

# BEING GENDERED IN AFRICA'S FLAG-DEMOCRACIES: NARRATIVES OF SEXUAL MINORITIES LIVING IN THE DIASPORA

**Kezia Batisai**

Department of Sociology  
University of Johannesburg  
keziab@uj.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

Critical engagement with existing scholarship reveals that many postcolonial African states have set up legal frameworks which institutionalise heterosexuality and condemn counter-sexualities. Clearly discernible from this body of literature is the fact that non-complying citizens constantly negotiate 'the right to be' in very political and gendered ways. Ironically, narratives of how these non-complying citizens experience such homophobic contexts hardly find their way into academic discourses, irrespective of the identity battles they fight on a daily basis. To fill this scholarly gap, I first insert the question of diaspora into the argument made extensively in literature that gender, sexuality and homophobia are intrinsic to defining national identity in postcolonial African states. Subsequently, I capture the experiences of queer Africans that emerged out of fieldwork conducted in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa, between 2011 and 2014. The focus is on the narratives of sexual minorities who migrated permanently to South Africa to flee draconian legislation and diverse forms of sexual persecution in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Nigeria. Juxtaposed with the experiences of South African sexual minorities, deep reflections of how queer foreign nationals have experienced their bodies beyond the borders of their respective homelands tell a particularly interesting story about the meaning of the postcolonial state, read through the intersections of gender, sexuality and diaspora discourses. Local and foreign sexual minorities' experiences are replete with contradictions, which make for rich and ambivalent analyses of what the reality of being a sexual minority in (South) Africa means. Contrary to queer Africans who construct living in South Africa as an institutionalisation of 'liberty', sexual minorities of South African origin frame the



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country's democracy as an intricate and confusing space. Although analysed in this article, this conundrum paves the way for further engagement with the interplay between sexuality, homophobia and migration/diaspora discourses, which are often invisible to queer research on the continent.

**Keywords:** African flag-democracies, gender, migration, nationhood, sexuality

## HOMOSEXUALITY IN AFRICA'S FLAG-DEMOCRACIES: MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE

Over the years, scholarly debates in Africa have grappled with the longstanding myth that homosexuality is foreign to the continent. A significant number of scholars (Arnfred 2004; Epprecht 2010, 2008, 2004; Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Murray and Roscoe 1998; Richter and Morrell 2006) have mapped and profiled the history of sexual diversity in Africa prior to colonialism and Westernisation (see Madunagu 2007, 91). Msibi (2011) and Boyd (2013) illuminate the existence of homosexuality in precolonial Africa. Explicit examples range from portrayals of same-sex engagements in Bushmen paintings in southern Africa; the notion of 'female husbands' in Nigeria; the case of King Mwanga II, the Bagandan monarch who had sexual relations with men in Uganda; to incidents of same-sex relations among migrant Malawian and Mozambican miners in Zimbabwe (see Msibi 2011, 64–67). Deconstructing the myth that homosexuality is unAfrican, which many political leaders on the continent hold (see Reddy 2001, 83), Epprecht (2004) argues that what is foreign to Africa is not same-sex relationships but homophobia, which he defines as fear of such relationships and the sexual desires involved (see also Msibi 2011).

The continent has recently witnessed an increase in homophobia, which many African states sanction through the criminalisation of homosexuality. Increased state-sanctioned homophobia in African contexts like Zimbabwe has been deeply informed by President Robert Mugabe's widely quoted 1995 labelling of homosexuals as 'worse than animals' (Epprecht 2010; Nyanzi 2013, 956; Phillips 2004). Mugabe's homophobic discourses had a trickle-down effect on Namibia, Swaziland, Uganda, Kenya and Egypt (Reddy 2001, 83). Several scholars have pointed out various ways in which 'sexual orientation is codified' on the continent (Lewis 2011, 208), with varying implications from one postcolonial state to another. In Uganda, the use of juridical apparatus could be tracked back to 2005 when the government proposed exterminating homosexuals in the country (Epprecht 2010, 769). Prior to its nullification in August 2014, Uganda's controversial *Anti-Homosexuality Act* prohibited same-sex relationships and clearly stated that those who knew of homosexuals living in the country and failed to report them to the police would be prosecuted – a situation which created and sustained a homophobic legal framework.

The Ugandan proposition crept into other postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria, Senegal, Malawi and Kenya (Mutua 2011, 457). The replication of homophobic legislation in many postcolonial states could also be interpreted in line with a series of gay/lesbian-related legal battles that were dominant in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana around the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Tamale and Bennett 2011, 4). What these legal battles reveal (see Heng and Devan 1992) is that besides policing 'the sexual', the criminalisation of sexualities that are counter to mainstream discourses offers a platform for inventing and regenerating hegemonic state power (see Alexander 1994, 6). Thus, these homophobic discourses expose the way inherent state power/ideological dominance of the powerful is used to either legitimise or delegitimise sexualities through law enforcement measures (Foucault 1978[1990], 3–4). For instance, the assertion that non-heterosexuals 'should have no rights whatsoever and are behaving worse than pigs and dogs' (see Phillips 2004, 157) suggests that as the state condemns homosexuality it reinforces the supremacy of heterosexuality. Furthermore, the fact that homophobia is sanctioned and propagated by dominant political figures hints at how the notion of sexuality is directly linked to processes of nation-building in Africa. Former President [of Namibia] Sam Nujoma's remarks, quoted below, expose the interplay between anti-homosexuality and nationalistic discourses:

