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(Re)Turn to the Rural: Queer Anti-Pastorals and Usable Traditions in John Trengrove's *Inxeba* and Nakhane Touré's *Piggy Boy's Blues*

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This paper analyzes black queer engagements with the South African rural in the film Inxeba (2017) and the novel Piggy Boy's Blues (2015). As I will argue, both the film and the novel revolve around a return to the rural that features the black queer protagonists' struggles for connection with each other, their communities and the natural environment. I read the fraught affect of these returns to the rural through *ulwaluko*, the male circumcision rite of the amaXhosa, as a crucial pastoral frame that makes visible what forms of engagement are made possible in the tensions between black queer and environmental politics. I will show how the film and novel each set up queer anti-pastorals in which the protagonists struggle to survive rural patriarchal spaces, but in which the rural is also always already queered and changing. In this capacity, I argue, the film and novel foreground the rural as an indispensable but often overlooked site of cultural regeneration, in which anti-pastoral queering, although at great cost to the protagonists and their surroundings, nonetheless works towards possibilities for queer futurity forged in the reshaping of tradition. Reorienting oneself towards a hostile rural environment, it turns out, is crucial in answering this largely open-ended question.

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Introduction: (Re)Turning to the Rural, Regardless

Recent research suggests that when it comes to understanding contemporary social networks in South Africa in general, we should turn our attention to the rural as a crucial site for the formation of "new forms of identity, citizenship and belonging within a changing historical landscape."[1] In a context in which "urban spaces increasingly spawn precarity,"[2] the rural proves essential in setting up translocal households. These households are often driven by rural women and span hundreds of kilometers, offering home grown produce, emotional refuge as well as formal livelihood like grant incomes that flow from the rural to the city rather than the other way around. Yet, when it comes to thinking about the role of the rural in the production of good life genres[3] and how access to such notions of happiness and acceptance are negotiated, cultural imaginations resort to rehearsed pastoral registers that tend to overlook "crucial aspects of 21st century life," both in terms of social relations and material conditions.[4]

For many black queer people,[5] gaining access to good life genres is further complicated by the socially prevalent "idea that same-sex sexuality is somehow un-African and alien to African cultural traditions."[6] In addition, since rural life is often seen as lagging behind the modern and therefore tends to be associated with rigid traditionality, black queer people who live "rurally" also have to contend with conceptions of queerness that emanate from life in the city. In such metronormative assumptions – a concept coined by Jack Halberstam in the context of the United States – a coming out narrative is yoked to the idea that only the city "allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers."[7] This idea, however, does not necessarily map onto how gender fluidity and non-normative sexual identity are already thought and lived in African communities,[8] nor does it tally with how black queer people – whether they see themselves as urban, rural, or something in-between – may desire "acceptance of their relationships within customary frameworks."[9] What is more, privileging the city in understandings of "true" queerness belies the rural's role in negotiating personhood and obscures how difficult it can be to imagine the rural as a dynamic political space at all, let alone one where black queer people can access happiness.

In what follows, I will analyze the film *Inxeba* (*The Wound*) (2017) directed by John Trengrove and the novel *Piggy Boy's Blues* (2015) by Nakhane Touré,[10] which both offer complex black queer engagements with the South African rural, more particularly the Eastern Cape. In these artworks, protagonists (re)turn to the rural as a central site of livelihood and imagination. Leaving rural life behind is definitely not self-evident for them. The question rather becomes what forms fantasies of return take in these two texts and what cultural work they do. What does it mean that these returns are figured,

as we will see, through pastoral and anti-pastoral registers as well as through a reliance on African tradition? How is the rural environment itself presented? And what kind of valences, if any, do pastoral constructs still have when we turn to the rural as a crucial site for thinking queer subjectivity, solidarity and futurity?

As both artworks suggest, the pull of the rural is particularly strong in the context of *ulwaluko*, the male circumcision rites of the amaXhosa, for which young men return to their homesteads in order to be circumcised, formally introduced to their ancestors and psychologically prepared for the responsibilities of their adult lives. It takes place *entabeni* (on the mountain) in the vicinity of one's ancestral village or town.[11] Without having undergone the ritual, Xhosa men cannot get married, build their own homesteads or take active part in community life.[12] It is a homosocial process[13] from which women are largely excluded and which is especially fraught for people oriented towards notions of manhood developed through queerness and non-normative sexuality. Queerness is generally regarded as compromising the sacredness of the ritual and undergoing *ulwaluko* as a queer or gay person is laden with communal expectations that initiates will "convert" to heterosexuality.[14] Yet, many young queer men are drawn to the rite of passage, because manhood (*ubudoda*) – like personhood in general and regardless of how it is oriented sexually – is acquired and actualized as a process situated in communal bonds. *Ulwaluko* can thus afford empowerment within and closeness to one's immediate family and community, even if feelings of marginalization continue to mar a fuller sense of acceptance imagined through "a nonheteronormative view of *ubuntu.*"[15]

