

Shifting Boundaries of Sexual Identities in Cape Town: The Appropriation and Malleability of ‘Gay’ in Township Spaces

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Abstract While much has been written concerning the effect of the post-apartheid transition upon gay communities in predominantly more affluent parts of South Africa, little is still known about how this transition affected black African residents in the former townships. This article therefore examines the impact that the political transition had on groups in the former townships through an exploration that highlights first the way it helped create delineated sexual binary relationships. It will then go on to explore how the social expression of these binary relationships has a unique geography within the former townships which in turn also allows us to see how an historically very Westerncentric term of identification ‘gay’ has been appropriated in unique ways.

Keywords South Africa · Sexual identity · Townships · Race · Gay · Cape Town

Introduction

This article aims to explore the evolution of sexual identities and social interactions of men who openly acknowledge they have sex with other men in the Cape Town townships. It will further explore these in relation to the types of social spaces these men today use and the way these spaces go towards both affecting these identities and are also affected by them. While much has been written about the reciprocal links between sexual identity and space in predominantly Western environments (see for example Aldrich 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004; Binnie 1995; Binnie and Valentine 1999; Chisholm 2005; Forest 1995; Knopp 1992, 1997, 1998; Phillips 2004; Quilley 1997), there is still a relative dearth of material on the way ‘non-Western’ environments are both shaped by and go towards shaping forms of sexual identity.¹

¹Research for this article began in 2004 and concluded in 2009. Extended periods of time have been spent in Cape Town’s former townships allowing me to engage in long-term participant observation and semi-structured interviews with respondents.

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This is especially important in the context of South Africa for two key reasons. First, the legacy of apartheid on black African male same-sex identities presents an intriguing backdrop from which to understand how histories of migration and forced segregation may have given individuals distinctive opportunities to understand the labelling of same-sex desire and position themselves in spaces in townships. Second, while many of the effects of the country's political transition post-1994 have been documented for diverse groups in society there is yet to be a sustained attempt to understand how same-sex identities in former townships have also been affected.

This article will begin with a brief summary of what is known about black African same-sex male desire in South Africa more broadly. It will then turn to the specific developments found in the Cape Town townships. Here, it will discuss how delineated sexual identities in terms of actual labels to mark out men who engaged in sex with men from other men appear not to have been as common in the early apartheid period as they became later. It will then go on to explore the development of identities and the eventual institution of a delineated identity around the term 'gay' in the Cape Town townships—from the early 1980s through to today. By way of conclusion, this article will suggest that the historical trajectory of South Africa—and specifically here, a legacy of racial segregation—has affected the way sexual identities are understood among and about black African township men. This can be seen most prominently by the way 'gay' as a label has been appropriated in a way that simultaneously highlights the malleability of the term while also allowing us to understand how identities can interface with urban spaces in diverse ways.

But just briefly before commencing this discussion, it is important to explain some of the terminology used in this article—and the way such terminology has become associated with particular theoretical positions. As has been written elsewhere, there are many identity labels that can be used to describe men who openly acknowledge their same-sex desire in sub-Saharan Africa (Eprecht 2005; Luirink 2000; Murray and Roscoe 1998). In the South African context, common words include 'moffie', 'stabane', 'queer', 'homosexual' and 'gay'. While these words are often used interchangeably—both by the men under study here and in wider academic literature—it is important also to realise that each has a slightly different etymology and can therefore represent and go to affect subjectivities in different ways. For example, 'homosexual' emerges from a particular Western European history tied to the medicalisation of the term (D'Emilo 1983; Foucault 1978). 'Gay' stems from Western European and North American civil rights struggles around 'gay liberation' in the latter part of the twentieth century and was often used in opposition to 'homosexual' (Kayal 1993; Seidman 1993; Warner 1993). 'Moffie' is a uniquely South African word, and as de Waal (1995) has explained, may have emerged from derivations in the Afrikaans language.