We made sacrifices for the liberation of this country and we are not going to allow individuals with alien practices such as homosexuality to destroy the social fabric of our society. (Reddy cited in Nyanzi 2013, 956)

Consequently, homosexuality is perceived as a threat to both society and institutional arrangements that have been central to the process of building and sustaining Africa as a sovereign space. In the context of Zimbabwe, Nyanzi (ibid.) reveals that 'Mugabe candidly assigned homosexuality to the West, dissociating it from Zimbabwe', simultaneously distinguishing that which is Zimbabwean from anything perceived as foreign. The same author draws on Reddy (2002, 164) to further demonstrate how Mugabe's nationalistic discourses generate the 'us/them' divide, which reinforces the construct that homosexuality has its origins in the West:

Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves. Let them be gays in the US and Europe. But in Zimbabwe, gays shall remain a very sad people forever. (see Nyanzi 2013, 956)

The above quote is informed by the fact that several Western countries (including France, some jurisdictions of the United States, Scotland, England and Wales) have over the years legalised gay marriage (Pew Research Centre 2013) – a situation which is in sharp contrast to what is happening in many parts of Africa. In all, the homophobic sentiments recorded across the continent, from the southern to the eastern and western parts of Africa (Nyanzi 2013, 956–957) not only perpetuate the polarised image of Africa and the West, but also set the parameters or limits of what an African flag-

democracy<sup>1</sup> is and should be. The image becomes that of postcolonial African states constructing nationalistic homophobic discourses which are deeply entrenched in the pressing need to disengage from the 'West' so as to protect national boundaries. Thus, the establishment of these flag-democracies has been embedded in dense body politics which tend to exclude sexualities categorised as counter to citizenship.

## REPERCUSSIONS OF A HOMOPHOBIC POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN STATE

Clearly discernible from the scholarly debates engaged above is the notion that nation-building in postcolonial Africa involves the deployment of state power to set up regulating parameters which, in contexts like Zimbabwe, Namibia and Uganda, normalise heterosexuality and condemn counter-sexualities (Epprecht 2010; Lewis 2011, 208). The scholarship also suggests that over and above institutionalising heterosexuality as '*the sexuality*', punitive postcolonial legislations ensure that non-complying citizens constantly negotiate 'the right to be' in highly political and gendered ways (Alexander 1994, 6). Ironically, narratives of how sexual minorities experience these homophobic postcolonial contexts rarely find their way into academic scholarship, irrespective of the identity battles being fought on a daily basis. Limited efforts at documenting the direct repercussions homophobia has on sexual minorities include findings from Nigeria, where state-sanctioned homophobia is argued to have deleterious effects on the overall handling of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. An online article titled 'You thought it was tough being gay in Uganda? It's hell in Nigeria' chronicles beatings, harassment, unemployment, homelessness and fear. Such scenes from Nigeria's anti-gay crackdown reveal that service providers have been hesitant to roll out treatment to gay communities, subsequent to the passing of the gay law in 2013 (Eichelberger 2014). In the same article, John Adeniyi (a human rights program officer at the International Centre for Advocacy on Rights to Health [ICARH], an HIV intervention organisation based in Abuja) notes a sharp decline (over 50%) in the number of patients seeking HIV treatment at ICARH since the law took effect:

One person told me he would rather die ... than come to the organization and risk imprisonment, he says. He adds that LGBT couples living with HIV may also be discouraged from going to the doctor for couples counselling, out of fear that the doctor may turn them over to the police. People thought, 'You know what? I don't want to be in prison because I'm providing treatment for these gay homosexual people.' (Adeniyi in Eichelberger 2014)

Likewise, homophobic attitudes in Zimbabwe force citizens into complex gendered binaries intimately connected to discourses of 'exclusion and infection' (Phillips 2004, 160). The National AIDS Coordination Programme (1998a) points to the failure of massive state-run campaigns in Zimbabwe to accept the reality of non-heterosexual sex and its role in the spread of HIV (see Phillips 2004, 160). The discourses of HIV/

AIDS and the political discourse of sexual orientation emerge as central to 'the fight about citizenship and identity' in predominantly heteronormative postcolonial states like Zimbabwe and Nigeria, where gays and lesbians perpetually live as foreigners in what is supposed to be 'home'.

