

# Southern Perspectives on Gender Relations and Sexualities: A Queer Intervention

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### RESUMO

This paper locates its position from the Southern African context in order to rethink knowledge production in sexuality and gender relations. Grappling with the brutal violence and murder of Black lesbians in particular, the paper unpacks how what I call 'the queer turn' has simultaneously advanced and made invisible particular struggles. Finally, based on the experience of the #RhodesMustFall movement and in artistic cultural productions, the paper argues for reimagining the category queer not just as sexual or gender identity, but also as a form of destabilizing notions of belonging attached to the racist and heteronormative neo-colonial project.

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### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Sexuality, Black  
Lesbians, South  
Africa, Queer,  
#RhodesMustFall  
movement.

In this paper<sup>1</sup>, I am interested in mapping some advances on knowledge production in sexuality and gender diversity (what many scholars call non-normative sexualities and gender identities) in the Southern African context. Connections will be made to other parts of the African continent, but my focus is particularly on South Africa. There are a number of reasons for this focus, and, in providing context, the following will be highlighted:

- I. South Africa is entering the third decade of decriminalised same-sex sexuality, promoting and protecting diverse sexual and gender relations. The country's Constitution is celebrated in many parts of the world not only as the most progressive, but also as having pioneered ideals around sexualities and gender diversity.
- II. While this may be the case, the cultural attitudes around notions of sexual and gender diversity do not seem to be on par with the ideals of the Constitution. Often, it is heard that many Africans understand sexual and gender diversity (often shortened to homosexuality and transgender) as un-African.
- III. Over the last twenty years, South Africans have witnessed an escalation of violence and murder of Black lesbians in particular. For a number of years, the terms 'corrective' or 'curative' rape have circulated unquestioned, and are posed as synonyms to Black lesbians' lived realities.
- IV. I will call attention to new movements and queer issues – what I would tentatively call 'the queer turn'.
- V. Lastly, I will briefly talk about turning South – here, I will be making new advances on thinking and generating new knowledges from the South, and how this could possibly illuminate what has been hidden in the project of Westernising knowledge.

#### **LOOKING BACK: THE EMERGENCE OF A LESBIAN AND GAY MOVEMENT – BLACK LESBIAN REPRESENTATION**

Twenty-seven years ago, Johannesburg-based Black lesbian activist Beverly Ditsie demanded to speak at the first gay and lesbian pride march on African soil. This became a moment that would haunt the gay and lesbian movement for a long time. I often return to this moment in my writing and reflections on what has become the loosely named lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) movement in South Africa. This is Bev Ditsie recounting what she said to the white co-organisers of the Johannesburg gay Pride:

*(...) I asked them [the organisers], "why is it that there is no woman of colour, girl of colour who is going to be part of the representation?". Because if it's only going to be white people who are going to be on the podium in the first pride march in*

**1** Various versions of parts of this paper appear in the 2018 Special Issue of *Critical African Studies*; forthcoming publication of *Global Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*. The paper is also a version of my presentations at Salvador and São Paulo. In the first case, it was the opening conference of the *V Seminário Internacional: Enlaçando Sexualidades/10 anos*, hosted by UNEB, under the general coordination of Suely Messeder – who, along with Laura Moutinho, made possible my visit to Brazil. The second presentation was held at USP, in the event *Numas apresenta*, organized by Thais Tiriba, Letizia Patriarca. Both presentations occurred in September 2017.

*Africa, then what it is – is white influence non-stop! I think I asked, “wouldn’t it help us to have a Black lesbian talk?”. And it was like “yeah, yeah, yeah! You wanna do it? You wanna make a speech?”.*

*So I made a speech. Those cameras around me didn’t mean anything, until it hit the news... Wow! Church groups, parent’s groups, school groups, and teachers’ groups – you name it. Everywhere there was a whole petition to get me killed, to get people like me [killed]. It’s like “we understand when it’s these white people, we understand it’s a very white thing to be doing, so, we understand. But when YOU stand up and tell us it’s all [South] African, oh – well, you’re starting to insult people’s sensibilities and you are shaking their moral ground, and you are shaking their own firm beliefs!”*

