

Queering Colonialism or Queer Imperialism?

Migrating Images and Methodologies of
Spatial Transgression

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Contemporary South African visual culture facilitates a complex process of renegotiation through which various issues regarding sexual identity are grappled with. In a post-apartheid context, convolution and ambivalence underscore the local visualization of lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgendered, and/or intersex identities (hence referred to as *lbgti* identities)—for the most part, this is evident in the domain of visual culture where diverse sexual identities are mobilized as reactions to the normative authority of South Africa and even the larger African arena. In studying these visual responses, the local transformation of the sexual topography can be traced in various changes that have occurred in the perception of homosexuality since the fall of apartheid.

Additionally, this investigation reveals South Africa to be caught up in continuing processes of discrimination and marginalization. This is evident in the rise of heteronormative discourses that question the purported authenticity of black South African homosexual identities, and that are largely shaped in response to other African countries where this is an issue of great dispute. In this regard, South African visual culture and media spaces present a platform for the mobilization of multiple *lbgti* identities, yet they also bear testimony to racial and sexual identities that are conspicuous in their radical absence and distortion.

I am interested in *re-membering*¹ those narratives and visualizations of sexuality that have been *dismembered*² by normative practices. Such a prac-

1 I use the term *re-membering* as an act of critical remembrance or awareness, and a socio-political reorganization of identity. My use of *re-membering* implies a re-

tice of *re-membering* can be regarded as an anamnestic equivalent to the queer project as it involves a questioning of memory and visualization devices, a blurring of delineations of sexual membership, and a transgression of the authority of both heteronormative and homonormative categorizations. My *re-membering* of peripheral narratives and visualizations of identity draws upon queer as a *troublant*, a way to *twist* (Sedgwick 1993: xii), and a means of *torturing* lines of demarcation (Hall 2003: 14). A queer methodology is thus concerned with spaces of intersection between (instead of absolute delineations of) the various discourses that shape the reading and expression of sexuality. My own queering of the South African sexual topography entails an investigation of those images, particularly photographs, which are inscribed in and partially erased from this country's visual and spatial palimpsest. Queer is not deployed for providing a resolution to the problematics surrounding the visualization of sexual identity—in fact, it is very sceptical of a dialectic framework with a ›final outcome‹ to the questioning of norms and boundaries. Rather, this essay emphasizes the power of images in troubling (instead of necessarily surmounting) hierarchical categorizations; thus bringing the complexity surrounding South African identity constructions to the fore.

QUEER METHODOLOGIES, HETERONORMATIVE CENSURE AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN SEXUAL LANDSCAPE

Various ideological structures have diminished (or increased) their normative stronghold over local discourses of alternative selfhood—that is points of reference that are not necessarily marked as heterosexual, male and/or white. One of the major transformations in the perception of alternative sexual identities was initiated by the South African Constitution that was adopted on 8 May 1996 after the first democratic elections.³ By providing a

thinking of the practices and discourses that govern a person or member as a social organ (or body) and a constituent within a particular context.

- 2 The term *dismembering* is employed as a practice that involves the forceful amnesia by which identities are discursively and visually silenced and repeatedly ›forgotten‹ in visual culture and spaces of identity formation.
- 3 This is the first constitution in the world to prohibit discrimination against people on the basis of their sexuality. The legal position of the South African *lgbti* population changed dramatically after the first democratic election and the adoption of the new Bill of Rights, according to which: »everyone is equal before the law [...] and] the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, *sexual orientation*, age, disability, religion, con-

space for people who identify as *lgbti* within a discourse of national belonging (Van Zyl 2005: 27), this constitution signifies a major shift in the expression and imagining of sexuality in contemporary South Africa. Yet, for all the legitimacy that the South African Constitution might bestow on *lgbti* identities, complex processes that simultaneously enunciate and disavow homosexuality's African heritage and political currency shape the local embodiment of sexuality. This is manifested in South African visual culture that is still marred by repressive, heteronormative discourses that deny certain identities space for renegotiation and expression. As a challenge to the myopic nature of apartheid visual culture and the sexual identities elided in its formation, histories and visual narratives of homosexuality are important for strengthening the case for the legitimacy of African *lgbti* identities.