Questions of exclusion are an inroad into debates around the intersections of gender, sexuality, homophobia and migration/diaspora discourses which are largely invisible to queer research on the continent. Local scholars who have explored the intersections of sexuality and migration focused predominantly on migrants and sex work (Gould 2011; Schuler 2013), a bias also noticeable in international literature (Agustín 2006, 2007). The global picture painted above does not undermine the work of Smith (2012) on South Asian gay men in Australia; Luibhéid (2008) on queer migration or Manalansan IV (2006) on queer intersections, sexuality and gender in migration studies, as well his 2003 publication on Filipino gay men in the diaspora. In an attempt to fill this scholarly gap, I draw on narratives of self-identified same-sex loving individuals who migrated permanently from Zimbabwe, Uganda and Nigeria to South Africa, subsequent to diverse forms of sexual persecution. Special attention is focused on the meaning these queer Africans attach to their experiences of living as sexual minorities in a space that is foreign to them, and in Africa's flag-democracies at large.

While the focus is on citizens who fled draconian legislation regulating sexuality in their respective homelands, one cannot miss the opportunity to engage with narratives of queer South Africans, given the widely documented disjuncture between policy and the experiences of non-heterosexuals in this country (Lahiri 2011; Mutua 2011; Van Zyl 2011). I therefore interrogate what it means to live as a sexual minority in a country where, on the one hand, sexual orientation has a human rights status, but on the other, lesbians are sexually violated in the name of 'corrective rape' (Epprecht 2010, 769; Lewis 2008, 107). When juxtaposed with those of queer foreign nationals, the narratives of South African sexual minorities illuminate how this space (South Africa) is experienced by both categories in ways that bring together questions of gender, sexuality and migration, and simultaneously further our understanding of the process of being gendered in flag-democracies on the continent.

## THEORISING GENDER, SEXUALITY AND THE NATION

In this article, Foucault's ideas about bio-politics are gateways into other theoretical work on gender, sexuality and the nation. Bio-politics, according to Foucault, are ideas which are deeply entrenched in discourses of bio-power that explore the meaning of surveillance and the ways in which the state manages the body. Foucault's theory exposes how nations are constructed and reshaped as the state patrols and subjugates the body (see Foucault 1978[1990], 140; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 5), given that it is within zones of power relations that the body acquires meaning (Butler 1990, 125). The article works with the idea that discourses around sexuality, gender and citizenship

constitute a way of imagining connections between the state and its citizens. Foucault (1978[1990]) formulates this argument in different ways through his notions of the production of knowledge(s) and discourses, of surveillance, and of how one perceives sexuality. Flowing from Foucault's work is a theory that frames the politics of gender and sexuality as fundamental to understanding the notion of nationhood and nation-building processes – a theory that has been explored by Judith Butler, Nira Yuval-Davis, Anne McClintock, Ann Stoler and Jacqui Alexander, among other dominant voices.

Similarly, a considerable number of African-focused feminists, but principally Desiree Lewis, Deborah Posel, Sylvia Tamale, Jane Bennett, Patricia McFadden and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, engage in debates raised through different 'zones' of theorising, often linked to questions of nationalism/nation-building. Their theoretical reflections suggest that 'the fight about rights' is at the centre of all other nationhood fights – and these are fights that citizens engage in as they negotiate issues of citizenship, gender-based violence, legal battles and laws, and the politics of heteronormativity. Posel (2011), for example, constructs 'nation' as a gendered, political and sexualised space where citizens battle for meanings derived from living in such a context. The postcolonial African state is broadly framed by scholarship (Batisai 2013, 2014; Boyd 2013; Lahiri 2011; Madunagu 2007; Msibi 2011; Phillips 2004; Reddy 2002, 2001; Van Zyl 2011) as a context in which sexual minorities constantly negotiate their identity and belonging. The argument these African-focused scholars make further illuminates how Foucault's framework creates a profound theoretical foundation for reading 'nationhood' through various discourses about the bodies of sexual minorities in Africa's flag-democracies. Hence the claim that to see nationhood in formation and in contestation is to see the operation of gender and sexuality.

Building on the theoretical argument made extensively in existing literature, namely that postcolonial African states use gender, sexuality and homophobia as a way to define national identity, this article inserts the question of diaspora into such scholarship. The article achieves this by posing (and grappling with) key theoretical and empirical questions including: How do queer Africans in the diaspora perceive their homeland and what is their connection with 'home'? What is their relation with the new hosting state – the South African state and society? Are they open with the rest of their community about their sexuality?

It is worth reiterating that data emerging out of the empirical voices of Zimbabweans, Ugandans and Nigerians living in the diaspora is not only interesting but also groundbreaking, for it brings together questions of gender, sexuality, homophobia and migration in the (South) African context.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is located in a qualitative methodological framework which allows researchers to 'study human action from the perspective of the social actors themselves'

(Babbie and Mouton 2001, 270). I therefore employ a qualitative methodology because of its ability to inquire into and explore the experiences of people and the meaning they attach to these experiences; while simultaneously capturing social relations and interactions that seldom find expression in quantitative representations. The methodological framework was designed in a way that allowed data triangulation, which Van Rensburg (2010, 90) defines as 'the use of more than one source of data'. As such, here data triangulation entailed the use of both primary and secondary sources, ranging from in-depth interviews, observational data, critical mapping of academic and non-academic literature (due to its vastness), to small talk and informal discussions with sexual minorities from different African countries.

