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Intersectional (un)belongings: Lived experiences of xenophobia and homophobia

Matthew Beetar

abstract

This reportback summarises two workshops held in South Africa, which engaged with lived experiences of homophobia and xenophobia. Partnering with PASSOP and Access Chapter 2, the sessions were open to individuals who felt subjective salience with the broad categories of African, 'foreign' in South Africa, male, and experiencing same-sex desire. The guided sessions created temporary spaces which explored what it means to legally and socially belong in South Africa as 'LGBTI foreigners'. Drawing on the narratives of the participants and the issues shared, the reportback emphasises that the enabling conditions surrounding the Constitution need to be multi-sited. The Constitution and supporting structures are framed as being inaccessible for many, contrasting formal equality with daily experiences in the country. It begins to shape steps towards an intersectional understanding of sexual and national belonging in a context of violent structural and substantive *un*belonging and institutionalised homophobia and xenophobia. In framing key experiences, it questions the premise of substantive equality offered by the Constitution of South Africa, focusing on the lack of access to the Constitution experienced by the participants.

keywords

xenophobia, homophobia, intersectionality, LGBTI, subjectivity, belonging

Background

South Africa is fraught with contradictions which translate into violent everyday struggles. Twenty years of legal and social change have created an image of progress which fails to hold true in the lives of many inhabitants. The dream of a 'Rainbow Nation' has become almost mythical in a wider context of deeply-rooted social prejudice. This project concerns itself with a configuration of such prejudices – paying particular attention to xenophobia and homophobia. Information about attitudes and realities faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) migrants and refugees is still sparse and given little

consideration on a structural level. This reportback begins to trace some of these realities, outlining sites for future engagement.

The wider project focuses on the personal journeys and suggestions of LGBTI Africans in South Africa, and is due for completion in 2016.¹ In 2015 I contacted Steve Letsike from Access Chapter 2 in Pretoria and Syla Ntumba Batshi from PASSOP in Cape Town to speak about hosting an all-day workshop at their organisations for people who were comfortable enough to attend and share stories. For ethical reasons we negotiated a day of partnership in which I would provide the structure for

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guided discussions (in preparation for the full thesis), and they would approach individuals familiar with the work of Access Chapter 2 and PASSOP to attend. The scope of the project is such that the sessions were open to people who had the broad subjectivities of “male”, “same-sex sexual attraction”, “living or working in South Africa” and “from another country in Africa”.²

the project ‘maps’ the complexity of the socio-political climate of South Africa as it relates to sexual rights, nationality and (un) belonging

One may reduce this demographic to a marker of “foreign gay men in South Africa”.³ However, a wider explicit reliance on intersectionality emphasises the need for a constant confrontation with the limitations of categories of analysis. Categories such as “gay” carry with them broader meanings, and the sessions were thus left open to wider subjective positioning with self-defined (potentially fluid) categories, including what it meant to be regarded as a “migrant” or a “refugee”. Seventeen individuals from diverse backgrounds participated, and each workshop was structured to foster discussion in a safe space. Conscious of my own subject position (a Queer white male born in South Africa to a migrant family), I invited the groups to create spaces of co-operation with a goal of collectively generating active suggestions for ways moving forward. I do not seek to present these sessions as representative of all social forces which may influence belonging. Similarly, the experiences shared by the 17 participants are in no way indicative of all ‘LGBTI Africans’ in the country. Rather, the project ‘maps’ the complexity of the socio-political climate of South Africa as it relates to sexual rights, nationality and (un)belonging using intersectionality as a guiding framework.

Crenshaw, writing from a perspective of critical legal studies, argues against a “single-axis” understanding of inequality (Grzanka, 2014a:XV). She proposes an analytic approach which considers multiple facets, engaging with “the multidimensionality of marginalised subjects’ lived experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989:139). “Intersectionality”, the term coined to describe such an approach, is rooted in a history of

struggles for social justice (Chun *et al*, 2013:922) and a critique of structural power – although these factors emerge from broader projects concerned with “interlocking oppressions” (Brah and Phoenix, 2014:310). This extends to an engagement with gender in relation to understandings of hegemonic masculinity. In the South African context patriarchy continues to be legitimised through the social subordination of women and femininity and, within this ideology, same-sex sexuality is regarded as a “repository of whatever is symbolically expelled” as undesirable to the hegemonic ideal (Connell, 2005:78; Beetar, 2012:55–56). Through encouraging one to consciously consider masculinity as it relates to popular identities and categorisations, intersectionality enables an exploration of how multiple dimensions of power subordinate histories and struggles. The concept moves away from “the ways in which formal equality frameworks” normalise assumptions of gender-based practice and expression (Carbado, 2013:817).

