

# **‘It’s about being safe and free to be who you are’: Exploring the lived experiences of queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents findings from three arts-based studies conducted by the African Centre for Migration and Society, in partnerships with Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action and the Sisonke National Sex Worker Movement. Drawing on participant-created visual and narrative artefacts, the article offers insights into the complex ways in which queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers living in South Africa negotiate their identities, resist oppression and confront stereotypes. It reveals the dynamic ways in which queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers forge a sense of belonging in spite of concurrent vulnerabilities and structural discrimination. It also reflects on the benefits and limitations of using participatory arts-based research with marginalised groups.

## **Keywords**

Identity, migration, participatory research, queer, LGBT, South Africa

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Queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers<sup>1</sup> traverse multiple borders – some are physical, such as national boundaries, while others are socio-cultural, such as gendered or racial expectations. A border crossing of any kind is dangerous, for it marks one out as an other, a potential threat to social categories that are fragile at best – ‘citizen’, ‘subject’, ‘male’, ‘female’. In many contexts, queer migrants are regarded as a double threat, in that they disrupt both hetero-patriarchal norms and claims to nationhood. This is particularly true in South Africa, where homophobic, transphobic and xenophobic discourses have coalesced to create an intensely hostile social environment. Yet even within this context of violence, queer migrants continue to develop livelihood strategies, forge networks and resist oppression.

In this article, we share findings from a number of arts-based interventions exploring the lived experiences of queer migrants living in Johannesburg. Our analysis is embedded within two guiding questions: (1) How do queer migrants understand their journeys to and lives in South Africa? (2) How do queer migrants understand their sexuality and gender in the context of their migration? In answering these questions, we reveal the complex ways in which queer migrants construct their identities and navigate various forms of injustice.

Before continuing, it is necessary to clarify our choice of terminology. We use ‘queer’ throughout the article to indicate the varying ways in which nonconforming identities challenge heteronormativity. While we are motivated by a growing body of work produced by self-identified queer African researchers (Nyanzi, 2014), we remain conscious of the polemics inherent in the word and acknowledge that it is a category not yet fully embraced, recognised and/or understood on the continent (see Msibi, 2012; Muthien, 2008). Queer is not employed here as an identity term, as participants in these projects did not use it in this way. Rather, it is used as an analytic term, one that is helpful for describing the ways in which participants resist social pressures and subvert hetero-patriarchal norms.

## **Background and context**

Queer persons and migrants living in South Africa face very high levels of discrimination, a reality more acutely felt when one identifies as both queer *and* migrant. This section seeks to make sense of this condition by exploring the context and theoretical frames in which this research is situated. We briefly describe (a) the ways in which non-normative sexualities have been understood in South Africa; (b) the politics of migration in the post-apartheid state; and (c) the complex ways in which homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and other forms of oppression intersect. We also offer an overview of recent debates on participatory arts-based methods.

### ***On sexual and gender diversity***

Contemporary attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity need to be situated within South Africa’s broader history of colonial struggle. Before colonisation, many southern African peoples regarded sexuality and gender as fluid and dynamic

(Muthien, 2008), in a similar way to other indigenous cultures in North America and Asia (see Amadiume, 2015). These traditions came into conflict with the value system imposed by European colonisers. In South Africa, Dutch and later British settlers quickly set about regulating the behaviour of indigenous groups (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

The apartheid era (1948–1994) was characterised by intense anxieties over social and sexual relationships (Posel, 2004; Thoreson, 2013). Punitive laws governed interactions at all levels of society, ensuring not just racial segregation but also strict conformity to heteronormativity. Concerns over interracial relationships were extended to same-sex sexual practices (and other ‘sexual offences’) with the introduction of the Immorality Act in 1957.

In 1996, post-apartheid South Africa became the first country to include a constitutional protection against discrimination on the basis of sexuality. The historic Equality Clause paved the way for significant legislative reforms: same-sex couples won the right to marry or form civil partnerships; to jointly adopt children and file for parental rights; and to claim benefits and inheritance (Judge et al., 2008). Laws prohibiting employment, housing and service-related discrimination were extended to cover homophobia and transphobia (among other prejudices) and protections against hate speech and harassment were introduced. Transgender persons also won the right to have sex descriptions amended on official identity documents, although misinterpretation of the Act by bureaucrats and long waiting periods have made this nearly impossible (Dey et al., 2014). Because of this constellation of rights, South Africa is often regarded as a beacon of hope on the continent and a ‘safe haven’ for queer persons (Dill et al., 2016).

However, while the reforms of the past 20 years have addressed legislative barriers, they have done little to improve the material realities of most queer persons, particularly those who are poor and black. Such individuals continue to experience high rates of discrimination and stigma, and are frequently excluded from public life (Marnell and Khan, 2016). Indeed, the ‘guarantee of democratic tolerance for all South Africans still remains somewhat illusory’ (De Ru, 2013: 221).

