at and funding of campus health units” (Ndelu, 2017:24). Furthermore, the lack of gender-inclusive campus healthcare services could play a part in substandard academic performance and a generally negative university experience.

The residence system at all of the universities investigated was found to reflect and enforce the rigid gender binary structure. Residences were classified as either single-sex or co-ed, with co-ed residences also reflecting a rigidly gendered structure. Co-ed residences enforce the gender binary by dividing building floors or sections according to gender. This structure follows a historical model that presupposes the perception that cisgender men are a danger to cisgender women. The report notes that this historical model does not account for instances of violence from one gender conforming student to another, nor does it consider the violence caused by cisgender students against gender counter-normative students. All things considered, the report asserts that gendered residences operate as sites of discrimination, alienation and violence for gender counter-normative students who are placed within these residences (Ndelu, 2017).

All the universities investigated require students and staff to have access cards in their possession for security measure purposes. These access cards display the title, name and surname, unique campus identity number and barcode, as well as the facial image of its carrier. The titles most commonly used in the access cards are that of either “Ms” or “Mr”. This derives from the legally recognised “gender” that the carrier was assigned to at birth according to South Africa’s National Populations Registry. This classification poses a problem for individuals whose gender identity does not align with the legally recognised title. Similarly transgender individuals, when transitioning, oftentimes replace their birth name with a new name that better suits their gender identity. This renders the birth name that appears on the access card obsolete. In some cases, the image that is displayed on the access cards of individuals’ in the process of transitioning is outdated as it does not reflect their current appearance due to the social and physical changes they have undergone (Ndelu, 2017).

In these cases, the access cards of gender counter-normative students and staff members serve as undesired and possibly distressing reminders of titles, names, pronouns and gender expressions that were assigned to them at birth. The aforementioned thus represents ascriptions that gender counter-normative students and staff members no longer associate with. In another sense, discrepancies between the gender expression of the access card carrier and the gender identity codified on their access card may result in allegations of misrepresentation or fraud from university security personnel (Ndelu, 2017). Additionally, the gendered access cards ‘out’ these persons as gender counter-normative without their consent – which in a hetero-cis-normative environment leaves them “vulnerable to discrimination and violence” (Ndelu, 2017:29).

The report credits the previously discussed *The trans\* Collective* activist group at UCT for holding UCT accountable for its aversion towards “reforming the gender marker of student and staff access cards” (Ndelu, 2017:10), for removing the gendered bathroom signs on the university’s main campus, and for criticising the university’s “ill-informed attempt to include gender diversity on its admission form” (Ndelu, 2017:10). The report also credits *The trans\* Collective* for their protest against the harassment, exclusion, underrepresentation and censorship of gender counter-normative students. According to the report, these forms of activism put pressure on UCT to be more gender-inclusive and recognise the needs of gender counter-normative staff members and students.

In addressing the UFS and Wits University, the report explains that gender diverse student and staff activists at these universities “successfully advocated for their universities to have accessible gender-neutral bathrooms across all their campuses” (Ndelu, 2017:11). This intervention was accompanied by “an extensive awareness campaign to sensitise the broader university community on gender diversity” (Ndelu, 2017:11). In 2016, Wits University gender diverse activists successfully campaigned for the university to commit to affirming gender diversity at the university. Whilst appreciating the aforementioned activist campaigns, the report warns that the successes of the campaigns should not be mistaken as an indication that South African universities are safe, welcoming and “non-antagonistic” spaces for gender diverse students.

The report recommends that university decision makers need to be more proactive in identifying and responding to the needs of gender counter-normative students and staff members. Additionally, South African universities need to ensure that gender counter-normative students have access to adequate information that would aid in their self-actualisation. It is also recommended that universities dedicate more time,

effort and resources to train staff members to be more aware of and sensitive to the subjectivities and sensitivities of gender counter-normative students. Additionally, university decision makers have to ensure that the university policy provides explicit guidelines for the “inclusion, affirmation, treatment and servicing of transgender students, workers and staff members” (Ndelu, 2017:31).

The report also recommends that more gender counter-normative individuals be appointed to the management staff and statutory bodies of South African universities. Finally, it is recommended that universities be committed to holding people who discriminate against and abuse gender counter-normative students, workers and staff members accountable for their transgressions. University officials responsible for diversity and transformation should also be held accountable if they fail to adequately include and affirm gender counter-normative individuals. Relatedly, universities should be more transparent, open, and allow for more participation regarding a university's transformation budget. Transparency and openness are needed in terms of where the university transformation budget is allocated and how it is to be used. This should be done to ensure that everyone is included in the university's transformation trajectory (Ndelu, 2017).

Matthyse (2017), whose work discussed here is situated within the University of the Western Cape (UWC), focuses on the challenges that homophobic and transphobic oppression, prejudice and discrimination pose to sexual and gender diverse students at the university. Matthyse's work furthermore focuses on how the Gender Equity Unit at UWC mitigates the impact of student experiences of homophobia and transphobia through awareness-raising initiatives. The author primarily conducted an

autoethnographic study which explores hir<sup>2</sup> own experiences as a “LGBTIQ identifying student, student leader of an LGBTIQ student organisation, and subsequently as a university administrative staff member working with LGBTIQ identifying students” (Matthyse, 2017:113).

Matthyse’s work reveals and reinforces that the quality of education in tertiary institutions are compromised for sexual and gender diverse students who are “invisibilised, traumatised and pushed to the margins” (Matthyse, 2017:123). Sexual and gender diverse students as “invisibilised, traumatised and pushed to the margins” (Matthyse, 2017:123) relates to the concept of *surplus visibility*. Surplus visibility, introduced by Patai (1992), refers to how counter-normative individuals are coerced or expected to remain invisible. Surplus visibility also considers how counter-normative individuals tend to be stigmatised and alienated when they resist this coerced invisibility (Patai, 1992).

Moreover, Matthyse (2017) argues that advocacy and awareness-raising are effective tools to utilise in challenging homophobic and transphobic prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Matthyse, however, makes it clear that the impact of the aforementioned tools are influenced by the role that “institutional functionaries” play in ensuring the efficacy of these tools, as the institutional functionaries “hold the power...to affect direct policy transformation” (Matthyse, 2017:124). To further illustrate the author’s position:

The two approaches should be mutually complementary, with awareness-raising stimulating transformation from the bottom up, while progressive policy and decision-makers stimulate transformation from the top down (Matthyse, 2017:124)

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<sup>2</sup> The author’s (Matthyse, 2017:113) self-designated gender-neutral pronoun.

The advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives under the Gender Equity Unit at UWC, along with Matthyse's call for collaboration between the stakeholders of the initiatives and the policy decision-makers both constitute examples of collective agency (Msibi, 2014; Francis & Reygan, 2016). As it pertains to my thesis, Matthyse's work sheds light on the role that SU arguably should play in adequately affirming, accommodating and supporting gender diverse students and staff. Matthyse's work also considers collective agency in creating inclusivity for sexual and gender diverse students within the context of a South African university, a notion that is relevant to my thesis.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

The reader will note the very limited scope of literature on gender counter-normative individuals in higher education, even more so within the South African context. In addition, there is very little published literature and research. I have, where deemed necessary, drawn on reports and newspaper articles in an attempt to compensate for the limited presence of published academic literature. Nonetheless, the present literature review showcases the pervasiveness of the hegemonic structure of cisnormativity at both North American and especially South African higher education institutions. The pervasive nature of cisnormativity creates higher education environments that promote gender conforming privilege which consequently operates at the expense of gender counter-normative students, staff members and workers. This is especially evident in the way that gender diverse individuals are absent from South African transformation scholarship and the non-discrimination policies – and other institutional policies – of higher education institutions.

As a form of symbolic violence, the exclusion of gender counter-normative individuals from institutional policies overlooks their existence. This form of exclusion sustains an

environment in which students and staff have a minimal understanding and knowledge of gender counter-normative individuals' experiences. Relatedly, the exclusion of gender counter-normative identities from institutional policies fails to acknowledge their specific needs. This, for example, includes the need for gender neutral housing; gender neutral bathrooms; gender diverse inclusive institutional forms and other forms of identification; and gender diverse-specific healthcare and other support services.

Beyond instances of symbolic violence that result in unintentional discrimination, the accounts discussed above also point to instances of overt discrimination, physical harassment, physical violence and other forms of marginalisation. It has been shown that the activist actions, and even the mere unapologetic existence, of gender counter-normative individuals have resisted the cisnormative status quo. Furthermore, it has been suggested that such a resistance to cisnormativity has been perceived as a threat to the patriarchal structure by gender conforming individuals who benefit from it. With cisnormativity and transphobia existing hand-in-hand (Worthen, 2016), gender diverse activists and individuals in the aforementioned instances were often subjected to physical and sexual harassment, violence, and attempts at censorship and erasure from the university space.

The demand for higher education institutions to compile gender diverse inclusive institutional policies has been made clear. This requires policies to explicitly account for gender identity and expression, and to provide the same protection to gender counter-normative individuals as they do gender conforming individuals. Universities should furthermore be committed to effectively addressing any violations of the policies and holding perpetrators of the policies accountable for such violations. Another suggested way of ensuring a gender conforming inclusive campus environment is to appoint more gender counter-normative individuals to positions

within the faculty, management staff and statutory bodies of the university. This would also assist in combatting students', educators' and (mental) healthcare professionals' ignorance about gender diverse students that also plays a role in the discrimination that gender counter-normative individuals may face.

As it pertains to this study, the literature discussed in the present chapter situates Stellenbosch University as a cisnormative, gender-specific space that marginalises gender counter-normative students. My study sets out to showcase the ways in which Stellenbosch University maintains gender conforming privilege. This is done by identifying the overt forms of marginalisation, and uncovering the seemingly covert forms of marginalisation, that gender counter-normative students are subjected to. The literature also suggests that the university should demonstrate a concerted commitment to confront and alleviate the marginalisation imposed on gender counter-normative students.

More importantly, the study prioritises the way in which gender diverse Stellenbosch University students navigate the cisnormative space. The present study thus positions them as agents enacting resistance against a hegemonic structure which attempts to subordinate them, police their expressions, and silence their existence. In turn, an exploration of gender diverse students' subjectivities and experiences, and the way that they navigate the university, would elucidate the ways in which the university could and should become more gender diverse inclusive and gender diverse competent.

## **Chapter 4: Methodological Considerations**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the methodological considerations that shape the present study is discussed. The chapter describes the research paradigm and design of the study, the data collection technique employed in the study, the sampling techniques utilised in the study, the recruitment of participants, the data analysis technique employed in the study, and the ethical considerations of the study. Ethical clearance to commence the study was received from the Research Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University.

Furthermore, the methodological decisions, as employed in conducting the present thesis, were deemed most appropriate in aiding in the processes needed to answer the study's primary research question:

How do gender counter-normative students navigate Stellenbosch University?

### **4.2 Research strategy and design**

The present study has been conducted within the qualitative paradigm. A major distinguishing factor of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to get an in-depth account and understanding of an informant's perspective (Babbie, Mouton, Vorster & Prozesky, 2009). The use of a qualitative approach has therefore allowed me, a cisgender woman, to explore and be responsive to the subjective everyday perspectives and experiences of gender diverse students at Stellenbosch University.

Considering the aforementioned sentence, the research design selected for the present study is that of the case study. The present study is concerned with how gender counter-normative students have experienced and navigated Stellenbosch University during and following a nationwide stream of student activist movements at several higher education institutions. Thus, as it relates to the present study, Yin

explains that “[a] case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context...” (Yin, 1994:13). The case study as a research design has therefore allowed me to investigate the previously outlined research question which sought to explore the lived experiences of specific individuals within a specific location. Each individual life history as presented in the findings chapter (Chapter 5) of the present thesis constitutes an individual case.

### **4.3 Data collection technique**

In conducting the present study, I utilised life history interviews (Seidman, 1991) as the primary data collection technique. According to Seidman (1991:3), in-depth interviewing goes beyond getting answers to questions, and instead has “an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” at its root. Life history interviews have been utilised in the present study to achieve this specific characteristic of in-depth interviewing. In his explanation of life history research, Seidman (1991:10) refers to the three-interview series as designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982). This series of life history interviews not only explores the respondent’s experiences, but to also situates these experiences within their contexts. I adapted this three-interview series when designing my interview instrument to construct three separate open-ended, semi-structured interview questionnaires. The interview questionnaires set out to explore participants’ life experiences prior to entering university, their life experiences whilst at university, and the meaning that they made of these life experiences.

Within this series, the first interview – the focused life history interview – allowed the participants to tell me as much as possible about themselves with regards to the development of their gender identity and expressions. This involved me asking them

to piece their earlier and more recent recollections of their experiences of their gender identity and expressions together. Participants were encouraged to draw on recollections as it pertains to their home life, their families, school, their friends and their recent experiences at university. Since the goal was to have the participant reconstruct and organise past and current experiences and events in their family, school and university life, the questions during this first interview was mainly framed as “how?” and not as “why?” questions (Seidman, 1991:11)

The second interview – concerned with the details of experience – focused on the notable details of the respondent’s gender identity and expression as presently understood and enacted within the university campus context. This also involved inquiring into what the responses to their gender expressions have been like on campus. Additionally, I inquired as to whether the university’s spaces, practices, attitudes, climate and/or institutional culture are gender diverse inclusive and/or exclusive. I also asked for certain stories about their experiences on campus as a way of eliciting more and/or more detailed information (Seidman, 1991:11-12).

The third and final interview allowed respondents to reflect on the meanings of their experiences. The question of “meaning” in this sense speaks to the “intellectual and emotional connections” between the respondent’s exploration of their past and recent memories, stories and experiences. This also spoke to the connections between these memories, stories and experiences and their accompanying contexts (Seidman, 1991).

Since life history research situates respondent’s experiences within their contexts, this method speaks directly to my research objective: to explore the experiences of gender counter-normative students at Stellenbosch University. Life history research was

especially employed to depict narratives that reflect diverse and unique contexts, experiences and subjectivities that showcase the interesting and dull and the good and bad moments of everyday life and consequently evade narrow and partial representations of life. All in all, life history research enabled me to achieve my research objectives.

#### 4.4 Sampling techniques

The present study required the use of both purposive sampling and snowball sampling as far as conducting life history research. The first participant to be interviewed was contacted via social media. I was acquainted with Valerie<sup>3</sup>, a coloured transgender woman, years prior to conducting the present study. Although we had lost contact for a while, we still shared a connection as we both had Instagram accounts, and “followed” each other on the social media platform at the time. Since this connection on Instagram was the only connection we shared, and as Valerie publicly proclaimed her gender identity on her Instagram page, I felt it was appropriate to recruit her for my study by reaching out to her on Instagram. Valerie’s chosen pronouns are *she*, *her* and *hers*.

The second participant, Aphiwe<sup>4</sup> – a black gender non-binary student – and I were introduced to one another months prior to commencing my fieldwork research. Aphiwe self-identified as gender counter-normative some time during a conversation short after our initial meeting. Months later, once I had received the appropriate ethical clearance to conduct my research, I reached out to them to recruit them as a participant. Aphiwe’s chosen pronouns are *they*, *them* and *theirs*.

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

I was introduced to the third participant, Lesedi<sup>5</sup> – a black transgender woman – by my first participant, Valerie, and consequently recruited her for my study. Lesedi's chosen pronouns are *she*, *her* and *hers*. I conducted three separate interviews – as previously explained – with each participant, and the interviews were generally between 60-90 minutes in duration. I started and concluded my interviews with Valerie and Aphiwe during the month of November of 2017, and with Lesedi during August of 2018.

#### **4.5 Data analysis and interpretation**

The transcriptions of the audio-recorded life history interviews were considered for analysis. The analysis of the life histories comprised the combined utilisation of thematic analysis (Seidman, 1991; Attride-Stirling, 2001) and within and cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998; Ayres, Kavanaugh & Knafel, 2003). Each individual life history constitutes an individual case study, and as such, the present research study comprises a total of three case studies. For the purposes of the present study, I adopted the approach to multiple case study analysis as delineated by Merriam (1998). According to the (Merriam, 1998:194), a multiple case study comprises two stages of analysis, namely within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Within-case analysis required each transcribed life history to first be “treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself”.

