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The gayle I know: A story about language, friendship and subjectivity

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The gayle I know: A story about language, friendship and subjectivity

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts (Film and Television) in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand.

12 August 2018

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Declaration

Student number: 0307689T

I hereby declare the following:

I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.

I confirm that ALL the work submitted for assessment for the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

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Abstract

This research takes the form of a short film (16 minutes), tackling the complexity of gayle in its circulation and the role of performance in constructing and maintaining identity amongst LGBTQ+ coloured users in Cape Town. The existing literature on gayle focuses on exclusively English-speaking white male participants, exposing a gap in the current literature on this subject that ignores the lived experiences of coloured users. I accessed friends, family and acquaintances in my fieldwork to explore the socio-political currency of the code and the relationship between language, identity and performance within a particular fraternity. Furthermore, this research explores the movement of the code from subculture to its appropriation by popular culture by referencing the work of Dick Hebdige.

The delivery outcomes include a report exploring the subjectivity of the research that exposes the relationship between the participants, the researcher and the research. Using these ethnographic strategies, the film moves between observational, non-observational and participatory modes.

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A mavis thing

"It's not a black thing or a white thing, or a white mavis thing … it really is a coloured thing." Glynnis Arendse (Visiting gayle, 2018)

This is a story about gayle, a linguistic practice that predominantly operates under the cloak of female names. The code began in the 1970s hair salons of Cape Town's District Six but, what started as an exclusive code amongst the gay community, spread through to the broader coloured community and into popular culture.

This code emerged in a period of oppression, responding with dissent to the oppressive confines of race, class and sexual categorisation. Dick Hebdige (1979) writes about subculture, framing his argument around British youth, from Rastafarians to punks. Hebdige claims that culture is a response to "social existence" and, since this is constantly shifting, neither culture nor subculture can be "completely raw". Culture (and subculture) is constantly being mediated "inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings" (Hebdige 1979, p. 80). Because subcultures seek to subvert the dominant system in which they exist, this form of resistance becomes attractive to wider groups through the media and are eventually appropriated by the dominant culture.

Decades later, gayle is still relevant as a tool of resistance for many of its users but, with the growing interest in queer identity, gayle is slowly making its way into popular media through young performance artists like Dope Saint Jude and Angel-Ho.

The methodology of the research is an intersection of linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork, with a particular focus on autoethnography. The film uses ethnographic strategies, moving between observational and non-observational modes. At the same time, the film is participatory in that the filmmaker allows the participants to offer her information about the code. Quentin Williams (2017:49) views ethnography as "both a form of knowledge and a way of gathering knowledge" and, in this way, the film is a collection of moments, engagements and conversations with gayle and the process of filmmaking. These conservations are often 'cut off' or open-ended to remind the viewers that they are only

getting a ‘taste’ of the code and the community. The filmmaker plays with the audience experience, pulling them in and out while simultaneously exposing her own relationship with the code.

Given the style of how the film is shot, as well as the choice of informants, the research occupies a subjective approach as a non-linguist filmmaker who has access to a community. While the research borrows from linguistic fieldwork, unlike other studies on gayle such as the work of Ken Cage and Gerrit Olivier, the filmmaker avoids focusing on the linguistic history of the code. Instead, her role, both as character and filmmaker, is evident in the subjectivity of the piece through the inclusion of illustrations, stills and dialogue between the participants and the researcher.

Gayle has many functions in different cultural contexts. It pops up in the drag scene, homes and work places thereby allowing people to engage in a shared experience of communicating around various motives including humour, political resistance and sexuality. For the purpose of this study, I approach gayle from the perspective in which I must frequently experience it and, as a result, most of the locations in the film are the homes of the participants.

Ken Cage, in his book, *Gayle: The Language of Kinks and Queens* (2003), describes gayle as an “argot”, extending Olivier’s description of the use of female names as “nouns, adjectives and verbs” interchangeably to “refer to race, state of mind or sexual activity” (1994, p. 222). For example, the words “dora” or “dorothy” mean an alcoholic beverage, but can also refer to the levels and effects of intoxication. Cage looked at gayle from the perspective of a user and insider within the gay community and obtained his data through acquaintances, questionnaires, chatrooms and gay bulletin boards (1999, p. 13). As a result, Cage focused purely on English speaking white male participants between the ages of 30 and 40, with limited reference to race, class and gender groups of that time (1999, p. 14).

In her thesis, Kathryn Luyt (2014, p. 34) focuses on English and Afrikaans speaking white men “as this was the group identified by Cage as the predominant gayle speakers of the 90s.” Luyt made use of questionnaires and also accessed contemporary data gathering tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Both Cage and Luyt deliver a lexicon of gayle that includes their identified group of participants’ most frequently used terms. Luyt adds that “new gay youth” have little to no experience of apartheid and so their “experience of discrimination” would

take on a different political agenda from the participants in the Cage study. Luyt describes the code as "contentious within the gay community" as a factor further marginalising groups who won and continue to fight for legal rights in contemporary South Africa (2014, p. 9).

I am not familiar with a large number of the descriptions of gayle in Cage's book. Many of the words are no longer in use, some have altered their meaning completely and perhaps I am not able to relate to the politics of the gayle described in the 1999 research because I engage with it in a different time and racial category. Cage explains that with Gay Pride came an overt bitterness towards heterosexual people for their treatment of gay people in the past. As a result, "there are a number of heterophonic words in gayle", amongst them are "bleeder", "fag hag" and "baby maker". Neither I nor the current participants I have interacted with consider these words gayle and I have not directly come into contact with participants using gayle for the purpose of antagonising heterosexual people or the perpetuation of misogyny.