I chose narratives that are biographical in nature, because they often give participants the opportunity to represent their personal trajectories and their interpretations (Mbilinyi 1992, 65) of other phenomena that they see as shaping their lives. Narratives also contribute to our analysis of how people's 'freedom to act is both constrained, and supported by their context' (Slater 2000, 38). Narrating their lived realities becomes a way of relaying how someone either negotiated the constraints or capitalised on the opportunities presented to them (Miller 2000, 75). In essence, a qualitative methodology in this article 'strives to create a coherent story as it is seen through the eyes of those who are part of that story, to understand and represent their experiences and actions as they encounter, engage with, and live through situations' (Nieuwenhuis and Smit 2012, 126). This article, through a qualitative methodology, captures the experiences of sexual minorities and the meanings they assign to their bodies in the diaspora, while highlighting debates about these bodies, as profiled in both academic and non-academic scholarship.

My interest in the experiences of sexual minorities in Africa emerged out of my previous theoretical research (Batisai 2013, 2014) which was largely informed by literature on how discourses of gender and sexuality were (and continue to be) central to the process of building African states in both colonial and postcolonial times. After writing the theoretical chapter for my previous research in 2011 (Batisai 2013; 2014), I embarked on a lengthy data-collection process (2011–2014) aimed at collecting individual narratives of being gay/lesbian in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Nigeria and South Africa. Given the diasporic focus of this article, queer Africans from Zimbabwe, Uganda and Nigeria who took part in this research were drawn from South Africa, a place which many (if not all) of these participants described as 'a safe haven' for non-heterosexual people from far and wide, because of the country's progressive constitution.

Overall, the three-year data collection process in Cape Town and Johannesburg entailed in-depth interviews profiling individual experiences of being gendered in the above-mentioned flag-democracies. I interviewed eight non-heterosexual people who were purposively selected based on sexual orientation and nationality (South African, Zimbabwean, Ugandan and Nigerian). My affiliation with a university in South Africa assisted me with issues of entry, as I managed to establish a rapport with students whom

I mentored. Capitalising on this rapport, I engaged in small talk with the students, who then assisted me in identifying possible participants within their social networks and beyond. Snowball sampling emerged as an instrumental technique for negotiating and re-negotiating entrée and gaining trust throughout fieldwork. For ethical reasons, all the narratives of the eight people who participated in this research are profiled and published under the shield of pseudonyms.

The narratives of sexual minorities presented and analysed in the following thematic sections of this article range from stories about what they went through and the circumstances that pushed them to cross the borders of their respective homelands into South Africa, and how they have subsequently experienced their bodies in this new space. Deep reflections on the experiences of queer Africans living in South Africa provide a particularly interesting narrative about the shape and meaning of the post-apartheid state, read through the interplay between sexuality and migration/diaspora discourses.

## NARRATIVES OF QUEER AFRICANS LIVING IN THE DIASPORA

As alluded to earlier, the experiences of sexual minorities from Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Uganda were captured through narratives that responded to key theoretical and empirical questions. It is no surprise that excerpts from the narratives of queer Africans living in Johannesburg and Cape Town (see below) reveal that all the respondents migrated to South Africa subsequent to various forms of sexual persecution in their home countries. Tom, a Ugandan gay man aged 57, simply said: 'I am gay ... I am Ugandan, and I have lived in Kampala for the greater part of my life. I left Uganda around 2005 for Johannesburg, South Africa.' Zoe, Joe and Melvin, however, elaborated on the kind of sexual persecution that pushed them out of their respective home countries:

I lived in a closet throughout my teenage life. My family was aware but society ... never. I could not join the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe because I had to be loyal to my family. I did not want to betray my family with whom I had reached an agreement that my lesbian identity shall be forever personal and very private. I got to a point where I was tired of living a lie, and through reading and exposure to the media it emerged that actually, one could be gay or lesbian in South Africa ... that was a 'wow' moment for me ... I left Zimbabwe. (Zoe, Zimbabwean lesbian, aged 29)

I am originally from Nigeria but I permanently reside in South Africa, in Johannesburg with my partner. In Nigeria, being gay is not only illegal but it is also taboo. (Joe, Nigerian gay man, aged 68)

They used to say I am a disgrace and a curse, not only to my family but to my community at large. They said 'the rain is no longer falling because of you ... God is angry because of you.' My family never had peace because society constantly told them to address 'my gay



problem'. Though verbal, the abuse we suffered as a family was bad ... so bad I tell you. I then decided to leave the country so that they could enjoy their peace ... That's how I came to Joburg [Johannesburg]. (Melvin, Zimbabwean gay man, aged 32)

Zoe, Joe and Melvin allude to the notion of heteronormativity, which refers to 'the institutionalisation of exclusive heterosexuality in society' (Steyn and Van Zyl 2009, 3). Heteronormativity patrols sexual interactions between women and men through a process which creates sexual boundaries that should not be crossed, since variance is considered punishable (Caudwell 2003):

In Zimbabwe, you are either straight or you remain in the closet forever ... yes, you either seclude yourself entirely or flaunt yourself and face the consequences ... That is why I just packed and left that country. (Jack, Zimbabwean gay man, aged 45)