I start with recounting this story because 1990 was an important year for gay and lesbian activists in South Africa. Bev Ditsie’s speech and public visibility disrupted white male gay dominance and unsettled blackness during the Johannesburg Pride march and beyond. It is curious for me that, even now, Black lesbians in South Africa are still demanding the right and space to be seen and heard within the white male ‘gay’ space, the Black African space, and the society as a whole. What Bev Ditsie reminds me of is the important work of destabilizing identities. As full beings, we cannot prioritise Black identity as the primary frame through which to pursue our politics (Cohen, 1997).

Since 1990, various forms of legal reform and recognition for lesbian and gay people followed through intense mobilisation, advocacy and human rights lobbying. Shortly after that, between 1994 and 1995, Routledge published a volume on lesbian and gay lives in South Africa, *Defiant Desire*, co-edited by two South Africa’s prominent white gay male icons. This text pioneered what we now see as South African gay and lesbian scholarship. Its contents are highly driven by the everyday life of gay and lesbian South Africans, as well as activists – who could then be visible in their identities because of constitutional gains aimed at giving evidence of same-sex (or gender diverse) existence in the country (it must be noted that some transgender, transsexual, and queer lives, although not named as such, were also present in the text). Very little, if any, theorizing was prioritised in the text. However, through its academically renowned publisher, Routledge, the text remains the most extensive resource for academics, researchers, and students interested in gay and lesbian life in South Africa. What I’m highlighting here is not the importance of the text *per se*. Rather, it is how everyday experiences, lives, and activism of lesbian, gay, and transgender people, captured in this text, inform contemporary scholarship and the academic field of sexuality studies and gender diversity. If everyday lives and experiences of people have given so much to a field, a body of scholarship, an academic plat-

form, in what ways has the academy reciprocated in developing that knowledge production? In this paper, I grapple with this central question.

South African academic writing on lesbian, gay, bisexual (and, most recently, transgender and queer issues) is advanced in the African continent. However, South African academics and scholars argue that the learning and the teaching environments in South Africa “remain some of the most conservative and untransformed spaces, even when several academic studies and publications have concentrated on demystifying sexuality and sexual orientation in South Africa” (Hames, 2012: 66). This also contributes to a campus culture that is not particularly prepared or welcoming to the needs of lesbian, gay, and transgender people. As Thabo Msibi (2013: 67-68) argues, “often, homophobia is peddled by both students and lecturers” and leads to “many queer students in South African universities experiencing higher education in negative ways.” These *sentiments* are echoed by Ugandan scholars Sylvia Tamale and Stella Nyanzi, and the North American scholar, Angela Davis, who attest to the university’s heteronormative culture. Stella Nyanzi pinpoints this as the “oppressive binary” (i.e. men are men and males, and women are women and females), which “reinforces patriarchy”, and thus perpetuates heterosexist and heteronormative “thinking, practices and praxis of formal education systems” (2015: 132). As Cathy Cohen (1997: 440) aptly states, we must see heteronormativity “as the normalizing practice|power.” Norms around sexuality, as Sylvia Tamale argues, are “institutionalized and therefore interwoven into the social fabric of student’s everyday experiences, knowledge and social relationships.” The transformative learning task that lies ahead “can only be achieved through a process of unlearning and relearning” (2011: 615), and mostly through the disruption of these dominant norms (Cohen, 1997).

In the next sections, I unpack the ways in which knowledges on sexuality and gender diversity have simultaneously advanced and made invisible particular struggles. I return to the idea of pride, as presented and challenged by Bev Ditsie, because this resonates with activism in many parts of the world. More than to focus on Johannesburg or Cape Town Pride, my interest here is to expose the shame often hidden under the guise of pride.