The need for such visual narratives of sexuality is accentuated by post-colonial renegotiations of identity within the African arena, many of which have led to critical enquiries into those discursive and material structures that are somehow reminiscent of Western hegemony. By drawing into disrepute those products, cultures and identities that were brought into and enforced upon the local population (Spurlin 2001: 189), colonialism and its discursive or embodied traces are still under critical scrutiny in African countries. One such structure that is often interpreted as a vestige of colonial imposition is homosexuality. To a certain degree, this can be attributed to the notion that Western sexual discourses were imposed on the African population, and that the general autocracy and dissoluteness of Western colonialism is indicative of homosexuality's purported immorality.

As a result, homophobic discourses pervade the African continent as homosexuality is viewed by various influential political figures (such as Yahya Jammeh, Robert Mugabe, Yoweri Museveni, Sam Nujoma, Jacob Zuma, and others) as a colonial identity that was imposed on, and therefore assimilated by, black Africans.⁴ The contentious issue of homosexuality being a supposedly foreign imposition has also recently been brought to the fore by Ugandan politician David Bahati, who proposed legislation that would impose the death penalty for some homosexual acts.⁵ Bahati and his

science, belief, culture, language and birth [my emphasis]» (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* 1996).

- 4 The notion of homosexuality as a perverted, bourgeois Western phenomenon is found, for instance, in Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's much publicised condemnation of homosexuality in 1995 during the International Book Fair where he stated that homosexuals were »worse than pigs and dogs« and had no civil rights in Zimbabwe (cited in McNeal 1998). Even though Mugabe received worldwide criticism, his sentiments are echoed by various African leaders who regard homosexuality as an unAfrican identity category that entails the ›perverted‹ activities practiced predominantly by whites.
- 5 David Bahati, the MP from the ruling *National Resistance Movement* who proposed the bill, argues that homosexuals should be rehabilitated—an opinion that

supporters argue that the anti-homosexuality bill is meant to safeguard Uganda's cultural heritage by prohibiting the »promotion or recognition of homosexuality and ... protect[ing] children and the youth who are vulnerable to deviation« (cited in Mmali 2009). Homosexuality is thus often made the scapegoat for issues ranging from colonial oppression and racial discrimination, to fears of moral degeneracy and national insecurity. The persecution of the *lgbti* population in contemporary Africa is made all the more incongruous by the fact that the judgement of homosexuality as unAfrican is often based on the very standards that were intrinsically imposed through colonial rule.⁶ The condemnation of homosexuality in Africa on the basis of its alleged colonial imposition reflects a deeply grounded heteronormative, colonial structure of prejudice and persecution that is still prevalent in contemporary African discourses (see Desai 2001 and Herdt 1997).

Recent studies on African sexualities challenge these strains of homophobia by contesting the notion of Africa as an authentic heterosexual territory. Research on homosexuality in Africa is used to recover historical material that can vouch for a homosexual heritage. For instance, Will Roscoe and Stephen Murray (1998) document same-sex practices in fifty societies found in most regions of the African continent, thereby providing a substantial account of same-sex practices and patterns that are not only found in contemporary societies, but also in traditional practices that predate colonial contact.⁷

Such discursive accounts may offer important material for fighting homophobia. In addition, the domain of visual culture is integral to the transgression of hegemonic, heterosexual regulations as media spaces are increasingly used to reconstruct sexually marginalized identities against the grain of heteronormative discourses. Images of homosexuality play an integral part in mobilizing queer visibility and countering heteronormative censure, and are often employed as vehicles for promoting *lgbti* acceptance. The notion of homosexuality having a liberated, discernable character is central to the system of visualization that is endorsed by certain media spaces. This drive towards visibility was manifested in the recent front-page coverage by a South African newspaper of two males kissing at an annual university event—see figure 6.1. With participants attempting to break the South African record for the most people kissing simultaneously in one

is shared by certain Ugandan religious organizations who call for homosexual sinners to repent and be rehabilitated (see Mmali 2009; Mujuzi 2009).

