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TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL FLOWS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF POSTAPARTHEID SAME-SEX SEXUALITIES

by

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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in

ENGLISH

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

at the

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

Supervisor: Professor Ronit Frenkel
Submission date: January 2017
DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that “Transnational Cultural Flows and the Representation of Postapartheid Same-Sex Sexualities” is my own original work, that all the sources I have used or quoted have been properly referenced, and that I have not previously submitted this thesis, in its entirety or in part, at any other university for a degree.

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SUMMARY

This study investigates how same-sex sexualities are represented in several postapartheid cultural texts, and how these representations mark distinct encounters between the transnational and the local. I trace how both historical and contemporary cultural flows exceed both the imaginary and physical boundaries of the national, and intersect with local racial politics to shape postapartheid same-sex public cultures. I develop the notion of restless mobilities to describe the uneven movement and transformations of ideology, aesthetics, affect, and form within global economies of cultural exchange. As I show, historical and contemporary cultural flows co-circulate in complex ways that shape the very constitution of the local in these texts. In particular, I am interested in how these cultural flows map onto postapartheid configurations of race, class, and gender during the production and circulation of these same-sex imaginaries, which are simultaneously rooted and transnational. My focus on restlessness opens up new ways of thinking about South Africa’s locatedness in the vast and uneven global networks of circulation. Restlessness refers to the different ways in which transnational cultural forms negotiate meaning within and between local sites, how ideological and political forms are inhabited differently in different spaces, and how different discourses are transformed in the production of local same-sex public cultures. First, I explore the mobility of global human rights discourses and identity politics, as they reveal both solidarities and discontinuities between the global sexual rights agenda and the antiapartheid movement. Secondly, I trace the power of transnational whiteness as a normative structure of privilege that maps historical connections and forges new ones in the production and circulation of particular white, gay imaginaries. Then, I consider the history of the black female body, as well as its multiple (dis)articulations of victimhood in the present. Finally, I analyse two novels by diasporic Indian writers whose works reflect the confluence of multiple competing transnational imaginaries. These two novels explore the making and unmaking of cultural ‘authenticity’ and sexual otherness within South African Indian communities. This thesis moves across different geographic sites, histories, and forms of ideology and identity. It also traverses several textual genres that include fiction, drama, a documentary film, photography, and a popular magazine. The fiction comprises four novels: Michiel Heyns’s The Reluctant Passenger (2003) and Lost Ground (2011), Shamim Sarif’s The World Unseen (2001), and Zinaid Meeran’s Saracen at the Gates.

Keywords: transnational; postapartheid; gay; lesbian; same-sex; human rights; Simon Nkoli; antiapartheid movement; whiteness; assimilation; black female body; diaspora; Indianness; *Gay Pages*. 
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On 6 October 2012, several sponsored floats, gorgeous go-go boys, and about 20 000 Joburg Pride revellers (sporting jeans and sneakers, rainbow flags, and corporate pink umbrellas) made their way down Jan Smuts Avenue in Johannesburg. However, as the festivities moved down the street, a small group of predominantly black, lesbian women staged a “die-in” (Davis 2012). These activists blocked the path of the procession using mannequins and their own seemingly lifeless bodies. Behind these protestors were banners that read “Dying for justice” and “No cause for celebration”. The anti-rape feminist organisation behind the protest sought to disrupt not only the physical movement of people along the designated route of the parade, but also the festive depoliticisation and exclusions that had come to characterise the spatial politics of Joburg Pride. The small group of protestors insisted that they wanted “one minute of silence” to draw attention to the culture of rape and violent assault against black, lesbian women. Theirs was also a protest against both the racialised exclusions enacted through Pride and the general apathy of its predominantly white, middle-class participants. However, as the swell of revellers moved closer to the site of the die-in, vitriol and violence ensued as some of the white marchers intimidated and attacked the black protestors. Demanding that the black women move out of the street, one of the white organisers of the parade shouted “this is my route”, while another physically assaulted one of the black women. In an online video (Shelver 2012) of the incident, white party-goers are heard shouting “drive over them” and instructing the black protestors to “go back to your lokshins [locations]” – a word that evokes the racialisation of apartheid’s spatial planning.

Though most of the ensuing online media fracas pointed to and blamed the structuring raciology of postapartheid cultural life, I felt dissatisfied by these explanations. They seemed too easy, too obvious, too insular. These explanations demanded too great a commitment to exceptionalism, and offered too little in the way of nuance. Of course, the racism and patriarchy rooted in our national consciousness might produce such divisions, but what else was at stake in this contestation over spatial visibility? What new connections and encounters would come into view if we read this conflict as a local instantiation of a global sexual politics? What are the broader transnational practices of inclusion and exclusion within sexual cultures, and how are they
transformed when enacted in the streets of Johannesburg? How do historical routes of white privilege intersect with contemporary ones and what does this mean for the ways in which images of gay men are produced and circulated? How does the transnational figure of the black female body mobilise new constituencies of affect, and how does her same-sex sexuality reproduce her vulnerability? What sort of same-sex public cultures are erased by these racially polarised protagonists? And, significantly, in what types of heteronormative cultures do such racial discourses play out, and who is invested in the outcome?

That morning in October exposed the seemingly intractable fractures, emotions, and exclusions within postapartheid sexual politics. It is also the day on which this project was born.
INTRODUCTION

Global cultural flows have lost the selective and cumbersome qualities that they have had for much of human history, during which most societies found ways to accommodate external systems of meaning within their own cosmological frameworks, hence producing change by dialectical accident and structural combination. Today, global cultural flows, whether religious, political, or market-produced, have entered into the manufacture of local subjectivities, thus changing both the machineries for the manufacture of local meaning and the materials that are processed by these machineries. (Appadurai 2013: 63-64)

This project is about same-sex public cultures in postapartheid South Africa. But it is also about the broader transnational cultural flows through which these publics are constituted in national and global imaginaries. In this investigation, through a close reading of several recent cultural texts, I argue that the restless mobilities of postapartheid same-sex public cultures form cosmopolitan imagination that negotiate the rooted specificity of domestic race and gender politics at the same time as they script connections (Samuelson 2010a) with transnational cultural coordinates. To refer to restless mobilities is to mark a particular set of cultural flows that are simultaneously rooted and transnational, disparate and uneven, precarious and contingent, and orientated more towards connections and movement than any inward-looking ossification of the nation-state. I use the concept of restless mobilities to trace the connections between contemporary same-sex public cultures in South Africa on the one hand, and racial and cultural politics that stretch beyond both the temporal and physical borders of the postapartheid nation-state on the other. This transnational and trans-historical connectivity links postapartheid same-sex sexualities to historical movements and their residues in the present, as well as to contemporary global networks of sexual politics.

I borrow the term restless mobilities from Meg Samuelson (2010b) in her analysis of the Indian diaspora in recent South African fiction. While I return to these diasporic cultural flows in my final chapter, I also extend Samuelson’s concept and use it in this thesis to map the broader transnational movements – both historical and contemporaneous – through which same-sex public cultures are formed in the present. Samuelson (279) productively writes that the concept “maintain[s] a tension rather than closing the gap between national and transnational affiliations”. However, she
also sets it against a “poetics of settlement” (282), in which oceanic movements give way to fixed notions of belonging. In place of this conceptual binary, I emphasise, rather, that the affective structures of rooted belonging are themselves a result of the historical and current movements through which these racialised and cultural communities have been formed. Rather than being fixed, these rooted communities are tied to an ever-expanding network of cultural flows. What is more, the rootedness of postapartheid racialised spaces and cultural formations is itself the product of earlier expansionist impulses of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid, which saw the unequal and brutal movement of capital, labour, ideology and cultural affects. Even apartheid biopolitics, which escalated during the country’s isolationism in the second half of the twentieth century, was informed by globalised discourses about race and sex. It is the cultural politics of these constructs that are bound up with racial politics and nationalisms elsewhere. Pamila Gupta (2011a: 16) succinctly writes that “older forms of migration directly shape and define the cosmopolitan identities of today”. In contrast to Samuelson, who emphasises the relationship between national identity and place, I stress the way in which historical routes inculcate a rootedness in the present that itself forges alternative transnational cultural circuits. Rootedness is therefore shaped by historical routes as much as it is imbricated in contemporary ones.

The cultural mobilities of same-sex publics are characterised as restless in order to emphasise the multiple forms, connections, and transformations that characterise their transnational economies of cultural exchange. Restlessness describes the asymmetrical reciprocities of global culture flows that are structured by well-wrought and invisible networks of access, exclusion, and transformation. Restlessness marks the unknown itineraries of different textual genres, ideologies, cultural forms, and the diverse practices of reception and circulation within different localities. And restlessness accounts for both the mapping of new routes and the co-articulation of older roots, reworking the dichotomies of movement and stasis that attach respectively to the notions of being routed and rooted (Samuelson 2010b; Greenblatt in King 2006: 710; Dodd 2007: 99). My formulation of restlessness is informed by Robin Wagner-Pacifi’s (2010: 1371) use of the term to point to the always contingent and evolving production and transfer of cultural meaning, “as actions and interpretations unfold across time, space, diverse media, and variably receptive publics”. In her analysis of how proliferating discourses and modes of representation imperfectly concretise
specific happenings into historical ‘events’, Wagner-Pacifici (1374) adds that restlessness is “a function of the ongoing interpretive and interactional competitions and contestations among principal actors and witnesses”. Similarly, Louise Bethlehem (2015) uses the term restlessness to describe not only how apartheid itself mobilised the global circulation of particular cultural texts, but also how the significations of these generative circulations resisted fixity. For Bethlehem, restlessness appears to characterise, at least in part, the multiple complex transnational movements, whether oppositional or overlapping, through which apartheid, its resistances, and its “cultural inscriptions of […] struggles over values and knowledge” (Bethlehem 2015: 8) circulated in the “global imaginary” (De Kock 2004).

In particular, I focus on the production, circulation, and reception of several postapartheid texts, and show how they negotiate the intersecting circulations of local and global sexual politics. In the first chapter, I read a drama and a documentary about the life of gay antiapartheid activist Simon Nkoli, which point to the transnational mobility of human rights as an ideological form, as well as the broader politics of race and representation. In the second chapter, I read two of Michel Heyns’s novels, as well as Gay Pages, a quarterly magazine series, to explore the mobility and reach of transnational whiteness. In the third chapter, I analyse a collection of photographs by black, lesbian activist Zanele Muholi, in which she reimagines the transnational figuration of the black, female body. And in the fourth chapter, I examine two recent novels by postapartheid Indian writers who challenge myths of cultural authenticity on which heteronormative patriarchy depends. This thesis is a cultural studies analysis of how same-sex sexualities come to signify within these circulations of culture. Stuart Hall (1996a: 165) reminds us that identities and cultural meanings are not stable entities that precede representation, but are rather constituted within and by representation. It is these very textual practices of cultural production – irrespective of the genres that they may constitute – that inform the multiple meanings and signifying systems through which same-sex sexualities circulate within the national and transnational imaginaries. Instead of reading postapartheid racial and sexual politics and practices from an exclusively localised perspective, then, I focus on how the cosmopolitanism of local same-sex public cultures depends on the transnational
movement of cultural artefacts – what Arjun Appadurai (2013: 64) refers to as “the machineries for the manufacture of local meaning”.

Circulations and the making of same-sex public cultures: a conceptual terrain

Same-sex publics, their aesthetic forms, ideological attachments, relations of affect, and internal fractures stand at the centre of this project. These publics, according to Michael Warner (2002), are constituted in the reception and circulation of cultural texts within discursive circuits. Warner distinguishes between the public and a public, noting that the latter is not defined as a political polity or as a fixed organised membership, but rather as an affiliation constituted in a common discourse. Attention and “active uptake” of cultural texts is enough, says Warner (419), for inclusion in the publics generated by those texts. So what I am referring to here as same-sex publics do not depend on identity categories or the vicissitudes of sexual desire, but rather on the reception and circulation of discourses through which same-sex sexualities are discursively constituted. Warner (420) explains that “[n]o single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse”. The various creative works of fiction and drama, photography and film, as well as popular magazines that I analyse in this thesis, circulate within mutually constituting networks of representation that make up postapartheid same-sex public cultures. To be clear, however, Warner (420) insists that individual “[t]exts themselves do not create publics”, and these are created by “the concatenation of texts through time”. “Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed”, he continues, “and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public”. Set against the historical circulation and institutionalisation of heteronormativity and the flow of Western hegemonies of identity politics, aesthetics and form, the production of same-sex textual publics mobilises new constituencies that are simultaneously local and globally connected.

These postapartheid publics are constituted, then, in the transnational circulation and reception of different genres and discursive forms that negotiate particular meanings within local cultural sites. Transnationalism, as I use it here, indexes itself against “circulations and crossings among different spaces, different scales […] and different
temporalities” (Frassinelli, Frenkel & Watson 2011: 3). These spatial, geopolitical, and temporal axes of cultural politics negotiate between the local and the global, and the past and the present, while exposing the internal fractures of the modern nation-state. These “circulations and crossings” that produce transnational publics also point to the way in which different modes of representation have both their own established circuits of cultural flow as well as a restlessness through which new connections and resonances can be mapped. While degrees of connectivity cannot simply be overlaid onto patterns of circulation (Appadurai 2013: 65) – given, of course, that transcultural resonances do not necessarily correlate with the form, intensity, and mutuality of global cultural flows – the movement of cultural affect depends on existing routes at the same moment that new attachments are formed. Significantly, Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma (2002: 192) argue that circulation does not merely reside in patterns of movement across cultures, but rather is “a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them”.

It is, then, the refraction through the cultural politics of the local that these complex transnational circulations produce the restlessness of postapartheid sexual publics, negotiating between several competing imaginaries. These include human rights, identity politics, African nationalisms, indigenous inscriptions of ordinary desire, religious conservatism, and historical diasporas.

As a type of cultural history predicated on the restless mobilities of particular sexual modalities, this thesis locates postapartheid same-sex sexualities within the global circulation of cultural politics, affect, aesthetics, and form. To be clear, this is not a comparative project of how same-sex sexualities are represented within different geopolitical contexts; rather, it is a study of how locality itself is produced within the transnational circulation of texts. Appadurai (2013: 69) emphasises the importance of reading the cultural archives that inhere in specific localities. He defines these localities as “temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms”. In a somewhat similar vein, Stephen Greenblatt (2009b: 252) reminds us that, despite their locatedness within intersecting networks of cultural exchange, “[c]ultures are almost always apprehended not as mobile or global or even mixed, but as local”. The “sensation of rootedness” through which we experience our cultural and social lives depends in many ways on the “powers of a culture […] to hide the mobility that is its
enabling condition” (252, original emphasis). Therefore, this is not a study of how particular discourses about same-sex sexualities simply replicate discursive modes and representational strategies that characterise specific localities and cultural hegemonies elsewhere. Rather, the thesis reads postapartheid cultural texts within these global circulations and maps the cultural spaces and forms, as well as the sexual politics, with which these texts are in dialogue. In this way, these circulations are not only thought of as a means for the transmission of cultural meaning, but are in fact “constitutive acts in themselves” (Lee & LiPuma 2002: 192).

The analytical purchase of transnationalism has been grafted onto several metaphors that gesture at both the complex relationalities and reach of global cultural flows. Portability (Hofmeyr 2004a) has been effectively used to refer to the ease with which particular cultural objects can be transported to alternative locations. Similarly, travelling has been used as a trope to refer to cultural movement, in order to emphasise “creative take-up, change, blending and redefinition” (Neumann & Nünning 2012: 7). Importantly, James Clifford (2015) points out that the word travel is associated with the notion of “everyday, institutionalized activity” on routes that are well known and mapped. While the concept of restless mobilities depends on some of these well-wrought conceptual and geographic paths, it also traces unexpected connections and flows between postapartheid sexual cultures and an interconnected global sexual politics. Although the use of particular metaphors to describe the entanglement of transnational localities – such as fusion (Ogundimu 2009: 388) and braiding (Jackson-Opoku 2009) – is powerfully suggestive of the complex interconnectedness between different geographic diasporic communities, it overestimates the fixity and stasis of these relations. I would argue that these relations are better imagined as being in “a more languid motion” (Montaigne in Greenblatt 2009a: 5) than a closed system of enmeshment.

The process of translation has also been used to conceptualise the global encounters between different cultural flows. And as a metaphor predicated on the very processes of meaning-making, it foregrounds the contingencies and indeterminacies that characterise cultural exchange. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2012: 27) argues that the analytical valence of cultural translation has shifted from concerns about accuracy and originality to ideas of transforming the very modes of representation, sites of cultural
difference, discontinuities, and power relations. Bachmann-Medick (30) emphasises that the translation metaphor does not refer to a unidirectional transfer of meaning, but is rather a “complex, sociological, relational one that opens up translation to reciprocity and mutual transformation”. As Hall (in Bachmann-Medick 2012: 38) reminds us, “translation [is] a continuous process of re-articulation and re-contextualization, without any notion of a primary origin”. Translation in these senses depicts not only the transfer but also the transformation – and not only the movement but the remaking – of cultural meaning across and between nation-states, as they connect to the rich tapestries of local cultural work. Anna Wendland (2012: 48) summarises the internal logic of these metaphors when she writes that “the transferred object is not left untouched but undergoes transformation during the transfer process”. What this means for same-sex public cultures is that neither the Western hegemonies of aesthetics, form and identity politics, nor the reach of anti-imperialist or religious homophobias are simply absorbed into the national body politic. Rather, they are negotiated and transformed through the rootedness of local discursive publics (shaped as they are by the histories of colonialism and apartheid). What this produces is same-sex publics that are subtended by complex renderings of race, gender, and history. It is within this context of the country’s past that these postapartheid sexual publics are rooted, and from which they themselves articulate new routes.

To refer to the transnational mobility of same-sex public cultures and to the connections between different cultural sites is not to assert a universalism in sexual cultures or the cosmopolitan imaginaries in which they take root. The relationships between hegemonic cultural flows and the localised remaking of cultural meaning poses challenges for imagining transnational sexual cultures. The iconic Michel Foucault (1998) famously locates the origin of homosexual identity formation in Europe in the nineteenth century. He traces the way in which discursive apparatuses of state, religion and psychiatry solidified same-sex sexual practices and desires into public identities, concluding that “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). Foucault argues that the production of the category and personage of the homosexual provided the homo/heterosexual binary and the discursive structure on which cultural meaning has been projected. While Foucault’s historiography has been rightly critiqued for its Eurocentricism and blindness to race (Stoler 1995; Massad 2008), it nonetheless provides a useful
The universal offers us the chance to participate in the global stream of humanity. We can’t turn it down. Yet we also can’t replicate previous versions without inserting our own genealogy of commitments and claims”. The notion of the universal functions, then, as an imagined figure who embodies particular clusters of aspirations, identifications, and aesthetics that can be globally generalisable. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues in Provincializing Europe, however, that the idea of the universal is an ideological fiction that imbues one system of cultural meaning with the power not only to author and regulate general hierarchies and norms for other cultural sites, but also to exclude other localised knowledges as aberrant outliers. Therefore, any universal sexual identity is itself always “a highly unstable figure” (Chakrabarty 2000: xiii). While same-sex sexual practices and desires can be imagined simply as a variant of human sexuality, this is not to say that there is a single nomenclature or monolithic notion of sexual identity, nor is there even a universal binary logic onto which gender and sexual formations can be mapped. Terms and positionalities such as homosexual, lesbian, gay, and queer have no universal applicability and are instead the production and export of particular forms of sexual identity that inhere within the networks of cultural transfer dominated by the Global North. Given the over-determined relationship between sex and identity politics that forms under the sign of modernity, I will use the adjective same-sex throughout this
thesis, unless reporting on the nomenclatures used in specific primary and secondary texts, or when engaging specifically with sexual identity politics.

Appadurai (2013: 66), for his part, emphasises the transnational circulation of cultural forms (be they physical, textual, ideological, conceptual or aesthetic), which he distinguishes from the “specific voices, contents, messages, and materials” that occupy those forms. The local sexual rights agenda in South Africa was tied to the global circulation of particular forms of political apparatus. Chong Kee Tan (2001: 126), for instance, credits the transnational circulation of form for providing sexual rights groups in Taiwan with “a forum (public hearing), a model (civil groups negotiating with the state), and a language (human rights) to articulate their demands”. Though these political forms are inhabited in different ways in different localities, they provide powerful models for the rollout of an expansive human rights agenda. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the global cultural flow of gay and lesbian politics into South Africa would develop, transform, and inhabit these political forms in distinct ways, and it was during this time that sexual rights and racial equality were increasingly being co-circulated among the antiapartheid political elite in the country, and among those in exile.

A restless history

Writing in the early 1990s, Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (1994: 5) reflected on the supposedly uniquely localised intersection of transnational sexual politics in South Africa: “From the ‘developed world’, we inherit notions of sexual freedom and gay subculture; from the ‘developing world’ we gain the imperatives of struggle, resistance, and social transformation”. More than anything else, this uneven and oddly dichotomised formulation reveals the challenges of writing a country’s sexual history. Not only does Gevisser and Cameron’s formulation alienate sexual rights from social justice, and activism from community formation, but it also constructs essentialist notions of the Global North and the developing South, and over-determines the universality of gay identity formation. While they recognise that sexual cultures are dynamic and are shaped by different cultural influences, they appear to limit these to a rather thin inventory, and erase the complexities that inhere in the meaning of cultural forms, both within different nation-states and through their textual circulations. What is
more, they also underestimate the extent to which same-sex public cultures in South Africa are not merely recipients of cultural form and content, but are themselves located dynamically and reciprocally within the global flows of sexual and racial politics. As Clifford (1997: 11) persuasively argues, location should be thought about as an “itinerary rather than a bounded site – a series of encounters and translations”. Mapping the historical geographies of sexuality consequently requires a focus on the specificities of cultural form and negotiation, and on the transnational textual publics that they constitute.

Gevisser and Cameron’s framing also fails to take into account the multiplicity of cultural circuits that move public cultures around the globe. Same-sex sexualities move along these global circuits in multiple ways. Rather than being caught in a dichotomy between the developed and developing worlds, same-sex sexualities “inhabit local sites in complex ways” (Appadurai 2013: 67), and the restlessness of same-sex cultural histories in South Africa is a result of multiple circulatory discourses that overlap and intersect. These discursive apparatuses include indigenous cultural systems and practices of desire, African nationalisms, the moralist social engineering of apartheid biopolitics, transnational religious systems, identity politics, and the mobility of human rights discourses in the second half of the twentieth century. The meanings, identities, and rhetorical strategies through which these same-sex sexualities are imagined are mobile, generated in and transported by official agencies of church and state, interpersonal exchanges, and by global media and communications networks.

In recent decades, some postcolonial African nationalists have reintroduced into circulation insistences that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican. This has functioned as a structuring trope in the formation of everyday postapartheid homophobias. These discourses are based on essentialist constructs of an authentic Africanness that claims custodianship of autochthonous myths of precolonial heteronormativity. Assertions that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican co-circulate with political opposition to the cultural imperialism of the West and the stubbornly persistent imaginings of cultural authenticity. It is this construction of an imagined heterosexual Africa that is woven into the fabric of many local sexual cultures that remain subject to often violent homophobia. While local postapartheid cultural politics and practices of inclusion and
exclusion are inevitably entangled with the intersecting significations of Africa, sexuality and identity, Sheldon Pollock (2000: 591) warns against thinking about “vernacular ways of being” as timeless, and instead reminds us that “autochthons […] do not exist outside their own mythical self-representation”. In spite of this, repeated assertions that same-sex sexualities should be excluded from the nationalist body politic link South Africa to essentialist constructions of a supposedly timeless continent. African intellectuals started linking same-sex sexualities to European imperialism in the 1930s (Epprecht 2013: 126), a discourse that re-emerges in the utterances of postcolonial luminaries such as Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyere (126-27) and Frantz Fanon (Epprecht 2004: 173). Co-circulating with this African nationalism, heteronormativity was considered to be constitutive of both anticolonial resistance and postcolonial statehood. Unsurprisingly, given the ascent of ethnic nationalism globally today, these discourses have taken root in communities across South Africa, despite the rich cultural history of same-sex sexualities across the continent. Appadurai (2007: 224) explains that “the central paradox of ethnic politics today” is that “primordia (whether of language or skin color or neighbourhood or kinship) have become globalized”. He expounds further that “sentiments whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political sentiment and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces, as groups move, yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities” (224).

It is through the expansive reach of transnational essentialisms that tropes of authentic heterosexual Africanness came to inform apartheid and postapartheid understandings of sexuality. This despite the fact that the history of same-sex sexualities in Africa predates (and is later coextensive with) colonialism and the Western cultural hegemonies of the present. There has been a great deal of scholarship in recent years that has mapped the diverse sexual practices of groups outside of the immediate ambit of the Western gaze. Diverse sexualities have been documented extensively in African communities across time and space, and this exposes the constructedness of authentic notions of heteronormative Africa. For example, in Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa (2004), Marc Epprecht investigates different same-sex practices on the sub-continent, and documents the markedly different cultural discourses through which they are rendered intelligible. Accounting for the periods before, during, and after colonialism, Epprecht shows that while reproductive
heterosexuality was widely exalted, same-sex sexual practices continued too. These practices were invested with meanings that ranged from the sensually intimate to the ritualistic, exceeding the narrow framing of mere situational or transactional homosexuality – a sanitising impulse that continues to shape representations of same-sex sexualities today.

Epprecht develops these ideas further in *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (2008). In this thoroughly researched study, he exposes the overlapping epistemological complicities through which heteronormative essentialisms were not only discursively constructed and grafted onto notions of Africa, but also how they then came to circulate globally. Similarly, in *Out in Africa: Same-sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Cultures*, Chantal Zabus (2013) provides a meticulous analysis of how various colonial, anthropological, and literary texts (which span more than one and a half centuries from the 1860s to the present) depict indigenous same-sex sexual practices. Zabus’s research problematises suggestions that same-sex intimacies are unAfrican, and it disaggregates the cultural meanings that inhere in such sexual practices. In many instances, same-sex sexualities are imagined through the prism of traditional gender binaries. This may take the form of ladies/gents (Reid 2013: 26) or butch/femme relationalities. These relationships also have complex genealogies that inhere in positions such as mummy-baby relationships, boy wives, female husbands, lesbian men, and ancestral wives. In some ways, these indigenised forms of social and sexual organisation resonate with contemporary gender politics of sexual minorities in the Global North.

Despite the transnational resonances in conceptualisations of desire and intimacy, they are still negotiated and articulated differently in different localities. Similarly, local notions of same-sex desire have been linked to the figure of the gay or lesbian sangoma (Chan-Sam 1994: 191-192; Nkabinde 2008; Reid 2013: 28), illustrating that cultural circuits are dynamic movements of fluid meaning rather than simply mechanisms for the deployment of dominant discourses in the Global South. Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde’s autobiographical *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* (2008) sketches her own position as a lesbian sangoma. In the book, Nkabinde destabilises structuring dichotomies of sexual identity that depend on polarised notions such as tradition and
modernity on the one hand, and Africa and the West on the other. Graeme Reid (2013: 198) emphasises the strategic importance of self-identifying gay sangomas as they connect modern sexual politics to one of the most privileged signifiers of African tradition. This increasing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on sexualities in Africa records the different ways in which same-sex sexualities are refracted through disparate discourses, practices, and signifying regimes of countless historical peoples of the continent. Thus, while certain identities, nomenclatures, and queer intellectual frameworks may have Western roots, claims that same-sexualities themselves are unAfrican find little support in this research as such desires and practices proliferate within various schema of social organisation in colonial and precolonial contexts. This scholarship dislodges sexual cultures in South Africa from the epistemic certainty of an imagined heteronormative authenticity and marks new intellectual contexts for the production of localised sexual cultures. It also circulates alternative imaginings of distinctly African same-sex sexualities that resist the homogenising trope of African homophobia.

Despite myths of a static cultural and geographic precolonial landscape in Africa, the period that preceded European control of the continent was characterised by extensive connections, travel and trade that took place between local clans and migrant communities, and with other trading groups including Arabs, Persians, and Indians (Epprecht 2004: 27, 43-44). That being said, the advent of European colonialism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries intensified the volume and momentum of these flows. However, rather than the reciprocal free movement of commodities and cultural artefacts, this period is characterised by what Isabel Hofmeyr (2009: 236) calls the “conspicuous circulation” of texts. This deliberate and publicised distribution of cultural texts (which articulated idealised ways of structuring political, economic, sexual, spiritual and domestic ways of life) was central to the domestic policy agendas of successive European monarchs and governments. The Protestant churches and the European structures of statehood formed an imbricated political nexus that depended on notions of sexual moralism and white supremacy. In African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization (2007), Hoad examines the importation (and imposition) of Christianity in the nineteenth century in Buganda in eastern Africa. In his analysis of global networks of Christian moralism and political power, Hoad observes how the meanings of sexual acts are refracted differently through
transnational flows and local archives. Furthermore, he maps same-sex sexual practices among the indigenous people and situates same-sex sexualities not only outside of the imperial agenda of the colonial project, but in direct opposition to it. For instance, in his analysis of the encounters between Christian missionaries (who denounced same-sex sexualities) and the Buganda King (who purportedly engaged in them extensively) in the late nineteenth century, Hoad (2007: 15) provocatively argues that “sodomy” could be read “primarily [as] anticolonial resistance”. Gevisser (1994: 73) writes that “the censure of homosexuality […] is a colonial import, brought to this continent by missionaries, and that there is irony to the fact that latter-day Africanists have assimilated this Judeo-Christian biblical propaganda and reconstructed it as precolonial African purity”, an intellectual dalliance that continues in the present. Hoad (2007: 76) similarly writes that “Christian norms and values, arguably Western imports par excellence, are often invoked as ‘authentic African tradition’ in the context of rebutting claims to citizenship rights by gay men and lesbians under the Southern African postcolonial state”. Historicising the place of Christianity in global cultural flows of the past allows us to refashion the relationships between same-sex sexualities and colonialism that are imagined by contemporary African nationalists and traditionalists, in South Africa and elsewhere.23

Colonial missionaries and European bureaucrats corrupted these rich, though no doubt internally contested,24 cultural histories of diverse sexualities, through both the erasure of local practices and customs and the colonial imposition of Christianity and the policing of colonial laws and norms. Heteronormativity in South Africa was governed through a hybrid legal order that was shaped by both Dutch and British legal norms and developments. Epprecht (2004: 52) notes that the morality of Dutch colonies was informed by the Calvinist ethos of Dutch society and the criminal law of the Netherlands. Noting the harsh penalties (including execution) that followed conviction for certain ‘unnatural’ sexual acts (including masturbation, inter-faith intercourse and same-sex sexualities), Epprecht (2004: 52) writes that “Calvinism in its extreme form was intolerant of any sensuous pleasure, [and] sex that deviated from the prescribed norm was viewed as especially reprehensible”. While certain forms of Calvinism would extend into the twentieth century and would provide a theological foundation for apartheid moralism (Du Pisani 2001), it would become refracted through competing interests in the Cape colony under the British colonial government.
The British’s similar criminalisation of sexual relations between men in vastly different colonies lead to its own legal codification of an imagined transnational heteronormativity that had global reach (Epprecht 2013: 123). The colonial imposition of laws to prevent and punish non-normative sexual acts can be read as a projection of European anxieties onto local populations. Not only was the supposed degenerateness of Africans a necessary precondition to justify colonial interventions (McClintock 1995; Lewis 2011; Nyanzi 2011: 477) but the enforcement of conservative sexual moralism also functioned as a site of nationalism for European powers trying to inculcate pure national identities; Epprecht suggests, for instance, that the harsh policing of same-sex sexualities in parts of Europe may have been informed by the Dutch’s desire to distinguish themselves from the seemingly more immoderate Spanish (2004: 52) on the one hand, while the British attempted to distinguish themselves from the imagined licentiousness of Catholic, Middle Eastern and Latin cultures (2004: 54) on the other. This points to the sustained imbrication of sexual moralism with nationalism, and discursive practices of inclusion and exclusion within essentialist readings of culture.

As several writers (Zabus 2013; Hoad 2007; Epprecht 2004, 2013; Wieringa & Sívori 2013) have cogently argued, Western colonialists, researchers and human rights activists have a pervasive history of packaging information for their own intellectual and ontological projects: while colonialists documented same-sex sexualities on the continent as moral aberrations that proved Africa’s savagery, contemporary Western human rights activists use extensive homophobia on the continent to evidence Africa’s intrinsically chaotic underdevelopment. Though the West appears to have shifted from violently imposing heteronormative sexual moralism in the colonial period to being the arbitrators of sexual justice and human rights in the present, it is an ambiguously constituted Western modernity that has been employed to justify its interventions in both periods. Far from introducing same-sex sexualities to Africa, then, as many postcolonial African leaders have insisted, colonialism enacted new forms of homophobia and heteronormativity. Sylvia Tamale (2011a: 3) links the colonial pasts to the contemporary inflections of Africanness through which local sexual cultures are constituted when she argues that “[t]he law turns sexualities into a space through which instruments of state control and dominance can be deployed”. Paradoxically,
whereas the colonial governments sought custodianship of sexual morality through their apparatuses of church and state, those same Western nation-states are now seeking to punish African states (through diplomatic and other means) for the very same systems of homophobia that they themselves institutionalised within their colonies, and which have now been assimilated into practices of postcolonial social engineering. Ryan Thoreson (2014: 5) insightfully writes that “[i]n the North and South alike, governments regularly use debates about sexuality to define national identity, whether through their insistence on the preservation of a heterosexual order or assertions of tolerance and diversity”. Jasbir Puar (2007) uses the term homonationalism to describe the way in which very specific non-heteronormative sexual bodies are incorporated into the body politic and how this progressive gender and sexual domestic rights agenda is used by erstwhile liberal democracies to camouflage human rights violations and to justify illegal wars in other regions. Tolerance for same-sex sexualities is seen, then, as a marker of ‘civilisation’ (Hoad 2007: 57), despite the fact that many Western governments and societies actively enforce (or tacitly allow) homophobic, transphobic, and racist discriminations.

My interest lies less in historical roots of indigenous same-sex practices than in the contemporary routes along which these discourses move, and how they are either erased or transformed in present constructions of African identities. While homophobic African nationalism²⁶ is a powerful transnational imaginary, its hypervisibility occludes other, more complex figurations of African same-sex sexualities. These more inclusive forms are rooted in the indigenous arrangements of sexual desire and intimacy that I have discussed, as well as the political work of sexual rights organisations, and they shape the ways in which same-sex sexualities are conceptualised beyond the scope of nationalist politics. Writing in *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa* (2013), Epprecht disaggregates the depiction of a universally homophobic continent and points to the multiple ways in which different communities mobilise resistance to institutionalised homophobia. He also looks at how governments’ domestic and foreign policy agendas are reforming to provide greater protection for non-heteronormative sexualities. Epprecht (2013: 7) criticises some media for its essentialist reproduction and circulation of “stereotypes of ‘Darkest Africa’ – homophobic, violent, irrational, childlike in their vulnerability to manipulation by foreigners, fundamentalists and evil-doers in general”. I am not asserting that there are not serious challenges in the realisation of
same-sex desires on the continent, where one’s life is sometimes literally on the line. I am insisting, rather, on more complex imaginings of African same-sex sexualities that recognise the asymmetrical cultural flows, historical overlaps, and modes of resistance that shape the production of the local.

Despite the overlapping manufacture of heteronormativity by both colonial governments and anticolonial resistances, multiple same-sex practices and modes of social organisation developed in South Africa throughout the twentieth century. Significantly, most of these cultural formations were subtended by the broader racial and class divisions in which South African sexual politics are invariably rooted. In contrast to claims of an authentic heterosexual African culture, various black same-sex communities flourished during the country’s colonial and apartheid periods. While they were shaped by local contexts, their identities and political vocabularies remain connected, given the entanglements of apartheid’s spatial planning of cities, townships and mines (McLean & Ngcobo 1994: 167). Particular sexual communities developed in black urban constituencies, though these sexual cultures remained racially exclusionary (Gevisser 1994: 42; Tucker 2009; Gunkel 2010: 53). Practices of same-sex sexuality also took root in certain mining and industrial towns, taking the form of so-called mine marriages which extended beyond sex, and also included relations of intimate domesticity (McLean & Ngcobo 1994: 163). Usually structured as intergenerational sexual and domestic relationships, these mine marriages mostly projected binary gender norms onto same-sex relationships. Glen Retief (1994: 103) observes that black men who had sex with other black men were generally overlooked by the state’s policing of sexual bodies. These well-documented sexual relationships between black men in the mining compounds (Moodie 1987) – ironically facilitated by the exploitative social engineering of the same regime – was not of major concern to the sexual moralists (Elder 1998: 160; Du Pisani 2012: 189; Gevisser 1994: 18). This illustrates that it was the intersecting racial and gendered privilege of heterosexual white men that shaped what Retief (1994: 99) calls “[a]partheid’s war on sexual dissidence”.

What is more, these mining compounds in Johannesburg also functioned as intersections between migrant workers, connecting South Africa to Lesotho (Epprech 2005) and Mozambique (Moodie 2001: 300) in a sub-Saharan network of movement
and desire. This network displaces notions not only of an authentic heterosexual Africa but also the absolute certainty of homogenously imagined national cultures. While these sexual relationships have been dismissed as being merely situational and functional – given the absence of wives within male labour compounds (Moodie 1987) – Zabus (2013: 39) warns against historiographical practices that construct “a bifurcated understanding of male homosexuality in South Africa, opposing black situational homosexuality with white gay male identity”. Avoiding narrow framings overdetermined by economics, Hugh McLean and Linda Ngcobo (1994: 166), Zackie Achmat (1993), and William Spurlin (2001: 190) insist that these intimacies should rather be read for the multiple sites of sexual expression that they opened up. While transnational notions of sexual identity have circulated within and through South Africa, these have been refashioned by communities and integrated into local vocabularies and existing understandings of gender and power among urban and peri-urban black men and women (Chan-Sam 1994; McLean & Ngcobo 1994; Vimbela & Olivier 1994). Greenblatt (in King 2006: 710) reminds us in this regard that we should not think about “culture [as] the product of stability and rootedness but instead […] as the restless circulation of languages and tales”. In other words, rather than seeing sexual cultures as either fixed within time and space or bound unconditionally to inherited concepts and aesthetics from the Global North, they are localised points within multiple global cultural flows, reflecting and refracting hegemonic discourses and identificatory modes in sometimes unexpected ways.

While a common legal apparatus was in place to protect an imagined heteronormative whiteness, multiple same-sex cultures proliferated. Some of the earliest urban, white same-sex communities in the twentieth century formed around the new urban geographies during the Second World War. During the war, Johannesburg saw a high concentration of young, uniformed men who were temporarily gathered together, providing the basis of new sexualised spatial communities (Gevisser 1994: 18; Epprecht 2004: 146). Around the army camps in Johannesburg, and in the port cities of Cape Town and Durban, coalesced increasingly visible same-sex spaces such as bars and cruising sites (Gevisser 1994: 19; Epprecht 2004: 146). Gevisser (1994: 18) points out that the formation of these mostly white, male, urban sexual spaces resonated with those that developed in American cities in the 1940s due to the social upheaval and increased mobility catalysed by the economic depression, and later, by
America’s entry into the Second World War. In the local context, the formation of these sexual spaces coincided with the formalisation of apartheid and therefore took root within the bounds of the state’s racialised spatial planning. While the gay rights movement was burgeoning in cities across the United States and Europe, it only partially travelled back to South Africa with those who had travelled overseas. Its broadly-conceptualised rights-based discourses were refashioned into a more palatable form: “the idea of a ‘gay life’, revolving around clubs, bars and neighborhoods” (Gevisser 1994: 39). This avowedly depoliticised cultural form was evidently more compatible with the dominant ideology of the local white, middle class constituencies.

As the twentieth century progressed, the heteronormativity of colonial biopolitics became increasingly refracted through the lens of a conservative Afrikaner Christian nationalism, and race and sexuality formed a nexus that was predicated on an imagined heteronormative whiteness. White supremacist opposition to miscegenation underscored much of the colonial project, and its various codifications by the South African legislature – most notably the Population Registration Act and the Immorality Act – marked intensifications of its segregationist and white supremacist philosophies. However, the constructed racial classifications on which the apartheid system was based were, of course, legally and politically manufactured fictions. Kopano Ratele (2009) points to the extensive workings of the race-making legislative and judicial apparatus of the apartheid regime and highlights how it exposes the arbitrariness and constructedness of race as a category. Deborah Posel (2001: 89) argues further that “in bureaucratizing the idea of race as a social construct, the apartheid state opened up spaces for […] racial common sense to infiltrate the processes of racial classification”. It is racism’s assimilation into the language of common sense that mobilised its insidious reach within and beyond the institutions of statehood. While race is a construct, it is nonetheless one that has immense local and transnational traction in shaping relations of privilege and power, including those related to the contours of postapartheid representations of same-sex sexualities. Throughout this study, race is understood as a fictional category around which imagined communities have become rooted, and through which transnational routes are forged. There is, therefore, an inevitable paradox as I use the language of apartheid while simultaneously pointing to the constructedness of these racial taxonomies.
With the rise of apartheid, the moralist control of sexual bodies was extended further, and existing prohibitions on same-sex sexuality were codified and brought within the ambit of the Immorality Act, which established sex as a nexus of social control. Though the Immorality Act functioned as the legislative mechanism to regulate sexual bodies, its historical meaning is restless and most often attaches itself to the prohibition of miscegenation, despite its concomitant centrality in the production of heteronormativity. Following the infamous police raid on a house party in Forest Town in Johannesburg in 1966, same-sex sexualities were increasingly constitutive of “[s]tate voyeurism” (Elder 1998: 158), extending beyond the racial eugenics of the apartheid state to monitor more generally which bodies were doing what with whom.

The Forest Town party consisted of a few hundred white men, and police arrested a number of them for supposedly indecent and unlawful acts. Following the raid, a moral panic about the impact of same-sex sexualities on the stability of the state and public morality was manufactured by the government, media and religious organisations (Du Pisani 2012). While sodomy was already prohibited under the common law, the state insisted that it needed wider powers in order to arrest and prosecute offenders. In response, the government proposed extensive amendments to the heteronormative policing that was already in effect through South African common law. Legislative resources were mobilised, draft legislation was written, and special parliamentary hearings were convened to tighten legal restrictions on same-sex sexuality. In his address to parliament on the police’s ‘discovery’ of these ‘sexual perverts’, Minister of Justice P.C. Pelser (in Retief 1994: 99) argued that this “viper in our midst” would lead to the “utter ruin of our spiritual and moral fibre”. With the coherence of the apartheid state supposedly at stake, the Forest Town raid marked the “elevation of homosexuality to the status of some sort of volksgevaar (threat to the nation) which held a real threat for the gender order” (Du Pisani 2012: 192). Glen Elder (1998: 160) points out that it was an “anxiety about white male bodies” that drove the parliamentary investigation into non-normative sexualities. This investigation was predicated on the supposed existence of a “normative heterosexual masculinity” that was under threat (Elder 1998: 160). Women’s sexuality, according to Elder (156), was seen merely as a site of reproduction, and thus there was very little perceived threat posed by female same-sex sexual activity. Even the limited legislative interest in women who have sex with women was predicated on the ontology of heterosexual men, as Retief (1994:
103) intimates: “The MPs [members of parliament] were rather worried about the sizes, shapes and attributes of the different kinds of ‘dilders’ used by lesbians” – with one MP enquiring whether “this instrument [is] of normal or abnormal size”.

White men organised themselves to respond to and resist these increasingly oppressive proposals. Henriette Gunkel (2010: 56) observes that these responses to the legislative threats, formalised as the Law Reform Movement, was the first time that sexual minorities had organised themselves politically in South Africa. This political formation, which mobilised and raised funds in a number of large cities, tended to be dominated by white men and failed to move beyond a conservative framing of legal reform. While the Law Reform Movement was successful in resisting the most restrictive and oppressive amendments to the Immorality Act, the success of this lobbying depended on the assertion of an apolitical whiteness that would continue to characterise sexual rights activism in the country for decades. Not only did the Law Reform Movement not challenge the raciology, exploitation, and brutality of the apartheid regime (Gunkel 2010: 57) but they also projected a conventional white, middle-class, identity in order to claim respectability. It was only through this narrowly-articulated conservative lobbying that this grassroots organising was able to succeed in resisting the more draconian restrictions on sexuality. Though less severe than had been feared, the statutory amendments to the Immorality Act still impacted many facets of sexual life and included legislative restrictions on sex-work, drag performances, displays of same-sex eroticism in public, and even sex toys (Gevisser 1994: 35). Although this final law was less sweeping than had been anticipated (owing to this intense lobbying by civil society), and despite the fact that there were periods of fewer arrests and prosecutions, Cameron (1994: 89-98) notes that homosexuals lived in fear and were turned into “unapprehended felons”. Significantly, following the relative successes of this ad hoc activism – and despite the statutory imbrication of racism and heteronormativity – sexual rights activism and organising would mostly disappear for more than a decade until new cultural and political formations would take root. Most of these, however, would remain equally fraught with racial tensions and divisions.

Significantly, this first major opportunity for sexual rights organising in South Africa coincided with the famous Stonewall riots in New York in June 1969, where patrons at
a bar fought back against homophobic and transphobic police harassment (Weeks 2015). Sexual rights organisations proliferated transnationally following these riots, and Stonewall continues to function as a historical rallying point. While ‘Stonewall’ as a signifier has come to mark a particular type of militant and confrontational sexual rights activism, it also suggests a moment of rupture, and point of no return. While the Forest Town raid and the subsequent legal activism might be compared to New York’s Stonewall riots, which marked the beginning of gay and lesbian activism in the West, Gevisser (1994: 34) and Mai Palmberg (1999: 271) warn against such readings: unlike the Stonewall riots, the Law Reform Movement was a mostly white and elite exercise that never developed into a radical or broad-based effort to oppose institutionalised heteronormativity. Significantly, the global sexual rights movement and its origin in the United States continues to be invoked through the signifier ‘Stonewall’, as it possesses extraordinary power to refract local events through the universalising ambitions of the global rights agenda. For instance, the decriminalisation of same-sex sexuality in India in 2009 was described as “India’s Stonewall” (Hegde 2011: 4), the formation of a sexual rights student organisation in Taiwan was compared to Stonewall (Tan 2001), and the paratext of a publication of LGBTI creative writing in Botswana foregrounded Stonewall (Zabus 2013: 11). Significantly, activist Simon Nkoli (1994b) eschews the racial elitism of the Law Reform Movement, and instead suggests that it is the adoption of the Freedom Charter by several antiapartheid organisations in 1955 that is most comparable to Stonewall. For Nkoli, it is this broad coalition of activism, with its commitment to social justice and an end to discrimination that marks the beginning of the intersectional human rights movement in South Africa.

The so-called coloured communities in Cape Town – the geographic and ideological borders of which were predicated on an apartheid fiction that collapses multiple ethnic and cultural groupings into a single rubric – are similarly connected to multiple cultural networks, but with different histories of movement and restlessness. While colonialism imposed cultural norms and ideologies from Europe, it also facilitated (with extraordinary brutality) the movement of colonised peoples and their own cultural ideas about sexuality. Epprecht (2004: 53) points out that slaves were brought to the Cape from Madagascar, India, and elsewhere in Asia where same-sex sexualities sometimes occupied a more ambivalent cultural space, further creating a restlessness of cultural meaning at the Cape. Many accounts of sexuality in coloured communities
point to a more open and tolerant cultural space (Epprecht 2004: 207), and ‘moffie’
drag cultures, the centrality of salons, and the progressive reworking of Islam are often
seen as characteristic of this (Gevisser 1994: 27; Chetty 1994). Jack Lewis and
Francois Loots (1994) and Achmat (1994) show further how the sexual cultures
themselves were complex, blending different transnational faith systems, racial
histories, and drag imagery. In other words, same-sex sexualities in apartheid’s
coloured communities were characterised by the renegotiation of multiple cultural
influences, including the entanglement of Christianity and Islam that moved among the
city’s slave populations.

Norman Kester (2000: xi-xii) describes the unique intersections of race, class and
sexuality that were etched into coloured cultural life in the Cape:

> Moffie life was rich in District Six, despite its desperation and poverty. ‘Gays’, who
would meet and cruise at bioscopes (cinemas) or at lavish home parties, would
jump off vans and do the Charleston to entice people to their marvellous
competitions at the Ambassador Club [sic] where they performed in lavish
ballroom costumes. They lived at home, helped their poor families and took the
children to school.

Gevisser’s (1994: 27) account of District Six as a key site for the making and remaking
of same-sex sexual culture also points to the reimagining of the apartheid past through
the lens of same-sex sexual intimacy. In addition, Dhiannaraj Chetty (1994: 118)
identifies the Americanisation of popular culture (that linked subversive moffie culture
to more normative cultural codes) and the centrality of Hollywood cultural images of
gender to the parodic project that inheres in drag performances. The blending of
American cultural references with local vocabularies and parodic interventions to form
a localised sociolect further constituted interracial linguistic communities that formed
around same-sex sexualities and remained fluid (Olivier 1994; Gevisser 1994: 28).
This linguistic indigenisation also functioned as an alternative mechanism through
which the coloured communities and the white Afrikaans same-sex sexual cultures
became increasingly entangled (Cage 2003: 19). The development and migration of
this Afrikaans sociolect from coloured communities to the heart of white Afrikaner
culture reveals how same-sex sexualities not only disavowed the constitutive
heteronormativity of the apartheid state, but also challenged its policing of racial
difference and separation. So while distinct urban same-sex cultural imaginaries
developed in different racialised communities, they remain interconnected.
Apartheid is widely known for its brutal constructions of race, and I am interested in how these constructions shape the representations of same-sex sexuality in the postapartheid present. Despite the dynamism of global cultural flows and the interconnectedness of contemporary sexual cultures, popular sexual histories in South Africa tend to cluster around the inclusion in 1996 of sexual orientation as a protected category of difference in the Constitution. This teleological historiography conceptualises the equality clause as the point towards which everything moved and the point from which everything henceforth flows. The country was proudly declared the first to include such explicit protections in its Constitution, and it was similarly commended for its litany of subsequent judicial successes: in less than a decade, sodomy was decriminalised; adoption processes were opened up to same-sex couples; pension benefits were extended to same-sex partners; and the exclusionary nature of the heterosexual marriage regime was invalidated. This history of sexuality is generally written in the register of South African exceptionalism, under which “we were ‘a world apart’ under apartheid, and are now somehow equally remarkable, different, exceptional, because we emerged relatively unscathed from it” (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 3). What is more, this progressive and inclusive sexual rights regime functions not only as the metadiscourse of sexual historiography in the region, but also shapes how the country has been constituted in the global imaginary as an exemplar nation-state predicated on equal rights, inclusion, diversity, and modernity.

However, much like recent developments elsewhere, these were political and judicial rather than popular interventions, and were engineered largely by a political and financial elite (Oswin 2007: 650-52; Kraak 2005: 133; Cock 2005: 189-94). Although these progressive developments in jurisprudence have been significant in recasting sexual rights and protections, they conceal a religious and traditional society that remains deeply uncomfortable with same-sex sexualities. Moreover, the homogenising impulses of the various judgements from the Constitutional Court – in which same-sex communities tend to be imagined as singular – have placed the very texture, entanglements and racial politics of postapartheid same-sex public cultures under erasure. Where heterogeneity is acknowledged within public discourse, it tends to be read in terms of a dichotomy that polarises white, middle-class gay men on the one hand, and black working-class lesbians on the other. Whereas the former have
functioned metonymically and are depicted as being urbanised, apolitical, and pleasure-seeking, the latter are invariably inscribed as victims. Insular and inward-looking perspectives grounded in notions of national exceptionalism underestimate the transnational cultural mobility that shapes representations of same-sex sexualities, while simultaneously fetishising the contemporaneity of the present. Postapartheid is imagined as a fixed chronotope, neatly demarcated in time and space, rather than as a dynamic moment restlessly produced at the intersection of various local and transnational movements and discourses, past and present.

South African sexual and cultural life bears the marks of how histories of colonialism and apartheid intersect with the historical mobilities of the antiapartheid movement, the cultural impetus of African nationalism, Western cultural hegemonies, and the connections that are forged between alternative diasporas. It also marks the paradoxical and parallel rise in global human rights activism and the increased trenchancy of claims of authentic heterosexual Africanness, both of which move on what Bethlehem (2015: 6) calls “deterritorialized circuits, crossing the boundaries between media and nations alike”. It is the multiple encounters through which both this movement and rootedness are negotiated that account for the contradictory political space in South Africa. While the rights-based discourses of the transitional period of the 1990s secured constitutional and legal reforms, there remains an uneasy tension between these dominant strains of political discourses and more conservative and traditional notions of African patriarchy and nationalism. For instance, the then Deputy President Jacob Zuma is quoted as saying, during a Heritage Day address, that in earlier years he would have violently assaulted an “ungqingili” [same-sex] person, and that same-sex marriage was “a disgrace to the nation and to God” (M&G 2006). Though incompatible with the country’s Constitution, this perspective is far from being unique within the national context, and resonates with a broader “postcolonial homophobia” (Gunkel 2010: 26) that is predicated on the anti-imperialist politics of scapegoating. Incidentally, Zuma’s comments also resonate powerfully with the homophobic political campaigning in the United States and Europe of the past few decades. Though such sentiments appear to be mobile, they are reconfigured differently in different geopolitical spaces. In the local context, Zuma’s comment reveals the imbrication of tradition and religion in the formation of a heteronormative nationalism that has stronger cultural ties to African despots’ claims that same-sex
sexualities are “unAfrican” than to the international human rights cultures in which the Constitution was forged.

Tsing (2005) uses the metaphor of friction to think about these interactions and connections between local communities and global forces. In her study of neoliberalism’s decimation of Indonesian rainforests, she describes friction as “the grip of worldly encounter” (2005: 1) and “the awkward, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (4). Tsing (5) employs the examples of vehicular movement and the use of sticks to make fire to explain how “friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power”. It is the frictional movement of postcolonial nationalisms, the human rights agenda of liberal universalism, and the rootedness of apartheid raciology that produce not only the racial contours of the postapartheid moment but also the particular configurations of its sexual biopolitics.

The multiple contexts of sexual politics continue to be uncertain in postapartheid South Africa. In 2010, in the climate of increasing state-sanctioned marginalisation of same-sex sexualities in Uganda, President Zuma appointed self-proclaimed homophobe Jon Qwelane (who has since been found guilty of hate speech) as ambassador to the country (BBC 2011). In a similar vein, while one South African cabinet minister was quoted (in Van der Vlies 2012: 140) describing photographs depicting intimate and naked black women as “immoral, offensive and going against nation-building”, another minister has denied widespread allegations that she attempted to impose homophobic censorship onto programming at the public broadcaster (Makisto 2013; Ferreira 2013). In 2012, at the commemoration of a historical battle, Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini allegedly insisted that same-sex sexualities were not accepted according to tradition, describing these intimate practices as “rotten” and “wrong” (Sowetan 2012). Significantly, in most of these instances, press releases were later issued which apologised for or clarified what had been said, or denied it altogether. In the case of the Zulu monarch, the South African Human Rights Commission instituted an investigation into the matter. What these responses reveal is that while homophobic sentiments that draw on religion and ethnic nationalism for their moral authority have considerable traction, they remain entangled within cultures of constitutionalism.
fostered by various antiapartheid leaders (both in the country and in exile) and enacted through the official channels of the postapartheid nation-state.