The country’s rights-based legislative framework has also done little to shift community attitudes. A longitudinal survey conducted between 1988 and 2008 found that 84% of South Africans believe that homosexual behaviour is ‘always wrong’ (Smith, 2011), while 72% of respondents in a recent large-scale survey indicated that same-sex sexual activity is ‘morally wrong’ (Sutherland, 2016).

Although nominally supportive of diversity, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has been slow to tackle homophobic and transphobic violence domestically and has been reluctant to endorse sexual and gender rights in regional and international forums (see Judge, 2016). High-profile ANC members, including former president Jacob Zuma, have also spoken out against diversity. In 2006, while still deputy president of the ANC, Zuma described same-sex marriage as a ‘disgrace to the nation and to God,’ adding ‘when I was growing up, an *ungqingili* [a derogatory Zulu term for a homosexual person] would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out’ (Croucher, 2011: 163).

These examples reveal the deep fracture that exists between South Africa's rights-based framework and any meaningful realisation of these rights. Moreover, they point to efforts by state, cultural and religious institutions to propagate conservative notions of morality and constrict the space available to those advocating diversity (Tamale, 2014).

Similar trends can be observed elsewhere on the continent, where same-sex sexual practices remain widely criminalised (Amnesty International, 2015). These laws are propped up by hegemonic discourses that seek to define the boundaries of acceptable sexuality. Political, religious and cultural leaders regularly denounce queer identities as sinful and abnormal and in doing so work to produce a new form of patriarchy embedded in distorted cultural norms. Such statements reinforce the widely held view that homosexuality was imported to Africa through western imperialism (Epprecht, 2004).

African gender and sexualities scholars have worked hard to re-position their discipline and develop concepts that are useful and appropriate for African contexts. Matebeni (2014) and Tamale (2011) highlight the role of geopolitics in shaping scholarship on African sexualities and the tendency of western researchers to reduce complex histories to a singular experience. Scholars like Stella Nyanzi, Hakima Abbas, Binyavanga Wainaina and Keguro Macharia are calling for an evaluation of old frameworks and have begun to excavate spaces in African academia for new approaches. They openly critique the role and work of western scholars, highlighting in particular how the established language of sexuality is rooted in the colonial project. This article seeks to contribute to this emerging field of work by situating its findings within larger discussions of collaborative knowledge production and social justice research.

### *On migration*

Migration has a long and complex history in South Africa: from the racialised migrant labour systems that exploited cheap black labour, to the forced exile of anti-apartheid activists during the liberation struggle, to the cross-border migrations of those fleeing political instability. In recent years, the South African government has drawn sharp criticism for its failure to adequately address xenophobic violence and for its ineffective implementation of legislation, including the Refugees Act. First drafted in 1998, 'a time when the South African commitment to rights was strengthened by the memory of the abuses of apartheid' (Palmary, 2016a: 16), the Act lists multiple grounds on which asylum can be claimed and outlines the government's obligations in relation to domestic and international law. It explicitly states that persecution on the basis of sexuality and/or gender, or a well-founded fear of such, qualifies an individual for refugee status. However, 'the implementation of this progressive legislation is fraught with inconsistencies' (Dill et al., 2016: 86). Research indicates that successful applications on the basis of sexuality and/or gender are unlikely (Palmary, 2016b). Reasons for this range from 'corruption to inaccessibility of the system to appallingly poor decision-making by the Refugee Status Determination Officers' (Palmary, 2016a: 16).

The country's progressive legislation has led many queer persons to seek refuge in South Africa (Oliveira et al., 2016). However, due to increasingly restrictive policies that make it nearly impossible for individuals without 'critical' or 'scarce' skills – as determined by the Department of Home Affairs – to regularise their long-term stay, most migrants either remain without legal documentation or are subjected to years of interrogation by immigration officials (Palmary, 2016b). Forced into a state of perpetual precarity, queer migrants become easy targets for violence and discrimination (Bhagat, 2018). Cross-border queer migrants are especially vulnerable, in that they are susceptible to both xenophobic violence *and* homophobic/transphobic violence (Beetar, 2016).

Xenophobic violence in South Africa needs to be situated within a broader context of intersectional oppression and colonial struggle (see Mbembe, 2015). It undoubtedly has racial and class dimensions, in that those migrants targeted are almost always poor and non-white. Furthermore, current manifestations of xenophobia are arguably Afrophobic, with individuals from elsewhere on the African continent bearing the brunt. Anxieties around sexual and gender norms add another layer of complexity, with some of the most extreme acts of violence reserved for those migrants who are sex workers, gender nonconforming or same-sex attracted. This discrimination is perpetuated not only by the public, but also by state actors, particularly police and Home Affairs officials (Moodley, 2012).

### *On intersections*

Intersectionality offers a useful rubric for understanding the complex relationship between homophobia/transphobia and xenophobia, in that it encourages us to unpack how these forms of oppression are linked – not just with each other, but also with a variety of other power differentials (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). It also provides a framework for analysing the different ways in which identities such as queer, migrant and refugee are embodied. Queer migrants do not experience homophobia/transphobia in one place and xenophobia in another, but rather live both concurrently. It is from the intersections of these (and other) forms of oppression that specific vulnerabilities emerge (Gunkel, 2010).