While I have not experienced heterophobia amongst gayle users, I am not denying its existence, but believe that the gay experience was not broadly excluded or rejected within the coloured community. Instead, there has always between a complex balance of acceptance without formally accepting people identified as LGBTQ. A reason for a 'more accepting' community is recorded in Cameron and Gevisser's book, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (1994) that "sexual dissidence is more tolerated in a hybrid, creole society like that of the coloureds than in supposedly coherent societies with stronger patriarchal mythologies and traditions, like those constructed by the African and Afrikaner nationalist movements in South Africa". Amongst coloured people, most speakers, whether queer or heterosexual, know of gayle or have appropriated certain words into their speech maintaining gayle as an integral part of coloured identity. District Six is often remembered as a space of dynamic cultural and racial acceptance but also a space of fluidity and a certain degree of acceptance in relation to sexuality. *Drum* magazine frequently featured and dramatised the lives of some the most famous gay people of 1950s and 1960s from drag artists like Kewpie, to Cape Town's legendary 'cross-dressing' gangster, Gertie Williams (Harrison, 2005: 11). Dick Hebdige (1979, p. 93) writes that "the emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press. This hysteria is typically ambivalent: it fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement". A similar scene played out with the portrayal of drag culture in the media of the time that often

covered the events and lives of the popular queer figures through the lens of mockery and ridicule.

Many of the definitions in both Cage and Olivier's work are centred around and attributed to gay male participants. Today, many of the gender roles of these terms have fallen away, for example, Olivier describes the term "Beulah" as "beautiful man", but currently it would only be translated as "beautiful". These terms are presently not exclusively male or gay terms. In her article, *A Queer analysis of the discursive construction of gay identity in Gayle: The language of kinks and queens: A history and dictionary of gay language in South Africa* (2009), Tracey Lee McCormick argues that Cage's dictionary "assumes that all gay people in South Africa are familiar with the lexical items defined and that, following this, there is a homogenous gay community" (2009:154). McCormick believes that gayle is not a "unique South African language", but rather that it can and is accessed by many different users who may or may not identify as gay. McCormick, instead, is interested in moving away from an essentialist view of gay identity towards a "fluid, unpredictable notion of identity, that is not only performed, but that is never complete" (2009:158). It is this flexible approach to performance that allows gayle, as a linguistic practice, to move in and out of a variety of spaces to maintain its relevance.

In addressing the function of gayle, Gerrit Olivier writes that "a common language gives to a community of people a sense of solidarity and unity; it allows members of that community to identify with one another and with the group through a mutually understood and exclusive code" (1994, p. 223). The film aims to show how language functions to bond a group of people through a series of testimonies and narratives using on-camera interviews, sound design, stills, illustrations and animation. In structural linguistics, there is a tendency to "box" or categorise social phenomena into definable terms, like slang[1] or lingua franca.[2] In relation to gayle, a structural linguistics approach may overshadow the importance of the practice of language when focusing purely on producing a lexicon. While it may not have been intentional, the previous writings on gayle carried out an erasure of the coloured community in the creation and circulation of gayle. Gerrit Olivier argues that, in exploring 'gay languages', the researcher "would … need to look more closely at the frequency of usage, the

[1] Words and phrases regarded as informal and commonly restricted to a particular context or group of people.
[2] Refers to a common language used by speakers whose native languages are different.

social contexts within which the words occur, the social background of the speakers, and the meaning that these speakers attach not only to words themselves, but to the use of the 'gay vernacular' in general" (1994, p. 219). For this reason, I refer to gayle as a linguistic practice, which allows the code to emerge out of its own context and look at the role of performance in relation to gayle and its users. Johannes Fabian argues that the practice of ethnographic writing is about understanding the world by the "making of knowledge out of experience" (1990, p. 756). Through my personal experience of gayle and the testimony of my informants and participants, the research offers a lived experience as a contribution to the existing knowledge of the code.

One of my participants, Kyle Carson, composed a gayle alphabet and released it daily on Facebook and Instagram. He decided to exclude some of the most frequently used gayle terms that he perceived as problematic such as Aunty Aida (HIV/AIDS), Belinda (blind), Reeva (rough) and Paula (posh) as well as the description of racial categories. Carson aimed to introduce gayle to a new audience as well as to celebrate it with its current users. Since the posts were intended for social media, Carson believed that including these words would create unintended negative perceptions for those who might come into contact with the code for the first time on these platforms. In *Figure 1* below, his alphabet is shown in pink and white, while I have added the excluded codes in yellow and black. Some of these descriptions include race, sexual violence and HIV.



Figure 1: Gayle chart by Kyle Carson with additions by Lauren Mulligan (2016)

In the scene depicted in *Figure 2*, a conversation takes place between Julian, Arlene and an unidentified man at *Cape Town Pride* in 2017.



Figure 2: Stills Visiting gayle, showing Arlene and Julian in at a Cape Town Pride (2017).

The setting for *Figure 2* is a party, where an unknown man is explaining his preference for certain men in a setting where it is likely that he will try to 'pick up' a sexual partner. The two gayle words that stand out for me in this conversation are "wendy" (white) and "reeva"(rough), because both these words in this context signify racial categories. He uses "reeva" to extend his initial description of "gangsterism and poverty". These descriptions refer to his attraction to rough coloured men. In this instance, the unknown character describes a stereotype of coloured identity that is associated with gangs, criminal activity and violence. This is evident in the gayle words he uses as well as in his interpretation of a taxi driver. As we watch Julian and Arlene's reactions, it is clear that they know exactly what he is referring to, and they playfully laugh at his descriptions. This sequence shows the ease with which gayle is used within the context of a party and that it has been a part and continues to function in these places of club culture.

