

GAY MEN'S PRESS

DIFFERENT

RAINBOWS

Edited by Peter Drucker

# Mandela's stepchildren: homosexual identity in post-apartheid South Africa

Mark Gevisser

## *Prologue*

'I'm in the constitution!' a particularly edgy black drag queen howled to the crowds as the fifth annual Johannesburg Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade, 2000 strong, passed through the high-density flatland of Joubert Park. It was October 1994, just six months after South Africa's exhilarating passage to democracy, and the onlookers—ordinary black folk who live in the neighborhood—beamed back delight. 'Viva the *moffies!*' a young man shouted, appropriating a liberation chant: Long live the queers!

The first such event took place in 1990; not uncoincidentally in the year that Nelson Mandela was released and the African National Congress unbanned. That was the year of national euphoria, when prison cells were unlocked and marches were legalized and books could be read; anything seemed possible and everything seemed terrifying. That first year, march organizers provided participants with paper bags to wear over their heads if they wished; an utterly contradictory symbol for Pride, but one that offered a visible and tangible image of the closeted fear so many South Africans still felt in those first tentative months of 'freedom'.

Four short years later, there was a palpable sense of liberation in the air. On one level, the bonhomie of the onlookers was simply sheer ebullience at a South Africa which no longer compartmentalized and categorized and shut people off from each other; a South Africa where you could parade your identity, whatever it was. Where you could now *have* a parade. But there was something deeper in the crowd's clear—if sometimes bemused—approval of the event. 'No, I would not want to see my son or daughter marching there,' said one observer to me, a stolid and ample-hipped woman in one of those flowing floral dresses that working people reserve for church. 'But those people have the right to march. This is the New South Africa. When we were voting last April we weren't just voting for our own freedom, we were voting for everyone to be free with who they are...'

The only vocal dissidents were a group of American Baptist bible-punchers led by one Pastor Ron Sykes who, for five years, had faithfully harangued the marchers with his 'Turn or Burn' sign and his finger-wagging admonitions of Sodom. In 1994, Sykes told the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*: 'A lot of people consider us fantastic and freaks, but we hope to make these people realise that [what they do] is a wicked thing.' Here was a Christian fundamentalist, claim-

ing to represent the moral majority, admitting that it is he and his troupe of naysayers who are generally considered to be 'fantastic and freaks'; acknowledging in effect that it was he—and not the gay marchers—who was marginal and out of step with the New South Africa.

Today, in 1999, five years into the new democracy, the Parade—now called a Mardi Gras—is escorted through downtown Johannesburg by a group of out-of-the-closet gay officers belonging to the South African Gay and Lesbian Policing Network. They are a little stiff, a little self-conscious, but beaming with pride. It takes your breath away when you remember how central the role of the police force was to apartheid repression, and how brutally it policed sexuality too.

### I

Lebo Khumalo, a teenage girl from Soweto, is thrown out of her family home when she tells her parents she is a lesbian. Wandering the streets, she comes across Sis' Nongezo, a street-sweeper, proud that he is 'the only drag-queen in the employ of the Johannesburg Municipality'. The two are visited by the Spirits, a delightful trio of gay ancestors who sing and dance and recount their lives as gay men and women in the '50s. Lebo realizes that she has a place in the world and in the history of her people—that she is not a freak and that, in fact, even her grandfather was a homosexual—and is thus able to go home and reconcile herself with her family.

This, roughly sketched, is the plot of 'After Nines', a play about the black gay South African experience that deploys the burlesque musical theatre codes and the pastiche story-telling style of black protest theatre of the 1980s towards the new end of gay liberation. Performed in township community halls and at Johannesburg's Civic Theatre in August 1998, it is a remarkable piece of work, not only because of its representation of black gay experience and excavation of black gay history, but because the brilliant performers are five men and women in their early twenties who—just like their antecedents in protest theatre—have become involved in theatre because of a sense of mission and identity.

The highlight of 'After Nines' is the cast's campy rendition, led by Sis' Nongezo in full, stylish township-drag, of 'Nkosi Sikel' iAfrika', the black liberation hymn. Despite the sanctity of this anthem—this, after all, is what doughty church-matrons and angry young comrades have used, for close to a century, to sing themselves into freedom—the three men and two women on stage reclaim it with a playfulness that does not mask, for one moment, their deep-rooted sense of belonging in the new, democratic South Africa of which 'Nkosi Sikileli' is now the national anthem.