Both the film and the novel, I argue, figure the return to the rural as pastoral in the sense that the depicted returns are motivated by a desire for refuge, belonging or a communion with Nature. In addition, the traditional Xhosa cultural discourse around *ulwaluko* could be seen as a pastoral frame due to its reliance on the importance of a return to the rural setting of the ancestral village for the development and/or restoration of one's personhood. As Gcobani Qambela argues in their analysis of *Inxeba*, "[t]he rural, when returned to, becomes a form of cleansing" in the context of *ulwaluko* and is seen in positive contrast to the corruptive ways of the city.[16] The mountain offers a spiritual basis that gives "access to full personhood and manhood" for those who have undergone the ritual successfully – a newly gained responsibility and knowledge that is then meant to feed back into society at large.[17] In this sense, *Ulwaluko* could be seen as a classic pastoral structure based on the celebration of "the rural mountainscape as a space where authenticity as a Xhosa man can be (re)established" in contrast to the moral confusion of the city.[18]

In *Inxeba*, Xolani, a warehouse worker in an undisclosed city, returns to his hometown Queenstown in the Eastern Cape to act as a caregiver in *ulwaluko*. Xolani also uses this

opportunity to be intimate with his fellow-caregiver Vija, who is married and has a wife and children. Xolani's and Vija's tenuous relationship is jeopardized by Xolani's initiate, Kwanda, who critiques Xolani's closeted life in the countryside and claims the heterosexual performing Vija does not really love him. In the end, when Kwanda threatens to expose Vija's and Xolani's carefully maintained equilibrium within the larger community of caregivers and initiates, Xolani hits Kwanda on the head with a stone so that he falls off a mountaintop. The film thus foregrounds how Xolani risks all in order to cling to glimpses of intimacy with Vija – an intimacy that is intrinsically bound up in the communal bonds established through *ulwaluko*. In its focus on the lethal tensions between desire, tradition, manhood, various queer identities, the country and the city, *Inxeba* explores what happens when several pastoral expectations are nested in a single space.

The novel *Piggy Boy's Blues* does not stop at the complex affective consequences of living with pastorals that cannot be anything but partial. Instead, it explores what happens when rural surroundings do not offer connection, even if fleeting, but instead effect a deep sense of alienation. The narrative begins when Davide M. returns to his ancestral homestead in the village of Alice to take refuge from depression. In Alice, he stays in his uncle Ndimphiwe's house which is also the ancestral home. There, Davide gradually gets embroiled in a tense affair with Ndimphiwe's lover Gray, who ends up raping Davide when the latter finally rejects Gray's constant passes at him. From this moment, the already looming anti-pastoral setting of the novel becomes one of sheer abandonment, in which Davide finds himself negated by the human, natural and ancestral connections that he seeks refuge in. Although any sense of queer community is undermined by the course of events, Davide, once reduced to animalistic suffering, also manages to forge a narrative of healing by utilizing the (other) traditions around him: his faith and his perspective on the tradition of *ulwaluko*.

Reading *ulwaluko* through a pastoral frame in these artworks adds significantly to how the affective pull of rural returns are generally thought. According to Raymond Williams's still-seminal discussion of the English pastoral in *The Country and the City*, pastoral forms invariably access the countryside as always already lost, with each new generation mourning the loss of the "authentic" countryside of their forefathers – a sentiment strongly influenced by childhood nostalgia.[19] In addition, there is the (re) turn to the rural as a place of refuge from modernity, either in retirement once one's working life is done or as a "non-place" where one can withdraw from the upheaval of the overly politicized present in order to return to it afresh.[20] The renditions of *ulwaluko* under discussion here partly overlap with Williams' views on rural return, but significantly do not place it squarely outside any true experience of the present.

Instead, as we will see, they actually help to acknowledge the countryside as a site of modernity in general and queer dynamism in particular.

In both *Inxeba* and *Piggy Boy's Blues*, however, the pastoral returns soon acquire nightmarish overtones. In order to think through this pastoral and anti-pastoral dynamic, I will build on Cameron Clark's eco-cinematic model of the queer anti-pastoral. Although Clark's model explores white male queerness, it is also highly pertinent to the black queer narratives here because it helps to foreground the protagonists' difficulty in forging meaningful relations *both* to other queer characters *and* to a hostile natural environment in a narrative trajectory that tends "to thwart, undercut or withhold pleasure."[21] In queer anti-pastorals, Clark makes clear, "pastoral conventions of Nature as a site for harmonious patterns and generative transformations at the service of the human" are destabilized and disrupted without being replaced by utopic renditions of queer, ecologically conscious lives in the countryside.[22]

In this sense, *Inxeba* and *Piggy Boy's Blues* not only move away from the "escapist pull" and "timeless abstractions" of more canonical gay pastorals,[23] but they also clearly resist a more recent queer eco-critical mode in world cinema, which "seeks to remedy both eco-criticism's blind spot around questions of gender and sexuality and queer theory's blind spots on environmental politics."[24] This is not to say that the black queer protagonists here offer clearcut solutions to the double problem of queer and environmental struggle, but Clark's frame does help to critically gauge how this struggle plays out and can be understood in different cultural settings. What forms of engagement, in both social and ecological terms, does this frame make visible in *Inxeba* and *Piggy Boy's Blues*, where connection is not completely devoid of empathy or care, as Clark puts it, yet focuses "on what is brought forth when interdependency is a ruse or a failure"?[25]