Although somewhat of a buzzword now and not without points of contention (Cho *et al*, 2013:788), the question of “what do we do with intersectionality?” has led to various calls to refine understandings and research methods.⁴ Here intersectionality emphasises an analytical and activist approach which problematises sameness, difference, and their relationship with power. It is thus an “analytic sensibility” (Cho *et al*, 2013:794) with an investment in “doing something” (Grzanka, 2014b:306) – actively seeking to transform social structures through coalitions. It is similarly a tool which acknowledges that any explanatory model will omit certain factors, but it compensates for this through its openness. An intersectional approach fundamentally recognises that prescribed lived identity categories are social realities that need to be acknowledged and integrated into strategies of intervention *whilst simultaneously* allowing for a fluidity of subjective salience and new imagined belongings. The Constitution can be regarded as a structural attempt to facilitate both the adhering to and moving between categories of subjectivity – with the effect that it gives material reality to specific experiences and understandings.

Lived journeys

The workshops began by using body-mapping to discuss subjectivities, and so

this is a useful starting point for consideration. The participants used words they personally felt applicable to describe themselves. Where sexual labels were used the majority of the groups self-identified as “gay”, with several preferring “homosexual”. What these meant varied between individuals: for Max and Pat – both migrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – “gay” was associated with living in South Africa and speaking English, taking on a sexualised understanding, shifting from a Francophone assumption of it simply meaning ‘happy’. For Pat this came to mean a transnational group of belonging, his “people”, with whom he connected when watching films. For Ken, an asylum seeker from Nigeria, and Ruwash, a migrant from Zimbabwe, identifying as “gay” was a self-definition close to their hearts. For others “gay” was a generic term for all LGBTI individuals. For Republican, a student from Zimbabwe, “homosexual” was a general blanket term for identification and “gay” was an unfavourable informal term which separated him from other ‘homosexuals’ (an unwanted cleaving of imagined community). Top, a refugee from the DRC, viewed “gay” as a generic marker, but within an activist context preferred to use the phrase “an LGBTI person”, emphasising a shared experience and community.

As the project goes forward one should hold both the enabling *potential* of transcontinental and transnational connections based on fluid sexual subjectivities, alongside their *limitations*. A very real sense of community was evident amongst participants. A danger of the focus on ‘shared gayness’ is, as Matebeni (2013) notes, the potential structural erasure of the complexities of everyday existence. This concern can be linked to a popular discourse of human rights wherein the legal protection of individual rights is hailed as the mark of an active democracy. Certainly the current legal framework undoubtedly acts as an “enabling tool” (Van Zyl, 2005:235) for many people in South Africa. However, to understand South Africa wholly within the narrative of the protection of individual rights as an ultimate endpoint (Lind, 2005) risks disregarding the need for constant reflection in a project of social empowerment.⁵ Although the Equality Clause fosters

belonging, Kevan Botha, a prominent gay activist, argues that “the clause is meaningless unless you’re “out”. In order to claim rights you have to acknowledge and own the identity of being gay” (in Cock, 2005:195). The real-world significance of this necessity of claiming a structurally predetermined category lies in the social dangers of ‘coming out’ in a hostile social environment, as well as senses of subjective absence, potential unbelonging, and a lack of social support which may arise through not finding these categories subjectively salient.