Indeed, in the very week their show began its run at the Civic, a far more momentous event was taking place just across the road in downtown Johannesburg, at the Constitutional Court—the highest court in the land. Here, the judges were hearing the very first test of the South African constitution's pro-

tection of gay and lesbian equality. The new constitution, passed in May 1996, is the first in the world to outlaw, explicitly, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. (Using the South African model, Ecuador became the second, in 1997.) Section 8(3) of Chapter Two of the South African Constitution reads: 'Neither the state nor any person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.'

Following an application from the National Coalition of Gay and Lesbian Equality (NGCLE) and the Human Right Commission, a statutory body, a supreme court judge had ruled in May 1998 that all the laws that render sodomy still a crime—or that discriminated against homosexual practise (such as unequal ages of consent)—were unconstitutional and had to be scrapped. 'The expression of homosexuality,' wrote Judge Jonathan Heher of the Johannesburg Supreme Court, 'is as normal as that of its heterosexual equivalent, and is therefore entitled to equal tolerance and respect.' Heher's interpretation of the constitution was that sexual orientation cannot be a factor which influences 'the distribution of social goods and services and the award of social opportunities': in South Africa, homosexuals may longer be discriminated against—in the workplace, in medical aid schemes, in adoptions, even, theoretically, in access to marriage.

It was now the Constitutional Court's job to ratify Heher's ruling, and, at the very moment that the 'After Nines' cast was concluding its dress rehearsal at the Civic, it did so, unanimously: 'Once you take away prejudice, there is nothing left,' commented Judge Albie Sachs. 'All the justifications [for homophobic laws] are based on prejudice, the very thing the constitution is there to prevent.'

Now, in the aftermath of South Africa's second democratic elections, which took place in May 1999, the battle to implement the constitution's homosexual equality provision has begun in earnest. Already, there have been some milestone applications of the constitution: the National Defence Act prohibits discrimination in the military on the basis of sexual orientation, and the new labour legislation (the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Employment Equity Act) prohibits all workplace discrimination. Most significantly, in early 1998, a lesbian police officer, Inspector Jolande Langemaat, sued the police medical aid scheme, POLMED, for refusing to register her long-time companion, Beverley-Ann Myburgh, as a dependant. Langemaat claimed that this was unconstitutional—and won: 'Both [homosexual and heterosexual] types of union are demanding of respect and protection,' wrote Justice Roux of the Pretoria Supreme Court. 'If our law does not accord protection to [homosexual unions], then I suggest it is time it does so.'

A year later, in April 1999, the Pensions Fund Adjudicator—a statutory official set up by the pension fund industry to regulate it—used the constitution to rule that the exclusion of same-sex partners from the 'class of persons entitled to enjoyment of the spouse's pension' unfairly discriminated against

lesbian and gay couples by denying them the same rights that heterosexual couples have. In late 1999, the Constitutional Court ruled that the state had acted unconstitutionally in regard to residency permits to foreign partners of homosexuals, and a state welfare agency used the constitution to justify its decision in allowing a gay couple to adopt a baby. With a speed that even South African gay activists did not expect, the country was, at the turn of the millennium, approaching a position where same-sex marriage existed in all but name.

## 2

In September 1999, Uganda's main newspaper, *New Vision*, ran a double-page pullout entitled 'Homosexuals increasing in Uganda. Who's responsible?' Homosexuals, the article disclosed, identify themselves on the streets of Kampala by wearing a 'unique perfume only worn by a "woman-man"'. Twenty-five students were recently suspended from the elite Ntare School for allegedly practising homosexuality, and this appears to have ignited a wave of moral panic in the country, where the vice, one school principal commented to the newspaper, has reached "unprecedented" levels. At girls' schools, lesbian students 'adopt carrots, eggplants and bananas for penises. Such fresh fruits are usually available in the first weeks of term... When they run out [the girls] resort to test-tubes.'

The article cites a psychiatrist—who believes that shock therapy might cure the deviants—enumerating the many dangers of homosexual sex, one of which is that 'because oral sex can be vigorous, it could fracture the jaw.' One might see the comedy in it all if it weren't for the fact that the Penal Code of Uganda, like that of most former British colonies in Africa, prohibits sodomy as 'carnal knowledge against the order of nature'.

The rule of Yoweri Museveni might have brought enlightenment to Uganda in other areas, but when Museveni's government rewrote the constitution and the penal code in 1990, the maximum penalty for 'unnatural' carnality was increased from fourteen years to life imprisonment. Indeed, Museveni pronounced in 1994 that his government would 'shoot at' anyone bringing the unnatural practise of homosexuality into his country; he reiterated, following the Ntare School scandal in 1999, that all homosexuals should be arrested and convicted.

He is by no means alone, on the African continent, in the extremity of his views. In 1995, Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe declared that homosexuality "degrades human dignity. It is unnatural, and there is no question, ever, of allowing these people to behave worse than dogs and pigs. If dogs and pigs do not do it, why must human beings? We have our own culture, and we must rededicate ourselves to our traditional values that make us human beings.'