As has been described in greater detail elsewhere, the term 'queer' while initially emerging from a late twentieth century political movement in the West (and broader academic writing), can be used to describe the men under study here both due to the way it acts as a placeholder for wider identity labels and because it allows us to appreciate the somewhat transient and ephemeral way other terms have been deployed simultaneously in the same place (with often conflicting results) (Tucker 2009). However, in the context of this article, the key concern is not in finding a word that can be overlaid onto diverse groups across South Africa's racial spectrum

to extend the effect of non-normative and at times destabilising positionalities into diverse urban spaces (Tucker 2009). Instead it is to explore the use of a particular identity label, that of 'gay', to understand how it has been appropriated in unique ways in different locations. As scholars outside geography (see for example the excellent work by Hoad 2007; Leap 2003, 2005; Ross 2005) have highlighted, there are exciting and important debates to be had about the way Westerncentric terms 'travel', are adopted and manipulated in diverse locations with diverse racial histories (see also Constantine-Simms 2001). The conceptual 'work' that these terms do—the way they are used and contested—can help us understand not only their emerging transnational genealogy but also in some instances how decidedly 'non-queer' terms such as 'gay' are 'queered' due to their use in new spatial locations.

As such, this article suggests we should not err too far away from studying the existence of Westerncentric labels in new locations for fear such a study itself simply has neo-colonising tendencies (see Oswin 2005 in response to Altman 2001). Neither should a study of 'queer spaces' be viewed as always inherently problematic due to what can appear as the artificial barriers scholars need to use to delineate such spaces (see for example Oswin 2008). Both of these views, if taken to extremes, are in danger of elitism, sidelining the actual lived experiences of marginalised groups—who, it would seem, struggle to find particular *often delineated or partially delineated* spaces of acceptance, *themselves* drawing on whatever conceptual languages they can find to understand their positionalities and their spatial and ideological location in society. In the context of South African studies of sexuality, this therefore requires a careful and nuanced appreciation of the racial history of the country (see also Hoad et al. 2005; de Waal and Manion 2006)—a history inherently defined around the issues of identity and spatiality (Robinson 1996). Furthermore, in this context, a study of such spaces can prove to be a decidedly 'queer' endeavour—precisely because of the diverse and imaginative ways sexual identities in these locations interface with a term such as 'gay'.

Lastly, it must also be stressed that this article is not proposing to have explored all locations where same-sex identities are understood within the townships of Cape Town. The townships themselves cover a vast area of the city. Langa, for example, founded in 1923 is the oldest township in Cape Town and is also the closest to the formalised city, located next to the affluent (and historically white) Pinelands suburb. It therefore has a different history and configuration to that of, for example, Khayelitsha, established far from the formalised city in 1985 and the site now to massive inward migration from elsewhere in the country and the region (Western 2001). In between are other townships such as Guguletu, Nyanga and Lower Crossroads. The research for this article was conducted among township men primarily in Khayelitsha, Guguletu, Nyanga and Lower Crossroads. As will be highlighted below, these different locations have presented different ways in which same-sex desire and identities are understood and possibly accepted. However, it must be acknowledged that limited space precludes a more detailed exploration of distinctions between these at times somewhat differing spaces.² It must also be

² For a more detailed exploration of the differences between township locations in Cape Town, see Tucker (2009).

remembered that the aim of this article is to draw out and explore how a history of racial apartheid in South Africa has, in the context of the Cape Town townships in general, helped to create unique configurations of identity and urban spatial negotiation.

From Mine Marriages to ‘Ivys’ to ‘Gay Men’—The Shifting Boundaries of Sexual Identities

As studies elsewhere are increasingly making us aware, ‘Western’ forms of sexual identity, located around what can be termed a particular ‘heterosexual/homosexual binary’ relationship (used here to highlight the positioning of different forms of sexualised difference in relation to each other around a binary—*not* in relation to a medicalised and often anachronistic ‘homosexuality’) and delineated sexual identities do not necessarily travel well, beyond the spaces in which they were initially brought to light (Byrne 2005; Hoad 2007; Murray 2000; Spurlin 2001; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000).³ This is especially important in the context of this article when we appreciate that what some form of public proclamation and self-identification with same-sex desire or activity implies will vary depending on what a particular society sees as defining each part of the ‘heterosexual/homosexual binary’. In other words, predominantly Western terms of definition, such as ‘gay’ (while increasingly deployed by men studied here—see below) may simultaneously flatten and obscure important degrees of complexity around identities if we are unaware of the actual history of the way communities over time came to understand same-sex desire. Indeed, if we are to take a cursory look at documented history of same-sex desire in South Africa, we would be hard pressed to apply a term such as ‘gay’ to these men from the colonial and early apartheid period.