#### **PRIDE AND THE LOCAL IMAGINARY**

It is a typical summer day in February in Cape Town. The city is full of tourists, and there is an air of jubilation in the wealthier parts of the ‘Mother city’ because it is Pride week. Cape Town Pride is an annual tourist attraction event which takes place in the upmarket suburb of Green Point, a few kilometres from the city centre. Given the history of forced removals and gentrification in Cape Town, the areas most close to the city centre and the Atlantic seaboard have become preserves for

white people. Coming to town, for many Black people, is still loaded with memories of the past. It has been said that many Black people are “temporary sojourners” in urban areas (Beavon, 2004: 97; Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008: 22).

The taxi ride from the Black township of Makhaza in Khayelitsha to the up-market suburb of Green Point is a tour from the past to the future. Behind, Black lesbians and all queer persons leave what I call *ihlazo*<sup>2</sup> – a degrading shocking reality, well-captured by the graffiti on the *potta potta* (*portable*) toilets lining the highway as one leaves Khayelitsha, *this city works for a few*: a mockery of the City of Cape Town’s previous pay-off line. A change of taxi meandering through Khayelitsha’s sandy streets and overpopulated shack dwellings eventually drops the passenger in the city forty-five minutes later, where one either takes another taxi to Green Point or walks through downtown to the famous De Waterkant – the only existing ‘gay village’ or what is known as ‘the pink strip’ in South Africa. The most popular spot in the village for many who have done this track from Makhaza is inside the Cape Quarter, a very fancy boutique shopping mall.

On arrival at Greenpoint, up the stairs from Spar supermarket, are the Cape Quarter toilets, a somewhat surprising popular spot for young Black lesbian, bisexual, and queer women who come to Cape Town Pride every year. This is where I found Siya with her friends changing into their ‘town clothes’ at the 2015 Pride. They were screaming with excitement overwhelmed by the grand mirrors, the white ceramic toilet bowls, the constant running water on taps that do not need to be touched, the floor adorned with marble tiles, the granite tops, two-ply toilet paper, and, mostly, because the toilet was bigger than the house that most of the people in the toilet could ever imagine living in. More than an hour was spent in the toilet, walking up and down, parading inside, with every cubicle door shining on the passing image reflected by the large mirrors.

Siya, a 20 years old Black lesbian and member of Free Gender (a Black lesbian organisation in Khayelitsha), met her friends on the escalators to the second floor of Cape Quarter while going to collect cardboard boxes at Spar supermarket. When she arrived, at 9:30am, she found a few of her comrades making placards for the Pride march. They were getting ready to stage a protest during Cape Town Pride, contesting how Cape Town Pride excludes Black communities. As she noticed that the cardboards were running out, she decided to walk across to the supermarket to collect more. By 10:30am, she had not yet returned.

Inside the toilet, a lively discussion was going on, mostly about the after party and what each person would be wearing later. Walking into the toilet was for me the most liberating and yet the saddest moment of Cape Town Pride. I had never seen so many Black women in this mall, especially in the toilet, and, mostly, they were all happy. Siya had completely forgotten why she had come. As we prepared to walk out, her friend said, *Ndimhle ne tshomi?* (*I’m pretty, aren’t I,*

**2** To unpack this concept, I use Patricia McFadden’s (2011) analysis.

my friend?) – a question that really deserved no answer. The mirrors had already told the story. It is this encounter in the toilet that marked the beginning of what Cape Town Pride has become, and perhaps the notion of pride itself.

The toilet is not the most likely place to imagine in relation to pride, but this is where the real Pride begins. For transgender people<sup>3</sup>, the toilet is a troubling space – often one that should be avoided because of its gender marking and fixing. Detailed investigations of the ‘bathroom problem,’ as it affects gender non-conforming people, show the limits of this “sexed site” (Browne, 2004; Rasmussen, 2009). Its enforcement of a binary excludes many of those who do not fit in neatly to gender norms. Thus, as Mary Lou Rasmussen (2009: 440) suggests, it is “a useful point of departure”.

Many Black people in Cape Town also have a violent relationship with the city’s lack of interest in decent sanitation. A few years ago, the City of Cape Town installed toilets in Khayelitsha that stripped away people’s dignity. The act of excretion, which for many is a private matter, was made into a public spectacle – something that became known as “Toilet Wars”, as the local government in Cape Town insisted that residents should enclose the state-provided flush toilets by themselves (Robins, 2013). The shocking ugly reality is the blatant denial of basic services for Black people in a city that prides itself as the most beautiful in the world. The conditions under which the majority of people are forced to live in show up Cape Town as a disgrace.

