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Sociality and Agency in Mandisi Bongelo's "I am a Human Being - Flesh and Spirit"

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Abstract
This article uses the close reading method to analyse Mandisi Bongelo's narrative, "I am a Human Being—Flesh and Spirit" to explore whether friendship fosters one's agency. It draws on Lucas' discussion of loneliness and appearance, particularly her discussion of ontological agency, and the African concept of 'Igwebuike.' After all, humans are driven by an insatiable want to connect with others because, via social interactions, people can express who they are and find a place to fit in, which leads to recognition and opportunities for social interactions. For certain people (particularly those that societies see as abnormal or unattractive), forming certain types of social bonds, including friendship and marriage, can be challenging at times, and can lead to a life that is purposeless and lonely. Against this backdrop, the article additionally attempts to ascertain whether friendship has the capacity to undermine negative and discriminatory narratives that marginalise individuals with albinism. In this regard, the article argues that friendship accords those with albinism the ontological awareness, bravery, and self-assurance to act alongside and ahead of those without albinism. Furthermore, social pressures and friendship-based influences can also negatively impact or severely undermine an individual's agency.

Keywords:
Albinism, Ontological Agency, Sociality, Igwebuike
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Introduction
In the contemporary world, people divide themselves on racial, religious, and other socioeconomic lines, which might expose one to social vulnerabilities, including enforced loneliness. Given the enforced social disintegration, individuals continually seek meaningful

social connections such as friendship, marriage, and sexualised bonds, as well as social affiliations or partnerships. However, establishing social ties can be difficult—if not almost impossible—for some members of a society where lookism is unavoidable and where certain people and forms of humanity suffer denigration and stereotyping. In such contexts, people endure loneliness resulting from a lack of working social bonds and interactions. For example, it is difficult, especially for individuals born with bodies conceived as 'abnormal' or rather 'different' to establish social ties that could enable them to mingle socially compared to individuals conceived as 'normal.' Thus, disabled people, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ) community, biracial individuals, people with disfigured shapes, and or those who live within a society whose race is entirely different from theirs find themselves socially victimised or become misfits and are therefore likely to endure loneliness. Such is also a valid case for people with albinism.

Although there might be changes in how some societies perceive people with albinism, a congenital absence of pigmentation in the eyes, skin and hair, in some African communities, people with albinism are mostly unwelcomed in social ties for they seemingly look less human or are perceived as ontologically 'aliens' and 'evils' (Kajiru & Nyimbi 2020), when compared to the dark-pigmented Africans. As a result, most people with albinism end up as a segment of the human population without meaningful social ties. Consequently, they endure the aftermath of social segregation. Thus, their life passes through unpleasant social experiences such as loneliness, which may hamper that which Lucas (2019) terms "ontological agency", defined as "the appearance as oneself to others in the world (the exercise of self-disclosure)" (p. 710). However, as an American psychiatrist, Waldinger, during the 'TED Talk' show in 2015 contended: "[p]eople who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community are happier, healthier, and live longer than people who are less well connected." Waldinger's words forced the researcher to consider the social experience of people with albinism, who are stigmatised and relegated to the fringes of several societies (Imafidon 2019, pp. 38, 104). The current study thus follows Waldinger's claim in exploring whether a meaningful social tie, herein friendship, authenticates

one as an agentic social and ontological agency, one's beingness, and contributes to one's social well-being.

The review of literary studies on albinism in Africa indicates a paucity of literary scholarship focusing exclusively on life narratives of African subjects with the condition. In addition to several studies on the fictional representation of albinism (see, for example, Spemba 2023, 2022; Mtenje 2021; Lipenga 2018; Baker & Lund 2017), the scholarly criticisms on life narratives have dealt explicitly with portrayals of subjects with albinism from outside Africa and on topics different from friendship and agency. In her PhD thesis, *Un-Othering the Albino: How Popular Communication Constructs Albinism Identity*, Miller (2017) examines the identity formation of people with albinism in media. This groundbreaking study is adapted from Miller's (2019) journal article, "'Other' White Storytellers: Emancipating Albinism Identity through Personal Narratives." The work discusses the counternarrative potential of personal narratives of persons with albinism. It concludes that the two subjects' narratives can dismantle the so-called "stereotypical albino identity" and they further "highlight the complexity of race and difference-making in our [American] culture" (p. 123). Unlike my concern, the study says nothing about friendship and agency.