However, when applied in isolation, an intersectional analysis offers an insufficient account of oppression. While such a reading recognises the dynamic relationship between multiple aspects of identity, it does not account for the role of social interactions in mediating experience. Queer migrants experience oppression through encounters – conditional relationships between the location of this group (as embodied in their gender, race, class, sexuality and nationality) and other locations (for example, physical geographies or state institutions). An experience of oppression is shaped by the relational trends that influence particular encounters. We must recognise, for example, relational trends between individual experiences (such as the concurrent experiences of being black and migrant and lesbian and woman) and locations (such as a township area) that may predispose a person to oppression. These configurations of embodied experience and spatial location are typically

enmeshed within broader configurations – for example, the South African state, which does not prioritise safety in township geographies. Applying Puar's (2005) theory of assemblage alongside a more standard intersectional analysis can allow for a more nuanced reading of oppression, one that is not fixated on specific identity configurations, or at risk of becoming a version of standpoint theory. Moreover, by understanding oppression as an assemblage of relational trends, we can more easily engage with and disrupt patterns of unfair encounters (Pitcher and Gunkel, 2008).

While the frameworks just outlined provide useful opportunities for understanding oppression, they are not beyond critique. Both are firmly rooted in the Euro-American academic project. The categories at the heart of an intersectional analysis do not translate easily across national, regional and epistemic boundaries, and there is a danger in uncritically employing these across historical and geopolitical locations (Puar, 2005).

### *On participatory visual methods*

As researcher-activists, we are interested in exploring collaborative forms of knowledge production. It is critical, we argue, that those who experience the issues under investigation are directly involved in the research process. Not only does this allow for a more nuanced understanding of complex phenomena, it also creates a space in which critical consciousness can be developed. Participatory methods can also support solidarity initiatives and produce materials that are relevant and accessible to individuals and their communities (Chatterton et al., 2007).

The projects that inform this article employed a range of participatory research (PR) approaches. Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, PR emphasises a 'bottom-up' approach *with* rather than *over* people (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Arts-based methods, such as those applied here, incorporate a range of strategies to evoke multi-dimensional responses (Eisner, 1998). The artefacts that are created by participants can 'serve as data, and may also represent data' (Leavy, 2009: 227). According to Oliveira (2016), participatory arts-based research provides everyone involved – participants, researchers, public audiences and so on – with an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and to consider the multiple meanings/messages behind what the creator might be sharing. Some critics question the subjectivity inherent in visual and/or narrative representations, but it is exactly this subjectivity that can unlock important insights into the complexities of experience and identity (Oliveira and Vearey, 2015). It is within this body of thought that we would like to locate the methods used here. We see them as *creative interventions* undertaken *in collaboration* with queer migrants with the view to *produce knowledge* and *create change*.

## **Methods**

This article draws on three projects undertaken as part of the MoVE (Methods:Visual:Explore) project.<sup>2</sup> Housed at the African Centre for Migration and

Society, MoVE uses visual and narrative approaches (alongside more traditional qualitative methods) to research the lived experiences of migrants in southern Africa.

Each of the projects received ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand. Prior to the start of each workshop, prospective participants were taken through an information session and informed of the associated risks and benefits. Those who wished to be involved gave verbal consent. In order to protect privacy, participants were asked to select pseudonyms; these self-chosen names have been used for all exhibitions, forums and publications, including this article.

### *Volume 44*

Taking place from 2013 to 2014, Volume 44 was a collaboration between the ACMS, Market Photo Workshop and the Sisonke National Sex Worker Movement. The project used an adapted version of 'photo-voice' to investigate the lived experiences of 19 migrants who sell sex (including a limited number of queer-identified participants). The project took place at two sites: Johannesburg, South Africa's most populated city, and Musina, a rural town on the South Africa–Zimbabwe border. Images and text from the project have been exhibited on three continents (including at multiple sites in South Africa) and have been shared in various publications (see Oliveira, 2016).

### *Queer Crossings*

Taking place from 2014 to 2015, Queer Crossings was a multi-stage project with queer migrants living in Johannesburg. The project used a variety of participatory methods to investigate issues of identity, well-being, belonging and inclusion.

The 2014 phase, run in collaboration with Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) and Seattle University, involved 11 participants of various nationalities (Congolese, Ghanaian, Malawian, South African and Zimbabwean). It took the form of a seven-day workshop facilitated by the second and third authors and Susan Meyers, director of Seattle University's creative writing program. The workshop incorporated both visual (body-mapping) and narrative writing components.

The 2015 phase involved 9 of the 11 original participants (see Dill et al., 2016). It took the form of a week-long poetry workshop that was co-facilitated by LeConte Dill from the School of Public Health, SUNY Downstate Medical Center, and Makhosazana Xaba from GALA.

Creative works produced during Queer Crossings have been exhibited locally and internationally and have been collated in a book of the same name (see Oliveira et al., 2016).