He made these statements after an international furore following the Zimbabwean government's refusal to allow a gay organization—the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ)—to exhibit at the high-profile Zimbabwe In-

ternational Book Fair, even though the theme of that event was 'human rights'. The more protest there was, the more intractable he became, seeing each criticism as further proof of the fact that the West was trying to corrupt essential and pure African morality. When a group of American lawmakers, led by Maxine Waters and Barney Frank, wrote urging him 'to reexamine the issue and to follow the government of South Africa in respecting the human rights of all people', he shot back: 'Let the Americans keep their sodomy, bestiality, stupid and foolish ways to themselves!... What is human rights? Don't we have natural rights too?'

One of the leaders of his ruling party's Women's League, a Mrs Mangwe, who is a member of parliament, drew the terms of this debate more crudely when she was asked by a South African TV crew whether the Zimbabwean war of liberation wasn't meant to free *all* people. 'Oh my God, no!' she responded indignantly. 'Our war was to protect our culture. Not to destroy by allowing homosexuality to run rife in it. It's not in our black culture and we don't want it!'

The effects of Mugabe's attack were immediately felt: the day after his first speech at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, one of GALZ's black officials was detained. Police went to his parents, who did not know he was gay, and showed them a photograph of him in a newspaper—he has been unable to return to his home township. While white gay Zimbabweans were relatively safe, black gay Zimbabweans stated that they feared for their lives, because for Mugabe to sustain his lie that homosexuality was un-African, he had to intimidate black gays into invisibility.

Mugabe's homophobia has provided other African leaders with a cue-sheet for how to rail against neo-colonialism. In the last few years, Kenya's Daniel Arap Moi has said that 'homosexuality is against African norms and traditions,' and Zambia's Frederick Chiluba that 'homosexuality is the deepest level of depravity. It is unbiblical and abnormal. How do you expect my government to accept something that is abnormal?' In March 1997, following the formation of Gays and Lesbians of Swaziland (GALESWA), the Swazi king Mswati III declared that 'these people are sick'; at a meeting between the king and the country's religious leaders, the president of the Swaziland League of Churches, Isaac Dlamini, said, 'Your Majesty, such people hate God. According to the Bible, these are the people who were thrown into the dustbin. The Bible said they should be killed.' After having been detained briefly, the founder of Galeswa, Chief Mangosuthu Dlamini—a member of the royal family—wisely fled to South Africa.

Responding to the formation of a gay group called the Rainbow Coalition in Namibia, the country's president, Sam Nujoma, told a women's conference in December 1996 that 'homosexuals must be condemned and rejected in our society.' He was backed up by an official statement, issued by the ruling South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO), that 'homosexuality deserves a severe contempt and disdain from the Namibian people and should be uprooted totally as a practice.' The statement called on Namibians to 'revitalize

our inherent culture and its moral values which we have inherited for many centuries from our forefathers. We should not risk our people being identified with foreign immoral values.'

All the above deploy a contradictory arsenal of Christian fundamentalism and African nationalism: they claim that it did not exist in pre-colonial African society, and that it is a colonial deprecation, a Western import—conveniently forgetting that it was the colonizer who brought both the bible and the penal code, with their censure of 'unnatural acts', to African soil. There is a clear relationship between the flagging fortunes of these African leaders, and their recourse to homophobia: gays become easy scapegoats and titillating distractions. Mugabe, who presides over a declining, corrupt and alienated state, unleashes his anti-gay rhetoric strategically to distract Zimbabweans from his government's failings: in the Mugabe world view, homophobia has become a way to rally his people around all that he thinks is wrong with 'Western' and 'liberal' society. Museveni became strident about homosexuals at exactly the time Ugandans were most critical of him for dragging their country into the Congo war; Chiluba did it when he faced a coup; Nujoma to distract attention from criticism against him for amending the constitution to serve a third term; King Mswati when he was facing massive internal strife from the pro-democracy trade unions.

In late 1999, succumbing to international donor pressure on his homophobia, Uganda's Museveni backtracked on his earlier extremism: if homosexuals 'did it quietly,' he was quoted as saying, they would be left alone: 'Homosexuals are the ones provoking us. They are upsetting society. We shall not allow these people to challenge society.' The message from Museveni, Mugabe and many of the others is clear: if homosexuals return to the old 'pre-gay' ways, they will be left alone.