Also, Ngaire (2000) looked at how an "identity of the Albino […is] mediated by [his/her African] ontology; the spiritual beliefs of his/her community; his/her relationship with family; society and self; his/her 'race of inheritance'; and his/her morphology" and how European and American discourses on identity "breed implications of the existence of the Black Albino on contemporary racial theory" (p. 10). The ultimate focus of Ngaire's (2000) study is, however, on what "the existence of albinism does to our (modernist) conceptions of race and spirituality" (p. 10). My exploration focuses on a relatively close but different aspect: how sociality impacts those with albinism.

Even though the current study adds to Miller's (2019) exploration, it has a slightly changed concern, not particularly on how narratives on albinism destabilised preconceived notions about race but on how friendship can yield 'difference-making' discourses and whether this impacts the sociality and agency of those living with albinism in African contexts.

Unlike Ngaire's (2010) concern, the current investigation reveals how literary depictions of friendly relations cultivate the agency of subjects with albinism in Bongelo's written (auto)biographic text, "I am a Human Being - Flesh and Spirit." The article interrogates how the agency of subjects with albinism is configured and reconfigured via friendship and clarifies whether sociality or lack thereof impacts the agency and personhood of individuals with albinism. The article examines how friendship denounces sociocultural factors allegedly delegitimising the social inclusion of subjects living with albinism from the African ontology, focussing on Mandisi' Bongelo's life narrative. The article argues that socialisation in the form of friendship is an aspect of empowerment and that forces born of sociality can also disempower or negatively impact one.

As stated earlier, the article explores sociality and agency. It treats "sociality" as per Rousse (2013, p. 417), "the condition of living and understanding oneself amidst social relations to others." It also regards Heidegger's view, as cited in Rousse (2013, p. 417), that sociality "is *constitutive* of the core features of human agency" (original emphasis). The paper further treats agency using Davies' (1991, p. 51) terms; "the ability to recognise discursive constitutions of individual self and identity to resist, subvert, and change the discourses constituting someone. It is the freedom to recognise […] that no discursive practice […] can capture and control one's identity." Given these definitions, the article demonstrates how Bongelo narratives depict the power of friendship as in (de)forming a socially fit individual, an agentic self.

Theoretical Framework

In discussing friendship as a form of human interaction and whether such interaction can impact agency, I draw on Hannah Arendt's thoughts on political exclusion, specifically, as they have been expanded by a feminist scholar, Lucas (2019), in her discussions of loneliness, appearance, and agency. Specifically, I draw on Lucas' (2019) article "Loneliness and Appearance: Toward a Concept of ontological agency" to problematise friendship as the evasion of loneliness and isolation and that the absence of the latter two cultivates agency.

According to Lucas (2019, pp. 709-710), agency implies an extra-political dimension of agency, especially if one considers the proposition that human subjects are born with what Arendt (1976, p. 477) terms as "elementary confidence"; an individual's capacity to "appear [uniquely] in the world in the first place." For Lucas Arendt's (1976) "elementary confidence" refers to *ontological agency*, "the appearance as oneself to others in the world (the exercise of self-disclosure)," which is "an irreducible and constant capacity of every individual, no matter how deeply silenced or oppressed she may have been" (original emphasis). Even so, one's ability to exercise ontological agency depends on a working sociality or lack thereof. Lucas (2019, p. 710) expounds on this view as she writes:

> I put forward an approach to this question that neither reduces [the] action to pure politics nor reifies political norms by offering a negative definition of agency—by asking what might it mean to *lack* agency completely? I argue that the absence of agency is the condition of loneliness. I will define loneliness, after Hannah Arendt, as non-appearance before others. If loneliness is the failure to appear as a self in the world, then […] we can conceive of appearance in the world as a kind of agency.

Even though I deploy this notion of ontological agency to examine how sociality or lack thereof contributes or interferes with the Bongelo's agency and, by extension the agency of persons with albinism and their relational others, the discussion also reflects on Imafidon's views on Africans' thoughts on people with albinism and their humanity. As Imafidon (2019, p. 38, 104) notes, in many African communities, subjects with albinism are isolated from spheres of social interaction because they are "seen […] as not fitting within the categories of human beings due to [their] unusual nature." Consequently, most of them lead a lonely life, for it is difficult for them to establish and or maintain meaningful social relationship including friendship. Of interest is whether such social relations cultivate a social space for people with albinism to appear before others (black-pigmented Africans) as human agents. I thus deploy Imafidon's (2019) arguments to analyse how some African ontological perceptions of people with albinism

might compromise or maintain the sociality of a subject with albinism and interfere with their exercise of agency.