### *The Sex Worker Zine Project*

The Sex Worker Zine Project involved 24 cross-border and internal migrants who sell sex. Participants were drawn from three South African regions: Gauteng, the



country's wealthiest province, Limpopo, a very poor province bordering Zimbabwe, and Mpumalanga, which borders Swaziland and Mozambique. A range of sexualities and gender identities were represented in the project.

Led by the second author, the project included facilitation support from Quinten Edward Williams, a Johannesburg-based artist who also served as visual researcher during Volume 44; Linda Monane, a previous Volume 44 participant; and Katlego Rasebitse, Sisonke's Advocacy Officer.

This multi-method project involved two-week workshops at two separate sites. The workshops culminated in the production of personal zines for public consumption. Zines are self-published works that normally address topics considered too controversial or niche for mainstream media (Oliveira and Vearey, 2016). The zines have been exhibited and distributed widely and have been published in book form (see Oliveira and Vearey, 2016).

The title of this article references a zine made by KG LOO (Figure 1). The quotation reflects the main reasons why participants chose to migrate, as well as their embodied hopes and dreams. The words: 'It's about being free and safe to be who you are' encapsulate our fundamental need – as human beings – for dignity, respect and security.

## **Findings and discussion**

The analysis that follows draws on creative works, spoken reflections and facilitator observations. The workshops themselves provided a critical space in which participants could analyse their creative outputs – both as individuals and as a collective – and these inputs have guided our analysis. However, while informed by participants' reflections, the discussion in this article reflects our own interpretation of the data.

While some visual materials are referenced, the primary data source for this article is narrative. The quotations used are taken from sharing sessions or follow-up interviews, as well as from stories and poems produced during the workshops. In terms of analysing visual products, it is often the memories and stories evoked by artefacts, rather than the artefacts per se, that provide the most useful insights into participants' lived experiences.

As Murray (2014) rightly points out, caution must be applied when working with queer migrant narratives. Researchers risk reinforcing hegemonic narratives of 'freedom' and 'liberation', or reducing individuals with complex lives, identities and emotions to stock characters. Indeed, mainstream depictions of queer migration tend to 'enforce a specific script built on highly heteronormative, ethnocentric and privileged definitions of sexual orientation and gendered identity' (Murray, 2014: 464). It is also important to recognise the ways in which hegemonic narratives shape participants' own retelling of their lives; queer migrants often become adept at crafting their story to align with the expectations of bureaucrats, researchers and others who may be able to provide assistance.





**Figure 1.** KG LOO's zine cover, with permission from the workshop participant.

The themes presented here should not be regarded as discrete. Participants rarely, if at all, used these particular frames when discussing their experiences. The layers of meaning discussed are better understood as entangled and murky, exposing as they do different facets of a shared reality – the ongoing struggle to be ‘safe and free’.

### *Migration: The promise of (false) freedom*

The decision to relocate to South Africa was overwhelmingly understood as a search for freedom and safety. Participants made sense of their journeys by

contrasting persecution at home with the freedoms offered in their adopted country. When referring to their home countries, many spoke of deeply felt anxieties and first-hand experiences of discrimination. French Guy, for example, described how he was 'living in fear' in DR Congo, while Timzy noted that '[he] never felt safe in Malawi'. A fear of state violence was mentioned repeatedly by the Zimbabwean participants, some of whom recalled police raids on events held by Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ): 'They would come [and] take whoever was there. They would put them in jail and beat them' (Marlon).

Pressures to conform to gender norms were also highlighted as a key reason for migrating to South Africa. For Timzela, a Volume 44 participant, visits 'back home' mean having to alter their appearance:

I go home to visit my mother, but I can't wear skirts or lipstick. I am a gay and I like to wear all kinds of clothes. But when I am home I only wear shirts and trousers. So I only go home for maybe three days and then I come back. It's not easy in South Africa, but it's better than back in Zimbabwe.

While this narrative does not mention direct physical abuse, it does point to the emotional violence embedded within heteronormativity. In particular, it reveals the intense self-regulation that accompanies life within hostile social contexts and the psychological distress that often goes along with it.

References to fear and discrimination were often combined with positive comments about South Africa's progressive legislative framework. The Queer Crossings participants described South Africa as more tolerant than their home countries, noting in particular that cases of homophobic and transphobic violence can be reported to the authorities. Petunia highlighted that 'being gay is legal' in South Africa and therefore comes with some level of protection: 'You can go to the police, but if you go to the police in Zimbabwe, they will end up beating you up'. Jonso also felt that the legal situation made a difference: 'Here people are less judgmental than in Zimbabwe. It is free. There are some rude people, but you can go to the police and report them.'

When reflecting on the differences between Zimbabwe and South Africa, Hotstix noted that 'Here I can be young, wild and free'. Timzy expressed similar sentiments: 'I feel freer than I ever have with my sexuality. My friends here accept me the way that I am and understand me. People here are not the same as in Malawi.' For some participants, arriving in South Africa was accompanied by an enormous sense of relief. In her original narrative piece, Marlon writes about her initial impressions: 'As I took my first steps in Johannesburg, I felt like a caged bird set free' (Figure 2).