Thus a difficult dialectic is emerging in contemporary African society: as gay organizations, heartened by the successes of the South African movement, are beginning to take root, state-sanctioned harassment and discrimination of and violence against homosexuals has increased. In Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Uganda, presidential anti-gay invective has without exception been in direct response to the growing articulacy, confidence and profiles of gay movements in those countries.

At the core of this dialectic is the troublesome reality that that Mugabe, Museveni, Nujoma et al are right about one thing: while homosexual practice predates the colonization of the continent, the advent of a 'gay' subculture—of people taking on identities as 'gay' or 'lesbian' and demanding rights as such is without doubt a new—and Western—import, insofar as it is a consequence of urbanization and modernization in a global society. Because of their advanced economies, their large white settler populations and their histories of struggle for human rights, Zimbabwe and South Africa have become the first two sub-Saharan African countries to have to deal with the cultural trauma of acknowledging homosexuality, but the trend is developing throughout the continent. As more and more young Africans come of age in the continent's

burgeoning middle class, they find the freedom, intellectually and financially, to be able to claim a gay identity, and to shift their sexuality from being a practice to being an identity. The internet, satellite TV and video rental stores are all key elements in the development of gay consciousness in Africa.

But as this happens, nerves become raw, as is clearly evidenced by the anger unleashed by African political and clerical leaders: for the first time, severely repressed societies are forced to talk about sex, a conversation which ends, logically, at a new analysis of gender, and roles that men and women play in both bedroom and society. The tension is between two very different ways of dealing with the homosexuality—the traditional approach, which finds ways of accommodating it and not talking about it (do what you like in private as long as you marry and have kids), and the Western way, which claims for homosexuals a 'gay' identity and impels them to live a 'gay' life. With the latter comes personal freedom—and extreme cultural conflict.

### 3

In September 1999, the International Lesbian and Gay Association, ILGA, held its biennial conference in Johannesburg; it had, consequentially, the largest ever number of African delegates at an international event of this nature: representatives from Namibia, Botswana, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroun and Zambia whose activism in the face of the opprobrium described above is nothing short of heroic.

The keynote speaker at the conference's gala banquet was the South African deputy minister of justice, Cheryl Gillwald. She reminded her audience that, in contrast with the attitudes of other African leaders, the South African president, Thabo Mbeki, had said as early as 1986 that 'the ANC is indeed very firmly committed to removing all forms of discrimination and oppression in a liberated South Africa... That commitment must surely extend to the protection of gay rights.'

How is it possible that the South African experience, in dealing with homosexuality, has been so utterly different from the rest of the continent? In marked contrast to Mugabe, Nelson Mandela made a point of mentioning the right to gay equality in his inaugural address after his election in 1994, and met with gay South African leaders a year later to reaffirm his commitment. Several senior ANC figures have called for an end to discrimination against gay people. In 1994, an outspoken gay activist, Edwin Cameron, was appointed to the Supreme Court; no one has blinked an eyelid. At a public hearing in 1995, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, tasked with deregulating the airwaves, tripped over itself to assure gay people that they would receive equity of air-time.

Opening the third South African gay and lesbian film festival in November 1996, Karl Niehaus, a senior ANC parliamentarian who is now South African ambassador to Holland, urged gay people to come out of the closet. Two years previously, opening the first festival, the minister of police for Gauteng

Province (Johannesburg), Jessie Duarte, offered herself as a patron for the local Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) and then called, loudly and publicly, for an end to discrimination against gay people. 'Not only are there legal injustices to be done away with,' she said, 'but mindsets and cultures have to be done away with too. It is one thing for you to have your rights and equality in the law, it is quite another to have them each day in the street, at work, in the bar, in public places where you socialize and where you cruise.' She then called for all homophobic police officers to be exposed.

In May 1996, when the final constitution was approved by South Africa's parliamentarians, only two legislators, belonging to the tiny fundamentalist African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), voted against the inclusion of 'sexual orientation' in the equality clause. All the rest, from the militant black nationalist Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) to the Afrikaner separatist Freedom Front, approved it.

Perhaps this was because they had other battles to fight, but this in itself is significant: despite voluble behind-closed-doors discomfort with gay equality within the ANC (see below), homosexuality, in post-apartheid South Africa, has by and large not been a public issue. When the leader of the the PAC, Rev. Stanley Mogoba, stated during the 1999 election campaigns that homosexuals were sick and 'needed help', the party quickly issued a statement to say that this was his personal opinion and not official policy. Not even the ACDP (which gets most of its ideology from the American Christian Coalition) deployed anti-gay invective in its election campaign. It has been, rather, in everyone's interest—particularly those representing other minorities—to accept the ANC's foundation-premise that all human rights are equal and indivisible.