To further underpin the issue of sociality (especially friendship) and how this (dis)empowers one, I call upon the notion of "*The Igwebuike*" popularly practised in West Africa. The notion explains the power of social ties or interactions, such as friendship drawing from (western) African philosophical thoughts. As adumbrated by Iwuh (2018, p. 46), the notion of "*The Igwebuike*" philosophy holds that "in number there is strength, there is power" and that philosophical thought is practically and "positively enmeshed in the concept of friendship." In plainer terms, Onebunne (2020, p. 9) states that *Igwebuike* "is a hermeneutics of communal strength as the typology of Igbo belongingness where [a] being is in one way or the other […] fundamentally belongs. […] Being is belongingness." I deploy the notion of *Igwebuike* to examine whether friendship is amongst conducive and supportive social relations through which individuals affirm those living with albinism or any despised form of humanity as unique human and social beings and whether such affirmation may activate one's ontological agency.

One of the critical aspects of the narrative examined herein is that it is a life narrative. Life narratives have the potency to voice or write back against prevailing, skewed narratives about albinism, which further hamper the sociality of individuals with this condition. Thus, I evoke Couser's (1997) notion of "counterdiscourse" to examine the discursive formations in the studied life narratives given the stereotypic portrayal of people with albinism. Couser (2012, p. 31) argues that personal narratives are a form of counterdiscourse; they talk back "to patronising and marginalising (mis)representation" of people living with somatic conditions. I deploy the notion to establish whether Bongelo's story challenges what Couser (2012, p. 31) refers to as skewed stereotypes and misconceptions that demonise people with albinism and impair their sociality and agency. Therefore, I treat Bongelo's act of narrating his story an agentic act in which he marks his body as the site of resistance against stereotypic conceptions of persons with albinism.

Methods

The object of this study is Mandisi Bongelo's written (auto)biographic text, "I am a Human Being - Flesh and Spirit." The story is in the collection of life narratives titled *Looking Inside: Five South African Stories of People Living with Albinism*, edited by Gunn and Puwana (2009), which was produced thanks to joint efforts between two South African organisations: Human Rights Media Centre and the Western Cape Blind Association both based in South Africa. In addition, the collection has four other personal narratives by Vuyiswa Kama, Nomande Ngcizela, Lucky Jackson, and Vinkosi Sigwegwe. However, these narratives remain un-discussed in this article for the reasons below.

As the first part of the collection's title, *Looking Inside* suggests, the life narratives included in the collection are also about the self-inquiry of their respective subjects. Each narrative maps a development journey in the retrospective first-person mode of its subject. Moreover, these personal accounts focus on disability, visual impairment, and albinism. This study thus focused on Bongelo's account because, in addition to how it typically exemplifies the collection's purpose, to promote awareness of issues related to albinism and visual impairment (Gunn & Puwana 2009, p. 1), the collection suitably speaks significantly of sociality matters and agency using rich methods and modes of narration which draw attention to such issues.

As such, the narrative crucially relates to my thematic exploration of how empowering social relations or lack thereof might be, which I explore as I dissect the issue of friendship. The story explicitly details the life of Bongelo from childhood to early adulthood as he grows up in a relatively very open-minded locality and family amid rumours cementing the social exclusion of subjects living with albinism in the African context. Bongelo was born to Nomalinge and Mr Bonisile on 22 September 1990 in Cape Town, South Africa. His narrative is set in rural and urban settings of Eastern Cape and Western Cape, respectively, and recounts Bongelo's childhood and growing up in a relatively very loving and caring family and neighbourhood. However, these neighbourhoods still bleed rumours about albinism. Bongelo recalls his social experience with his extended relatives, parents, siblings (three elder brothers and two sisters), a cousin

(Thobeka), and his childhood friends while in Zwelendiga and Lady Frere (Eastern Cape). Also, Bongelo's narrative chronicles his interactions with his family members, fellow learners at schools, unnamed childhood friends, and community members in different settings of Cape Town and Eastern Cape.

Being a literary-cum-cultural study, the forthcoming sections thus conduct a close reading of Bongelo's story; narrative "I am Human Being-Flesh and Spirit". The discussion dissects aspects of narration such as subjectivation and subject positioning, diction, and anecdotes that suggest whether Bongelo's youthful social and personal experiences enabled him to escape conditions producing loneliness and isolation and to exercise personal and social agency from his very early age. I further dissect the motif of social relationship to examine whether friendly social interrelations affect Bongelo's agency given that friendship—a cordial relationship "behind every human interaction, whether formal and professional, as in doctor to patient relationship, lawyer to client relationship and the likes, or informal as seen in relationships that are of a familial type" – interlaces people and renders them as capable (Iwuhu 2018, p. 16, 19). I argue that affable acquaintances are an aiding trait that characterises Bongelo's subjectivity and agency amid the presence of some discriminating individuals and the influence of peer pressure and gender roles.