While the protections of the South African constitution were regarded as positive, they were also understood as false freedoms. Many participants spoke of a gulf between their legal rights and their everyday realities. Shane noted that legal protections do not guarantee safety: 'You can be free constitutionally, but the



**Figure 2.** Marlon's body-map, with permission of the workshop participant.

discrimination from the community is always there.' This concern was echoed by Tino, who feels that his dream of a better life remains unfulfilled:

The major reason why I left [Zimbabwe] was because of my sexuality. I thought maybe if I went to South Africa it would be much better...The constitutional rights say that LGBTIQ people are equal, but it is not enough. We are being represented and shaped in certain ways. What people believe to be true and what is happening is totally different.

Other participants reflected on the material impacts of living as an undocumented migrant. In Jonso's original poem, 'I am nobody', she explains how foreign

nationals are often denied the rights enshrined in the constitution:

It's very hard for me to get a proper job or a house of  
 My own coz they say im not a citizen of this nation  
 Now I have nowhere to go, cz I used to think SA its gonna  
 be umbrella for me...  
 Its very hard to stay in a foreign country  
 Nobody will give a fuck abt me...  
 It feels like im living in hell

This poem evokes the harsh realities of life as a queer migrant. Jonso hoped that South Africa would serve as an 'umbrella', a protective shield against discrimination, but soon discovered this was little more than a fantasy. The language used points to the entangled nature of inequality, with the author recognising the xenophobic and class dimensions of her oppression. Jonso knows that her freedom is contingent on citizenship and the benefits it affords; her status as an outsider – in this case, an undocumented, unemployed Zimbabwean lesbian – places the promise of stability and security out of reach.

Stigma and discrimination were also contributing factors for some internal migrants. Like Timzela, Drama Queen, a participant in the Sex Worker Zine Project, encountered hostility because she 'liked wearing girl's clothes'. During the workshop, Drama Queen shared the 'hurt' and 'stress' she felt when bullied at school:

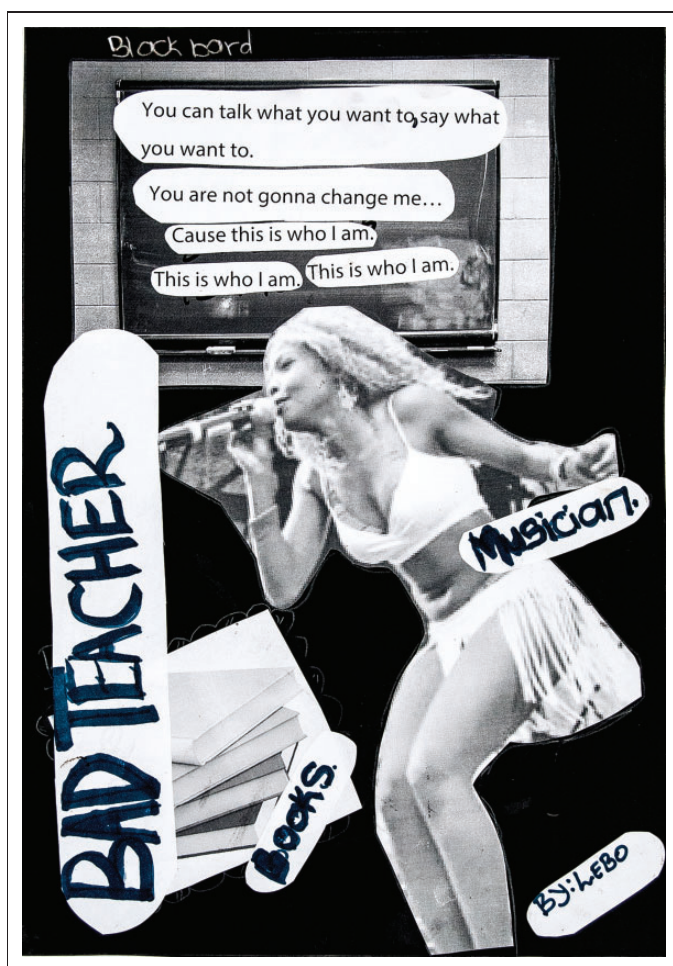
It was only when I had that very mean teacher who while at school made fun of me, including pressuring other teachers to discriminate against me, and at home wanted me to have sex with him, that things got bad for me and I decided to leave.

Although Drama Queen was not fleeing legal persecution in the same way as the cross-border migrants, her decision to relocate was motivated by prejudice and inequality. Her experience highlights the ongoing discrimination faced by many queer South Africans and the failure of progressive legislation to address oppressive behaviours (Figure 3).

While the 'quest for freedom' narrative was the most prominent, it was not the only framing applied to migration. A number of participants mentioned economic opportunities as a key factor: Marlon, Shane and Timzy all spoke of a desire to find work, and other participants, such as Hotstix and Lonely & Lonely, identified their jobs as an important aspect of their life in South Africa. For Modise, an internal migrant who participated in both Volume 44 and Queer Crossings, the search for employment was her primary reason for moving. Her experience challenges popular perceptions linking rural areas to increased homophobia: 'Back home you can do whatever. There are no killings because you are gay or lesbian'.

