

*Routledge Advances in Critical Diversities*

# QUEER IN AFRICA

## LGBTQI IDENTITIES, CITIZENSHIP, AND ACTIVISM

Edited by  
Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro and Vasu Reddy



*Queer in Africa* is a powerful intervention in the roiling debates around sexuality in the region. I hope it gets widely read on the continent and beyond, not only because it gives a platform to a diverse range of fascinating scholars and activists from countries outside of southern Africa – toward which the literature on queer themes has historically been skewed. But also because the evidence and arguments it presents so forcefully challenge the heterosexism or passive acceptance of gender and sexual binaries that still prevail in so much scholarship (and art) from and about the continent. It is a disturbing fact that “Africa” is often treated as a footnote in queer theory in the Global North, or its supposedly monolithic homophobia as a rhetorical football in homonationalist self-congratulations. Yet even scholars of gender in Africa commonly continue to ignore contests around non-normative sexuality and identity in their research, and to justify their disinterest by the somewhat misleading claim that sexual minorities are a hard-to-reach population. Yes they are, except when one knows or intuits where to look and how to ask questions respectfully. I congratulate the editors of *Queer in Africa* for assembling such a rich tapestry of respectfully asked questions.

**Marc Epprecht**, Professor, Department of Global Development Studies, Queen’s University, Canada

This is a very welcome and wide-ranging set of original essays that will add to our rapidly expanding awareness of African sexualities. Both academic and activist, the essays help both clarify and move beyond traditional Western theories and categories.

**Ken Plummer**, Emeritus Professor of Sociology,  
University of Essex, UK



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# Queer in Africa

African sexualities are dynamic, multifaceted, and resilient. However, people with non-heterosexual sexualities and gender-variant identities are often involved in struggles for survival, self-definition, and erotic rights.

*Queer in Africa* forms an entry point for understanding the vulnerabilities of queer Africans as shaped by social, cultural, and political processes, aiming to provide innovative insights about contentious disagreements over their lives. The volume mediates southern and northern scholarship, directing attention towards African-centred beliefs made accessible to a wide audience. Key concerns such as identity construction and the intersections between different social forces (such as nationalist traditionalism and sexualities) are addressed via engaging chapters, some empirically based and others providing critical cultural analysis.

Highly interdisciplinary in nature, *Queer in Africa* provides a key resource for students, academics, and activists concerned with the international support of sex and gender diversity. It will appeal to those interested in fields such as anthropology, film studies, literary studies, political science, public health, sociology, and socio-legal studies.

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# **Queer in Africa**

**LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship,  
and Activism**

**Edited by Zethu Matebeni,  
Surya Monro and Vasu Reddy**

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# Introduction

*Vasu Reddy, Surya Monro, and Zethu Matebeni*

## Context

Sexuality in Africa is a multifaceted domain, deeply material (visceral, embodied, and politicised), and, like gender, informed by interlocking political, social, class, religious, cultural, and economic interests. ‘Sexual politics’ undergirds the circuits of power informing the shape, architecture, and patterns of African queer lives because the gendered hierarchy is sexualised by powerful cisgender men and states, anchored in patriarchy, and in turn circumscribed by heteropolar regimes of gender that make sex dangerous for sexual minorities. Therefore, to be queer in Africa is to be in effect constrained and regulated by the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler 1999), ‘the straight mind’ (Wittig 1992), and the ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 1980) that informs the hegemonic order of heterosexuality. Gender variance in Africa is similarly constricted by compulsory gender binarism, patriarchy, and heterosexism.

Whilst the idea of ‘queer’ can be used to destabilise rigid sex/gender categorisations, debates about the meaning and utility of the term also exist. In this collection, the term is sometimes used as a verb (to mean challenging or destabilising heteronormativity and/or gender binaries) and/or as a noun denoting people who are non-heterosexual and non-gender binaried people, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT). However, as Matebeni (2014) points out, the term ‘queer’ can hide diversities between groups of people. The idea of ‘queer’ has been criticised by some African scholars, who see it as a neo-imperial concept (see Nyanzi 2014), whilst other African scholars have embraced and worked with it (Matebeni 2014; Nyanzi 2014). Other non-heterosexual and/or non-gender binaried identities are common at local and country-specific levels in Africa (see, for example, Tamale 2007). These may conflict with ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer’ (LGBTQ) categories. However, local non-heterosexual and/or gender-variant identities can themselves be contested and under debate.

African non-heterosexual sexualities and gender diversities are, in our view, neither static nor uniform; rather, they are dynamic, multifarious, and resilient. While identity seems to be an ongoing component of self-definition, African queer identities are fundamentally under construction, changing, discursive representations

that reflect the tensions between the personal and the oppressive power of social structures. The tensions between ‘legal’ protection on the one hand and cultural beliefs on the other hand remain a serious challenge to the ongoing fashioning and mobilisation of African queer identities. Tangible expression (sexual acts, sexual behaviours, and sexual choices) confirm in Rubin’s early formulation the battles and contestations fought over sexuality:

The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics [. . .] They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political.

(1984: 267)

Active hostility towards gender-diverse and non-heterosexual people in Africa is still pervasive, and deliberate, sustained anti-gay expressions are evident realities for the majority of African queers. More specifically, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, transgender, and other forms of gender variance and other non-normative sexed and/or gendered identities are still essentialised in terms of culture. That is to say, LGBTQ, in its perceived ‘un-Africanness’, still signifies excess and promiscuity to many African people (see Nyanzi 2013). LGBTQ lives are viewed by African homophobes, biphobes, and transphobes as *acts* and *behaviours* that should not be accorded status as identities with citizenship rights. Given the aforementioned perceptions and their inherent stigmatisation of LGBTQ people, it remains essential for queer politics to remain vigilant and attentive in order to mobilise against exclusions, discrimination, and silencing. Queer identity formation in Africa is also intimately concerned with advancing a human rights strategy that works with reinforcing solidarity by building strategic coalitions with rights-based organisations across class, race, and gender lines. Any attempt to dis-identify and minimise citizenship is a serious challenge to the identities of LGBTQ people and others with non-normative gender and sexual identities. Perhaps the greatest threat to being queer in African geopolitical contexts is the withdrawal of rights by the state, resulting in renewed violence against African queers. Issues of survivability and freedom from violence and abuse are pertinent for many (see, for instance, Koko et al. in this volume). The heterogeneity of queer communities must also be re-asserted.

Importantly, African queer sexualities should not be reduced to the representation of symptoms of suffering, pain, mourning, and despair. Pleasure, celebration, and affirmation, as well as the positive expression of erotic desire, prevail despite ongoing pathologisation, marginalisation, and persecution. Neither should we attempt to homogenise the continent in a narrow and essentialist way. ‘Africa’ is not singular but instead a heterogeneous geopolitical entity with multilayered complexities of transnational contexts, represented by a diverse set of identities of its peoples. In other words, African countries vary considerably in the ways that gender and sexuality are constructed, with postcolonial and neo-colonial relations, local subjectivities, traditionalist patriarchies, and nationalist homophobias intertwining with human rights frameworks and activist interventions (Mwangi

2017; Thoresen 2014; Zabus 2013). Within these countries, lived experiences of genders and sexualities are highly diverse, whilst cross-cutting themes are apparent concerning the formation and operation of power structures (Tamale 2011). The material realities confirm that in African contexts, the restraining power exerted over LGBTQ people is revealed both by criminalisation and vocal public denigration. In this sense, LGBTQ people continue to be represented as abject figures over which governments and cultural institutions exert a great degree of control. Intellectual and political projects that are directed towards questioning the way we make meaning of ourselves as queer and/or non-heterosexual and gender-variant people is therefore a necessary precondition for developing ‘freedom’ for queers and others who do not fit gender and sexual identity norms. Queer African lives, and the interconnected struggles for identity and citizenship, are constructed at the junction of repudiations, evasions, and denials that represent sexual minorities as a problem.

*Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism* provides an entry point for reading, interpreting, and understanding the conditions of possibility that give rise to being queer in current African contexts. ‘Queer’ signals an active force that motivates and asserts identity within a heterosexual matrix. ‘Queer’ to a large extent frames not only sexuality but also calls into question the binary-gendered regimes that constitute identity. The volume deepens understanding of lived vulnerabilities. It is concerned with the social, cultural, and political processes within which queer articulation of identities emerge, and simultaneously explicates how such identities are suppressed, resisted, and (re)articulated. ‘Resistance’, ‘articulation’, and ‘affirmation’ of identities become ‘queer’ within structures of power that regulate the lives of LGBTQ people. These identities are repressed, minimised, and contained, but never completely silenced. The central ideas addressed in this volume confirm that to be queer in Africa is an ongoing challenge defined by struggles concerning identity politics, citizenship claims, and activist interventions that are underpinned by *normative* expectations. As Taylor (1992) has argued, the political issues raised by identity, citizenship, and activist claims resonate fundamentally with a politics of *recognition*, the latter referring to the social and political acknowledgement of the authentic identities of others.

## Locating the scholarship

There is a developing and vibrant body of scholarly and popular interest in critical approaches to gender and sexuality (Arnfred 2005; Cole 2010; Gunkel 2010; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013; O’Murray 1998; Spronk 2012; Tamale 2011). This includes LGBTQ studies (Ekine and Abbas 2013; Epprecht 2013; Gross 2011; Kaggwa 2011; Hayes 2000; Hoad 2007; Schäfer and Range 2014; Tamale 2007) that direct attention to Africa (see also Kaoma 2009). The intersectional turn in diversity studies points to a pressing need to develop knowledge about LGBTQ and non-heterosexual identities in relation to other social characteristics, such as ethnicity and national identity (see, for example, Carasthathis 2016; Grzanka 2014; Jónasdóttir et al. 2012; May 2015; Richardson and Monro 2012). Yet there



is a dearth of literature that examines non-heterosexual and/or gender-diverse people of varied ethnicities in southern countries, drawing on (and critiquing) northern-originated concepts (see also Sandfort et al. 2015; Sandfort and Reddy 2013). The marginalisation of African-centred scholarship on LGBTQ and non-heterosexual subjectivities points to a pressing need for scholarship in this field.

The African literature on LGBTQ issues to date has been dominated by Southern African studies (Currier 2012; Epprecht 2004; Lorway 2014; Matebeni 2014; Mkhize et al. 2010; Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Reddy et al. 2009; Reid 2013; Steyn and Van Zyl 2009; Stobie 2007; Swarr 2012). Interest in African scholarship more broadly is signalled by the publication of recent collections, including Tamale (2011), Ekine and Abbas (2013), Nyeck and Epprecht (2013), Matebeni (2014), Sandfort et al. (2015), and a monograph (Epprecht 2013). This volume reflects the growing interest in international sexualities and genders, bringing the insights generated by African studies into conversation with debates taking place in the global North. In so doing, the insights and interventions help to remedy the Anglophone northern bias in these academic fields and in policy networks. The book takes a fresh and innovative approach in including activist-scholars and activists as authors or co-authors alongside emerging and established academics, presenting a range of original empirical and theoretically motivated material from a variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives. Centralised around non-heterosexual sexualities and gender-variant identities, the volume broadens the emphasis from men and homosexualities, and more specifically beyond the established nomenclature of L (lesbian) and G (gay). It is the case that the L and G impose limits in African contexts as categories of naming all struggles by sexual minorities under a single banner. Naming also oversimplifies differences and tensions among groups by privileging some identity struggles over others. In several ways, our text also opens up a space for less visible and publicised sexualities and genders usually hidden and marginal in the African scholarly field, such as transgender (Cromwell 1999; Monro 2005; Hines and Sanger 2010; Stryker and Whittle 2006) and bisexuality (Beemyn and Eliason 1996; Monro 2015; Rose et al. 1996; Stobie 2007).

Brian Okollan (2017: 3), an activist from northern Kenya, surfaces an important tension in a discussion paper, 'Rethinking Sexual Citizenship: Our Solidarity, My Citizenship':

A further critical look at this struggle, one will discover that the LGBTQ movement is a disunited segment. What is it that unites the letters in the LGBTQ? A more closer look will reveal massive internal deep rooted identity politics. How do we address the Q and the I not forgetting the T?

Does the strategy and policies on HIV target them? If yes how and at what point? How do we involve them in the struggle?

And because our main focus and advocacy has always been around sexual acts and freedom we have forgotten to respond to these questions. This failure has given the general society, religious and conservative traditionalists a

space to dictate a normative sexuality, and they have done this by restraining access to sexuality discussions, forbidding certain acts, information, imposing age of consent; or by making certain groups dependent on the authority of others.

Okollan raises pertinent questions from a lived grassroots perspective about the dangers of selective struggles that erase transgender and intersex issues. He also directs attention to the implied silences when citizenship rights are withdrawn and there is an absence of safe zones that result in marginalisation, vulnerability, and persecution in the context of police brutality.

The title of this volume does not include the 'I' for 'intersex'. While we do acknowledge that the circulation of the category lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) in African contexts already includes intersex people, we are mindful of the silencing that overshadows the 'I'. In some African languages, there is slippage between 'intersex' and non-heterosexual; for example, Mary Hames, in this volume, explains that the word 'stabane' describes an intersex person in isiZulu vernacular, but in isiXhosa, it is a derogatory term to describe a lesbian or gay person. However, apart from a brief mention in the chapters by Hames and Velile Vilane, intersex is not addressed in the volume. We acknowledge this omission and rather than a symbolic inclusion of intersex issues, we call for more research and scholarship in the area of African intersex to build on the existing work of authors such as Gross (2011) and Kaggwa (2011). There is emerging interest in both scholarly and activist domains around intersex (see, for example, Carpenter 2016; Chase 1998; Hegarty and Chase 2000; Holmes 2002; Husakouskaya 2013; Monro et al. 2017; Preves 2003; Rubin 2017; Turner 1999). Intersexuality is a phenomenon that can be interpreted by some as questioning the binary nature of sex and gender – namely, the received assumption that there are neat and distinct categories of male and female. Intersex issues in the African context may complicate and open up models of sex and gender by disturbing and troubling received meanings about genders and sexualities that move us beyond the foundational work of Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000) and Kessler (1990, 1998). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that, internationally, intersex people mostly identify as either male or female. Their key areas of concern are different to those of LGBTQ people; they revolve around, in particular, a dearth of fundamental human rights; the ongoing practice of highly damaging non-consensual surgeries and other medical interventions on infants and young children; forced sterilisation; and foetal termination. The amalgamation of intersex with LGBTQ has been heavily criticised by intersex people, who understand this to link them with groups they do not necessarily feel they have anything in common with, in effect colonising their identities and marginalising them. There are, however, areas where alliances may be productive, especially given the resources that some LGBTQ organisations have (see Monro et al. 2017).

Julius Kaggwa (2016), executive director of the Support Initiative for People with atypical sex Development (SIPD Uganda), writes about the important

interventions made by SIPD as well as evident gaps and limitations in current lesbian and gay activist organising that erase the experiences of intersex people:

We build the knowledge base of those who care for them around intersex issues, as well as related health and rights issues. However, while this engagement is having a direct and positive impact on both carers and the intersex children they look after, there is the lingering hitch of not having enough active voices bold enough to persistently keep these issues on the policy negotiation table. This is not unique to Uganda; the situation is quite similar across the East African region. Being politically labelled as LGBTI and part of the gay rights advocacy discourse also has its contribution to pushing intersex people in Uganda further to the margins, keeping us only visible through a homosexual lens.

Kaggwa (2016) directs attention to and highlights a violent feature unique to the African experience of intersex experiences that responds to a perceived spoiled identity under a medical gaze (heightened by cultural prejudice, secrecy, and shrouds of silence). Any attempt at ‘coming out’ that could result in an intersex pride is negated and withdrawn, resulting in further invisibility and sustained heteronormality amongst the intersexed population. Whilst issues of survivability are pertinent for many Africans who are non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality, they are critically important for intersex people in some countries.

In Uganda, the traditional way of dealing with perceived sex development differences, often perceived as ‘abnormalities’, has largely been staying silent – and wishing them away through various kinds of traditional rituals, which often meant killing the intersex infants in question. This was, for decades, considered to be both the best and normal way to handle intersex births. Normally, just being a girl or a boy in Uganda and the East African region generally – without any sex development differences – comes with more than enough cultural, religious, and political expectations, demands, impositions, and prejudices, prejudices that form most of the gender inequities and human rights issues we still battle with. The indeterminate state of sex that defines intersex people, therefore, creates even more complex cultural and religious prejudices. The initial treatment of an intersex birth in Uganda will often be silence and secrecy. The family will isolate the child from the general public. In most cases, the mothers of such children will be frowned upon. Usually, superstitions loom large as their families consult witch-doctors, mediums, and traditional healers for a solution. In many instances, the mother will work with either a traditional medicine practitioner or some other ally to kill the child.

In trying to fix the appearance of children’s genitals, grave mutilations have occurred, which have left these children scarred and dysfunctional for life – for most with no chance of ever getting these errors corrected. This is because there is overwhelming pressure at all levels (family, community, spiritual, cultural, and political) to have a child with a body that conforms to the normative ‘male’ or

‘female’ body. It is a pressure so overwhelming that parents will often kill their intersex babies or surrender them to harmful mutilations.

The approach that is used by the ‘elite’ is a concealment approach, where an intersex child will be hidden and ‘offered’ up for surgery without warranting it, and without proper surgical or psychosocial support facilities.

Another example of an African country where intersex people’s lives are in peril is Kenya. British intersex activist Hayes-Light documented the homicide of a 17-year-old Kenyan intersex person, Muhadh Ishmael, by his hostile family. In Kenya, intersex babies are often abandoned or killed at birth. Hayes-Light was contacted by a Kenyan woman who has begun to adopt intersex babies, and some useful alliances were established between them (Monro personal communication 3.04.2017). Kaggwa (2016) also writes about efforts to mobilise, unsettle paradigms and ensure change: ‘My own outreach to religious leaders promises that if we are relentless in our educational work, to change hearts and minds, we will make incremental and lasting attitudinal changes concerning differences in sexual development’.

Overall, *Queer in Africa* challenges the metanarratives of silence around sex, sexuality, and gender diversities by recognising the urgency for change and transformation in negotiating identity in relation to lived realities. The volume expands and foregrounds the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, scholarship and advocacy, while simultaneously remaining committed to the experiential basis of sexed and gendered lives. It engages, in a coherent way, with key concerns such as the construction and deployment of identities, the social structuring of activism and human rights claims, intersections between different social forces (such as nationalist traditionalism and sexualities). More broadly, the volume provides a response to the pressing need to rethink feminisms, masculinity studies, and queer studies in an increasingly globalised world. Whilst we recognise the limits of pre-given categories such as LGBTQ, the queer(ing) of gender and sexuality require us to challenge and move beyond reductive binaries, and to confront the problem of heteronormativity.

The knowledge of being queer in Africa that is presented mediates southern and northern scholarship, directing attention towards African-centred understandings accessible to a wide audience. This is an important intervention because African studies of gender and sexuality are sparse, and some of the most interesting contributions historically have been restricted to particular disciplines (notably anthropology, e.g. Murray and Roscoe 1998) or countries (South Africa, with its specific history of colonialism, apartheid, and post-1994 reconstruction). The insights generated by African scholars (beyond South Africa) in the assembled collection are of pertinence internationally. They include situated and contextually grounded studies addressing the interfaces between legal frameworks and identity formation and regulation, and chapters interrogating the construction of gender and sexual categories and the ways that these are shaped by forces associated with nationality, tradition, faith, heterosexism, and patriarchy. Some chapters chronicle highly topical concerns, such as migration, human rights abuses, and provision of

development aid. Crucially, the agency of the subjects is foregrounded in these chapters, as well as the forces that constrain and striate their lived experiences.

## **Organisation and scope**

This book offers accessible analyses of an emerging diversity of non-heterosexualities and gender diversity in contemporary Africa, set within a variety of critical conceptual and methodological frameworks. Accounts of lived experience are complemented by materials from those concerned more broadly with LGBTQ cultural representation, advocacy, and activism. The contributions of Southern African scholars reflect the growth and prominence of the South African literature and the emergence of queer cultural representations and activism. The comparative chapters engage with crucial debates concerning issues such as identity formation and the way that institutions and the state structure this. The chapters that focus on Nigeria and Swaziland provide rich, in-depth accounts of some of the intersections between gender, sexuality, faith and traditionalism, and activism and human rights in those countries.

The book includes chapters drawing from activist approaches as well as the following academic disciplines: anthropology, film studies, literary studies, political science, public health, sociology, and socio-legal studies. In taking multidisciplinary perspectives towards non-normative genders and sexualities, the book seeks to contribute to the development of international studies concerning non-heterosexual, queer, and LGBTQ identities, politics, theories, and gender and sexuality studies more broadly. The focus on African perspectives that may be critical of the northern-originated LGBTQ categories ‘speaks to’ the turn away from identity politics, but sets this within activist and human rights contexts, exploring the ways in which subjectivities are forged and used. Northern-originated theories are employed in some of the chapters, bridging between southern and northern bodies of scholarship in an innovative way, and providing a timely contribution to the existing literature.

This collection is organised using three thematic sections, each consisting of a brief thematic overview and three chapters. While the discrete chapters provide contributions that ‘speak to’ the overarching section themes, the authors of the short thematic introductions discuss some of the issues raised by the chapters in a critical way, opening up further questions of relevance and applicability. The first section of the collection, African Studies: Non-normative Genders and Sexualities, showcases the exciting scholarship that is emerging from African cultural scholars concerning identities, politics, symbolism, and concepts of gender and sexuality. Different theoretical lenses are used to interrogate traditionalist approaches to sexualities, whilst troubling and questioning notions of ‘LGBTQ’ or normative genders and sexualities. Specific intersections of ethnicity, space, gender, and sexuality yield new insights into both identity formation and politics. The second section of the book, Moving Beyond and Between Identity Categories, focuses on a key issue: the way in which specific categories of gender and sexuality can restrict, shape, or empower individuals and groups. Looking beyond the identity

categories of 'LGBTQ', the chapters in this section aim to uncover the complexities of identity as lived reality or as presented in cultural representations. The third section, Citizenship, Activism, and Human Rights, addresses the absences, uses, and failings of human rights frameworks regarding non-heterosexuals and people of diverse genders in African countries. Citizenship rights are particularly tenuous, or absent, for certain groups who face intersectional marginalisation, such as LGBTQ refugees (see Chávez 2010). At the same time, within certain African contexts, new sexual and gender citizenship claims, and calls for erotic justice, are evident. Activists and advocates take a range of approaches in working with non-heterosexuals and gender-diverse people in Africa, ranging from lobbying within international fora, to grassroots advocacy.

### ***Section 1: African studies: non-normative genders and sexualities***

The first chapter of the book, by Senayon Olaoluwa, foregrounds everyday and periodic rites of passage amongst the Ogu-speaking people of Southwestern Nigeria. The chapter contends that the rites are mediated by human communicative interactions that blur, and in some cases reverse, sexual roles while sometimes investing humanity with gender neutrality and hermaphroditic orientations, regardless of more popular affirmations to the contrary on the African continent. The assumption speaks to the blurring of 'dichotomies' in discourses of sexuality, sex, and gender. The chapter privileges cultural, linguistic, and spiritual symbolisms which articulate everyday staging of 'transgressions' and that highlight the limitations of human assumptions of absolute dichotomisation in African sexuality discourse. By relying on an experience of auto-ethnography, Olaoluwa argues that the imaginations of Ogu-speaking people interface and articulate with parallel symbolisms of 'transgressions' in Christian redemptive affirmations. While close reading the textual data that reference the blurring of gender lines in Ogu ontology, the discussion reinforces the parallels in Christian spirituality in order to contest the rigidity of exclusive dichotomisation in African and global sexuality discourses further. The chapter addresses both human-human relations and human-non-human relations.

In Chapter 2, Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi reads African political prison writing as a site of debates on homosexuality within African political struggles. The representation of same-sex desire or putative homosexuals in this genre is deeply enmeshed with the social distribution of agency. Attention to the regulation of bodies illuminates the genre's interest in the entanglements of exposure to violence with histories of sexuality within African political activism. The author analyses non-normative sexual desire and practices as interrogatory presences in prison writing from Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, and Nigeria. The chapter focuses on three narratives: Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (Nigeria 1972), Sam Mpasu's *Prisoner 3/75* (Malawi 1995), and Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Notes* (Nigeria 2003). Through close readings, the author expands earlier studies that map out how the contradictory deployments of homosexuality in prison writing indicate a history of queer interrogations that predate the twenty-first-century

developments across Africa. If prison writing is the one genre in which the question of sexuality cannot be avoided, then its representations of homosexuality codify the limited abilities of authors to accommodate sexual difference in their respective analyses of political hegemony.

The final piece in this section (Chapter 3 by Cheryl Stobie) provides a queer bisexual reading of the film *Karmen Gei*. This film sets the familiar Carmen story in contemporary Senegal and depicts Karmen as having same- and different-gender attractions and relationships. The queer bisexual reading employed in this chapter highlights the possibility, and the fatal hazards, of free female sexual expression outside socially mandated limits and reveals lacunae in queer readings that ignore bisexuality. The representation of Karmen's bisexual behaviour implicitly criticises narrow conceptions of sexuality, including homophobia, monosexism, and possessive monogamy. Examining the film through the lens of critical bisexual theorisation reveals that this is a queer African Carmen with *brio*, sexual assurance and political purpose.

## ***Section 2: moving beyond and between identity categories***

The fourth chapter, by Derrick Higginbotham, examines the depiction of Vera Stark in Nadine Gordimer's novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994), which represents South Africa's transition to democracy, alongside the portrait of Tshepo in K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), a novel that dramatises urban life after the supposed accomplishment of that transition. Higginbotham argues that both novels evince a queer sensibility that attempts to move beyond normative identity boundaries, particularly the boundaries that demarcate sexuality and gender. Still, Duiker's novel imagines a world in which racial and national boundaries are also fundamentally fluid, while Gordimer's book cannot conceptualise a future without rigid boundaries demarking racial difference and national identity. Duiker's novel ultimately expresses a queerer outlook than Gordimer's, insisting on the instability of identity, and its refusal to reinscribe identity boundaries opens a conceptual space where solidarities across sexuality, gender, nation, and race can form. Such a space can energise queer collectives grounded in a shared relationship to dominant modes of power rather than in a shared history or identity, and these forms of solidarity appear vital to establishing a more sustainable future not only in South Africa but also across the continent.

The next chapter (5), by Jane Bennett, explores the possibilities of co-imagining the politics of queer and the meaning of whiteness in contemporary South African writing by white lesbian and gay writers. The first section contends that the work such imagination involves entails the negotiation of a radical 'fissure' between experiences of life from the point of view of those writing as black and the meaning of whiteness. The second section draws on theorists as diverse as Morrison, Muholi, and Lorde to address one explication of the need to 'call out whiteness' within the politics of solidarity. The last section explores some of the work of key South African fiction writers who position themselves as either 'gay' or 'lesbian' in order to discuss their strategies of negotiating the fissure of writing as white and

claiming entrance to queer writing activism. The chapter's conclusion, although tentative, is direct and immediate: 'queer/white' in contemporary South Africa constitutes an oxymoronic location, impossible to resolve under current conditions of incomplete and ever-receding decolonisation of the state.

The final chapter in this section (sixth in the volume) is by Abisola Balogun and Paul Bissell. It examines assumptions regarding the singularity in which masculinity and male sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa can and should be enacted and expressed. This narrative is driven by assumptions of a predominantly heterosexual Africa. In Nigeria, particularly, the hegemonic form of masculinity is a patriarchal and heterosexual masculinity. Men who deviate from this hegemonic form of masculinity are believed to challenge the prevailing power structures and thus are potentially susceptible to societal stigma, discrimination, and extreme violence. This chapter presents findings from a qualitative research study conducted in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria, between January and April 2016. The argument lends evidence to and acknowledges the existence and myriad of ways in which Nigerian men express their masculinity and sexuality. Given the illegality of homosexual identity and practices in Nigeria, Balogun and Bissell discuss how men who have sex with men in Nigeria understand and construct meaning around their sexual identities and practices, as well as how they manage their non-heterosexual identities. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the implications for the field of public health.

### ***Section 3: citizenship, activism, and human rights***

The seventh chapter in the collection, by Mary Hames, explores the lived experiences of a group of black self-identified lesbian students at a historically black university (HBU) in South Africa. It focuses on the marginalisation and erasure of lesbians in the broader LGBTQ programme. The chapter also explores the safe space that lesbian students co-created and raises questions pertaining to the hegemony of certain bodies in a supposedly inclusive space. The meaning of safe spaces is interrogated through a black feminist lens. The contribution of lesbian feminists in the #FeesMustFall student protests and the reclaiming of activist spaces is also explored. In addition, the chapter highlights the continuation of racism, sexism, and violence in the South African higher education environment and the role played by lesbians in raising awareness regarding rape cultures on campuses. At its core, this chapter focuses on claims about lesbian agency in the higher education environment.

Koko, Monro, and Smith's chapter (8) addresses the issue of forced migration amongst LGBTQ Africans, based on original empirical material from two qualitative studies conducted in South Africa with refugees from countries including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. LGBTQ people become forced migrants for a number of reasons, including internal displacement, becoming an asylum seeker, being resettled, or being deported and repatriated. Whilst some of these grounds for forced migration are shared with other migrants, others are



LGBTQ specific, in particular where migration is due to persecution relating to gender or sexual identity. Key difficulties include a lack of legal status when migration is illegal, xenophobic violence and prejudice, and a lack of access to housing and employment. The chapter outlines the human rights frameworks available at international, pan-African, and national (South African) levels, and examines the institutional structures and processes that forced migrants have to engage with when they arrive in South Africa. It highlights the lack of rights that African LGBTQ forced migrants have in South Africa and addresses their experiences in a number of settings. In doing so, it uses and elaborates on intersectionality theory. Overall, the chapter reveals the multiple marginalisations that African LGBTQ forced migrants face, and their invisibility, as well as the coping strategies that some LGBTQ African forced migrants use.

The ninth and final chapter in the book, by Velile Vilane, unleashes silenced voices by documenting the experiences of transgender Swazis as they navigate the education, health, and legal sectors of the Swazi government. It starts with an overtly overlooked conversation which sits at the intersection of being a Swazi citizen who experiences gender dysphoria in a country that is oblivious to gender variance. It nullifies the erasure from Chief Mgwagwa Gamedze, who claimed that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual, and pansexual plus Swazis do not exist. Transgender Swazis experience violence from schools which enforce rigid gender binary norms, teachers who gatekeep these norms and penalise gender expressions that transgress them, and a national school curriculum which either erases or pathologises non-cisheteronormative ways of being. These social ills are also found in the healthcare system, where uninformed healthcare providers punish transgender Swazis by invasive questioning and ultimately refusal of healthcare. Similarly, bureaucratic entities refuse to issue legal documentation to transgender citizens if they do not conform to the state assigned gender. At the intersection of Swazi citizenship, gender dysphoria, and wilful ignorance are transgender Swazis who are bullied in schools, are not catered for in public healthcare systems, and are gendered as fugitives (their gender expression is incongruent to their legally assigned gender, which translates to being perceived as fraudulent). This chapter also introduces TransSwati, a non-governmental organisation concept by transgender activists in Swaziland which was conceptualised to drive behaviour and policy reform in the aforementioned government sectors. It summarises the strategies that transgender activists in Swaziland are planning to take in order to improve the lives of transgender people in Swaziland.

## Conclusion

A retrospective overview of *Queer in Africa* reveals an interesting observation. It has been expressed in our introduction that a critical issue with African queer lives is a salient concern with difference that manifests in exclusion, marginalisation, and, at best erasure, that delinks queer Africans from their rights to citizenship. The authors assembled in this volume motivate arguments that shift our attention

from difference to connection (and by extension inclusion and belonging). In their multifaceted ways, and at the risk of not over-determining their commonalities, the chapters have mobilised compelling arguments that provide an antidote to the anxieties and panics that inform current interpretations and perceptions about non-heterosexual sexualities and gender variances.

It is our hope that this volume will provide the impetus for further projects that will add to and shape future understanding of the ways in which living and performing queer African lives require ongoing critical responses to hetero-patriarchal regimes of authority, combined with further intersectional analysis. Renewed efforts should also foster and stimulate spaces of agency for queer lives to thrive that facilitate enhanced well-being, and richer options that offer correctives to, and counter, societal processes of silencing and shaming. Intellectual and political action that makes sense of African queer lives requires sustained analysis and activism that responds to stigmatising and heteronormative discourses. Identity, citizenship, and activism matter *not* only as theoretical concepts but also as tangible and material factors that shape, contest, and reimagine political life. For if we agree that the realm of sexual life and gender identities are governed by the political regimes that construct us, then the question of 'freedom' is a valid concern that reminds us, in the context of notions of the 'human' and 'livable', about the future for queer identities. Engagement with identity, citizenship, and activism is closely connected to normalising the rich and variegated queer selves, and ultimately contributes to the production of sexual citizenship that involves negotiating the private and public spheres. For African queer lives to be fully meaningful, acknowledged, and recognised we have to evolve, as Weeks (1995) has cogently claimed, an ethics of love, care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Such values are achievable if there is a sustained critical and political commitment to full equality. Sadly, we are far from achieving that reality just yet. For the moment, 'queer' is a necessary (and strategic) political attachment we should hold on to.

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# **African studies**

## **Non-normative genders and sexualities**

There is a growing and substantial body of African scholarly literature in the areas of gender and sexuality (see, for example, Tamale 2011). A sizable emerging field of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer scholarship exists (Reddy et al. 2009; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Epprecht 2004, 2013; Matebeni 2014; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013; Sandfort et al. 2015; Swarr 2012). Other contributions are focused on African feminism – for example, Nnaemeka (1997) and Mama (2007). More broadly, wider fields are relevant to developing African gender and sexuality studies, including those focusing on politics (Resnick and van der Walle 2013) and development (Ukaga and Ukiwo 2014). Some of these address non-normative sexualities and genders from particular perspectives – for instance, Cornwall et al. (2008) and Lind (2010) focus on sexuality, gender, and development studies, but take an international approach.

This section does not seek to bolt itself neatly onto the existing literatures. As each of the chapters in this collection contributes in its own way to African knowledge about non-normative genders and sexualities, we chose instead to include chapters here that offer something unusual or innovative to developing African knowledges and to gender and sexuality studies internationally. In the first chapter, Senayon Olaoluwa's auto-ethnographic account of sexed and gendered symbolism amongst the Ogu-speaking people of Southern Nigeria troubles Western notions of African homophobias – and of gender and sexual categories themselves – in two key ways. Firstly, it demonstrates how, for the Ogu peoples, gender and sexuality are highly complex, with blurrings, transmutations, and transgressions in the areas of linguistics, relationships with the earth and the market, and spirituality. Secondly, Olaoluwa's chapter disrupts the notion that individual embodiment and embodied intimacies should form the basis for theorising gender and sexuality. By using the notion of 'assemblages' (Aldred and Fox 2013), Olaoluwa develops a significantly different way of understanding gender and sexuality. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi's chapter, which follows, also takes a laterally innovative approach. It focuses on queer performativity in African prison writing. Performativity refers to refusals, transgressions, or other disruptions of performativities (see Poletti 2016) that occur on the 'edges' of the performances that constitute everyday lives. By analysing the ways that heteronormativity is reinscribed in a series of African prison texts, Osinubi reveals contradictions and ruptures, some

of which intersect with other important processes – not only the imposition of state power via the apparatus of the prison but also quotidian experiences of procreation, rape, and physical violence. The final chapter by Cheryl Stobie originally appeared in *Research in African Literatures*. It offers a queer bisexual reading of Joseph Gaï Ramaka's popular film *Karmen Geï*, set in Senegal. Bisexuality is often hidden, written under homosexuality, or erased in African literature. Stobie remedies and unsettles the homonormativising of bisexuality by offering a reading of *Karmen Geï*'s queer bisexuality, which destabilises desire, eroticism, monosexuality, patriarchy, gender, and power. Embedded in the Senegalese context, Stobie argues that 'Sexual justice is part of social justice and human rights'.

Each of these chapters foregrounds, in its own way, the richness, variegations, and complexities of identity construction in African settings. Olaoluwa's chapter provides an in-depth understanding of a specific social grouping, albeit set within the wider Nigerian context. The chapter demonstrates hybridisation in the ways that the Ogu people have absorbed and reworked hegemonic religious (Christian) edicts imposed on them via colonialism, thus adding to the decolonising literature (Hoad 2007). Osinubi also performs textual analysis using books from a range of African settings, but his work draws more explicitly on poststructuralist approaches. Using a feminist lens and a queer critique, Stobie offers readers and viewers alternatives that go beyond identity and behaviour in thinking about (bi)sexuality in Africa. Osinubi and Stobie add to African political knowledges about non-normative genders and sexualities, whilst Olaoluwa's work is primarily an anthropological and philosophical contribution.

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# 1 The human and the non-human

## African sexuality debate and symbolisms of transgression

*Senayon Olaoluwa*

### **Introduction and context: LGBTQ and the un-Africanness debate**

It is my persuasion that an understanding of the everyday practices of symbolic transgression of gender and sexuality amongst the Ogu of Southwestern Nigeria should begin with locating the discourse within the broader context in Africa. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) debates in Africa have assumed peculiar dimensions for various reasons. One such dominant debate is epistemological, with proponents as individuals and groups asserting the ‘un-Africanness’ of homosexuality in Africa (McAllister 2013: 88). Advocates of this view contend that such practice and diverse manifestations of its experiences are not traceable in history. Extremist as the view may sound, it has nevertheless set the tone for social interaction in many African countries, and as a dominant form of social consciousness, it has often determined questions around safety and insecurity (McAllister 2013: 88), privilege and marginalisation (Msibi 2012: 515), normality and abnormality (Matebeni and Msibi 2015: 3), among others.

The framing of same-sex sexualities and gender variance as ‘un-African’ is related to the purchase of Christianity and Islam, two Abrahamic religions that have dominant influence on contemporary Africans. According to Mutua (2011: 452),

The subject of sexual orientation, as understood in all its complexity, is extremely charged in Africa because of the deeply socially conservative landscape and the domination of the political space by Christianity and Islam, the two prevalent messianic faiths in the region.

As he reflects further, describing Africa as a spatial category edged by conservatism may account less for the response to the question of sexual orientation than for holding Christianity and Islam accountable. Invariably, Mutua avers that rather than seeing Africa as inherently and historically homophobic, it would be more appropriate to acknowledge how the popular following of the Abrahamic religions is at the core of the social phenomenon because ‘the two religious traditions [. . . have] homophobia in their doctrinal teachings’ (Mutua in Mutua 2011: 452).

Closely linked to the fusion of African conservatism and overwhelming embrace of the Abrahamic faiths is the burden of colonial memory and the anxiety of re-colonisation by the West, even when in this context the West appears to designate the transcendence of Africa because of its rather liberal approach to the question of homosexuality. The anxiety generated at the cultural level, according to John McAllister (2013: 88), makes

identifying with what is so visibly a Western image of gayness expose [. . .] sexual minority communities to the most dangerous of the justifications for homophobia in Africa, the argument that sexual dissidence is a neo-colonial conspiracy to subvert 'African values'.

Gayness is taken as symbolic of the other categories of the LGBTQ that reveal, amongst other things, the increased visibility of 'personified . . . homosexual identity', which has in turn produced 'increased expressions of homophobia in Africa' (Msibi 2011: 55).

The debates and controversies about LGBTQ issues have also found expression in the domain of leadership, where certain African leaders either accuse their counterparts of aiding a foreign culture or encouraging human rights abuse through their opposition to the expression of LGBTQ rights. One such instance was the public remonstrance of the presidents of Botswana and Zambia against the president of Malawi in the 2000s 'for his homophobic rhetoric, a rare breaking of ranks among African nationalist patriarchs' (Epprecht 2013: 1). The open disagreement at the leadership level is instructive in the sense that in spite of the dominant homophobic hostility, certain African countries have continued to demonstrate exceptional reception and tolerance for the articulation of LGBTQ identity. Countries such as South Africa and Mauritius can be cited as examples (Epprecht 2013). What is more, the place of South Africa in the contemporary evolution of LGBTQ discourse is further reinforced by the fact that it provides a rather unique historical model as far back as 1972 when S'bu, a black South African male, was wedded to a Methodist priest in a village some distance from Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal region. According to Reddy (2009: 341), the event of the 1970s in today's equation is an illustration of how 'history always has an uncannily ironic relation (and relevance) to the present'. In spite of the hostility and opposition to the expression of LGBTQ rights, not only has the situation on the continent drawn attention from the United Nations and other world bodies, it has become an issue for which various rights groups, even in the countries with the strongest opposition, have continued to canvas for as constitutive of human rights.

## **Nigeria and the forbidding climate**

In this section, it is my intention to connect the ongoing sexuality debate to the internal dynamics of the Nigerian postcolonial society, especially with reference

to sexual orientation and gender identity. In Nigeria, the homophobic consciousness at the turn of the twenty-first century also coincided with the reinstitution of democracy in the country in 1999. The period between 1999 and 2007 witnessed a series of arguments and counter-arguments about the propriety of homosexual identity. The general feeling during the democratic dispensation headed by Olusegun Obasanjo was that giving an official endorsement to such identity would be impossible, even when there really was no law prohibiting the affirmation of homosexual identity. Obasanjo did not make any pretence about his revulsion of the expression of LGBTQ rights – a situation that warranted outcry by people with sexual orientations other than the heterosexual to seek help from the international community. For instance, the Alternative Lifestyle Foundation in 2005 published an article in the *International Spectrum* in which ‘this unsolicited report describes a dire situation for gay men and lesbians in one of the world’s poorest countries, and announces the formation of an organisation whose mission is to fight anti-gay persecution and to lobby for sexual equality’. The description of the report as unsolicited underscores the desperation of people with alternative sexual orientations to call the world’s attention to their plight during this period. Also important in the controversy was the role of the (Nigerian) Anglican Church as a platform that had consistently condemned homosexuality while making its view also known at international fora for which authorities of the sect, particularly in the United Kingdom, had had to intervene several times. As H. A. Gay Times (2008: 97) recalls, the Church of Nigeria issued a statement in October 2003, which read,

We totally rejected and renounce this obnoxious attitude and behaviour [homosexuality], it is devilish and satanic. It comes directly from the pit of hell. It is an idea sponsored by Satan himself and being executed by his followers and adherents who have infiltrated the church. The blood and power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth will flush them out with disgrace and great pains.

Such public condemnation of people with non-heterosexual orientation to ‘the pit of hell’ provided a moral ground by which the social construct of abnormality was sustained during the political dispensation.

While the late Umaru Yar’adua’s tenure after Obasanjo was short-lived, Goodluck Jonathan’s administration, mild as it appeared, was no less severe in respect of what should be the official position on and attitude towards LGBTQ rights. Part of Jonathan’s legacy is the outlawry of gay rights in 2012. His presidency witnessed the enactment of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which amongst others, ‘prohibits a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of the same sex, and provides penalties for the solemnisation and witnessing of same thereof’ (Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013). The popular following of Islam and Christianity as two Abrahamic religions in the country was an underlying explanation for the legal penalties imposed on LGBTQ people. Citing the response of an activist to the outlawing of homosexuality, Paul Canning (2012: 6) reports, ‘One of Africa’s best-known human rights activists says religion is very

much behind Nigeria's recent outlawing of same-sex unions, which could mean a 14-year jail term for anyone convicted of entering into a gay marriage contract.' Not only are the guilty susceptible to 14 years in jail but also those found to be aiding and abetting them are liable to 10 years imprisonment. By 2014, there had been reports about arrests and interrogations of people in Southern Nigeria perceived to be gay, showing an onset of persecution in Christian-dominated areas; people engaged in same-sex sexualities in the predominantly Muslim north had long before that time been facing punishment under shariah law (Nichols 2014: 24). The stringency for successive administrations up to the present day is an indication that the expression of LGBTQ rights in Nigeria faces difficult times because of the forbidding stance of the Nigerian government that rests solidly on social constructs derivable primarily from the homophobic tapestry of religion.

Generally, the atmosphere of hostility to homosexual orientation in Nigeria has enabled a consciousness of what Lindsey Green-Simms (2016: 139) has described as 'everyday fears, desires, pleasures, and anxieties of those who experience same-sex attraction'. Although Green-Simms's observation describes the representation of characters in twenty-first-century Nigerian novels, the wordings are apt in capturing the actual realities and experiences of people constructed as differently oriented from heterosexuality in Nigeria. While, for instance, Charley Boy and Denrele are two popular figures in the entertainment industry who have openly disclosed their homosexuality and identified with gay communities in the country, the overwhelmingly hostile social consciousness has since made both of them engage in continual affirmation and denial. The example of the two popular stars and their ambivalence are important in the way they illustrate the precarious condition of LGBTQ communities in Nigeria. The experience further explains why in most scholarship about the prevalence of homophobia in Africa, Nigeria has often been included in the transnational trinity of hostility, the other two sub-Saharan African countries being Uganda and Zimbabwe (Hoad 2016).

A more personal account was the one given by Oluwaseun on Sahara TV (2015) during a special report titled 'Being Gay in Nigeria' aired in the wake of the passage of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in 2013. A Lagos state indigene by birth and residence, Oluwaseun paints a vivid picture of the forbidding atmosphere against homosexuality in Nigeria in the following words:

Nigeria is not the best place to be a gay person. The society is not very accepting, but we are beginning to see changes. Prior to now people do (sic) not talk about sexuality . . . most people would not believe homosexuals exist in Nigeria . . . but because of the law on homosexuality in Nigeria . . . because of the global phenomenon of it now, we want acceptance here too in Nigeria . . . we want to be recognized . . . we want our human rights . . . we want to be free . . . we want to be able to express ourselves

He goes further to describe the daily struggle against discrimination, generally as an experience he says is common 'on the bus, in school and at place of work'. The ubiquity of discrimination by society, to say nothing of the harassment by law

enforcement agents, has led to what Oluwaseun refers to as deterioration in the health of same-sex-oriented individuals who on this account have to contend with ‘depression and mental health’. The revelation is instructive by the very sense in which it contrasts with findings from South Africa where the legalisation of homosexuality and acceptance of people of same-sex orientation have proven to facilitate insulation against depression and mental illness (Potgieter and Reygan 2012: 39; Sandfort et al. 2016). Although Oluwaseun expresses optimism in the face of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, because it ironically draws attention in a sense to the existence of homosexuals in Nigeria – there is yet to be seen a sympathetic response for which people ‘would have been able to share part of our burden’. The absence of an understanding social response explains why the video clip blurs Oluwaseun’s face for protection from discrimination and further attack, which is another dimension to the iconography of homophobia in Nigeria.

Before moving on to the discussion about Ogu forms of gender and sexuality, it is worth pointing out that there is considerable variation in formations of sex, gender, and sexual identities and relations across Nigeria. For example, the levelling of sexes and gender roles within the context of farming amongst the Ogu contrasts significantly with the binary that is affirmed between men and women amongst the Biase people of Southeastern Nigeria. According to David Iyam (1996: 369), Biase people not only regard the cultivation of certain crops as exclusive to men but also concede ‘fullness’ to women only in the context of magical powers, which in most cases assumes ambivalence of greater negative connotation than positive. Considering the constant contestations that dog how women’s wealth is regarded in the Biase community (405–6), the commonality of interaction with the non-human others does not translate into blurring of genders. The contrast that the reality offers in comparison with the Ogu may then be explained in the non-acknowledgment of the subjectivity of the non-human others by the Biase.

### **Beyond intimacy: witnessing symbolic sexual and gender transgression amongst the Ogu**

In this section of the chapter, I reflect on the irony about the actuality of sexual and gender transgression at the symbolic level amongst the Ogu and how it contrasts with the ongoing contestations about sexuality in Nigeria. The situation in Nigeria and the debates around the reception of, and opposition to, homosexuality the world over have generally been about discourses of intimacy. Central to the various debates is the question of the body as a trapped social category, because the body is not possible to change, besides the tyranny of gender allocation on the basis of biological sex. It is my intention in this chapter to steer the discussion away from that familiar domain in order to examine at the level of symbolism the various ways in which it is possible to witness manifestations of sexuality. I will also discuss the transgression between the dominant binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality as a constitutive element of the everyday cultural episteme in a country such as Nigeria, where the forbidding stance of officialdom ranks amongst the most stringent in the world. In order to underscore the irony

of the situation in Nigeria, I adopt the critical model offered by Fox and Alldred (2013) by extricating the discourse of homosexuality from the realm of the personal into the 'impersonal'. The approach enables a libratory discursive foray in which understandings of embodiment and individual identities transcend the notion of intimacy through the granting of subjectivity to language and other impersonal categories. As Fox and Alldred explain, such an approach is an 'anti-humanist move [that] is then needed to overturn anthropocentric privileging of the human body and subject as the locus of sexuality' (2013: 769). By shifting the location of desire and sexuality from the bodies and individuals, they assay to discuss sexuality as contingent on 'assemblages' of impersonal flow in which 'bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, [constitute a system] which produces sexual [and other] capacities in bodies' (2013: 769). The territorialisation of the body, they argue, sets limits in the imagination of sexuality and restricts possibilities beyond the normative. Against this backdrop, I examine the impersonal interaction of bodies and individuals amongst the Ogu of Southwestern Nigeria against the architecture of 'assemblages' in which the discourse of land, commerce, and labour offers fresh understandings of sexuality as parallel to the otherwise restrictive assumptions of 'bodies and individuals' in the unpacking of sexuality as a social category of intimacy. In a similar way, I also consider how the trope of 'assemblages' resonates with expressions of spirituality and worship amongst the Ogu, together with curious resonances in biblical hermeneutics.

My adoption of auto-ethnography, what Holman Jones (2005) describes as dealing with 'self-other' relations, stems from the need to project from a perspective of indigeneity the cultural world of the Ogu, an indigenous group based in Southwestern Nigeria to which I belong. Ogu is often erroneously described in scholarship as constitutive of Yoruba ethnic identity. This is the case even though I bear a Yoruba surname.<sup>1</sup> This methodological approach is needed because of the agency of auto-ethnography in the representation of self and the interrogation of external hegemonic discourses that undermine the place of self and the construction of selfhood by outsiders (Cloud 2010: 84). As is normatively conceived (Oelgemoller 2012: 1487), my approach in this discussion will seek to foreground my personal experience of the Ogu and the intersection of this experience with the collective cultural intimations that are relative to the Ogu identity, while drawing on a range of scholarly material to facilitate the discussion.

## **Gender binarism and blurring amongst the Ogu**

The introduction to this chapter provided a context for the discussion of symbolic manifestations of gender and sexuality amongst the Ogu in Nigeria, ending with an explication on the adopted methodology. The next sections address the question of gender binarism and blurring, and linguistic relations in the everyday episteme amongst the Ogu. Other preoccupations border on ontologies of sex/gender/sexual diversities; the intersection of commerce, labour, and land within the discourse of gender and sexuality; symbolic transgression regarding gender and sexuality in Ogu spirituality; and the conclusion to the chapter.

