Intersections of Queer in Post-apartheid Cape Town

Bryce Lease

In 2013, Siona O'Connell, Nadia Davids and I were awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) grant to support our project 'Sequins, Self & Struggle: Performing and Archiving Sex, Place and Class in Pageant Competitions in Cape Town', the aims of which are to research, document and disseminate archives of the Spring Queen and Miss Gay Western Cape (MGWC) pageants performed by disparate coloured communities in the Western Cape. Important to these performance events is the figure of the 'moffie', a queer male, often a transsexual, who has traditionally choreographed and designed the Spring Queen pageant, but who is forbidden from competing in it.[1] Alternatively, MGWC is a platform for queers of colour to perform in a secure environment without exploitation. My individual work in this collaboration focuses on the MGWC pageant and the attendant methodological questions that have arisen in our attempt to forge bridges between Western queer theory and local articulations of gender identity and alternative sexualities, considering the current preoccupations in scholarship around (South) Africa that cut across geography, politics, economics and history. I will briefly outline the research questions that have arisen from my particular focus on the project aims: the relationship between post-apartheid South African national identity and gay rights, new postcolonial directions in queer theory and the sexual geographies of Cape Town that are bounded by race and economic privilege.

A number of scholars have recently considered significant connections between expressions of ethnicity and sexuality, and sexuality and citizenship in South African contexts.[2] South Africa was the first country in the world to include an antidiscrimination clause in its constitution that banned discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. In this way, an African nation has radically influenced legislation around homosexuality in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia. Conversely, countries such as Uganda, Malawi and Nigeria have reacted to South Africa's culture of tolerance by implementing draconian laws directed against homosexuals, including imprisonment without trial and, in some instances, the death penalty.[3] Given that gay rights have been at the heart of the narratives around public culture and nationhood in the initial transitional period of post-apartheid South Africa, I found it imperative to consider how sexuality has played a large part in the construction of the 'Rainbow Nation', a name which already implies an intersection between multiracialism and gay rights.

In order to do this, I am focusing on recent studies that have offered new understandings of social and cultural oppression that link postcolonial and queer theories in a self-conscious and nuanced mode that are sensitive to the particularities of local contexts.[4] Although the use of queer theory directly impacts on the mode in which I attempt to consider the anti-normative performances in MGWC, I am also attentive to underlying assumptions around race, gender, nationality and economic privilege that are embedded in much Anglo-American scholarship in this field. As a result, I do not use 'queer' as an umbrella term that embraces all races, cultures and sexual identities, nor do I consider it to be an inherently liberational or progressive methodology. On the one hand

it is true, as anthropologist Saskia Wieringa and cultural theorist Horacio Sivori have argued, that under colonialism 'the production of cultural alterity was sexualized, as much as it was racialized and intersected by gender hierarchies',[6] while on the other hand, as queer theorist Ian Barnard has pointed out, it is not adequate to try and separate sexuality out from race or gender as a mode of understanding identification or oppression.[7] This becomes particularly pertinent when considering multivalent queer coloured identities in Cape Town. Analysis and criticism of the pageants as performance present the possibility of troubling known and stable categories of representation of the term coloured, a hurtful stereotype that exists as a nexus of class and race that is multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-class. Considering intersections of sexuality, race, religion and geography in the MGWC, I follow sociologist Zimitri Erasmus' seminal study, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (2001), which invites us to think about coloured identities as creolized cultural identities in which 'creolisation' is positioned as 'cultural creativity under conditions of marginality', a queerly inflected theoretical intervention that attends the complex remaking of identity politics in this cultural space.[8]