The experience of migration offered by participants is one of hope: a search for safety and security that remains largely unfulfilled. A 'quest for freedom' framing is





**Figure 3.** Drama Queen's zine cover, with permission of the workshop participant.

used to make sense of people's journeys, even if the rights of the constitution are seen to be out of reach for participants.

### *Seeking legitimacy: Sexuality and the state*

Oppressive state practices served as a prism through which participants could make sense of their sexuality and/or gender. When referencing their home countries, participants spoke mainly of repression, noting how the threat of persecution forced them to conceal their identities. In a post-workshop interview, Shane noted how 'homosexuality is condemned in Zim[babwe]. People are arrested and

beaten if [the authorities] find out you are gay.’ The ever-present threat of police brutality made it impossible for participants to openly express their identities, as explained by Jonso: ‘I was hiding myself in Zimbabwe because it was very dangerous.’ Speaking in relation to the Malawian context, Timzy explained how he hid parts of his identity out of fear of persecution: ‘You can get arrested! Nobody knew about my sexuality.’ These narratives point to the role of states in legitimising specific constructions of sexuality and gender and to the very real consequences for those seen to transgress social expectations (Giametta, 2017).

Similar concerns were expressed in relation to South Africa, with participants recalling negative encounters with state institutions. Those who sought to formalise their stay reported various forms of discrimination by Home Affairs staff. Lonely & Lonely saw the asylum application process as inherently biased, explaining how state officials initially dismissed his claim: ‘I told them the whole story – that I had fears because I was gay. They did not want to believe me.’ A similar narrative was shared by Shane, who noted how government officials change their behaviour around queer persons: ‘You go for an interview, but when they realise you are a gay, the treatment is not the same.’

Others described having to pay bribes to enter processing centres, such as the Marabastad Refugee Reception Office in Pretoria. As Marlon explains, ‘It is difficult to get inside as there are a lot of people. You have to bribe them to get in, and still might not be served.’ Tino was also forced to bribe his way into Marabastad. When he finally gained access, his sexuality was questioned by those processing his claim: ‘When I tell them I am gay, they often respond by telling me things like “You don’t look gay. You look like somebody who just wants asylum”.’ These statements reveal not just the bureaucratic and financial obstacles facing queer migrants, but also the power of the state to determine how certain identities should be embodied and expressed (Camminga, 2017).

A related narrative highlights the structural barriers that make it difficult for non-English-speaking migrants. French Guy attempted to apply for asylum on the basis of his sexuality, but was unable to do so because of his state-appointed translator:

I spoke about my life and about my homosexuality. At the time I did not speak a local South African language. The interpreter was a woman from Congo and she told me that I could not tell this story, and I was a shame for our country. She changed my story... When I started to learn English, I realised what she had done.

In this example, the participant had both his application for asylum jeopardised and his identity delegitimised. By glossing over French Guy’s sexuality, the translator contributed to the general denial that queer asylum seekers exist and are worthy of state protection.

The near impossibility of having one’s sexuality and/or asylum claim recognised by the state has serious consequences for individuals. Many participants described feeling isolated or invisible, and expressed frustration at not being able

to participate fully in society. The liminal space occupied by queer migrants is powerful expressed in 'Citizenship', an original poem by Modise:

You can see me but am invisible, I feel small but big  
 Who are you to discriminate, who we are to judge  
 Am me and I love being me. Citizen or not am here  
 For sure. Am trapped in the box...

This poem is indicative of the emotions expressed by participants when describing their efforts to engage the state. Many spoke of fear, frustration and hopelessness, and of the constant battle to secure assistance. Participants were well aware of the multiple factors contributing to their vulnerability (including their ethnicity, class, sexuality and documentation status) and how this undermined their ability to exercise their rights.

### *Dangerous geographies: Navigating violence and hate*

When sharing narratives of violence, participants emphasised the dangers associated with particular locations. The most obvious example was the crossing of national borders, an experience frequently referred to as difficult and nerve-racking, even if it provided some level of relief. At other times, participants spoke of the risks associated with certain urban environments, highlighting the constant threat of street harassment and sexual assault.

Two narratives in particular capture the dangers associated with specific geographies. In Babymez's original narrative piece, 'Regrets', she describes the rape she endured after disembarking from a local minibis taxi. A physical assault also plays a key role in Hotstix's narrative piece, 'A friend who then hated me', in which the author describes a verbal and physical assault near Johannesburg's main bus terminal. These stories underscore the gendered nature of violence targeting queer migrants. Both incidents involved men assaulting women, with Hotstix's attack motivated by anxieties around sexual and gender norms: 'He said that he doesn't smoke with a "Chi-Chiman" [referring to Hotstix's butch gender expression]. He came toward me and told me how nasty I was because I dated women.'

To fully understand these crimes, they need to be geographically situated: in both examples the violence occurred in areas where working-class black people live with little policing and few community safety mechanisms. Thus there is a clear class element to such attacks: those who are poor are made more vulnerable by their inability to access social support. For Babymez, Hotstix and other participants, it is not just their identities that put them at risk, but also their economic position – 'affordable housing' for queer migrants often means shared accommodation in impoverished and under-serviced areas.