The primary reason why the notion of gay equality passed so smoothly into the constitution is most likely that the ANC elite has a utopian social progressive ideology, influenced largely by the social-democratic movements in the countries that supported it during its struggle: Sweden, Holland, Britain, Canada, Australia. In exile in these countries, key South African leaders came to understand and accept—and, in the case of women, benefit from—the sexual liberation movement. Foremost among them were Frene Ginwala, now Speaker of Parliament; Albie Sachs, now a judge on the Constitutional Court; Kader Asmal, now the minister of education; and Thabo Mbeki himself, South Africa's second democratically elected president.

Very significantly, though—unlike in other African countries—those uncomfortable with gay equality could not marshal the support of a homophobic church. On the contrary, South Africa's undisputed moral leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has made it an article of faith to support gay equality: he has become an international advocate for the ordination of gay priests into the Anglican church, and he has repented publicly for the church's previous discriminatory policies. Tutu has recently written that those who make gays and lesbians 'doubt that they were the children of God' commit 'the ultimate blasphemy... If the church, after the victory over apartheid, is looking for a worthy moral crusade, then this is it: the fight against homophobia and hetero-

sexism.'

In its campaign to get the gay equality clause passed, the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) managed to secure support letters from several prominent clerics, Tutu included. The NCGLE, formed in 1994, has set itself the primary task of decriminalizing homosexuality and lobbying for legislative reform. The cornerstone of its highly effective—if essentialist—strategy has been to define homosexuality as a characteristic as inherent and immutable as race: 'Every single black South African,' says Kevan Botha, the coalition's chief constitutional lobbyist, 'knows what it's like to be discriminated against because of something you have no control over. And so it was very easy for them to make the connections to what we were saying about how gay people are victimized.'

Another key element of the strategy is to view gay equality as a broad-based human rights issue rather than the narrow pleadings of a dispensable minority. This approach has taken root in neighbouring countries too—most notably, in Zimbabwe, where GALZ has aligned itself with the extra-parliamentary opposition to Mugabe's autocracy, and where the trade-unionist leaders of this movement—people like Morgan Tsvingarai who will be the next generation of the country's leaders—have made it clear that they support the notions of homosexual equality developed in South Africa.

The ground had been laid for the South African strategies of viewing gay issues as part of the struggle against apartheid by the coming out, during the struggle, of prominent gay anti-apartheid activists. Foremost among these was Simon Nkoli, who died of AIDS-related illness in early 1999. In the infamous Delmas treason trial of the mid-1980s, Nkoli disclosed his homosexuality, and eventually managed to gain the support of all his co-accused, several of whom are now senior members of the ANC government.

One of them is Patrick Lekota, the ANC national chairman and South Africa's defence minister, who said at the time of Nkoli's death that 'all of us acknowledged that [Simon's coming out] was an important learning experience... His presence made it possible for more information to be discussed, and it broadened our vision, helping us to see that society was composed of so many people whose orientations are not the same, and that one must be able to live with it.' And so, when it came to writing the constitution, 'how could we say that men and women like Simon, who had put their shoulders to the wheel to end apartheid, how could we say that they should now be discriminated against?'

Upon his release from prison in 1989, Nkoli founded GLOW, radically different from the gay organizations that preceded it in that it was a black organization. Nkoli's major contribution was thus to counter the notion, prevalent in Africa, that homosexuality is not only un-Christian, but 'un-African', a white contamination of black society.

But the work of Nkoli and other black gay South Africans is by no means over. Taking note of the extreme homophobia that exists on the continent and in South Africa, deputy minister of justice Cheryl Gillwald, in her speech to

the ILGA banquet, warned South Africans not to become too complacent: her own party, the African National Congress, she admitted, 'did not come to its position [on gay equality] naturally, or by osmosis'; 'the journey to the point of [constitutional] inclusion was neither smooth nor easy.'

In January 1998—nearly two years after the constitution was passed—the ANC's newly elected governing body, the National Executive Committee (NEC), held its first meeting, behind closed doors, in Johannesburg. This was the first NEC to be elected following the ANC's 1994 victory; it represented the face of the movement, not so much in resistance, but now firmly ensconced in power. On the agenda was a motion to adopt a resolution, proposed by progressive members of the SA Communist Party, committing the ANC to an active struggle against all forms of discrimination suffered by gay and lesbian people, and to the support of gay adoptions and marriages.

Astonishingly, given the large number of issues facing the NEC, the debate on this resolution took up an entire afternoon of the two-day meeting. The 'gay issue' became a lightning-rod for other divisions within South Africa's ruling party, a battle between social conservatives who see themselves as 'African nationalists', and the leftists aligned to the SA Communist Party. Division, too, happened along racial and gender lines—only one African man, minister for the environment and tourism Pallo Jordan, was willing to speak on behalf of gay equality; others, such as Thabo Mbeki, chose to remain silent.