In conducting the within-case analyses I utilised thematic analysis to identify and report the noteworthy themes within the textual data. Following Seidman's (1991) description of an analytic approach to life history research, I identified the categories and subsequently compared these categories to identify certain themes as they emerged

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym

from the data. For instance, within Lesedi's life history data, I identified a category that spoke to her grievance of the absence of gender-neutral public bathrooms on campus. Another category spoke to the oppressive nature of gender-specific single-sex residences for gender counter-normative residents. When compared, these aforementioned categories revealed the theme of the social exclusivity of gender counter-normative students within the SU context.

A preliminary across-case comparison of the total life history case studies revealed that some of the identified themes within each case were prevalent across all three cases. In light of this, the themes selected to be presented in Chapter 5 of the present research study comprise “visibility/invisibility” and “inclusivity/exclusivity”. “Visibility/invisibility” here relates to the needed increase in visibility of genderqueer students and gender diversity issues, and the contrasting desire of some genderqueer students to remain invisible in certain situations. Additionally, “inclusivity/exclusivity” relates to perceived spaces of genderqueer inclusion and exclusion within the university.

It should be noted that the across-case comparison as described above was conducted in part to organise the structure of the findings, and as such does not constitute the cross-case analytic process in its entirety also employed in this study. Furthermore, the above-mentioned themes that emanated from the within-case analyses were organised within the frameworks of the reviewed literature and theoretical considerations as discussed in the present thesis in order to further make sense of the findings.

As such, the results of the within-case analyses as presented in Chapter 5 constitute a focus on *surplus visibility* and *counter-normative spaces*. The theme

*visibility/invisibility* relates to *surplus visibility*, which denotes how counter-normative individuals are coerced or expected to remain invisible (Patai, 1992). Additionally, the theme *inclusivity/exclusivity* relates to *counter-normative spaces* and denotes the inclusive counter-normative spaces that the participants' frequent, belong to and create themselves in contrast to the existing exclusionary spaces. Each case study, or each participant's life history, is presented as individual vignettes to reflect the participants' narratives as distinct from one another and to accentuate their individuality. Although not initially part of the rationale for presenting the life histories as individual vignettes, the individual representation of the case studies also reflects the within-case analytic process applied to each case study as described thus far.

I commenced the cross-case analysis following the completion of the above-described within-case analyses. In conducting the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998; Ayres et al., 2003) I compared the analysed individual cases – comprising a discussion of the findings as they related to each life history – to one another. As such, the overall commonalities between the cases were identified, and as relevant the variances between the cases considered, to arrive at general synthesised explanations that capture the essence – and as relevant, the variations – of the participants' experiences. To illustrate, the common themes that emanated from the cross-case analysis pronounced the participants' expressions of their gender identities, the safe spaces that they belonged to, and their agency and autonomy in navigating their everyday lives. The identified commonalities and variances across the cases were also interpreted consulting the theoretical framework and relevant literature as explored in Chapters 2 and 3.

The general explanations are reported and investigated under the macro-themes of *gender expression oppression*, *counter-normative spaces* and *agency and resistance*.

As revealed by the collective narratives of the participants, the macro-theme of gender expression oppression considers how the heterosexual matrix – and related hegemonic gender structure of hetero-cis-normativity – operates to create incidents of surplus visibility, symbolic power, and the internalisation of gender expression oppression.

The macro-theme of *counter-normative spaces* complicates the notion of *counter-normative spaces* as introduced in Chapter 5. This is done by prioritising the agents that create and contribute to counter-normative spaces and assessing the potential threat to the effective and prolonged functioning of these spaces.

The final macro-theme of *agency and resistance* especially prioritises the subjectivities of the participants by exploring how, and the various ways in which, they enact their agency. The exploration of how and the various ways in which the participants enact their agency primarily constitute how they remain resilient whilst navigating gender expression oppression, and relatedly how they challenge the heterosexual matrix and particularly cisnormative standards and expectations. The results of the cross-case analysis are investigated in Chapter 6 of the present research study.

## **4.6 Ethical considerations**

### **4.6.1 Privacy**

Having understood that participants had the right to refuse to be interviewed and refuse to answer any questions (Mouton, 2001:243), I informed the participants of these rights beforehand. I did this in advance when I recruited them as participants, and then once again immediately before starting the interviews. Participants were interviewed at appropriate times, as the interview dates and times were confirmed by the participants and they were not interviewed for excessively long periods of time.

#### **4.6.2 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Participants' anonymity was prioritised in the present study, as I have used pseudonyms when referring to the participants. My intention to protect their anonymity was expressed to the participants prior to commencing the interviews. The interviews were recorded using a voice recording application on my personal password protected tablet device. As the participants agreed to being recorded, the data that resulted from the interviews have been handled in harmony with the participants' rights to welfare, dignity and privacy (Mouton, 2001:243).

I have kept all data with information that could be used to identify participants, and/or which is confidential, in my password protected tablet device and personal computer. The hard copies of the signed informed consent forms and transcriptions have been kept in a locked drawer which only I have access to at my home.

#### **4.6.3 Informed consent**

Participants were informed about what the present research entailed and what it aimed to investigate. This was done both in advance when recruiting participants and immediately prior to the commencement of the interviews. They, in the form of informed consent forms, have been reassured that they would not be harmed in any way, have the right to remain anonymous, and have been made aware of their right to opt out of the interview or reject answering any questions (Mouton, 2001:244). I have, as such, obtained both verbal and signed consent from the participants who took part in the present study.

#### **4.7 On the validity of my research study**

Guest, MacQueen and Naley (2012) emphasise the importance of and provide recommendations for enhancing the validity of qualitative research inquiry – especially

the “quality of output from a thematic analysis” (Guest et al., 2012:98). The authors argue that researchers should be transparent in communicating the processes they employed in planning, conducting and analysing their research. Doing so is essential to “making a convincing case for the validity of one’s findings and interpretations” (Guest et al., 2012:85). In keeping with the idea of transparency, I will proceed to be forthcoming about the ways in which I failed to strengthen the validity of the present research study.

In providing suggestions for enhancing the validity of the research project as it pertains to its research design, the authors argue in favour of the triangulation of data sources and data collection methods. As the present study only employs life history research as its primary data collection technique, it could be argued that the study fails to ensure triangulation in this regard. However, one has to consider that the present study comprises the evaluation of three interviews per participant. Additionally, the sample size of the study consists of three participants. I call for these considerations to exemplify that the amount of data generated by life history research is quite extensive. The use of one data collection method is thus sufficient given the scope of the particular research undertaking. Additionally, a comparison of selected South African studies (Francis, 2014; Monakali, 2018; Van Der Wal, 2016) suggest that the sample size of transgender participants tends to be limited. Comparatively, it is thus not unusual for the present study to have a small sample size.

The present study does, however, employ theory triangulation by using multiple theoretical perspectives to examine and interpret the data as detailed in Chapter 2. The study employs a theoretical perspective that comprises a convergence of queer theory, gender theory, intersectionality and theory of the Global South. As Denzin (1989:307) explains, “[t]he rationale behind [triangulation] is that by accumulating

multiple points of reference, researchers can minimise the intrinsic bias that comes from...single-theory studies". A convergence of different relevant theoretical perspectives as presented in the present study ensures that the strengths of one theory compensate for the weaknesses of another theory. As the theoretical framework was utilised in conducting the analysis, the present study thus also ensures the triangulation of a method utilised in conducting and completing the analytical process.

Guest et al. (2012) assert that the external reviews of a researcher's findings and interpretations enhance the validity of the researcher's analyses. These external reviews are to be done by another researcher not involved in conducting the research, and/or the study participants – a process also known as "participant validation" (Guest et al., 2012:93). The present study failed to enlist another researcher and the study participants as external reviewers of the findings and analyses presented in the present study. Additionally, I did not develop an "audit trail" (Guest et al. 2012:93-34) of the analytic processes conducted to arrive at the findings and interpretations as they appear in the present study. The aforementioned oversights potentially diminish the overall validity of the study.

The present study, however, utilises a method that enhances the face validity – "the degree to which an indicator for a concept...intuitively makes sense" (Guest et al., 2012:81) of the research. As it pertains to the present study, the face validity thereof can be determined by "the audience to whom one reports" (Guest et al., 2012:95). Chapter 5 of the present study makes use of direct quotes. These quotes not only indicate the participants' own words as they relayed their narratives, but also represent excerpts of the raw data as contained in the transcriptions of the audio-recorded life history interviews. The reader is therefore able to get a glimpse of the relationship

between the participants' everyday lived experiences, and the researcher's findings and interpretations of the participants' experiences (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). This, in a manner, makes the research data that I managed, investigated and analysed transparent to the reader, which provides them with adequate information to judge the research findings presented in the present thesis.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The qualitative research paradigm, case study research design and life history interview method were utilised for their corresponding orientations, as already detailed. Utilising the aforementioned has enabled me to meet my research objectives: to explore and be responsive to the subjective perspectives and experiences of specific individuals (gender counter-normative students) within a specific location (at Stellenbosch University).

Additionally, a reconciliation of thematic analysis and within-case and cross-case analysis was employed to identify, analyse and report the (1) salient findings within the individual case studies and (2) general explanations across the case studies. The findings and explanations interrogate the subjective experiences of gender counter-normative students as they have navigated the Stellenbosch University space. The findings and explanations also consider the implications and interplay of the university's historic legacy, its structural design and its institutional culture on the participants' everyday lived experiences. The subjective experiences of the participants were also examined and interrogated outside of the spatial confines of the university environment and the temporal confines comprising the participants' enrolment at the university.

In addressing the question of the overall validity, or credibility, of the present study, I acknowledge the oversights made during and following the analyses employed in the present study. This was done in an effort to be transparent about the potential hinderances that could contribute to a diminished validity of the present research study. Additionally, I make mention of the methods utilised in conducting the theoretical framework of my thesis, the methods utilised in conducting the analytical process employed in my study, and one of the methods used in presenting the findings of my study in Chapter 5. These methods contribute to an enhancement of the overall validity of the present study.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore selected sections of the life histories of Lesedi, Valerie and Aphiwe<sup>6</sup>. The selected sections comprise the research findings that centre around accounts of *surplus visibility* and *counter-normative spaces*. The concepts/themes of *surplus visibility* and *counter-normative spaces* will be discussed throughout the chapter. The conclusion of the present chapter will briefly consider how the aforementioned concepts/themes relate to relevant literature explored in Chapter 3.

In conducting my interviews with the participants, I found that they were unique and engaging in their own way. This chapter, as such, presents each life history individually to reflect their narratives as distinct from one another and to accentuate their individuality. To present the life history findings collectively across designated themes would dismiss and negate the individuality of each participant. Therefore, presenting the life history findings individually – or as individual vignettes (Kumashiro, 2002) – takes the form of individual narratives. The vignettes attempt to present certain aspects of their lives, their experiences, and the scope and depth of their experiences. The vignettes also depict their challenges and resilience, their anxieties and triumphs, their fears and hopes, and their happiness and sadness as recounted by the participants.

Presenting the research findings in this way suitable as it strives to do justice to the life history method that is meant to “convey individuals’ stories through their own words” and “provide a deeper understanding of the key factors that have influenced

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<sup>6</sup> The participants’ names used in this study – Lesedi, Valerie and Aphiwe – are pseudonyms.

and shaped a person's life" (Davies, Singh, Tebboth, Spear, Mensah & Ansah, 2018:7,22). The quotations interspersed throughout the following discussion of the findings are directly from the participants as documented in the transcriptions of the life history interviews.

## **5.2 Lesedi**

### **5.2.1 Brief biographical overview**

Lesedi is a black<sup>7</sup> transgender woman. She grew up in a village in Limpopo where she also started and completed her primary school and high school careers. After matriculating she commenced her tertiary education at Stellenbosch University (SU) in 2015 and at the time of our interviews, in 2018, she was a third-year Engineering student.

Lesedi recalls that she first started to resist her birth-designated gender at the age of 4 when she expressed her desire to wear dresses. After her family's reluctance to comply with said desire, she displayed her retaliation by destroying her "boy" toys. Lesedi, throughout her childhood and adolescent years, did not feel comfortable subscribing exclusively to either gender identity – that of "man" "or "woman". She felt that solely living within the parameters of the gender roles ascribed to each gender would have limited the way she chose to live her life and express herself.

Although she has always refrained from limiting herself to one gender identity, she explains that she was bolder in her expression thereof as a child than she was as a

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<sup>7</sup> The participants self-identified in terms of racial categories when recounting certain experiences. In mentioning racial categories – "white", "black" and "coloured" – this study speaks to how "we continue to construct our social realities in racial terms" (Posel 2001:3). According to Posel ( 2001:3), "the idea that South African society comprises four distinct races – 'whites', 'Coloureds', 'Indians' and 'African' – has become a habit of thought and experience...[and these apartheid-era designations] are now the site of redress [or efforts at transformation]..."

teenager. She explains “I was a strong person as a young person. I didn’t listen to anyone. I was like ‘I’m going to live this way’. It’s when I got older that I kind of moulded myself into what society expects”. She kept her gender identity secret throughout her teenage years and found refuge in her high school academics. Her scholastic achievements became her main priority as she had set her sights on studying at a university far away from home. Explaining that “I wanted to know who is this person that I’ve been hiding for so long?”, she was convinced that being on her own far away from home would allow her to unashamedly discover and embrace her authentic self. Her first year at SU momentarily hindered her plans of self-discovery. She was unexpectedly confronted with incidents of structural racism within the residence where she stayed – a single-sex male residence I will refer to as *Murray Residence*<sup>8</sup> – and the lectures that she attended. Despite navigating the aforementioned hinderances, she became more aware and convinced of her identity as a transgender woman during her first year at university. However, having to share her room at Murray Residence with a roommate discouraged her from transitioning – which is what she had begun to feel compelled to do – as she preferred to go through the process in private and on her own.

Lesedi was able to move into a single room in Murray Residence at the start of her second year at university and the privacy accompanied with no longer having a roommate allowed her to start her social transition. For her third year (in 2018), she moved to a single room in another residence – a co-ed residence I will refer to as *Roux Residence*<sup>9</sup>. Her new living arrangement provided her with even more privacy than the year before at Murray Residence. Although the section that she resides in is gender

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>9</sup> Pseudonym

neutral, the bathrooms in this section are still gender specific. However, according to Lesedi, residents are allowed to make use of the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity. This ensures a relatively accommodating living situation to students with diverse gender identities. She also started the process of medical transitioning in her third year.

At the time of our interviews Lesedi looked forward to graduating at the end of 2019, starting her career soon thereafter, and moving away from home to either Cape Town or somewhere abroad.

## **5.2.2 Surplus visibility**

### **5.2.2.1 Invisibility as a choice**

During her earlier primary school years Lesedi became aware of the gender practices that young boys were encouraged to engage in, and that young girls were relatedly discouraged from engaging in when it came to playing games. She explained that boys were encouraged to be adventurous when playing games, whereas girls were encouraged to be more passive when playing games. In high school Lesedi noticed that girls were not encouraged to become self-reliant, whereas boys were taught to pursue careers and become independent. Although boys were encouraged to embark on professional endeavours, Lesedi observed that their personal and emotional development was neglected. She, in the same vein, realised that she did not receive sufficient emotional attachment and support from her own parents. Lesedi explains

I would say I was at a crossroad...being different you always look at things from an outside perspective so it was like "I know these ladies, like, the rules being put on them is not fair", because they can't contribute anything to society if they keep on living this way. And the boys, even though they were encouraged to do that they were not really

emotionally...parents weren't emotionally invested in them to teach them emotions and stuff... So that's why I was like "Okay I'll just be my own person, just be neutral, because I can't really play these two roles".

Lesedi positioned herself as "different" throughout her school career and explained that being different allowed her to assume an outsider perspective. Assuming an outsider perspective made her aware of how gendered expectations could have limiting and detrimental effects on individuals who obediently and unquestioningly conformed to gendered expectations. In acknowledging that potential career opportunities and the ability to become independent was limited for girls, Lesedi recognised that she did not want to find herself in a similar position. She instead sought to become a successful, self-reliant, contributing member of society and dedicated herself to excelling in her academics. She did this with the goal of enrolling in and graduating from a university on the way to embarking on a productive career in mind.