In 2016, the body of the 19 years old Sinoxolo Mafevuka was dumped in a communal toilet in Town Two, Khayelitsha, raped and strangled by two men related to her boyfriend. Similarly, the murdered body of Nopinki Sifuba had been dumped in a communal toilet.<sup>4</sup> While the demand for decent sanitation continues to scream loudly in Cape Town, it is disregarded. The 2015/2016 report by Cape Town-based advocacy group Equal Education shows that South African schools have substandard sanitation facilities, with 29% of schools still using pit toilets. The report also highlights how toilets were the places where school learners felt the least safe. This was evident when, on his first week of school, the six years old Michael Komape fell into a pit toilet and died.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘toilet wars’ and ‘bathroom problems’ affect lower class, poor, disabled, and queer citizens. In Cape Town, these are Black people, who make up the majority of the city and country’s population. While it is clear that toilets engender danger, violence, and possible death, it is important to note how they can also be spaces of pleasure and joy. While it may be easy to attach this temporary joyfulness to Cape Town Pride’s location in the most affluent area in Cape Town, it is also important to note how the toilet, for many Black lesbians at Cape Town Pride, is the only ‘freely’ accessible space. Pride continues to be an expensive experience, in which all its venues demand entry fees. The reality is, as Pride con-

**3** According to paper presented by Neo S. Musangi, “Trans(ag)gression: Experiences of public space for trans”, intersex and gender non-conforming persons in Kenya”, part of *Boldly Queer: African Perspectives on Same-Sex Sexuality and Gender Diversity*; and paper delivered by Nigel Patel at the *Queer in Africa? The Cape Town Question Symposium*, October 7th 2016, District Six, Cape Town.

**4** See newspaper articles relating to Sinoxolo Mafevuka by Petersen, T., 2016, in *News24*: [http://www.news24.com/Tags/People/sinoxolo\\_mafevuka](http://www.news24.com/Tags/People/sinoxolo_mafevuka) (last accessed at 20/9/2016); and Ntlemeza, S. 2016. “Woman’s body dumped in toilet”. *IOL: Crime & Courts*, 8 December. Available at: <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/womans-body-dumped-in-toilet-7125643> (last accessed at 20/12/2016).

**5** *City Press*. 2014. “Boy (6) who died in pit toilet had ‘escaped death’ in taxi accident”, 22 January. Available at: <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Boy-6-who-died-in-pit-toilet-had-escaped-death-in-taxi-accident-20150429> (last accessed at 15/4/2017); Gopal, C. and Ngubeni, Z. 2016. “Public school toilets are the pits”. *Mail&Guardian*, April, 22. Available at: <https://img.co.za/article/2016-04-29-public-school-toilets-are-the-pits> (last accessed at 15/4/2017).

tinues to attract many Black queer people to the 'gay village', that the drive for consumption, even at the Cape Quarter mall, will increase, enforcing payments to access toilets.

For the Black women who attend Cape Town Pride, the toilet is one temporary space where they can feel comfortable to be themselves, and feel beautiful in the company of women like them. The toilet becomes the "space where one's race, gender, and sexuality are felt and lived as the experiences that they are" (Lane, 2015: 236). While in an unlikely space, Black queer women transform the toilet into a "space of lesbian conviviality" (ibid., 223) where possible joy, even temporarily, can exist within the confines of impossible spaces in Cape Town's townships. In this moment, the distinction between private and public space is strangely blurred.

The beauty of the toilet is a violent reminder of inaccessible rights. Simultaneously, it is the beginning of being in town, requiring a transformation to a new aesthetic. The township is left behind, literally and materially, and a new being unravels. Beauty (and happiness) must be confirmed within the town/toilet space, and affirmed. The toilet, as town, is the realisation of pride. *Ihlazo* encapsulates this dynamic, transcending any possible translations.