The type of body moving through a space can determine the level of risk. For Modise, experiences of violence are often linked to her butch gender expression. In her original narrative piece, Modise describes the danger she faces when using



toilets, noting how venue bouncers sometimes ‘kick me out and beat me’ for using female facilities. She also writes about being attacked at a tavern by a man who thought she was hitting on his girlfriend. These experiences highlight the increased vulnerability of bodies regarded as transgressive.

The risk of abuse is not limited to physical spaces; dangerous encounters take multiple forms and often involve non-physical violence. Participants spoke of navigating social geographies, such as families, schools and churches, and the different ways these encounters impact on their lives. In his original narrative piece, Tino described being betrayed by a cousin:

[H]e outed me to my lovely conservative family of which I was not yet ready to be distinguished as gay. My family is a Christian family, who considers someone gay as a taboo, satanic, demonic, unnatural, unAfrican and against culture.

He goes on to describe feeling ‘betrayed, painful and lonely’ and the eventual breakdown of family relationships.

These narratives point to the very real dangers facing queer migrants, both in their countries of origin and their adopted home. It is telling that the majority of participants chose to share narratives of violence and abuse, not because this is *the* story of queer migration, but because it demonstrates how experiences of inequality are embodied and mediated. It shows how certain geographies, both spatial and social, can become dangerous once inhabited by a queer person, particularly those who endure concurrent forms of oppression.

### *Claiming space: Resistance and pride*

Tales of discrimination were interwoven with narratives of survival. Participants emphasised their ability to thrive in difficult circumstances and to claim their identities in powerful ways. When writing about experiences of violence – which ranged from social exclusion, to physical and sexual abuse, to state harassment and arrest – participants emphasised how they emerged stronger and prouder. In some cases, moving away from oppressive environments was presented as an act of resistance. In the following extract, taken from Hotstix’s poem ‘My body work’, the author celebrates her determination to survive and be herself:

...  
 Coming from my country was not easy  
 Not because they chased me away but my soul needed to  
 I came from a place were no baboons would want to stay  
 I am a lesbian and I am proud

...  
 Above all discrimination doesn’t stop, either  
 You in SA or Zimbabwe but I learnt to survive

A similar sense of defiance permeates the following poem by Modise. Here she lists derogatory terms used to shame women, including a pejorative Nguni term for queer persons: *isitabane*. At the end of the poem, Modise offers her own strong retort, ‘Phuma Kimi’, meaning ‘get out of my business’ (Dill et al., 2016: 90).

Am me and am happy to be me  
 The world went rough on me but I didn’t change  
 of being me. They call names, bitch, slight whore, isitabane  
 But I kept going and stronger day by day  
 Who are you to tell me what I am  
 If you don’t like what you see, Phuma Kimi!

Feelings of internal homophobia and shame were countered with narratives of subversion, particularly in relation to conservative religious and/or cultural norms. In Tino’s poem, ‘The son of soil’, the author depicts his community’s disgust towards his sexuality, but then counters this with an impassioned statement of self-love:

Wicked I am in their eyes  
 ...  
 Taboo, unnatural, outcast, became,  
 Lesson learnt at least now  
 You know, a shame, disgust evil  
 I brought, both to the family and to the nation.  
 Here I am the son of the Soil...  
 I am Pure African-Zimbabwean, never been  
 Out of Africa – I am a real black  
 faggot.

All of these extracts contain an unmistakable assertion of self – all the poets position themselves as the ‘I’ subject and then powerfully proclaim their strength, pride and determination.

But not every participant framed their resistance in such bold terms. Arnold, a gay man from a rural area in Limpopo, wrote in his zine about the devastating consequences of shame, isolation and loneliness:

I want people to know that I am a gay and you must support me because you can’t change me. I like the way that I am!... Some people in my community don’t understand that you can be born a man and not have feelings for women... After experiencing these kinds of abuse, some kill themselves because they don’t have the support of their families.

The phrase ‘I like the way I am!’ conveys a strong sense of pride. However, this positive assertion is quickly followed by an acknowledgement of the negative

impacts of discrimination (whether through direct violence or more subtle forms of harm).

### *Contested identities: Responses to labels and categories*

Pressures to conform to heteronormative gender expressions were highlighted as a key concern. A number of participants imagined a world where gender can be expressed beyond strict male–female/masculine–feminine binaries.

The majority of participants self-identified as gay, lesbian or transgender. When introduced to ‘queer’, most were reluctant to adopt the term because of a lack of clarity around its meaning. For Snowy, a transgender woman involved in Volume 44, ‘queer’ minimises the political dimensions of her identity:

For me it is important to name who I am. This way there isn’t confusion. Queer isn’t clear enough. I want people to know that I am a transgender woman. When they meet me they can’t ignore who I am. This is important for me in my life and in my work.