As Campbell (2003) and Elder (1995, 2003) have highlighted, the migrant labour system during the colonial and later apartheid era had a direct effect on the way black African men socialised with each other. Men spent several months at a time working on the mines away from their homes and families, living in cramped and overcrowded mining hostels. And by the beginning of the twentieth century, the British in South Africa had begun to document the somewhat widespread occurrences of same-sex sexual activity on the mines. As the 1907 Taberer Report explained:

It appears to have become a well-recognised custom among mine natives...to select from youths and younger men what are termed amankotshane or izinkotshane. An inkotshane may be described as a fag [*sic*] and is utilised for satisfying the passions. Any objection on the part of youth to becoming an inkotshane are apparently without very much difficulty overcome by lavishing money and presents on him. (Quoted in Moodie and Ndatshe 1994, p.2)

As Sibuyi (1993) has reported, these youth were commonly referred to in the mines as ‘wives’. It was noted that these young men would be proposed to upon

³ Additional studies have also pointed out how these terms do not work necessary well at encompassing the diversity of same-sex desire in the West either. See for example, Ross (2005) and Wilchins (2004).

entering the mining compounds by more senior mine workers or ‘boss boys’. Upon acceptance (often facilitated by bestowing gifts such as clothes, blankets and even bicycles), the ‘wife’ would be expected to wash dishes and look after the more senior mine worker, the ‘husband’. Sex would also occur between the two partners, both penetrative and by the rubbing of the more senior partner’s penis between the thighs of the younger ‘wife’. These relationships or ‘mine marriages’ were taken very seriously by those who took part in them, with some documented cases of senior mine workers going so far as to pay lobola (bridal wealth) to the wife once they returned to their homes.

Clearly, this brief example highlights the problems of applying Western identity terms and colloquial labels such as ‘straight’ or ‘gay’ to these men. For Moodie (1988), these marriages were the result of a lack of female companionship on the mines. For others, mine marriages were seen as a way of accumulating money so as to pay *lobola* to a female girlfriend’s parents at home. In these instances, it becomes hard to position these men within a framework located around Westerncentric discrete sexual identities. It would seem that in some instances, these men, despite their sexual activities, might well continue to see themselves as not deviating from wider sexual norms—especially if they subsequently left the mines and returned home to marry their female partners. For others however, as Epprecht (2005) has suggested, these relationships were also due to same-sex desire—in which case it might become easier to label these men as perhaps identifying with a form of non-heteronormativity. Yet even here, widespread acknowledgement of these men as existing with a separate sexual *identity* does not seem to have occurred.

We see a similar question over definition when we examine the types of identities and activities undertaken by men in the Cape Town townships during the 1980s and early 1990s. Rather than label themselves with terms that would mark themselves out as ‘non-heteronormative’ through a public proclamation of same-sex desire to the wider community, they instead used the term ‘Ivy’ to describe themselves. While these men were known within their own circle to be engaging in sex with other men, their identity to the wider community was not an especially sexual one. As this individual explains about the way Ivys were understood within the wider community:

But they [were] perceive mostly that they are straight people, they’re nice people, they’re called “Ivys” ...[forget] about sex part of it. They don’t talk about sex part of that. MARTIN⁴

And as another individual went on to describe; Ivys were known more by the type of dress style they had rather than by any sexualised identity:

It’s that they were like, they were wearing tight jeans, and [they] were different because they used to have long hair, they used to perm their hair....Some of them [used to have sex with other men], because, what they did, they were hiding it. You know? You may never know ... KEVIN

As such, the wider community did not identify Ivy’s with any form of non-heteronormativity. The following quotation highlights how, from a contemporary

⁴ All names given are pseudonyms.

perspective, the activities these men engaged in with each other would mark them out as sexually distinct (and hence, to follow a common term now used in the townships, ‘gay’, see below). However, the term ‘gay’ was not used to describe these men during the actual period in question in large part because there was little awareness of the idea of sexual identities based around same-sex object choice at the time:

So because most of those guys that were Ivys, they were gay people, but it never comes to the wider community that they are gay people, because there’s no gay people, any to their minds, that exist in our townships in those days. UNATHI

This of course is not to suggest that there was no awareness of men engaging in sex with other men by the wider community during the period. Indeed, reports by Donham (1998), Mathabane (1986) and McLean and Ngcobo (1995) highlight how same-sex hostels in Johannesburg during the 1970s and 1980s were known as locations where men did engage in sex with each other. It is also important not to discount the fact that labels common in other racially defined communities in South Africa such as ‘moffie’ or ‘gay’ must certainly have travelled into township locations in Cape Town as well, to a certain degree. However, it is important here to realise that while the wider community and indeed Ivys themselves may have been aware of these terms, Ivys did not use such words to describe themselves in a way that the wider community would have become aware. As such, a delineation of sexual identities between men who engaged in sex with other men and the wider community does not seem to have been as apparent in Cape Town during the late 1980s and early 1990s—as would later emerge.