This story involves the full use of dramatic cues from tonal ranges, to widely expressive facial and hand gestures. The importance of a good story and the awareness of an audience is a key component of gayle. When a group is engaged in sharing information, the speakers are fully aware that their audience demands a witty tongue, because there are always other people ready to tell their story, like performers eagerly awaiting the stage.

How I met gayle



Figure 3: Rob and me (1988) Cape Town, South Africa

When I started high school, my older brother, Rob, moved into a bigger room outside the house which was still connected to the kitchen by a narrow red stoep. Rob 'came out' to me when he was in his final year of high school and, after that, I was allowed to hang out in his room – a privilege that only I had that was denied to my younger two siblings. Even though we did very little talking, he would introduce me to a range of musical genres, from grunge to techno. When he got old enough to go out clubbing, he would open the door after he had showered and let the hot fragranced steam out, while the sound of his music filled the family kitchen. On a particular day of this routine, my mother was preparing supper when the Moon Safari (1998) album by the psychedelic pop duo, Air, started playing and almost immediately the chorus repeated the distorted words, "Sexy Boyyyyyyy". My mother stormed out of the kitchen, across the stoep and into his room to cut the song short. It wasn't long after he turned nineteen that Rob moved out.

When I was seventeen, we moved to Johannesburg after the company that my father worked for retrenched a number of employees in their Cape Town branch. After I completed high school, I went to spend my holiday with Rob who was renting a flat in Gardens, Cape Town. Rob worked in retail, focusing on the visual design of stores, and shared a flat with his best

friend, Julian, who did the traffic reports on a local radio station. Their friends were either working in creative fields or looked as if they did, so the flat was constantly alive with conversation. At the time, I was listening to a lot of Erykah Badu albums and spent most of my time drawing and writing "not-so-deep poetry" about the earth and "mother Africa" and many other embarrassing "coming of age" things.

One day, I was sitting on the balcony while completing one of my drawings, when some of their friends came around for drinks to 'warm up' before a night out. They were all squashed in the kitchen area laughing about an incident involving a friend, his boyfriend and a gorilla lock (a metal bar that locked the steering wheel of a car) that had become a weapon during one of their many arguments. I kept to myself, mostly because I was intimidated by their life experiences and their engaging storytelling techniques, but I was also busy completing a present for my brother that was made up of a combination of text and rock art inspired drawings. At some point, Julian broke away to see what I was doing and looked very impressed with my work, then turned to walk back to the others. Then I heard him say "ursula gerty". I was so confused, I had no idea what he had meant and no intention of drawing attention to myself by asking, but it sounded like a good thing so I decided that it meant "intelligent". I don't think that was my first introduction to gayle, but it was the first time I remember a being uncertain of what a word meant.

I love stories. I love the long descriptive ones, the short witty ones, the ones that lose their track to become another story and then come back again. I will happily listen to them all. Once upon a time, I had a big family that gathered every weekend and squashed into small lounges to share "the happening" of the week and re-told their funny memories. I admired their confidence and ability to hold the attention of so many people as they wove their tales around the punchline using animated facial and body gestures, and switching between English, Afrikaans and Kaaps. When I started learning about gayle, the context and structure felt very similar to these family gatherings. The only difference was the inclusion of a code that used predominantly woman's names and that most of its users identified as gay.
I learned the most about gayle in homes of friends who celebrated their sexuality and encouraged me to explore my own sexual identity as a queer woman. The people whom I heard using it were ambitious young adults who worked and partied hard. It showed me a very different perspective to the depressing imagery of gay people I had seen in the media. I'm not saying there were no tragic events or "dodgy" people around me. I'm saying that my

brother and his friends shaped my experience, perhaps unintentionally, and these experiences prevented me from building a negative perception of what it meant to be queer.

I remember when the television series, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, was the most popular show and all my school friends memorised the lyrics to the title track just so we could rap with each other. It always sounded messy because we would all rap different lyrics and this would often end in a heated argument. At the time, there was no way to check the lyrics through Google search, which would have settled the disputes. My experience of learning about gayle didn't include an overarching standard of 'correctness' because the code was constantly morphing. Although some users take the 'rules' of gayle very seriously, this was not my experience with people I was learning from; 'mistakes' were embraced. For example, a popular drag artist mispronounced the gayle word "vast"[3] and what probably started as an inside joke, spread to wider group of people and became "varns". Also, in gayle, a man is called a "bag", but sometimes new users mix things up and call a woman a "bag". This is all part of learning the code, but people who have been speaking gayle for a long time feel that this is destroying the foundation of gayle.

I did not meet any of my grandparents except my father's mother; the others died when my parents were still children. My siblings and I spent a lot of time with my gran; we would go to her every day after school and see her on weekends too. She had three jokes that she retold, all equally offensive on the build-up to the punchline. But what my gran did best was word play and she passed that on to my Aunty Dawn. My gran was diabetic, but her favourite line when offered anything to eat was "nee maar gee ma" which loosely translated means "no thanks but I'll take it". When spoken, it has a humorous tone for two reasons. Firstly, it rhymes and, secondly, the two parts of the response are contradictory.

One day, after school, a friend came to visit while I was at my gran's place and, after my gran had thoroughly interrogated her on her last name, she turned to me and said, "Why can't you talk like her? Why you talk so plat?" I burst out laughing because she was questioning the eloquence of my speech, even though we spoke in exactly the same way.

