

Kendall Petersen

Department of Classics and World Languages
University of South Africa
peterkkw@unisa.ac.za

Graeme Reid. 2013. *How to be a real gay: Gay identities in small-town South Africa*. KwaZulu-Natal: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. pp. 24–38 ISBN: 13 978 186 914; 10 186 914 2438

How do homosexual men, particularly those in small-town South Africa, negotiate a (gay) identity which is caught, as it were, between two almost opposing poles of influence? On the one hand a constitution which has been hailed as one of the most progressive and exemplary in the world in terms of its recognition of, respect for and protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) rights, and on the other hand a country in which tradition, and traditional values and culture, exert an influence of almost gravitational force in terms of its dismissal of homosexuality as a product of Western import and therefore fundamentally *un-African*.

The title of the work was inspired by an eponymous series of workshops held in October 2000. The workshops, together with events such as Miss Gay Queenstown (2000), served as the medium for the exploration of gay self-identification which not only mediated, but is also a means of addressing, the nod of approval provided by the South African constitution to the LGBTQIA community, and to LGBTQIA identity and rights. In addition, they come to represent a component of (or independent response to) an international LGBT movement. Finally, the workshops come to echo the anti-apartheid struggle in their capacity as a site of resistance. These constitutional rights ultimately serve as a barometer or litmus test for any constitution claiming (or aiming) to protect its ‘weakest and worst’ (p. 15).

Problematically, however, being a ‘real gay’ in small-town South Africa is a gay identity which is strongly (almost exclusively) predicated on a range of stereotypical notions such as, for example, that homosexual men have a natural predilection towards creative enterprises such as hairdressing and fashion. In addition, the ‘gayness’ of the ‘real’ small-town gay (by extension its authenticity) is located in the performance of a distinctly hyper-feminine model of masculinity (and gender) which ultimately does not subvert any gender roles, but instead reinforces the stereotype which dictates that in a male same-sex relationship, one partner is expected to play the masculine role, while the other is expected to play the feminine role. Simply stated: in a gay relationship one man is the man, and the other is the woman.

The ‘real’ gay is therefore not a gay after all. The hyper-femininity of the man (who has sex with men) who self-identifies as feminine and female, particularly in terms of adopting stereotypical gender and sexual roles such as passivity and submission, enables the construction of a same-sex sex act in which the active partner (who demonstrates a corresponding hyper-masculinity) is then

able to self-identify as a straight man, thereby avoiding classification as a homosexual man. This, of course, ultimately serves to reinforce the belief that homosexuality is, in fact, un-African. This belief, according to the findings of the research, is located in the unquestioning acceptance of gender difference, which forms ‘the basis for erotic activity in male same-sex relationships’ (p. 30) amongst the gay inhabitants of these small-town communities.

So, at the end of the day, this is perhaps not entirely about stereotypical gender roles, but rather about the tenacity with which these roles are adhered to in these specific male same-sex relationships, which form the subject of the study. It should of course also be taken into consideration that the results of this study, as indicated in the title, are context specific. This means that the location of the argument in a specific context makes the interpretation of the final product not only somewhat biased, but distinctly limited as well, in that in this case it caters almost specifically to a stereotypical construction and adoption of gender roles by virtue of the fact that this appears to be the predominant feature characterising these relationships and identities.

While this may indeed be the case on the one hand, an additional problematic arises which, on the surface, appears to address and challenge the dismissal of the gay African identity as an *un*-African anomaly. This problematic takes the form of fashion, and the association which is made between the concepts of fashion and contemporary gay lifestyles. Drawing strongly on the idea that gay men possess a natural inclination towards industries such as fashion – which itself is seen as emblematic of modernity – and reinforced in events such as the beauty pageant which formed part of the original impetus for the research, an identity is established which appears to rest between two conflicting poles of origin and influence. While gay men, as mentioned, are stereotypically associated with consumer-focused areas such as the fashion industry, and the men examined in the study (specifically the ‘real gays’ or *ladies*) equally stereotypically perpetuate this cliché, what occurs as a result is a gay identity which could effectively be seen as cancelling itself out, as it were.

This is due to a paradox inherent to the fashion industry. On the one hand, the *ladies*, too, become emblematic of modernity and the quest for modernity, albeit from the marginalised position of a sexual and social minority. Theirs, too, is an identity which is modern, and given South Africa’s own advances in the fashion industry, theirs is also an African identity – a modern African identity. However, the very location of this identity in the realm of fashion also means that this identity is capricious, flighty and largely determined by trends and measures of popularity and public consumption. The gay African identity in this regard becomes something which, though emblematic of modernity on the one hand, is also unstable, unpredictable, transient and ultimately insubstantial on the other hand. While the author does indeed acknowledge the problematic nature of the association made between the construction of this particular segment of gay African identity and the ephemeral nature of the fashion industry, the research provides very little indication regarding a suggested theoretical response to, or a way forward from, this juncture.

Problematically, the research seems to indicate an adoption of an almost completely Western gay identity and, by implication, the (perhaps unintended) negation or dismissal of the recognition of an authentic *African* gay identity. In addition, owing to the adoption and perpetuation of Western,

heterosexist and heteronormative positions regarding gender and sexual roles, as well as the equally stereotypical association made between contemporary gay lifestyles and creative industries such as fashion and hairstyling, one is also encouraged to question the extent to which the *ladies* of these small-town South African communities demonstrate or embody a response to (or even result of) the international gender equality and human rights movement. While it could certainly be said that there has been a marked increase in the visibility of gay groups and communities in South Africa since 1994, coinciding with democratic and constitutional developments made in the country, the immediate and overwhelming impulse remains, however, to question what Reid himself refers to as ‘the primacy of gender roles in same-sex relationships’ (p. 49).

At the end of the day, the problem could effectively lie in the practice of naming and categorising and, by implication, in the act of (self)-identification. The highly problematic dynamic of stereotypical gender roles adopted in the same-sex relationships examined by Reid leads one to question the legitimacy of the impact made by the international LGBT rights movement on sexually marginalised communities. This is, of course, particularly relevant to those communities existing on the fringes of a country whose history has been permanently scarred by the discrimination and segregation of individuals on the basis of (amongst others) race and sexual orientation. The international LGBT rights movement was centred on the emancipation of individuals who had been (and continue to be) persecuted and oppressed because of their sexuality. These individuals were classified as deviant because of the behavioural patterns associated with their classification. The categories of deviance were located under the Western rubrics of ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ and exist in opposition to a heteronormative frame of reference. Western systems of categorisation and self-identification dominate the relations and, indeed, the communities explored in the study. It does, however, remain clear that the imposition of a Western system of categorisation (particularly the stereotypes and clichés emanating from within these categories) is also one which confines sexual practice to a limited and limiting binary, which threatens the modes of expression (and by extension the very existence) and occurrence of practices outside the parameters of the binary. So, while the *ladies* and *gents* examined in the study may or may not be the ‘real gay’, it may in fact be because there simply is no other word for it.