The film and novel add significantly to the notion of the queer anti-pastoral. Both feature characters who are from and belong to the rural, even if they are not always at home there. As such, they offer black queer perspectives on the rural *from* the rural, rather than a mainstream, urbanized or tourism based perspective on it. Both artworks are deeply steeped in the traditions associated with the rural, which they turn into "usable traditions." As Xavier Livermon, who coined the term, has shown through interviews with black queer people who have succeeded in making *ulwaluko*, gay *lobola* (dowry) or the practice of *insangoma* (traditional healing) work together with their communities, African tradition and customs should be seen as fluid and capable of changing along with the wishes of the community.[26] Taking these two points together, I will show how the film and novel each set up queer anti-pastorals in which the protagonists struggle to survive rural patriarchal spaces, but

in which the rural is always already queered and changing. In this capacity, I argue, the film and novel foreground the rural as an indispensable but often overlooked site of cultural regeneration, in which anti-pastoral queering, although at great cost to the protagonists and their surroundings, nonetheless works towards possibilities for queer futurity forged in the reshaping of tradition. Reorienting oneself towards a hostile rural environment, it turns out, is crucial in answering this largely open-ended question.

Glimpsing Intimacy in the Partial Pastoral in John Trengrove's *Inxeba*

Inxeba (*The Wound*), directed by John Trengrove and co-written by Thando Mgqolozana and Malusi Bengu sparked intense debate even before its release[27] because the film controversially shows the traditional space of the mountain as already queered; both Vija and Xolani are there by choice as respected members of this sacred space. Vija is popular in the group and Xolani is praised by his elders for loyally returning from the city to offer his exceptional caregiving skills. As guardians of the new generation of initiated men, they condition the sensibilities of personhood that keep their translocal community going, even if they come to the mountain for different reasons than their roles may be thought to dictate. They are, however, not interested in destroying or even harming the process of *ulwaluko*, as their relationship fully depends on the promise of its return and continuation. When Kwanda tries to drive a wedge between the two, Vija threateningly warns him not to "fuck up" the ways of the mountain.

Xolani fiercely negotiates and defends this tense relation between the city and the country, between his "everyday" working life and his "queer" time on the mountain, and between his fear of being outed by Kwanda and his strategies for remaining largely invisible as queer. When Kwanda asserts that Xolani should move to Johannesburg so that he could really be himself, Xolani expresses a strong preference to stay tethered to the mountain. On the mountain, Xolani is respected. He has Vija. It offers him something to look forward to. He knows full well that all of these things are partial and might not last. Vija is only capable of gentleness with Xolani in rare and brief moments bracketed by Vija's otherwise toxic masculinity that covers up, if at times poorly, their relationship from others. Xolani is lonely apart from the weeks of initiation, but he knows there will always be a next time. And so, as the pastoral gives way to the anti-pastoral, Xolani seems to reason, the anti-pastoral will at some point turn into something pastoral again, however fraught and fleeting. In this way, the cyclical return and the connection with his community and his ancestors this return affords allow Xolani to create his own partially pastoral moments: glimpses of sexual and communal intimacy in the interstices of tradition.

Exactly how hard-won this intimacy is, is reflected in the bleak depiction of the mountain itself. From a homoerotic pastoral perspective, Xolani and Vija would have been depicted in picturesque rural spaces.[28] As Livermon has noted in their reading of *Inxeba*, however, while "the mountainscape is a liminal space where transformation occurs for all participants, it is generally represented in the film as part of a larger undifferentiated rural" that borders on the claustrophobic.[29] The erotic and intimate scenes have dark colour schemes that depersonalise the characters and are shot so close that appreciation of the mountain as a natural space functioning on its own terms is foreclosed (**Figure 1**). Others are shot with an emphasis on constant communal surveillance (**Figure 2**). The film's engagement with the mountain is structured around the group moving along narrow paths that snake through the forest (**Figure 3**) and punctuated by repetitive wood chopping scenes in which the initiates are taught to provide for themselves by relentlessly ripping into trees with machetes (**Figure 4**).

Figure 1: Vija and Xolani reunite sexually after Xolani's arrival on the mountain.

Figure 2: Vija and Xolani in an intoxicated embrace that is designed to hide their desire from the other men around the fire.

Figure 3: Xolani leads Kwanda through the forest.

Figure 4: Xolani and another caregiver chopping wood.

In the film's most powerful scene, this troubled relation to the natural environment comes to a head as several forms of queer manhood intersect and clash. The group of caregivers and initiates try to visit a waterfall, but encounter a white farmer who is fencing off their path in order to pasture his goats. The group falls silent. One of the caregivers wants to turn back, Vija does nothing, while Xolani goes up to the farmer to ask if they can pass. This conversation in Afrikaans between a black man and a white man by a fence points to the histories of dispossession that have haunted the South African rural for at least two centuries. It lays bare the ways in which black manhood has been forced to develop in a frame of colonial, often pastoral, belittlement. It is a frame in which black male bodies have been stereotypically reduced to slave-like labor on the mines or on farms, or to so-called "garden boys" in the cities.[30] Despite these hauntings and histories, however, the conversation is a relatively calm one until Vija steals one of the farmer's goats.