The Ogu, a minority identity in Lagos and Ogun States in Southwestern Nigeria, provide an example of a cultural category in which linguistic and spiritual interaction between humans, deities, and other non-human categories facilitates an order of symbolic transgression of sexuality. Understanding how the interaction works requires that we consider first the fundamental paradigm of everyday practices of human relations. Generally, the Ogu affirm the interaction of gender as basically constituted by male-female binary. Invariably, in the allocation of roles, beginning with chores and socialisation for children, there tends to be the overt or implied acknowledgement of gender difference. While, for instance, chores such as sweeping and cooking are assigned to girls, others such as farming, hunting, and harvesting of palm fruits by climbing palm trees are traditionally designated as the preserve of male children. In the performance of drumming and dance, most genres such as *hungan*, *sato*, and *agbato* are conceded to males, while genres such as *gangbe* and *pasha*, amongst others, are performed by women. Yet there are other genres such as *toba*, *ajogen*, and *zobo* that require both male and female for their membership and performance to be normatively constituted. In the last illustration, it is clear that the fusion of sexes is a precondition for the mobilisation and performance of some genres.

At the level of the moral codes underpinning social conformity, the Ogu institute parallel paradigms of punishment in a manner that suggests equity between men and women. When a woman commits adultery, for instance, and she is caught, she automatically loses her place in matrimony. However, when the adultery is with a member of the husband's family, it is the male who loses his place forever in the family because he is irrevocably disowned when rites of passage are performed for him as though he were dead and buried. For instances like the aforementioned, the affirmation of difference between the sexes is clear. The instances are also representative of the everyday practices that demonstrate human-to-human interaction amongst the Ogu.

At other levels, during which social interaction is broadly conceived to include interaction with non-human categories of various kinds, the lines between the sexes are generally blurred. In the context of the human interaction with the non-human, transgression of gender roles has implications for the assignation and re-assignation of sexes. When thus symbolically viewed, the everyday practices of gender flexibility illustrate the irony of sexual and gender transgression, which tends to be denigrated as homosexuality in the broader context of intimacy in postcolonial Nigeria and some other African countries.

### **Language and quotidian relationships amongst the Ogu**

Relationships at the linguistic and interactive levels, as constituted in everyday performance amongst the Ogu, yield themselves to a great deal of flexibility that blurs the line between the otherwise absolute affirmations of male-female binary. In Igbo language and culture where Ifi Amadiume (1987: 17) intimates 'grammatical construction of gender, a neutral participle is used in . . . subject or object pronouns, so that no gender distinction is made in reference to males and females in

writing or in speech'; the same is applicable to the linguistic construction amongst the Ogu. This neutrality, as I intend to argue shortly, is fundamental to the flexibility and ease of gender transposition in matters of symbolic human and non-human interaction. Using the following sets of sentences, we encounter the pragmatism of the blurring of the gender line between the human and the non-human, especially with the third-person pronoun subject and object:

*Maumeh bayi awhli de yon whanpeh* (Maumeh is a beautiful lady). *E non non Awolin* (She lives in Lagos). *N nabajonoh e to osoh* (I will pay her a visit tomorrow).

*Semako bayi depevu de yon whanpeh* (Semako is a handsome young man). *E non non Awolin* (He lives in Lagos). *N nabajonoh e to osoh* (I will pay him a visit tomorrow).

*Awonlinbayioto de yon whanpeh* (Lagos is a beautiful city). *E so bayi ajoh-wiwa sin tado* (It is also a commercial capital). *N na ba jono e to osoh* (I will pay it a visit tomorrow).

The first sentence in each set begins with a proper noun that clearly indicates gender difference especially between male and female in the case of 'Maumeh' (female) and 'Semako' (male). Clearly, 'Awonlin' (Lagos) is the non-human in the set. However, with the subsequent application of the pronoun subject and object, both male and female dissolve into the same inanimateness of Lagos. The revelation is instructive by the very sense in which 'E' (subject pronoun) and 'e' (object pronoun) level all the proper nouns and by implication the distinction between the human and the non-human. It is further instructive to note that human participation in inanimateness also allows for the inanimate to participate in human gender, particularly in the context of commerce, labour, spirituality, amongst others. Unlike Amadiume's (1987) Nnobi context in which politics and spirituality authorise the symbolic performance of maleness by women, the non-human interaction with humans amongst the Ogu often grants male subjectivity to the inanimate while both human male and female assume generic femaleness.

The configuration of relationships in patrilineal structure allows for a sort of co-maleness status in the way daughters are regarded. For example, in Ifi Amadiume's (1987) work, as is the case amongst the Ogu, women are best described as 'male daughters' and 'female husbands'. Their description in this way stems from how daughters are considered co-husbands with their male siblings and other paternal relations. To that extent, the wives of their siblings and other male relations refer to them as 'asu/osu', which literally means husband in Ogu. Appropriate honour and courtesy based on this understanding are observable in the interaction between wives and the female siblings and relations of their husbands. If amongst the Igbo such 'male husbands' are called 'umuada', they constitute what the Ogu designate as 'tanyino'.

At another level, Ogu men in their relationship with descendants of their female relations share in femaleness; for not only are maternal relations greatly revered but also they are generally regarded as mothers to the children of their sisters and



other female relations in the extended families. It is equally important to note that the motherhood of one's maternal male or even female relation is not restricted by age. It explains why a younger male maternal relation, to say nothing of female, is nevertheless one's mother. Again, it may be necessary to turn to Achebe's explanation in *Things Fall Apart* on why amongst the Igbo a girl is named Nneka, which means 'Mother is supreme' (1958: 133). A similar justification is provided amongst the Ogu for the general motherhood of maternal relations irrespective of their gender. This author has for decades remained 'mother' to a particular much older daughter of his paternal aunt because she simply refers to him as 'my mother'. To that extent, the human interaction amongst the Ogu offers a unique dimension to the non-absolutism of gender in that sense; because every male is a maternal relation to other people, he shares in everyday femaleness. The suggestion thus provides the ground to talk about not only 'male daughters' and 'female husbands' but also about 'male mothers' amongst the Ogu.

### **Ogu ontologies and sex/gender/sexual diversities**

Within Ogu culture, there are 'assemblages' in which human bodies and individuals are symbolically aligned with otherwise inanimate categories such as the tripartite alliance of land, labour, and commerce. Invariably, the human body loses traction as the centre of sexuality by granting parallel agencies to other categories while binding the human to the non-human or the personal to the impersonal. Thus considered, sexuality manifests with nuances and sophistication that resolve the dialectic of gender in the conventional mode of male and female. The condition allows for various possibilities of relationships in which case the question of gender and sexuality turns more flexible rather than hard-edged. Against such a template, neither male nor female, heterosexuality nor homosexuality is of consequence. The situation underscores a certain level of permutation projected by Jeff Hearn (2014: 400) that underscores a 'sexual blurring scenario – greater sexual/gender similarity and greater sexual or sexual/gender equality'. This is because within the Ogu linguistic architecture, not only are the terms used with a high frequency of symbolic flexibility of sexuality but also there is a certain level of instability to the concepts in relation to multiple levels of interaction that deemphasise the bodies. As intimacy is not within the brief of this chapter, it will thus suffice to consider in more specific terms other issues in the conceptualisation of what the discussion has termed 'symbolisms of transgression' within the sexuality debate.

Understanding symbolisms of transgression in relation to sexuality must be extended to the relationship that comes with the dialectic categorisation of the human and the non-human other(s). If the earlier discussion shows some of the ways in which there is a blurring of the gender lines between humans, then there indeed is a strong sense in which the Ogu offer other forms of everyday interaction that foreground the implication of the human in the non-human. In most cases, the blurring of gender lines in this form of interaction invests non-human phenomena such as farms, nature, deities, markets, and commerce with maleness. The implication is that humans are subordinated to the subjectivity of

the non-human characters in the symbolic interactions. Human gender is generally collapsed into femaleness, while the non-human others assume maleness. Like in the human-human interaction, gender is not absolute, because male or female can assume the other gender. This is another way that maleness simultaneously participates in femaleness amongst the Ogu. Yet, in some other instances, gender dissolves into neutrality, just as is the case amongst the Nnobi people of Eastern Nigeria. Such instances occur in matters of reference to the dead as ancestors, because the Ogu believe that gender is of no consequence when one joins the ancestors who are simply referred to as 'kufitoh'.

More specifically, in ecocritical studies, the human/non-human relations basically designate the ecology and the environment (Roos 2011: 50). The relationship of the human and the non-human is inevitably emphasised in symbiosis, an assumption that often provides the basis for environmental justice espousal (Colebrook 2012: 185). However, within the context of symbolic transgression of sexuality amongst the Ogu, especially as anchored in linguistic and spiritual understanding, the notion of the non-human necessarily extends to the category of the supernatural. Inevitably, the discourse allows for an extension in the category of the non-human to accommodate the supernatural, which presents us with a situation of what I call triune unity. Here triune unity designates the constellation of the human, the non-human, and the supernatural in both linguistic and spiritual rites of passage which sanction fluid and flexible transposition of gender and sexuality in all facets. At other times, human gender assumes a certain form of neutrality to the extent that what matters is the interaction, and for which all other binary considerations are rendered inconsequential. If this is true for humans, it is also the same for the categories of the non-human – that is, the ecology and the supernatural.

Apprehending symbolisms of transgression amongst the Ogu must begin with an acknowledgment of the coevalness of real and imagined experiences. For whereas the real might be invested with a greater level of reliability, the imagined is not without its value of counter-balancing the real. If this speaks to the question of dualism, it at the same time evokes Stuart Hall's reflection on how we make sense of moments. As he asserts, 'Moments are always conjunctural . . . have their historical specificity; and . . . always exhibit similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this' (cited in Allen 2012: 211). It is significant to note that the citation is used by Allen within the discursive context of what he refers to as 'this queer space we find ourselves inhabiting currently' (211). The question of intimacy and the imagination or suggestion of same is taken seriously here, even when it does not constitute the main focus of this research. The momentary relevance of intimacy consists in the illustration of how what is considered approved or abhorrent is both affirmed and contradicted in linguistic and spiritual performance of the everyday between the three levels of interaction amongst the human (human-to-human), the ecological (non-human), and the supernatural (spirituality). Put differently, the approval or condemnation that may come with the performance of heterosexuality or homosexuality both in historical and contemporary terms can be thoroughly enmeshed in contradictions

within the Ogu cultural context. This is precisely because the fluidity that both linguistic and spiritual moments authorise enables a certain level of gender fluidity that blurs the binary associated with sexuality.

Amongst the Ogu, communication as the index of linguistic performance of the everyday creates a nuanced understanding, which first and foremost recognises human beings as *gbeto* (father(s) of life). It then stands to reason that whether male or female, every human being is a 'father of life'. By virtue of this, the liberty to life already sanctions a certain measure of equality and for which those of the female gender also engage in an everyday performance of masculinity and maleness. Even at the level of ambiguity, which allows for another possible meaning of *gbeto* to be a 'denizen/citizen of the earth', what is of the essence here is not gender, but the commonality of humanity. Much as Hearn (2014: 404) contends that a situation of this nature 'raises the possibility that gender may not be a central dimension of analysis and practice in the future', the projection is already a well-entrenched lived experience as an everyday practice amongst the Ogu. The subjectivity of linguistic symbolism grants both equality and neutrality to gender and the mode of sexuality. Such assumption sets the tone for the levelling of genders in the linguistic designation of certain activities and practices in which those involved are either exclusively male or exclusively female, irrespective of their biological make-up, which in other contexts allows for their description as *sunu/osu* (male) or *yonnu/asi* (female).

The levelling capacity of such a linguistic item as *gbeto* is instructive in this context because the binary that sex and gender are divided into has also been the basis for gender disrespect and injustice. The split leads us to the broad categorisation of sexuality into heterosexuality and homosexuality, under which the LGBTQ terminology and other similarly conceived notions of sexuality are grouped. The issue about the dialectic of sexuality takes us to the heart of the matter. The binary has been the basis for discrimination and hostility, which has set people of various religious, cultural, ideological, and moral persuasions against one another in an unprecedented way, as the question of sexuality is profoundly implicated in the contemporary discourse of globalisation. Just as the tetchy issue of racism resulted in the powerful diagnostic terminology of either 'disrespect' or 'injustice', or both (Pierce 2014: 23), so also can both terms be said to be applicable to the binary of sexuality and why the discourse has become so important today. Therefore, by investing humanity with androgynous affirmations, the linguistic referent sets the tone for other fluid linguistic and communicative interactions in which both gender and sexuality pale beside the specificity of the indicated activities in human-human and human-non-human interactions.

### **Commerce, labour, and land**

The scholarship on commerce, labour, and land has often demonstrated that the three activities are intertwined (Boomgaard 2009; Saito 2009). The grounding of these connections in culture and linguistics is not lost on the Ogu, as there is a linguistic awareness that supports the commonality of the intersection of the three

in expression through given lexical items. Beginning with the word *ahisi*, which means customer/buyer or clientele, as the case may be, in the context of commerce, what is of the essence is the activity at the centre of which both men and women are located. Besides this conventional understanding, *ahisi* in real terms means market wife/wives (*ahi* – market + *si* – wife). The seller, whether male or female, is *ahisino* (female market owner/seller). Here the socially constructed nature of the market is paramount. Market, and by implication commerce, assumes an active role to which both men and women are subordinated. The subjectivity of the market makes the question of human sexual binary of little consequence. The gendered nature of the market amongst Ogu people suggests another way in which the non-human participates in maleness; once we acknowledge the male subjectivity of the market in this context, it dissolves the human sexual binary into exclusive femaleness. Because of the subjectivity of the supra-human market forces in certain interactions with the human, sexual binary is dissolved and reconfigured into femaleness, as both human male and female are subjected to the masculine powers of the market, hence both male and female become *ahisi*, wives of the market. This in itself speaks to the concept of market forces both in the pre-capitalist sense where, say, goods or slave exchange was predominant (Alonso-Corte's and Cabrillo 2012: 709; Temin 2004), and in capitalist economies, where markets are not discriminatory in the way they affect humanity (Underhill 2003). This suggestion resonates with Hearn's (2014: 404) notion of 'post-gender scenario' in which case 'gender and gender antagonisms are or appear transcended, [through] plural fragmentation or crossing of dichotomous gender boundaries, [...] through economic imperatives'. Whether in their oppressive manifestations and consequences or in their positive effect on people, gender is really of no consequence when market forces assume subjectivity. All this makes the market, and by implication commerce and economy, signal a domain of attraction and seduction to which both male and female are amenable. This subjectivity invests the market in the Ogu epistemic mould with a form of male virility that is indiscriminate in desire. It is suggestive of a market-human commercial/economic intercourse in a way that collapses male and female gender into female, investing market with alpha maleness. Invariably, all humans in their engagement with commerce and market economy are market wives who are bound to the overall market desire and principles of bargain (Alonso-Corte's and Cabrillo 2012: 709).

The consideration of labour in the interactive order set out reveals a similar linguistic tendency. The word *azon* means labour; those involved in labour, irrespective of gender, are referred to as *azonsi* (*azon* – labour + *si* – wife). Here, as in the case of market, labour assumes subjectivity for which human gender is reduced only to the female strand. This in itself contrasts with the nature and history of European labour as a constitutive element of commerce where there was 'a gender binary that positioned the sober housewife as partner to the honest and ambitious man of the market' (Howell 2008: 519). With the Ogu, such gender bias is absent. To forestall the associated 'disrespect' and injustice of the binary, both male and female are simply categorised as female and wives in the performance of labour, whereby labour assumes male/husband subjectivity. In a similar vein, Adam

Smith's popular theory of division of labour may have had an enduring appeal for the understanding of labour dynamics over the centuries. Nonetheless, it fails in its attempt to subject both genders to the principles of equality before labour. This is precisely because for him, there is the 'propensity in human nature for one man to barter with another, which is common to all men and known to no other animal' (cited in Alonso-Corte's and Cabrillo 2012: 709). Whether taken in its literal or metaphoric sense, the linguistic preference for 'man' in making reference to humanity in Smith's theorising lingo is reminiscent of the earlier explication on what Martha Howell (2008: 519) terms the male 'Gender of Europe's Commercial Economy' in which the female is at best a 'house wife'. Amongst the Ogu, the pre-Smith labour principle etched in the linguistic signification subjects both male and female to the same labour law, even when 'bartering' is involved. The situation forecloses Hearn's scenario of 'hyper-patriarchy' in which case 'men and women [are] becoming more divergent, and with greater oppression and inequality' (403). The labour paradigms of operation within the Ogu linguistic milieu invariably lays a level playing field, making both men and women subject to labour forces. With the evolution of a global capitalist economy, the Ogu have maintained this linguistic consciousness, which is best captured in the adage *Akwe ma tin, gbeto ma yon* (Without money humans are not good). This returns us to the intimation of *gbeto*, which allows both male and female to be content with being the 'fathers of life'. What this presupposes is that feeling 'good' in a capitalist age is contingent, for the most part, on access to capital. It does not matter whether one is male or female, the 'good' feeling can be either sustained or compromised by accessibility or inaccessibility to capital. This then sums the linguistic principle of market and labour amongst the Ogu.

At the level of human interaction with the non-human where land/ecology/environment is concerned, the earth naturally comes to mind precisely for the various spaces and constituents that it presents humans with. Not surprisingly, the magnitude of what the earth offers and the narratives of the largesse have facilitated a notion of the gender of the earth as female. The image of the female earth is perhaps best captured in the phrase 'Mother Earth'. Such representation also finds parallels in the rendition of nations and continents as female. For instance, not only is Africa considered the original homeland to humanity in its several evolutions (Barham and Mitchell 2008: 1) but also at the same time it is Mother Africa. In terms of its enormous resources frittered and exploited over the centuries through external depredation, the inexhaustible endowment of the continental space is captured in the image of what Awoonor (1975) refers to as 'the breast of the earth'. Going by this, the question of the earth's gender appears to transcend opinion. Against such a backdrop, the representation of the earth as female leaves us with an understanding trope that smacks of rigidity and gender reductionism. For the Ogu, however, the earth is not necessarily female. Yet its suggestive masculinity is not without the care, tenderness, and abundance often associated with its representation as Mother Earth. The question may then be asked, how does the conception of the earth as 'male' stand to animate our understanding of human-natural relations?

The Ogu linguistic practice in human-natural relations offers a fluid perspective in which both the earth, in the broad categorisation of its constituents, and humans are engaged in an interactive bond in which genders are fluid, flexible, and transposable. In more specific terms, the earth, for that matter, is not necessary female, let alone mother, because of its capacity to make humans – both male and female – interact on a plane of equality which permits a male-female interaction between the earth and humans. Where the earth is thus represented in masculinity, all humans automatically become the earth's wives, irrespective of their genders. The realm of agricultural production offers one such instance of interaction in which survival and productivity amongst the Ogu invest the earth with the agency of maleness while all other forms of human involvement turn feminine. More specifically, farming is a constituent of the earth in which human interaction with the earth as ecology is devoid of the divisive repetitions of political ecology, integral ecology, and contentions of feminist and queer ecologies (Conley 2015: 27; Bauhardt 2013: 361). The principle of 'organisation sexualities' at play here departs from the contemporary neo-liberal operation that Hearn (403) argues endangers both humans and the environment through a process of 'hyper-patriarchy'. All of these affirm a clear binary between male and female in a struggle for economic survival through access to land, resource management, and biodiversity conservation. However, amongst the Ogu, farmers are *glesis* (farmers' wives – *gle* – farm, *si* – wife). The gender binary is therefore not between humans, as they are all reduced to 'women', while the male/husband agency in the interaction is that of the earth, whose constituent in this case is the farm.

The designation for farmers – male and female – as *glesis* affirms the unity of commerce, labour, and land, because in an average Ogu community in South-western Nigeria, agriculture is the most popular occupation and the one by which survival and well-being are defined. In constructing the farm as not only 'male' but also 'husband' to humans who are reduced to a wifely essence in their interaction with nature, the earth is represented as holding a seductive male attraction for humans. The attraction thus finds expression in the lifelong fascination of farmers with their farms and the various processes of the interaction: bush felling, burning, ridge making, planting, weeding, harvesting, ad infinitum. The enduring romantic attraction the farm, and by implication the earth, holds for Ogu farmers can be illustrated at this juncture with the legend of Pando in the village of Obakobe in the 1970s and 1980s. His legend as default *glesis* consisted in his reputation for abandoning his homestead for his farm to make ridges during moonlit nights. He would stay up in his farm, which was by the roadside, and make ridges from about 9:00 p.m. into the middle of the night. At other times, depending on the brightness and length of moonlight, his ridge-making activities could extend to dawn. Pando invariably became an enduring mnemonic icon of the illustration also because his romance with the earth attracted villagers from time to time to his farmstead. His action thus became a wifely performance of a lifelong romance with the earth, creating a legend that facilitated a formation of a fan base. Beyond the iconic popularity of Pando, the entire community

is involved in this romance with the earth through the agency of farming. As an enduring cultural practice that is suggestive of human-nature romance, the subjectivity of the earth is internalised in the processes of socialisation. This is because as children grow up into youth, they form various farming associations. The collective performance of their conjugation with the husband earth inheres in being able to, like Pando, engage in various individual and group farming competitions, the most famous of which are those undertaken during moonlit nights. Age group accounts would thereafter be passed from generation to generation. This symbolism thus turns the normative conception of the earth as female and mother on its head, because the harvest that results from farming is not read as a gift from Mother Earth, but as a gift from Husband Earth to human wives who, irrespective of gender, are *glesis*.

Yet the representation of the earth as male and husband in the context of farming is not absolute. This is so especially when farming is read as a means to life sustenance. The spousal relationship between humans and the earth in this context is thus linked up with the processes of ecological depletion and the necessity of replenishment, which is another core area of ecological studies (Olaoluwa 2012: 128). Amongst the Ogu, the relationship between the earth and humans is symbiotic. In this case, the processes of farming are symbolic of all other economic and extractive activities and signal depletion of the earth, even if the tendency is to interpret them to be evidence of the abundance and largesse of the earth. This leads the discussion to the instability associated with the question of sexuality. Having given so much to his human wives, the earth ultimately seeks replenishment in a manner that is at best analogous to the unpredictability associated with the femme fatale as ‘a site of semantic complexity and uncertainty’ (Pikula 2014: 277). The linguistic affirmation of this view finds expression in the deep philosophical naming practice of the *Avoseh* amongst the Ogu.<sup>2</sup> Of all the possible names, *Thoduemegu* (the earth inherits humans) speaks to death as the direct consequence of the previous human extractions from the earth, which accounts for its depletion. To fulfil a daily rite of renewal and replenishment, the earth literally eats up (*du*) humans. There is another ambiguous angle to the word as used in the name. The earth ‘eats’ humans either through the process of internment or cremation. It then stands to reason that amongst the Ogu, there is no innocence to the earth’s largesse. This is because even when it appears as a caring husband to humans, ‘eating’ it in the end suggests that its relationship with humans as farmers is only designed to take back their entire being at death, at which point the earth, cutting the image of a woman, does add up as Mother Earth, but only as a femme fatale. The memory of Pando as a default *glesis* (farm wife) becomes again illustrative, because for all the legendary romance with his farm and all the attraction it held for him, in dying, he was buried and given back to the earth for consumption. The imagery of *dudu* or eating invariably reduces humanity to a manurial essence and invests the earth with an androgynous/intersexual gender which is male at interaction with humans for their extractive activities, but turns femme fatale for their consumption at death through internment and other possible processes of decomposition.

## Transgression regarding gender and sexuality in Ogu spirituality

The reflection on the expression of sexuality between the human and the non-human can be extended to the domain of spirituality. An examination of this cultural category amongst the Ogu provides a fresh perspective on the instability of gender and by implication sexuality. Beyond any animist reductionism, the Ogu linguistic repertoire affirms a strong relationship between worshippers of various deities and the deities. The relationship transcends the predictability of piety, zeal, and commitment. In capturing this, lexical items within the vocabulary of identification present worshippers, priests, and priestesses, as well as other categories of votaries as ‘wives’ of individual deities. Humans are in a relationship with the supernatural; humans are wives, while the deities are husbands. To be a worshipper of a deity is therefore to be its wife. At such point of commitment to piety, the sex or gender of the humans involved is of no consequence. The understanding of animism as ‘the process of activating personness within the world – a personness that includes both humans and other-than-humans’ (Kubiak 2012: 52) – serves to illuminate how we may make sense of spirituality amongst the Ogu. Being thoroughly grounded in spirituality, the Ogu identify various levels of worship. While they acknowledge an overall Supreme Being, who is Mau or Gbethato or Togbeno, or Jiwheyewhe, they also acknowledge deities that are believed to be involved in their affairs of the everyday. At other times, specific clans are dedicated to the worship of specific deities, amongst which are *Than*, *Vothun*, and *Hun*. The categories of spiritual relationship between humans and the supernatural constitute a representative category in the sense that, even when most people are required to demonstrate pious commitment to these deities, there are those considered votaries of the deities. Moments of possession by spirits and utterances in trance are treated as gender-neutral, as the gender of the individual in a trance does not matter. Instead, the gender of the deity under whose influence the votary is possessed is the pertinent issue – the deity is always in this context implied to be male. This is why it is the subjectivity of the deity, whether as *Hunor Than*, *Vothun*, or another deity that matters; when a deity selects a votary, it is said that ‘*Vothun de asi*’ (The deity has selected a wife). Invariably, it is of no consequence whether the possessed votary is male or female, as only one human gender counts here: female.

The selection process for dedicated service as votary to the deities is termed *asidide*, which means bride-taking or bride selection. The process is systematic, as after the selection, a long rite of passage is commenced. The votaries are subsequently taken into training camps, which are analogous to seminaries or universities, as their training combines both sacred and secular knowledge in the arts and science of the Ogu. Depending on the deity, training varies from 9 to 12 months to 3 years and in some rare cases, 7 years, as is the experience of some *Hun* votaries who graduate with highest honours as *Avoseh*. Upon graduation from their various seminaries, not only do they take on new names but are also addressed in special ways, different from how others are addressed. Those who have trained to be votaries to *Than* become *thansi* (wife or wives of *Than*); those dedicated to



*Vothun* become *vothunsi* (wife or wives of *Vothun*), and those whose allegiance is to *Hun* become *hunsi* (wife or wives of *Hun*). The equality of humanity before deities sanctions a blurring and transgression of the sex and gender binaries between male and female, making it possible for men to fall into the category of wives to a deity who amongst the Ogu is male. It also reminds us of everyday participation of women in maleness, as they are first and foremost *gbeto* (fathers of life) before they are women. Not only do they share in the masculinity of the everyday but also in the otherwise exclusive notion of maleness. That the cultural paradigm of gender and sexuality is not hard-edged thus finds articulation in how votaries all become female in the performance of spirituality of the everyday.

The Ogu may have embraced Christianity mainly in the middle of the nineteenth century as the first set of converts in what later became Nigeria. Their understanding of spirituality from the Christian angle has not, however, resulted in any radical review of their view of the relationship with the supernatural. Such a perception that sustains the flexibility of gender and sexuality amongst the Ogu can be seen as finding parallel in the difference of theistic temperament in the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament of the Bible. The transition stands to facilitate the fluidity of gender and sexuality, and how generally the Ogu appropriate new cultural forms in order to sustain the affirmation of the mobility, rather than stability, of sex, gender, and sexual categories. This in itself is not surprising seeing that it speaks to the tendency for the 're-traditionalization of Africa' in the wake of African cultures' encounter with indices of Western modernity (Garuba 2003: 263–264). In this way, those otherwise exotic Christian cultures and practices are assimilated into the architecture of indigenous socio-cultural, economic, and political practices. Looking at the clarity with which homosexuality is condemned in the Old Testament, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah confirms its categorisation as a forbidden act in the estimation of the Hebrew God. The transformation of the same God into the God of all nations in the New Testament appears to have with it an incarnation of a God whose severity on homosexuality has undergone a certain level of subtle revision.

Taking the Bible as a text facilitates a deeper understanding of the evolutionary representation of sexuality. For instance, it is instructive to note Jesus' response when asked about the ultimate fate of a serial widow who has been subjected to surrogacy from her late husband's male siblings. As the question anticipates the condition of sexuality in heaven, Jesus simply tells his hecklers that there will be no marriage in heaven (Luke 20: 27–40). Yet eschatological teachings founded particularly on the book of Revelation make it clear that Jesus will be at the centre of a marriage referred to as Marriage of the Lamb (Revelations 20). The relationship is taken to mean a marriage between the saved and raptured believers who while on earth were male or female. There is for that matter a sense in which this understanding interfaces with the relationship between the Ogu and deities. The gender binary is blurred at Rapture and Resurrection for Christians, at which point they are all married to Jesus, who symbolically is the Lamb and the bridegroom. The suggestive sexuality inheres in knowing that those previously male are also going to be among Jesus' brides.

For the Ogu, such spiritual understanding of the theistic or pantheistic relations to humans had been well situated in the culture long before the advent and proselytising of Christianity alongside Western colonialism in Africa. Therefore, rather than being a point of dilemma, as is the case with the encounter of Christianity in some other cultures (Chua 2012: 511), the eschatological intimations fit well into the existing cultural palimpsest of the Ogu. The understanding is that of ‘continuity’, which finds, on a last note, articulation in the following Christian song:

<i>Thahomlan Messiah e e, e a he e</i>	Shout out in praise to Messiah
<i>Thahomlan Jehova e e, e a he e</i>	Shout out in praise to Jehovah
<i>Jesu sin hun we mile zon</i>	We are votaries of the Jesus <i>hun</i>
<i>Meh e tha 'yihonsiweh mi</i>	We are wives to the creator of the earth
<i>Ohunvoh de mo no note do mi</i>	No ordinary <i>hun</i> can stand before us
<i>nukongba</i>	

The similarity drawn between Ogu sensibility of relations to spiritual beings or deities has been substantially responsible for the very way in which they have been able to make sense of Christianity. But more important is the fact that the cultural transition does not leave us in doubt about their construction of sexuality in these matters as flexible if at a symbolic level that facilitates an everyday performance of transgression of sexuality. The linguistic construct allows men to be women and vice versa, and by implication makes it possible for both to participate symbolically in the LGBTQ culture of the everyday. Not allowing sexuality to be an absolute cultural category has additionally illustrated how the triune unity of commerce, labour, and land can also be situated within the discourse of sexuality without perpetuating the divisive binary of gender. As has been demonstrated, resource use, replenishment, and conservation can be carried out using a template that levels all humans as *ahisi*, *azonsi*, and *gles*i, as the case may be precisely because they are all first and foremost *gbeto*.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the symbolic understandings of gender and sexuality amongst the Ogu. It has important implications for sexuality studies, as it invites us to reconsider what Weeks (2004: 2) has referred to as ‘neo-traditional societies’ defined ‘by rigid distinctions between men and women, the harsh punishment of transgressors, and a bitter rejection of Western secularism’. For Ogu society, the notion that ‘neo-traditional societies’ have rigid gender distinctions is clearly untrue; the reality is far more complex. A blurring and transgression of gender and sexuality binaries manifests in different ways in Ogu society, including in the linguistic realm, the ontological underpinnings of Ogu life, Ogu relations with land and with commerce, and Ogu spiritualities. Even within the context of deep spiritualism amongst the Ogu, there is a cultural paradigm that allows for fluidity and flexibility of sexuality whereby even men can become wives, suggesting an emphasis of their feminine allegiance to a masculine deity.

This chapter supports arguments that the conception of the body as the locus of gender and sexuality has meant its normalisation and regulation within a social frame that subjects it to enslavement (McQueen 2014: 533). The approach adopted in this chapter has examined the primacy of the body by privileging symbolisms beyond embodiment and the reflexes of intimacy. The approach has facilitated an extra-intimacy discourse which contrasts with the Western discourse of 'LGBTQ' that tends to be exclusively focused on intimacy and associated cultural forms and rights claims. By extending the exploration of bodies and individuals' interactions to other non-human categories, the chapter has demonstrated how the question of gender and sexuality can extend to inanimate domains such as land, commerce, labour, and spirituality. When compared to the resonances of the LGBTQ debates, the implications for Africa and African nations, such as Nigeria and the oppositional state responses, the dynamics of symbolic sexual transgression at the cultural and linguistic levels provide a grand irony. The situation underscores the flexibility of gender and sexual binaries within African ontological paradigms and interrogates the attempt to construct certain categories of gender and sexuality as absolute. The chapter admits that, as much as the symbolic approach facilitates a break with discourses of the embodied intimate, the binary challenge that sexuality poses will continue for a long time to come and may continually manifest in the evolutionary reversal of homosexuality and heterosexuality, whilst leaving a contentious space in-between. As the debates linger, the everyday performance of symbolic sexuality transgression in the linguistic and spiritual realm amongst the Ogu provides a coevalness that underscores the impossibility of affirming absolutism with respect to the sense we make of sexuality and gender. It additionally offers a middle ground for negotiating and tempering the tensions of the space in-between. Just as the binary is daily blurred in the triune unity of the human, the non-human, and the supernatural, an acknowledgment of the fluidity to sexuality against this symbolic backdrop stands to facilitate a deeper and more comprehensive understating of the complex phenomenon.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Notes**

- 1 Like the author of this chapter, many Ogu people bear Yoruba names. For some, first, middle, and last names may be Yoruba; for others, they could be two or one. This, however, does not translate into denial of their Ogu identity. Those conscious of their identity affirmation insist that in spite of bearing such non-Ogu names, their ethnicity is paramount.
- 2 *Avoseh* is the highest titled of a *Hun* votary. It is awarded after a successful completion of years of seclusion and training.

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## 2 Creaturely lives and sexual exposure in African prison writing

*Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi*

It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones – *and South Africa treated its imprisoned African citizens like animals.*

Nelson Mandela (1994: 201, my emphasis)

Homosexuals in Cameroon are treated like animals.

Cameroon: Abuses in 'Homosexuality' Prosecutions.<sup>1</sup>

Human Rights Watch Documentary, March 21, 2013

### Introduction: sex in African prison narratives

In the last two decades, African political prison writing has been a productive site for queer scholarship because it assembles representations of same-sex sexual practices at a nexus of expansive debates about democracy, resistance, and political rights.<sup>2</sup> Critics have used the genre's representation of 'homosexuals' to illuminate the inequalities attached to sexuality and gender within African political cultures and the enunciation of post-liberation African social worlds.<sup>3</sup> Reading the frequent juxtaposition of romanticised 'heterosexual domestic space' to 'the gender-pervverting space of the prison', Keguro Macharia, for example, suggests that prison narratives encode the links 'between political and sexual masculinities' and circulate what is considered proper political masculinity (2009: 7). Certainly, historically, various forms of masculinity – such as the heroic or big-man politician – have been circulated widely in African political scenes as affective matter facilitating popular political attachments, yet such circulated embodiments – often incarnated as political patriarchs – are iconic representations resulting from complex manipulations of gender and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Zackie Achmat disaggregates such procedures when he points to the subjection of bodies and the social reconstruction of power, gender, and pleasure in prisons. Following his interpretation, all gender and sexual identities produced in prison systems stand in relation to one another in a chain of complicity, participation, and co-implication (1993: 93–96). Thus the injunction is to think through the functions of sexuality in securing distinctions amongst subjects caught within power relations.

This chapter extends the current reading practices that African queer scholarship brings to the analysis of queer citations within narratives of political resistance

(Munro 2012). Rather than focus on citations of same-sex desire alone, this chapter examines the place of same-sex desire within constellations of lived experiences in prison narratives. In the earlier epigraphs, the references to animals point to complex relations to the extraordinary violence of incarceration. Nelson Mandela and the unnamed Cameroonian seek to render visible their reduction to subjects seemingly outside of human life and, consequently, outside of political recognition (see Wallerstein 1961). Specifically, they denounce their reduction to biological matter from which different forms of life are summoned through political processes. Such references are common in prison writing, but as writers turn to animal life in order to express their encounters with the unmitigated force of state power, some fail to grasp the implied dissolution of all binary demarcations that secure political standing as well as their own complicity in interdependent networks of political discourses that regulate the exercise of power. Just as the non-human animal stands as the ultimate subject of violence in the epigraphs, other life forms – homosexual men and ‘rape-able’ women are two recurrent examples – serve as model recipients of violence in other contexts.

Critical consensus indicates that animals have foundationally served as the quintessential other in narratives of modernity (Bouttier, 2015; Vermeulen and Richter, 2015). Anat Pick asserts that the boundary between human and animal is ‘a site of contestation, anxiety, and ritual’, and its conservation inflicts a fierce cost on animals because they become the prototypical subject of a power that operates in ‘exemplary purity’ (Pick 2011a: 1). According to Pick, *creature* subsumes human and non-human, and supplanting the *human condition* with *creatureliness* forces an evaluation of not only what constitutes inhuman conditions but also how all categories of life dwell within life. The creaturely, she explains in an interview, embodies the primal ‘condition of exposure and finitude that affects all living bodies whatever they are’ (Pick 2011b). Literary scholars have approached creaturely poetics as writing that exploits the destabilisation of the human/animal boundary in order to explore forms of exposure to violence. The term *exposure* implies a vulnerable position with reduced possibilities of self-defence in relation to harmful external forces. In the legal situations that unfold in prison writing, exposure connotes a range of subject positions with graduated losses of the legal protections that guard against legal abuse. Creaturely poetics makes these susceptibilities to sexual exposure visible; the writerly turn to animals indirectly expresses ‘embodied conviviality’ (Acampora 2006: 96).<sup>5</sup> The world-constituting violence of arrest, torture, and incarceration institutes a radical encounter with incomprehensible exposure for political prisoners.<sup>6</sup> The representation of animals, sexuality, and gender in prison narrative delineate the remaking of the social world.

As much as some prison writing might circulate homophobic representations, some writers have represented the prison as sites of the first debates on homosexuality in contexts of African political activism. Attention to prison narratives addresses not only the consolidation of specific masculinities but also their imbrications with political processes and cultural practices beyond the prison in everyday life (Musila 2009; Osinubi 2014). Such consideration means investigating

the transposition of those social processes into narrative and, vice versa, how narrative mechanisms in prison writing illuminate the larger co-implicated social world of politics that is rendered peripheral by the urgent constraints of resistance (Quayson 2003). Since initial demarcations of political masculinity from homosexuality and the resulting reification of gender responded to the incarceration regimes launched by the colonial state, emblems of normative political masculinity in prison narratives of anti-colonial resistance are metonymic constructions supplanting complex narratives (Starck and Sauer 2013). Sexual orientation and gender embodiments become causalities of resistance literature in the sense that the exposures and risks attached to them are often ignored or marginalised in prison writing. Rethinking the reification of gender and sexuality in these narratives demands responsiveness to the functions of peripheral elements. As should become clear in the following readings, the periphery's utility has been underappreciated in studies of prison writing.

Starting with J. M. Kariuki's *Mau Mau Detainee*, published in 1963, writers turned to animal imagery or actual animals – as fellow inmates – in order to capture their exposure to colonial governance and its regulatory forces within camp or prison systems. For Kariuki and other writers, the emasculation and sexualised torture and humiliation in imprisonment is part of an overall dehumanising regime. They express the encounter with 'the condition of exposure and finitude' through a selective erosion and reconstruction of material and symbolic boundaries between human and non-human life. If animal life captures one extreme, marriage guarantees removal from exposure. Far from simple narrative prostheses, animals and marriage function as bookends to material social processes and the production of identities.

Reading the nexus of marriage, creaturely poetics, and sexuality in prison writing, I argue that whereas some writers codify queer bodies as subhuman, others reposition homosexuality, through the manipulations of gender codes, as interrogatory presences to any legitimization of exposure based on sexual desire. I purposely analyse Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* (Nigeria, published 1972), Sam Mpasu's *Political Prisoner 3/75 of Dr. H. Kamuza Banda of Malawi* (Malawi, published 1995) and Kunle Ajibade's *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Notes* (Nigeria, published 2003). Generally acclaimed as a masterpiece of the genre, Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died* appears in direct or discursive citations in the narratives by Ajibade and Mpasu. Whereas Soyinka manipulates gender conventions to construct the indefatigable authorial persona and remains silent on the possibility of same-sex desire, Ajibade and Mpasu revise Soyinka's scheme by recognising and foregrounding the nature of sexual desire as an opaque but, nevertheless, vital force to human well-being, even if it is permanently subject to value-regulating adjudications. They isolate how prison culture rehearses extra-carceral punitive regulations of homosexuality. I contextualise the particularities of these three narratives with a brief discussion of earlier intersections of gender and creaturely poetics in Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall Be Free* (Zambia, published 1962) and J. M. Kariuki's *Mau Mau Detainee* (Kenya, published 1963).<sup>7</sup> What remains of this chapter is divided into five sections. It begins with a section in which I clarify



the key concepts of this chapter. The body of the chapter comprises three consecutive sections on intersections of creaturely life and gender aesthetics in the prison narratives of Wole Soyinka, Kunle Ajidade, and Sam Mpasu, respectively. In the final section of the chapter, I summarise the importance of a creaturely approach to prison writing to African queer scholarship.

### **Narrative frames: queer citations as peripheral indexes**

Critics of autobiographical discourse have long argued that the intelligibility of the authorial subject depends on the performative repetition of a recognisable sequence of plotted life events. In an adumbrated definition, performatives are utterances that create new social relations specifically through their pronouncement. The marriage declaration is often offered as the best example. The phrase ‘I pronounce thee man and wife’ does precisely that: it makes two individuals a couple bound in law. In autobiography, writers establish the sense of a coherent narrating subject through rehearsals of narrative conventions and socially accepted and intelligible discourses on the very constitution of a lived life (Smith and Watson 2010: 16). In the narratives under examination, such performative sequencing rests upon (1) professions of normative masculinity established through declarations of marriage and heterosexual love, (2) expressions of defiant political views, and (3) creaturely poetics. Creaturely poetics perform the crucial task of delineating forms of dehumanisation, citing creaturely solidarity, or signalling that which lies outside the human. Citations of marriage, on the other hand, secure narrative closure and indicate impending or previous removal from carceral exposure. Marriage and the marriage plot frequently mark performative narrative self-creation or transformations from one form of being to another.

Anna Poletti (2016) has suggested that inasmuch as performative iterations might ensure the intelligibility of the narrating subject, contradictory narratives around performative utterances can undermine the performativity of narration. That is, while the authorial subject strings together iterations that accumulate performative force, the narrative can also showcase departures and refusals around the performative: such refusals, on the peripheries of the performative utterance, do not automatically gain legibility and they are known as ‘periperformatives’. Poletti borrows the periperformative from Eve Sedgwick, who, extending J. L. Austin’s definition of the performative, argues for the existence of utterances adjacent to the performative proper: whereas performatives – such as the paradigmatic example of the marriage vow ‘I do’ – establish consensus, periperformatives draw attention to the possibility of dissent around the performative declaration and emphasises how such dissent cannot be successfully articulated.

Eve Sedgwick elaborates the periperformative as a concept adjacent to performative acts. Thus the marriage vow is made within a group of witnesses whose silence and compliance is necessary for the ceremony to take place. It is ‘the bare, the negative, potent but undiscretionary speech act of one’s physical presence – maybe even *especially* the presence of those people whom the institution of marriage defines by excluding itself – that ratifies and recruits the legitimacy of its privilege’ (Sedgwick and Frank 2003: 72). Sedgwick elaborates marriage as

'theater – marriage as a kind of fourth wall on invisible proscenium arch' with world-constituting effect on relations amongst those in its vicinity. Citations of marriage index operations of the marriage plot and contraventions of marriage injunctions approximate periperformative enunciatory positions. They accumulate periperformative force fields that unsettle the theatrical field of the marriage performative itself. Periperformative clusters mark a processual delinking from one dominant performative and a divestiture of its force.

Reading for periperformatives begins with attention to marriage injunctions not only as performative utterances but also as indexes of material apparatuses that transform the performative into material effect. Marriage references are indexes for wide-ranging conventions that determine social and legal status of individuals. As Elizabeth Povinelli points out, historically, marriage possessed world-constituting force for the social legibility of the human being in civic life. In modern, and especially in pre-modern, societies, marriage bestowed persons with social legibility by granting them recognisable genealogies. One's position within genealogical grids implies specific positions within family trees, kinship, and citizenship systems, but historically, they have also meant positions within or outside humanity (Povinelli 2002: 218). Reading Segdewick and Poletti together with Povinelli crystallises the interplay between authorial performativity and queer periperformatives in African prison writing.<sup>8</sup>

If we read African prison writing for the conjugations of the creaturely, homosexuality, and gender construction, we realise its rehearsals of political masculinity go beyond sexual normativity as such; they explore the putative transformation of nature into culture. What is being revised are the forms of consensus on culture and the place of sexuality and gender within it. In effect, some writers struggle to accommodate homosexuality within culture. Josiah Kariuki initiates a primal scene in *Mau Detainee*. His taxonomies of good and bad sexual conduct and affirmation of good Kenyan – i.e. African – recur in prison writing. His use of non-human animals repudiates his own exposure:

In the jails [Mau Mau prisoners] had formed a separate group from the *Mahuru kanga*, who were the ordinary criminals, thieves, pickpockets and so on. *Mahuru* is the word for carrion crows and they were given this name because they could steal and quarrel, fight and commit sodomy with each other: they had no discipline and they were like the vultures who have no shame and eat the filth and garbage and the flesh of dead things.

(Kariuki 1963: 139–140)

This entanglement of animals with 'sodomites' and criminals, which recurs through African prison writing, names a problematic cluster of animal lives against which Kariuki – and subsequent writers – define their humanity. Against the ostensible animal rabble, Kariuki offers two striking scenes of closure that lift him outside animal exposure. First, he represents Jomo Kenyatta as an emblematic political father figure for a post-independence future in an impressive apotheosis:

There, framed in the doorway, waiting for us, was Mzee. He greeted us in a wonderful manner and as he embraced me to him I felt like a chicken being

folded under its mother's wings; all my worries and troubles now belonged to him. This would be a small burden indeed for a man who had already taken suffering of all our people on himself.

(Kariuki 1963: 178)

Jomo Kenyatta – complexly gendered as father and mother – displaces women and provides an apotheosis in which the encounter with animal exposure and sex-gender instabilities are dramatically resolved. Beyond this patriarchal apotheosis, Kariuki's own marriage – captured in photographs of his family after incarceration – secure his departure from animal and sexual instability. Readers can appreciate the interchangeability of the protective political father and marriage: both secure the end of exposure.

Kariuki's textual manoeuvres need to be compared to Kenneth Kaunda's narrative to grasp the entanglement of creaturely poetics and the periperformative. Writing around the same time as Kariuki, Kenneth Kaunda frames his putative discovery of same-sex desire within a welfare project in which participants in such sex acts would be rehabilitated. He focuses on coerced same-sex practices, which he rationalises as part of criminal practices that emerge in carceral spaces:

If a boy tries to resist, his so-called protector arranges with others to thrash him so that by coming to the boy's protection at the right moment, he will submit to his unnatural desires. [. . .] From this time, the boy is treated like a 'housewife.' [. . .] This is true, of course, of some grown-up men who agree to play the role of women, and it applies equally to white prisoners from what I was able to observe and hear from those white prisoners who worked with us at the book-binding.

(Kaunda 1962: 133)

Although he reports a commonplace discovery of homosexuality in prison writing, Kaunda's attention to the cross-racial similarity of homosexual practice and the observation of homosexuality across the racial binary interrogates the same dualisms that creaturely poetics disrupts. Prison 'marriage' mimics social conventions but especially codifies and sanctions gendering as carceral exposure. Kaunda imposes a developmental frame of analysis on the 'corruption' of young men, but he frames his observations within a restorative welfare model:

I am convinced beyond doubt that some of these people could be saved if we could treat these moral and spiritual diseases with the seriousness physicians treat serious cases of pneumonia for, in both cases, people are dying. The difference is that in the one case they are dying physically and in the other, morally.

(Kaunda 1962: 137)

Kaunda stands out for his candid bewilderment instead of a vitriolic call for violence or recourse to punitive animal exposure. But, more importantly, his language of social rehabilitation can be juxtaposed to the creaturely poetics in the following appraisals. Writing as part of anti-colonial resistance, Kaunda can project a future

welfare state. Soyinka, Mpasu, and Ajibade wrote under African dictators who had negated the possibility of that state.

### **Soyinka's dehumanised man: big-man roadkill**

Soyinka does not cite homosexuality, but he synthesises all poetic features that I have described so far: animal references, the marriage plot, the deferral of sexual desire, and a critique of political abuse. The absence of homosexuality – which recalls Ngugi's exclusion in *Detained* – allows readers to observe idiosyncratic gender performances that destabilise biological embodiment, whilst also reconstituting it as both a form of recognition in the theatre of politics and a mythopoetic system of biological reproduction. This pattern begins in the title *The Man Died*. The sentence describes the death of the journalist Segun Sowemimo from injuries he sustained from a beating ordered by a military governor (13). The journalist's death results from the excess of political masculinity, which Soyinka decries throughout the memoir. When Soyinka repeats the titular sentence after another death or as an admonishment, it reverberates in the memoir such that 'The Man' signifies as the murdered journalist, the generic abstraction 'man', and *the man* – the brave, political subject as a putatively viable being in every citizen. The responsible political subject Soyinka genders as a man is an abstraction, and it signifies more than the immediate biological connotation.

Critics have often noted a conservative stance in Soyinka's uses of gender. When Mary David asks if his female figures are 'unrealistic', he responds,

Well, that is my attitude to women. Their form, their being and the fact that they unlike men reproduce, cause them to become fused in my mind with nature in a way which men are not and can never be [. . .] There is no compromise for me on the subject. A woman's shape, a woman's reproductive capacity which is unique to the female sex sets her apart from men.

(David 1995: 212)

Mpalive-Hangson Msiska ascribes Soyinka's position to his quest for political justice: 'Soyinka subordinates gender identity to the broad project of understanding the workings of political hegemony and producing counter-hegemonic agency' (Msiska 2007: 26). In his prison narrative, Soyinka reforms gender as political identity irrespective of biological bodies and as a mythic category of biological and cultural regeneration. But he also repudiates sexual desire to fashion an impervious self.<sup>9</sup>

Soyinka structures the prison as a 'human ecology' – a term supplied by a prison commander whose staccato institutional language, a series of disarticulated utterances, reflects disorders in that human ecology:

I study in archaeology. I am not just that. A prison governor you know study in Khartoum. Archaeology. And if I am in university today I can tell you. That, I will also lecture in human ecology.