Even though most participants preferred to identify with the LGBT acronym, some were concerned that these terms did not capture the fluidity of their identities. Hotstix drew gender-neutral bathrooms in her body-map and later explained that this represented her desire to be accepted as both – and beyond – male and female. Jonso painted a green tie on her body-map as a way to ‘show the world that women like me, lesbians, can also wear men’s clothing’ (Figures 4 and 5).

These examples highlight a tension between, on the one hand, claiming a known identity and, on the other, acknowledging new and fluid modes of being. This tension is intensified for those who are routinely excluded from public discourse and social movements, in that they are often afforded less space and support to explore different identity formations. In the case of queer migrants, there is a strong desire to carve out space for complex identities, though at the same time there appears to be uncertainty about how to do this. Queer and other fluid identities also conflict with the essentialist logic deployed by the state, thus further constricting the imaginative and embodied possibilities open to vulnerable persons.

### *Summary and conclusion: Multifaceted existences*

The participants in these projects made sense of their journeys and identities in ways that highlight the intersection of the two. The first theme reveals how participants used the lens of migration to give shape and meaning to their sexuality and/or gender. Comparisons between their home and adopted countries allowed participants to articulate a sense of self and make sense of their decision to relocate. Home countries were often described in terms of fear and persecution, whereas South Africa was linked to freedom, albeit of a limited kind. Participants recognised that access to rights in South Africa is contingent on citizenship and a normative performance of sexuality and gender.



**Figure 4.** Hotstix's body-map, with permission of the workshop participant.

Participants gave further meaning to their identities by interrogating discriminatory encounters with the state. In the second theme, participants identified bureaucratic practices as the conduit through which sexuality is legitimised. The narratives highlight participants' struggle to navigate state structures, as well as efforts by state actors to erase the experiences of queer migrants. Queerness is positioned as something that needs to be made tangible for the state, even though existing processes make this almost impossible (Cammings, 2017; Bhagat, 2018). The experiences shared by participants show how queer migrants are forced to reduce complex experiences, traumas and desires to accepted scripts that align with the state's heteronormative agenda (Akin, 2018).

The third theme points to the ever-present threat of violence and discrimination. In particular, the narratives show how experiences of violence are rooted in concurrent and multiple oppressions, and exacerbated by the precarious geographies queer migrants are forced to occupy. These factors overlap with material





The foregoing analysis points to the complex ways in which queer migrants and asylum seekers make sense of their identities and experiences. It draws attention to the multiple and intersecting factors that shape experience, while also underscoring the myriad challenges endured by participants. The story of queer migrants is not one of absolute oppression: the narratives demonstrate the dynamic processes that allow queer migrants to forge a sense of belonging in spite of concurrent vulnerabilities and structural discrimination (Ou Jin Lee, 2019).

## Implications for research and activism

Ellsworth (1992) argues that some of the key assumptions, goals and practices used in PR, including claims to ‘empowerment’, ‘voice’ and ‘dialogue’, are repressive myths that actually reinforce hierarchal power relations (see also Walsh, 2014). The literature and artefacts emerging from this field – including this article – produce results that do not always benefit participants, and at times even exacerbate the conditions they seek to disrupt (for example, the hegemony of Euro-American epistemic practices). While PR methods potentially offer greater opportunities for creative expression, critical thought and individual/community action, they are not in and of themselves liberatory. Participants still experience high rates of xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of violence. Participants are still largely poor and unemployed; the unequal relational trends remain unchanged.

What does this mean for research going forward? What opportunities do PR methods offer? First and foremost, researcher-activists need to continue sharing empirical findings, especially in relation to under-researched groups, as these can strengthen activist responses. PR methods offer a useful tool for undertaking this work, not just because of the advocacy products that emerge, but also because of their potential to support community-driven responses. The potential for long-lasting and engaged partnerships between researchers and social movements must also be recognised. The projects presented in this article, like many other PR interventions, contribute ‘organizing tools that help us strike back at attempts to isolate queer, sexual and gender non-conforming Africans from each other and larger communities’ (White, 2014: 4). However, one must be cautious about any claims to empowerment or suggestions that power hierarchies are eradicated simply because a creative process is present.

Moving forward, there is an urgent need for researcher-activists to rethink pedagogical and epistemological positions that are taken for granted (Khan, 2014). We need to resist the uncritical adoption of concepts such as ‘sexuality’ or the ‘nation state’. How we use these concepts has implications for our research and shapes the kind of stories we end up telling. Writing about queers and migrants needs to be uncertain if it is to undo histories of colonialism, both within and outside of the academy. Our writing must produce questions and uncertainties; it must transgress. In doing so we may disrupt claims to authority and ‘authentic’ modes of being – whether in relation to sexuality, gender, nationhood or any other oppressive social category. Crossing a border is a moment of uncertainty; our

writing on the topic must reflect and embrace this uncertainty. Only then can we challenge ourselves to think differently about how and why we produce knowledge.

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### Notes

1. We use the term 'queer migrants' as an umbrella term for queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.
2. For more information on MoVE, see <http://www.migration.org.za/move>. All project outputs are available through MoVE's ISSU page: <https://issuu.com/move.methods.visual.explore>.

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