Indeed, the Ivy identity label did not last indefinitely. Instead, the wider community itself, by the late 1980s, started to become aware that these men were not simply a new social grouping with a particular dress sense within the townships. In part, this emerged because the wider community started to examine how the dress code worn by these men did not fit into wider cultural constructions of male attire and accepted gender binaries:

I think, to me, the way I see it, I think the people started to be very, compare the—they said put gender on it, because it’s tight, it’s like something that was not supposed to be worn by man, it’s supposed to be - I think, and then it lose that touch, and then people, they tried to analyse it too much... And also now people started to identify themselves clearly as gay people, rather than something else. And then, ja, it’s really different, a lot of things. And then that was the end of it. UNATHI

Yet this shift also occurred as a result of the fact these men themselves started to identify far more strongly with the idea of delineated sexual identities after 1994 (and as the quotation above highlights, specifically the term ‘gay’).

I think that changed mostly right after the elections in 1994, where you’ll find most black people are expressing themselves, who they are. I think also the speech, which our president made when he got out of gaol—of prison, Nelson Mandela, where he addressed the issue of sexual orientation. I think that’s when most people came out. That’s when most people accepted themselves as who they are. WESLEY

As this individual explains, a ‘coming out’ was possible when these men located themselves within a more rigid sexual binary relationship. Yet it is also possible to surmise that before this period in the early 1990s, there was no need to ‘come out’ since it appeared there was little awareness or hurry to acknowledge identities around particular sexual activities. Yet after the end of apartheid, we now see a situation whereby the new freedoms that were emerging in South Africa had a direct effect on the ability of men with same-sex desire to position themselves within a sexual binary relationship and become known to the wider community. As has been documented elsewhere, the ending of race-based discrimination in the country clearly also had an effect on many diverse sectors of society that had been discriminated against in diverse ways (for very recent accounts of this see Russell (2009) and Johnson (2009)). In particular, the naming in the Interim Constitution of 1994 of sexuality along with race, gender, age and disability, as elements for which discrimination would not be tolerated, altered how these men were able or willing to engage with the wider community (Tucker 2009).

Yet the choice of these men to identify with a label such as ‘gay’ rather than ‘Ivy’ did not mean that these men would also simply follow the type of sexual subjectivities with which this term is most synonymous in the West. As this article has already briefly touched upon, and as Seidman (1993) and Warner (1993, 2000) have described in far greater detail, ‘gay’ emerged out of a particular period of North American and Western European political struggle for sexual identity rights and today is associated overwhelmingly with men who follow a particular rendering of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. From within this binary, ‘gay men’ are commonly seen as relatively separate from wider heterosexual society in terms of both their sexual identity and the individuals they have sex with. Further, if men were to engage in sexual activities with both men and women they would, to follow common parlance, be considered bisexual (Hemmings 1995). Lastly, as Wilchins (2004) and Swarr (2004) have explored, these men tend overwhelmingly to associate with more ‘masculine’ public performances than overt and sustained femininity. These socio-sexual conventions have proven to be decidedly different to what emerged in the 1990s in the Cape Town townships—despite the continual use of the word ‘gay’. To understand these differences, we must turn first to the particular spatial positioning of these men within the wider community and the history of spatial segregation across the country.

The Development of Gay Male Identities and Socialising Venues in the Cape Town Townships

As numerous studies have pointed out, ‘gay spaces’ in the West have been represented and understood to be delimited spaces within the urban environment. From the earliest studies by Manuel Castells (1983), detailing the development of The Castro in San Francisco through to the latest work by Bradley Rink (2008) and Gustav Visser (2003a, b, 2004, 2008) on the ‘gay village’ in Cape Town, these studies have explored how particular spaces offer a rupture in otherwise heteronormative environments. While these are obviously not the only types of spaces that might be considered ‘gay’, they are nonetheless some of the most visible

and widely known about manifestations, being based often on an agglomeration of individuals, businesses and residential dwellings. These spaces offer the opportunity for gay (and lesbian) individuals to socialise with each other and engage in leisure or business activities.