[3] "Vast" can be used as an adverb to describe a great extent or amount, but it be used as affirmative tool to agree with a speaker while in conversation.

Word play or word association is a very big part of the coloured community, especially creatively switching meanings between languages. For instance, I knew someone called “five bop”, because he had a bald spot and a scar at the back of his head the size of an old 50 cent coin. Someone else was called “Oegdie”. The first part “oeg” is Kaaps for “eye” and “die” means “the” in Afrikaans. Everyone would immediately know who the speaker was referring to, but the humour lay in the tone of the speaker and the playful approach to language within the coloured community.

A kind of ghetto poetry is everywhere in Cape Town, from the taxi gaatjie (a person who works with the driver by collecting payment) shouting out creative descriptions about the route to attract potential commuters, to the person selling vegetables at the traffic lights, “Avokado peere maak jou hare meere!” (avocado pears give you more hair).

My Afrikaans is terrible. It’s something that never came naturally to me and that I always found painful to practice. Perhaps it’s because I have always struggled to say the letter “R”, which is a pretty big part of sounding authentic in speech. To this day, I still haven’t perfected that rolling motion of the tongue. When I hear gayle, it sounds the most humorous and effortless when being used with Afrikaans or Kaaps and so perhaps herein lies some of my reservations for using the code. Being based in Johannesburg, I rarely hear gayle, because it is not used as frequently outside of Cape Town and so my use of gayle is limited to dropping a word here or there in conversation. Sometimes, when I visit Cape Town, I spend the first few days just listening closely in order to figure out which words are outdated and what the new ones are. For example, during my last visit, my brother told me about an incident where his friend was walking through the mall with her mother and noticed the flamboyant dress sense of a coloured man who was passing them. She said, “Kyk daai maybelline”, which, loosely translated, means “look at that effeminate gay man”. The man immediately turned to give her a scathing look and continued on his way. I had never heard ‘maybelline’ up until then and asked my brother why it was being used as I assumed it was a variation of ‘mavis’ which is gayle for ‘moffie’. He replied, “because maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s maybelline”. In this example, the popular slogan, “Maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s *Maybelline*”, belonging to the cosmetics company, *Maybelline*, has been appropriated by some gayle users. In the context of the phrase being used for the cosmetics brand, the defining factor is beauty and whether it was achieved ‘naturally’ or through using the cosmetic products. When the phrase is used in the context of gayle, the defining factor is

sexual identity. The slogan offers an opportunity to laugh at heteronormative ideas around queer identity and is a convenient phrase that has dual meanings.

Not just a skinner, not just a patsy (party)

The locations of the research are mostly in the homes of my participants. I wish to introduce three main characters, my brother, Robert Mulligan (Rob), his best friend Julian Naidoo and Glynnis Arendse. Through these characters, the viewer learns about the kinds of relationships that form around gayle and the evolution of this linguistic practice. Rob is where my introduction to gayle begins and therefore he functions as my primary informant in gaining access to the code and a particular group of users. Julian's home is where the film allows the audience to spend time with gayle in a group setting, learning more about it through observing and listening to gayle in conversation. Glynnis Arendse (2018) offers a historical perspective on the inclusive and exclusive functions of the code from the perspective of a female user.

Cage argued that, like most queer 'languages', its existence functioned to conceal sexual identity and movement by operating as a key conduit through which gay men and women could communicate with lovers and friends without revealing their sexual identity to their heterosexual neighbours. Cage claimed that "repressive anti-gay legislation in 1968" drove gay people into dark dingy bars where, amongst "white South African men, Gayle found fertile soil" (2003, p.13). While bars and nightclubs were active spaces for the circulation of the code, queer coloured men also found a use for gayle while working as shampooers and cleaners in the exclusively white owned hair salons that served only white customers. It was in these spaces that coloured employees used a linguistic code to communicate and share a common bond while gossiping about the clients using gayle. This frustration furthered divisions between the white and coloured gay men as they competed for sexual partners. During an interview with a friend of my informants, Cedric (Sandi) George, he recalled his young self, interacting with legends like Kewpie and other famous drag artists. He was the youngest of the queens at the time and remembers rivalry along racial lines:

> "We, as coloured queens, didn't really like the white queens around the coloured clubs because they would lure the coloured boys, you know, with money … so we were never really welcoming of them when they used to mince (enter) into the clubs with their coloured boys." (Cedric George, 2018)

It seemed that there was no escaping the upper hand that money and class privileges afforded their white counterparts which made the grounds for competition uneven both in the context

of the salons and the club scene. In the context of the coloured community, gayle is not exclusive to male users. According to Sandi, these relationships between gay men and women (both identifying as lesbian or heterosexual) were mutually beneficial as both were vulnerable groups and open to attack:

> "We had a lot of girls that used to move around with us … we used to go to clubs together because they felt safer with us. Women that could gayle also used the gayle." (Cedric George, 2018)

Therefore, unlike the group in Cage's study, coloured users have a different point of entry and are not exclusive to people who identify as LGBTQ+.

ethel, olga and ola



Figure 4: Colin, Glynnis and Robbie (1994), Bondi Beach, Australia

I was scrolling through Facebook when I came across a picture of, Glynnis Arendse, one of the key characters in the film, seated between two men. When I requested more information about it, she sent me this text message:

> "This picture was taken on Bondi Beach 24yrs ago with two SA *mavis's* [gay men] living there … Colin on the right has passed on … Robbie (kubra) on the left, I have no contact with." (Glynnis Arendse, Whatsapp, 25 February 2018)

