Article

The Politics of Belonging: Exploring Black African Lesbian Identity in South Africa

Mikki van Zyl (posthumous)
Stellenbosch University

Sarah Frances Gordon
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5131-8519
Stellenbosch University
gordonsarah44@gmail.com

Amanda Gouws
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-3944
Stellenbosch University
ag1@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This article explores black African lesbian identity in South Africa and how lesbian women understand belonging. This is a contentious subject and is situated within a long history of heteronormativity and homophobia on the African continent, as well as the influences of colonialism and contemporary society. This history of heteronormativity and homophobia, combined with the Civil Union Act that gives South African lesbians and gays formal rights to marriage, has resulted in narratives in which contemporary black African women unravel the contradictions and emotions embedded in their struggles for belonging and identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: belonging; lesbian; identity; South Africa; black African

https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-8457/3140
ISSN 2412-8457 (Online)
© Unisa Press 2018

Introduction

The dismantling of apartheid in 1994 brought with it a "new" South Africa and a new constitution, which advocated for the rights and freedom of all its citizens. The Constitution of 1996 is one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and South Africa is the first country to list sexual orientation as an equality provision in its Bill of Rights, as nascent lesbian and gay movements lobbied to have "sexual orientation" included in the equality clause (Van Zyl 2009). This laid the foundation for extensive legislative protection, as well as the passing of the Civil Union Act No. 17 of 2006 on 28 November 2006 (Van Zyl 2009). Marriage is a powerful social and cultural institution of inclusion/exclusion in citizenship, and the Civil Union Act gave South African lesbians and gays formal rights to marriage. However, despite this progressive legislation and the inclusion of the same-sex rights clause in the post-apartheid constitution, homophobia, discrimination and LGBTIQ-related hate crimes persist. This article draws on doctoral research that addresses these issues, focusing on how lesbian couples in committed relationships perceive and experience same-sex marriage in South Africa. Seventeen lesbian couples (34 individuals), who had been in committed relationships for at least seven years were interviewed, but for the purposes of this article focus is placed on the stories of the 16 black African lesbian respondents in the wider sample. The article explores the lives of contemporary black African lesbian women in post-apartheid South Africa and exposes narratives of struggle and belonging in which these women try to reconcile their identity as lesbians with their cultural and racial identities as black African women. We also explore the history of homophobia on the African continent, the influence of colonialism and the context of contemporary society as it grounds our understanding of how these women understand their roles in contemporary South Africa. Special attention is paid to the influences of queer and postmodernist feminist theory, as well as Yuval-Davis's framework of belonging.

The History of Same-Sex Relationships in Southern Africa

Murray and Roscoe (1998, xi) state: "Among the many myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental in African societies is one of the oldest and most enduring." They relate how the early European anthropologists denied same-sex sexualities even when they encountered them. The pervasiveness of same-sex relationships and marriages since pre-colonial times are the most tangible proof of fluidity in gender performances, despite gender differentiation or gender hierarchies. For example, evidence of same-sex practices throughout Africa go back as far as the San (Epprecht 2008, 42) and homoeroticism was noted by Falk (1998, 195) in the 1920s among Bantu language groups, as well as among the Khoi and San living in Namibia. Murray and Roscoe (1998, 279) comprehensively list same-sex patterns amongst African cultures, of which 30 are from the Bantu language groups. These indigenous gender conventions were eroded by colonialism, and knowledge about these practices was further eclipsed by Western knowledge production, which

wrote women out of accounts of power and economics, relegating them to the "private" sphere, while simultaneously occluding knowledge about practices of erotic intimacy between people of the same sex (Epprecht 2008; 2013; Van Zyl 2015b). However, the notion of a homosexual "lifestyle" is considered a Western import (Epprecht 2008).

Same-sex sexual behaviour among adolescents in Africa was generally not condemned (Epprecht 2013), but if such behaviour persisted it was explained in terms of several causes. For example, if a person manifested the gender characteristics of the opposite sex, it was explained in terms of the presence of an ancestral spirit of the opposite sex (Nkabinde 2009). Many cultures in Africa socially integrated same-sex practices through understanding them as fulfilling spiritual functions in the society, or as determined by spiritual causes (Epprecht 2008; Murray and Roscoe 1998). In contemporary southern Africa, many same-sex practising people—both women and men—find a calling as traditional healers. Traditional healers still hold important social power in the community, which highlights their potential power to challenge homophobia (Nkabinde 2009).