Such a space does not exist in the Cape Town townships. Instead, shebeens (formal and informal taverns) frequented also by members of the wider heteronormative community are one of the key sites that gay men use to socialise. While not all shebeens are open or accepting towards gay men (see below), the few that are offer gay men and men who identify as heterosexual the possibility of interacting with each other. As this owner of a shebeen commented:

if your place is like a place where people who hang around there are people who understand and knows what goes on in life they would accept gays... Ja, this is what happens here at my place. Most of my [heterosexual] customers are very sensible people and that is why they don't have a problem with [gay groups].

FRANKIE

Yet some such venues do not simply allow gay men to socialise with the wider community—they also help facilitate sexual interactions between men who identify as heterosexual and gay men. As this shebeen owner went on to explain:

Ja, some boys or sometimes come with ladies here, understand? And then I would see him with some gay guys and then I would hear from one of the other gay guys that this one is having an affair with this one... I did see him come with a lady and they have been intimate and the next thing I see him hang around with this gay guy. And the other gay guy will come and tell me... I will ask him "listen what is happening now because he was here with a lady two weeks ago and now he is hanging around with this one. What is happening?" They will say "No! They are having an affair". But I am not surprised by that. FRANKIE

What this allows us to start to understand is that the delineations between men who identify as heterosexual and those who identify as gay do not stop some individuals from within these two groups from engaging in sexual activity with each other. This is then facilitated at socialising venues for the whole community such as shebeens and no doubt to some degree goes to further such interactions. After all, unlike traditionally studied 'gay spaces' in Western formalised environments, the space of the shebeen is not demarcated as existing solely for the enjoyment of gay-identified men. Further, men who self-identify and are identified as heterosexual or 'straight' are not considered to be in need of reclassification as gay or (the rarely used term, 'bisexual') should they have sex with gay-identified men. As this individual explains:

So in these shebeens, [gay] people will sit and drink and socialise with straight people, and also just discover that, oh, straight people do accept us the way we are, who we are. And you must also remember, we also go out with them. You know? I had an affair with a straight guy, but who had a girlfriend. So it was that on and off. You know? You have to understand that that person is straight, as he say, he's got a girlfriend, but, ja, he does give you his time, his chance, you know, when you want to be with him. WESLEY

Yet not all shebeens are accepting towards men who identify as gay. Indeed, discrimination directed at gay men and women is also a common occurrence across the townships of Cape Town and wider South Africa (ActionAid 2009; Nel and Judge 2008).

There's a lot of guys they used to, when they get drunk, they used to call you with anything [at a shebeen]. Sometimes they know about your life or they – I mean, they know about your history....And then they used to shout to me, "Hey, you..." whatever, "You blah, blah, blah, blah blah" calling all that ugly names... Because they say, they go, "Hey, moffie⁵! I call you a bloody moffie," or whatever. But—sometimes I don't respond. I just go. SIZWE

And in terms of homophobia more generally against gay groups:

Even here outside, like, it's not that easy to be gay. Especially in the township, they can just knock you, for no apparent reason...some of my gay friends, like... life for them is hell. BILLY

Homophobia, clearly, can occur for a variety of reasons. Yet in township locations, a key reason suggested here to explain why homophobia today is so prevalent stems from the sudden visibility of groups positioning themselves as distinct from wider society post-apartheid. Indeed, awareness of men who engaged in sex with other men by the wider community, and following on from that, the possibility of these men publically and openly describing themselves as undertaking such sexual activities was less common in the decades leading up to the end of apartheid. As this article has briefly highlighted, delineated 'gay' identities are a relatively recent phenomenon in the Cape Town townships. An important explanation therefore, when considering the widespread prevalence of homophobia in the Cape Town townships today, emerges as a result of the fact the wider community did not have to conceptualise of, or find ways of accepting, such individuals in the same way they do now.

Yet this issue has also further been compounded by another recent development post-apartheid, namely the large-scale migration of black African groups to Cape Town (Western 2001). During apartheid, state planners attempted to keep what is now the Western Cape a predominantly white only area. It was this part of the country, after all, which was seen by apartheid's architects as containing some of the most conducive environments to settlement. This, together with an appreciation that what is today the Western Cape had historically been unoccupied by black African groups, acted as important rationales for keeping the area relatively free of black African habitation during apartheid.⁶

It therefore also stands to reason that with a smaller black African community in Cape Town during apartheid than exists today, that knowledge of same-sex desire

⁵ As briefly described above, moffie is another term sometimes used as a label for men who openly proclaim sexual attraction to other men.