The scene emphasizes that, in South Africa, access to rural good-life genres remains closely tied to historically ossified issues of racial inequality and the delays in land

redistribution that fuel such disparities. As a result, it is rightfully read by scholars as a reclamation of rights to the land from the white farmer.[31] In this frame, the theft crucially reorients, if not unproblematically, stereotypes around black rural men as poachers[32] by framing it as reparation. But even more is at stake. Vija's caper undermines Xolani's negotiation with the farmer on behalf of the group and thus harms Xolani's position in it. As the men run away with the goat and retreat to the forest, Vija orders Kwanda to kill it – another calculated stab at Xolani's authority as Kwanda's caregiver – and Xolani flies at him in a rage. Kwanda, who is ridiculed by others throughout the film for his queerness and wealthy city ways, brutally slaughters the goat while the group watches Vija push Xolani to the ground in a posture that resembles the goat's. In this scene, Kwanda forcefully imprints his own "brand" of queer manhood on the group as superior to the petty squabble of the two grown men on the ground. He proves he is a man because he can kill a goat: he is filmed from below, defiantly showing Vija, the alpha male, his blood covered chest as he casually tosses the knife over his shoulder (**Figure 5**). At the same time, however, he saves face for the symbolic slaughter of Xolani by drawing attention away from that humiliation.

Figure 5: Kwanda kills the goat while Xolani and Vija are fighting and throws away the knife.

The goat scene in *Inxeba* contributes to a recent shift in South African rural film and literature, a shift away from the white-owned farm as "one of the privileged scenes of South African rurality."[33] Instead, the "real" struggle in this film takes place on an altogether different stage that lies at the heart of black queer manhood as it plays itself out on the mountain. It is not that the struggle over the fence (as a cypher for negotiations between black and white people over the right to land) does not matter, but rather that the mountain (as a cypher for the negotiation of different forms of non-normative black manhood) is where we need to train our gaze in order to truly "queer the postcolony."[34]

As Lwando Scott argues, same-sex desire needs to be taken much more seriously in dynamics both on and off the mountain, as it offers "the ability to imagine and craft the self beyond the descriptions of settler colonial laws that prohibited same-sex desire" in the first place.[35] In *Inxeba*, going beyond the sexual anxieties at play in settler colonial contexts involves the task of rethinking both manhood *and* the rural, insistently asking who is imagined to own right of access to which material and culturally significant parts of rurality. In other words, *Inxeba* challenges viewers to consider a reshaping of black heteronormative manhood as well as the limited nature of the pastoral projections of cultural ownership and material access to the rural that such heteronormative manhood (whether white or black) seems to imply.

In doing so, *Inxeba* lays bare the intersections between several pastoral legacies as well as the abject excesses that these legacies produce. There is the pastoral space of the mountain, a space of temporary sojourn away from the moral deprivation of the city and where Xhosa manhood can be produced in community. There are Xolani's queer pastoral hopes projected on the same space. And there is the legacy of a colonial / settler pastoral, which fences off the land from black use and brings the conflict among the three queer men to a head. Between these pastorals, both environmental concern and queer solidarity, as Clark also argues, slip through the cracks. In *Inxeba*, these excesses are figured through the goat, whose blood is shed as collateral damage to the crisis of interhuman relations and thus stands for the disregard the three men seem to have for their surroundings in general. Even though Kwanda offers Xolani a queer solidarity that is forged through the confidence he has acquired on the mountain, he plummets off a mountaintop at the end of the film: Kwanda in turn becomes a sacrificial lamb to Xolani's attempt to keep tradition in place.

Yet, as Lindsey Green-Simms points out in her reading of the film, *Inxeba* overall "refrains from putting ulwaluko [sic] in a negative light."[36] I would go even further. Even if the space of the mountain is something of a conundrum in Vija's and Xolani's own lives and even if the three men, who are crucially never filmed in the same shot, miss the opportunity for more positive iterations of togetherness, *ulwaluko* is ultimately presented as part of a changing, living tradition that is often negatively stereotyped as out of time and static. Xolani, who excels both in caregiving after circumcision *and* in creating his own partial queer pastoral amid the contested space of the mountain, could thus also be said to personify *ulwaluko* as a living and usable tradition in Livermon's sense. What this means for the future, considering Kwanda's fatal wound as well as the three men's problematic lack of attention to their environment, *Inxeba* refuses to say.

The film is ultimately neither fully pastoral, nor fully anti-pastoral, but instead points to the constant ebb and flow of these two trestles of the rural imagination. There

is no guarantee for a regenerative return to the rural for these three black queer men. The question remains whether Xolani, seen on a truck arriving in Johannesburg at the end of the film (the same Johannesburg he has renounced to Kwanda earlier), is tempted to kickstart the cycle again in order to await the return of a flickering intimacy. In the next section, I will focus on how the desire for rural return functions in *Piggy Boy's Blues*. Less a negotiation of various partial pastorals that are still aimed at finding some sort of intimacy like *Inxeba*, *Piggy Boy's Blues* stages a more explicit anti-pastoral conspiracy working against Davide's expectations of the rural. What kind of queer subjectivity, solidarity or futurity is possible in the face of such a lack of connection?