(Soyinka 1972: 102–103)

The governor's fractured speech mimics the estrangements in the human ecology that becomes the operative metaphor for the interconnectedness of all living beings and the attunement and solidarities amongst them. Within this distressed ecology, Soyinka renders humans and non-human animals within a network of creaturely exposure encompassing all facets of social interactions within and outside the prison. This network of creaturely life allows him to represent the genocidal pogroms in the north, the carnage of war, and the brutalisation of citizens concurrently as symptoms of a systemic breakdown in political imagination that operates in the prison and in national life in the form of big-man mentality.

Unlike the governor, the prisoners participate in this human ecology. Throughout the memoir, Soyinka emphasises the ravages of incarceration on fragile human bodies that become host to numerous biological infestations. At one point, that mass of infected bodies communicates its representative status as an expression of potential exposure through song: 'That brutalized humanity beneath us were singing, and the listening bodies of inmates became a tangible, communal thing' (110). The communal singing body counters the prison governor's inarticulate speech. A prisoner notes the contrapuntal nature of musical eloquence and the unfeeling inhumanity of the prison system as part of a common network: 'I wish the human ecologist could have heard them' (112). This contrast between the human ecology and the impervious governance returns in the other two memoirs, but sexual desire and not music functions as the communicative conductor.

Though Soyinka separates gender from deterministic biological and social configurations to express political ideals of resistance, he retains the binary dichotomy to indicate weakness and strength. Thus moments of panic are characterised as moments of weakness coded as feminine (108; 115–116). This gender scheme materialises in Soyinka's comparison of two inmates thrust abruptly into his cell early in his detention: the Igbo woman facing grave danger because of her ethnicity and the midwestern man, a doctor, imperilled by his doubtful ethnic and professional genealogies. As an Igbo woman resident on Nigerian soil, the woman faces 'infinite exposure'. Yet Soyinka suggests the woman draws strength from seeing him shackled. When she is suddenly removed from the cell, Soyinka intuitively feels that she has conquered her fears and implicitly becomes a 'Man'. However, he describes the non-Igbo doctor as a man who became *cowed*:

Doctor X. swore that the Matron had denounced him; the police of course refused to reveal on whose word he had been arrested or bring face to face with his accusers. He was flung into Ikoyi goal where he became ill and *cowed*. After several days [. . .] he sent instructions to his family to insert an advertisement in the papers changing his name to a less Ibo-sounding one.

[. . .]

'Don't change your name.' I said.

'Oh but we've always wanted to change it in our family. You see, we're not really Ibos. We belong to the . . . family but you see our family moved and settled with the clan of . . . , their migration, land disputes, intermarriages. My ears ached.'

These passages schematise a battle over genealogical reassignment in which Soyinka resettles the doctor as a creaturely being while the doctor wards off his potential dehumanisation through a name change – a performative legal declaration – clarifying his genealogical and ethnic affiliations. The matron uses the extraordinary circumstance of the political war to advance her side in the otherwise peripheral gender war. The innuendo on *cowed* mobilises what has been described as the metaphor of ‘the woman as cow’ (Grimmer 2016: 73). It also combines the animalising and gendered significance of the noun cow with the meaning ‘oppress’ buried in the etymology verb *to cow*. The episodes of the Igbo woman and non-Igbo man miniaturise and refract complex entanglements of gender and creaturely exposure. Soyinka’s earache signals both the limits of what he will admit as testimony and his refusal of political solidarity with the *cowed*. References to the *cowed* man and the powerful matron and other resonances of disrupted gender relations cumulatively generate echoes of absent scenes of prison writing: the male prisoner who enjoys homosexual liaisons or who is forced into receiving anal sex. Wittingly or otherwise, the resonances of an apolitical man as *cow* – i.e. the female reproductive non-human animal fit for slaughter – naturalise, or at least identify, the suppressed notion that the gendering of biological bodies codifies relations to political exposure.

Soyinka further elucidates the connections between gender and exposure in incidents in which citizens who unwittingly hold up presidential motorcades are publicly brutalised or detained for obstructing the passage of big men *qua* displays of big-man masculinity (228–230). Lindsey Green-Simms has documented how cars reflect ‘social and material change, the processes of urbanization, or the shifting gender dynamics that shape Africa in different historical moments’ (2017: 5).<sup>10</sup> Presidential motorcades dramatise the power of big-man masculinity. Automobiles are symbols of autonomy and social mobility, and traffic on road networks are symbols of social connections. Literature and film rework traffic networks as metaphors and material incarnations of biological ecosystems by superimposing upon material road networks multiple axes of legal, social, and biological interaction. Road traffic reflects what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) calls schemes of ‘social belonging’ and ‘economies of abandonment’ under systems of governance.<sup>11</sup> Such representational schemes draw on creaturely poetics in which human beings have as much chance as non-human animals to become roadkill. When drivers unwittingly obstruct government motorcades and are brutalised, they create moments of traffic gridlock following which the government’s disciplinary apparatus momentarily or permanently reassigns the individual’s genealogical status. When such drivers die, they become roadkill that obliterates distinctions between human and non-human animals.

By conjugating his reports of President Gowon’s motorcade with the performative force of a wedding, Soyinka not only heightens readers’ appreciation of the interplay amongst the motorcade, the wedding, and the dehumanisation of human beings but also uses Gowon’s wedding – the beginning of Gowon’s new genealogical line – to show hierarchies of sexual life and human lives. As readers are informed, military officers wanted to present the fall of Umuahia to Yakubu

Gowon as his wedding gift, but the city only fell days after the wedding. Soyinka's deliberations on Gowon's wedding stresses his overall investment in crystallising the significant connections between the prison system and everyday life in the dictatorial state. Gowon's wedding party – as a fact and metaphor for a cabal – travels on an axis different from the general population.

Soyinka's suspension of sexual desires and his fortification of the body for political resilience does not imply an obliviousness to the subject of sex in prison. That deferment intensifies instances when Soyinka uses sex and sexual reproduction to apprehend encounters with exposure, or to enhance the inviolable self. That is the case with the reference to sex change and male pregnancy in the extract following a prolonged refusal of food:

I made a strange discovery this morning. I am pregnant. For a long time I looked down on the evidence, wondering how it came to be. [ . . . ] Considering my sex, it should not happen to me at all. Of course, stranger things have been known to happen. Sex change could creep up upon a man, unnoticed in such an asexual atmosphere.

(Soyinka 1972: 212)

Soyinka describes transformations to his body morphology but the intimations of male pregnancy alert readers to his revisions of gender binarism. The flitting reference to pregnancy describes in sexual terms ravages on the body. The prison is not an asexual place; Soyinka simply confines sex to non-humans in the creaturely complex. The juxtaposition of lizards' energetic sex lives to their constant destruction by a bored and obstinate warder replicates, in miniature, the dysfunctionality of the prison ecology:

They copulate incessantly, the [prison] has become an orgiastic spectacle of sex. It would be a lizard sanctuary also but Ambrose [a warder], when the spirit of boredom overtakes him, hunts them down with stone and baton, sometimes slaughtering three or four in a single afternoon. I question him. No, he does not hate lizards. He piles up their bodies and proudly points at the day's bag.

(Soyinka 1972: 266)

Soyinka's interrogation enhances the contrast between the bored warder and the impassioned lizards while the word *slaughter* evokes a disparity of scale. This invitation to comprehend the warder's action as murder within the creaturely world raises a striking disaffiliation because the warder does not share the ethics and emotions of the creaturely world. The disparity between the warder and the reader, between the warder and the exposure creatures, and the incommensurability of perceiving creaturely sex as worthy of protection demand careful consideration. Within the repertoire of African prison writing, Soyinka's representation of creaturely sex and irrationality of the exposure – i.e. lack of protection to which

it is subjected – offers a model for gauging the potential or actual proximity of all sexual acts to unjustifiable exposure.

### **Prison grotesque and the theatre of homosexual camouflage**

Soyinka's rejection of a vulnerable authorial self and human sexuality make his narrative an excellent foil for Ajibade and Mpasu. Comparing their references to women and same-sex desire to Soyinka's silence sharpens reader appreciations of sexual and gendered exposure in their narratives. Kunle Ajibade, the author of *Jailed for Life: A Reporter's Prison Notes*, was jailed from May 1995 to July 1998 during the regime of Nigerian dictator Sanni Abacha. He signposts his investments in creaturely apprehension through references to Franz Kafka's novels. As he points out, Kafka repeatedly depicted the transformation of 'human beings into grotesque figures' and deployed a set of '*leitmotifs* to depict a nightmare world in which humankind sometimes finds itself' (119).<sup>12</sup> Although he does not dwell on non-human animals in prison spaces, they appear in nightmares induced by the 'life-threatening environment' that suspends inmates between human and the creaturely, which Ajibade calls the 'grotesque' (48–49). This grotesque apprehension extends to the decrepit military hospital complex where Ajibade receives treatment following an illness. It is there especially that he gathers narratives of soldiers returning from horrific experiences in Nigeria's peacekeeping mission in Liberia (58–65). Like Soyinka, Ajibade assembles an ecology of exposures from the hospital, the war front, and the prison system. However, Ajibade extends that ecology into the secluded arenas of the home and sexual desire. Homecoming scenes and family reunifications are generic scenes of closure in prison writing: Ajibade's brief discussion of his marriage and the effect of his imprisonment on his wife follows those conventions (Ajibade 2003: 180–181). The wife's pregnancy and the birth of a son enhance the distinction between the former's inmate exposure and the unceasing precariousness of national political life.

Although Ajibade distinguishes his family's encounter with the violence of dictatorial politics from the general population's quotidian encounters with such violence, that distinction (between general citizen exposure and sex-gender exposure within domestic spaces) draws attention to the regulation of same-sex desire and practices within the prison and beyond. By situating prison prohibition and practices of same-sex desire within a larger ecology of sexual desire, Ajibade rebuffs the fantasy of a politically upright collective subjectivity consolidated through repudiations of homosexuality. Sex might be a matter of convention, regulation, and improvisation, but some improvisations are censured everywhere. An instructive incident demonstrates how prison writing struggles with the circulation of sexual desire between men, while maintaining the appearance of habitual homosocial exchanges within constricted prison spaces. Ajibade identifies hidden discourse on homosexual acts as a mode of response to the enforced prison ecology and its management of human life. Instead of ubiquitous denunciations of homosexuality, Ajibade shows the contradictions between the public rituals of homosexual prohibition and the pressures of human desire for sex. In the passage



that follows, Ajibade describes the performance of ritual prohibition following the arrival of a new prisoner:

There was a loud bang on the floor in A2 cell, the most crowded of the cells for armed robbery suspects.

[. . .]

The Inspector-General moved to the centre of the holding what they called Penal Code, which no official could touch without his permission.

Silence in the cell. I now read the sacred Penal Code. Every offence under Section A carries 21 days in gas chamber: fighting, stealing, homosexuality, coup attempt, smoking of Indian Hemp, insulting a cell officer, habitual coming to prison and urinating on the cell floor.

[. . .]

The new comer said he would obey the Penal Code of Alabama City [i.e. A2 cell]. The provost who sat like a king then said, 'Welcome to Alabama City.' And he started smoking [tobacco] as he sang a popular love song in Tiv. A warder passed by. He greeted him. They both laughed as he said, '*We dey enjoy, Oga. Nothing spoil. Only women we no get.*' Another inmate then rendered a flawless performance of *Is This Love* by Bob Marley. Desolate night finally came.

(Ajibade 2003: 131–132)

In political prison writing, virtually all accounts of homosexual practice are ascribed to non-political inmates. Although Ajibade follows that scheme, his attention to the absence of women and improvised rehearsals of love songs divulges the persistent circulation of sexual desire as an open secret. The improvisations of love songs express re-inventions of sex-gender conventions in the absence of women. Within this ecology of sexual desire, prisoners pair their public adherence to hierarchies and distinctions with covert recognitions of the need for intimacy intimated through reciprocal salutations and laughter. Prison same-sex conviviality repeat possible codes for outside life. Occasionally, an inmate breaks the code of pretence around prison sex. Ajibade presents one particularly Kafkaesque scene of homosexual denunciation:

Tomidel, one of the convicts in the black cells, raised an alarm sometime in May 1996.

'Warder! Warder!'

*I thought another inmate had died.*

'Warder! Warder!'

There was a stampede in the yard. I heard the door of the cell open as the warders brought out the alleged culprits.

'*Na lie. I no do am. Na lie.*' The culprits pleaded.

But Tomidel did not relent.

'*My eye never seen this kind thing before. Man dey f – k another man's yansh. Haba!*'

It was a case of sodomy. Since the warders did not catch them at it, the alleged offenders were not punished. But the authority decided to increase the potash [. . .] in the prison food. They believed it would kill the sexual urge of the prisoners. But the prison still throbbed with pent-up lust.

(Ajibade 2003: 132)

There is an unmistakable irony in the sentence '*I thought another inmate had died*'. Ajibade contrasts the alarm in this denunciation to prison writing's recurring representations of alarm as solidarity in moments of acute endangerment and rescue. Such moments, which occur when an inmate falls ill, disclose the values attached to specific lives. Soyinka offers a classic example in Chapter 28 of his narrative. That chapter begins with the 'groans of anguish' from a medically distressed prisoner and calls for medical attention. It ends the next morning when a warder tells Soyinka, 'The man died' (199). Within the harsh regimes of prison writing in which homosexuality is described as an aberration or participants are cast as abject creatures (see Kariuki), Ajibade's account does more than refuse the distinction between forms of sexual expression: it affirms sexuality as a biological expression. Its parallel between the hospital and the prison interprets the regulation of sex as another feature of the degradation of human life. Similarly, the unmistakable comparison of denunciation and solidarity shows how the denunciation affects the health and regulation of the entire prison complex. The regulation of one scene of sexual life is the regulation of all sexual life.

Joseph Strelka describes Kafka's fiction as figurative parabolic stories that defamiliarise the everyday through exaggeration. The recurrent traits involve an acute sense of a prolonged apocalyptic state, unceasing uncertainty, inequitable domination, and encounters with absurd illogicalities. Because Kafka strives to describe the human condition, 'he draws a total picture of man, from the sensual sphere through the intellectual to the metaphysical' (1984: 435). Ajibade's Kafkaesque rendition of homosexual indictment exceeds its prison contexts because the prison is only the metonymic symbol of a national nightmare in which the wider citizenry constitutes the general population of a nation-state as a carceral system. That is, insofar as prison narratives mediate on the overall distribution of exposure through political discourses, this Kafkaesque denunciation and the prison regulation of sexuality refracts the putative homosexual's unrestrained exposure to infinite power not only at the hand of the state but also within the general population.

### **Human immobility: homosexual life as proxy exposure**

Sam Mpasu's brief reference to homosexuality, the micro-narrative of desperate homosexual love, foregrounds his inability to comprehend alternative paradigms of erotic life. *Political Prisoner 3/75 of Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, Mpasu's account of a two-year detention without trial under President Banda, exceptionally draws attention to the suffering of wives outside prison. Not only is his wife,

Sophie, an Ethiopian citizen, briefly declared mentally unstable and confined to a mental institution by the repressive state apparatus, but also she becomes pregnant following what Mpasu asserts is a rape by an official of the state welfare office who exploits her vulnerability. This rape narrative complicates any reading of the fleeting reference to homosexuality, because it foregrounds the wider contexts of political violence and its gendered and sexual manifestations. In this case, the wife undergoes an incredibly traumatic experience that cannot be fully narrated through the husband's perspective. This suspended rape narrative delineates sharply the limitations the authorial persona imposes on the diverse narratives of sexual violence related to imprisonment.

Mpasu structures his account with the performative frame of marriage and the teleological template of the marriage plot. However, his account interrogates marriage performatives by exploring discarded narratives that cannot be housed within the marriage plot. In the preface, we read, 'Sam Mpasu is married to Linda. His first marriage to Sophia was destroyed by his long imprisonment' (iii). Mpasu's marriage with Sophia frames the pre-imprisonment idyllic life and promising future: 'Up until the day of my arrest, our marriage had been idyllic. We had been deeply in love' (5). He dwells extensively on his new marriage, his upward social mobility, and his wife's pregnancy: 'We had been watching her bulging tummy with excitement' (4). Pregnancy resonates powerfully in this narrative. In Ajibade's narrative, it marks the end of his exposure; fatherhood reinstates him as a man after imprisonment and guarantees his sons improved life chances. For Mpasu, pregnancy marks suspension between forms of exposure.

A traffic accident announces Mpasu's removal from the marriage idyll into creaturely life. As he is being transferred to prison, the security official loses control of the van and kills a pregnant goat shepherded by a woman:

She went livid with obscenities and vituperation against [the driver]. Apologies were not acceptable. She demanded money for compensation and not for one but for several. [. . .] A compromise was reached when I suggested that this was a road accident and the traffic police ought to be involved.

(Mpasu 1995: 14)

In this incident of roadkill, the woman insists that the traffic police investigate the incident, and she demands compensation. This encounter, a variation on the nexus of roadkill, social mobility, and the genealogical society forms a transfer point in which Mpasu – and other detainees – move from a purely human existence into creaturely. As it turns out, whereas the woman can fight for compensation, Mpasu's family is totally incapacitated. Mpasu's imprisonment spells the end of his marriage, his notion of love, and his idea of the sanctity of his wife's body and of his sex life. The alleged rape of Sophia, his wife, and the implied abortion suggest the annihilation of a life with an unworthy genealogy. It is in the dissolution of his marriage, its idylls, and the radical destabilisation of his assumptions about human life and the meaning of sexual love that Mpasu's inclusion of this otherwise peripheral narrative of a putative homosexual love gains meaning.

Mpasu's account of homosexuality involves a man who makes suicide attempts because he is purportedly deprived of the object of his sexual desire. Mpasu writes,

I totally failed to understand the actions of this man. *Giving up his life because of thwarted sexual gratification was something I could not understand. But then I had heard of some men dying for women and some women dying for men. This was the first time I saw a man trying to die because of another man.*  
(Mpasu 1995: 57, my emphasis)

Readers never receive the man's individual account, but Mpasu's comments are remarkable in that he registers the attempt as his personal crisis of knowledge, which acts as a prelude to his recodification of norms and perversions. More importantly, prison officials brutally punish the prisoner for the suicide attempt by denying him food and keeping him 'in water, day and night totally naked, like an animal' for days: 'On the third day, he was more than grateful for the half ration he received [because] he was now anxious to preserve his life' (57). Although Mpasu describes other suicide attempts that end in similar punishment, this extravagant incident – and the interpretative gloss – of a lovelorn prisoner's response to thwarted sexual desire has powerful reverberations in the subsequent rape episode because (1) Mpasu's encounter with homosexual desire becomes a crisis of knowledge; (2) Mpasu's encounter with the perversion of rape illuminates, paradoxically, the impossibility of a single truth about sex; and (3) because the so-called homosexual serves as a foil to Mpasu himself and his encounter with the world-constituting force of sexual desire. That is, sexual desire as a source of human force and agency is entangled in contradictory combinations of pleasure and pain illuminated negatively through the divergent experiences of rape.

Mpasu learns of the pregnancy when he is taken to visit his wife in the presence of state security agents and welfare officials. During the transportation, security officials repeatedly insinuate that women are also sexual beings with longings like men and imply that the incarceration of husbands deprives wives of sex. When he finally sees her, he states,

The woman who walked in, behind [a] small boy, looked familiar but haggard and pregnant. I looked closer at her. Then the shock hit me. It was my wife. She was at least six months pregnant. There was no mistake about it. Her tummy was so large.

(Mpasu 1995: 123)

In the unfolding Kafkaesque scenario, Mpasu accuses his wife of infidelity and a one-sided dissolution of their marriage, while the wife and all present security officials deny the highly visible pregnancy. Eventually, Mpasu understands that he must accept this newly imposed social contract. As he realises upon his release, his acceptance of that script of denial was essential to his release:

I learned, later on, that my wife had been raped [by] a perverted Social Welfare Officer who came from a family with a history of sexual perversion. One

of his brothers who was in jail for murder, after he brutally beat his own wife to death over a disagreement about sex. The brother who raped my wife went to [. . .] rape her in the hostel at night.

(Mpasu 1995: 126)

Apparently, the Malawian government suggested Sophia procure an abortion in Ethiopia, but she needed the husband's permission to travel abroad with the son who was a citizen of Malawi.

The competing explanations of the pregnancy, Mpasu's allegation of rape, and the state's allegation of an extra-marital affair frame Sophie's vulnerability, her missing account, and the subsequent devaluation of the foetus as a life fit only for abortion.<sup>13</sup> Citations of rape pose several problems in any project of representation. As Lynn Higgins and Brenda R. Silver point out, representations of rape are often framed through a male perspective, which absents the experience of women. Often, rape is used to disclose cultural secrets because it 'exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction, or censorship', and it often inaugurates 'an origin of social relations in which the event itself is subsequently elided' (1991: 3). Thus Mpasu's relation to the rape serves as the origin of his post-imprisonment social relations just as the departure into creaturely livelihood marks his entry into the prison. For Mpasu, the representation of rape forces him to redefine perversion as sexual violence against women and to redefine Malawi's state apparatus a perversion. His account dislocates perversion from its habitual association with same-sex desire in prison narratives, but the evacuation of his wife demands an investigation of the representation of same-sex desire as part of a larger culture of sexual regulation. In sum, the rape – in a manner similar to the homosexual denunciation – points to other silenced subaltern positions in prison writing. Mpasu and Ajibade identify sites of exposure that precede and outlive their incarcerations.

### **Conclusions: exposure and queer scholarship**

Throughout this chapter, I have traced how incarcerated men who, when confronted with exposure to the injustice of incarceration, reflect upon the imbrications of sexuality and gender in the encounters narrated in prison writing. Imprisonment exposes concealed devaluations of the human within the nation-state, and authors of prison narratives confront the implications of sexual desire and gender in the political processes and institutions that accord them recognition as citizens and participants in political life. Imprisonment not only ruptures domestic space and re-gender the arrested but also radically upends all previously accepted social codifications of biological life and attendant life processes. The recourse to creaturely poetics constitutes a turn to fundamental debates about human life arrangements within modernity. When these writers claim they are treated like animals, they revitalise deliberations on modernity and its antinomies. Distinctions between human and animal raise fundamental questions about other co-implicated binary divisions. Once writers confront the anxiety about the

animal/human boundary, they engage with an array of distinctions based on race, gender, sexuality, and other social characteristics. Consequently, their narrative mechanisms of closure are not mere poetic conventions. Rather, postulations of political masculinity, fatherhood, marriage, pregnancy, genealogical descent, and procreation serve as heuristic closures based on material processes – and privileges – enmeshed with political discourses and structures that facilitate distinct and unequal forms of exposure to scales of legal and extra-legal violence.

The readings analysed in this chapter show the indexical function of homosexuality within multiple sites of exposure that exceed the prison space. We must thus rethink marriage and the marriage plot as counterpoints to social and legal exposure. While marriage might seem like protection against becoming animal, marriage is itself a scene of exposure within certain contexts, and the marriage plot provides aesthetic recalibrations of such exposure. Writers of prison narratives are not simply juxtaposing idealised home spaces of marriage to the re-gendered prison space; they are exploring the adjacent political claims that are evacuated from the site of formal party politics. The violence of rape and the permanent vulnerability attached to same-sex desire disrupt the drive to closure as the end of exposure.<sup>14</sup>

In the narratives by Mpasu and Ajibade, violence against women and governmental repression based on sexual orientation constitute sites of urgent political campaign that extend beyond what the authors could codify within the prevailing political paradigms of their time. With regards to literary studies, these citations of same-sex desire reinforce Anna Poletti's assessment that

formal innovation in life narrative can be a way to critique the terms under which truth claims [...] are made while still insisting on the unique force of the nonfictional mode of life narrative to make claims about [the conditions of] living.

(2016: 361)

The absence of same-sex desire in Wole Soyinka's narrative is congruent with his overall treatment of sex: in his iconic lizard copulation scene, all sex can be subject to purely illogical violence. However, his creaturely poetic frame invariably condemns the violence that targets consensual sexual activity. The citations of homosexuality in Ajibade and Mpasu contravene standard generic repudiations of exposure through the social distance of marriage and the post-carcer home space. Citations of homosexuality in political prison writing are indexical peripformatives: they underline the fiction of completely heterosexual African worlds, highlight the malleability of sex-gender conventions, and prevent narrative closure on the intimate forms of exposure beyond the prison.

Although I have deployed the peripformative to crystallise the narrative functions of queer citations in African prison writing, this reading extends to historical citations of *queer* in other genres of African literature. Prison writing, as a quintessential genre of protest and resistance literature written by political activists and dissidents ultimately codifies the refusals to the genre's performative definitions

of the good life after resistance. In this sense, Ajibade and Mpasu, while echoing Soyinka's 1972 narrative, depart significantly from him. The presence of individuals with non-normative sexual desires in prison narratives that invariably testify to human rights abuse should be read as instances of peripformative juxtaposition: they constitute cases of lives that the dominantly inscribed sense of a narrative's good life cannot accommodate. Indeed, in some memoirs, citations of queer subjects radically undermine the very stability of the narrating authorial subject. Reading these narratives in the context of twenty-first-century assertions that homosexuality is un-African or within what Mark Gevisser (2015) describes as the global culture wars that attribute the emergence of African lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism to developments in Europe and North America situates prison narratives, as African political autobiography, as documents in which African politicians and activists recognise alternatives to the socially sanctioned performatives of the good life in which the writers were themselves complicit. Queer citations, as such, reveal the limits of authorial definitions of political life in African political prison writing. They also suggest that political prison writing constitutes a counter-archive to emerging African LGBT life narratives.

## Notes

- 1 'Cameroon: Abuses in "Homosexuality" Prosecution'. [www.hrw.org/video-photos/video/2013/03/21/cameroon-abuses-homosexuality-prosecutions](http://www.hrw.org/video-photos/video/2013/03/21/cameroon-abuses-homosexuality-prosecutions).
- 2 Brenna Munro identifies the dialectical co-presences and interchanges of antipathy to homosexuality in political prison and the recuperative revisions of the scripts of homosexual representation by gay writers.
- 3 The meaning of homosexual, homosexuality, or queer are often in prison writing since these narratives are written by professed heterosexual men who do not engage in same-sex practices. It is never clear if the men involved define themselves as such or if they define their acts as homosexuality. Some writers use homosexuals as a generic name and do not even distinguish between consensual sex and coerced sex. In this chapter, I have adopted the terms homosexual and homosexuality as it appears in narratives. I assume that the writers are not simply writing about the sex acts as such but about the idea of the homosexual and homosexuality, which they routinely avow to confront for the first time.
- 4 For background on the concept of political masculinities, see Starck and Sauer. For African contexts, see the representative chapters in Ato Quayson and Immanuel Wallerstein. For an introduction to the Kenyan context, see Musila. For an introduction to the concept of *bigmanity* or big-man politics, see the introduction to Mats Utas, ed. *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*. London: Zed Books, 2012.
- 5 See, especially, Sarah Bouttier and Peter Vermeulen on creaturely poetics. On animals within ecologies of affect, see Ralph Acampora.
- 6 Pick's interest in the Holocaust's dehumanizing of the human is remarkably pertinent to those who experienced internment during the British suppression of the Mau Mau political uprising; it is equally relevant in Soyinka's account of protest against the destruction of human beings in the Nigerian pogroms of 1966 and the ensuing war, and it also illuminates Mpasu's experience in the famous prisons of President Banda.
- 7 Given the existing scholarship on prison writing from South Africa and Kenya in queer scholarship, I am focusing on Nigeria, Malawi, and Zambia. I deliberately leave out the following pertinent texts: Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, 1981) and Maina wa Kinyatti (Kenya: *A Prison Notebook*, 2009).

- 8 The contestations over homosexuality and masculinity constitute refutations of creaturely exposure and vulnerability; they insist on belonging within humanity.
- 9 This is evident in his rejection of his wife's visits. Even when he is finally taken from prison to a hospital, he ignores the presence of women in the streets of Kaduna: 'I denied even recognition to the presence of women in the streets as we drove through, denied that my body had made physical breach of the prison walls' (285).
- 10 See Lindsey Green-Simms. *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- 11 See the introduction to Povinelli, *Economics of Belonging* (2011).
- 12 For an introduction to the concept of the Kafkaesque as an analytic optic, see Joseph P. Strelka's. 'Kafkaesque Elements in Kafka's Novels and in Contemporary Narrative Prose'. *Comparative Literature Studies* 21(4) (1984), 434–444.
- 13 This chapter cannot fully attend to the complexities of this rape account because experiences of the spouses of imprisoned political detainees deserve their proper study. The rape narrative marks the end of the marriage as an idyll. Given the prominence of marriage and its performative force in the memoir, Mpasu's happiness upon release to a home without his wife and son marks a passage into a new state of knowledge about the distribution of violence and exposure in his country. If prison narratives celebrate the personality and the body of the hegemonic, political father, Mpasu rejects that tradition to identify the violence beyond such metonymic figures.
- 14 For example, the suspended representation in Mpasu deserves its own investigation, which I am unable to provide in this chapter.

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### 3 ‘She who creates havoc is here’

#### A queer bisexual reading of sexuality, dance, and social critique in *Karmen Gei*<sup>1</sup>

*Cheryl Stobie*

Be careful! Hide your women, hide your men,  
Karmen has come! She who creates havoc is here!

(Ramaka 2001)

A bisexual perspective is a way of looking, rather than a thing to be looked at.  
(Hemmings 1997: 14)

#### Selective overview of critical responses to *Karmen Gei*

To date, very few films with queer themes have been produced from within Africa. One example of this small corpus that is well known in the context of American art-house and queer film festival dissemination is Joseph Gai Ramaka's *Karmen Gei*, which appeared in 2001. As Lindsey Green-Simms notes, 'African celluloid films [. . .] are often not seen by African viewers' (2012: 27). In the case of *Karmen Gei*, the distribution of the film was curtailed even further by censorship imposed by the Senegalese state some six weeks after the film began screening in Dakar, as a result of a *fatwa* declared on the grounds of blasphemy by a Mouride cleric and a violent protest by his supporters (Nelson 2011: 75–76; see too Maas-ilta 2007).

The film has received attention from Western-based critics, such as Kenneth Harrow, whose fine chapter portrays the central character in terms of a 'trashy' woman who typifies Senegalese histories of 'love, enslavement, and freedom' (2011: 120); who flouts convention; and whose death enshrines her in the aesthetic realm of an immortal, reinvented Carmen-figure: 'Even a Wolof Carmen [. . .] and a gay Carmen' (123). By contrast, Frieda Ekotto criticises Ramaka for failing to counter the taboo of female homosexuality in Senegal by retaining the traditional ending of the Carmen story in which the central protagonist is killed, arguing that this 'illustrates the filmmaker's underlying reestablishment of the patriarchal order, which shows how difficult it continues to be to confront the oppression, marginalisation and alienation of women in West Africa and around the world' (2007: 80).

Few critics of *Karmen Gei* specifically refer to the representation of Karmen as displaying bisexual behaviour. Phil Powrie's interesting article, 'Politics and

Embodiment in *Karmen Gei* (2010), for instance, refers extensively to lesbianism, but does not mention bisexuality once. In other commentators' work, where bisexuality is referred to, it is generally treated fleetingly, with no attention given to the specific effects achieved by this representation. A recent example is Ato Coly's cogently argued 'Carmen Goes Postcolonial, Carmen Goes Queer: Thinking the Postcolonial as Queer' (2015) in which she investigates the modalities of power, resistance, and subjectivity in the film by deploying theorists including Achille Mbembe and Jasbir Puar, thus highlighting 'indigenous conduits that queer Bizet's *Carmen*' (15). While the word 'bisexual' appears once (in the disparaging context of 'bisexual libertine') in Coly's abstract, indigenous queerness is treated non-specifically throughout the article.

One exception to this lacuna is Babacar M'Baye's article, which, despite being marred by some surprising errors such as the claim that Karmen 'fatally stabs her overly jealous lover Lamine' (2011: 127), addresses the issue of 'variant sexualities' and makes an occasional reference to bisexuality and queerness. M'Baye notes 'Karmen's ability to transcend not just sexual taboos by stimulating the love of both men and women, but also her capacity to go beyond the social boundaries of her Senegalese society' (123). He continues,

Karmen's open sexuality is a political act of defiance against the limited space that both the neo-colonial and patriarchal order give to African women by confining them primarily to the cult of domesticity and giving them fewer rights than men have. This neo-colonial and patriarchal order that Karmen seeks to transgress is apparent in the censorship that the film has received since 2001.

(123)

In this chapter, I offer a reading of *Karmen Gei* that extends M'Baye's observations (see Harrow 2013; Maasilta 2007). My understanding of bisexuality accords with that of Robyn Ochs (2015), who refers to bisexuals as people who have romantic and/or sexual attractions to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, or in the same way, or to the same degree. I would argue that Ramaka's choice to represent Karmen's behaviour in terms of bisexuality is crucial to his critical vision in applying the Carmen story, which emphasises a quest for freedom, to the Senegalese context. Bisexuality may not exist as a concrete sexual identity in Senegal; there are differences between identity, behaviour, and desire, and I do not propose the use of the term in a universalising or essentialising manner. This chapter closely examines the film's depiction of female bisexuality as a complex, queer site which destabilises stereotyped gender roles, patriarchy, monosexuality, heteronormativity, and, by implication, other social and political structures connected to the regulation of power and appetite. The film eschews the marriage plot associated with heterosexuality and the coming out plot connected to homosexuality. I note Ramaka's use of Senegalese practices by women such as dance and grooming rituals to widen the applicability of female homoeroticism and same-sex desire beyond the central character, Karmen,

and suggest that his placement of her in the pantheon of historical heroic and mythical female figures imbues the Senegalese past and its cultural artefacts with a queer hue. I mention Ramaka's deployment of film genre, including the musical and melodrama, to offer the viewer a feminine, bisexual viewpoint which gains further focus by the strategic use of the carnivalesque, which is characterised by bisexual practices (see Bakhtin 1984). By various means, *Karmen Gei* uses bisexuality as a destabilising element to open up different, less restrictive, possibilities for desire, power, and society at large.

First, however, it is apposite to take a step back from the film itself and examine the material realities that are relevant to Ramaka's fictional truths in depicting Karmen as a politically astute character who acts on attractions to women and men, creating havoc within the context of the film as well as for viewers and critics.

### **Variant sexualities and gender in Africa, particularly bisexuality in Senegal**

Non-normative sexualities are subject to legal and social censure worldwide. Out of some 196 countries (Rosenberg 2014), at least 76, or possibly up to 81, criminalise homosexual acts ('79 Countries' 2015). Out of a total of 54 African countries, homosexuality has been declared illegal in 38, and the death penalty can be applied in four of these ('Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual' 2014). Despite this rampant homophobia and abuse of human rights, however, sociological and anthropological accounts, life writing, literature, and film from many of these countries testify to the presence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals.

Senegal has had penalties for homosexuality embedded in law since 1965. Article 319 of the Senegalese Penal Code sets the punishment for sexual acts between members of the same sex as a jail term of between one and five years, and a fine (IRB 2013). While criminal prosecution occurs, the US Department of State's Country Reports for 2011 suggested that increasing international publicity may have 'caused the government to curtail prosecutions and other official discrimination' (quoted in IRB 2013), alongside legal challenges mounted by Senegalese citizens. This possibility highlights the potential significance of an analysis of queer activism from the outside of specific African countries in solidarity with sexual minorities within these contexts, both working in tandem to effect progressive shifts in law, popular opinion, and attitudes towards queer individuals and behaviour.

Although the focus of this chapter is a queer reading of an African text, it is of course important to examine the particularities of national, social, and religious contexts in providing critical analyses of cultural artefacts. Recent research conducted in Senegal on men who have sex with men (MSM) finds an unexpectedly high rate of bisexuality compared with rates reported in surveys conducted in Western countries (Larmarange et al. 2009: 643–645). The authors observe that generally, in the African context, there is social pressure to marry and procreate, and there is widespread disapproval of homosexuality, leading to relatively high

rates of bisexuality. (For more in this regard, see Stobie 2007: 50–52) Specifically, in the Senegalese context, the authors note,

The high prevalence of ‘permanent bisexuality’ among MSM in a context where homosexuality is condemned by law, where there is considerable social discrimination against homosexuality, strong social and religious pressures to marry and have children, and only embryonic special interest organizations.  
(Larmarange et al. 2009: 658)

Although these observations may have some validity, the article contains a sub-text that is biased against bisexuality, as the implication is that bisexuality should be a passing stage rather than a permanent identity, and bisexual men in the study would opt to be gay were it not for social pressures to conceal their ‘true’ identities. The authors make a passing reference to the fact that the issue of female homosexuality in Senegal is ‘largely ignored’ (658). One exception to this lacuna is a non-random survey conducted by R. Schenkel in the early 1970s, which found that 17.6 per cent of Senegalese men interviewed and 44.4 per cent of their female counterparts reported having had sexual experiences with same-sex partners (cited in Murray and Roscoe 1998: 107). This research also noted the visibility of ‘homosexuality in Dakar’ (107), the capital of Senegal, which is the setting for Karmen Gei.

As disproportionate academic attention has been devoted to male homosexuality, although both women and men are subject to legal punishment for performing homosexual acts in Senegal and elsewhere, it seems appropriate to concentrate on same-sex connections between women to redress the balance somewhat. This shift of focus is particularly apt given the complex gender dynamics in Senegal, shaped by traditional beliefs and customs, Islam, and French colonialism; in addition, given the discrepancy between the guarantee of gender equality enshrined in Senegal’s 2001 constitution and the Gender Gap Index total score of 0.6923, with a ranking of 67th out of 136 countries (World Economic Forum 2013: 17). A further factor to consider is that there is widespread bias against bisexuality in the Western context (see, for example, San Francisco 2011; San Filippo 2013). In 2011, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission LGBT Advisory Committee summarised research into bisexual invisibility and concluded, ‘Bisexuals experience high rates of being ignored, discriminated against, demonized, or rendered invisible by both the heterosexual world and the lesbian and gay communities. Often, the entire sexual orientation is branded as invalid, immoral, or irrelevant’ (2011: 1). This erasure or stigmatisation occurs despite the fact that, according to several studies, ‘self-identified bisexuals make up the largest single population within the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] community in the United States’ (1). Interestingly, in all these studies, ‘more women identified as bisexual than lesbian, and fewer men identified as bisexual than gay’ (1). A 2010 study published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* found that 3.1 per cent of the respondents self-identified as bisexual, compared to 2.5 per cent who identified as gay or lesbian (1). Bisexuals can, therefore, be considered ‘an invisible majority’

(1) in the LGBT community, and this chapter, I will examine the interface of queer and bisexuality in the Senegalese film, *Karmen Gei*, using a feminist lens.

### Queer, bisexuality, gender, and 'race'

Queer theory has the potential to destabilise rigid, heterosexist, binarist interpretations of texts; as Alexander Doty maintains, 'Ultimately, queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories' (1993: xvii). Teresa de Lauretis goes further, urging that queer theory be used to perform 'the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences' (1991: xvii). Ruth Goldman takes up this point, arguing,

However, bisexuality, along with race, continues to be one of the 'constructed silences' within queer theory, as it is within lesbian and gay studies. Although queer theory indicates a significant ideological shift from lesbian and gay studies, it has carried with it the essentializing categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay', and although queer theory scholarship sometimes includes superficial mentions of bisexuality, it is often disappeared at best and disarticulated at worst. Thus, in some ways, bisexuality has become the contemporary version of 'the love that dare not speak its name'.

(1996: 175)

According to this argument, then, black bisexuality would be a highly elided category, and gender would add another dimension. (A further aspect to consider is that codes of discretion are prevalent in many African societies, whereby private knowledge about sexual behaviour which differs from the norm is not publicly discussed.)

It is common, as Maria San Filippo points out in her recent book *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, that the word 'bisexual' is not used as a descriptor within the significant number of films she cites that feature bisexual characters. What concerns her more than this lacuna is the relative absence of attention given to bisexual epistemology and representation from within queer studies. She claims, 'Bisexuality remains the blind spot of queer formations and queer studies' (2013: 240) – an assessment with which I would agree. Emphasising the necessary connection between the terms, however, she adopts the usage 'queer bisexuality', which implies that 'bisexuality and queerness are not mutually exclusive – rather, bisexuality constitutes one realm of queerness, though with a specificity and idiom that deserves its own mode of inquiry' (243). Bisexuality has the potential to expose the complex malleability and transgressive nature of desire, and the oppressiveness of heteronormativity and mandatory monosexuality. Marjorie Garber notes the implicit threat and anxiety bisexuality poses in cultural inscriptions: 'Conversion, sexual fluidity, the capacity to attract and to be attracted by members of both sexes – these are genuinely dangerous attributes' (1996: 473). This anxiety, as a number of theorists of bisexuality have pointed out, leads to a range of stereotypes, castigating bisexuals as 'predatory,

manipulative, opportunistic [and] exhibitionistic' (San Filippo 2013: 135), or, as Jo Eadie suggests, unconfined, deceptive, and disruptive (1997: 155–156). The seductive allure and horror of bisexuals reside in their transgression of norms of gender and sexuality, and the fear that they may easily provoke others to explore their own latent subversive potential. Yet as Alexander Doty observes, the ambiguous and liminal position of bisexuality, 'both 'between' and outside gender binaries' (2000: 148–149), offers a creative spectator position from which to analyse texts and viewing pleasures. Although San Filippo's monograph on bisexuality in film is focused on Anglophone films – mainly North American, with a few British examples – she acknowledges that her ideas need to be extended to a transnational context. Further, she reveals that even taking into consideration the Western visual bias favouring the representation of white characters in film, there is a 'disproportionate scarcity of characters of color readable as bisexual in Western film [. . .] narratives' (2013: 65). Many of the frameworks San Filippo suggests are inapplicable to the film under scrutiny here, *Karmen Gei*, but her views about the effects of representations of queer bisexuality, in conjunction with the suggestions of Garber, Eadie, and Doty, offer some productive grounds for analysis, as does her implied suggestion that black bisexuality needs to be made visible and analysed.

### ***Karmen Gei* and representations of bisexuality**

*Karmen Gei* (Ramaka 2001), starring director Joseph Gaï Ramaka's wife Djeïnaba Diop Gaï as Karmen, is radical in its gender, sexual, and postcolonial politics. The film adapts the Carmen story as originally written by Prosper Mérimée in his 1845 novella, *Carmen*, which inspired Georges Bizet's 1875 opera, *Carmen*. Mérimée's characterisation of Carmen is racist and sexist, and others her by vilifying her 'Gypsy' origins, depicted in terms of blackness, as well as her unbounded sexuality, deemed unacceptable for a woman according to the double standard of the day. Bizet's version of the narrative differs significantly from Mérimée's, and the operatic Carmen acquires a mythic force through her songs and dance, although she is still a figure whose sexuality provokes extreme masculine anxiety. The story of Carmen has subsequently been rendered in numerous film versions, including the second-millennial Senegalese setting of *Karmen Gei*. In a number of ways, *Karmen Gei* is transcultural and anti-binarist: for instance, it is a co-production spanning Senegal, France, and Canada, and it features local music and drumming, as well as jazz music by an American saxophonist, instead of Bizet's music, although some of the libretto is used, translated into Wolof. Most of the dialogue is in Wolof, although French is also used, and there is also English sub-titling.

In terms of genre, *Karmen Gei* does not conform to the categories examined by San Filippo that highlight bisexuality; instead, the film fruitfully combines the musical and melodrama. In the West, these minor forms have long been associated with stylised, extravagant aesthetics, queer affect, and an emphasis on the centrality of women characters and the female gaze; in addition, both genres contain elements of realism juxtaposed with anti-realist features. Kenneth Harrow notes that new African cinema revivifies and renders indigenous these trends

(2011: 223). Referring to the melodrama, he maintains that this form is essentially conservative, as it consolidates social values that prevailed prior to the beginning of the narrative, such as 'dominant economic and political power structures, and dominant heterosexual and gender relations' (223). However, I would argue that the characterisation of Karmen as bisexual, and the deployment of political criticism regarding gender relations and other forms of power within the mixed form of the melodrama and musical in *Karmen Gei*, work to unsettle structures of oppression, marking it as progressive rather than conservative. Harrow (2011) itemises film techniques characteristic of the 'African aesthetic' as portrayed by directors such as Sembène Ousmane and compares these with a more contemporary mood. Ramaka, however, is again combinational, employing elements of both waves: from the earlier style, long shots, few close-ups, outdoor shots showing community, and a focus on women's collective experiences, and from the newer style, fast action, jump cuts, and dramatic music. Focusing on the representation of women in African cinema, Beatriz Leal Riesco (2011) observes that the combinational form of melodrama and the musical is 'dynamic, irreverent, and entertaining, combining elements of satire, drama, [. . .] and the carnivalesque'. In the case of *Karmen Gei*, this combination of genres confronts the social spectre of sexual energy, specifically embodied in female bisexuality and creativity. The most spectacular presence in the film is the character Karmen, whose credo is freedom from social restraints and norms, including heteronormativity, phallogentrism, and confining gender roles.

At the start of the film, the viewer is immediately immersed in a carnivalesque atmosphere. The term 'carnavalesque' was used by Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to scenes in literature that illustrate the temporary overturning of social hierarchies permitted during celebrations such as carnivals. These scenes feature the temporary freedom of the marginalised to express themselves in theatrical performances that highlight the needs of the body and that have the potential to challenge authority and effect change. Robert Stam notes that as carnival, 'at least since the Dionysian festivals, has been intimately connected to music and dance, the concept is also relevant to the musical' film (1989: 92).

In *Karmen Gei*, the sensual, carnivalesque atmosphere created as the credits run quickly becomes queer. Karmen is seated, being fanned by a singer, with a background of traditional *sabar* drummers beating out a compelling rhythm. She is smiling triumphantly and fleetingly touches her mound of Venus and then swings her knees rhythmically open and shut. Although her silky black boubou, a traditional Senegalese gown, is draped to the ground, her thighs are bare as they fan back and forth, drawing attention to the covered apex of the meeting of her thighs, which seems to be the source of her heat, energy, and power. As she rises, a cheer goes up from the crowd. She begins to dance forward, flashing the red netting of her particularly short, modern loincloth or '*béthio* ('*petits pagnes*' or 'mini-wrapper')' (Nyamnjoh 2005: 308). The systemic male gaze is unsettled and queered as the camera shifts between Karmen's provocative gaze and that of the seated female figure in a khaki skirt and top, who is eyeing Karmen with unwavering attention, her head tilted the better to appreciate the spectacle before



her. The pulse of desire is shown as primarily between these two women, who occupy different positions of power, as Karmen is a prisoner in the Kumba Kastel prison on Gorée Island off the coast of Dakar, an island which was the departure point for slaves during the time of slavery, while the other woman is Angélique, the prison warder. The dance Karmen is performing is shown teasingly to the viewer, as she lifts the folds of her skirt high above her head while facing the crowd of women and men, with her back to the camera and Angélique. Karmen then turns and dances ever closer to Angélique, revealing her intimate *béthio* and suggestively dancing towards the warder's seated body. With one finger, Karmen then lifts Angélique's chin and draws her upright, leading to an ecstatic cheer from the crowd. A mesmerised Angélique first dances with Karmen behind her and then after she gestures for her fellow prisoners to join the dance, the two face each other, with Angélique placing her right hand on Karmen's shoulder as Karmen cradles Angélique's head. Karmen also pulls provocatively at the neck of the warder's shirt. She thus unsettles either/or gender categorisations, as in her solo dance, she appears as highly feminine in dress and movement, but she is also assertive and sexually blatant, and her body language in her paired dance with Angélique is gentle, intoxicating, and demanding. From the outset of the film, Karmen portrays the queer transgressiveness of desire.

The seductive dance performed by Karmen interpellates the viewer into succumbing imaginatively as Angélique does physically, crossing possible borders of country, class, gender, or sexuality. Dance is one potent, potentially carnivalesque form mentioned by Audre Lorde which encapsulates the intersectionality of blackness, the erotic, and feminism. She explains,

The word 'erotic' comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women, of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

(1992: 78)

Lorde further notes that freely expressing women's eroticism can be personally and socially transformative:

[It] can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world; rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

(83)

The opening scene of *Karmen Gei* suggests the potential of Karmen to subvert social norms and transcend the sexist and racist origins of the Carmen story as

Lorde envisages through its frank display of carnal appetite, its assertive transgression of stereotypes of femininity, and its public act of seduction. Karmen's *joie de vivre* and erotic undermining of authority structures are thrilling and call forth pleasure both diegetically, when Karmen summons the other women prisoners to join her and Angélique in frenzied dance, and extra-diegetically, as the viewer enters the realm of the queer carnivalesque. The effects of the dance between Karmen and Angélique as built up between the two characters, as obviously interpreted by the prisoners ('It worked!' one triumphantly crows), and as experienced by the queered viewer generate intense desire. This works to provoke a wish to see a consummation; however, the domain of the carnivalesque always occurs in a brief time out of time, illustrating the precariousness of Lorde's idealistic vision. The dance scene ends with a shrill whistle calling the prisoners away from the courtyard of desire to their squalid cells, and the camera pans upwards to observe the herded prisoners from the position of the panopticon, the walls of which are studded with cannons – reminders of militarism, the exploitation of the slave trade, and masculine power. Social change is possible, but the process is arduous, and progress is hindered by atavistic relics.

The astute viewer would have noticed from the outset the wedding ring on Angélique's finger, which in the Senegalese context suggests a heterosexual marriage and raises the possibility of bisexual attractions, thus problematising glib assumptions about her sexuality (critics invariably refer to her as a lesbian). The next scene between Karmen and the other prisoners makes it explicit that she is regarded by them as bisexual. As she distributes her clothes to her fellow prisoners in anticipation of being released from prison after having sex with Angélique, the women sing,

Karmen there's no one like you. You attract men and you make women undo their robes. I like you, you like me. It's all about feeling good. Be careful! Hide your women, hide your men. Karmen has come. She who creates havoc is here.

Having initially opened up for the viewer the perspective of a feminised queer carnivalesque, the film more specifically explores the concept of bisexuality, which, as Robert Stam argues, as one of a number of notions that are evoked by carnival, allows for 'a release from the burden of socially imposed sex roles' (1989: 93). Karmen Geï now proposes the ideal spectator position as that of a notional female bisexual, as it portrays both the potential pleasures and hazards of bisexual behaviour. Karmen's difference from others is more a question of degree and heroic charisma than of exceptional behaviour, as in addition to Angélique's response to Karmen, the other prisoners graphically and humorously simulate same-sex intimate acts. Bisexuality is not represented as a stable identity; in fact, as Brian Loftus notes, 'The concept of bisexuality is fundamentally unsuitable to signify identity as such, since the plurality of bisexuality – defined as two nonidentical sexualities – explodes the very terms of identity – sameness, stability – that it seeks to inhabit' (1996: 208–209). This places bisexuality as an epistemological

register in line with queer theory's deconstructive critique of identity. In *Karmen Gei*, bisexuality is accorded the status of a valid queer experience and spectator position, unsettling stereotyped gender roles and monosexuality. Each vector of the presumptive, normative, white, male, middle-class, heterosexual gaze in cinema is called into question.