⁶ As the following profoundly blinkered (with regard to European encroachment) statement made by Dr E G Jansen, the Minister of Native Affairs in South Africa in 1958, exemplifies: 'Whatever claim, morally or otherwise, that Natives [black Africans] have in other parts of the Union, they have no real claim to be here in the Western Province at all. It is within the memory of many people today that there was a time that a Native was unknown on the Peninsula.' As Western (2001) points out such a policy was of course never entirely successful. See also Bickford-Smith et al. (1999).

among a minority of black African individuals in the Cape Town townships would also have been proportionally smaller as well. As this individual explains:

Yea, I think because Jo'burg [Johannesburg] has been there for a long time, they have big townships and there's everybody there, so Cape Town's just grown now, Khayelitsha is just new, this place is just new. Only Langa and Nyanga and they were very small towns here, just to come and work in the kitchens, helping, so but Johannesburg has been there for a long time and people are working in mines and people are staying in, what you call those places? Hostels, so that's where it started, hostels, mines, whatever, long time ago. KEVIN

Yet today, as the townships around Cape Town have continued to grow, the number of men who openly are now feeling able to proclaim a public gay identity has also increased. This in turn can also be seen as an additional factor that could accentuate homophobia among the majority.

Here then, we find a situation whereby to understand contemporary 'gay' identities in the Cape Town townships and the relationships that exist between gay-identified men and the wider community, we must appreciate the history of black African same-sex desire in the country and also the way the labelling and acknowledgement of discrete sexual identities has evolved as a result of apartheid and its end. We can therefore appreciate how an identity label such as 'gay' may end up doing different conceptual work in different locations in which it is appropriated. After all, as other scholars have already documented, gay-identified men in the formalised and historically white city in Cape Town deploy 'gay' in a way that is similar to its use in places like North American and Western Europe (Rink 2008; Swarr 2004). This is different to the situation found in former townships.

On the one hand, 'gay' does not delineate the boundary between men who engage in sex with other men and men who do not in township locations. As the experiences that occur in certain shebeens highlight, not only is there a lack of 'exclusive' gay spaces, but such a lack reflects and can be seen to help facilitate sexual interactions between men who might consider themselves to be heterosexual and those who are gay-identified. We might wish to surmise that this situation in part has emerged due to the very 'newness' of the term 'gay' within the Cape Town townships—and as a result of a different history of the term to that of identity-based demarcated political movements in the 1960s and 1970s in the West. Yet on the other hand, we must also appreciate the parallel development of widespread homophobia towards those individuals who proclaim a gay identity in the townships. Again, this may in part be explained by exploring the history of sexual identity labels during the apartheid and early post-apartheid period. It was only during the period after 1994 that individuals stopped referring to themselves as Ivys and instead began to refer to themselves as gay and position themselves within a far more rigidly defined heterosexual/homosexual binary. And it was only at this point that the wider community had to come to terms with a suddenly very visible group of men who openly proclaimed their difference to the rest of society. As such, it becomes possible to see how one key reason why homophobia has become widespread at this particular juncture in history is again because of the 'newness' of the widespread use of the term 'gay' in these locations. This can then be seen to have been accentuated again by recent

large-scale migration to Cape Town which also has brought far larger numbers of men who feel able to identify with the label ‘gay’.

Yet the growing size of the Cape Town townships—and the growing size of the ‘gay male community’ there have also had other effects on gay group socialisation in Cape Town. The following section will therefore explore how the growing number of gay-identified men in the townships of Cape Town has also altered socialisation of gay men themselves.

The Growth of Township Gay Communities Post-apartheid: A Diversifying ‘Community’

Like wider society, it would be foolhardy to assume that all individuals will inevitably interact harmoniously with each other. Variations in age and class for example could easily and often do easily limit wider group solidarity. Other work has already explored such issues and the way they can also feed into distinctions between groups of men in the Cape Town townships (Tucker 2009). Here however, I want to focus in some detail on the way specific factors that are tied directly to the history of apartheid in the country and forced migration have helped delineate particular groups. To understand this, we must look at issues such as how individuals have spent in the city and the way this issue can also impact on constructions of gender. This will then help us understand in a different way how urban space and sexuality combine in the townships in ways somewhat distinct from the studies of ‘gay space’ conducted so far.