Lesedi also became aware of the potential detrimental personal effects associated with stunted emotional growth that she noticed many teenage boys were subjected to. She found that she was also lacking in emotional support from her parents. In recognising the importance of continued emotional growth, Lesedi turned to "books and media" to educate herself on how to further her personal development. This learning process entailed a discovery of how to make up for the emotional support that was lacking in her own life. By committing to her academics and educating herself on how to improve in other areas of her life Lesedi became determined to "be [her] own person".

Although Lesedi drew on the perceived positive aspects of both gender categories to circumvent the potential setbacks associated with both gender categories, Lesedi was still coping with her own diverse gender identity. Part of "being her own person" meant

not conforming to gendered expectations. As a teenager she became conscious of the “shame” that people around her imposed on her whenever she resisted gender norms. She became less daring in expressing her resistance to gender norms as she “[started] to care about people’s opinions”. As a way to escape potential pushback from others whilst still being in control of her life, Lesedi opted to “just [be] neutral”. She stayed “neutral” by, for instance, not wearing “particularly boyish clothes” and instead wearing “gender neutral clothes to just get by...”. Lesedi therefore chose to remain “invisible” to an extent to, on the one hand, avoid unwanted attention from other people that would have caused her psychological stress. On the other hand, she chose to remain “invisible” to resist compliance with gender conformity and, by extension, the heterosexual matrix. In this sense, remaining invisible was a choice made and enacted by Lesedi to simultaneously protect herself and exert her agency in resisting the heterosexual matrix.

Although Lesedi has started socially and medically transitioning while being a university student, she has expressed that she still chooses to remain invisible whenever she goes back home, explaining that

I actually isolate myself when I go back home. I’m planning to move because it’s quite a small village and because I’m transitioning it’s quite a scary place to go out because everyone knows the “old” you. And they’ll ask stupid questions... because they don’t know anything about transgender issues.

Lesedi explains that other people from her village would likely inundate her with unwanted questions regarding her transition, mainly because they are uneducated about transgender issues. This contributes to an exhausting experience when she allows herself to be visible in her community. As such, Lesedi chooses to isolate herself whenever she is at home in order to prioritise and maintain her own wellbeing.

Her own experiences with choosing to remain invisible leads her to speculate that there are more transgender students on campus than are visible, as they would probably prefer to not disclose their gender identity. These speculations come to the fore when she indicates that she prefers to go to the LGBTQI+<sup>10</sup>-centred events organised by the Equality Unit<sup>11</sup> and the LesBiGay<sup>12</sup> society. In referring to her experience of these events, she states that

They are quite powerful. I know it sounds silly but being there and seeing all those people live their authentic lives, it's so wonderful. Even though I wish there were more transgender people.... Even if they are not transitioning or don't plan to transition, I wish they could come to such events.

At the same time, however, Lesedi is aware of the marginalisation of transgender identities and individuals. She expresses that the university facilities and spaces should transform in ways that acknowledge, affirm and support transgender identities and individuals. Such transformation is framed in contrast to the current perpetuation of the pervasive hetero-cis-normativity that positions gender diverse individuals as deviant individuals that should be policed and regulated. Additionally, according to Lesedi, the marginalisation of gender diverse individuals in South African society contributes to transgender students' desire to remain invisible.

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<sup>10</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and other sexual and gender identities/categories.

<sup>11</sup> The Equality Unit at SU "coordinate[s], educate[s] and raise[s] awareness around sexualities, gender, HIV/Aids, sexual harassment and anti-discrimination...[and] deliver[s] [these] services and support to students, faculty and staff at SU" (About Us, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> The LesBiGay student society at SU "strives to serves students identifying within the Queer community in a manner that is compassionate, dignified and supportive." (LesBiGay, 2019).

### 5.2.2.2 Coerced invisibility and inevitability of one's own visibility

Even though Lesedi did not participate in the FeesMustFall (FMF) movements of 2015 and 2016, she related to the exclusion and censorship that gender diverse student activists experienced at (UCT) during and following the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement in 2015.

Additionally, Lesedi expressed her concern regarding the lack of visibility of transgender student leaders. She was furthermore apprehensive that transgender students would be given the opportunity to hold positions of leadership, and as such was concerned that they will remain invisible in student leadership circles. This concern stems from her own experience when she availed herself for the position of Cluster Convener<sup>13</sup> in 2017. Lesedi explained that a small group of students attending the caucus were made aware that she was a transgender woman. They attempted to intimidate her by inundating her with a barrage of questions – students attending the caucus were allowed to ask Cluster Convener candidates a few questions regarding their intentions for availing themselves for the position. She explains:

One significant event I can recall is when I went for a caucus, for Cluster Convener...One of my friends were sitting in the audience, and a bunch of these Afrikaner guys, someone told them that I'm a transgender woman. And they started "attacking" me with questions on the stage... and what made them [angrier] was that I was calm...and confident, I always answered them. I feel like it threatened them...because we are taught to be ashamed of our identity, we are taught to be smaller and I'm not. I was so confident and calm it angered them more.

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<sup>13</sup> A student leader "who assists...with all the activities in a cluster", whereby a "cluster" refers to "a group of residences that are grouped together primarily on a geographical basis and to which a PSO ward (in the case of an integrated men's and women's ward) or two PSO wards (in the case of separate men's and women's wards) are allocated to form a student community..." (Stellenbosch University, Policy for placement in residences, and in listening, learning and living houses, as well as allocation to PSO wards and clusters, 2013:8).

This experience has shown her that transgender individuals would be discriminated against and/or harassed into being excluded from opportunities that should be afforded to all students. The abovementioned account shows how Lesedi as a transgender woman has experienced reactions from other people that attempted to render her invisible. This coerced invisibility is a form of social exclusion that gender counter-normative individuals especially face.

The coerced invisibility of transgender individuals as a form of social exclusion is used to alienate, silence and reject gender counter-normative individuals. When the group of students at the Cluster Convener caucus were attempting to intimidate her, Lesedi recalls that she remained calm and confident. She remained calm and confident as she did not allow them to make her feel insecure. She explains that “we are taught to be ashamed of our identity, we are taught to be smaller, and I’m not”. Moreover, Lesedi accepts that, since transitioning, her visibility as a transgender woman are at times inevitable. At the same time, she acknowledges that it can be “scary” because her visibility can elicit unwanted transphobic – be it overt or indirect – reactions. These reactions attempt to invalidate transgender individuals and create an alienating space for transgender individuals.

Additionally, she recognises that the pervasive invisibility of transgender individuals sustains the social exclusion of transgender individuals. In recalling her experiences at the LGBTQI+-centred events she expressed that the visibility of other “out” gender diverse individuals at the events empowered her. In addition, seeing others self-actualise inspired her to also self-actualise. Feeling inspired and empowered, she took control and connected with other transgender people. She subsequently utilised the student support services available to her and engaged in activities that promoted self-growth and self-care. As such, Lesedi asserts that there is a need for the increased

visibility of gender diverse individuals and issues relating to gender diverse individuals. Additionally, Lesedi is aware that she cannot control other people's reactions, but she does remain in control of her own reactions. She explains that she does not take transphobic encounters – or whenever people “try to be mean” to her – personally. She views others' trans-antagonisms towards her as being “more about them” and their personal issues than it is about her.

### **5.2.3 Counter-normative spaces**

During Lesedi's first year at university she felt excluded in the lectures as the lecturers for the most part conducted the classes in Afrikaans, a language that she is not fluent in.

You could see the preference, like when you would put up your hand to answer they would pick the white students... They would speak in Afrikaans to an English group and you would see white people nodding their heads...and then you have to be the troublemaker who raises their hand to ask, “What did you say?”

She also experienced her residence – Murray Residence, a single-sex male residence – as an exclusionary space as she was faced with systemic racism during her stay there.

*Yoh* I never realised that white people can have so much power, especially in Murray...honestly it felt like I was living in apartheid era, because I grew up with my granny telling me these stories...but arriving there and them having so much power over everything that happens in your life, I was like “wow”. And every time you seek a position of power they won't give it to you no matter how qualified you are for the position...

Her lack of privacy in her first year at Murray Residence – as she shared a room with another student – also hindered her from transitioning sooner. Lesedi also remarked

that the gender-specific bathrooms on campus were exclusionary spaces. Following her own experience of being harassed in one of the gender-specific university bathrooms, Lesedi “[researched] what happens to transgender and gender diverse people in the bathrooms”. She discovered that public gender-specific labelled bathrooms pose a threat to the safety of gender counter-normative individuals. Gender-specific labelled bathrooms typically are sites where gender counter-normative individuals could potentially be targets of harassment and violence. Asserting that “people [should] feel [safe and] comfortable because it’s their basic human right to use the bathroom”, Lesedi explains that gender-specific bathrooms represent sites that negate diverse gender identities and create spaces that could potentially violate one’s dignity.

These aforementioned exclusionary experiences, along with her experience at the Cluster Convener caucus, presents these spaces as promoting social exclusion on the bases of race, language and gender identity. Additionally, spaces of social exclusion comprise sites that are oppressive, harmful, alienating, (potentially) unsafe and as hindering personal, academic and co-curricular development. Conversely, counter-normative spaces are inclusive, safe, welcoming, supportive, accommodating and allow one to “have a voice”. As previously discussed, Lesedi experienced the LesBiGay society and Roux Residence – the co-ed residence where she stayed during her third year in 2018 – as counter-normative spaces. With reference to her experience with the Equality Unit, another identified counter-normative space, Lesedi illustrates

I haven’t had many encounters with [the Equality Unit], but they helped me...because I remember... [that I was at] quite a fragile point in my life [at one time], and I went there. And the help they gave me...they gave me someone to speak to, and they were very clear that they [counsellors] don’t deal with many transgender students. He made me

very aware that I had to tell him my struggle for him to understand... so, *ja*, the Equality Unit is quite good, they helped me a lot.

Additionally, her position as a member of an on-campus transformation committee allows her to “have a voice” where the other members of the committee “listen to [her]”. As such, Lesedi used her position on the transformation committee to advocate for the implementation of gender-neutral bathrooms. The rest of the transformation committee supported her petition for the implementation of gender-neutral bathrooms and they collectively presented the petition to the university council. The transformation committee was awaiting a reply from the university council at the time of my interview with Lesedi. All in all, Lesedi experienced the LesBiGay society, Roux Residence, the Equality Unit and the transformation committee that she serves on as counter-normative spaces.

She, however, claims that the LesBiGay society tends to neglect issues pertaining to gender diverse individuals. This suggests that even counter-normative spaces have the potential of engaging in exclusionary practices. Conversely, although Lesedi experienced her lectures as exclusionary in terms of language use, she credits her lecturers and fellow classmates for respecting her gender identity. Spaces that are exclusionary in one regard can therefore be inclusive or counter-normative in other regards. This also speaks to intersectional theory – a notion that will further be dealt with in detail in Chapter 6. Finally, Lesedi commends the university for having online services and application forms in place that allow one to self-assign one’s gender identity markers. She thus recognises these as inclusive or counter-normative services. Her accounts shed light on the ways in which counter-normative spaces challenge social exclusion. At the same time, however, her responses speak

exclusionary spaces, which reveals that the university space is not exempt from sustaining social exclusion.

Lesedi's discussions of her experiences in exclusionary spaces positions these spaces as perpetuating different forms of systemic oppression that impedes academic, personal and co-curricular development. These spaces also have the potential to embolden students to resort to discrimination or harassment when they intend to be malicious towards another student based on personal dislike. This assertion became evident when Lesedi explained that some of her fellow classmates purposefully misgendered her. They did not necessarily misgender her because of her gender identity but resorted to doing so because they disliked her personally. Lesedi speculates that they thought that misgendering her would hurt her.

Even though Lesedi could not overthrow the systems of oppression that she has been faced with on her own, she exerted her agency by being in control of how she navigated the oppression that she was subjected to. She navigated her gender oppression by "finding loopholes" in her first-year and second-year in Murray Residence to circumvent racial discrimination. She also "found loopholes" to secure a single room that allowed her the privacy and freedom to start her social transition. Additionally, she navigated the exclusion she experienced in her lectures by speaking up in class when lecturers conducted lessons in Afrikaans. She also detached herself from these incidents of oppression and any attempts at harassment by refusing to take these incidents and attempts personally.

## 5.3 Valerie

### 5.3.1 Brief biographical overview

Valerie is a coloured, transgender woman who grew up in the Cape Flats<sup>14</sup> area.

According to Valerie

My childhood was very...it was tumultuous, I would say. At best, it was very transient. I used to live here and there [in the Cape Flats area] with my mother because it was temporal...It wasn't the best situation because now you have to consider certain things such as domestic violence, emotional and physical abuse...

I sort of knew the "coloured" pattern of growing up impoverished, having a father who was a drunkard, having a mother who was solely responsible for everything and then you as the child being, I would say, sort of coerced into being independent, self-sufficient, and if you didn't make it...if you look at sort of the symptom of "impoverished coloured people" – it's not that I'm using the phrasal noun in a derogatory term, it's just to sort of indicate the specificity of the socio-economic stance that we were going through – so that for me, that pattern, was easily recognizable.

Although she moved around a lot with her mom as a child, she completed her primary school career at the same school, as they were still broadly living in the same area. She, however, changed schools in high school. She attended a high school in Retreat for grade 8 & 9 and subsequently moved to another school in Constantia for the remainder of her high school career.

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<sup>14</sup> The Cape Flats is situated on the outskirts of Cape Town's city centre. Following the forced removals under the Group Areas Act of 1950 during apartheid, the Cape Flats became home to people designated as "non-white" under the apartheid regime (Bowers Du Toit 2014; Standing 2003). According to Standing (2003:1) "there are more populous 'coloured' communities...and...less numerous, but more densely populated, African townships" within the Cape Flats.

She enrolled for a Bachelor of Science degree for her first year at SU but discovered that it was not for her. She then enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts degree for her second year at SU. As far as her living arrangements throughout her years at SU, she explains

Throughout my 4 years at the university, my living arrangements has reflected my home arrangements. It's been so transient; I've lived here and there. First year I was in Murray [an on-campus residence], second year I was in Nooitgedacht [private student accommodation], third year again in Murray [Residence], now my fourth and final year [currently, of undergraduate study] which is in LLL [Listening, Learning & Living House].<sup>15</sup> And then next year for Honours I'll stay in LLL as well. So, it sort of reflects that home dynamic.

At the time of our interviews Valerie was balancing her education with her work. Besides completing her final year of undergraduate studies – she graduated sometime between our second and third interviews – she was busy with a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course. She was also working as an intern at a student support office at the university.

### **5.3.2 Surplus visibility**

#### **5.3.2.1 The ambivalences of “invisibility” and “visibility”**

Valerie explained that during her childhood and teenage years she did not have access to information about transgender individuals and identities. As a result, she aligned herself with the identity of a “gay man” and expressed herself in ways that she considered appropriate to said identity.

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<sup>15</sup> LLL is a flagship residential initiative offered by SU to senior students. The LLL house refers to an “official University house (property of the University) in which smaller groups of students are accommodated around themes and taking diversity into account” (Stellenbosch University, Policy for placement in residences, and in listening, learning and living houses, as well as allocation to PSO wards and clusters, 2013:8)

For the... aforementioned part of my life... I was living...as sort of a queer individual who wasn't "themselves" and fully realised...So for me with that - being trans - I always thought that I didn't know who I was so I defaulted on what a typical "gay male" would be like in the context and I would sort of "lash out" and things like that until I came to university when things changed and I was able to self-identify because of sort of greater knowledge, abilities and things like that.

The invisibility of trans identities in this regard suggests the necessity for adequate dissemination of information regarding trans identities, individuals and related issues. This is seemingly necessary for gender diverse individuals to self-realise and subsequently self-actualise their gender identity. Relatedly, when she studied Sociology as part of her undergraduate degree at SU, it encouraged her to conduct research on gender diversity. In doing so she found herself associating with the identity of a transgender woman, was able to self-realise and started to self-actualise.