Anti-Pastoral Abandonment in Nakhane Touré's *Piggy Boy's Blues*

Piggy Boy's Blues revolves around Davide, who returns to the rural to escape a long-standing depression. In the course of the novel, the reader surmises that Davide has left behind his ailing mother, who has instilled a belief in him that he is a prophet. He is now staying in his maternal uncle's homestead in an attempt to restore his waning faith.[37] The novel's beginnings, then, adhere to a classically pastoral schema in which the countryside is figured as refuge from the urban, a panacea facilitating reconnection with the self. This process of restoration hardly goes as planned, however.

Like *Inxeba*, *Piggy Boy's Blues* is a queer anti-pastoral in that it offers a "discomforting representation of queerness within the natural world that struggle[s] to achieve interpersonal or ecological awareness."[38] One crucial difference is, however, that the queer characters are not the ones doing the natural world harm in the novel. Nonhuman nature is not hacked into or even slaughtered, as was the case in *Inxeba*, but instead maintains a threatening distance that turns into outright hostility as events around Davide become increasingly violent and disconcerting. Although both artworks render rural landscapes not as "a space of freedom, contentment or harmony, but as one of captivity, despair, and alienation,"[39] in *Piggy Boy's Blues* this despair and alienation are much more threatening than in *Inxeba*. At each turn, I will argue, Davide is confronted with his own unrealistic assumptions about returning to the rural. He does not find the surroundings welcoming, but rather dull and oppressive. A meeting with his ancestors also does not offer release and he needs to relearn what a connection to the natural world really means. In the end, Davide can only get unstuck from his depression, the novel suggests, once he is stripped of all his expectations of the rural as a pastoral site of belonging and connection.

From within this profound anti-pastoral alienation, Davide does forge a new, if compromised queer subjectivity. Blending his religious calling with his ambivalence towards the tradition of *ulwaluko*, he finds ways to accept his abandonment by his

surroundings and of living on, rather than of living for: "alone – to fight off an early expiration – and every day, to exist and live and survive is to put one foot in front of the other."[40] Unlike Xolani, Davide does not walk the tightrope of balancing tradition in order to sustain it as a living and usable source that blends the needs and desires of the individual with those of the community, however fatal this process turns out to be in *Inxeba*. Rather, Davide is robbed of his illusions and desperately salvages what he can from the traditions that have failed him in order to survive. With the shift in Davide's attitude towards the natural environment from a site of communion to a state of existential abandonment, I argue, *Piggy Boy's Blues* shows the difficulty of living a life altogether uncushioned by pastoral relief and shows possible ways, but also the cost, of breaking away from the tide of the pastoral / anti-pastoral dynamic.

The initially uncomplicated notion of return that Davide brings to Alice shrivels almost as soon as he arrives in his uncle's homestead. At first, Davide enjoys the silence inside the house and is amused by its dilapidation, "a tragic mess" that contrasts with the lively stories Davide has heard about his family.[41] Outside the house, remnants of an idyllic town life are still palpable: "He heard the dogs in heat, baying, sheep in the distance bleating, ring-necked doves cooing and the laughter of friends."[42] These surroundings, however, become increasingly fraught as the tension between Davide and Gray starts to build. The cooing of the doves soon grows "repetitive" and grasshoppers pop "like Christmas crackers" in the prolonged heat caused by the fact that the "rains had missed their cue by months."[43] The strangling heat indicates a time out of joint that congeals into an ambivalent lack of connection. His uncle is constantly away at work. Gray, who both amuses and disgusts Davide, hardly leaves his side. The small number of visits that Davide and Gray pay together to the run-down Royal Hotel, whose clientele reminds Davide of a past he would rather not remember, brings little relief. This conspicuous absence of a sense of social cohesion that otherwise forms a clear positive mark of rural life has the double anti-pastoral effect of separating Davide from the potentiality of the queer community represented by both his queer relatives and the diverse clientele of the Royal Hotel.

This possibility for a pastoral (re)connection with the already queered community of Alice is further crushed when Gray assaults Davide one night on the pitch dark dirt road outside his uncle Ndimphiwe's house. In this attack, the violence of human and nonhuman nature collide:

> A stone pressed hard against the back of his head. Several stones appeared to be trying to make blunt incisions through his clothes. Gray turned him round onto his stomach and pinned him to the ground with his knee. Davide spat out soil and bits

> of stone. They made a paste with the wet on his face. His pants and underwear were pulled down with quick, chafing precision. Now the stones had better access to his skin. They scraped and dug in.[44]

The fact that the road features so explicitly in the scene is significant. It contrasts with the literary trope of the road as a place where adventurous meetings with other people and the environment might occur[45] and with how queer pastoral *mise-en-scènes* traditionally function to communicate the authenticity of male-male desire.[46] The promising phallic symbols of the proteas in the city parks where Davide used to cruise in search of risky contact are nowhere to be found. In the rural of *Piggy Boy's Blues*, the natural world disconcertingly connects with some (queer) humans but not with others; the stones are active agents that hurt Davide, especially when helped along by Gray's desire. The road morphs from setting to willful agent in a fashion that resonates with the animist realist treatment of roads in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, destroying whatever positive futurity could have existed between any of the characters in *Piggy Boy's Blues*.[47]