Loftus usefully considers bisexuality 'not as a term describing a subject but rather as a semiotic tension – a contradiction, a multiplication, and at times even a trope – within the field of sexuality that constitutes the subject in various and inconstant ways' (208). Certainly, this effect is discernible in the representation both of the character Karmen in *Karmen Gei* and in the unsettling of the viewer's conventional positioning. As Loftus continues, the trope of bisexuality can productively be 're-vision[ed] as a frustration of hegemonic categories rather than as a normative consequence of compulsory heterosexuality' (211), or, it might be added, its counterpart, homonormativity. This offers 'a queer symbolic grounded on [...] indeterminate paradox instead of on binary opposition' (211). Loftus notes that there is a visual bias that is used to 'reinforce gender stability, masculine privilege, and heterosexuality itself' (211). It is this very bias that Ramaka is unsettling, not only in the opening scene of *Karmen Gei* but also throughout the film.

As San Filippo points out (2013: 130), an all-female community is a staple setting for film representations of bisexuality, evoking judgmental stereotypes of bisexual women as promiscuous and psychologically unstable. Instead of activating such negative associations, however, Ramaka illustrates the connections between women in the prison as well as their sexual agency, both of which act as alternatives and implicit challenges to heterosexuality, patriarchy, and feminine gender roles of marriage, motherhood, and sexual submission. Situational bisexuality reveals the mutability of desire, instead of positing sexuality as an inborn absolute. By foregrounding bisexuality in the milieu of the prison, *Karmen Gei* accords with San Filippo's view that the pairing of bisexuality and institutionalisation 'serves to trouble, and thus to acknowledge the spaces between and beyond, the oppositions between hetero- and homosexuality and between sane and insane (or normal and abnormal, or social and antisocial)' (130).

Situating Karmen and Angélique as bisexual before their sexual encounter occurs places this act within the troubled and troubling liminal space alluded to earlier. Ramaka discussed his intention to explore the effects of showing the body in various manifestations well before the film appeared: 'I will show many bodies, naked bodies, dancing bodies, young bodies, old bodies, but the camera will seize in them the desire which they inspire rather than the libido they might unleash' (Powrie 2010: 285). The distinction that he is making here is between a psychological and emotional condition and a merely physical, genital effect. This effect of inspiring desire can be clearly seen in the sex scene between Karmen and Angélique, which reveals tenderness, passion, and reciprocity. Although this scene and the later one where Angélique masturbates are exceptional in African cinema, they are not explicit. In the consummation scene, there is play between sameness and difference, light and shadow, yearning and satiation. A cut between

Karmen's departure from her cell and Angélique's movement through the striated corridor briefly confuses the characters in the viewer's mind. Active roles are reversed from the seduction scene as Angélique rouses a sleeping Karmen. When the warder removes Karmen's wrapper, both of them are revealed to be wearing similar pairs of black thongs, but their different skin tones and Angélique's nail polish and make-up, contrasted with Karmen's hennaed feet and aphrodisiac waist beads (*ferr* in Wolof-M'Baye 2011: 125), highlight the genetic, cultural, class, and religious differences between them. Once Karmen is awake, the two embrace, and Karmen rolls on top of Angélique, reasserting her sexual sovereignty. The soundtrack comprises a brief ominous sound, possibly thunder, and sighs from the pair of lovers as Karmen moves gently. The scene is intercut with the sound of the prisoners banging spoons on the metal of the gates to their cells to express themselves and communicate with one another. This emphasises the carceral setting which Karmen is attempting to escape. After a brief glimpse of the two spooned lovers lying sleeping, we see Karmen leaving the prison. It might be assumed that she has merely engaged in transactional sex to achieve her liberty, but the tender, peaceful post-coital moment, combined with her grief after Angélique's death and her later acknowledgement that she loved Angélique, persuades the viewer that the cliché of the callous, heartbreaking bisexual has been averted.

Karmen is accorded with the power to destabilise masculine pre-eminence through her corporeal performativity. The hegemonic heterosexual male gaze is rendered partial and unsatisfactory, as its instances of privilege are revealed, while modes of engagement offering imaginative entry into alterity from social norms are validated. Karmen's agency refutes the heterosexual policing of desire according to a binarist straight/queer paradigm. Her character brings havoc to the status quo.

Eadie and San Filippo refer to the effects of the popular Western filmic representation of the bisexual in terms of a vampire, an irresistible but fatal figure. By contrast, Ramaka gives depth to his bisexual character, Karmen, by referencing specifically Senegalese female figures, both historical and mythical, with more positive associations. He has explained that the eponymous title of the film refers to a renowned female *sabar* dancer:

I thought of the rhythm of the *sabar* called 'Ndèye Guèye'. The person who gave her name to this particular rhythm was a beautiful and exceptional dancer. She was a Carmen. So the title of my film is *Karmen Geï*.

(Quoted in Powrie 2010: 286)

Mari Maasilta notes further that Ndèye Guèye 'made all the men of Dakar fall in love with her but never consented to marry any of them' (2007: 170). The use of a K instead of a C for the first name makes it clear that this is a Wolof version of the story. In addition, the name Geï is a common surname in Senegal (the actress who portrays Karmen and the director both bear this name). The name can either signal membership of the class of nobles, or 'a popular griot family attached to these nobles' (Scott 2003–2004: 205). Finally, the name Geï works as a reference

to the functional queerness elicited by the film, and, it should be noted, griots' gender identity is coded as ambiguously traversing masculinity and femininity (Castaldi 2006: 83). The film title thus simultaneously alludes to Senegalese identity, a noted female exponent of the national dance and drumming form, and an indigenous form of sexuality referred to by the global umbrella term for variant sexualities.

As well as an association of the character Karmen with the legendary dancer, Ndèye Guèye, Karmen attains mythic and archetypal force by being associated with another powerful female figure: Kumba Kastel, the spirit of a sea-dwelling, beautiful, and dangerous goddess who combines the attributes of liberator and destroyer. The prison is called Kumba Kastel; the name of the mythic being occurs a number of times in the film, and Karmen is called her granddaughter. When Angélique asks Ma Penda, Karmen's mother, for advice about Karmen, the implied answer that she cannot be possessed is supplied by the blind female griot (played by Yandé Codou Sène), who sings about the ocean: 'She's stubborn and free. Like that woman.' Kumba Kastel is the name for the Gorée personification of the sea goddess known in many African societies by her pidgin name of Mami Wata, Mother of Water. Henry John Drewal summarises the attributes of the trans-cultural deity, the concept of whom arose from the image of the mermaid transferred in the contact zone between Europe and Africa dating from the fifteenth century: 'She personifies unattainable, exquisite beauty, vanity, jealousy, sexuality, romantic not maternal love, limitless good fortune; not health, long life, or progeny, but material and monetary riches' (2002: 198). Not all of these attributes are applicable to the characterisation of Karmen, and some are used ironically, but the image of a larger-than-life figure who inspires the character's non-procreative sexuality and has associations with wealth is suggestive (see Green-Simms 2012: 40–47 for a discussion of the use of Mami Wata in a Ghanaian video-film). Drewal notes that Mami Wata is a "free," unencumbered spirit of nature' who 'attracts those concerned with sexual matter[s]', significantly including 'homo- or bisexuality' (2002: 197). In addition, Mami Wata is venerated for her promise of riches, but she also brings misfortune; she is thus an ambivalent deity who functions as a metaphor for the desire for a life of plenty and fulfilment in Africa, although this desire is thwarted by unequal opportunities. As Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi pertinently observes, 'Mami Wata focalizes sexual and economic desires and the contradictory social forces they unleash. Women may worship Mami Wata, but women who become Mami Wata surrogates cannot escape the constraints of a dominant patriarchal culture' (2014: 16).

In a scene at Karmen's mother's bar, the chorus evokes the name of Kumba Kastel and sings of Senegalese women of yore who are celebrated as martyrs for their heroism and courage in resisting another form of oppression: that imposed by foreign invaders. The noble women of the village of N'Der in Northern Senegal are remembered with reverence in this song. In 1819, women from this village first fought fiercely against a group of Moor attackers and then immolated themselves rather than face being captured into slavery (Serbin 2006). The name of Aline Sitoe Diatta, renowned in Senegal, also occurs in the song of praise

presented by the chorus. She was born between 1920 and 1925, and despite her marginal status as a paralysed person, she acquired a spiritual reputation as a local rainmaker. French colonial officials imprisoned her, and she died in 1944. Later, her reputation was revived and expanded, firstly as an exemplar of regional 'religious and ethnic identity' and, more recently, as a 'Senegalese national heroine' in opposition to colonialism (Toliver-Diallo 2005: 341). A phrase from an eponymous popular song of 1992 has become enshrined in the national memory, epitomising Aline Sitoë Diatta as '*djigen gu mën gor*' or 'the woman who was more than a man' (342), thus suggesting both her transcending of gender norms and her exceptionality.

All of these African and Senegalese historical and mythic resonances endow Karmen with a host of associations with specifically female physical, emotional, and spiritual strength and power, broadening the character beyond the limits of her predecessor, Carmen. Allied to Karmen's bisexuality, these allusions strengthen her epitomisation as a figure who refutes either/or oppositions, but engages creatively in the interface between imprisonment and escape, brutality and the commemoration of resistance, and desire and the impossibility of its attainment.

Particularly relevant to the characterisation of Karmen as behaving bisexually are various forms of homoerotic practices which occur on a continuum of display and desire within Senegalese society. Hudita Nura Mustafa summarises her fieldwork in Senegal by illustrating homosocial links between women in what she typifies as a 'previously matrilineal society' (2006: 27). Mustafa delineates rituals performed by women both in public and private in Senegal, mentioning *mokk pucc*, pleasurable practices used by married women to seduce their husbands; the *dirriankhe*, alluring dress and self-presentation of women, mainly to gain the respect and appreciation of other women; and 'the erotics of motherhood' as seen in grooming rituals conducted in the private sphere. These rituals can be applied to a reading of *Karmen Geï*: Karmen is shown to employ *mokk pucc* even more towards Angélique than towards her male lovers, thus unsettling heteronormativity. As Francis Nyamnjoh notes, however, another category of women exists alongside *dirriankhe*, that of the *disquette*: the former is generally an older, more statuesque woman who dresses in traditional clothes, while the latter is 'slender, elegant, trendy, beauty-conscious, fun-loving, nightclubbing, often young, [. . .] fascinated by Western consumer tastes, music and the modern tunes of rising Senegalese stars' (2005: 299). Karmen fits neither category exactly, as her body shape is slender, and she is young, but she wears traditional apparel on occasion. Typical of representations of refutations of boundaries by bisexuals, then, she is able to shift between styles or even combine them, emphasising that categories of gender, identity, and sexuality are mere conventions, and that performativity can transcend them. Her feet are hennaed, and she wears a sexy Western-style thong along with her Wolof aphrodisiac waist beads during her sex scene with Angélique. In several scenes, Karmen's garb, posture, and demeanor exemplify *dirriankhe* in contexts where women, not men, are central, thus sidelining domesticity and the erotic interests of men. Karmen and her mother are shown to have a frank relationship in which her mother offers her daughter her own bedroom in which

to have sex with Lamine and in which they laugh over Massigui's and Samba's sexual shortcomings. In various ways, women in Senegal, as typified by *Karmen Geï*, transcend the limits of male desire. They use their bodies as wealth in acts of self-affirmation and homosocial and homoerotic bonding.

### ***Karmen Geï* and dance**

Women's bodily displays can be seen most clearly in the dance sequences of the film, particularly the first two, which employ the conventions of the *sabar* dance. As Francesca Castaldi elucidates, the 'skills of the dancers seem to correlate with the permission and appreciation of risqué bodily exposure: the more skilled a dancer, the more she will undress and expose in the dancing circle' (2006: 82). Unlike the habanera of the opera *Carmen*, which emphasises hip movement, the *sabar* involves the whole body of the dancer: feet, legs, arms, and hips are all employed in acrobatic, sensual style, as clothing is deftly moved to reveal and conceal different parts of the body. *Sabar* dance allows women the opportunity to celebrate 'an explicitly sexualized feminine identity' (82), engaging in 'spectacular kinetic stunts that both tease and resist visual objectification' (82). Further, Castaldi argues, 'The women-centered celebration of eroticism practiced at *sabars* seems to question the primacy of a bounded, domestic heterosexual bond, if not heterosexuality itself, suggesting at least the possibility of homoerotic relations' (90). This gynocentric eroticism stands in contrast to the hegemonic Islamic sexual codes in Senegal, which confine female sexual activity to marital relations in service of the desires of the husband, although the establishment of separate gendered spheres paradoxically offers a site for women's agency and intimate connection. The *sabar* dance is also a reminder that Senegal was previously a 'matrilineal society' (Mustafa 2006: 27) and is currently organised according to matrifocal kinship patterns (Castaldi 2006: 89–90). Within the wider African context, Nawal el Saadawi notes that the presence of goddesses in pre-Islamic Arab societies highlights the social importance of women, and their relative freedom is revealed by their ability at that time to practice polyandry (1997: 74).

Karmen performs a different dance with each of the four lovers we see her with in the film. In her first dance, she publicly seduces Angélique in order to subvert the penal system and secure her freedom, with the connivance of the other prisoners and at least one of the guards, yet the relationship is one which is full of desire and feeling on both sides, despite a mismatch of emotional needs. As Karmen explains to Samba, she could have loved Angélique, but 'her love was sad'. However, the queer carnivalesque dance which sparks their sexual liaison is an example of one of the attributes of the carnivalesque, 'the valorization of Eros and the life force' (Stam 1989: 93). This dance is also an emblem of the radical and liberating potential of the art form. It simultaneously defies the oppressive penal system and embraces the figurehead of authority in that system. Although the depiction of dance in film can be used as an exoticising spectacle, its use in *Karmen Geï* is nuanced and presented from within Senegalese cultural traditions.

Karmen's second dance occurs at the wedding of Lamine and Majiguene, the daughter of a high-ranking official, and here again Castaldi's suggestions about the subversive place of the *sabar* with regard to the primacy of the heterosexual marriage bond are apposite. Karmen enters the wedding like one possessed, wearing a stunning ice-blue embroidered gown with a red-and-black scarf around her waist. She dances and accuses the high-ranking, corrupt dignitaries:

Let Kumba Kastel's spirit appear. Your rifles cannot bring me down. The eagle soars over the sky. Ramatou, the little bird, flies under his wing. You are evil. I say you are all evil. You've swallowed up the country. We'll eat your guts.

She flings her scarf at Lamine, who looks enthralled and avidly inhales the scent of the fabric. This time as Karmen dances, she faces the camera, and winks, implicating the viewer in her outspoken condemnation of greed, corruption, and mismanagement leading to social misery. Karmen's quest for sexual liberty is here clearly paralleled with the fervent desire for freedom for the people of Senegal in political, economic, and social terms. Sexual justice is part of social justice and human rights for all citizens. Castaldi notes that at *sabars* two women often dance together (2006: 82). In this scene in *Karmen Geï*, the dance takes the form of a contest, with Karmen outdancing her rival, Majiguene, and then knocking her down and pinning her head back, using her defeat as a symbol of the triumph of the underclass. Karmen's parting shot is, 'You've swallowed up the country! But it will stick in your throat! Ah, but you're evil!' Good and evil are redefined by Karmen, not referring to bourgeois morality but values of reciprocity and fairness. Karmen's seduction of Lamine visually reveals her attraction to the same and other genders, and her provocative act is seen as another way to destabilise the elite. Number concepts associated with carnival are dramatised in this second dance: the valorisation of Eros, the notion of bisexuality, the subversion of established power, and union with the community (Stam 1989: 93–94). In both these dances, in different ways, the feminist adage of 'the personal is political' is transformed into the bi/sexual is political.

Karmen's first dance pits her against the justice and penal systems, and this second dance functions to destabilise the institution of marriage – a cornerstone of order in the nation-state – and to critique the rampant consumerism and corruption of the state. Scott comments that Karmen's dance habitually overturns gender norms: 'Her dancing is virile, always sexed, provoking social (and chronological) ruptures wherever her hips pop' (2003–2004: 207). More than this, however, in this scene, the triangulation of main characters and the palpable undercurrent of erotic attraction as well as competition displayed by Karmen and Majiguene activate a fluid spectator position which has the potential to re-vision the significance, construction, and precariousness of marriage. As Robin Wood observes,

Bisexuality represents the most obvious and direct affront to the principle of monogamy and its supportive myth of 'the one right person'; the homosexual



impulse in both men and women represents the most obvious threat to the norm of sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the ideal of family.

(2003: 65)

Karmen's bedazzling of Lamine on his wedding day satirises the myths of one-and-only 'true love' and marriage as a sacrament, and reveals instead that marriage is institutionalised and commodified through religious and state sanctioning and the oppression of women. In addition to dancing in this scene, Karmen also takes on the role of a griot as she denounces the ruling regime.

The second dance scene of *Karmen Gei* provides a contextualisation for Karmen's bisexualised criminality, showing that while she criticises the socio-political system where the rich plunder the public coffers, as a member of the poor class, she is implicated in supplying goods to meet public appetite as she runs a smuggling gang in order to survive, if not thrive. The smuggled goods include alcohol and marijuana – luxury goods condemned by Islam and offering an altered state of consciousness. Karmen is a fence who unloads stolen property transported by sea; this literalises her position 'on the fence' – a metaphor for a bisexual person. The figure of the bisexual in many films illustrates concerns around 'the moral restraint of appetite, monogamous commitment and excessive desire' (Eadie 1997: 143). The character Karmen through her varied dances implicates the viewer in a dynamic of desire and anxiety as she incarnates passion, appetite, and excess, which call into question society's promise of the fulfilment of needs and its inability to regulate these equitably.

In the third dance scene, Karmen briefly performs erotically for Lamine in private, in her mother's bedroom. This scene ominously foreshadows potential problems between the protagonists. Karmen is in her *béthio* and waves her hand fan as she sings softly. Lamine is clearly enraptured, but he does not dance, and he appears subdued and diminished as Karmen towers over his seated figure. Loss of masculine power, impotence, and male voyeurism are referenced in the film with regard to Lamine. His father-in-law ignominiously strips him of his rank as a police corporal; he is jailed because he lets Karmen escape, and Karmen and her accomplices release him from jail. The intimate moment between Karmen and Lamine is visually interrupted by intercut scenes and is a far cry from the intensely erotic scene played out between Karmen and Angélique. From the exchange of glances between Karmen and Lamine as she prepares to leave, it appears as if his sexual performance was unsatisfactory. Later, he is derided for having 'no balls' by a barmaid, and he anxiously and jealously observes Karmen with others, including Massigui. From the outset of the film, the power of masculinity, heterosexuality, and the law are called into question, and the destabilising of the pervasive male, heterosexual gaze arouses a desire for alternative, more inclusive, and humane modes of social organisation.

Karmen is also shown dancing with Massigui and Samba. In addition, she is given a backstory of having been 'given back the will to be happy' (Ramaka 2001) in a love affair with Samba as a damaged young woman, which gives a sense of interiority and history to the character. The relationships with each of the four lovers are visually highlighted for the viewer by means of these dances; each one shows differing possible modes of channelling desire for Karmen. Massigui

woos her with song and flattery, which she responds to knowingly. She appears most comfortable in her carefree, laughing dance with Samba. Each lover also displays a different reaction to this complex and vibrant character. Angélique's 'sad love' causes her pain, as she cannot substitute another lover for Karmen, and she is wracked by unassuageable desire, as is shown in the scene in which she masturbates without achieving satisfaction. She responds by walking with dignity into the domain of Kumba Kastel, the ocean, and committing suicide – a masochistic act. Massigui appears to adore Karmen, but she laughingly alludes to him to her mother as a rooster, a masculine show-off whose best attribute is his (apolitical) sexuality; he is portrayed as narcissistic. Lamine is obsessed with Karmen and abandons his bride, Majiguene; then he refuses to return to her, although she wants him to, and Karmen urges him to after breaking off relations with him. Despite being warned by Samba that he should distance himself from Karmen because he loves her 'badly', the possessive Lamine is shown attempting to salve his masculine pride through sadism by killing Karmen with a phallic substitute of a knife. The most worthy response to the challenge posed by the liberty-driven Karmen is offered by Samba, who has the strength of character and maturity to accept and continue loving her despite the fact that she takes new lovers, which causes him anguish (her mother notes, 'When your loins shudder, he gets seasick'). Samba models an ideal form of empathy towards Karmen.

The confrontation between Lamine and Karmen that occurs near the end of the film does not contain a dance sequence, but it references a 'morbid' element of the carnivalesque, 'emphasizing ritual sacrifice, the concatenation of life and death, Eros and Thanatos' (Stam 1989: 93), through Karmen's words delivered in song. Powrie draws attention to 'the use of the words of the 'Habanera', frequently sung by Karmen, to the extent that the song becomes a leitmotif, but in Wolof, with the words changed and with the tune very different from Bizet's (2010: 290). Karmen's last sung words consist of the words of liberty from the habanera: 'Love is a rebellious bird and no-one can tame it. If it doesn't feel right to him, it's really no use to call him. There's no use trying. You can't buy it.' She then speaks, 'Lamine, love isn't a business deal. If you want to kill me do it quickly and do it well. Tomorrow's another day.' These courageous words place Karmen in the pantheon of the other brave women remembered in song in Senegal and commemorated in the film, while acknowledging the power exerted over Mami Wata surrogates by the agents of patriarchy. As Lamine stabs Karmen in the chest, she defiantly keeps eye contact and falls on her back to the plank flooring with light from the stage below filtering up towards her. The singing from the blind griot below extols Karmen and marks her passing in a praise-filled dirge. The viewer follows Karmen's vision into the vale of the beyond as she re-encounters the numinous ancestral figures with painted faces seated on each side of a passageway to the hereafter. This vision suggests another aspect of carnival: its spiritual dimension. The last view of Karmen is of a shrouded figure being wheeled by her faithful lover Samba up the hillside of a cemetery. There is a crescendo of drumming, recalling Karmen's first dance scene and emphasising the absence of her body, but the presence of her memory. Samba picks up her body and exits top left of the screen. Even in death, Karmen is still in movement at the end of the film.

## Conclusion

What is the significance of Ramaka's twenty-first-century Senegalese characterisation of Karmen as having attractions to and relationships with members of the same and another gender, compared with the nineteenth-century representations of Carmen by Mérimée and Bizet? In general, the viewing of a film can be seen as a two-way process, as Maria Pramaggiore elaborates, 'Spectators construct textual meaning, yet [. . .] a film's narrative and visual structures [. . .] must inform viewer positioning' (1996: 279). Ramaka naturalises both same-gender and opposite-gender desire (a phenomenon that exists in Senegal, in Africa, and globally) through the trajectory of Karmen's affective connections, made visible through her evocative dances. This representation enables a queer bisexual reading that highlights the thrilling possibility, and the fatal hazards, of free female sexual expression outside socially mandated limits and that reveal certain lacunae in queer readings that ignore the concept of bisexuality.

*Karmen Gei* depicts bisexuality as a complex, queer site which destabilises stereotyped gender roles and monosexuality, and calls into question the mechanisms by which desire and appetite are regulated. The character Karmen acts in many ways as a both/and combinational character. She offers an anarchic alternative to the status quo, although she is herself implicated in the system. She critiques social inequity, but she is herself involved in the production of appetite in her smuggling operation. She is both an ordinary citizen and an extraordinary icon. Illustrating her typicality, on the beach with Massigui she signals to the other prisoners and Angélique, her jailer, showing her connections to both sectors of the justice system and to the women in it who, like her, desire love, freedom, and happiness. When Massigui compliments Karmen on her exceptionality, she demurs, insisting that she is the same as the others, but that 'they don't show it. So as not to make waves' (Ramaka 2001). Yet in addition to acting as an outspoken representative of the desires of ordinary women, Karmen is associated with the divinity Kumba Kastel and with heroic Senegalese female predecessors. The representation of the character deploys a range of potent, ambivalent associations with the carnivalesque, shown in the dance scenes and through song. Karmen's complex characterisation as creator of 'havoc' situates the spectator in a queer bisexual position which intriguingly interrogates the economy of desire.

## Note

- 1 "'She who creates havoc is here': A Queer Bisexual Reading of Sexuality, Dance and Social Critique in *Karmen Gei*" by Cheryl Stobie originally appeared in *Research in African Literatures* 47.2 (2016): 84–103, and appears here by kind permission of the publishers, Indiana University Press.

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# Moving beyond and between identity categories

Emerging research in African scholarship attests to how local identities may inflect and conflict with Western categories of ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex’ (LGBTQI), which are increasingly circulating, adopted or reshaped by African activists (Matebeni 2014). In some instances, local terms are themselves the subject of scrutiny and are likewise contested; they can be both stigmatising and/or empowering. The chapters in this section deal with two main identity categories in very different ways: queer and MSM (men who have sex with men). The latter, a public health and development intervention (Reddy et al. 2009), ‘has gained firm recognition as being crucial to HIV/AIDS treatment campaigns in many African countries’ (Ekine and Abbas 2013: 42). In this volume, Abisola Balogun and Paul Bissell examine the experiences of men who have sex with men in Nigeria, in a deeply patriarchal, religious, and traditional context where male non-heterosexuality cannot publicly exist. They illustrate the instability of identity categories (homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual) when heteronormative cultural expectations are high.

In their respective chapters, Derrick Higginbotham and Jane Bennett interrogate the various usages of ‘queer’ as a category of analysis in South African literature. Both authors draw on intersectional readings of queer in various texts, covering race, racialisation, intimate bonds, and economics. Higginbotham’s use of queer as a verb symbolically shows the complexity of economic relationships between people. Located in a democratically transitioning South Africa, the two novels featured in Higginbotham’s analysis offer a glimpse into how queer can help readers see those marginalised on the bases of their economic standing. From these texts, Higginbotham frames queer subversively. In his reading, there are no boundaries, and queer goes beyond sex and gender conventions. Blackness in his view is also queered and so are heterosexuality, business relations, friendships, and camaraderie. While it may appear that everything is queer, and thus nothing is (Sullivan 2003), this is not necessarily the case. Rather, Higginbotham deploys queer to understand ‘processes and structures of distancing’. Quite similarly, but from a feminist and critical whiteness lens, Jane Bennett’s approach to whiteness in a South African context troubles notions of race and ethnicity in its exploration of queer and white alignments. Whilst located initially in her subjectivity

as a white South African scholar and activist, Bennett extends her critical reading of whiteness to analyse a selection of primarily African texts, reading these alongside North American texts by African American women. Her interrogation of whiteness in multiple activist and intellectual spaces leads her to maintain that whiteness has resulted in divisions in queer spaces in South Africa. She positions this 'division as catastrophe', suggesting that whites cannot be queer in certain spaces. Bennett's use of queer is a 'doubling, a spiral-back-and-forth' invested in calling for a more 'rigorous analysis' of queer by white people. Like Higginbotham, Bennett appeals for a queering of queer that pays attention to racial politics.

In the final chapter of this section (as discussed earlier), Balogun and Bissell ask how a context that has been open to sexual and gender diversity (Amadiume 1987; Iyam 1996) has become so restrictive. MSM or non-heterosexual men whose masculinity is not hegemonic in Nigeria are questioned and challenged to 'change' so as to accommodate heteronormative sexuality and gender presentation. To do this, many devise strategies to manage and negotiate their identities either through concealment, passing, or stigma management. Thus, in such a context, even the category MSM is constantly shifting.

These chapters proceed beyond the 'LGBTI' frame by exploring intersections between race, class, economics, culture, tradition, and desire with queerness. They name, develop, and expand on notions of queer that are not limited to sex and gender binaries. While there has been an increase in representation of queer figures, in the arts and popular culture, the interrogation of queer itself or queering queer has been minimal. Taking these three chapters together allows for a transnational-comparative analysis that queers identity categories, including queer. This is a critical and timely shift in theorising African queerness and (sexuality and gender) identity categories. In her provocative essay, Stella Nyanzi (2014: 66) insists on a new reading and thinking of queer that goes beyond the straight|queer binary. She correctly and poignantly questions:

when firm boundaries are drawn between homosexuals and heterosexuals, isn't this a simplistic restyling of essentialist schisms? Isn't this another polarisation of binary oppositions – this time based on sexual orientation? Where do bisexual people fit within the dual division between homosexuals and heterosexuals?

Nyanzi's interrogations compel us to really reflect on and question the essence of queer in African contexts. It appears that up to now, queer has been deployed in its North American usage as what is at 'odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin 2008: 200). Applying this definition simply glides over and misrecognises processes of de-normalising that historically happened because of colonial conquests in Africa. As Abisola and Bissell note, what was normal in Nigeria has become taboo. Similarly, Bennett suggests that the whitening of gay and lesbian writing in South Africa, which she hesitates attaching to the category queer, has othered black experiences. In a related way, Higginbotham peels off the different layers that mask the complexity of queer in the South African

context. The underlying and complex racial dynamics that have plagued South Africa, while the country has been seen as a champion for LGBTQI rights, requires extensive investigation. Both Higginbotham and Bennett direct readers towards a deeper analysis on queer solidarities along race, class, and gender lines. Undoubtedly, as the chapters in this and the next section show, reading South Africa in isolation from the interlocking social forces of race, class, and gender will yield no results. Important transnational theorisation is urgent.

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## 4 Beyond identity

### Queer affiliation and the politics of solidarity in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* and Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*

*Derrick Higginbotham*

#### Introduction

Late in Nadine Gordimer's 1994 novel, *None to Accompany Me*, Vera Stark debates with her friend Zeph Rapulana about their roles in the transition to democracy in South Africa. Because of her work legally defending black communities from forced relocations, the provisional government offers her a place on the committee designing the new constitution, an offer that she and Zeph consider together. After Vera admits her own worry about her capacity to abuse power, Zeph explains that even he, a well-known black activist, faces criticism for the work he does in rebuilding the state. His work, which is 'making a place for blacks in the money world' (Gordimer 1994: 251), as Vera puts it, involves liaising with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other financial institutions to suture the South African economy back into global capitalism. To believe in Zeph and his activism, the narrator contends, Vera and others must accept that solutions to the apartheid state's violent social arrangements can be found in 'some of the means of capitalism' (ibid.). At this moment, Gordimer's novel inadvertently identifies what will be a significant socio-political problem in so-called post-apartheid South Africa: without any transformation of the economic system, of wealth distribution especially, the racial order legally and governmentally dismantled via political struggle and the transition to democracy would live on, making the term 'transition' something of a misnomer.

K. Sello Duiker's sprawling novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, published seven years after Gordimer's book and set after the transition, also evokes some of the ways that capitalism sustains an older, racist hierarchy. Near the end of the novel, its central protagonist, Tshepo, walks through Nyanga, a township north of Cape Town's city centre, as he sinks into an increasingly disordered psychic state. While charting the vibrant lives of those living in the township, he recognises that poverty and lack of infrastructure harms them. At one point, he muses, 'With capitalism it seems someone has to lose, someone has to be the underdog, someone has to play the poor bastard that holds up the structure, so the rich can be rich' (Duiker 2001: 577). Duiker's novel critically acknowledges that in a democratic South Africa, black people more often than not still lose economically, yet

Tshepo's vision also imagines the category of 'underdog' as capaciously as possible, not limiting it in terms of sexual, racial, or national identity.

This moment that focuses on economic losers, I argue, implies a queer sensibility that appears throughout Duiker's novel, which insists on the decomposition of rigid identity boundaries, creating a discursive space for solidarities to develop, ones that the novel will envision as necessary for a more just world.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, queerness can signify financial loss: 'to queer the pitch', for instance, means not only to spoil someone's affairs but also to interfere with a vendor's business, diminishing that vendor's success (Chen 2012: 60).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the expression 'queer street' denotes a place where people facing financial difficulties reside, showing that queer can characterise those who do not fit in a world that prizes economic growth and upward mobility. This sense of queer extends beyond the economic to portray those aspects of individual or group behaviour that are unconventional or not normal. Not only does this queerness, following Zethu Matebeni and Jabu Pereira, push 'the boundaries of what is embraced as normative' (2014: 7) but also tries to express what is outside those boundaries, including the normative boundaries of identity. It is this version of queerness that encompasses a 'shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalises, legitimises, and privileges', a kind of queerness that does not need to find its foundation in a 'shared history or identity' (Cohen 1997: 458).<sup>3</sup> Here I return to the phrase 'queer street' because it alludes to a collective space that assorted versions of queerness can inhabit, stressing a sociality that can enable unexpected affiliations and collectivities to emerge, fostering political strength, not division.

To demonstrate the ways that Gordimer and Duiker's novels conjure this kind of queerness, I show that the two very different central characters – Vera is white, older, and middle class, while Tshepo is black, young, and, at first, economically unstable – cultivate queer affiliations with others and both embrace the queerness of downward mobility, a similarity between these books that scholars have not recognised to date. Most of the research on Gordimer's novel concentrates on its literary linkage to Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Engle 2010), its depiction of space (Barnard 2006), or Vera Stark's friendship with Zeph (Head 1995; Munro 2009). More work has been done on Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, but the bulk of that research focuses on the depiction of race (Viljoen 2001), masculinity (Crous 2007; Tsehloane 2010), and foreigners (Samuelson 2007; Pucherova 2009). Carolin and Frenkel (2013) restrict their focus by concentrating on the representation of sexuality, although they stress that Duiker's book resists 'simple binaries' such as gay and straight, a resistance to enforcing strict binaries that I extend to racial and national identity, showing Duiker's wider political vision (see Carolin and Frenkel 2013: 38; Carolin 2013: 49). Only Stobie (2003) and Munro (2012) consider queerness, a term they use as a synonym for sexual and gender minorities, with both insisting that Duiker's novel fits within a nationalist framework. By contrast, I demonstrate that it resists fixed borders, insisting upon a queer sense of solidarity, which differentiates Duiker's work from Gordimer's since her vision in *None to Accompany Me* cannot consider a world without hierarchies and without immutable lines of difference organising people on the basis of race and

nationality. Unlike Gordimer, Duiker asks readers to imagine a queerer form of collectivity, one that turns away from nationalism and other forms of identity – especially sexual and racial identities – as the route to a sustainable future.

### **Queer affiliation I: beyond friendship**

Gender hierarchy is one of the ways that *None to Accompany Me* seeks to reinforce the notion that apartheid and its dissolution creates social dislocation. The inversion of a traditional gender hierarchy – one of those dislocations – appears most vividly in the interrelations between two couples that are also long-standing friends: the Maqomas and the Starks. In exile, Didymus Maqoma continued to agitate for the movement, going on a variety of secret missions in Europe and participating in an uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) prisoner camp located in Tanzania, while Sibongile raised their daughter, Mpho, in London, their home base. These arrangements mimic conventional gender roles, with Didymus working outside the home and Sibongile working within. Upon their return to South Africa, though, Sibongile's political career in the African National Congress takes off, and the party pushes Didymus out of his executive position, likely because his involvement in the MK prisoner camps makes him no longer politically viable. This exchange in their political roles reshapes their household: Sibongile 'did not have time to do the daily tasks that would maintain it [the home]' (Gordimer 1994: 67), so Didymus does the shopping, transports Mpho to and from school, and deals with the plumber, when needed. The novel employs this inversion in their gender roles to evoke the social instability attendant upon the transition to democracy.

Similarly, the gender dynamics in the Starks' relationship do not abide by heteropatriarchal norms, although the unusualness of their dynamics appears before the end of apartheid. Annie, their daughter, when arguing with Vera about the division of labour between couples, recalls that when she was young, Ben did a large portion of the childcare duties, putting Vera's career before his own (ibid.: 138). The novel intensifies the meaning of these unusual dynamics by highlighting Vera's transgression of gender norms in the present. The narrator characterises Vera as having 'the haircut of a woman who has set aside her femininity' (ibid.: 37) when depicting Didymus' first impression of Vera upon his return to South Africa. Further, at a restaurant with Ben's business colleagues, after he starts up a luxury baggage company to secure their retirement, Vera is the only woman to take a cognac, rather than the 'approved female choice of a sweet liquor' (ibid.: 97) after the meal. It is not specifically the political upheaval of the transition period that disturbs dynamics between Vera and Ben, as it is for Didymus and Sibongile. Rather, Vera's focus on her career and Ben's investment in her success makes them appear different from normative heterosexual couples, but during the transition, as Vera's role in public life becomes more pronounced, her refusal to follow the typical script of femininity intensifies the queerness associated with her departure from norms governing heterosexual womanhood.

That said, even though Vera and Ben upset patriarchal gender dynamics that would place men's interests before women's, her investment in a normative form

of heterosexuality limits her queerness. This conformist element in her worldview noticeably surfaces in her struggle to accept that her daughter, Annie, is a lesbian. In a scene where Annie and Vera debate the merits of same-sex desire, Vera claims only to love men, wondering aloud 'how can there be love-making without the penis' (ibid.: 140). She continues by emphatically claiming that 'with the penis inside you, it's not just the pleasure – it's the being no longer alone' (ibid.). Without that opportunity, she implies that Annie can never overcome her solitude with her lover, Lou. Furthermore, Vera's investment in the sexual importance of the penis can be aggressive, underscoring her heterosexism. The narrator describes Vera's seduction of Ben on the first night that they stay at Annie and Lou's house in these terms:

They were making love the way a man and woman do, in this house where, on the other side of a wall, two women lay enlaced. The awareness became a kind of excitement, a defiance for her, an assertion for him.

(Ibid.: 201)

That the sex they have is an act of 'defiance' for Vera signifies her uncompromising commitment to normative heterosexuality as a source of not only pleasure but also power, with Ben's own 'assertion' suggesting that this power is complicit with a certain type of male dominance.

Vera's commitment to heterosexuality, however, involves her wilfully breaking the rules that govern its expression, and this rule breaking queers her from a different angle. Earlier in their marriage, Vera has a long-term love affair with a young filmmaker, Otto Abarbanel, who is in South Africa to document the transition for Austrian television. After one of their encounters, the narrator reports on Vera's perception of her actions:

And when she came home later in the afternoon it was as she could never have imagined it could be, what had happened in the three hours' interim was something that concerned her alone, her sexuality, a private constant in her being, a characteristic like the colour of eyes, the shape of a nose, the nature of a personal spirit that never could belong to anyone other than the self.

(Ibid.: 57)

Vera conceives of her actions in an unorthodox manner, envisioning sex with Otto as something that 'concerned her alone' because her sexuality was 'a private constant' to which no one else could lay claim, not even her husband. In bed that night, she thus experiences not a sense of betrayal but a sense of 'pride and freedom' (ibid.), framing the sex she had with Otto as an assertion of individual liberty. Her experience of pride and freedom stresses her sense of sexual autonomy, even though that autonomy translates into adultery – a common but typically taboo violation of marriage.

Vera's understanding of her privacy and her autonomy only grows more emphatic as she ages, and during the transition, this change begins to undermine

her investment in heterosexuality as an institution. Their son, Ivan, who lives in London, asks Vera and Ben to let their grandson, Adam, stay with them for a while, yet Vera proves resistant to this familial duty, even as Ben welcomes the opportunity. Recognising her resistance, she admits that ‘she had never realised how much her . . . sense of privacy had grown’ (ibid.: 219). This growth in her sense of privacy, her sense of aspects of herself that no one, not even Ben, could possess, let alone influence, becomes the rationale for ending her marriage with Ben. One night when contemplating the different ways that she and Ben view the dissolution of their marriage, she conceptualises it as part of an inevitable journey of ‘moving alone towards the self’ (ibid.: 272). Just before this insight, she dances on her own in her house, celebrating her aloneness, which she construes as linked to ‘a freedom; an attraction between her and a man that had no desire for the usual consummation’ (ibid.). Here the character and the novel work toward a sense of solitariness that is not entirely isolated: without the unburdening of self that sex produces, Vera imagines another kind of bond with a man – in this case, her bond with Zeph – that preserves her privacy and autonomy, her separateness.

Throughout, she and the novel strain to find the words to describe precisely the bond that exists between her and Zeph. They first meet each other because Vera represents the Odensville residents in a land claim and Zeph acts as the representative of those residents. After a white farmer attacks the residents because he claims ownership of the land they live on, Vera finds herself worried not only about the inhabitants of Odensville in general but also more acutely about Zeph. Because of the intensity of her worry, Vera contemplates her bond with Zeph, classifying it as not very deep, yet it is ‘tranquil’ as well as ‘complicated and profound’; the narrator further characterises it as at ‘a level that was neither sexually intuitive nor that of friendship’ (ibid.: 109). Such a moment indicates that the novel tries to delineate an emergent sense of intimacy outside conventional notions of erotic interest and beyond amity. Eventually, gender becomes the idiom that Vera and the narrator employ to explain this bond by asserting that ‘they belonged together as a single sex, a reconciliation of all each had experienced, he as a man, she as a woman’ (ibid.: 110). Their involvement in the being of each other transforms them into ‘a single sex’, one that was neither male nor female, a third ‘sex’ that reconciles the two genders that usually engage in socio-sexual antagonism within a hetero-patriarchal system. They herald, then, a queer and future form of gendered being uncontained by the boundaries that sex/gender conventionally establish – indeed, outside these boundaries altogether – yet, contradictorily, this new being depends upon maintaining strict boundaries around the self.

## **Queer affiliation II: beyond brotherhood**

Like Gordimer’s novel, Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* portrays a quest for belonging that finds its foundation in erotic desire yet exceeds that desire, reaching for a queer expression of attachment particularly intertwined with economics. Its protagonist, Tshepo, applies to work at Steamy Windows, a massage parlour/brothel, in a moment of economic and psychic distress since he loses his

job, and his roommate Chris, along with his two friends, Brendon and Virgil, rape him. His new employment opportunity offers him a much-needed route to financial security and re-establishes his sense of agency. While Tshepo initially appears sceptical about working at Steamy Windows, he quickly gains confidence with his first client, Bill, who inducts Tshepo into the business, helping him to master the script of how to massage, have sex, and shower with a client. Once Bill pays, Tshepo meditates:

I go back to the room holding the pink notes. There is something important about the fact the money is pink. Pink Power. Gay power, gay energy, men's energy – a jumbled thought comes to me, celebrating the occasion. Pink money is going to look after you. I smile to myself and shove the money in my pocket. I straighten out the room. The sheets are clean so I do not have to change them.

(Duiker 2001: 320)

Significantly, the South African rand notes that Tshepo holds are reddish-pink in colour, and this fact becomes symbolic for him since it recalls other meanings of pink. He imagines this money as an actualised form of 'pink power', linking it to 'gay energy', particularly gay 'men's energy', effectively collapsing the distinction between money and sexual desire. Moreover, he declares that this pink money can 'look after you', papering over the physical and psychic harm of the violence he recently faced, a form of caretaking that he does not find elsewhere, except intermittently with his friend Mmabatho.

The novel repeatedly depicts sex and wealth as intertwined for the workers at Steamy Windows, but most obviously in the way their labour gives them access to the knowledge necessary to increase their wealth, along with mastering the practices associated with the well-to-do, an induction into the culture of the affluent. At one point, West, one of Tshepo's co-workers, catalogues what his male clients have taught him, including:

I learned to hold a magnum of champagne properly, to serve wine, to carve a duck, to eat a lobster, to be a considerate guest, to jumpstart a car, to introduce myself with a firm but gentle handshake, little things that my mother never could teach me. Things that you can only learn from another guy. I learned how to use money, to apply for a credit card, to balance a cheque book, to try my luck on the stock market. These are not difficult things when someone takes the time to show you.

(Ibid.: 389)

Notwithstanding the sexism of West's claim that only another 'guy' could teach him these skills, he enumerates a variety of practices, ranging from how to serve wine to how to shake hands. While learning to jumpstart a car or be a considerate guest are abilities that people can possess across classes, several of the practices in this list, like how to hold a magnum of champagne correctly, socialise him

into the worlds of the well-to-do. Most importantly, his clients show West how to ‘use money’, which includes obtaining a credit card and participating in the stock market – opportunities to increase the wealth he earns at Steamy Windows. In turn, West shares this knowledge with Tshepo, and Tshepo employs this knowledge to better himself financially. Later in the novel, after Tshepo visits his estranged father, who has been shot in what appears to be criminal activity, he wishes his father could appreciate his success. That is, he wants to tell his father

that West and some of the men [likely other workers and clients] I’ve met taught me a thing or two about the stock market. I wish he knew that I’ve invested money in equities, in IPOs. I know he would be impressed.

(Ibid.: 538–539)

The novel does not hesitate to affirm that Tshepo’s employment at Steamy Windows builds his wealth and provides him with the social contacts that make him upwardly mobile.

Besides gaining wealth and skills, working at Steamy Windows also instils a sense of camaraderie that emerges between the workers, and that camaraderie transcends sexuality in complex ways, a point not recognised by critics such as Dobrota Pucherova (2009) and Brenna Munro (2012). West, for instance, explains the bonds born within this workplace when he first meets Tshepo. Upon finishing with a client, Tshepo retreats to the bathroom, and West silently enters, takes Tshepo in his arms, and kisses him. After this kiss, West welcomes Tshepo, even as he clarifies that he is not primarily attracted to men. He explains that because they never kiss the clients, kissing Tshepo, or any of the other workers, ‘is more meaningful, more personal than shaking your hand’ (ibid.: 322). Later in this conversation, besides claiming that ‘we all look after each other’, West informs Tshepo that they will have sex, so they can get beyond the ‘orgasm and feeling nice’ (ibid.: 323) that pleasuring the body produces to discover the communicative element of sex, a metaphysical sense of communion through sex. It is this more transcendent communion that can emerge from a sexual encounter that defines the two as ‘brothers’ (ibid.: 323), a queer vision of sex between men since its significance is not organised around the expression of desire but the bonding that that expression of desire can enable.<sup>4</sup> The brotherhood that exists amongst the sex workers, while not dismissive of bodily desire, exceeds it, which points to the queer quality of their attachment to each other, and that queer attachment is comparable to the affiliation that Vera and Zeph experience in Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*.

Distinctively, Duiker’s novel subjects this vision of brotherhood to stinging critique, highlighting its potential sexism. Sebastian, another worker at Steamy Windows, engages Tshepo in debates – or more accurately, offers speeches – on gender and sexuality. At one point, Sebastian extols gay men because ‘they don’t have wives’ (ibid.: 334), and thus they do not raise children, two supposed encumbrances that burn out straight men, but when Tshepo challenges him for not considering the role of ‘gay women’, Sebastian replies that they will be ‘the wise

women of the community' (ibid.: 335). He explains that women will have this role because of their strength, spirituality, and intuitiveness – traits that make them better than men (ibid.). Sebastian's assessment of women oscillates between fear and praise, peppered as it is with stereotypical assumptions about womanhood. This half-baked theorising slides into overt sexism during one of his later interior monologues when he paranoically proposes that some shopping centres secretly pump oestrogen through air vents and air conditioning to encourage docility (ibid.: 548). Tshepo echoes this proposition in the following chapter, although he has never – at least, to the reader's knowledge – heard this part of Sebastian's theory. Such an echo suggests that the closed world of the brotherhood encourages contempt, if not for women as persons, then for what constitutes femininity, marking out its limits as a reservoir for values alternative to those demarcated by the hetero-patriarchal world outside of Steamy Windows (see also ibid.: 398).<sup>5</sup>

Just as *None to Accompany Me* represents the dislocations that apartheid and the post-apartheid moment produce, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* often dramatises contesting views of phenomena without offering any resolution, creating a dialogical effect that disorients readers, pointing to a queer political openness that the book encourages. Brenna Munro, furthermore, observes that Duiker's novel is formally dialogic since it wavers between 'two different modes of writing' (2012: 216–217): a realistic mode and a visionary, almost prophetic, mode, with the former grounded in the present time and the latter reaching for a mystical time (see also Stobie 2003: 128–129). Its dialogic form, however, has its correlative in content, as Carolin and Frenkel point out when they emphasise the book's 'polyvocality' (2013: 42), which continually destabilises discourses (see also Carolin 2013: 50–51). After all, the novel presents the brotherly bonds of Steamy Windows as saving Tshepo, giving him a way to explore and eventually revel in his sexuality, which restores him after his rape, yet those same bonds can brutally marginalise women. This novel, to put it differently, depicts brotherhood in these contested terms and refuses to resolve this contestation. Therefore, it invests in creating a sense of irresolution, and this capaciousness can point to its ethical critique of purity, a refusal of fixed boundaries and separateness, which can act as a rejection of apartheid logic itself, especially as this logic lives on after the transition to democracy.

### Queer affiliation III: racism, race, and nation

Not only does *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* critique the fraternal bonds that emerge amongst the sex workers at Steamy Windows as potentially sexist but it also exposes the ways that racism intrudes on the brotherhood. Before work one day, Tshepo goes to a local gay bar to have a drink, and the white waitrons ignore him; when he insists that they serve him, they do so contemptuously, and they do not give him his change when he pays his bill. He demands his change, and they threaten to call security. Suddenly, Tshepo becomes acutely aware of his blackness: he looks around the room and realises that he is the only black patron (ibid.: 457). Not long after this disorienting revelation, Tshepo finds out that his vision



of brotherhood at Steamy Windows is not shared by all his co-workers, particularly since race structures business relations. Once West leaves his job, Tshepo asks Cole, another black man working at the brothel, what he thinks about West's departure. Cole proceeds to school Tshepo by asking him who controls the business. Tshepo names Shaun, which acknowledges the racial hierarchy that defines their workplace with a white, straight man running the business, while men of various races and sexualities work for him, making the business lucrative. Cole then points out that 'the whole brotherhood thing is very convenient' (ibid.: 462), which undermines the utopic possibilities of this fraternity since it exists within a socio-economic framework of not only Steamy Windows as a commercial venture but also Cape Town as a city where white people monopolise economic and political power.

Even as *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* portrays Tshepo's disillusionment with Steamy Windows because of racism, it queers race, insisting on an expansion of the meaning of blackness. As Cole condemns the racism he experiences, he also announces that there is a 'deeper blackness' within the self that makes someone 'an African', which enables him to declare that West is 'really black', a declaration that Tshepo affirms (ibid.: 463). In response to this, Tshepo formulates a series of questions as he attempts to think through Cole's assertion. Tshepo, for instance, wonders whether he 'can claim Afrikaans, Coloured tsotsi taal, Indian cuisine or English sensibilities as my own?' (ibid.). After this question, he queries whether he should be 'apologetic for wanting more than what my culture offers' (ibid.) – a question that implies Tshepo believes it better to want more than what one's race and culture can offer. Indeed, he next frames sticking to one's own culture as 'a kind of stagnation, a kind of incest' (ibid.) that likely will result in ruin. This attitude that the boundaries distinguishing race and culture can be too rigid appears earlier in the novel when Mmabatho, Tshepo's closest friend, voices her resistance to restrictive notions of blackness. When talking about nightlife in Cape Town, she asserts that she does not 'go for that blacker than thou thing' (ibid.: 35) when people critique where and with whom she socialises.