In the next section, I unpack violence as it affects Black lesbian families and communities in particular. Writing about death and violence is difficult. Doing this in this paper and narrating these deaths is not to produce a 'pornography of violence'. Rather, what is more difficult in this case, as Cathy Cohen (2011: 129) argues, is going "beyond the brief memory of the deaths" towards a more comprehensive, "ongoing and long-lasting analysis of violence."

#### **ON KILLING THE BLACK LESBIAN BODY**

Since February 2006 till September 2014, there have been at least 42 known brutal murders of mostly Black lesbian, gay, and transgender people in South Africa. These brutal murders added to the popularized notion of corrective and curative rapes towards Black lesbians. Our understanding of rape became deeply challenged by the targeting of Black lesbian bodies specifically. As all women in South Africa, Black lesbians are similarly vulnerable to sexual violence. At the same time, they occupy a different space in society – as challenging, often openly rejecting, sexual, gender, and other cultural norms. While sexual violence towards women is generally aimed at abusing power over female bodies, we also understand that the added vulnerability of rejecting Black heteronormativity carried a heavy, and often deadly, penalty on Black female bodies.

In February 2006 Zoliswa Nkonyana (19) was stoned, kicked, and clubbed to death by her peers on the streets of Khayelitsha, metres from her home, because

she was a butch lesbian. Six years after her death, Zoliswa's murderers were sentenced to 14 years (18, with 4 years suspended) in prison for denying her the right to live according to her sexual preference.

In the following year, the naked, brutalized, and tortured bodies of Salome Masooa (23), Sizakele Sigasa (34), and Thokozane Qwabe (23) were found by passersby in open fields. Those accused of these murders, and many others, have not been arrested or found guilty. The women were all shot or stabbed numerous times. At close range, Sizakele had three gun shots to her head. The other three were distributed throughout her naked body. Salome died after one gun shot to her head.

Violence does not only take place on our bodies – often, the system perpetuates it, even when death has already occurred. In 2008, Khanyiswa Hani (25) and Sibongile Mphelo (21) were dismembered and murdered by people who have never been found. Our communities, streets, parks, and homes are filled with crime scenes. Perpetrators visibly walk around and yet there is no sufficient evidence for the dead. Some are even assisted to escape the criminal justice system, as we saw in the case of Zoliswa Nkonyana on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

Eudy Simelane (32) was murdered on her way home by a group of men who knew her as an open lesbian in KwaThema, Johannesburg. Her murderer said he panicked when she called out his name while robbing her and attempting to rape her. So they killed her, multiple times, making sure she was dead, dead. In his judgement, Judge Mavundla added another layer to Eudy's death by denying that her sexual orientation had any matter in her first death.

Year after year, young Black lesbians and other gender non-conforming people die at the hands of brutal rapists and murderers. Their bodies are hidden in bins, ditches, graves, and dilapidated buildings in their own neighbourhoods. Nontsikelelo Tyatyeka's (21) body was found a year after disappearing, decomposed and stuffed in a neighbour's wheelie (rubbish) bin metres from her home. Noxolo Nogwaza's (24) body was found in a ditch in front of a local tavern/bar. When her body was found by kids playing in an abandoned building, Nokuthula Radebe's (20) pants were removed; she was suffocated with a plastic bag and strangled with her shoelaces. Nqobile Khumalo's ex-boyfriend hid her body in a shallow grave after raping, beating, and choking her to death. Her eyes had popped out of the sockets.

In 2012, the choke of grief<sup>6</sup> came inside our homes. Behind locked doors, vultures hunting Black lesbian bodies followed them into their houses. Andritha Morifi's (29) mother found her daughter's body drenched in blood in her house, her neck stabbed and slit multiple times with a fork and her underwear soaked with blood on the floor. Her murderers were found still wearing her jacket. The murderer of Phumeza Nkolonzi followed her into her family home. Inside the

<sup>6</sup> Taken from Unoma Azuah's poem with the same title, which deals with the harsh realities in which many LGBT people find themselves in many African countries. The poem is reprinted in the forthcoming anthology, *Walking the Tightrope*.