By sharing their experiences of being gay and lesbian in Zimbabwe, Zoe, Melvin and Jack not only depict the complex social and cultural spaces they had to navigate, but also illuminate how the state – especially President Mugabe – defines the place and situation of homosexuals in the country. Nyanzi (2013, 956) draws on Reddy (2002, 164) to capture the president's remarks: 'But in Zimbabwe, gays shall remain a very sad people forever', which explicitly point to the complexities of being gay in Zimbabwe. While this article acknowledges the tolerance of homosexuality from a human rights perspective by some African leaders (Nyanzi 2013, 957), it concurrently reveals how authorities on the continent use the sexual binary to differentiate 'insiders' from 'outsiders' (Phillips 2004, 159). A heterosexual identity becomes a symbol of 'legitimate national membership' (Tambiah 2005, 258), such that with a homosexual tag, one can 'never' be a true citizen of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya (Phillips 2004, 159), Nigeria or Uganda. Tom poses a very fundamental question:

...in fact, should I still consider myself Ugandan given my gay identity? I wonder. (Tom, Ugandan gay man, aged 57)

The question above suggests that legal frameworks and nationalistic constructions not only perpetuate homophobic practices in this country, but simultaneously create some kind of identity crisis for gay Ugandans living in the diaspora. Nyanzi's remarks, captured below, raise a key question that opens room for scholars to re-engage with the meaning of citizenship and the politics of belonging to the postcolonial African state of Uganda:

In Uganda to be anti-gay, homophobic and anti-trans is to be patriotic. So, how can queer Ugandans be true to themselves when they are labelled unpatriotic? Nationalism is necessarily anti-queer in very many African locations. (see Calata 2014)

As if to respond to Tom's identity question, and simultaneously concur with Nyanzi's comments about anti-queer sentiments across African contexts, Zoe shares the challenges inherent in being lesbian and Zimbabwean:

They say, 'If you are lesbian you cannot be Zimbabwean' ... in fact, your national and ethnic identities are suddenly swamped by your sexual identity such that you are lesbian, a pervert, or a moral/societal misfit first before you are Zimbabwean. (Zoe)

Closely related to such nationalistic discourses is the gendered notion of citizenship, which is often linked to heteronormative constructions that narrowly reduce the scope of sexuality to its procreative ability, leaving out non-reproductive virtues. One of the respondents, Joe, says: 'In Nigeria...there is a strong emphasis on masculinity and procreation – categories which I obviously do not fit into.' When sexuality is embroiled with procreation, such hegemonic perception marginalises the experiences of sexual minorities, who choose not to give birth. Similar to progressive scholars who challenge the procreation-centred sexuality which prioritises 'societal survival [over] individual rights' (Makinwa-Adebusoye and Tiemoko 2007, 2), Joe is quick to remind society about the contribution gay couples make, based on his personal experience in South Africa:

Society argues that if you are gay you can't have children but what society forgets is that the world is overpopulated ... and ourselves ... as a gay couple in South Africa ... we [Joe and his partner] actually adopted children. I am certain that gay couples in similar positions across the world ... in countries that are pro-gay ... are doing the same. And for those who want children, they can still conceive through alternative fertilisation methods like surrogacy. (Joe)

Joe's progressive experiences in the diaspora have created a platform for him to ask: 'So what is wrong with being gay? We do not kill anybody ... but you violate our rights, you torture us in every sense of the word ... Society wise up please!' Narratives of sexual minorities' experiences of torture in many African contexts are a way into the work of Macharia, for instance, who analyses the book: *Queer African reader* (eds Ekine and Abbas 2013). Macharia traces the origins of the word 'queer', locating it in the politics of mourning, especially its connection to 'disposability, bodies and lives we throw away' (see Calata 2014). When framed that way, queer people emerge as bodies that society can violate, penetrate and even fatally attack. This takes us to the question 'which bodies matter?', inspired by Magubane (2001) and Butler (1993). Assigning value to bodies is evident in the work of Jacqui Alexander (1994, 6), who points out that bodies and sexualities which are categorised as counter to citizenship have often been excluded from the operation of nation-building in Trinidad, Tobago and the Bahamas:

Not just (any) body can be a citizen anymore, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation.