More recently, the rootedness of a particular type of African anti-imperialist homophobia has emerged in the Congress of Traditional Leaders. The organisation has come under fire, not only for calling for legislative reforms to remove sexual orientation from the equality clause (Mambaonline 2012) but also for insisting that same-sex couples will be denied access to traditional land (Mambaonline 2016). In these instances, same-sex sexualities are positioned as being antithetical to both religion and tradition. These investments in heterosexual cultural authenticity speak to Jane Bennett’s (2011: 80) assertion that “the representation of time past is no more or less than a retrospective projection of contemporary anxieties”. Implicated in discourses of exceptionalism, South Africa is seen as being “somehow different from the rest of the African cont[in]ent, outside of the lateness of its postcolonial moment” (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010: 3).

However, the continuities between various transnational sites of conservative homophobia can be seen in recent public positionings of the Anglican and Catholic churches in South Africa, which persistently discriminate against same-sex couples, despite some progressive overtures on an international level (Hoad 2007: 71). Furthermore, the systematic manufacture of militant homophobia by right-wing American missionary churches working in some African countries exacerbates existing prejudices (Epprecht 2013: 143; Poku & Mdee 2011: 97). Ironically, it is particular iterations of homophobia that are again being imported from the Global North, rather than same-sex intimacies and desires. This reveals a restless itinerary for the movement of conservative heteronormativity, in which postapartheid same-sex public cultures are connected as much to the churches of post-Mediaeval Europe and contemporary America as to the anti-imperialism of some parts of postcolonial Africa. These contradictions and tensions are certainly not unique to any one nation-state, but are rather suggestive of the cultural circuits within which these same-sex public cultures take form.

Recent scholarship on same-sexualities within postapartheid literary and cultural studies tends to be circumscribed by the conventional borders of the nation-state.
Though this work points to important ways of thinking about gender and sexuality in the present, much of it also tends to separate South African cultural formations from global flows of commodities, discourses, ideologies, and affect. This delimited focus on the postapartheid nation-state is evident sometimes merely in the inward-looking specificity of sexual cultures within national or regional borders (Tucker 2009; Murray 2013; Milani & Wolff 2015; Marais & Stobie 2014). It is even more obviously reflected in the explicit engagement with the politics of citizenship, nationalism, and constitutionalism in several recent works. In *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come* (2012), for instance, Brenna Munro traces the significance of sexuality during both apartheid and the transition in shaping the contours of the body politic and its alternative nationalisms. Through excellent close readings of several literary texts and photography, Munro maps the emergence of fraught conditions of sexual citizenship and political legitimacy, revealing how progressive sexual politics were simultaneously constitutive and disruptive of an imagined postapartheid nationalism. In Cheryl Stobie’s *Somewhere in the Double Rainbow* (2007), the productive ambivalence of bisexuality is grafted onto the transformative possibilities of the new nationhood produced during the transition to democracy. Through a close reading of mostly postapartheid fiction, she expertly navigates dominant and newly emerging tropes of bisexuality. Stobie reads both the transitional period and bisexuality as being liminal spaces that allow new imaginings of selfhood and agency. Invoking the imagery of both the rainbow nation on the one hand, and the rainbow flag of the organised LGBTI rights movement on the other, Stobie’s double rainbow locates sexual identity as being imbricated in an inclusive and transformative nationalism. Gunkel’s (2010) *The Cultural Politics of Female Sexuality in South Africa* focuses on the ways in which particularly black, lesbian women are both the subjects of constitutional rights and the objects of homophobic violence. Gunkel’s scholarship disrupts the easy optimism of the Constitution’s equality clause, situating female sexuality at the intersection of homophobic violence, human rights law, homosocial affect, and contemporary racism. These important full-length projects instantiate the contested sexual politics in South Africa at different points in its recent history. This thesis, however, shifts the emphasis towards global connections and flows, focusing explicitly on the question of how same-sex public imaginaries are shaped by a complex interplay between transnational cultural flows and local cultural politics.
Chapter outline

In Chapter 1, I focus on Robert Colman’s drama, *Your Loving Simon*, as well as Bev Ditsie’s and Nicky Newman’s documentary film, *Simon & I*, to explore the overlaps between the transnational gay rights and antiapartheid movements. Both these texts centre on the life of Simon Nkoli, a prominent gay rights and antiapartheid activist. I use them to read the intersection between the gay rights and antiapartheid movements, unpacking the local translations of the global human rights agenda of the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, this chapter focuses on the manufacture and transnational mobility of identity politics, the history of sexuality in the antiapartheid movement, the localised production of progressive constitutionalism in the 1990s, and the new circuits of cultural affect that followed the AIDS crisis. Nkoli functions as a lens through which to read shifting configurations of race and sexuality in oppressive contexts, as he challenges the heteronormativity of the antiapartheid movement and the white separatism of local gay rights organisations. The drama and the documentary film also link Nkoli’s sexuality to his positionality within Africanist notions of blackness, in which vitriolic essentialisms read same-sex sexualities as unAfrican. The two texts thus locate Nkoli within nationalist sexual politics of an ‘authentic’ Africa at the same time as they articulate more progressive imaginings of African same-sex sexualities. They also attest to new transnational solidarities that were forged around the figure of Nkoli, and open up ways of thinking about the reach and resilience of human rights as an ideological form. At the same time, Nkoli’s experiences of homophobia from within the antiapartheid movement disrupt the current deification of the struggle by revealing the layers of prejudice and conservative essentialisms that co-circulated with the inclusive rights-based discourses of the exiled leadership of the ANC, who were themselves under immense pressure from gay rights organisations abroad.

In Chapter 2, I read Michiel Heyns’s *The Reluctant Passenger* and *Lost Ground*, as well as *Gay Pages* (a quarterly magazine series) to explore the normative power of transnational whiteness, and the politics of assimilation. Both novels and the magazine reveal the characteristic restless mobilities of same-sex publics as they locate themselves simultaneously within the specific raciology of the postapartheid moment and within the transnational movement of images, identities, and constructions of race.
and masculinity. Through my analyses of these texts, I examine the circuits and localised renegotiations of transnational whiteness. Whiteness, here, marks the material and symbolic privileges of being culturally coded as white, and moves along historical and contemporary routes of power that are both rooted in the history of apartheid and tied to the global reach of racial supremacy. I argue further that the normative and invisible power of whiteness camouflages the otherness of non-heteronormative sexualities, and shapes how those sexualities are represented. Though all three texts contribute to the production of an imagined white gay community, they do so in different ways, privileging certain assimilationist aesthetics over others and emphasising different practices of inclusion and exclusion.

In Chapter 3, I trace the histories of the black female body within local and transnational imaginaries. Black women are often imagined through the trope of victimhood in global media discourses, and this only intensifies when black lesbian women are represented in the South African context. Through a reading of Zanele’s Muholi’s photographs, I map the ways in which the notion of victimhood is renegotiated and supplanted by a complex rendering of desire, agency and gendered power. The substance and aesthetics of Muholi’s work constitutes a provocative rejoinder to claims that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican, as she reimagines a more inclusive cultural history of African sexualities. Her photographs also connect contemporary same-sex desire and violent heteronormativity to the historical commodification of black female bodies, pointing to a politics of the body that is both urgently contemporary and deeply historical.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I discuss the transnational cultural flows through which the Indian diaspora in South Africa is discursively constituted. Focusing particularly on Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* and Zinaiid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates*, this chapter explores how heteronormativity figures in the production and policing of cultural identities. Sarif’s novel explores how the transoceanic cultural flows between India and her diaspora, as well as the colonial circulation of (proto)feminist literary works, are negotiated in the formative years of apartheid. The chapter further explores how Meeran’s novel constructs a postapartheid Indian identity that conjoins transnational flows of Islam and cosmopolitan materialism, both of which are marked by truly global connectivities. In this chapter, I argue that both texts expose the
constructedness of an ‘authentic’ Indianness that is complicit with the raciologies of the apartheid and postapartheid periods. I argue, further, that when these novels reveal that the normative centre of Indianness is a constructed fiction, sexual otherness itself is disarticulated. Read together, these two novels offer a way of thinking about same-sex sexuality outside of the hegemony of both lesbian identity politics and epistemic positionalities of sexual difference, while inscribing a more progressive cultural history of Indianness in South Africa.

Notes

1 Following Clifford (1998: 362), I use the term ‘cosmopolitan’ to suggest “worldly, productive sites of crossing [as well as] complex, unfinished paths between local and global attachments” that are “viewed without universalist nostalgia”. Though I use the term cosmopolitanism to suggest the expansive identifications and connections that characterise the restless mobilities of same-sex publics, I do not propose – in either a descriptive or prescriptive sense – a single mould for an imagined global sexual politics. Kwame Appiah (1998: 92) writes that cosmopolitanisms should be thought of as “sentiments more than ideologies”. These sentiments can therefore be inhabited by different political ideologies, whether religious conservatism, nationalism, inclusive liberalism, or others.

2 Appiah (1998: 91) uses the concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism” to explore somewhat related ideas. However, I resist this phrase because of its conservative conflation with “cosmopolitan patriotism” in Appiah’s work, which privileges not only the borders of the nation-state but also a fixed state of hybridity. Appiah (1998: 91) writes that “the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people”. I also prefer the term ‘restless mobilities’ because it foregrounds the movement and uncertain connections of cultural flows and their transnational attachments. Furthermore, the language of restless mobilities resists the over-determined binary tension that inheres in the rhetorical juxtaposition of roots and cosmopolitanism, and allows for more unbounded negotiations of identities, allegiances, attachments and cultural objects.

3 The transnational same-sex publics that are formed through these cultural attachments and textual imaginings need to be located historically, cognisant of the asymmetries that characterise transnational connectivity (Bösch & Büschel 2012: 384; Wieringa & Sivori 2013: 2; Hegde 2011: 2, 8; Spurlin 2006: 116; Grewal & Kaplan 2001: 671).

4 The phrase restless mobilities has also been used by Ellen Rothenberg (2001) to describe a photographic art exhibition about life in the city, by Augusto Ferraiuolo (2009: 226) to refer to particular ontological fluidities, by Stephen Dodd (2007: 99) to refer to an attitude towards travel characteristic of youthfulness, and by David Robson (1985: 187) to refer to intranational geographic migration.

5 Following Jessie Forsyth, Sarah Olutola, and Helene Strauss (2016: 108), I use the term ‘affect’ to “signal forms of intersubjective sociality that shuttle within and across cognitive, sensory, conscious, autonomic, and atmospheric terrains of embodied experience”, and that have “relational and transformative capacities of affective transmission”.

6 This formulation resists the trend in much scholarship on globalisation and transnationalism in which “the local is seen as working against or in resistance to the global” (Grewal & Kaplan 2001: 671).

7 I borrow this term from Chabal and Daloz (in Hofmeyr 2004b: 130) who reject the Manichean models of political power in Africa.

8 The conceptual use of the homophones routes and roots to explore the relationship between mobility and fixity can be attributed to Paul Gilroy (1993: 19) who popularised it in The Black Atlantic: “Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes”.

9 Although Wagner-Pacific (2010) focuses particularly on the tension between the “political semiosis” and the imagined discursive certainty of the American geopolitical ‘event’ now known as 9/11, the notion
of restlessness is also powerfully suggestive of the types of same-sex public cultures that I discuss here.

10 Though Warner distinguishes between publics and counterpublics, with the latter being “constituted through a conflictual relationship to the dominant public” (2002: 423) and “an awareness of its subordinate status” (2002: 424), I use the phrase publics throughout this thesis. The notion of counterpublics overlooks the multiple axes on which power and privilege are projected.

11 This term was first coined by Warner (1991) and is largely synonymous with what Adrienne Rich (1980) calls “compulsory heterosexuality” – a system of cultural and institutionalised norms that position monogamous, heterosexual romantic and family structures, as well as traditional gender roles, as normative. I use the term homophobia, on the other hand, to refer to an explicit action or declaration that polices, marks and discriminates against sexual difference.

12 The “scales” to which Frassinelli et al. (2011: 3) refer describe the different scopes of relational connectivity between the local and the transnational, “subnational, national, outernational, and global”.

13 While the rise in digital technologies, electronic communication, international media houses, transnational corporations, and the increase in migration, tourism, and business-related travel are often cited as causes of the communication networks and circuits of global cultural flow, scholarship is increasingly tracing the cultural flows and transliterations that characterised much earlier centuries as well (Datta 2011; Mukherjee 2009; Zerlang 2009; Greenblatt 2009a; Hofmeyr 2004a; Acheraïou 2011). This points to a global interconnectedness that is simultaneously deeply historical and cutting edge. The restless mobilities to which I refer mark mobilities that exceed the bounds not only of geopolitical spaces but also the temporalities through which they have been structured. It is through these earlier movements, after all, that the rootedness of the present has been negotiated and rerouted.

14 Frank Bösch and Hubertus Büschel (2012: 382) and Appadurai (2013: 63) assert that we should not think about cultural flows in terms of acculturation (in which cultural objects supposedly move unidirectionally from a dominant to a receptive cultural space); nor should we rely on the language of mixture, hybridity, creolisation, and blending to describe the locality through which particular cultural forms circulated. Bösch and Büschel (2012: 382) observe that both ways of thinking are limited because they “imply relatively static spaces within the borders of an allegedly definable localised culture”. Appadurai (2013: 67) adds that such a focus has emphasised the “mixture at the level of content” rather than at the level of form, concluding that “we need to probe the cohabitation of forms […] because they actually produce new contexts through their peculiar inflection of each other”.

15 Greenblatt (2009a: 6-7) reminds us that while global mobility can bring about greater tolerance, it can also generate conservative exclusionary practices. Unsurprisingly, given the sheer range and penetration of American popular texts, it is the same global communication networks and film productions that have moved progressive and inclusionary discourses about sexuality around the world that have also inculcated new quotidian homophobias at different points in South African history (Eppehert 2004: 141). Reflecting on these circuits of culture and consumption more generally, Appadurai (2013: 65) argues that “the same dynamics produce various cultural flows and the very obstacles, bumps, and potholes that impede their free movement”. In other words, the very circuits through which inclusive sexual rights discourses are translated from Western texts into local contexts also facilitate the movement of exclusionary discourses and new normativities that produce unreceptive audiences for positive depictions of same-sex sexualities.

16 In Race and the Education of Desire (1995), Ann Laura Stoler argues that Foucault’s conceptualisation of sexuality ignores the colonial context that in fact structures nineteenth-century European thinking on sexuality. The figuration of normal and abnormal sexualities, according to Stoler, is inextricably bound up with colonial imaginings of race, sexuality, and modernity. She asks how Foucault’s analysis of the nineteenth-century production of knowledge on sex was able to overlook the “racially erotic counterpoint” that had been projected onto the “libidinal energies of the savage, the primitive, [and] the colonized” (Stoler 1995: 6-7). Similarly, Massad (2008: 7) stresses that his concerns regarding Foucault’s ideas are not based on his failure to “historicize how these concepts were applied to the colonies”, but rather that his work is blind to the way in which “these concepts were themselves products of the colonial experience”.

17 Massad (2008: 174) notes that the imposition of sexual identities and gay cultural politics by the “Gay International” has marked and emphasised the otherness of same-sex sexualities in a region in which they previously went largely unremarked. For example, whereas same-sex sexualities in Egypt did not attract police attention and criminal sanction, explicitly gay sexual politics and identities have, since the 1980s, catalysed new state oppositions and criminalisations (Massad 2008: 183).

18 While for some, terms such as gay, lesbian, queer, and even LGBTI (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-intersex) are powerfully suggestive of one’s individual and collective sexual selfhood, for others the terms are anathema and serve only to alienate their sexual desires from their own cultural
placements. Though acronyms such as WSM (women who have sex with women) and MSM (men who have sex with men) have been used to counter the perceived stain of Western identity politics, these terms remain linked to the global epidemiological flows that moved AIDS-related education and care around the world (Wieringa & Sîvori 2013: 16-17). Wieringa and Horacio Sîvori (2013: 17) warn that even such seemingly apolitical terms can constitute new Western hegemonies that prescribe a linguistic “process of purification in order to acquire true (global) sexual citizenship”.

Significantly, Appadurai (2013: 66) acknowledges the somewhat imprecise nature of his distinction between content and form, and notes that his intention is merely to elevate the issue of global circulation to “a slightly more abstract level”.

Of course, the marking of same-sex sexualities as unAfrican was not merely a localised production of resistance to an imagined cultural imperialism from the United States and Europe, it was also caught up in what Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (2012: 10) call “feedback loops” that connect circuits of cultural production, new technologies and sites of uptake. Spurlin (2006: 2) argues that some African Americans have similarly viewed same-sex sexualities as mechanisms for the white contamination of an authentic blackness, linking African American sexual politics to the heteronormative purity of an imagined homeland.

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See Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men, and Ancestral Wives (Morgan & Wieringa 2005), as well as Boy Wives and Female Husbands (Murray & Roscoe 1998) for more on these relationship forms.

These include the Basotho (Kendall 1998), Igbo (Zabus 2013: 44-48), Buganda (Hoad 2007), Shona (Epprecht 2004: 35-39), Tsonga (Zabus 2013: 37), Khoisan (Epprecht 2004: 25-26), and the Azande (Zabus 2013: 36-37).

However, Altman (2001: 22) warns against both the ossification of tradition as a signifier of unconditional tolerance and inclusiveness, as well as the “romanticizing [of] ‘primitive’ homosexuality”. Instead, Altman (2001: 23) argues that tolerance towards non-heteronormative sexualities can be both superficial and strategic, functioning as a mechanism to conceal oppressive practices and exclusionary heteronormativities.

While same-sex sexualities occupied different spaces in African social and cultural life, Tamale (2011a: 4) warns against “romanticised notions of pre-colonial African sexualities as having been unrestricted and unbridled”. She argues that “[a]s in all social organisations, African societies historically involved the organisation of gender, sexuality and reproduction – the diverse shapes, fluidities, the visible and invisible, the spiritual and the political and economic dynamics of those societies – which resulted in certain restraints”.

In practice, however, the British moderated the severity and regularity of sentencing for such sexual relations once taking power at the Cape (Epprecht 2004: 54).

The recent rise in homophobic discourse by African leaders corresponds to the deteriorating economic conditions in certain countries. Used as a form of politically expedient scapegoating, homophobia is allegedly mobilised to ferment heteronormative nationalisms and distract voters from the negative economic conditions. This is evident in Basile Ndjio’s (2013: 122) study of postcolonial Cameroon, Jarrod Hayes’s (2001: 92) analysis of Algeria, and Epprecht’s (2013: 133-37) discussion of Zimbabwe. Significantly, both Zimbabwe’s and Algeria’s economic downturns are linked to the failure of the austerity measures and structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Ironically, it is through the neoliberal interventions of global institutions that produced the conditions for homophobia to flourish. Put simply, Hayes (2001: 92) argues that “[r]ather than bringing homosexuality to Algeria, therefore, the forces of economic globalization may actually have homophobic effects”.

Epprecht (2004: 139) notes, however, that this was the second major manufacture of homophobic moral panic in twentieth century South Africa, following the media’s reporting on supposedly scandalous same-sex social networks in 1939.

Following the brief successes of the Law Reform Movement, social organising and activism on the basis of sexuality remained largely ineffective, if not absent. Gevisser (1994: 43-44) notes the short-lived formation of a gay rights movement at the University of Natal in 1972 and the growth of same-sex support service organisations later in the 1970s. The absence of an active and sustained gay rights movement in the country for almost two decades – despite the rapid circulation of its form and aesthetic around the world – speaks to the challenges of occupying particular political spaces during apartheid.
CHAPTER 1: SIMON NKOLI AND THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

Lesbian and gay human rights circulate transnationally and appear as an extremely unstable placeholder for a set of desires, anxieties, claims, and counterclaims around modernity and cultural authenticity in the discourses of postcolonial nationalism, which are themselves transnational. (Hoad 2007: 69)

The place of sexuality within discourses of the antiapartheid movement and the eventual inclusion of sexual orientation in the South Africa Constitution’s equality clause have a contested history in which local cultural politics overlap and intersect with transnational agents, ideologies, and affects. Tim Trengrove-Jones (2005) argues that sexual rights in South Africa and the expansive Bill of Rights were inevitable given the prevailing human rights culture and discourses of equality that characterised the antiapartheid struggle and the transition. However, this argument overlooks the multiple conflicting transnational imaginaries in which this sexual rights regime was constituted. Far from being inevitable, I would argue, the recognition of gay and lesbian rights as human rights was located within the crosshairs of an uncertain and volatile historical moment. In this chapter, I trace several transnational cultural flows and show how they were renegotiated, within the liberation struggle and during the transitional decade of the 1990s, to produce a particularly localised sexual politics. My analysis of these cultural flows is framed by the historical figure of Simon Tseko Nkoli, a prominent gay rights and antiapartheid activist, who was charged, along with with 21 others, in what famously became known as the Delmas Treason Trial.¹ It was while awaiting trial in prison that he revealed his sexuality to his fellow prisoners, many of whom went on to become leading figures in the postapartheid government. His decision to come out to his comrades, to risk exclusion from their collective defence, and to persevere in the face of prejudice, exposed the fractures in the human rights agenda of the antiapartheid movement at the same time as it catalysed new political solidarities.

Nkoli’s insistences on the indivisibility of rights and his own political commitments are widely regarded as being among the most significant factors that would inform the resolve of the African National Congress (ANC) to ensure the retention of sexual orientation as a protected category in the final Constitution’s equality clause (Cameron 2014: 119, 217; Lekota 2005: 153; Kraak 2005: 130). Fellow Delmas Treason Trialist, and later a provincial premier, cabinet minister and chairperson of the ANC, Mosiuoa
Lekota reflects on Nkoli’s importance in the co-articulation of race and sexuality in a postapartheid rights-based imaginary:

His presence […] broadened our vision, helping us to see that society is composed of so many people whose orientations are not the same, and that one must be able to live with it. And so, when it came to writing the Constitution, how could we say that men and women like Simon, who had put their shoulders to the wheel to end apartheid, how could we say that they should now be discriminated against? (Lekota in Gevisser 2000: 119)

In this chapter, I focus on how two cultural texts about Nkoli and his political activism represent the local negotiation of transnational human rights discourses. *Your Loving Simon* (2003) is a stage drama, written and directed by Robert Colman, that explores Nkoli’s imprisonment and his experiences of coming out to his political comrades. Playing with the epistolary textual form, the drama draws on the archived letters that Nkoli wrote to his partner, Roy Shepherd, while in prison. The second text, *Simon & I* (2002), is a documentary film directed by Beverley Ditsie and Nicky Newman that represents the life and activism of Nkoli, from his imprisonment in the 1980s to his untimely death in the late 1990s. The documentary film traces not only Nkoli’s antiapartheid and gay rights activism, but also his friendship with Ditsie and her own experiences of political activism and forms of social exclusion. As the principal frame narrator and first-person narrative voice throughout the documentary, Ditsie reads both her life and transition-era sexual politics through the larger-than-life figure of Nkoli. As a collaged cultural history of the emergence of a local black-led gay and lesbian rights movement, the film examines the solidarities, ruptures, and discontinuities that characterised local sexual politics during the transitional period, as well as the frictional (Tsing 2005) encounters between different transnational imaginaries. This chapter analyses the generic and textual strategies through which both the drama and the documentary film represent intersecting local and transnational sexual and cultural politics. The texts do not imagine a binary relationship between the local and the global, but rather reveal the ways in which global cultural forms have been transformed and become constitutive of the local. The texts reveal the circuits and agents of global human rights discourses and identity politics, and show how they traverse both the heteronormativity of much of the antiapartheid movement, as well as essentialist configurations of race, gender, and religion.
While both the drama and the documentary are informed by extensive archival content and are invaluable as historical resources, I resist mere mimetic analyses of these texts. Rather, I read them as creative cultural works that reimagine Nkoli, and open up new ways of thinking about transnational cultural flows, and the texture and fractures of the local gay and lesbian rights movement. Both the play and the documentary are the result of myriad creative processes of inclusion and exclusion, juxtaposition and sequencing, and fictionalising interventions that construct Nkoli as a historical figure as much as a literary one. In other words, the play is not simply reducible to the collection of Nkoli’s letters in the same way that the documentary is more than simply an objective collection of original footage, archival content and historical facts. Both the drama and the documentary circulate, then, as distinct cultural texts, each with its own internal logic, characterisations, emphases, and aesthetics. Though both texts explore the movement and negotiation of sexual rights discourses, their representations draw on markedly different visual and intellectual traditions. Whereas the political didacticism and imagined liberation heroism of Colman’s play echoes the protest theatre aesthetic of the apartheid era, Ditsie and Newman’s documentary traces the complexities, contradictions and transnational connections that produce local sexual cultures. While the drama is heavy-handed in presenting an overly idealised hero figure, the documentary forces fractures into teleological gay rights histories, and resists the temptation to imagine the attainment of sexual minority rights in South Africa as inevitable. The figure of Nkoli is refracted differently through these two texts, emphasising the contingencies and complexities of same-sex publics that are as connected to transnational power structures as they are to the rooted specificities of the racial and gendered histories of apartheid and the transition.

‘Gay rights are human rights’: Transnational circulations and local histories

Despite their ubiquity in popular discourse, the concept and substance of human rights are neither natural nor neutral, and invariably move within existing circuits of global power. In his provocative criticism of the hegemonic and homogenising tendencies of human rights discourses in the West, Makau Mutua (2002) emphasises that human rights are a constructed set of discourses that often erase cultural specificities in local contexts. Similarly pointing to the ideological baggage of human rights as constructed political discourses, Joseph Slaughter (2012: 45) writes that “in practice, human rights
are not the natural rights of human beings as presocial creatures but the positive rights of citizens as incorporated creatures of the state”. However, recognising the constructedness of human rights discourses does not negate their humanitarian and democratic worth, nor does it undermine the extraordinary social and political developments that have taken place under their name. Rather, recognising the ways in which these global discourses and power structures are produced and sustained foregrounds the contingencies of their mobility and the ideological reach of their claims. The intellectual frameworks for the Western human rights agenda is indebted to the foundational French and American constitutional declarations of political rights in the eighteenth century, as well as the broader discourses of the Enlightenment. However, it was only in the 1940s, in the aftermath of the Second World War, that this agenda would claim a global reach. The early promise of an inclusive and egalitarian global political system through the United Nations (UN) and its institutionalisation of an international human rights charter marked the zenith for liberal internationalists. Indeed, the UN mobilised new ideological circuits that would provide innovative intellectual and political tools for both domestic and transnational advocacy. However, the idealism of this moment was marred by the spectre of colonialism that, ironically, was being enforced by many of the same nations who were authoring supposedly universal rights to equality, freedom, and self-determination (Mutua 2002: 16).

Despite the adoption of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the election in South Africa of the National Party and its legislative formalisation of apartheid in the same year foreshadowed the extraordinary brutality, discrimination, and biopolitical controls and exclusions enacted by and within states during the second half of the twentieth century. But this period also bore witness to an expansive human rights agenda that circulated through several different forums, including the policy priorities of different governments, the advocacy and care work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media and communication networks, and increasingly vocal populations. Much of this human rights advocacy was transnational and built on the generic and inclusive language of individual human rights imagined in the UDHR and other international conventions. However, human rights as a conceptual form became inhabited by the discursive specificities of different citizen-subjects, their sites of harm or vulnerability, and their broader political strategies. Appadurai (2013: 63) observes that since the formation of the UN, “the discourse of human rights [has spread] into
the center of the vocabulary of politics” and that “virtually every known society has generated individuals and groups who have a new consciousness of their political status within the framework of human rights”.

Modern human rights have had uneven mobility over the second half of the twentieth century, with some citizen-subjects invoking a universalist language of rights more successfully than others. Although the UN was first petitioned to recognise and protect sexual rights as human rights as early as 1951 (Paternotte & Seckinelgin 2015: 215), it would be several more decades before sexuality was incorporated in the institutional rights discourses of the global body.\textsuperscript{7} This resulted in the formation of a small number of transnational rights organisations focusing particularly on gender and sexual rights. The most significant of these for local same-sex subjectivities in South Africa is the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA).\textsuperscript{8} As I argue in relation to both the gay and lesbian and antiapartheid movements, while differently inhabited human rights discourses can often complement one another, at other times they block each other’s traction and mobility, contesting for priority and legitimacy. Though there were some important strategic overlaps between the antiapartheid and sexual rights movements that would assert the indivisibility of rights – that is, the universality of form despite variations in content – their histories are characterised by some stark exclusions and oppositions.

While the UN and many of its member states from the West were advancing the development and spread of distinctly political rights and democratic forms of government, NGOs were mobilising identity politics across borders to expand sexual rights advocacy globally. However, the travel of these discourses was often uneven, and they were negotiated differently in different political contexts. Paradoxically, as I have discussed, the rise of more militant sexual politics across Europe and the United States following the famous Stonewall riots in 1969 coincided with the dismantling of the sexual rights movement in South Africa. Following the relative successes of the Law Reform Movement that same year, gay and lesbian political organising near disappeared for more than a decade. In 1982, however, the Gay Association of South Africa was formed (GASA). Though based far more on social support than political activism, this predominantly white organisation increasingly located itself within existing transnational gay and lesbian cultural and aesthetic forms. In response to
GASA’s constitutive whiteness and its apolitical silence on apartheid (Gunkel 2010: 63), Nkoli formed the Saturday Group as one of its structures to provide mainly black gay men and lesbian women with a safe space in which to engage on issues of politics and sexuality. However, Nkoli’s arrest later in 1985 on charges of treason marked the beginning of the end, not only of the Saturday Group and Nkoli’s relationship with GASA, but of the organisation itself. After Nkoli’s arrest, GASA distanced itself from him and framed his antiapartheid activism in terms of murder, treason, and illegality – crimes for which the evidence was tenuous (Heaton-Nicholls 2005).

Having been granted formal membership of the influential ILGA in 1984, GASA now faced severe criticism for its refusal to support Nkoli after his arrest and for its increasingly tenuous insistence on being apolitical in the context of apartheid, where silence was ever more inseparable from complicity (Rydström 2005: 34-35). Glen Shelton’s (in Rydström 2005: 42) description of GASA as “racist, sexist and collaborationist”, a designation that also aptly describes the similarly exclusionary and avowedly apolitical Law Reform Movement more than a decade earlier, was accepted by many activists in South Africa and abroad. Having failed to recognise the interconnectedness of political struggles, GASA was suspended from ILGA in 1987 (Rydström 2005: 40), and after months of “dwindling and teetering towards collapse, out of tune with contemporary South African political developments and mired in internal problems” (Reid 2005: 30), GASA ceased to exist by the end of that year (Rydström 2005: 43). The organisation’s demise points to the impossibility of credible white-dominated gay rights organising in South Africa, and of apolitical stances in the face of apartheid’s discrimination and brutality. It also reveals the increasing overlaps in the global conceptualisation of racism and heteronormativity in the human rights agenda, and how Nkoli functioned to solidify these understandings. Through intense lobbying from within the international body over GASA’s failure to support Nkoli and explicitly oppose apartheid, ILGA articulated apartheid’s racism and homophobia as mutually defining, and by doing so, they transformed the configuration of human rights that they circulated around the world. Significantly, however, this also reveals how the production of local sexual politics transformed the transnational rights agenda of ILGA and its affiliates, and opened up new spaces for global antiapartheid activism. After his acquittal in 1988, Nkoli founded the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), the activities and internal discourses of which dominate much
of Ditsie and Newman’s documentary film. Together with the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA),9 GLOW became one of the first significant multiracial and explicitly antiapartheid gay rights organisations in the country, embracing political activism and formally affiliating itself with the ANC-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF).10 Under Nkoli’s leadership, GLOW would play a major role in shaping political activism and discourses on sexuality through to the early 1990s, organising the country’s first gay and lesbian pride march in Johannesburg in 1990.

At the same time as ILGA and GASA were negotiating the intersections between state-sanctioned racism and heteronormativity in the context of apartheid, the liberation movement itself was coming under international pressure for its ambivalence on sexual rights. While the ANC used the language of inclusion and equality in global forums, there were growing concerns about homophobic exclusions in a speculative postapartheid state. There were also reports about the victimisation of sexual minorities in the ANC dating back to the early 1970s (Tatchell 2005a: 140), and extensive accounts of heteronormativity and silencing in the movement (Kraak 2005; Kleinbooi 1994; Toms 1994: 260; Nhlapo 2005: 69). In 1987, Peter Tatchell, a long-time antiapartheid organiser, sought to emphasise a broad coalition of inclusive human rights work by exposing the growing homophobia in the movement. He admits that he wanted to “embarrass the ANC leadership [to drive] its switch to a more gay-sympathetic policy” (Tatchell 2005a: 141). He interviewed two senior members of the ANC for Capital Gay, a magazine that circulated within transnational same-sex publics. The organisation’s erstwhile representative in London, Solly Smith (in Tatchell 2005b: 148), points to narrow framings of human rights discourses when he says that “[w]e cannot be diverted from our struggle by these issues. We believe in the majority being equal. Those people (lesbians and gays) are in the minority. The majority must rule”. Similarly, Ruth Mompati (in Tatchell 2005b: 148), a leading ANC figure in Lusaka, stated in the interview that:

The gays have no problems. They have nice houses and plenty to eat. I don’t see them suffering. No one is persecuting them... We haven’t heard about this problem in South Africa until recently. It seems to be fashionable in the West.

What is clear from both of these statements is that same-sex sexuality was read (at least within parts of the ANC leadership) as a decadence of middle-class whiteness and a site of special rights – ideological traditions that continue to linger in South Africa
today. Reducing same-sex sexuality to a “fashion[…] in the West” also points to the parochialism which characterised parts of the liberation movement, both in the country and in exile, and which overlooks the extraordinary contributions being made to the antiapartheid movement by men such as Simon Nkoli and by gay rights movements internationally. This particular interview was circulated globally, and the ANC was inundated by communications and complaints from antiapartheid allies about the narrow framing of the organisation’s human rights project. This reveals the sometimes divisive relationship between the antiapartheid movement and broader human rights cultures, as gay and lesbian activists contested norms and exclusions to forge new transnational networks predicated on an indivisibility of human rights.

The controversy and growing discontent within the broader antiapartheid movement prompted Thabo Mbeki, then the ANC’s Director of Communications based in Lusaka, to issue a reply to Tatchell. In his letter, Mbeki (2005: 149) implicitly acknowledges the indivisibility of rights demanded by the ANC’s Freedom Charter and insists that “[t]he ANC is indeed very firmly committed to removing all forms of discrimination and oppression in a liberated South Africa. […] That commitment must surely extend to the protection of gay rights”. Tatchell (2005a: 144), as well as Bart Luirink (2006: 32) of the Dutch antiapartheid movement, argue that it was the antiapartheid activism of gay men such as Nkoli and Ivan Toms, a leading activist in the End Conscription Campaign, that shaped the ANC’s recognition of sexual rights as human rights. This position would later be rearticulated by several party luminaries in the late 1980s, including Frene Ginwala (Rydström 2005: 47) and Albie Sachs (Tatchell 2005a: 147). The ANC’s use of the language of human rights in its forging of transnational antiapartheid solidarities and its simultaneous ambivalence on the inclusion of sexual rights within these solidarities illustrate how the human rights movement of the second half of the twentieth century was fraught with internal contradictions, contestations, and universalist fantasies.

In a short autobiographical essay entitled “Wardrobes”, Nkoli reads his personal life through the metaphor of the closet and the declaratory act of coming out. Reimagining the closet as a simultaneously racist and heteronormative site of exclusion and ontological silencing, Nkoli (1994a: 249-50) writes that:
If you are black in South Africa, the inhuman laws of apartheid closet you. If you are gay in South Africa, the homophobic customs and laws of this society closet you. If you are black and gay in South Africa, well, then it really is all the same closet, the same wardrobe. Inside is darkness and oppression. Outside is freedom. It is as simple as that.

Nkoli’s revisionist metaphor of the closet suggests not only a constitutive overlap in the racism and heteronormativity of the apartheid state, but also the strategic entanglement of sexual rights and the broader discourses of the antiapartheid movement. In her ground-breaking *Epistemology of the Closest*, Eve Sedgwick (2008: 57) argues that the while the “post-Stonewall gay movement […] posited gay women and men as a distinct minority with rights comparable to those of any other minority, it served notice that at least some people were in a position to demand that the representational compact between the closet and the culture be renegotiated or abrogated”. In both *Your Loving Simon* and *Simon & I*, the local negotiation of this “representational compact” is largely dependent on the openness of the antiapartheid movement to rights discourses that were universal and indivisible. Munro (2012: 53) reflects on Nkoli’s “Wardrobes” and writes that its exclusive focus on South African events “helps to combat the idea that homosexuality is a foreign import and contributes to the transformation of gay rights from a transnational phenomenon into a symbol of rainbow nationalism”. However, Munro’s binary reading of the relationship between postapartheid nationalism and transnational rights discourses fails to recognise the complex interconnectedness that drives the production and circulation of both antiapartheid and postapartheid same-sex publics. Rather, it is the ambiguous, uneven and contested co-circulations of antiapartheid and sexual rights activism that is powerfully suggestive of the type of movements and transformations that I am calling restless mobilities. Dennis Altman (2001: 36), in his discussion of the globalisation of sexual rights discourses, contends that “[s]exuality, like other areas of life, is constantly being remade by the collision of existing practices and mythologies with new technologies and ideologies”. While the concept of human rights has a transnational mobility that extends across constituencies and contexts, it remains varied in application and content, internally fractured, and often subtended by new forms of exclusion. Colman’s drama, as well as Ditsie and Newman’s documentary, evidence the complex and sometimes contradictory negotiation of the antiapartheid and sexual rights agendas, both of which were transformed through their local and transnational imbrications.
**Your Loving Simon**

*Your Loving Simon* was conceptualised and written by Colman in a workshop together with the original cast, Fourie Nyamande and Bheki Vilakazi. It was first performed in April 2003 under Colman’s direction at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, itself a bastion of antiapartheid protest theatre. Based on the letters that Nkoli wrote to his partner during his imprisonment, the drama’s title is derived from Nkoli’s closing salutations in some of these letters. However, the specificity of Nkoli’s historiography is blended by the playwright with more general perspectives on race and sexuality that were generated by the two actors with whom he was workshopping the text, and elements from those actors’ personal biographies (Colman 2014: 8). This two-hander play is structured into several scenes and documents the experiences and perspectives of Nkoli and his imagined cellmate, Madoda. While the setting for most of these scenes is the prison in the 1980s, the play also includes a scene at a shebeen and later a hospital after Nkoli’s release, as well as a prologue and epilogue set in the present in which Madoda addresses a spectral Nkoli. Though some of Nkoli’s letters were included verbatim in the play, the contents of others were integrated into several dialogues between the protagonist and his cellmate. Through the adaptation of these letters, the fictionalised backstory of Nkoli’s cellmate, and the play’s dialogue, Colman produces a work that unapologetically frames gay rights within the antiapartheid movement’s discourses of struggle heroism and equality. While the drama reflects the production of a local sexual rights discourse at the intersection of the globalised antiapartheid and gay rights movements, the text is avowedly didactic, and it erases the complexities of personal and sexual subjectivities. What is more, the limited critical reception of the text has tended to erase both the implicit and explicit transnationalism that shapes the production of a particularly rights-based same-sex sexuality in the drama, as well as the overlaps between a protest theatre aesthetic and the antiapartheid movement’s broader hero-making strategy.

Despite the temporality of its production and performance – and Colman’s (2014: 9) assertion that the literary and performative conventions of drama “play with the archives” to produce more textured social commentary – the text itself is unable to break out of the protest aesthetic that characterised theatre during the apartheid era.
Protest literature developed in opposition to the totalising brutality and inequality of the apartheid regime, seeking to mobilise new constituencies of dissent and opposition to the state-sanctioned injustices (Maree 1998: 18; Von Brisinki 2003: 114). In this form of political theatre which characterised the genre in the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid was revealed to be an oppressive and brutal system that all ethical art needed to oppose. However, this opposition often resulted in the exclusion of the complexities and innovations of dramatic and artistic form in favour of the urgent priorities of antiapartheid resistance. Sparking new debates in the liberation movement about the role of art in cultural and political life, Albie Sachs (1990: 20) famously criticised the didacticism of much antiapartheid creative work as follows: “The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out”. Using the notion of spectacle to think through similar ideas, Njabulo Ndebele (2006: 41-42) criticises the erasures and hollowing out of much antiapartheid political literature:

The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness.

While apartheid was the evil that needed to be opposed in the protest theatre of this period, in Colman’s more recent play it is heteronormativity that the text militates against. Despite the fact that most of the performance is set during apartheid, it is its opposition to heteronormativity that drives the characters’ dialogue and interactions. In other words, while the Manichean form of protest theatre is inhabited differently by Colman’s drama, the work remains subtended by the same binary logic, as it depends on the aesthetic and formalistic conventions of the historically oppositional and teleological mode of the genre.

Since its debut performance, and its publication a decade later, the drama has had limited critical reception. Munro (2012) and Johann van Heerden (2008) both read the indivisibility of rights that Nkoli embodies as suggestive of particular configurations of an inclusive postapartheid nationalism. Munro (2012: 56), for instance, focuses on how the play extends the genre of prison writing into a site of nation building, arguing that
Colman’s play “makes Nkoli an exemplar of rainbow nationalism”. While she offers an interesting reading of the textual possibilities of the genre, and points to the centrality of the protagonist’s coming out, she fails to engage with the transnationalism that underscores the text’s production of an interconnected human rights agenda. Similarly, Van Heerden’s doctoral study of postapartheid drama situates Colman’s play within “a trend of painting portraits on stage of prominent individuals, portraits that all contributed to a mosaic of the past, a past that was now being replaced by a new present to be experienced as the ‘Rainbow Nation’” (Van Heerden 2008: 131). Much like in Munro’s analysis, Van Heerden reads the play and Nkoli’s coming out as a performative production of a particular type of nationalism predicated on a broadly inclusive human rights project. Furthermore, Van Heerden (177) correctly notes that the play eschews the antiapartheid struggle itself as its overriding theme, foregrounding instead “the diverse multi-faceted themes explored in new South African theatre”. Though he recognises Colman’s important intervention in reinscribing a gay cultural history and reworking apartheid-era themes, Van Heerden does not engage with the continuation of a distinctly apartheid-era protest theatre aesthetic, in which heteronormativity merely replaces apartheid as the oppressive power structure that needs to be opposed, and which is central to the way in which the text depicts the production of a local antiapartheid sexual rights discourse.

Van Heerden also problematically locates the play’s dominant temporality in the postapartheid period by stating that the play “passionately focus[es] on one aspect of life in the new democracy and specifically the place of black homosexual men and women” (2008: 177). However, while the prologue and epilogue are located in the present and are concerned with the failures of the postapartheid state, most of the play focuses squarely on Nkoli’s imprisonment in the 1980s. In fact, postapartheid same-sex sexualities hardly feature. Instead, the play is Colman’s postapartheid reflection on a definitively apartheid-era political moment. Van Heerden’s limited reading of the play – which seems to privilege a universally imagined ‘gay’ experience above the specific encounter between sexual and political rights at this historical juncture – fails to examine how the text depicts the localised negotiation of a distinctly antiapartheid sexual rights discourse. A similar reading is offered by Christine Kennedy (2003: 34) in her review of the play for The Citizen newspaper, in which she argues that the play “will assist those with little understanding of gay matters to put a
face and a context to a lifestyle they consider ‘abnormal’”. This is problematic as it not only dehistoricises Nkoli’s imprisonment and ignores the centrality of Nkoli’s coming out to these political leaders at this political time, but it also asserts an ahistorical and non-racial experience of sexuality. Significantly, her reading of this play universalises the themes and perspectives and fails to acknowledge the pervasive influence of race in the ways which same-sex texts are read and same-sex publics are constituted.

In Colman’s play, the protagonist’s decision to reveal his sexuality to his co-accused was more than simply being “honest, [or] true to [him]self”, as he explains to his cellmate (Colman 2013: 30). Rather, the disclosure invokes a particularly Western epistemic tradition that links the act of coming out of the proverbial closet to particular notions of gay identity politics. It is the act of coming out – as Altman (1997: 419), Rachel Walker (2010), and Rosemary Deller (2010: 169) have argued – that appears to interpellate one as a minority sexual subject, within what David Halperin (2007) calls a “quasi-ethnic social identity”. Through the declaratory act of coming out, sexual desire is subsumed by sexual identity in the play; it is enough that he articulates his sexual identity. Though the protagonist at first recalls in one of his letters to his partner that he had angrily shouted that “I am gay” (Colman 2013: 29), he later elaborates and says that “I am homosexual and I am not ‘forced’ to be one, I am one by nature” (31). In a curious authorial choice that demands an essentialist reading by audiences, Nkoli foreshadows his later coming out in an earlier scene in the play in which he draws on the stereotypical trope of fashion that tends to co-circulate with dominant notions of middle-class gay identity formation. Reading a letter that he has written to his partner from prison, he explains that “there is nothing that I want more than a sky-blue suit. Choose between Christian Dior and Carducci. If you do find a sky-blue suit, please, Roy,16 get me a sky-blue tie as well” (14). The inclusion of this particular letter in the play, which references specific international fashion labels, further links Nkoli’s imprisonment for antiapartheid activism to particular circulations of gay cultural identity predicated on fashion, upward mobility, and certain forms of capitalist consumption. The portability of this configuration of gay sexual identity is reiterated near the end of the play when Nkoli attends his own “coming-out party” at a shebeen after being released on bail. He appears on stage wearing, according to the stage directions, “a sky-blue suit and tie, and a brown Afro wig” (43). These stage directions bring together obvious visual symbols of both distinctly African and modern gay identities. This
performatively contests the assertion that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican. What is more, the transnational mobility of hair politics located in the Afro also opens up questions about the intersection of race and sexuality across geographic and historical contexts.

Nkoli’s decision to come out follows a scene in which Madoda and Nkoli were preparing for cross-examination. During this scene, Madoda gives a powerful speech about the righteousness and heroism of the liberation struggle (28). In a fight directly following Nkoli’s revelation, he parodies the earlier speech and says to Madoda:

   I am dedicated to the struggle. It’s you who doesn’t understand, Madoda, because you’re so prejudiced and terrified. Suddenly, I am a different person. Yesterday, it was fine. ‘When you stand there Si, just remember you are an activist. Feel that pride, remember what you are fighting for. We’re all on the same side, we’re all there to support each other’. I was Simon to play soccer with, share parcels, tell stories, pass the time. Now I’m a different person? (31)

Though Nkoli argues here that his sexuality does not alter his political commitments to the struggle, he later argues that sexuality is in fact constitutive of an expansive activist identity. Nkoli’s opposition to apartheid and to other forms of homophobia are linked when he says:

   What is this now, am I on two trials? On the Delmas Treason Trial and now I am also on trial for being a homosexual terrorist? Am I now charged with treason against the struggle? (32)

Paradoxically, perhaps, Colman’s play highlights the way in which heteronormativity was the governing gender and sexuality regime in both the apartheid state and in many structures of the antiapartheid movement. Colman highlights the indivisibility of human rights by linking the struggle to end racial discrimination (which lay at the heart of apartheid) to the struggle to resist homophobia. Furthermore, in a speech slightly overwrought with the language of self-actualisation, Nkoli says to Madoda that his homophobia “is a gift for me” (40). He adds that:

   Every time I am forced to be myself, I face my fear. Like looking into the eyes of a lion – eventually, the lion shakes its head, flicks its tail and walks away. I win and I am free; even locked up here, some little bit of fear has left – through the window. (40)

When Munro (2012: 54) argues that this speech situates Nkoli “firmly in the tradition of the heroic political prisoner, maintaining his dignity through adherence to principles
in the face of fear”, she overlooks the problematic way in which the hero figure is constituted, and the stark erasure of complex and nuanced characterisation.

Mike van Graan (2006: 280) observes that among the dominant characteristics of antiapartheid protest theatre was the hollowing out of characters on stage. He writes that “generally, the characters were closer to caricatures representing types, rather than multi-layered characters” (280).17 This is the mode of characterisation in this drama, as Nkoli is constructed uncritically in the mould of the struggle hero, while Madoda functions as a stock spokesperson of homophobia and later acceptance. The reception of Nkoli as a literary character is also over-determined by the paratextual context of the play’s performance. Audiences were provided with a pamphlet detailing Nkoli’s political activism, and display cases at the entrance to the theatre itself exhibited Nkoli’s personal artefacts: “Amid the handcuffs and other memorabilia are his passbook, famous photographs, a strip of toilet paper documenting prison conditions, and a letter to his lover Roy officially stamped by Modderbee prison” (Sichel 2003: 4). This paratextual theatre-as-archive constructs an uncritical interpretive frame of individual heroism, a didacticism that drives the play itself.

However, this production of Nkoli as the gay, black, antiapartheid activist was also an important part of the hero-making apparatus of the antiapartheid movement. In the same way that a certain concept of Nelson Mandela was produced and circulated through transnational networks of activism and solidarity (Klein 2010) to mobilise global opposition to the regime, Nkoli was made into both a local and transnational figure through which a progressive sexual rights agenda could be imagined.18 In the play, some time after coming out, Nkoli reads another one of the letters that he has written to Ron:

We didn’t get bail, but, oh well, life goes on. Did I tell you I received a letter of support from a professor in Chicago? He wants to put my picture in a magazine. […] It seems as if I am getting international support for my cause in opposing apartheid. The Simon Nkoli Anti-Apartheid Committee has been started. I am going to be chairing our meetings for the next four months, reading and presenting documents to the other 21. (Colman 2013: 37)

Colman’s play depicts how, through the figure of Nkoli, the transnational sexual rights movement mobilised new networks of antiapartheid solidarity. Through the publication of his photograph and the centrality of his name in the newly formed “Simon Nkoli Anti-
Apartheid Committee”, and countless other political developments not accounted for in Colman’s play, Nkoli emerges as the political signifier of the interconnectedness of antiapartheid and anti-homophobic political activism in the late 1980s. Not only are sexual and race politics compatible, but they appear here to be mutually defining. Interestingly, Nkoli states in this letter that he is “getting international support for [his] cause in opposing apartheid”. It is his openness about his sexuality that attracts this international attention and what is only implied in the letter is that this support is being given on the basis of his combined opposition to racist and homophobic discrimination.

Of course, the increased mobilisation of the international antiapartheid movement that formed around the figure of Nkoli itself mitigated the concerns of those of his co-accused who feared that his sexuality would undermine the credibility of the movement (Non-Stop 2012). The indivisibility of rights that Nkoli symbolised also thus brought attention to the interconnectedness of the racism and homophobia that was being enacted by the apartheid state. Nkoli was therefore not merely the recipient of attention and support from elsewhere. Rather, the restless circulation of Nkoli as a political figure transformed the way in which the transnational sexual rights movement engaged with issues of race and social exclusion, and broadened its mandate beyond single-issue politics. Mutua (2002) correctly cautions against perpetuating particular tropes in the reading of global human rights, in which Western agents of human rights are celebrated as the saviours of African victims of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination. However, what the figure of Nkoli in Colman’s play illustrates is something Mutua underestimates, namely how human rights are not merely transported as fixed political objects, but rather are translated and transformed through their global circulations. Apartheid, then, functions as “an apparatus of transnational cultural production” (Bethlehem 2015: 4) in which the indivisibility of sexual and political rights circulated between and within nation-states, both moving along existing circuits and restlessly charting new ones.

In an early scene in the play, Nkoli and Madoda are playing soccer in the exercise yard of the prison. Madoda is trying to teach Nkoli how to play while Nkoli appears more interested in writing letters. Madoda’s growing criticism of Nkoli’s lack of skill takes the form of essentialist denigrations of women. Over the course of only a single scene, Madoda makes several such remarks to Nkoli:
What are you afraid of? The women are out there. Let’s do this. Let’s do this.
Soccer is for men. (Colman 2013: 16)

Don’t close your eyes, keep your eyes open. You play like a woman. Women are
the ones who do that. (imitates Simon closing his eyes). Let’s try some passing.
(17)

Nkoli confidently challenges Madoda on his essentialist understandings of gender and
says:

But why are you always talking about ‘I play like a woman’. You keep on saying it.
A girl must be like this, a man must be like this, or like that. Why? They are part of
the struggle, too, you know. There are also women in detention, they are our
comrades. (18)

In this extract, Colman broadens the scope and moral authority of the indivisibility of
rights by linking women’s rights to the antiapartheid movement’s discourses of
equality. This statement also draws on the global circulation of political demands for
women’s rights – an agenda that had already found considerable traction within the
exiled liberation movement (Mompati 2005: 7). Nkoli’s response – and his invocation
of “comrade” as a ubiquitous marker of solidarity – also emphasises the extent to which
political capital derives from one’s imprisonment for antiapartheid activism, reframing
his own explicit insistence that gay rights are human rights. Soccer also functions here
as a rather heavy-handed metaphor for one’s mastery of the codes of specific
configurations of hegemonic masculinity, and again evidences the play’s shallow
refashioning of resistance literatures.

Nkoli is constructed as a caricatured hero figure in the drama, and Madoda is similarly
denied depth and complexity and appears as a rather undeveloped political activist.
For instance, moments after introducing himself to Nkoli, Madoda announces that he
is reading “[a]bout Malcolm X”, explaining that he likes “serious, political biographies,
theory, history, etc.” (Colman 2013: 12-13). Though this is an important intertextual
reminder about the interconnectedness of global struggles against racial oppression,
its lack of subtlety undermines its impact. Over the course of the play, Madoda
functions as a conduit through whom homophobic sentiments are initially expressed
and thereafter through whom an inclusive reconciliatory agenda is communicated.
Madoda is initially vocal in his criticism of Nkoli’s sexuality: he describes Nkoli as
“disgusting” and “sick” and threatens violence against him (30-33). In an interview
following a performance of the play, Colman (in Krouse 2003: 2) states that he created Madoda as a fictional cellmate to tell:

the story of a friendship that develops between two men sharing a tiny space over three to four years; how that friendship is confronted when Simon makes his choice of coming out; how his friend turns against him and how that is resolved.

However, while this account captures the shifts in Madoda’s perspective, it romanticises what is in fact more of an over-wrought testimonial than any affective complexity. Privileging exteriority over interiority, as well as broad symbols over nuance, the play systematically identifies and then disavows several constitutive threads of heteronormativity. For instance, Madoda says to Nkoli that:

All this time you have been writing to ‘your friend Ron’. And all the parcels? No wonder. You see, you are not really a gay; it is a white thing, this ‘gay’. Our people are not like that. You have been brainwashed. It’s okay, I understand now, you just need to meet a nice African woman. (Colman 2013: 32)

Madoda, here, acts as the mouthpiece for the conservative discourses of an imagined heterosexual African authenticity. Nkoli responds to him by insisting that he is not the “puppet of some white man” and he rhetorically asks whether he is now suddenly “not even a black man” (32). Similarly, Christianity is identified as a structuring mechanism of heteronormativity when Nkoli recounts a spectacular story. After studying to become a priest, he says:

I decided to tell the Father in charge, sort of the principal, that I was gay. […]
I was expelled. They gave me a chance to repent and confess first, of course. When I wouldn’t, they expelled me. They took everything from my room – the curtains, the carpet, blankets and burnt them. Made a small bonfire and burnt them. Then, wherever I walked, two younger boys had to sweep up the ground after me. (42)

After finishing this account of the cruelty of the church, Nkoli offers Christianity a rehabilitative route when he states that “the God I believe in is someone very different from their kind of God. She’s black!” (42). Within a very short space of time, the play also requires Nkoli to remind Madoda that gay men are not sexual predators (33), that sexuality does not detract from one’s struggle heroism (30), and that same sex-desire is not contagious (31), a choice (39), or an illness (39-40). In the last instance, Colman emphasises the full gamut of institutionalised heteronormativity when Nkoli states that “sangomas, ministers, [and] psychologists” failed to “cure” him (39). While the play acknowledges the multiple cultural flows through which local same-sex publics are
constituted – including religion, African ‘authenticity’, transnational antiapartheid activism, and Western gay identity politics – the play’s teleological heavy-handedness limits its potential range and depth in a way that Ditsie and Newman’s documentary does not.