Moreover, the vision of blackness that Duiker's novel espouses is pan-African and not limited by the borders of the nation-state, illustrating the way that *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* reaches for, to use Rindaldo Walcott's expression, 'outer-national' (2003: 114) connections, ones that form attachments with a black African diaspora across the continent.<sup>6</sup> Threaded throughout the book are moments when Mmabatho paradoxically expresses her contempt for black foreigners, even as she would like a more expansive definition of blackness. Once when she and Tshepo walk through an open-air market as Tshepo looks for a new backpack, she notes that the sellers are 'mostly foreigners, dark and tall and with features that don't really blend in with the general population' (Duiker 2001: 343). As Tshepo continues looking at various stalls, she warns him to be 'careful of makwere-kwere' (ibid.), using a derogatory term for immigrants, which startles Tshepo, leading him to label her as xenophobic. Neville Hoad (2007: 81) argues that the term makwere-kwere homophonically echoes the term queer, capturing the similar social status of foreigners and sexual and gender minorities in

South Africa: they are both outsider groups (see also Munro 2012: xxv–xxvi). Tshepo's attachment to foreigners appears symbolically linked to his own sense of queerness, his own sense of not belonging. In comparison to Mmabatho, he embraces a pan-African sensibility that reinforces his commitment to openness and his rejection of restrictive definitions of both 'black' and 'African'. During his walk through Nyanga, he reveals that he does not 'care for people who want to prescribe what it means and doesn't mean to be African', rejecting those 'purists' who seek to establish firm borders between peoples and places, implicitly envisioning a form of diasporic collectivity (ibid.: 584). *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* resists logics that secure identity as a home, as an incontestable form of belonging, embracing an orientation towards the world and others that insists upon a sense of rootlessness.

By contrast, Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* concentrates solely on events within national borders, rarely if ever connecting the transition in South Africa to peoples, places, or politics on the continent, except to acknowledge that many anti-apartheid activists were in exile. Even as this novel sounds the restless relationship between blacks and whites during a time of social upheaval, it also occasionally traffics in racist images of black characters, presenting a very limited vision of blackness, which complicates the novel's politics. A good example appears in the representation of Oupa, one of the younger colleagues at the foundation that Vera both befriends and mentors. In the middle of the novel, Oupa and Vera are injured in a carjacking, and Oupa ends up in the hospital where he eventually dies from complications due to his injuries. As he lays unconscious in the hospital bed, Vera, via the narrator, describes his face:

His fuzzy lashes on closed eyes, the particular settle of his scooped round nostrils against his cheek; his mouth, the dominant feature in a black face, recognized as such in this race as in no other with an aesthetic emphasis created by highly developed function, since we speak and sing through the mouth as well as kiss and ingest by it.

(Gordimer 1994: 183)

This description uncomfortably employs a racial stereotype because it highlights the largeness of Oupa's mouth, which the narrator claims is 'the dominant feature in a black face', moving too rapidly from an individual case to a generalisation about black people. Moreover, the narrator asserts that black people have large mouths as a by-product of a 'highly developed function', presumably because they use their mouths to speak, sing, kiss, and consume so often. Such an image explaining this allegedly phenotypic aspect of an individual's face echoes demeaning caricatures, such as blackface, that exaggerate the physiognomy of black people to dehumanise them. As *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* wishes to make the meanings of blackness as open as possible, extending the reach of blackness beyond the nation and beyond skin colour, Gordimer's book, by contrast, finds itself unable to offer such a rich sense of blackness for all of its efforts to depict a time when racial politics underwent substantive transformation.

**Going down: queer transitions**

From a different position, Gordimer's novel does engage the politics of race by presenting a distinctive representation of inter-racial relations at the end of *None to Accompany Me*, one that welcomes downward mobility for whites. Once Ben visits their son, Ivan, in London for what will appear to be a permanent move, Vera celebrates her time alone in the house she considers 'her sole and only possession' (ibid.: 270). Obtained as part of the divorce settlement from her first marriage, the house remains a constant as her life changes, and, as Rita Barnard (2006) notes, this constant exists within a book preoccupied by the shifting of residence, making Vera's relationship to her house stand out. Despite this constancy, Vera finally sells the house, without consulting Ben or informing her children, a move that shocks her daughter. She then becomes the tenant of Zeph, moving into a cottage on his property where she plans to live on her own. She enjoys this new designation of 'tenant':

It was a kind of private play on words, between Zeph Rapulana and Mrs. Stark, linking their present arrangement to Odenville, the matter of land, over which they came to begin to know one another. It was a consequence in which there were loyalties but no dependencies, in which there was feeling caught in no recognized category.

(Ibid.: 285)

Vera's wilful social demotion exemplified by her relinquishing her property stymies her social trajectory at the very moment she rises politically as she helps to craft the new constitution, work that will presumably establish her prominent stature in the new nation. Veering off this track, she invests in an inversion of race relations, not unlike the gender inversions discussed earlier, by socio-economically subordinating herself to a black man, particularly because of the queer affinity, the 'feeling caught in no recognised category', that bonds her to Zeph, an affective state of loyalty, not dependency, that facilitates her acceptance of such an economic loss.

Like Gordimer's novel, Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* presents socio-economic loss – downward mobility – as transformative, offering political and, for Duiker's novel especially, psychic hope. Psychologically upset by repeated experiences of racism, Tshepo unravels himself economically after his father's death. One of his first actions involves calling his money manager and liquidating his investments (Duiker 2001: 553). Without a rationale for going forward, Tshepo begins walking with no destination in mind, although he ends up wandering from the city centre to Nyanga. As he walks through the township, his delirium only increases, yet he continues moving forward without any purpose, and as he does so, he witnesses the impact of racist capitalism on individuals and communities, a system that creates Fanon's *les damnés de la terre*, the wretched of the earth (1967: 30 and *passim*). This group, *les damnés*, comprise, as Sylvia Wynters (2003) emphasises 'an ever-expanding global, transracial category of

the homeless/the jobless, the semi-jobless' and the imprisoned, within the neo-colonial present, and, she contends, this category is still coded as *the* condition of blackness because of the way racial hierarchies persist across geographic territories (ibid.: 261–2). What Tshepo grasps through his pilgrimage to Nyanga is the vast economic and social inequities that persist in the present, well after apartheid. As he tells the reader,

A lot of capable men hanging around corners, their hands idle, frustrated, itchy with desperation. Are they plotting their crimes quietly? There is a goldmine in the suburbs, even the dustbins eat well. Perhaps inside they are bruised, feeling forgotten, progress going at lightning speed while poverty takes them at a snail's pace. No one knows how shattered we are inside, they seem to say with their eyes, how desperate we are. Given a chance we can do anything.

(Duiker 2001: 574)

He imagines those in the township feeling left out by 'progress', which quickly moves forward for some – those with money as well as social capital in the suburbs – while those without, the poor in townships, travel as 'a snail's pace', highlighting the different temporalities and trajectories that racist capitalism creates.

Rather than ending his portrait of Tshepo here, Duiker then depicts his recovery from this wrenching psychological experience, albeit he is a transformed person, one who no longer aspires for financial success. With his savings, Tshepo moves to Johannesburg where he finds work in a children's home, even though 'the money is not good' (ibid.: 603). This new trajectory refuses the capitalist logic of continual accumulation, embracing instead economic limits, and through his work, Tshepo opts to nurture others, creating queer family relations beyond biology since all the children at the home call him 'uncle', a family not unlike the queer brotherhood he found in *Steamy Windows* (ibid.: 604). Furthermore, this queer affiliation extends to foreigners, especially those from the African continent because Tshepo picks Hillbrow as the neighbourhood where he will live, a neighbourhood defined by a medley of others from different African nations. He also continues to build intimate bonds with men, bonds that can be sexual, and these men provide him with 'blueprints for survival', stressing that 'capitalism is not the only way', with 'working together', a sense of queer solidarity outside the frame of the nation-state, as a source of political hope (ibid.: 607). That Duiker's novel ends with a vision of Tshepo fluidly participating in different yet interlinked collectivities accentuates what he learned through his struggles, an openness that does not refuse difference but embraces the work of solidarity across identities, which distinguishes it from Gordimer's ideological insistence on separateness, on fixed differences that likely should not be, or cannot be, overcome, with Vera appearing entirely alone in the novel's final moments. The communality that Tshepo practises at the novel's end, thus, acts as a blueprint to a future not defined by separateness from others, racially, sexually, or nationally, a future conceived through conflict, surely, but with the potential to produce forms of solidarity that guarantee social change.

## Notes

- 1 My use of the word 'solidarity' here, and throughout this chapter, relies on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's understanding of the term. Her definition of solidarity does not presuppose that it requires a 'commonality of oppression' because it stresses the bonds of people 'who have chosen to work and fight together', with difference as central to its expression. Such solidarity is 'the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences' and thus is always an 'achievement', not a given (Mohanty 2003: 7).
- 2 Chen significantly recuperates the economic dimension of queerness by returning to the wide range of meanings that 'queer' has had historically, as detailed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, particularly when used as a verb or adjective.
- 3 In my argument, 'queer' does not act as a synonym for sexual and gender minorities, in part because efforts to turn queer into an identity usually tries to define its referent, thus creating a norm, which contradicts that aspect of queerness that resists or exceeds norms, breaking down the order of things to prepare the way for other futures. José Esteban Muñoz defines such queerness as a 'longing that propels us onward' and 'that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough' (2009: 1), which enables us to claim the utopic aspect of queerness that incites us toward that which is beyond the present as it is arranged. This refusal to create normative boundaries has been a feature of queering since its genesis as a method for political organising and critique. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her essay 'La Prieta', originally published in 1981, imagines the El Mundo Zurdo, the Left-Handed World, created by 'queer groups' of those 'who don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world, nor completely within our own respective cultures', a collective that, across differences, 'can live together and transform the planet' (2015: 209). Cathy Cohen (1997: 438 and *passim*) forcefully argues for this sense of queerness as beyond identity since an investment in identity will limit the radical potential of queer politics. She contends that queer politics must make a problem of all identities that seem like home, grounding queerness, instead, in a form of collective un-belonging that can create a broader political vision through coalitions, no matter how provisional. Most recently, Mel Y. Chen, highlights this aspect of queerness when she claims that it is not in service of homonormative politics like marriage equality. She asserts that queer 'animates too much, exacerbates rather than contains frisson, soars beyond its bounds' (Chen 2012: 67), and it is this version of queerness that I identify in Gordimer and Duiker's texts.
- 4 A persistent aspect of critical arguments about the representation of the brotherhood that forms at Steamy Windows is that this brotherhood displaces family ties, proffering an alternative form of kinship. Tshepo, as Brenna Munro (2012) argues, leaves his biological family after his father organises the rape and murder of his mother, and after drifting in university, Tshepo finds a new home and fraternal bonds in the brothel. Scholars such as Viljoen (2001), Pucherova (2009), and Munro (2012), as well as Carolin and Frenkel (2013), argue that Steamy Windows at least partially functions as a space of 'healing' and 'friendship' grounded in sexuality. While I concur that Duiker's novel queers fraternity (Munro 2012: 210), my point is that that queering involves a transcendence of eroticism; it only serves as a route to the fraternal, not as the foundation for it, as critics often propose.
- 5 Stobie (2003), Pucherova (2009), and Munro (2012) also recognise that the fraternity that develops at Steamy Window fosters sexism.
- 6 Walcott makes the case for 'outer-national identifications' as an affirmation that 'the nation is not the only signal of belonging' (2003: 119). His argument is a strong one for recognising that any localised version of blackness cannot stand in for all forms of blackness and that even within territorial borders, blackness likely will vary in its expression. Duiker finds an ethical resource in insisting upon what Walcott terms a 'transnational sensibility' (ibid.: 121) that can create alliances across different forms of blackness and across different geo-political borders.

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## 5 ‘Queer/white’ in South Africa

### A troubling oxymoron?

*Jane Bennett*

#### Introduction

The reflections drawn on in the piece that grew into this chapter were embedded in a conference on the politics of queer hosted by Zethu Matebeni, researcher and activist at the University of Cape Town in 2015. The original title of the piece was “Making Trouble: Reflections on the Politics of Knowledge Creation around South African Queer Processes”. At the time, two particular events were on my mind, connected with *troubling* people and normative knowledges, and with *being troubled* myself. In the first instance, I had just caused a great deal of trouble to an activist woman I deeply respect by keeping a meeting time with her ‘only’ two hours – this after she had decided to ask for the help of the police because I may have been kidnapped. The short version: someone I had wanted to see for a while, who lives in Makhaza (Khayelitsha) in Cape Town, generously agreed to meet me at her home. Not only did I leave an earlier meeting an hour later than I should have, but despite familiarity with the route, I also stopped at the wrong shopping mall. Here I met an old friend and gossiped for another 30 minutes before tidying myself up into the right mall, and, all the while, sending SMSs (but not while driving) so that my communication with the activist expecting me was disjunctive and annoying. I was waited for, found, and then we spent time together (after the police had been reassured that all was well), yet in my efforts *not* to ‘cause trouble’ (the white grrrrl in Khayelitsha, the writer as an activist, the one who has not seen the other one for far too long, and whose fault is that?), I had caused a great deal. Incarnating every trope of whiteness in the multiple and justified critiques of white people’s efforts to work politically (and personally) in deep collectivity with black people in South Africa, I was deeply ashamed of my carelessness. Very grovelly I was, and it set me to rethinking questions I have worked with all my life: *In the waters of lived and embodied resistances to political and economic injustice, what are white people up to? What are the overt troubles we cause? How does one begin to unravel those covert, denied, erased and those (starkly visible to some, those as ‘natural’ as breath to others and just as essential) imagined ways of being human which result from racialisation within contemporary whitenesses?*



The second instance involved a moment within the dynamics of the 2015 #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement, which grew through 2016 and changed in complex and powerful ways in relation to the national South African #FeesMustFall student-worker alliance. As is now widely documented, the movement on the University of Cape Town's campus (a set of energies long in the making) focused on the colonial legacies apparent within the university architecture, governance, and pedagogical practices, and on the Western-oriented curricula themselves. A key target was the university's statue of Cecil John Rhodes, which occupied an iconically central point in the walk up to the main campus from the roads below and whose stone eyes gazed across a panorama of the city. Early in the first week of the initial protest against the statue's largely untroubled presence on the main entrance to central upper campus spaces, I was part of a large meeting in which everyone was welcomed and where white people were requested by the facilitators not to ask for individual speaking time as a wide range of issues were debated. Later that evening, I posted a small note on Facebook which celebrated the meeting's rigour and noted that white people present were asked not to request public speaking space, didn't, and that a great deal of work had got done. My comment took obvious pleasure in how easy this seemed to be for everyone present.

The next day, colleagues asked me why I was supporting a 'limitation on free speech', and it was suggested in another social media space that 'I would not be saved when the time came'. As the movement catalysed a wide range of action and debate, participants' clear, grounded, and complex arguments about the meanings of race and racism were regularly erased in social and news media which sought to characterise #RMF as 'race nationalists', akin to ISIS, apartheid apologists, and Nazis. Listening to late-night discussions, I heard the multiple ways in which #RhodesMustFall sought to negotiate these smear tactics; no one wanted to waste precious time attuned to the wearying calls ('how do white people get involved?') or explaining the obvious ad nauseam (*the experiences of violence here involve long and complex racialisations as 'black'; these experiences generate theoretical expertise which must be synergised as strategy. We will not all agree on everything; we are, however, going to do this work together.*) Sometimes, Biko's language on 'how to deal with "progressive white people"' was invoked (and indeed was drawn upon in the #RhodesMustFall's mandate):

The (white) liberal must understand that the days of the Noble Savage are gone; that the blacks do not need a go-between in this struggle for their own emancipation. No true liberal should feel any resentment at the growth of black consciousness. Rather, all true liberals should realise that the place for their fight for justice is within their white society. The liberals must realise that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification.

(Biko 1978: 46)

Note that the citation from Biko gestures towards two quite different strategies. I have never been able to take the first ('all true liberals should realise that the place for their fight for justice is within their white society') without question. The suggestion that those steeped, at both conscious and unconscious levels, in apartheid's languages for their self-recognition as 'white-human' have the collective capacity to 'work against racism within their own communities' strikes me as being naïve about the work entailed and naïve about what it means to 'work for' the death of those normalisations through which one has been offered singularity. Contemporary scholarship on whiteness frequently foregrounds the implacable (and unconscious?) semiotic frameworks through which people racialised as white in racist societies make sense of their humanity, and as Melissa Steyn and Don Foster write, 'Localised studies are corroborated by large-scale surveys that show persistent patterns of whites' resistance to integration and the new non-racial social order' (2008: 26). There is little historical evidence that those ancestrally, materially, and culturally empowered by structural racism are *able* (as a group, within a lifetime) to transcend – or destroy – the very ontologies through which their languages of salience circulate. Biko may not, then, be the most provocative theorist of 'white consciousness' (indeed, this was to him beside any useful point).

In addition, of course, Biko's extraordinary writing offers little towards any theorisation of 'queer', those processes through which Zethu Matebeni critically frames enquiry, interrogation, 'talking-back', a punctuation mark which refuses closure and entails interlocation: 'queer, in this book is understood as an inquiry into the present as a critical space that pushes the boundaries of what is endorsed as normative' (Matebeni 2014: 3). Matebeni's use of 'queer' comes in the initial pages to the curated volume, *Reclaiming Afrikan*, which accompanied the work of the 2014 symposium. Matebeni's 'queer' here doesn't overtly consider the politics of racialisation and racism; the symposium, however, certainly did. Stella Nyanzi was one of the voices opening the symposium, and it was vitally clear that her delight in participating in the symposium arose from the occasion's rejection (for her) of what she termed 'white South African queer'. Hailing those from Kenya and Zimbabwe, she voiced a central chord within the symposium's multilayered design: a focused engagement with 'the African', 'the black', the body whose racialisation positions them at terrifying angles to 'the human'; the powerfully and independently political' the ordinary lover, writer, dreamer; the one just walking the earth (Nyanzi 2014: 32). Such an engagement insists on the salience of understanding questions of race and racisms as central to activism/theorisation within queer, and especially within queer located in South Africa.

For those of us racialised as white, whose lives are inextricably connected with and inflected by centuries of complex, still emerging, narratives of racism as foundational to practices of wealth accumulation, symbolic, and material authorities, and gross human cruelties, the question of whether self-location as queer *can* be aligned with recognition of the politics of whiteness has to be raised as one of impossible concatenations, provocation, disruption, and in the expectation of trouble. This chapter seeks to initiate an exploration of the possibilities of aligning queer with the deconstruction of whiteness within the work of some

white writers. The chapter is not interested in any evaluation of such work as 'racist' or 'not racist', nor in the allocation of any particular writer/artist to the boxes of 'good'/'bad' white people (as if such boxes were of any theoretical value at all). I am more interested in thinking about the strategies deployed to gloss, wrestle, radicalise, or – indeed – normalise the meaning of whiteness within work enveloped in the queer South African panorama. And while black queer writers and artists are deeply engaged with questions of race, blackness, the strategies of invisibilisations occasioned by intersectionally violent gazes, and the politics of resistance, I seek to understand more of what white writers and artists (amongst whom I include myself) have been up to in terms of devising discursive strategies to surface and negotiate whiteness as 'we' are drawn into it as a centrifugal place of imagining different humanities.

The chapter is organised in three sections. The first deepens the assumption that the division caused by whiteness constitutes trouble within the politics of knowledge creation amongst South African queer circles. It focuses on academic writing for the sake of precision and space, and draws on a concept of division as catastrophe (as opposed to scenarios of differentiation), exemplified for me in a short story by Makhosazana Xaba. The second section works with three very different black queer voices (Muholi, Morrison, and Lorde) to explore the strategy of 'calling out' whiteness as an invitation to conversations about race and racism within representations of the marginal. Such calling out is embedded in moves towards what a deconstruction of whiteness would look like, and this sets the scene for an exploration of how some white voices, within queer South Africa work, have themselves strategised engagement with whiteness. The chapter is not intended as definitive nor encyclopaedic in range.

### **Division as catastrophe**

A range of South African writers, curators, and artists have theorised the challenges of knowledge creation in contemporary research spaces where the focus of their work involves the lives and experiences of diverse, multi-lingual, differently resourced, and poorly connected gender-non-conforming people (Matebeni 2013, 2014; Hames 2007). It is important to be straightforward here: the field of queer writing, of activisms which embrace the term, and of visual and performative creativities which allow the realisation of queer energies is small. Not a person who engages in this field is cowardly, and not one lazy, arrogant, greedy or self-aggrandising. As a tiny collective, it would be possible to argue that 'we' are more than usually careful in acknowledgement of one another and more than willing to love one another's ways of being across many divides.

Some of those divisions, however, resemble fracture more than difference, estrangement and betrayal more than partiality. Makhosazana Xaba's (2013) short story *Running* captures the sense of fissure and betrayal to which I am referring. In this story, the narrator works as an administrator at a pre-1994 conference on women and liberation run by 'the women of the [African National Congress] ANC', where the ANC connotes – absolutely – the possibility of freedom from

race-based apartheid. She describes herself and her colleagues like this: 'We are the oil, or the nuts and bolts of the train to liberation', and later: 'Being a soldier at a women's conference is unique. I am moving between the two pillars of our struggle, mass political mobilisation and the armed struggle' (Xaba 2013: 62), and she is excited to be engaging with concrete planning for the 'non-sexism' which must accompany any formulation of a new order. Just after Comrade Lungi ('I conclude she is beautiful') has finished her input, the news is brought to all of the seated delegates that Comrade Reverend Vukile Dladla has been gunned down. The agenda of the meeting immediately turns to encompass the shock and distress of everyone gathered, and there are calls for someone to talk about Vukile Dladla to celebrate and commemorate his comradeship. This becomes complicated because no one in the room seems to know much about a comrade based in Natal, and quickly, debate spirals into tension as participants wrestle with one 'elephant in the room': the meaning of facing Inkatha as enemy instead of the apartheid police, civilians, soldiers – the meaning of 'fighting one's own people'. Participants call for order, hail the principles of non-'tribalism', and ask for people not to get distracted. Meanwhile, the narrator's 'elephant' is splitting her lines (literally – there are two fonts on the page) into two. She *does* know Vukile Dladla (this is the struggle name for the Reverend Mdladlane). She knows the meeting has misrepresented both his actual name and certainly his relationship to fighting for liberation. In italics, she recalls the story of Reverend Mdladlane's rape of her as a schoolgirl; trapped against him inside a car, she flings herself out of the door and runs and runs. '*Thixo mntwanandini!*' he says as he catches up with her in his car along the dust road, 'Have you lost your mind, *Thixo mntwanandini!*'

Xaba's story, for me, dynamically reveals that fissure – that moment in which the option of 'liberation' and its hegemonic conversations tear away from the recognition of the sexual and gendered body and, in so doing, outline the savagery of the politics of heteronormativity. The division in her world is not bridgeable – she cannot be both 'comrade of the liberation struggle' and 'rape survivor/woman'. The meaning of such a fissure, between what is truth and what is mask, allows me to think in later sections about the meanings of attempting to synergise whiteness with queer.

The story ends with Comrade Zodwa, the narrator, trying to stop crying, trying to pack, in utter dislocation and knowing things 'have to be ordered' but that her expertise as an 'arranger' is in suspension. The moment reveals 'queer' consciousness as a doubling, a spiralling back and forth across what it means to remember one's body and what is offered as 'formal/community recognition'.

In *Reclaiming Afrikan*, Matebeni is explicit about the trajectories represented under her curation. She takes the 'K' to 'signal an appropriation of identity and belonging that is always detached from a queer person' (Matebeni 2014: 8), marking the histories and contemporary realities of continental contexts in which non-gender conformity and desires which confound heteronormative patternings are vilified and the division between 'queer' and 'normal' becomes one fraught with stigmatisation. The gesture has the power to embrace many stories, without too constrained a hold, and simultaneously reminds that 'queer' fundamentally resists the flag-democratic notion of a 'country'.

To do this in South Africa (and perhaps elsewhere) is explicitly to decolonise and as explicitly to demand an interrogation of the politics of race and racism, both so vital to the long histories of colonialism and apartheid, and so chaotically unresolved 20 years after 1994. Queer processes and ways of being are not simply in relationship to the rigidity of heteronormativities; they are as fully implicated in the realities of race and racism as any other trajectories of social/political and cultural community finding. Queer no more consists of a rainbow arc than the rest of South Africa, and calling for a more rigorous analysis of this by white writers (including myself) seems more than timely.

### Calling out whiteness?

Any preliminary review of queer writing in South Africa would note that many of the academic writers are white, and most in middle-income locations. Most white queer academic writers (some of whom struggle with the distinction between notions of queer and the terms, 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'transgender') explore the realities – actual, activist, and artistic – of black gender non-conforming people. I have yet to read the work of a black queer theorist and artist in South Africa who concentrates solely on the work of 'white' queer work. Very few white people in queer work overtly with their racialisation; while all black people working in queer engage the meaning of blackness in a thousand ways and are often grounded in the autobiographical. International interlocutors with 'South African queer' are overwhelmingly white and write almost exclusively about 'black people'.

It could be argued that such divisions are overly crude, saying next-to-nothing about the trajectories or shapes of the actual writing involved. Yet this kind of mapping carries the bones of a knowledge structure typical of academic sites: dominated by white researchers, invested in the experiences of the racialised/exotic Other, evasive or sceptical of deconstructive moves against its hegemony.

The invocation of the politics of racialisation as an interrogation of queer solidarities has, nonetheless, been strongly alive for several years. In her film, *Difficult Love* (2010), which explores through kaleidoscopic and self-reflexive images the meaning of her own photography as activism against the visual erasure of black lesbian women and trans people, Muholi uses an interrogation of intimacy as a strategy for defamiliarisation of South African race normativities. She moves from a presentation of a 2008 series of images she entitled *Massa and Minah* in which the historical and contemporary racialisation of the relations of domestic ('intimate labour') work are reversed (so that it is a black figure who choreographs 'madam', while a subservient and white one wears the uniform of the 'maid') to a triptych.

Classically associated with a three-panel relief or carving forming an altarpiece in Catholic churches, the form depends on the assertion of separation (each panel is set apart from the others) and simultaneous symbiosis (the three create one narrative). Muholi's triptych, *Caitlin and I* (2009), shows two full bodies lying skin to skin, naked, one facing upwards along the back of the second. The horizontal intimacy is rudely interrupted by the vertical breaks between the panels, and the

face of the lower figure is turned into the gaze of the lens (Muholi's own lens and the eyes of the viewer simultaneously), while the eyes of the upper figure look towards a ceiling-distance, away from the camera. The lower body is Muholi's own, and the face the same one earlier seen narrating the trajectory of the documentary: 'This is me; I just got up: This is what I look like, take it or leave it'; the skin colour is brown. The upper body is pale skinned, and Muholi is explicit about what she is revealing: 'How sometimes in our relationships, we feel like slaves.' To watch this, as someone racialised as white, akin to madam/master, is to be invited to reflect on what it might mean to lie on someone's back in the upward position, claiming connection, yet rooted in invested and denied *weight-fulness* (the weight, in the triptych, of one full body upon the other).

Not only does *Difficult Love* raise direct questions about race, racism, and intimacy as foundational to the work of visualising black and queer experiences (and bodies), but the documentary also offers one clear strategy for conversation between white and black people whose lives are read as counter-heteronormative. In seeing the images of the triptych, a range of enquiries (silently) unfold: *How can a white body claim intimacy with a black one on whose spine they lie? What versions of close encounters can we tell across and between one another? Is the white gaze of the upper body inevitably drawn up and away from what must be seen? Is there any way for the spine of the body below to forget the heaviness of the body above? Was the weight ever experienced as desirable? Or as love? Are top and bottom the only positions? If the lower body moves away, will the upper body's balance shift so radically it can no longer sense it'd own world? Wouldn't that be queer?*

Creating a network of questions which genuinely probe at the heart of race relations is a strategy with a bite. There is no assumption that responses could ever be uniform and a clear hint that some questions only nourish others, and answers (depending on the interlocutors) could involve despair, rage, and conflict. There is no guarantee that those invested in the luxury of being the upper body can be provoked into alternative worldviews through being questioned.

Muholi's move echoes, however, those of other iconic voices seeking to strategise the deconstruction of whiteness and to highlight the complexity of race relations within representation. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) consolidates a set of lectures given in 1990, meta-analyses of the ways in which race – whiteness and blackness – is figured within the work of four canonical USA fiction writers, all white. Her hunch was

through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence (an Africanist presence) – one can see that a sense of a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.

(1992: 6)

The overarching goal of the collection is the revelation of the strategies used by well-known white writers to nationalise whiteness as universal, timeless,

unbiased, and undifferentiated dependent on the figure of 'the dark and abiding black'/'the African' for its power. Such strategies include 'economy of stereotype', 'patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language', 'metaphysical condensation' and others (1992: *passim*). The grammar of the assertion of whiteness as American offers ground to counteractive strategy: if the writer collapses whole groups of things, peoples, or events ('metaphysical condensation') into singular categories, a deconstructive strategy not only points this out but also demands an opening up, a search for the myriad. If the writer 'fetishises' (she offers blood as an example, through the notion of 'black' or 'white blood' in their imagined connections with possibilities of purity or pollution), the deconstructive strategy again begins with naming the fetishisation and can then move into demands for the material or the scientifically legible. Although Muholi's concerns and the shape of her work differ dramatically from Morrison's, both confront whiteness simultaneously by 'reading it back' to itself and by charting the ground for a range of difficult and intellectually powerful questions about and to whiteness.

It is hard to engage with Morrison without glossing an earlier conversation, this one between two lesbians: Mary Daly and Audre Lorde: Audre Lorde's 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly' (1981). Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* was published and made a passionate argument for the analysis of Judeo-Christian religious traditions as quintessentially patriarchal and for the recognition of strong, pre-industrial, women's spiritual traditions which included goddess figures and matriarchal practices as capable of animating the then-women's movement in the USA. The book used 'womanhood' as a universalising category and the roots of the feminist spiritualities invoked were European. Lorde's opening sentences acknowledge Daly's scholarship and her commitment to a fight against injustice and then to the heart of her decision to write:

The history of white women who are unable to hear black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering, I hope.

(Lorde 1981: 67)

Her letter then tracks Daly's own strategies of whiteness (calling out, as Morrison and, much later, and in a very different context with different peers, Muholi does): excluding major figures of African spiritual significance from her overview of goddesses, evoking the 'African' only in relation to women's victimhood from patriarchy, ignoring the history of white women's political complicity with gross and organised racism, ignoring the vast differences of experience, based on race/class, between USA-based women for the sake of an overarching and would-be-authoritative argument. Lorde nears her conclusion with two paragraphs whose salience resonates, nearly 40 years later, in contemporary black voices (from a very wide range of epistemological approaches):

We first met at the MLA\* panel, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.' Shortly before that date, I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy, because of their destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another, at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing. This letter attempts to break this silence.

I would like not to have to destroy you in my consciousness. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

(Ibid.: 68)

Daly's response, which was found in Lorde's papers some years after Lorde's death and was never published, did not come quickly and offered apology and the recognition that Lorde 'had a point' (Rycenga and Barufaldi 2017). This strikes one as minimal, and the conversation continues to serve as a template for strategies of both naming whiteness as a discursive form of racist and political erasure and of offering rewritten and wider space for more generous, accurate, and complex knowledges.

These are far from the only examples of work which 'calls out' whiteness in its self-centralisation within knowledge making, and a full exegesis of this goes beyond the scope of this chapter. The key point of the section is that the strategy of 'calling out' is well rooted as a strategy, and often includes analysis of the operation of whiteness – at discursive and political levels – alongside exemplification of what could be revealed as whiteness decentred, held accountable, and rendered largely irrelevant to the project of sustainable change in the poetics of becoming human.

## White/queer?

In the final section of this chapter, I work with three pieces written by contemporary South Africans who would place themselves within the ambit of queer space and who are racialised as white. Each one would also place themselves within trajectories of writing-as-activism, although they are differently located in relation to the genres they engage, their particular styles and interests, and the contexts in which they work. I have chosen the pieces as exemplificative of three different strategic approaches to the narration of whiteness within South African debates on the significance of counter-heteronormative marginalisations.

The earliest fiction writing, by white authors in English, to work explicitly with concepts of counter-heteronormativity in South Africa came from men: Damon's *A Sinless Season* in 1982 and Stephen Gray's *Time of Our Darkness* in 1988. Mark Behr's *Embrace* (2001) Tatamkhulu Afrika's *Bitter Eden* (2000) and, much later, Gerald Kraak's *Ice in the Lungs* – memoir more than fiction – (2005) can be linked by two common threads, despite their differences. The first is a negotiation of masculinities and the skinlessness of intimacy and desire between men; the second is what Brenna Munro has called a version of 'coming out' (Munro



2012: 101). Munro names this impulse as a 're-imagination of whiteness', a step away from the whiteness of the apartheid state and of institutions such as whites-only boys' schools and, in Kraak's case, liberal anti-apartheid organisations. The notion that 'coming out' as gay could reracialise a white man so that his sexual orientation operated as a passport to difference equal to the difference experienced by black people under racialisation is variously represented as a secret, a liberation, a move towards citizenship of a context in which whiteness could be shed in favour of exultant queer/pariah solidarity.

Despite the calibre of these writers' work as wordsmiths of thoughtfulness and courage, the naivety of the hope that sexual orientation has the capacity to unravel – in any generalisable way – the meanings of whiteness as a colonising gaze is stark. Crude retrospect is, of course, a dangerous tool, revealing always only naivety, and often worse. Historisation of white gay writing, both pre- and post-1994, deserves more. The point I am making is, nonetheless, one I'd defend: in much white gay and lesbian writing from the late 1980s through to the mid-1990s, iconic whiteness is associated with the gender/sexual normativities of the apartheid state, and homosexuality is celebrated as an option to 'become other', an 'other' whose experiences warranted the same consideration in terms of protection from violence and stigmatisation as were demanded by the majority of South Africans who were black. Although Hein Kleinbooï (1994) writes in *Defiant Desire* of the racialised split he experienced as a young black activist student in the 1980s between the black-but-homophobic spaces of South African Students Congress (SASCO) and the white-but-racist spaces of lesbian/gay organisations, and although both Bev Ditsie and Simon Nkoli, in the same volume, are clear about the inability of late 1980s/early 1990s gay/lesbian activism to either recognise or resist its inherent whiteness, white writers themselves (and a number of organisational leaders of the time) worked with the assumption that their homosexuality 're-imagined (their) whiteness'. They write from the conviction that their critical engagement with the violent heteronormativities of their own homes, churches, and environments could – in some way – be understood as ethically and political equivalent to the experiences of racism so deeply part of South Africa.

I would argue that this notion that self-identification as gay or lesbian warranted access to a political space free of intersectional accountability lies at the roots of what can be termed 'lgbt rights' discourse, in northern environments, and I would not be alone here. Pre-1994 in South Africa, the notion allowed for explicit demands that the experience of homophobia paralleled the experiences of racism, and although black gay and lesbian voices problematised this, it is possible to witness the persistence of the idea that questions of personal connection to race are of minor salience to the meaning of queer for white-authored lesbian and gay fiction and memoirs. The collection *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction*, edited by Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba (2013), celebrates the provocation of 'queer imagination' and the 'multi-vocal and multiversal'. Contributions are clearly chosen for their revelation of 'queer imagination . . . as a lens through which to view the macro political and the intimate, always at the same time' (Gqola 2013: 3) rather than for their particular backgrounds. One story

exemplifies the idea that the representation of 'queer Africa' may evade questions of racialisation altogether. In 'Asking for It', Natasha Distiller's story in the same collection about the economy of bodies, pain, language, and sexual desire, the character of Julia's lover wraps their sexual explorations into the tattoos on Julia's skin. Cath (the lover) is turned on by the dolphin etched across Julia's breast, and Julia seeks out the pain of new tattoos in anticipation of Cath's erotic delight and attention. There's a sharp twist to the tale, and the narrative's interest in the transactional language of reciprocal desire is edgy. At no point in the story does Distiller offer the characters more than their involvement with each other (they have a lounge and a stereo, the tattoo parlour is in Seapoint with 'depressing carpets', and they've been on holiday to Brazil together); what Julia does, however, have is skin. There's no description of the skin's tone or colour, only the fact that 'Cath loved the look of the black ink on Julia's skin' (Martin and Xaba 2013: 52).

Most skin tones/colours can and do take black tattoo ink; yet the combination of the characters' names, the choices for tattoo images (a pixie, a fairy, a genie, a mermaid), the availability of the funds for tattooing all gesture towards whiteness. And the gesture strikes one as all the more pronounced for being ignored: the assumption of the skin as 'normative' (pale). I would surmise that the neglect of skin colour/racialisation in the tale arises from the notion that white South Africans *can* evade questions of race and racism through a concentration on queer embodiment and that – in some way – representation of such embodiment may transcend the materiality of South Africans' actual lives and experiences. A queer rainbow.

If one strategy of white gay and lesbian writing in South Africa is to attempt the transcendence of race through a homogenising hope for the innocence of sexual/queer space, another is embedded and intense (almost obsessive) exploration of relationships between 'the black' and 'the white'. Mark Gevisser's (2014) memoir, *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, explicitly a cartographic and textured collection of reflection on the meaning of being human across many decades of compulsive intimacy within and with the city of Johannesburg, is saturated with the interrogation of race and racism. From the earliest pages in which a young boy with a 'nanny' is puzzled by the *Holmden's Register of Johannesburg's* erasure of the black ('I discovered how intent the *Holmden's* was on actually losing me. . . . That thing called a "township," that place where the black people who worked for us would go to church or visit family . . . it was unknowable, difficult, and dangerous. . . . It was on another planet' (ibid.: 17)) to the third section of the book in which the narrator, traumatised deeply by a house break-in, finds emotional release in a sudden moment of easy acknowledgment between himself (*umlungu*) and two young black men, as the narrator stands on the landing outside the home of an Alexandra friend, the memoir circles and recycles the meaning of whiteness within the DNA of a South African-born, white, gay writer.

The starkest of contradictions emerge from this strategy. At one pole lies the memoir's persistent and rich threads of storytelling about black people's lives (the people are very diverse, ranging from once-off conversations with the famous such as K. Sello Duiker to lifelong knowledges of friends named only as 'Edgar

and Phil'). Here relationships are deep, and black people relate complex and different experiences to the author, seemingly with affection and trust. The author is never asked by any black person in the memoir to account for his own blindness or privilege as 'white', and there is only one moment where he writes of any personal sense that his racial difference may be a source of irritation, anger, or fear to black interlocutors. The narrator is never 'called out'.

At the polar opposite of this representation of intricate, knowing, and interested relationships between the white narrator and a lifetime of black interlocutors stands the experience which forms the structural arc of the memoir. At the beginning of the book, and in much more detail towards the end, the narrator presents the terrifying tale of being badly attacked with friends in their home; the attackers are black, fairly brutal (but not brutalised as characters), and well organised. The aftermath of the assault, which includes the writer's decision to live more permanently in France with his husband, is dense with the incomprehensibility, inefficiency, and pain of attempting following through a legal charge laid against the assailants. In this space, whiteness and blackness are largely untranslatable to each other, the connection of inevitable violation, linked only by formal economies – invasion and theft. And despite the plethora of narratives across the memoir concerning the structural violence black South Africans have navigated, the personal victimhood here is of a white man. There is no way around this; the author does not try for one – this is the tale he chooses. In the end, and somewhat despite itself, the strategy of a deep dive into the cartographies of 'white and there', 'black and erased', leaves the narrator as 'the good white' embedded in a lifetime of rich and diverse friendships with black people (including lovers and partners), encyclopaedic in his knowledge of black South African social and cultural histories, genealogically rooted away from the Aryan (he is Jewish), and, in the end, a (thoughtful, saddened) victim of post-apartheid configurations of crime and punishment.

The third strategy I want to look at for this chapter is quite different. Instead of representing queer as transcendent of racial politics, or plunging headlong into the vicissitudes of autobiographical white identity as an integral facet of gay South African experience, some white gay and lesbian authors chose to create white characters who are distinctly unattractive, 'white' in their behaviour, sexual and otherwise.

Two stories in the *Queer Africa* collection wrestle explicitly with the implications of whiteness in the characters' lives. In Rahiem Whisgary's 'The Filth of Freedom', a white adolescent boy, hiding his sexual desire for men and his smoking from 'despotic' maternal surveillance, finds himself mocked by Thabo, the young black man he has grown up with: the domestic worker's son. The rage and disgust between the two characters seeps onto the page, and the whiteness of the environment overwhelms the black character, who turns in a final paragraph to writing as a path beyond the 'filth' of the lying white boy and his outraged mother. Annie Holmes in 'Leaving Civvie Street' represents the explicit and crude racisms of young colonial Rhodesian youth as the narrator (an 'I'). One of the young white adolescent girls betrays a would-be, tentative girl-lover by turning away from her and leaning into the safe chest of a Mark, who 'runs his finger down my neck'.

My own story, 'Porcupine', a collection in which diverse racialisation figures – always lesbian – occur takes the strategy of representing 'whiteness' through an

overtly racist character fairly far. The narrator is racialised as black and well aware of how this positions her within a largely white university context:

When I speak up in this place of higher education, this place of small rooms and heads around seminar tables, when I speak up and say, 'Porcupine', I am usually asked to repeat myself. Heads turn and ask one another, 'What did she say?' as an enormous porcupine with a mohawk of spines scurries across the floor, claws scratching the wood. Sometimes the white woman tutor see it too, and calls it, 'a complex challenge'. Her eyes look serious as she says this, and although I remain ignored, heads nod.

(Bennett 2008: 72)

The narrator's white lover, someone whom she's allowed to edit her own writing, suddenly one evening begins to provoke her: within their love-making, with racist jokes, fucking with 'race'. The narrator is appalled; the figure of the lover is one of a proprietary and psycho-dynamically sadistic woman. The narrator leaves, her emotions, writing, and sexualities 'fucked-with'.

I am not sure (for a range of reasons) that this particular story works, and the strategy of writing whiteness as seamlessly hideous has a kickback. The characters (Wishgary's pale James, my 'white lover', the crude Rhodesian young men) too readily claim the space of a 'bad whiteness'. This, I would argue, 'disappears' the responsibility of the author to imagine more complex, less banal, more self-critical engagement with the impossibilities of holding the representation of whiteness as any form of queer.

This section has sketched three strategies white gay and lesbian authors have deployed to simultaneously claim their work as queer and self-position as 'white'. The first imagines queer (or sometimes just gay or lesbian sexual orientation) as a passport beyond whiteness; the second inhabits whiteness with agonised ferocity, but cannot escape its hypocrisies. And the third demonises whiteness, leaving behind only stereotypes.

As noted early on in the chapter, I have not attempted a comprehensive review in any way, nor sought to pin particular writers, in a permanent way, to the strategies deployed by the pieces of work I've chosen to explore (each writer has produced much work of a range of genres and across decades). The goal has been to bear witness to the conviction that white South African gay and lesbian writers seem to share that it *is* possible to live outside of heteronormativities, even to embrace the marginality and critique of queer, and to simultaneously live constantly inflected by the meanings of whiteness, which at their very least alienate, anger, economically terrorise, and bewilder millions of South Africans. This conviction strikes one as schizophrenic, at best, ruthless, at worst.

## **Without conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to profile, and explore, what strikes me as a 'fissure' at the heart of much white-authored South African writing which is overtly committed to the project of radicalising heteronormativities. That fissure (one

as cataclysmic for me as the moment in Xaba's short story in which her identity as comrade is torn away from her through her self-knowledge as rape survivor) is rooted in the political history of white gay and lesbian activism pre-1994, which frequently conceptualised sexual orientation as akin to race, in its effects on white lesbian and gay people's lives. This self-location erased racialisation, to a large extent, split 'the queer revolution' from the decolonial one, the one about resources, land, and race. Post-1994, an enormous amount of activism, including writing, from a range of black queer people and organisations has reoriented the meaning of queer in South Africa and with very clear links to continent-wide work. The 'call-out' to white writers in South Africa remains, nonetheless, critical (and interesting). As the second section briefly suggests, the roots of such intervention lie deep within black and African feminisms, and, as many have argued, the dissolution of the power of 'whiteness' within the politics of representation entails learning the strategies through which normative whiteness can be both rehearsed and liquidated. The third section explores three such strategies, revealing all as compromised, but in different ways. In making this analysis, I am not suggesting despair for white writers: it is impossible to queer while white, or while white is aspirational, and figuring out what doesn't work is useful. Or maybe I am suggesting despair. Despair recognises the fissure, at least.

In 1988, J. M. Coetzee's *White Writing* critiqued the narratives, penned by a variety of white authors, which describe South African lands as empty – almost prehistorically strange – space to be populated by courageous and independent settlers. Since then, a number of critical theorists have sought to unpack and negotiate the whiteness of South African writing authored by cisgendered writers for decades. Within the lesbian and gay archive, however, it has only been very recently that queer activist art has been radically challenged. #FuckWhitePeople, the evolving installation and performances of Dean Hutton, insists that whiteness as stance, voice, legacy, economy, and human being is catastrophically corrosive. Hutton's work has catalysed death threats to them and a range of sarcastic, violent, and dismissive responses, almost exclusively white-authored. However, they simultaneously receive responses of interest, encouragement, and relief, especially from South African black queer communities. What is salutary here is the importance of difficult and experimental moves implacably certain that there is no political language in which queer may co-exist with the interests of whiteness. The erasure of whiteness within efforts to represent South African queer is likely to require the design of probably unprecedented strategies for any writer claiming both counter-heteronormative experience and retaining racialisation as white. For too many of these writers, I imagine the nexus between self-erasure as white, and self-erasure is too tight, and the monolingual/literate range too narrow for much movement. Waiting in the wings, at a corner, unseen, is always/perhaps the next grrl/boi/being with a maverick pen. I watch out for them, just in case.

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## 6 Practices of non-heterosexual masculinities among MSM in Nigeria

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### Introduction

There has been a long existing assumption in the singularity in which masculinity and male sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa can and should be enacted and expressed. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the dominant form of masculinity is the heterosexual male (Ampofo and Boateng 2007; Ratele 2014). In Nigeria, particularly, hegemonic masculinity is patriarchal heterosexual masculinity. Masculinity and sexuality are not easily separated; this is because once a man does not conform to the hegemonic form of masculinity, the first thing to be questioned is his sexuality (Ampofo and Boateng 2007). This assumption of a predominantly heterosexual Africa was fuelled by colonial writers such as Edwards Gibbons, an English writer and historian, who wrote in a published study, ‘I believe and hope, that the Negroes in their own country were exempt from this moral pestilence’ (cited in Murray and Roscoe 1999: xii). By ‘exemption from moral pestilence’ what Gibbons implied was the absence of homosexuality on the African context. Shortly after, Sir Richard Burton, an English explorer and geographer wrote, ‘The negro race is mostly untainted by sodomy and tribalism’ (Murray and Roscoe 1999: xii). More recently, those who hold political power across the African continent have followed suit, notably, Daniel arap Moi of Kenya and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, who have both described homosexuality as unnatural, ungodly, and un-African, and the anathema to the morals of the ‘African culture’.

This chapter, however, lends evidence to and acknowledges the existence and a myriad of ways in which Nigerian men express their masculinity and sexuality. These forms of masculine and sexual expressions lie in the heterosexuality-homosexuality continuum. While we acknowledge that women also demonstrate non-normative sexualities, our focus in this chapter is on the non-normative sexualities of men. This chapter is intended to motivate that other than the normative heterosexual expression of masculinity and male sexuality, there are indeed multiple ways an African man may enact his masculinity and express his sexuality. It also shows that these non-conforming forms of masculinity and sexual expression in the heteronormative context attract immense stigma, discrimination, homophobia, and extreme violence amongst other injustices. Indeed, men who express non-heterosexual masculinities in Nigeria must negotiate their sexuality in the

midst of traditional and received cultural expectations of manhood. Therefore, they have to manage their identities in their largely heteronormative, homophobic, and criminal context.

This first section in this chapter outlines the context of the study. It provides contextual background to the research and describes aspects of socio-cultural, legal, and religious systems pertaining to Nigeria, which act to constrain the activities and identities of men who identify as non-heterosexual. The second section details the methods employed in investigating the practices and lived experiences of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nigeria. It provides a reflection of some of the negotiations that had to be made in order to gain access to this hidden population and researches a sensitive topic seldom heard in a country where same-sex relationships are criminalised. The third section engages the 'formation of sexual identities' and the different ways which MSM express and enact their non-heterosexual identities. Within this section, key experiences of some participants from our study, which reveal their understanding and construction of meaning around their sexual identities, are highlighted. Given that their sexual practice is not only criminalised but also attracts immense stigmatisation and discrimination, the fourth section discusses the ways in which participants manage their non-heterosexual identities. The chapter concludes with a final reflection on the implications for the field of public health.

### **The Nigerian context in a nutshell**

This study is situated in the Nigerian context where religious and cultural forces heavily shape and influence the legal framework of the country. The research was conducted in two dissimilar states, demographically, socially, and culturally. These are Lagos and Abuja in Nigeria. Located in the southwestern part of Nigeria and with a population estimated to be about 21 million in 2016, Lagos has the highest population in Nigeria and is the second-fastest growing population in Africa (Lagos State Government 2017). Lagos, the financial hub of Nigeria, predominantly constitutes the Yoruba tribe; albeit, it has also experienced an influx of people from all tribes seeking job opportunities and prospects which has changed the demographics to a mixed one. Hence it has been described as the melting pot of all cultures in Nigeria. In terms of religious representation, there is a mix of Christians, Muslims, and a minority who are adherents of traditional or indigenous beliefs.

In contrast, Abuja, a city constructed in the 1980s located in the north central geopolitical zone, is both the nation's capital city and the Federal Capital Territory. Abuja has an estimated population of over 1.4 million (National Population Commission 2017). Similar to Lagos, it has had an influx of people from various tribes and currently has all tribes represented. However, the Hausa tribe remains the predominant tribe, with Hausa as the major language spoken. In terms of religious practices, a majority of the population practice Islam. However, in the study reported in this chapter, the majority of the study participants sampled from Abuja



identified as Christians with only one participant identifying as Muslim. This may be attributed to the majority of the participants being of Igbo descent and, traditionally, indigenes of the Igbo tribe are predominantly Christian.