Valerie also mentions that invisibility is oftentimes forced upon gender diverse individuals. She considers the coerced invisibility of transgender individuals and identities as acts of transphobia. On a related point, Valerie argues that there is room for improvement with regards to the visibility of transgender individuals on the Stellenbosch University campus. She explains that even though the university has taken steps to deal with genderqueer individuals "in a professional manner", SU does not adequately acknowledge, speak about or incorporate genderqueer staff members and students into the university space.

On a personal level, Valerie explains that "the more trans people talk the more they become aware of their own limitations and their own hindrances in society". She relates this to her own experiences where her visibility as a transgender woman was met with discrimination. Visibility in this sense goes hand in hand with unwarranted

discriminatory reactions and is tied to the desire to remain invisible. Valerie explains that “for trans people it’s more about blending in, we don’t want to stand out, yet some of us do.” The aforementioned quote expresses her and potentially other genderqueer individuals’ desire to be “invisible” in certain spaces. These accounts provide examples of and speak to the social exclusion that genderqueer students may face in their daily lives.

Valerie’s account regarding the self-realisation of her gender identity implies that the inadequate or non-existent dissemination of information regarding gender diverse identities, individuals and related issues impedes gender diverse individuals’ self-realisation and related self-actualisation of their gender identities.

How someone self-actualises and identifies as trans...it comes with knowledge. It comes with knowledge acquisition and with reproduction and also with application within your own life. And for me specifically, with most trans people... you live your sort of first half of your life as your assigned person, and then you go from that to acquiring knowledge at a stage within your life living as an assigned human being. Then you self-assign and you create change and that modality within your life. And that creates a better lived experience as the self, as the comfortable self, that you need to be instead of in contrast to the assigned self...

...and especially with this most transwomen [presumably referring to transwomen who are attracted to men] find that they identified as gay because of sexual interest. You define yourself via sexual interest and that’s what most people do within society instead of defining themselves in terms of gender representation... So that’s how we sort of elucidate who people are and in terms of trans people the grand narrative has always been because of sexual interest you identify as gay and then you become trans...

She explains that she resorted to aligning herself to the identity of a “gay man” and expressing herself in ways that she thought were appropriate to said identity. Expressing herself in terms of a mistaken sexual identity, and not her gender identity, meant that she was living her life in a manner that was “not fully realised” and unfulfilled. She was only able to accurately identify as a transgender woman when she had access to information on gender diversity and was able to educate herself on diverse gender identities. This enabled her to embark on her self-actualisation. In other words, the effective dissemination about information regarding gender diverse identities, individuals and related issues is necessary for effective self-realisation and self-actualisation.

As previously mentioned, Valerie had her own experiences with her visibility being met with transphobic reactions. One of her lecturers, for instance, continuously misgendered her. Valerie addressed the lecturer during one of the lectures to explain to her that she was being disrespectful towards Valerie by not referring to her with the pronouns that she already explained she preferred. As the lecturer was educating the class on the term “misogynoir”<sup>16</sup>, Valerie drew on “transmisogyny”<sup>17</sup> as a parallel to “misogynoir”. She did this to explain to the lecturer that she was being “transmisogynistic” in continuously misgendering her. This particular experience, and other experiences with lecturers who she feels did not know how to “deal with trans students” led to her keeping a low profile in her lectures. She kept a low profile as she did not want to draw unwanted attention to herself. She explains

But I find the same thing with the use of pronouns, we [trans students] don't want to be referred to so we don't participate in class. So that's,

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<sup>16</sup> [A]nti-Black racist misogyny” directed at black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018:762).

<sup>17</sup> “...negative attitudes, hate and discrimination of...particularly transgender women” (The Anti-Oppression Network, 2014).

like, the one reason for it and then the other reason would be that we would just be spotlighted, you know, we would just be drawn attention to. And for trans people it's more about blending in, we don't want to stand out, yet some of us do. *Ja*, usually classes are supposed to be safe spaces but ...I find that lecturers and teachers don't know how to deal with trans people or students, you know, in general.

Valerie was also misgendered at her work as a student intern, but displayed more patience being misgendered at her work than she did being misgendered in class. Whenever she was misgendered at work she responded by explaining to them that the act of misgendering operates to marginalise gender counter-normative individuals. She explained that she essentially made it a priority to teach her colleagues to not misgender her and to instead respect her. Educating her colleagues in this way was a deliberate effort to acclimatise them to working with a transgender individual. She elected to do this as she sought to do her part in creating a safe space for the "next trans person who maybe comes and works in the office". Valerie thus took on the responsibility of transforming her workplace into a more counter-normative space.

### **5.3.2.2. Invisibility with regards to the FMF movement**

In detailing a story that a friend of Valerie's relayed to her when she attended one of the FMF meetings, the social exclusion of certain individuals from the movement became clear. According to Valerie, the meeting took the form of a panel discussion where queer women, transwomen and black women were meant to voice their opinions. The meeting, however, was cut short when black men students started verbally attacking the panellists, questioning their positions as student activist leaders on the basis that they were women. Queer women, transgender women and black women students were thus marginalised in this particular space.

Valerie asserted that the voices of queer women, transwomen and black women – more specifically queer, black transwomen – needed to be heard in that moment as intended. According to Valerie, queer, black, transgender women are positioned at “the periphery” of society. She added that being positioned at “the periphery” enables one to “see more clearly about what’s happening in the centre”. Valerie, in other words, believed that the women in question would have provided necessary and innovative insights into the FMF movement had the meeting proceeded as it was intended to. Valerie also explained that experiences like these convinced her to not attend the FMF meetings because she “never really felt included in such narratives” and she did not “want to have to deal with such things”. She did, however, participate in other FMF protest demonstrations. Furthermore, Valerie affirmed that “we [referring to queer women, transgender women and black women who participate in student activist movements] are silenced”.

### **5.3.3 Counter-normative spaces**

Throughout her four years at SU – at the time of our interviews in 2017 – Valerie has encountered most spaces at the university as being exclusionary in some regards, whilst simultaneously being counter-normative in other regards. As a first-year student in Murray Residence – a single-sex male residence – Valerie’s first impression of the residence was that it was an outdated setting. This impression at first elicited doubt in her decision to enrol and move to SU. However, almost immediately after experiencing this doubt she found that the residents welcomed her into the residence space. She explains that they “saw that I was a queer body when I came in immediately and...that recognition, it made things easier”. Valerie also met another first-year transgender

woman resident during welcoming week<sup>18</sup> and they became fast friends who supported and relied on one another.

Contrarily, Valerie's assigned roommate displayed negative reactions towards her. Her roommate insinuated that Valerie was going to "prey" on him. Although she had a disagreeable experience with her assigned first-year roommate, Valerie took the necessary steps to alleviate the situation. She approached the residence head and arranged to room with another roommate who, unlike the first assigned roommate, did not contribute to an uncomfortable living arrangement. Compared to her experience living in an LLL house, Valerie explains that the LLL house is very inclusive of queer bodies, portraying it as a counter-normative space.

Valerie used to be a member of the LesBiGay society and explains that she experienced it as a counter-normative space as it was welcoming to and celebrated queer students. She later became disinterested with the society as she began to see it as an elitist society that was out of touch with reality. To her, the association was an exclusionary space for queer individuals concerned with raising awareness for especially gender diverse issues. The association also failed to connect with comparatively less privileged gender and sexuality diverse individuals. She explains

I joined [the LesBiGay society] because there were events. Because sometimes they would [facilitate access to] Pride [events]...but now it's very elitist. If we look at all subcultures, there's going to be an elitist component and when we look at societies, such as LesBiGay societies, it's an elitist programme for people who have the ability to access those platforms. If we look at queer people in Steenberg, Vrygrond, Montagu Village<sup>19</sup>, they don't have the access to go. Especially if you're a young

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<sup>18</sup> The orientation programme for first-year students entering SU preceding the beginning of the first term of the academic year.

<sup>19</sup> Areas within the Cape Flats.

queer transwoman in that area and you're posing as a gay child, you don't have access to go do the Triangle Project<sup>20</sup> which is in Observatory to create that access and that education for yourself.

Elaborating on her experience with the society, she explains

I think they're very uninvolved. When there was a party it wasn't about sharing and creating solidarity and camaraderie amongst queer individuals, it was always just a party...it was never with a direction, like, "Oh let's spread awareness for Trans Day of Remembrance, or queer issues, or corrective rape or the homelessness of LGBTQI people", and things like that. It was never with a purpose. It was always one-sided.

She discontinued her membership of the LesBiGay society when she began to feel that the society lacked social awareness. The lack of social awareness conflicted with her personal ideals, as she believed that the society should have done more to raise awareness of especially gender diverse issues and events, and connect with less privileged queer individuals outside of the student community.

Besides experiencing lectures and her workplace as exclusionary spaces, as previously discussed, Valerie adds that the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus creates exclusion of gender diverse individuals. She does, however, commend SU for enabling prospective and registered students to self-assign their identity markers on application forms and online student profiles. Overall, she regards SU as a welcoming space for gender diverse individuals that allows one to create a safe space for oneself. Valerie's experiences navigating and impressions of the university space provides examples of how SU, on the one hand, promotes social inclusion and, on the other hand, perpetuates social exclusion. Valerie has become

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<sup>20</sup> The Triangle Project "is a non-profit human rights organisation offering professional services to ensure the full realisation of constitutional and human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, their partners and families." (About, 2015)

aware of the ways that she has been and could be disadvantaged within the university space. However, she also explained that she purposefully takes advantage of opportunities that afford her joy, as she values her ability to create enjoyable experiences for herself.

As previously mentioned, Valerie posits that SU allows one to create a safe space for oneself. She explains that other gender diverse students and prospective gender diverse students “see [us – referring to her and other genderqueer students] walking around living our best lives, and it’s like we’re unabashed.” She adds that queer individuals living “unabashedly” on campus also allows “others [to] believe that it’s okay for them to be themselves walking around” campus. She asserts that her and other gender diverse students’ ability to create safe spaces for themselves in this way contributes to the visibility of gender diverse individuals. It also establishes SU as a welcoming space for gender diverse individuals.

## **5.4 Aphiwe**

### **5.4.1 Brief biographical overview**

Aphiwe was born, grew up in and went to school in the Eastern Cape.

I was raised partly by my grandmother. My grandma lived in a semi-rural area and that’s where I did my primary school.

Aphiwe attended primary school and lived with their grandmother up till grade 9. They would visit their mother – who was living and working elsewhere – over the weekends. Aphiwe started primary school at the age of 5. As they were always the youngest in their class, and with them usually being teacher’s pet – “not by my choice” as Aphiwe quipped – Aphiwe found it difficult to connect with their peers. Aphiwe expressed

I was a nerd [laughing] so *ja*. They didn't want to play with me, so I was like "*ja*, you do you". I read a lot as well, so I was friends with my books mostly...

It was towards grades 8 and 9 that Aphiwe started to connect with and interact more with their peers at school.

Aphiwe went to high school after grade 9 and also moved in with their mother at this time.

That's when I moved in full-time with my mother...My father is married so they're not together – he's married to someone else – so I would only see him during school holidays or like that. So, I stayed full-time with my mother from grade 10 to 12.

After matriculating in 2011, Aphiwe enrolled in an Information Technology course, but changed direction soon after and completed a business course. Aphiwe then decided to enrol for a Bachelor of Arts degree at SU with the goal of studying philosophy. At the time of our interviews, Aphiwe was a postgraduate Honours student within the Arts and Social Sciences faculty.

With regards to Aphiwe's gender identity, they recount a conversation with a friend who was questioning their gender. This conversation illustrates how Aphiwe thinks – and has always thought – about their gender:

[The friend asked]: "So is it perhaps a question of gender, you are a woman, right?" I'm like, "No..." I don't know what that means to me. I don't have an association to it. I've never called myself a "man" or a "woman" or a "girl" or a "boy". It's just a weird thing to say because what does it mean, what does it look like? What do I do now that I'm a boy or what do I do now that I'm a girl...There's no connection with it [the gender categories of either "man" or "woman"]. Like what is "it" that you want me to associate myself with?

When asked when Aphiwe was able to put their feelings illustrated above into words for themselves, they explained that

I don't think I'm comfortable with putting it into words, because when you put it into words, you're sort of boxing it, then is it fluid? It kind of takes away from the fluidity of it. But I would say recently the term "non-binary" kind of frames it or puts it in a nice way...but it's not "my" term... but for the purpose of clarification or simplicity I would say "non-binary"...

Further on the notion of "fluidity" and how it ties in with their gender identity, Aphiwe indicated:

I guess my idea of seeing myself, of remaining in the open/fluid sense of identity, also comes from how my family treats me. Like it's rooted in some ways in how I was brought up and how my family still responds to me and treats me. Because even my father, he doesn't have a specific way of calling me or referring to me: one day it's, "Hi, baby" then "my daughter" then "my son" and I've never asked him why he does that. It's random, I don't ask [laughing]...and he says it so affectionately and I'm just like "okay..." [laughing].

## **5.4.2 Surplus visibility**

### **5.4.2.1 Visibility treated as a spectacle**

During my first interview with Aphiwe they expressed that, since matriculating, people have tended to take note of their gender ambiguity "in every space that [they] move". Furthermore, these people seem to be preoccupied with placing them into a category, although they rarely engage with them to enquire about their gender identity. Aphiwe added that these people typically do not think of them in terms of gender categories. They tend to speculate about Aphiwe's sexual identity. Their curiosity with regards to Aphiwe's gender expression, and their preoccupation with determining Aphiwe's

gender identity, typically manifests in them just staring at Aphiwe. Aphiwe recalls the following incident:

I recently...took the train to Cape Town...I'm used to the stares that people give me. I mean, now I know what people are looking for, so I don't get too worked up about the stares...[there was an] old, coloured Muslim man [on the train who was staring at them]...and I greeted [him]. I greeted, "Salaam" [laughing].

Aphiwe infers that the man in question did not expect them to greet him, especially not in accordance with the common Islamic greeting. He was therefore surprised by Aphiwe's friendly approach. Aphiwe explains, however, that by initiating conversation with people who stare at them, they are able to gain control of the situation. In doing so, they transform a seemingly uncomfortable and potentially distressing experience into a cordial and amicable encounter.

You kind of learn how to respond to the stares and how to sort of displace the gaze and try to engage the person, not how they want to engage, but something totally different...

The quotes and explanations above speak to other people's stunned reaction at observing Aphiwe's ambiguous gender expression. These also illustrate their hesitancy to interact with Aphiwe, as they expect the interaction to be uncomfortable. According to Aphiwe, this comes down to them treating their gender diverse expression as a spectacle. Aphiwe's experiences of their own gender diversity being treated as a spectacle has placed them in a position to observe, speculate and reflect on how visible gender diverse expressions are reacted to and dealt with. They also observe, speculate and reflect on what it reveals about people who treat gender diversity as a spectacle. Additionally, they are able to assess the implications that these reactions have on individuals whose gender identity is made into a spectacle.

They also assess the role that higher education institutions should play in addressing and engaging with issues of gender diversity.

In thinking about why people tend to treat visibly gender diverse individuals and their gender expressions as a spectacle, Aphiwe surmises that when encountering someone who presents themselves in a way that is inconsistent with “your preconceived ideas about how people...should act and present themselves”, people tend to fixate on the perceived difference. This fixation occurs to the point where people treat the gender diverse expression and individual as an anomaly. As Aphiwe states, “...all of a sudden they [the gender diverse individual] are alien to you...[and] you don’t know what to say to [that] person”.

The issue of the spectacle as discussed above manifests in another way. Aphiwe states so eloquently that

There’s also that fetishization of difference, which also works with the spectacle. People act interested just so they can satisfy their curiosity, not because they care about how you identify or who you are, it’s just so they can say, “Oh I know that one, they’re ‘this and this and that’”. There’s no care in it or wanting to understand who you are. It’s just to treat it as a spectacle...They fetishize difference.

Drawing on their experiences and observations as highlighted thus far, Aphiwe asserts that academic, administrative and support staff at SU should accommodate gender counter-normative students. Accommodation in this regard entails interacting with students without asking intrusive questions regarding their gender diversity, or otherwise interact with gender counter-normative students in a manner that treats their gender diversity as a spectacle. They provide an example:

Say you’re going to the fees division and they’re focused on how you present yourself and they go, “Oh okay, what are you?” Those aren’t the

questions that sexually diverse or gender diverse students have to deal with. If you go there, you're going to deal with fees, it shouldn't be a spectacle.