The arrival of the colonists with their guns, Bibles, cultural imperialism, appropriation of land and exploitation of labour soon changed the traditional patterns in sexual relations in southern Africa. Christianity and colonialism brought with them the intentions of "civilising" Africa, resulting in the wide-scale condemnation of behaviour which was deemed "sin," "crime" and "disease" (Epprecht 2008). This contributed to the notion of a "heterosexual Africa" and helped shape how sex was socially constructed in southern Africa. These constructions were overlaid with any existing stigmatisation to consolidate wide-scale homophobia in Africa and fuelled the notion that homosexuality was "un-African" (Epprecht 2008; 2013). Key among these fantasies of essentialised African identities is the notion that homosexuality was imported into Africa: yet a great variety of same-sex relations were found throughout pre-colonial Africa with varying degrees of acceptance, stigmatisation, silencing or opprobrium (Epprecht 2008; Falk 1998; Murray and Roscoe 1998). However, with all the changes modernity has wrought, practices such as initiation, polygyny and brideprice remain woven into African traditions of sexuality and marriage, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

In the post-colonial aftermath and as part of modern nation-building, African leaders projected imagined "authentic" African identities, simultaneously (re)producing the colonial myth of a "heterosexual" Africa (Epprecht 2008; 2013). Though post-apartheid South Africa followed a very different constitutional path, apartheid military masculinities have endured and merged with post-colonial nationalist masculinities, strengthening misogyny and homophobia. After the dismantling of apartheid, the Bill of Rights provided an equality provision for sexual orientation, laying the foundation for extensive legislative protection, as well as the passing of the Civil Union Act No. 17 of 2006 on 28 November 2006 (Van Zyl 2009). Despite sexuality being a key site for political contestation in post-apartheid South Africa (Posel 2005), events such as "Pride

marches" have become important occasions for the public expression of modern African lesbian, gay and transgendered identities (Matebeni 2011). However, these safe spaces are contentious in South Africa as they are typically held in white neighbourhoods and are considered white spaces. Although everyone's opportunities vary widely, depending on their class as well as their physical and social locations, all LGBTIQ identities in South Africa have the enabling tool of the Constitution. The legislative environment has made it safer for people in urban workplaces to "come out" and the Civil Union Act has provided some constitutional safety by allowing same-sex people to marry; however, at the same time, this progressive legislative environment is not consistent with the high levels of homophobic violence and stigmatisation still present in South African society (Lynch and Van Zyl 2013; Mkhize et al. 2010; Van Zyl 2015a).

Postmodernist Feminist and Queer Theory; Yuval-Davis's Framework of Belonging

Both the qualitative, narrative biographical research approach and the theoretical framework of postmodernist feminist and queer theory inform the data collection and analysis techniques in this study. Feminism is a struggle in opposition to the power of men over women and postmodernist feminism refers to questioning and rejecting traditional essentialist practices, as established in and by modernity (Wolff 2007). Queer struggles centre around heteronormativity as a constellation of power and queer theory was favoured in this study because it is critical of fixed identities—particularly those which thrive on binarisms—and it focuses on subjectivities in dynamic interaction with one another. Postmodern feminist and queer epistemologies argue against taken-for-granted beliefs about disembodied and universally knowing subjects, and are concerned with the ways in which gender influences what constitutes knowledge, who the knowing subject is and practices of inquiry, representation and circulation of knowledge (Code 2014). Postmodern feminism, queer theory and epistemologies emerge from paradigms that emphasise the instability of identities, and are critical of standpoint perspectives, which are based on assumptions that subjects are stable unitary selves. Postmodernist feminist and queer epistemologies emphasise the social construction of knowledge, arising out of multiple and unstable identities, which are generated through an ongoing process of becoming (Hammers and Brown III 2004). They also caution against a "politics of location," which reproduces Othering by arguing that some knowledge is superior and thereby exclusionary (Hammers and Brown III 2004, 93). Traditionally, feminists have critiqued marriage as an institution of gendered hierarchy and a site of profound oppression for women. It is symbolic of women's differentiated citizenship through, inter alia, the ideology of "women as property" and therefore same-sex marriage is deeply politicised in how it upholds or challenges heteropatriarchy, making postmodernist feminist and queer theory relevant to this study.

Yuval-Davis's framework of belonging is the framework through which the results of the study are viewed. Yuval-Davis (2011, 200) describes belonging as a "state of emotion and mind which … [is] critical to people's emotional balance and well-being"