“the risk of me being a gay in my country is very high”

Thinking on this, I invited the discussants to each take two pieces of clay; one symbolising sexual subjectivity and the other their sense of connection to Africa. I asked them to consider how these two factors relate in their lives, and asked each participant to physically show, by shaping the balls of clay, how they hold these in their minds. The intention behind this was to physically tease out ideas which may not be easily expressed otherwise. The sizes and shapes of the clay varied. Ken broke off a small piece to symbolise his sexuality and surrounded it with the other piece, symbolising Africa and Nigeria. He explained that “the risk of me being a gay in my country is very high” and that the size relation speaks to a sense of isolation and insignificance. For Max and JuiceBabie, from Zimbabwe, the two pieces of clay were squashed together. JuiceBabie surrounded his ball symbolising Africa with his gay clay (for lack of a better phrase) to emphasise how “you should be proud of yourself”. Max, however, almost covered his ball symbolising his sexuality with his African clay, emphasising how “it’s not that I’m hiding my sexuality” but rather that he foregrounds his Africanness in his mind so he does not have to put himself “under this stress of switching” between being gay *or* being African. This idea of “switching” was raised by Republican who held his two pieces of clay in different hands, emphasising that the two do not connect:

“There is a switch. I can say there is a switch. But when I am in Zimbabwe I definitely ... I have my African obligations, my

Zimbabwean obligations – and my gay obligations. And usually the two don't meet because if ... I need to be completely free and do everything I want to do in any space I feel like, in the same way that heterosexuals do in Africa, but I can't. So I can't marry the two."

Pat agreed with him, emphasising how he cannot connect the two aspects out of fear of people judging and a fear of his life being threatened. This idea of separating these aspects was the dominant representation across both groups. Roda shared that "I know that in Uganda [being gay] is a Western character, and that's why most of us – we gays – we decided to depart from our home country". Others echoed their agreement. The King, an asylum seeker from the DRC, shared that he holds the pieces apart because "I live my own life, because whatever I have seen, whatever I have experienced, I tend not to trust anybody. [...] It's difficult to be both of those things". Daniel, a student, shared that some of the people in his life "have this perception that, like, you can't be homosexual if you are African".

homosexuality as unAfrican did not grow to be a dominant legal discourse in South Africa as it did in other African countries

The rhetoric that 'homosexuality is unAfrican' draws on the shaky assumption that same-sex sexual activity and identities are a colonial import. The focus in other countries on combating the unAfrican trend in the form of legislation is often a way of "distracting the populace from more urgent needs" (Ekine, 2013:84) using an "essentialist notion of an 'authentic Africanness'" (Ekine, 2013:80), with the effective scapegoating of homosexuality as the root of society's ills. Due to the ultimate alignment of 'gay rights' with the struggle against apartheid on an ideological level, homosexuality as unAfrican did not grow to be a dominant legal discourse in South Africa as it did in other African countries (Leatt and Hendricks, 2005). However, it frequently emerges as a popular social discourse in tension with the legal framework currently in place.

The personal anxiety that the participants displayed sat at odds with the image of South Africa as a progressive Utopia – an image that many of them shared before

journeying here. However, the legal foundation of the Constitution did not come into being through a wide party-supported commitment to gay rights in particular, but rather through the prioritising of a recognition of the need for a broad ideal of non-discrimination (Jones, 2005). Rooted in the history of the country, therefore, is a tension between a (fought-for) legal adherence to an ideal of social progressivism, and conservative social values amongst many of the key leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), to which many constituents turn for moral guidance and leadership, as well as amongst significantly large sections of society itself. Although the Constitution projects a climate of acceptance and tolerance, key institutions continue to display deeply prejudicial attitudes.

Indeed, this discourse affects LGBTI people from South Africa itself – but further consideration of intersectionality needs to be given to the ways in which this anxiety and conflicted sense of belonging manifests socially for *non-South Africans* specifically. The overlaying of the discourse experienced in 'home' countries with homophobic encounters in South Africa is, for example, compounded by the prejudice encountered within local migrant communities. Sash, a sex-worker from Burundi, reflects how he worries about other migrants finding out that he identifies as gay, fearing for his safety. He was chased out of a refugee camp after other refugees discovered that he was gay, and currently receives death-threats from an inmate in Pollsmoor. Top echoed this fear, describing how he remains 'undercover' after being attacked by two Congolese men in his community and witnessing them kill his partner. Tito, a community activist from Malawi, described being attacked and stabbed five times by residents in a local Malawian neighbourhood.