Reflecting on the changing perspective of Nkoli’s cellmate, Munro (2012: 53-54) identifies rather formulaic character development and argues that “Madoda’s journey through homophobia to acceptance, admiration, and finally mourning [after Simon’s death] is perhaps an overly idealized fleshing out of the gaps in Nkoli’s own account of what happened”. In one of the later scenes in the play, Madoda asks Nkoli for forgiveness:

I apologise, Simon. Please, I’m asking you ... Let me ask you that ... to forgive me. Let me take this as a gift. Meeting you and becoming your friend.

[...] Yes, a chance for me to understand something that I never understood before. You were right, we are both fighting for the same thing, we are on the same side [...]. (Colman 2013: 39)

It is in recognising the indivisibility of rights and the imbrication of apartheid’s policing of racial and sexual bodies that Madoda imagines the outlines of a broadly inclusive struggle. While Munro (2012: 54) describes this rather belaboured scene of expiation as being characterised by “a simple eloquence”, I would argue that it is a product of apartheid-era protest aesthetic in which, according to Van Graan (2006: 280), “the plays were didactic, with little room for interpretation. The message was the thing; theatre was simply the vehicle”. Further to this, and following the mutual recognition by the characters that sexual rights are inextricably bound up with demands for political justice, the stage directions state that “Madoda sings a Zulu song [while] Simon sings a Sotho song” (Colman 2013: 41). Thus, the characters’ reconciliation and the somewhat trite acceptance of same-sex sexuality function as the canvas on which idealised notions of unity and ethnic diversity can also be projected.

Nkoli later hosts a party at a shebeen in Soweto in one of the final scenes of the drama after being released on bail. He says:

I must speak into the camera? For the BBC? (To camera.) Well, what can I say? Of course, it’s wonderful to be free, to be here at Lee’s place, our very own shebeen in Soweto, and I am so grateful for my Freedom Party! (Off-camera.) Yes, my coming-out party! Hey, sweetheart! (43)
This staged interview with the BBC situates Nkoli, his release, and his gay rights activism within the transnational news networks and his prominence in the Delmas Treason Trial. In this monologue, Nkoli highlights the different ways of conceptualising “freedom” in oppressive contexts. The meaning of “freedom” is inextricably bound in this extract to the phrase “coming-out” and refers both to his own release from prison, as well as his refusal to accept heteronormative cultures of secrecy and shame. The stage directions here frame this as an aside, excluding the camera, and makes the audience complicit in the pun and its political implications in linking his earlier declaratory act of coming out to the antiapartheid’s structuring ideology of “freedom.”

His expository monologue continues and he says that:

I have been released on bail, so even though I am free, I still have to report to Hillbrow Police Station, twice a day. Yes, my comrades did accept me in the end, they got used to me and they ended up welcoming me – well, most of them. Ja, it was fantastic, because don’t forget that some of them may be running this country, one day. (43)

Interestingly, Nkoli’s reminder that his physical freedom is not absolute and is constrained by ongoing bail restrictions resonates with the inevitable reality that his sexual freedom will also face constraints. The oppressive reach of the apartheid state, at least at this point in the play, remains intact. Nkoli also points explicitly to the political capital of the co-accused and insists, correctly it turns out, that “some of them may be running the country, one day”. That this is juxtaposed with the assertion that the comrades not only accepted him but also “ended up welcoming [him]” connects Nkoli’s disclosure in prison directly to the progressive moves of the later ANC government.

Nkoli’s act of coming out, however, is a mobile form that signifies restlessly among different constituencies. While the immediate interlocutors of his declaratory act of coming out were his antiapartheid co-accused in the prison, his re-articulation of the relationship between race and sexuality also questioned the hegemonic whiteness of the local gay and lesbian rights groups (Rydström 2005). Achmat (2005: 168) highlights this when he writes that “[a]cross the world, lesbian and gay people rallied to support Simon Nkoli and the Delmas Treason Trialists. In South Africa, the white-led gay and lesbian movement disowned Simon Nkoli and the struggle against apartheid”. Colman’s play, however, is selective in representing these overlapping constituencies: while black antiapartheid formations are rightly criticised for their heteronormativity, the deep-rooted racism of the predominantly white, gay and lesbian
rights groups is omitted. Kennedy (2003: 34) writes in her review of the play for instance, that:

Fearing rejection by their communities, black homosexuals are perhaps more inclined to remain in the closet than their white counterparts. Hopefully, Your Loving Simon will inspire such people with its portrayal of a gay black man who became an icon and a role model.

While this reading of Colman’s play accurately captures the text’s moralising focus on homophobia within black constituencies, it also perpetuates Colman’s erasure of the complicity of many white gay men and lesbian women in sustaining structural racism and the relative isolation of Nkoli while in prison.

Simon & I

Simon & I charts the complex and uneven ways in which a local gay rights culture was produced in the crucible of antiapartheid and transition-era discourses. Contrary to Colman’s depiction, the documentary problematises the hero figure, as well as the seemingly easy inevitability of postapartheid sexual rights. The film reveals these discourses to be animated by global circulating forms of rights, identity, norms and statehood that have become constitutive of a rather anxious notion of the local. The film focuses on several key sites of this production of a local sexual politics, including the activities of GLOW and its refashioning of sexual rights discourses during the early 1990s, transnational Christian and Africanist homophobias, the ambivalent relationship between women’s rights and sexual rights, and the role of AIDS in producing new transnational circuits of affect. Significantly, the documentary does not shy away from exploring the friction that characterises these encounters. Following Tsing (2005), I read the friction between these different circulations as generative of new cultural forms and meanings.

In as much as the documentary provides a history of the organised local sexual rights movement from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, it is also a deeply personal biographical and autobiographical film that reveals the complex overlaps between the personal and political lives of two of the country’s most high-profile sexual rights activists. The limited body of critical work on the film has tended to see it as an archival collection of historical facts or soundbites (Gunkel 2010: 67-68; Oswin 2007: 649)
rather than as a creative cultural text that bears its own aesthetics and artistic agency. The film blends original interviews and footage from Ditsie’s personal collection with extensive archived material, including audiovisual recordings, newspaper cut-outs, and photographs. The documentary shifts between the past and the nominal present, and historical narrative is interspersed with nostalgic scenes of Nkoli and Ditsie in the former’s lounge as they read through collected publications, watch raw footage from the documentary, and discuss their political pasts.

The film’s different scenes are framed by a recurring shot of Ditsie in the present as she sits on a couch with her guitar (with a poster of Nkoli in the background) and shares deeply personal reflections about her and Nkoli’s life histories, as well as their political and personal relationship. She appears to respond to unasked interview questions as she interprets and connects the various items of audiovisual or archival content that have been included thus far, and thereby develops a coherent piece of storytelling, however fraught and entangled. This recurring scene conjoins Ditsie the character and Ditsie the narrator – resisting what Elizabeth Louw (2014: 208) has called the “outdated and unfashionable” use of the “omnipotent’ and preferably strong male voice” to sustain some form of cohesion and narrative flow in the documentary genre. While such films often stage a particular tension between an ‘objective’ truth and subjective storytelling (Louw 2014: iv), Simon & I self-consciously acknowledges its mediated form. This is achieved in several ways, including Ditsie’s dual role as character and narrator, and the inclusion of scenes in which the protagonists watch raw footage from the documentary. In addition, the post-production inclusion of scenes in which Nkoli indirectly acknowledges the camera as a mediating apparatus is also significant. For instance, not only does Nkoli ask Ditsie to pour him a drink because “I want to appear to be drinking”, but also, later in the film, he coyly complains to the camera, midway through a conversation, that “[y]ou didn’t say you were filming” and “[n]ow you’re giving me too many [voice-recording] machines”. In this way, the documentary’s constructedness as a mediated form of knowledge production is foregrounded, suggesting a form of visual media that Louw (2014: iv) might call a “collusion of voices” rather than any singular definitive history. With its stylistic and generic jaggedness and frayed edges sometimes exposed, this collaged visual history reinscribes the anxieties, uncertainties, ruptures, and sense of urgency that characterised the sexual rights agenda of the transition.
Though the film documents the fractures within the antiapartheid movement and slippages in its discourses of political solidarity and inclusion, it also contextualises and sets the stage for Nkoli’s political activism after his release, which dominates most of the documentary. The simultaneously historical and (auto)biographical mode of the film is established in the opening scenes, where footage from the first Gay and Lesbian Pride March in 1990 is cut with footage of Nkoli and Ditsie addressing a small group of people in preparation for the march. In this scene, Nkoli and his interlocutors are heard loudly repeating the refrain that “gay rights are human rights”. Ditsie’s narration over this scene introduces the film’s two eponymous protagonists: “This is Simon. That’s me. I really loved him. Sometimes I hated him. He changed my life”. The juxtaposition of Ditsie’s personal introductory remarks with the political slogan that captures the essence of the sexual rights movement’s assertion that human rights are indivisible, points to the way in which their friendship and activism is inextricably bound up within this political trope. Though most of the documentary focuses on Nkoli’s and Ditsie’s activism and relationship from when GLOW was formed in 1988 onwards, it situates these developments within a particular history. The documentary records the brutality of apartheid, the importance of the Delmas Treason Trial, and the history of Nkoli’s imprisonment. Much like Colman’s play, the documentary reveals how Nkoli’s coming out exposed deep-rooted homophobic hostilities and articulated new transnational antiapartheid solidarities. Ditsie foregrounds Nkoli’s significance as a prominent gay antiapartheid activist and says that “[a]s word of the trial spread, support poured in from many parts of the world. Simon started to become a gay hero”. However, in contrast to Colman’s play, she scrutinises rather than simply perpetuates the process of hero-formation. For instance, Cameron (who was a judge of the high court at the time of the interview) describes Nkoli as “an extraordinary package of a lot of different things. He could be coy and coquettish. He could be a rampant queen. He could be petulant, and spiteful, and mean. He could also be immensely generous. And above all, he had vision and courage”. The film also depicts Nkoli’s growing self-absorption through several exchanges in which he appears disinterested in the achievements of his friends and colleagues (though Ditsie contextualises this within his declining mental and physical health). The City Press’s (2002: 23) review of the documentary describes Nkoli as “jealous” of Ditsie, and Rupert Smith’s (2002) review
in *The Guardian* describes Nkoli as “self-obsessed, narcissistic, [and] interested only in remembering his triumphs in the struggle”.

The formation of GLOW is itself positioned in the film as a politicised act of defiance against the apartheid state. The narrator points out the dangerous environment in which GLOW was formed when she says that “[e]ven though Simon was acquitted, he was still forbidden to meet with more than three people at a time. He went ahead anyway and called together a group of gays and lesbians to form GLOW”. The organisation is shown to have been an incredibly important space for the production of new forms of belonging. It becomes the site for the articulation of particular forms of Western gay identity politics, as well as for a reimagining of Ditsie’s own sense of place. The documentary initially recounts Ditsie’s perspective in which her own same-sex sexuality is initially experienced as confusing, alienating, and dangerous. She narrates that:

> My confusion started when I realised that I was the only one I knew who liked girls more than boys. I didn’t know words like gay or lesbian. I just thought that I was very odd. That’s when I started to feel the loneliness.

She explains later that hearing Boy George on the radio resulted in a discussion of sexuality and her own sudden disclosure to her family: “My sister said ‘hey, if he is gay, that must mean you are gay’. I was so excited that I didn’t think before I burst into the lounge and said ‘hey, I’m gay’”. This coming out, tied to the sexual identity of a British music figure, was disastrous for Ditsie. Her family did not accept her sexuality. She says that “[f]rom that day I was made to feel dirty and guilty all the time. But I couldn’t just lie and pretend to be like everyone else. Nothing made sense. Later that year, I attempted suicide”.

It is only later, with the formation of GLOW and its first meeting, that she embraces her sexuality. Ditsie describes her feelings at the first meeting and says that “[f]or the first time I was happy; I was home”. In doing so, she encodes the organisation, its membership, and its articulation of a sexual rights vocabulary with feelings of acceptance and belonging, contrasting the fear and isolation that preceded her immersion in sexual identity politics. GLOW gives Ditsie a language to understand her desire and a ritual for its articulation, shown when she enthusiastically comes out to her fellow members. A younger, radiant-looking Ditsie looks into the camera and
states: “I was born gay. And I am proud of it. And I want all of you to be proud of what you are”. This declaration is followed by visuals of Ditsie confidently embracing a particularly masculine aesthetic and occupying local gay and lesbian cultural and political spaces, including clubs and drag shows. She states that “[f]rom that day my life transformed. I just blossomed. There were meetings, rallies, and parties all the time. I found what I had been looking for: a place to belong. I now had friends and a political space to express myself”. Though GLOW exposed Ditsie to the mobility and power of the term ‘lesbian’ as an organising category of identity and resistance, as well as to the sexual minority networks it opens up, the documentary also rejects the essentialism that subtends the language of sexual identity politics. For instance, after a heated homophobic exchange with another contestant on a reality television show that she participated in a few years later, she says “I’m no different to you. And that’s not all it’s about. I don’t lesbian for a living”.

While Ditsie is situated in what appears to be localised sexual spaces, the documentary reminds us about the transnational cultural flows in which local sexual rights activism and community-building were negotiated. Interspersed with some of these moments are the scenes of Ditsie and Nkoli sitting on the couch watching footage and reading collected newspapers. One of the publications which appears throughout the documentary commemorates the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. The headline in the publication – “Seize the spirit of Stonewall 25” – appears in large font and can easily be read several times by the viewer of the film. This scene, along with the recurring headline referencing Stonewall, connects the local forms of gay and lesbian activism and identity formation to the transnational circulation of the forms of identity politics and mobilisations that Stonewall has come to represent. These links are highlighted in the film when both Ditsie and Nkoli comment on their respective invitations to New York and Glasgow for further advocacy work and solidarity-building.

In addition to the nomenclatures of gay and lesbian sexual identities, the documentary also reveals the rootedness and ubiquity of certain transnational strategies and symbols that characterise sexual rights movements of the Global North, most notably pride marches and the striped rainbow flags. Simon & I is, in a way, bookended by the representations of two pride marches in Johannesburg, the first in 1990 and the
second in 1999. While pride marches have a long history as central organisational and symbolic mechanisms for visibility – dating back to their origin in 1970 to commemorate the Stonewall riots (Weeks 2015: 45) – they have since shifted globally towards a depoliticised festival. The documentary highlights the way in which the global form was appropriated and then transformed through its imbrication with the antiapartheid movement and its structuring ideology of equality (Tucker 2010).

Describing the march in 1990, Gevisser and Reid (1994: 278) argue that:

> On the one hand, the march fits into and invokes the tradition of human rights protest marches in South Africa, from the Women’s March on Pretoria in 1956 through to the marches of the defiance campaigns of the 1980s that signified the collapse of apartheid. On the other hand, it draws its style and indeed its name from the carnivalesque tradition of the pride march, initiated in North America after the Stonewall uprising of 1969 [...].

The first pride march was set to take place only a few months after the unbanning of political parties and the release of political prisoners in 1990. The climate was hostile and support from some parts of the antiapartheid movement was not guaranteed.

The documentary juxtaposes footage of Nkoli’s and Ditsie’s organisational preparation for the pride march with the iconic news footage of the release of Nelson Mandela as he walked from Victor Verster prison, hand-in-hand with his wife, Winnie. Ditsie’s voiceover historicises the release and political reforms and states that “[b]ecause of Simon’s contact with [Mandela] and other Delmas leaders, we were confident that the ANC would support us”. As she says this, the visuals shift from Mandela to Nkoli as he bends over, painting gay rights iconography onto a protest sign for the pride march. Through post-production, the film reinforces not only the interconnectedness of political struggles, but also Nkoli’s significance as a historical figure through which this interconnectedness could be articulated. This moment in the film draws on the moral authority of the antiapartheid movement and the political capital of Mandela as a figure of inclusive constitutionalism and equality in order to encode the gay rights movement and the pride march within a similar ideology. In other words, the struggle against heteronormativity is linked by the visual sequencing of the film to the other discriminations and oppressions against which the antiapartheid movement militated. This discursive and ideological entanglement is sustained throughout much of the film, and there are several visual reminders of this. Nkoli is then seen energising a small group of organisers as he repeats a slogan on one of their painted signs: “We’re here.
We’re queer. We’re everywhere”. This sign – which is seen numerous times in footage of the march itself – appropriates the language of a more radical oppositional sexual politics from the Global North. Nonetheless, the march blends this transnational political sensibility with the local particularities of South Africa in transition.

Though such a march is a transnational form with recognisable aesthetics and contestations, Lynda Johnston and Gordon Waitt (2015: 117) remind us that “the politics of gay pride festivals and parades are always located; place matters”. Cameron, then a human rights lawyer, addresses the gathering and reminds the marchers of the specific political agenda of the event: “This meeting and this march today has a message. We have a message to all the law-makers of South Africa and the constitution-makers of South Africa. That message is: criminal law is for criminals. Gays and lesbians are not criminals”. Cameron’s reference to the constitution, not yet negotiated, reminds us of the volatile and uncertain period in which this march was taking place, and of the reach and resilience of apartheid biopolitics. Similarly, the documentary shows Ditsie addressing the crowd:

Today the world is going to know that we here in South Africa have been oppressed for too long. We can’t stand it anymore. Why do we have to fight for the right to love who we want to love? This is about time and today we’re making history.

Her assertion that “we here in South Africa have been oppressed for too long” generates a productive ambiguity about the nature of the oppression, linking discrimination on the basis of both race and sexuality. While the banner behind her – which reads “Gay Pride March ’90” – indicates that she is referring to sexuality, her speech also invokes the place of the country in the global imaginary, which was inseparable from the struggle against apartheid and its racial programming. Nkoli similarly frames the pride march within the local imbrication of race and sexuality when he says to the crowd:

This is what I say to my comrades in the struggle who ask me why I waste time fighting for moffies. And this is what I say to white gay men or women who ask me why I spend so much time talking about apartheid when I should be fighting for gay rights. I am black and I am gay. I cannot separate the two parts of me into secondary or primary struggle. They will be all one struggle.

This is followed in the film by footage from the march itself which shows a multiracial procession that marks the confluence of several global cultural flows.
Though a transnational gay rights aesthetic is portable and circulates through the pride march in the form of a float with brightly-coloured balloons (resembling the rainbow flag), iconic pink triangles symbolising sexual rights, waves of pink fabrics, and repeated chants of “out of the closet into the streets”, a different political aesthetic is also negotiated. For instance, the official hand-painted banner states the theme of the march – “Unity in Community” – and features a map of Africa, circulating not only a different site of political solidarity to the hegemony of Western gay identities but also reasserting that same-sex sexualities have a long history in Africa. The formerly banned flag of the ANC, which featured prominently in the images of Mandela’s release, is also appropriated by the march organisers and participants who have either written political messaging on it or, in one instance, stuck it onto the middle of a bright pink placard. The liberal and inclusive discourses of which the ANC flag was a symbol are thereby infused into the political demands of the march, and this renegotiates the language and form of transnational gay rights organising in the local context of the transition. The protestors’ locatedness in the political transition is similarly apparent from some marchers (many of whom are wearing pink) carrying placards reading “Gay rights are human rights” and others calling for “peace” in the face of political violence and uncertainty. These marchers thereby rearticulate the very terms of same-sex spatial visibility.

The documentary ends with footage from the tenth annual pride march. Ditsie introduces the event from a balcony with a giant rainbow flag hanging from a building in the background. Though this particular pride march is dominated far more by a generic transnational gay rights aesthetic – including rainbow flags, bright feather boas, drag queens, and pink fabric – there are strong reminders of South Africa’s particular political history of sexual rights. The march is also presented as a celebration of Nkoli’s role in antiapartheid and sexual rights activism (following his AIDS-related death a year earlier). At one point, at the unveiling of a new street sign officially renaming an intersection “Simon Nkoli Corner”, he is honoured by fireworks, large photographs and a banner that runs the length of one building as Amnesty International and rainbow flags are flown with prominence. This Amnesty International iconography also references an earlier point in the documentary during Nkoli’s imprisonment in which several letters from the international rights organisation
concerning Nkoli are overlaid onto one another, thus linking Nkoli’s imprisonment to contemporary global rights advocacy. These concluding scenes of the documentary acknowledge the centrality of Nkoli in refashioning the relationship between homophobia and racism, and articulating new ways of inhabiting the global human rights discourses that are simultaneously inclusive and localised. Through juxtaposition, then, the documentary provides a type of cultural history of GLOW that transforms the global movement of affect, aesthetics, and identity politics into constitutive roots of local sexual cultures as it articulates a broad-based understanding of human rights and solidarity.

The period between these pride marches is shown in the film to have been a challenging time of advocacy and solidarity-building as the activists worked tirelessly to ensure the retention of sexual orientation as a protected category in the Constitution’s equality clause. Ditsie’s narration introduces the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE), the lead lobbying collective who worked with GLOW and others for sexual rights. Ditsie narrates further that despite some opposition or intransigence from some government officials, the coalition was making progress in advancing a sexual rights culture. Ditsie then juxtaposes this political advocacy with the fact that she “started to join Simon on his overseas trips” to meet with other activists and organisations around the world. This is accompanied by a still image of Ditsie in a Philadelphia newspaper (under the headline “Soweto lesbian activist visits Philadelphia”) and another of Nkoli visiting the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force. These scenes and images of Nkoli and Ditsie resist the suggestion that sexual cultural flows move singularly from the United States to the Global South. Instead, they invert this assumption by depicting the reciprocal movement of people and local rights discourses from Soweto to the United States.

Significantly, this brief history about the local solidarity-building and lobbying is interrupted by the inclusion of a scene from Ditsie’s participation in the reality television show in which several people were to share a house for six months. The inclusion of this original footage disrupts the easy optimism of the transition and the sense of inevitability about sexual rights. The show reveals the depth of homophobia in society and reminds viewers of the difficulties that activists would face. One resident tells Ditsie that he wants to avoid being around her because of his contempt for same-sex
sexualities. He says: “I used to beat up gays, because as far as I'm concerned they don't belong on earth [...]. They're wrong. They're naturally screwed up”. Another one of the residents adds that he “personally feel[s] that being homosexual is [...] mentally retarded”. Ditsie responds to this by arguing that social exclusion on the basis of sexuality relies on the same logic as racism. She angrily asks:

> How many times have we black people been walking into places and been looked at strangely? [interjection] No, look, it's exactly the same thing. [...] You walk into a place and you get looked at strangely. People look down on you, just because of the colour of your skin. It's been happening [for] generations and generations all over the fucking world. Right. And now I'm going to say something and he's going to look at me strangely and act strangely and I must accept that?

The indivisibility of rights (which is a logical corollary of the overlapping complicity of these discriminations) is used at this point in the documentary to counter the attempts by some to construct a particularly heteronormative form of constitutional statehood. Cameron (2011: 12) explains the intersecting positionalities of victimisation and social exclusion further when he says that “we were able to ride the liberation wave. The wave that turned its back on discrimination, oppression and stigma, and said, yes, everyone, everyone, ‘even sexual orientation’, it was the even sexual orientation wave that carried us home with the new Constitution”. The inclusion of the qualifier “even” in Cameron’s formulation of “even sexual orientation” is incisive and revealing about the place of sexuality in the transition: while homophobia was increasingly recognised as another form of apartheid’s state-sanctioned discrimination and victimisation, this recognition remained precarious.

Though Ditsie notes that public homophobia escalated as the constitutional negotiations were coming to an end, the adoption of the Constitution is marked as a moment of celebration in the film. The signing of the Constitution is accompanied by celebratory scenes in the streets, waving of the national flag, and ululation, and it reframes the constitutional protection of sexual rights as being constitutive of nation-building. Mandela is featured in an archived video clip reading a prepared speech to mark the signing of the Constitution. He says: “They speak of a constitutional, democratic political order in which regardless of colour, gender, religion, political opinion, or sexual orientation the law will provide for the equal protection of all our citizens”. The inclusion of the category ‘sexual orientation’ not only in the Constitution but also in this speech marks the culmination of many years of both race and sexuality
being co-articulated as innate characteristics that should drive the political rhetoric of equality. It is significant that parts of Mandela’s speech are used as voiceover as different newspaper headlines are overlaid onto a faint image of two men kissing. These headlines demonstrate actual progressive legal or political shifts that have followed on from this inclusive political moment such as equal adoption rights and the opening up of the armed forces to the LGBT communities. Ditsie reflects on this, embracing the biopolitical protection and production of constitutional subjects: “We were accepted by our government. Actually our government. The people that […] rule, and make the rules said you are okay. Nobody should touch you”.

Though the film documents the flow of global human rights discourses, and their transformation and rootedness within the language of the antiapartheid movement, it also highlights the competing transnational imaginaries that fight back against these circulations. The film portrays Africanist and Christian heteronormativity as parallel discursive apparatuses that produce exclusionary publics. In the documentary, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe functions metonymically as the mouthpiece for homophobic assertions that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican. The first articulation of his homophobic views is drawn from archived news footage from his infamous speech at the International Book Fair in 1995 in which he stated that “[i]f we accept homosexuality as a right as is being argued by the Association of Sodomists and Sexual Perverts, what moral fibre shall our society ever have to deny organised drug addicts or even those given to bestiality?” Though his views are initially encoded within discourses of social deviance and moral depravity, his arguments are extended later in the documentary when he frames same-sex sexualities within notions of neo-colonial contamination and unforgivable foreignness: “Let them be gay in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere. They shall be sad people here”. These speeches are juxtaposed in the documentary with Mugabe’s official state visit to the country and a tension is thereby staged between different understandings of statehood and citizenship.

Though the documentary reveals the importance of an imagined African authenticity in the transnational production of homophobia, it also subverts the logic of this claim. Mugabe’s assertion that gays and lesbians are not only foreign and unAfrican but also “sad people” is contrasted by the visuals that directly follow it in which an upbeat and
self-assured Nkoli appears in a protest march insisting on a positive, celebratory black, gay visibility. Nkoli confronts Mugabe's claims directly when he says that “[t]oday we are here to show the world that […] we are here and we’re African and we’re gay”. The documentary further undermines essentialist notions of authentic African heterosexuality, embodied here by Mugabe, through several protestor’s placards. Through the democratisation of visual culture, these placards illustrate that Mugabe’s homophobia and discourses of unAfricanness are foreign to South Africa’s official discourses of equality and human rights. For instance, an older white woman holds up a sign that reads “Mugabe Beware: You are entering an equal rights zone”. It is Mugabe and his ideas that appear to be foreign and incompatible rather than the same-sex sexualities to which his vitriol refers. This point is made even more dramatically in the documentary through the visual of a placard, being held by two men kissing, which compares Mugabe’s crackdown on human rights to that of Hitler – marking homophobia as a transcultural site of despotism rather than a noble defence against colonial influence. What is more, the film also juxtaposes the contrasting political imaginaries of Mugabe and Mandela when, during the protest at Mugabe’s visit, a man holds a sign declaring “No Gay Rights = Apartheid”, while wearing a shirt that reads “Mandela for World President”. The textual juxtaposition here again connects state-sanctioned discrimination against homosexuals with the near universally reviled regime, while invoking Mandela as the antithesis of both. As we have seen during footage of the pride marches, the transnational sexual rights agenda is inhabited here by a different sort of political aesthetic, predicated on cultures of constitutionalism and opposition to discrimination which become embodied in the figure of Mandela.

Despite this complex encounter between racism and heteronormativity, the City Press’s (2002: 23) review of the film says that “[i]t is widely agreed that the greatest achievement of the documentary is to highlight the fact that Nkoli was a visionary who could clearly see the urgent need for the African community to accept its gay and lesbian sons and daughters […].” What is most problematic about this review is that it inadvertently reproduces the very relationality that Nkoli criticises by centring homophobia among black people and failing to engage the structural racism in the local gay rights movement or transnational faith systems. While this review disproportionately tasks the seemingly monolithic “African community” to embrace its
“gay and lesbian sons and daughters”, the white gay community and conservative homophobic Christians are absolved of responsibility.

Transnational homophobic Christian discourses are also depicted as being stubbornly relentless in their opposition to same-sex sexualities. Not only do Christian protestors picket the route of the pride marches promising eternal damnation, but one priest is reported to have appeared on television calling for the pride participants to be killed. What is interesting about how conservative Christianity circulates through this text, however, is the way in which the religion is linked by most of its adherents to notions of statehood – which perhaps is not surprising given the centrality of fundamentalist Christian Nationalism in the history of apartheid (Giliomee 2003). Initially, while final preparations are being made for the march, one man stands with his hands in pocket and delivers what is clearly a list of tired injunctions: “Homosexuality is a sin against God. Homosexuality is a curse on the nation. Homosexuality leads to eternity in hell”. This man’s dire threats are cut with a scene showing a smiling and energetic Nkoli as he enthuses a jovial crowd with a loudhailer. Similarly, another spectator on the street declares “They have no right really to do this, you know. Because we, as Christians, believe it is a big sin”. In both these instances, the public visibility of same-sex sexualities challenges the forms of nationhood predicated on Christianity and heterosexuality. The “we” in the second instance is powerfully suggestive of what Sachs (1990) famously called “the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination”; the collective pronoun reveals that the country was still being singularly imagined as Christian at its constitutive core. Similarly, interspersed with discussions about the constitutional negotiations, a Baptist Minister says: “We are here today because we believe it’s a blatant sin that not only defiles a person but defiles a nation. And because of that cause God will withdraw his blessing from a country”. Same-sex sexuality is imagined as being a threat to the postapartheid state. That he delivers this statement in a strong American accent – as does another religious proselytiser at the end of the film – with clichéd posters in the background proclaiming “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”, shows that heteronormativity has its own transnational circulations that interact with local anxieties about postapartheid nationalism. Homophobia, then, is revealed to be both transnational and rooted, contemporary and deeply historical.
The documentary is also, in many ways, animated by the frictional encounter between these competing transnational imaginaries and their local attachments. It reveals how the intersection of Christianity and same-sex sexualities generates ambiguous and contradictory cultural meaning. In one instance, during one man’s dire proselytising during the first pride march, a thin, lonely, and seemingly vulnerable figure is seen wearing a bag on his head to conceal his face while he carries a sign in Afrikaans that reads “God het almal lief” [God loves everybody], with the word “almal” [everybody] underlined for emphasis. The footage juxtaposes this man’s deeply personal interpretation of his faith with the celebratory aesthetics of pride. What is more, however, the documentary rearticulates same-sex sexuality in the language of Afrikaans cultural politics. Afrikaans was historically marked as the language of conservativism and racist oppression. The emphasis on “almal” in his sign connects the pride march to the history of cultural oppression at the same time as it opens up new constituencies of same-sex public cultures. In the final moments of the film, during the pride march in 1999, a near-naked man painted fully in the colours of the rainbow flag is seen carrying a large, bright pink cross, again marking the transformation of globally circulating forms of identity politics and religion. Thus, even some of the exclusionary imaginaries are rearticulated in the film as inclusive. In one of the final scenes, set between footage of the vitriolic homophobia of Christian bystanders during the pride march in 1999, a black effeminate man, says to the camera: “They should come to our churches, and know, how we feel, and who we are, what we doing, and what we don’t do, as gay Christians”. What complicates this image further is the fact that he is wearing a leopard-print top and an ethnic necklace, and has braided hair. This figure’s traditional African self-presentation (including his clothing and his articulation of distinctly indigenised hair politics) and his defence of Christianity further complicate ways of reading religious cultural flows. He embodies how the local encounter between transnational global imaginaries produces what Tsing (2005: 3) calls “persistent but unpredictable effects of global encounters across difference”.

The frictional encounter between these disparate transnational imaginaries and their local attachments challenge Trengrove-Jones’s (2005) assertion that the inclusion of sexual rights in the constitution was inevitable. Rather, the early 1990s saw the intensification of some cultural circulations and the indigenisation of others. Ditsie and
Newman’s representation of these competing cultural flows also disrupts Mutua’s assertion about the production of human rights in South Africa:

[T]he dramatic rebirth of the South African state, marked by the 1994 democratic elections, is arguably the most historic event in the human rights movement since its emergence some fifty years ago. Never has the recreation of a state been so singularly the product of such focused and relentless advocacy of human rights norms. […] The construction of the post-apartheid state represents the first deliberate and calculated effort in history to craft a human rights state—a polity that is primarily animated by human rights norms. (Mutua 2002: 126)

While Mutua correctly observes the intense circulation of particular forms of rights and discourses about statehood that characterised the transitional period, he overlooks the friction that these cultural flows generated when they negotiated local attachments or encountered competing transnational discourses.

While for most of the film Ditsie and Nkoli articulate a shared sexual rights agenda in the language of universal human rights, there is one issue over which they disagree which ultimately ends their close friendship. Ditsie explains that she had a growing sense within GLOW that its male members were not concerned about the specific challenges faced by black, lesbian women. This sentiment resonates with similar concerns about the subordination of women's issues in favour of a male-centred sexual rights focus that can be traced back to the early activism and social organising in the United States (Jackson 2015: 33). The documentary relays the sense of apathy among most of GLOW’s male members about the sexual violence that black lesbian women were facing. Not only does Ditsie recount her own vulnerability, given the sexual violence she was threatened with after she appeared on a television news insert, but she also interviews other lesbian women who had been raped.

As part of her recurring frame narration that takes place on her couch, she explains how cultural codes of patriarchy and sexism become compounded by heteronormativity:

In terms of sexual violence and violence against women […], as soon as you’re anywhere, anywhere, you’ve got a dangerous element right there. You’re always looking out for yourself because anything could happen, any time, you know. Rape, being beat up, just being treated like shit […]. But coming out as a lesbian is even harder because then you are putting yourself in the firing line. Any angry man will use his machismo to try prove to you that you’re straight although he’s proving absolutely nothing because all he’s doing is actually raping you […].
In Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989: 140) iconic study of intersectionality, she cautions that “the intersectional experience [of black womanhood] is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”. Writing elsewhere, Crenshaw (1991: 1242) argues that “[i]n the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class”. Ditsie’s narration in the film expands this notion of intersectionality by emphasising how heteronormativity further marginalises vulnerable women, and how the risks faced by women are often overlooked in the articulation of gay rights activism. This intersectional reading of the complex positionalities of black, lesbian women during the transition reframes the documentary’s narrative and refuses the idealisation of constitutionalism that often co-circulates with sexuality in postapartheid South Africa.24

Despite Nkoli’s central role in the mobilisation across traditional axes of race and sexuality within transition-era politics, Ditsie exposes his wilful blindness to the uniquely intersectional experiences of black women, and of black lesbians in particular. After being invited to attend the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, she describes his lacklustre response: “He was asking what relevance is this. And for someone who talks non-sexist, non-racist, non-, non-, non-, for him to ask me that was very disappointing”. The film identifies Ditsie as the first openly lesbian women to address the UN. Ditsie, while wearing what one newspaper called “an African-print wrap-around skirt”, uses the inclusive political language that characterised the transition and argues for the indivisibility of human rights:

I urge you to make this a conference for all women, regardless of their sexual orientation, and to recognise in the platform for action that lesbian rights are women’s rights, and that women’s rights are universal, inalienable and indivisible human rights.

The representation in the documentary of Ditsie’s address to the UN reveals a transnational same-sex public that connects not only the supranational body to grassroots sexual rights organising, but also the corridors of power in Beijing to the streets of Johannesburg. Through the inclusion of foreign-language newspaper cut-outs, news clips and footage of Ditsie addressing a crowd in Johannesburg, her speech is shown to have linked, however tenuously and unevenly, the struggle for sexual and gender rights around the world. In this speech, Ditsie builds on the
widespread formulation of women’s rights as human rights, which was popularly constitutive of the conference’s Platform of Action (Goldberg & Moore 2012: 8). Though the conference concluded with widespread support for women’s rights in many sectors and societies, the bid to protect sexual orientation on a global platform was unsuccessful.²⁵ Thoreson (2014: 93) explains that:

Unlike *jus cogens* norms which met with widespread approval prior to their institutionalization in global human rights agreements, the protection of SOGI [persons with non-normative sexual orientations or gender identities] has often preceded, or been only tentatively grounded in, public opinion. The seeming specificity of SOGI has fostered the belief that LGBT persons demand ‘special rights’ or ‘new rights’, framings that have proven persuasive in debates in the North and South alike. By implication, the rhetoric of new or special rights contrasts LGBT rights with universal human rights, making it seem selfish or trivial for advocates to spend time, energy, and resources securing them.

However, Ditsie’s speech resists this idea of ‘special rights’ by simply proposing a slightly broader imagining of rights-bearing subjects. In other words, human rights as a transnational political form is inhabited at this conference by specific notions of womanhood, and Ditsie’s strategy appears not so much to be about demanding new forms of rights, but rather to contest the way in which the normative figure of woman is policed.

Though Ditsie is highly critical of the apathy among many gay men, especially in GLOW, to “what became big lesbian issues, like lesbian rape”, she reads the political apathy and the structural racisms and patriarchies of the major gay rights organisations through her personal relationship with Nkoli. She sings: “It aint working. It aint working. You and me, sweetheart, it aint worth it. And I’m sad to say and you’ve hurt me too much. It aint working. No, no, it aint worth it”. The documentary places footage of her speaking publicly to raise the profile of the specific vulnerabilities of black lesbian women alongside intimate photographs of Nkoli and Ditsie at earlier events. The evocative song lyrics that are repeatedly heard throughout these scenes link her feelings of political isolation and frustration to the end of her friendship with Nkoli. Global patterns of gendered exclusion within various sexual rights movements are rearticulated here as personal loss, leading the *City Press* (2002: 23) to describe the documentary’s depiction of their relationship as “tempestuous”. While Smith (2002) rightly describes Nkoli as “the sine qua non of the South African gay movement” in his review of the documentary, the film contests the strategic heroism that characterises
many representations of him over the course of a decade and highlights his failure to extend his own conceptualisation of intersectionality to incorporate women’s struggles. Whereas in Colman’s play, Nkoli righteously educates his co-accused about the importance of women’s rights, the documentary exposes his complicity in perpetuating a male-centred gay rights agenda.

During the 1990s, Nkoli also emerged as a symbol of AIDS activism and social justice, and marked the realignment of several of these competing transnational imaginaries. Through the temporally complex structure of the documentary, it is made clear that in addition to exploring Nkoli’s fame as a gay rights and antiapartheid activist, this is also a documentary about AIDS and its transnational attachments. The ampersand in the film’s title in the opening sequence appropriates the visual form of the international red AIDS ribbon, and Ditsie’s voiceover within the first few minutes also explains that that particular scene was “the last time Simon and I were together; he died of AIDS complications a week later”. Rather than being a site for pathology or moralism, however, AIDS is depicted as being yet another transnational mechanism for social exclusion and the production of otherness – analogous with racism, homophobia, and patriarchy. Since its emergence in the early 1980s, AIDS has been linked to the regulation of moral surety of transnational spaces (Patton 2000) – physical, geopolitical, and symbolic – and, later, the imposition of neo-imperial knowledges on sexual communities in the Global South (Epprecht 2013: 141, Tamale 2011b: 21; Broqua 2015: 67).

However, in contrast to these seemingly uneven cultural and capital flows, the documentary situates AIDS as the constitutive centre of a localised sexual politics. It links the AIDS crisis explicitly to both the antiapartheid movement and to the local organised sexual rights agenda. For instance, directly after narrating that Nkoli had been acquitted in the Delmas Treason Trial, Ditsie says: “But while Simon was in prison, he found out that he had another life sentence: HIV”. The threat of life imprisonment at the hands of the racist apartheid state is linked directly to his terminal illness. Similarly, directly after explaining that GLOW and other activists had been successful in securing sexual orientation as a protected category in the Constitution, Ditsie (over images of burials) states: “We had won the constitutional battle but the fight wasn’t over. An even bigger enemy was facing the country: AIDS”. Transnational
AIDS discourses are translated here into the local political idiom of the struggle, and into the concomitant anti-discrimination imperatives of Nkoli’s constituencies. Significantly, Nkoli twice explains that he has challenged the postapartheid government to respond proactively to the AIDS crisis, whimsically saying that “Fighting the national government: You know, I don’t know which government I’ve never fight with; the old one, and the new one I’m still fighting”.

This damning account of the postapartheid government marks the continuities between past and present state practices of social exclusion, co-articulating apartheid’s policing of black bodies with the ANC government’s marginalisation of HIV+ ones. Of course, the documentary does not equate the apartheid regime with the subsequent constitutional postapartheid state. Rather, it reads the AIDS public health crisis through the transnational language of human rights, and South Africa’s specific racist and homophobic histories of exclusion. As Yasmina Martin (2016: 21) poignantly writes in her analysis of Nkoli’s transnational AIDS legacy: “With his focus on visibility and willingness to risk being his whole self, Nkoli challenged single-issue advocacy and situated himself within his connecting oppressions in working towards the creation of a world he would never see”. Though Jeffrey Weeks (2015: 48) and Ann Cvetkovich (2003) argue that the AIDS health crisis reinvigorated a depoliticised gay and lesbian community in the United States and Britain, the documentary shows that this was not the case in South Africa. Instead, AIDS is shown to be integrated into the already vibrant human rights culture of the early 1990s, reinforcing local entanglements of transnational imaginaries and political forms.

Interestingly, despite his centrality as both an antiapartheid and later gay rights activist, the news coverage of Nkoli’s death, on the eve of World AIDS Day, emphasised his AIDS activism. The same is true of the coverage provided by the public broadcaster’s evening news bulletin, as well as that of The Sowetan newspaper (Molefe 1998: 8). The documentary’s representation of Nkoli’s funeral captures the depth and range of his multiple, overlapping subjectivities. Janet Smith (2007: 7) notes that at Nkoli’s memorial service in Johannesburg, “the national flag shared space with a Glow banner, the gay rainbow flag and the flag of Nkoli’s beloved Orlando Pirates”. These symbols are enriched further by the singing of Christian hymns, and many mourners’ shirts that depicted either GLOW or ANC imagery. The combination of the rainbow
flag draped over the coffin as it descends into the ground and a man wearing an ANC shirt featuring a large image of Mandela again signals the negotiation of a complex local sexual politics. The antiapartheid movement’s famous power-to-the-people refrain is used during Nkoli’s burial when mourners engage the dialogic mantra that invokes political solidarity and demands an end to oppression: “Amandla! Awethu!” [Power! To the people!]. This trope is similarly invoked when an unattributed voice declares that “Simon gave power to the people and he gave power especially to lesbians and gays” while Nkoli’s coffin is being carried out of the church. In doing so, Nkoli’s overlapping political commitments – against apartheid, for sexual rights, and for AIDS advocacy – are mapped onto and legitimised by the contemporary idealisation of the antiapartheid struggle.

Conclusion

These two texts provide us with more than simply a gay cultural history of this tumultuous period in the country’s past. Instead, they render intelligible the mobilities of several global cultural flows and offer evaluations of how their local negotiations and rootedness remain complex and restless. Both the play and the documentary trace the ways in which human rights discourses encounter other transnational imaginaries and form local attachments and constituencies. Though both Colman’s play and Ditsie and Newman’s documentary draw on archival histories, and both provide biographical accounts of the same person, the texts construct same-sex publics in vastly different ways. Revealing the overlaps between the didacticism of the protest theatre aesthetic and the hero-making apparatus of the antiapartheid movement, Nkoli in Colman’s play is a hero figure who becomes the spokesperson for an expansive human rights agenda. The play juxtaposes practices and forms of Western gay identity politics with competing notions grounded in patriarchy, Christianity, and African nationalism in such a way that we get an overly-wrought text that systematically works its way through and disavows the different discourses of heteronormativity. The didacticism of this not only erases the friction that such discursive encounters would generate but also deprives Nkoli of his complexity. Though Colman’s text is significant for both reinscribing a gay cultural history into discourses of the struggle, as well as for breaking the taboo on criticising the liberation struggle in postapartheid theatre (Maree 1998: 28), its didactic production of individual
heroism, rainbow nationalism, and an indivisible human rights discourse undermines its scope and potential.

The documentary, in contrast, provides a complex and layered picture of both Nkoli and of the production of same-sex public cultures through the local negotiation of several transnational circulations. Ditsie and Newman’s film reveals the friction that these restless encounters generate as they transform the global human rights project. Unlike the drama, the documentary acknowledges its own creative constructedness and offers a reading of Nkoli that is always already limited and incomplete. Though some significant parts of the documentary have been criticised for their fragmented and informal style (Vasquez & Sloan n.d.), it is this fragmentation and partial narrative frame that give the interactions between Nkoli and Ditsie – loaded as they are with loss, regret, and a rekindled intimacy – their raw immediacy and roughly sewn aesthetic. It is also the intersecting temporal contexts of the film, its crossings and circulations, its juxtapositions and contrasts that complicate histories of local sexual rights organising. These shifting temporalities reflect the fraught and contested place of sexuality within the antiapartheid movement, and the transitional decade of the 1990s – reminding us that progressive gay rights and cultures of constitutionalism were neither obvious nor inevitable. Gerald Kraak argues that the recognition of “the indivisibility of human rights” (2005: 119) by the liberation movement and the retention of the equality clause in the final constitution was a “miracle” that depended on “the actions of a few brave individuals who had the foresight to seize the historical moment” (133). Paradoxically, while both texts emphasise the historical centrality of Nkoli, they also make visible several precarious and uneven cultural flows through which the local same-sex public cultures are constituted.

Notes

1 See Hoad (2005: 20) for a discussion of the legal basis of this trial.
2 While the play was first performed in 2003, it was only formally published in 2013 and subsequent in-text references will reflect the date and pagination of its publication.
3 Mutua (2002: 137) also critically interrogates the ways in which rights-based discourses tend to entrench economic privilege and resist the type of transformation that was necessary after apartheid. Thoreson (2014: 113) is concerned about the conventional language of human rights as this often emphasises violations enacted by the state, despite the fact that many of the challenges and dangers faced by local LGBT constituencies emanate from non-state actors.
4 The US Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was adopted in 1789.
The League of Nations was a precursor to the United Nations, but it lacked the global reach of the latter organisation.

As a parallel and interrelated process in the 1960s and 1970s, early pan-African human rights discourses emerged from within the African independence movements. Frans Viljoen (2001), in his analysis of Africa’s contribution to international human rights law, writes that African countries were instrumental in the infusion of antiracism into human rights discourses and conventions at the UN in the 1960s, as well as the development of more expansive rights regimes to protect children, women, refugees, and the environment. Viljoen also observes that the development of indigenised human rights discourses in Africa insisted on the equal recognition of first generation political rights and second generation socio-economic rights. This ideological position emphasises the indivisibility of rights, an ideological discourse that would shape the sexual rights movement in South Africa. The language of human rights functions, then, as a rhetorical strategy that forges different transnational strategic attachments for different constituencies.

There have been several significant developments, including the adoption in 2011 of a sexual rights charter by the body’s Human Rights Council, and the insistence in 2012 of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon that the UDHR should extend to include sexual rights (Paternotte & Seckinelgin 2015: 209-210).

ILGA was originally known as the International Gay Association (IGA) until it changed its name to the International Lesbian and Gay Association in 1986 (Rydstöm 2005: 34) to reflect its broadening scope and membership. The important advocacy and support work that ILGA undertook was later supported by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), as well as in the subsequently expanded mandates of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Thoreson 2014). Thoreson (2014), in his detailed analysis of a transnational LGBT rights organisation and its partners, insists on the heterogeneity of transnational LGBT rights organisations, as they have different strategies, priorities, relationships with local partners, and investments in identity politics.

Several other gay and lesbian rights organisations were formed during the 1980s, including the Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians, ABIGALE (Tucker 2010: 446), the Rand Gay Organisation (Gunkel 2010: 66), and the Congress of Pink Democrats (Rydstöm 2005: 42). OLGA, in particular, would continue to have influence into the 1990s.

In addition to the ANC, similarly homophobic views were also held by other constituencies in the liberation movement, including the United Democratic Front (Hoad 2007: 78), the Azanian People’s Organisation, and the Pan-Africanist Congress (Gevisser 1994: 71).

Mutua (2002: 133-34) points out that while rights and protections on the basis of sexual orientation were absent from both the ANC’s 1989 and 1990 constitutional guideline documents, they were included in a revised draft bill of rights released by the party in 1992.

Of course, the antiapartheid movement is not reducible to the ANC. Colman’s play makes the point clearly when the organised antiapartheid movement is only signified through groups associated with the ANC, including the Vaal Civil Organisation, the Azanian People’s Organisation, and the United Democratic Front.

A two-hander play is a work of theatre that is performed by only two actors.

Though the famous Delmas Treason Trialists comprised 22 men, Nkoll’s co-accused have been collapsed in the play into a single character, Madoda. Despite Munro’s (2012: 273) speculation that Madoda could be a thinly-veiled Mosiuoa Lekota – a reading that inadvertently displaces the centrality of Nkoli in the drama – Colman (in Sichel 2003) insists that Madoda is a fictional character.

Though the play constructs Ron as a thinly-veiled Roy Shepherd, there are slippages in the text and ‘Ron’ and ‘Roy’ are used interchangeably. I will use whichever name appears in the text of the play itself.

Van Graan (2006) stresses, however, that there is a place for protest theatre in postapartheid South Africa.

A few examples of this public profile include specific protests, the depiction of Nkoli and his imprisonment in various print media forms (including a local publication, Exit), as well as in John Greyson’s documentary A Moffie Called Simon (Munro 2012: 62). Gevisser (1999) also observes that “[t]here is a Simon Nkoli street in Amsterdam [and] a Simon Nkoli Day in San Francisco. He has an international name recognition few other South Africans share”.

Quotes from the documentary have been transcribed by me.
While there have been aesthetic revisions over time, the rainbow flag has come to symbolise the positive refashioning of LGBTI sexual identities since it was first introduced at the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade in 1978 (Seahorn 2010: 218).

Cultural forms of same-sex visibility can never be dislodged from the political when they take form in the heteronormative contexts of the everyday, even if those cultural forms are not orientated towards the left. I therefore use the term ‘depoliticised’ to mark the absence of an explicit ideological and political agenda.

Natalie Oswin (2007: 650), however, argues that the NCGLE was seen as “elitist, unrepresentative, and male dominated” and she critically notes the organisation’s insistence on professional lobbying rather than the grassroots organising and mass protests of the 1980s. Croucher (2002: 329), on the other hand, argues that the NCGLE board was broadly representative of gender and race.

Mutua (2002: 130) distinguishes between states that have gradually reformed themselves to increasingly respect political and other rights and a “human rights state, [which] by contrast, is a term coined here to describe an aspiration – an ideal state that would be constructed from close adherence to the prescriptions of the human rights corpus”.

Despite the very real political currency of tropes of victimhood and vulnerability as representational frames for black lesbian lives, it is not without costs, a point that I explore further in my reading of Zanele Muholi’s photography in Chapter 3.

David Paternotte and Hakan Seckinelgin (2015: 214) point out that the words ‘lesbian’, ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘sexual rights’ were removed from the final text that was adopted at the conference. Instead, they add, the relevant section of the agreement ultimately stated that: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence”.

Martin (2016) reports that Nkoli also started developing transnational AIDS networks even in the 1980s while in prison.

Achmat (2005: 169) points out that the apartheid government was similarly apathetic about AIDS: “the National Party government neglected gay men and black people in the HIV/AIDS epidemic”.

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20 While there have been aesthetic revisions over time, the rainbow flag has come to symbolise the positive refashioning of LGBTI sexual identities since it was first introduced at the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade in 1978 (Seahorn 2010: 218).
21 Cultural forms of same-sex visibility can never be dislodged from the political when they take form in the heteronormative contexts of the everyday, even if those cultural forms are not orientated towards the left. I therefore use the term ‘depoliticised’ to mark the absence of an explicit ideological and political agenda.
22 Natalie Oswin (2007: 650), however, argues that the NCGLE was seen as “elitist, unrepresentative, and male dominated” and she critically notes the organisation’s insistence on professional lobbying rather than the grassroots organising and mass protests of the 1980s. Croucher (2002: 329), on the other hand, argues that the NCGLE board was broadly representative of gender and race.
23 Mutua (2002: 130) distinguishes between states that have gradually reformed themselves to increasingly respect political and other rights and a “human rights state, [which] by contrast, is a term coined here to describe an aspiration – an ideal state that would be constructed from close adherence to the prescriptions of the human rights corpus”.
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CHAPTER 2: WHITE GAY IMAGINARIES AND THE POLITICS OF ASSIMILATION

There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception. (Dyer 1997: 12)

Gevisser and Cameron (1994: 3) reflect on the dominant representations of non-heteronormative sexualities in South Africa during apartheid and argue that “[w]hat has passed for ‘the gay experience’ has often been that of white, middle-class urban men”. Rather than being isolated in time and space, however, this representational mode is tied to a seemingly invisible transnational network of cultural flows that create separate, though inter-connected, spaces of normative whiteness. These cultural flows circulate certain imageries about race and the imagined communities that they circumscribe. Perhaps the most enduring of these imagined gay communities is that populated by the figure of the white, middle-class gay man who downplays sexual difference and is characterised by an assimilationist aesthetic. However, despite the assumed homogeneity on which this imagined community depends, this figure remains rather nebulous, despite its resilience, and is inhabited differently in local contexts.

The mobile form of an imagined gay community moves across borders along the historical and contemporary routes of transnational whiteness, enforcing new discursive regimes of sameness and enacting new forms of exclusion. Though this imagined gay community has located itself firmly within the assimilationist aesthetic and within the ideological norms that have historically been tied to the cultural capital of whiteness, they are not homogenous. Ruth Frankenberg (1997: 13) writes that whiteness “turns out on closer inspection to be more about the power to include and exclude groups and individuals than about the actual practices of those who are to be let in or kept out”. The production and circulation of gay, white imaginaries depend, then, on “separating the good queers from the bad” (Puar 2001: 175), however this axis might be populated. As I will discuss, whiteness is not only the custodian of the normative in South African public discourse, but it also marks the mobility of transnational figurations of what Duggan (2002) imagines as the “homonormative” gay citizen – implicitly ‘respectable’, middle-class, cisgendered,¹ and white. I argue that the cultural capital of local and transnational whiteness tends to camouflage (Bérubé
the otherness of same-sex sexualities and facilitates conditional assimilation into a normative centre.

Though same-sex sexualities obviously inhabit a range of representational forms, I am interested here in one particular hegemonic configuration of same-sex sexuality that moves along the circuits of transnational whiteness. In this chapter, I argue that selected postapartheid cultural texts circulate these white transnational, gay imaginaries at the same time as they expose their constructedness and their constitutive exclusions. It is, after all, only through the policing of the borders of the supposedly ‘good gay’, seemingly unmarked by race or history, that myths of an imagined gay community can be sustained. Whereas in the previous chapter, I focused on how postapartheid same-sex political cultures took root within inclusive discourses of antiapartheid activism and racial equality, this chapter traces an opposing process through which forms of same-sex publics depend on highly exclusionary practices through which imagined gay communities are constituted in the visual register of whiteness. It is whiteness, after all, “the privileged signifier” (hooks 1992: 167), that has immense power in postapartheid textual circulations as it defines the norm and articulates an assimilationist aesthetic through which the otherness of same-sex sexualities can be camouflaged. Focusing particularly on *Gay Pages*, a quarterly magazine series, as well as *The Reluctant Passenger* (2003) and *Lost Ground* (2011) by Michiel Heyns, I contend that each text presents a distinct site for the negotiation of meaning and is marked by different aesthetic and ideological emphases, and enacts its own forms of exclusion.