in a context of normative differences "constructed in different public, formal and informal discourses." The politics of belonging concerns the contestations of normative boundaries, while belonging consists of three interrelated facets: social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and political and ethical values. Yuval-Davis's (2011) first facet of belonging (social location) stipulates that every person is situated within a community where pre-existing ideological boundaries have been demarcated; therefore people may be said to belong to different classes, nations, races, sex-gender-sexualities, and so forth. Yuval-Davis's (2011) second facet in the analysis of belonging concerns identifications and emotional attachments to others. Yuval-Davis (2011) uses narrative theory to explain identities and argues that people project particular conceptions of themselves through the "stories people tell themselves and others about who they are" (Yuval-Davis 2011, 14). Stories about identity can invoke the past, or can aim to situate us in the present, but can also project a direction for a future. Yuval-Davis (2011, 15) also presupposes that identities are never "complete," but always contingent and multiplex in an ongoing process of "being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong." Yuval-Davis's (2011) third facet of belonging highlights how ethical and political values pervade society through discourses of human value that range from international to local evaluations of what is "good" and what is "bad." Discourses of value have currency in everyday life, ranging from micro to macro levels in a profusion of ideologies. In this article we argue that the issue of same-sex marriage in South Africa constitutes a project in the politics of belonging.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretative, biographical research methodology of narrative inquiry for eliciting stories about the respondents' perceptions and experiences regarding their long-term relationships and how they felt about the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The central research question to this study was: How does the Civil Union Act impact on the sense of belonging felt by lesbians and gay men living in Cape Town in long-term intimate relationships? The study focuses on the sexual politics of belonging in relation to same-sex marriage for lesbians in South Africa. A sense of belonging is subjective, deeply affective and shaped by factors ranging from personal psychology to social relationships as well as cultural and political disciplinary values and regimes. Postmodernist feminist and queer theory was the theoretical underpinning of the study and influenced the research design and intentions of this research, which aimed to empower these women and tell their stories of belonging and identity. Face-to-face, open-ended interviews with 17 LGBTIQ couples and key figures were conducted. To interpret their responses a narrative thematic analysis was used (Riessman 2005). Narrative inquiry helps raise important questions about power, method, authority and community (Pinnegar and Daynes 2007). Responses were organised and thematically coded by using Nvivo 10 software. Nvivo 10 is qualitative data analysis software, which helps systematically coordinate and link qualitative themes to excerpts from the interview transcripts, helping the researcher to form patterns, which inform the interpretation process. Codes were based on Yuval-Davis's

(2006, 2011) categories of belonging (identities; emotional relationships; political values; cultural values; struggles for belonging) and codes emerging from the interviews. Other steps in the data analysis process included checking interpretations with research assistants and writing up the findings. The use of biographical methods enabled the researcher, Mikki van Zyl, to explore how people's life experiences reflect social changes and how individuals interpret their changing identities and relationships with families and communities (Roberts 2002).

Respondents

Mikki van Zyl was an activist in the LGBTIQ sector for many years, and therefore was known to many key figures. She used her networks to recruit respondents through purposive and snowball sampling (Coyne 1997). Snowball sampling uses the relationships between people to find participants, and since this type of sampling results in the recruitment of "like-minded" people, certain inclusions/exclusions will occur (Browne 2005). However, since this narrative inquiry was aiming for deep affective stories, and in no way intended to be quantitative or representative, it was deemed an appropriate sampling technique. LGBTIQ couples who had been in committed same-sex relationships for at least seven years were selected. A potential danger lay with "outing" respondents, therefore only self-identified "out" lesbians were asked to participate in the study. Van Zyl interviewed a diverse range of lesbian couples of different ages, races, cultures and nationalities from all over Cape Town. In the final version of the report, 10 participants out of 36 chose to use pseudonyms and the rest of the participants gave permission to use their real names in written consent forms, which they signed. Therefore, some details of the stories, in which women chose to use a pseudonym, were changed to respect their anonymity (such as the names of people and places). The women who chose to use pseudonyms were not revealed in the final report, because this ensures that all the stories have the same status. For the purposes of exploring black African lesbian identity, only the findings of the 16 black African lesbian respondents were analysed in this article as the researcher wanted to draw on the voices of black African women and allow them to tell their stories of identity and struggle in post-apartheid South Africa.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Open-ended face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents. Informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. The interviews focused on facets of belonging according to the framework developed by Yuval-Davis (2006; 2011) around their identities, emotional attachments and political values. Interviews were audio-recorded with respondents' consent. Each interview took the form of a conversation, which usually started with Van Zyl asking: "Please tell me a bit about yourselves." Van Zyl used prompts to elicit narrative accounts of the partners' social positionalities (race, class, etc.), identities, their relationship, their relationships with significant others, their political values and their involvement in LGBTIQ struggles.

Respondents could choose in which of the three local languages—Afrikaans, isiXhosa or English—they wanted to conduct the interview. Xhosa research assistants were used where necessary and Van Zyl was fluent in English and Afrikaans.

Results

The results reflect how black African lesbians conceptualise their identity in post-apartheid South Africa and incorporate notions of "belonging" into their daily lives. These women explore themes such as their intersectional identities as black African lesbian women; ideas of marriage and belonging; the discourse that homosexuality is "un-African"; and the prevalence of homophobia and hate crimes in South Africa. These themes are discussed below.

Intersectional Identities: Racial and Lesbian Identities

The intersectional nature of the identities of the women in the study is depicted in how their racial and lesbian identities constantly collide when they discuss their life stories and their understanding of "belonging." Some respondents, such as Brenda and Neo, linked their racial and lesbian identities. Zethu politicised her identity as a black lesbian, and Funeka is the founder of a black lesbian organisation. The importance of black lesbian visibility in South Africa is asserted by Zethu, Funeka, Puleng, Anna, Maru, Neo, Brenda and Sue. Gugu, Tete and Sue also used the term "African" to describe themselves, while Neo preferred the word "stabane[1]" to "lesbian." These women in the study referred to multiple identities in their talk surrounding race and sexuality, emphasising the intersectional nature of identity. Puar (2013) acknowledges how intersectionality as a tool for understanding multiplex identities has found resonance in LGBTIQ struggles for recognition. It is important to note that homosexuality is commonly considered "un-African" because of the essentialised African identities produced as a result of colonialism and the discourses of moral degeneration (Bennett 2010; Morrisey 2013). These discourses "rest on the racialisation of the queer body as white, and the sexualisation of the black body as straight" (Livermon 2012, 302). As a result, black queers labour intensively to make queer black bodies visible, to access their rights in the Constitution, and cultural belonging within communities, hence the emphasis on black queer identities amongst the women in the study.