Friendly Family and Self-Assertive Narrator

As one reads Bongelo's story, one quickly remembers Chinua Achebe's representation of children with albinism in *Things Fall Apart*, thrown to die in the evil forest. More significantly, one learns how Bongelo's story challenges this traditional view about the marginality of people with albinism and how familial relations are central to an individual's self-assertion, unlike many individuals with albinism who endure cordial relationships with their family and community members. Bongelo's narrative recalls how his family and many community members readily accepted his body (with albinism) during his youth. This experience positively affected his subjectivity formation and agency, reminding his readers that families and social spaces such as schools and communities whose members had virtues of friendship accommodate human

differences, especially albinism. Such is because, as Telfer (1970, p. 238) claims, friendship brings "a degree and kind of consideration for others" welfare, the very thing through which Bongelo enjoys.

Bongelo's first claim for the agency, which also shows how a friendly environment he grew in demystifies persons with albinism, is discernible in the diction of the story's title: "I am Human Being-Flesh and Spirit." Considering the denigrated subjectivity of people with albinism, this title, which is Bongelo's pronouncement, signifies his agentic entitlement to humanity. To this claim, one must consider that several African societies frame people with albinism as if they lack humanity and are ghosts or immortals (Ngaire 2000). Thus, from the title, the pronoun "I," reminds readers that Bongelo recounts his story in the first-person; more so, its deployment grants his narrative a level of authenticity and truth value. Of interest is the pronoun "I," which reaffirms and confirms the narrator's negated subjecthood and ontological status, given discourses that repel them, and other persons born different from humanity.

For example, Bongelo's narrative informs readers of his awareness of the discursive power of such myths and superstitions by saying: "I have also heard stories that people with albinism do not die" (p. 118). Thus, the rhetoric of the title, which saves as an act of affirming the albino body, also offers what Couser (2017, p. 200) terms as a "compelling counter-representation" that challenges "rhetorics already in circulation that simply reinforces stigma or condescension" of people with albinism. For example, some of Bongelo's community members regard people with albinism as less human or immortal. Thus, Bongelo uses the term "stories" instead of saying, for example, "I know," the narrator signals his awareness of and resistance to discriminative narratives. These discourses negate the ontological agency of individuals with albinism. For example, some members of Bongelo's community occasionally call him "an ape" (p. 118).

Imafidon (2019) observes that "[t]he person in African traditions is a composite whole of several substances: material, immaterial and even quasi-material sub-stances. He has a body, spirit, mind, and destiny. The physical body is concrete and tangible […on the other hand,] the spirit, on the other hand, is the spirit of the individual" (p. 37). Thus, when Bongelo

claims he is human with "flesh" and a "spirit," he also asserts his right to life, dying and spirituality. The view is reinforced via this rhetoric: "I believe that I am a human being and have a spirit, I breathe and do everything that others do" and "If *you* die, why won't *I*?" (118, my emphasis). This claim for humanity, shared humanity, and spirituality resonates with Mbiti (1969)'s postulation on the African conception of personhood: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (quoted in Imafidon, 2019, p. 41). Although everyone is unique, Bongelo's words, when read against the narrative title, seem to imply that recognition of each other's individuality might guarantee or rather motivate everyone's "confidence" (in Arendt and Lucas's sense) to exist among others. Thus, the title hints at how Bongelo claims his ontological agency or is socially accepted by his friendly family and most community members (as discussed in the proceeding sections).

Although Bongelo has an African (a Xhosa background), and where there are life costing stereotypes against people with albinism, he is lucky that he was born and raised at a time or rather communities that had changed somewhat in their views of albinism (or at least that is what his story suggests), because Bongelo's family, community (in the rural areas of Eastern Cape), and school environments (in the city of Cape Town) seem accepting of PWA, which suggests some increased level of education and social awareness regarding the condition. Nonetheless, his story also shows that, sadly so, some rumours, myths, and superstitions about albinism persist among the people he encounters. Notably, being positively considered by others accords Bongelo with the agency, or rather, the capacity and confidence to appear before others and act through and with people in his family, community, and school. Of particular interest for discussion herein is how Bongelo narrates forms of "friendship," which, according to Arendt (1990, p. 83), can make subjects with differences "equal partners in a common world - they together constitute a community." How would such a world enable a friendly appreciation of human variation and agency?