The image encapsulates Glynnis's character in the film. Within the structure of the film, she is positioned as a central voice that represents a source of knowledge about the history of the code, a kind of anchor for the viewer. The use of gayle does not "extend much beyond the description of social and sexual interaction" amongst gay people and their friends (Olivier, 1994, p. 220). This suggests that users intentionally select spaces and groups in which to activate gayle, perhaps as a means of controlling access beyond the established group. Cage (2003, p. 27) took this one step further by claiming that a gayle user would typically be male and would not use gayle in conversation with a woman. While this may have been the case among the participants in Cage's study, this cannot be applied to coloured users because these binary 'rules' are not part of their social structures. According to the participants in my study, both coloured men and women used/use the code and most coloured people had some knowledge of gayle, whether or not people identified as gay, lesbian, transgender or queer.

Another space of contention lies in the origin of the code. On the one hand, Cage writes that "Gayle originally developed in the 'moffie' drag culture of the Cape 'coloured' community in the Western Cape in the 1950s" (1999, p. 2), but Glynnis Arendse, a key informant in my research, claims a different time period as the origin. At the beginning of the interview with Glynnis (Visiting gayle, 2018), she asked me, "Do you know where it comes from? Do you know why it was started?" It is here that she asserts her position as a witness to the early function of the code and placed it firmly in the 1970s salons amongst hairdressers. According to Glynnis, the function of the code was initially developed to "skinner[4] about the people sitting in the chair". Speakers found solidarity and power using gayle as a form of protest against the economic and racial divisions of a South Africa under apartheid rule. It allowed them to assert their agency through language on the limited work environments of white-owned salons. During his investigation into the Nukulaelae Atoll in the Central Pacific and the influence of the global on the local, Niko Besnier writes: "Through gossip, people make sense of what surrounds them, interpreting events, people, and the dynamics of history." Similarly, gayle allowed users to 'make sense' of the oppressive racial hierarchy that upheld apartheid structures. For the hairdressers and shampooers, gayle offered safe passage to 'speak back' to the white privilege sitting in the chairs. In a chapter of *Defiant Desire* entitled *A drag at Madam Costello's: Cape moffie life and the popular press in the 1950s and 60s*, Dhianaraj Chetty (1994, p. 123) writes: "The Hanover Street area of District Six had a whole cluster of hairdressing salons around which gay life revolved … since the forced removals of 1976 and the destruction of District Six, these salons are now to be found dispersed all over the Cape Flats."

Gayle is a linguistic practice largely associated with queer identity, but the code has moved outside the exclusive walls of a subculture and into the broader population of Cape Town and into popular media. In describing the function of subcultures, Hebdige claims that they are "expressive forms" and argues that they express as "fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second class lives" (1979, p. 137).

When I started my research on gayle, a few of my friends convinced me that it was dying out and that most young people they knew did not use it. A few weeks later, a friend sent me a music video "Catherine St Jude Pretorius" by rapper, Dope Saint Jude (DSJ), a symbol of

[4] Skinner is the Kaaps word for "gossip" and a variation of the Afrikaans word "skinder".

resistance against boundaries within Hip Hop culture. In her track, "Keep in Touch", featuring Angel-Ho, she uses gayle as a celebration of coloured queer identity. During my interview with DSJ, she spoke about the use of gayle within her group of friends and the resistance they initially faced when trying to book gigs in a predominantly white run Cape Town club scene: "Gayle came into it to talk smack about people who would treat us like shit in the city and then use the language as a way that they wouldn't understand … specifically like the word 'wendy', for a white person". In his article, "*Queering Hip-Hop, Queering the City: Dope Saint Jude's Transformative Politics*", Adam Haupt (2016) argues that DSJ uses gayle and hip-hop to address "processes of exclusion from the city, which was transformed by apartheid and, more recently, gentrification, by claiming it as a creative and playful space for queer subjects of colour".

It is evident through DSJ's work that not much has changed in terms of the exclusionary landscape of the city, and that gayle has maintained its initial relevance as a tool to speak back to the economic and racial power dynamics that still exist today. Gayle has and continues to provide a marginalised community with the linguistic power to speak about people in their company.

> "When you a straight woman, you competition … you must either be a letty (lesbian) or you must be a hairdresser otherwise you not part of this because you coming to interfere with the bags (men) here" (Glynnis Arendse, *Visiting gayle*, 2018).

Glynnis found gayle as a teenager through a friend who worked as a hairdresser. She became part of the group even though her sexuality as a 'straight woman' initially placed her on the outside. She recognised that the gay clique, she so desperately wanted to be a part of, saw her as competition in the pursuit for male sexual attention. It wasn't until a camping trip that she used her knowledge of gayle to bond with the group and show her allegiance to queer identity and, as a result, she earned the acceptance of the group. It was through these relationships with her gay friends that she found safety and support when she divorced her husband and raised her two daughters with the help of a queer family that assisted with school runs and hospital visits. For Glynnis, gayle represents a clear statement against the conservative social and cultural ideology, but it is also a tool with which she can bond with both her daughters and her friends:

> I used to have this friend, she was very…letty gerty (lesbian woman). She worked with me, but old school, man.
>
> And then the one day we were having a conversation, I mean, Jill, if she's still alive now, she's probably in her eighties, late eighties … and Calvin … and she would use like old letty gayle (lesbian language).
>
> Or mavis gayle (gay language) …
>
> … she would say like, instead of olga (old) she'll say ethel (old), you know the words have also changed, do you know that?
> She'll talk about ethel (old) or whatever …
>
> … and then Calvin say
>
> "Here (God) Jill, how long are you a moffie (gay man)?"