Funeka's coming out in the ANC Youth League, as well as her "visibility" through radio interviews and on TV, showcases the "black lesbian body" in defiance of cultural taboos about black queer bodies. Funeka emphasises the importance of her black lesbian

1 "Stabane" refers to an intersexual person, someone that has both a penis and a vagina (Swarr 2009). However, "stabanes" rarely have inter-sexed bodies; instead in African townships and elsewhere, there is a widespread assumption that those who self-identify as lesbian or gay may be inter-sexed (Swarr 2009). The term is usually used derogatively, intending to insult and humiliate lesbians and gays.

identity in her statement below, specifically her marriage to her partner, when introducing herself to her political comrades in the ANCYL.

Funeka: And politically … I'm introducing myself to my comrades. It's just like "I'm Funeka who is married." It's always that I make sure that people know that I'm married, legally married. Because that's possible.

Marriage and Belonging

Many of the women in the study constructed marriage and exercising their legal right to do so as an important part of their black African lesbian identity, as seen in Funeka's excerpt earlier on, in which she feels it is important to disclose her marital status to others. In the excerpt below, Thando speaks about the importance of the role of the Civil Union Act in combating homophobia.

Interviewer: And the Civil Union Act, how do you feel about that?

Thando: For me, it gives us rights so that we can say "Ok, I'm also married." And I can have the certificate, but ja.

Interviewer: But why is it important?

Thando: For me it is a need to respect that it's there, and it does exist, because when you hear people talking and saying you can't be married, you are another woman … so in our culture we don't recognise that; that's not a marriage. But it's there, though they don't recognise it—the community—the law recognises it.

The importance of being able to marry one's partner was emphasised in the study and seen again in Phuleng's excerpt below. It appears that the symbolic power of the institution of marriage and its associated feelings of belonging, are what is important to these women.

Phuleng: We struggled for a long time to get married, a couple of times we were rejected by Home Affairs. After battling and fighting we finally got married after the Civil Union Act was passed. We finally tied the knot.

Although the women in this study all appear genuinely to value same-sex marriage and its associated meanings, critics may argue that same-sex marriage is an attempt by same-sex couples to conform and assimilate to a problematic mainstream heterosexual culture. This can be problematic because many feminists argue that marriage is a patriarchal and sexist institution, which is structurally oppressive to women (Brook 2002; Ettelbrick 1997[1989]). However, legalising same-sex marriage also helps reduce homophobia and gives the LGBTIQ community access to the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples (Jowett and Peel 2010). Same-sex marriage is seen by many as a symbol of equality and progress in the LGBTIQ community. This can be seen

in the excerpts above, in which respondents Thando and Phuleng refer to the Civil Union Act with the following statements: "It gives us rights so that we can say: 'Ok, I'm also married'"; and "We finally got married after the Civil Union Act was passed." Both Thando and Phuleng do not refer to "civil unions" but instead choose to appropriate the language of mainstream heterosexual marriage, by using the term "married" and construct it in a positive way.

Phuleng also appropriates the language of mainstream heterosexual marriage in the excerpt below, where she discusses incorporating traditions from heterosexual African marriage and a civil union. In the excerpt below Phuleng describes the process of combining African marriage traditions (the payment of *lobola* and respect to one's ancestors) and a civil union.

Phuleng: We decided to get married in 2003 in a traditional way and in 2008 we decided to legalise our marriage at Home Affairs. Our families performed a traditional wedding so that my wife can be accepted in the family by the ancestors, and she was given a maiden name which is "Mahlompo." My mother finally accepted her as a daughter-in-law and treated her with respect. Her family didn't like me, they wanted that a man prefers her, a new married woman. Only if I'm with her, I gave her the name. In my culture, if you take a wife, it is from parents to the other parents … you pay *lobola*. Your family talks to the girl's parents: "I want my child with six cattle."