As the following individual explains, during the early 1990s social interaction between gay men tended to take place in such a way that the relatively small number of men who openly identified as gay were able to come together at particular locations and events. In particular, beyond the social world of shebeens, a small number of key individuals were understood during the period to have helped galvanise gay men—to act as ‘social nodes’—around their own homes and the parties that took place there. As this individual describes about one such individual:

He will say he invite all gay people...and all gay people used to go to his house because he liked, he liked to throw parties for gay people, all the time, he liked to, to throw parties... LINDIWE

Yet the growth in the size of townships has meant that such events have become less possible. As this individual explains about another key individual who used to act as a focal point for the small number of open gay-identified men during the period and the changes that have occurred subsequently:

Cape Town has grown, basically, because we were like then, in the nineties, we had, like, two, three townships, and it was easy to go to somebody’s house and hang around there. And I remember there was [X’s] house in Langa. It became the big place where lots of people, a lot of gay people ‘came out’, you know. Now there’s, like, Cape Town has grown such a lot. I mean, within no time, because I’ve noticed in Khayelitsha there’s, like, certain groups of gay people that I haven’t seen. MELISIZWE

The growing number of men who openly proclaim a gay identity in the Cape Town townships has therefore led to fractures between groups of men. Indeed, ‘social nodes’ are now also defined around issues of such as time spent in the city and constructions of gender in relation to sexuality. For example, a social node in Lower Crossroads is understood to comprise mostly recent migrants to Cape Town—due to the fact that this node is headed up by an individual who is perceived by many to be ‘rural’ or ‘tribal’ and still have strong links with the former ‘homelands’ of the Transkei and Ciskei. As this individual explains about this nodal leader:

But lot of gay people, they like, we can’t go to [X’s] place because [X] is a tribal, a tribal is someone who comes from the Eastern Cape, someone who’s got...that [traditional] Xhosa thing, who has all the cultures from them, ja. LINDIWE

Yet in addition, migration and time spent in the city is itself also related to issues of gender. Since the early 1990s, cross-dressing as a form of public sexual identity performance has been an important part of emerging gay social scenes in the Cape Town townships. As has been explored elsewhere, this can in part be seen to be the result of interaction with and appreciation of relatively large and well-known groups of cross-dressing men within coloured communities in the city (Tucker 2009). Yet as this following respondent discusses, another key reason to explain a recent history of cross-dressing among gay men in the former townships is the existence again of the few key early individuals who helped bring together the small number of gay men in the early 1990s. Some of them not only brought gay men together, they also helped to legitimate cross-dressing among this group.

[X] used to wear dresses, even—we went to another gay friend of ours who passed away, I think, a year before [X] passed away. But [X] was wearing an African dress and tying a big hood, like the traditional Xhosa woman would wear, and that’s who [X] was. As a result, at [X’s] funeral, there were lots of drag queens, and we were there—we are wonder—we thought we are going to be sad, but people started saying, “Come on, guys... If [X] would wake up, he wouldn’t like to see us like this. We have to sing.” In the graveyard we were singing like this, every—all the stuff that he used to sing, joyfully. Even, you know, [X’s] funeral attracted funeral guys—I mean, other people who were attending separate funerals from the graveyard—and they would stare, and say, “Ah ...”—I miss him. I do. I do. I do miss him a lot. XOLO

This legacy has remained important for some gay groups in these locations today—for some acting as a key marker of self-identification. As this man explains:

Dragging is kind of fun... It’s kind of like, finally, it’s me. I love the way I am. It’s my drag, it’s my make-up. MALCOM

Yet today, cross-dressing is seen to be less prevalent among gay-identified men who have spent longer in the city. As this individual explains, migration (or more specifically, time spent in the city) is understood to interface with individual’s different public performances of sexuality:

Because, like, a lot of gay people now, there’s a lot of, a huge influx of gay people from the Eastern Cape, and the ‘Capetonians’ will sort of outclass those

ones, because, like, the Eastern Cape is mainly known to be backwards... In terms of—not more, less cosmopolitan than Cape Town, and... they do drag more, because, like, all of them, they're very comfortable dragging... It's because they just feel—it's the bigger city. Maybe they feel they are out there, they're free... MELISIZWE

Indeed, for this individual, it would appear that cross-dressing is something that is easily associated with an initial desire to be 'free' of societal constraints that can be placed on individuals in more rural locations—locations that may present further barriers to publically identifying with a term such as 'gay'. As this individual then went on to explain, such a need for initial freedom—and the bodily manifestation of this—can lessen for others who have been in the city for longer or who cross-dressed at an earlier period:

You know, it's like... it's, like, the big city: "I feel free, I can be gay, I'm away from the family, and nobody's going to talk about me." And yet in the smaller towns, people do—dragging, it could be, like, a huge drama... Ja. You know. And—but that's not how I think [now], because, I mean, I think men and men is fine. You know, it's—it doesn't have to be—I don't have to be like a woman...I think it's just growing up. MELISIZWE

Two caveats must however be stressed here. First, care must be taken in distinguishing between men who would fall into the more established (and admittedly Westerncentric) terms of 'transgendered' or 'transsexual' and other men. Yet in part it is the fact that *all* men who cross-dress are simply termed 'gay' that highlights again a different way this term is deployed in the Cape Town townships than elsewhere. Second, therefore, we should also take care in simply assuming all men who cross-dress do so out of a desire to very publically express to the wider community their new found 'gay' identity. And also to assume that for all men this desire lessens over the period after they have 'come out'. Nevertheless, the distinction as described here, between those who do cross-dress and those who do not, is well-recognised in the Cape Town townships and also has a marked spatial dimension as well.

While cross-dressing exists in all townships in Cape Town, it is especially noted in Khayelitsha township, which has grown tremendously in recent years due largely to inward migration (see above). In addition, one of the main social nodes there is headed by an individual who supports and attempts to protect cross-dressers—a point understood by gay-identified men themselves to be relatively unique among other social groupings of gay men. As this nodal leader from Lower Crossroads explains:

BEN: There are [cross-dressers] in Guguletu and in Nyanga, but the most, the majority is in Khayelitsha...I think because of there's a lot of drag queens and there—and too much drag queens in Khayelitsha...

INTERVIEWER: Why?

BEN: I will say that [X, a social nodal leader in Khayelitsha] does not have a problem with cross-dressers but at [Y, a social nodal leader in Nyanga] house you will find people who see cross-dressers and then don't feel comfortable even to be there and then they avoid them, that is the problem.

This is a point supported by a social nodal leader in Nyanga:

I'll say, ja, it's like forcing yourself into something which that person doesn't like, and I think also straight people outside, they don't want someone who's too much of a womanish, because they don't want to be seen walking with a queen, a queer. You know? WESLEY

It must then also be realised that such distinctions are themselves reinforced by high levels of homophobia in township locations. While, as previously discussed, there are opportunities for gay-identified and heterosexually identified individuals to socialise with each other at particular shebeens, homophobia in other locations can take the form of violence and even murder. In these instances, social nodes serve to act not only as a validation of particular interpretations of what a gay identity can come to mean, but also as a form of wider protection. Indeed, in communities with high levels of homophobia, it is fair to argue that many groups of gay men require all the social support that they can get.

What emerges therefore is awareness among gay-identified men themselves of distinctions within the township use of the term 'gay'. This not only shows us how the term is deployed in a different fashion to elsewhere, but also how differences within the use of the term itself in township locations has become grounded in the actual spaces of different township social-nodes. Yet the way these distinctions—just as with interactions with the wider heterosexual community described above—must be seen to have emerged as a result of the particular way delineated categories of sexual identity developed in the Cape Town townships and the history of segregation and migration in the country as a result of apartheid. This then lets us appreciate how an identity label such as 'gay' and the type of public sexual performances with which it is now associated have intermingled in ways both linked and yet also dissimilar to those from where the term 'gay' originated.

Conclusion

This article has concerned itself with exploring the development of delineated sexual identities based around a public affirmation of male same-sex desire in the Cape Town townships, the way such identities relate to particular urban spaces—and particularly social spaces—and the uses that are made of the term 'gay' in this regard. As such, it will hopefully add to debates concerning the allegedly neo-colonising way in which this term can override local difference, highlighting instead the way the term itself can be appropriated in very unique ways by communities themselves.

As this article has endeavoured to show, the deployment of delineated sexual identities in the Cape Town townships is a relatively recent phenomenon, has been strongly affected by the history of apartheid and the post-apartheid transition and has resulted in particular social and sexual interactions becoming possible between individuals who describe themselves as gay and those who do not. Further, interactions between gay-identified men and between gay-identified men and the wider community are marked by particular geographies both in relation to the types of social spaces such interactions take place and in regard to being strongly affected by broader geographies of racial segregation and migration.

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