In this regard, Imafidon (2019, p. 2) states that the "difference of body colour" subjects include people with albinism subject to social seclusion from their childhood and, sometimes, for their entire lives. Even though

Bongelo is born with his often stigmatised condition, he was accepted and celebrated by his family. He anecdotally explains that Siyabulela, Xolisa, and Siyabonga (his siblings) "were amazed when they saw me," and they "were happy because every time somebody visited my mother, they would announce that there was a new baby at home. They told everyone that there was a new baby at home" (p. 105). The diction "announce[d]" and "told everyone" of "a new baby at home," connotes a positive atmosphere indicating that Bongelo, as a 'new baby' was fully and happily appreciated and recognised amongst family members as being a fellow human. This embracement contradicts the reality that children with albinism are mostly raised without social support, for they are seen as bustards or cursed individuals (Franklin et al., 2018, p. 4). Thus, Bongelo is unlike so many unlucky children with albinism who get killed or are forced to lead a sad and lonely life.

The act of being happy, as demonstrated by Bongelo's friendly family towards his birth and being, connotes "That which underlines friendship" […]; "a reciprocity" (Iwuh 2018, p. 48). That is, treating one as an equal, the very thing that Cicero (cited in Iwuh 2018, p. 48) would refer to "as a mirror representation." Considering these words, one sees that Bongelo and his family engage in a social transaction in which parts involved look into each other's faces and see themselves as carbon copies. That is to say, for example, a friendly family neutralises any human difference that could otherwise breed social alienation of subjects with albinism. How is this possible?

Undeniably, Bongelo's family members do not only display an act of love that binds family members together but their acts also connote "attributes of friendship, such as affection, trust and loyalty" (Guichard et al. 2014, p. 6). With such sociable makings, which also serve as the foundation of kin relationships (Guichard 2014, p. 6), the family member accepts Bongelo's bodily differences without singling it out as ugly or not human enough, terms through which subjects with albinism are mostly perceived (Imafidon 2020). The unconditional acceptance then arises because his members treat him (in Cicero's sense of reciprocity of friendship) as their true "copy," irrespective of his unique individuality and albinism, and this authenticates his ontological legitimacy. As Ndubisi (2020) observes "*[T]he*

human person can only authenticate his/her existence as a social being when he/she collaborates with the other in a relationship that is hinged on openness, reciprocity, trust, sincerity, truth, mutuality, respect for the other, justice, among others" (p. 9, original emphasis). At the heart of this assertion is how one's ontological agency is cultivated by positive social intercourse because all these features define friendship and nurture one's self-confidence. So, for example, Bongelo's family granted him his ontological agency amongst his family members who, times and again, Bongelo narrates, are "happy" to have him as their sibling.

Furthermore, the fact that Bongelo gets a social space and recognition from within the family is implicit when his siblings happily announce to whoever visits the family about the presence of "a new baby at home." Via the announcement, the family accords Bongelo social agency and ontologically renders him a human amongst them, thus deserving social recognition. Such social agency foregrounds Bongelo's family living in a community more tolerant of albinism. Indeed, the act contradicts several narratives in which albinism is framed as unpleasant, an ugly identity, and one that people should evade (Imafidon 2020, p. 25).

Looking at Bongelo and his family relationship and considering the prevalent narratives on the social or physical obliteration of people with albinism, one garners a clearer indication of how the power of social relations is useful in forming a well-anchored self. Unlike Bongelo, many people with albinism encounter emotional and social rejection from within their family from the moment they are born till their deaths (Baker et al., 2010, p. 169). For Bongelo, familial affection enables him to claim his agency—personal and social attachment. For instance, when his brothers "dropped [him] at the crèche before going to school" (p. 106), where he felt lonely, he subsequently expresses his desire to be among other family members: "The crèche was on a little hill so I could see home and what my mother was doing, and I always cried because I wanted to be with my mother, my brothers, and my sister and cousin" (p. 107).

It seems then that, unlike individuals with albinism who are abandoned by their family members and community as they are regarded to be a pending danger (Imafidon 2019, p. 430), Bongelo's family cordially accord him jovial times, peacetime, cheerfulness, courage, and the confidence of

being among them. All these virtues of friendships guarantee Bongelo a positive atmosphere in which he feels valued and has the confidence to appear before his family members as a legitimate child/person, irrespective of his bodily differences.

Childhood Neighbour Friends and Bongelo's Happy Times

As Iwuh (2018) has argued, one's "confidence of being is because others are in being" and being with "[others assures one] of their solidarity and complementarity without which [one] cannot be" (p. 23). In other words, what one does to enjoy living is furthered as one acted through and with others. Bongelo reminisces about how his friends in Zweledinga made his social life meaningful and supports this maxim of cordial social relations: "I enjoyed those days; they were happy times. We could see the dam in the far distance and when the weather was hot, we would all gather to swim" (p. 107). This dam with "dirty water" happens to be a site where friends transgress and defy their parents, who do not want them to swim in this dangerous place. Thus, even the act of swimming is transgressive and agentic as well. Notably, transgression is one of the ways young children commonly use as they try to wield their agency, the very things that friendship does. Friendship forges a stronger bond of companionship between Bongelo and his peers, signalled by his use of the plural subjecthood "we" to connote that those friends earned his agency to collaborate and realise his happiness or deliberation. To line with Iwuh's (2018) already-cited assertion, Bongelo has the confidence to swim in a shared space because he swims with others.