Beyond reinforcing the widely documented argument that issues of citizenship, identity and sexuality in postcolonial Africa are contested, interviewees insert migration discourses into the process of building a postcolonial state. Out of this insertion emerges

an interrogation of the extent to which the state can continue to exercise control over its citizens who are at liberty to explore other African spaces which they perceive to be pro-gay, when their homeland is not. Though nullified in August 2014, Uganda's controversial *Anti-Homosexuality Act* included a clause aimed at reprimanding citizens in the diaspora – a move that hints at how the parameters of that which is 'Ugandan' today are informed by the politics of gender and sexuality, as was the case in colonial times:

The legal developments in Uganda left me confused ... I thought I was safe in South Africa but not anymore ... the new law has provisions that allow the state to arrest gay people like me who crossed the borders of Uganda ... According to this law, I may be extradited back to Uganda for punishment ... how sad? I am terrified to go back to a place I once called and still want to call home. On second thoughts ... no ... extradition my foot!!! They will have to drag me out of this South Africa ... I tell you. (Tom)

It is such emerging, homophobic cross-border legislation that Tom challenges, by vowing to remain in South Africa. The boldness of his narrative is deeply embedded in the immigration positions of queer Africans in South Africa, who are either on long-stay temporary or permanent residency permits. These legal immigration statuses, along with the progressive constitution, foster a strong sense of belonging among queer Africans living in South Africa. Closely related to this sense of belonging is the agency that these sexual minorities exercise in their new host country – an agency that many suppressed in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Nigeria, where they could neither speak out nor come out:

... but I say to you today ... I am no pervert, I am a lesbian and above all, I am proudly Zimbabwean. Nothing and no one shall ever take these intersecting identities from me. (Zoe)

The notion of agency, evident in Zoe's narrative, pushes one to infer that South Africa, like other pro-gay diasporic contexts, offers queer Africans a space for rediscovering who they are, and for legitimising and affirming their sexual identities away from the societal and familial gaze, as well as the punitive and restrictive legislation of their homeland.

Now I live freely, and walk the streets of Cape Town with pride and dignity. (Zoe)

Now that I am in South Africa, Cape Town specifically, I have the freedom of expression ... I define this country as a place where all those who want to discover who they are ... from a sexual perspective ... should come ... In this country, I exercise my agency, I have the freedom to be ... just to be me ... yes, to be gay. (Jack)

... and here I am, enjoying my freedom, this is what I call independence, not the Zim [babwean] one where one lives as an alien from another planet. I am glad I am out of that dungeon ... phew! (Melvin)

Zoe, Jack and Melvin explicitly distance themselves from their homeland and frame Zimbabwe as a country they cannot even imagine going back to. Their standpoint

cannot be separated from the outright condemnation of homosexuals in Zimbabwe, which is deeply embedded in the complex support of culture or tradition (Phillips 2004, 157). Zimbabwe becomes a nation where being gay often means negotiating a publicly denounced identity (Epprecht 2010) and navigating violent (sometimes fatal) circumstances (Phillips 1997, 484). Evidence from Zimbabwe further suggests that members of the diplomatic mission jeopardise their relationship with the state and risk persecution whenever they fight for the rights of marginalised citizens whose sexual identity forces them to operate 'nicodemously'. For instance, an online article titled 'Zimbabwe: Gay rights advocates mark Int'l Day Against Homophobia in hiding' (*Free Speech Radio News*, May 19, 2014) refers to President Mugabe's April 18, Independence Day speech in which he 'threatened to expel Western diplomats who publicly promote gay rights in Zimbabwe'. That notwithstanding, this article reads the existence of the Gays and Lesbians Association of Zimbabwe (though still invisible) as a ray of hope for sexual minorities and rights activists located in this homophobic African space.

Contrary to Zoe, Jack and Melvin, Tom is somewhat nostalgic. The declaration 'On second thoughts ... no ... extradition my foot!!! They will have to drag me out of this South Africa ... I tell you' on one hand suggests that Tom, like other respondents, has found a new home in the diaspora. But on the other, the statement 'I am not sure if I will or can still go back to my motherland ... I am terrified to go back to a place I once called and still want to call home' speaks volumes about a strong sense of connection and relationship with his home country. Overall, 'home' (country of origin) is constantly juxtaposed with the diaspora (South Africa) – a space where queer Africans openly share their sexuality with the new host community.

## BEING GENDERED IN SOUTH AFRICA – A VIOLENT PROCESS

The stories of queer Africans from Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Uganda, captured in the preceding section, create a platform for analysing how this same space (South Africa) is read and experienced by sexual minorities of South African origin. It is noteworthy that all participants who are foreign to South Africa, along with one local, construct Cape Town as a refuge. For instance, Tom, who hails from Uganda says: 'I find South Africa a better environment to be gay/lesbian'; and Khanyisa from the Eastern Cape equally finds Cape Town to be the best place to be gay: 'I believe Cape Town is a place of refuge ... the only place I feel safe to be gay in South Africa.' Conversely, South African sexual minorities' experiences of being gay and lesbian on the Cape Flats challenge the image of Cape Town as a 'safe haven':

I was sexually assaulted several times ... Khayelitsha, the community I live in does not tolerate my sexual identity. The men in my own community feel that I have some abnormality that needs to be corrected. They often say 'we want to show you what a real man is like and how he behaves

... walks ... talks ... not what you do ... you are fake ... yes a fake man.' (Nondumiso, South African lesbian, aged 30)

They said to me, 'If you are a man, penetrate me ... where is your machine [penis] ... you are not a man without one ... don't fool yourself. Get real, sister ... you are a woman, not a man ... period! You are short-changing us, men ... we need women like you.' (Vuyokazi, South African lesbian, aged 40)