The abovementioned quote also sheds light on how seemingly gender conforming students are able to move with ease around the university campus without having their gender identity being brought into question. In terms of gender identity, gender conforming students, unlike gender counter-normative students, do not carry the burden of being placed in situations where they have to declare and defend their gender identity, or otherwise validate their existence.

Aphiwe asserts that the element of the spectacle that is still pervasive in the university context "is just testament to how...we still have a long way to go". Considering that "gender", like "race", is a social construct that denotes a "plurality", Aphiwe argues that South Africa should pride itself on being a multi-gendered nation as much as it prides itself on being a multi-racial nation. Aphiwe furthermore asserts that higher education institutions are accountable to society and as such are also accountable to the diversity in society. Higher education institutions such as SU should thus reflect the aforementioned ideals. During their years at SU as a student, Aphiwe has noticed that there is a lack of gender diverse knowledge production at the university. Therefore, according to Aphiwe, SU – as "hubs of critical thinking" – should host conversations about gender diversity and present modules that deal with gender diversity. They add that SU should generally promote knowledge regarding gender diversity that develops the entire campus and ultimately society as well.

#### **5.4.2.2 Invisibility imposed on gender diverse identities**

As previously mentioned Aphiwe expressed that when people attempt to place them into a category upon observing their gender ambiguous expression, they tend to not

think of Aphiwe in terms of gender categories. People instead tend to speculate about their sexual identity. They explain

“Transgender” as an identity is not the first thing that people think of when they see a gender ambiguous person, at least in my experience, because it’s a sexuality thing. Like you’re either a “soft boy” or a “butch lesbian”.

The quote above speaks to an erroneous common-held understanding of gender diversity, whereby gender identity and sexual identity are conflated. In this sense, sexual identities are prioritised and, as such, gender identities – more specifically, gender diverse identities – are rendered invisible.

Regarding our understanding of gender diversity and sexual diversity, Aphiwe surmises that “we are moving very slow”. According to Aphiwe,

When we speak of sexual diversity, we immediately think of homosexuality which I think is also problematic, because it inadvertently erases other sexual orientations. Also now, I think, when we think of gender diversity we do think “transgender”, but the male-to-female or female-to-male type of trans identities.

As such, our understanding of sexual diversity tends to only consider same-sex sexualities, thereby neglecting other diverse sexual identities. Similarly, our understanding of gender diversity tends to exclusively consider male-to-female and female-to-male transgender identities, thereby erasing other gender counter-normative identities. Even so, Aphiwe remarks, as gender diversity is already “part of our reality”, we should cease to treat it as a spectacle. We should instead become and remain “cognizant of it... because it’s something we try to suppress”. They furthermore explain

We know there are trans people; we know there are homosexual people. We know about these things, but we choose not to see diversity. We choose to live with our concessions of how things should be.

To this, Aphiwe reiterates that higher education institutions have the “resources...and the platforms to talk about gender diversity, [these institutions] just choose not to”. These aforementioned perceptions highlight but one of the ways in which the existence of sexual and gender diverse identities and individuals are marginalised as a result of our complacency with hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity.

With reference to the LesBiGay society Aphiwe explains that, besides not being interested in joining associations in general, they never felt compelled to join the LesBiGay society. This comes down to the name of the society, as it indicates that they only prioritise lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. The society’s designation thus immediately negates remaining sexual diverse identities, and gender diverse identities in general. This suggests that, even within a space that seeks to celebrate counter-normative identities and individuals, certain identities are overlooked in favour of others. Beyond the LesBiGay society, in Aphiwe’s experience, sexuality generally tends to be prioritised at SU. Moreover, same-sex sexualities in particular seem to be prioritised, and as such other sexual and gender diverse identities are left behind. This again speaks to Aphiwe’s sentiment that SU “still [has] a long way to go” in terms of transforming the university into a trans-inclusive and trans-competent<sup>21</sup> space.

#### **5.4.2.3 Coerced visibility and its potential consequences**

Although Aphiwe’s gender ambiguity makes them stand out to some people, it allows them to move freely between gender categories which they use to their advantage. As

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<sup>21</sup> Aphiwe (November 2017) introduced the term *trans-competent*, explaining that “I don’t like using the word ‘inclusive’ [referring to trans-inclusive], because you can still be an inclusive space and lack competency in dealing with trans issues.”

they explained, for instance, their gender fluidity places them in a position where they are able to use any gender-specific bathroom, regardless of its label. This in a sense allows an ease of access. They are, however, aware that transgender individuals do not necessarily have the same freedom of access. Although gender-neutral bathrooms accommodate anyone regardless of gender identity, Aphiwe questions whether gender-neutral bathrooms are indeed safe spaces for gender counter-normative individuals who prefer not to disclose their gender identity. It would be presumed that individuals entering gender-neutral bathrooms are gender counter-normative, since cisgender individuals will presumably continue to make use of gender-specific bathrooms.

According to Aphiwe, whenever transgender individuals enter a gender-neutral bathroom, they are essentially disclosing their gender identity (“outing” themselves) whether they elect to or not. In general, transgender individuals are coerced to “out” themselves whenever they are required to disclose their gender identity to get by. This could occur whenever gender diverse individuals enter spaces or make use of services that require one to disclose one’s gender identity. Aphiwe recognises that this can be particularly distressing to individuals who are more reserved or prefer to keep their gender identity to themselves. Individuals who, in other words, prefer to remain “invisible”. As Aphiwe surmises, “there is a price to visibility”, especially in a place such as SU “that is heavily hetero-patriarchal and religious Christian-oriented”.

#### **5.4.2.4 Coerced invisibility with regards to the FMF movement**

Aphiwe indicated that they did participate in the FMF movement. They attended a few of the meetings, a night vigil, and took part in a few demonstrations. Although they were not aware of any internal politics within the leadership of the movement at SU,

they became aware of such conflicts during the RMF and FMF movements at UCT when watching a stage play called *The Fall*:

[*The Fall* is] about the Fees and Rhodes Must Fall at UCT... There was a gender nonconforming student on the SRC I believe, and I remember when the students said that, "It's all about what men want, it's all about what women want, what about the non-binary students and what about the trans students?" And one of the hetero-patriarchs of the leadership was like, "That comes after, what is important is us demolishing the system and getting fees scraped and also working on racial things, gender is secondary to all of this".

Taking the abovementioned into consideration, Aphiwe was unaware of any internal struggles within the leadership of the FMF movement at SU. According to Aphiwe, there was, however, "a silencing of women, a silencing of black women, a silencing of queer women" – "queer" in terms of lesbian – during the FMF movement. The "hetero-patriarchs" of the student leadership movement at SU were thus instrumental in suppressing the influences, contributions and voices of women who sought to shed light on issues surrounding race, gender, sexual diversity and gender diversity.

#### **5.4.3 Counter-normative spaces**

Aphiwe expressed that their self-concept is tied to an "open/fluid sense of identity". This self-concept is rooted in how they were brought up and how their family responded to – and still responds – to them. Reminiscing about their childhood, Aphiwe thinks that them "not conforming to the gender roles...made [them] physically stand out, because [people] couldn't place me". Even so, Aphiwe recalls that, even as a child, they "[moved] through every space with ease", primarily because they did not "think of [themselves] in gendered terms". As such, "that fear was never part of [their] childhood". Moreover, Aphiwe does not recall feeling scared being in certain areas or

anticipating what other people would say to them or do to them as a child, as they felt a strong “sense of safety” being in their community. Aphiwe acknowledges that being surrounded by “a lot of love and support and encouragement” from their family secured their sense of safety. This therefore also secured their ability to freely move between spaces that represent the rigidity of the gender binary – such as attending soccer matches with their uncles, for instance – without fear of judgment or regulation. Considering that it was obvious that they did not conform to gender roles and practices, they explain

Where I grew up there were no questions asked...the neighbours were...everyone was just chilled about it. I don't know if they even thought about it themselves. But it was nothing questioned, it was never like, “Oh you should be this” or “You shouldn't be this”.

Aphiwe's neighbours, therefore, also never questioned or attempted to regulate Aphiwe's gender fluidity. Furthermore, their neighbours in general never questioned their identity or them “as a person”. Owing to their reputation as “the smart kid”, people more so challenged their intellectual abilities by, for instance, challenging them to complete difficult tasks. Aphiwe also used this reputation to their advantage, as they would challenge people's ideas. They explain that “if there was any ‘nastiness’...that kind of cushioned me from the nastiness...people knew, “Don't mess with the smart kid”. As already stated, however, any “nastiness” was never in reaction to Aphiwe's gender expression oppression.

Aphiwe's ability to “move with ease” between gendered spaces also relates to how they demonstrate their ability to move with ease between gender categories. Although Aphiwe was quite reserved throughout their primary school years, they started interacting more with their schoolmates during their grade 8 and 9 years. They recall

that they could comfortably “move between the boys’ and girls’ groups”. When sharing their experience during welcoming week upon arriving at SU, they explained that they lived in private accommodation and belonged to a Private Student Organisation (PSO) ward<sup>22</sup>. The PSO that Aphiwe belonged to organised student activities similar to the activities that students staying in on-campus residences took part in. They explain

And it was all, “Boys this side! Girls this side!” I went with the group where I had most friends, so if I had more guy friends there I would just go with the boys. And if more of my girl friends were there, I would go with them. Wherever I had companionship, I would go.

All in all, Aphiwe’s childhood was characterised by a strong sense of safety that enabled them to easily move between gendered spaces and gender categories. Their family and members of his community never placed them in a position where they had to question their gender identity and the way that they chose to express themselves. They were also able to use their intelligence as a shield to protect them from any potential distressing encounters. Aphiwe stressed that their family has always and continues to surround them with love, support and encouragement. Additionally, their family’s respect, acceptance and affection are apparent in how they respond to and treat them. As Aphiwe experienced the community that they grew up in as safe, the community can be considered to be a counter-normative space. Additionally, Aphiwe’s family’s continuous support of them is also tied to them being supportive of their gender counter-normativity. As such, their family provides a counter-normative space for Aphiwe.

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<sup>22</sup> “[A]lso called a PSO house or private ward; this is a grouping of PSO students who are grouped together for organisational and community-formation purposes. Such houses are grouped together along with residences into clusters and they also have a student leadership structure (including mentors for new first-year students)” (Stellenbosch University, Policy for placement in residences, and in listening, learning and living houses, as well as allocation to PSO wards and clusters, 2013:9)

As already mentioned, Aphiwe's gender ambiguity has allowed them to move between girls' and boys' groups in school and during welcoming week at SU. Aphiwe's gender ambiguity also allows them to use any public bathroom, be it gender-neutral or gender-specific. As such, Aphiwe utilises their gender ambiguity to their advantage to move between gender categories and spaces that are structured in a gender-specific manner. Their gender counter-normative actions and expressions expose the presumed legitimate divisions of binary gender-specific categories and spaces as fictitious. This therefore also subverts the perceived and imagined of the heterosexual matrix. The counter-normative actions that Aphiwe enacts not only demonstrates their agency as a resistor of the normative structure perpetuating the heterosexual matrix, but also contributes to the creation of counter-normative spaces.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented the findings as they emanated from the narratives contained in the life histories of the participants. Each life history vignette comprises the individual experiences, observations and perspectives of the participant as it relates to the general themes of surplus visibility and counter-normative spaces. The designations of these particular themes are meant to give structure to the individual life histories. Although these designations aided in the cross-case analysis of the findings that resulted from the within-case analyses of the individual life histories, these themes do not constitute the results of the cross-case analytic process investigated in Chapter 6.

In keeping with these themes, one of the ways in which surplus visibility (Patai, 1992) manifests relates to the perception that visible counter-normative individuals transgress the coercive expectation that they should remain invisible. When their

visible “transgression” is perceived, counter-normative individuals are stigmatised and alienated by individuals who embody or conform to normative expectations. More specifically, this stigmatisation comprises “the perception of excess and exaggeration whenever minorities become visible at all” (Francis, 2017a:3).

The participants’ accounts, however, displace the aforementioned “perception of excess and exaggeration”. Their accounts reveal that others’ reactions to their observable counter-normative gender expressions are typically excessive and exaggerated. In line with surplus visibility, the participants’ narratives also reveal how invisibility is imposed upon counter-normative individuals, or how they are invisibilised. The invisibilisation of counter-normative individuals also played out within the FMF movement at SU.

Lesedi and Valerie’s accounts additionally speak to how they have felt compelled to remain “invisible” in order to escape the distress that comes along with surplus visibility. This compulsion echoes Patai’s (1992:35-36) assertion that “[s]urplus visibility reinforces the invisibility imposed on the marginalized by making it safer to go one’s own way quietly, without calling attention to oneself”. The participants’ accounts furthermore disclose that the aforementioned is not always possible. In navigating rigidly structured gender-specific spaces, the visibility of one’s counter-normative gender expression is inevitable. This led Aphiwe to conclude that the establishment of isolated gender-neutral facilities – in the attempt to accommodate gender diverse individuals – within a university space that reflects the hegemonic cisnormative gender binary could potentially do more harm than good.

Relatedly, the findings as they relate to the notion of *counter-normative spaces* reveal that hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity is pervasive throughout and within all spaces in

society (Worthen, 2016) – including within the institutional space of SU, for instance, that is structured and organised in ways that reflect the gender binary – and as such perpetuates the marginalisation of, and creates exclusionary or unwelcoming spaces for, gender counter-normative individuals (Hames, 2007, 2016; Matthyse, 2017).

In light of this, *counter-normative spaces* refer to spaces that the participants have frequented and belonged to that they have experienced as safe, inclusive, welcoming, accommodating, supportive and assist in their personal development. Within the university context specifically, counter-normative spaces meet the aforementioned specifications and also assist in their academic and co-curricular development. Counter-normative spaces take the form of places, services, associations, support networks and communities that, on the whole, empower and validate counter-normative individuals. The participants have also demonstrated that they have navigated oppressive spaces in ways that have enabled them to create counter-normative spaces for themselves. As such, the participants have contributed – and continue to contribute – to the formation of counter-normative spaces.

The conclusion as delineated above simultaneously comprises a summation of the present chapter, and previews the discussions presented in the chapter that follows. Surplus visibility ties in with the macro-theme of *gender expression oppression*, and counter-normative spaces introduces the macro-theme of *counter-normative spaces* to be discussed in the following chapter. Framing the conclusion in this manner provides the reader a glimpse of the transition between the two stages of the analytic process that I employed. The first stage of analysis involved within-case analysis, and the second stage of analysis involved cross-case. To reiterate, the findings of the within-case analysis are presented in the present chapter, and the interpretations of the cross-case analysis are presented in the following chapter – namely Chapter 6.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

The overall discussions contained in the current chapter present the results of the cross-case analysis of the findings as presented in Chapter 5. The interpretive discussions are primarily informed by my theoretical framework as contained in Chapter 2. In addition, the discussions as presented in the current chapter occasionally draw on relevant literature as explored in Chapter 3.

First, I discuss *gender expression oppression*. This section entails the moments of the participants' narratives that speak to the general marginalisation of and antagonistic reactions to counter-normative expressions of gender that challenge prescriptive cisnormative expectations of gender performativity. This section considers how gender expression oppression connects with surplus visibility, symbolic power, and the internalisation of gender expression oppression. The discussion and mentions of surplus visibility within the present chapter further investigates the theme of surplus visibility as contained in Chapter 5.

Next, I discuss *counter-normative spaces*. Chapter 5 already introduced the notion of counter-normative spaces. Within the current chapter, the notion of counter-normative spaces is further interrogated. The social agents that compose counter-normative spaces, and the overall threat to the effective and prolonged functioning of these spaces is also considered. This section also tentatively considers the role of SU in transforming the entire university environment, and all its constituent structures, facilities and services, into a counter-normative space.