*Gay Pages*, for instance, circulates a gay identity that emphasises leisure and consumption, essentialist ideals of normative masculinity as athletic and rugged, and a policing of visible whiteness. As a normative structure, the cultural hegemony of whiteness in the magazine is shown not only to delineate what is normal and abnormal, moral and immoral, acceptable and unacceptable, but also to provide an aspirational form of gay identity. While Heyns’s comedic novel, *The Reluctant Passenger*, provides a more expansive reflection on same-sex sexualities as it explores several ways of inhabiting the assimilationist form, it also reminds us about the centrality of whiteness as a mechanism of social inclusion. As my analysis will show, this novel also disarticulates claims that the sanitisation or desexualisation of same-sex sexual...
cultures is a requirement for assimilation into an imagined normative centre. Finally, Heyns’s *Lost Ground* reveals the subtle ways in which the invisible normative power of whiteness and essentialist masculinities are regulated through the marking of racial otherness and the contemptuous exclusion of effeminacy and a camp aesthetic. The internal logic of the novel’s erotic subtext also points to the way in which desire and intimacy can operate outside of the reach of gay identity politics, marking a mode of assimilation whose complexity belies the stable moulds of sexual difference. While the texts that I analyse here are vastly different in substance and style, they all articulate whiteness as a normalising discourse through which sexual otherness can be downplayed and through which assimilation can be imagined, thereby emphasising the overlapping aesthetic and normative continuities between imagined heterosexual and homosexual subjects. What is more, though *Gay Pages* appears wilfully blind to the operations of race and social exclusion, both *The Reluctant Passenger* and *Lost Ground* expose the deep-rooted raciology of the postapartheid cultural landscape, albeit with different effects. I am interested in the simultaneous textual practices of racial exclusion and normative assimilation, and the connectedness of these practices to transnational gay imaginaries. While these novels and the magazine might gesture to heteronormativity (sometimes rather playfully), they do so in a way that seeks to integrate men who have sex with men into existing power structures and ameliorate difference rather than confront heteronormativity with any overt militancy or activism.

Finally, the notion of a white, gay imaginary is a complex one. As both racial and sexual identities are cultural constructs rather than biological facts, this chapter is not about rigid classifications but is rather about privileged modes of representation. This is a study of how the cultural codes of whiteness and same-sex sexualities overlap to produce a particular representational trope that lies at the centre of an imagined transnational gay community. Richard Dyer (1997: 1) writes that “since race in itself – insofar as it is anything in itself – refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographic/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play”. Similarly, it is the imagery through which ‘the global gay’ is constituted and circulated that is relevant, rather than the ways in which individuals self-identify. While many men who have sex with men may disavow the term gay, whiteness also signifies in restless ways and “can be at the same time a taken-for-granted entitlement, a desired social status, a perceived source of victimization and a tenuous situational
identity” (Twine & Gallagher 2008: 7). There is, therefore, an important distinction to be made between people culturally coded as white on the one hand, and whiteness as a privileged representational mode on the other. John Hartigan (1997: 180) argues that “[w]hile whiteness may be fixed as a unified or unifying phenomenon when regarded ideologically at the national level, ‘on the ground’ that unity quickly becomes illusory”. As Sarah Nuttall (2001: 135) asserts, “[a]lthough the ‘white condition’ is not so fluid as to detach it from power, privilege, and oppression, the experience of Africans of European origin is a contingent and situated identity”. In other words, recognising race as a constructed cultural category does not erase the structural, economic, symbolic, and discursive privileges that have accrued, and continue to accrue, to those coded as white in the postapartheid context. As my reading of the magazine and the novels will show, race can also not be overlooked in the ways in which transnational gay imaginaries circulate. Resistant to essentialist readings of whiteness or indeed of ‘being white’, this chapter is not imposing a uniform whiteness in South Africa, nor is it asserting the monolithic figure of the white South African. Rather, the chapter traces the way in which whiteness functions as a symbolic and cultural discourse of power in shaping the way in which different texts construct local instantiations of transnational white, gay imaginaries. In other words, it is the imagery of race and sexual identity and the circulation of specific aesthetic forms that implicate one in an imagined gay community, rather than one’s active acceptance of those identity forms. Finally, though, of course, whiteness also works with female same-sex sexualities in interesting ways – as Bennett’s (2008) and David Medalie’s (2010) short stories suggest – this chapter focuses exclusively on how distinctly male same-sex publics are produced and circulated through particular configurations of race.3

Transnational whiteness and the aesthetics of assimilation

Though institutionalised structures of whiteness took on localised forms during apartheid that depended on and perpetuated essentialist myths of racial supremacy, whiteness at its core remains a transnational discourse of power, normativity, and reciprocal practices of inclusion and exclusion. Whiteness is imbricated in historically expansive routes of global white supremacism that stubbornly took root in colonial, apartheid, and postapartheid social formations. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Maryrose Casey, and Fiona Nicoll (2008: x) define whiteness as “a transnational process of
racialization, which exceeds containment within fixed boundaries of identity and
nation, reinscribing social hierarchies through national imaginaries and their transgression”. Moving through circuits of colonial power, whiteness constantly reproduced colonial knowledges about non-white bodies and codified them through scientific and institutional means. As whiteness moved, it interacted with local contexts and agents, authorising the control and decimation of indigenous bodies, as well as the dispossession of land, in different ways in different parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. It co-circulated with the transoceanic slave trades that took different routes through the Indian and Atlantic oceans, and enacted various brutalities and practices of othering in new territories. And, as whiteness took root amidst the local epistemologies that it encountered, it drove the representational reproduction of tropes of selfhood and otherness, securing for itself the privileged term in the binary as the unmarked norm. “Whiteness colonizes the definition of the normal”, writes T. Muraleedharan (1997: 61), “and subsequently achieves a complete disavowal of ethnic categorization”.

Though in no way suggesting an unbroken continuity with the past, I am interested in the transnational reach and resilience of whiteness as a system of privilege and its mechanisms of regulating social inclusion and exclusion. Of course, manifestly violent practices such as forced labour migration, proxy colonial governments, militaristic expansion, and biopolitical administration of race have, to a large extent, been supplanted by a more insidious global network through which transnational whiteness is produced and transformed: representation. Appadurai (2007: 219) emphasises that the production and global circulation of particular visual and narrative representations are central to imagining contemporary transnational architectures of power that complicate centre-periphery binaries. What I am arguing in this chapter, however, is that despite contested forms of global power, whiteness continues to shape much of what Appadurai (2007: 219) calls the transnational “landscape of images”, rooting itself in local media forms in insidious and often unacknowledged ways.

Though South Africa’s complex racialised history has produced an economy that is one of the most unequal in the world and where white privilege takes extensive material and financial forms, it has also produced a cultural architecture in which whiteness continues to function as a privileged way of both speaking and being heard.
Birgit Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene Nexica, and Matt Wray (2001: 10) argue that “whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world”. Dyer (1988: 44) remarks that the difficulty in analysing whiteness as a category is, in part, “because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular”. My focus in this chapter is on how this largely unacknowledged normative power of whiteness works to conceal the otherness of (white) same-sex sexualities, as practices of racial inclusion are shown to outweigh those of heteronormative exclusion. While this reflects a radical refashioning of whiteness as it moves away from the apartheid era in which heteronormativity was in fact constitutive of white Christian Nationalism (Giliomee 2003), it also points to the continuation in the present of the racially exclusionary practices of certain white-dominated gay and lesbian organisations during that same period.

In Ryan Murphy’s *The Normal Heart* (2014), a film adaption of Larry Kramer’s play of the same name, a conversation between the protagonist and his friend illustrates the ways in which whiteness co-circulates with the norm. In response to one character’s statement that “You don’t look that Jewish”, the protagonist immediately replies by saying: “And you don’t look gay, so I guess we can both pass for white people”. This deceptively simple dialogue exposes how whiteness and the ‘normal’ are, in many ways, mutually-defining. It also reminds us of the malleability of the category ‘white’ as a racial identity as it links the historical exclusion of Jews from the categories of normative whiteness to the more contemporary exclusion of some same-sex sexualities from the body politic. The protagonist is also sardonically pointing out how same-sex assimilationist strategies are part of a longer history in which ethnic, religious and immigrant communities downplayed difference, however this might be configured, in order to be accepted within the normative centre.

Though I read whiteness as “a normative structure, a discourse of power, and a form of identity” (Ware & Back 2002: 13), it is also a transnational circuit for both the production and movement of particular representational tropes about sexuality. The production of white, gay imaginaries projects a form of assimilationist politics. Ken Plummer (2015: 348) suggests that the central fault-line that runs through twentieth and twenty-first century sexual politics divides “assimilationists who want ‘same sex
relations' to be simply accepted and brought into the mainstream of society; and the radicals who want the radical restructuring of society” and its sociological structures and biopolitical norms. Warner (2000: 66), in *The Trouble with Normal*, distinguishes between the ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ ways of occupying non-heteronormative sexual spaces:

Those whose sex is least threatening, along with those whose gender profiles seem least queer, are put forward as the good and acceptable face of the movement. These, inevitably, are the ones who are staying home, making dinner for their boyfriends, for whom being gay means reading *Newsweek*.

Warner distinguishes these so-called assimilationists from “[t]he others”:

[T]he queers who have sex in public toilets, who don’t ‘come out’ as happily gay, the sex workers, the lesbians who are too vocal about a taste for dildos or S/M, the boys who flaunt it as pansies or as leathermen, the androgynes, the trannies or transgendered whose gender deviance makes them unassimilable to the menu of sexual orientations, the clones in the so-called gay ghetto, the fist-fuckers and poppers-snorters, the ones who actually like pornography […].

Duggan (2002) uses the term “homonormativity” to refer to a normalising disciplinary regime that regulates how ‘acceptable’ same-sex sexualities are represented. Homonormativity, according to Duggan (179), is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”. In other words, this homonormative subject downplays sexual difference, rejects effeminate and camp aesthetics, prefers assimilation to activism, and middle-class consumption to ideological conflict. He (and yes, he is implicitly male) emphasises aspirational images of wealthy gay men and deploys the visual and cultural codes of normalcy and respectability in order to assimilate into a national body politic. Duggan’s criticism of homonormativity also reveals her concerns that sexual rights activism will be limited to the drive to open up certain normative social institutions, and will reject a more radical intersectional politics about social justice and a diversity of non-normative erotic bodies. She dismissively writes that homonormativity has “administered a kind of political sedative – we get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever” (189). Though military service for ‘homosexuals’ was a priority in the United States, same-sex marriage is a hallmark of sexual rights movements around the world.
Although Duggan’s and Warner’s conceptual approaches provide a useful way of thinking about a certain ideological form, they also tend to presuppose an essentialist queer oppositional subject whose ‘true nature’ is suppressed by a compulsory impulse to conform. Gavin Brown (2012) is critical of the language of homonormativity, in part because it suggests an “all-encompassing” homogenous force that over-determines people’s lives and undermines the agency of “ordinary” same-sex subjectivities. In this chapter, therefore, I focus rather on the assimilationist aesthetics that, while drawing on Duggan’s homonormative figure, emphasise the politics of representation rather than of essentialist subjects. I also emphasise the restlessness of this rather nebulous aesthetic form that is inhabited differently in different texts. Though this assimilationist aesthetic does not only move along normative cultural codes of whiteness – as Michael Johnson (2010) and Altman (1997) argue in relation to the construction of sexual identities among African American and Asian communities, respectively – the unmarked, normative invisibility of whiteness is certainly the dominant constitutive assimilationist trope in these cultural texts. The white, gay imaginaries that are circulated through the magazine and the novels are characterised by this assimilationist aesthetic, albeit with different images, emphases, and exclusions.

Though the assimilationist aesthetic is textually constructed and has its own visual codes, it also depends on the erasure of visual tropes, strategies, priorities, practices, and forms of identity that fall outside the scope of an imagined ‘respectable’, middle-class whiteness. Hartigan (1997: 180) writes that “there is a shifting series of domains (local, regional, national, transnational) across which whiteness materializes according to distinct centers of significance, assimilating or effacing a varying array of internal differences, and projecting or excluding a host of corporal others” (my emphasis). Thus, the production and circulation of whiteness depends as much on the assimilation or erasure of “internal differences” as it does on practices of exclusion. It is not a coincidence, therefore, as I will discuss, that the whiteness that assimilates same-sex sexualities depends on the simultaneous policing and exclusion of bodies that are not culturally coded as white, masculine, and middle-class. What Hartigan (1997: 180) also points to is that whiteness, as a means of privileged signification, is “inhabited” differently in local sites as it negotiates transnational normative forms and the local contexts in which it moves and is reproduced. While the magazine and the
novels circulate the idea of a white, gay imaginary, they also expose the practices of exclusion on which these assimilationist aesthetics rely.

These texts are located within the imagined (white) gay community that has been circulated through American and European media forms – circulations that create a transnational network of whiteness through which particular assimilationist aesthetics dominate. Visual media that circulate these images of white middle-class, gay men include *Will & Grace, Queer as Folk, Gossip Girl, Days of our Lives, The Fixer, Glee, Brokeback Mountain, American Beauty, The Hours, Four Weddings and a Funeral, The Normal Heart, Saved, Cloud Atlas*, and countless others. Similarly, news coverage of the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Ireland and the United States circulate with images of predominantly white men, as do news stories about individuals coming out such as Will Young, Neil Patrick Harris, Elton John, Alan Cumming, Rupert Everett, Adam Lambert, Lance Bass, Ricky Martin, and more. While of course there are exceptions, and gay black men are increasingly being represented in the media networks of the Global North (Johnson 2010), such representations remains considerably less common. While some of these texts erase poor, effeminate, and transgendered same-sex sexualities from visual culture, or disavow intersectional social justice issues, others erase transgressive sexual acts that are constitutive of some same-sex cultures. That being said, there are also significant exceptions (such as Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*) which are contributing to more complex representations of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities. Although the texts in this chapter engage with assimilationist strategies differently, with uneven emphases and exclusions, I argue that all three construct middle-class, ‘respectable’, and depoliticised sexual selves who downplay difference and are linked by an assimilationist agenda that is always already both transnational and white.

Of course, though I refer to the invisibility of whiteness, Frankenberg (2001: 73) reminds us that “the notion of whiteness as unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage or indeed, to put it even more strongly, a white delusion”. She insists that the cultural, economic, and political privileges of whiteness cannot be regarded as invisible by those who are not beneficiaries of this privilege. Rasmussen et al. (2001: 10) add that “while whiteness is invisible to whites it is hypervisible to people of color”. Unqualified assertions that whiteness and its concomitant privileges are invisible only reinforce the
perceived superiority of the white gaze. bell hooks (1997: 165) notes that black people have always had a “‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people”. hooks (165) argues further that white people do not acknowledge the possibility of “whiteness in the black imagination”. So whereas the depth and scope of whiteness appears invisible to many of its beneficiaries – many of whom now stubbornly insist on a post-race body politic – it cannot be said that it is invisible to those excluded by its operations.7 In other words, as different forms of transnational whiteness took root during the apartheid, transitional and post-transitional periods, white supremacy was refracted through a particularising lens that brought into sharp focus its institutional machineries and normative power. The political, economic, and cultural privileges of whiteness have always been hypervisible, then, to those who do not benefit from its dividends; insistences that whiteness is invisible evidence little more than the presupposition of a universalised white viewing subject. Whiteness, in other words, mistakenly asserts that it can control and regulate what hooks (1997: 168) calls “the black gaze”. hooks (168) writes further that:

[t]o be fully an object, then, was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. These looking relations were reinforced as whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible.

The apparent universality of the white gaze is one of the central mechanisms through which whiteness co-circulates with the normal – seemingly unmarked and invisible. As I will show, while Heyns engages explicitly with issues of whiteness and power in his novels, Gay Pages fails to reflect critically on how whiteness frames the representation of non-heteronormative sexualised bodies, as well as how the text presupposes and reinforces the notion of a universal white gaze. Despite these rhetorical differences, however, both novels and the magazine series reveal how whiteness refashions and incorporates same-sex sexualities into inclusive terms of respectability, while at the same time forging connections with transnational spaces of sexual identity and desire.

**Gay Pages**

Starting out as a business directory for predominantly gay entrepreneurs in the early 1990s (Van Niekerk in Disemelo 2014: 178), Gay Pages has grown to become one of the mainstays of the local gay media industry. I argue here that the magazine asserts
an assimilationist strategy in which the supposed otherness of same-sex sexualities is camouflaged by whiteness, a normative masculinity, and “a hyperreal world of commodities, leisure and luxury” (Disemelo 2014: 111). Though the magazine obviously contains content that relates specifically to same-sex sexualities, this is found alongside articles and advertising that focus on the latest cars, adventure sports, gym, high-end holiday resorts, wines and cuisine, health and dentistry, and playful pictures suggestive of sexual desire and intimacy. Paradoxically, perhaps, the magazine constitutes the white transnational, gay subject while it simultaneously downplays the significance of sexual difference, a strategy central to an assimilationist agenda. *Gay Pages* is not the only local same-sex publication to have emerged over the last three decades; while it distinguishes itself from *Equus* (Gevisser 1994: 45), *Wrapped* (Disemelo 2014), and *Outright* (Disemelo 2014) simply because of its continued existence and its national reach, it also contrasts the tabloid format, racial diversity and somewhat more politically engaged content that has characterised *Exit* (Davidson & Nerio 1994; Disemelo 2014; Beetar 2012: 51). Instead, the glossy magazine situates a narrow form of local gay cultural life within the circulations of transnational gay cultural imaginaries.
This textual figuration of the global gay, to borrow Altman’s (1997) formulation, tends to downplay sexual difference and emphasises essentialist continuities between men, irrespective of sexual identities or desires. However, what ties the images in the magazine most notably to transnational cultural flows is their deployment of whiteness as means of assimilation. While *Gay Pages* offers us an ostensibly non-racial perspective of same-sex culture in the country, we are reminded of Rebecca Aanerud’s (1997: 43) insistence that “[r]eading whiteness into texts […] that are not overtly about race is an essential step towards disrupting whiteness as the unchallenged racial norm”. I argue that the middle-class, assimilationist aesthetic of whiteness is the structuring trope of the magazine as it largely reproduces the stock figure of the white gay subject. This is evident in the way that the magazine’s visual content is populated almost exclusively by white men, as is its editorial staff, its advertising, and its selection of books, music, and films that are reviewed.
Perhaps most strikingly, in more than twenty years since it was first published, Gay Pages has never featured a cover model who was not white. The editor of the magazine, Rubin van Niekerk (in Disemelo 2014: 182) explains his selection of cover models and argues that participants in “some or other gay event, like Mr Gay South Africa or Mr Gay World are preferred. Sometimes cover models are simply placed for their stun-value. Eye contact is really important and professional photographers with sufficient lighting are non-negotiable”. What is alarming about this is the editor’s omission of race as a factor for selection, despite twenty years of evidence to the contrary. There are black, Indian and coloured men who have participated in these gay events (and who have been featured in some photographs) and yet they are seemingly overlooked for inclusion on the cover. Only white models, it would seem, have the requisite “stun-value” for consideration. His references to the basic characteristics of professional photography such as appropriate eye contact and lighting is little more than a distraction from the way in which the cover images of this publication perpetuate whiteness as an unmarked and invisible norm. Allan Bérubé (2001: 237) argues that “racially familiar situations can make us mistakenly believe that there are such things as gay issues, spaces, culture, and relationships that are not ‘lived through’ race, and that white gay life, so long as it is not named as such, is not about race”. Bérubé (237) explains further that “[t]hese lived assumptions, and the privileges on which they are based, form a powerful camouflage woven from a web of unquestioned beliefs – that gay whiteness is unmarked and unremarkable, universal and representative, powerful and protective, a cohesive bond”. There is therefore a lot more at stake in the selection of cover models than merely lighting and eye contact; it is the white assimilationist aesthetic that not only attracts attention and informs buyers’ purchasing decision, but also perpetuates the erasure of black gay lives from the magazine shelves.10

Through an analysis of several issues of the magazine published between 2012 and 2016, I show not only how the normative power of whiteness mitigates the otherness of same-sex sexualities, but also how the magazine itself constructs an imagined transnational gay community that is blind to its own constitutive racism. This chapter extends Theo Sonnekus and Jeanne van Eeden’s (2009) earlier analysis of “dual ‘othering’ of black men” in the 2007 and 2008 editions of Gay Pages, and the issues of the magazine that I consider here mark a continuation in the present of decades-
long practices of textual exclusion. Though Van Niekerk (in Disemelo 2014: 182) argues that the paucity of racial diversity in the magazine is because “[b]lack men are far more closeted and difficult to reach”, this requires further interrogation. This claim appears disingenuous given that the majority of original articles are accompanied by what appear to be generic stock images, almost always of white men. White men appear, almost exclusively, alongside the featured articles in each edition that explore various themes such as vegetarianism, meditation and yoga, travel, aging, white-collar gay businessmen, dating advice, religion, underwear, and social networking. The advertising that traverses the publication also features only white models, with three notable brand exceptions.¹¹ The magazine thus projects an image of a wealthy white consumer and suggests that healthy living, designer clothing, expensive watches, travel agents, hair stylists, and dating and hook-up services are intended for white men only. In one recurring full-page advertisement that appears in each issue, “Gabriel’s Advertising” artistically features a near-naked man with angel wings. What is interesting about this advertisement, however, is that although the featured model is different in each issue, he always seems to be white.
The gay culture that is depicted in the magazine is tied to a transnational sexual politics that is assimilationist and almost exclusively white. For instance, transnationalism overlaps with the local in one story titled “The Ten Best Gay Beaches in the World” (2012c: 62-67). Cape Town’s Clifton Beach is included in a list that spans the US, Spain, Mexico, Israel, Brazil and Australia. The photograph of Clifton is a long shot and thus one can discern little more than specks of colour from the umbrellas on the beach. Whereas some of the featured beaches appear only from a distance, close-up photographs of others feature only white people. In a similar vein, a transnational gay cultural imaginary is also textually constructed in the magazine through aesthetic appropriations, the nature of the content, direct linkages with events abroad, and similar events in the local setting. Each issue contains a section titled “International Events” that contains a long list of upcoming gay pride and festival events in different cities around the world. Each entry is bulleted by the flag of the relevant country, and it provides the date and location of the event. That this list almost always appears opposite a full-page advertisement for an airline creates the sense that these are events that the upwardly-mobile South African reader might attend. The international list of events appears next to a different white model in each issue, framing these transnational events within the trope of transnational whiteness. This page is followed by an “International News” feature that contains several stories about gay cultural politics around the world. This section explores global issues of sexual identity, rights, and representation in more detail. However, rather than explore the complexities of these ideas, articles in this section tend to perpetuate the idea that transnational gay cultures are inherently white, fashionable, and attached to Western media forms. Almost all of the photographs in this section feature white men, such as actors Stephen Fry (2012c: 36; 2015a: 32), Ian McKellan (2015c: 29), and Matt Bomer (2012a: 28), reality television stars (2012a: 28; 2015c: 29), and athletes-turned-gay-porn-stars (2012a: 30). Somewhat bizarrely, even in those instances where the magazine circulates serious international stories about sexual politics, the stories are almost always juxtaposed either with photographs of the white individual named or with photographs of white models, usually exposing their well-defined upper bodies. This includes stories about new HIV drugs (2012c: 32), Jewish anti-homophobia outreach in the UK (2012c: 35), legal reforms in Ireland, Greenland, the United States, Great
Britain and Italy (2016b: 27; 2015c: 26-27), corporate boycotts of homophobic countries (2016c: 30), and possible HIV criminalisation in Canada. In one instance, Pope Francis’s ground-breaking statement that Christians should apologise to gay people is placed beside a photograph of a naked Olympic swimmer as he appears ready to dive into a pool, inadvertently rearticulating the “gay people” to whom the pope refers as being white, male, attractive, and athletic. While the photographs are not always attached to the story specifically, the page layout is arranged in such a way that whiteness pervades almost every aspect of the transnational gay culture being articulated. Appadurai (2007: 225) writes that “[t]he globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization, but globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, clothing styles and the like)”.

Though the magazine’s policing of an unmarked whiteness depends on its inclusion of attractive and famous white men throughout its pages, it also depends on whom it is excluding. In Frankenberg’s (1997: 7) words, race is one of the central axes around which “the polarizations of insiderness and outsiderness [are] organized”. In most instances – and not unlike many other representations of African sexualities (Epprecht
2013) – the rest of Africa is excluded from the transnational sexual cultures that the magazine imagines. Where the continent is mentioned in the magazine, it is usually to reproduce essentialist imaginaries about a singularly homophobic continent. Van Niekerk (2012a: 4) writes in an editorial that:

> Being geographically on the southern end of homophobic Nirvana can be quite tough as our northern neighbours have a deeply ingrained refusal to understand that human rights, gay rights and freedom of expression are the minimum requirements for trade and tourism. […] No sane person would choose to rendezvous with the devil and his bats from hell […]

Not only does Van Niekerk’s editorial construct a binary between South Africa and the rest of the continent – which he collapses into “homophobic Nirvana” and “the devil and his bats from hell” – he also seems to be inadvertently suggesting that trade and tourism are central objectives in the formulation of any human rights agenda. Where other African geographies and cultural imaginaries are depicted, it is usually either as advertised game reserves or holiday resorts, or as sites of homophobic oppression. In one case, a short piece appears under the heading “Uganda: Anti-gay law declared ‘null and void’ by constitutional court” (2014d: 38). This is accompanied by a photograph of three people whose faces are entirely covered by masks painted in the colours of the rainbow flag, and who are racially marked only by their visible black hands. In the following year, an article appears that describes the visit that International Mr Leather 2015, Canadian-born Patrick Smith, took to Uganda to do community “outreach” work (2015d: 26). The short piece notes that he met with a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and a respected religious leader of the LGTBI-supporting Unitarian Universalist Church. However, instead of featuring photographs of Smith with either of these two local Ugandan sexual rights activists, the photograph accompanying the article is of him alone, topless, wearing unbuttoned jeans with little evidence of underwear. So instead of using his trip to Uganda as an opportunity to map a broader and more inclusive transnational sexual politics, this media account opts to eroticise yet another muscular white man. The erasure of the vast networks of indigenous sexual rights advocacy among individuals and groups on the African continent by the visual depiction of Smith is reinforced by the article itself. It quotes Smith, who works for Marvel Studios by day, saying that he takes “inspiration from the many superheroes clad in their tight leather gear” (26) when he does his activist work.
The white visual aesthetic of the magazine’s photographs contribute to “the over-representation of whiteness and its discursive naturalization within the media” (Disemelo 2014: 143, original emphasis). In addition, each edition is framed by a regular editorial. There is no formula to Van Niekerk’s column, instead it takes the form of short musings on certain topics. However, an unmistakable sense of whiteness runs through many of these editorials. For instance, Van Niekerk’s writings tend to offer a revisionist history of the past in which homophobia rather than structural racism was the primary objective of apartheid. After discussing the challenges faced by gay teens, he writes that “[w]hen Nelson Mandela was released from prison on 11 February 1990 after 27 years in prison he improved our lives. He played an instrumental role in ensuring that our rights were constitutionally protected” (Van Niekerk 2014a: 2, my emphasis). Elsewhere, he writes that “[r]efraining aloof and silent is irresponsible. It is up to us to keep the flame of fairness alive. Having survived the dark days of homophobic persecution before, I see the need for democratic freedom to express freely” (Van Niekerk 2016a: 2). While these observations are not in and of themselves incorrect, the failure to contextualise homophobia within the racism of the past unmask the magazine’s refusal to engage meaningfully with the ways in which whiteness reproduces privilege in the present. In fact, recurring gestures towards discrimination reiterate discourses of ‘reverse discrimination’ as he obliquely criticises affirmative action policies and seems to reject the constitutionally-mandated need for racial redress. When identifying the challenges facing the country, a vaguely articulated opposition to affirmative action is sustained: on different occasions, the editorial describes “unfriendly labour legislation and discrimination” (Van Niekerk 2012b: 4), “our political woes and discriminatory employment policies” (Van Niekerk 2016b: 2), and “our gladiatorial arena of farce, corruption and institutionalised racism by the morally indefensible” (Van Niekerk 2016a: 2) as the central problems facing the country. Furthermore, he writes that:

Talented gay people tend to migrate from countries where they are persecuted, to countries where their skills and talent are welcomed. Since the late 1980s well over a million of South Africa’s most talented people have emigrated to greener pastures – notably the UK, Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. All these regions share an openness [sic] towards skills utilisation and are generally tolerant and more welcoming. (Van Niekerk 2012b: 4)

In this extract, Van Niekerk obfuscates the relationship between race and sexuality. His assertion that “talented gay people tend to migrate from countries where they are
persecuted” subtly suggests that these South Africans are leaving because of homophobia. However, he then says that more than a million “talented” people have left South Africa over the last three decades, a period characterised by greater tolerance and state protection for same-sex sexualities. It is therefore not a million gay people but rather white people who have left, as the excesses and immorality of white supremacy were exposed. Indeed, many of these people oppose affirmative action policies and have elected rather to live in countries that are “open[…] towards skills utilisation”. The editorial seems to assume that the gay people to whom it refers are already constitutive of the “talented” white million who have emigrated. That white people in postapartheid South Africa and gay people are conjoined by the word “persecuted” highlights the magazine’s blindness to the continuing privileges of whiteness, and the brutality of the country’s unacknowledged past. This notion of a beleaguered white minority who singularly possess talent and skill is similarly articulated in a later edition when Van Niekerk (2014b: 2) states that “[f]ortunately we still have a large pool of talent that has not departed for Perth yet and these entrepreneurs are still stoking the engine of our economy with such determination, that they deserve an encore after their standing ovation”. The racial subtext of immigrating to Australia suggests that it is white people, unnamed and unmarked, that are the talented ones who are keeping the economy going, and it is these white gay people who are the magazine’s imagined readership.

Though the featured articles explore several important topics related to same-sex cultural politics, they construct an essentialist mode through which gay men can access the dividends of the normative centre. An article in one of the earliest issues of Gay Pages in 1995 advances an essentialist and exclusionary idea of same-sex sexuality, which illustrates local instantiations of the contested politics of representation that Duggan and Warner have observed:

[The South Africa Tourist Industry] would be shocked to discover that their image of gay drag queens, limp-wristed madams and butch dykes can be completely blown out of the water. We look, talk and act like typical boring tourists with fat wallets. On much closer inspection a very large percentage of pink money is spent on holidays and other forms of entertainment. It is also a fact that our average income levels fall into the top income levels of society. (in Hoad 2007: 73)

Though the magazine appears to be resisting certain stereotypes about same-sex sexual cultures, ultimately it simply replaces them with others by insisting on
exclusionary discursive practices in which “drag queens, limp-wristed madams and butch dykes” are excluded at the same moment that poor and working-class people are. The “we” to which the magazine refers is middle-class, ‘straight-acting’, and implicitly white (given the article’s visual frame). The seemingly universal “our” whose “income levels fall into the top income levels of society” is unapologetically exclusionary and, as Hoad (2007: 74) points out, “speak[s] to [only] a very small minority of South Africans who engage in same-sex erotic practices”.

A far more recent article, titled “Notable success for the white-collar gay leaders in business”, opens with a simple statement: “Known to society as people with energy, clout and not afraid to venture into untested waters be it in the corporate world or small business world, gay people are doing well in business” (Mthavani 2012: 82). The article takes the form of a comparative analysis of corporate positioning of gay men in the US and the UK, suggesting the importance of “seven leadership principles rooted in the professional worldview of gay men that develop through learned skills such as adaptation, intuitive communication and creative problem solving” (83). Of course, the stock image accompanying this story is again of a smiling white man (despite the article being authored by a black man), advancing whiteness as the only means of assimilating into corporate success. An article in a later edition, titled “Does God Love Us?”, revises biblical and religious condemnation of same-sex sexualities and offers “young homosexuals [who] grow up in Christian families” an ideological access point to the privileges of an imagined Christian norm (Hackney 2013: 61). The photograph accompanying this story features a clean-shaven white man with his hands together in a way that suggests prayer. Another article focuses on issues of fatherhood and surrogacy, arguing at one point that “[i]t’s the natural course of life for a human being to reproduce” (Viljoen 2012: 69). Photographs of the (white) “single gay dad-to-be” on the beach, as well as his dogs, accompany the story.

Another article in the magazine refracts the idea of normative whiteness further through a discussion of the English language itself, arguably the very grammar of postapartheid whiteness. Alongside a photograph of a conventionally attractive white man talking on the phone while lying on the couch, the piece says: “Am I the only one who thinks it’s sexy when someone can string a sentence together? Those that cannot differentiate between your and you’re, to and too, there and their, deserve to be shot.
By the grammar police. Point blank” (Bowers 2013: 63). Keeping in mind that all articles in the magazine appear in English, except for a few very short Afrikaans book reviews that appear periodically, this is an aggressive silencing of those gay men who have not been endowed with very specific forms of cultural capital. The article continues along this line and says:

Eleven national languages may seem like a delightfully rich culture, but when Charlemagne said that, ‘to have another language is to possess a second soul’ he did not envisage a rudimentary grasp of kitchen Zulu, ‘faga lapha’, as another language. South Africans would do well to heed the wisdom of Goethe and learn a truly foreign language for ‘those who know nothing of foreign languages, know nothing of their own. (63)

Astonishingly, the writer dismisses linguistic diversity only if it is premised on South Africa’s national languages, and he goes on to ridicule “rudimentary […] kitchen Zulu” as falling outside the bilingualism imagined by an early medieval European monarch. Strangely, he then urges readers to follow the advice of the German writer Goethe to learn a “truly” foreign language. The clumsy logic of this article suggests that English proficiency is weak because of the constitutional recognition of African languages, but that it would improve if readers studied additional European languages instead. The article does not even attempt to hide its hierarchy of linguistic value, privileging European over African cultures. What is more, the “rudimentary grasp of kitchen Zulu” to which he refers suggests that his imagined readership is white and for whom (black) Zulu speakers remain in the kitchen. Language access (especially when deployed explicitly as a proxy for race) is itself a powerful mechanism for social exclusion. As Mason Stokes (2001: 13) reminds us, “whiteness works best – in fact, […] it works only – when it attaches itself to other abstractions, becoming yet another invisible strand in a larger web of unseen yet powerful cultural forces”. In addition to being white, the reader of this article is also assumed to be middle-class, as is evidenced by the unsubstantiated later assertion that “[d]ue to a lack of public transport, South Africans spend a lot of time in the car” (Bowers 2013: 63). Readers who do not own cars or who might speak Zulu as a first language are discursively excluded, here, from Gay Pages’s assimilationist sexual politics. Bérubé (2001: 247) writes in this respect that:

[A] gay rights politics that is supposedly color-blind (and sex-neutral and classless) is in fact a politics of race (and gender and class). It assumes, without ever having to say it, that gay must equal white (and male and economically secure); that is, it assumes white (and male and middle-class) as the default categories that remain
Once one discounts those who as gay people must continually and primarily deal with racism (and sexism and class oppression), especially within gay communities.

When asked about how the magazine contributes to a sense of ‘gay community’, the editor states that *Gay Pages* supports young people “search[ing] for belonging” and is “a handy tool for someone with no idea how to connect, by offering a list of community organisations, businesses and entertaining content, helping to eliminate the sense of isolation that we all share” (Van Niekerk in Disemelo 2014: 179). Despite the whiteness that overwhelmingly structures the magazine’s content and visual layout, the editor sees it as offering a seemingly non-racial sense of “belonging” and a universal way to overcome feelings of “isolation that we all share”. Similarly, Van Niekerk (2014a: 2) writes in an editorial that “[g]ay people born before 1980 had a tougher time. Now it is much easier and the *Gay Pages* has helped many people to just be themselves”. This suggests that the magazine has constructed a universal mode of sexual identity into which anyone can assimilate. These fascinating statements suggest that the experiences of homophobia of the white editor, the almost exclusively white contributors, the white models, and even the brand identity of the advertisers are unmarked by race, class and patriarchy and are, in fact, universal. Whiteness, to borrow Frankenberg’s (1997: 1) formulation, “remains unexamined – unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and apparently unmarked by history or practice”.

The magazine also advances another form of transnational gay culture that is less concerned with masculinity and consumerism and more with performative publics such as gay pride parades and festivals. The photographs of Cape Town Pride, Joburg Pride, and Knysna’s Pink Loerie Mardi Gras circulate through the pages of the magazine year after year and articulate a vast array of different forms of self-expression and public performativity. The 2014 Mardi Gras, for instance, is awash with drag imagery, party-goers, affluence and whiteness (2014b: 80-83). While the magazine’s selection of images of the earlier Mardi Gras offers far more diversity in terms of age and race (2012b; 2013c), its aesthetic is nonetheless exclusionary. The 2012 Mardi Gras features sports cars and exclusive restaurants where some participants gather. What is more, the magazine’s coverage of the event is preceded by a double-page spread that emphasises the enormous beach houses and yachts.
that line Knysna’s shoreline, assimilating the otherness of same-sex sexualities into the normative centre of white affluence (2012b: 78-85).\textsuperscript{13}

The magazine also devotes several pages to certain Pride events. However, in the tradition of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, these remain controlled spaces, characterised by performance and subversion, onto which the excesses of a broader queer imaginary can be projected and exiled, standing in contrast to the traditional notion of masculinity that pervades the rest of the publication. Though transnational gay cultural forms such as drag queens, rainbow flag imagery, and waves of pink fabric dominate the textual construction of these pages, they are also inflected with local priorities and contexts. So, for instance, the juxtaposition of photographs of blue Democratic Alliance political organisers with white affluent party-goers and white marchers carrying the Zimbabwean flag (2016b: 55) mobilises a set of discourses that reinforce the idea that gay identity is constituted in whiteness.
While the magazine’s representation of the 2012 Cape Town Pride event has several pages of photographs of predominantly white drag queens and erotic same-sex pairings, its few photographs of black female activists tend to show them as a largely undifferentiated mass (see Figure 5), foreclosing the range of sexual subjectivities that black participants could occupy. In the magazine’s coverage of the 2013 Cape Town Pride, the brief written introduction to the event’s coverage notes that “[a] strong message against rape, child abuse and gender violence could be seen on large posters throughout the parade” (Smith 2013: 64). However, the three double-page spreads that contain photographs of the event do not feature any of these signs, and indeed have little evidence of any social justice agenda. This erasure of class politics is similarly evident in the brief account of the fateful protest that took place at Joburg Pride in 2012 (which I discussed in the Preface). In an account provided by Gay Pages, one of the organisers identifies the anti-rape protest as one of the significant reasons for the disbandment of Joburg Pride:

1-in-9’s unfortunate interruption of Pride 2012 shifted the event from a low-risk event into a high-risk category […]. It provided great short-term publicity for 1-in-9, but created far-reaching negative publicity for Joburg Pride. It’s ironic, as we agreed with their message – but not their medium, as it obviously negated our work over the past seven years, while providing a hint of potential operational and security risks. (2013b: 32)

That this claim goes unchallenged in the short piece, along with the blindness to structural racism that characterised “our work over the past seven years”, points to the complicity of Gay Pages in perpetuating a middle-class, white, and consumerist profile for the modern gay subject. This extract also highlights the exclusion of gender rights activists from the magazine’s intended readership. Arguing that apartheid legislated spatial, professional and sexual identities, Gevisser and Cameron (1994: 5) write that “[a]sserting a lesbian or gay identity in South Africa is thus more than a necessary act of self-expression. It [is] a defiance of the fixed identities – of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality – that the apartheid system attempted to impose upon all of us”.

However, while this rousing defiance of apartheid’s racial and sexual politics is important, it inadvertently erases the complex continuities between race and sexuality in the present. The attainment of sexual rights and new forms of expression have been
coterminous with the perpetuation of whiteness as a normative aesthetic form. In other words, while same-sex sexualities find creative expression in innumerable cultural texts, the hierarchies of normative racial power remain intact and undermine the optimism expressed by Gevisser and Cameron. Stokes warns against over-estimating the subversive potential of non-heteronormative sexualities when they leave the structures of racial, class and gendered privilege largely unchanged. She writes that there is an “ironic relationship in which queerness threatens whiteness, but whiteness makes queerness more palatable – demonstrat[ing] the risks in hastily granting […] subversive potential to queer sexuality” (Stokes 2001: 183).

**The Reluctant Passenger**

Whereas *Gay Pages* appears blind to the whiteness that structures its assimilationist aesthetics, *The Reluctant Passenger* is more peculiar in that it engages explicitly and insightfully with the politics of whiteness while it simultaneously all but erases black, coloured, and Indian people from the domestic body politic.¹⁴ Heyns’s second novel is set in Cape Town in the years following the watershed elections in 1994. It traces the experiences of its first-person narrator, Nicholas Morris, an environmental lawyer, who is left irrevocably altered after he takes on a new client who opposes commercial developments in the Cape Point Nature Reserve. His client, Luc Tomlinson, heir to his grandfather’s fortune, lives on a designated piece of land in the reserve and has a particularly strong impulse to protect the baboons who reside there. Once Nicholas has successfully uncovered acts of corruption and links to blackmail (absurdly linked to apartheid-era same-sex orgies), he is able to stop the commercial development from taking place. Luc’s aggrieved father maliciously organises to have the baboons abducted and they are taken to a secret research laboratory that was previously used to develop chemical and biological weapons for the apartheid government. Nicholas and his best friend, Gerhard, develop a plan to get into the facility and rescue the baboons. While the facility is now used to do illegal experiments on animals, it is also the headquarters from where “The Black Widow” offers conversion therapy for ‘homosexual’ patients. The ridiculousness of these plot developments is compounded further: after Nicholas has successful rescued the sedated baboons in a hijacked taxi, which is itself hijacked again, and eventually has to chase a troop of baboons through
Cavendish Square, he allows them to sleep in his spare room and his client, Luc, to sleep in his bed.

While it is difficult to agree with Jane Rosenthal’s (2003) assertion that the novel is “entirely convincing”, it is certainly compelling and its satirical mode is effective in exposing normative power structures and their underlying assumptions. Despite its occasionally convoluted plot, the novel advances an assimilationist politics of whiteness while it simultaneously maps a transnational sexual culture that forges connections between Cape Town, Rome and London. Through the characters of Luc, Nicholas, and Gerhard, Heyns’s novel emphasises that the assimilationist aesthetics of the transnational gay imaginaries can be inhabited in vastly different ways. The text also rejects the sanitising impulses of some assimilationist modes of representation and circulates an uncensored form in which same-sex sexual publics are celebrated rather than erased. The novel thus reproduces a flexible and more inclusive (though no less racialised) white, gay imaginary through which same-sex sexualities are rendered intelligible.

Unlike *Gay Pages*, which appears to advance some sort of post-race imaginary that is wholly out of touch with the raciology of postapartheid society, Heyns foregrounds the relationship between whiteness and power in this novel. Nicholas appears initially to be a spokesperson for the decadent invisibility of white privilege as he dismissively reflects on his decision not to vote, saying that “[h]aving been born into the sin of having the vote, and having felt guilty for 25 years for having it, I’m not going to start feeling guilty now because I didn’t exercise it” (Heyns 2003: 32). This gestures to those shifts in public discourse in which some white South Africans appear to assume the burden of victimhood as they claim a beleaguered selfhood. The significance of apartheid as a temporal and contextual referent in this text cannot be overstated. Ironically, however, it is the systematic racism of the previous regime that makes the seemingly unmarked operations of a more insidious white privilege so palatable in its ubiquity. Stokes (2001: 13) argues in this regard that:

In part, white supremacy makes whiteness possible because it allows whiteness the space of moderation and normality that it needs to survive. White supremacy, so often imagined as extreme, allows whiteness once again its status as the nonthreatening, as the good. White supremacy, then, becomes something of a scapegoat for whiteness, the convenient location of white violence and
lawlessness, distracting our attention from the violence and lawlessness of whiteness itself.

In contrast to this, whiteness is made hypervisible in this novel and it is interrogated by the author throughout the text. In a telephone conversation between Nicholas and his mother, the apparent normative invisibility of whiteness is foregrounded and satirised:

‘You must be careful, dear. They say that they’re planning all sorts of things for after the election.’
‘Who are the they that are saying this?’
‘Oh, they, you know, people.’
‘And the they who are planning all these things?’
‘They…you know, them.’ (Heyns 2003: 19)

Heyns draws readers’ attention to the fact that the white people who are expressing their fears are just “people” – apparently unmarked by race or history – but the black people who are supposedly doing the planning are polarised and excluded as “them”.

Dyer (1997: 1-2) writes that:

As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race.

Similarly, in addition to the recurring figure of the white neighbours who are moving to Perth, caricatured white anxieties are also highlighted and satirised throughout the novel. This includes narratives of anti-hijacking devices (Heyns 2003: 59), hijackings (103, 223-233), the inefficiency of the police (60), and vague accounts of wealth redistribution policies, ironically described by the narrator as “urban terrorism and depredation visited upon the propertied classes” (60).

Nicholas recalls some of the comments made by one of his white colleagues at work after those first elections:

Why drive out all the way to Guguletu to stand in a queue with all sorts of people when you can just walk to the Scout Hall in Monte Vista? (14)

From now on we’re on African time in this country, and you’d better get used to it. What’s more, you can forget about your aerials and your swimming pools, once we have the majority government you’re all so excited about. (15)
The satirical construction of a hypervisible whiteness here is compounded by the interjections of one of only two black characters in the novel:

‘Now what, I wonder,’ mused Dikeledi Modise, ‘could African time be? Is it something I have that you don’t have, Nick? Like natural rhythm?’
‘I don’t know, Dikaledi,’ I said, laughing. ‘But then, I’m African too, remember.’
‘Gmf,’ she snorted, ‘you’re about as African as those prissy little Ray-Bans you wear.’ (15)

Dikeledi refuses to allow Nicholas his claim of an unproblematised African identity that would permit him to distance himself from the privileges of his whiteness. Similarly, later in the novel, when Nicholas is considering emigrating, he asks Dikeledi for a reason to stay in South Africa:

She gave me her what’s-with-this-white-shit look. ‘I could say we’re trying to make a go of it, but that’s not going to do it for you, so I’ll just say because you’ve still got it better here than you’ll have it anywhere else.’
‘For how long?’
‘I don’t know, Nicholas. We’re not handing out guarantees.’
‘We?’
‘The New South Africans. The Dark Peoples. Whoever it is that you see yourself as distinguished from’. (303)

This marking of whiteness, which makes its essentialist assumptions visible, reveals how it authorises particular ways of seeing and being seen.

Significantly, however, whiteness cannot be imagined in the singular form, and the novel exposes the complicated intersections of race and sexuality when Nicholas initially describes one of his conversations with Gerhard:

‘Spare me your erotic imagination,’ I said, uncomfortably aware of [his secretary] Myrah hovering. Fond as she was of Gerhard, she had problems both with his Afrikaans origins and with his fluent English. (31)

While it is first suggested that it is the homoerotic nature of Gerhard’s stories – stories he tells often and with great relish – that might unsettle Myrah, Nicholas instead reveals that it is a complex reading of his language and ethnicity as constitutive of his performative whiteness that concerns her. In a similar way, Nicholas recounts how Gerhard went to a conservative Afrikaans university where he failed to discover ‘the nature of his own sexuality, a failure of imagination he ascribes to the fact that, as he said, ‘in a good game of rugby you don’t notice that you’re not actually getting fucked’’ (44). To put it differently, when one is engaging in the performative reproduction of hypermasculine whiteness, otherwise exiled homoerotic arrangements of men’s
bodies become not only acceptable but necessary. The resignification of rugby here, one of the most reliable markers of white, nationalist heteronormativity, further suggests the entanglement of normative codes of whiteness and masculinity with sexuality.

For most of the novel, Nicholas maintains what can, perhaps, best be described as a studied asexuality. He and his girlfriend Leonora are unequivocally celibate (192), which he laments only because it detracts from the otherwise perfect “statistics of [his] own normality” (170). The mundaneness of his relationship with Leonora is exemplified by a not-atypical incident in which he notes that putting his hand on hers was “one of the few overt gestures of affection [he] allowed [him]self, or persuaded [him]self she would allow [him]” (37). In contrast to this polite tedium, however, the protagonist’s interactions with Luc are characterised by intensity from the outset. Luc disrupts the strict order, predictability and supposed normality of Nicholas’s life, and the escalating sexual tension between Nicholas and his client is sustained throughout the text. The intensity of Nicholas’s feelings for Luc is startling compared to the mundaneness of his interactions with his girlfriend. Though these feelings are initially of frustration and disgust, they become more complex as the novel progresses, and Nicholas regularly describes Luc in ways that are sexually suggestive. For example, while Nicholas is feeling outrage at the fact that his wealthy client is “dirty” and smells of something “wilder […] than the standard stable-and-barn mix” (22), he also thinks to himself that “[h]is t-shirt and shorts parted to reveal a flat brown stomach sloping down into his loins that appeared untramelled by civilised amenities like underpants” (22).

Similarly, when Nicholas first goes to visit Luc at his home in the Cape Point Nature Reserve, he observes with a sense of irritation that Luc is naked:

I couldn’t help reading a sort of arrogance into the ease with which he turned his back on me, secure in the knowledge that there was no aspect of the whole flawless length of his body that could not bear scrutiny. The smooth tan skin was overlaid with a sheen of very fine coppery down, which contributed to the effect of effulgence, giving definition to the delicately sculpted cusps and arches and planes of his body. (69)

The overt sexualisation of Luc by the protagonist creates a heightened homoeroticism in the narrative, a sexual tension that is only resolved near the end of the novel when Nicholas and Luc finally have sex with one another. This initial tension plays out
dramatically, albeit absurdly, when Luc takes Nicholas to meet the baboons that he is
going to be litigating to protect. Luc insists that they should both be naked, so as not
to offend the baboons. While expressing his considerable discomfort at being naked
with a client around masturbating baboons, Nicholas nonetheless thinks to himself that
“[Luc] Tomlinson is equipped like a young centaur” (83). The sexual tension plays itself
out using the male baboon who Nicholas and Luc observe as a proxy for their own
feelings:

‘Bloody amazing,’ said Luc, almost admiringly. ‘You must have really potent
pheromones.’ He added with an unconvincing affection of concern, ‘I’m afraid he
wants to fuck you.’ [...] ‘No, well, he knows me far too well to find me attractive.
But you... I’ve never seen him as excited as this. You obviously have something.
Fucking amazing.’ (84)

The initial intensity of these sublimated feelings does not fade and Nicholas’s narrative
is littered with references to Luc’s sexuality. That the site for this homoeroticism is the
land that Luc inherited from his grandfather is also significant. Nicholas reflects earlier
that “according to unconfirmed rumours” Luc Tomlinson’s property in the nature
reserve had been given to Luc’s grandfather by Cecil John Rhodes who “had been
infatuated with the young Tomlinson” (26). Intimations that Rhodes, undoubtedly one
of the arch-patriarchs of white colonial capitalism in South Africa, was sexually and
emotionally interested in men, are not new. But this suggestion does point to
continuities in the way in which the otherness of same-sex sexualities is assimilated
into structures of social power at opposite ends of the twentieth century.

Near the end of the text, once Nicholas and Luc have rescued the baboons, they stay
at Nicholas’s house because it is too late for Luc to go home. After much resistance,
Nicholas finally allows Luc to sleep in his bed. The sexual tension and uncertainty that
the novel has sustained and channelled from the outset are finally given expression
when Nicholas and Luc finally “fuck” (352). However, Luc’s proposition, and the
visceral description of sex that follows, are preceded by subtle textual reminders about
the race of the men. That Luc is recognisably white is clear, given Nicholas’s
observation that he “look[s] like an angel, his red hair glowing like a halo around his
contrite face, his blue eyes wide with concern”, a point he repeats when he describes
“the blue of his iris” (352). The text effects a similar coded whiteness in an earlier
discussion of Nicholas’s own normalcy where he states that “[m]y hair, which I wear a
medium length, is between blond and brown, and my eyes are between blue and grey”
(169). While it is not stated explicitly, blond hair and blue eyes presuppose a definition of normal that is implicitly, though undeniably, white. The very fact that race is not mentioned in this context and is instead signified through seemingly more benign characteristics further illustrates how whiteness works best when it positions itself as invisible and unmarked in its production of a seemingly unracialized normal. Though race is not named here, the scene is encoded within the normative codes of assimilationist whiteness. The novel offers a celebratory framing of same-sex intimacies, rendering its otherness unseen as it basks in the implicit glow of white, middle-class respectability. Signalling the potential for self-actualisation, Nicholas embraces “Luc Tomlinson’s energetic incursions” (378) and observes with something akin to incredulity that before sleeping with Luc, he had lead a “carefully shuttered, gated and signposted existence” (355). Significantly, just before being propositioned for sex, Nicholas had observed that he was “a normal heterosexual male with no more than a statistically insignificant attraction to other males” (352). Given that sex between two men follows this assertion, the falsehood of both the protagonist’s ontological certainty and the supposedly static signification of the word ‘normal’ are exposed. The sexual activities of the two men (which are depicted as being unremarkable) co-circulate with markers of their whiteness, reinforcing suggestions that whiteness makes same-sex sexualities more acceptable, and that such co-circulations perpetuate stereotypes that same-sex sexualities are always white.

The morning after having had sex, Nicholas observes that “[t]he morning sun flooded the bed, lighting up the coppery-red hair on the pillow. Luc opened his eyes, smiled, and stretched himself indulgently” (355). Again, the narrative, somewhat inconspicuously, marks Luc’s whiteness by remarking on his hair colour, noting that “the dusting of red-gold down gleamed” on his chest (355). Looking at Luc in the bed, Nicholas says “The Angel of Dawning”, a name that Gerhard has repeatedly used to eroticise Luc. Heyns (355) writes:

[Luc] smiled again, and pushed the blankets all the way down. ‘You mean this one?’ he asked. ‘We used to call it a Morning Glory.’
‘So did we,’ I said, ‘but Angel of Dawning is better.’

The way in which both characters nostalgically refer to a separate but connected “we” – implicitly white and heterosexual given the structuring of their society – emphasises the continuities between conventional locker room adolescence and their same-sex
intimacies in the present. What is more, the novel emphasises Luc's and Nicholas's mutual whiteness through a conversation that Nicholas has with his mother: she laments that he is “rejecting [his] background” because his girlfriend and best friend are both Afrikaans-speaking. His mother adds that “[he’d] be better off with a nice English girl” (362). In response to this, Nicholas thinks to himself: “‘Yes, mother.’ If it’s any consolation to you, mother, I’ve just been fucked silly, in a very precise sense of the word, by a nice English boy” (362). Though he does not say this, of course, he nonetheless emphasises the way in which his sex with Luc is marked by an unnamed whiteness – coded here as English-speaking – and its concomitant privileged status.