bedroom, with her aged grandmother and five years old cousin watching, he shot her three times. The first shot he fired, as her grandmother stated, was “to silence” them. He was informing them of his intention. The second shot went directly to Phumeza. She asked him, “Ndikwenzeni? What have I done to you?” The murderer responded with a third shot that sent her to the ground splashing her blood all over the walls, the bed, and onto her grandmother and young cousin’s bodies. The neighbours heard Phumeza’s grandmother’s screams, the kind of cry only made by a mother who has lost a child. They were too frightened to go out of their homes and help. They watched from their curtained windows the murderer, gun in hand, walking freely on their street.

This is nauseating. Duduzile Zozo’s (26) body was found lying in a yard opposite her home. She had been raped and strangled and a toilet brush had been shoved inside her vagina. Similarly, Gift Disebo Makau (24) was found raped, strangled with a wire around her throat, and a hose pipe with running water was forced down her throat to her stomach. Both women were left lying in their neighbour’s yards. The brutality of their murders continues to torment their family members every day.

Over the years, as members of Black lesbian communities, we have watched this with horror and lived in perpetual fear, sometimes calculating how our own deaths would be carried out. Living, when the possibility of death is an everyday reality, is risky. Perpetrators plan new victories over Black queer bodies. One gunshot is never enough. A knife must pierce through your body more than three times. Strangling must be accompanied by an insertion of a foreign object. Rape is no longer deadly.<sup>7</sup> After the first shot to the head, the third stab to the heart, the choking after the rape – what else is being killed? What more is there to die? These are questions I grapple with as I think about queer deaths. Eric Stanley (2011) offers the concept of *overkill* – *excessive violence that pushes a body beyond death*. In relation to the queer body, he argues (2011: 9), “it is not just the desire to simply end a specific life, but the ‘ending of all queer life.’”

Writing from the vantage point of queer studies in North America, Stanley starts off from Mbembe’s (2001: 174) provocative question, “[b]ut what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” To theorise queer bodies as *nothing* is, for me, located in Africa and at this time, a challenging task to grapple with. But, following Mbembe, Stanley (2011: 10) suggests a deep connection between human and *nothing*, arguing that the former makes the latter “not only possible but necessary”. If this logic is followed, then “the work of death, of the death that is already nothing, not quite human, binds the categorical (mis)recognition of humanity. The human, then, resides in the space of life and under the domain of rights, whereas the queer inhabits the place of compromised personhood and the zone of death.”

**7** Here I am referring to Gibson-Graham (2001: 241), who suggest a change in the representation of rape – to see rape as “death, an event that is final and lasting in terms of the damage it does to the self”.

To completely follow Stanley's logic in the South African context would be a disfavour to queer bodies and to the larger body politic, and possibly not useful. The queer body, in South Africa at least, becomes human only through its attainment of rights (thus, it attains life under the domain of rights). In other parts of the continent, the queer body is not yet human. Often, in both locales, it is considered un-African, uncultured, ungodly, and "highly visible manifestations of the undesirable" (Gqola, 2006: 83). This discourse has contributed to the queer subject as that which ought to be easily discarded.

Rather than conceiving the queer subject as *nothing*, as Stanley suggests, it is Walter Mignolo's (2015) conceptualisation of the human, that connects the queer subject to "decolonial thinking and living", that is illuminating. Mignolo's (2015: 120) framework challenges "not to assimilate but to deny the universal pretense of the *humanitas*." He extends this framework by referring to Sylvia Wynter's analysis, and pointing out that the crisis of the human is that there are "all those who are not fully incorporated in the Western construction of Man/ Human, that is, all the 'we' who do not identify as Human because 'we' have been placed outside of it" (ibid.).