Everyone in the room burst into laughter, as we listened around her table and once she had caught her breath, she explained that Jill was white:

> But of course she was white and she was from Camps Bay and they don't talk like that, even the hairdressers … it really is a coloured thing, you know.
> It's not a black thing or a white thing or a white mavis (gay) thing, it really is a coloured thing.

When we hear about a white lesbian attempting to demonstrate her knowledge of the code in the company of coloured users, this testimony addresses issues of identity and ownership. Jill has limited knowledge and access to gayle and this is evident in her use of outdated words. In the story, Calvin does two things: he exposes Jill as an outsider, but acknowledges and accepts her presence based on the merit of her sexuality. He also claims the code as a symbol of the "moffies" therefore belonging specifically to gay men. The term "moffie" was predominantly used within the coloured community and makes it clear that gayle is a marker of coloured queer identity. Many of the words have changed but some have stayed the same for decades. For example, "nancy" meaning "no" or "not" has probably been around since the earliest speakers as the name "Nancy" celebrated its popularity between the 1940s to 50s and is used today but "olga" which used to be the gayle word for "old" has changed to "ola".

Glynnis's testimony provides 'historical' knowledge of the transformation of gayle and acknowledges the morphing and evolution of some words, but also notes the preservation of others. While she is not a gay man, she has the authority to speak directly from lived experience and her relationships with queer users. When Glynnis shares stories about her friendships, she appears to sink into that memory as it is happening again in that moment. She closes her eyes and occasionally pauses, as if she is watching the memories play back in her mind before sharing the scenario on camera. In this example, the camera stays on the narrator and does not move to re-enact the memory because, in this case, the filmmaker is asking the viewer to watch the pleasure experienced by the storyteller. In that moment, the joy is in the privilege of being inside this vibrant kitchen with a knowledgeable and passionate storyteller.



Figure 5: Stills from Visiting gayle (2018)

cindi and sally

The importance of gayle in her everyday life is evident in the passing on of gayle to her daughters, Kelly and Leanne. I introduce Kelly in her home through an on-camera interview then she tells the story of her relationship with gayle. Most people start gayling as adults and this is often simultaneous with their coming out or their relationships with LGBTQ communities but Kelly's introduction coincides with her parents' divorce. Glynnis finds support and safety in the relationship with her gay friends who form a family bond with her and her daughters. Kelly learnt about gayle from the age of six and grows up hearing and using the code in her everyday speech. Gayle is an integral part of her relationship with her mother, sister, friends and her association of family. In the example Kelly uses to describe her interest in understanding the gayle her mother and her friends were using, she says:

> I remember at one stage we were sitting in the room and they were gayling and they mentioned 'sally' and I must have been about twelve ten, like eleven …
>
> … and I was like 'ooooh, what's sally?'
>
> And then somebody had to say: 'It's fellatio dear', one of the mavis's said, and then I said, 'Now, what is fellatio'…
>
> … because you didn't know what fellatio is at that age.

This story shows that, while Kelly was growing up, Glynnis and her friends were using gayle to disguise the content of the conversation from her children. After being surrounded by gayle for years, Kelly finally asked about the meaning of a word that had stood out as central to the conversation. She knows that 'sally' was not referring to a person because she asked "What is sally?", making it clear to the adults around her that she was aware that she was being left out. The humour of this story is her double confusion with the meaning of sally because even when she is told what it means, her youth and limited vocabulary denied her access. In this way, they were still able to regulate her experience of the inappropriate content of the conversations without completely excluding her. To this day, gayle remains a central part of Kelly's life and, in our interaction, gayle is always present. This translates to her romantic relationships and, during the interview, she proudly claimed, "I taught all my bags

to gayle". In setting up her relationships, gayle is part of the contract but in one situation she ultimately removed the word "sheila" from her vocabulary. In gayle, "sheila" means "shit", but this was also the name of her previous partner's late mother and, as a result, she stopped using "sheila" and replaced it with "hilda", which mean hideous or ugly.

Is this gerty making a video of us?



Figure 6: A still from a cellphone recording of a conversation between Rob and Julian.

Julian is Rob's best friend and, by extension, my other brother. He has been in and out of our family home since I was a teenager and acted as the 'good cop' in response to my many questionable life decisions. The clip represented in Figure 5 is some of the earliest footage I shot towards my research on gayle and captures the structure and style of the film. It observes a conversation between two friends talking about social pressures on women and relationships. Julian is the primary storyteller in the scenario, while Rob gives the occasional affirmational "uuum" and towards the end of the clip he finally says: "Well, I'm sure she'll find another man". After a short pause, Julian quickly snaps back by saying, "sy is'ie 'n a mannerage kind 'ie" which, loosely translated, means that she doesn't place much of her focus on male attention. Once they realised that I had been filming them, Julian asked Rob, "Is this gerty making a recording?" and then the footage ends. The composition of the frame is indicative of my access in carrying out the research with Rob as the primary informant and my lens closely following and shooting over his shoulder. In the film, Julian's character offers reactions to what is happening in particular moments. He performs and reflects a symbolic reaction of the audience. In the observational sequence around the dinner table, Kelly shares her thoughts on relationships and marriage when Rob asks about her current partner, Sven. Julian immediately asks, "From where?" and when Kelly responds that he is local, Julian's facial expression is one of shock. From here, the conversation is all about the unusual match of this name with a "chlora bag", meaning a coloured man. Julian verbalises what everyone at the table is thinking, that the name Sven is not typically South African or