6 Sodomy and other homosexual acts were often considered by colonial rulers to be typical of the »immoral« (African) inhabitants of colonised lands, and homosexuality was regarded by European colonists as characteristically African and »unEuropean« (Bleys 1996: 32). With homosexuality often considered deviant by colonial rulers, the actual persecution of homosexuals in contemporary Africa has its roots in the continent's previous colonial institutions.

7 See also Dunbar Moodie (1988) and Judith Gay (1985).

space, *Soen in die Laan* (or *Kissing in the Avenue*) has been an exclusively heterosexual affair to date. However, in 2010 members from the local *lgbti* population decided to use the opportunity to stage their own kiss-in to promote queer visibility. Ironically, most of the heterosexual kissing-pairs hardly took notice of the queer couples and only after this photograph appeared in a student newspaper did the presence of the homosexual participants come to light.

Figure 6.1: Vanessa Smeets, *Soen in die Laan*, 2010



Source: *Die Matie*, 11 August 2010

The image sparked fierce debate—while the local *lgbti* population largely met the image with praise, many South Africans reacted with horror and scorn. Copies of *Die Matie* newspaper where the image was first published were defaced and slashed, with the picture torn out, the couple crossed out with a marker or their identities visually manipulated—see figure 6.2. Subsequently, the image has been circulated by various local and international newspapers, on the internet and even on television.⁸ The public’s reaction to the image ranged from the two students being hailed as »gay heroes« (*Queerlife* 2010) to the condemnation of the picture as an explicit and immoral ploy to enforce diversity (*Rapport* 2010). These responses reflect the various conflicting discourses that simultaneously disavow and enunciate homosexuality’s place in South Africa. It is also a sign of the contemporary renegotiation of apartheid’s heteronormative legacy and the hegemonic discourses that fuelled its obsession with moral and racial »purity«.

8 See Booï (2010), Jones (2010) and Kgatle (2010) for examples of the media’s reaction to the photograph.

Figure 6.2: Defaced newspaper, 2010



Source: author's archive

The fact that conflicting discourses intersect on the visualization of identity is made evident in the various reactions to this photograph, as well as the narrations of sexuality that are erased from its surface of homosexual intimacy. For this image is significant not only for the identities that it gives exposure to, but also for the identities that are elided in its construction and public circulation. The particular image that was chosen for the newspaper's cover is but one of a series of photographs that were taken at the event and that were considered as possible alternatives. Knowing that a queer image might prove to be contentious, the newspaper's editor settled on what she considered to be the least controversial photograph (Vanessa Smeets, personal interview, Stellenbosch, 11 October 2010)—in this case, it was decided that an image of two white males kissing would be less shocking to a South African audience than an image of an interracial couple, as seen in figure 6.3.

Even though the publication of homosexual imagery in media spaces may appear to be important vehicles for mobilizing *lgbti* identities as tactical points of resistance, they also draw upon pre-existing discursive frameworks for their visual constitution, with the presentation of a supposedly liberated gay identity playing a very important role in the local embodiment of homosexuality. Problematically, the imaging and imagining of homosexuality in visual spaces often perpetuate the notion that a gay and/or queer identity is necessarily white and male. The latter two categories are often conceived as the logical or safer—that is the more acceptable and less controversial—embodiments of homosexuality, with other identity narrations

receiving less visual exposure.⁹ The validity of the media for mobilizing queer transgression is therefore debatable, particularly as the media's call for gay visibility within the South African arena may actually undermine the complexity that pervade the local representation of sexual identity.