#### **THE QUEER TURN – CALLS FOR DECOLONISATION AND THE DEMANDS OF STUDENT MOVEMENTS**

In the last section, I have been gliding, unproductively so, over the term queer, making its connections with Black lesbian realities, sometimes using it as an all-encompassing term for a reality that is at the margins of full humanity. While all this may be true, it is important to note how what I call 'the queer turn' has taken over African popular discourse, sometimes without thorough attention to its limits. In the last five years alone, a number of significant texts have popularised and deployed queer as a tool for making connections across the continent. Most notable are five volumes worth mentioning: *Queer African Reader* (Ekine and Hakima, 2013); *Queer Africa I: New and Collection Fiction* (Martin and Xaba, 2013) and *Queer Africa II: New Stories* (Martin and Xaba, 2016); *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives in Gender and Sexual Identities* (Matebeni, 2014a); *Boldly Queer: African Perspectives on Same-Sex Sexuality and Gender Diversity* (Sandfort, Simenel, Mwachiro and Reddy, 2015). In all these, what is increasingly seen is not just the use of the term, but also the end of the exceptional focus on South Africa because of its legal reforms. While queer is used mostly as a shortcut for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex persons, it also marks similarities in experiences across the continent. All the texts highlight the celebration of an identity that locates itself in Africa while overcoming the challenges of a denied existence.

Yet, South Africa remains an important location from which to understand

the significance of the travelling queer term. With the opening of the country's borders, there has been intense and various forms of migration: not only of people as tourists, but also as labourers, permanent residents, refugees, and asylum seekers – terms have also travelled, sometimes attached to the people who pass through borders. In this sense, queer's relevance takes new significance. Over the years, South Africa has become notorious for (xenophobic) violence towards African people, foreign nationals who come to South Africa because of its opportunities and tensions in their countries of origin. A local derogatory term for African foreign nationals (often blamed for 'stealing jobs' from South Africans), *amakwerekwere*, bears significance to the term queer. Both categories are ejected out of society not only because they destabilize notions of belonging: they also call into question the very premise of being African. Neville Hoad (2007: 81), who is attuned to the homophonic proximity of the words 'queer' and '(ama)kwerekwere', extends this relation. It may be an imaginative productive stretch, but, in his reading, "the queer is foreign, and the foreign is queer." This perhaps leads to the idea of queerness, of *kwerekwere* as representing a disturbance in the order of things, an unsettling *defamiliarisation* of the kinds of bodies and performances that are legitimated by the African and heteronormative discourse.

Drawing from Cohen's (1997: 440) call for queers "not just to prioritise sexuality as the primary frame through which to pursue their politics," but also to search for an understanding of the different manifestations of multiple systems of power in everyday lives, I turn now to the ways queer politics has been used in the last two years within student movements, in particular the calls made by the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement emanating from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. This movement galvanized many parts of the world to take another deeper look at what Nyamjoh (2016) calls "resilient colonialism". From its inception, this movement positioned itself as an intersectional movement, not only to undo the remnants of colonialism still existing within the university, but also to undo the related racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism attached to the neo-colonial project. What the #RhodesMustFall movement endeavoured to do was a reimagining of queer as a "new political identity" (Cohen, *ibid.*) that is not just about sexual identity, orientation, or gender identity. As one member of the movement eloquently puts it:

*The only way to truly travel that road is, firstly, to LISTEN. LISTEN to the voices of RMF: we, the Black students who have created safe spaces for critical debate on intersectional identity. We, who have dared to imagine a university free from racism, free from sexism. We, who have the radical impulse and revolutionary commitment to realise what we imagine. The University has to make space for the voices of marginalised people of the institution – Black people, women,*

*workers, and people from the LGBTIAQ community – not only to be heard but to dictate the transformation agenda. The knowledge of how the oppression of the institution operates is situated in these groups and it is critical that the experiences of these groups – those oppressed by the hegemony of white capitalist patriarchy – are listened to and not argued away by white liberal standpoints that seek to preserve the status quo. It is only through listening to and understanding the daily experiences of these people, and then, taking as a departure point the transformation of the dominant culture and the institutional structures that reproduce those experiences of oppression, that any sort of relevant transformation agenda can be forged. Indeed a transformation agenda that we are driving is the only one we will accept (oNe StAB, #RhodesMustFall movement, 2015).*