coloured. Julian's character comes to symbolise the familiar, the straddling of many class and social norms that have come to represent complex identities, like a blend of sweet and spicy Cape Malay curry. For Julian, gayle is less important because using it means excluding his husband who is a white English-speaking male. In fact, he avoided speaking gayle when they first started dating because he was fully aware of this exclusion and it is only after years of marriage that he is able to drop a gayle word into a conversation with his husband. In 2017, I joined Julian and his cousin, Arlene, at Cape Town Pride to double up on hanging out with them and shooting some footage for my research. At the time, I was searching for participants and had set my sights on a popular drag artist in the Cape Town club scene. As she finished her last song of the performance, I asked Arlene to introduce us as she came off the stage. I tried my best to "sell" my research above the noisy rave music and, as I finished, she said, "We can organise an interview, but I don't gayle" and immediately turned around to gayle to Arlene. This moment made two issues very clear to me. The first was that, for some, gayle represents a lower-class structure, an association with the 'informal' that generates negative associations with language in relation to education. The second is the reading of my 'outsider' status in this context and the reminder that my interest in the code did not guarantee access. After I returned home to Johannesburg, I decided that I would approach the research using my relationships with friends and family and treat the filmmaking process as an act of collecting moments.

Visiting gayle

There are sequences in the film where the camera follows Rob, both on foot and driving in a car, in order to create the feeling of a journey. These shots plot the process of the filmmaker's experience of gayle, through which Rob is the primary informant and point of entry. Early on in the film, the sound of a bell interrupts the soundscape with a medium shot (MS) of Rob chanting " Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" in a living room area. For almost a minute, we watch and listen to him chant, lifting his palms together in the position of prayer until he stands up to close the brown wooden box in front of him and sits down again to ring the bell, signalling the end of his chanting. Immediately, he jumps up, turns to the camera while raising his hand into 'peace' signs and says "Done!". The intention with this sequence is to allow the viewer to learn more about the character they are watching, for example, that he is religious but also does not take himself too seriously. The edit then cuts to a gate opening and Rob walks ahead while the shaky camera follows. The sound of laughter interrupts the windy sequence as the camera searches for the source. This is where we meet Julian, who smiles and waves inside the house, framed by a large window with dappled light reflected on the glass. The voice of the filmmaker comes from behind the lens, "Hello honey" and, after a beat, we are in the kitchen with a wide shot of Julian at the sink. The filmmaker is clearly familiar with Julian and his home, capturing the conversation between friends:

Leigh-Anne: This is that Gina (weed) that makes you in your puzzy.
Rob: Julian, aren't you going to ask me ...?
Julian: What's with the band?
Rob: Yes.
Julian: Ja, what's with the band?

The camera moves to from Julian towards an open door where Rob is standing with two women, Leigh-Ann and her partner, Jay and then moves to Julian inside the kitchen.

Rob: So I mos now … after this Buddhist retreat now, so I'm mos now a leader in the … in the Buddhist organisation so this is my leadership colours.
Leigh-Anne: Ohhhhhh…
Julian looks in the group's direction and very quickly realising Rob was lying, he bursts into laughter.
Julian: Ok … interesting …

The camera moves back to grab the reaction of the group in the doorway.

Leigh-Anne: It's nancy (not) a zit?
Rob: A zit?

In this sequence, two key characters are introduced through observational strategies. I chose to let the viewer watch the characters in order to reproduce a similar intimate experience of my introduction to gayle. I occupy three positions: the space of the filmmaker who informs the viewer, a character in the narration and the researcher. The filmmaker exposes her position as reflexive through the choice of a handheld camera that follows speakers into spaces and this establishes the camera's perspective as a character. This creates the feeling of a journey in which the viewer and the filmmaker collect information about gayle and the participants. The filmmaker's voice is heard in conversation with the participants and takes the position of 'researcher' through the off-camera voice.

The challenge of the edit was in the construction of the narrative and how I would piece the conventional interviews and observational footage to construct the narrative. I approached the research from a position of collecting stories and so the structure was revealed through the edit. The solution came when I incorporated hand-drawn and digital illustrations to act as interruptions and what initially seems incongruous sets the style and rhythm of the piece. The drawings are predominately black and white, but also offer variations to this, firstly through incorporating everyday mundane objects, like scissor or memory sticks and transforming their function into a new use in the story of the illustration. Like gayle, the object holds maintains appearance but its function transforms by means of the line drawings around it as well as the sound design into a visual pun. In the interpretation of 'willamina', a memory stick is transformed into a hairdryer by illustrating a hand and dog with the appearance of movement to its coat.

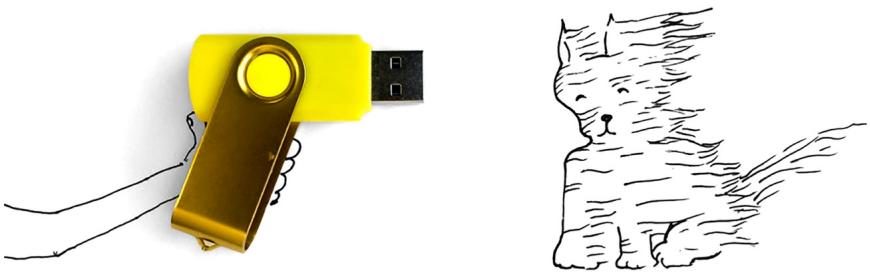

Figure 7: An illustration depicting "willamina" meaning "wind" in gayle, Visiting gayle (2018)