This violence and fear is a daily reality for most of the participants. The police occupy an ambivalent role in relation to this. Roda, Sash, Ken and Tito described positive personal experiences with the police in Cape Town, with Roda jokingly reminding everyone that sometimes the police want to help because they "are also gays" and that some of them are "the customers". This conviviality, however, had a darker side in that Roda and Sash noted that sometimes in order to receive help from the police there is an

expectation of sex. Ken also recounted how the police approached men who were harassing him at a bar for being gay and how they laughed at him, asking “why did you wear a dress?” (metaphorically), only to walk away to leave him to be assaulted. Despite this, if there was an issue involving sexuality, the police were considered to be approachable with regards to one’s orientation.

This, however, sat in stark contrast with experiences of the police regarding the participants as ‘foreigners’. Each participant had negative personal experiences, speaking to an almost necessary ‘splitting’ of identities when approaching the police for support. The King shared how the police refused to investigate a robbery because they knew he was not South African; Top noted how the police drove off when he was frantically searching for help after his partner had been murdered; Max was arrested and detained whilst out cycling because he was not carrying his passport – the stories are numerous. The overwhelming sentiment was that the police harass and intimidate ‘foreigners’ (who are often, of course, also gay people), and that they are not a source of support – echoing established reports on xenophobia in South African institutions (Neocosmos, 2010; 2008).

In much the same way that the participants resigned themselves to occurrences of homophobia they also framed that they have no choice in tolerating xenophobia. Initially both groups largely considered ‘xenophobia’ to mean the extreme levels of violence reported in the news. Within this extreme understanding no-one positioned themselves as having experienced xenophobia. However, discussions unpacked this disidentification through considering everyday micro-aggressions. Each participant recounted how they encountered hostility when they were unable to speak local languages in various contexts – particularly on taxis. Pat noted how he had to collect money in a taxi, and that people kept staring at him and shouting, when he spoke English, to “*Khuluma, khuluma, khuluma*” (Zulu translation: “talk, talk, talk!”) causing him to feel “like no, this is not my place, I wasn’t supposed to be here”. Issues around language and expression had particular resonance with the groups, extending beyond everyday intolerance to practical difficulties such as

not being aware of or being able to access support structures in times of need. Delphi is a self-identified trans sex-worker whose subjective positioning as “male” comes from the fact that her asylum seeker papers list her as a man – a fact which causes ongoing anguish. As a native French-speaker a lack of language-based support has contributed to her frustration, as well as resulted in misunderstanding a situation which resulted in her gang rape in Johannesburg. The group noted that on the whole they were unfamiliar with what resources are available to them in times of need, and that they often struggle to access information that may be of help.

Several of the participants explained that they are apprehensive about revealing their sexuality to Home Affairs should they need to, for fear of further discrimination.

However, prejudicial encounters occur most frequently and universally at the dreaded Home Affairs. This is the government department which issues residence and work permits, and is dreaded in part because it has the power to deny such permits. Tito summarised general feelings by sharing that Home Affairs treats people “like a dog”. Star, from Namibia, lamented the “degrading” treatment, and Pat explained how a lack of support has practical implications, such as uncertainty over how to open a bank account with refugee status. Officials claiming to be from Home Affairs frequently harass individuals, with JuiceBabie sharing how his work is regularly raided to demand people produce “papers”. Pat echoed this by recalling how he was stopped in the CBD of Pretoria by an official in uniform. If documentation is not produced immediately then, as in Max’s story, they are arrested. South Africans can share, to some extent, this frustration with Home Affairs, but as a key structural support in the country it requires intersectional consideration for the challenges faced by LGBTI individuals. Several of the participants explained that they are apprehensive about revealing their sexuality to Home Affairs should they need to, for fear of further discrimination. However, Ken, who applied for asylum from Nigeria on the grounds of his sexual orientation, was required to ‘prove’ his sexuality. Officials in South Africa refused to believe

that he is gay, and eventually seized his phone and tablet to check private chat messages and photos for 'evidence'.

These factors contribute to a state of constant anxiety about belonging. To give credit, South Africa has been signatory to various conventions about migration and refugee protection, giving backing to this locally through the promulgation of the Refugee Act in 1998. However, overall attitudes in legislation towards migrants continue to be largely based on "notions of exclusion and control" (Steinberg, 2012:354) and these are, ironically, rooted in the Constitution. Although the Preamble boldly claims that the country belongs to all those who live in it, the text of the remainder of the Constitution

distinguishes between two categories of people: citizens and persons. The distinction means that not all people within the country are interpellated in the same manner. Some are said to have rights which others do not have (Neocosmos, 2010:84).