Afterwards, Davide turns to the homestead for ancestral healing. He crawls back to the pear tree planted by his great-grandfather Jeremiah M. Significantly, this tree also represents a pastoral gone wrong. The homestead in which it is planted is Jeremiah's second one, which he builds after having shamefully abandoned his first wife and their son Mdibanisi (Davide's mother's father). Leaned against the trunk of this symbol of compromised genealogical responsibility that survives all the same, Davide meets two ancestors that night. The first is Jeremiah M., who tells Davide that he knows full well what Davide is, but refuses to say what this means. The second ancestor is an unnamed woman with blood on her hands and clothes, who tells Davide that people blame her for the fact that they are not doing well, but also does not disclose any further details. The sequence is one of simultaneous connection and separation, comfort as well as casting out. Davide realizes this as he wakes up alone. He may have finally met his ancestors, but they have also left him behind: "All things that had been separated could never be joined again: the living and the dead, innocence and experience."[48] The meetings thus fail to produce the desired sense of belonging and confirmation; the pear tree itself already foreshadows the theme of solitary survival that is to unfold fully for Davide as he makes his way to the river in a final attempt to recover himself through an appreciation of the muddy river bank and the animal life it supports.

Scouring the fringes of his own pastoral expectations ("This is good. This has to be good"),[49] Davide's shirt is caught in the river and he almost drowns. It is at this juncture that the radical potential of the "grievous disruptions" of the queer anti-pastoral,[50] which in *Piggy Boy's Blues* mix human, ancestral and natural negation, is released:

> He swam with all his might against the demonic current until finally he was lying on the mud, coughing and groaning, exhausted from the fight. *Like Jacob with the angel.* He dug his hands into the mud and summoned a deep breath. There, like a beached whale finally coming to terms with its fate, he gave out an animal cry, sobbing with all the strength in his body.[51]

After having been sundered from life by the rape, the boggling ancestral meeting, the near death experience, and finally his perceived struggle with God, Davide finds himself reduced to animalistic suffering by the river. In this becoming animal lies the novel's most radical depiction of anti-pastoral relations to the landscape. Nature is never even close to being mastered by Davide, nor does it lend itself to healing and communion. The image of the beached whale drives this home with precision: there is no sense of having seen the face of God, as was the case for Jacob, nor is there a return to the fold of God's work as the reference to Jonah would lead one to expect. The beached whale, instead, is an image that forecloses redemption and punctuates Davide's helpless isolation. He does not belong where he happens to be beached, as if to make the point that as long as he clings to the pastoral preoccupations that function as "a blockaded failure to access an inherent ecological interdependency," there will be no release for Davide.[52]

That receiving the wounds the landscape inflicts on him and accepting his existence as that of an animal amongst others offers a possible way out of the pastoral / anti-pastoral continuum, does not dawn on Davide until he has returned to the city of Port Elizabeth. As the cuts and chafes on his body start to heal, Davide is reminded of the first time he came back from the rural wounded when he sees initiates newly returned from the mountain on the street corners of the city. He mentions *ulwaluko* again a couple of pages later to describe, in retrospect, how he left Alice after the night of Gray's attack:

> I left Alice without looking back, mimicking the actions of initiates leaving their camp. In my mind, I could see it: it was burning hot and wild, the village and the house. Fire rained on it like it did on Sodom and Gomorrah.[53]

By comparing Alice to both an initiation camp that is burned after the initiation period has ended and to Sodom and Gomorrah, the text fuses two powerful symbols together in the cleansing and retributive image of fire. On the one hand, what happened in Alice is posited as sinful, shameful and in need of destruction, like Sodom and Gomorrah. On the other, Davide puts *ulwaluko*'s symbolic charge of wounding for the sake of personal growth to work for his own healing.

Of course, the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah is an incredibly fraught one in the context of religious condemnations of homosexuality, but the blended imagery also

forces a reconceptualization of the terms involved. The image of Sodom and Gomorrah instills Davide with a sense of religious righteousness that prevents him from falling into victimhood, while *ulwaluko* helps him to see the ordeal as a challenge overcome. His sexual orientation is never mentioned as being in tension with either. Davide thus performs a "black queer South African labor" through which queerness and tradition – whether of an African, religious or pastoral nature – are no longer at odds with each other, but their intersection, instead, does fundamental cultural work in "testing and pushing the limits of black cultural subjectivity" in general.[54]

These usable traditions, are, crucially, not romanticized: Davide's emotional labor leaves him no less isolated than before. For the moment, however, stripped from the pastoral expectations of what his return to the rural was supposed to do for him, Davide's cathecting of his anti-pastoral abandonment along the lines of *ulwaluko* also suggests the beginning of a new phase in which he seems content to put "[o]ne foot in front of the other, to live, to cease this pull to expiration."[55] In this sense, even Davide cannot seem to escape ploughing his rural experiences thoroughly back into his life. Anti-pastoral as the novel is, the existential pull of rural regeneration also reasserts itself as a crucial tool for survival in the end.