Unlike Luc and Nicholas, who are depicted as having pleasurable sex with each other without any recourse to identity politics – despite Stobie’s (2007: 173-75), Trish Murphy’s (2003: 19) and Rosenthal’s (2003) assertions to the contrary – Gerhard openly embraces a gay cultural politics and its sexualised spaces. It is also through Gerhard that the novel maps a transnational sexual culture. Having accidentally stumbled upon a gay bar one evening in London while a student, Gerhard has sex with another man. He returns to his residence, wakes Nicholas up, and declares to him: “I have discovered that I am, in all probability, a moffie” (Heyns 2003: 47). After undergoing this ritual of coming out, so central to Western gay identity politics, he explains to a confused and uncomfortable Nicholas that “[t]o put it more plainly, if you enjoy sucking cocks you are a cocksucker” (48). These two declarations are more significant than they may initially seem, and in fact mark out the battle lines that have shaped significant transnational debates on assimilationist politics. Larry Kramer, for instance, advances a typical argument that gay public visibility should be sanitised and desexualised in order to mould a palatable assimilationist aesthetic. He argues that “the only way gays can assume our political responsibility and obtain our democratic due, is to fight for our rights as gays. To be taught about, to be studied, to be written about, not as cocks and cunts, but as gays” (Kramer in Warner 2000: 33). However, others are critical of the way in which some organisations and modes of representation pursue progress in the name of sexual identity, leaving the stigma and shame of sex largely intact (Warner 2000). Gerhard, in contrast, embraces a gay identity while at the same time reminding Nicholas (and the reader) what sexual acts this identity signifies. Significantly, however, Heyns’s novel advances an assimilationist aesthetic that does not demand “a desexualized or sanitized version of queer culture as the price for
inclusion within the national public sphere” – to borrow a phrase from Cvetkovich (2003: 5). Instead, sexuality is represented with candour in the novel, exposing the resilience of postapartheid whiteness in framing assimilation.

In some ways, Gerhard is an exemplar assimilationist. Nicholas remarks that “[h]e is not really an obvious homosexual: he looks quite normal, even more normal than most, if by normal you understand a square chin and big muscles and general bulk” (Heyns 2003: 43-44). This description resists essentialism at the same time as it enacts new exclusions. Though Nicholas, Luc, and Gerhard engage in same-sex sexualities, the otherness of which is camouflaged by the normative privileges of their common whiteness, their assimilationist aesthetics take on vastly different forms. Gerhard, a lawyer, seems to function as the spokesperson for the lustily erotic and he lives in a flat in the centre of the city in Cape Town “which serves him more as a launching pad, really, than a home” (57). The narrator’s ironic hyperbole does not detract from the playfulness with which Gerhard’s sex life is described. He remarks to Nicholas at one point that he is hoping for “a night of mindless and ceaseless carnal delights to follow” his evening game of squash (33). After having sex with Luc, Nicholas recalls Gerhard’s explanation of the rules supposedly governing casual sex among gay men. Though noting that he desperately wants commitment from Luc, Nicholas speculates that he has been a “one-night stand, or a bed-and-breakfast” (356, original emphasis) and recalls the language through which Gerhard has depicted gay sexual cultures as constitutively promiscuous and non-committal: “I had learnt from Gerhard that a post-mortem presumes a corpse and not to regurgitate the meal; I knew to make love, not conversation and not to take a fuck for an introduction” (360, original emphasis).

Despite the salaciousness of Gerhard’s sexual history, and his account of same-sex sexual cultures, for most of the novel Gerhard is, in fact, in a committed relationship with his boyfriend, Clive. Noting that Clive’s expectations of fidelity are “[i]nconvenient but sweet” (107), Gerhard remains in a monogamous relationship with him for most of the novel. Monogamous coupling is positioned as the exemplar of a “bourgeois existence” and in direct opposition to “extreme promiscuity” (418). This is simultaneously a playful appropriation of a Marxist critique as well as an ironic comment on the supposed conditions of assimilation. The text is also quick, however, to reject essentialist notions that heterosexuality is at its core about moderation and
monogamy. The Black Widow explains the rationale behind her conversion therapy and says:

'It is my theory, for which I have considerable evidence, that sexual hyperactivity is an indicator not, as is often assumed, of an excess of sexual appetite, but of profound dissatisfaction: to put it bluntly, homosexuals fornicate ceaselessly because they're never satisfied.'

Bruce [the barman], overhearing this [...] interjected, ‘You mean straights fuck just once and die in bliss like bumble bees?’ (291)

Gerhard further criticises what he imagines are the excesses of assimilation when he says “I don’t want to be a heterosexual and join the PTA and the Rotarians and go to dinner dances at the golf club” (266). As Gerhard seems to insist, however, there is no single mode of sexual respectability. Instead, whiteness as the privileged frame of signification in this novel constructs all the sexual and romantic coupling between white men as various iterations of a seemingly acceptable norm.

The text locates these same-sex sexualities within a very particular liberal constitutional framework, and the Constitution’s equality clause is identified as an assimilationist mechanism *par excellence*. In response to Nicholas’s description of “the poofter press”, Gerhard reminds him that “[u]nder the new Constitution it’s illegal to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation” (265). This utterance takes on the power of fact and Heyns does not interrogate the limitations of this legal document; the Constitution is imbued with absolute power. Similarly, Luc is quick to point out to Nicholas that sex between men is “not a sin, it’s not even a crime anymore” (346). The word “even” suggests that while the white male characters have already disavowed any moralist or religious prohibition against same-sex intimacies, it is to reforms in the legal framework of statist biopolitics that they gesture most forcefully. Through Gerhard, the Constitution is imbued with a (non-racial) universalism that benefits the almost all-white cast of characters (127, 265, 316), highlighting the text’s blindness to the racial politics through which the equality clause was formulated (see Chapter 1), as well as those who are, in practice, excluded from its protections (see Chapter 3).

Heyns’s novel maps a transnational gay culture, as the apparent continuities between same-sex sexual cultures stretch across three countries. Nicholas recounts that the gay bar where Gerhard met his first lover was called “The Stud Farm” (46). Gerhard, who “was wearing the boots and leather jacket that he had used for hunting in the
Western Transvaal [and] which in the middle of London has quite an exotic effect” (46), went inside the bar and was surprised to find that the men inside were dressed almost exclusively in leather. He recalls that a man approached him and complimented him on his boots and asked “Are they King’s Road?” to which he replied “No, Mkwassie Co-op” (46). Gerhard’s sexual awakening takes place in this gay leather bar in London. This awakening also reveals the (re)circulation of cultural artefacts in different contexts. Not only does Gerhard’s insistence on wearing his hunting jacket and boots from rural South Africa designate him as a cultural outsider in the streets of London, it is that same outfit that allows him to assimilate into this sexualised space. What is more, his naïve assertion that his boots were not manufactured by a famous brand but by a rural outfitter back home highlights the continuities between hypermasculine cultures of hunting in the Western Transvaal and hypermasculine spaces of same-sex sexuality in London. This leather bar is also tied to an ever-expanding transnational gay imaginary, as its depiction resonates strongly with the description of a bar in Cape Town, later in the novel. At this bar, the protagonist observes “[t]wo men, bare-chested except for leather waistcoats, […] performing an elaborate ritual on the tiny dance floor; they were attached to each other by two chains, clamped with crocodile clips to the earlobes of the one and the nipples of the other” (289). These leather bars constitute anchors in the transnational aesthetics and form of same-sex public cultures that advance assimilation without sanitisation.

After his embrace of his sexuality while studying in London, Gerhard convinces Nicholas to embark on a tour of Italy. He obtains the ManMeet Guide: “a lurid but terse publication listing in graphic shorthand the nature, location and attractions of the apparently innumerable places on earth where men intent on sexual intercourse with other men could meet other similarly inclined” (49). Though this guide maps multiple spaces of same-sex sexuality around the globe, it is across Italy that Gerhard (accompanied by Nicholas as an art enthusiast) travel. Nicholas observes the breadth of this imagined gay community when he recounts some of the guide’s keywords: “LBAYOR, for instance, stood for Leather and Bondage, At Your Own Risk; BSRS was Beware: Sincere Relationship Seekers, and BB was Bargain Basement. [However] most of the ManMeet recommendations turned out to be truck stops on the Autostrada (PSBB: ‘Probably Straight but Bored’)” (49). The guide literally maps the spaces of same-sex sexuality in their diversity and sketches a dynamic sexual network, which
includes kinky leather cultures, serious monogamous encounters, and heterosexual men who want to have sex with men. Gerhard's itinerary connects these multiple imaginaries as the trip unfolds, and includes frequent sex with strangers, oral sex with truck drivers on the Autostrada (51), accidentally (and laughably) “proposing oral sex to a flock of sheep” (51), and waiting next to the statue of David because, according to the guide, “[s]ooner or later every gay man in the world visits the David, so hang around” (51).

Sexual cultures in Cape Town are cast as coterminous with those in these European capitals, producing cosmopolitan knowledges about an imagined gay community that is always already white. Nicholas describes similar cultures of cruising and casual sex in Cape Town to those mentioned here when hespeculates about the different clubs, bathhouses and public spaces known for anonymous sexual hook-ups between men that Gerhard might have visited: “Angels? The Bronx? Rondebosch station? Sandy Bay? Sea Point Promenade? Steamers?” (61-62). However, the novel projects a distinct image of the types of men who populate these spaces when Nicholas describes a barman in one of the gay clubs who “rippled the muscles of his abdomen, evidently to demonstrate his qualification for this vocation” (288). Furthermore, surreptitiously identifying his race, the narrator describes this barman’s “tanned features, so curiously featureless in their bland perfection, relaxed into a blinding grin” (288). At the bar, Nicholas tries to play the role of the ‘authentic homosexual’ as he meets the Black Widow. He recalls: “I wanted a beer, but I thought I’d better ask for something homosexual. ‘White wine, please. Dry.’” (288). The barman subverts his assumption when he informs him that the regulars seldom order wine, rejecting stereotypes that link same-sex sexuality with the apparent femininity of wine drinkers, and disavowing Nicholas’s exaggerated sense of difference.

Gerhard further describes a visible sexual public when he explains his boyfriend’s infidelity:

‘Strictly speaking, of course, and this is what he maintains, he did go for a jog, and the blowjob just sort of took him unawares. And don’t look sceptical, it happens, I have often enough been, as it were, for unwary passers-by, the Unforeseen Blowjob in the Bus Shelter, the Faceless Fuck in the Forest, the Whimsical Wank in the Woods...’. (432)
Though Duggan (2002: 181) suggests that ‘respectable’ assimilationists militated against “publiciz[ing] ‘private’ matters considered offensive to the phantom ‘general public’”, Heyns’s texts resists these binaries of acceptability. It is not just the alliteration and playful tone of this extract and its extraordinarily forgiving sentiment that intimates a more open-ended same-sex sexual culture; it is also the way in which gay men are seemingly deprived of agency, as if “the blowjob just sort of took him unaware”, suggesting that sex simply happens to gay men without their capacity to decline. While this characterisation is, of course, an essentialist hypersexualisation of gay men, this is subverted throughout the rest of the novel. The Reluctant Passenger appears to disarticulate imagined hierarchies of sexual respectability and, instead, insist that integration into mainstream society is predicated on middle-class whiteness rather than any sanitisation of gay sexual cultures. One of the only instances of homophobia occurs against Gerhard’s boyfriend, Clive, after he has engaged in oral sex in a bus shelter. After being badly assaulted, he decides that he wants to move to London to get away from the violence. However, Gerhard is quick to point out that “even in London they take a dim view of people giving each other blowjobs in bus shelters. It’s not as if England is exactly Poofter Heaven, from what I hear” (Heyns 2003: 431). In this way, the novel marks out a transnational gay imaginary that is overlaid onto a somewhat more faint network of heteronormative power and exclusion.

Lost Ground

Less ironic and more introspective than his earlier text, Heyns’s fifth novel Lost Ground recounts the experiences of its protagonist, Peter Jacobs, who returns to his rural hometown of Alfredville, 22 years after leaving it to avoid conscription to the apartheid military. The novel interrogates the machinations of the assimilationist form in several ways. Similar to Luc and Nicholas in The Reluctant Passenger, the text constructs complex characters for whom same-sex sexual desire is a private encounter between men that is absent from, or only vaguely part of, their public identities. The text is also significant for the way in which it discursively marks and excludes those same-sex sexualities that are not white or conventionally masculine. Peter’s reason for returning is to investigate the seemingly racialised murder of his cousin, Desirée, about which he hopes to write an article for an international media publication. While he hopes to frame the story as a modern day Othello – replete with the murdered white woman
and her black husband, who returns from exile as an antiapartheid hero – Peter fails to realise the extent to which he is, in fact, an unnamed erotic subtext to the real murder plot. Though the frame narration is set in January 2010, it is interspersed with Peter’s memories of his adolescence in the town in the late 1980s. Details about his relationship with the best friend of his youth, Bennie Nienaber, are paired with revelations that appear to link Bennie to the crime. While the text resists some of the typical plot and character developments that characterise crime fiction as a genre, readers accompany Peter as he attempts to make sense of the seemingly anomalous narrative threads of the murder.

Peter initially uncritically accepts the assumption that the victim’s black husband committed the crime, and readers are reminded by several characters that not being white makes accusations of criminality and violence against one more plausible. The centrality of Peter to the murder of his cousin remains only implicitly suggested for most of the novel. It is Bennie’s wife who is the actual killer, and she murders Desirée in an act of jealousy, knowing that Bennie has had an emotional and sexual interest in her since before their marriage. However, the uncanny physical resemblance between Peter and his late cousin is remarked on a number of times and this is significant in light of the homoeroticism that underpins his best friend’s love interest. Finuala Dowling (2012) astutely observes that as Desirée’s “doppelganger”, Peter was her twin “in beauty, glamour, and witting or unwitting sexual manipulation”. Furthermore, Dowling (2012) writes:

The cousins, it turns out, have elicited love and jealousy from the same two people. Tall, blonde, beautiful and with an inbuilt sense of their own apartness, the cousins have been oblivious to the heartbreak they have caused.

Dowling’s point is that Bennie was in love with both Peter and, in his absence after leaving for England, Desirée. The jealous person to whom she refers is Bennie’s wife, Chrisna. Following Bennie’s suicide after being accused of the murder by Peter – a seemingly obvious conclusion given the information to which Peter is unwittingly given access – Chrisna admits to Peter that it was in fact she who murdered his cousin. Chrisna, it appears, has always been jealous of Bennie’s love for Peter, and his cousin by extension. Summarising Peter’s memories of his childhood, Dowling (2012) describes the “lyrically tender and funny recollections of his teenage years, moonlit Karoo summer nights, skinny dipping with a school friend, motor biking, pretending to
like girls when they really loved one another”. What we know is that the seeds for the tragic murder seem to have been planted more than two decades earlier when one young man unexpectedly and unforgivably abandoned his best friend who loved him. Chrisna makes this point explicitly at the end of the novel when she says to Peter: “If you really think about it, in the end it was you who caused your cousin’s death” (Heyns 2011: 288).

Chrisna is acutely aware of her husband’s unacknowledged love for Peter, and how this has played out with Desirée, and reveals her jealousy when she complains to Peter that:

[You came back and found Bennie happily married and you started working on him to make him dissatisfied, taking him running, going for walks with him at night, going swimming with him, two grown-up men carrying on like schoolboys. I don’t know what you did to him, but after Desirée’s death he was more restful, and he would have settled again, but then you came, and he became all restless again. And with you even looking like her, it was like having her back. (290)]

That Bennie kills himself after he is falsely accused of murder by Peter – “the one man in the world whose opinion matters to [him]” (287) – reveals the intensity of the unspoken feelings between them. The unacknowledged sexual intimacy and tension between Peter and Bennie in their youth, is evident, for instance, when Peter reflects on a girl from that period: “It is inconceivable that this fat, fruitful woman could ever have been the object of my and Bennie’s erotic fantasies. Or perhaps she was never their object, more their occasion – that is, we needed to share an erotic fantasy and she was its pretext” (182). The novel situates Bennie in something of a love triangle with his wife on the one hand, and Desirée/Peter on the other. Bennie, therefore, evidences a different way of occupying an assimilationist aesthetic, in which his self-presentation remains constant, irrespective of whether his desire is directed at another man or a woman (who overlap in his consciousness). Bennie is described as being “in good shape [without a] paunch or double chin” (127), and his normative assimilation does not take the hypermasculine muscular form or the identity politics that characterise Gay Pages, or Gerhard in The Reluctant Passenger. Instead, he is described as wearing “a short-sleeved khaki shirt and khaki shorts with flip flops” to dinner (127), apparel associated more with rural, Afrikaans communities than with the urban centres of sexual identity politics. While Renate Lenz (2015: 165) initially seems to desexualise the men’s complex histories when she vaguely writes that “Bennie
Nienaber spiritually merged his being with Peter”, the novel does not. It is the desperate urgency of desire, love and loss that drives this novel to its conclusion.

Heyns appears to repeat his assertion that the object of someone’s sexual desire should not disrupt that person’s locatedness within an imagined mainstream. Marking the continuities between desires that are directed at a person of the same-sex and of the opposite sex, the novel dismisses any claims that same-sex intimacies are a barrier to continued inclusion in an imagined normative society. Peter reflects on his life after leaving Alfredville:

And if I’d stayed in Alfredville, I muse over the remains of my milk tart, might I have married Emmerentia or someone like her? Instead of which I have, or had until recently, James. Is it possible that the same person could conceivably been equally happy or unhappy with Emmerentia and with James? (Heyns 2011: 182)

Most interestingly, while Peter has repeatedly marked James as a racial other, he does not name gender as the point of difference between him and Emmerentia. Rather, the question is posed as a more generic issue about how partners shape our identities and experiences. This collapses the differences between same-sex or heterosexual coupling, challenging sexuality as a basis for identity or for exclusion from the body politic. Similarly, Peter describes his sexual experimentation in London and observes:

The somewhat uncertain direction of my sexuality, too, seemed not to be a problem here, where everything was permissible and experimentation was encouraged. I discovered somewhat to my bemusement that I was, if not exactly courted, then at any rate in moderate demand, at parties and in pubs, both by women and by men. I found that I could give and receive pleasure to and from both, and decided that the fuss about sexual orientation was a hangover from a puritanical age when human diversity was regarded as subversive. (199)

Not only is the pursuit of sexual pleasure prioritised here, so too is the disavowal of sexual taxonomies more generally. Lost Ground and The Reluctant Passenger share a scepticism of sexual identity politics and prefer to articulate an unmarked assimilationist aesthetic predicated on the continuities between men, irrespective of their sexual desire. Peter’s assertion that sexual identities are “a hangover from a puritanical age when human diversity was regarded as subversive” is also an explicit rebuff of the queer oppositionality demanded by Duggan and Warner, as Heyns insists that same-sex desire may very well be only incidental to identity.
Perhaps one of the most fascinating characters in the novel, in terms of the connections between whiteness, transgression and respectability, is Dr Henk Pretorius, the town’s vet. Peter plans to meet Henk to find out more about his cousin, who had befriended him. The ‘straight-acting’, attractive, and unassuming vet is positioned as an exemplar in the novel: Dr Henk Pretorius comes to resemble an ideal form of same-sex masculinity, one that so admirably resembles heterosexual men that its otherness is not identifiable. One local resident, unaware of the vet’s sexual interest in men, remarks that Henk is “quite an ordinary-looking bugger” (71). Similarly, Peter describes Henk physically and notes that “he has the kind of rangy weatheredness that women and some men find irresistible” (120). Peter observes with approval “that there’s nothing flamboyant about Dr Henk Pretorius” (121-22). It is significant, then, in light of his status as a respectable exemplar of ordinariness and an idealised masculinity that Henk engages in same-sex sexual activity. His participation in cruising practices, despite the evident parochialism of the town, is clear when he thinks that Peter is following him down the street in order to proposition him for sex. Henk later admits to Peter that “I cruised you on the main street of Alfredville” (148), after which Peter thinks to himself that perhaps Henk only cooperated with the questioning about Desirée because he assumed Peter was “biddable and beddable” (149).

Henk’s (white) assimilationist aesthetic camouflages the otherness of both his same-sex sexuality, and the fact that he has sex with (legal) adolescent school boys (185). Often cast as the most heinous sexual transgression, sex with high schoolers does not result in Henk being discursively excluded from the assimilationist centre. When Peter visits Henk at his home, he briefly draws on stereotypes about gay men by observing that he would have known Henk was gay because of “a certain meticulousness” and the “evident care with which each object [in the room] had been selected” (183). However, this view is soon displaced by a return to the eroticism of same-sex subjectivities when he picks up a book that features a “tastefully erotic cover, a pair of bare shoulders, a shaven head half-buried in the folded arms” (183). This displacement of the stereotypical in favour of the erotic again points to how Henk’s assimilation – implicitly white, middle class, and straight-acting – bleaches the otherness of same-sex sexualities, diminishing his stain, as it were, on the town’s body politic. Heyns makes no judgement about the character, nor does he elicit such a judgement from the reader. He also does not need to defend explicitly the sexual
activities of the vet, revealing instead an awareness that Henk’s potentially transgressive otherness is always already mitigated by his whiteness and rugged masculinity. It is not my suggestion that embodying such an assimilationist aesthetic is intrinsically negative or should be read as being complicit with heteronormativity, as Warner (2000), Duggan (2002), and others might suggest. I am also not suggesting that an assimilationist aesthetic conceals some sort of essentialist queer self. Many men who have sex with men occupy such a mainstream positionality in the same way that Henk does. I am interested, rather, in how such an aesthetic co-circulates with specific configurations of race and how this mitigates imaginings of sexual difference.

*Lost Ground* exposes the way in which overt racism overlaps with a post-race idealism in the town, pointing to the myopia that is the condition of white privilege. Overtly racist comments are made throughout the novel by various residents, including Peter’s uncle (Heyns 2011: 127), his aunt (89), the receptionist at the hotel (160), and customers at the hotel bar (20-21, 26). Certain characters also express resistance to an interracial marriage (66). At the same time, some white men construct themselves as victims of a ‘racist’ postapartheid society because of the inaccessibility of certain transformation and economic empowerment deals (22). Resonating somewhat with this cultural space, the protagonist notes that in his luggage he includes a copy of both Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart*. Incidentally, Eusebius McKaiser (2012: 56) observes that these two white writers mark what he calls “a false dichotomy” between two extreme positions of postapartheid whiteness, based either on “regret and guilt” on the one hand or an alienating sense of “self-pity” on the other. What is more significant, however, is that both texts illustrate the intertextual connections between whiteness and the postapartheid moment. The protagonist’s self-consciousness about his whiteness (and its concomitant privileges) is evident when he thinks to himself that “I recognise to my dismay, I am still racist enough to be surprised at seeing a black woman reading Coetzee” (Heyns 2011: 25). While whiteness is a structuring representational mode that has circulated transnationally for centuries, it also takes very particular forms in this small town as it negotiates its precariousness in the present. Peter reflects on the ways in which whiteness co-circulates with assumptions of respectability and normality when he writes an email to his former partner in London:
Judging by the conversation of the chap next to me on the plane, a corporate type from Stellenbosch […] any hitch in any arrangement confirms the whites in their none-too-covert conviction that blacks (or they as they are elliptically but pregnantly called) can’t run a country. Not, I seem to remember, that they (the other them!) did a much better job when they (we!) had the opportunity. Heavens, the very pronouns are confused in this place. (19, italics in original)

This email reveals not only the protagonist’s heightened awareness about race relations but also the subtle ways in which he has the power to locate and, to an extent, define his own subject position. Peter’s commentary about the pronominal marking of racial otherness also speaks to the essentialist assumptions that white supremacy makes mobile, attesting to the power of whiteness in shaping expectations and perceptions.

Despite his insights into the complexities of race, the protagonist appears blind to the legacy of apartheid’s spatial planning in the town. As he meets with Nonyameko, a former antiapartheid activist and psychologist who he has befriended, he realises that they grew up in the same town at the same time. Nonyameko corrects him and says: “Hardly. You grew up in white Alfredville, I grew up in black Alfredville. They are two different places” (98). Melissa Steyn and Don Foster (2008: 30) write that it is this “characteristic lack of insight into its own privilege that is the trademark of whiteness”.

Later, when Peter and Nonyameko go for a walk together, the supposed invisibility of this whiteness is exposed:

I automatically turn left, in the direction of the dam: Alfredville does not offer a wide variety of walks. But Nonyameko puts a restraining hand on my arm. ‘No, let’s walk this way,’ she says, turning towards the road leading up to the R62.
‘There’s nothing there, apart from the main road,’ I protest.
‘Yes, nothing apart from the main road and about twenty thousand people.’ (Heyns 2011: 203)

After admitting that he had never walked through a township, Peter is lead through a black community, where the two characters share their own narratives of belonging, exclusion, and exile with one another. Though Sam Naidu (2013: 131), in her reading of the novel within the crime fiction genre, writes that Nonyameko “plays the role of sidekick”, this characterisation undermines her importance in the novel in disrupting the invisibility of whiteness and in inscribing alternative imaginings of race and identity.

Furthermore, Lost Ground conceptualises assimilation as an exercise in both normative whiteness, gender norms, and racial exclusion. Peter’s decision to travel to
the Karoo from London is informed partially by his breakup with his partner, James. Peter recalls the time that his parents met James in London:

They met James once, when they came to London, but if they wondered about him, about the tall, elegant Jamaican who seemed to share my life on an undeclared basis, they didn’t say so, and I didn’t volunteer any information. (Heyns 2011: 35)

Albeit with some subtlety, James is racially marked here, as the reference to his nationality conjures new imageries about race and histories of cultural exclusion. Similarly, the fact that James’s racial identity does not circulate with Peter’s own sense of whiteness recurs several times. For instance, when he first speaks to Nonyameko, he tries to defend his British identity and says: “I have a British partner, for God’s sake” (96). He thinks about this declaration and reflects to himself that “[o]kay, so he’s half Jamaican, and he’s no longer my partner as of a week ago, but I needn’t tell her that” (96). Similarly, his former “common-law mother-in-law” is also marked explicitly as Jamaican in his narrative. He later explains to Nonyameko that “[f]he thing is, my partner of five years’ standing – and I might as well go all the way and tell you that he’s a man, a black man – broke up with me a week ago” (111). What is interesting about this is the layered way in which the revelation unfolds. It is not enough to mention his gender; his race must also be identified, marking him as other at the same time as he clings to the intimacy of their former relationship. Nonyameko then ridicules his racial marking and says: “Did you not say he was black? He and I will be discussing the proletariat revolution. Relationships are a bourgeois obsession” (112). Nonyameko thus questions essentialist notions of black identity as she simultaneously mocks those who criticise long-term monogamy as not being sufficiently radical or revolutionary.

Much like in The Reluctant Passenger, sexual intimacies between men are cast in a playful and even celebratory tone in Lost Ground. Sexuality is merely incidental, rather than central, to the narrative. However, this is predicated on a certain contextual and conceptual relationship between race and sexuality. In a similar way to The Reluctant Passenger and Gay Pages, the whiteness of same-sex sexualities is enforced through the nominal and discursive marking and/or erasure of black men who have sex with men. The self/other dialectic operates largely on the axis of race rather than sexuality, leading to the incorporation of white men who have sex with men by virtue of race, and excluding black people – including black gay men – on the same basis. When
describing the two men who manage the hotel in the town, Peter notes that “this is not
the Alfredville of my youth […] this is Alfredville with a gay hotel owner and his black
partner” (25) He also notes that this hotel is run by “a queen and – if I read the signs
correctly – his black consort” (20). What is clear from both of these remarks is that gay
men are implicitly white unless named differently. It is only when the “partner” or
“consort” is black that this has to be stated. Similarly, Peter earlier observes the
patrons at the hotel bar, noting that they include “two black businessmen – as I assume
from their suits and ties” (20). Unlike the “three farmers” and the “young couple” whose
are sitting nearby and whose race is unmarked, it is only when one is black that this
needs to be added. In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison (1993: 72) comments on the
race of a character in one of Ernest Hemingway’s novels and astutely observes that
“[he] is white, and we know he is because nobody says so”. The implication here is
that white is the universal norm and only otherness needs to be named. Frankenberg
(1997: 4) writes that “whiteness makes itself invisible precisely by asserting its
normalcy, its transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its
transparency depends”.

In a somewhat similar vein, the protagonist marks and discursively excludes men who
challenge the assimilationist investment in conventional ideas of masculinity. On first
seeing Joachim, the hotel owner, he observes that he has a “Burt Reynolds
moustache” but was “waving an un-Burt Reynolds-like wrist” (Heyns 2011: 10),
marking his coded effeminacy and his exclusion from assimilationist masculinities that
the famous actor might signify. Similarly, he notes that Joachim was known as “Fairy”
(11) in his youth, an epithet that he continues to use in the present. Similarly, Boris,
Joachim’s partner, is described and dismissed by the protagonist as being a “[p]onsy
little queen” (115). The assimilationist aesthetic depends on this exclusion of
effeminate men and the camp aesthetic, as publicly occupying the space of ‘normal’
is shown to be inextricably bound up with conventional masculinities.

The politics of exclusion become even clearer when Peter learns that Boris and
Joachim are engaged to be married. As it happens, the protagonist’s first thought is of
Boris and James, conceptually brought together only by their common blackness and,
incidentally, their same-sex sexuality. Peter reflects: “I look at Boris. I have often
wondered whether black people can blush – James is impervious to embarrassment,
so that’s no test – and I’m intrigued to see Boris’s melted-chocolate complexion acquire a distinct glow” (248). Both men are marked as racial others and positioned outside the invisible privilege of Peter’s own normative whiteness. The complex othering on the basis of race, on the one hand, and the policing of the codes of normative masculinity on the other, come together in Joachim’s description of what his wedding with Boris will look like. When asked what type of wedding they are planning, Joachim announces “a white wedding, of course” with “Boris all in white and me all in black, yin and yang checkerboard, much more stylish than the rainbow nation” (249). Boris is feminised and it is suggested that he will wear a “cute little going-away number” (249). Joachim notes that he will have a “mother-of-the-bride outfit designed for his mother and that he can expect his family to attend because they will “go anywhere for a free piss-up” (249). Boris’s coloured “people”, Joachim jeers, “those of them who aren’t dancing around with bare boobs and grass skirts, can serve the koeksisters and [his] dad […] in his leopard loincloth can slaughter a goat” (249). While no doubt said in jest, this description of the wedding exaggerates and exposes the exclusions on which the assimilationist aesthetics of whiteness depend. Although Joachim does not have high expectations of his own extended family, he still imagines that they will join them in the NG Kerk “with a reception in the Kerksaal afterwards, koeksisters and tea for everybody” (249). It is Boris’s family that is marked as culturally unassimilable and reduced to crude colonial caricatures of racial otherness.

Interestingly, while this novel describes the planning for this same-sex marriage, the zenith of gay rights activism globally, it remains a deeply conservative project predicated on the reproduction of historical forms of racism. Indeed, “there are times” – Heyns seems to be suggesting – “when whiteness seems to mean only a defiant shout of ‘I am not that Other!’” (Frankenberg 2001: 75).

Conclusion

The texts that I have discussed here articulate a particular relationship between race and sexuality, despite the different rhetorical strategies that each text employs. The paradoxically post-race, all-white visual register of Gay Pages contrasts with Heyns’s novels. While in Lost Ground the non-white gay men are marked out and discursively excluded, and in The Reluctant Passenger black same-sex sexualities are absent altogether, Heyns’s fiction at least acknowledges and subverts whiteness’s custodial
role over the normative. Though these transnational white, gay imaginaries are portable across time and space, they remain restless as the internal logic of each text refashions the aesthetics of assimilation. Though Gay Pages consistently projects a figure of the white, wealthy, attractive, athletic gay man who appears to be interested in conventionally (heteronormative) masculine practices of consumption, a somewhat similar figure circulates in the form of Gerhard in The Reluctant Passenger and of Henk in Lost Ground. However, whereas Gay Pages does little to complicate this figure, Heyns’s fiction generates a richer and more complex construction of these white, gay imaginaries. In Heyns’s earlier novel, Gerhard’s fixed sexual identity and his active participation in its sexualised spaces and rituals is contrasted with the behaviour of the other two main characters. While Nicholas is an anxious lawyer who thrives on social order, and Luc is a spoilt nudist and naturalist who sometimes has a girlfriend, both men find emotional and sexual fulfilment in sex with men. Nonetheless, despite the very different ways in which they claim a privileged social position, they remain camouflaged by the normative power of middle-class whiteness throughout the text. Similarly, Lost Ground positions Bennie and Peter as ‘normal’ men whose same-sex sexual desires are unremarkable given their privileged social location. Theirs is a story of love and devastating loss that appears untrammelled by obvious societal homophobia. This novel acknowledges, however, that the perceived normativity of Peter’s same-sex sexuality depends on the exclusion of both black men who have sex with men, as well as men who are effeminate, which undermines Lenz’s (2015: 201) rather simplistic assertion that “Peter, Desirée and Joachim all accept otherness on equal terms and engage with those who are different to them”. Finally, though Gay Pages and The Reluctant Passenger explicitly map transnational sexual cultures, they both limit these connections to spaces of urban power in the Global North. Though this reflects the historical roots of the organised gay and lesbian rights movement, the texts’ failure to conceptualise a truly global itinerary of sexual cultures and forms of identity reasserts that it is a definitively white transnational network of representation that lies at the centre of the gay imaginaries that circulate through these texts.
Notes

1 The term cisgendered refers to persons whose biological sex aligns with their gendered identity, and is generally used in contrast to transgendered.

2 Though Sonnekus and Van Eeden (2009), as well as Katlego Disemelo (2014), offer important analyses of the politics of race in earlier editions of Gay Pages, their analyses maintain rather inward-looking emphases that tend to overlook the significance of both historical and contemporary transnational cultural flows and the negotiated production of rootedness.

3 See Andrea Dottolo (2014) and Catherine Crisp (2014) for a discussion of whiteness and lesbian women.

4 Many sources have insisted however that whiteness continues to be enacted through military, biopolitical and epistemic violence, particularly in relation to the war on terror, migration policies, and the inequitable distribution of resources.

5 Frankenberg (1997: 1) similarly insists that foregrounding whiteness as an analytical lens is critical in order to confront the “continued failure to displace the ‘unmarked marker’ status of whiteness, a continued inability to ‘color’ the seeming transparency of white positionings”. Frankenberg (1997: 1) warns, nonetheless, against allowing the study of whiteness to “contribute to the process of recentering rather than decentering it”.

6 Frankenberg (2001: 76) reminds us that “whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it”.

7 Canonical works of literature from the twentieth and twenty-first century attest to this and show the ways in which black South Africans have mapped whiteness and its arrogant assertion of (un)acknowledged power. Whiteness as a privileged social location is evident in popular fictional and non-fictional works that span more than a century, from the autobiographies of Sol Plaatje and Es'kia Mphahlele, the plays of Gibson Kente and Mbongeni Ngema, and the political treatise of Steve Biko. More recent South African literature by black writers such as K. Sello Duiker, Lewis Nkosi, Sindiwe Magona, Zakes Mda, Fred Khumalo, and Imraan Coovadia continue to make visible the insidious power of whiteness. While there were, of course, several significant white writers (such as André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and Breyten Breytenbach) who sought to expose the racism and brutality of the apartheid regime, the production, circulation and reception of their work inadvertently perpetuated the platform of white privilege from which they spoke. The preservation of whiteness as a structuring discourse, then, is not necessarily a question of racist intention but rather a blindness to one’s location in privilege.


9 Sonnekus and Van Eeden (2009: 86) made a similar criticism of Gay Pages’s contributors several years ago.

10 See Sonnekus and Van Eeden (2009) for a similar discussion.

11 Advertising for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, The Brunch Club, and the Southern Sun include non-white models.

12 Even in those instances where the magazine risks a broader mapping of LGBTI sexual cultures, the featured stories are of white transgendered men and women. These include photographs of former athlete Caitlyn Jenner (2015c: 26; 2016c: 28) and even a story about a transgendered man winning the somewhat obscure “Sexiest Vegan Male of the Year” award (2016c: 32). A photograph of unnamed transgendered women in India is an exception (2014c: 30)


14 With only two black characters in the entire novel, both of whom identify as heterosexual and have been explicitly raced through their names, Dikaledi and Mhlobo, there is little space for exploring same-sex sexualities among people who are not white. While the novel is bold in exposing the machinations
of white privilege, it is also blind to its considerable erasure of black bodies. At the end of the novel, these two characters decide to get married, a decision that Mhlobo explains away by stating simply: “Just say it’s a cultural thing” (Heyns 2003: 429), a statement that has previously been established as a discursive mechanism for the othering of those whose sexual selves are not bound up in whiteness. However, the impending marriage between the only two black characters in the novel offers a conservative reframing of sexuality, perpetuating the stereotype that same-sex sexualities are inherently white and ‘authentic’ blackness is always already heterosexual.

15 See Naidu (2013) for a more detailed discussion of this.
CHAPTER 3: READING THE BLACK LESBIAN BODY IN ZANELE MUHOLI’S ONLY HALF THE PICTURE

What can the future hold if our present entertainment is the spectacle of contemporary colonization, dehumanization, and disempowerment where the image serves as a murder weapon. Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation. (hooks 1992: 7)

In August 2009, then Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana walked out of an exhibition in Johannesburg that was to feature and celebrate the works of several black, female South African artists. Amongst other things, Xingwana objected to a number of Zanele Muholi’s photographs that depicted nudity as well as intimacy between women. The Minister went as far as refusing to deliver her prepared address at the opening of the exhibition. Failing to conceal her disgust, Xingwana (in Van der Vlies 2012: 140) stated that the photographs were “immoral, offensive and going against nation-building”. The disjuncture between cultures of constitutionalism and human rights on the one hand, and the lived experiences of black lesbians on the other – iterated differently in homophobic violence and in senior governmental ambivalence – speaks to the way in which discourses about race and gender can take root in vastly different ways. These discourses also continue to structure the personal and political dividends of the Constitution’s equality clause that is central to the postapartheid project. Describing herself as a “visual activist” (in Schwendener 2015), Muholi confronts and challenges discursive regimes of silencing and invisibility by building an autoethnographic photographic archive of the experiences of predominantly black, working-class women who love and desire other women. Muholi (2005) insists that “[t]hese are not only subjects; these are my people. They describe the person I am”.

In this chapter, I read a selection of Muholi’s photographs as a type of cultural history of black lesbians in South Africa, and trace the way in which her work is implicated in transnational figurations of the black body. In her work, the body functions as a site for the contestation of the ways in which black womanhood is discursively constituted and deployed, how black female bodies are marked by practices of patriarchy, and how they come to be conduits for the articulation of non-heteronormative sexual subjectivities. As a site of visual culture and what Hall (1997: 5) calls the “production and circulation of meaning”, Muholi’s photographs intersect with discursive regimes in which the meanings of black lesbian bodies are negotiated and constituted. This
chapter is resistant to mimetic readings of photography that conceptualise photographs as unmediated and objectively ‘true’ reflections of ‘reality’, or analyses determined by what Pierre Bourdieu (2007: 164) refers to as “criteria of resemblance and legibility”. Rather, the reading of these photographs as cultural texts focuses on the ways in which cultural meaning is made and unmade. Reading Muholi’s photographs alongside other literary and visual discourses in this thesis weaves a complex and richly-textured cultural fabric of practices of representation, meaning-making, and visibility in postapartheid same-sex publics. Jessica Evans and Hall (2007: 2) warn, though, against allowing visual forms such as photography to be subsumed unproblematically into generic cultural studies without regard for:

the specific rhetoric, genres, institutional contexts and uses of visual imagery [that] can become lost in the more global identification of cultural trends and their epic narratives of transformations of consciousness in the rubric of ‘postmodern culture’.

My reading of Muholi’s work in this chapter, then, is informed by the analytical specificities – the techniques, technologies, ideologies and conventions – of photography as a distinct medium. I simultaneously locate this reading within a broader mapping of the politics of same-sex representation and the economies of transnational cultural exchange. As sites of (dis)articulation of cultural discourses, Muholi’s photographs mobilise signifying practices that intersect critically with dynamic networks of texts, signifiers and concepts that gesture to both local and global modalities of same-sex public cultures.

As hooks writes in the passage used as an epigraph to this chapter, victimhood is one of the defining tropes through which black women’s bodies are read. The histories of black womanhood are indelibly marked by experiences of suffering, commodification, exploitation and control. Though this figuration of the black, female body is transnational and maps restless historical geographies of oppression, it also characterises the experiences of many black women through the colonial, apartheid, and postapartheid periods as agency was curtailed by gendered and racial power structures. While the figure of the black woman tends to occupy the space of victim in dominant local and transnational media circulations, this marginality is compounded when women do not conform to heteronormative gender and sexual norms. Focusing particularly on a collection of photographs taken between 2003 and 2006, exhibited
and published as *Only Half the Picture*, this chapter explores how Muholi refutes victimhood as the singularly defining trope in representations of black lesbian women and articulates a new sexual imaginary that conjoins agency, vulnerability, desire, and constructions of Africanness. Muholi’s photographs engage explicitly with the rhetorical strategies through which black, working-class, lesbian women are positioned as the symbolic and cultural Other, as they are subordinated multiply by patriarchy, racism, class, and heteronormativity. Reading Muholi’s photographic archive as a cultural history, this chapter also examines the circuits of cultural consumption through which meaning is (re)produced and circulated in differing cultural and class contexts, how the subject is constituted, and practices of looking. Kylie Thomas (2013: 358) writes that *Only Half the Picture* “works with the aesthetics of the body, a complex holding of traumatic histories encoded in skin together with a celebration of lesbian desire and the promise of pleasure”. As visual discourses, Muholi’s photographs disrupt the circulation of existing signifying systems and discourses around female same-sex sexualities in various media forms. I argue, in other words, that while Muholi’s images explore the victimisation and abjection of the black lesbian body, they also disarticulate the singularity of these heteronormative and patriarchal tropes. Her photographs complicate representations of black lesbian subjectivities by interrogating the historical and contemporary transnational cultural flows through which they are imagined.

**Travelling imaginings of the black, female body**

In this chapter, I examine how Muholi’s collection of photographs both co-circulates with and disrupts historical and contemporary imaginaries of race, gender and sexuality. Though these figurations of the black, female body have transnational routes, they have also been translated into the local idioms of the colonial and apartheid pasts, and the postapartheid present. Desiree Lewis (2005: 15) describes the perpetuation of the image of black women as victims when she writes that:

In a familiar tradition of documentary photographs of African women, for example, rural Southern African women, or women in war-torn Rwanda, the signifier of the anguished or traumatised African woman, as a symbol of ‘suffering Africa’, is very common.

Pumla Gqola (2005: 4) extends this idea and argues that:
More recently, we have been gawked at because of poverty, HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation, virginity testing and other capitalist heteropatriarchal woundings. Within African continental and diasporic societies too, the body continues to be pressed and made to yield to easy cataloguing.

Framed by this existing system of signification, representations of black lesbian women in South Africa tend to be circumscribed by an erasure of agency. Shaped by a transnational circuit of textual production, the reception of photographs of black woman is framed by discourses inherited from slavery, colonialism and apartheid. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (2002: 3), in their study of the history of the image of black women, argue that the “explosion of ethnographic photography” that accompanied the increase in anthropological excursions at the end of the nineteenth century shaped the way in which Africa and Africans have been understood. Similarly, Sandra Jackson, Fassil Demissie and Michele Goodwin (2009: xiv) argue that “[b]lack bodies arouse notions about savagery, wildness and uncouthness”. Furthermore, Lewis (2011: 205) notes that “myths about sexuality have been linked to definitions of the African female body in terms of domestic work, physical labour, sex work and all activity denying the mind and prescribing service”. Positioned as being void of complexity and agency, black female bodies have long been characterised by both erasure and excess.

The exploitation of brown-bodied South African women is embodied in the figure of Sarah Bartmann, a Khoisan woman who was commodified and exhibited as the “Hottentot Venus” in Paris and London at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Bartmann, according to Willis and Williams (2002: 61), was fetishised and positioned as a dark-bodied erotic spectacle due to her large buttocks and, to a lesser extent, her extended inner labia. She was a favoured fair attraction in European cities for a number of years until her death in her mid-20s. The legacy of her objectification as a site of both derision and racialised desire was solidified and extended through the preservation and display of her dissected body parts in a Parisian museum. In other words, Bartmann’s body was used to fuel a specific strain of ‘scientific’ racism, both during her lifetime and in the many decades that followed. Her status as the symbol of exploited and violated brown-bodied women in public discourse was reinforced through the much-publicised return of her remains to South Africa and a ritualistic (and televised) burial in 2002. While Bartmann was of course not the only black woman exhibited as a culturally-othered caricature, she has remained, for over two centuries,
a signifier of the race/gender nexus on which her vulnerability and visual exploitation was predicated. Bartmann also marks the transnational production of the black, female, sexual other and constitutes the cultural embodiment of the patriarchal and colonial gaze on which much ethnographic and exhibitionist work depended. Lewis (2011: 200) observes that it is from various essentialist colonial-era discourses that “assumptions […] about the fundamental bestiality or degeneracy of African bodies” emerge. Zethu Matebeni (2013: 405) cites Bartmann as an exemplar of the pervasive influence of broader colonial histories of exploitation when she argues that “[g]iven such horrific details of the objectification of the black female body, it is no surprise that post-colonial narratives of African womanhood have tended to cover the body of the black female”. However, this act of concealment, a political strategy against centuries of sexual objectification on the global stage, results in the desexualisation of black women and the erasure of sexual agency and of pleasure from their bodies. It is with these conservative configurations of the de-eroticised black female body, informed by Bartmann’s spectral presence, that Muholi’s work dialogues. Muholi’s images speak to the histories of shame and the deprivation of agency, and offer a cultural and textual repositioning of black women and desire in postapartheid public discourse.
The histories of violating, commodifying and othering black women that are inscribed onto Bartmann, frame (in some ways) the contemporary racial and gender politics that inform Muholi’s *Only Half the Picture* collection. In “Reclining figure”, for instance, a voluptuous black woman appears lying on a mattress that is covered only in a dishevelled white sheet against a pale cream wall. The woman has large, textured buttocks and thighs which appear somewhat indistinguishable in the image. This photograph resonates strongly with the caricatured depictions of Bartmann in which her uncommonly large buttocks, at least in terms of European perspectives, were the primary marker of her ‘bestial’ and ‘unnatural’ sexuality. The ironic disjuncture between the title of the photograph and its composition engages not only with the colonial gaze but also with the relationship between subjecthood and objectification in a photograph. The woman’s evident discomfort in the photograph – marked by the awkward positioning of her body and the attempt to use her hand to conceal her face – speak to the disingenuous ways in which exploited women’s bodies have been culturally coded to satisfy the needs and expectations of the colonial viewer. While the title locates this image within the visual tradition of odalisque poses, the photograph itself undermines this in the very same gesture. Not only do her deliberately concealed face and breasts resist the conventional sexualisation of her body, the anguish, pain, or discomfort suggested by her body language shift the focus from her body to the unseen cause or origin of her feelings. This both disrupts the hermeneutic relationship between seeing and knowing and displaces the visible with that which is unseen, further dramatising the tension between subject and visual object. As a result, the woman’s subjectivity is foregrounded, and the pervasively historical objectification of sexually available black women is countered.

The bare bed and the absence of exotic props and cultural markers in Muholi’s photograph further evince a resistance to the highly decorative and essentialist odalisque portraiture and photographic tradition in which the reclining figure was a stock constituent. The image is in dialogue, then, with “[t]he salacious sexualisation of the reclining body”, which, according to Willis and Williams (2002: 44), was “clearly a Western cultural construct”. With her large buttocks that draws on Bartmann as a late-colonial and post-colonial transhistorical signifier, the composition in “Reclining figure” locates the rest of Muholi’s collection within the fraught representational histories of racist and misogynistic objectification and exploitation. Simon Watney’s (2007: 159)
observations, in his analysis of photography and the politics of representation, seem particularly pertinent here: “[p]hotographs are no more, and no less, than fragments of ideology, activated by the mechanisms of fantasy and desire within a fragmentary history of images”.

Of course, the transnational imbrication of Muholi’s photography does not only depend on the spectral figure of black womanhood that shapes its production, circulation and reception. Rather, her images have political potential of their own as they move along cultural circuits to other parts of the world. As these photographs move, they transform contemporary understandings of the sexualised body – connecting diverse ideological and geographic spaces as she is exhibited globally, forging a new transnational imaginary that stretches from an international arts festival in Singapore (Yee 2014) and a contemporary art exhibition in Germany (Zvomuya 2012), to an exhibition in New York on the visual history of the African diaspora (Abraha 2013), as well as a public appearance with the Norwegian monarch in Oslo (Majola 2013). Muholi’s various collections of photography therefore mobilise new cultural flows, however restless and uneven, in which the black, lesbian body is inscribed into new visual spaces. Her work, therefore, powerfully blends the brutal transnational history of black womanhood with the global circulation of new cultural imaginaries.

I will read Muholi’s collection of photographs as a disruption of the dominant ways of representing not only black female bodies but black lesbian bodies in particular. Muholi refuses the scripts of otherness to which black female bodies have been reduced. Her photographs defy the singular frame of victimhood, as well as the desexualisation of female same-sex subjectivities. Rather, the bodily, experiential, and ontological complexity of the subjects in Muholi’s collection is foregrounded. What distinguishes Muholi’s work from the prevailing representational frame of victimhood is the complex rendering of the body, in which desire is placed alongside abjection – and is simultaneously a site of intimacy, violence, agency, and transgression. About sixty photographs have been featured as part of the collection within different sites of exhibition and publication. These images include nude and semi-nude women in intimate embraces, hate crime survivors, blood-soaked sanitary pads, voluptuous bodies, close-up shots of intimate body parts, and ambiguous gender practices such as breast wrapping. Munro (2012: 226) keenly observes that “[t]he bodies in Muholi’s
work are, in general, an antidote to the hyperreal images of the female body in modern global visual culture: they look lived-in, marked, bruised, stretched, and scarred."

While the inclusion of images such as “Reclining figure” in this collection gestures at the continuities between historical and contemporary practices of racism and misogyny, the broader collection resists caricatured renderings of the black body. I am interested here in the interdependent significations of sex, race and identity in South Africa in which ‘corrective’ rape and the black, lesbian, working class experience have become mutually defining. My reading of the black lesbian body is located within a central contextual paradox that underscores Muholi’s work: ‘corrective’ rape and other homophobic hate crimes against black lesbians are simultaneously invisible and ubiquitous in South African public discourse. There is both a pervasive absence of critical engagement with homophobic hate crimes against poor black women, while, at the same time, homophobic hate crimes are the only way in which poor black lesbian women are discursively constituted. This “striking repetition of inscription and erasure” – to borrow a phrase from Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver’s (1991: 2) introduction to Rape and Representation – evokes the complex cultural landscape in which Muholi’s work is located. Gqola (2006: 83) insists in this respect that black lesbian bodies are certainly not invisible:

> The range of names given to them in various languages, along with the very unambiguous attacks on these women within South African society, suggest that they are in fact highly visible manifestations of the undesirable.

Being marked and made visible, as Gqola conceptualises it, is constitutive of larger textual histories and representational traditions in which black women have been subject to multiple forms of material and symbolic exclusion and marginalisation.

While the reporting on same-sex issues in the English print media has increased considerably in the past decade, most of these news reports continue to construct black lesbians almost exclusively as victims. Some such stories bear rather innocuous headlines such as “Out of the closet, into a hostile world” (Tolsi 2007: 8) and “Gay rights still just a promise, says judge” (Bailey 2007: 10). Many more of the articles construct the experiences of black lesbians as spectacles in explicit and sometimes quite blunt terms. *The Daily News*’s article “Lesbian killed, body burnt” (Cole 2010: 3) and *The Cape Times*’s biographical article “I will find you and I will fix you” (Farber
2011: 7) are examples of this. These newspaper articles concerning black lesbian women go beyond describing mere discrimination in the workplace, familial or religious exclusion, or public jeering. The brutal policing of black, non-heteronormative female bodies in these newspaper reports – while a necessary intervention in countering the silence about hate crimes – tends to construct a singular, homogenising understanding of what is a complex and sometimes contradictory convergence of racialised and gendered vulnerability. Reflecting on the power of discourses to constitute rather than reflect ‘reality’, Hall (1997: 5-6) insists that:

> [R]epresentation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process, as important as the economic or material ‘base’ in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event.

The primary experiential frame for being a black lesbian woman, then, if these mainstream newspaper articles\(^5\) are to be believed, is one of suffering and victimisation. Extending Hall’s observations, such singular representational frames not only misrepresent complex lived experiences and subjectivities, but in fact come to constitute those realities in the public imaginary.

The raciology of female same-sex vulnerabilities is similarly pervasive but largely unacknowledged in a collection of short autobiographical narratives titled *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sapphos’s Daughters Out in Africa* (Diesel 2011a). This collection contains first-person narratives from seventeen contributors who reflect on their experiences of being lesbian women. Three black female contributors to the collection engage with experiences of what Muholi (2011: 198) calls the “lesbophobic rape of black South African women”. In “Finding the real me in a storm of violence”, Marco P. Ndlovu (2011: 55) writes that “[a]s a lesbian, hate, violence and misogyny follow me wherever I go”, adding that she has been both raped and “beaten almost to a pulp” because of her sexuality. Keba Sebetoane (2011) describes an experience of ‘corrective’ rape in more detail and goes on to expose the institutionalised homophobia within public hospitals and the police when responding to her case. Similarly, Ponie Nozipo Ngcobo (2011: 174-175) frames her experiences of being in public spaces within an aggressive heteronormative misogyny when she recalls how men would say things like “[c]ome here and we’ll show you what a woman should do” and “[w]e’ll show you what a woman is”. However, in sharp contrast to this, the narratives of white
female contributors to the collection do not engage with homophobic hate crimes and instead focus largely on topics such as coming out, family relationships, careers, religion, marriage, property ownership, and even pets. Despite the anthology’s admirable intentions and wide scope, it unfortunately reproduces the tropes of victimhood through which black, lesbian woman are discursively constituted in local contexts. Munro (2012: 224) warns against reading ‘corrective’ rape as “an isolated, dehistoricized issue” and reiterates concerns raised by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) that being bound in public discourse to representations of hate crimes “is itself traumatizing” (224). What is more, Simon Faulkner (2014: 158) astutely observes that the reiteration of images of suffering “has the potential to naturalize this condition, encouraging a perception of [a particular group] as those who exist to suffer”. Furthermore, groups constituted in the trope of victimhood “thus come to be viewed as those who lack, not only human rights but also political agency” (Faulkner 2014: 158). It is this fixed positionality and the erasure of agency that Muholi’s collection contests.

In a delayed and somewhat fragmented governmental response to these homophobic hate crimes, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development produced a short television public service announcement in 2014 that addresses homophobic violence and discrimination (Government 2014). The apparent intention of the video is to assert the rights of non-heteronormative persons and to encourage victims of homophobic crimes to report incidents to the police. The video starts off with this brief extract from the Bill of Rights, which is communicated through both visual text and spoken voice: “Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law”. Interestingly, this is section 9(1) of the Constitution, which is repeated at the end of the video, and which insists on equality under a law of general application. The public service announcement refrains from citing the specificity of section 9(3) of the Constitution, which draws attention to sexual orientation as a specific category of non-discrimination. Rights for lesbian women, then, are framed by a generalised right to equality to which all persons are entitled. This parallels the transition-era discourses in which the specificity of same-sex rights was subsumed under broader discourses of liberal constitutionalism. The first scene of the video opens with two black women walking in a peri-urban, working-class area surrounded by taxis. The two women are holding hands and appear to be engaging in an animated
conversation while passers-by stare at them. Significantly, the only people featured expressing surprise at the displays of same-sex intimacy are black. The video continues and the two women are shown in a small bedroom. While one woman constructs an obviously masculine butch aesthetic, wearing stylishly ripped jeans and a button-up shirt, the other lies on the bed watching her get dressed. As the one woman is about to leave, her partner says to her “you look dashing, honey” to which her partner responds by blowing a kiss. This is the extent to which the women are shown to be intimate with one another, depriving these black women of agency as sexual subjects as they are later reduced to mere victims of heteronormative patriarchy. One of the woman leaves the house and walks alone in the dark, evidently nervous, until she is accosted by a black man who pejoratively and lecherously declares her a “tomboy”. He chases her and the scene ends with sounds of only her screams as she experiences some unnamed physical (and perhaps sexual) assault.