Anna followed the Basotho traditions of *lobola* and Phuleng's family negotiated a traditional marriage between the women. They paid the brideprice of six cattle, and followed the rituals for her new identity as *makhoti* (daughter-in-law)—giving her a new name and substituting all Anna's clothes with the dress codes in keeping with her married status. Despite having a civil union, both Phuleng and Anna engaged in heterosexual African traditional marriage discourse by paying *lobola,* for example. This practice of *lobola* or brideprice inscribes a gendered hierarchy in marriages because it is not merely a commercial transaction, but is symbolic of family connections and subsequent obligations and responsibilities (Ansell 2001). Research similarly finds that the payment of *lobola* can also be amongst lesbians where the masculine-identified partner will pay *lobola* to the feminine-identified partner's family (Baraka and Morgan 2005; Khumalo and Wieringa 2005). In the quote above it is clear that Phuleng identifies as the masculine partner as she discusses paying *lobola* and her "wife" being accepted into her family. This indicates that civil unions in the study are constructed in such a way as to bolster the institution of heterosexual marriage and gender hierarchy in South Africa. At no point in the interviews does Phuleng or Anna highlight the potential problematic nature of these heterosexual marriage discourses.

In each respondent's quest for belonging, queers carve out their own "cultures" within heteronormative spaces, negotiating the boundaries of culture by appropriating or discarding the symbolism of heterosexual relationships. This can be seen in the example of Anna and Phuleng, where they adopt the symbolic act of *lobola* in their marriage

ceremony. However, neither Anna nor Phuleng highlights the potential contradictions intrinsic to these practices; but Zethu does as she identifies the complications and contradictions involved in appropriated heteronormativity in same-sex marriages, which is displayed in the quote below.

Zethu: For example, wanting to have a traditional wedding, and wanting to have a traditional wedding as if you don't take into consideration that a traditional wedding has its own sets of rules, and now you're wanting a traditional wedding …

Mikki: … white dress, tuxedo, *lobola* … ja they're all traditions.

Zethu: … but a lot of those things are very gendered. And so if you're aspiring towards normativity, you have to play according to gendered expectations. And already by being same-sex, you are setting yourself up for failure. And of course we can say failure is great, we can argue about that, but for some people they then realise this does not work, because they fail to be full … they fail to be heterosexual [laughs].

Zethu recognises the problematic nature of appropriating heterosexual traditional marriage discourse because, as she puts it, queers will always "fail to be heterosexual." Brook (2002, 61) asks the important question: "If men could marry men, and if women could marry women, would the hegemonically heterosexist institution of marriage be blown down like a discursive house of cards, or would it mortar historically heterosexist norms in gay and lesbian relationships?" However, even though the respondents in the study discuss creating their own practices within the heteronormative space of marriage, it is our argument that it is impossible to escape the structurally oppressive history that marriage carries. However, despite this argument surrounding the structurally oppressive nature of marriage and its implications for gender hierarchy, marriage is still considered one of the cornerstones of society and is instrumental to notions of citizenship and the politics of belonging. It is, therefore, understandable that the men and women in this study place such importance on participating in this social practice, despite its oppressive nature, as it helps them establish meaning and belonging in their lives. Furthermore, as Brook (2002, 62) states, "respecting people's search for conjugal happiness means not dismissing marriage, but critically interrogating it."

Homosexuality is un-African

In Phuleng's interviews, she disclosed that her family was not completely happy with her and Anna's decision to get married. This was a common finding among other black lesbian women in the study as Thando, another respondent, also discussed how her family was divided regarding her marriage and refused to recognise it.

Thando: The thing about my marriage is at home my mother knows … but it's a no-go area. They don't recognise it. We haven't spoken about it.

This common theme of the family's resistance to accept black lesbian marriages and civil unions may be indicative of the stigma attached to homosexuality and may touch on the ingrained social discourse that "homosexuality is un-African" (Livermon 2012; Morrissey 2013). These factors may explain the resistance in Thando and Phuleng's communities to accept their status as married, black lesbian women. The norms of heteropatriarchy and the discourse which dictates that "homosexuality is un-African" are well ensconced in what passes for "African tradition" (Livermon 2012). This can be seen through the voices of the women in this study, detailed below.

Lumka: Even in our culture, people have problems with us. If there are traditional ceremonies like funerals, my family do not expect me to dress the way I want and do not accept my sexuality.

Thando: If things are not going your way, they will always blame your sexuality, because you are a lesbian, "that is why things are going wrong." So they will use all these things.

Thando: The family like to talk when they want to run away from things, they will say "but the ancestors won't allow it." But they don't know if the ancestors will allow it because they are not there to say [lots of laughter].

In the quotes above, Lumka and Thando recognise how the rhetoric of "tradition" is deployed to enforce the rules of gender and heteronormative conformity. This is similar to findings in Cock's (2003) research, which found that a major problem for black lesbians was African culture and tradition, specifically the fact that women are expected to conform and be silenced into a wife-and-mother role.

The discourse that "homosexuality is un-African" is problematic for black queer lives in South Africa. The dissemination of the imagined "authentic" heterosexual African identity has led to a culture of homophobia, which exists in contrast to South Africa's liberal constitution and pro-gay legislation (Livermon 2012). This is reinforced in Funeka's statement: "I can't say that SA is ready for the sexual orientation or the Civil Union Act. People are not prepared," in which she acknowledges the contrast between the culture of homophobia in South Africa and its progressive legislation. This suggests that the history of racialisation continues to infuse discourses of "authentic" African identities, singling out black queers as abject. Already positioned as differentiated citizens through being black, this discourse compounds the precariousness of queer black lives, and has profound consequences for their safety.