Figure 6.3: Vanessa Smeets, *Untitled Image*, 2010



Courtesy of Vanessa Smeets

GAY PRIDE, QUEER TRANSGRESSION, AND IN-BETWEEN SPATIALITIES

Certain Eurocentric universalisms, such as Stonewall-inspired accounts of liberation,¹⁰ have tremendous bearing on South African conceptions of homosexuality. Such accounts are frequently seen as narratives around which images of gay identity can be constructed. With visibility considered essen-

9 See Sonnekus (2007), Tucker (2009), Van der Wal (2009) and Visser (2003) for more information on the effect of apartheid's racial legacies on homosexual visibility in contemporary South Africa.

10 One global event that arguably played a definitive role in the construction of South African *lgbti* identities, is the New York Stonewall Riots of 1969—an event which marked the launch of the gay-rights movements in America and is still regarded as playing a key part in gay-rights struggles on an international level (De Waal/Manion 2006: 9). The global symbolism of the Stonewall Riots and »the configurations of Stonewall as a moment of universal gay and lesbian liberation and as a construction of ›liberation‹ itself« are questioned by Martin Manalansan, who regards it as extremely problematic to take for granted the legitimacy of Stonewall as the origin of international gay resistance. In this manner, Eurocentric universalisms are globally circulated as ›authentic‹ narrations of liberation that have significant bearing on gay phenomena around the world (Manalansan 2003: 208–209).

tial for raising gay consciousness, the visual images that encode homosexual identities are carefully selected as »sites of struggle« that can be mobilized for both celebration and protest (De Waal/Manion 2006: 9). The visibility of an autonomous gay community is often read as a visual antidote to homosexual oppression and censure. The notion of ›gay pride‹, which is used in contemporary media to galvanize homosexual acceptance, often underscores essentialism and prejudice as it allows for the visualization of homosexuality in terms of sameness at the cost of sexual multiplicity. Additionally, narrations of a liberated, visible homosexual subject run the danger of stripping local identities of their contingency by forcing them to claim their legitimacy with Western discourses of gay liberation. In this manner, the local imagining of a gay subject as white and male allows for the perpetuation of apartheid delineations of race and gender.

These problematic delineations that dictate the expression of gay subjectivity have drawn critical attention within the domain of visual culture. The questioning of gayness and its racial margins has recently taken the form of an art exhibition—appropriately entitled *Swallow My Pride*—that aimed to address the real life diversity of local queer culture where issues of race, poverty, religion and discrimination still have bearing on the visualization of sexual identity. This exhibition was envisioned as a visceral response to the commodification of gay culture in South Africa, with the title consciously subverting the concept of ›gay pride‹ which was once an urgent call to march and make visible the diversity and difference of local queer identities (*Swallow My Pride* 2010).¹¹

One of the most prominent images that haunted the viewer at this exhibition was Lindsay Nel's photograph of Anelisa Mfo, a lesbian mother who was raped at gunpoint to ›cure‹ her of her sexuality—refer to figure 6.4. This horrific experience, coupled with her then five-year-old daughter also being raped, later drove Mfo to try and take her own life by setting herself on fire. With the scars from this incident still visible on her body, this image bears testimony to homophobic violence that is rife in township areas, but largely ignored by the South African government. South African lesbians are subjected to ›corrective rape‹ by men allegedly trying to ›cure‹ them of their sexual orientation—a crime that is for the most part going unrecognized by the state and unpunished by the legal system.¹² A rising tide of

11 This exhibition, which was held at *blank projects* in Cape Town in 2010, investigated the experience of commodified gayness, and the manner in which it is predicated upon acceptance from heteronormative capitalist society. This exhibition was presented as a general critique of gay stereotypes that are constructed around the notion of ›gay pride‹—typecast categories of sexual identity that are often imagined as white, Western and male in mainstream visual culture.