Mona Livholts (2008: 195) observes in her analysis of media reporting on rape in Sweden that “the focus on the evil perpetrator draws attention away from the institutional relations of violence between men and women”. Similarly, in this public service announcement, the rapist/assaulter is located as an aberration and broader structures of culturally regulated heteronormativity are unintentionally obscured from view. The victim in this public service announcement is then seen bruised and assaulted with her partner, as well as her mother who insists that she reports the incident to the police. The victim of assault responds by saying that “the police won’t take it seriously”. This assertion supports the prevailing perception among many activists and commentators that the experiences of victims are characterised by judicial and police inefficiency, institutionalised homophobia, and secondary victimisation for complainants in cases of homophobic violence.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the government’s public service announcement counters this view and offers us a depiction of the police and courts that is efficient and supportive. In a fascinating racial positioning, both the police officer to whom the crime is reported, as well as the magistrate who delivers a guilty verdict, are white men. Not only is the agency of black lesbian women brought into question here, but structures of patriarchy and racism are rehearsed as white men provide support, security, and justice to the black female victims – victims, it is worth adding, of violent black men. The racial
Positionings in this public service announcement speak to Gunkel’s (2010: 143) warnings about the risks of allowing hate crimes to dominate representations of black lesbians: not only does this reinforce the idea that homophobia is a uniquely black phenomenon, it also obscures the complexities and priorities that are “at the heart of lesbian politics in contemporary South Africa”. The video ends with the voice of Jeff Radebe, former Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, reaffirming one’s rights not to be assaulted and to equal access to legal processes and protections. This synchronises with a visual of four adults and an infant of different races, all wearing white t-shirts, walking onto a white set featuring large colourful blocks in the middle of the scene. The visual is void of intimacy between the people and there is no indicator whatsoever of same-sex coupling or desire. Rather, transition-era myths of rainbow nationalism are deployed in the service of an inclusive non-homophobic rights discourse. This is reinforced by the inclusion of the South African flag near the end of the video, as well as the liberal democratic keywords “Equality. Dignity. Freedom” punctuating the final scene in which the Department’s logo and Government’s coat of arms are displayed.

In what Matebeni (2013: 410) calls an “interventionist mode”, Muholi contests these dominant tropes of victimhood through which black, lesbian women are read, while also reinscribing a celebratory eroticism. Despite the specificity of its context, Only Half the Picture remains located in a transnational representational regime which tends to foreclose on complex imaginaries of black women. Muholi’s collection engages with the colonial and neo-colonial representational productions of black womanhood, and challenges moralist assertions that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican. It advances a much bolder political discourse that reimagines the complexities of gendered bodies, the agency of sexual desire, and the richness of indigenous African cultures. Muholi (2011: 188) reflects on the ways in which essentialist notions of African heterosexuality intersect with racism:

I spend most of my time with the women who live their lives as lesbians, as lesbian men, as femme and butch mothers, as women loving women who push against the boundaries of who is, and what is, an “African” woman. [...] My community is those women who are too poor and ‘uneducated’, too African to some and too un-African to others to be entrusted with any meaningful participation as citizens of this country.
In this extract, the photographer imagines the multiple ways in which same-sex sexualities can enact both gender and sexual identities, outside of the scope of organised sexual identity politics. She notes that the marginalised women with whom she works have, in many ways, been excluded from the postapartheid body politic – both on the basis of race by those who see them as “too African” and on the basis of sexuality by those who read their same-sex sexuality as being “too un-African”. Muholi’s photography, insists Munro (2012: 224), “illuminates the ways in which sexuality, trauma, gender identity, race, poverty, and blood taboos are all bound together rather than being separate issues”. Aware of the cultural and political costs of an unmitigated essentialism, Muholi’s *Only Half the Picture* resists didacticism and can be read as an insistence on more nuance and complexity in the way in which black lesbian women and their experiences are represented. Four intersecting structuring themes can be traced through this collection of photographs, namely victimhood and violence, intimacy and desire, womanhood and the female body, and the aesthetics of Africanness.

**Victimhood and violence**

In the mid-2000s when many of these photographs first appeared in public, ‘corrective’ rape had only a limited and partial presence within national public discourse, and it was considered by many as little more than a few isolated attacks. Government and police inaction were paralysing mobilisation efforts and the attacks were escalating. In this context, the marking of the black body as victim by Muholi was an essential political move to draw attention to the scourge of rape and gender-based violence, and to force them into the national conversation. While the collection contains only a few photographs that explicitly address homophobic hate crimes – suggesting a scepticism of essentialist depictions of victimised black lesbian women – these stills do so in a way that demands a radical reading of the symbolic and physical violence that lie at the heart of the heteronormative policing of the female body.7

Noting that ‘corrective’ rape is one of several ways in which non-heteronormative sexualities are being “contain[ed] and suppress[ed]” in South Africa, Alleyn Diesel (2011b: xiv) writes that:
Every aspect of [women’s] upbringing urges them to view men as the objects of their sexual interest, and they are inundated with role models who promote their ‘femininity’, and sexual attractiveness, to men. Thus, women who flout these social and sexual expectations, refusing to define their lives by their relationship to men, are perceived as being a political, as well as a sexual, threat to the patriarchal status quo and are labelled as deviant […].

The physical and symbolic markings of this deviance intersect in Muholi’s “Aftermath”, a photograph featuring a victim of ‘corrective’ rape. “Aftermath”, the title of the image, gestures towards the bodily and ontological residue after the subject’s physical violation.

The subject of the photograph is a 17-year old girl who was raped less than two days before this photograph was taken (Gunkel 2010: 141), and she appears in the photograph wearing only a pair of brand-name underpants, her hands folded gently in
front of her genital area. The positioning of her hands, which is simultaneously protective and defensive, speaks to her recent sexual violation; it is a posture and positioning demanding both recognition and privacy. There is also a long downward scar on the woman’s leg, evidencing a past bodily trauma that has inscribed itself into the woman’s present. The subject’s body is marked by a juxtaposition of uncertain temporalities and varied visibilities, and the photograph sustains a tension between the visible scar on the thigh and the invisible experience of rape, signified by the concealing underpants.

The interpretive frame of ‘corrective’ rape is provided by Muholi (in Van der Vlies 2012: 144) when she says that the young woman was raped by someone whom she knew in order to “show her she is not a man”. Muholi observes further that “[s]he already has a scar from a past incident, yet received new emotional scars from her rape” (in Van der Vlies 2012: 144). Andrew van der Vlies (2012: 144) observes that, unlike many heterosexist photographic practices, the woman in the image:

is not subjected to a prying gaze: we do not see her genitalia or her breasts. We do not see her face. She is an individual whose dignity is respected, whose privacy is restored, whose experience is recorded […].

The cropping of the image in order to focus only on the specific site of violation in a way that records rather than scandalises is significant. Reflecting on photographs in this collection, Lewis (2005: 15) asks: “How does Muholi speak about victimisation without rendering her subject a victim and without endorsing conventions associated with familiar media images of victimisation?” While both the explicit and implicit visual codes of trauma mark the subject as a victim, “Aftermath” interrogates the very way in which victimhood is discursively constituted. By staging the tension between seen and unseen traumas, the photograph engages with how the practices of textual reception privilege physical inscriptions of victimhood and otherness over psychological ones.

This tension is described by Muholi (in Van der Vlies 2012: 144) in her text that accompanied the image at an earlier exhibition: “Many lesbians bear the scars of their difference, and those scars are often in places where they can’t be seen”. While Muholi is bringing urgently needed attention to the scourge of homophobic hate crimes, she is also capturing women’s agency and resistance to this violent heteronormative policing of black bodies. The design of the underwear briefs as well as the clearly
visible brand label that appears in the photograph are also significant here for the way in which they connect the girl in the photograph to circuits of cultural production that are subtended by gender and class. “Jockey” is a well-known and expensive American underwear brand that has traditionally catered for men, though it increasingly caters for women now too. The underwear briefs that she is wearing are traditionally worn by men, however. Van der Vlies (2012: 143) writes that the Jockey label “mark[s] the wearer in a transnational circuit of mainstream commodity or commercial culture, inflected by or dictated by American cultural norms”. Lewis (2005: 15) remarks that the brand label points to “a history and identity beyond the frozen photographic image” in which this particular pair of underpants was obtained and selected to be worn. Lewis (15) argues further that “[t]he highlighted simple detail of the brand-named underwear makes the image profoundly fluid”. While I recognise the fluidity of meaning allowed by the signifier of the brand label, I would extend this point and argue that the label and male-centred design of the underpants also affixes the multiple meanings of the image to transnational networks of patriarchy and capitalism. While this raped woman is photographed as a victim of a particular iteration of what Muholi (2011: 197) calls a “heterosexual black masculinity [that] appear[s] to be invested in raping black lesbian women”, her multiple sites of subjugation on the basis of race, class, and gender are inscribed into the image through the Jockey signifiers of male-centred eroticism and upward social mobility – an upward mobility to which the working class women in Muholi’s photographs appear to remain extraneous. Kirk Sides (2011: 132) offers a comparable analysis of the work of South African artist Berni Searle in which he argues that the use of spices in a specific series of artworks “plac[es] the contemporary South African body beyond the sole purview of apartheid’s historiographical hegemony”. Sides is concerned with the way in which bodies, subjectivities and histories have become subsumed under apartheid and nationalism as interpretive master-tropes. The specific branding of the underwear in Muholi’s photograph similarly intersects race and gender vulnerabilities with reiterative global economies of power. The “Jockey” signifier problematises the race/gender/victimhood nexus in the very same moment that it reinforces it.
Two consecutive photographs in *Only Half the Picture* – “Hate crime survivor I” and “Hate crime survivor II” – are similarly reluctant to engage in the reductive tropic production of victimhood that characterises the government’s public service announcement and the *Reclaiming the L-word* collection, for instance. The focus of the former image is comparable to that of “Aftermath” in its close-up on the subject’s upper thighs, genital area, and lower arms. The woman’s hands are similarly positioned in front of the genital area. However, what distinguishes this image from “Aftermath” is that the subject is fully dressed and is wearing medical alert bracelets. These bracelets suggest that the subject of the photograph has recently been in hospital for medical care, presumably following a hate crime. The simple vertical lines on the subject’s pants and the photograph’s understated greyscale colouring contrast with the unknown trauma signified by the “hate crime” in the name of the photograph. This photograph is linked nominally and sequentially with “Hate crime survivor II”, in which an indiscernible person appears lying in a hospital bed, which similarly speaks to a trauma that is unknown.
The dark blanket covering the patient, contrasted by the white clarity of the rest of the linen, gestures towards the invisibility and unknowability of black lesbian victims of hate crimes. As a site of cultural memory, this photograph both radicalises responses to hate crimes and acts as a ‘working through’ of the collective trauma inscribed into black, lesbian self-imaginings. The two images of survivors also create a tension between the general and the specific. Higgins and Silver (1991: 3) argue that rape functions largely as a contextual representational framework in which gender relations are negotiated and constituted, adding that “rape [often] exists as a context independent of its occurrence as discrete event” (1991: 3). This concern, that rape loses its visceral specificity through various iterations of its representation, is challenged by these two photographs. While the latter image constructs a victimhood void of agency or particularity, the former imposes itself on viewers through its individualisation of the patient through the medical bracelets. Evoking a patient’s medical history and the particularities of care, the bracelets function as a visual
signifier of a history, an identity, and a life that precedes and exceeds this photograph. These photographs document the lived experience of black lesbian women in a way that highlights their specific vulnerability under the sign of heteronormativity or what Nomusa Makhubu (2012: 505) calls their “susceptibility to targeted violence”. The ambiguously situated single shoe at the bottom of the second photograph – the origin and ownership of which is unknown – suggests the uncertain and potentially unsafe positioning of black lesbian women in familiar spaces: in many cases, the perpetrators of homophobic violence are known by their victims. However, the shoe remains ambiguous and could equally belong to a lover or family member who is visiting and anxiously watching over the patient in the hospital bed. This reading hints towards an ordinariness of the everyday in which even vulnerability can be reimagined through quotidian referents of intimacy and love.

These two images of hate crime survivors are accompanied in the collection by “Case number”, a photograph of a record of a complaint to the police, indicating the date, the case number, and the name and contact information of the investigating officer. Designating “Att. Rape + Assault GBH”, the torn-off fragment of a page of paper states that the complainant opened a case of attempted rape and of assault with the intention...
to do grievous bodily harm. The handwritten words “rape” and “assault” are separated from the actual traumatic events that they signify by a series of semiotic codes, and come to be listed as mere innocuous details on a form. Paradoxically, it is the very linguistic markings on the page which record the crime that impose the impenetrable distance between the experience and its typographical signifier. That the photograph reveals creases and intimations of previous foldings points to the likelihood that it has been handled frequently. As a record of the crime and as a statement against institutional and social amnesia, the torn-off piece of paper is imbued with personal and political meanings that exceed the bounds of the image itself. The evident excessive handling of the piece of the paper inscribes individualised anxiety and vulnerability while simultaneously pointing to the institutional indifference that has characterised the perceived response of the criminal justice system to such attacks.

In addition, the piece of paper also includes a stamp that indicates the date on which this crime was reported. December 16th is a date layered with historical and contemporaneous meanings about race, agency and subjecthood in South Africa. In the postapartheid political climate, the day has been designated as a public holiday and called the Day of Reconciliation. As a signifier of state apparatuses, the stamp also connects the pervasive institutional inaction of the police to the official discourses of the postapartheid state. There is a startling disjuncture, then, between postapartheid claims to constitutionalism and human rights, on the one hand, and the hate crimes against black lesbians, on the other, as the women seem unable to access the dividends of the Constitution’s equality clause.

While there is a temptation to strategically isolate homophobic rape as an example of South African exceptionalism, this would overlook the complex transnational networks of violence and solidarity that are forged on the basis of sexuality and gender. Bennett (2011: 79) describes the broader social conditions that give rise to such violence when she writes:

> Given the intimacy with which sexual practices, norms, struggles and rebellions are woven into the material realities of living, people in any context (especially those characterised by rapidly changing political economies, multiculturalism and exposure to mass media systems) can be expected to engage in vigorous – even vicious – debates and dissension around the meaning of sexual bodies and sexual citizenship.
Though this is certainly not an excuse for the perpetuation of rape cultures, it does read local homophobic violence against a set of transnational practices of neoliberalism, the rise in ethnic nationalism globally, and globalised media forms. The women in “Aftermath” and “Hate crime survivor I” insist on being photographed as acts of self-actualisation and defiance, and “Case number” confronts and challenges the institutional homophobia and apathy that victims have experienced. The visual simplicity of these four photographs belies the violent trauma of hate crimes. While this suggests a distance between the viewer and the traumatic event, the photographs compel an intimacy between the viewer and the subject. Muholi’s visual intervention foregrounds subjectivity and challenges the dominant signifying regimes that uncritically situate black lesbian women as victims. In so doing, the images refuse to embrace either the sensational representation of rape or the reductionist readings of black lesbian subjectivities.

**Intimacy and desire**

Though Muholi’s collection engages with the complex politics of violence and victimhood, it also contests these very tropes and resists the insidiousness of the colonial and patriarchal gaze. Employing different registers of representation, several photographs in the collection depict same-sex intimacy and desire in a way that, according to Munro (2012: 224), “insists both that the black lesbian body is multiple and various and that violation does not obliterate sexual pleasure”. These photographs resist the desexualising tendencies of biopolitical and popular media discourses and place female same-sex subjectivities within a celebratory eroticism, evading the heteronormative logics of sanitised representation. While ‘corrective’ rape is one way of policing black female bodies, I would argue that desexualising representations is another. Lewis (2011: 206-207) observes that “there is a relative paucity of [scholarship] on African women’s sexual pleasure: far fewer writers have constructed women’s sexuality in relation to desire and sexual autonomy”. It is with this absence that Muholi’s collection engages. The photographs that contain representations of sexuality are varied and include subjects who are kissing, hugging, embracing one another or looking at each in ways that convey longing and desire.
In “Sistahs”, two women – a couple, it would seem – are featured in a bedroom. While one subject sits on a chair alongside a bed in her dressing gown, the other appears only in her underwear. This woman appears to be putting lotion on her thighs, and the raised foot and the positioning of her hands suggests that she has been captured in motion. This implied movement and the smile on the face of her partner, who is revelling in the pleasure of watching her rub lotion onto herself, constructs a spatial and temporal setting of emotional intimacy, affirmation and desire. That her gaze is directed at her partner’s thighs and genital area also reinscribes an explicit eroticism into the intimacy of the everyday. Significantly, if we read clothing as a site for the performance of identity – as Joanne Entwistle (2000) suggests in *The Fashioned Body* that we should – then this photograph of two women not yet dressed points to the way in which identity formation (whether conscious or through cultural programming) is always a process of becoming. While the subjects in “Sistahs” appear to be female-bodied, the precise nature of their gender and sexual identities remains unclear and contingent. Though Busi Kheswa and Saskia Wieringa (2005: 200) insist that the butch-femme binary is the structuring framework for many same-sex female relationships in Johannesburg, the photograph undermines this notion, as intimacy
and desire are privileged above identity politics and binary modes for structuring relationship.

While Judith Butler (1993) reminds us that our reading of subjects’ bodies as sexed is itself a result of culturalisation, one cannot ignore the performative possibilities of the as yet unseen clothing in “layering cultural meanings on the body” (Entwistle 2000: 143). Muholi (2010) engages with the signifying potential of clothing explicitly when she rhetorically asks “Is this lesbian more ‘authentic’ than that lesbian because she wears a tie and the other does not?” The open tub of cream on the bed points to a ritualistic intimacy of the everyday, and the bag on the bed and the suitcase in the corner suggest a confined domestic space in which there is little or no cupboard space. Cognisant of these nuances of quotidian lives, Gabeba Baderoon (2010) reflects on the importance of Muholi’s photographs in speaking to the “hypervisibility [of lesbians in the media] that has been used to violate lesbian lives through a sensationalistic focus on suffering that has simultaneously made it possible to ignore that suffering”.11 Baderoon’s (2010) observation about Muholi’s work generally seems to speak, with particular acuity, to “Sistahs”:

Muholi’s images confront such hyper-visibility and reclaim a space for the women in her photographs away from denigration and hostility and toward presence, pleasure and wholeness. Her work shows us there is no category of human being whom it is safe to despise and whose hurt it is expedient to ignore.

The intimacy between the two women in this photograph, though not explicitly sexual in nature, disarticulates the heteronormative hegemony of the bedroom as a site for the reproduction of traditional gender roles. It also confronts the way in which female sexuality has been thought of, according to Natasha Distiller (2005: 46-47), as a mere instrument with which to construct the desiring male heterosexual subject. The photograph signifies, rather, a domestic space of intimacy and pleasure, from which men have been excluded.

Engaging a comparable intimate aesthetic, the five photographs in the “Beloved” series feature two women touching, kissing, and staring at each other longingly. In “Beloved I”, the two subjects are positioned in the centre of the grayscale photograph. The one woman’s face and upper body are visible while the other woman is hidden behind her hair as she appears to kiss her partner’s neck. This woman’s long
dreadlocks dominate much of the photograph. The metonymic cultural logic of this photograph marks a disavowal of the hegemonies of ostensibly white notions of beauty by imposing an explicitly black African aesthetic, mobilising the racial politics of hair in the same way that Ditsie and Newman’s documentary does. While the one woman’s face is not visible as she enacts pleasure on her partner, the other woman performs a type of disinterest in the camera, as her head leans back in evident pleasure. Indeed, even the act of intimacy itself is concealed behind the hair, rendering this posed scene an intensely personal moment rather than a commodified image of the sexual fetishisation that often constitutes the gaze. This photograph comments on the history of the ethnographic aesthetic in which black bodies were made to perform essentialism for the colonial camera. Describing an earlier image in the collection, Lewis (2005: 15) draws attention to the “legacy of photography as an intrusive technology [and] to the invasiveness of the camera as it probes and dissects others’ suffering”. Infused with a celebratory eroticism and undeniable sexual agency, this photograph articulates an alternative relationship between the photographer and the photographed, insisting on the women as desiring sexual subjects rather than as mere sexual objects.
In “Beloved II”, the same two women are lying on blankets on the floor, and the woman whose face was previously invisible is now the focal point of the image. Touching the near-naked body of her partner, the woman stares directly at the camera, insisting on a confrontational inversion of the colonial and patriarchal gazes that have rendered black women multiply oppressed. Historian Yvette Abrahams (1997: 44-45) traces the historical legacy of this gaze back to Bartmann in the nineteenth century, stating that:

Dismembered, isolated, decontextualized – the body in the glass case epitomises the way white men were trying to see Khoisan women at this time, as unresisting objects open to exploitation.

In contrast to Willis and Williams's (2002: 25-28) assertion that when a black female subject's “blank gaze is directed up and beyond the picture frame [it] gives additional license to objectify and thus sexualize her image”, I argue that such a ‘look’ foregrounds the subjectivity of the woman and undermines the centrality of the viewer in our otherwise ocular-centric culture. The agency and re-articulation of the female sexual subject in this photo is significant in light of hooks’s (1992: 75) concerns when she asks: “How and when will black females assert sexual agency in ways that liberate us from the confines of colonized desire, of racist/sexist imagery and practice?” Significantly, then, the other woman in the photograph is looking away to something
that lies to the left of the photographer. However, this act of looking does not indicate submission to the viewing gaze, but rather an emotional complexity that cannot be captured fully in a single image. As female same-sex desire is foregrounded and masculinity is erased, this image is also in dialogue with the historical trope of black women as sexually immoral and uncontrollable, which similarly draws on slavery, as well as on colonial and apartheid-era discourses in which (implicitly heterosexual) black women are imagined as savage temptresses and as sites of unnatural vice for white men.

The photograph therefore contests the imaginings of the black body that circulate on the historical routes of transnational whiteness while also resisting the global (re)production of a heteronormative Africa. Reflecting on Muholi’s subjects, Gqola (2006: 87) writes that “they are neither ‘freakishly’ pornographically displayed nor cast in the stereotype of ‘noble, native maidens’”. Muholi’s Only Half the Picture offers instead an expansive ideology, in which, while she engages and gestures towards the discursive legacies of fetishised objectification – one thinks of the intertextual interplay between Bartmann and “Reclining figure” – she simultaneously moves beyond a defensive desexualisation and insists instead on a celebratory eroticism. The complexity of this positioning is brought about both by the sanitising operations of heteronormativity on the one hand, and in response to the desexualising impulse of representations of black women on the other – an impulse forged in the crucible of centuries of constructed hypersexualisation, visual exploitation and fetishised objectification. While Matebeni (2013: 405) problematically reads Minister Xingwana’s rejection of Muholi’s work outside of the repulsion rooted in societal taboos on same-sex relationships, she also insightfully suggests that:

[T]he minister’s gaze and self-looking is narrowed and clouded by histories of the violation of black female bodies. On seeing two black female bodies together and undressed, she could only imagine pain, violation, torture and a version of pornography. She is unable to see, or rejects the capacity in herself to see, in the images pleasure, joy, beauty, intimacy and eroticism, which are at play between two female bodies.

In light of these histories of the deprivation of agency and the representational reproduction of victimhood, I am reminded of Gqola’s (2006: 84) important observation that “Muholi’s work is less about making Black lesbians visible than it is about engaging with the regimes that have used these women’s hypervisibility as a way to violate
them”. In “Beloved II”, the subject’s leftwards glance also suggests a setting and series of events that precede and are extraneous to the reach of the fixed temporality of the image, evidencing the limitations of photography in capturing the complexities of lived experiences. Significantly, in neither “Beloved I” nor “Beloved II” does the uncovered breast function as a site of sexual objectification. Rather, it merely reinforces the eroticism of the sexual intimacy between the two subjects.

This is similarly reflected in “Independent”, which features two women holding hands, alongside two exposed breasts, one belonging to a white woman and the other belonging to a black woman. The photograph is cropped in such a way that the women’s sensual and intimate grip is foregrounded and the exposed breasts contextualise the intimacy rather than being its focus. This is the only photograph in the collection that includes a white subject, and her naked inclusion intersects directly with what hooks (1992: 65) calls the “racist/sexist iconography [that situates black female sexuality] as more free and liberated”. Each of the raced breasts signify distinct historical tropes of raciology and their juxtaposition points to the intersectionality that underscores black women’s vulnerabilities. Hazel Carby (1996: 73) criticises white
feminism’s tendency to ignore the multiple inscriptions of oppression experienced by black women and argues:

The herstory of black women is interwoven with that of white women but this does not mean that they are the same story. Nor do we need white feminists to write our herstory for us: we can and are doing that for ourselves.

While the erotic embrace between the two women depicts a shared moment of same-sex female intimacy, Carby would remind us that the bodies do not and cannot signify “the same story”. Her concerns about the appropriation of authorship and the deprivation of agency are negated in this image, however, insofar as it is Muholi who stages and takes a photograph of herself with a white woman, she assumes control of their shared moment, despite the incommensurability of their positionalities. Muholi’s photograph also appears to be in dialogue with a history of visual representations of black women in which, according to hooks (1992: 119), “[black] bodies and beings were there to serve – to enhance and maintain white womanhood”. In contrast, it is the white breast in this image that functions to inform reception of the black women in the broader collection. Kobena Mercer (1994: 194) highlights the significance of a photographer’s subject position in the production and circulation of meaning that constitute visual culture:

The contestation of marginality in black, gay and feminist cultural politics thus inevitably brings the issue of authorship back into play, not as the centred origin that determines or guarantees the aesthetic and political value of a text, but as a vital question about agency in cultural struggles to ‘find a voice’ and ‘give voice’ to subordinate experiences, identities and subjectivities.

Through its exclusion of what Matebeni (2013: 408) calls “the opportunity for male intervention”, this image also decentres men and disavows the ways in which patriarchy has deployed and defiled racialised female bodies. The photograph also insists on the entanglement of raced and gendered sexualised subjectivities. As an elloquent declaration of both interracial and same-sex intimacies, the photograph is doubly transgressive of apartheid’s statutory regulation of bodies and erotic desires. Nuttall’s (2009: 1) account of “entanglement” – illustrated in the image through the tightly held hands and the close embrace – is important in this respect:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained [...]. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness.
Nuttall’s almost celebratory reading of cultural entanglement speaks out against essentialist discourses that caricature the relationship between sexuality and race in the service of a conservative heteronormativity. Matebeni (2013: 410) writes:

The irritational claim that black queerness colludes with whiteness not only works against interracial intimacy but also constructs same-sex couples and intimacy as monoracial (Steinbugler 2005). It pretends to reflect the power relations between queerness and race while it actually masks power dynamics within blackness itself by shifting the attention to queer identity’s association with whiteness.

In *Only Half the Picture*, “Independent” is the only photograph featuring interracial intimacy, and it is also the only photograph depicting a white woman at all. The collection of photographs is not structured or underscored by discourses of whiteness; instead, it is characterised by an avowedly black African aesthetic. The conflation that Matebeni critiques and that Muholi’s collection disarticulates is that of whiteness and same-sex sexualities. In this photograph, the polysemic white breast and arm stand as a metonymic reminder of the aesthetic and ideological absence in the collection which the pale skin performs best – whiteness. Hall (1997: 6) insists, of course, that a visual text should not just be read for its semiotic codedness but more importantly for the “effects and consequences of representation – its politics”. This photograph mobilises a politics of representation in the collection that celebrates same-sex sexualities while simultaneously displacing white cultural hegemony on which heteronormativity has insisted it remain conceptually hinged.¹²

The recurring trope of victimhood that characterises representations of black lesbian woman is further destabilised by Muholi in “Dada”, a provocative photograph of a woman with large breasts wearing a strap-on dildo. The large-breasted, near-naked black woman invokes the colonial exoticisation of the racial and gendered Other, described by hooks (1992: 67) as the “pornographic fantasy of the black female as wild sexual savage”. However, the photograph disavows this interpretive frame, which appropriates agency and selfhood, through the inclusion of the white phallic dildo – an object of sexual pleasure that reveals the possibility of sex and intimacy that “threatens the very core of patriarchy’s sense of itself, of its assumed right to control women’s sexuality” (Distiller 2005: 47). The light colouring of this dildo contrasts with the dark-skinned body, the black leather, as well as the dark traces of pubic hair of the subject. The asymmetry of the photograph, in which the breasts appear to be of considerably different sizes and the dildo points to the side, undermines the aesthetic cohesion of
the image, evidencing the documentary realist aesthetic rather than the pornographic sexualisation of the female subject. While Diesel (2011b: xii) points out that self-representation by lesbians has been characterised largely by self-censorship and a “conceal[ing of] the nature of their sexuality”, this photograph foregrounds a specific site of sexual pleasure that disturbs – rather than subscribes to – the male fantasy and gaze. Lewis (2005: 17) argues in this respect that certain objects included in Muholi’s photography – the strap-on in “Dada”, for instance – “disrupt romanticised perceptions of sexual pleasure, and draw attention to practices and commodities that do not fit into anaesthetised, naturalised heteronormative scripts”. Significantly, the photograph actively captures a movement as the woman is either putting on or removing the strap-on.

The everyday specificity and knowability of this moment suggests not only a refusal to sanitise or desexualise representations of same-sex intimacies, but also a refiguring of the representational strategies that “render especially black lesbian lives, bodies,
and desires foreign and sensational” (Ngcobo 2006: 4). The presence of the dildo in this image also confronts the exclusion of female sexualities from popular and historical discourses, which Gunkel (2010: 57) addresses when she writes that “the criminalization of the dildo is widely unattended” in South African historiography. Although female sex toys were criminalised as part of the amendments to the Immorality Act following the Forest Town raid in 1966, the politicisation of female same-sex sexualities during apartheid has been largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship. Furthermore, at one point in Enraged by a Picture (2005), a short documentary film produced by Muholi, a number of photographs from this collection are positioned in a public street in Johannesburg. Dramatising the representational possibilities between victimhood and sexual agency, “Dada” is displayed alongside “Aftermath”. The film captures the public’s keen interest, which ranges from amusement to incredulity. It is, of course, the metonymic logic of the dildo – gesturing towards an alternative female sexual agency – that constitutes the most radical displacement of male-centred intimacy and gendered social relations. It is this image that violates the codes of sexual subordination and victimhood that define women in general, and lesbians in particular, within the public imaginary. Muholi’s refusal to desexualise representations of black lesbian lives is a critical response to those who offer conditional acceptance predicated on sanitised notions of what it means to ‘be lesbian’. Ironically, this position is expressed by Diesel in her introduction to the collection of first-person narratives by lesbian women. Diesel (2011b: xiv) writes that:

The need for successful, respectable, well-adjusted professional, happy, attractive and vulnerable lesbian role models is essential to break down damaging stereotypes and demonstrate that this is an appropriate and acceptable choice for women.

It is not only the assertion that there is an idealised way of being a black lesbian that concerns me. It is also the radical de-eroticisation of this idealised persona – resonating, in some ways, with the conservative assimilationist aesthetic that characterises Gay Pages. The celebratory eroticism that characterises Muholi’s work, in contrast, disrupts the codes of victimhood and demands a re-evaluation of the significance of sex and desire in shaping gendered subjectivities, eschewing tropes of desexualisation and victimhood.
Womanhood and the female body

Similarly, by focusing on the materiality of the body, Muholi’s photographs reveal the multi-modal complexities of being a black lesbian woman. They also problematise the somewhat rigid discourses of gender and sexuality that dominate perceptions of non-heteronormative sexualities, and they interrogate the very constitution of womanhood, butch-femme identities, and gendered selves. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993: 231) reflects that:

> The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible practice, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.

In this way, Butler points to the fractures and shifting signifiers that emerge within the circulation of gender norms. Reflecting further on the uneven interplay between the nominally stable categories of sexuality and gender, Butler (1993: 238) writes:

> Although forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain. Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men “feminine” or calling lesbians “masculine,” and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender (“no longer being a real or proper man” or “no longer being a real and proper woman”), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender.

It is the mechanisms of gender shaming and the policing of bodies that Muholi’s collection exposes, celebrating the destabilisation of gender practices without producing new lesbian essentialisms. The complex signifying systems with which black lesbian women are discursively produced in Muholi’s work both interrogate and embrace what Judith (Jack) Halberstam (1998) famously refers to as “female masculinity”. Halberstam (1998: 1) warns against allowing “masculinity [to be] reduce[d] down to the male body and its effects” and instead insists that the concept of masculinities refers to the modes of behaviour and appearance that may be difficult to define but are easily recognisable. Female masculinity, particularly among lesbian women in different transnational contexts, is most often culturally coded as ‘being butch’. Ngcobo (2011: 174) discusses her understanding of what it means to be butch:
I am a ‘butch’ lesbian – I like dressing in ‘men's clothes’ and hate wearing skirts. Even in church I used to wear my brother’s things. I feel most comfortable like this, and it gives me more freedom. I also look like my father. But I am a soft, soft person, and I was expecting love and happiness [...].

Jeanne Córdova (2011: 223) provides a similar definition for the term butch in its earlier usage as:

a concept that refers to a code of masculine behaviours and gender performativity among gay women. A butch is born as a female, but a female who bridges the feminine and the masculine in that she genetically and later culturally acquires body language and clothing presentation, thought processes, and behaviours, sexistly categorized as ‘masculine’.

While Córdova intimates that this is a problematic and somewhat dated definition of butch, it is the one that Muholi – and the black working-class lesbian public cultures that she imagines – tends to mobilise. Indeed, while Ncobo’s understanding of butch is widely shared, the use of the term is far more disparate and contested within lesbian public cultures in the Global North: butch co-circulates with differently gendered pronouns, differently sexed bodies, those who do and those who do not identify as lesbian or woman, and with varied and uneven use by transmen (Córdova 2011: 225). Córdova (225) argues, even, that as an identity marker, the label “‘butch’ can be removed from the male-female binary and exist as its own gender”.

Figure 16: *(in)security*. Source: Stevenson Gallery.
Muholi explores these complexities of butch lesbian identities in numerous photographs in her collection. In “(in)security”, for instance, a woman in uniform appears standing on the grass alongside the wall of a built structure. The subject’s pants, police-issue leather boots, and folded arms signify an embodied toughness. This photograph depicts a butch female masculinity, then, not only by way of her clothing but also through the authoritarian toughness of her physical placement and positioning. That this photograph has been published alongside an essay on butch-femme cultures in Johannesburg in *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* (2005) reaffirms it as an exemplar of butch lesbian sexuality. The contrast between the textured, natural grass and the smooth, shiny shoes in the lower third of the image invokes the constructedness of the *uniformly* heteronormative identity to which the clothing attests. The masculine aesthetic of the subject is productively complicated, however, by the composition of the photograph: the creases and folds in the pants, enhanced through manipulation of the exposure, form a Y-shape and connect at the genital area of the woman’s pants. To some extent, this is the focal point of the shot.

While the image draws our eyes to and foregrounds the very bodily node on which heteronormative codes are inscribed, the remainder of the image destabilises the basis of those gendered normativities.

In Muholi’s *Enraged by a Picture* (2005), this photograph appears juxtaposed with written text that reads:

\begin{quote}
(in)security: ‘I’m serving in silence – straight by day, and a dyke at home’
\end{quote}

In addition to the title of the photograph and the semiotic logic of her clothing, the term “serving” in this description reveals that the subject of the photograph is a police officer. The word “silence” here and the polarisations of her lived experience as being either “straight” or “a dyke” point to the pressures of heteronormativity. The written text also speaks to the fragmented sense of identity that is structured into distinct public and private spheres. While the photograph can be read as a declaration of identity and deliberate presence through the stance of the woman in the image (which clearly indicates that she is posing for this photograph), this is contrasted by the fact that her
head and upper torso have been cropped out. The image thus attests simultaneously to a resistance to erasure, as well as to the limitations of any such resistance under the pervasive sign of heteronormativity. The institutional silencing that the subject describes in the written text corresponds to the eerily (dis)embodied anonymity afforded by the cropping. A deliberately ambiguous use of brackets in the title of the photograph creates a link to her job as a police officer, but it also engages the tension between the security of selfhood that she feels in the domestic space, and the fear of disclosure and the concomitant ontological uncertainty when she is in public. This tension is dramatised in the photograph itself. In “(in)security”, the black belt appears considerably darker than the remainder of the woman’s uniform. Above the belt, we see only her folded arms and intimations of her small breasts, given the cropping of her head and shoulders. The belt functions then to divide the image between the seen and the unseen, between the uniform and the uniqueness of flesh, between the masculinity of the covered body and the suggested femininity of her breasts.

Significantly, the subject’s status as a police officer and her performance within a culture of presumed heteronormative uniformity – a uniformity literally embodied in her clothing – resonates with another of Muholi’s photographs: that a police officer is forced to hide her sexuality reinforces the institutionalised heteronormativity and inaccessibility of state apparatuses that Muholi’s “Case number” documents.
In “ID Crisis”, Muholi locates gendered and sexual identities as everyday acts of self-constituting constructions. This photograph depicts a young, thin woman tightly wrapping her breasts with a white bandage. Her breasts are still partially visible in the image as the bandage appears to be flattening them downwards onto her lower torso. The luminosity of the photograph bifurcates the subject’s setting, dividing the bright light on the left, emanating from a window, from the relative darkness on the right. The dispersal of light, which is manipulated by the over-exposure of the photograph, engages the clichéd binary tropes of light/dark, known/unknown, public/private secrecy/disclosure – binaries that Sedgwick (2008) contends are among the structuring tropes of sexuality. However, the composition of the photograph complicates and inverts these ostensibly neat binaries. The subject of the photograph is illuminated by the bright light in the same moment that she conceals her breasts. The white bandage, with which the biological signifiers of her feminine body will soon be disguised, is foregrounded both through its position at the centre of the image between the two breasts and by its white colour which reflects disproportionately the bright light from the window. While the bandage, in this instance, works towards concealment, it performs the function of disclosing, of asserting, of making known a non-heteronormative identity.

Muholi’s photograph dramatises the empowering and illuminating potential of ambiguous gender practices such as breast-binding; rather than being acts of secrecy or shame, they are cast as self-fashioning moves of self-actualisation. The trope of secrecy/disclosure – as well as the effectiveness of the rendering of light in this image – depends on the myth of an ‘authentic’ self. While heteronormativity insists that non-binding of the subject’s breasts is a requirement for this authenticity, the photograph’s deployment of the trope of lightness/darkness contends that a complex and layered non-heteronormative self is in fact the object of her self-actualisation. This photograph also expertly illustrates Susan Sontag’s (2007: 91) warning against “separating photography as art from photography as document”. By playing with these binary tropes, the luminosity and composition of the photograph interrogate what it is that is being concealed or revealed. In other words, Muholi’s photograph exposes the complicity of these visual tropes with heteronormativity – insofar as categories of natural, normal and authentic, capable of being concealed or disclosed, are produced.
and controlled. In light of Sedgwick’s (2008: 100) insistence on the significance of naming (or not naming) in maintaining the operations of the secrecy/disclosure binary, this photograph acts as a naming device, a way of making the subject’s sexual and gendered identities knowable.

That the breast-binding process appears to be ongoing suggests a raw immediacy in the photograph, as well as a constructedness of the subject’s identity formation. The bandage in this image works metonymically as one of many ways through which alternative bodies and identities can be constructed, through which victimhood can be disarticulated, and through which cosmopolitan knowledges of an imagined township sexuality can be circulated. The frayed edges of this bandage, which stand out against the grayscale in the background, constitute then a visual reminder of the jagged, rough and uneven nature of this identity formation. The shy, contemplative look on the subject’s face in this photograph, captured sympathetically close-up in grayscale, in addition to the inherently personal process being depicted, suggests a tangible vulnerability. Muholi’s *Enraged by a Picture* documentary points to the connection between breast-binding and butch identities by juxtaposing this photograph with the narrative of other expressly butch women, one of whom is seen binding her breasts.

Cvetkovich (2003: 81) offers a particularly insightful observation about the traditional rendering of emotionally unavailable butch lesbians, which seems poignantly performed in Muholi’s “ID Crisis”:

> Butch dykes reconfigure the meanings of being hard or numb, showing both its necessity and difficulty, giving dignity to the moments when it is not possible to be vulnerable and also revealing the many ways in which vulnerability can be performed.

Furthermore, the first-person written text accompanying “ID Crisis” in Muholi’s short documentary film states:

> I’ve been doing this for years now,
> I’m not the only one…
> I don’t feel the pain anymore

The woman’s suggestion, in this autobiographical extract, that her gendered self-fashioning is a long-term process intersects productively with the raw immediacy of the photograph which captures the act in progress rather than as an outcome. Her
suggestion that she is not alone in this breast-binding practice connects her to a network of non-heteronormative sexual and gender identity construction in her community, simultaneously vernacular and transnational. The ambiguous signification of “feel[ing] the pain” speaks to the interplay between corporeal and discursive readings of the black lesbian body. While the photograph evidences the visible pain and discomfort that this process no doubt entails, she suggests that she has grown accustomed to it and no longer feels the physical pain. However, the descriptor “feel[ing] the pain” also engages the broader ontological challenges of the fragmentation and uncertainty of selfhood.

An implication is that this move to re-author the body through its partial de-feminisation ameliorates the emotional turmoil that characterises initial forays into non-heteronormative gender and sexual identity formations. Walter Benjamin (1972: 25) reflects on the interpretive importance of accompanying written text in the reading of a photograph in his famous essay “A short history of photography” and asks: “Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?” He elaborates on the significance of the paratext when he writes:

> The camera becomes smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture transitory and secret pictures which are able to shock the associative mechanism of the observer to a standstill. At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literalises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate. (25)

While the written text accompanying “ID Crisis” in the documentary film informs the reception of the image, this contrasts with Benjamin’s linear and literal reading of the relationship between image and text. Rather than foreclosing on interpretive possibilities, the shifting signifiers in the accompanying text and the title itself pry open alternative readings of the image. Its ironic title – “ID Crisis” – speaks to the tension between the way in which non-binarist genders and non-heteronormative sexualities are often interpreted by others as identity crises on the one hand, and the active self-actualisation and practices of identity formation that we see in this photograph on the other. Sedgwick (2008: 27) cautions against conflating gender and sexuality in analytical practices and observes that while “[t]he study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender […] we can’t know in advance how they will be different”. “ID Crisis” itself does not interpellate the subject within specific gender and sexual taxonomies. Rather, the individual subject’s experience is foregrounded with
sensitivity. This does not merely eschew politicised identities in favour of individualised subjectivities. Rather, the photograph interrogates the very workings of authenticity and identity politics on which both heteronormativity and much queer activism depend.

Figure 18: "What don't you see when you look at me I". Source: Stevenson Gallery.

Figure 19: "What don't you see when you look at me II". Source: Stevenson Gallery.
While *Only Half the Picture* includes photographs of masculine-presenting butch women, the collection also critiques the essentialism underpinning the gender/sexuality nexus that prescribes certain ways of being. In “What don’t you see when you look at me I”, Muholi interrogates the heteronormative codes of meaning-making. A carefully cropped photograph reveals only the waist and scarred arm of a subject who is wearing a white shirt, grey pants and a black leather belt. The provocative ambiguity of the photograph depends on the uncertain sex of the masculine-presenting subject, as well as the scarred inscriptions of an unknown experience. This marking ironically designates the subject as unknowable, gesturing towards a past that is extraneous to this temporal moment. As the name of the photograph suggests, the focus of this image is that which cannot be seen. It asserts that perceptions and discursive mappings of the Other depend on a series of fragments that are always imperfectly drawn together. This photograph is followed by “What don’t you see when you look at me II”, which is a close-up shot of a pair of black men’s shoes and grey trousers. Together, these photographs problematise the relationship between seeing and knowing, and reveal the limitations of imposing identities on women who love and desire other women. Paradoxically, it is the hermeneutic uncertainty signified by the scarred marking on the subject’s arm that reveals the impossibility of singular and essentialist markings of lesbian women. The dissimilarity between these two ambiguous cropped images and those in the “Beloved” series, for instance, which rely on the specific visual language of intimacy and female-bodiedness, illustrates the multiple ways in which *Only Half the Picture* refuses essentialist renderings of the black female body.

Muholi similarly questions the conflation of identities and bodies in her photograph titled “not butch, but my legs are”. It focuses downwards on the legs of someone who appears to be sitting on the floor with a mug of coffee situated between her slippers. The hairs on her legs are thick and dark and disrupt expectations – whether rooted in heteronormativity or a white aesthetic hegemony – of a modern feminine subject. Compositionally, the photograph locates the coffee mug as the focal point of the image, making the hairy legs secondary. In fact, the contrast between the everyday normality of a coffee mug and the female subject’s unconventional hairy legs are compounded by the colouring and shading of the greyscale photograph. While the coffee mug and its contents are presented in definitive black and white, the subject’s
legs and hair are cast in shadows and shifting shades of grey. This invites the viewer to consider how the unquestionable knowability of the crockery reinforces the ontological and bodily uncertainty of the subject. Distiller (2005: 50) observes:

I am struck by the difficulty lesbians (and, indeed, gay men) have in speaking as homosexuals in South African public life without invariably falling into one or other of the available stereotypes (the ‘butch’ and the ‘moffie’ being the two with which the South African media seem most comfortable). Lesbians wishing to talk about their desire, to vocalise their pleasure, to represent themselves (however fractured and shifting these selves must by definition be, most of us still experience our selves as such on a daily basis) have only the tools of language steeped in cultures which serve to construct them as irredeemably other, and their desire as, at best, a simulacrum or stimulation of a hetero/sexual norm, and at worst as deviant, defective or damaged.

The uncertain visual and titular codes in Muholi’s photograph assert the female subject’s right to disavow taxonomical identity labels, despite the fact that her body and sexuality violate the constructed binaries of heteronormativity. Muholi (2010) poses the question explicitly when she later asks: “Is there a lesbian aesthetic or do we express our gendered, racialised and classed selves in rich and diverse ways?”
Muholi’s collection examines the butch-femme binary, lesbian identity and female-bodiedness in several other photographs, some of which engage explicitly with the relationship between menstruation and womanhood. Muholi (in DeBarros 2006) reflects on the ambiguous gender positionings of butch lesbian women when she says that “[i]n my books there are pictures of a lot of [menstrual] periods; there’s this idea that butch women don’t bleed”. The photographs in the “Period” series, which deploy menstrual blood as a disruptive though uncertain signifier, include images of blood pooling on the ground, a blood-stained sanitary pad, clotted blood draining away in a bathtub, and the artist positioning a used tampon in her mouth as one would a cigar. Gqola (2006: 86) contends that the series of photographs depicting menstrual blood:

normalises Black lesbians as women. It positions the most reviled women through images of the most abhorrent – albeit normal – aspect of women’s lives. [...] Muholi’s normalising of Black lesbian sexuality positions it as part of the continuum of women’s sexuality at the same time that she plays with notions of what is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. Homosexuality is often demonised as abnormal because it is not ‘natural’, as though the natural is easily discernible and desirable.

Muholi does not articulate menstrual blood as a fixed signifier in the photographs that constitute Only Half the Picture. Rather, she harnesses the very ambiguity of menstrual blood as it contests for signification in the public imaginary as intersecting iterations of disgust, shame, naturalness, womanhood, biological inevitability, and (failed) motherhood. The complex layering of meanings parallels the complexity of lesbian lives, which involve the negotiation of gendered, racial and sexual identity markers. Not only is motherhood a key site for the legitimisation of patriarchy, it is also a central node around which heteronormative opposition to legal reform by conservative organisations has mobilised. Furthermore, the photographs also dramatise alternative possibilities for engaging with discourses of gender and sexuality. Rachel Epstein (2002: 55) reflects on responses to butch mothers in the United States and argues that:

Butch mothers perform the unexpected in many directions. Butches are not supposed to be mothers, and mothers are not supposed to be butch. When butches mother they denaturalize both terms and transform both subjectivities.
The tension between gendered identities and markers of biological motherhood is explored in “Period I” which features the photographer herself and focuses downward on a bloodied sanitary pad that is lying on the floor. While the abdomen and upper thighs of the body appear to be blurred, the sharp focus of the image is on the pad which lies between the photographer’s two feet. The pad in fact appears to be framed by the photographer’s feet and body, reinforcing the centrality of the menstrual blood in this image. Though evidently naked, the photographer does not reveal either her breasts or genital area in this photograph. Instead, her female-bodiedness is marked by her capacity to menstruate and the image appears both intimate and distant – familiar yet unrecognisable. The photographs of menstrual blood constitute an unequivocal rejection of conditional representation: they refuse the sanitisation of black lesbian bodies neatly packaged for deployment as victims and insists, rather, on a complex reading of gendered subjectivities. As an “autobiography of the body” – to borrow Willis and Williams’s (2002: 5) phrase – this photograph foregrounds a female-bodied lesbianism at the same moment that it engages with the constructedness of the visual self.
Similarly, “Period III” features a bloodied sanitary pad as its subject. However, unlike the previous image, which framed menstruation as a deeply personal and private encounter with one’s gendered self, “Period III” stages menstruation and womanhood as a public performance. A bloodied sanitary pad appears hanging on a washing line outside, next to a black article of underwear. The public and performative nature of this positioning is evidenced by the composition of the photograph in which the blue sky in the background attests to the fact that this pad is visible and locates its exposure within the apparent predictability of the everyday. The photograph responds to a culture where menstruation is both inevitable and unspeakable. In fact, this photograph appears to be articulating “menstrual blood [as] some kind of uncouth truth
that is vulgar to others” (Makhubu 2012: 518) to defy the codes of art reception and representation. Gqola (2006: 85) argues that “[t]he series is courageous in drawing the eye to that which patriarchy is most vehement about making invisible: menstrual blood”. This confrontational image engages the discursive operations of patriarchy by refuting the discourses of shame and silencing that characterise menstruation as much as they do same-sex subjectivities. The stark images of blood operate within an overlapping system of signification through which these explicit references to menstruation displace victimhood as the singular frame of representation for black lesbian women. Muholi (in Godana 2006: 91) states in this respect that “the same blood that defines us as women is the same blood which we [lesbian women] shed in the attacks against us”.

Engaging a similarly abrasive aesthetic, Muholi’s photograph “Untitled” presents a crude artistic rendition of the female reproductive system, gesturing vaguely to the ovaries, the fallopian tube, the uterus and the vagina. The image is drawn in menstrual blood on a piece of lined paper, suggesting a further disavowal of the codes of artistic practice. While the image links menstrual blood to reproduction explicitly – operating as the biological mechanism of heteronormativity – it also parodies this connection and challenges the biological essentialism on which gendered identities depend. Reflecting on another photograph of a bloodied sanitary pad in Muholi’s collection, Gqola (2006: 85-86) observes:
The image startles because of the meanings that attach to women’s sexuality and reproduction: that evidence of a woman’s failure to conceive is shameful and to be hidden. A menstruating woman is a useless woman: under patriarchy she has failed to marshal her body parts to act in accordance with the rules that govern how such a society replicates. The pictures seem to ask: how much more disposable is a bleeding lesbian?

Reflecting similarly on the centrality of reproduction in shaping conservative religious and cultural views on sexuality, Tamale (2011a: 2) insists on understanding sexuality as a complex network of socially constructed meanings and argues that “[t]he study of sexualities therefore offers unending lessons about pleasure, creativity, subversion, violence, oppression, and living”.

Aesthetics of Africanness

Though Only Half the Picture has received considerable scholarly attention, and several of its photographs have been reproduced in anthologies and other publications, a series of five photographs has been largely overlooked.14 This series of photographs, collectively entitled “Closer to my heart”, concludes Muholi’s collection. In these images, she appropriates the Khoisan rock art aesthetic by projecting dark silhouettes onto an ochre-coloured background. In these five images with uncertain composition, ambiguous scenes of both violence and intimacy are presented. However, the images insist on an ambiguous reading of the participants and their actions. While the rest of the photographs in Only Half the Picture tend to be characterised by a documentary and realist aesthetic, these five refuse any singular interpretation and interrogate the very basis of the photographic form. I am reminded of Sikhumbuzo Mngadi’s (2005: 155) assertion that a photograph might be “considered in terms of the multiple effects of meaning that it engenders, rather than as a statement of evidence”. The five images that conclude the collection, in their ambiguous composition and anomalous aesthetic, demand a re-reading of the earlier photographs, gesturing towards the nuances and complexities that may have been overlooked. The photographs also gesture at alternative representational possibilities in which the figures in the images appear oblivious to viewer’s expectations or presence;15 in fact, that they are being photographed at all seems secondary.
The black body is not put on display in these images; rather, a complex and ambiguous signifying system is brought to bear – undermining the homogenous codes of victimhood that characterise depictions of black lesbian women. The black women’s subjective experiences of intimacy and passion is privileged, then, above our voyeuristic gaze, reinforcing Muholi’s insistence that black lesbian women must be read as desiring sexual subjects rather than as mere commodified sexual objects or victims devoid of agency. This challenges the depiction of photographed black female bodies being always already packaged and prepared for the heteropatriarchal viewer. The dangers of reproducing singular and essentialist representations of marginalised groups is articulated by Mercer (1994: 250) as follows:

[T]he idea of speaking as a ‘representative of the race’ reinforces the myth, on which ideologies of racism crucially depend, that ‘the black community’ is a homogenous, monolithic or singular entity defined by race and nothing but race.

Far from fixing meaning or interpretation, the “Closer to my heart” photographs serve to undermine the apparent ‘obviousness’ of the other images by framing Only Half the Picture within an interpretive open-endedness. Noting the complexity in much of Muholi’s work, Gqola (2006: 83) remarks that her “work shows up the lies that heteropatriarchy sustains about who Black South African lesbians are. Her lens ensures that this space’s jagged edges are seen”. While Gqola is referring to the
collection as a whole, I am interested in how it is the “Closer to my heart” photographs in particular that foreground the “jagged edges” of black lesbian life and its representations.

Figure 25: “Closer to my heart !”. Source: Stevenson Gallery.

Distiller writes about the conceptual frames in which same-sex desire is constituted and understood. Noting that same-sex desire has difficulty in escaping the strictures of heteronormative discursive positionings, Distiller (2005: 45) writes that:

[L]esbians have [difficulty] in speaking (of) themselves, into normativity, without invoking one or other of the available identity positions. These positions are invariably informed by a heteronormativity which can understand the lesbian only in its own terms (‘which one of you gets to be the man?’), or as deviant (‘why do you hate men?’), damaged (‘it’s because you were abused/ had a bad experience’) or improperly developed (‘all you need is a real man’/ ‘how do you know you aren’t heterosexual if you’ve never tried it?’).

The ambiguous register employed in these images resists discourses of authenticity which postulate ideal ways of being black or lesbian, or a woman more generally. While public discourses on female same-sex sexualities fail, then, to account for the complexities and multiple ambiguities that characterise lesbian lives and desires, the five “Closer to my heart” photographs refuse discourses of authenticity and rhetorical strategies of strategic essentialism. Similarly, the butch-femme binary – which is increasingly an analytical frame in sexuality studies in South Africa – as well as the
assimilationism/queer binary are negated and replaced by a fluidity of sexual practice. While very little is known about the participants in these five photographs, the complexity of their lived experience and subjectivity is not denied, but simply remains undisclosed. Muholi gestures, then, towards the possibilities of sexual play outside of identity and cultural politics. Most significantly, however, these “Closer to my heart” images also contest contemporary configurations of race and desire. Though Gqola (2006: 88) has pointed out the Khoisan rock art aesthetic, I want to extend this observation and interrogate the political implications of this stylistic form.