Many of those who opposed the resolution were vituperative in their homophobia, re-stating the canard, most forcefully articulated by President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, that homosexuality was alien to African culture, and that the battle for gay equality was anathema to an African liberation movement. The debate plunged to its nadir when the ANC's KwaZulu/Natal leader, S'bu Ndebele, a former political prisoner with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, declared that it was outrageous for the ANC to support homosexual activity. He reminded his comrades that anybody caught doing this on 'The Island' was automatically expelled from the party, before turning to his colleague, Dumisane Makhaye, a returned exile: 'And you, Comrade?' he asked, 'how did you deal with homosexuals in the [guerrilla] camps [of the ANC]?' 'We shot them,' responded Makhaye.

Such overblown invective is (one hopes) rhetorical rather than factual; nonetheless, it is representative of the homophobia of many in the ANC. In the face of it, the party decided not to adopt the resolution, and to go no further than reaffirming 'the constitutional position on the equality clause'.

Many might say that this reaffirmation is more than enough; it reinforces the supremacy of a human-rights agenda that includes gay equality. But the message is clear: the ANC's sponsorship of constitutional equality for homosexuals came from a liberal elite within the movement, and is by no means a widely-held position of the ruling party, which was not prepared to include, in its election platform, a position perceived to be unpopular. Even if gay equality does remain, for now, in the ANC's pantheon of human rights, many of the ANC's leaders, like their constituents, remain uncomfortable about it. And so,

if there is going to be full equality for gays and lesbians in South Africa, it will come from the judicial system, in its application of the constitution, and not from the ANC lawmakers in parliament.

## 4

It could be any Saturday afternoon football match at any migrant hostel on any South African gold mine: the 22 young men kicking a ball around on a craggy, dusty field; the speckling of spectators on the bleachers; the tarts—who congregate at mines looking for business on weekends—smoking insouciantly at the sidelines. Except the tarts are men in drag; look closely at one of the teams, too, and you'll note that the players too are wearing make-up and frilly blouses instead of sports shirts.

It is a wintry day in 1995. The girls on the sports field belong to GLOGS, Gays and Lesbians of the Goldfields. Based in the mining town of Virginia, GLOGS fields its own team. Their style is burlesque rather than sportif, and everyone is having such a good time that the spectators elect to give the winnings, about \$50, to the *moffies* even though they have lost hopelessly to the 'Illiterates', a team made up of migrant labourers from Mozambique.

GLOGS's only goal was scored by the team's star striker, Pule Hlohoangwane, the organization's founder and a middle manager in the human resources department of one of the mines. I met him in 1995, when he was a personnel officer at the Harmony Gold Mine (he has since been transferred). Virginia, like all provincial South African mining towns, still follows the rigid geography of apartheid: the verdant, spread-out white town; the densely-packed, dusty township in which local black people live; the single-sex hostels set up to accommodate the thousands of migrant miners who work underground.

Pule was one of the first black people to rent a flat in the white part of town, and it had become the gathering-point, a haven, for black gay miners. In his late twenties, he was out of the closet: all the black miners under his responsibility, and the white bosses to whom he is accountable, knew that he is gay. 'I'm a very gifted soccer player,' he told me. 'In fact I am the reason why Harmony Gold is in the second division and not the third. So I am respected.'

Here is his recruiting strategy: 'When I'm walking home from a match, the young men will often follow me and say, "Pule, you are so strong and yet you walk like a lady. Why is that?" Or they'll ask, "Pule, how come you are so clean and tidy, not like the other men?" So I tell them if they want to know more, they should come to the next meeting of GLOGS in my flat. We've got about 50 members now!'

Within the single-sex compounds of the mines, there has always been much homosexual activity: men, removed from their women and families and often sequestered in near-prison-like conditions for most of the year, turned to each other for affection and relief. In fact, mine-life is traditionally organised around the *mteto*, a same-sex marriage ceremony in which novices are wedded to veterans.

Both mine administrators and labour historians have tended to write off such activity as the 'circumstantial homosexuality' akin to that which happens in prisons, or in military forces. This explanation has passed into common lore. When gay-hate hit Swaziland in early 1997, for example, a journalist calling for tolerance wrote the following in the Swazi *Times on Sunday*: 'Homosexuality began way back when men from the southern part of Africa would flock [to] the South African gold mines in pursuit for better lifestyles. Women were prohibited there and the only alternative they had was to turn to their fellow men to appease their sex drive. Upon return, these men would not only bring wealth to their families, but also homosexual tendencies, and thus the ever growing number of gays.'