12 The subjection of lesbians to ›corrective rape‹ has gained public attention after the brutal rape and murder of Eudy Simelane in 2008 in Kwa Thema, a township

Figure 6.4: *Lindsay Nel, Raped as a ›cure‹ to my sexuality, 2009*



Courtesy of Lindsay Nel & Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography

on the outskirts of Johannesburg where she lived openly as a lesbian. Simelane was gang-raped and brutally beaten before being stabbed twenty-five times in the face, chest and legs. This event was covered extensively by the local and global media (see for example Harrison 2009; Kelly 2009; *The Telegraph* 2009), and gave rise to the publication of a report by the international NGO ActionAid that called on the South African legal system not to allow cases of ›corrective rape‹ to go unpunished (*ActionAid* 2009). This report found that 31 lesbians have been reported murdered in homophobic attacks from 1998 till 2009, and of these cases there has been only one conviction. *Triangle Project*, a local gay rights organization based in Cape Town, commented on the gravity of this issue by stating that it deals with up to ten new cases of ›corrective rape‹ every week (cited in Kelly 2009). From this report it became evident that local lesbians are increasingly at risk of rape and murder, particularly in townships where homosexuals are largely prone to persecution. Non-profit organizations, such as Luleki Sizwe in Gugulethu, provide shelter and support for women in townships, such as Analisa Mfo, who have suffered from ›corrective rape‹ (Luleki Sizwe 2010).

violence against the local homosexual population reveals an increasingly hostile political environment and a culture of impunity that allow for these hate crimes to go unpunished. These cases of ›corrective rape‹ are also brutal embodiments of the sentiment that homosexuality is unAfrican—that it should be exterminated with vehemence for its supposed deviance from heterosexual, African norms. However, what transpires when looking at this image of Mfo is not the deviance of homosexuality that is professed by heteronormative discourses, but rather the intolerance and inhumanity that still saturate heterosexual myths of normality.

In contrast to the notion of liberated gayness that is so glibly perpetuated in visual and textual spaces, this image clearly shows the suffering and discrimination that pervade the local experience of homosexuality. In the face of heteronormative oppression, the local *lgbti* population not only has to deal with hate speech and allegations of homosexuality being unAfrican, but with physical violence—an issue that is repeatedly obscured by the imagining of homosexuality as a white, Western identity formation.

CONCLUSION

By assimilating and visualizing previously marginalized identities within a national framework that is still burdened by colonial and apartheid discourses, media spaces—and particularly photographic practices—act as disruptive impetus for the visual mobilization of queer transgression. Yet, since heterosexual patriarchy is the dominant sexuality in most environments and the majority of interactions between people take place within heterosexual discourse (Valentine 1993: 241), gay and/or queer narrations of sexuality inevitably draw on the repertoire of heteronormative languages. In the same manner, a postcolonial queer project runs the danger of perpetuating the various discriminatory practices enforced during colonialism.¹³

Contradiction seems to rule the visualization of homosexuality in contemporary South Africa. From one point of view, media spaces contest notions of the unAfricanness of homosexuality by visualizing black *lgbti* identities to counter those homophobic discourses that still pervade the African arena. However, these spaces also promote homonormative discourses, and some critics are uncomfortable with the discursive limitations and uncritical consumption of ›gay pride‹, as well as its ignorance of the intricacies and problems that pertain to local experiences of sexuality. Occurrences of ›corrective rape‹ reminds one how easy it is to mistake the Western discourses of gay liberation and queer transgression that circulate on a global

13 The term ›queer‹ has been prone to critique from postcolonial writers for its perpetuation of whiteness as normative category in mainstream Western culture and its insensitivity towards racial inequalities—see for example Muñoz (1999) and Hayes (2000).

level for the brutal homophobia that many homosexuals still have to endure. For those homosexual South Africans who live in a township, gayness may not necessarily be a discourse of liberation, but can point to white ignorance and the manner in which only those who have the resources can buy into the notion of a united, free gay citizenship. Meanwhile, a queer project and its suspicion of normative identity politics may reveal the sexual topography to be an undemocratic and discriminatory space, yet its transgression of those homophobic discourses that pervade the African arena may be severely restricted. As long as the notion of ›homosexuality‹ remains settled in the public consciousness as a ›foreign imposition‹—as a bourgeois, Western phenomenon—terms such as ›gay‹ and ›queer‹ may prove to have limited currency for negotiating spaces of sexual tolerance.

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