These animations and illustrations function as a clue to guide the viewers by enabling them to decode gayle but showing them rather than telling them the answer. These 'clues' are also scattered through the film, not necessarily as an introduction to the next story, which forces the viewers into a challenge of memorising the clues as they make their way through the narrative. The illustrations act as a device that links the expositional with the informal footage and audio recordings. Furthermore, these interruptions are strengthened by the sound design, for example, the illustration depicting "priscilla lodge" or prison relies on the sound of a heavy metal gate closing to give weight to the severity of the meaning. At the same time, the term "priscilla lodge" is humorous and is a playful wrapping for a serious topic. In expanding on her theory on gender as performative, Judith Butler explains, "It is important to understand performativity – which is distinct from performance – through the more limited notion of resignification … but in the place of something like parody I would now emphasise the complex ways in which resignification works in political discourse" (Osborne & Segal, 1994). In this case, the illustrations function as a performative tool mirroring the duality of gayle, by operating through humour to execute visual puns. The illustrations make their way into the frame during the conventional expositional interviews accompanied by the sound of the story being told. When Glynnis informs us about the origins of gayle in the hair salons, illustrations begin to emerge in the frame around her. At the same time, the sound of a hairdryer and a light chatting interrupts the storytelling process for a few fleeting seconds to imagine the sounds of a bustling salon. Sound design is a critical part of the film and the interruptions, because it legitimises the drawn image by giving it depth. The viewers 'buy

into' what they are watching because they are assured by the sound that their interpretation of the line drawn image is as 'real' as a photograph or moving image.

The subtitling in the film is approached in two ways; the larger white and yellow texts written on the images are direct translations of their spoken word, which is very often Kaaps.[5] The white text represents the language – English, Afrikaans or Kaaps – in which gayle (in yellow) is embedded. The second approach is on the bottom of the frame in a smaller font and provides the English subtitles. In her research on English/Afrikaans codeswitching amongst Cape coloured speakers, Diane Lesley Bowers (2006, p. 12) states that most speakers are bilingual and often use both languages in the same sentence. She goes on to argue that the motivation for codeswitching was "influenced by situational and contextual factors … associated with ingroup membership" through which they could access various identities, but that "codes may also be switched as a means of expressing emotions, showing deference, and as a means of either accommodating an addressee or putting up a social barrier" (2006, p. 2). It would then not be unusual for participants in this research to easily switch and mix between English, Afrikaans, Kaaps and gayle in a similar way because this structure is a part of their daily lives both in language and code.

The final scene of the film puts the viewer back with Rob and his friends, with Julian teasing Leigh-Anne about changing her dress code to a more conservative style to fulfil the contractual obligations of a married woman. At the same time, the footage shows Julian struggling to hang a picture on a wall of framed family pictures and this doubles up the humour by reflecting it onto Julian. The characters say their good-byes and one person says "it was nice to meet you" and leaves the story open-ended in the hope of encountering these characters on screen again.

[5] Kaaps is a variant of Afrikaans that has been part of the diverse group of speakers from the time of the Cape under Dutch rule. In recent years, there has been a growing movement to challenge the view of Afrikaans as a language of the of the oppressor by encouraging a reimaging of the language through Kaaps.

mince! minaj!

The gayle word “mince” has a dual meaning within the code itself as it can be used to describe the act of entering or exiting a space. For some users, “mince” has been transferred to “minaj”, appropriated from American-Trinidadian rapper, Nicki Minaj. It’s possible that the choice to use “minaj” enhances a mundane act by injecting humour and performance.

The research offers a set of observations that show that language is dynamic as is evident with the circulation of gayle between different groups, and also shows how inclusionary politics play out. We observe that language is linked to identity politics and shared experience through the characters and their relationships. Gayle is a linguistic practice associated with LGBTQ+ users and their friends, whether gay or straight. Language is a space of contestation and proof that communities or groups do not always agree. We see this play out in the varying opinions of gayle’s inception, with Cage claiming that gayle was formed around the 1950s, while Glynnis Arendse (2018) places its origin in the 1970s. While we might never know the origins of the code, it is evident from the writing and lived experience of the participants that the code is used in many different spaces, from hair salons and homes to nightclubs.

This research on gayle is based on participatory practice. In various stages of the research, I shared sections of the film with the participants and welcomed their responses to how they are represented. This act of ‘going back’ became the opening scene of *Visiting gayle* as it was taken from one of many telephonic conversations with my brother, Rob. I used these reflective sessions to speak through my ideas and listen to his opinions on the set of representations and observations being made in the film. I found that sharing short clips of the film gave the participants a kind of agency in the process and they shared voice notes, video clips and images throughout the period of this research.

I have shared the completed film with other participants in the study, including Kyle Carson, Charlton Opperman, Kelly Arendse, all of whom have done the same. Their responses have been mixed, both positive, in the case of Kyle and Charlton, however Kelly was less enthusiastic about what it reveals. For example, the observation style scene at a dinner table where Kelly attempts to dismiss the group’s interest in a man she is dating by describing him as “Just a *bag* who’s around”. As the filmmaker, I did not enjoy this scene because of what it

revealed about Kelly, but rather the humour around the associations with names. In this scene, the name “Sven” becomes the focus of interest because, in this context, the person who it belongs to is coloured and reaffirmed speaks to a set of identity politics. As a result, the film is an exercise in bringing the viewer closer to the community in this research through humour, observation and participatory practice. The research is an act of self-representation as well as an exploration of my relationship with the participants.

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