Nigerians can be said to be a very religious and cultural people. In the traditional Nigerian context, there is a deafening silence about issues pertaining to sexuality (Ikpe 2004). In fact, these issues are really never openly discussed except in 'respectable' private spaces such as within the confines of a heterosexual marriage union (*ibid.*). Issues pertaining to sexuality and sexual behaviour are heavily regulated by religious and cultural norms, which influence the legal context (Obadare 2015; Ojo 2007). In Nigeria, like other countries on the African continent, only the 'hegemonic' form of masculinity and heterosexual expression of sexuality are permitted, despite the multiplicity of masculinities and sexual expressions in the country (Uchendu 2007; Groes-Green 2009).

The Nigerian context, which is highly heteronormative, privileges heterosexuality over homosexuality and assumes heterosexuality to be the norm (Gaudio 2014). In this heteronormative context, once a man reaches a certain age, social and cultural expectations require that he gets married to a woman and that they procreate. Although the social system appears to be shifting, the Nigerian context is still highly patriarchal in the sense that male agency is privileged over the female. More so, the hegemonic male who is the dominant male in the Nigerian context is placed on a higher hierarchy than other male figures who do not quite meet the standard. This standard, dictated partly by social, cultural, and religious systems, posits male dominance, where the man makes the majority and the most important decisions in society and holds power and authority.

In 2014, under the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) was passed into law. The title SSMPA1 is particularly problematic and deceptive for a number of reasons. First, even though its implication is that same-sex marriage is prohibited and illegal, it goes beyond this and extends to prohibiting and criminalising established or suspected same-sex relationships with a jail sentence of 14 years. Second, it penalises witnesses to same-sex marriages or individuals who are aware of same-sex relationships, including those who run gay clubs and organisations, with ten years' imprisonment. This law fundamentally infringes on the human rights of Nigerian citizens as guaranteed by the constitution. After the signing of the same-sex marriage prohibition by President Goodluck Jonathan, the environment of homophobia, discrimination and oppression in Nigeria was not only revived but also intensified. It is against this backdrop of patriarchy, repression, and heteronormativity that Nigerian MSM have to negotiate their non-heterosexual identities.

## **Methods**

As stated earlier, this study was conducted in two states, Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria. The study employed qualitative research approaches to critically explore and describe the lived experiences of HIV positive MSM, including how they manage their non-heterosexual identities in the heteronormative context of Nigeria.

Qualitative research approaches, such as in-depth interviews, were deemed appropriate for this study because its focus was on a vulnerable population and issues that can be considered sensitive (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). In Nigeria, the HIV positive MSM embodies a vulnerable persona because he experiences significantly reduced autonomy because of his marginality in a context which is not only heteronormative but also patriarchal (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). He is marginalised due to his HIV status and because of his sexual practices, which are considered taboo. Unlike other subjects of research who may be easily located, he is considered 'hard to reach'.

This research was considered sensitive because it required the revelation of practices considered to be 'deviant', distressing, and difficult to disclose, and would otherwise have been kept confined within the 'private space' of the men who were interviewed (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2006). Furthermore, the revelations from these men are both socially and politically charged, and potentially incriminating. Every single step of the research process, from negotiating entry to building rapport to the commencement of formal data collection and analysis and to the end of the study, needed to be considered with utmost sensitivity.

The first step in the negotiation process was finding an organisation that would act as the gatekeeper for the study – an important first step especially in light of the illegal nature of same-sex sexual practices and the stigma associated with researching these issues in Nigeria. In addition, it was of utmost importance to secure the backing of a gatekeeper organisation (GO), as it was essential in facilitating access to this hard-to-reach and hidden population. Not only did the GO enable access to this population but also ensured safety and expedited the process of rapport building. Heartland Alliance International (HAI) was selected as the GO because it was amongst the few organisations providing psychosocial support as well as HIV prevention and human rights protection services to Nigeria's most at risk populations, including MSM, using a comprehensive, rights-based approach. In order to increase the sampling frame, HAI connected us with two other organisations, Population Council (PC) and the International Centre for Advocacy on Rights to Health (ICARH), both providing HIV services including antiretroviral therapy (ART) to MSM populations. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sheffield and was also obtained from two research governance bodies in Nigeria, the Federal Capital Territory Health Research Ethics Committee, and the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital Health Research and Ethics Committee after passing through a rigorous process. Because of the sensitive nature of this study, issues such as ensuring voluntary participation, providing participants with both verbal and written information about the study, and ensuring the safety of both participants and researchers had to be clarified in the ethics application before ethical approval could be obtained. It should be noted that the SSMPA does not criminalise the provision of healthcare services to MSM. Therefore, there are no ethical issues in naming these GOs.

In Abuja, the sampling frame which participants were recruited from was provided by all three non-governmental organisations (NGOs) mentioned earlier: HAI, PC, and ICARH. These NGOs were briefed and provided with information

about the inclusion criteria. In order to recruit participants for both focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs), the GOs were asked to approach clients who met the person specifications and provide them with verbal and written research information. With respect to the IDIs, once clients agreed to be interviewed, a convenient date and time was agreed upon. A total of 13 in-depth interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. In the case of FGDs, participants were approached and provided with the study information on the day AOB<sup>1</sup> was present at the facility. They were given a minimum ‘cooling off’ period of 24 hours to decide whether they were willing to participate. Upon agreement, participants were recruited until the desired number of participants in each FGD was achieved. A total of three FGDs were conducted, with nine participants in the first, five participants in the second, and six participants in the third.

In Lagos, the GO was asked to approach clients during a support group meeting in order to recruit participants for both IDIs and FGD. As in Abuja, potential participants were provided with both verbal and written research information, as well as a consent form to initial if they decided to partake in the study. The FGD was subsequently conducted by AOB on the day of their support group meeting. This was because it was the most pragmatic way to get all participants at the same time in the same venue. A total of eight in-depth interviews and one FGD were conducted before data saturation was reached.

To gain more in-depth accounts of participants’ experiences, FGDs were conducted prior to the interviews in both Abuja and Lagos. In order to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and safety of participants, prior to the commencement of interviews and FGDs, it was reiterated that consent forms were initialled instead of signed. This also ensured that participants’ audio recordings could easily be matched to their documents during data analysis.

In Abuja, AOB and an assistant who was also MSM and who had the role of taking notes moderated the FGDs. All FGDs were conducted using a pre-structured topic guide. The topic guide began with an icebreaker question asking what participants would do with an unlimited amount of money they had won through the lottery (see Appendix for topic guide). This question was used to build rapport with participants and enabled easy transition to the main questions. An additional rapport-building strategy was paying courtesy visits to the NGOs and staying back for informal chats with participants and other MSM. Each FGD lasted approximately 1 hour 45 minutes.

IDIs were conducted with purposively selected participants from FGDs to get more detail into their lived experiences. In Abuja, 13 IDI participants were selected, while in Lagos, 8 participants were selected, making for a total of 21 IDIs. Interviews were conducted in office spaces provided by the NGOs. The initial intention was to conduct narrative interviews. The topic guide was developed and administered in English or Pidgin English<sup>2</sup> and asked the broad question, ‘Tell me about your health or life in relation to your illness.’ It became apparent after the first few interviews that participants were not familiar with this form of enquiry and had anticipated more structured questions. This prompted the use of the semi-structured interview topic guide, which explored three areas of their

lived experiences: their social context, understanding, experiences, and management of HIV, and, finally, their experiences of accessing healthcare services as well as adhering to ART. This chapter is concerned with the first area, the social context in which they experience their non-heterosexual masculinities. Participants each received refreshments worth 1500 naira/participant, which was equivalent to £4.50, as remuneration. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. All interview and FGD data were transcribed verbatim and transferred to NVivo for management and thematic analysis.

## **The construction of non-heterosexual masculinities in Nigeria**

Masculinity and sexuality are inextricably linked, and are not easily separated. This is because in nearly every part of the globe, much of what it means to be masculine is entrenched in a man's ability to prove his sexual prowess and, most times, in the heteronormative sense. African scholars have embraced the plurality of the concept of 'masculinity and sexuality' owing to the fact that there is a multiplicity of ways in which these two can be enacted (Ratele 2005; Ratele 2014; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005). Furthermore, we will add that given that Africa is not homogenous and there exists a multitude and variety of cultural expressions and practices, it is problematic to make the assumption that there is a singular way in which African masculinity or sexuality is and can be enacted. In light of this, we will, instead, refer to masculinities and sexualities.

Heterosexual sex is employed in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, and, in the African context particularly, a man who uses his phallus 'incorrectly' is very often ridiculed (Ratele 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, a concept first defined by R. W. Connell, is 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 1995: 77). It has been described as 'the dominant form of masculinity in a society and pertains to the relations of cultural domination by men' (Ampofo and Boateng 2007: 42). This notion of hegemonic masculinity has informed much conceptual work on masculinities in Africa. Like the hegemonic male in the Western context where this concept originates, a defining attribute of the African hegemonic male is his heterosexuality. The African hegemonic male is characterised by his 'physical strength and bravado, exclusive heterosexuality . . . and intense interest in sexual "conquest"' (Trigiani 1998: 22). He dominates not only over women but also other men who express non-heterosexual forms of masculinity and sexuality. He is the symbol of virility and prides himself with the amount of sexual partners he is able to amass (Ikpe 2004; Uchendu 2007). Therefore, the 'real' African male is everything the non-heterosexual African male is not (Ratele 2014).

In the heteronormative Nigerian context, in particular, hegemonic masculinity is patriarchal heterosexual masculinity. Descriptions of the Nigerian hegemonic male can be found in the literary arts. For example, in *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe (1958) depicts Okonkwo, a man who can be said to be the African

hegemonic male. Okonkwo is described as having attained solid personal achievements by defeating one of the greatest wrestlers in his village. He is described as being tall and huge, with bushy eyebrows and a 'severe' look. Perhaps what distinguishes Okonkwo as the epitome of dominant African masculinity is that he has three wives and eight children, and was said to rule his family with an iron fist. Okonkwo's character is contrasted with that of his father, Unoha, who perhaps can be seen as the embodiment of the subordinate male. Unoha is described as being tall and thin, docile, and spendthrift. He was nothing like Okonkwo and represented everything Okonkwo hated. Okonkwo was teased as a child because of his father who was referred to as '*agbala*', which loosely translates to woman or a man without a title (Achebe 1958). By contrasting Okonkwo and Unoha, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* presents the perfect picture of African hegemonic masculinity against a subordinate form of masculinity.

From the Hausa *yan daudus*<sup>3</sup> of the north to the Yoruba cross-dressers of the southwest and the 'male daughters' of the East, Nigerian men have historically troubled what is assumed to be the hegemonic form of masculinity and demonstrated a multiplicity of masculinities and sexual expressions (see Gaudio 2014; Amadiume 2015). In the study reported here, participants reveal the multiplicity of non-heterosexual expressions of masculinity and, indeed, dispel assumptions and claims that there exists solely one form of masculinity or male sexual expression: the heterosexual male. Their narratives provide insight into how non-heterosexual masculinities are constructed and negotiated in heteronormative Nigeria.

Findings from this study showed that some Nigerian men identify with non-heterosexual identities such as homosexual, bisexual, and pansexual. Participants defined a homosexual as a person who has sexual feelings and attractions for the same sex and a bisexual as a person who has sexual feelings for both sexes, male and female. Only one participant reported identifying as pansexual. He defined pansexuality as being sexually attracted to all genders, gender identities, and biological sex. The use of MSM to describe this group of men was deliberate, as it is a term commonly used in public health, especially in the context of African sexualities and HIV, where men may not necessarily identify as homosexual or bisexual for various socio-cultural reasons. Although, as this study revealed, the usefulness of this label in describing these men can be contested, as different participants ascribed different meanings to it. While some participants accepted the label, some were hesitant to identify as MSM because they understood it to connote men who have sex with men for reasons other than sexual attraction or feelings – for example, for financial gain or for fun.

For MSM living in Nigeria, it appeared that the construction of understanding of their sexual identities was very often directly linked to their practice of engaging in sex with other men. This was evident from the interview sessions, where study participants referred to themselves and other participants as 'homosexual' or 'gay', thereby revealing their general understanding of sexual identity as the act of sex. Their use of 'gay', 'homosexual', and 'MSM' interchangeably also appeared to suggest that there is not a precise delineation of sexual identity,

behaviour, and orientation, and the connotation of these terms in this context appear to be blurred. In other words, a man who engages in sex with another man may be referred to as gay or homosexual regardless of whether he also engages in sex with women. In the same light, a man who also engages in sex with women may not necessarily identify as bisexual but consider himself homosexual, even though he is sexually attracted to and may at some point in his life have engaged in sexual intercourse with women. A case in point is illustrated by the example of Akin, who when asked about his sexual preferences, responded,

Yes, I consider myself homosexual in the sense that I have never had sexual intercourse with a woman, but I am attracted to women.

(Akin, self-identified homosexual man)

As the quotes that follow reveal, one study participant pointed out that he was born having homosexual tendencies by mentioning that he had never had sex with a woman. Another participant, Ibrahim, who also self-described as a homosexual man, reported that although he had previously engaged in sexual intercourse with women, he still considered himself to be 'homosexual',<sup>4</sup> because since he started developing sexual feelings towards others, they had never been towards women.

I remember having sexual intercourse with a girl, but it was like a childish, um, way of life, I have not fully understood what sex is all about that time, that was when I was still a kid. I did it and it was not on one occasion, several times, but then that was the only person, that was the only girl I have had sex with, but while I was growing as I got mature, I didn't have sexual interests in women and I don't think, even up to now I don't think I have feelings for the women.

(Ibrahim, self-identified homosexual man)

It therefore appeared to be that homosexuality as conceptualised by the men in this study was not only fluid but also situation-specific. These participants also frequently used feminine pronouns when describing those who self-identified as homosexual. Interestingly, and as elaborated on in the next section, some participants, who were considered to behave in ways described as 'feminine' had successfully learned to perform masculinity in public and some private familial spaces. In fact, one of them mentioned during his interview that he would never identify as 'homosexual' outside the confines of the NGO, which served as a safe space for him and others like him.

No matter what you do, the moment I am stepping out of this very place and you call me outside, even you, you call me outside and you ask me, are you a homosexual? I am going to tell you I don't know what you are talking about. Why? It's because it's the society where I'm living. I have to protect myself, and then protect my family.

(Kinle, self-identified homosexual man)

Performing masculinity was not an easy task, and some had to put more effort into managing their sexual identities in their daily lives.

Some participants expressed ambivalence about their sexuality. Some who identified as homosexual also revealed that they were indeed attracted to the opposite sex, but because they had not experienced sex with them, they could not consider themselves bisexual. For example, one participant stated,

I consider myself homosexual in the sense that I have never had sexual intercourse with a woman, but I am attracted to women . . . I think bisexual is when you have both . . . I've never tried women, so I keep saying I'm homosexual. I'm homosexual because I've never had that of a woman.

(Yemi, self-identified homosexual man)

Ambivalence and confusion about sexuality was expressed in a different way by a participant who self-identified as bisexual but expressed that he initially considered himself to be homosexual and had only recently developed an attraction to females. According to this participant, he grew up wearing girl clothes. As he grew older, he joined a gym, became more masculine, conforming to the hegemonic social ideals of masculinity in Nigerian society. He eventually developed an attraction for females, although, he remains more attracted to males than females. This participant's narrative, which appears next, reveals the transient and malleable nature of sexuality.

I love the dress. I love the bra. I love the hairdo. I love female shoes. . . I change my peer groups from MSM people to heterosexual friends. I go to watch football, not like I even love football, but I try to even watch most times, so I can at least have a change of environment.

(Hasan, self-identified bisexual man)

Of note, some of the self-identifying bisexual participants who reported engaging in sex with men as a form of recreation considered the act to be a game or fun that they could end at any time. One participant expressed this: 'I play, the game I do is fun. I do it for fun' (Chris, self-identified bisexual man). Some self-identifying homosexual and bisexual participants reported that they were expected to get married and have children in order to meet up to cultural expectations of the heteronormative Nigerian context. Several others simply had the desire either to get married or to have children. In this study, a couple of the participants were married. The married participants reported that their wives were aware of their sexual practices. As observed across various African contexts, in Nigeria, getting married and procreating are a result of societal and cultural norms (Dlamini 2006; Uchendu 2007; Odimegwu and Okemgbo 2008). For example, according to participants, cultural and societal expectations dictate that the only son, or the oldest son, in a family gets a degree, gets married, and procreates.

In terms of the realisation of their 'sexual identity', for most participants, it came during their formative years – that is, during their school-aged (childhood)

years. For some participants, this realisation was hastened by classmates and sometimes family members who ridiculed them about their feminine mannerisms and inclination towards conventionally feminine objects and activities. For example, their tendency to want to dress in their mother's or sister's clothes as illustrated in the following quote (translated from Pidgin to English):

When I was small, I used to do things like a woman. I used to tie wrappers and wear my sister's blouse . . . I just thought it was normal . . . when I go to school, all my friends would insult me; they would say I act like a woman. I don't hang out with boys . . . as I got older. That's when I realized that it is possible for a man to have sex with another man.

(Amaechi, self-identified homosexual man)

For some other participants, it was the feeling of being female and the physiological development of breasts which served as a confirmation of sexuality. These participants reported that they had always been attracted to the same sex, even without necessarily understanding what these feelings meant. Some of the participants, like the participant in the quote that follows, had always perceived themselves to be female, and this was the case especially when they were the receptive partner in sexual intercourse:

When I'm having sex with a man, I don't feel like I'm a man, I feel like it's the right thing I'm doing because I feel like I'm a woman that was born as a man. So, but when people see me they feel I'm a homosexual or gay person but to me, I don't feel like that. I feel like I'm a woman.

(Olu, self-identified homosexual man)

In Nigerian society, cultural, religious, political, and legal expectations shape aspects of an individual's life, including how he chooses to express and enact his masculinity and sexuality. In this study, participants' responses illustrated the significant role religion and family play in shaping aspects of social life, thereby strengthening this claim. One of the participants, Bode, reported that he identified as bisexual mainly because as a child he was attracted to females and never had feelings for males, or even knew that it was possible to develop same-sex attraction. His mum, coming from a strong Christian background, however, did not like the idea of having females around him and tried to reduce his contact with females. She even went as far as enrolling him into an all boys' boarding school, and this was where he was introduced to homosexual practices. He reported that he did not enjoy his first sexual experience but soon after he became accustomed to it and began seeking same-sex relationships. In accordance with Bode's report, his mother's religious beliefs and perceptions of females as the source of diseases and inherently dangerous caused him to avoid females. He further narrated that he had been intimately involved with females, one whom he loved so much that '[he] forgot [he] was gay' (Bode, self-identified bisexual man). A sexual affair with his girlfriend's male cousin led to their break-up, an action he will forever regret. He,



as well as other bisexual-identifying participants, tended to express their desire to get married to a female one day.

For participants who had always had same-sex attraction, religion played a different role in the process of realising their sexuality. One participant, for example, reported that during childhood he experienced immense conflict with his sexuality and constantly battled with these feelings because of his religious beliefs, which advocated that his sexual attractions were iniquitous. It was therefore necessary to constantly suppress and refrain from acting on these feelings by praying, fasting, and observing other religious rituals in order to remain in right standing with God. However, participants reported that despite the prayers, fasting, and deliverance sessions, their sexual feelings only intensified.

So, I started being very religious and trying as much as possible to avoid any relationship with the female peers. But then I kept having that feeling that I am sexually attracted to the same sex, I tried to suppress the feelings. Each time it comes on me, I keep praying oh blood of Jesus cover me . . . I don't like this.

(Ibrahim, self-identified homosexual man)

Some participants reported that they did not fully comprehend their sexual attraction towards the same sex till they were taught or had engaged in sex with another man. As expressed by an older participant, 'Most people that are MSM, they don't know what they are doing until they are already into it' (Gaddo, self-identified bisexual man). The majority of the participants in this study understood their non-heterosexual identity to be an innate, natural, and God-given part of their self-identification, while others understood it to be circumstantial. Crucially, those participants who conceived their sexuality to be inherent stressed that they were neither taught nor lured to have same-sex attractions. Therefore, in the current legal context of criminalisation, it appeared to this group of MSM that they were being criminalised for an attribute which was out of their control. However, participants who understood their sexuality to be circumstantial stressed that they were – as they said – lured, sexually abused, or introduced to the practice in school. Others saw the practice as a game, a way of making a living or sustenance.

Participants in this study also had different sexual partnership preferences; for example, while a few preferred younger guys, others preferred older, more mature men. Their sexual preferences determined the way in which they negotiated sexual partnerships. This was to the extent that participants who preferred younger men were opposed to the idea of getting paid for sex. This opposition can be attributed to the age, power, and respect dynamics, where older individuals are more inclined to give money to younger individuals.

### **Management of non-heterosexual masculinities**

Findings from this study reveal that religious, cultural, political, and legal frameworks impact heavily on the management of the daily lives of Nigerian MSM. In other words, these frameworks, beliefs, and norms influence the ways in which Nigerian MSM choose to express their masculinity and sexuality in public spaces.

This is because, as has been reported in the previous section, their sexual practices and identities do not conform to the hegemonic form of African masculinity and therefore trouble strongly held socio-cultural beliefs of what a Nigerian man should be. Nigerian MSM therefore experience an unprecedented level of stigma, discrimination, and extreme violence in the heteronormative Nigerian context.

Every aspect of the life of a Nigerian MSM as a member of society requires careful identity and information management. Failure to do so successfully subjects him to immense levels of stigma, discrimination, blackmail, and extortion, and, in many cases, extreme violence enacted by healthcare providers, family members, non-MSM friends, and members of the society. In this study, both the social and legal context played a critical role in the propagation of stigma and discrimination. Particularly, it was found that societal perceptions of homosexual practices as sinful, immoral, and ‘un-Nigerian’ facilitated the stigmatisation and discrimination of these men. Likewise, the legal context of criminalisation of same-sex relationships also contributed to the stigma and discrimination meted out on MSM in Nigeria.

In the health sector, healthcare workers were reported to preach to the men when they became aware of their sexual practices. Sometimes these men were stigmatised and outrightly denied treatment. In one case, a healthcare worker was reported to go as far as threatening to kill anyone, including her child, if she found out he engaged in homosexual practices or identified as being non-heterosexual. As a result of ill treatment experienced, lack of confidentiality, and a fear of stigmatisation and discrimination, many MSM do not access healthcare services, especially from general or public healthcare facilities in Nigeria, as illustrated in the quotes that follow:

I was having STI, when I go to a hospital in Maitama. When I discuss to the lady, she was saying God forbid bad thing, are you a gay? She was shouting Jesus! All these kind of things, so since then I don't feel [like?] going to the hospital.

(Arinze, self-identified homosexual man)

Anywhere I am I don't think I can ever, ever, ever, if it is going to public hospital I would stop.

(Boye, self-identified homosexual man)

In their homes and communities, MSM were often disowned, evicted from their homes, and socially excluded once their sexual identity or practices were known. This was the experience of a participant who reported,

So, my immediate elder brother had to like break my wardrobe, saw some lubes and condoms, so he had to take it to like our eldest brother and tell him that this is what he saw in my room, that he believes that I am gay. So, they called me and asked me, I told them yes I am, which resulted to a serious issue, actually I was sent out of the house for being gay.

(Akin, self-identified homosexual man)

Participants also reported that once their sexuality was revealed to family members, they were deprived of educational and financial support, sometimes permanently, other times with the condition of renouncing their sexual identities and

desisting from their sexual practices. For example, the participant whose view is presented next reported that his father stopped supporting him financially:

When my dad knew I was gay, I was discriminated by him, stigmatised; we were not on good terms for a year plus, and that was what actually stopped my education. He didn't give me any as in my feeding allowance; he didn't want to talk to me for a year plus.

(Olu, self-identified transgender man)

Many of the religious MSM found it extremely difficult to manage their identities at their places of worship. For example, they tend to internalise the pastor's preaching against homosexuality and label it demonic. This internalisation can be attributed to religious upbringing that speaks against homosexuality. As a result, they attempt to stop by seeking deliverance, fasting, praying, and performing other religious rituals. However, participants reported that most of the time, their sexual attraction and feelings for the same sex only came back much more intensified. They sometimes feel a sense of regret, and this is especially amongst those who identify as bisexual and believe their homosexual practices are circumstantial. For one participant, though he experienced conflicting feelings about his sexuality being circumstantial; he acknowledged that sexuality was a way of life and some may be born with non-heterosexual identities as a result of their biological make-up. However, because he was not initially attracted to the same sex, he was ambivalent about his sexual attractions. His previous relationships with females further amplified this ambivalence. The societal expectations that a man should get married served as a sort of validation for him. This coupled with the transiency of his sexual practices is evidenced in his statement:

Being gay, being homosexual, being bisexual, well I know I will marry someday and very soon by the grace of God, but me being gay, I don't like the idea at all. Given a choice, I won't even choose to be one. But I don't have a choice here; I have tried my best.

(Lucas, self-identified bisexual man)

In light of these experiences, MSM, therefore, managed their identities through the use of two strategies: living discreetly or simply concealing their sexual practices. Living discreetly meant those parties, meetings where 'gay' men convened, were held discreetly and many times at night. This was to keep police officers and suspecting onlookers at bay. Talking about the clandestine 'gay parties', one participant reported,

It still happens in Nigeria, but those things are very, very secret, even as we did it like this Friday, the next Friday police had to bombard into that hotel; they were thinking that is the day we want to do it, not knowing that we've already done it and left. So, it's quite alarming here; it is just that everybody should be very, very careful.

(Chris, self-identified homosexual man)

In addition, living a discreet life meant that they were careful about which men they approached and brought into their private spaces. This was done to avoid stigmatisation and homophobia. Most importantly, this tactic was used to avoid blackmail by those who pretend to be MSM in order to extort from, or enact extreme violence on, them. One participant reported,

I live a very discreet life. I might like a guy. . . I will never talk to you, let it be in my heart. . . If you choose to be my friend fine; some of them even walk to me and say: I want to be your friend, without even knowing that already in my mind I'm wishing for you to say that. . . But for me to tell you, I will not, because I'm scared that you might say no and then you will get my name about and then people would start talking about me, and I don't like that, and when you start talking about me, my family might get to hear it, and I wouldn't want that as well. I don't want anybody in my family to know this part of my life.

(Kunle, self-identified bisexual man)

Concealment was used by the men as a strategy to manage information about their societally devalued identities. In Nigerian society, certain 'markers' are often used to identify men who deviate from dominant masculinity in their mannerisms and sexual practices. Amongst these markers were if a man presented mannerisms considered to be effeminate and if he was always seen with other men and hardly in the company of women, especially in private spaces. By concealing their sexuality from outsiders, they were able to 'pass' as heterosexual. Passing here is a form of stigma management whereby a person with a socially discredited attribute, in this case non-heterosexual masculinity, presents themselves as though they did not possess that attribute (Goffman 1963). It follows, however, that some men were more easily able to 'pass' as heterosexual than others. Those men who were unable to 'pass' as easily were described by society as possessing feminine characteristics and mannerisms. This is because they dressed, walked, talked, or were drawn to interests considered to be 'feminine'. Many of the MSM reported concealing their identities by changing these mannerisms in order to conform to societal expectations. In their words, they had to 'man-do . . . learn how to be a man' (Peter, self-identified homosexual man) when they were in public spaces. One participant during the FGD reported that whenever he went to a hospital, he had to 'man-do', and it was difficult because it did not come naturally.

Participants, especially those who were unable to manage their non-heterosexual masculinity successfully, reported cases of extreme violence against them, as illustrated in the quote that follows:

It is like hell being MSM in Nigeria; there is jungle justice everywhere. I even heard about one in Ondo state, a politician and a man, a married man actually with two kids and a wife, you can imagine? . . . the politician was able to bail himself with some money . . . then they killed the other guy; they

brutally beat him up, and he died in the hospital. He's a man, a married man. So I don't know; they took laws into their hands.

(Joe, self-identified bisexual man)

Another participant reported how he received threats of a mob attack from men living in his neighbourhood because they had not seen him with women:

Even where I live in Apo. . . Area boys, they started putting eye on me, that they have not seen me with woman; its only guys, guys that visit me. To a point, they now started saying that they are going to set me up; they are going to, to mob attack me. That there was a day they caught me having sex with a man, they were peeping through my window.

(Sule, self-identified bisexual man)

The extreme violence observed here is a reflection of not only repressive laws but also a homophobic society that disregards the prevailing laws and takes matters into their own hands.

## Conclusion

The men in our study have evidenced the different versions and lived experiences of non-heterosexual identities as well as their conceptualisation and understanding of these identities against the backdrop of a heteronormative and criminalised context. As indicated, many Nigerian MSM self-identify as bisexual, homosexual, and pansexual, all expressions of non-heterosexual identities. Their understanding highlighted ambivalence, fluidity, and complexity of masculinities and sexualities in the Nigerian social context. While the majority of MSM identifying as homosexual understood their sexuality has being innate, others who identified as bisexual reported that they were lured or driven to assume their sexuality as circumstantial. As these men do not conform to the societal expectation of hegemonic African masculinity, they are stigmatised, discriminated against, and subjected to violence and homophobic attacks in almost every aspect of society. They, therefore, have to manage their identities through strategies such as concealment and 'leading a discreet life'. Their daily lived experiences of stigma, discrimination, and extreme violence negatively affect every aspect of their lives, including their access to fundamental necessities of life. Poor access to HIV-related health-care services, which has been recorded in MSM populations in Nigeria, particularly has negative public health implications. This is because the Nigerian MSM population is highly and disproportionately burdened by the HIV epidemic. It is imperative that policymakers are engaged and an open dialogue is initiated on the nature of MSM and implications of criminalisation on health outcomes including HIV. This may be a necessary first step in order to prevent a reversal of the gains recorded in the control of the HIV epidemic. Furthermore, society-wide sensitisation, which includes mass education of the society about the history of sexuality in order to debunk myths about homosexuality being un-Nigerian should be seen as a matter of urgency.

## Notes

- 1 Abisola Olatokunbo Balogun, primary author.
- 2 This is a variation of English spoken widely across Nigeria.
- 3 *Yan daudu* is a Hausa name used to describe a boy/man who behaves and dresses in a manner considered to be feminine. Some of these men who transgress gender norms occasionally engage in same-sex relations with other men.
- 4 Homosexual here refers to sexual desire and not just sexual behaviour.

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# Appendix

## Welcome

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group. I appreciate your willingness to participate.

## Introduction

My name is Abisola Balogun. I am a PhD Student at the University of Sheffield, and I will be moderating this focus group. Here with me is [insert name], and he will be the assistant moderator and will be taking down notes and operating the recorder.

## Purpose of the focus group

The reason we are having this focus group today is to get an understanding of your opinions, experiences, and concerns about accessing and using healthcare services and specifically accessing, using, and adhering to treatment. Your input is very important and as such, I would want you to share your honest and open thoughts during this focus group.

## Ground rules

- 1 You have your numbered identification for anonymity. If I call you or need to clarify, I would refer to this number.
- 2 I want you to do all the talking! Everyone has to participate, and if I don't hear from you in a while, I may call on you.
- 3 It is important that we talk one after the other, so no talking over each other.
- 4 Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, every person's experiences and opinions are important, and please speak up whether you agree and disagree, because it is important that I get a wide range of opinions.
- 5 What is said in this room stays in this room! I want you to feel as comfortable as possible when discussing or sharing issues which may be sensitive. You will not be identifiable in any report.

- 6 [Insert name here] will be recording this group discussion because we want to capture everything you say. Again, remember to talk one after the other so it's audible on the recorder.

### **Icebreaker question**

We will start with an icebreaker question. So imagine that you won the lottery today, and this lottery has a limitless budget, so you can take as much out as you want at any time. What will you do with the money?

### **Questions**

- 1 What is it like being HIV positive in Nigeria? (experiences, stigma, and discrimination)
- 2 How do you get your knowledge about HIV? (TV? radio? newspaper?)
- 3 Do you use any treatment to manage your illness? What treatment options do you use?
- 4 How do you navigate healthcare in Nigeria?
- 5 What challenges have you faced accessing your treatment? (What makes it easier?)
- 6 What barriers do you face in using your treatment? (What makes it easier?)
- 7 What challenges do you face adhering to medication? (What makes it easier?)
- 8 Tell me what it is like being a man who has sex with men in Nigeria?





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# Citizenship, activism, and human rights

This final section assembles three chapters that address issues of citizenship, activism, and human rights from varied vantage points. Mary Hames' chapter 'Lesbian Students in the Academy: Invisible, Assimilated, or Ignored?' focuses on the lived experiences of black lesbian student activists in a specific South African university. It reveals the extent of marginalisation (and to an extent, the erasure) that black lesbians face in the academy, but at the same time demonstrates multiple points of agentic activism. The second chapter, by Guillian Koko, Surya Monro, and Kate Smith's, which analyses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) forced migrants and asylum seekers who come from different countries across Africa to seek refuge in South Africa, takes a different approach and fills a void in the African scholarly discourse on the relationship between queer migration and LGBTQ human rights activism. The chapter challenges essentialising gender, sexuality, and culture in individual (and collective) expressions that relate to border politics. More than this, the chapter challenges the tacit assumption that, as Eithne Luibhéid puts it, 'all the immigrants are heterosexual' and 'all the queers are citizens' (2004: 233). After providing a snapshot of the discriminations faced by LGBTQ Africans in a number of countries, the chapter addresses international and South African human rights frameworks and the deficits in their implementation. Like the first and third chapter in this section, attention is paid to the diversities of lived experience and to agency, but there is a greater focus on social structures and their interpretation using intersectionality theory. The third chapter, Velile Vilane's account of the experiences of transgender people in Swaziland, foregrounds the voices of a section of the Swazi population that faces severe human rights deficits and a lack of citizenship rights. Like Hames, Vilane zeroes in on lived experiences and highlights agentic actions via activism. However, he maps these experiences across three key domains: education, healthcare, and the legal system.

The chapters in their varied ways enhance and make an important contribution to the citizenship literature. As Richardson (2015) argues, sexual citizenship literature is Western-focused. Some scholarship countering Western-centrism exists (Epprecht 2013; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013), and this highlights the importance of homophobic nationalism amongst political leaders in some African countries. The chapters in this collection help to counter notions of monolithic homophobic

nationalism by describing the identities and experiences of LGBTQ nationals in different African countries. They enrich the existing citizenship literature, including feminist (Lister 1997, 2011), race (Mepschen et al. 2010), sexual and intimate (Weeks 1998; Richardson 2000, 2015; Plummer 2003), and transgender (Monro 2005, 2010; Hines 2013; Hines et al. 2018), with a particular emphasis on rights aspects (Marshall 1950). Different aspects of lived experience that are relevant to citizenship studies are used in the various chapters. For example, Vilane's chapter provides a sharp account of the way that the public-private divide plays out in the lives of transgender Swazis, whilst Hames' chapter offers a topical contribution to lesbian and feminist citizenship studies.

Contemporary normative standards for the promotion of human rights have demonstrated limited potential to deal with deeply entrenched patriarchal power in African societies. At the same time, this has yielded useful frameworks for formulation of strategies to strengthen individual entitlements to sexual orientation and identities. Hames' chapter draws on African feminism in a way that indicates the potentials and limitations offered by Western-based human rights concepts and discourses (Bennett and Reddy 2015). Koko et al.'s and Vilane's chapters demonstrate stark human rights deficits, not only in countries where human rights policies for LGBTQ people are absent but also, in the case of Koko et al.'s chapter, in South Africa. All the chapters in this section of the volume seek to offer a more nuanced approach to advancing sexual rights amidst growing heteronormativity in the region and to provide possible entry points for furthering advocacy action, citizens' activism, and resource mobilisation (Ndashe 2011).

This section of the book also 'speaks to' other areas of scholarship, including postcolonial theory (Hawley 2001) and development literature (Cornwall et al. 2008). Notably, it advances southern intersectionality studies. There is a dearth of intersectional research in a southern context (see, however, Al-Rebholz 2013; Moolman 2013). Existing authors call for the use of intersectional frameworks and theory in a transnational context (Choo 2012). Nkabinde's (2008) work suggests that race, tradition, gender, and sexuality are routed through each other in the global South. The chapters in this collection all demonstrate this intersectional formation of identity. Hames' chapter specifically explores intersectionality within the academy and black lesbian activism in South Africa. Koko et al.'s chapter develops an intersectional analytical framework for understanding the multiple marginalisations and persecutions faced by African forced migrants in South Africa. It addresses social forces that have often been overlooked in intersectional analysis, including nationality, spatial aspects, liveability, and poverty.

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# 7 Lesbian students in the academy

## Invisible, assimilated, or ignored?

*Mary Hames*

### Introduction

South Africa is the only country on the African continent that has an extensive legal and policy framework that gives lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people unprecedented access to rights that were previously automatically granted to heterosexual people. However, some of these rights were gained through protracted legal action (see Croucher 2002; Bhana et al. 2007; Vincent and Howell 2014). LGBT people, like anyone else on the continent, continue to live in a society that reflects deep homophobia, transphobia, and, especially, lesbophobia (Mkhize et al. 2010). A large body of research has been developed with black lesbians in townships as research subjects (see, for example, Msibi 2012). Very little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of young lesbian students at universities. This chapter addresses the gap in knowledge about lesbian students in South African Universities from an activist-academic perspective.

I have observed, during my years of teaching in South African Higher Education, that radical black South African feminism is increasingly shaped by activism outside the classroom in civil society, mainly by organisations such as 1 in 9; Forum for the Empowerment of Women, one of the first organisations for black lesbians in Johannesburg; and Coalition of African Lesbians. While these organisations have informally been teaching Feminism 101<sup>1</sup> and feminist activism for years, black feminists have started to use cyberspace effectively to consolidate feminist thought and action. Young women students outside the classroom who are at the forefront of the current student politics and protests are also shaping and influencing radical black queer feminism. One reason for this phenomenon may have arisen because the university classroom has very limited opportunity to reach a wider audience that wants to learn and understand feminist thought. Classrooms can also be very hostile and intimidating. The old struggle maxim ‘each one, teach one’ was used to teach feminism outside the classrooms during the student protests. Vibrant discussions on social media unpacked the mystique of feminist and lesbian thought (South African Young Feminist Forum 2015).

There are very few studies done on lesbian identities and experiences in the South African academy. The studies done on black lesbians are primarily focusing on individual narratives (Morgan and Wieringa 2005), or violence, discrimination,

and stigma (Human Rights Watch 2011), and there is very limited reflective writing in broader theoretical approaches dealing with rights or gay studies (Hoad et al. 2005). A large percentage of South African academic and activist writing primarily reduces black lesbians to 'victims of violence' and in the process negates the contributions that they have made to the struggle for inclusive citizenship. Recent published work often portrays lesbians as victims of violence and hate crimes or interprets lesbian existence in relation to that of gay men (Matebeni 2008). This chapter helps to remedy the limitations of the existing literature in the field.

It is worth pointing out that recent discourses within higher education in South Africa centred on Africanisation and the decolonisation of the curricula and university. A few years back, the discourses in higher education were mainly around neo-liberal market concerns such as funding, access and throughput, and good governance (Cloete and Bunting 2000; Bok 2003). The University of the Western Cape (UWC), which forms the site of the research presented here, was one of the only historically black universities (HBUs) that included sexuality and gender concerns as integral to the transformation debate. This makes it a particularly interesting case study for the examination of discourses and activist interventions regarding black lesbian citizenship and human rights.

Since the democratic dispensation in 1994, where sexual orientation and gender have become focal areas for societal transformation, lesbians have been instrumental in changing South African jurisprudence (Hames 2008). However, legal and policy discourses did not substantively transform the lives of most black lesbians within the lower socio-economic class. Elsewhere, I have noted that much of the litigation for rights has been done by privileged, white, educated middle-class lesbian and gay people or by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) organisations funded by foreign donors (Hames 2008). Class plays a significant role in the type of visibility available to, and the erasure of, lesbian people.

A review of existing literature showed that there has always been tension regarding lesbian identity, bisexuality, and queer theory (see Rust 1995; Monro et al. 2017). It is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss the various positions, but it is necessary to point to the fact that lesbians have always been on the forefront to challenge patriarchy and the privileges of heterosexuality (Rich 1980; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Lorde 1984; Jeffreys 1994; Smith 2000; Anzaldúa in Keating 2009). Black lesbian feminists critiqued racism in the white mainstream feminism and argued for the recognition of multiple and intersectional axes of oppression that impacted black women's lives. It is through the black lesbian feminist lens that I approach the chapter.

We are currently living in a world of acronym speak, where the regular use of LGBTQ draws attention to the diversity of queer and the need to avoid essentialising. In a world where oppressions are often competing as being more marginalised, needing more attention or resources, I deemed it important to reaffirm the politics of naming the self as lesbian. Because only one of the participants referred specifically to bisexuality, I did not explore it further in this chapter, as this would lead to a different study regarding sexual identity at a later stage.

Gomez argues that black lesbians' existence should be realistically portrayed, even though these lives and sexualities are often severely truncated and distorted (quoted in Smith 2000). In her essay, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language', Audre Lorde implored the importance of naming and says she had to do it 'because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself' (Lorde 1984: 41). In the twenty-first century, identity politics became important as Ahmed makes the political statement that her feminist life is lived as a lesbian, and she explains at length how lesbians are being invisibilised and how the straightening tools function in calling lesbian couples either 'sisters' or 'husband and wife' (Ahmed 2017). This chapter provides an account of lived black lesbian female students' lives, their activist activities, and the structuring forces that affect them.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of lesbian activism at the university before providing information about the methodology used for the study on which the chapter is based. I discuss the implementation of the methodology in some detail in relation to an aspect of black lesbian student identity, identity labels, in order to demonstrate the richness of the data gained. The chapter then moves on to discuss the following key issues: safe spaces, racism in the academy, processes of assimilation and the invisibilisation of black lesbian voices, and political agency. Lastly, I provide a short conclusion focusing on activism.

### **Lesbian activism at university**

South African black lesbians are either invisibilised or made hypersensitive depending on the gaze (Potgieter 1997; Mkhize et al. 2010). My emphasis on the activism and experiences of lesbian women students at UWC aims to confront the relative dominance and hypervisibility of gay men, whose prominence, I argue, is a result of their gender. The history of UWC's LGTBQ activism at the start of the millennium initially involved lesbian women playing a central role in mobilising, consciousness-raising, and shaping various programmes amongst students and in the wider community. This reflected their visibility and agency decades before, when Kopanang (a women's student organisation in the early and mid-1990s), affiliated with the broader feminist movement on campus, sought to integrate awareness around sexual orientation into the broader struggles for gender justice on campus. Lesbian women, therefore, have a history of initiating lesbian and, ultimately, queer rights activism on campus.

In 2005, the Gender Equity Unit (GEU)<sup>2</sup> conducted a survey on how lesbian students experienced the post-1994 university, and in 2006, the first awareness-raising week on antihomophobia was organised at UWC. The outcome was the formation of Loud Enuf, a lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual programme which became responsible for subsequent annual awareness-raising events. In 2010, the GEU conducted another survey to assess the effect of the awareness-raising programmes and the creation of safe spaces. In 2015, the conversation series with lesbian-identified students began, and it allowed for a longitudinal reflection on what, if any, changes the institution has undergone in making the

campus an inclusive space and 'home' for all. This study is therefore a reflexive study on how 'progressive interventions' impacted the institution, the individual, and the collective. The current study (2015/2016) deals with the effect of the institutional culture on non-heteronormative lives and bodies, with attention being focused on how lesbians have actively responded to their subordination and silencing through efforts to define a distinct identity and politics vis-à-vis the Fallist<sup>3</sup> movement.

Despite lesbian women's on-the-ground role as initiators and activists, gay men increasingly began to take over existing spaces and structures that had been established by lesbians. This chapter asks what do these trends reveal about how queerness intersects with other forces of power, masculinity, entitlement, and marginalisation? And how can the fluctuating status of women in LGBTQ activism reveal lesbians' social positioning in an environment that remains fractured by race, gender, and sexual orientation? The chapter 'Lesbian Students in the Academy: Invisible, Assimilated, or Ignored?' deals with the complexities of identity politics that include race politics, sexual orientation, and gender identity in relation to South African lesbian women broadly, and specifically at the UWC. The chapter, therefore, seeks to demonstrate the intricacies of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) as 'an analytical tool that gives people better access to the complexities of the world and themselves' (Collins and Bilge 2016: 2). This chapter also indicates how the researcher needs to battle to 'hear' and 'see' intersectional struggles that often elude more familiar and recognisable axes of power as they represent themselves in gender, race, class, and language in the current student politics. Ideas of intersectionality have been taken up in the context of the South African student protests (Collinson 2016). This chapter implicitly shows how the convergence of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation contribute to the multiple oppressions of young lesbian students.

Another issue that black lesbian students face in South African universities concerns self-identification and feminism. Self-identification as radical black feminists saw them taking agency on many fronts – for instance, the protests to highlight 'rape culture' and misogyny on the various campuses, including that of the UWC. This identification with feminism can be interpreted as a sign of defiance to the exclusion of lesbians by other 'feminist' and student groups. In a study conducted by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Group and the Center for Women's Global Leadership, it was found that 'many feminists continue to feel the need to reassure the world that they are *not* lesbians' (Rothschild 2005).

## **Methodology**

I have used a combination of intersectional and discourse analysis to make sense of the different group discussions and individual conversations with lesbian-identified women students studying at the UWC during the 2015/2016 period. Intersectional analysis (Trahan 2011) provided a means of addressing key structuring forces in the lives of the lesbian students. Discourse analysis made it possible for me to interrogate



the discursive practices that shape higher education institutions. I searched print media, existing feminist journals such as *Agenda* and *Feminist Africa*, and I accessed research on traditional and online databases and research publications to assess the existing discourses regarding black lesbians in South Africa. In addition, the research took a participative observation approach (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994), in that I worked with students as an educator and facilitator, enabling the establishment of a space where black lesbian feminist thought and actions could be developed. In this chapter, I discuss my observations alongside data gathered directly from the research participants. Instead of having focus groups or constructed interviews with the participants, I decided on informal conversations. The reason was that I have been working with these women students in various programmes and projects over a lengthy period, and we have shared very intimate information as part of the pedagogical processes at the GEU. We have built up mutual respect and trust over a period of months and, even in some instances, years. My interests and views shaped the research in many ways; for example, the participants were informed that the conversations are not sites for the claiming of victimhood but to find solutions to make the institutional culture much more inclusive and to challenge them to take agency.

Fairclough et al. (cited in Van Dijk 2011) draw attention to the dialogic relationship that shapes critical discourse. They argue that in many dominant discursive practices, major ideological factors come to the fore and that prejudices and biases could either be reinforced or contested. For instance, unequal power relations between social classes, women, and men can be produced or reproduced in the way in which certain groups are discursively represented. Discourse analysis, according to them, foregrounds the opaque characteristics of discourse as a social practice. In this instance, the shaping of current discourse as reflected in the conversations conducted with the lesbian self-identified students clearly showed how overtly or covertly heteropatriarchy, homopatriarchy, ableism, sexism, and racism remain constant threats to women in general and specifically to lesbian women. Lesbians often find it difficult to give expression to their feelings of discomfort and exclusion in heteronormative environments and in those environments where gay men are dominant.

Discourse by its very nature includes the politics of identity and subjectivity (Widdicombe 1995). Discourses also include a 'broad conglomeration of linguistic and non-linguistic social practices and ideological assumptions that together construct power or racism' (Schiffrin et al. 2003). In exploring discourses in relation to identity, I ascertain what the reasons were for the ways that the perceptions of lesbians shifted from visibility to invisibility to hypervisibility and again to invisibility. Numerous studies have shown how black South African lesbians gained hypervisibility whenever there is extreme violence perpetrated against them and when they are perceived as the perpetual victims (Mkhize et al. 2010).

Taking this into consideration, I became interested in the discourse currently shaped by young black lesbians who are either middle class or on their way to becoming middle class and who are located at a university. I was also interested in how lesbian students have come to identify themselves as radical feminists, whether they identify as lesbian women, and how they approach the student political

environment without losing sight of their principled stance around the importance of gender justice alongside queer rights as well as the current call for the Africanisation of the university. I am, therefore, concerned with how their lived experiences of intersectionality have translated into their politics and their conscious articulation of 'intersectional feminism' that includes not only race and gender as the more familiar axes of intersectional identities in South Africa but also sexual orientation. I also wished to explore the way that they understood Africanisation, as many of the continent's leadership demonises homosexuality, and when archaic colonial penal codes are being invoked as argument for gender mainstreaming (see Dudink 2011; Epprecht 2013).

I started the study just before the 2015 student protests exploded all over the country. It was therefore imperative that I had to incorporate and understand the ways in which queer feminist thought was shaped during the 2015/2016 student protests at UWC. Each university's history and geographical location contributed to the evolution of distinctive forms of protests on individual campuses. My research on lesbian students in the context of FeesWillFall (FWF)<sup>4</sup> at UWC will therefore yield different patterns from studies dealing with lesbian women at, for example, the University of Cape Town or the University of the Witwatersrand.

I employed the snowball sampling method whereby known self-identified lesbian women students were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a series of intimate discussions. These women were already part of the broader student volunteers at the GEU, and they were asked to bring other self-identified lesbian students to the conversations. They brought their friends and acquaintances to the initial conversational meetings. At the start of the first conversation, they were handed consent forms to read and sign, and had the option to withdraw from the process at any time that they felt uncomfortable. In addition, individuals known to the researcher were also approached and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the conversation. This chapter is the conclusion of the different meetings that were conducted with the student groups.

In this study, I took consideration of the participants' race, ethnicity, education, status, domicile, geographical location, language(s), sexuality and sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and class. I knew all of the participants except one. Three of the participants attended historically 'coloured' schools and the rest attended historically 'white' schools.<sup>5</sup> The content of the conversations might have been influenced by where the participants completed their primary and secondary education, and what they were currently studying, as the subsequent analyses show.

Three of the participants were current cast members in the Educational Drama Programme located at the GEU and one was a former cast member and student. One of the participants was involved in the Mentoring Programme at the GEU. Three participants were active members of the Loud Enuf Programme. Although many of the students are open about their sexual orientation on campus, some of them have not shared this information with their parents.

The participants studied in different fields ranging from BA in education, economic, and management sciences; micro biology and forensic science; to dentistry

and law. Eight of the participants were third-year students, one was in first year, and one participant had already graduated with a BSc and was pursuing a second degree in dentistry.

### **The research process and the issue of identity categories**

On the first day of the conversation, there were ten participants. After the initial introductions, the conversation started with a leading question: ‘What are you calling yourself?’ or ‘How do you identify yourself?’ This was important because the use of correct pronouns has increasingly become a way in which gender and sexual non-conforming people wish to be identified. The conversation then interrogated the different derogatory or affirmative terms that abound in society for LGBTQ people. It also centred on the perception that homosexuality is a Western construct and on the rape and murder of young black lesbians in South Africa. The research participants had different opinions about how they should identify. Some preferred to be called lesbians, while others felt it is easier not to identify with any ‘label’.