While attempts to imagine a new way of knowing have been demobilised politically in South African universities (through the arrest, intimidation, and suspension of #RhodesMustFall activists), there are glimmers of hope. As I conclude, I am interested in finding new ways of speaking back to the normalising regimes of academic knowledge production, which disconnect the intellectual project from people's lived realities. As activists in South Africa have shown, the artificial divide between knowledge creation and activism can no longer be sustainable. In this pursuit, my quest is sustained by interrogating the limits of "language and language-ing" (Nyanzi, 2014: 66), and how Englishness has left us with – LGBT – narrow frames of conceptualising contemporary ideas on sexuality and gender diversity in Africa. I take the cue from cultural producers, artists such as Nicholas Hlobo, who are propelling a different conversation about sexual and gender diversity.

#### **UNONGAYINDODA**

Nicholas Hlobo is a Black gay male artist based in South Africa, known mostly for his intricate sculptures made of fabric and often rubber. In his numerous works, he weaves through forms of existing, imagining a new world for him to exist in his multiple embodiments. As an African gay man who undergoes Xhosa rituals, his references in his creative works are embedded in his rich cultural heritage. Identity, ethnicity, masculinity, femininity, fragility, beauty, and strength – all run throughout his pieces. The materials and fabrics he makes use of can be thought of as visual metaphors, revealing a new possibility of co-existence.

For example, his 2006 installation, *Unongayindoda* (which he translates to "one who almost looks like a woman"), asks the viewer to "imagine a performance in which a drag queen with a harness on her waist is hoisted up gently,

so the dress becomes elongated, then lowered again, so the dress opens” (Hlobo, 2006). In this installation, both playful and multi-gendered, Hlobo is making many references. Like his other works, the installation fuses harsh materials, such as second-hand leather jackets and old punctured car tyres, with soft materials, such as organza fabrics that are stitched together with multi-coloured ribbons. This combination of materials suggests

a play and dialogue between forms of masculinity and femininity, and within these genders, but also makes space for alternative gender expressions. Referring to this installation, Hlobo (ibid.) states that *unongayindoda* “is a very feminine structure, yet masculine at the same time.”

The visual cue of rubber as the head of a phallic object is suggestive. Similarly, the open dress at the bottom is both an invitation to adore as well as to enter. In this work alone, a figure is transformed into a multiplicity of existence.

It is curious to observe the ways Nicholas Hlobo chooses to bring meaning and understanding to the title of his installation. He opened this installation with a performance in which he was an initiate, *umkhwetha* (Makhubu, 2009: 67) – a very symbolic ritual of coming into manhood among Xhosa men. In many ways, this installation is symbolic of his own position as a Black gay and a Xhosa man in South Africa who travels all over the world. What is intriguing is the way he makes use of language by infusing it with different kinds of materials and rituals as a way of claiming and reinstating his own hybrid nature and artistic form.

Hlobo’s peculiar use of the word *unongayindoda* retranslates the ways in which the term has been used by gender and LGBT scholars. One prominent scholar argues that ‘*Nongayindoda*,’ in isiZulu, “stigmatise women thought to be living beyond accepted heterosexual norms of dress, behaviour or desire. On the other hand, there are no widely accepted, positive, non-colonial terms for a celebrated and chosen, non-conventional sexual identity” (Bennett, 2010: 37). Similarly, the Human Rights Watch Report (2011: 20) associates this term with women who transgress gender norms “or female born persons who are thought to want to pretend to be men”, and sees it as derogatory. The context within which both of these writings appear suggests a strong association between les-



**Figure 1**  
Nicholas Hlobo,  
*Unongayindoda* (2006),  
installation including  
*Imtyibilizi Xa Yomile* and *In  
a While*: organza, rubber,  
ribbon. 260 x 600 x 330cm  
(variable). Available at:  
[www.stevenson.info](http://www.stevenson.info) (last  
accessed at 20/9/2016).

bian masculinity and the term (Human Rights Watch, 2011). This link is exactly what Hlobo attempts to avoid in his work – what I see as a necessary disassociation and defamiliarisation that unsettles even categories such as LGBT.

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