While essentialist claims that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican construct a powerful transnational imaginary that conjoins homophobia and post-colonial Africa, there is a more expansive ideology about African sexualities that circulates. As I discussed in the Introduction, there is a rich cultural history of same-sex sexualities on the African continent. It is with this history of a complex pre-colonial accommodationist approach to sexual diversity that these images are in dialogue. Muholi’s appropriation of this visual form is significant, then, for its aggressive contestation of the truism that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican, and that same-sex sexualities demand particular identity forms. The deployment of homophobia for nationalist objectives has created tenuous polarisations of morally corrupt colonial cultural formations on the one hand, and a seemingly natural heteronormative African culture on the other. However, the “Closer to my heart” series forms part of a political project that connects local township sexual politics to a more global production of a restless sense of ‘African sexuality’. The images suggest that while not all practitioners of same-sex intimacies embrace labels such as gay, lesbian and queer, same-sex desire is nonetheless imbricated in personal intimacies, cultural formations, and gender politics in Africa.

Muholi (2011: 191) reflects on the ideological violence imposed by vitriolic claims of an authentic heteronormative Africanness:

The reality of being black and lesbian in South Africa is that we become ‘outsiders’ inside our townships or rural communities because there are those who have defined homosexuality in racial and ethnic terms as ‘un-African’. Some make the argument that those who identify as LGBT are mimicking western or ‘white’ culture. ‘Black lesbianism’ is acknowledged and constructed through a heteronormative lens and is recognised as situational, as ‘a fashion’ or phase ‘because her friends are doing it’ or as a response to frustration with a boyfriend. What is conveniently
forgotten is that African cultures have historically accommodated same-sex desires and relationships.

By appropriating the Khoisan rock art aesthetic, Muholi is drawing on a pre-colonial system of signification to indicate that certain African practices (including same-sex sexual practices) existed prior to the supposed contamination by the West. She thereby challenges reductionist readings of sexuality in Africa which are perpetuated by both conservative African nationalists on the one hand, and the global human rights agenda on the other. The intertextual logic of these photographs also resonates with the contemporary urbanity in her other images, suggesting that there is an ahistorical timelessness to same-sex desire and intimacy. What is more, these photographs offer a powerfully suggestive way of accommodating histories of transnational violence enacted upon black, female bodies without reproducing singular tropes of victimhood.

Conclusion

What distinguishes Muholi’s photography from other visual and media depictions of black lesbian women is the way in which she engages and undermines multiple oppressive and essentialist discourses simultaneously. Central to my argument in this chapter is her refusal of reductionist positionings that oversubscribe to representational frames of victimhood, how her photographs intersect with both hypersexualising and desexualising representational impulses, and the refiguring of identity politics and notions of Africanness. She does this by exploring the complexities of black lesbian lives and the fluidity of both subjectivity and visual form. Muholi’s sexual images are uncompromisingly erotic and candid as they foreground the interpersonal experiences of her subjects and disavow the patriarchal gaze. *Only Half the Picture* also locates black lesbian lives within a contextual network of discourses, identities and experiences that map the intersecting biological and cultural definitions of sexuality, womanhood, motherhood, the natural, and the normal. Her work further problematises the relationship between bodies, sexualities and identity markers, not only insofar as it relates to butch self-definition, but to inscriptions of victimhood more specifically.
Muholi’s provocative appropriation of the Khoisan rock art aesthetic and the political potentialities of this are significant in the production and circulation of alternative imaginings of black lesbian lives. Framing the ambiguously-depicted experiences of black lesbian women within this visual register demands a radical disengagement with discourses asserting essentialist notions of either Africanness or the sexual identity politics of the Global North. Significantly, Muholi’s collection of photographs highlights the intersectional nature of black lesbian women’s disempowerment as they face oppression and social exclusion on the basis of sexuality, as well as of race, class, gender. While Muholi weaves these multiple threads of identity formation and disempowerment into her representations, these inflections remain contextual rather than thematic, resisting the impulse to formulate alternative socio-economic iterations of victimhood. Indeed, despite the general invisibility of black lesbian women in public discourse, government policy-making and circuits of cultural production, Muholi’s imagining of this citizen-subject exceeds the bounds imposed by heteronormativity, patriarchy and racism.

Notes

1 Despite a number of variations on the spelling of Bartmann’s name and surname – including the suffix -tjie as a diminutive term of endearment – I follow Gqola’s (2010: 66) use of the spelling that appears on Bartmann’s baptismal certificate, in part to “recogni[se] … the history of a slavocratic, colonial and apartheid trajectory which infantilised adult Black men and women in the service of white supremacist patriarchy”.

2 Munro (2012: 226) makes a similar observation about this photograph.

3 For further discussions about the signifying systems and deployment of Sarah Bartmann in postapartheid cultural texts, see Samuelson (2007) and Gqola (2010).

4 Reflecting on a selection of photographs from this collection that I do not discuss here, Thomas (2013: 359) writes that “[t]he marks on the limbs of these women invoke the history of slavery, summon photographs of those killed in the Rwandan genocide, provide a visual echo of the legs of schoolgirls who have been tear-gassed and who run from the police in Soweto in South Africa in 1976”.


6 Though Faulkner’s (2014) discussion focuses particularly on notions of victimhood in relation to representations of Palestinians, his insights resonate with my concerns about black, lesbian women.

7 My reading of these particular photographs is informed by Cvetkovich’s An Archive of Feelings (2003) in which she examines the textual responses to sexuality and trauma that come to constitute lesbian public cultures in the United States. Cvetkovich argues that cultural texts that emerge in response to trauma can function as productive sites for articulating cultural memory, inculturating cultures of political and cultural solidarities, as well as disrupting myriad structures of normativity.

8 Historically, the day marks the intersection of two significant, though contradictory, events, and the political constituencies that they circumscribe. It was celebrated as a holiday during apartheid to commemorate the Battle of Blood River in the nineteenth century, in which the Afrikaners defeated the Zulu army, and it is also the date of the formation of the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, more than a century later in 1961.

Kheswa and Wieringa’s qualitative research project focused on a number of black, lesbian, working-class women who live in Johannesburg.

Here, Baderoon is in dialogue with an earlier article by Gqola (2006).

White women feature more prominently in some of Muholi’s later collections, such as *Massah and Minnah* where she engages directly with the racial inequalities of the past that have continued into the present.

In a coffee-table book publication of the photographs in this collection, this particular image is titled “In-security”. However, the function of the brackets in deliberately exaggerating the title’s multiple ambiguous meanings is similarly fulfilled by the hyphen in this iteration.

Gqola’s (2006: 88) and Brett Seiler’s (2016) brief commentaries are significant exceptions. Seiler (2016) writes, for instance, that “The *Closer to My Heart Series* captures two women embracing one another represented only by their shadows. It is a painful, yet playful reminder of lives that once existed, of love that is fleeting”.

Gqola (2006: 88) makes a somewhat similar observation.
Indianness is a porous transnational construct that circulates through different global imaginaries. It is inhabited differently in different contexts and it generates distinct cultural histories as it takes root in local geographic and cultural spaces. There are constant efforts to fix the meaning of an Indianness rooted in South Africa – ironically, by colonial and apartheid biopolitics, as well as from within diasporic communities themselves. However, Indianness remains a rather restless cluster of circulating meanings, practices, tropes, and modes of representation through which the contingencies of race, place, and ethnicity are negotiated.¹ In this chapter, I focus on two postapartheid novels by diasporic Indian writers which expose the constructedness of particular forms of Indian identity, as well as the conservative gender and sexual politics that they subtend. The novels map historical and contemporary transnational cultural flows as they intersect with certain coordinates of South Africa’s racialised past and its continuities in the present. While Indian identity is imagined differently in the two novels, it is the patriarchal and heteronormative controls of female bodies that appear to signal the connections between and within these imagined diasporic communities. The texts are situated more than five decades apart and at opposite ends of the apartheid period, however, both Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* (originally published in 2001) and Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009) explore the construction of seemingly ‘authentic’ Indian identities and reinscribe alternative same-sex cultural histories into two vastly different historical moments.

Importantly, the notion of authenticity is a political fiction that requires constant policing. The logic of authentic cultural identities circumscribes and legitimises the basis of essentialist and seemingly insular cultural formations. Under this logic of authenticity, an idealised though often indeterminate origin is reified; internal differences are collapsed; practices move from specificity to synecdoche; cultural memory and national histories are iterated in the singular; and overlapping imaginaries and hierarchical investments are articulated in their impossibly immobile continuity. The idea of a singular transnational Indian identity, which the novels root in various continuities and connections, belies the contemporary constitutive practices of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the complex negotiation of global cultural flows.
within local settings. Whereas in the previous chapters I focused predominantly on the transnational circulations between the Global North and the Global South, and I discussed race in somewhat binary terms, this chapter explores a different set of transnational cultural flows and racial politics that emphasise historical and contemporary South-South relationalities.

Sarif’s *The World Unseen* is set in the early 1950s in and around Pretoria and focuses on the experiences and increasing desire and intimacy between two female Indian immigrants, Miriam and Amina. Miriam, who oversees the family’s small shop under her husband’s instruction, is in a loveless marriage and is burdened by spousal and parenting responsibilities. By contrast, Amina is unmarried, free-spirited and the co-owner of a small café. Amina contravenes the conservative gender expectations of her diasporic community as much as she defies the emerging absurdity of apartheid’s racist legislation. Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* is a first-person narrative set in contemporary Johannesburg. The novel is narrated by the protagonist, Zakira, a wealthy young Muslim woman who dutifully works in her parents’ bakery and embraces conservative religious codes during the day, while living a rebellious, alcohol and drug-infused partying lifestyle under the cover of darkness. She soon joins a small group of politically aware Muslim women and falls in love with its leader, Sofie.

Though both texts depict and expose the fictions of an authentic Indianness, they do so with different emphases, exclusions, and attachments. Sarif’s novel depicts an Indian culture whose imagined authenticity is derived from circuits of oceanic movement between India and the diaspora. For Sarif, Indianness is predicated on overlapping investments in tradition that demand patriarchy, heteronormativity, and racial purity. Though Sarif’s text marks an important intervention in its inscription of same-sex sexualities, it is also important for its depiction of the continuities and complicities between apartheid biopolitics and the policing of Indian cultural identity from within. While the geographic and nationalist signifier ‘India’ figures in this text as a historical basis for the making and remaking of cultural identity, the nation-state from which the characters have emigrated is not idealised and is instead depicted as being merely complicitous with the iterations of Indianness that take root in the diaspora. In Meeran’s text, authentic Indianness is similarly exposed for being a cultural fiction that is performed according to particular scripts in the community. Much like in Sarif’s
novel, *Saracen at the Gates* reveals the interconnectedness of sexuality, gender, race, and class in the policing of postapartheid Indianness. In addition, however, Islamic religious practice and crass cosmopolitan materialism circulate as transnational imaginaries, displacing attachments to India and discourses of dislocation as constitutive of an imagined Indian identity. In Meeran’s novel, the designation Indian itself comes to signify a closed racially-pure ethnic identity rather than a national affiliation. While the marker ‘Indian’ signifies differently in each text, what connects them is the centrality as well as the instability of the servile female bodies on which fantasies of authenticity are projected. It is this figure of the Indian woman that is contested in both novels, and, significantly, it is from within Indianness itself that a transformative gender politics is articulated.

Through their (de)construction of ‘authentic’ Indianness, the novels reveal both the brutal excesses through which cultural identities are produced and policed, along with the complicitous relationship between some forms of Indianness in South Africa and the discriminatory raciologies of the apartheid and postapartheid periods. In this chapter, I argue that by exposing the constructedness of these imaginings of diasporic Indianness and their constitutive regulation of imagined racial purities and gendered norms, the novels undermine and discredit the normative structures of compulsory heterosexuality that are central to the constructions of Indianness in both texts. The normative centre, as it were, cannot hold, and things fall apart as the moral surety of Indian identities – and their constitutive heteronormativity – are destabilised by both Sarif and Meeran. Binaries of sameness and difference depend on an imagined normative centre against which otherness is defined. In the absence of a stable centre, Sarif and Meeran seem to be suggesting, the epistemological basis of otherness is destabilised.

Though both novels depict explicitly heteronormative contexts, they each eschew the representational impulse of otherness and queer oppositionality, instead inscribing female same-sex desire into cultural histories of the Indian diaspora. While they are set many decades apart, their production and circulation are relatively coterminous. Significantly, both novels circumvent the imperatives of sexual identity politics. Despite their different temporal settings, both texts are situated outside the historical high point of the global sexual rights movement. Sarif’s novel, on the one hand, precedes the
post-Stonewall global rights agenda and the rise of lesbian identity politics by almost two decades. Meeran’s text, on the other, speaks to a more radical divestment in sexual identities among millennials globally. However, what is common to both texts is their disarticulation of fixed identities and positionings of otherness to which same-sex sexualities are habitually assigned. While *The World Unseen* does explore the logic of the closet and its reciprocal tropes of secrecy and visibility, *Saracen at the Gates* unsettles further the fixity of these heteronormative knowledges.

My focus in this chapter is on how two novels imagine specific forms of Indian identity, which appear to be conservative and reactionary. However, it is important to note that the texts also deftly explore how Indianness as a cultural identity is deeply invested in transformative gender politics. It is therefore certainly not my claim that Indian identities are uniquely or universally oppressive. I am interested, rather, in the relationships between conservative gender and sexual politics and constructions of cultural ‘authenticity’. This chapter therefore uses South African Indian identities as a conceptual and contextual lens to explore the relationship between seemingly ‘authentic’ cultural norms, same-sex sexuality, gendered power and resistance, and notions of sexual difference.

**The routes of Indianness in South Africa**

While India itself is discernible as a fixed geopolitical space on contemporary maps of South Asia, Indianness as a cultural imaginary marks a far more disparate, porous and contested subjectivity. Indianness is situated within a complex network of competing historical and contemporary transnational flows of people, ideologies, practices, and aesthetics that forge local attachments and occupy distinct cultural forms in different sites around the world. In *India Abroad* (2003), Sandhya Shukla maps the textual formation of the Indian diaspora in the United States and England, and emphasises that India and Indianness are restless signifiers that mould onto other positionalities and vectors of agency in the production of cultural identities and diasporic consciousness. She argues that India is “not a precise location of homeland, nor a singular motivating impulse, but instead a heterogeneous imaginary that draws energy from historical formations of colonialism and postcolonialism, discourses of diversity, and exercises of bureaucratic power” (Shukla 2003: 3). Hall (1996b: 213)
similarly advises against fixed coordinates of cultural identity and argues that “[i]t is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth”. For him (213), cultural identities are “[n]ot an essence, but a positioning”. He writes that rather than being dependent on some fixed sense of an inherited tradition, identities mark “the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (213).

Indian identities have distinctly ambivalent roots in South Africa, and are characterised by a history of borders and boundaries, classifications and controls, resistances and transgressions. However, not unlike other racial and cultural identities in twentieth-century South Africa, these borders and boundaries were as ideological and cultural as they were geographic and statutory. On the one hand, the oceanic migration of Indians at the behest of the British colonial enterprise, the racist segregationist agenda of the Union government (Klotz 2015), and the brutal spatial planning and social engineering of the apartheid regime constructed both physical and imaginary spaces of Indianness. On the other hand, diasporic Indian communities also policed these porous borders of Indianness to produce an imagined homogeneity. Despite attempts to impose a uniformity on the South African Indian community, the fractured histories of migration and intersectional modalities such as of religion, caste, and class expose the failures to transpose unproblematically Indian as a national identity onto Indian as a racial taxonomy. And of course, as Thomas Hansen (2010: 109-110) writes, for diasporic cultural formations, there is nothing “inevitable, [or] natural, in an attachment to practices, memories, and cultural representations that are Indian, in their broadest sense”. The rendering of cultural identity as fluid, contingent, and contested resists what Paul Gilroy (2004: 128) calls the “discursive unanimity of the nation”, while undermining the very terms of its epistemic hierarchies. The fiction of authenticity is written into and through several epistemic binaries – such as original-copy, pure/corrupted, conformity/altered, home/diaspora, inclusion/exclusion etc. – that are as relevant to the machinations of heteronormativity as they are to the production of Indianness. With this in mind, the notion of South African Indian identities remains a productive lens through which to read these homogenising tendencies of cultural formations, as well as to trace the production of conservative gender norms to which notions of authenticity have often been tethered. My comparative reading of Sarif’s and Meeran’s texts is intended to expose rather than reify the architecture of
apartheid’s racial taxonomies as I examine the different ways in which the signifier Indian erases difference in favour of an imagined homogeneity, and rearticulates heteronormativity as an unmarked normative centre that becomes constitutive of Indianness itself. As Shukla (2003: 7) writes, “[n]ational belonging may underlie Indianness, but that organizing principle becomes more heterogeneous as it maps onto other forms of identification in diaspora and even becomes a newly constitutive category of other national frameworks”.

The emphasis on cultural roots and myths of origin in thinking about diasporic cultural identities (Govinden 2008: 48) often overlooks the nuanced and varied histories of oceanic migration from colonial India as it spanned the globe. That being said, the cultural mobility of the Indian Ocean and the biopolitical imposition of categories overlap to offer new ways of thinking about the making of race, the mapping of space, and inevitable impossibility of authenticity. For instance, the social and geographic movement of indentured labourers, who were transported to the then British colony of Natal from 1860 onwards in order to provide cheap agricultural labour, contrasts with that of so-called passenger Indians who followed as traders to engage commercially with the local structures of indenture (Ebr.-Vally 2001: 80-81). Anthropologist Rehana Ebr.-Vally (2001: 143) observes that cultural markers of linguistic, regional, and caste difference overlap unpredictably with religion “in defining various degrees of distance, similarity, difference, and compatibility between members of the ‘Indian’ community”. The request of the colonial government in Natal that almost a third of all Indians “imported” be female (Ebr.-Vally 2001: 81) reveals the constitutive (re)productive relationship between diaspora and heteronormativity. Despite the implicit genealogical permanence suggested by this request from Natal, South Africans of Indian descent were regarded as a foreign and “transitory population” (Frenkel 2010: 60) until 1961 when they were finally recognised as a permanent population group. Ebr.-Vally (2001: 84) is quick to point out, however, that the formal recognition of this group was in furtherance of the objectives of apartheid rather than a break from its racist ideology: “The decision was neither the sign of new-found enlightenment nor a magnanimous gesture on the part of the South African government. It was a way of stopping India’s interference in South African affairs”. In other words, the tension between the conflicting political trajectories of apartheid South Africa and post-independence India
increasingly marked a growing disjuncture in the political mobility of Indians across the Indian Ocean.

While Indianness demonstrates the restless circulation of cultural forms that are inhabited differently in Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels, both texts interrogate the policing of the female body and its place in the imagined Indian community. The ideological appropriation of the female body provides a key site for the enactment of these regimes of compulsory heterosexuality and the embodiment of cultural authenticity. Gilroy (2004: 83) comments on this political deployment of the female body when he writes that “[w]here the nation is a kin group supposedly composed of uniform and interchangeable family groups, the bodies of women provide the favored testing grounds for the principles of obligation, deference, and duty that the camp/nation demands”. Despite the contested histories of movement and domesticity, women continue to be the “privileged bearers of cultural authenticity” (Kandiyoti 1994: 378) or what Elizabeth Jackson (2011: 64) calls “custodians of traditional culture within the home”. In the introduction to her collection of short stories Jesus is Indian, Agnes Sam (1989: 11) explains that, faced with the inevitability of hybridisation in diasporic cultures, it is “migrant women [who] attempt a balancing act between new and old countries, cultures, religions and languages” in order to preserve particular iterations of Indianness.

Women are deemed responsible, in other words, for the cultural reproduction of a supposedly uncontaminated community. At the same time, however, notions of purity, heteronormativity, and docile domesticity are inscribed into women’s bodies for the (re)production of cultural identity. Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 14), in her study of non-heteronormative sexualities in representations of the South Asian diaspora, explains the symbolic deployment of the female body: “[t]he ‘home’ […] is a sacrosanct space of purity, tradition, and authenticity, embodied by the figure of the ‘woman’ who is enshrined at its center, and marked by patriarchal gender and sexual arrangements”. As my reading of the novels will show, it is the female body through which a cultural and racial purity is imagined and onto which fantasies of tradition and honour are projected. Both Sarif and Meeran illustrate the attempts to erase non-normative practices of gender and sexuality, thereby evidencing Hansen’s (2010: 112) assertion that Indianness is “continuously an object of labour that ultimately fails”. Gilroy (2004:
127) makes a more general observation about the symbolic currency of women’s bodies in the making of national or cultural identities when he contends that “[t]he unholy forces of nationalist biopolitics intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic difference and the continuance of blood lines”. The ‘properly’ constituted reproductive and kinship structures are imagined as central to the reproduction of authenticity itself. As Sarif and Meeran expose in their mapping of distinctly South African diasporic Indian identities, it is through this heteronormative appropriation of female bodies and the control of their sexual, reproductive, and domestic labours that Indianness, as a circumscribed set of imaginaries, is articulated. But it is also through the textual inscription of sexual agency and same-sex desire that an alternative and more fluid framing of Indianness is made possible.

Sides (2011: 121) warns against “the hegemony of apartheid narrative paradigms for telling South African history”, and recommends the “more expansive histories of the entangled travel of commodities and race across the globe”. Significantly, then, Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels also chart the transnational routes of cultural flows and their restless transformations in apartheid and postapartheid settings. While Sarif’s novel is set in the early years of formalised apartheid, and provides a cultural history of the intensifying restrictions, resistance, and riots (Sarif 2011: 128-29) that shaped the Indian diaspora in the country, the text is imbricated in a complex network of cultural flows that exceed the geographic and temporal bounds of apartheid. As a work of historical fiction, The World Unseen reinscribes a same-sex cultural history into discourses of the apartheid era while simultaneously tracing the transnational itineraries of those histories. Sarif’s novel resists the narrow contextual framework of ‘apartheid’ and provides a more expansive historiography by linking overlapping histories of racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity. While in Sarif’s novel sexual mores and gender politics circulate via India itself, they are also refracted intertextually through a more progressive British and American intellectual and cultural tradition of same-sex sexuality and (proto)feminism. Similarly, Meeran’s text frames transnational Islamic ideologies and practices as inherently confining in their investment in tradition and an imagined purity, and juxtaposes this with competing transnational media and trade networks of Western modernity, as crass materialism becomes partially constitutive of an oppressive and exclusionary Indianness. For both Sarif and Meeran, the control of the reproductive, sexual, and domestic labour of female bodies exceeds
the bounds of the national: these controls speak to global diasporic investments in the making and remaking of cultural identity in the same moment that they circumscribe local cultural practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Of course, I should point out that far from being constitutive of the nation’s literary canon, South African Indian literature has been largely overlooked by anthologists and literary criticism, as well as within pedagogical practices in universities. As full length studies of South African Indian literature, Devarakshanam Govinden’s ‘Sister Outsiders’ (2008) and Ronit Frenkel’s Reconsiderations (2010) are important interventions in rethinking this history of exclusion and elision in South African literary scholarship. Govinden’s analysis focuses on both fiction and non-fiction written specifically by South African Indian women since 1960. Frenkel, on the other hand, reads late apartheid and postapartheid fiction as a type of cultural history of Indians in South Africa at the same time that she interrogates the constructedness of Indianness within racial and cultural taxonomies. With very few exceptions, South African Indian literature itself has contributed to the normalisation of heteronormativity through the dominant depiction of heterosexual familial structures and the erasure of others. For instance, while novels by Aziz Hassim and Farida Karodia, or short stories by Agnes Sam and Jayapraga Reddy may offer progressive repositionings of South African Indian women, their textual imaginaries do not exceed the boundaries imposed by heteronormativity. In these writers’ works, heteronormativity does not manifest as homophobic violence, religious injunctions or social marginalisation, but rather in the erasure of non-heteronormative possibilities. Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels are significant, then, both for their celebratory inscription of female same-sex desire and their critical disruption of heteronormativity within the operations of an imagined Indian cultural authenticity.

The World Unseen

Sarif’s debut novel has a non-linear relationship to the Indian diaspora as the author’s own perspectives as a British woman of Indian descent intersects with the stories told to her by her Indian grandmother about living in South Africa. The novel acts as an intergenerational cultural history that simultaneously traces and contests dominant ways of thinking about desire, Indianness, gendered bodies, and heteronormative
spaces. The text focuses primarily on the experiences of two Indian women, Miriam and Amina, who live in the burgeoning diasporic Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria following their migrations across the Indian Ocean in the first half of the twentieth century. Whereas Amina’s sexual relationships with other women and her co-ownership of a café with a coloured man defy both the conventions of her community and the statutory prohibitions of apartheid’s formative legislation, Miriam lives a more traditional life of motherhood and heterosexual domesticity. The novel narrates the growing intimacy and desire between these two women while simultaneously exposing the constructedness of an imagined normative Indianness that proscribes their relationship. Heteronormativity is evident throughout the text, and is even enacted violently at times. However, the novel disarticulates the otherness of same-sex sexuality by destabilising and delegitimising the imagined normative centre of Indianness against which otherness is defined. While the Asiatic Bazaar is itself a consequence of an imposed statutory spatiality, it becomes a site for its own internal exclusions and controls that overlap in unsettling ways with the segregationist and patriarchal state ideology.

In the novel, India is conceptualised as a site for both the production of conservative gender norms and for the articulation of resistances. Unlike Frenkel (2010: 76) and Samuelson (2010: 282), whose readings of the novel tend to emphasise the emergence of female resistance within the diaspora, I argue that gendered power is both enacted and resisted across and within these interlinked colonial sites. The narrator observes that while Amina’s parents abandoned attempts to ensure their daughter’s conformity upon their arrival in South Africa, they had only made “cursory half-hearted attempts” in India (Sarif 2011: 24), where her childhood was characterised by headstrong defiance of gender norms and a precocious independence (15, 22, 23). Significantly, Amina’s departure from India with her parents is precipitated by the death of her maternal grandmother, Begum, who had previously forbidden the family to move to South Africa. Begum, we are told, had been severely beaten and maligned after giving birth to a mixed-race child after being raped by an unknown man as a young wife while in South Africa. Forcibly excluded on the basis of her contamination and shame, she was expelled from her husband’s family and forced to return to India in disgrace. The violent enforcement of patriarchy in the name of cultural and racial purity is carried back through the oceanic passage that returns Begum to India in 1892. Her
transoceanic travel also resists what Hofmeyr and Michelle Williams (2011: 5) call the “one-way problem”, which privileges historiographies of cultural flows from India to South Africa but overlooks reciprocal movements. Significantly, through Begum, the novel locates the cultural control of female bodies within the Indian Ocean histories of slavery:

‘Don’t ever be a slave to anyone. I was, all my life, and it ruined me’. These had been Begum’s final words to Amina Harjan. She had uttered them with a rasp of desperate conviction on a sunny Saturday morning in Bombay. (Sarif 2011: 14, my emphasis)

Her maternal grandmother spoke to her of pride, of self-reliance, and of courage. These were the things to cultivate, she had told her granddaughter, and not a slavish attitude to duties and traditions that were built on subservience and pain and fear. (23, my emphasis)

In the context of the histories and oceanic routes of slavery and indentured labour that defiled the Indian Ocean for more than two centuries, the use of the words “slave” and “slavish” reference the history of exploitation, commodification and control over colonised Indian bodies. Slavery is a recurring trope in the novel through which patriarchy and heteronormativity are conceptualised, pointing to Sarif’s depiction of a type of Indianness that is constructed through the confluence of intersecting oppressions. Govinden (in Frenkel 2010: 67) writes that “[w]hile colonialism was subjugating people on the basis of race, it was in turn being used by the colonised to subdue women in traditional societies”. Begum and her earlier homeward oceanic journey, which conjoins victimhood and patriarchy, is the explicit foil to Amina’s own journey to the Natal coast several decades later, making the latter’s move to Natal (and then Pretoria) an intergenerational reworking of shame and the recovery of gendered agency.

Miriam, on the other hand, anticipates a break between the oppressive culture in India and an imagined newness in the diaspora, hoping that her arrival in Durban with her new husband will mean that “now she could start again, a different life in a different place” (Sarif 2011: 53). However, this notion of rupture is undermined in the text by the fact that her memories of oceanic travel, optimism and seasickness are overlaid with her later experiences of morning sickness (during her third pregnancy) and her realisation that cultural life in Pretoria constitutes a continuation of gender relations in India. Similarly, despite Amina’s reading of a rupture between India and her new
country, Rehmat, Miriam’s Parisian sister-in-law, exclaims that the Asiatic Bazaar is “exactly like a mini India. Our people come here but live the same way – keep their women inside, keep their children inside. And God help anyone who tries to fight it” (104). It is again the control of female bodies that is emphasised by these transnational links. By tracing movements of populations across the Indian Ocean, Amina’s, Begum’s, and Miriam’s experiences connect formations of the Indian diaspora in South Africa – whether forced, coerced, or voluntary – to longer historiographies of violence and the denial of female sexual agency through which a version of Indianness has taken root. Frenkel (2010: 71), in her reading of the text, incisively writes that “centre and periphery merge or bleed into each other quite substantially, in that India as the nation or centre is created, at least partially, externally or on a periphery in South Africa”. Neither apartheid nor transnational Indianness are marked as exceptional in the novel and are instead connected to a global history of inclusion and exclusion.

Oceanic travel again characterises the routes of heteronormative and patriarchal cultural practices through the character of Amina’s paternal grandmother: wholly unlike the protagonist’s deceased maternal grandmother, she polices the boundaries of conservative authenticity while visiting from Bombay, illustrating the restless mobility of Indianness as it travels in the diaspora. The grandmother functions as the vanguard of an authentic cultural identity that draws its implicit moral authority from its origin in the supposed homeland. Her imposition of cultural authenticity is most manifest in her response to Amina’s refusal to submit to a heteronormative gender order:

[Amina] walked in and her grandmother saw that she wore what appeared to be a pair of her father’s old work trousers, some braces and a collarless shirt. She wore also a wide-brimmed hat, pushed back on her high forehead so that it held back most of the long, black curls that otherwise tended to fall about her face. She looked like one of the Boer farmers who came to her father’s filling station to buy petrol for their trucks.

‘God forgive us,’ the old lady whispered to herself. (Sarif 2011: 21)

Clothing, for her grandmother, is the most visible mark of Amina’s audacious non-conformity, which is seen here to be performed with particular ease. Clothing is both a mechanism for social enforcement of gender norms, and a means through which they can be subverted. The omniscient third-person narrator uses this as a frame through which to elaborate Amina’s transgressions, which include her insistence on working at her father’s garage (rather than performing domestic chores in the kitchen),
as well as her enthusiasm for reading (22-24). That Amina is compared to “the Boer farmers” marks her as doubly unknowable: not only is she read in masculine terms, she is also discursively excluded from the Indian body politic in racial terms. The text similarly expounds the intransigence of binary perspectives when the narrative continues its focalisation through Amina:

She liked to play sports with boys at school, and she was good at her schoolwork – when it held her attention – and she wanted to work at a business or trade when she grew up. Why were these attributes only fit for a boy? Finishing school in order to get married made no sense to her, nor did it hold much appeal, and as ingrained as it was into the consciousness of everyone around her, it was still almost beyond her comprehension. (22)

Sarif exposes the rigidity of the borders that polarise gender norms. The freedoms afforded to boys, according to Amina, include rugged physical expression (through sports), education, and financial independence. This is contrasted with the expectations of marriage and docile domesticity that were “ingrained […] into the consciousness of everyone around her”, and the novel thus exposes the arbitrariness with which the physical and sexual labour of gendered bodies is controlled.

Sarif does not situate Amina’s grandmother as an anomaly but rather as an intense iteration of a pre-existing cultural conservatism that is mobile across the Indian Ocean. After Amina departs from the home, one reads: “‘God forgive us,’ her grandmother breathed again, as though exorcising a horrible spectre” (25, my emphasis). That her grandmother reads Amina’s flagrant disregard for tradition in terms of the foreign corruption of an otherwise pure body suggests the centrality of bodily control and imagined purities in the making and remaking of cultural authenticity. After recovering from the shock of Amina’s reimagining of Indian womanhood, her grandmother attempts to impose cultural authenticity through the heteronormative structures of marriage. Unaware of Amina’s previous relationships with women, her growing attraction to Miriam, or her co-ownership of the café with a coloured man, her grandmother insists on a dinner with another family to discuss the terms of an arranged marriage with that family’s son. For her grandmother, marriage is both a codification of female bodies, as well as a cultural ritual which, in its repeated iterations, takes on the form of a performance through which heteronormativity and cultural authenticity are inextricably bound. Ebr.-Vally (2001: 146) notes that marriage is not only a highly significant event for an Indian family, irrespective of its religion, it is also an exercise
in corporeal and cultural transfer as the spousal partnership is, in the main, determined by the larger family structures. The fact that the wife is usually expected to “leave her family” and embrace “her husband’s clan” and its rules (147) signals her submission to the service of ‘authenticity’ along with the submission of her body as the site on which heteronormativity and patriarchy will be enacted.\(^7\) In imagining the wedding, the grandmother evidences the complicity of women in the reproduction of patriarchy when she looks forward to “accepting the congratulations, good wishes and general adulation of all her friends and family at the marvellous match she had managed to make for her granddaughter” (Sarif 2011: 60).

Amina’s parents and her grandmother discuss the idea of marriage in an exchange that complicates the position of female agency in traditional cultural practices. While her grandmother says to her son that “[w]e women understand these things. You should leave such matters to us”, Amina’s father responds by stating simply that “I have. I have left my daughter’s affairs to her” (60). The word “affairs” is particularly significant here as it blurs the general with the specific. Though it refers, in the first instance, to matters concerning his daughter’s life, it also gestures towards Amina’s seemingly unspeakable sexual liaisons. By privileging his daughter’s sexual agency over his wife’s and mother’s investment in heteronormative patriarchy, Amina’s father contests the invisibility and inevitability of heteronormativity and tradition. This evinces an Indian identity in which the layers of gender politics are more contested and dynamic than they might initially appear. While Sarif’s text is at risk of constructing what Hansen (2010: 109) calls a “homogenising narrative that lumps many discrete experiences together into a story of ethno-genesis of what is commonly referred to as ‘the community’ embodying a distinct South African Indianness”, this is mitigated somewhat by the multiple registers in which both control and resistance are articulated.

Nonetheless, despite his resistance, a formal dinner is planned between Amina’s family and that of a young Indian man in the community. Invited to dinner with her parents and grandmother, Amina is unaware of the mechanisms of tradition and heteronormativity that are being mobilised in spite of her wishes. After she arrives late, still dressed in trousers and a work shirt, Amina is ushered upstairs and is confronted by a traditional two-piece shalwaar kameez, laid out on her bed for her: “Amina saw it,
but seemed not to make any connection between the flowing pink cloth and her own undressed body" (Sarif 2011: 65). The clothing that her mother and grandmother have selected for her, despite her distaste for it, simultaneously performs her femininity and her supposedly authentic Indianness. Amina’s resistance to the rituals of heteronormative coupling transform her parents’ home into a stage for the articulation of alternative configurations of gender and sexuality that expose the shaky normative centre of an imagined heteronormative Indianness:

[A]fter she was married she would no longer be running around working. [Amina’s grandmother] thought it prudent to point this out in her own rambling way to the boy and his family.
‘I think girls are just as happy to stay at home these days as they were when I was married. I don’t know why people say they are too modern. They may go out and want to see things for themselves for a while, but I think our girls always find it better to stay home in the end.’ (68)

The conversation continues and shifts from the idealised docile domesticity of female bodies to a woman’s apparently natural and inevitable procreative function:

‘Do you want only boys?’ he asked, pleased to be able to talk with her at last.
‘Why do you assume I would want boys at all?’ she asked him, and his eyes widened in surprise and he looked down at his plate, embarrassed. The old lady moved swiftly in.
‘What rubbish!’ she told Amina. ‘Everybody wants a boy first. Everybody.’ (69)

For Sarif, the commodification of reproductive labour lies at the heart of the domestic economy of particular forms of heteronormative Indianness. Amina’s response to the question about whether she wants only boy children – “Why do you assume I want boys at all?” – disavows the patriarchal premium on male children, as well as the heteronormative assumption that she would be interested in a male partner.\(^8\) In other words, the shifting signification of the word “boy” subverts patriarchy and heteronormativity in the very same gesture, exposing the workings of heteronormativity and denying it its continued invisibility. That her grandmother, a visitor from Bombay, who is charged with policing cultural authenticity, dismisses her rebuttal as “rubbish”, evidences her insistence on patriarchy as a timeless essence. Through this exchange, Sarif’s text stages an intergenerational contestation over an imagined coherence and authenticity, albeit indeterminate, that privileges tradition over transition, purity over porousness, and insists on fixed arrangements of gender and sexuality.
Rather than functioning as a liminal space between an oppressive homeland and a liberatory diaspora, the transoceanic movement (embodied here by the visiting grandmother) is framed by Sarif as a connector between differently articulated networks of oppression and resistance. Though the imbrication of heteronormativity and cultural authenticity in the diaspora claims legitimacy through its mimicry of conservative cultural practices in India itself, this relationship is tenuous and depends on imagined continuities and essentialist notions of cultural stasis. The fluidity and dynamism of these diasporic cultural circuits reject the postcolonial binaries of centre and periphery and instead produce what Hofmeyr (2004a: 24), on the one hand, calls “an intellectually integrated zone”, and what Pradip Datta (2011: 58) imagines as “interlocking histor[ies]” on the other. It is through this interconnectedness that fraught cultural discourses of authenticity, otherness, and exclusion circulate through local sites of same-sex cultural politics. The incompatibility between Amina and her paternal grandmother reframes the home space as one of a transgressive politics of desire. Sometime after the initial encounter with the would-be suitor, his family returns to give Amina’s grandmother their “reply” in which they “refused [Amina] for their son” (Sarif 2011: 220) because of her business with a coloured man and her lack of conventional femininity. Learning about the extent and flagrance of her granddaughter’s refusal to submit to heteronormative patriarchy is followed by a heart attack and her sudden death. The death of the arch-matriarch of heteronormative Indianness, and the parallel intensification of Amina’s and Miriam’s intimacy and desire, are suggestive of Gopinath’s (2005: 11) assertion that same-sex sexualities become “a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora”.

Though Indianness circulates within transnational circuits, it is also refracted through local histories. Sarif’s text emphasises the brutal continuities between the production of cultural authenticity on the one hand, and colonial and apartheid biopolitical controls on the other. Through the focalisation of Rehmat, for instance, readers learn about her family’s racist opposition to her relationship with a white man. The narrator states:

She had been a grown woman when she had left that day [nearly eight years ago], but she had been treated like a wayward child. She had emerged from her family home with heavy bruises leaching out across her arms and legs, bruises that her father had given her the night before with the rough side of his belt; for he had finally heard the rumours about [James] and herself. (Sarif: 2011: 98)
The narrative continues and describes her escape from her childhood home:

If she had been found within a day, she would have been dragged home alive but beaten. After two or three days, they might have just brought her home dead, for by then it would have been too late to pretend that she had never left; the damage to her reputation would already have been done. (99)

Shame functions as a mechanism for the cultural regulation of sexual agency and the maintenance of an imagined racial purity. Significantly, this violent enforcement of patriarchy and racism in the 1940s predates the formalisation of apartheid and points to the imbrication of statutory prohibitions with existing systems aimed at preserving cultural authenticity. This is a confirmation of an earlier focalisation of Miriam who “had learned […] some time ago that Rehmat’s husband was white, and that this was the root of her family’s displeasure, but the realisation that since the 1948 laws Rehmat’s marriage would also be illegal only occurred to her now” (92). Rehmat’s initial escape from her family home to Cape Town and then to Europe forges an alternative exile narrative in which she escapes from her family’s control in a way that resonates with similar responses to apartheid’s racial and moral policing. Exposing the overlaps between the reproduction of authentic Indianness and the legal separation demanded by the white settler minority undermines the contemporary reading of apartheid as an imposition of borders on an otherwise multiracial body politic. Instead, authenticity is shown to be a fiction that needs to be produced and policed – sometimes violently – in a way that foreshadows the brutality of the apartheid regime.

Significantly, the novel’s recovery and contestation of a subsumed cultural history of same-sex Indianness in the middle of the twentieth century comes at a heavy cost of erasure: black people in the novel are either unseen or denied agency and deployed as caricatures to modify or develop Indian characters. Not only are black men largely erased from the geography of Pretoria and Springs at the dawn of apartheid but, when they are represented, they are cast, almost exclusively, as servile and grateful black youths, recipients of help, or rapists. Gupta (2011b) uses the adjective “disquieting” to describe the simultaneous complex attachment to place and the ambivalent locatedness between coloniser and colonised of the Asian diaspora in (post)colonial Africa.⁹
The novel also maps the continuities between cultural and state-sanctioned structures of exclusion to interrogate the relationship between sexuality and visibility. For instance, the text transposes the “familiar outrage that is invoked in contemporary South African public cultures, when confronted with stories of interracial love destroyed by apartheid” (Frenkel 2010: 83) onto same-sex sexualities. After being alerted to the illegal marriage between Rehmat and her white husband, the police search for her. In need of safety, she approaches Amina, who hides her in her closet behind supplies for the café. Sarif connects state-sponsored racism and heteronormativity in an exchange between Rehmat and Amina after successfully evading police detection:

Rehmat looked away, and asked her quickly if she hadn’t been scared of the policemen.

‘Oh no,’ said Amina. ‘I’ve had plenty of practice.’

‘With the police?’ asked Rehmat, surprised.

Amina laughed. ‘Yes, I suppose, but I meant I’ve had plenty of practice with the closet.’ (Sarif 2011: 179)

The figure of the closet frames a relational form of sexual subjectivity that is inhabited differently in this text. Sarif theorises a version of the closet that differs from the one that co-circulates with the cultural flows of Western modernity that Simon Nkoli describes in Chapter 1. Whereas the closet is today often read together with the idea of ‘coming out’ into a sexual identity, Sarif reads the closet rather as an axis for tropes of secrecy and visibility that exceed the bounds of same-sex sexuality. While Amina’s defiance of racial segregation is clearly on display, her disregard for the heteronormative arrangement of Indian society circulates as gossip among the seemingly insular community. Her same-sex sexuality appears to be widely known in the community.10 Miriam reflects on Amina’s reputation when she observes that “despite her lack of conformity, she was still Indian, still a very young unmarried girl, and her seemingly unlimited freedom and lack of concern for propriety was of great concern to everyone in the Asiatic Bazaar” (34). Though not included in this initial description, Amina’s engagement in same-sex relationships is later identified as one of the central reasons for her derision in the community (303), reframing these notions of “freedom” and “propriety” in explicitly heteronormative terms. Frenkel (2010: 74) writes that the Asiatic Bazaar within which Amina’s sexual, gendered, and anti-racist agency is situated is a place of “insularity and conformity” in which “Amina is constantly the subject of gossip, her lifestyle serving as a mechanism around which the
conservatism of her community is rallied”. While her sexuality is acknowledged and even respected by some – such as her business partner (Sarif 2011: 279) and her father (303) – it is shunned by most others.

Although Frenkel (2010: 77), Stobie (2009: 332), and Zabus (2013: 210) use the word “lesbian” to refer to the intimacy and desire between the two protagonists, and Stobie (2003: 127) further reads Miriam’s ambivalent position at the end of the novel through taxonomical markers of “bisexuality and polyamory”, the novel resists the reach of sexual identity politics and marked categories of desire. Sarif instead reworks the conventional notion of the closet and non-normative sexuality. Steven Seidman (2002: 8) explains this conventional form of the closet in which same-sex sexuality:

is so fateful for the individual precisely because the closet involves fashioning a public life at odds with private feelings and one’s core sense of self. […] The realities of the closet force individuals to make a momentous choice: a life of passing or a struggle to come out.

However, this novel resists this idea in a number of ways. While Amina does not claim a sexual identity of otherness, she certainly does not conceal her sexual desires and activities. She does not attempt to ‘pass’ for heterosexual, nor does she “struggle to come out”. In fact, the novel eschews the genre of the coming out novel altogether. Munro (2007: 755) explains this Western literary genre when she writes that “[c]oming-out stories have been essential for creating a politically ‘representable’ constituency; they might be described as mirrors in which people learn to recognize themselves. As such, they promulgate a quite specific form of identity through the process of reading”. However, in *The World Unseen* there is no distinct lesbian culture, nor are there any forms of sexual identity politics. Instead, the text proposes a version of the closet that does not depend on coming out into a lesbian identity. Rather, the closet is imagined as a space for the negotiation of a range of alternative cultural norms, desires and practices of visibility. Rehmat is concealed in the physical closet to hide her from the administration of apartheid biopolitics, and the closet is, therefore, a space that conjoins the supposed otherness of same-sex and interracial sexualities. Through the figure of the closet, Rehmat’s illegal marriage to a white man is read through Amina’s same-sex relationships with women. Resisting essentialist configurations of racial and sexual purity, Amina’s closet unwittingly forges links between both an Indian diasporic culture and the moralist and exclusionary policies of the apartheid state on the one
hand, and between heteronormativity and racial supremacy on the other. However, unlike the traditional coming out narrative, Rehmat’s coming out of the closet as a woman in an interracial relationship does not accrue identity markers or mobilise identity politics. Instead, her relationship with James is simply protected from state and communal interference through subversions of visibility. In the same way, Amina’s location outside of the closet does not result in the mobilisation of particular forms of sexual identity. Instead, the politics of same-sex desire are overlaid onto the prohibition of interracial desire during apartheid, creating a site for the transgression of statutory and cultural regulations rather than a site for the interpellation of new discursive systems of classification.

The novel further demonstrates the continuities between apartheid’s policing of interracial and same-sex sexualities through the parallel desire and intimacy between Jacob, Amina’s coloured business partner, and a white woman who works at the local post office. While Amina warns Jacob of the risks involved in pursuing an illicit relationship, he reminds her of the similarities between their proscribed desires:

‘I was just reading about this kind of thing in the paper,’ [Amina] went on. ‘It’s not a safe way to live, however nice she might be.’
Jacob stood up from the booth.
‘This kind of thing?’ he said, and she winced at the implication he gave her words.
‘I’m just saying,’ she answered, ‘that you should be very careful. We don’t live in a place where certain ordinary human relationships are acceptable.’

[…]
‘It’s not a safe way to live?’ he repeated. ‘It’s not acceptable? Since when have you known anything about an acceptable way to live? If you lived the way you were supposed to, and only went with people you were supposed to go with, you’d be married to some nice Indian boy by now. (Sarif 2011: 278)

After Amina rhetorically asks whether it is worth “going after people you really shouldn’t go after”, Jacob pointedly connects their respective defiance of statutory and cultural control of romantic and sexual agency when he say that “It is worth it […]. You, more than anyone, my young friend, have taught me that” (279). Amina’s reference to “ordinary human relationships” further collapses the differences between same-sex and interracial desire. Though their respective refusal to comply with either the racist or the heteronormative systems of control are linked in a statement of self-actualisation, this exchange also gestures to the strategic possibilities of alliance-building between so-called sexual transgressors and the broader antiapartheid movement that would only materialise meaningfully in the late 1980s.
The novel does not construct sexual identities explicitly, but it does map an intertextual transnational network of same-sex sexuality and female agency. For instance, on the day that Miriam and Amina first meet each other at the café, a Cole Porter record is being played (38). The song from the American songwriter, “Night and Day”, is an explicit declaration of love and lust. Significantly, though Miriam notes that she knew many of Porter’s songs verbatim, she had never heard this one. It is this sexually-charged song, first heard on the day that Amina’s smile ended “[h]er ten days of counting, of watching for some sign of concern or pleasure or kindness” (39), that foreshadows their imminent relationship. The obvious resonances between Porter and Miriam – both in heterosexual marriages despite same-sex desires and relationships – sketches the outlines of a transnational same-sex public that predates the later developments of organised sexual identity politics. Significantly, another Cole Porter song is played in the café (264) just before Amina decides to go visit Miriam at her home. Miriam and Amina’s budding romance is situated within this transnational musical production of illicit public cultures, while also being linked to a distinctly Anglo-American literary tradition. After realising their common interest in literature, which Miriam had suppressed since becoming married, she searches for her books which she had brought from India. When the box of books is recovered from the cellar, Miriam:

piled them all around her – there must have been fifteen books in all – and picked up *Far from Madding Crowd* and *Jane Eyre*, but settled finally upon *Little Women*, which she remembered well from her school days. As a schoolgirl, she has always imagined herself as the fiery, independent character Jo, but when she thought about it now, it was someone else that she pictured in that role. (209-10)

One of her first overtly romantic and suggestive gestures towards Amina is to send her this copy of *Little Women*, inscribed with a note that reads “To the lover of books, Love Miriam” (210). These canonical British and American novels all contain strong female protagonists who interrogate and exceed the bounds of what is expected of women in conservative contexts. That Miriam reads Amina through the character Jo in *Little Women* marks the ways in which this American novel gives Miriam a critical lens through which to imagine a transnational (proto)feminist subjectivity. It is through Porter’s music and these texts that an alternative Indian female subjectivity emerges. Though intertextual references to Cole Porter and these canonical literary texts map a complex transnational (post)colonial imaginary, they also inadvertently perpetuate
an Orientalist perspective in which Western modernity and progress are overlaid onto India’s seemingly constitutive control of women’s bodies.

Despite the text’s circulation of these transnational intertextual cultural flows, the novel remains, in many ways, more closely aligned with South Asian diasporic literary cultures than with the American or British literary tradition with which the novel is in dialogue. As Gopinath (2005: 14) writes, while some Western gay and lesbian texts “imagine ‘home’ as a place to be left behind, to be escaped in order to emerge into another more liberatory space, [some] queer South Asian diasporic texts […] are more concerned with remaking the space of home from within”. Not only is Miriam’s kitchen the site for the contestation of the heteronormative logic of the home, it is also a space marked by the historical inscription of domestic violence against her. The first time that she had been hit by her husband, Omar, follows Miriam’s decision to assist a black man who had been injured and abandoned after a car accident (Sarif 2011: 204).

Significantly, Miriam notes that this compassionate decision to help the man, and thereby defy the family’s codes of racial supremacy and separatism, is vaguely informed by “a fleeting thought of Amina” (201), linking Miriam’s growing consciousness about racial injustice to her growing sense of sexual agency. Much later in the novel, Omar attempts to hit her again in this kitchen because of his growing awareness that her desire to cook at Amina’s café is based on “reasons he could not counter, even if he were willing to hear them” (311).

In contrast to this, Amina, who had stayed over at the house on one night because of a punctured tyre, helps Miriam’s children prepare for school. A growing intimacy frames the way in which Amina inhabits the domestic sphere as she interacts with the children and assists Miriam. Through caring for the children and cooking in the kitchen, Amina offers a more expansive way of thinking about domestic family life predicated on support, egalitarianism and same-sex intimacy. Sarif (146) writes: “It was a new experience for Miriam, this help in the kitchen, this fun over breakfast, this care for her children from someone other than herself, and she liked it”. The ordinariness of same-sex domesticity figures in this interaction between Amina and the children as the site for resistance to heteronormativity and offers new ways of thinking about same-sex sexuality as both transformative and rooted in cultural practices.
The scene also points to alternative configurations of “the Indian family”, which Hansen (2010: 117) argues has conventionally been imagined as “a uniquely warm and coherent institution that has preserved Indian culture through the upheavals and losses”. Miriam’s daughter makes the ordinariness of this configuration of intimacy and same-sex ‘parenting’ evident when she abruptly asks whether “Aunty Amina [can] live with us all the time” (Sarif 2011: 146). While the domestic sphere of the home is still populated by women in this scene, its spatial politics are rearticulated and open to alternative intimate and sexual imaginings, further interrogating how gender and sexual politics become constitutive of an ostensibly ‘authentic’ body politic. Though same-sex parenting would have been unimaginable during the period in which the novel is set, it has increasingly emerged as a major struggle of the twenty-first century sexual rights movement that has been coterminous with the publication and circulation of the novel.

By the end of the text, the racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and violent excesses of an ‘authentic’ Indianess have been exposed, and so too has its continuities with the reviled apartheid regime. By destabilising and discrediting a particular imagining of diasporic Indianness, Sarif ensures that the normative centre of the text cannot hold, and offers a complex disarticulation of the epistemic structures through which sexual otherness has been constructed. In the final chapter of the novel, Miriam remains married to Omar and simultaneously defies him by agreeing to work with Amina in her café. Rather than reading this ending as evidence of “bisexuality and polyamory”, as Stobie (2003: 127) suggests, I read it as a far more complex imagining of community where same-sex desire is embraced, female agency is reinscribed, interracial friendship is protected, and the architecture of an alternative Indianess comes into view. This ambiguous ending, in which Miriam embraces a more fluid and uncertain politics of desire, resists the hegemony of what Gopinath (2005: 14) calls the “developmental, progress narrative of ‘gay’ identity formation”.

The World Unseen can, of course, also be read as a local rewriting of Fannie Flagg’s famous novel, Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café (2000 [1987]), which is set in Alabama and structured in dual-chronotopes, shifting between the 1920s and the 1980s. Flagg’s text also explores the intimate relationship between two women, Idgie and Ruth, who contest prescribed gender norms in a small, racially segregated
town. In Flagg’s novel, the two women also initially appear as opposites: the character of Idgie resonates with Amina as an independent, free-spirited tomboy who embraces sexual autonomy and refuses codes of racial segregation, and Ruth is comparable to Miriam as she initially subscribes to the conservative cultural norms of the American South and finds herself in an abusive heterosexual marriage. In both novels, a café in a small rural community functions as a site of transformative cultural politics in which same-sex desire is actualised, female agency is articulated, and interracial collegiality and friendship contravenes the dictates of both white supremacist contexts. The scene in *The World Unseen* where Amina explores the possibilities of alternative configurations of family by assisting Miriam with her children speaks to the earlier novel in which the two female lovers care for Ruth’s child. Both texts stage burgeoning erotic and romantic relationships in the respective cafés which act as liminal spaces of alternative configurations of identity and desire. The resonances between these two novels (as well as their subsequent film adaptations) connect the gender politics and compulsory heterosexuality of the Indian diaspora in apartheid South Africa in the 1950s to a similar gender regime in white supremacist Alabama early in the twentieth century – marked by the racist overlaps between apartheid and the Jim Crow South that continue to be inscribed into cultural histories of the present. These textual resonances locate Sarif’s novel within transnational discourses of sexual agency, cultural norms, and the politics of representation. A transnational cultural history of resistance is forged between the novels as the depoliticised same-sex intimacies and desires in both of them undermine regimes of compulsory heterosexuality and sexual identity politics. It is the intertextual resonances suggested by these two texts that situate *The World Unseen* in this alternative transnational connectivity that displaces the globalising hegemonies of Western gay and lesbian politics – and its figuration of the closet – in favour of a more complex set of imaginaries about desire, agency, constructions of race, and transgressive spaces.