The narratives profiled here resonate with those of sexual minorities from Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Joe, Zoe, Melvin and Jack) who previously faced resistance stemming from a homophobic culture in their respective societies back home. These experiences confirm the remarks made by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Doctor Max Price, during the Queer in Africa: Confronting the Crisis symposium held at the University of Cape Town in June 2014 (see Calata 2014). Price noted that many students who come to a relatively 'liberal Cape Town' often deal with homophobic realities upon returning to their respective localities, in and outside of South Africa. Price's assertion is evident in Khanyisa's narrative:

Originally, I am from the Eastern Cape but I live in Cape Town. My community back home holds very strong cultural beliefs ... very restrictive ... I cannot be a Xhosa man and gay at the same time. They say, 'A real Xhosa man is someone who is circumcised ... because circumcision marks the transition from boyhood to manhood ... you are taught issues of how to become a man ... it entrenches the feeling of being a man.' I am not circumcised ... so I am not a man ... they call me names ... 'ikhwenkwe' ... which means a boy, an uncircumcised one .... (Khanyisa, South African gay man, aged 26)

Khanyisa's experiences speak to the way custom reinforces gendered identity boundaries (Meena 1992, 1) through socialisation. Unpacking the complexities stemming from the 'gender' portion of the phrase 'being gendered', Bennett (2011, 96) frames the categorisation of sexed bodies as either male or female through gender markers, and the reinforcement of such identities through secondary socialisation as inherently violent. Khanyisa is violated by the way his gay identity clashes with his cultural and religious beliefs, especially the explicit construction of sexual activities between men as an abomination. His statement 'I cannot be a Xhosa man and gay at the same time ... I am a total misfit in their eyes ... I am not human enough ... it is heart breaking ... indeed' reiterates the notion of identity crises raised by Tom from Uganda. In the same vein, Nondumiso uses these violent realities to raise a question which is central to her identity:

Who exactly am I, beyond my sexual orientation? I don't belong to this community ... where there is a sense of communal responsibility to teach us lesbians or rectify any abnormalities ... I am prone to sexual violence ... I am terrified. (Nondumiso)

Violent experiences of being lesbian and gay on the Cape Flats of South Africa concur with Reddy's (2001, 83) theorisation that homophobia is indeed 'a form of gender-

based violence'. Lack of safety and the feeling of not belonging as a sexual minority are lenses through which Vuyokazi illuminates a disconnect between constitutional rights and the lived realities of homosexuals, and interrogates the meaning of democracy in this country:

I feel so violated and out of place in this new South Africa. Is this the freedom they promised us in 1994? Where is the constitution ... when does it protect us as lesbians? Does it only protect us after we have been assaulted and raped? (Vuyokazi)

While the new democracy has been applauded for its progressive stance on sexual orientation (Mutua 2011, 458), the fact that lesbians are sexually violated in the name of 'corrective rape' (Epprecht 2010, 769; Lewis 2008, 107) proves otherwise. Experiences of corrective rape among other forms of gender-based violence propagate the image of a crime-ridden democracy in dire need of 'more policing and harsher sentencing' – factors which reinforce state hegemony (Lahiri 2011, 123–124). Similar to Mutua (2011), Van Zyl (2011) and Lahiri (2011), Price reiterates the disjuncture between policy and the lived experiences of non-heterosexuals in South Africa, noting that

the attitudes, the practices and the extent to which there is hate speech and action as well as discrimination directed at such individuals continues, and in some cases, might be worse than in previous years. (see Calata 2014)

The bodies of sexual minorities located in a radically shifting political milieu become 'a site for discursive power struggles' (Steyn and Van Zyl 2009, 4). Again, these circumstances prompt Vuyokazi not only to deconstruct the image of South Africa as a safe haven, but to pose questions that call for an engagement with the interplay between gender, sexuality, homophobia and migration/diaspora discourses on the continent.

Should I up and leave ... but the question is, where do I go when all these other [African] countries are even worse? I have so many unanswered questions ... with no one to ask. Do I have to live with this violence? I wonder .... (Vuyokazi)

One might well ask why Cape Town (and Johannesburg) – in the words of queer Africans from Zimbabwe, Uganda and Nigeria – is 'a better environment to be gay/lesbian', but ironically not for this country's own sexual minorities? The answers to this key empirical and theoretical question are *partly* located in notions of class and space in South Africa. Queer Africans who have experienced upward class mobility in the diaspora often live in middle- and upper-income suburbs where they seldom experience homophobic violence and discrimination, compared to their South African counterparts in black working-class townships. In a context where the gap between rich and poor is wide (Maarman 2009), and where there is mass unemployment (Seekings and Nattrass 2002), young black South African men without a regular income have very limited financial resources to start and sustain a family. Spaces for legitimising masculinity become extremely narrow, such that violent sexual relations with women often emerge

as one of the few ways in which these men can express themselves and reassert their manhood. Largely, the South African black township setting exposes how issues of race and class are still central to the politics of gendered and sexuality identities, and of belonging (Swarr and Nagar 2004) in this postcolonial and postapartheid democracy.