The truth, as always, is a little more complex. Look, for example, at Pule Hlohoangwane: the mere fact that he, a young, relatively educated black man, lived in a flat in the middle of the white section of a conservative Afrikaner town would be astonishing enough. But he shared this flat with his 'husband', a migrant miner from the neighboring country of Lesotho.

Polygamy is very much part of traditional Southern African society, and many migrant labourers leave their first wife back home, and take a second one in the cities where they work. Pule's man, however, decided to take up with another of his own sex—and the relationship prevailed even though neither of the two men live in the single-sex hostel. When the migrant miner's wife first arrived to visit him in Virginia, Pule told me, 'she looked around and saw how neat the flat was, and said, "There must be a woman here. Where is she?" My husband pointed to me. And now I am accepted within his family as the second wife, the junior wife. His senior wife often writes to me, and she sends her children to stay with us during the holidays. And one of the kids, the eighteen-year-old boy, is very close to me. I am teaching him English, and he stays with us. Sometimes, when my husband does not return home, the boy gets very angry. He says, "You are the wife. You have rights over my father. You must not let him abuse you!"'

Pule's story is, perhaps, the exception rather than the rule, but it demonstrates a fluidity to sexual identity not uncommon in African societies. Although most township gay culture is youth culture, it is entirely wrong to suppose that homosexual activity in the townships is a recent phenomenon, imported by white activists and 'dinge queens': indeed black gay men and lesbians protest that such an analysis robs them of the agency for their own desire. Despite the recent upsurge of a township gay scene, organized homosexual activity—if not lesbian and gay organization—has existed in black communities for decades. Ronald Louw, an academic from the University of Natal, is currently doing pathbreaking work on traditional Zulu gay marriages that took place in Mkhumbane, outside Durban, up to the late 1950s, and in Cape Town, there has always been an identifiable and public black gay subculture.

There is also some evidence of rural African homosocial activity that is entrenched in traditional hierarchy. The Lovedu Rain Queen in the Northern Province is a female hereditary leader who keeps as many as forty wives. Now

that some female *sangomas*—traditional healers—are now coming out as lesbians, it is being hypothesized that the institution of the *sangoma* might have developed as a way for women-identified women to find space for themselves outside of the patriarchy; at the very least, it presents to Africans the model of a respected community member who defines herself independently of men.

In African military history too there is a venerable tradition of homoeroticism. Shaka, the great king of the nineteenth-century Zulu empire, used to encourage his male soldiers to engage in *hlobongo*, thigh-sex with each other. Zulu historians have always seen this as his way of channeling the sexual urges of adolescent boys; more recently, it has become seen as a means to create tight allegiances and loyalties—love relationships, in effect—among young soldiers.

Gay Africanism, a discourse only in the very early stages of development in South Africa, maintains that it is the censure of homosexuality that is a colonial import, brought to this continent by missionaries, and that there is irony to the fact that latter-day Africanists, like Robert Mugabe, have assimilated this Judeo-Christian biblical propaganda and reconstructed it as pre-colonial African purity. But whatever the roots of homophobia, it must be conceded that homosexuality is taboo in as many African cultures as it is in Western cultures. The sometimes-violent censure of homosexuality within black cultures, however, must not be mistaken for evidence of the non-existence of homosexuality: the very fact of censure indicates that it exists.

## 5

'When you're gay, you're beautiful, right?' asks Pastor Tsietsi Thandekiso at the height of his sermon. When his congregation, a hundred or so young black men and women, does not answer, he volleys back, 'Has somebody got a problem here?', his voice slightly inflected, Southern-Baptist camp. 'Because if you got a problem we'll lay our hands on you and solve the problem. But you'll still be gay. No one in this church is a mistake. If you got a problem it's in your head; it's not because you are gay.'

Tsietsi Thandekiso, who died in early 1998 of AIDS-related illness, founded his Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) in April 1994, literally days after the first democratic elections. It is now the most important institution in urban South African black gay life—in fact, the cast of 'After Nines', the black gay play at the Civic Theatre, was drawn from the HUMCC's choir. The reason for the church's popularity is precisely its use of the style and the liturgy of the African Independent churches, which, fusing charismatic Christianity with local African prayer-styles and singing, are immensely powerful in black communities.

The HUMCC meets on the seventh floor of the Harrison Reef Hotel in Hillbrow, a crumbling and crime-ridden inner-city ghetto that used to be the city's gay neighborhood when it was still all-white. Downstairs is The Skyline, Johannesburg's oldest gay bar, which has changed colour along with the neighborhood: black drag queens, rent boys, professionals and township kids gather



there on Friday and Saturday nights. With a jukebox and tacky modular 1970s decor, it is one of those environments that is perfectly retro without having the slightest intention of being so.