The Magnetic Pull of Rural Regeneration

Even if the return to the rural "goes wrong" and has devastating results for those involved, the ways in which the protagonists discussed here transport themselves physically or imaginatively to rural settings are crucial to their struggles over what it means to live a good life, or as Davide implies at the end of *Piggy Boy's Blues*, a life that occasionally has joy in it. Although Xolani and Davide each formulate different solutions to being caught up in the pastoral / anti-pastoral dynamic, the role of *ulwaluko* in making that dynamic inhabitable for these black queer men is undeniable. Xolani chooses to fatally protect the possibilities offered by his regular return to the mountain, even though the idyllic pastoral moments are few and far between and may cease altogether because of his murder of Kwanda. Davide, even when abandoned by the traditional structures of the pastoral itself, the ancestral homestead, and by his inclinations to seek healing in the natural environment of the village, continues to glean from the pastoral whatever he can by using the narrative conventions of *ulwaluko* to make his ordeal meaningful.

These two renditions of *ulwaluko* as a usable tradition suggest that there may be something positive to salvage from the ceaseless dynamic between pastorals and anti-pastorals. Crucially, *Inxeba* has scorched an inflammatory queer critique into the heart of conceptions of heteronormative manhood in South Africa. The film is radical not

because it critiques the rigidity of African traditions, but because it depicts them as already changing. *Piggy Boy's Blues*, although apparently less incendiary for the public, is no less radical, especially in its depiction of the extent to which African custom, religion and queerness – three categories that are generally regarded as irreconcilable – can unapologetically, if not without difficulty, merge in one single person.

Another radical point raised by these artworks relates to the role accorded to the natural world in their renditions of the rural. Both *Inxeba* and *Piggy Boy's Blues* offer insight into how various intersecting pastorals create environments that are toxic on both a human and an ecological scale. In both cases, the natural world is not encountered on its own terms, but rather seems to be "on the side" of the perpetrator. Xolani hits Kwanda with a rock after which Kwanda falls from the very mountain that allowed him to come to terms with his queer manhood, while Gray is aided in his sexual assault of Davide by the grit of the very road that was supposed to bring Davide home but ends up pushing him into complete existential abandonment. Sadly, it does not seem coincidental that Xolani and Davide both survive, whereas Kwanda, whose queerness reads as most visible and outspoken, does not. Those who stick closest to how tradition is encoded in the rural space, this seems to suggest, are safest – both from normative and environmental forces, some of which may themselves be queer.

Taken together, the film and novel thus urgently ask what needs to happen to human attitudes of relationality before both environmental and interpersonal toxicity can be addressed. It is not before the human is reduced to a vulnerable place as an animal amongst others struggling to survive, the novel seems to suggest, that their pastoral inclinations towards utility and mastery can finally be interrupted and the work of forging sustainable social and environmental relations can begin. As long as pastoral moments are fiercely defended, change remains foreclosed. Yet, following Xavier Livermon's logic, there may always be opportunities for effecting change, even if the traditions we work with and the results that come from that are not always of our own choosing. What if one approached the pastoral itself as a usable tradition, one in which we try to unlearn the drive for mastery over other people and the landscape that pastorals themselves seem to script and that their anti-pastoral inversions merely sustain? What kind of relations become possible if the pastoral's desire for returning to the rural were reworked, critically? By (re)turning our attention to the rural in a mode that is stripped of both idealizations and vilifications of the countryside as an outside to modern reality, we can see that it is in those easily overlooked rural spaces that tradition – and the desire to belong that tradition affords and represents – gets reshaped, perhaps, most profoundly.

Notes

[1] Elizabeth Vibert, "Translocal Lives: Gender and Rural Mobilities in South Africa, 1970–2020," *Politikon* 47 no.4 (2020): 471. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2020.1840027.

[2] Vibert, "Translocal Lives," 471.

[3] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[4] Esther Peeren, "Villages Gone Wild: Death by Rural Idyll in *the Casual Vacancy* and *Glue*" in *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things*, (ed.) Ben Stringer, 64 (Novato: Applied Research and Design Publishing, 2018).

[5] Following Xavier Livermon, I see queer as "a constellation of non-normative genders and sexualities" that reflects people's (often marginalized) lived realities and as such also offer ways to "think through a larger critique of normativity". Xavier Livermon, "*Inxeba*, Rethinking Dichotomies of Queer Visibilities," *Urban Forum* 34 (2023): 213, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-023-09486-y.

[6] Xavier Livermon, "Usable Traditions: Creating Sexual Autonomy in Postapartheid South Africa," *Feminist Studies, Inc*. 41 no. 1 (2015): 16, https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.41.1.14. This problem is well documented. For an early discussion of this assumption, see Marc Epprecht, "'Bisexuality' and the Politics of Normal in African Ethnography," *Anthropologica* 48 no.2 (2006), https://www.jstor.org/stable/25605310.

[7] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005), 36.

[8] Zethu Matebeni, "*Nongayindoda*: Moving Beyond Gender in a South African Context," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 39 no.4 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2021.1914825.