Finally, I turn to a discussion of *agency and resistance*. This section especially prioritises the subjectivities of the participants by exploring how they enact their

agency. The exploration of how, and the various ways in which, the participants enact their agency primarily constitute how they remain resilient whilst navigating gender diverse oppressive structures and spaces. How the participants enact their agency also relates to how they challenge the heterosexual matrix and particularly cisnormative standards and expectations. The section also explores the interrelationship of and draws a comparison between individual agency and collective agency.

As mentioned, the present chapter covers interpretive cross-case discussions of the findings presented in Chapter 5. Although the cross-case discussions predominantly consider the commonalities between the participants' narratives, the variances between the participants' experiences are also of significance to the present study. Since there are only three participants, the moments where their experiences diverge become quite prominent. Additionally, as explained in chapter 5, the individuality of each participant is unquestionable. I will thus – where the digressing experiences and perspectives of the participants are of relevant importance to the discussions – refer to the participants by name. Certain assertions made by the participants also at times eloquently underscore the interpretations presented in this chapter. As such, where I make mention of their assertions, it would only be appropriate to accredit them by name.

## **6.2 Gender expression oppression**

### **6.2.1 Gender expression oppression in relation to surplus visibility**

Certain responses provided by the participants illustrate how the heterosexual matrix accounts for the organisation of a society with unequal power relations. Within this structure of unequal power relations, individuals with sexual and gender identities that

do not align with hetero-cis-normative expectations tend to be marginalised. According to Worthen (2016:34), homophobia and transphobia are intertwined with heteronormative and cisnormative attitudes, as both phobias are symptoms of hetero-cis-normativity. It follows then that heterosexual and cisgender individuals who conform to and benefit from hetero-cis-normativity tend to have heteronormative and cisnormative attitudes. Hetero-cis-normative attitudes may thus also manifest in homophobic and transphobic attitudes. More specifically, cisgender individuals who conform to and benefit from cisnormativity tend to display transphobic attitudes and engage in trans antagonistic<sup>23</sup> behaviour.

The responses as relayed by the participants reveal that such attempts at transphobic oppression manifest particularly in the form of gender expression oppression. Gender expression oppression affects individuals with noticeable counter-normative expressions of gender, as these expressions reject and complicate the gender binary. Gender expression oppression, as delineated in the vignettes presented in Chapter 5, significantly relates to surplus visibility (Patai, 1992). The notion of surplus visibility accounts for the coerced invisibility of gender counter-normative individuals. Surplus visibility also acknowledges that visible gender diverse individuals are typically stigmatised in an attempt to sustain the aforementioned coerced invisibility (Patai, 1992; Francis, 2017a).

As the visibility of gender counter-normative individuals and expressions is inevitable, the manifestations of surplus visibility considerably feature in the everyday lives of gender diverse individuals. Lesedi and Valerie felt compelled to evade the effects of

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<sup>23</sup> Trans antagonism refers to the “[a]ctive hostility, opposition, aggression and/or violence towards trans people. Trans antagonism reflects a hatred of those who do not fit easily into the gender binary.” (Anti-Violence Project, 2018)

surplus visibility by occasionally choosing to, and expressing a desire to, remain invisible. Their occasional desires and decisions to be invisible additionally led them to speculate that other gender counter-normative students share similar desires, and/or even choose to remain invisible altogether. In navigating the SU campus space, gender diverse students thus at times have to negotiate between facing the gender expression oppression that comes with surplus visibility or finding a way to inconspicuously evade the gender expression oppression that comes with surplus visibility (Patai, 1992). It however seems that, to convincingly be inconspicuous, one has to either “pass”<sup>24</sup> – in spaces where others are not knowledgeable of one’s gender diverse identity – or altogether suppress one’s counter-normative gender identity and expression.

The forms of gender expression oppression that come with surplus visibility relate to how others have reacted to the participants’ gender counter-normative identities and expressions. Although “perception of excess and exaggeration” (Francis, 2017a:3) is cast upon counter-normative individuals in an effort to alienate them. The participants’ narratives, however, reveal that others’ reactions to their visible gender diverse expressions are typically excessive and exaggerated. This thus displaces the presumption that counter-normative individuals engage in excessive and exaggerated behaviours. As mentioned, this presumption is mainly made by the dominant group of individuals who personify or conform to normative standards.

The participants’ accounts furthermore showcase that agents of gender expression oppression tend to display and/or engage in exaggerated and offensive attitudes and behaviours. The enactment of these attitudes and behaviours have the potential or

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<sup>24</sup> “Passing refers to a transgender person’s ability to be correctly perceived as the gender they identify as and beyond that, to *not* be perceived as transgender.” (Lee, 2017)

actual consequence of silencing, alienating, invalidating, harming or otherwise marginalising counter-normative individuals. The aforementioned effects of gender expression oppression were both experienced and observed by the participants, and originated from instances of:

- their and others' gender diverse expressions being fetishized or treated as a spectacle,
- their and others' gender diversity being interrogated,
- their and others' gender diverse expressions being regulated and policed,
- them being misgendered,
- them and others being ignored or silenced based on their gender identity,
- them and others having to consistently affirm their gender identity,
- them having to stay in campus residences that were not conducive to actualising their gender identity,
- them being verbally harassed and discriminated against as to not attain student leadership positions,
- and them and others being physically harassed.

The abovementioned experiences and observations constitute forms of gender expression oppression. These experiences and observations include instances of coerced invisibility and exaggerated responses to noticeable gender diverse expressions. They also contributed to particularly Lesedi and Valerie's occasional desires of being rendered undetectable or invisible. These experiences and observations are thus closely linked to surplus visibility. In addition, the abovementioned experiences and observations occurred primarily within the university campus context. However, some of these also took place outside of the

temporal confines of the participants' enrolment at the university and the spatial confines of the university space.

### **6.2.2 Gender expression oppression as symbolic violence**

The participants' observed and lived experiences of gender expression oppression primarily consist of experiences of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence refers to "non-physical violence or 'power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force'" (Cornell et al., 2016:100). Symbolic violence corresponds to the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix similarly positions the misleading conflation of biological sex, gender identity, sexual orientation as legitimate. The aforementioned presumed normative credibility of conflating conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality in part relates to the presumed legitimacy of heteronormative and cisnormative classifications. The present thesis furthermore considers how especially cisnormative classifications are embedded and reflected in social organisation. For now, the study considers the salient forms of symbolic violence as engendered by cisnormative and other hegemonic structures within the SU context.

The findings in the present study echo observations of symbolic violence made by gender counter-normative students at selected South African higher education institutions as outlined by Cornell et al. (2006) and Ndelu (2017). These instances of symbolic violence, in consideration with hegemonic cisnormative classifications, include the structural design of university facilities that are segregated along the lines of the gender binary. This structural design endorses cisgendered assumptions about gender. It additionally accounts for the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms on the university campus, and the lack of visible gender-inclusive student services. For all its

efforts at gender diverse inclusivity thus far, the university generally remains an exclusionary space for gender diverse students. The social exclusion of gender counter-normative individuals as such constitutes symbolic violence.

In Cornell et al.'s (2016) study a student at UCT explained that the discourse at the university positions the white, male, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class student as the "ideal student". Any student who diverges from this token of the "ideal student" could be subjected to alienation and marginalisation. The participants from my study shared similar sentiments. They perceive SU as a space that sustains and perpetuates both a normative structure and institutional culture that accommodates and privileges white, cisgender, heterosexual, Afrikaans-speaking student. As a result, students who do not fit into one, some or all of these aforementioned identity markers tend to be marginalised. The aforementioned observation speaks to the intersectionality of different normative systems, and the intersectionality of different social categories of identity. The notion of intersectionality, as it relates to normative systems and social identities, will be explored further at a later stage.

The participants explain that gender diverse students have to constantly affirm their gender identity when navigating everyday life on campus. This is inevitable in any space that sustains the gender binary, as these spaces negate and invisibilise gender diversity. The coerced invisibility that operates within these spaces is, again, related to the notion of surplus visibility. Having to constantly affirm one's gender in navigating everyday life can be a distressing, and potentially physically violent, experience to a gender diverse individual. This relates to Ndelu's (2017) assertion that students' access cards, that typically display gender-specific ascriptions of identity, "out" gender counter-normative students without their consent. This leaves them "vulnerable to discrimination and violence" (Ndelu, 2017:29). In comparison, gender conforming

individuals have the privilege of navigating their daily lives without having to disclose and affirm their gender identity. Not being afforded this gender conforming privilege, and the potential threat to personal safety, also constitute forms of symbolic violence.

Whereas Ndelu (2017) limits involuntary “outing” to student access cards, the participants in my study broadened this form of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence in this regard comprises any activity and interaction that requires gender diverse students to forcibly and involuntarily disclose their gender identity in order to get by. Aphiwe also asserted that gender diverse individuals would even have to involuntarily “out” themselves when entering gender-neutral bathrooms. Already related to surplus visibility in Chapter 5, this assertion speaks to the pervasiveness of cisgendered assumptions about gender. As cisnormative assumptions about gender is embedded and reflected in the structural design of the university campus, gender-neutral spaces would be rather conspicuous. This also indicates how hegemonic cisnormativity is able to operate in a manner that thwarts counter-normative spaces intended to be gender diverse inclusive. Additionally, the gender identities of individuals who frequent highly visible counter-normative spaces are left open to speculation. As a form of symbolic violence, gender expression oppression as results from the hegemonic cisnormative structure continues to undermine the dignity and possibly the safety of gender diverse individuals.

### **6.2.3 The pervasive ignorance of gender diversity**

The findings in the present study bring other instances of symbolic violence, and symbolic violence as it overlaps with surplus visibility, to the fore. The implications thereof and how it affects gender counter-normative individuals are also brought to the fore. These instances of gender expression oppression and its implications for gender

diverse individuals are unique to the study as it relates to Chapter 3. The pervasive ignorance of gender diversity as a form of gender expression contained in the present section therefore augments the existing literature presented in Chapter 3.

The societal and institutional silence surrounding, and denial of, gender diversity correlates with the pervasive ignorance amongst cisgender individuals regarding gender diverse individuals and gender diverse issues. This, again, stems from the current gender hegemony that presupposes that gender is strictly binary. The current gender hegemony overlooks and ignores gender identities and expressions of gender that transcend, complicate, resist and subvert the gender binary. The reader will note the parallel with pervasive coerced invisibility of gender counter-normativity in relation to surplus visibility.

The findings in the present study reveal that the pervasive ignorance regarding gender diversity has particular intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences for gender diverse individuals. The intrapersonal consequences relate to one's ability to construct and develop one's gender identity, specifically with reference to one's access – or lack thereof – to information about gender diversity. The interpersonal consequences relate to how especially cisgender individuals react to gender diverse individuals and gender counter-normative expressions. These intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences primarily contribute to and exemplify the symbolic violence of gender expression oppression that gender diverse individuals are subjected to.

As explained in Chapter 3, the present thesis argues that the personal construction and development of gender identity is a process that occurs in relation to the macrostructure of gender as a binary system. The effects of the compulsive nature of cisnormativity – a feature of the hegemonic gender binary – became apparent in the

participants' narratives as explored in Chapter 5. As such, the present thesis posits that access to knowledge with respect to gender diversity is crucial to a fulfilling development of one's gender identity. Furthermore, the deficiency or absence of accurate information dealing with gender diversity could hinder the realisation and actualisation of gender counter-normative individuals' gender identity.

There is thus an urgent need for the widespread dissemination of gender diverse knowledge that is easily accessible. The systemic silencing and invisibilising of gender counter-normative individuals and identities does a disservice to individuals who would benefit from, or whose gender identity development would rely on, attaining information dealing with gender diverse issues. Additionally, and within the university context, the findings as outlined in Chapter 5 attest to the systemic silencing of gender counter-normative individuals and identities that remains pervasive at SU in general.

SU's *Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019-2024* (Stellenbosch University, 2018:14) positions the university as "Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where [the university] advance[s] knowledge in service of society". The mission contained in the framework positions SU as "a research-intensive university...a place connected to the world, while enriching and transforming local, continental and global communities" (Stellenbosch University, 2018:15). Taking this into consideration, SU positions itself as a higher education institution that facilitates both social development and knowledge production, development and dissemination.

SU should therefore be responsible for the production, development and dissemination of knowledge concerned with gender diverse issues. Doing so would both reflect the gender diversity in society, and further transform the university and

broader local context to be more inclusive of gender diversity. To reiterate, I draw on the argument made by Aphiwe when they assert that higher education institutions as “hubs of critical thinking” are accountable to society as a whole. They added that higher education institutions should thus also be accountable to the gender diversity in society.

Francis (2017b:146) asserts that it is necessary for schools to affirm sexuality diversity that prevents the discrimination of sexual diverse identities and individuals. He furthermore advocates for the teaching of sexuality and gender diversity (Francis, 2017b:131). Drawing on Francis’ aforementioned arguments, and considering the scope of the present study, I contend that higher education institutions should incorporate gender diversity and promote knowledge regarding gender counter-normativity. Furthermore, higher education institutions should be responsible for producing, developing and disseminating gender diverse knowledge that is easily accessible to individuals within and outside of its educational contexts.

Such significant gender diversity education would also dispel the common-held misconception of gender that conflates gender and sex, or gender and sexuality – a misconception in line with the heterosexual matrix. Gender diversity education would additionally challenge the silence that oppresses and suppresses gender diverse identities, expressions and individuals. The common-held conflation of gender and sexuality became apparent when the participants explained some of the ways in which others have reacted to their visible gender counter-normative expressions. All things considered, the adequate dissemination of information regarding gender counter-normative identities, individuals and related issues is crucial. Exposure to information about diverse gender identities could arguably enable individuals to better recognise

and question restrictive gender norms and better understand gender identity and expression.

As already mentioned, the pervasive ignorance surrounding gender diversity is sustained by hegemonic cisnormativity. Hegemonic cisnormativity in turn seeks to marginalise, regulate and punish gender diverse identities, expressions and individuals in a way that coerces individuals into conforming to said cisnormativity. As such, gender diverse and especially cisgender individuals are subjects of the pervasive ignorance surrounding gender diversity. Although individuals are coerced into conforming to cisnormativity, the observations made by Aphiwe suggest that this ignorance is sometimes engaged with willingly. According to Aphiwe, members of society are aware of the gender diversity that is already part of our reality. However, we instead choose to suppress this diversity in favour of our beliefs of how society should be structured, and our belief that individuals should conform to the status quo.

As this status quo and the structure of society is informed by the cisnormative gender hegemony, individuals conforming to cisnormativity become complicit actors who sustain and perpetuate the current gender hegemony. This complicity entails, as mentioned, choosing to overlook the gender diversity already present in society. This complicity also involves being complacent with a macrostructure that sets out to marginalise, regulate and punish gender diversity. As stated in the Chapter 3, cisnormativity also represents a hierarchical system of dominance and subordination in which cisgender individuals are regarded as superior to gender diverse individuals. It can therefore be argued that the actors sustaining the gender hegemony do so in order to benefit from the privilege awarded to individuals who conform to socially endorsed “gender appropriate” ways of being (Case et al., 2012; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Lucal, 1999). This also speaks to the individual and collective agency that goes

into sustaining the cisnormative gender hegemony. The present thesis will later discuss the individual and collective agency of the gender counter-normative participants and their allies.

The discussions thus far primarily deal with participants' experiences of gender expression oppression as symbolic violence. Although the participants did not disclose incidents of physical violence, it should be noted that they brought up the existent high incidence rate of transphobic violence and transphobic fatal violence that is pervasive throughout the country (Wilhelm, 2017; Jagmohan, 2018; DeBarros, 2018). This suggests that the reality of transphobic (fatal) violence has a significant impact on the participants.

#### **6.2.4 Internalised gender expression oppression**

To reiterate, the hegemonic structure of cis-normativity dictates and perpetuates the gendered standards, roles and behaviours/expressions that individuals are expected to conform to. As such, individuals who conform to cisnormativity internalise cisnormative standards and expectations as they resort to live and express themselves within the confines of the gender binary. Furthermore, and extending the argument made by Worthen (2016), individuals who internalise cisnormativity tend to adopt transphobic attitudes and behaviours.