Overall, one might argue that experiences of gender policing across the world are indeed violent, based on isolated incidents of [sexual] violence in the West, irrespective of progressive legal frameworks. Although there are more academically valid examples that can be used to deconstruct the image of pro-gay nations as 'safe havens', the story headlined 'Homophobic thug jailed for battering flatmate while he slept' in *The Metro* of September 9, 2014, challenges the assumption that homophobia has been defeated in the West. That notwithstanding, the 'homophobic thug' tag, along with the 14-year jail sentence imposed, reinforces the reality that the state and its legal framework are pro-gay. For instance, the tag and the sentence sketch a situation which is somewhat contrary to what happens in homophobic African societies, where a thug may be celebrated and a victim further victimised for being gay, irrespective of 'life-changing injuries' as evidenced by a skull abnormality, epilepsy and loss of independence (*The Metro*, September 9, 2014). It is noteworthy that the effects of homophobia in African societies do not only impact on sexual minorities – they are also felt by intellectual activists, who research and write on homosexuality in ways that fight for and support the rights of sexual minorities in various African democracies.

## INTELLECTUAL ACTIVISM AND THE HOMOPHOBIC CONUNDRUM

As African-based scholars theorise on the politics of heteronormativity stemming from 'the escalating and often state-sanctioned homophobia evident in countries such as Namibia, Zimbabwe and Uganda' (Lewis 2011, 208), homophobia becomes more of a personal struggle. In the context of Uganda, Tamale's (2003) *Out of the closet: Unveiling sexuality discourses in Uganda* bears witness to the precarious conditions under which scholars theorise. The article is a reflection on Tamale's experiences of how she was 'caught up in the eye of the homophobic storm, and became a "punching bag" for the public to relieve its pent-up rage' (ibid, 42). By anchoring the article in 'the contestations and discourses of homosexuality in Uganda' (a theme which takes questions of gender, power and identity seriously), Tamale suggests that neither the 'homophobic furore' that preceded its publication nor the 'lynching and crucifying of Tamale' (ibid.) erased the politics of heteronormativity from the frame of her theorisations. Regardless of the precarious conditions under which some may theorise, African-based scholars have exposed the complexities of sexuality, citizenship and belonging while simultaneously opening up new ways of reading and theorising about the relationship between sexual bodies and the postcolonial state in Africa.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored debates within existing scholarship that illuminate the fact that nation-building projects can be analysed in relation to gender and sexuality, and in the process, sexual bodies and identities can define and reset national borders 'whether imagined or real' (see Anderson 1983). These national boundaries are set in ways that exclude and include certain individuals through a process that marks and distinguishes insiders from outsiders (Yuval-Davis 2006, 204). What also emerged from the literature is that the meaning of belonging in postcolonial Africa is constructed in the light of notions of citizenship which blatantly frame homosexuality as a 'Western' phenomenon. Dichotomising and opposing the West and African countries is becoming a strong component of a new sort of African nationalism which deserves further investigation.

Discourses on the African state and the process of being gendered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century hint at the construction of flag-democracies (by the leadership) as modern, controlled and civilised nations. Their failure is evident in efforts by the Ugandan state to broaden the anti-homosexual framework to encompass legal clauses that reprimand sexual minorities in the diaspora. The state emerges as a dynamic entity that reacts to ideological, socio-political and economic realities (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989, 58) which, in this context, include the intersections of gender, sexuality and migration debates. One can think of contemporary discourses about nationhood as a reformist and paternal environment controlled by the leadership, in which citizenship is largely about being a nation, but under the watchful eye of the state. Conversely, diverse experiences of queer Africans in the diaspora (South Africa, in particular) – ranging from the ability to marry and adopt children; the freedom to speak and come out; to the possibility to acquire permanent residency status and citizenship, and forge a progressive relationship with the new hosting state – challenge constructions of nationhood that are narrowly limited to one's homeland.

The article juxtaposed how queer foreign nationals have experienced their bodies in South Africa with narratives of local sexual minorities and unearthed contradictions which make for rich and ambivalent analyses about what the reality of being a sexual minority in (South) Africa means. Contrary to queer Africans who construct living in South Africa as an institutionalisation of 'liberty', sexual minorities of local origin frame the democracy as an intricate and confusing space. This conundrum, although analysed in this article, paves the way for further engagement with the interplay between sexuality, homophobia and migration/diaspora discourses which are often invisible within queer research on the continent. Price's assertion that homophobia is 'a pan-African problem that embarrasses us all' (see Calata 2014), along with the fact that some queer Africans are now living in the diaspora, legitimises the call for transnational theoretical and empirical analyses of emerging sexuality, homophobia and migration discourses in Africa. Combined, the theoretical and evidence-based analyses presented in this article illuminate the way nationhood and citizenship in flag-democracies on the



continent are exposed to new revelations of power and difference, as sexual minorities within and beyond our national borders continuously engage in identity and belonging battles which are typical of postcolonial Africa.

## NOTE

- 1 Also referred to as a postcolonial African nation/state in this article – is a phrase that marks the era of decolonisation and nation-building after the struggle for liberation.

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