I don’t introduce me as a homosexual woman, nor do I introduce myself as black. I am a human being first. What has my sexuality to do with anything? Straight people do not introduce them as such.

(Participant 1, 2015)

Usually, I do not have to explain that I’m with girls or guys. Guys do not take it well.

(Participant 3, 2015)

The participants varied in the ways that they were overt or covert about their lesbian identity. For example, participant 4 played rugby, and she shared that she had to ‘hide’ her sexual orientation when she is with the rugby team. She was afraid that the other team members would become hostile towards her. She could ‘camouflage’ her sexuality behind her tracksuits and sneakers, and because she played on women’s teams, nobody was able to accuse her of lesbianism.

Some of the first-year students were very wary of self-labelling. One of the participants commented that she had relationships with both girls and guys. She claimed that she would rather call herself ‘bi-curious’. Whenever her friends found out that she liked both genders, they called her ‘confused’. It was clear that the participant was deeply hurt because her peers did not validate or respect her feelings. This dismissal of her sexual orientation and calling her confused has been identified by researchers as an indication of the presence of biphobia (Rust 1995; Wishik and Pierce 1995; Monro et al. 2017). At that point, the participant was in a monogamous relationship with another woman student who did not want to identify as either ‘lesbian’ or ‘queer’. She believed to classify people is to limit them. She believed if you do not classify, things work out fine; it is when you

classify or label yourself that people become uneasy, as people are obsessed with classifying people to control them.

Another issue that emerged from the research is that the participants were divided in their opposition to derogatory terms and the reclaiming thereof, as the following 2015 conversation revealed:

I don't mind being called stabane<sup>6</sup> at all. It depends on the environment you are in. It is not offensive. For me this prove that homosexuality is African. Why? There is even a word for it. Where did it come from? . . . Stabane – depends on the connotation attached to it. It is cool to use it amongst friends.  
(Participant 1, 2015)

I do mind being called a stabane. You know Xhosa is a very rude language. Why do I confuse you? I don't want to be called 'butch' don't place me in a box.  
(Participant 2, 2015)

The participants constantly challenged each other, and a lively debate ensued where they interrogated the term 'lesbian'. The question here was why some preferred to be called 'lesbian' or 'queer' but not 'stabane':

But I'm not a lesbian. Maybe I have been lesbianing together when I date a lesbian. I feel lesbian now and then. I don't feel offended.  
(Participant 1, 2015)

I find it very funny that you feel offended to be called a 'stabane' but it is okay to be called lesbian.  
(Participant 2, 2015)

The reply to the aforementioned:

For me it depends on the connotation.  
(Participant 1, 2015)

Always someone who used 'stabane' as derogatory that is when it is offensive to me 'lesbian' okay 'stabane' something that puts me down. A word that I detest is 'unkonkoni';<sup>7</sup> this term could also apply to gay guys. For me, sexuality is not important – I was always looked at as sporty.  
(Participant 4, 2015)

The unfolding conversations then moved from individual identity politics and self-reflection to taking agency and building community. There was a marked difference in the narratives between the initial conversations in 2015 and the follow-up in 2016. The initial conversations mainly dealt with the self, while the 2016 conversations were much more self-reflexive, included agency and viewed

community building as a prerogative. The 2016 conversations also lent themselves to reflections of the roles of some of the participants in the student protests. The ensuing selected quotations show how the participants' conversations and arguments changed from a very narrow inward looking of the self and terminology in 2015 to a deeper sense of belonging and involvement in the broader struggles around identity politics in both the wider community and in the student struggles.

The work of various scholars is useful in interpreting the aforementioned findings. Penelope (1992) raises important questions regarding 'lesbian identity' and the 'reclaiming' of derogatory terms, and argues that one should be very wary of reclaiming terms that dehumanise and that hold painful memories. Terminology such as 'stabane' and 'unkonkoni' are examples of what Lorde (1984) refers to as 'threats of labelling, vilification and/or emotional isolation' that contribute to the fact that black women often avoid each other politically and emotionally. Wallace (2008) says it is critical to identify as lesbian because it opens 'the spectrum for possibilities for black women beyond servility and self-abnegation'. Where Potgieter (2006) found that the respondents in her study did not want to be labelled or mistaken for lesbians, I found that ten years later, there was a confidence and pride to identify as lesbian. However, students avoided terminology such as 'dyke' or 'Tommy boy'—terms that have associated with 'butch' lesbians in the recent past, mirroring the findings of Morgan and Wieringa (2005).

In all the research conversations, race, gender, and class were important indicators of the tension in the student politic. The participants mentioned that radical black feminism, lesbian feminism, and queer body politics were excluded from the essentialist patriarchal approach that predominated in the student movement. The participants reported that some of the women students (even those in leadership positions) in the political movement displayed severe discomfort with the presence of lesbian and queer students in the broader political movement. At UWC, prominent lesbian-identified students in the FWF leadership were part of the conversation series.

### **Lesbian identities and safe spaces**

The issue of safety was important to the research participants in a number of ways. Firstly, they discussed personal safety in general. They then talked about safety within the university in the sense of space that is free from lesbophobia, sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Violence against black lesbians has been escalating in South Africa (see Kheswa et al. 2008). The research participants discussed how safe they were feeling on, as well as off, campus. One of the participants stated 'I have never been gay-bashed' (Participant 3, 2015).

The other participants analysed this statement and concluded that 'gay-bashing' is not always obvious physical attacks but could be in the form of remarks, attitudes, and exclusions from spaces and events. It could also be the non-allocation of resources or venues to host events or the withholding of safe transport to and from events off campus. It is often the subliminal nature of lesbophobia and homophobia that causes deep psychological trauma. As Collins (2000) argues, safe spaces

for black women are constituted by values and principles that resist objectification as the 'other'. In these safe spaces, women define themselves and defy the dominant ideology enconced in heteropatriarchy and sexism. The research participants agreed that it is important that lesbians should not try to assimilate into the heteronormative institutional culture but that they should present visibility.

The safety – or lack of it – of black lesbian students can be looked at in terms of the institutional spaces and facilities of the university. In 2014, the outcomes of a separate group assignment resulted in an exhibition in the main library on gendered spaces by Women's and Gender Studies. The exhibition showed that lesbian, gay, and gender non-conforming students regarded the GEU as *the* safest space on campus. In 2015, LGTBQ students openly organise, they are occupying leadership roles in the student political organisations, and they do not hide their same-sex relationships.

The research participants discussed the Loud Enuf programme, which was located at the GEU. In response to the appropriation of the Loud Enuf space by mainly gay men students, the lesbian students decided to form a special sub-space for women only, which they called 'Black Queer Voices'. This subgroup connected with networks on and off campus, and organised social events for queer women.

The development of a lesbian subgroup raises a number of questions about the Loud Enuf space and its safety for lesbians. Did it provide adequate metaphorical and physical 'safe spaces' for LGTBQ students to meet, read, watch movies, conduct discussions, or just be themselves? Or did the conceived inclusive space unintentionally exclude and become responsible for the invisibilisation of certain bodies as the space and the discourse around sexuality and gender evolved? The underlying argument is that 'spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in' (Ahmed 2013). Why do lesbians currently experience hostility and discomfort in a space that they co-created? Sometimes, as Anzaldúa says, 'we feel most unsafe with people of our own group', and she says we must recognise that pain (quoted in Keating 2009). Underpinning the conversations was the question of whether the Loud Enuf programme became the intended 'home' for all non-heteronormative people as it had been originally envisioned or did other hegemonic powers and bodies capture the space?

After listening to the concerns of some of the lesbian women, I wanted to understand concerns about the *perception* of the social and political erasure of lesbian contribution to the LGTBQ programme at UWC.

There are various possible reasons for this erasure and the resulting discomfort with supposedly 'safe space'. Perhaps the discomfort came about because of the false assumption that all oppressed people or bodies have almost similar experiences of othering, heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, classism, and racism, amongst others. However, this tension alerted us to the fact that the different oppressions affected the intersections of racialised bodies, genders, identities, and sexualities and sexual orientations differently, and this forced us to return to the original black feminist's notion of separate safe spaces. Gomez reminds us that while the histories of black lesbians and black gay men often overlap, their

respective experiences of repression and (in)visibility differ in a variety of ways (Gomez 2005). It is therefore important that the social and political spaces are taking both the similarities and the differences into consideration.

The issue of safe space on university campuses connects with broader debates. Globally, researchers have noted that lesbians, even though they have equally contributed to the political struggle for social, political, and human rights, tend to be invisibilised or erased from the dominant narrative (Duggan 2012). It is within this context that Rich's text 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' carries currency well into the twenty-first century (Rich 1980). The relevance of Rich's work leads to the important question of where, when, and how the lesbian body, narrative, and theory re-entered the broader queer theorisation. 'Sexuality', argues Collins, 'is a site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converged' (Collins 2005).

Some theorists argue that black feminism provided the platform for them to come out as lesbians (Jones et al. 2014). The prevalent question is whether this rings true for the students at the UWC. It was therefore imperative to ascertain whether the lesbian-identified students embraced black feminism to deconstruct the complex lived experiences of black lesbians in the academy and society. How would they contribute to the theorisation and avoid being merely an addendum to other gender identities and homosexual lives within the broader continuum of the LGBTBQ experiences?

### **Racism in higher education**

In South Africa, the politics of race have always been complex. During apartheid, certain terminology was officially constructed to 'other', to dehumanise, and to ensure white supremacy (Mkhize et al. 2010). Racism manifests itself in a variety of ways in higher education's institutional cultures, and black students and staff are particularly affected. Institutions, facilities, and benefits have historically been constructed to favour one race group above another. The legacy of racism and unequal education continues well into the twenty-first century (Mekoa 2011; Ramphela 2008; Walker 2005).

UWC was established as a 'coloured educational homeland' via the promulgation of the Extension of University Act 1959. It has an approximate student population of 22,000 and a staff complement of almost 2,000. Most of the students are black. Historically, the university was geographically located in a 'coloured preference labour' province. The apartheid race classification divided the nation into African, coloured, Indian, and white, where whiteness was regarded as supreme. To be able to study at an institution of higher learning outside your race classification meant that you had to apply to the minister of home affairs for special permission. Although the race classification legislation has been repealed, the designations are still applicable on the official forms. It was only with the promulgation of the post-1994 labour legislation that people classified as 'African' during apartheid were appointed in meaningful positions at the university. White staff have always occupied senior positions at the university since its inception.

In many classes, there is a pedagogic distance, exacerbated by the racial composition between those who teach and those who learn. Politically, the black conscious staff and students of the university have always identified as black. Therefore, the university continues to be structured by institutionalised racism.

The research findings foregrounded the issue of racial inequalities and racism. Intersections of race and gender exposed the effect that the racialised society still had on black people, even after 20 years of democracy. For example, in the conversations, the participants had a long discussion of how they were being watched and followed when they enter shops. This surveillance of potential black consumers has been 'normalised' in the post-apartheid South Africa. Race classification and black dehumanisation seem to continue in the twenty-first century. Black lives remain under scrutiny. hooks theorises extensively about the assimilation of some of the black students into white culture as the only way to survive in the academy, and this causes tremendous pain (hooks 1989, 1992). During the FWF protests, the students often refer to black pain and the process of exclusion, inclusion, and tokenism. The participants wanted black women's bodies and contributions to all the struggles past and present to be acknowledged and narrated. They said, for example,

Well, I am a Black woman and I know Black women's struggle history. I take race classification seriously – I am a poster child for corporations. I have opportunities now that Black women did not previously have. I cannot disregard it is my identity. Because of the colour of my skin, I do not have the same privileges as others. My question is why is it important? In my field of study, race is sub specie. I don't live my life to how the world defines me. I looked for a place to stay in a previously white area – when they heard my accent on the phone, they said that there is a place but when they saw me, they told me that the place is not available any longer. So many other things that we can do are not dependent on my melanin.

(Participant 1, 2016)

The discussion turned to the fact that there was an overwhelming perception that a black person should 'stay in your lane'. But what does it mean to be black and homosexual in this overtly racialised society? The participants agreed that race and gender are social constructs; for example, participant 2 stated, 'It is not about the biology of it all. It is not about skin colour, hair texture. It is a social construct, and we cannot get away from it' (2016). They discussed discourses that dehumanise and degrade lesbians, and the ways that that – combined with the kind of Christian religious damnation and sexism practised on campus – they can become very hostile and threatening.

Issues of race and sexual self-identification intersected with other structuring forces. The participants felt irritated by the fact that people are almost mostly concerned by who is 'butch' and who is 'fem'. They related the ways in which questions abound how they have sex. For the participants, these questions do not determine who they really were; they were more interested in their existential



approach and in defining themselves. Many participants defined themselves as black lesbians. There were lengthy debates about race, class, and privilege. They were very conscious of the fact that they as students were far more privileged than many of the lesbians living in black townships. However, at that moment, they were clueless about how they could use their student privilege, their class position, and their intellectual activism to the advantage of and in collaboration with the broader LGBTQ community outside the campus borders.

Race and class appeared to be particularly persistent structuring forces in the university. Although their class position and access to the university set the participants apart from their peers, they occupy a different class and race position in relation to their professors, who are mainly white. And this, following Anzaldúa, makes 'it difficult to get through the class barriers that exist in institutions of learning, writing, and art – barriers to being in school, to speaking out, to making our voices heard' (as cited in Keating 2009). The participants exercised considerable agency regarding these forces, however. As the student protests intensified, they became increasingly vocal about the disillusionment with the education processes and the need for claiming and redefining blackness and the history of women. As one of the participants put it, 'I must think and do things differently. My future is going to be a canvas of me. Put that in the box – I don't care because I am black' (Participant 3, 2016).

### **Invisible, assimilated, or ignored: lesbian women in academic organising**

Despite the years of awareness raising as well as the official theoretical discourse in the classrooms, there remains a tacit silence about the social inclusion of the homosexual, bisexual, and trans body in the academic life. Both students and teachers must constantly confront a complex realpolitik of sexual disclosure living and working as sexually other in the university (Epstein et al. 2003). 'Coming out' is therefore not a 'once-off' process, but each situation compels homosexual people to always 'confess', yet the same is not expected from a heterosexual person (Ahmed 2017).

The university is usually the place where the young women explore their same-sex sexuality for the first time. The GEU offers support and resources to the questioning student population. Previous research shows that 'lesbian youth population remain invisible until they manage to access support services' (Kowen and Davis 2006). During the FWF student protests, lesbian students refused to remain invisible and organised political education classes with the aim to educate the broader student movement regarding feminism, intersectionality, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

There was the perception that Loud Enuf did not afford lesbian students the opportunity to lead political discussions, as the gay men were dominant in foregrounding their needs and programmes. Lesbians also felt excluded because of their gender and race. In 2015, there was a dominance of 'coloured' gay men in Loud Enuf. The old apartheid era classification seemed to have infiltrated some

of the perceptions of most students. During the conversations, it was obvious that some of the participants expressed disillusionment with the Loud Enuf programme as the following quotations show:

When I joined Loud Enuf in the beginning of 2015, I felt excluded. There was no black woman in the group, and whenever I came to meetings then they said that they were still discussing the matter. I realised that black lesbians are not coming to join the programme and that the responsibility was on me to create a space for black lesbian women.

(Participant 2, 2016)

As I indicated earlier in the section on lesbian identities and safe space, the lesbian students experienced homopatriarchy and misogyny within the Loud Enuf space. This caused tension within the broader group, and the following quotation gives expression to the feelings of the participants: 'Queer men sometimes perform (and benefit from) hegemonic masculinity within shared spaces with queer women, therefore making said space "unsafe" for women'. For this reason, designated 'queer spaces' comprised mostly of men may not feel as safe and welcoming to queer women (Johnson and Sandahl 2005). Lesbian feminists drew attention to these issues decades ago when they pointed out that 'gay male culture is not necessarily any more pro-feminist or women-loving than malestream culture in general. The cultures that men produce routinely exclude women and depend for identity on the oppression of women' (Jeffreys 1994). Lesbian students reported that some of the gay men in the Loud Enuf students often told them that they would be more 'comfortable' in the Edudrama programme, as that programme caters for women only. This monolithic view of lesbians became a challenge.

I observed that all over South Africa, queer and sexually fluid women students were at the forefront of the student protests. This group called on the student movement to include and acknowledge their presence and activism in the protest narrative. However, despite their contributions to the student protests, the UWC feminist students, who contributed to the research and who were involved in the protests, frequently referred to the fact that they were called names such as 'feminazis'. They stated that they were told that feminism is irrelevant or not 'African' when they called for a feminist analysis to the challenges foregrounded in the protests. They also felt that because they placed concerns that specifically affect women, lesbians, and queer bodies on the political agenda, they were often accused of being divisive. As one of the participants remarked,

We speak as women because we are women and because we have legitimate issues that we deal with as women. Us wanting to deal with our issues as women does not mean that we as women think or feel that any issues that are not pertaining to women are less important and less legitimate.

(Participant 1, 2016)

The research conversations showed that the lesbian-identified students became more and more disillusioned with the Loud Enuf programme because the perception was that their needs did not receive as much attention as that of the gay male students. They were also under the impression that the annual awareness-raising programmes concentrated on drag performances and pageants that did not necessarily include them as lesbian women. I argue that the lesbian women were more focused on political education about race, gender, sexual orientation, and the politics of inclusion, while the gay male students were much more interested in social events that made them and their political agenda more visible.

There is a spatial dimension to the marginalisation of lesbian students within the student protests and on campus at the UWC. The geographical history and the mapping and the marketing of Cape Town as the Gay Capital of the Continent favour gay men's experiences and leisure activities. For instance, the so-called coloured gay men dominate the drag pageants, and this spilled over into the university environment, as many of the drag participants and followers associated themselves with UWC. In fact, three of the former drag queens who consecutively won the Miss Gay Western Cape title were alumni of UWC. This annual event is well sponsored and marketed across the Cape Flats.<sup>8</sup> The social networks of the gay male students were therefore extremely strong and well supported by the gay networks. Thus it was easy for them to manipulate and set the agenda for Loud Enuf.

There is not a similar well-marketed event for lesbians in Cape Town. While there are bars, restaurants, and events that cater for the social and commercial needs of gay men, there are no dedicated social spaces for lesbians in the city. One of the perceptions is that lesbians are more politicised and usually organise around issues. Likewise, there is no political organisation for gay men in Cape Town. However, there are several health-focused organisations that exclusively cater for gay men.<sup>9</sup> UWC is also far away from any of the social sites that the city offers to the homosexual and trans community. The spatial marginalisation of lesbians is an issue that has been raised internationally by many scholars, and it can take place because of a number of factors, including the relative poverty of lesbians compared to gay men (see Richardson and Monro 2012).

The marginalisation and discrimination against lesbians and other non-heterosexuals that took place during the student protests can be analysed as follows: 'sexuality-baiting' and 'lesbian-baiting' remain effective tactics to discredit and undermine women's activist work (Rothschild 2005). The participants knew, as has been recorded by others, that black men's negativity towards feminism was because they felt threatened by the mere possibility that black women might organise around their own needs. There is the perception that once feminists organise around their needs as women, black men would not only lose the valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but also they will be forced to change their oppressive sexist ways (Jones et al. 2014).

It became clear that the young lesbian women students at UWC took up the challenge to debunk the myths about the 'poor black lesbian' who has no agency. The participants in the 2015/2016 study were faced with various challenges, amongst

them the fact that not all of them joined the formal Loud Enuf programme; some of them were drawn into the research through the snowball method. Several participants were members of the Educational Drama Programme of the GEU where they have been exposed to feminist discourse. Others were involved in sport such as hockey, soccer, and rugby, and, in these structures, they often had to hide their sexual orientation for fear of reprisal.

### **Political agency and networking**

Political agency was an important theme to emerge from the research conversations with black lesbian students at UWC. Networking and alliance building was a key part of this. The UWC black lesbian students found connection and solidarity with one of the lesbian organisations, Free Gender,<sup>10</sup> in Khayelitsha.<sup>11</sup> Free Gender organised around violence against black lesbians and is focused on the empowerment of black lesbians and social justice and human rights for them. There was also solidarity around the deracialising of the Cape Town Pride event. The challenge was not to leave Loud Enuf but to 'reclaim' the space for lesbian women in the programme and shape the programme differently.

Over the years, the GEU built relationships with individuals and organisations, and the students therefore had a repertoire of existing networks, individuals, and movements to tap into. The roles that the Educational Drama Programme as well as the student protests of 2015/2016 played should not be underestimated; these have invariably opened black feminist discourse on an unprecedented level on campus. Solidarity amongst queer and lesbian and heterosexual feminists was built across campuses, other political groupings, and with civil society organisations.

In the following section, I make the connection between the subsequent action of the lesbian participants and the building of networks with individuals and organisations off campus. I have observed that movement building relating to social and human rights rarely, if ever, happens in the formal structures but tends to ignite spontaneously when concerned individuals or like-minded people feel marginalised or oppressed. I therefore link the protests of the black feminist lesbian students with similar action in civil society.

During the research, I witnessed the ways that the student protests opened teaching and learning opportunities for the student population to introduce feminism on their terms without the interference of the formal, often conservative, practices of the classroom. During the information meetings, educational and teaching moments were created outside the classroom. Post-1994 young women are claiming their feminism on numerous fronts. They became the advocates and educators of black feminism on campus. They took the leading role in organising awareness campaigns against violence against women and rape cultures on campus. They challenged patriarchy, persistent homophobia, transphobia, and various manifestations of sexism and racism within campuses and within their own student structures.

These young feminists unapologetically embraced the black feminist concept of intersectionality. These women challenge the masculinist and patriarchal

university structures, and force a rethinking of the meaning of the inclusion of hitherto marginalised and invisibilised bodies. They started to serve on critical university committees and contributed effectively to the transformation of the university. The young feminist students questioned the existing spaces that were created as 'safe' spaces. They pointed out how hostile these spaces were and how ignorant the spaces remained to the special needs of feminist lesbians.

The young feminists increasingly proved it is necessary that feminists in the academy should revisit their roles and find ways to 'bridge' the divide/binary between activism and intellectualism. The student protests over the last two years have given lesbian students the platform to re-engage with concerns that directly affected them. Their refusal to be simply co-opted into the broader student politics and thus make their lives invisible has highlighted contributions to decolonising of the academic space on their terms.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter interrogated how lesbian students negotiated their sexuality and feminist activist lives at a HBU in South Africa. The university is a place of exploration, and it is often the first time that young people are away from protective environments, such as homes, where they must fend for themselves (Ellis 2009). This research was prompted by the dearth of research done by black lesbians and their experiences within the academic environment. Despite the hypervisibility of violence against lesbians outside the academy there is seldom a 'coming out' within insider perspective on how they deal with the discrimination and prejudices inside the ivory tower (Hames 2007).

The research was conducted after some of the lesbian-identified students raised their concerns about their marginalisation within the Loud Enuf LGTBQ programme. They felt not valued and excluded from many of the events that were organised. UWC is the only HBU that has an official programme focusing on the holistic needs of LGTBQ students. It was therefore interesting that lesbian women students felt excluded and marginalised within the broader system of 'queerness'. These co-constructed spaces became unfriendly, and it became clear that the umbrella notion of 'queer' had the potential of creating certain sexual and gender hierarchies above others. Serious political questions were raised pertaining to the complexities of gender and sexuality in the context of lesbian erasure.

These lesbian women challenged the spaces, ideologies, and theories that they deem hostile, oppressive, or problematic. As participant-observer, I firstly provided the 'safe space' both in a metaphorical and practical sense for young black lesbian students to unlock discourses pertaining to their understanding of gender, sexuality, race, and racism class, and how this intersects or interlocks with their lived realities socially and politically, as well as in the classroom.

These conversations took place before and during a time when the South African universities were under pressure from the students to provide free higher education; calls were also made to decolonise the curricula, and there was also a

renewal of feminist thought which became one of the decolonising tools used by non-heteronormative bodies to gain visibility (White 2017).

The participants in the conversation series interrogated the labels that society ascribed to them and concluded that they are the agents of their own being. They reflected on their positionality and analysed the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. They realised that some of the disciplines in which they study do not offer them the opportunities to reflect and pose questions on their lived realities. This gap in the 'formal education process' does not prepare them to become the 'political' professionals they would like to be, because it is expected of them to assimilate into the dominant heteronormative environments in which they live, learn, and work.

Sexism and racism in higher education featured high on the protest agendas (Collinson 2016; Publica[c]tion 2017). It was noted how the intersections of race, sex, and sexual orientation affected, in diverse ways, black lesbian students. Added to this was the fact that many of them came from outside the city and therefore they did not have access to the cultural and social capital that the city had to offer. In the conversations, it became clear how they as lesbians had to negotiate and renegotiate these offerings. They shared how they experienced racism and sexism outside the campus boundaries, and sexism and lesbophobia and biphobia within.

During the research period, the UWC was locked down, and staff and oppidan students were not allowed on campus. At times, the only people on campus were the students in residence and private security. The GEU remained open and became a 'safe space' in this time of turmoil. Students trusted the space and used these conversations as 'political educational opportunities' to speak out and to regroup. For some, it was the first time that the feminist maxim 'the personal is political' made practical sense.

As insider and outsider in these critical conversational series, I had access to rich data I would not have gained otherwise. I was aware of my 'perceived power' as director of the unit, my age, the holder of the key to the office, and my position as one of the middle managers of the university. My struggle was how to juggle these seemingly conflicting positions. However, as a black intellectual lesbian feminist activist, I could offer insight into the higher education environment with its paradoxes of oppression and exclusion, and, simultaneously, its parallel of offering progressive spaces such as gender and other units. My extensive insider knowledge of lesbian lives and networks helped me to facilitate the conversations. One of the outcomes was to allow the lesbians to form a subgroup that solely addressed their needs. In this study, I subscribed to the notion of 'political or strategic essentialism' when I foregrounded the concerns of lesbians within the academic environment (Spivak 1988).

Social media assisted the students in their awareness raising and networking with like-minded individuals and organisations. Feminist organisations, blogs, and e-magazines such as HOLAAfrica! and SAY-F Activists (South African Young Feminists) played a key role in their networking. #ForBlackGirlsOnly became an

instant phenomenon where hundreds of young black women were invited through social media and then physically gathered and claimed public spaces.

The women student activists started to campaign and network across campuses to address commonalities such as the oppressive patriarchy, rape cultures, and homophobia in student culture. These moments and developments in contemporary South Africa had a profound effect on and connection with the programmatic work and vision of the GEU. This is a very important marker in the sustainability of feminism, as the teaching of feminism has become increasingly elitist and confined to academic women's and gender studies programmes. Feminism and lesbian feminism found an alternative means of infiltrating intellectual activist learning.

## Notes

- 1 Organisations, such as the Forum for the Empowerment of Women and People Against Women Abuse, have developed dedicated workshops and methodologies where young lesbian women are taught about lesbian leadership, feminism, and activism.
- 2 The GEU is an administrative unit that ensures that gender equity is properly implemented in all operations and programmes of the university.
- 3 The members of the FeesMustFall student movement refer to themselves as Fallists.
- 4 At UWC, the FeesMustFall movement was renamed as the FeesWillFall.an.
- 5 Under the apartheid regime, the education system was divided into four racial categories – namely, white, Indian, coloured, and African. There was a racial hierarchy that contributed to the differential allocation of rights, benefits, and resources.
- 6 Stabane is an isiZulu vernacular to describe an intersex person, but in isiXhosa, it is a derogatory term to describe a lesbian or gay person.
- 7 Unkonkoni is an isiZulu word that means gnu or wildebeest, but in isiXhosa, it is used to degrade and dehumanise lesbian and gay people.
- 8 The Cape Flats is the geographical area away from the central business district of Cape Town and is largely populated by people classified as 'African', 'coloured', and 'Indian'. UWC is located on the Cape Flats.
- 9 Health for Men is one of the organisations that offers health and clinical care for men having sex with men.
- 10 Free Gender is a black lesbian organisation.
- 11 Khayelitsha is isiXhosa for New Home. It is one of the largest 'townships' on the Cape Flats.

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# 8 **Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) forced migrants and asylum seekers**

## **Multiple discriminations**

*Guillain Koko, Surya Monro, and Kate Smith*

### **Introduction**

This chapter addresses the forced migration of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people from a range of African countries to South Africa. There are many places in Africa (including Tanzania, Kenya, and Nigeria) where homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender people are at a high risk of death and therefore have no option but to flee. In their countries of origin, LGBTQ people are exposed and subjected to discrimination, persecution, exclusion and violence, murder, and rape at the hands of state and non-state agents. According to a report by People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP), an organisation in South Africa and the Leitner Centre financed by the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (2013), same-sex activities are criminalised in 38 of 54 countries in Africa (Itaborahy and Zhu 2014). Many people are forced to migrate, and South Africa, because of its progressive laws on LGBTQ issues, is frequently viewed as the best option for refuge.

The chapter is underpinned by the assumption that fundamental human rights should be available to all persons. It centres on two sets of rights: those accorded to migrants and those accorded to persons of non-normative genders and sexualities, known here as LGBTQ and/or as sexual orientation and gender identity expression (SOGIE) groups. The right to migrate is essential to all persons:

Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his [sic] own, and to return to his [sic] country. . . . Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 13 and 14)

‘The right to freedom of expression’ and the ‘right to freedom of assembly’ (Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) are also relevant. Both of these support the protection of LGBTQ human rights, incorporating the right to express one’s sexuality and to be free from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. SOGIE-related rights represent more recent advances in the

protection of LGBT human rights directives at an international, regional, and, in the case of South Africa, national level. Seeking to address these two sets of rights within an African context, this chapter focuses on the specific experiences of LGBTQ/SOGIE forced migrants who seek refuge in South Africa. In so doing, it contributes to debates about the increasing attention to sexual minority rights in human rights discourse and to the body of literature that is developing around LGBTQ forced migration.

Despite growing international attention to the subject of LGBTQ lives and forced migration, the marginalisation of African-centred scholarship on LGBTQ identities highlights an imperative for scholarship. Within and between African countries, the constructions of gender and sexuality vary considerably, and the lived experiences of LGBTQ forced migrants are highly diverse (Tamale 2011). Much of the African literature is dominated by studies conducted in South Africa (Reddy et al. 2009; Steyn and Van Zyl 2009; Mkhize et al. 2010), and it is evident that many African LGBTQ people remain invisible and are barely discernible as subjects of social science knowledge. Narratives of LGBTQ migrants in Africa have tended to be foreclosed because of the persistent exclusion of non-heteronormative arrangements in a number of countries and the increasing criminalisation of homosexuality.

Scholarship and policymaking around forced migration has been historically organised and has reinscribed heteronormative assumptions about migrants (Luibhe'id 2004). However, a growing body of queer and migration scholarship, across the humanities and social sciences, has emerged since the 1990s, challenging some of these assumptions. This knowledge base has frequently sought to ensure that both gender and sexual identity are recognised as grounds on which people are persecuted and may be forced to migrate (Lacey 1997; Millbank 2005). Scholars have also begun to argue for the perspectives of LGBTQ migrants to be made visible and to inform understandings of how sexuality effects migratory experiences (Cantu 2009). This includes LGBTQ migrant activists and scholars directly confronting normative and exclusionary discourses of belonging (Chávez 2010), thus building understandings about the diversity of lived experiences and identities of LGBTQ forced migrants.

Some of the LGBTQ migrancy literature conceptualises the dynamics affecting LGBTQ forced migrants in terms of oppression. For example, Millbank (2009) shows that interlocking structures of oppression characterise the lives of LGBTQ forced migrants and discusses the multiple marginalisations in the relationship between LGBTQ forced migrants and immigration regimes. In this chapter, we take this as a starting point, adding to it some aspects of intersectionality theory. US scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the term 'intersectionality' to mean a crossroads where different identities (in her case, race and gender) intersect, and so this body of theory was forged by Western feminists of colour and critical race theorists (McCall 2005). Intersectionality approaches have been used by activists in South Africa (Collinson 2016) and can be useful in understanding the complexities associated with the experiences of LGBTQ forced migrants in Africa. The understanding of identities as being 'routed through' each

other, which characterises intersectionality theory, is highly pertinent to LGBTQ refugees in South Africa.

There has been a tendency for intersectionality studies to focus mostly on gender, class, and race (Hurtado and Sinha 2008), to the exclusion of sexuality and gender-identity expression, which this chapter will help to remedy. Despite its huge popularity in the global North and indications that race, tradition, gender, and sexuality are routed through each other in the global South (Nkabinde 2008), there is a dearth of intersectional studies in a southern context (see, however, Al-Rebholz 2013; Moolman 2013). Existing authors call for the use of intersectional frameworks and theory in a transnational context (Choo 2012). In taking a primarily intersectional approach, the chapter also draws on the notion of necropolitics, which is ‘a term used to interrogate the ways in which some (queer) populations are subjected to normalised life-threatening violences, within democratic states such as South Africa’ (Haritaworn et al. 2014). Since LGBTQ forced migrants in an African context regularly face survival issues, attention simply to oppression and/or social marginalisation, as is common in intersectional approaches to SOGIE (see, for example, Richardson and Monro 2012), is not sufficient in understanding the intersecting processes. Social inequalities structure many LGBTQ African forced migrants’ experiences and attention to the material effects of these (e.g. freedom from violence and homicide) is necessary. Using an approach that includes necropolitics may enhance intersectional analysis and understandings of the human rights issues of this group of people.

The chapter draws substantially on two research reports which the lead author of this chapter, Guillain Koko, was involved in producing. The first report (PAS-SOP 2012) includes data from interviews with 25 LGBTQ refugees living in Cape Town, mostly from Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cameroon, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Angola. The second (ORAM 2013) involved 74 in-depth interviews conducted with sexually and gender non-conforming (SGN) migrants, service providers, agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and government representatives in South Africa. The interviews were audio recorded, held confidentially, and analysed using thematic methodologies. Where details about the research participants’ gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics, such as nationality, are provided in the reports, they are provided after quotes from their interviews. All quotes appear verbatim to enable people to make points in their own words and as such may include grammatical errors and everyday language.

The chapter uses LGBTQ and SOGIE terminology; we are aware that other terms are used. The terms ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, ‘bisexual’, ‘transgender’, and ‘queer’ are Western-originated, and, for some authors and activists, are associated with neo-colonising processes. However, the term ‘LGBTQ’ is widely used in the reports and data (with the exception of ORAM 2013), and so we choose to continue its use here. We are not including intersex people per se, but we acknowledge the complex and diverse human rights abuses often faced by intersex people

in Africa (Kaggwa 2013). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide detail about the different LGBTQ identities, but we note that risks vary across the LGBTQ grouping that may be dependent on a number of intersecting factors. For example, Guillain Koko reported that bisexual forced migrants are largely invisible and face stigma from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people. Transgender persons experience multiple levels of discrimination including a lack of access to justice, education, health and psychological care, employment, secure housing, and documentation issues. Camminga (2017) reports specific challenges faced by transgender refugees in the South African asylum system. Black South African lesbians face particularly high levels of homicide and violence (Mkhize et al. 2010).

We begin by briefly outlining SOGIE and refugee international human rights frameworks, and go on to provide indications of some of the ways in which these are being breached in an African context. We then give an overview of relevant human rights and legislative instruments within South Africa and some of the implementation gaps. The chapter goes on to look at LGBTQ forced migrants' experiences in South Africa, focusing on some of the institutional processes and moving on to show how this group faces a range of social challenges. Lastly, we provide some analysis of the situation from an intersectional perspective and indicate the importance of necropolitics in understanding the issues.

### **International human rights frameworks and perspectives**

According to guidelines on international protection, a state may not remove, expel, or extradite a person to any state where that person may face a well-founded fear of torture, persecution, or any other form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (UNHCR 2012). That is the meaning and content of the non-refoulement principle, which is the backbone of the refugee regime when assessing claims to refugee status within the context of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. At an international level, a number of the key legal instruments and human rights frameworks are in place to protect African LGBTQ people facing, or experiencing, forced migration, which include the following:

- The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees;
- The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Articles 2, 6, and 26, which include sex and sexual orientation;
- The 1969 AU Convention Governing the specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (see UNCHR 1992);
- The 1984 Convention on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
- The 2007 Yogyakarta Principles.

More recent developments include the Human Rights Council Resolution 17/19 on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (adopted June 2011) that expresses grave concern about violence and discrimination against people because of their gender identity and sexual orientation, and the Human Rights Council Resolution 32/2 Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (adopted June 2016). These international instruments place obligations on individual states to protect people against homophobic and transphobic violence and torture, as well as cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. Specifically, the Yogyakarta Principles set out a range of human rights principles supporting individuals to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution related to sexual orientation or gender identity. The Yogyakarta Principles relate directly to human rights in the areas of sexual orientation and gender identity, and are intended to apply the standards of international human rights law to address the abuse of the human rights of LGBT people.

There is also human rights provision at a regional level across Africa. For example, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (adopted June 1981) stipulates rights to non-discrimination, equality before the law, life and integrity of the person, and dignity and freedom from torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. 'Sexual orientation' and 'gender identity' are not explicitly criteria for distinction, but the rights stipulated are specified as belonging to 'every individual' (Rights in Exile 2016). The 1969 African Union/OUA Convention on Refugees also provides some protection. Taken together, these directives and instruments constitute a substantial human rights framework that should protect LGBTQ people in their countries of origin and within the countries to which they are forced to migrate. However, as we will show in the next section, LGBTQ forced migrants can experience an extremely challenging combination of marginalising processes, as there are many difficulties with the ways in which fundamental human rights are denied and neglected through different practices.

### ***Breaches of human rights that affect LGBTQ people in the African region***

Gross human rights deficits and abuses against LGBTQ persons are taking place in many African countries. Penalties for same-sex and gender-diverse-related activities and associations range from fines to death (PASSOP/Leitner Centre/Open Society Foundation for South Africa 2013). In many African countries, criminal charges are laid on people simply for expressing their sexuality or gender identity (Fisher 2013). In addition to this, there is systematic anti-gay sentiment: for example, a study conducted by the Centre for Development of People revealed that 34 per cent of gay Malawian men were denied basic social services such as healthcare, and 8 per cent had been beaten by police or other officials because of their sexual orientation (see also PASSOP 2012). In some African countries, even where homosexuality is not illegal per se, 'community attitudes and the church's stance have led to many LGBTQ people being arrested by the police. Some of

those interviewed were harassed and others arrested because of their gender identity or sexual orientation in their home country' (PASSOP 2012: 11). For example:

There was nowhere to go because in Congo if you go to the police you could be arrested or stoned. The police are not trained about it [homosexuality]. Being gay is taboo in Congo.

(Gay asylum seeker, Congo)

PASSOP (2012: 10) reviews journalistic coverage of increasing homophobia in many African countries, including beatings, death threats, assassinations, and rape. Other key issues are rejection by family and friends, forced marriage, or subjection to unwanted ritualistic procedures. Indicative quotes from this report reveal these realities:

My partner was killed and his house was burned. We lived together in the same house. If I had been there that day, there is no doubt I would have been killed also.

(Gay asylum seeker, Uganda)

The family agrees with the community every time. According to them, the death of a family member who is gay is much better than the shame of the family and all the community.

(Male-to-female transsexual, Uganda)

My mother and my sisters took me to church for exorcism because they assumed that I was a man possessed by supposed evil supernatural force that led me to debauchery.

(Gay asylum seeker, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Despite multiple hardships, LGBTQ people in African countries exercise agency in a variety of ways. For instance, ORAM (2013) documents the importance of social networks and access to information for LGBTQ/SGN refugees. Not everyone has access to the Internet, but some LGBTQ forced migrants successfully use the Internet to make contacts in South African society.

### ***South African human rights frameworks and legal instruments***

Post-apartheid South Africa was the first country in the world to guarantee non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation constitutionally in 1996 (Gunkel 2010). South Africa has subsequently played a leading role in LGBTQ rights agendas on an international and domestic level. There are a number of domestic laws underpinning rights regarding sexual orientation, including the Employment Equity Act (1998), the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000), the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Based on Sexual Orientation (2000), and the Civil Union Act (2006). Case law has also proved effective;



for example, in the 2002 case of *Du Toit v Minister of Welfare and Population Development*, the South African Constitutional Court legalised joint adoption by same-sex couples – a decision cemented in the 2005 Children’s Act.

The law which governs refugee status determination procedures in South Africa, the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 (S. Afr.), contains two provisions of particular importance to LGBTQ refugees. First, the Act specifically defines ‘social group’ to include persons of a particular gender or sexual orientation. Second, following a decision of the Constitutional Court which ruled that permitting the immigration of spouses of South African residents without affording partners in a permanent same-sex relationship the same benefit was unconstitutional, ‘spouse’ is now defined to include ‘a permanent homosexual or heterosexual relationship’. In addition, sexual orientation persecution may contain a gender element, recognised in many common law and civil law jurisdictions. As the 2012 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Guidelines on gender-related persecution notes, ‘A claimant’s sexuality or sexual practices may be relevant to a refugee claim where he or she has been subject to persecutory (including discriminatory) action on account of his or her sexuality or sexual practices’ (UNHCR 2012). In many cases, the claimant has refused to adhere to socially or culturally defined roles or expectations of behaviour attributed to his or her sex. This may involve SOGIE people who have faced extreme public hostility, violence, abuse, or severe or cumulative discrimination.

Further issues relating to sexual orientation and gender-related asylum claims include visa waiver entry (refugees do not usually need to carry a passport or have a visa to enter South Africa) and the granting of asylum on the basis of well-founded fears of persecution and non-refoulement (refugees would only be returned to their country of origin in exceptional circumstances). The process by which individuals can apply for asylum in South Africa consists in brief of the following:

- 1 Lodge an asylum claim at the border and receive a transfer permit (Section 23 permit);
- 2 Interview at the Refugees Reception Office (RRO) and be given an asylum seeker permit (Section 22 permit) which grants a range of rights including the rights to work or to study;
- 3 Interview at the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to determine whether refugee status will be granted or not.

(ORAM 2013)

There are, however, substantial obstacles throughout this process, which we will now explore, together with broader aspects of human rights deficits.

### ***Human rights implementation gaps in South Africa***

Whilst post-apartheid South Africa has progressive human rights frameworks, Human Rights Watch (2014) noted difficulties with implementation of SOGIE human rights. Despite South Africa’s official position to protect sexual minority rights, the country

often fails to offer asylum and assistance to sexual minority refugees (PASSOP 2012). For example, on submission of application for refugee status, many LGBTQ asylum claims are rejected as ‘unfounded’ or ‘manifestly unfounded’. Other claimants are arrested, detained, and deported to their countries of origin where they may be exposed to risk of harm and persecution upon their return (Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2011). The principle of ‘non-refoulement’ is the cornerstone of refugee law that safeguards the rights of refugees to not be returned to a country where they face persecution because of homophobic laws or laws that criminalise same-sex relationships. This situation raises questions about the international obligation of South Africa when human rights, afforded by international law, are denied to refugees, forcing (or coercing) them to leave the country of asylum.

The difficulties facing LGBTQ forced migrants are compounded by national legislation, which is lacking in support for human rights for these groups. Specifically, the South African Immigration Act of 2014 Regulation 3 (2) (a) (i) has a requirement that a permanent or heterosexual relationship exist for at least five years before the date of the application, and there is already a five-year waiting period in order for spouses and life partners to be able to apply for permanent residence. A similar requirement exists in order to prove that cohabitation has been in existence for a period of not less than five years. In the case where the relationship is between two foreigners in a foreign country, the draft regulations require that there is an official recognition of the relationship issued by the authorities of the relevant country (PASSOP/Leitner Centre/Open Society Foundation for South Africa 2013). In the case of homosexual relationships, obtaining proof of a relationship may render couples in a difficult or impossible situation, as we noted earlier, there are 38 African countries in which homosexuality is illegal and same-sex relationships are not recognised.

Overall, a gulf exists between the legal and constitutional frameworks supporting LGBTQ people in South Africa, including refugees, and the realisation of SOGIE human rights. The problems facing LGBTQ forced migrants and asylum seekers throughout the phases of a migration cycle are numerous and serious. The next section addresses the broader aspects of the oppression and social marginalisation of LGBTQ forced migrants in South Africa. These aspects both foster and are fostered by the implementation gap concerning human rights.

## **LGBTQ forced migrants’ experiences in South Africa**

This section begins with an examination of the institutional processes and structures that LGBTQ forced migrants in South Africa contend with. We then move on to provide an examination of quotidian experiences of hate crimes and community relations before looking at issues concerning the ability to survive and thrive, focussing on employment, housing, healthcare, and education. It is important to point out that LGBTQ forced migrants arriving in South Africa can be successful in negotiating positive outcomes, despite facing major challenges. However, the mechanisms and processes associated with seeking asylum in South Africa are

often deficient, fuelling a lack of human rights implementation. See the following quote for example:

I realised that human rights in South Africa are only written in legal texts and the constitution is not practiced in real life. That's why I was so disappointed, upset and shocked by what I experienced, that I swear that I can't apply [for] asylum in a country which is unable to protect me.

(Gay man, Ethiopia; PASSOP 2012: 17–18)

On several occasions, the DHA, through its RRO, has introduced very strict practices and an internal policy that limits and hinders the rights of asylum seekers and refugees to seek asylum, to renew their permits, and to lodge appeals (see *Sca-labrini and others v Minister of Home Affairs* (735/12, 360/13) [2013] ZASCA 134; 2013 (6) SA 421 (SCA)). There are major problems with the current services that are SOGIE-specific. LGBTQ asylum seekers often face difficulties in the documentation process in South Africa. Flaws in the documentation process leave many persecuted LGBTQ individuals without refugee status. Legal barriers are characterised by the inefficient application of the asylum laws and systems, lack of sensitivity by asylum officers, lack of documentation, and lack of police protection, as well as bias among police, courts, and other legal offices. Institutionalised SOGIE-related prejudice is manifestly evident within refugee-related institutions, and there are also reports of bribery and extortion. This affects LGBTQ people as well as others:

We . . . have to bribe . . . for that you to be able to get in, into that queue. Even have to bribe the officials. . . That's the real world. That's exactly what's happening.

(Transgender woman, Zimbabwe; ORAM 2013: 11)

One specific issue illustrating a lack of appropriate processes and mechanisms regarding LGBTQ refugees is that '[t]he backlog of undecided asylum cases, coupled with limited capacity at RROs, forces individuals to wait in lines with hundreds or even thousands of other asylum seekers in order to access documentation' (ORAM 2013: 5). The queues are gender binaried (separate male and female lines), which poses particular difficulties for LGBTQ individuals who present as non-gender normative, with reports that they are harassed (see ORAM 2013):

The first time when I arrived, I was told that newcomers from my country and the SADC region have their day. That [I] have to come on Thursday, when I arrived there was no queue for people like me, when I went to the female queue, I was pushed and told that 'I am not a female', I must go to the male queue who also pushed me and said 'I'm not a male, I am a female'. In the meantime, the rest of the crowd was yielding at me, call me names, throwing stones saying in my language that I am a disgrace. A lady was pulling me to

her and I fall down, the security guards who were there started beating me up and embarrassed me in front of everyone else.

(Asylum seeker, country unknown; Koko 2016: 30)

The experience related in this quote is just one of thousands of experiences that LGBTQ people have faced while applying for asylum. Similar experiences were reported at the DHA: the PASSOP report (2012) describes interviewees applying for a permit at least three times before they were seen by an official, along with routine intimidation by security guards and officials. Gay asylum seekers reported the following:

I went there [DHA] four times. Yes, I was intimidated by a security guard who hit me the first time I went there.

(PASSOP 2012: 16)

I went there more than 10 times. . . . We were beaten up by an official constantly. The security guards got orders to mistreat people.

(PASSOP 2012: 16)

Almost half of the refugee interviewees in the PASSOP study (2012) did not disclose their SOGIE because they did not know that this was a ground for seeking asylum. In addition, many LGBTQ refugees do not disclose because of valid fears of harassment or threat to life. This issue is recognised in the international literature where there is a discussion of asylum systems as uneven and the regulation of LGBTQ identities as often essentialised, simplistic and stereotyped (Lewis and Naples 2014). For example, some lesbian women are forced to be secretive about their sexuality, which adds to the difficulties of self-identifying as a lesbian and the legal obligation to *prove* their sexual orientation or *perform* their sexual identity in order to be a ‘credible lesbian’ is highly problematic (Bennett 2014). In South Africa, the problems are particularly apparent in the refugee service provision of interpreters from the individual’s home country, which fails to take account of the reasons that LGBTQ people may become forced migrants. For example, an asylum seeker from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who had been tortured for being gay, explained,

Because of what I had gone through back home, I was afraid of what would happen to me if anyone from my country knew about my sexual orientation. I was afraid that they would pass the information to the people back in my country that I was now in South Africa. So I decided to lie.

(Okisai 2015: 37, no country details provided for interviewee)

This type of account is corroborated by stakeholders; for example, ‘Status determination officers sometimes respond with xenophobic comments, or with homophobic comments, so people then don’t really [want to] disclose additional information and are not very comfortable disclosing that information’ (ORAM

2013: 11). Overall, there is a stark difference between the human rights directives and domestic law regarding SOGIE forced migrants in South Africa, and implementation of these in refugee services.

Wider economic and structural difficulties underpin the problems with the implementation of human rights directives: the asylum system is ‘severely overburdened’ (University of the Witwatersrand 2009, cited in ORAM 2013). Problems are compounded by a lack of LGBTQ refugee-specific supportive NGOs, and there are reports of bias and discrimination against this group amongst the more generic NGOs (ORAM 2013). Evidence also exists of wider patterns of victimisation by state officials. For example, a gay asylum seeker reported,

When I got beat up, I went to the police. They laughed at me but arrested the person who attacked me. The next day after I had gone to the hospital, they had already released the man that attacked me.

(PASSOP 2012: 15, no country or identity details provided for interviewee)

There is much work to be done to ensure that human rights directives and the frameworks to protect LGBTQ forced migrants are implemented in South Africa, and recommendations for improvement are provided in reports by institutions such as PASSOP. The next section discusses another aspect of the LGBTQ refugee experience in South Africa: marginalisation and persecution by ordinary South Africans, and by members of the individual’s community of origin.

### ***Safety, housing, employment***

The day-to-day situation facing forced migrants in South Africa is perilous, and there is extensive evidence of homicides. It is a situation in which ‘the government struggled to stop attacks on businesses and homes of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, denying they were motivated by xenophobia or other forms of intolerance’ (Human Rights Watch 2016: unpaginated). As noted earlier, people flee their home countries to escape various forms of danger, but they feel unsafe in South Africa because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (PASSOP 2012). For example, a gay asylum seeker from Cameroon said, ‘I came to South Africa to get rid of the harassment and so that I would be free to live the lifestyle I wanted. But some people are homophobic here too’ (PASSOP 2012: 17). Whilst the Organisation for Refugee, Asylum and Migration (ORAM; (2013) study showed that the environment in South Africa can be less negative than that of the country of origin, LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers who took part in the PASSOP (2012) research overwhelmingly described a lack of positive relations with the non-LGBTQ community in South Africa, due primarily to experiences of xenophobia but also to SOGIE-related prejudice. A high incidence of sexual violence, including so-called corrective rape, is underpinned by ‘the patriarchal and rigidly defined gender roles of South African society’ (ORAM 2013: 9), as well as homophobia and high and increasing levels of attacks.