Another example, which highlights that in South Africa black bodies cannot be queer, is that most of the white and coloured couples in this study were more "out" than black respondents, who struggled for acceptance as queers. It also resonates with Judith Butler's (1999, 227) question about outness: "For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? … For whom does the term present an impossible

conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics?" The rights and protections afforded in the Constitution and legislation surrounding women and LGBTIQ individuals in South Africa are often influenced by place and material conditions and do not extend to the impoverished communities. These impoverished communities, also known as "townships," are often under-resourced, crime-ridden and generally occupied by the black population due to the wealth and social inequalities in South Africa, which were reinforced by the racialised economy and oppressive government during apartheid (Aliber 2001; Nattrass and Seekings 2001). A black queer in South Africa must not only contend with the discourse that "homosexuality is un-African, ungodly and unnatural"—the discourses surrounding gender inequalities and violence—but also intergenerational wealth disparities and racialised oppression, as a result of apartheid. Visibility as a black queer can be life-threatening in South Africa, which can be seen in the rise of homophobic violence against black African lesbians in impoverished communities in recent years (Anguita 2012; Mkhize et al. 2010; Morrissey 2013).

Discrimination and Hate Crimes

The belief that "homosexuality is un-African" is conducive to homophobia, discrimination and hate crimes. This was reiterated by the women in the study. In the quote below, Thando speaks about how the legislation against LGBTIQ-related discrimination does not shield her from the discrimination she experiences at work.

Thando: For me I know there is a law that protects us, but it is not really working, it is just on paper for defending themselves. But really, when it comes to implementing it … because you know they will discriminate against you, not directly and sometimes you feel there is nothing you can do, because you don't have actual proof of discrimination. Even at work you can see the way they talk, they will sort of cover it, they don't want to be exposed that they are discriminating.

Furthermore, there has been an escalation of homophobic hate crimes in South Africa over the last 10 years (Lynch and Van Zyl 2013; Mkhize et al. 2010). In the quote below, Phuleng highlights the escalation of homophobic hate crimes and cautions lesbians to stay away from shebeens (informal bars commonly found in townships) to avoid violence.

Phuleng: It's where the problem starts. During the daytime, you're gonna go to the shebeen and sit on the bench, but later you start to be a victim. Later, you start to be the victim, because they're scared; they say we are taking "their" women.

Phuleng highlights how men feel threatened by her lesbian status and that black lesbians are not safe in public spaces because of the risk of homophobic violence. Hate crimes are the ultimate weapon of heteropatriarchy against active agents because lesbians visibly "flaunt" subjectivities that symbolise that some women are beyond men's reach

and control (Phelan 1999; 2001). As a result, men respond violently as a way to gain control over women. The increased visibility of South African queers, combined with a rising tide of homophobia, fuelled by post-colonial and religious discourses and the production of public spaces as heterosexual, has left black lesbians in townships vulnerable to hate crimes (Oswin 2008; Mkhize et al. 2010). These women are subject to everyday misogyny overlaid with homophobia and become symbolic sacrifices during times of social change (Tomaselli and Van Zyl 1992), bolstered by hegemonic discourses which contend that homosexuality is "unnatural," "un-African" and "ungodly" (Vincent and Howell 2014). These discourses defend the boundaries of "heterosexual Africa" through racial demarcation, moral injunction and biological imperative.

Funeka highlights the homophobic rhetoric against black lesbians and her own personal experience of hate crime in the quote below, where she is speaking about a radio interview she did and an incident in which she was stabbed.

Funeka: In 1992 we went to the pride [march] in Johannesburg … then when I got there, I was invited on the radio to talk about sexuality in an African context. They asked if we could expand the time because like everyone was listening, and people were calling in. People wanted to comment, and there was only one hour that I had to be on the radio.

Interviewer: Was it a phone-in?

Funeka: It was a phone-in and everyone was screaming … because everyone was screaming, "This is un-African" and "When I really, really need help, I can go to the doctor if I want to be a man, and then the doctor can help me to be a man. If I want to be a man maybe there's a ritual that I have to undergo." It was so crazy, but ja, I just responded nicely and comfortably, but ja, it was bad. It was just after that interview in 1992; then in 1993 I was stabbed in Langa by guys.

Interviewer: Was it because you were a lesbian?

Funeka: Ja. Because those guys were screaming, saying that I'm thinking that I'm a man. I don't even think that I'm a man. I don't even want to be a man. I just love women.

The quote above displays homophobic talk, which warns people to "keep in their place," and is a regulatory mechanism to control and maintain dominant hegemons through patrolling the boundaries of heteropatriarchy (Van Zyl 1991). Destabilising norms are dangerous, and gender-based hate crimes, the logical extension of homophobia or hate-talk, enforce hegemonic masculinities and femininities as well as heteronormative sexualities. The hate crimes against black lesbians also consolidate boundaries of privilege where white people living in the "suburbs" can enjoy the benefits of citizen rights contained in the Constitution. The boundary of belonging between security and

danger is influenced by identities, place and material conditions, showing that struggles for recognition cannot be separated from struggles for distribution.