*Saracen at the Gates*

Meeran’s award-winning novel is set in contemporary Johannesburg more than half a century after Sarif’s text and explores a differently articulated diasporic Indian body politic. *Saracen at the Gates* is an urban novel that is narrated by Zakira, the self-proclaimed “princess of the curry mafia” (Meeran 2009: 20), a cultural mapping of
Indianness as an ethnicity predicated on religious observance and crass materialism. The novel details Zakira’s experiences as a wealthy young woman who embraces the parties and clubs of the city’s nightlife while also performing the role of the dutiful daughter: she works in her family’s bakery, supports the religious work of the community, and politely entertains would-be suitors. Zakira soon finds herself involved in a baking-circle-cum-anarchist-girl-gang and she falls in love with its politically-astute convener, Sofie. The Indian Muslim community in Johannesburg is located as part of a more complex transnational formation in which the boundaries of the nation-state are subordinated by other cultural and religious ties. While the imagined racial purity of the novel’s “curry mafia” is not disputed, transnational connections are forged between the Indian community of Johannesburg and those in regions of both India and Pakistan, as well as the religious geopolitics of Palestine. Meeran’s novel thereby exceeds the bounds of the national and imagines an alternative cultural geography predicated on transnational Islam. Whereas Sarif refigures India from a signifier of place to race, Meeran reads Indianness as an ethnic identity.

The novel interrogates how cultural authenticity is made and remade, and offers a complex repositioning of gender and sexuality within normative frameworks of authentic Indian cultures. Rather than being an atypical instance of a cultural identity located on the periphery of a national culture, however, ‘authentic’ Indianness is criticised by Meeran for its continuities with the imagined ethnic insularities and essentialisms of the apartheid and postapartheid periods. Much like The World Unseen, Meeran’s novel interrogates the production and policing of Indianness, making legible the architecture of its tenuous normative centre while destabilising the concomitant production of otherness. While Antoinette Pretorius’s (2016) reading of the novel emphasises its depiction of “otherness” and “queer desires” in the text’s imaginings of cultural fluidity, I argue that Meeran theorises a more complex sexual politics: through the unreliable first-person narrative perspective, the novel exposes the fictions of homogenous ‘authentic’ Indianness and the epistemic violence of its constitutive constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. And, as the boundaries of Indianness are shown to be tenuous, heteronormativity and its construction of sexual difference are rendered unstable by the text, and notions of sexual otherness are placed under erasure.
Strong patriarchal community bonds govern structures of family, desire and agency in the novel. In the second chapter, on a morning following a late night of revelling, the protagonist is woken by her mother with instructions to come downstairs. Having been told to “dress nicely”, Zakira reflects that this is a coded instruction that she wear a Punjabi, which includes a skirt and pants to cover her legs as well as a scarf (Meeran 2009: 11). Zakira explains further: “More precisely, ensure the pants are visible so the menfolk know you are wearing a pair. They must be certain your panties are not exposed to ants and other insects which may be able to look up your skirt” (11). As in Sarif’s novel, clothing again has a complex cultural currency and marks out degrees of ‘authenticity’ and desirability. Zakira walks downstairs to join her mother and finds “[p]lonked into every available couch and sofa were a startling number of molvis, imams and various bearded ragheads sitting in clouds of rosewater perfume” (12). Zakira, who is at first uncertain about the reason for the visit of the group of religious men, grows increasingly anxious when her father says that the men are there “with a very special, a, how-you-say, blessed request” (15). Zakira is jarred by his sudden linguistic adoption of the “how-you-sayisms of the pious” and asks “[w]hat was next, what-you-call and whatsername?” (15). Shown to be entangled with the cultural currency of Indianness, this sociolect features centrally in the senior cleric’s marriage proposal:

Dear brothers and elders, I would like to request of you Cassim and Razia Bibi Cachalia on behalf of my dear brother, Jumsheed Dadabhaai, of the Tugela Ferry Dadabhaais, the hand in what-you-call, whatsername, how-you-say, how-they-call it, marriage, of your daughter Zakira Bibi Cachalia. (16)

That this negotiation involves “brothers” and male “elders” suggests that not only is heteronormative marriage central to community cohesion but also that this community is explicitly patriarchal. This is confirmed when Zakira speculates that “shyness [in a woman] was the most valued quality known to man” (12). This patriarchal investment in heteronormativity also draws its impetus from the intergenerational accumulation of wealth when the cleric reminds the protagonist’s family that the prospective husband is “of the Tugela Ferry Dadabhaais”. Despite being reminded of Dadabhaai’s extensive agricultural businesses by her mother (17), Zakira dismisses the collaborationist heteronormative impulse of their negotiations as an “elaborate pantomime” (16). On first seeing the prospective husband, Zakira describes him as both a “reformed psychotic” and a “Holy Joe” and irreverently observes the religious significance of his
pants: “The pious maintain that the Prophet Mohammed only wore three-quarterlies, Tintin-style. The Prophet would have fit in well in the nineteen-thirties, when those were all the rage” (14). Here, she both acknowledges the ideological power of transnational cultural artefacts in regulating cultural practice, but she also ridicules the historical intransience of these significations.

She similarly points to the performative nature of ‘authenticity’, and the shifts from religious purity to crass materialism in these performances, when she observes that on Friday afternoons, “Kurthas and attar turn to Pierre Cardin and Hugo Boss. Bhurkas and downcast gazes become high heels and sidelong glances” (226). Zakira marks the encounter between competing transnational imaginaries in which signs of tradition and modest femininity give way to Western modernity’s practices of consumption, drawing parallels between these otherwise distinct forms of cultural currency. Historical attachments to the supposedly monolithic reproduction of Muslim identities are literally refashioned into crass materialism. Significantly, however, this refashioning is not as liberating a move as it may initially seem; though the discourses through which Indianness is imagined may have a contemporary impulse, it is no less constructed or exclusionary. As Radha Hegde (2011: 1) writes, “[g]lobal flows of media technologies, migration, and the unfettered mobility of capital rework old logics of domination in new global forms. The subject of sexuality and cultural politics gets caught in the global crossfire, and the issues are no longer contained within national borders and local domains”.

Zakira conflates the delegation’s marriage request (and the patriarchal power relations by which it is circumscribed) with the excesses of religious extremism when she describes the communal delegation as “godmongers” who are “[f]ucking straight out of the Taliban’s graduation yearbook” (Meeran 2009: 18). Whereas Frenkel (2010: 78-79) rightly warns against the possible reproduction of Orientalist stereotypes in The World Unseen, Meeran’s protagonist reads practices of arranged marriages as religious extremism and excludes them from her own experiences of cosmopolitan Indianness. This production of Indianness draws on different competing circulating discourses, and religious observance, material wealth and heteronormativity are identified as constitutive of an authentic Indian body politic. The imam explains the significance of marriage:
When the time comes to reckon up our whatsername bank accounts with the Almighty, those of us who have not taken the holy vow of marriage will find our accounts severely debited. It is the sacred responsibility of every man and woman in the ummah to follow the example of our beloved Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, and take this what-you-call blessed vow. (Meeran 2009: 15)

The use of financial tropes to explain the religious ideology of marriage highlights the imbrication of these in the formation of a heteronormative cultural identity, as Meeran blends cultural flows of a seemingly timeless transnational Islam with the materialism associated with the West. Later in the novel, another religious cleric similarly explains that “[o]ur turnover is measured in souls. Our bank balance with Allah is filling up, as such, but capacity we will never reach” (159). While Gopinath (2005: 10) argues that diasporas and closed community formations depend on a “genealogical, implicitly heteronormative reproductive logic”, Meeran reminds us that these normative familial structures themselves depend on configurations of cultural ‘authenticity’. Zakira’s father had attempted to arrange the proposed marriage in order to “unite the Cachalia confectionery dynasty of Fordsburg with the sheep empire of Tugela Ferry” (Meeran 2009: 82). The proposed conjoining of family businesses through marriage would have secured the intergenerational accumulation of wealth and reinforced the centrality of heteronormativity in the production and preservation of materialist privilege and imaginaries of Indianness. While Shukla (2003: 9) argues that “Indianness itself can become a language of either race or nation, particularly when we consider how it may express a set of identifications that have emerged out of colonialism and anticolonialism”, I read Indian identity in Meeran’s novel as a contested site for reimagining the relationship between Islam and the West in a very particular historical moment.

Unlike in *The World Unseen*, in which Indianness moves from being an indicator of nation to an indicator of race, in *Saracen at the Gates*, Indianness envelopes a cultural identity that is simultaneously more exclusionary and inclusive than the earlier text. While Zakira seems naïve and conservative as she voices the sentiments of the community, the exaggeration and crude simplicity of her ideas betray the narrative’s satirical mode. For instance, she observes that the black women who work in the family’s butchery “are Muslim, trumping their fundamental error of being black” (Meeran 2009: 44). She later notes that “w[e] curry mafia are always skeptical about whether these black Muslims are bona fide or not” (143). In this way, she reinscribes
the racial and religious requirements for insiderness and suggests that Indian Muslims are the true custodians of this Islamic identity. Her brother, in “near-autistic Islamist rants”, similarly describes Zulu converts to Islam and insists that “to ensure our noor we must not mix with them, and they must not mix with us because like that everybody’s happy” (153). Much later in the novel, Zakira has a fight with her two Indian friends who “caught [her] perving a tall black yuppie” (242). The sheer idea of a relationship with a black man generates near-hysteria in the two friends as they express their concern about familial purity, religious observance, and the miscegenation tropes of dark skin tone and different hair types (244). Reproducing stereotypes embedded in the colonial discourses of the bestiality of black bodies, her friend Aziza concludes that once any children are born, “he’ll show his true colours” (244). Aziza reveals the continuities of apartheid’s legacy of white supremacism in the present when she insists that her interracial relationship with her white boyfriend is wholly incomparable to Zakira’s appreciation of a black man’s sex appeal. She declares (with a simplicity that belies centuries of racism): “Oh come on, he’s not black!” (244). In this way, Meeran highlights the continuities between the policing of local Indian identities and the structural racism of the apartheid period, undermining the moral surety of an idealised Indianness.

The novel also contests Goolam Vahed’s (2007: 119) assertion that Islam in South Africa offers a totalising singular identity – “a monolith to outsiders” – irrespective of race, class, and geography. Instead, Meeran shows how religious identities can be mobilised to police essentialist notions of Indianness. For instance, Tamil and Hindu Indians are also excluded from an authentic Indian body politic, despite apparent phenotypical similarities. The centrality of Islam in the regulation of an Indian ethnicity is clear when non-Muslim Indians are excluded as being “roti-ous”, subject to the same processes of exclusion as the racially distinct “wit-ous” (Meeran 2009: 57). Similarly, class intersects with religion in constituting ethnicity when the protagonist says that:

There are rumours my Mommy is of canecutter stock and on top of that a thumbee – Tamil – and that her great grandfather converted to Islam. Jeez, people will say anything to drag down your good name when you on top!” (44)

Zakira articulates the cultural histories of shame that are associated with diasporic migrations to Natal in which the upwardly mobile passenger Indians are distinguished
from the “canecutter stock” who were indentured labourers, pointing to the heteronormative intergenerational reproduction of racial and historical purities.

Intensifying the control over gendered bodies already suggested by the unsuccessful marriage proposal, the novel interrogates the control over women’s sexual agency and the preservation of purity that is seemingly constitutive of an authentic Indianness. Zakira reveals women’s complicity in regulating this sexual purity when she remarks, earlier in the novel, that her friend Aziza “is a bit of a sex fiend. She lost her virginity to Hendrik four years ago. Four! This alone shows you how borderline a curry mafia princess she is, but I guard her secrets” (89, my emphasis). That Aziza’s sexual activity compromises her respectability and renders her inclusion in Johannesburg’s Indian elite “borderline” resonates with the protagonist’s later observation that “[t]he curry mafia princes were preserving us for the marriage night and bonking bruin-stekkies, or wit-stekkies if they were lucky, to bide their time” (175).17 This perpetuates patriarchal monopoly on sexual agency as it allows Indian men to have unmarried sex on condition that it is not with Indian women. Meeran therefore exposes Gopinath’s (2005: 15) assertion that “the figure of ‘woman’ as a pure and unsullied sexual being is so central to dominant articulations of nation and diaspora”. Indian women are therefore marked as the bearers of racial purity and moral virtue, and Zakira is desexualised as the condition of her inclusion in the Indian body politic. In contrast to this, however, her male twin, Zakir, enjoys what Raewyn Connell (2005: 79) might call the “patriarchal dividend” uninhibited: the protagonist notes that not only is her brother a “serial wanker” whose autoeroticism was largely unfettered by parental oversight (Meeran 2009: 211), but also that despite not returning home some nights, he “breezes in whenever his lordship pleases, complete with a new dent on his car, freshly fucked and hungry” (8).

Zakira’s sexual relationship with Sofie exposes the absurdity of the racial constructions of cultural authenticity as much as it does its constitutive heteronormativity. As the daughter of a Lebanese mother and an Indian father (109-111), Sofie is far paler than others in the Indian community. She is described at one point as resembling an “Afghan refugee” with “ghost-pale cheekbones” (78) and elsewhere simply as “blanched” (106). However, while miscegenation is wholly condemned if it involves black men, Zakira observes that “milky skin [is] so beloved [among] the curry mafia”
Zakira’s mother first describes Sofie by saying: “lovely the girl is, so fair and well-spoken” (103). She is similarly embraced because she is the “chief baker of the Sacareen” and the daughter of Professor Khalil Jasat, whose specialisation in the history of North Africa and the Middle East is collapsed by Zakira’s mother into simply the history of Islam (233). Ironically, it is Sofie’s light skin, her mastery over the grammar of whiteness, and an assumed religious observance that authorises her respectability. She appears to have all the characteristics valorised by the novel’s Indian body politic, despite the detached intellectualism, secular feminism, and sexual autonomy that characterises her family home – a domestic space and a subjectivity that marks a more inclusive and progressive layer in an inherently porous Indianness.

Zakira first sees Sofie – “a hot girl” – while she is on a date with a man and observes: “I had perved girls before, the mintyness of their breath, that citric tomato smell of their skin, the blonde down at their jawlines, but this girl I wanted to leap on” (77-78). This first reference to Zakira’s fluid sexuality is grounded in both subtle sensuality and visceral desire. Her extended friendship and sexual relationship with Sofie is facilitated, ironically, by her mother’s insistence that she joins the Al Sacareen baking circle for young Muslim women, which Sofie hosts every Sunday at her home. However, Zakira soon discovers that this baking group is also the radical Saracen political formation that has been vandalising prominent sites in the city. Her mother describes the baking group as “wholesome” and insists on the religious values of the group when she says that “[t]hey call themselves Al Sacareen, The Sweets, you know in Arabic. So pious using Allah t’Allah’s language” (103). Zakira is sceptical of this and speculates that the real reason for her mother’s enthusiasm is “industrial espionage, to learn yet another baker’s trade secrets and milk those to generate profits for Cachalia Confectioners” (103), the family’s bakery. As a site of religious observance, female domesticity, and now familial capitalism, the Al Sacareen baking circle seems to circumscribe and reproduce a particular form of transnational Indianness while simultaneously exposing the very constructedness of those positionalities. That this seemingly unobtrusive cultural space is also a site of radical feminism and same-sex eroticism makes this all the more significant, and authors an alternative cultural politics of both Islam and Indianness.18 By the time Zakira joins the small group, Saracen has already vandalised several buildings, bridges, and even an aeroplane. The group’s initial activities and graffiti vandalism align closely with Islamic communities’ traditional
transnational political solidarities in the Middle East. For instance, these public acts of graffiti include the painting of the words “Saracen in the Clouds” in the colours of the Palestinian flag (126) on an aeroplane, as well as the spray-painting of “an Israeli flag depicting the outlines of an Uzi instead of the Star of David” (130). The Islamic subtext of the group is clear in the Arabic name which, as the protagonist’s brother explains, refers to “[t]he soldiers of Salahudin in old time[s]” and those “[f]ighting crusaders in [the] Middle Age[s]” (126). This transnational political history is translated into the idiom of the local through Sofie’s appropriation of the name which, as Pretorius (2016: 22) notes, “wrests the term from colonial discourses and repositions it within their own sociocultural context, allowing them to re-inscribe it with subversive meaning”, while simultaneously displacing the centrality of maleness in political Islam. While the group draws on the language and symbolism of Islam, its internal leftist discourse generally eschews religious texts and beliefs in favour of a deeply articulated secular political ideology that is opposed to gender exploitation, cultural and economic imperialism, racism and patriarchy. A celebration of female agency structures its operations and an affirmation of same-sex eroticism is the subtext that sustains it as it rewrites the city space and its biopolitical history of racism, heteronormativity and patriarchy.

Sofie and Zakira’s sexual intimacies are framed as exploratory and celebratory when the protagonist says that they “bounced onto the bed and tore at each other, grabbing at any body part that happened by” (Meeran 2009: 177) and later says that she “wrestled Sofie back into bed biting [her] lip to stop the squeals” (237). Zakira rejects the heteronormative control of sexual bodies when she returns home one morning and reads her body as a site of same-sex desire and transgression: “Surely they could smell Sofie on my breath? I must reek of Sofie’s vanilla bean B.O! Surely she could hear me squelch with each step, wet from daydreaming about Sofie’s origami hair?” (183). Despite the overt politicisation of the Saracen group, the sexual and emotional relationship that develops between Sofie and Zakira escapes the imposition of sexual identity politics. Significantly, the only character who reads their same-sex intimacies through the term “lesbian” is the protagonist’s twin brother (145, 262). However, as an exaggerated caricature of self-involved absurdity, her brother’s utterances generally lack credibility and coherence as he shifts in the novel from being a reckless drunk ambulance driver in Palestine to a hermetic religious extremist searching for Osama bin Laden, then to a Buddhist-leaning Danish pop musician. His language undermines
itself throughout the novel and his invocation of sexual identity labels similarly fails to gain traction. In spite of Murray’s (2013: 130) description of the character’s “lesbian desires”, the novel does not meaningfully contemplate sexual identity politics and instead proposes a way of thinking about sexual desire beyond the politics of labels and positionalities of otherness. In doing so, Meeran’s novel intervenes against the hegemony of gay and lesbian identity politics as it embraces alternative configurations of post-labelling sexuality favoured by millennials. The novel outlines an alternative trajectory for the representation of sexuality which forges new routes of subjectivity and affect that do not rely on epistemologies of sexual difference.

Meeran’s novel is located firmly within postapartheid South Africa, and simultaneously depicts and satirises the continuing racism and sexual moralism of the present. After Zakira tells her brother that she is in love with a girl, he compares her with prisoners who engage in sex with other men and bluntly asks her: “What’s your excuse?” (Meeran 2009: 262). Their subsequent exchange is significant for the way in which it reframes an inclusive postapartheid ideology. She says that “I don’t need one, you bleddy-well homophobe! Read the blerry-well Constitution!” He replies by saying: “Ooh, Miss South Africa! Very nice. Constitution! Blessed country needs the death penalty, not a Constitution” (262). Though Zakira attempts to read and locate her own sexuality within the discourses of constitutionalism, her brother dismisses this. Instead, he derisively refers to her as “Miss South Africa” and connects the Constitution to the broader nation-building agenda at the same time as he relegates this agenda to the periphery of relevance. The Constitution is similarly derided by Shubnum, one of Zakira’s friends, when she criticises her domestic worker for having a male companion in her room, which Zakira’s mother later explains by stating that “they have a very strong sex drive, the Zulus” (312). Shubnum laments that she cannot dismiss her domestic worker because “they got their constitution”, to which Zakira’s mother adds: “Ja and their this-thing, their bill of rights” (312, my emphasis). These two characters are similarly derisive about the rights-based discourses of the postapartheid period and impose the Constitution onto a readily established other – already excluded on the basis of race, class, and culture. In both these instances, sexuality is read through the prism of the Constitution and discursively excluded.
The impetus towards a celebratory same-sex sexuality is disrupted in the novel when Zakira’s mother discovers her daughter “moaning and squirming” (293) in bed with Sofie. After this discovery, the family, according to Zakira, reach the “unspoken consensus [she] had committed a hanging offence” (295) as it seemingly threatens to bring “shame […] onto the family” (294) and compromise their standing in the community. Her parents respond to her sexual transgressions by reinscribing the codes of cultural ‘authenticity’: female domesticity is imposed in the form of compulsory baking responsibilities at Cachalia’s Confectioners; the control of female bodies is asserted through enforced isolationism and immobility after her car keys are confiscated; religion intrudes into the home; and non-conformity is excluded as an aberration.

For her parents, Zakira symbolises the failure of reproducing the normative ordering of gendered bodies. While Meeran’s text exposes the excesses of a type of confining Indianness, it also highlights the continuities between the political cultures of different conservative traditions. Earlier in the novel, Sofie describes Zakira’s parents as “verkramptes” (192). By linking Zakira’s Indian parents to the regressive apartheid politics of Afrikaner conservativism and reactionary white supremacy, Sofie exposes the network of intersecting gender oppressions, which extend from ostensibly authentic Indianness, to the tarnished history of apartheid-era defenders of the volk, and beyond. The novel therefore resists Orientalist and insular readings of Indian culture by foregrounding the continuities between an iteration of Indianness and broader conservative politics rooted in the (post)apartheid cultural imaginaries.

Sexuality in the novel is also refracted through disparate transnational cultural flows that ostensibly produce a series of binaries and absolutist cultural norms. For instance, Zakira’s uncle, Imtiaz, “a bumbling buffoon” (Murray 2013: 132), attempts to police a notion of identity in which a ‘pure’ cultural imaginary is under siege from an amorphous and corrupting Western culture. He says, for instance, that “the good morals of the Vest are found wanting when they compare to our diligent ways! Indeed, their good morals are our sins! Not so? […] Little by little they take our beautiful young ladies from us” (Meeran 2009: 317). He insists further that “so-called professions that offer nothing but psychological anguish for the female mind” are similarly constitutive of “the boiling cauldron of sin that is the West” (321). Significantly, however, Imtiaz’s
suggestion that same-sex sexualities are un-Muslim is contradicted by the rich histories of same-sex sexualities in the Arab world (Massad 2008), proving, in other words, that “the relentless search for the purity of lost origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure” (Roach in Gopinath 2005: 4). Meeran’s novel cautions against the impulse towards the reproduction of a form of Indianness that is “[p]etrified and sterile” (Gilroy 2004: 84), as it insists that Indian identity is porous and can be rearticulated as a site for transformative gender politics. In contrast to Imtiaz, Sofie (who has already been acknowledged as a credible custodian of Islamic values and Indian identity) and the Saracen show how a progressive identity can be refigured from within, drawing on competing Islamic and Western imaginaries in the articulation of an inclusive cultural sensibility that foregrounds the complexities through which local subjectivities are produced.  

On first meeting Zakira’s parents, Sofie, “the chief baker of the Sacareen” (Meeran 2009: 233), is offered pies and other pastries. However, as she reaches for one, Zakira’s mother’s loudly protests and warns her that the one she has selected is particularly spicy and “[f]ull-up of green chillies” (234). As Sofie bites into the pie she grins. Surprised by the paler girl’s enjoyment of spicy food, Zakira’s mother simply asks “[s]he eats, what?” (234), which is also the title of the chapter. In a deceptively simple way, this exchange interrogates the complexity through which borders of cultural authenticity are constituted and breached. The rhetorical question posed by the protagonist’s mother is, of course, an idiom that gestures to sexual practice of cunnilingus that is not uncommonly designated as the basis of same-sex female sexuality. Sofie’s willingness to eat the particularly spicy food legitimises her inclusion in the cultural community whose culinary arts have tended, at least in the Western public imaginary, towards spiciness. Ironically, the rhetorical question exposes the overlapping histories through which cultural authenticity is imagined by simultaneously marking Sofie’s inclusion because of her willingness to engage in seemingly authentic culinary habits, and signalling her inevitable exclusion because of the same-sex sexuality that the idiom denotes. Despite earlier being seen as the embodiment of respectability and an idealised Indianness, Sofie’s sexual indiscretions recast her simply as “[t]his Jasat girl” who is “a well-known problem child” (318). Described as “a serial seducer” who “consumes” her sexual partners (319-20), Sofie’s
non-heteronormative desire is excluded from the Indian body politic as female sexual agency is shown to be always already read as excess.

After months of isolation, and through the intervention of her mother attempting to realign her daughter with normative heterosexuality, Zakira is visited by Panty Huffagee, who has recently returned from Milan’s Fashion Week. Panty is the “son and heir of the dynasty that clothes the naughty bits of the nation to the tune of thirty million rand a year” (327). As he is a supposed “prince of the curry mafia”, according to the protagonist, Panty and Zakira’s coupling was seen by the closed Indian Muslim community as “a matter of course” (68). Despite the implicit heteronormative basis for his invitation to the home, Panty rejects the stifling conditions of cultural authenticity when he shows Zakira’s parents a slideshow from his fashion range which depicts “one relentless image after the next of outrageous lingerie splashed onto whacky-beautiful women”, including a model who “wore a high school tie with her undies” and “had little tufts of hair at each armpit” (326-27). As the celebratory eroticism of these transgressive images unsettle Zakira’s parents, she observes that she was “witnessing a curry mafia prince groomed to take up the title of mamu from the moment he stepped off his potty come out in [her] living room” (327). Through his literal refashioning of gender norms, Panty divests from essentialist configurations of Indian identity and its policing of an imagined homogeneity. Zakira observes further that Panty’s “expression [was] of a don-ling about to announce his resignation from the curry mafia” (328). While the revelation of his fluid sexuality – what he vaguely refers to as “multisexual[ism]” (330) – is significant in shaping the protagonist’s ideas about community and self, it is rather his provocative slideshow and its radical declaration of dissent that spurs Zakira to reflect that “[she] had been bullshitting [her]self for a good couple of years now, eighteen, to be precise” (327). While this statement gestures towards an embrace of her same-sex sexuality, its ambiguity also opens up new ways of thinking about the protagonist’s participation in practices of Indian womanhood more generally. If authenticity depends on a “continuity with traditional or customary practice” as Lee (2010: 192) suggests, Panty’s non-conformity marks an intergenerational rupture of culture and an alternative framing of Indian subjectivity as being able to incorporate divergent sexualities on its own terms.
Whereas Saracen initially operates as an outward-looking interracial progressive movement that mostly coheres around the transnational political positions of Johannesburg’s Muslim community, its focus shifts inwards near the end of the novel. The movement decides to infiltrate and bring down a human-trafficking syndicate that is operating out of Hooligans, a strip club in the city. As it happens, however, Zakira’s father is complicit in this business as he owns the building where the club is located and launders their money through various other businesses. He is thus seen as the novel’s arch-patriarch who profits from the commodification of heteronormativity and the sale of women’s bodies. Significantly, Zakira remarks earlier in the text that her father is a businessman whose only resemblance to the religious clerics who visited to propose marriage is his beard: “He speaks the language of cold hard cash, not airy matters of the afterlife” (Meeran 2009: 15). However, while his religious observance may be no more than performative – “as a curry mafia don he was always front and centre of the jaamat” (168) – the similarities between him and the conservative imams are striking. He shares these men’s investment in an authentic Indianness predicated on the commodification of female bodies and the imposition of heteronormativity, albeit for different reasons. Human trafficking by this “patriarchal mercenary capitalist” (339) highlights the excesses and abuses that can take root beneath the veneer of an imagined social respectability.

This conservative Indianness is confronted decisively at the end of the novel. Due to increasing frustration with her isolation from Sofie and the overbearing presence of her father, Zakira leaves the house and runs to Sofie in a nearby suburb. Though Zakira’s conservative articulation of her ethnic and class identity have thus far prevented her from venturing into the city without her expensive car, her spontaneous run at night in her pyjamas is an ideological departure from her home as much as it is a physical one. In a seemingly unprecedented move, Zakira runs for ten kilometres and then takes both a bus and a taxi, first going to Sofie’s house and then going to the Hooligans bar where she knows the other Saracen are trying to infiltrate the structures of the human trafficking business. Through this fast-paced pursuit of love, and the rejection of the heteronormativity with which her family’s cultural identity seems so invested, alternative configurations of selfhood are mapped onto the city, where new routes displace roots and new ways of imagining cultural solidarities are forged.
Zakira’s spatial movements track a complex process of meaning-making through which the cultural coordinates, literal and figurative, are contested and rearticulated. The space that Zakira traverses is “not a ‘thing’ but the outcome of past and present activities and social relationships: the social contexts of earlier networks coexist with new ones so that space always contains multiple temporalities” (Knowles & Alexander 2005: 4-5). Signification of the city space, one that Zakira had previously read only in her exercise of power as a member of the curry mafia, is shown to be contingent and contested. The heteronormative signifying possibilities of various spaces in the novel – moving from private to public, fixed to malleable, and exclusionary to cosmopolitan – is challenged through the destabilisation of essentialist notions of Indian identity. Anne Putter (2012: 19-20) similarly writes that Zakira’s “movements through, and experiences in, the city gradually reveal the fluidity of her identity”. This movement through the postapartheid city, where the protagonist rejects familial gender norms and searches for her same-sex lover, steers clear of the global machinations of both an imagined transnational Islam and the commodification of Western modernity. Zakira then travels with Sofie from Hooligans to Cachalia’s Corner, where her father’s vault is located, most of the monetary contents of which has evaded tax and was being laundered. In a radical denunciation of Hooligans, and the institutionalised patriarchy, capitalism, and duplicity that it represents, Zakira and Sofie decide to burn all the “[b]ricks and wads of [money that] lay stacked to the ceiling like gold bullion” (Meeran 2009: 359) in an attempt to “hit a mamu where it hurts” (357). The use of the word “mamu”, which denotes a mafia kingpin in an Indian South African sociolect, reminds readers that Zakira’s father is not merely an influential criminal, but also that he embodies the excesses of a certain type of Indianness in the text. In its various ways, this final scene, in which the same-sex couple is together and about to burn the family’s money as well as the bakery itself, stages a disavowal of the materialism, feminine submission, heteronormativity and patriarchal authoritarianism that has come to dictate the borders of Indianness in the novel. Although this moment is highly politicised, it is also deeply personal as the novel concludes with Sofie asking Zakira whether “[she] ha[s] a ciggie, by any chance” (360), echoing Zakira’s question to Sofie when they first met: “do any of you guys perhaps have a ciggie I could bum off you?” (79). The lighter, which is originally intended as a tool for the imminent politicised spectacle of arson and destruction, is refigured here and refracted through the personal, tying their militant rejection of this symbol of power to both their same-sex
relationship and their articulation of an Indian identity invested in a transformative gender politics. For Sofie and Zakira at this moment, the personal and the political are inextricably bound and subversion is not only coterminous with sexual agency, but dependent on it.

Conclusion

My reading of sexuality in both *The World Unseen* and *Saracen at the Gates* is structured by a certain conceptual paradox. I have argued that the novels depict heteronormativity while simultaneously undermining the conceptual cohesion of the sexual otherness that it generates. I have argued that by exposing the constructedness of seemingly authentic Indian identities and by mapping their continuities with apartheid biopolitics, certain types of Indianness itself are destabilised and delegitimised, and the notion of authenticity is exposed as little more than an oppressive cultural fiction. Although heteronormativity pervades the texts, the novels show how the normative centre of cultural identity cannot hold, and that in the absence of a coherent and cohesive norm, sexual otherness itself has no critical purchase. Both novels therefore theorise transnational same-sex subjectivities that are bound neither to the global circulations of gay and lesbian identity politics, nor to positions of queer oppositionality, otherness, or difference. In doing so, they co-circulate with other South Asian diasporic texts that are characterised by the “defamiliarization of conventional markers of homosexuality” (Gopinath 2005: 12).

In *The World Unseen*, the heteronormativity, racism, and patriarchy of certain notions of an ‘authentic’ Indian identity mark a complicitous encounter between transoceanic imaginings of India and the local biopolitical making of race and sexual moralism. South African Indianness in Sarif’s text, and its constitutive exclusions, draws its moral authority from these oceanic cultural flows. The novel also maps a complex transnational (post)colonial imaginary in which a seemingly portable diasporic Indian identity encounters the racial taxonomies of apartheid, the gendered modernity of British and American literary texts, and the intertextual circulation of an American same-sex subjectivity. Whereas an unsettling Orientalism underscores the restless mobilities of Sarif’s novel, *Saracen at the Gates* provides a more layered conceptualisation of Indianness. In this text, both transnational Islam and the values
of mass consumerism and materialism, attributed to the West, are overlaid onto exclusionary configurations of race, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, the Saracen’s appropriation of the transnational circuitries of both Islamic discourses and ‘progress’ narratives of modernity function as important points of access to gendered agency. These restless cultural flows and their rootedness in cosmopolitan Johannesburg are uneven; they blend Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western cultural geographies with the pervasive raciology of the postapartheid nation-state.

Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels articulate an expansive ideology regarding the (dis)location of same-sex sexuality within seemingly closed cultural formations. Though the novels’ distinct cultural histories expose the transnational routes and local attachments through which cultural identities are negotiated and policed, they also provide us with different ways of thinking about the supposed otherness of same-sex sexualities, and the hegemonies of sexual identity politics. The texts map how notions of authenticity are produced, how norms are policed, how exclusions are enacted, how their excesses and complicities are exposed, and how cultural identities themselves are constructed as political fictions in which certain groups are deeply invested and others expediently marked as other. Homophobic exclusions cannot be justified on the basis of their non-conformity to ‘authentic’ cultural identities, because the normative centres of those identities are mythical constructs that are inherently unstable and against which constructions of otherness are tenuous. In the absence of fixed epistemic binaries of sexual normalcy and sexual otherness, Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels disarticulate essentialist claims that same-sex sexualities are un-Indian as Indianness itself has come to inhabit an essentially plastic transnational formation that is constantly redefined and challenged.22

Notes

1 This is explored expertly by Shukla (2003) in relation to the Indian diaspora in England and the United States.

2 In her study of Indian literature in South Africa, Govinden (2008: 48), argues that “Indian identity is not about reclaiming a lost sense of ‘Indianness’, a harking back to some romantic notion of ‘Mother India’. The search for ‘roots’ can also be an essentialising process, perpetuating false dualisms, and exhibiting an exoticised, commodified notion of some suppressed identity waiting to be excavated. Such a search (for ‘roots’) may make one actually believe that a supposedly ‘authentic’ Indian identity is attainable.”

3 Frenkel (2010: 61-62) discusses this intergenerational production of narrative in more detail.

4 Frenkel (2010: 76) reflects on the relationship between space, gender and agency and in the novel and argues that the “tacit implication” that Amina would not have “found her freedom” had she remained
in India perpetuates the “colonial stereotypes that saw the colonies as spaces where behaviour that was not permissible at ‘home’ could be enacted openly”.

5 Samuelson (2010: 282) argues that in the novel, South Africa “offers a platform for the emergence of the resistant female subject”.

6 Miriam, on her imminent departure to South Africa, was similarly told by her mother to marry Omar (whose own mother had died) and “be thankful that no mother-in-law will ever make you work like a slave” (Sarif 2011: 30, my emphasis).

7 Jackson (2011: 58), in her analysis of the relationship between space and gender in selected Indian fiction, notes that Indian women, irrespective of religion, have “historically been subjected to various forms of purdah. Purdah practices have varied over time and between regions, ranging from minor restrictions on women’s mobility to total incarceration within the home”.

8 This patrilineal dividend is similarly evident elsewhere in the novel, such as when Omar expresses hope that his third child will be a boy (Sarif 2011: 82), and through the revelation that Amina’s grandmother Begum was ‘instructed’ by her husband to only have male children.

9 Gupta (2011b: 82) focuses particularly on the “state of uneasiness” of diasporic Goan communities in Portuguese-controlled Mozambique.

10 For instance, Amina says to the police officer that “[y]ou know as well as I do that I’ve had some women in here, but this time even I don’t know what...”. (Sarif 2011: 175).

11 Frenkel (2010: 77) explains her use of the term and acknowledges its limitations by stating that she is “not asserting a uniform or global lesbian identity”. Rather, she uses the term in order to inscribe “a lesbian and gay cultural history into a cohesive understanding of South Africa”.

12 I have similarly explored the limitations of this literary genre in an earlier study (Carolin 2011: 53).

13 Miriam’s husband Omar enforces heteronormativity once the couple settle in Pretoria. Omar, who is described as being “taciturn” (Sarif 2011: 17), enforces a rigid division of responsibilities in which he attempts to control Miriam’s domestic, reproductive and sexual labour. Miriam is initially denied sexual agency and she appears wholly unsatisfied by the conjugal demands of heteronormativity. Intercourse between the husband and wife is described as “his sexual requirements” (Sarif 2011: 79) and “Omar’s demands on her” (Sarif 2011: 33), a discursive positioning that voids the interaction of intimacy, reciprocity and female pleasure.

14 This stands in contrast to an earlier scene in the kitchen where Omar, watching his children while his wife is in labour, evidences his emotional unavailability and “confus[ed]” uncertainty as to what they eat, whether his four year old daughter usually has homework, or “what it was they did” in the afternoon (Sarif 2011: 80-81).

15 See Pretorius (2016) for an excellent analysis of how Meeran’s representation of food is imbricated in the production of both sexual desire and cultural identity.

16 I am indebted to Gayatri Spivak for this term.

17 In the South African Indian sociolect that is used in the text, “bruin-stekkies” and “wit-stekkies” refer to coloured and white women respectively.

18 Meeran’s rendering of female same-sex eroticism is consistent with those representations offered by Bollywood films. Gopinath (2005: 25) argues that “the most enabling and nuanced instances of queer female desire on the Bollywood screens transpire not through the representation of explicitly queer coded, visible ‘lesbian’ characters but rather through evoking the latent homoeroticism of female homosocial space”.

19 Jessica Murray (2013: 135) reflects on this conversation between Zakira and her brother and argues that while he appears to offer a progressive reading of sexuality, he inadvertently reinscribes the otherness of same-sex desire.

20 When Zakira’s mother does gesture towards a rights-based discourse, this remains exclusionary as she suggests that she should have a different order of entitlements. She asks: “What about my bill of rights? Is’n so I also got rights?” (Meeran 2009: 312).

21 See Appadurai (2013: 63).

22 The internal logic of these texts applies equally to essentialist exclusions of same-sex sexualities that are deemed unAfrican, unAsian, or any other imagined site of ‘authentic’ cultural identity.
CONCLUSION

In November 2016, as this project was entering its final stages, the United Nations General Assembly voted, by a narrow margin, to confirm the creation of a specialist position to investigate and report on LGBT rights globally. While the South African delegation had abstained from the vote during the earlier committee phase, favouring solidarity with dissenting nations, it now voted against the African bloc’s attempt to suspend the landmark decision to create the watchdog position. The African bloc’s arguments extended beyond the creation of this particular expert position, and their draft resolution insisted that sexual orientation and gender identity should not be recognised within the existing apparatus of the global human rights regime. Over the past few years, extraordinary progress in the expansion of sexual rights in some parts of the world has been coterminous with the intensification of homophobic violence and discrimination elsewhere. However, these developments and diplomatic manoeuvres are often structured along regional, religious, and ideological blocs in which much of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East – cast as universally homophobic – are pitted against the seemingly enlightened Western democracies in North America and Western Europe. However, such progress narratives of the West versus the rest, to borrow Niall Ferguson’s (2011) formulation, are themselves imaginings of ‘civilisation’ dating back to antiquity. This binary overlooks the fact that, until very recently, these Western democracies were sites of structural homophobia, and that they continue to be spaces in which explicit racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia and indeed heteronormativity circulate through the body politic in different ways. These practices of inclusion and exclusion, which have, in many ways, been constitutive of Western modernity itself, are increasingly coming into view through the rise of the right on both sides of the Atlantic. This signals complex and unexpected continuities and ruptures in how sameness and difference are negotiated in different geopolitical spaces.

Despite their challenges and limitations, LGBTI human rights organisations are doing extraordinary work in measuring and recording human rights cultures, and trying to hold governments to account for their domestic and foreign policy agendas. Reports are published and lists are updated that detail the countries where same-sex marriage and adoption are legal, where sodomy has been decriminalised, where workplace discrimination has been banned, and where hate crime legislation has been enacted.
The voting track record of different member states at the United Nations is publicly available, and is a source of much hand-wringing globally. Though the nation-state has immense power in creating biopolitical legal frameworks to situate same-sex sexualities, these lists often conceal more than they reveal. Voting tallies at the United Nations or lists of countries with sexual rights frameworks are rather blunt analytical tools. They do not record the contradictions and contestations within these spaces, or how cultural meaning is produced through different representations, ideological and textual forms, and cultural affect. The official documents of statehood, diplomacy, and political activism seldom foreground the complex transnational cultural flows and their localised negotiations and transfers through which same-sex sexualities are constituted in disparate public imaginaries. Throughout this study, I have resisted the teleological impulse that reinscribes the traditional borders of the nation-state and overlooks the transnational circuits of cultural production through which local discourses of identity, rights, and visibility are articulated. Through my reading of same-sex sexualities in postapartheid South Africa, the study has mapped the diverse “communities of sentiment” (Appadurai 2013: 63) that take root within and across borders, and shows how these are shaped by the uneven resonances, connections, overlaps, and transformations in different geographic sites, both past and present.

**Limitations and exclusions**

While this study was conceptualised to be broadly inclusive of a range of racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities, it inevitably remains exclusionary. For instance, the analytical focus on same-sex sexualities risks reproducing the erasure of bisexuality as a form of cultural identity and a social organisation of desire. Similarly, through the selection of some texts and the de-selection of others, this project also perpetuates a cisgendered normativity that does not interrogate fully the complex ways in which same-sex sexualities might intersect with transgendered and intersex bodies. My own positionality as a white, middle-class man (who has sex with men, and who sometimes identifies as gay) no doubt contributes to the reproduction of certain epistemologies, as particular routes and sites of connectivity have come into view at the expense of others. The limited scope of the project also results in some cultural communities, textual forms, and modes of same-sex expression being privileged over others. While this project largely overlooks rural communities, same-sex cultural
histories of coloured communities, elite cultures of drag performance, bear and leather communities, and various other same-sex subjectivities, a similar restlessness would no doubt characterise their transnational connections and circulations. Perhaps the greatest risk in this project, however, is an unintended reification of apartheid’s racial taxonomies. As I have argued, despite its constructedness as a system of classification, race remains a powerful axis on which inclusion and exclusion have historically been mapped, and continues to be a conceptual site around which community and identity take form. The cultural texts that I analyse here map the different interactions, frictions, and cultural transfers that shape both heteronormativity and its cultural sites of resistance. The notion of restless mobilities, which I have used to think through transnational relationalities in these texts highlights the precariousness and contingencies of these connections and flows, their complex complicities with structures of power, and their rearticulation of agency. Restlessness also marks how historical encounters are continually being reinscribed in the present, and how cultural flows exceed both the temporal and geographic bounds of the postapartheid chronotope.

**The restless mobilities of postapartheid same-sex sexualities**

The eight cultural texts that form the basis of this project chart a complicated network of representations through which same-sex subjectivities are discursively constituted. Despite their differing genres and movements, these texts evidence diverse encounters between global circulations and the rootedness of postapartheid cultural politics. Although human rights as a specific ideological form conjoined antiapartheid and sexual rights advocacy, and became constitutive of postapartheid cultures of constitutionalism, they are also revealed to be located within structures of privilege. Similarly, while sexual identities circulate through most of these texts in one way or another, they are problematised and disarticulated by some who question their reach, relevance, or internal coherence. A number of the texts also explore the circulation of transnational Christianity or Islam and how these religious discourses transform – and are transformed by – same-sex desire and intimacy. Africanness similarly recurs in many of these texts as a restless form of identity that circulates transnationally and attaches itself to local practices and modes of representation. While assertions that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican are challenged by inscriptions of visibility, in both
historical and contemporary registers, they are also inadvertently perpetuated by some other texts which erase black same-sex subjectivities. Significantly, it has also become clear that the structures of racial, gendered, and heteronormative power that are represented across all texts (and that have taken root and shaped the contours of the postapartheid imaginary) cannot be separated from the spectral brutal histories of transnational whiteness. Furthermore, while most of the texts reject the analytical impulses of rainbow nationalism and South African exceptionalism, they also point to the imbrication of the past and the present, as historical routes become constitutive of local roots, and are, in turn, refashioned by the contemporary movement of cultural forms, aesthetics, and ideologies. Though different itineraries and routes are rendered visible by the different texts, they all locate South African same-sex sexualities within transnational circuits through which cultural flows are translated into the idiom of the local.

In Colman’s *Your Loving Simon*, for instance, the mobility of human rights as an ideological form is interrogated as the moral surety of the antiapartheid movement is projected onto the gay rights movement. Colman’s play reveals how Christianity and notions of authentic Africanness are explicitly transnational constructs that are renegotiated by this representation of Nkoli, not only questioning their constitutive homophobia but also reclaiming the discourses to imagine a broadly inclusive sexual rights agenda. The play also reveals the interconnectedness of racial, gendered, and homophobic oppressions (in much the same way that Sarif’s and Meeran’s novels do), projecting postapartheid outrage against racism onto contemporary inscriptions of homophobia. The play also constructs a distinctly gay subjectivity as the protagonist embraces identity politics and the ritualistic coming out of the closet. In addition, through the play’s didacticism, it reproduces the hero-making apparatus of the antiapartheid movement and constructs Nkoli as a figure through whom the indivisibility of rights can be imagined.

While Ditsie and Newman’s *Simon & I* similarly explores the scope of human rights as an ideological form, it makes legible a broader set of transnational imaginaries through which sexual rights discourses were constituted and contested during the transitional decade of the 1990s. These discourses link gay rights and antiapartheid activism, and blend their distinct iconographies. The encounter between the antiapartheid and
sexual rights movements, which themselves spanned multiple geographies and solidarities, illustrates both the expansiveness and the limitations of human rights as a mobile ideological form. Though transnational Christianity circulates through the documentary as a conservative discourse for the reproduction of heteronormativity, it is also renegotiated and becomes a way to rearticulate same-sex sexualities in broadly inclusive terms. Similarly, while the text acknowledges the powerful transnational discourse that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican, it also exposes the restlessness of this discourse as the language of equality displaces essentialist notions of African heterosexuality. The figure of Robert Mugabe, for instance, is refracted through the local lens of constitutionalism and read as a foreign contaminant of an imagined postapartheid body politic. The documentary also reflects on the ambivalent place of women in gay rights advocacy, and reads Nkoli as a complex historical character through whom different exclusions were enacted. Significantly, the film’s sustained reading of the political and cultural mobility of AIDS within transnational networks of affect and activism opens up further the category of human rights, and reminds us about the widespread invisibility of AIDS in the other texts in this study. This invisibility raises significant questions about the confluence of global and local factors that result in the relative erasure of AIDS from these same-sex public cultures in South Africa.

Unlike the drama and the documentary, in which same-sex sexualities are mostly situated in a progressive discourse of racial inclusion and equality, *Gay Pages* constructs an imagined gay community that is implicitly, though undeniably, white. Throughout this magazine series, whiteness functions as a normative camouflage that mitigates the otherness of same-sex sexuality. The magazine also polices an assimilationist aesthetic which privileges white, middle-class, ‘straight-acting’, athletic men, excluding others from this imagined community. While the publication imports an aesthetics and mode of gay identity politics from the Global North, this is refracted through the conservative and reactionary forms of postapartheid whiteness. Whether through its cover models, editorials, stock photographs, or articles, the magazine produces and circulates a transnational white, gay imaginary that links gay men in South Africa to those in other spaces around the world. This transnational imaginary emphasises the continuities between local and international Pride events and beauty pageants, as images of white gay celebrities, models, and marchers circulate through the pages. Startlingly, however, not only does the magazine almost entirely erase
black gay men from its visual history, it also fails to imagine interracial political solidarities and cultural flows from elsewhere on the African continent.

In Heyns’s *The Reluctant Passenger*, a similarly pervasive whiteness circumscribes conditions of assimilation in postapartheid Cape Town, as well as the circuits through which transnational publics are mapped. As in the magazine, white, gay imaginaries constitute (and are constituted through) the representation of transnational same-sex publics. Unlike *Gay Pages* however, the novel offers a more expansive reading of same-sex subjectivities. Gerhard embraces an explicitly gay identity, and Nicholas and Luc do not and instead articulate a sexual desire that is less bound to taxonomies of sexual identity. While these three characters demonstrate the relationship between identity and desire in vastly different ways, they also situate themselves differently within the privileges of middle-class whiteness. In addition, while Gerhard downplays sexual difference, and can be read within an assimilationist aesthetic, he also refuses the sanitisation of same-sex sexualities as the condition for his inclusion in the (white) body politic, instead exploring rich transnational sexual cultures that include public sex, leather bars, and anonymous hook-ups. The novel explores whiteness as a privileged mode of signification and its centrality in shaping the form of ‘respectability’ and assimilation into a normative centre. The text’s depiction of the transnational politics of assimilation reveal the continuities of whiteness in the present, as historical roots of white supremacy are rearticulated as cultural practices of inclusion and exclusion through which white, gay imaginaries are simultaneously depicted and contested. Inadvertently, however, the production and policing of these racialised imaginaries also contribute to the erasure of black same-sex sexualities – a representational elision that is similarly complicit in the rootedness of discourses that locate same-sex sexualities as unAfrican.

In a similar vein, Heyns’s *Lost Ground* reveals the contours of an imagined white gay community that depends on practices of exclusion and on the rigid policing of an assimilationist aesthetic. The whiteness that structures this text’s depiction of same-sex sexualities is marked by the linkages between the specific raciology of apartheid and the contemporary transnational circulations of whiteness. My reading of this text resists binary constructions of the local and the transnational, as the postapartheid chronotope is shown to be inextricably bound to both recent and distant routes of
uneven and asymmetrical cultural flows and transfers. This novel, like *Gay Pages* and *The Reluctant Passenger*, explores the politics of assimilation and how whiteness works to mitigate the otherness of same-sex sexualities. However, this assimilationist aesthetic depends on the exclusion or discursive othering of black and effeminate same-sex sexualities, privileging a particularly white, middle-class, ‘straight-acting’ visibility.

It is with the erasure and caricatured imagining of black same-sex subjectivities that Muholi’s photography is in dialogue. Her work simultaneously depicts and contests historical tropes of victimhood through which black female bodies are imagined. The transnational production of the black female body is tied to the white supremacy of colonialism, but continues in the imagining of black lesbian women in the present. Exploring the reciprocal interplay between hypersexualisation and desexualisation that have co-circulated with tropes of victimhood, the collection of photographs insists on the agency of desiring subjects. As a visual cultural history of black, lesbian subjectivities, Muholi’s work demands that the vulnerability of black lesbian lives be acknowledged, without allowing that vulnerability to foreclose on the different ways in which more complex positionalities are articulated. Muholi’s images complicate notions of victimhood, inscribe the sexual agency of black lesbian women, and problematise constructions of womanhood and butch identities. Her collection also reasserts a particular African cultural history. Whereas the representations of Nkoli and the antiapartheid movement analysed in Chapter 1 contest discourses that same-sex sexualities are unAfrican, Muholi’s appropriation of the Khoisan rock art aesthetic marks a more provocative commentary on desire, intimacy, histories of colonial moralism, and the texture of an imagined Africanness that exceed the bounds of the nation-state and essentialist notions of ‘authenticity’.

The epistemic violence of ‘authenticity’ is further explored in my reading of Sarif’s *The World Unseen*. While the novel represents a cultural history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa at the dawn of apartheid, it also marks an extraordinary intervention in this history, through its inscription of female same-sex desire and intimacy. The diaspora in *The World Unseen* reflects conventional linkages with the imaginary homeland, and the uneven reciprocal cultural flows that characterise the production of transnational Indianness as a mobile and porous form. Sarif’s text exposes the
constructedness of an essentialist Indian identity – as it is simultaneously rooted within apartheid’s racialised spatial planning and tied to the routes of the Indian Ocean. The text also boldly maps the overlaps between the Indian community’s and the apartheid government’s policing of both sexual bodies and racial ‘purities’. In the absence of a trans-historical, ‘authentic’, and legitimate normative centre, the novel refuses designations of sexual otherness, and instead sketches an alternative same-sex politics of domesticity. Significantly, this politics is predicated on reimagining the home as a site of egalitarianism, desire, and intimacy, rather than on any invocation of sexual identity politics. That the emergence of female agency and sexual desire is coterminous in the novel with the discovery of canonical British and American literature, and the mobility of Cole Porter’s subtle same-sex subjectivity, all point to a historical community that remains tied to cultural imaginaries of the British colonial project. Unfortunately, while the multiple historical inscriptions of white supremacy are exposed in the novel, the juxtaposition of these Western cultural intertexts with the interconnected conservativisms of India and her diaspora perpetuates Orientalist progress narratives in which Western modernity becomes the way of escaping seemingly universal oppressions elsewhere. These same discourses have today inhabited the language of human rights and continue to be underscored by constructions of racial otherness and gendered vulnerability. Though essentialist notions of Indianness are rejected by the novel, it nonetheless offers a progressive repositioning of Indian cultural histories as interracial solidarities are forged, and alternative arrangements of desire are imagined.

The production of an essentialist Indian identity in Meeran’s Saracen at the Gates depends on similar race and gender politics. However, Indianness is situated as a more complex cosmopolitan imaginary that conjoins transnational Islam and Western discourses of capitalism, consumption, and individualism. Meeran’s novel shows how circulating forms of Islam and Western modernity can function as sites around which an oppressive authenticity is policed. It also reveals how these imaginaries can be appropriated as sites of female sexual agency, and reimaginings of community, identity, and selfhood. While Islam is positioned as a counterpoint to a seemingly immoral Western culture, the currency and volatility of these competing discourses are shown to intersect in far more complex ways in the production and destabilisation of traditional Indianness. The policing of racial ‘purity’, gender norms, and
heteronormative bodies are also shown to be constitutive of Indianness in the text, illustrating the overlaps between apartheid and postapartheid constructions of race and the internal policing of tradition and purity from within the Indian community. Significantly, in much the same way that Sarif does, Meeran rejects an ‘authentic’ set of cultural norms, and the brutal ways in which they are produced, undermining moralist and essentialist constructions of sexual otherness. While Heyns’s novels show how the otherness of same-sex sexualities is mitigated through their camouflaged inclusion in the normative centre of whiteness, Meeran disarticulates sexual otherness by insisting that the centre itself is an unstable fiction against which difference cannot be imagined. Furthermore, much like in both of Heyns’s novels, *Saracen at the Gates* acknowledges the purchase of gay and lesbian identity politics while refusing their unproblematic imposition in the present. Meeran goes further, however, celebrating desire and intimacy while almost erasing the contours of sexual identities from contemporary Johannesburg. The novel thereby offers us a way of thinking about same-sex sexualities outside of the hegemony of gay and lesbian identity politics, and beyond the positionalities of otherness and difference.

Same-sex sexualities occupy an ambivalent place in the postapartheid public imaginary; it is a place that is simultaneously set and contested, known and unimaginable, and inextricably bound up with the biopolitical histories of apartheid. At the same time, however, representations of these subjectivities are also tied to the transnational flows of cultural affect, form, ideology and aesthetics that are variably inhabited, transformed, or undermined through their negotiation with the texture of the postapartheid present. Writing in their introduction to a published history of Joburg Pride, Shaun De Waal and Anthony Manion (2006: 9) interrogate the notion of a postapartheid gay and lesbian community and argue that “[f]requently, the only thing the people of this ‘community’ have in common is their difference from the heterosexual norm, and often the differences within the ‘community’ feel stronger than the commonalities”. The restless mobilities that characterise the cultural texts that form the basis of this study show that postapartheid same-sex sexualities cannot be read outside of historical and contemporary transnational relationalities. Rather than constituting a closed cultural collective in itself, same-sex sexualities are constitutive of broader transnational cultural and racial communities, whose specificities are rooted
in the past as much as they are shaped by the points of connectivity and cultural exchange of the present.
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