In South Africa, communities of origin can also be very unsafe for LGBTQ asylum seekers. Incidents of violence against LGBTQ refugees by other refugees from the same country have been reported. For instance, a gay man from Congo reported, 'It is very dangerous to be surrounded by Congolese people' (ORAM 2013: 12). Rather than being a support structure, many of the refugee communities that exist in South Africa uphold the same anti-gay sentiment as in their home countries (UN News Centre 2011). In addition, for LGBTQ people, religious organisations often fail to offer refuge and may foster prejudice. LGBTQ asylum seekers also lack integration into the South African LGBTQ communities. Over half of those interviewed in the PASSOP study (2012) said that they were not aware of the Cape Town LGBTQ 'scene'. This affects liveability, as LGBTQ asylum seekers may lack intimate connections because of fears about being 'out' and/or an inability to meet other LGBTQ people.

The material underpinnings of liveability are central for LGBTQ asylum seekers in South Africa. Each person must find housing when he or she arrives, as refugee camps are non-existent (PASSOP 2012). There are some positive reports of shelter and support – for example, in the case of the Inclusive and Affirming Ministries shelter: 'They take people without shelter and they provide for them until they can get on their feet (Transwoman refugee, ORAM 2013: 16). However, other interviewees reported prejudice and violence in shelters. There are difficulties with shelters being established to support men or women without flexibility to accommodate transgender people. There are also issues with rented accommodation:

I used to move sometimes by my own will from one place to another when a place became unsafe, however it happens more often that the landlord evicts me without even a short notice when he found out that I am gay.

(Gay asylum seeker, Cameroon; PASSOP 2012: 12)

LGBTQ tenants commonly face violence and harassment from other tenants and landlords, but few of them reported breaches of their tenant rights to the police station, fearing more experiences of prejudice (PASSOP 2012).

Housing security is inextricably bound up with finding the economic means to survive. LGBTQ asylum seekers usually lack extended economic support, rendering them particularly vulnerable to extreme poverty. The PASSOP study reports, '90% of LGBTQ refugees were unemployed. Of the 10% surveyed who held jobs, only 4% worked full-time and 6% work part-time' (2012: 6). In more than half of these cases, unemployment was linked with a lack of documentation. Many LGBTQ people faced discrimination on the basis of SOGIE as well as their refugee status (PASSOP 2012):

Xenophobic violence and rampant discrimination against SGN [LGBTQ] refugees and asylum seekers also impacts on their ability to find work and to meet their needs for basic subsistence. Unable to find jobs, some SGN refugees turn to sex work in order to survive.

(ORAM 2013: 1)

There are multiple accounts of job-related discrimination:

I faced difficulties in keeping my last job although I was called a hard worker by my boss. Some of my colleagues were gossiping about me and some customers refused to be served by me. I was fired, but I cannot report to CCMA [Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration] or to the labour court because they will side with my boss.

(Gay refugee, Democratic Republic of Congo; PASSOP 2012: 13)

I was a victim of unfair dismissal. I reported the case to CCMA first and then to the Labour Office. People from my community and other refugees from my country told to my boss to fire me because I would bring misfortune to his business. My boss fired me but the CCMA required him to pay me. He refused. Then I reported to this to the CCMA and my problem has remained unsolved for over than a year.

(Transgender women refugee, Burundi; PASSOP 2012: 14)

Problems with unemployment and job discrimination are compounded by difficulties with accessing public education and training opportunities. Although LGBTQ asylum seekers are guaranteed the right to access public education, and are often keenly interested in gaining more education, financial barriers and other barriers (including a lack of somewhere to study) can impede their efforts (ORAM 2013). There are further issues with other areas of service provision, including healthcare. Whilst some refugees reported positive experiences with healthcare services, including some targeted at LGBTQ refugees, there are also ‘barriers to accessing basic health care, as well as discrimination in the provision of these services. Many face prejudice in public health facilities and abuse from healthcare providers due to their status as foreigners’ (ORAM 2013: 1). In summary, the combination of xenophobia, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia leads to bias amongst service providers, prevents service providers from reaching out to sexual minority refugees, and prevents sexual minority refugees from seeking help out of fear of further harm and discrimination.

Overall, the problems facing LGBTQ forced migrants and asylum seekers are multiple and severe. Major breaches of human rights are taking place within South Africa with regard to both the institutions and broader dynamics concerning communities, safety, housing, employment, and access to amenities. The next section explores these breaches of human rights from an intersectional perspective.

## **Intersectional analysis**

Intersectionality concerns the ways in which multiple social forces (such as patriarchy, homophobia, and sexism) interact or interlock so that these forces combine to forge particular social positions (see Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Since the

introduction of the concept, various approaches have been taken to intersectional analysis and applied to understand queer and other sexualities in different ways (Richardson and Monro 2012; Bowleg 2013). Here we analyse the relevance of the work of one intersectional author, McCall (2005), in relation to human rights for LGBTQ forced migrants in South Africa.

According to McCall (2005), there are different methodological approaches to intersectionality studies. The first of the three approaches, *anticategorical complexity*, deconstructs identity categories. Anticategorical approaches can be used to dismantle, for instance, the assumption that people have fixed, discrete sexual identities and the assumption that monosexuality (having sexual desires towards others of only one gender) is normal. Both of these assumptions are institutionally embedded, self-replicating, and tied in with the unequal distribution of material and social resources in such a way as to marginalise individuals and groups who do not conform to them.

The anticategorical approach to intersectionality can be used to explain some aspects of the LGBTQ forced migration context within South Africa. The institutions and mechanisms in place act to marginalise and socially exclude LGBTQ forced migrants and asylum seekers not only because of the implementation deficits concerning human rights but also because of the ways in which some of the rights-related structures are constructed. Specifically, the requirement that individuals have static identities such as 'gay' acts to 'freeze' people's identities in ways that may not be useful for some LGBTQ forced migrants and asylum seekers. This issue is discussed more broadly in the literature: for asylum claims to be deemed legible by courts, the 'LGBTQ refugee' must understand and present his or her experience and identity through particular notions of sexuality and gender as sufficient to require the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees protection as interpreted by a court (Johnson 2011). Credibility is a key element of the court's focus, and the requirement of identifiable sexual activity and behaviour has delegitimised LGBTQ asylum claims for protection (Bennett 2014; Morgan 2006). As such, asylum regimes serve as a form of governance whereby identity categories establish and regulate the individual's relationship to the state, producing categories in order to distinguish 'those worthy of permanent residency and eventual formal citizenship from those deemed unworthy' (McDonald 2009: 68). This phenomenon is particularly problematic for bisexuals and others with complex and/or fluid sexual identities seeking asylum (see Monro 2015).

Difficulties remain with the use of fixed identity categories, supposedly tied to specific forms of sexual activity, as a basis for asylum claims. However, whilst a radical deconstructionist (and/or queer) movement might call for the deconstruction of all fixed gender/sexuality categories, this is problematic where there is a need for pressing human rights interventions for forced migrants with non-normative SOGIEs. Monro (2015) has argued for a prudent approach to deconstructionism in relation to policy issues because of pragmatic concerns with the development of rights-supportive policies that rely on identity categories. Activists and policymakers who are concerned with human rights need to be able to group people together in categories in order to organise politically or to develop policy initiatives. This



imperative stands in contrast to approaches that deconstruct identities, although the term ‘SOGIE’ goes some way to disentangling individual identities, oppressive forces such as homophobia, and rights claims based on gender and sexuality. Despite this word of caution, there is certainly a need for policymakers and legislators in the LGBTQ human rights field to find ways to address identity variations and the limitations of categorising systems such as LGBTQ.

McCall discusses another approach to intersectionality termed *intracategorical* ‘because authors working in this vein tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection’ (McCall 2005: 1771). This approach to intersectionality is immediately useful for understanding LGBTQ forced migrants in both their countries of origin and a South African destination. This group of people faces multiple oppressive forces that act to marginalise them, as manifested through persecution and discrimination which is institutionalised in various ways in both state and civil society arenas. The most apparent intersecting social characteristics relate to being both LGBTQ and a refugee. As the ORAM report states, ‘SGN refugees in South Africa face double marginalisation because (1) they are foreigners and (2) because of their sexual orientation or gender identity’ (2013: 12). This intersection is clearly neglected within South African service provision, as the institutional processes overlook the particular needs of this group, and SOGIE prejudice is perpetuated in frontline practices. However, there are a whole set of other intersecting forces that make life very challenging for LGBTQ refugees in South Africa such as poverty, spatial elements (the areas that are cheapest to live in are also the most dangerous), and gender (notably people who present as female are most likely to suffer rape). These multiple marginalisations compound each other, meaning that people who are extremely impoverished are also at most risk of violence; are most likely to be forced into survival sex work, thus most at risk of HIV; and are also least likely to be able to access safe housing, healthcare, and social networks where they could find support. Intersectionality theory can be drawn on in acknowledging this and explaining why this group is largely invisible: they are rendered highly marginal, sometimes unable to survive.

McCall termed a further approach of intersectionality ‘intercategorical’. For McCall, ‘*intercategorical complexity* . . . requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions’ (2005: 1771). Intercategorical intersectional theories enable interrogation of the ways in which power and access to resources are unequally distributed, along gendered, sexual, or economic lines, for example. For LGBTQ refugees in South Africa, nationality is clearly one of the overarching factors (South African LGBTQ people are less precarious and more able to access rights), but it is also heavily striated by other forces, notably heteronormativity and gender binarism. Across the region, these are shaped by the historical legacy of colonialism and homophobic nationalism amongst political leaders (Epprecht 2013; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013). Discrimination against LGBTQ people in the African region, and the state-sponsored persecution that these people face in some African countries, also demonstrates the hegemonic ways in which heteronormativity and gender binarism are perpetuated.

With the intercategory approach, there is also an understanding that categories can be used strategically in an agentic way. Some research findings indicate ways in which LGBTQ forced migrants exercise agency, ranging from strategically planning their escape to South Africa and making contacts via social media, through to changing accommodations in order to escape violence and engaging in sex work to gain funds and therefore ensure survival when no other alternative is available (see PASSOP 2012; ORAM 2013). However, multiple marginalisations make it harder for people to exercise agency and/or compromise their agentic moves. This could perhaps be a point for the further development of intersectionality theory, which is often employed in contexts where individuals can use several aspects of their identity in an empowered way (for example, white LGBTQ British nationals; see Richardson and Monro 2012).

This section of the chapter has explored some of the ways in which intersectionality theory can be applied using McCall's 2005 schema of anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategory methods. We finish this chapter by summarising our findings and providing some thoughts about intersectionality theory in a southern context and about necropolitical analysis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an indication of the agency, persecutions, and challenges faced by many LGBTQ people across the African continent. By starting with the perspectives of LGBTQ people, including those seeking refuge, theoretical and methodological insights have been gained about structural forms of oppression (including heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia) as they intersect with migration, and the ways in which they can shape the identities of LGBTQ people who are forced to migrate. These critical frameworks also reveal the multiple and complex ways in which fundamental human rights are denied and neglected through practices such as the detention and deportability of LGBTQ forced migrants (see Tabak and Levitan 2014), and they expose a gulf between human rights ideals for LGBTQ people and persistent human rights violations (see O'Flaherty and Fisher 2008).

Despite the existence of substantial international and pan-African human rights mechanisms, violence and abuse are perpetrated against LGBTQ people by both state and non-state actors in many countries. LGBTQ people exercise agency, both in attempting to find ways around discrimination and persecution in their countries of origin, and when they begin migration journeys to South Africa. Whilst South Africa is considered by some to be a beacon of LGBTQ human rights, the reality can be rather different. LGBTQ people in South Africa bear the brunt of the gap between supportive legislation and practice. For LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers, prejudice and violence against LGBTQ people can combine with discrimination against asylum seekers and refugees, rendering them highly vulnerable. Human rights imperatives highlight a need for action to remedy the abuses perpetrated against LGBTQ forced migrants in South Africa, at both policy levels and in terms of wider awareness raising. Specific policy recommendations are available in reports such as PASSOP (2012) and ORAM (2013),

and in other sources such as Okisai (2015) and Koko (2016). However, there is also a need for the development of conceptual tools to understand the situation of SOGIE forced migrants in Africa.

As this chapter demonstrated, SOGIE forced migrants who arrive in South Africa face an extremely challenging combination of marginalising processes. These can include a lack of safe shelter, unemployment and/or employment in precarious and high-risk occupations such as sex work, discrimination from communities of origin, xenophobia from South Africans, spatial disadvantage which can be related to a lack of capacity to access healthcare and other services, and bigotry from faith groups. This situation exemplifies a stark example of what McCall (2005) terms ‘intracategorical’ intersectionality and can be described as multiple marginalisation. However, the ways in which these different forces combine means that experiences are more than just those associated with particular social exclusions; for instance, dire poverty affects a person’s ability to find shelter and access transport to help with gaining employment. In South Africa, the institutions that are supposed to assist forced migrants are also shown to harbour institutional homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, and in some cases, state agents directly perpetrate violence and abuse against SOGIE people. Overall, understanding of these processes adds to existing insights about the ways in which sexuality and gender binarism are embedded within multiple, intersecting, and complex relations of power which are unequally located within and across different local, national, and transnational borders and contexts (see Luibhe’id 2008).

We suggest that the concept of ‘necropolitics’ (Haritaworn et al. 2014) be used to enhance intersectionality theory and practice, especially McCall’s (2005) intracategorical method. It explains the territory ‘beyond’ the prejudices, abuses, and violence that the most discriminated against people in society face. It is important to point out that intersectional necropolitics plays out in different ways internationally. For example, in the United Kingdom, the routine termination of intersex fetuses (Monro et al. 2017) can be seen as a form of genocide, as it involves the annihilation of a large proportion of a population with non-normative sex characteristics. In the South African context, key authors (Matebeni 2014; Hames in this volume) have discussed the importance of ‘livability’ and the agentic lives of black lesbians and others in the face of survival challenges such as access to food and shelter. It is crucial in political and scholarly terms to avoid framing a particular social group as subject to necropolitics if this then serves to stigmatise or ‘other’ them. However, more broadly, the issue of death and annihilation is overlooked at a cost not only to SOGIE people and allies with an interest in supporting LGBTQ human rights but also to social theorists. Dead people can, of course, not agitate for human rights. Their absence is not fully mapped when a focus is only on agentic processes or on the structuring of marginalised people’s lives by two or three forces, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. There seems to be a built-in elision amongst some intersectionality theorists (including in the previous work of Richardson and Monro 2012) of the experiences of those who experience severe marginalisation along many trajectories, in particular in relation to the fundamentals of life such as food, shelter, and physical safety. Future intersectionality scholarship, and LGBTQ-related research, could usefully explore the notion of necropolitics more fully.

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## 9 Experiences of transgender people in Swaziland

*Velile Vilane*

### Introduction

I am a Swazi man assigned female at birth. In my country, I am not considered male nor a man because society traditionally reduces manhood to specific genitalia and corresponding gendered behaviour. If one is born with female genitalia, that person is automatically assumed incapable of being a breadwinner and therefore regarded as a subordinate to a man. Cultural expectations related to gender in Swaziland are evident from birth. In Swaziland, it is assumed that all babies are cisgender and thus assigned a gender based on the appearance of their genitalia. This assumption forces transgender children into a gender classification that is incongruent with who they inherently are. This problem is perpetuated by the country's policies, which do not cater for transgender specific amendments in the births register. It is also perpetuated by politicians such as Chief Mgwagwa Gamedze (ex-minister of justice and constitutional affairs), who declared that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual, and pansexual plus (LGBTIQAP+) Swazis cannot be legally catered for because they were an insignificant minority, if they exist at all (Nkambule 2011). Consequently, all human experiences outside the cisgender, heterosexual bracket are policed (Magagula 2013), victimised (Mazibuko 2013), and silenced (Dlamini 2014) in Swaziland. These human experiences can be broadly categorised into LGBTIQAP+; however, this chapter focuses on the transgender (T) subgroup in LGBTIQAP+.

Transgender Swazis are currently navigating public systems with no legislation that holistically supports their existence. Consequently, they are marginalised, victimised, and often denied access to public services. This raises major issues concerning citizenship rights for transgender people. Citizenship can be defined as a collection of rights which provide access to recourses in a particular socio-political community. However, it has been observed that some populations within socio-political communities are excluded from full citizenship. For example, Lister (1997) critiques the exclusion of women at conceptual and policy levels by the masculinist notions of citizenship proposed in Marshall (1950). Similarly, transgender people cannot access full citizenship in many socio-political communities (see, for example, Tacaks et al. 2017). To date, the transgender citizenship literature has been largely about transgender people in Western contexts (Monro

2000, 2005; Monro and Warren 2004; Hines 2013). This chapter provides a contribution to the transgender citizenship literature, helping to redress the Western-centric tendencies of the field. It addresses key aspects of trans citizenship, such as the importance of trans people having agency regarding their bodies, legislative rights, and access to healthcare where needed.

This chapter uncovers the intersecting issues in transgender people's lives that collectively contribute towards their marginalisation. It surfaces perspectives from transgender Swazis and confronts the pervasive political silencing articulated as 'LGBTIQAP+ people do not exist in Swaziland'. It begins by addressing the education sector, which could be used as a vehicle that creates awareness and drives policy change. The chapter then looks at the health sector and transgender Swazis. It moves on to outline some legal aspects of the situation for transgender people in Swaziland. Lastly, the paper introduces activist interventions by an emerging group of transgender people in Swaziland, TransSwati.

## **Participants**

All participants are transgender activists who are Swazi citizens and are aged 20–31. The chapter documents a collection of experiences from four transgender activists (myself included) who informally convened to share experiences in December 2016. This collection of experiences highlighted three main government sectors that needed to be reformed in order to improve transgender lives in Swaziland. In this meeting, activists decided to start working towards registering the first transgender non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Swaziland, TransSwati. The chapter also references experiences of other transgender Swazis who were not necessarily participants in this study. It draws the latter experiences from newspaper publications and NGO archives. All the documented experiences in this chapter affirm a binary trans identity; consequently, the experiences of non-binary trans people (Monro and van der Ros 2017) are not represented in this chapter.

## **Trans Swazi's experiences with the education system**

There is a body of evidence which proves that LGBTIQAP+ are verbally and physically victimised in schools (Msibi 2012: 517; Richardson 2006: 137). Teachers and school bodies largely remain silent on this issue and do not challenge the rife vilification of LGBTIQAP+ learners (Butler et al. 2003: 5). Swaziland's education system is also silent on the vilification of LGBTIQAP+ learners in schools. This violence is not documented, and therefore authorities have the leeway to not account for it (Nkambule 2011). In order to break this silence, it is important to expose the different ways in which transgender learners are vilified in Swazi schools. This chapter interrogates the different ways in which cishetero-normative school ethos, an LGBTIQAP+ silent curriculum, and uninformed teachers affect transgender learners in Swaziland. The violence that transgender



learners experience in schools is similar in many ways to that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, queer, asexual, and pansexual plus learners. However, there are unique experiences that only resonate with transgender learners, and these occur when school ethos enforce sex segregated groupings on learners. These groupings include binary enforcing of school uniforms, single-sex occupancy toilets, and all-male, all-female fraternities.

Swaziland embarked on education reform after the country attained its independence from British colonial rule in September 1968. The primary goals of this reform were to make basic education accessible to every citizen to the limit of their capabilities and to advance Swazi culture and way of being (Ministry of Education 1992: 1). A national education review commission was set up in 1985, and it configured formal schooling into seven tiers: preschool, primary grades 1–7, junior secondary forms 1–3 (also known as grade 8–10), senior secondary forms 4–5 (also known as grade 11–12), A level, vocational, and higher education. Basic education includes primary (grades 1–7) and junior secondary (form 1–3) schooling. At the end of basic education (form 3), a standardised Junior Certificate Examination is written by learners to channel them towards senior secondary streams of their inclinations (typically science, commercial, or general streams).

### **Gender binarism in Swazi schools**

Swaziland's education system imposes rigid gender binary norms onto learners and erases human experiences outside the cisgender heterosexual bracket. This was very evident in the stories provided by the research contributors. This section of the chapter focuses on the experiences of one particular trans man who describes school in the following way:

My first day of preschool, the boys and girls were separated into two rooms, which had toys. The girls' room had dolls and the boys' room had cars. The girls remained in their room playing dolls whilst the boys collected a few toys and relocated to play outside, in the soft rays of the morning sun, away from the confines of any walls. Playing is vital for every child's emotional and cognitive development. However, in my case, social forces threatened the kind of play I needed the most. I was grouped with the girls and forced to play dolls when all I wanted to do was play cars. I eventually left the girls room in a quest to play cars. Showing up at the boys playground got very awkward; I was in a fluffy rounded collar dress and I wanted to play with 'their' cars. Instinctively, the boys started to hold on to their toys, as they reacted to the imminent discomfort that I brought to their space. Usually that's the time when one makes an effort to introduce themselves, but it was a challenge introducing myself under the fluffy layers that drowned my true self. Fast forward to the point where the teacher noticed the tension. Like most systems of power, she solved the problem by overlooking my experience and dragging me back into the girl's room. She did not try to mediate the situation by

asking all kids to play together. Consequently, I got silenced and learnt that being true to yourself gets you into trouble so, 'I guess I should not do that'.  
(V, transman, 31 years)

From the extract, it appears that the teacher did not know about gender variance, and she used her personal ethos to enforce cisheteronormativity on the playground. Children have agency to choose playmates, and refusing to play with others is a consequence of that choice. This choice can be interpreted as rough play that is motivated by perceived differences (Reed and Brown 2000: 110). According to Reed and Brown (2000), rough play hurts, but it is vital to children's development; it can teach them to negotiate their way into successful play. The teacher disrupted any chances of the latter by removing another child without fully conceptualising the conflict at hand. Pedagogy in Swaziland is deeply rooted in social norms and favours a transmission mode of teaching (Rooth 2005: 210). The teacher is older, assumed to be wiser, and to know best. This kind of pedagogy assumes that age guarantees experience and overlooks that some children have unique experiences that teachers will not experience in their lifetime. The cisgender teacher understood the conflict from a cisgender perspective and did not know best. The teacher conceptualised a 'girl' disrupting boy play and solved it by removing the 'girl' to go play with other girls. The removal was not driven by a child-centred will to protect the 'girl' from rough play, but by a desire to reinforce rigid gender binary norms.

Learners are not at par at the onset of primary school because the preschool curriculum is not standardised. Swazi preschools are administered as private businesses and the Ministry of Education has limited control on their curriculum or forms of pedagogy (Mundia 2007: 154). At the onset of primary schooling, learners have varied knowledge, which depends on the kind of preschool they attended (whether academically oriented or primarily day care). Therefore, it is common for learners to have difficulties adapting to primary schooling. For transgender learners, the difficulties in adapting extend beyond the curriculum. School ethos forces them to wear uniforms that conform to their assigned gender. For example, one participant shared how he struggled in school because he was expected to wear girls' uniform (a tunic or skirt):

I just couldn't; what were my friends going to say? I played soccer with them and they knew me as a boy, now they were going to see me in a tunic and know I'm a girl. I stayed at home: after two weeks, my parents beat me up and forced me to go to school.

(P, trans masculine, 29 years)

In the extract, P talked about how his parents knew that he did not like clothes that are typically considered as girl clothes. However, they did not know the deeply entrenched complexities causing his discomfort with girl clothes, and they therefore did not understand why a tunic should interfere with education. The tunic 'outed' P, brought anxieties of not being able to integrate with his playmates, and

left him vulnerable to transphobic violence. The extent of transphobic violence inflicted on transgender people and the degree to which it affects their lives is well documented in Jauk (2013).

Gender incongruence in children is sometimes perceived to be a passing phase (Steensma et al. 2011: 499). P tells a different story; his discomfort with what is typically considered female clothing and his female school uniform (skirt and tunic) was permanent. His coping mechanism was wearing tracksuit pants underneath his female uniform. He looked forward to winter months when he would be allowed to wear tracksuit pants under the tunic because they made it more bearable. The discomfort worsened in secondary school when the tunic started accentuating the feminine features that had developed when he underwent female puberty. He described going through female puberty with both hands covering his face:

I did not know what was going on. I wanted it to go away but I could not stop it. I wish I had been informed about what was happening to me. I could have avoided the trauma of growing breasts, which I now have to pay exorbitant amounts to remove because medical aid thinks its cosmetic surgery.

(P, trans masculine, 29 years)

The overarching issue is that all of these experiences occurred in P's life, and he did not know what was going on. Recent publications such as the 'Gender Revolution' (National Geographic 2017) make it easier for millennials who have a certain degree of exposure to media to identify themselves. However, these perspectives on gender were not popular 15 years ago when P was in high school. Transgender people often misidentify themselves as either gay or lesbian because gender variance discourses are hardly known. All the participants in this study misidentified themselves as either lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) at one point. The participants articulated the misidentity period as very confusing. They could relate to LGB politics, which speak to sexual diversity, but only up to a certain degree, because LGB politics did not speak to the gender dysphoria they were experiencing. The experience of gender dysphoria combined with the lack of gender variance education has resulted in transgender people being labelled as 'the gays that took it too far' (Dhillon 2016). This label has perpetuated further rejection of trans people by society as well as within LGB circles. Dealing with transphobia, structural discrimination, and gender dysphoria drives a majority of transgender people to suicide at an alarming rate of 41 per cent (Maguen and Shepherd 2010: 34).

### ***How Swazi schools fail transgender learners***

In Swaziland, the gender binarism that pervades schools manifests in ways that can breach basic citizenship rights, such as personal safety. For example, L is a transfeminine person who was enrolled into an all-male school (Salesian high school). Similar to P, she was aware that she was different during this time of her

life, but she did not know how she was different. Her high school experience is an accurate reflection of how transgender people experience the schooling system in Swaziland:

The teachers issued a warning for learners to not use the route by the bushes because it was full of thugs. I continued using it every day to avoid the other kids who made fun of me. . . I never left class during break to avoid them during daytime . . . the teachers also bullied me; then they realised I got good grades and started tolerating me.

(L, trans feminine, 24 years)

The degree of bullying from students and teachers had to be very intense for L to continue going through a deserted crime spot because the prescribed 'safe routes' were an illusion that predisposed her to bullying and harassment. Safety is key, but whose safety takes precedence in schools? Teachers at Salesian high school were worried about protecting learners from harm, but they did not consider victimising a transfeminine learner as harmful. This is because some teachers justify bullying LGBTIQAP+ learners, because it is seen as a means to correct their 'wrongful' ways, as articulated in Msibi (2012). Since the school had not established policies that specifically protected L from gender-based violence, she invented ways to shield herself from the abuse. She chose isolation and excelling, the latter being her only bargaining tool to being recognised as a human being.

L's experience of teachers partaking in the abuse of learners is not a unique phenomenon. Recently, a South African head teacher co-opted learners to harass a transfeminine learner (Nare Mphela) in the toilet. In this instance, the learners were encouraged to grab Nare's crotch and find out what is there (Botha 2017). As noted earlier, Swazi schools also enforce a rigid binary system that is regulated by single-sex occupancy in their toilets. Binary toilets are a safety threat to transgender learners, because their gender expression differs from their sex. Therefore, they are seen as invaders in single-sex occupancy toilets and have to take whatever cisgender learners who are using the toilets at the time throw back at them by. They end up getting thrown out, yelled at, or, ultimately, beaten up for just trying to respond to nature's call. However, it is worth noting that this is not only Swaziland's issue. Birth certificate versus toilet access is a heated debate worldwide, especially with the recent enactment of the HB2 bill in the USA that forces transgender people to use bathrooms corresponding to the sex indicated on their birth certificate (Plaskow 2016: 749).

The Swazi basic education curriculum (grade 1–form 3) does not document LGBTIQAP+ existence. There is no documented information on the forms of pedagogy that Swazi teachers undertake when they are mandated to relay LGBTIQAP+ affirming information to learners. However, we can use other controversial topics, such as teenage pregnancy, to understand the manner in which Swazi teachers relay uncomfortable information to learners. Dlamini et al. (2003) reveals instances of teacher abstinence, where teachers were unwilling to engage in pedagogies of discomfort to teach sexuality to learners.

Documenting discrimination and erasure of gender diversity in schools in itself is not enough, as researchers have observed in the context of the South African Life Orientation curriculum. Within the coverage of issues that curricula provide, questions about who is documented, how they are documented, and why they are documented play a vital role in portraying an LGBTIQAP+ affirming message to learners. The Swazi curriculum erases LGBTIQAP+ people and pathologises any human experiences which transgress the gender/sex binary. For instance, the genetics section in the prescribed biology textbook (Cambridge GCE-O level biology) used in the years 2002–2003 presents intersex people as genetic mutations. This representation of human experiences reinforces the idea that there are only two sexes and two genders, any sex and gender variance is pathologised. It also heightens cognitive dissonance in learners who relate to these experiences but cannot express themselves because they are only taught to perceive themselves from a pathologised perspective.

One of the key problems with transgender citizenship Swazi schools is teachers and their teaching practice. Teachers lack knowledge of sexual orientation and gender variance, and consequently partake in the abuse of LGBTIQAP+ learners. Teachers cannot articulate LGBTIQAP+ content outside the realm of pathology. They are uncomfortable relaying LGBTIQAP+ content to learners and sometimes wilfully ignorant towards the humanity of LGBTIQAP+ people. Therefore, even the minority of learners who are exposed to LGBTIQAP+ people in the classroom are not equipped with the knowledge to unsettle the problematic ways in which LGBTIQAP+ people are represented in society.

Another key difficulty with schools is that they lack support structures for transgender learners. The schools had no support structures for P and L because no policies had been formulated around this kind of gender-based violence. P is male; he had to wear a girl's uniform to get an education. L is female; she was enrolled in an all-male school where she consequently suffered intense victimisation. She was not protected against the abuse and had to find coping mechanisms to stay in school and get an education. The policymakers are not aware of, or they remain oblivious to, this violence because they are not mandated to cater for it. A curriculum that does not educate learners on gender variance also causes structural discrimination of transgender people in health and legal systems.

Overall, Swazi schools fail transgender people because the basic education curriculum does not teach about gender variance. P finds himself navigating traumatising puberty and is not aware of what is wrong with him because the other learners enjoyed going through puberty. Similarly, L finds herself a target of bullying because she is different, but does not know how she is different. She has to choose between being victimised by local thugs or the school bully who has support from teachers. The teachers and the school bullies treated L in this manner because Swaziland's basic education curriculum did not, and still doesn't, sensitize Swazis about LGBTIQAP+ matters. The research shows that there are major difficulties for transgender learners in the Swazi education system. I argue for the need to advance a reformed education system that promotes inclusivity by exposing the manner in which the current education system violates transgender

people. The education system can promote societal awareness on gender and sexual diversity by introducing an LGBTIQAP+ discourse in the basic education curriculum.

### **The health sector: the questions that make trans people take a step back**

Swaziland has one of the highest HIV prevalences in the world, with 32 per cent of adults currently living with HIV (Fielding-Miller et al. 2014: 2). There is a close link between poverty and HIV/AIDS. Many Swazis are chronically food insecure and depend on food handouts and public services for survival (Swaziland Vulnerability Assessment Committee 2004). Similarly, the public health system in Swaziland is severely overused and resource constrained. It is not uncommon for health systems to not prioritise the needs of population minorities when resource constrained (Morison and Lynch 2016). Whilst this is understandable, it does not justify the complete erasure of and a lack of accountability for population minority healthcare. Healthcare reform is necessary to minimise the issues affecting population minorities that also perpetuate the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

The socio-economic factors that marginalise Swazi citizens are mediated by access to public services to some degree. For transgender Swazis, these socio-economic factors are perpetuated by structural discrimination. This section unpacks how structural discrimination in the health sector restricts the access of transgender people to healthcare services. The structural discrimination of transgender people by the healthcare system in Swaziland comes in two forms. Firstly, medical practitioners are not trained to cater for the specific needs of transgender people. Secondly, there is no treatment plan for transgender Swazis who need medical interventions to combat gender dysphoria. The lack of access to trans-related treatment forces transgender people to unorthodox and often dangerous methods of self-medication (Grossman and D'augelli 2006: 114; Sanchez et al. 2009: 713). Notwithstanding the dangers, self-medicating brings forth other barriers to healthcare access, especially when a transgender person is located in a country that is oblivious to the existence of transgender people. For example, a person assigned male at birth who self-medicated with oestrogen and developed secondary female characteristics can no longer safely access hospitals, primarily because healthcare practitioners are prejudiced towards trans patients (Müller 2013: 4). Some of the issues are articulated by a participant in Logie et al. (2016):

It's a different scenario when it's trans, people have got these social expectations, people feel more intimidated, feel more confused when they are interacting with trans people. . . I feel that it is even more difficult for trans people to access health care. They get a lot of those common questions what are you. . . And those are the questions that make trans people take a step back. I feel that Swaziland is at a stage whereby we are not quite understanding as a country when it comes to trans people, it is a space whereby a lot needs to be done.

***Interactions between Swaziland's healthcare practitioners and transgender patients***

Wirtz et al. (2006) stipulated that healthcare practice has favoured a paternalistic approach to treating patients over many centuries. This approach rests all decision-making power on the healthcare provider with limited input from the patient. This approach is dominant in public sector hospitals in Swaziland. It is a hindrance to transgender healthcare, because practitioners are not willing to engage with patients when they declare that some medical tests are not necessary in their context. Whilst a paternalistic approach may work in instances where the healthcare provider is a theoretical expert on the matters at hand, it is, however, a complete disaster in the area of transgender healthcare because practitioners are not knowledgeable on transgender healthcare. They therefore use a cisgender gaze to provide a rigid gender-binary-enforced approach to treatment, as experienced by a participant in Nkabinde's (2016) study, who identifies as a transwoman in one of Swaziland's public sector hospitals:

Usually, the nurses will fill in the forms and select female gender because of our appearances, and we do identify as women after all. However when you are asked to do more tests such as pregnancy tests or have to go for X-rays that is when it becomes a problem because we now have to explain about genders and they are not interested in listening.

Swaziland's healthcare practitioners are taken aback and lack capacity when confronted with transgender patients. They often respond with harassment, bullying, and sometimes denial of healthcare: '*Asenitongibukisa lana*', (Nkabinde 2016) translated as '*come and see this*', captured the moment when a nurse finally realised she was confronted with a transgender patient. A close analysis of this quote reveals a scene where a nurse is calling for backup from her colleagues to 'view the spectacle' that was confronting them. The request for backup in this instance is not meant to benefit the transgender patient, but to justify the nurse's forthcoming reaction because her 'limits' have been tested. Alternatively, the nurse could have engaged in a patient-based approach to the situation at hand and requested, '*asenitongibonisa nganaku*', translated as ('*come and help with insights*'). In this instance, the healthcare practitioners (the nurse and her colleagues) would have been prompted to interact with the transgender patient on their specific needs without bullying or harassing them.

A similar situation was described by research contributor V (transman, 31 years old), who visited a semi-private health institution (small clinic operating within a retail pharmacy) in Mbabane Swaziland to get his testosterone injection. A nurse at this institution was not knowledgeable on the different reasons why male patients are prescribed testosterone. Whilst she did not have an option to call for backup (because insufficient nursing staff were available), she fed her lack of knowledge back to V in an unprofessional way. To this appointment V had brought a doctor's prescription, a dosage, and a vial of testosterone; he needed the

nurse to perform the testosterone injection. Usually, the nurses at pharmacy outlets in South Africa (where V's doctor is) check the prescription plus the dosage and administer the testosterone without asking awkward questions. However, this Swazi nurse became curious about why V was taking testosterone. The encounter took place as follows:

- V: (*Handing over doctor's prescription to nurse*) I am here to do my testosterone injection.
- NURSE: (*Strange stare from the top of her glasses*) Why do you need testosterone?
- V: (*Hesitating after noting the stare*) I do not produce enough.
- NURSE: (*Studying V and the prescription*) How do you know you do not produce enough?
- V: (*Hoping the nurse does not know any better*) I got tested, and my levels are low.
- NURSE: (*Shifting attention from the prescription to V*) I see, [pause], what is wrong with your genitalia? Did they not grow properly? [Nod], would you mind if I examine them? It would be unprofessional for me to give you medication without knowing your ailment. I need to protect myself.
- V: (*Realising the situation just escalated*) Okay, but can I collect my syringe from the pharmacist first? I use a 2 ml syringe; it is smaller than the ones on your desk.
- NURSE: (*Checks all her drawers, for a 2 ml syringe*) Okay, return before the queue gets long.

V left the establishment and never returned. He still needed to get his injection and was forced to learn to self-administer testosterone. Leaving and never returning is a common experience among transgender people after interacting with health-care practitioners. Müller (2013) analysed that these interactions make population minorities wary of the health system because it violates them when they disclose their minority status. The lack of appropriate healthcare is one of the ways in which Swazi transgender people's citizenship rights are violated.

A lot needs to be done in Swaziland's healthcare system to accommodate transgender people. They are a vulnerable minority group, often targeted for sexual violence, which has severe consequences such as sexually transmitted infections as articulated in Muller and Hughes (2016). The Swazi health system needs to encourage population minorities to 'return' by incorporating trans inclusive policies into the existing minority population programmes since their existing programmes primarily focus on men who have sex with men (MSM) populations.

### ***Existing health programmes for population minorities overlooks transgender populations***

The Swaziland's extended National Multi-sectoral HIV and AIDS Framework (*eNSF*) 2014–2018 (Southern Africa Litigation Centre 2016: 44) granted sexual and reproductive healthcare to MSM populations through *HealthPlus4men* programming. There is still no similar programming for transgender people, and there



are no policies integrating transgender-specific issues in this programme. The studies conducted by Kennedy et al. (2013) and Risher et al. (2013) are evidence that the research lens on LGBTIQAP+ people in Swaziland is focused on HIV pathology in MSM populations. The voice of transgender people in these studies does not exist. This could be caused by a general lack of awareness of the difference between sex and gender, which leads to a universal assumption that all participants and their partners are cisgender. In this instance, transgender women can be grouped into an MSM category, which erodes and silences their transgender experience. Alternatively, transgender people can be actively excluded from MSM research because their experiences do not align with the overarching MSM mandate.

More research should be conducted on transgender populations in Swaziland. This research can focus on their specific needs, the structural discrimination they face, and measures that can be taken by the health system to address these needs. In addition, the needs of transgender people and other invisibilised population minorities should be mainstreamed into the health curriculum. Transgender people must be invited to partake in the development of a trans-inclusive health curriculum. In addition, they must be afforded an opportunity to teach it to practising healthcare professionals and students enrolled in the faculty of health sciences.

### **The legal sector: when cisgender law collides with transgender bodies**

Section 18 (2) of the Swazi constitution protects citizens from torture, inhumane, or degrading treatment. The constitution also grants citizens' rights to equality, freedom of expression, and association. The constitutional rights of all citizens are supposed to be protected by the law. However, if the law is conceptualised and actuated from a cisheteronormative gaze, it becomes selective concerning the citizens it protects. Authorities who are often prejudiced against minority populations such as transgender people enforce the law (Miles-Johnson 2013). Swaziland has no statistics on the hate crimes imposed on transgender populations. This could be due to systemic erasure, or wariness to report these crimes. Transgender people in Swaziland cannot access full citizenship:

You would not dare walk into a police station and report that someone is verbally abusing you because even the people who are supposed to protect us have no idea what gender issues are. People in Swaziland just lack knowledge and it would make our lives easier if the laws also protected us.

(Nkabinde 2016: 10)

Swaziland has no legislation that allows Swazis to alter their gender classification after medically transitioning. Transgender Swazis who have medically transitioned are forced to use legal documents that classify the gender assigned to them at birth. This means that they are predisposed to being harassed, violated, and, ultimately, refused access to services because their gender classification and their appearance do not comply. They are positioned as potential fugitives wherever they produce their

legal documentation, and this impedes on the daily activities and progressions of their lives. This is demonstrated by Z, a Swazi transwoman who is studying towards a degree through distance learning at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

UNISA might not mark my script; the invigilators think I am writing for someone. They encircled my name on the attendance list, and that is a red flag to me.  
(Z, trans feminine, 25 years)

Swaziland assigns a compulsory gender to newborn babies based on the appearance of their genitalia. This gender is classified male (M) or female (F) on all fundamental documents of identification: birth certificate, national identity number, driver's licence, and so on. The intersection of the birth certificate, the transgender identity, and access to public spaces (like toilets) is a contested issue in the twenty-first century (Plaskow 2016: 749). Society has this problem because it has oversimplified gender. Gender was erroneously assumed to be immutable to the extent that no one questioned the effect of including gender classification in fundamental documents of identity. Transgender people are positioned at the intersection of the oversimplified version of sex, gender, and the law. Their gender classification (M or F), gender expression, and physical anatomy often collide with the oversimplified version of gender that is known by officials. The experience of trans persons being gendered as fugitives can be summarised by the quote from Currah (2009: 254):

I do not suffer from gender dysphoria. I suffer from bureaucratic dysphoria. My ID does not match my appearance. I worry every time I apply for a job, every time I authorize a credit card check, every time I buy a plane ticket, every time I buy a beer at the corner deli. I have changed my name but my gender continues to be officially and bureaucratically male.

The bureaucracy surrounding gender classification in legal identity documents is a consistent trigger of violence for transgender people. This violence trigger surfaces in the worst possible ways when transgender people are asked to present identity documents that reflect their assigned gender. One of the bureaucratic requirements for attaining a Swazi national identity document is to look as natural as possible. This requirement was redefined to enforce rigid gender binary norms when a transgender person tried to attain a national identity document. A transwoman informant in Nkabinde's report (2016) reported her experience attaining her legal documents at home affairs and how this gave an opportunity for home affairs officials to correct her image because it had migrated from norms expected from the assigned male gender on her birth certificate. Home affairs officials refused to issue her national identity card until she conformed to the highest degree to her assigned male gender:

I had to be taken to their superiors because they 'did not understand me' but luckily she was friendlier and explained to me that a person has to look as

natural as possible in their national ID. She asked me to remove my makeup, earrings and I had to undo my braids which I had just done the previous day. Because my hair is long I had to tie it at the back.

The Swazi bureaucratically correct image that corresponds with the assigned gender is unsustainable for transgender people to maintain, because it triggers gender dysphoria. Therefore, transgender people 'get into character' by conforming to the appearance norms of their assigned gender in order to get their identity documents. After the home affairs show is over, they return to being their true selves (that is they express the gender they identify with). The problem starts whenever they have to present their identity documents and the 'forced appearance' (on the identity document) is incongruent with the physical person. As a result, transgender people cannot use their identity documents without being read as fugitives. The ultimate collision occurs at airports, border posts, and banks. The conflict between trans persons' gender expression, their gender classification, and an official's understanding of gender produces a category crisis (Currah and Mulqueen 2011: 572). Officials try to solve this category crisis by detaining transgender people to conduct pat down procedures and, ultimately, invasive interviews about what sits in your knickers, as experienced by research contributor Z at Matsapha Airport:

The passport official was reluctant to stamp my passport; he looked at me back and forth and then called for backup from his colleagues. They all stood there invasively staring at me and finally asked if I was a boy or a girl. I had to say that I was a boy, that's what my passport says. But I am not a boy, and I do not look like one. Then I was pulled aside for a search to confirm if my anatomy complied.

(Z, transwoman, 25 years)

The pat down procedures are not only invasive but can also be inconclusive, which adds another dimension to the category crisis. This is because there are different versions of bodies generally, and transgender bodies also are not uniform. Transgender bodies may or may not have undergone medical interventions, and if they have, the interventions are not similar in what Singer's (2011) study theorises as the transgender sublime. This theorises transgender people as a proliferative matrix which produces rapidly shifting embodiments that unsettle familiar ways of knowing (Singer 2011: 11). Therefore, can pat-down officials comprehend the plethora of existing transgender bodies to accurately confirm identity? More interestingly, do we need a gender to travel? Identity anxiety is a common experience among transgender people globally (Currah 2009: 254). Transgender Swazis who can get permanent residence in countries that allow gender alterations leave Swaziland to seek refuge in those countries. The refuge seeking provides a temporal solution to the immediate problem. Swaziland still recognises them by their assigned gender. This calls for a paradigm shift in the way states view gender and officiates it in bureaucratic documents. This paradigm shift would allow states to

make provisions for gender-marker alterations to citizens who were assigned the wrong gender at birth.

### **Transgender activism in Swaziland: TransSwati**

Transgender activists in Swaziland are setting up a trans-specific NGO, TransSwati, to tackle the problems outlined earlier and to avoid the rife trans antagonism they continuously experience from LGB-dominated NGOs. One of the main challenges they face is getting officially registered because activism is not an act you perform publicly in Swaziland. Any existing forms of LGBTIQAP+ activism hide under a larger mandate. For instance, MSM activism is hidden under HIV healthcare. TransSwati activism is currently focused on the health sector. In future, it looks to engage with the legal and education sectors.

Similar to MSM activism, TransSwati activists have piloted a health allyship system with some open-minded health professionals (nurses). These health professionals were recommended to attend a gender-affirming healthcare pre-conference hosted by the regional transgender organisation, Gender Dynamix, in November 2016 (Gender Dynamix 2016). These allies would lobby and advocate the health sector (get doctors on board) and other parts of government. So far, the health allyship system has introduced transgender health in a meeting with leaders of the Swazi government. The leaders responded, '*Kulungile ingalashwa lemikhuhlane*', which is loosely translated as '*It is okay, the cold and flus can be treated*'). In this instance, the leaders used 'cold and flus' symbolically to represent ailments as a way to address trans people's health needs. However, they stipulated a requirement that these ailments must not be publicised to the general public. No agreements have been made on paper. TransSwati activists are forecasting that it is likely that transgender health will get to a point where some public hospitals provide hormones to transgender people, and their next focal point will be legal gender classification changes.

To date, no motions have been made on gender classification changes since the pressing issues have been ensuring that transgender Swazis have access to healthcare. However, TransSwati activists are aware that gender-marker changes are equally important, since cross sex hormone therapy worsens the incongruence between the transgender person and their legal gender classification. Swazi transgender activists are looking into the possibility of using a provision that was made for alterations to the births register. This provision (the Births, Marriages and Deaths Registration Act 5 of 1983) was possibly made for intersex people and it states:

If after registration of birth, the change in any other particular of a person not provided for in this section has occurred, he, if he is 21 years of age, may apply to the Registrar directly or through respective district registrar or assistant district registrar for alteration of such a particular in the births register. Thereupon the Registrar shall, if satisfied that the applicant is competent to make the application and on production of documentary proof (in case of

change of sex of the child a medical certificate from the medical practitioner shall be produced) and on payment of the prescribed fee, cause the said particular of the person to be altered in the original birth information form filed in his office, but without erasing the original entry.

(Southern Africa Litigation Centre 2016: 44)

It is not clear that the same provision can be used to alter the gender classification changes of transgender people. This is because it stipulates sex, and chances are it only considers supporting medical evidence of 46XY chromosome deficiencies and not a gender dysphoria diagnosis. However, it can be used as an entry point to justify gender classification changes for transgender people in Swaziland. TransSwati activism efforts would need to be invested in convincing the registrar that such a change should be enacted for transgender persons upon presentation of a gender dysphoria diagnosis instead of 46XY chromosome deficiencies.

In the future, TransSwati activists are ultimately hoping to engage the education system. As it stands, this is going to be a difficult process, considering the leaders prefer these ‘ailments’ to not be publicised. This is not surprising because Swaziland’s political stance has been to erase the existence of people outside the cis-heteronormative bracket. However, TransSwati activists have been invited to meet with members of parliament in June 2017. The Swazi parliament is responding to a call from Nicola Bellomo (European Union ambassador to Swaziland) requesting Swaziland to recognise LGBTIQAP+ rights (Zwane 2015). In this meeting, TransSwati activists will hand in a document that summarises the experiences of transgender people in Swaziland. The document will also provide insights on how the Swazi government can mitigate the struggles faced by transgender people in Swaziland. TransSwati activists are aware that in December 2013, the Ministry of Education requested teachers and administrators to be more understanding and supportive of LGBTI people in schools and the community (Zwane 2013). TransSwati activists are planning to use that call as a channel to propose including an LGBTIQAP+ discourse in Swaziland’s basic education curriculum.

## Conclusion

Transgender Swazis face challenges in the education, health, and legal sectors of the country. Political figures erase the existence of sexual and gender minorities in Swaziland. Therefore, government sectors are not mandated to prioritise social policy reform. Consequently, no efforts are made to educate the general Swazi public on sexual and gender variance.

Swaziland schools enforce a rigid gender binary on pupils, and any gender expressions that transgress the expected norms are penalised. The teachers are oblivious to gender variance and are therefore gatekeepers of binary norms who partake in the bullying of transgender pupils. The curriculum is silent on transgender issues, except on instances where it has been observed to pathologise intersex people. Consequently, the authorised penalisation, pathology and bullying makes the Swazi school environment inaccessible to transgender learners. Transgender

learners have to sacrifice their mental well-being in order to get an education. Transgender Swazis are denied healthcare in instances where their gender expression supersedes the expected norm. There are no public sector healthcare provisions made for transgender people in Swaziland. Transgender people who wish to undergo a medical transition must be able to afford the private sector or not get treatment. Even in the private sector, transgender people still have to explain their existence to uninformed healthcare professionals who may subsequently choose to ridicule and refuse treatment. The bureaucratic legal system assigns gender at birth with no supporting provision for transgender Swazis, who were wrongfully assigned at birth, to change their gender marker. Instead, the bureaucratic system forces all those who were wrongfully assigned to conform to the assigned gender. Therefore, transgender Swazis repeatedly experience identity anxiety from the marked incongruence between their gender classification and gender expression. This incongruence presents them as identity fraudsters when presenting legal documentation at banks, airports, job applications, and writing university exams; they are gendered as fugitives.

Transgender activists in Swaziland are setting up an NGO TransSwati, which is meant to drive policy reform in the education, health, and legal sectors of Swaziland. TransSwati activists have since lobbied government leaders to provide public healthcare access that speaks to the specific needs of the transgender key population group. In the future, TransSwati activists are going to tackle legal and education reform. The activists are planning to advocate for transgender gender-marker changes using an existing act that allows intersex people to alter their sex. In the future, TransSwati activists will lobby the education sector to address the curriculum and teaching practices in schools.

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