Several black lesbian organisations have mobilised specifically against hate crimes, but also to address broader issues of queer identities and the transformation of homophobic attitudes among police and in local communities in South Africa (Lynch and Van Zyl 2013). However, in these organisations the act of "coming out" into public spaces and naming yourself is potentially dangerous in a homophobic environment, as Funeka found out. Nevertheless, despite the dangers of "coming out," activism is still a significant dimension of recognition for marginalised people, because it draws people into communities of belonging whilst they are struggling for belonging. Funeka, Zethu and Liesl are all active in organisations and events to combat hate crimes against LGBTIQ.

Conclusion

In this interpretive study we used narrative inquiry and thematic analyses to understand how lesbian couples in committed relationships perceive and experience same-sex marriage in South Africa. The article focuses on the stories of the black African lesbians in the study and it is through their stories that we unravel the ambiguities and contradictions of same-sex marriage as a project of belonging, to show how black African lesbian citizens experience equality and dignity in their everyday lives, as well as their struggles for belonging. Exploring these stories revealed the following themes: each woman has a complex, intersectional identity, which she is constantly negotiating; adopting heterosexual marital practices and the inherent contradictions in this; the discourse that "homosexuality is un-African" and the prevalence of homophobic crimes and discrimination against black African lesbians. There is a need for more studies that examine how black African lesbians conceptualise their place in post-apartheid South Africa and experience issues such as discrimination and homophobic violence. This is also a need for more literature which problematises heterosexual marriage and the way black African lesbian women incorporate the discourses surrounding heterosexual marriage into their own practices and their understanding of belonging, especially within the context of African cultural practices. Finally, despite the presence of the Civil Union Act, which gives gays and lesbians the right to marry, there still exists a culture of homophobia in South Africa which is intertwined with different discourses surrounding what it means to be African. This, in combination with the rising tide of homophobic violence against lesbians and gays in South Africa, makes life for black African queer women precariously dangerous. However, despite this, black African lesbian women integrate their African traditions into their same-sex marriage practices seamlessly, despite the inherent contradictions attached to the relationship between heteropatriachal African tradition and homosexuality; and the heterosexual institution of marriage.

Notes

- This article is based on the doctoral research of Mikki van Zyl, who sadly passed away shortly before receiving her degree. Her degree was conferred posthumously. The title of her PhD is: "A Sexual Politics of Belonging: Same-Sex Marriage in Post-Apartheid South Africa." It is available on the electronic data base of Stellenbosch University (http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/96581).

- We acknowledge the financial support of the NRF.

Author Biographies

Sarah Frances Gordon, Stellenbosch University, Department of Political Science, Post-doc fellow for the SARChi Chair in Gender Politics.

Amanda Gouws, Stellenbosch University, Department of Political Science, SARChi Chair in Gender Politics.

References

Aliber, Michael A. 2001. "Study of the Incidence and Nature of Chronic Poverty and Development Policy in South Africa: An Overview (No. 1)." Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, School of Government, University of the Western Cape.

Anguita, Luis A. 2012. "Tackling Corrective Rape in South Africa: The Engagement between the LGBT CSOs and the NHRIs (CGE and SAHRC) and its Role." *International Journal of Human Rights* 16 (3): 489–516. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.575054.

Ansell, Nicola. 2001. "Because it's Our Culture! (Re)negotiating the Meaning of Lobola in Southern African Secondary Schools." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27 (4): 697–716. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070120090691.

Baraka, Nancy, and Ruth Morgan. 2005. "I Want to Marry the Woman of my Choice without Fear of Being Stoned: Female Marriages and Bisexual Women in Kenya." In *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, 25–53. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. "Circles and Circles: Notes on African Feminist Debates around Gender and Violence in the c21." *Feminist Africa* 14: 21–48.

Brook, Heather. 2002. "Stalemate: Rethinking the Politics of Marriage." *Feminist Theory* 3 (1): 45–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1460012002003001065.

Browne, Kath. 2005. "Snowball Sampling: Using Social Networks to Research Non-Heterosexual Women." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8 (1): 47–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000081663.

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London: Routledge.

Cock, Jacklyn. 2003. "Engendering Gay and Lesbian Rights: The Equality Clause in the South African Constitution." *Women's Studies International Forum* 26 (1): 35–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(02)00353-9.

Code, Lorraine. 2014. "Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality." In *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Mary Evans, Claire Hemmings, Marsha Hendry et al., 9–25. Washington: Sage Reference. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473909502.n2.

Coyne, Imelda T. 1997. "Sampling in Qualitative Research. Purposeful and Theoretical Sampling; Merging or Clear Boundaries?" *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 26 (3): 623–630. https://doi/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.t01-25-00999.x.

Epprecht, Marc. 2008. *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS.* Athens: Ohio University Press.