The previous paragraph relates to gender conforming individuals in particular. However, gender counter-normative individuals are surrounded by individuals who engage in gender expression oppressive behaviours and exhibit gender expression oppressive attitudes. Gender counter-normative individuals additionally navigate structural and social environments that constantly reinforce gender expression oppression and accordingly operates to negate their existence. Considering their

positionality, gender expression oppression can affect gender counter-normative individuals in a way that socialises them to internalise gender expression oppression.

The internalised gender expression oppression of gender diverse individuals – as becomes apparent in Lesedi's narrative in Chapter 5 – leads one to suppress one's gender identity and/or refrain from expressing one's gender in counter-normative ways. The pressure to suppress one's gender identity relates back to the notion of surplus visibility (Patai, 1992). Surplus visibility attempts to force counter-normative individuals to succumb to and assume the invisibility imposed upon them. Although not expressed by the participants, gender counter-normative individuals who internalise gender expression oppression could also exhibit or display gender expression oppressive behaviours and attitudes towards other visible gender diverse individuals. Gender counter-normative individuals who internalise gender expression oppression can thus also become actors of gender expression oppression.

Cisgender and gender counter-normative individuals who internalise gender expression oppression thus refrain from outwardly expressing gender in counter-normative ways and/or condemn others who display gender in counter-normative ways. For gender counter-normative individuals, internalised gender oppression furthermore involves a suppression of their gender identity. The aforementioned manifestations of internalised gender expression are in line with prescriptive cisnormative expectations as perpetuated by the current gender hegemony. Individuals who internalise gender expression oppression therefore, although to varying degrees, become agents in the continued perpetuation of a cisnormative gender structure that operates to marginalise and alienate genderqueer individuals. The internalisation and resultant enactment of gender expression oppression therefore specifically targets and significantly impacts gender diverse individuals in

particular. Taken altogether, the experience and implications of internalised gender expression oppression is thus both an effect of gender expression oppression, and instrumental in the continued maintenance or perpetuation of gender expression oppression.

### **6.3 Counter-normative spaces**

#### **6.3.1 Forms of counter-normative spaces**

The participants identified support services, structures and networks at SU that either contribute to or constitute what this thesis considers to be counter-normative spaces. Structural counter-normative spaces take the form of university facilities and services that incorporate strategies of gender diversity and set out to accommodate gender diverse students. Relationally, social counter-normative spaces primarily take the form of support networks. These support networks include the participants' friends, families, and communities. Friendship, familial, and community networks therefore take the form of and/or contribute to the formation of counter-normative spaces. The notion of support networks as providing and contributing to inclusive spaces also speaks to the capacity of collective influence in contributing to the formation of counter-normative spaces. The notion of collective agency, along with the individual agency of the participants, will be discussed at a later stage.

Valerie asserted that – despite SU's prevailing exclusion of gender counter-normative students – gender counter-normative students have the capacity to create safe spaces for themselves. Accordingly, the participants' accounts revealed their individual contributions to the formation of counter-normative spaces. The participants demonstrated this capability by, for instance:

- navigating gender-specific constructed environments to their advantage,
- challenging and educating individuals who misgender them,
- unabashedly expressing their gender identity,
- contributing to the creation of safe spaces for other gender counter-normative individuals,
- and advocating for the implementation of gender-neutral public bathrooms on campus.

The participants subvert the hegemonic cisnormative structure by creating safe spaces for themselves and others within environments that marginalise gender diverse students. They thus not only challenge the validity of hegemonic cisnormativity, but also contribute to the creation of counter-normative spaces. In navigating the SU campus space, the participants demonstrate a multitude of ways in which they subvert the current gender hegemony and contribute to the creation of counter-normative spaces. The study thus positions the participants as agents of resistance against hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity – or the heterosexual matrix – and will discuss this assertion in detail at a later stage.

### **6.3.2 Hegemonic cisnormativity within counter-normative spaces**

As previously alluded to, hegemonic cisnormativity and the marginalisation that it entails manifest in a manner that infiltrates spaces that are intended to be counter-normative. The participants' sentiments regarding their participation in the FMF movement at SU communicate a suppression of sexual diversity and gender diversity. The initiative instead prioritised the issue of race. The intersections of gender and sexuality in relation to race was altogether ignored. Taken into consideration alongside the March 2016 protest led by gender diverse student activists at UCT, these FMF

experiences convey a history of the silencing and censorship of gender counter-normative students and their contributions to student protest movements.

The pervasiveness of the hetero-cis-normative structure, through the actions of agents in defence of patriarchy, infiltrated the FMF movement at SU. The student activist leaders who acted as agents of patriarchy suppressed the influences, contributions and voices of women student leaders and activists. These women student leaders and activists comprised black women, queer women, transgender women. As the FMF initiative was meant to be intersectional movement upon its inception, it could potentially have represented a counter-normative space. However, the actions of the hetero-patriarchal leaders of the initiative derailed the intersectional cornerstone of the movement. This sheds light on the capacity of students to also be active and instrumental in the marginalisation of other students. It also provides an example of how pervasive hetero-cis-normativity corrupted a movement that intended to provide a counter-normative space.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Lesedi and Valerie commended the LesBiGay society for creating a space that intends to support and celebrate sexual and gender diverse students. At the same time, however, they acknowledged that the LesBiGay society tends to neglect issues that pertain to gender diverse individuals. Aphiwe took note of the society's designation, *LesBiGay*, as presenting itself as an association that prioritises same-sex and bisexual identities. This observation was in line with their overall experience of SU as an environment that prioritises same-sex identities, and therefore marginalises other sexual diverse identities, and gender diverse identities altogether.

As such, the society – as an association that aims to support sexual and gender diverse students – is not immune to the pervasive and insidious nature of the hetero-cis-normative macrostructure. The hetero-cis-normative structure is reflected in, and further perpetuated by, the surrounding gender-specific structures and hetero-cis-normative institutional culture of the university. Although the society intends to create a counter-normative space, it paradoxically engages in exclusionary practices that have left the participants feeling alienated from the very association that claims to welcome and support them.

The abovementioned examples of how hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity infiltrates and undermines intended counter-normative spaces occur primarily within the SU context. Additionally, the participants' university experiences suggest that, although undeniably necessary, the mere construction of gender-neutral structures and the provision of selected gender diverse designated services, do not constitute sufficient attempts at accommodating gender diverse staff and students. At present, there is essentially an absence of a concerted effort on the part of SU to dismantle hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity.

Msibi (2013) that calls for the adoption of a queer approach to transformation in higher education. Centring this argument within the context of the research site of the present study, SU should be obligated to transform the university into a counter-normative space. SU as a counter-normative space would competently affirm, welcome and support gender diverse individuals and their needs. A queer approach to transformation should thus be adopted to ensure the adequate implementation of gender diverse-inclusive policies and strategies throughout the university environment. The configuration and implementation of queer policy and strategy frameworks should be cognisant of and account for the insidious nature of hetero-cis-

normativity embedded in the university's structures and its institutional culture. Doing so would simultaneously demonstrate a commitment to dismantling, and comprise a method of attempting to dismantle, the heterosexual matrix and related hetero-cis-normativity that pervades the university space. This would, by extension, demonstrate a commitment to dismantling, and involve an attempt at dismantling, the related marginalisation of gender and sexual diverse staff and students.

In sharing a positive experience of her lectures, Lesedi relayed that her lecturers and fellow classmates accordingly and respectfully responded to her gender identity. On another note, the intersectionality of student experiences will be discussed soon. In addition to the argument that SU should queer its transformation policies and strategies, Lesedi's positive lecture experience evinces the potential of the university's learning environments to be counter-normative. The university has the potential to create learning environments that comprise spaces that are inclusive of gender diversity. These counter-normative learning environments would also be instrumental in sensitising individuals to be considerate of gender diverse individuals, identities and issues. All in all, Lesedi's lecture experience evinces the potential of the university to establish learning environments that challenge the effects of the hegemonic hetero-cis-normative structure.

Conversely, participant accounts disclose the prevalence of transphobic behaviours from other students in response to the visible gender counter-normativity of the participants. This reveals the capacity of individual and collective agency in contributing to the social exclusion of gender diverse identities and issues. It relatedly reveals that and how homophobic and transphobic individuals actively participate in the continued perpetuation of hetero-cis-normativity. The already pervasive nature of hetero-cis-normativity in the institutional culture of the university contributes to a

climate that condones and even encourages students to display and engage in homophobic and transphobic attitudes and behaviours. The pervasive nature of hetero-cis-normativity also, as previously argued, begets the pervasive ignorance regarding gender diversity. The pervasive ignorance regarding gender diversity within the university context therefore also creates an environment that condones trans-antagonistic attitudes and behaviours.

In acknowledging the potential of the university to create learning environments that constitute counter-normative spaces, the abovementioned explanation serves as a reminder of how the institutional culture of SU does its part in coercing individuals to conform to hetero-cis-normative standards. It furthermore demonstrates how SU's institutional culture enables individual and collective agents of the hetero-cis-normative structure to scrutinise, regulate and punish other individuals who challenge or who are perceived to challenge these standards. This assertion therefore points to the necessity of the university to create learning environments that

- educate staff and students on issues of sexual and gender diversity,
- adequately sensitise individuals to the experiences and needs of sexual and gender diverse individuals,
- and as such do their part in dismantling the oppressive nature of hetero-cis-normativity presently embedded in the structural design and institutional culture of the university context.

This also includes the commitment to counteract the potential of the hegemonic hetero-cis-normative structure to invade and undermine counter-normative spaces.

The notion of intersectionality as introduced in Chapter 2 has been repeatedly mentioned and alluded to throughout Chapter 5 and the present chapter. In

aggregating all of these aforementioned instances of intersectionality, intersectionality manifests in various forms and within various situational contexts within the broader university space. A simplified view of intersectionality, as related to the participants' narratives, holds that the intersections of normative systems and strategies within the university context influence how the participants navigate their lives. Furthermore, the participants' narratives in relation to intersectionality positions them as individuals whose constructed identities are shaped by the intersections of multiple identity markers. In other words, student experiences indicate the interrelated intersectionality of both human lived experiences and normative systems and strategies as they operate within university context.

SU is informed by various historical and systemic conditions, rooted in the racial and (cis-) heteronormative orders of the apartheid regime (Francis, 2019), that converge to embed a multitude of oppressive structures. It thus appears that the university's institutional/transformation policies and strategies should be calibrated to incorporate a queer, intersectional framework. The aforementioned assertion draws on Msibi's (2013) argument calling for the incorporation of queer theory and intersectionality as a framework. A queer, intersectional transformation framework would constitute a useful method to devise a more holistic approach to transformation policies and scholarship in higher education institutions (Msibi, 2013). Drawing on Matthyse (2017:124) the effective implementation of queer, intersectional institutional/transformation policies relies on a serious commitment from the functionaries responsible for the implementation of the policies. The aforementioned serious commitment should therefore be upheld by:

- the university management,
- the different leadership bodies within the university,
- and the administrative, support and academic staff of the university.

## **6.4 Agency & Resistance**

### **6.4.1 Individual agency and resistance**

Growing up, Lesedi had to reconcile her counter-normative gender identity within environments that coerced her to conform to cisnormativity. In reconciling these two conflicts, she elected to perform her identity in a gender-neutral manner. I assert that, for her, performing and expressing her gender in a gender-neutral manner was a strategy Lesedi enacted to simultaneously protect herself and exert her agency in resisting the heterosexual matrix. In employing this strategy, Lesedi showcased her resilience at the time.

This example of resistance in the face of oppression demonstrates that resistance is not necessarily enacted in a forceful or commanding way as could be expected. Resistance can therefore also take on a more subtle approach. In addition to the abovementioned resistance strategy, I will proceed to discuss other examples of the resistances that the participants perform. In doing so I strive to convey that acts of resistance take on various and nuanced forms. Although the methods of resistance differ, the participants' ability to enact resistance demonstrates their agency and resilience in navigating and overcoming the challenges imposed by the heterosexual matrix.

All of the participants utilised their experiential knowledge and learning about gender diversity to good advantage in navigating their childhood and adolescent years. This navigation took place both within and outside of their school contexts. In enacting their

agency, the participants employed their experiential knowledge and their access to resources to protect and create betterment for themselves, thereby demonstrating their resilience. The participants also demonstrated their agency in educating themselves and attaining and applying the knowledge that was necessary for them to develop their gender identity on their own terms. To reiterate, the examples of agentic action and resilience above occur in opposition to hetero-cis-normativity and as such display acts of resistance to the heterosexual matrix.

The participants have the advantage of occupying the roles of both insider and outsider observers. The observations that they have made in light of their insider and outsider perspectives have made them attentive to the challenges that gender diverse individuals navigate. They have also become attentive to the forms of gender expression oppression that they and other gender diverse individuals encounter. Additionally, their insider and outsider observations have equipped them to skilfully navigate and circumvent especially instances of gender expression oppression. In navigating and circumventing instances of gender expression oppression, the participants have learned to handle these experiences with humour. At times, they even employ humour to engage with individuals who appear to be discomforted – a discomfort they impose on themselves – by the participants' counter-normative gender expressions. The participants, furthermore, also at times engage with individuals in ways that displaces the gender expression oppression that they attempt to impose on the participants. In doing so, the participants also challenge these individuals' preconceived notions of gender diverse individuals and expressions.

The participants have also conveyed stories of trans antagonistic encounters. In telling these stories they have revealed that they typically maintain their composure and disregard others' attempts to make them feel ashamed of their gender counter-

normative expressions. In doing so, the participants refuse to succumb to the attempted regulation and punishment of their gender counter-normative identities and expressions. As stated, attempts at regulation and punishment constitute oppressive strategies intended to coerce individuals who exhibit and enact gender counter-normative expressions to conform to cisnormative expectations. A refusal to succumb to attempts at regulation and punishment furthermore displays rejection of cisnormative expectations and the overall cisnormative structure. This, at the same time, troubles the presumed legitimacy of cisnormativity and demonstrates the fragility of the cisnormative structure. Considering Butler (1990), the abovementioned examples of participants' agentic resistances to hetero-cis-normative standards and expectations also troubles the presumed legitimacy of the heterosexual matrix and exposes its fragility. Chapter 5 also details instances of how the participants

- “found loopholes”,
- utilised existing student support structures,
- and approached university support staff members and university residence heads as they took charge in mitigating their experiences and incidents of gender expression oppression.

The participants even succeeded in doing so whilst having to navigate various intersecting systems of oppression within the university structures that they frequented. Chapter 5 also explores how the participants have had to take on the role of an educator in responding to actors of gender expression oppression. In educating perpetrators of gender expression oppression – in lectures and workplaces for instance – the participants challenged the hetero-cis-normativity that pervaded these environments. The participants therefore also become instrumental in – and even become pioneers in – creating counter-normative spaces.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Lesedi became a member of an on-campus transformation committee where she advocated for the implementation of gender-neutral bathrooms. Lesedi, in other words, demonstrated her agency by choosing to engage in advocacy aimed at securing safe spaces for gender diverse students. Here she used her voice to advocate for one of the ways in which the university can adequately accommodate and include gender counter-normative staff and students. She is thus influential in the potential establishment of structural counter-normative spaces within the university context.

The present section has thus far delineated the opportune, creative, innovative, pedagogical and advocative methods of resistance that the participants enacted in opposition to the hegemony of the hetero-cis-normative structure. Furthering the topic of counter-normative spaces, I now consider how the participants employed university support services and drew on support networks. In doing so I also introduce the link between counter-normative spaces and collective agency.

#### **6.4.2 Collective agency and resistance**

The participants utilised the student support services available to them and joined student-centred support networks to aid them in the promotion of their personal wellbeing and development. The participants also drew on support networks as they presented opportunities to engage in recreational activities. Correspondingly, Valerie expressed that it is important for gender diverse individuals to enjoy themselves. She added that it is important for gender diverse individuals to take advantage of enjoyable moments that they do not necessarily have to create for themselves. It becomes apparent that the participants exerted their agency by seeking out and creating opportunities that counterbalances the marginalisation, alienation and discrimination

produced by hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity. The participants therefore display their resilience by prioritising their personal well-being and development. They do this by seeking out support where available when needed, surrounding themselves with individuals that validate and support them, and being mindful of the importance of seeking enjoyment in their everyday lives.