Despite the protection under the law for sexual minorities authorized by the constitution, it remains dangerous to be publicly identified as queer,[9] and particularly difficult, according to gay-rights activist and queer theorist Zethu Matebeni, to be both queer and black in South Africa.[10] Cultural geographer Andrew Tucker's *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (2009) has analyzed the performance of homosexual and queer culture in the city centre, the Cape Flats and Townships, the latter of which are primarily coloured and black spaces, and the ongoing

exclusion of queers of colour from the gay village in the City Bowl, where the MGWC pageant takes place.[11] The US cultural theorist Charles I. Nero, who writes about gay neighborhoods in 'Why are Gay Ghettoes White?', theorizes the rhetorical figure of the 'black impostor', who symbolizes the contradiction between the abstract notion of universal homosexuality and the concrete experience of many homogenous gay neighborhoods in ways that are comparable in Cape Town.[12] As the political sphere in the early 1990s moved away from certain pro‑apartheid stances that posited homosexuality as an aberration and anti‑apartheid factions which imagined it as 'a perversity of white rule'[13] that contaminated African heteronormativity, I am seeking to explore a more recent association between gay identity and economic advantage, which implicitly favors professional gay white males. In so doing, I intend to highlight the performance of non‑normative sexualities in the Cape Flats and Townships that are largely excluded from the gay village, as well as the city's gay pride events, which are almost entirely restricted to the village's urban boundaries. This exclusion is embedded in the discourse of public space from the Cape Town carnival to the door policy of some nightclubs in the gay village that cater to Western 'pink' tourism. These debates find further shape in Tucker's assertion that drag by white performers in South Africa is read by white audiences as highly theatrical and performance based, where men are 'drag artists' that engage in parody that is safely bounded in theatre/cabaret/art venues, whereas non‑white 'common drag queens' engage in a cross‑dressing identity that is overly emotional, effeminate, unbounded and public.[14] The MGWC problematizes these distinctions by

placing performers that defy or undermine these stereotypes within the boundaries of the city centre. While the project ultimately seeks to shed light on lines of oppression, marginalization and classification that persist in post-apartheid democratic South Africa, and to give agency to those participating communities and individuals in the documentation of their performance practices, I aim to reflect upon how MGWC is shaping non-white LGBTI culture in the Western Cape and challenging the exclusionary racial and economic privileges of the gay village that are re-racializing forms of difference in the 'Rainbow Nation' that prolong the inimical legacies of apartheid. .

Endnotes

[1] 'Moffie' is a pejorative term that has been largely reappropriated by the contestants of Miss Gay Western Cape who use it as a positive means of expressing queerness.

[2] See, for example, Joane Nagel, 'Ethnicity and sexuality', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26.1 (2000), pp. 107-133; Brenna Munro, *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Amanda Lock Swarr, *Sex in Transition: Remaking Gender and Race in South Africa* (New York: Suny Press, 2012).

[3] Many scholars who work on sexuality in Africa feel anxiety for what might be called 'Afro-pessimism', that is, the reinforcement of the predominant representations of African gays and lesbians as passive victims or targets of violence and prejudice. It is crucial that other perspectives and experiences are equally represented within and outside

of the African continent. For an accessible overview of this concern see Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2013), pp. 15-18.

[4] John C. Hawley, *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays* (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 2001); Martin Manalansan & Arnaldo Cruz-Malave, *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Annapolis: Duke University Press, 2007); Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny, *The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America: A Reader on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Saskia Wieringa & Horacio Sivori (eds.), *The Sexual History of the Global South. Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London/New York: Zed Books, 2013).

[6] Wieringa & Sivori (2013), p. 11.

[7] Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 3.

[8] Zmitri Erasmus, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Kwela books, 2001), p. 16.

[9] See Graeme Reid, 'The Canary of the Constitution: Same-Sex Equality in the Public Sphere', *Social Dynamics*, 36.1 (2010), pp. 38-51.

[10] This remark was made by Zethu Matebeni at the Pride Discussion Forum in Cape Town on 2 March 2014.

[11] Andrew Tucker, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2009).

[12] Charles I. Nero, 'Why are Gay Ghettoes White?' in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (eds.) *Black Queer Studies*, pp. 228-248.

[13] Brenna M. Munro, 'Queer Family Romance: Writing the "New" South Africa in the 1990s', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15.3 (2009), pp. 397-439, p. 402.

[14] Andrew Tucker, 'Framing Exclusion in Cape Town's Gay Village: The Discursive and Material Perpetration of Inequitable Queer Subjects', *Area* 10, 41.2 (2008), pp. 186 – 197.