[9] Livermon, "Usable Traditions," 32.

[10] *Inxeba*, directed by John Trengrove (2017; Urucu Media). DVD. Nakhane Touré, *Piggy Boy's Blues*. Johannesburg: Blackbird Books, [2015] 2018). I acknowledge that as a scholar based in the Netherlands, I rely strongly on (cultural) translation in analyzing these objects and that my analysis has limitations as a result.

[11] I take this translation from Gcobani Qambela, "'There Is Only One Place For Me. It Is Here, Entabeni' *Inxeba* (2017), *Kalushi* (2016) and the Difficulties of "the Urban" for the New South African Man" *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* (2021). https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2021.1899737. Xavier Livermon speaks of "in the bush." *Ulwaluko* can occur in two moments in the year, in the winter or in the summer.

[12] Sakhumzi Mfecane, "'Ndiyindoda' [I am a man]: Theorising Xhosa Masculinity," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 no.3 (2016): 204–214. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2016.1208535.

[13] Livermon, "*Inxeba*," 220.

[14] Anathi Ntozini and Hlonelwa Ngqangweni, "Gay Xhosa Men's Experiences of *Ulwaluko* (Traditional Male Initiation)," *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 18 no.11 (2016), 1310. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1182213. See also Ingrid Lynch and Matthew Clayton, "'We Go to the Bush to Prove that We Are Also Men': Traditional Circumcision and Masculinity in the Accounts of Men Who Have Sex with Men in Township Communities in South Africa," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 19 no.3 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1215527.

[15] Livermon, "Usable Traditions," 40. See also Bridgetti Mashabane and Neil Henderson, "Ulwaluko: 'Rights' of Passage of Gay Men in South Africa," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 16 no.2 (2020), 172–3. https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2020.1739487; Lungelo Manona and Andrea Hurst. "'What Is It To Be a Man:' Rites, Hashtags, Outrage." *Image & Text* 32 (2018), 5. The term "non-place" is inspired by, but differs from by Marc Augé's *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. (London/New York: Verso, [1992] 1995).

[16] Qambela, "Entabeni," 10.

[17] Qambela, "Entabeni," 3.

[18] Livermon, "*Inxeba*," 2023, 215. This juxtaposition of the wholesome countryside and morally deprived city is also established by Williams in *The Country and the City*.

[19] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1973] 1975), 12.

[20] Williams, *The Country*, 282. Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois (eds.), *Politics of Withdrawal: Media, Arts, Theory* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 3.

[21] Cameron Clark, "Grief, Ecocritical Negativity, and the Queer Anti-Pastoral," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17 no.2 (2019), 214. https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2019.1590931.

[22] Clark, "Grief," 211.

[23] David Shuttleton, "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral," in *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, David Shuttleton and Diane Watt (New York: Routledge, 2000): 126.

[24] Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt. *Queer Cinema in the World*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 247.
[25] Clark, "Grief," 212.
[26] Livermon, "Usable Traditions."
[27] For thorough, first hour responses to the reception of *Inxeba* see the special issue in *Image & Text: A Journal for Design*, 32 no. 1 (2018).
[28] Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema*, 246.
[29] Livermon, "*Inxeba*," 2023, 215.
[30] Lwando Scott, "*Inxeba* (The Wound), Queerness and Xhosa Culture," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 33 no.1 (2021), 29. https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2020.1792278.
[31] Nicholas Tyler Reich, "Queer Ecology in (Gay) Post-Pastoral Cinema," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 2020: 15. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa165. Lindsey B. Green-Simms, *Queer African Cinemas*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 143.
[32] Jacob S.T. Dlamini, *Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).
[33] Hanneke Stuit, "The Ruins of the Rural Idyll: Reconfiguring the Image of the Farm in *Homeland* and *Five Fingers for Marseilles*," *Social Dynamics* 46 no.3 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2020.1858542.
[34] Lwando Scott, "Queering the Postcolony: Same-Sex Desire and Xhosa Culture in Postcolonial South Africa" in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, (ed.) Zowie Davy, Ana Cristina Santos, Chiara Bertone, Ryan Thoreson and Saskia Wieringa (Los Angeles and London, SAGE Publications ltd., 2020).
[35] Scott, "*Queering*," 9.
[36] Green-Simms, *Queer African Cinema*, 143.
[37] Touré, *Piggy*, 62.
[38] Clark, "Grief," 212.
[39] Clark, "Grief," 217.
[40] Touré, *Piggy*, 156.
[41] Touré, *Piggy*, 9.
[42] Touré, *Piggy*, 9.
[43] Touré, *Piggy*, 20.
[44] Touré, *Piggy*, 67.
[45] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1982), 98.
[46] Shuttleton, "Gay Pastoral," 124.
[47] Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, [1991] 2003).
[48] Touré, *Piggy*, 74–5.
[49] Touré, *Piggy*, 77.
[50] Clark, "Grief," 231.
[51] Touré, *Piggy*, 78, emphasis in original.
[52] Clark, "Grief," 231.
[53] Touré, *Piggy*, 129.
[54] Livermon, "Usable Traditions," 36, 41.
[55] Touré, *Piggy*, 156.

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