As the participants drew on the assistance and fellowship of other individuals, it comes to light that their individual agency at times coincides within the context of collective action. Their ability to change their circumstances for the better relied on engagement with others and a sense of belonging to a community. Additionally, the friendship, familial and community networks that the participants belong to are characterised by camaraderie, affection/love, security and encouragement. Their connection to the participants positions them as networks that validate the participants and, by extension, the participants' identities as gender counter-normative individuals. As such, these networks constitute counter-normative spaces.

Aphiwe revealed that their family has always accordingly responded to their gender counter-normative expression. As such, Aphiwe's family contributed to the creation of a counter-normative space. Their belonging to this counter-normative network played a part in the participant's ability to construct and express their gender identity outside of the limitations perpetuated by the heterosexual matrix. Additionally, Aphiwe's neighbours never questioned their movements between and within the gendered spaces of their community. The community therefore also contributed to the creation of a counter-normative space.

Furthermore, Aphiwe enacts their agency by moving between binary gender categories and spaces that are structured in a gender-specific manner with ease. They

therefore expose these binary gender classifications and divisions as fictitious and fallible. They thus also subvert the perceived and imagined validity of the heterosexual matrix. The counter-normative actions that Aphiwe enacts not only demonstrates their agency as a resistor of the normative structure perpetuating the heterosexual matrix, but also contributes to the formation of counter-normative spaces that further subverts the heterosexual matrix. To reiterate, the participant's current independent capability to subvert and trouble the hetero-cis-normative structure by transcending its boundaries can be traced back to the collective agency of their family and the community that they grew up in. The collective agency of their family and community manifests in their creation of, and them constituting, the counter-normative spaces that made it easier for the participant to resist the heterosexual matrix. Their family and community were thus collectively also instrumental in resisting the heterosexual matrix.

As already discussed, Valerie and Aphiwe participated in the FMF movement, which indicates that they engaged with others in collective advocacy. Although the FMF movement at SU essentially overlooked gender counter-normative students, Chapter 3 of the present thesis provides examples of the potential of collective student advocacy to facilitate institutional change at higher education institutions. As discussed, the Trans University Forum (TUF!) report credits *The trans\* Collective* activist group at UCT, and gender counter-normative student and staff activists at Wits and UFS for their collective activism that put pressure on their respective universities to be more gender diverse-inclusive and to recognise the needs of gender counter-normative staff members and students. Although South African universities are still regarded as spaces that marginalise gender diverse students (Ndelu, 2017), the

aforementioned examples of and successes of collective activism suggests that collective agency has the capacity to facilitate institutional change.

As previously argued, SU has the potential to transform itself into a counter-normative institutional space. Borrowing from Matthyse (2017), collective advocacy comprises an effective tool to utilise in challenging gender expression oppression. Besides the examples of collective activism detailed in the previous paragraph, the present thesis also considers the ability of the collective agency of the participants and their allies to create, and contribute to the creation and maintenance of, counter-normative spaces. The collective agency of the participants and their allies, regarded alongside the position that SU already evinces the potential to create counter-normative spaces, furthermore makes the case for the capacity of collective agency to facilitate institutional change.

In focusing on the role of the university in creating counter-normative spaces, I draw on Matthyse (2017). Matthyse (2017) calls for collaboration between the stakeholders of advocacy initiatives and the policy decision-makers in ensuring gender diverse inclusivity and competency at higher education institutions. This thus also requires collective effort and agency in affecting counter-normative institutional change. Matthyse's (2017) perspective also considers the bridging of students, staff and university management collaboration as necessary in order to facilitate effective institutional change.

The first part of the present section illustrates the opportune, creative, pedagogical, innovative and advocative ways in which the participants have exerted their individual agency. The latter part of the section discusses the collective networks that the participants engaged with and belonged to. Despite the apparent division between the

two forms of agency, it should be noted that the present thesis considers agency and resistance – in opposition to hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity – as comprising both individual and collective agentic resistance. The present thesis acknowledges the formidable influence of the participants' individual agency as they:

- display their resilience in the face of hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity,
- are able to create betterment for themselves,
- and are able to transform their immediate environments into counter-normative spaces.

At the same time, however, my thesis recognises that the potential reach and influence of collective agency is greater than the potential reach and influence of individual agency. Collective action is thus necessary to further create and sustain counter-normative spaces, and to bring about broader institutional and societal change. The present thesis therefore affirms queer theory's focus on individuals that resist the presumed legitimacy of normative social orders, systems and their related strategies. My thesis furthermore extends the aforementioned focus of queer theory by recognising that the participants, as individuals, belong to and engage with collective groups (Msibi 2014; Francis & Reygan 2016). The present thesis thus acknowledges the transformative potential of individual agency, and the wide-reaching transformative potential of collective agency. It observes both forms of agency in their ability to challenge oppressive structures and systems, and resultant forms of gender expression oppression and other forms of marginalisation and discrimination.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented a cross-case discussion of the findings in Chapter 5. To reiterate, gender expression oppression sustains the heterosexual matrix and

related hetero-cis-normativity. The effective functioning of these normative structures relies on the subordination of sexual and gender counter-normative individuals. As such, gender expression oppression operates and attempts to regulate, punish and coerce gender counter-normative individuals into conforming to hetero-cis-normative standards and expectations. The present chapter especially takes a look at hegemonic hetero-cis-normativity and gender expression oppression within the context of SU. The operation of, and regulation accompanied by, hetero-cis-normativity in the form of gender expression oppression is enacted by the university's structural design and institutional culture. It also coerces and/or influences individuals to become agents of gender expression oppression.

Gender expression oppression furthermore correlates with the surplus visibility (Patai, 1992) of gender diverse students and expressions of gender counter-normativity. Additionally, the participants revealed various but also shared experiences of gender expression oppression as symbolic violence (Cornell et al., 2016). Surplus visibility overlaps with symbolic violence in that its manifestations, as revealed by the participants' responses, take on the form of symbolic violence. The focus on gender expression oppression as symbolic violence does not negate the existent reality of pervasive transphobic (fatal) violence. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of gender expression oppression can socialise gender counter-normative individuals to internalise gender expression oppression. By suppressing one's counter-normative gender identity and expressions in compliance with gender expression oppression, internalised gender expression oppression is both an effect of and instrumental in the continued maintenance of gender expression oppression.

The present chapter additionally identifies the pervasive ignorance of gender diversity as a form of gender expression oppression. The chapter presents gender diversity

ignorance as a widespread societal and institutional phenomenon that affects both cisgender and gender counter-normative individuals. These effects occur in ways that further sustain the marginalisation directed at gender counter-normative individuals. In addition, individuals who are subjected to pervasive ignorance of gender diversity can either unknowingly or willingly be complicit in the maintenance of gender expression oppression.

Stellenbosch University, as an institution that equally prioritises academic knowledge production and social development, has an obligation to attend to the gender diversity ignorance that pervades the immediate university environment and broader societal context. This requires a concerted effort to develop, produce and disseminate knowledge surrounding gender diversity. This furthermore entails a queer, intersectional approach to curriculum that provides gender diversity education and establishes learning environments that sensitise individuals to be considerate of gender diverse individuals, identities and issues. These learning environments would be implemented throughout all faculties and departments. Not only be confined to the classroom, the learning environments would also be implemented throughout the different structures – such as the administrative, support and residential structures – of the university.

The queer, intersectional approach to addressing pervasive gender diversity ignorance as outlined in the previous paragraph would contribute to the alleviation of gender expression oppression in general. In addressing the current perpetuation of gender expression oppression within and throughout the university, SU should transform itself – and its constituent structures – into a counter-normative space. Counter-normative spaces simultaneously ensure the social inclusion of gender diverse individuals and threaten the hegemonic structure and influence of

cisnormativity. Besides prioritising gender diversity education and the institution of counter-normative learning environments, SU's institutional/transformation policies and strategies should be calibrated to incorporate a queer, intersectional framework. SU is informed by various historical and systemic conditions, rooted in the racial and hetero-cis-normative orders of the apartheid regime. Queer, intersectional policies and strategies would therefore account for the convergence of multiple normative structures and consider the implications and effects of these normative structures on lived experiences. Queer, intersectional policies and strategies would thus constitute a more holistic approach to transformation in higher education institutions.

Crucially, the present chapter prioritises the agency of the participants as they have demonstrated their resistance to the gender expression oppression that they encounter. In light of this, the present chapter presents the varying and nuanced nature of the range of the participants' individual agentic resistances against the heterosexual matrix. These resistances took the form of opportune, innovative, creative and pedagogical strategies as employed by the participants to counterbalance incidents and experiences of gender expression oppression. The individual agency of the participants reveals their capabilities to, on the one hand, enact their resilience in the face of the heterosexual matrix and, on the other hand, contribute to the creation of counter-normative spaces. Resilience in the face of the heterosexual matrix, and in being responsible for the formation and maintenance of counter-normative spaces, disrupts the hetero-cis-normative structure that pervades Stellenbosch University in particular.

Furthermore, the participants drew on broader frameworks of familial networks, fellowship, assistance and community to augment their capacity for individual agentic resistance. The actors comprising these friendship, familial, community, activism and

other university support networks are also regarded as agents in creating and maintaining counter-normative spaces. Additionally, recognising the individual participants' affiliations with support networks, and interactions with the collective, the thesis thus accounts for the influence of both individual agency and collective agency in challenging the hetero-cis-normative structure. The present thesis also asserts that the transformative potential of collective agency is greater than the transformative potential of individual agency, as collective action is better suited to affect institutional change.

As it relates to SU, collective action need not be confined to the participants and their allies. The transformation of SU into a counter-normative space necessitates the collective agency of functionaries responsible for the development and implementation of queer, intersectional transformation policies and strategies throughout the university structures. This includes the collective agency of management, staff – academic, administrative, and support staff – and different leadership bodies.

In the chapter that follows, I present the conclusion of the thesis as it outlines the salient findings that the present study has uncovered in exploring how gender diverse students navigate Stellenbosch University. In addition, I suggest recommendations for how the salient findings of the thesis can be considered moving forward.

## Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The present study answers the following exploratory research question:

How do gender counter-normative students navigate Stellenbosch University?

In sum, the salient findings of the present thesis are as follows:

Gender diverse students encounter gender expression oppression in navigating the university environment. Gender expression oppression significantly relates to surplus visibility, as it reveals attempts at the invisibilisation of gender diverse individuals and recognises the stigmatisation of individuals with noticeable counter-normative expressions of gender. Gender expression oppression through the lens of surplus visibility also overlaps with symbolic violence. The participants' lived and observed experiences of gender expression oppression primarily constitute incidents of symbolic violence. Gender expression oppression as symbolic violence and in relation to the heterosexual matrix imposes the prescriptive hegemonic cisnormative structure as legitimate. The structural design of and institutional culture at Stellenbosch University reflects the taken for granted legitimacy of cisnormativity. The university is therefore conducive to the perpetuation of gender expression oppression. In addition, the pervasiveness of gender expression oppression can socialise individuals to internalise gender expression oppression. The internalisation of gender expression oppression is both an effect of and instrumental in the continued maintenance of gender expression oppression.

The participants' life histories reveal the pervasive societal and institutional phenomenon of gender diversity ignorance. The pervasive ignorance of gender diversity constitutes a form of gender expression oppression – also in terms of how its manifestations connect with surplus visibility and embody acts of symbolic violence.

The pervasive ignorance of gender diversity relates to the systemic silencing of gender diverse individuals, identities and related issues. The systemic silencing of gender counter-normative individuals and identities does a disservice to individuals who would benefit from, or whose gender identity development would rely on, attaining information dealing with gender diverse issues. The pervasive gender diversity ignorance that individuals are subject to sustains the harmful presumed misconceptions individuals hold that in effect negates gender counter-normativity. Relatedly, pervasive gender diversity ignorance simultaneously results from gender expression oppression and the continuation thereof operates to further sustain gender expression oppression. The role that Stellenbosch University should play in addressing pervasive gender diversity ignorance will be mentioned in the recommendations section.

The participants have access to and belong to structural and social counter-normative spaces. The social counter-normative spaces that the participants belong to take the form of supportive social networks, such as familial and friendship networks. Their interactions with others attest to how the individual forms part of the collective that they belong to at any given time. The participants have demonstrated that they create safe spaces for themselves and others within a university environment that tends to marginalise gender diverse students. In creating and contributing to the creation and maintenance of counter-normative spaces, the participants and their allies essentially subvert the reach of the hegemonic cisnormative structure. Additionally, hegemonic cisnormativity, through the actions of agents complicit in the perpetuation of the gender hegemony, has the potential to infiltrate and undermine counter-normative spaces. When this happens, the spaces that are intended to be counter-normative tend to

perpetuate gender expression oppression that resultantly, and paradoxically, alienates gender counter-normative individuals.

The participants demonstrate their resistance to the gender expression oppression that they encounter in navigating the Stellenbosch University space. The participants employ creative strategies of opportunity, innovation, pedagogy and advocacy to counterbalance the incidents and experiences of gender expression oppression that they face. In doing so, the participants display their resilience in being confronted with the pervasiveness of hegemonic cisnormativity. The participants also display their agentic resilience in, as already mentioned, creating and contributing to counter-normative spaces within a broader space that perpetuates gender expression oppression. Thus, gender counter-normative individuals as resisters of the normative gender structure and its prescriptive standards and expectations trouble the presumed legitimacy of the related heterosexual matrix.

Moreover, considering the heterosexual matrix alongside the notion of gender performativity, the participants perform, or rather express, their gender identity in ways that transcend the heterosexual matrix. As such, in expressing their counter-normative gender identities they illuminate the fragility and unreliability of the heterosexual matrix. Additionally, the collective networks that the participants belong to, access and/or rely on assist them and augment their agency in their resistance against the hegemonic cisnormative structure. The support networks that the participants belong to therefore represent collective agency in its resistance to the current gender hegemony, especially within the context of Stellenbosch University. This is also displayed in the participants' and their allies' shared contribution to the formation and maintenance of counter-normative spaces. The participants' narratives in this regard evince the transformative potential of both individual agency and collective agency in

their ability to challenge oppressive structures and systems and their resultant forms of gender expression oppression.

In investigating how gender diverse students navigate Stellenbosch University, the pervasive gender expression oppression perpetuated by the university came to light. Stellenbosch University should therefore work towards becoming a counter-normative institution. The suggested recommendations that the present study puts forth with reference to the aforementioned assertion are as follows:

1. Stellenbosch University should adopt a queer, intersectional approach to curriculum. A queer, intersectional approach to curriculum could be useful in dismantling the pervasive ignorance that plagues individuals and additionally contributes to and sustains gender expression oppression. Additional strategies should also be implemented outside of the classroom – in residences, co-curricular programmes and events, etc. – to sensitise staff and students to gender diversity.
2. Stellenbosch University should create learning environments that:
  - educate academic, administrative and support staff and students on issues of gender diversity,
  - adequately sensitise academic, administrative and support staff to the experiences and needs of gender diverse individuals,
  - and as such do its part in dismantling the oppressive nature of prescriptive cisnormativity presently embedded in the structural design and institutional culture of the university context.
3. Furthermore, the university's institutional/transformation policies and related strategies should be calibrated to incorporate a queer, intersectional framework. A queer, intersectional approach to policy development would

account for the historical and social conditions unique to the Stellenbosch University context. How these conditions relate to the various normative structures embedded in the university, how these normative structures converge, and how the convergence of these normative structures factor into the lived experiences of students and staff – also considering the range and intersections of their social categories – would offer a more inclusive, holistic approach to transformation.

4. Serious commitment to the effective implementation of queer, intersectional approaches to curriculum and transformation/institutional policies is crucial and should be upheld by university management, the leadership bodies within the university structures, and the administrative, support and academic staff of the university as they would be responsible for the amendment and implementation of the policies.
5. Another suggested way of ensuring a counter-normative campus environment is to appoint more gender counter-normative individuals to positions within the management; academic, administrative, and support staff; and leadership bodies of the university.

The effective implementation of the aforementioned recommendations would require earnest commitment from functionaries and the collective university staff to uphold these transformative strategies. A committed queer, intersectional approach could arguably create a university environment that would significantly minimise reports of gender expression oppression from gender counter-normative students as they elucidate how they navigate Stellenbosch University.

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