Intelligibly, personal accounts agentively talk "back to the cultural stories that […script… their respective narrators] as particular kinds of subjects" (Smith & Watson, p. 176). Such a case appears true for Bongelo. The assertion clarifies when one considers how his swimming with friends enables him to disclose a trait that is part of his true self-boldness. As he recalls,

> The boys from the village thought I was spoilt because I had stayed in Cape Town. So, I had to go with them and get tough. Women and girls collected the firewood [,] and they have to cook. The boy's job was to look after the livestock and have fun in the

> dam […i]n the morning, we had to push the cattle to get water and grass. (p. 108)

Adding:

> The boys did not want me to swim in the dam with them because they were afraid my mother would see, because the mud stuck on my skin and was noticeable. But I did not listen to them; I swam despite their warning. (p. 107)

Whereas the first anecdote supports Bongelo's capacity to do what their friends thought he could not, the latter presupposes that by acting together with friends he exerts his agency thereby showing readers that despite his condition, albinism, he too has boldness just like his friends and that like other children, Bongelo, resists, or challenges authority. The daring attitude through which Bongelo objects to the group's order shows how he already, as a child, exercised agency.

Friendly School Atmosphere and the Agentic Bongelo

Friendly relations are key to Bongelo's character formation at home and in the social space. In primary school, supportive social relationships similarly afford him space to assert himself as a person with abilities and agency. A section of his narrative details how easily Bongelo mingled with other students:

> I participated in a lot of activities, like choir, drama, rugby, cricket, [and] dance, and I played club soccer. When we had events at school like [a] farewell, we did drama on the quad to raise money for them. When they called the drama with the loudhailer to perform, I jumped and got on stage. When they called the dancers, the […] – township dancers and the traditional dancers, I performed. I was popular at school. (p. 110)

According to Lucas (2019, p. 709), one enjoys and exercises one's ontological agency by "being an interlocutor, through thought, speech, or action, with others." Social exchanges thus give one space and the ability to exert and display agency and identity. By participating in singing, drama, and dance, Bongelo becomes an actor who "inserts" (in Lucas'

[2019] sense of the word) himself among others and eventually discloses the fact that despite his unique appearance, he too can act/do what others are capable but most importantly before others. Had the school been hostile, Bongelo's capacity to act would have been thwarted so is his social agency. Furthermore, Bongelo's recollection, to use Couser's (2017, p. 200) words, "undo and/or overwrite, […] prior representation and beliefs which confound [people with albinism's]"—for they are framed "as defective, deficient, interpellated as fundamentally alien." This very potency is characteristic of disabled subjects' life narratives. How is this claim verified? Based on Bongelo's recollection, it is apparent that he positions himself to be physically and intellectually endowed like other children without albinism.

Usually, many children with albinism tend to endure social stigma in Africa, with many people subscribing to the misconceived notion that any interaction with a person with such a condition "can be detrimental" and so they exclude "persons with albinism from social gatherings or activities" (Imafidon 2019, p. 430). Given their immaturity and the inability to distinguish facts from falsehoods, children can succumb to such falsehoods and manipulative myths. However, Bongelo's story suggests that the power of friendship can deflate these myths:

> As a child, I had lots and lots of friends. Every day, when my father came from work, he gave me money to buy a loaf of brown bread. My father buttered some slices with margarine and put them in my big school lunch box [...]. The rest was meant for Siyabulela and I to eat after school. […] During break time, I collected my friends, we walked to my home, and we ate all that bread that was meant for us after school. When Siyabulela got home, the bread was finished, so he had to cook for himself (pp.109-110)

Although mentioning sharing food connotes the "friendship of utility" because the children appear to share a loaf with Bongelo, expressions like "I had […] lots of friends," "I collected my friends," "we walked to my home" and "we ate that bread" reveal the power friendship has—to relocate an allegedly stigmatised identity into one which is embraced and loved. One thus is reminded of Iwuh's (2018, p. 19) assertion to the effect

that "[t]hat which the human person befriends, must be that which he loves," and that "[f]riendship binds people together in justice, weaving them as one and creating a harmonious existence, which sees every party coordinating itself in sync."