The rights to vote and "engage in freedom of trade, occupation and professionalism" are, for example, reserved for citizens alone, despite the overall scope of protection of the Constitution, in theory, being extended to all who live within the geographic borders of the country (Crush, 2000:110). The sovereign foundation of South Africa is based on an inherent opposition between an ideal of universal belonging and the reality of delineated categories of inclusivity. This is not to suggest, of course, that an open-door policy on immigration would eradicate xenophobia. Rather, for the purposes of a framework of understanding, it draws attention to a fundamental disconnect in the conceptualisation of (legally) belonging. Indeed, when asked for opinions on the statement '*there is a Constitution in South Africa which protects all people living in the country*' the participants largely felt that it does not apply to everyone. Republican and Star felt that it only applies "on paper". The participants expressed uncertainty about what rights they were entitled to as 'LGBTI foreigners'. The overwhelming view of the Constitution was that it is a vague construct that exists for some unknown purpose. The King summarised this opinion sharing that

"it doesn't apply to everyone who lives in South Africa" because the government never sends people to the community "on the ground" to talk about it – to explain "why a community should be okay with anybody who lives in South Africa".

This sense of a lack of care extended to everyday interactions. Throughout the discussions key issues faced by 'LGBTI foreigners' were highlighted. These included a lack of: safe and affordable shelter specifically for LGBTI people; jobs; information about rights and responsibilities; information about Home Affairs procedures and accountability; easily accessible health services for gay men; and representations of 'LGBTI foreigners' in the media. All of these contributed to a unique configuration of anxieties and conflict expressed by the participants.

These in turn shape an unstable sense of belonging in South Africa. The country legally 'welcomes' the participants and yet structurally and socially isolates them. As the project moves forward considering the intersection of sexual subjectivity with national belonging, the development of a "shared framework of values" (van Zyl, 2009:371) becomes appealing. Strategies for intervention based on intersectional understandings have the potential for a constant reflection on layers of privilege, disprivilege, empowerment and disempowerment – in turn shaping a value-based understanding of everyday reality in South Africa. On a practical as well as intellectual level recognition must be given to the realisation that an (African) national identity, and in turn an (African) continental identity, are, within the discourse of 'homosexuality as unAfrican', at odds with a broadly 'gay' subjectivity. As one claims a 'gay' subjectivity one is seemingly stripped of any claim to a national subjectivity. Similarly, as one claims a national subjectivity one is met with extreme, often violent resistance in trying to claim a 'gay' subjectivity. The legal structures in South Africa give hope for continued support, and yet need to be questioned and pried open to allow for re-imaginings of subjectivities beyond national identities, rendering Africa as a whole as the site of potential belonging.

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Notes

1. This is a PhD project supervised at the University of Sussex by Dr Sharif Mowlabocus and Dr Paul Boyce. The research here includes reworked extracts from the wider thesis and data from fieldwork which has been ethically approved by the university. This extends to confidentiality clauses assuring the anonymity of participants and the secure storage of transcripts. The identity of participants is protected here through the use of pseudonyms.
2. The scope of the project limited participants to include self-defined “men” only due primarily to research paradigms and time constraints within the PhD. This extended to an ethical consideration of potential participant discomfort in discussing personal accounts of trauma in mixed-gendered ‘safe spaces’. Men were also selected as a demographic out of a recognised need to include understandings of masculinity as a part of intersectional solutions (see Carbedo, 2013). Fluidity of sexual orientation differs from fluidity in gender identity, and although the project embraces various understandings of masculinity it is limited in its consideration of dynamic gender expressions. The project does, however, remain mindful of the intersectional issues that trans* individuals and women face. Another limitation was that the sessions had to be conducted in English.
3. Participants self-identified as either refugees or migrants. These categories became regarded as secondary to the adopted marker of “foreigners”, indicating a sense of solidarity separate from the nation-state, as discussed.
4. See, for example, Brah and Phoenix (2014: 310); Grzanka (2014b: 302).
5. Various authors have discussed the politics and complications surrounding notions of ‘gay community’. See, for example, Ekine (2013: 85); Steyn and van Zyl (2009).

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