Epprecht, Marc. 2013. *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance.* London: Zed Books.

Ettelbrick, Paula L. 1997[1989]. "Since when is Marriage a Path to Liberation?" In *We are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics,* edited by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, 757–761. New York: Routledge.

Falk, Kurt. 1998. "Homosexuality among the Natives of Southwest Africa (1926–26)." In *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, edited by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, 187–196. New York: Palgrave.

Hammers, Corie, and Alan D. Brown III. 2004. "Towards a Feminist–Queer Alliance: A Paradigmatic Shift in the Research Process." *Social Epistemology* 18: 85–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/0269172042000249408.

Jowett, Adam, and Elizabeth Peel. 2010. "Seismic Cultural Change? British Media Representations of Same-Sex Marriage." *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (3): 206–214. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.12.009.

Khumalo, Siza, and Saskia Wieringa. 2005. "'I'm the Black Sheep of my Family': Same-Sexuality in the Corners of Swaziland." In *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives: Female Same-Sex Practices in Africa*, edited by Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa, 261–280. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Livermon, Xavier. 2012. "Queer(y)ing Freedom: Black Queer Visibilities in Postapartheid South Africa." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18 (2–3): 297–323. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1472908.

Lynch, Ingrid, and Mikki van Zyl. 2013. *Justice Delayed: Activist Engagement in the Zoliswa Nkonyana Trial.* Cape Town: Triangle Project.

Matebeni, Zethu. 2011. "Exploring Black Lesbian Sexualities and Identities in Johannesburg." PhD dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand.

Mkhize, Nonhlanhla, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy, and Relebohile Moletsane. 2010. *The Country We Want to Live in: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Morrissey, Megan E. 2013. "Rape as a Weapon of Hate: Discursive Constructions and Material Consequences of Black Lesbianism in South Africa." *Women's Studies in Communication* 36 (1): 72–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2013.755450.

Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe. 1998. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. New York: Palgrave.

Nattrass, Nicoli, and Jeremy Seekings. 2001. "Two Nations: Race and Economic Inequality in South Africa Today." *Daedalus* 130 (1): 45–70.

Nkabinde, Nkunzi Z. 2009. *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma.* Johnnesburg: Jacana Media.

Oswin, Natalie. 2008. "Critical Geographies and the Uses of Sexuality: Deconstructing Queer Space." *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (1): 89–103. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507085213.

Phelan, Shane. 1999. "Bodies, Passions and Citizenship." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 2 (1): 56–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698239908403268

Phelan, Shane. 2001. *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Pinnegar, Stefinee, and J. Gary Daynes. 2007. "Locating Narrative Inquiry Historically." In *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology,* edited by Jean D. Clandenin, 3–34. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226552.n1.

Posel, Deborah. 2005. "Sex, Death and the Fate of the Nation: Reflections on the Politicization of Sexuality in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Africa* 75 (2): 125–153. https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2005.75.2.125.

Puar, Jasbir. 2013. "I Would rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess: Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics." *Meritum, Revista de Direito da Universidade FUMEC* 8 (2): 371–390.

Riessman, Catherine K. 2005. “Narrative Analysis.” In *Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life*, edited by Nancy Kelly, Christine Horrocks, Kate Milnes, Brian Roberts and David Robinson, 1–7. Hudderfield: University of Huddersfield.

Roberts, Brian. 2002. *Biographical Research: Understanding Social Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Swarr, Amanda L. 2009. “Stabane, Intersexuality, and Same-Sex Relationships in South Africa.” *Feminist Studies* 35 (3): 524–548.

Tomaselli, Keyan G., and Mikki van Zyl. 1992. “Themes, Myths and Cultural Indicators: The Structuring of Popular Memories.” In *Movies, Moguls, Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979–1991*, edited by Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha, 395–472. Cape Town: Showdata.

Van Zyl, Mikki. 1991. “Invitation to Debate: Towards an Explanation of Violence against Women.” *Agenda* 11, 66–77.

Van Zyl, Mikki. 2009. “Beyond the Constitution: From Sexual Rights to Belonging.” In *The Prize and the Price: Shaping Sexualities in South Africa*, edited by Melissa E. Steyn and Mikki van Zyl, 364–390. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Van Zyl, Mikki. 2015a. “Working the Margins: Belonging and the Workplace for LGBTI in Post- Apartheid South Africa.” In *Sexual Orientation at Work: Contemporary Issues and Perspectives*, edited by Fiona Colgan and Nick Rumens, 137–151. London: Routledge.

Van Zyl, Mikki. 2015b. “A Sexual Politics of Belonging: Same-Sex Marriage in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University.

Vincent, Louise, and Simon Howell. 2014. “‘Unnatural,’ ‘Un-African’ and ‘Ungodly’: Homophobic Discourse in Democratic South Africa.” *SiSexualities* 17 (4): 472–483. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714524766.

Wolff, Kristina. 2007. “Postmodern feminism.” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Accessed 3 January 2018. http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433122_ss1-75.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2011. *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations.* London: SAGE.