This recollection shows that Siyabulela never minds Bongelo sharing the bread that meant for him with his friend. Bongelo's contentment then symbolises an African view of life, where one shares life with others to appear human. Among Africans, Kanu (2019, p. 4) says, "Life is a life of sharedness. One in which another is part thereof. It is a relationship, though, of separate and separated entities or individuals […] but with a joining of the same whole." Communal relationships thus may accord one reciprocal acknowledgement, recognition, and complementing coexistence; hence unique entities appear as humans before one another. The sharing of one loaf of bread by many children is then an agentive act; it humanises the child with albinism and epitomises how friendship binds Bongelo and friends together.

Friendliness versus Enigmatic Social Cultural Truism

As demonstrated earlier, Bongelo has cognition regarding myths that disrespect PWA in his community. He remembers an occasion during which he suffered abuse because of his bodily appearance: "The drunkards in my community sometimes call me names. They say 'Hey *Inkawu* or *umulungu* – an ape or white person.' It hurts me […]" (p. 118). Ape simply refers to the pervasive name-calling that people with albinism endure in their lifetimes. It connotes they are not human. However, by calling his abusers "drunkards" instead of "people," Bongelo's narrative implies his people's inability to reason (as symbolised by the assaulters' drunkenness) is what motivates the exclusion of albinism as a valid form of human difference. That way, myths, superstitions, and hatred that demean albinism are born of irrationality, a state similar to when one is drunk. This interpretation emerges as Bongelo and the sane-friendly community members react against his rejection while depicting his understanding of his condition:

> My great-grandfather had albinism. It's inherited. Some community members say God created it. They shout at the

> drunkards who insult me, telling them that it is because of God that I am the way I am. They reprimand them and ask, "What would happen if we were all the same? How would you feel if you were insulted?" And the drunken person would apologise to me. (p. 118)

By uttering the words "My great grandfather had albinism," Bongelo signals his understanding of the hereditary nature of this genetic condition and his position as a significant subject in the family genealogy. When the friendly community members invoke the spiritual narrative that God created all humans, reaffirm that they are all "the same" regardless of their somatic differences; they also question the perceptions of "normalcy." Couser (2012, p. 33) argues that physical, social, and cultural obstacles are likely to eliminate people born different from the common world. In line with this assertion, the spiritual rhetoric that God created albinism signifies society's readiness to recognise albinism as a form of humanity. Eventually, their narrative guarantees Bongelo's social inclusion, which symbolically occurs when the "drunken person would apologise [to Bongelo]." This religious rhetoric demands that people with albinism be counted as valid ontological beings, for it considers individuals with albinism as Godly created. Therefore, they all look alike, contrary to other condescending and stigmatising myths.

Friendship Power and Bongelo's Self-Will

The preceding elaboration explains the upside of friendly companionships on Bongelo's social agency. However, there is a shortcoming to the friendships established due to peer pressure, which shows that friendship may either thwart or activate one's agency. Thus, he narrates:

> Grade Ten was very hard, partly because […] of the influence of my friends. I would leave home early, meet up with them [friends], and we would arrive at school late when the gates are closed. So, we would go back to the township and hang out together (p. 114)

This kind of disobedience is common to adolescents who exert their agency, but Bongelo, the tone in the excerpt reveals, compromises his agency, for he does it unwillingly. The diction and his position amongst

his fellow transgressive youngsters enlighten his impetus for doing so. The tone and diction of his words elaborate the point hereunder:

> I did these naughty things with fellow learners so that I could fit in. […] I hung out with them during school time to prove that I was just like everybody else. You were regarded as a sell-out if you did not do what the other boys did. (p.104)

Although one may read these words as marking Bongelo as inferior, the tone in this excerpt as implied by the phrases "I did naughty things" and "so that I could fit in" and not "regarded as a sell-out" signal the desire to fit in amongst friends in addition to evoking personal sacrifice. Bongelo's very act of giving up his willpower for social belonging, to "fit in," indicates that friendship may sometimes overpower one's personal agency. By investing more time in friendship than in his studies, Bongelo fails "Grade Ten" (p. 114). However, when he repeats the Grade, he resists peer pressure: "I do not have a lot of friends" because by having many friends "your focus will be on your friendships rather than on your studies. So, I don't have any friends […but] I speak to my classmates during lunchtime" (p. 115), and occasionally asks other learners for academic help and jokes with them (p. 116). Here, one sees Bongelo's choice of "being alone" without being lonely enables him "[…to exercise his agency] the sense of absolute independence" (Arendt 1973, p. 466). Bongelo's exertion of agency against peer pressure is motivated by his teachers who counsel him, and the family "encouraged [him] to continue with […] schooling" (p. 114). Utilising his freedom, Bongelo studies hard and performs well. He says: "[m]y father decided to slaughter a sheep and hold a celebratory ceremony because I had passed my exams" (p. 116). Notably, we learn two things here. One is that Bongelo, like other learners, passes his exams, hence attesting to his intellectual prowess. Two, regardless of the financial burdens, the friendly father seems to acknowledge Bongelo's success irrespective of his condition of albinism.

Another downside of socialisation on the part of Bongelo's agency emerges as his friends, father, and even the community force him to conform to normative gender roles: "I was bullied and teased [by the leaners] for befriending girls and was labelled a *moffie*—a derogatory term for homosexual or an effeminate male" (p. 114). Lipenga (2014) explains

that the "values of masculinity are imparted onto […] children by various socialising agents in their societies, including their parents, siblings and peers" (p. 7). It seems, then, the same society that accommodated Bongelo's condition—albinism, citing Lipenga (2014, p. 8), "defines which bodies are to be valued" and that would accord one with the confidence to regard himself and be regarded by others as masculine. Lipenga (2014, p. 2) reminds us that in the ableist culture, "the ideal masculine body" is "the able-bodied one." Such is a tag that disabled individuals and, more specifically, people with albinism do not fit in.

Thus, being "bullied" entails Bongelo should behave "manly" because femininity is denigrated in his society. There are two ways through which Bongelo resists the learners' bullying, for he says: "I had to deal with them after school as well" (p. 114). However, it appears that the pressure was too severe and somehow irresistible, as he reveals: "My father is not happy with me befriending girls," and "I am careful not to be seen comfortably befriending girls" who are "many "'' my friends" (p. 119). The scenario here is reminiscent of how normative gender roles impact male individuals in Bongelo's community, but more importantly, connotes how Bongelo's agency is thwarted, for he must conform to the stereotype of ideal masculinity for him to be valued as a man irrespective of his condition.

However, as Morrell (1998, p. 5) observes, "usually, a particular version of masculinity holds sway, bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own." What Sibonile and Bongelo's friends want is not to socio-culturally exclude Bongelo; rather, they desire that he should display a manly appeal deemed as normal or abled and that will accord him the "patriarchal dividend," the privilege or agency ungranted to subordinated identities such as homosexuals or effeminate figures. This view signals that the friendly community does not look at Bongelo in terms of colour; instead, they are interested in how he expresses his masculinity to eventually navigate 'the community of real men.'

Even so, Bongelo further expresses his agency by embracing some virtues of masculinity, such as his desire for initiation: "Next year, I have to go to initiation school in the Eastern Cape because I will be turning twenty and […] I will be *ubhuti* — a man" (p. 124). Here, "initiation" and "man" reflect

Bongelo's desire for the standard, which then could equip him with confidence to appear himself as a man following "how men should behave and how putative 'real men' do behave, as the cultural ideal" (Morrell 1998, p. 4). This desire also is reflected in Bongelo because he expects to "get a job," get married and have children, and live in his "own house" (p. 124). Although naively planned, these expectations speak of his social agency, the need to appear like a traditional Xhosa man, the virtues he learns from his "father and mother" — his "role models" (p. 124) — people who had brought him up with love. Implicitly, agency in Bongelo's narrative transcends the focus on only the self. Bongelo desires to be a social worker (p. 124) to educate and care for others, especially those with albinism. Bongelo's telling of his story is, thus, an agentic act that makes public the private. The narrative also speaks for others he wants to empower once he becomes a social worker so that they can be similarly transformed.

Conclusion

This article has explored whether friendly social relations endow agency to people born with albinism. Reading Bongelo's narrative against the backdrop of Lucas' (2019) claim that "supportive relationships facilitate […] agency by providing a world in which the agent can be certain she will appear as herself" (p. 718) has exposed how, for Bongelo, socialisation is an aspect of empowerment. Conversely, forces born of sociality can also disempower or rather impact one negatively. For instance, Bongelo, his family, and the majority of the community members he mingles with are friendly to him and, thus, authenticate his social agency, affirming his personhood. Through a friendly society, Bongelo gains recognition from others and becomes an authentic text to undo narratives pre-inscribed to people with disability and albinism in particular. Using the autobiographical mode, he discloses to other subjects and readers that he is "a Human Being - Flesh and Spirit." Still, Bongelo's story teaches us that there are also moments when one must give up their preference to conform to the identity preferred by peers or traditions. Furthermore, Bongelo's case hints at a need to explore sociality and agency in life narratives in other African contexts further. After all, this article has dissected only the textualities of an autobiography. As such, other studies

should be done on other genres to enrich our understanding of the agency of people with disability concerning sociality and friendship. More so, friendship is just one dimension of sociality; one can also explore how other socio-biological ties, including mothering, impact the agency of the subject and character with albinism.

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