But if the Harrison Reef rebounds with the gay anthems of the '70s on Saturday nights, it gives way to a very different aural interference on Sunday afternoons: the gospel-chanting, chair-slapping, Satan-slaying, yea-saying evangelism of the church; lurid faith superimposed upon a shabby hotel room converted into a place of worship with a wooden cross wrapped in tinfoil, a keyboard, some pink tablecloths and a bouquet of flowers.

The prayer, this wintry May Sunday in 1997, is particularly fervent, because today's service is the anniversary of the marriage of two young Soweto women, Pretty Robiana and Sbhongile Malaza. The couple shuffle into the room to the rhythm of an African hymn, Pretty in a military-style navy suit with gold braiding and epaulets, Sbhongile in a girlish pink appliquéd dress. There is no doubt as to the gender roles in their marriage: Pretty is as burly and aggressive as any African man is meant to be; Sbhongile, still in the throes of adolescent acne, is almost a caricature of the traditional African wife: she does not look you in the eye, she answers in whispers. They call each other 'husband' and 'wife'.

They grew up on the same street in Emdeni, one of Soweto's rougher neighborhoods. Sbhongile is nineteen, and in her final year of high school; she has been raised by her grandparents, a domestic worker and a retired security guard. Pretty is 24 and unemployed, the daughter of a single parent, a nursing sister; she is of the 'GLOW generation', the first generation of black kids to have come out in the townships. Ostracized from her family's church because she refused to wear the women's uniform and came instead in jacket and tie, Pretty found out about the HUMCC through a magazine article. She joined the church, and decided that she wished to marry her sweetheart.

Although gay South Africans have constitutional equality, statutes that criminalize homosexuality or discriminate against gay peoples are still on the books; in its lobbying process, the NGCLE has decided to leave the marriage battle till last, fearing a backlash from an extremely conservative society that has voted the ANC in without really coming to terms with the radical implications of its social agenda.

Nonetheless, Thandekiso agreed to marry Pretty and Sbhongile before God. The two were already ostracized from their families; Sbhongile's grandmother, who had worked for a white lesbian couple, told the girl that it was 'Satanic' and 'un-African'. When Sbhongile's grandfather turned a gun on Pretty and assaulted both of them, the young couple fled the township, spending some time in a battered women's shelter. Later, meeting her on the street, the old man fired three shots at his granddaughter's 'husband', narrowly missing her head.

Laying charges of attempted murder with the police, Pretty met with an unexpected response. The station commander, a woman, told her: 'The constitution is here now. You people have decided you want to lead this life and it

comforts you, so let us call the family together and discuss it and make peace.' She convened a meeting with both families and the chairman of the local street committee who said, according to Pretty: 'This is a surprise to me. I have never seen this before, but there is nothing I can do about it.' After the meeting the station commander gave Pretty a document to sign to say that she was responsible for Sbhongile, and told Sbhongile's family that there was nothing illegal about the women's union.

Now that marriage has the official stamp of the station commander, the Malaza family has changed its tune: they want Pretty to pay them *lobola*, the bride-price that is at the root of African marital union. It is a startling example of how people change their ideologies to fit in with new hegemonies.

Nonetheless, the only member from either family to attend the anniversary service was one of Sbhongile's sisters: 'We accept our sister,' she said in a brief and shy speech to the church, 'despite what she is.' The night before, Pretty and Sbhongile held a party at the Harrison Reef, to which hundreds came: not only fellow-congregants, but neighbors from Soweto—where the couple rent a room in a yard—and even one of Sbhongile's teachers, who made a speech and gave a gift.

Their story offers all the paradoxes of contemporary gay African life. 'Homophobia in the townships is superficial,' said Thandekiso before his death. 'We are living through a time where it's actually not such a big deal to be gay. Go to the township, and you will see in almost every school a group of children who are gay. There are gays on the streets, gays in the taverns. It's become a part of life.'

When I visited the HUMCC in 1996, at the height of Robert Mugabe's homophobia, I met two young Zimbabweans in the church. One, Remington Ncube, was a migrant miner working in the Johannesburg area. A deeply religious man, he had been an altar-server in his Catholic church; when his family discovered he was homosexual, he was chased out of home and church. 'I had to leave Bulawayo,' he says, 'and there was only one place to go. It is known all over the continent that Johannesburg is the freest place for black gays...'

Thoko Ndlovu comes from Bulawayo too. 'Why am I in Johannesburg?' she asked. 'Well, I picked up one of those pop black magazines in Bulawayo one day, and there was an article about all this terrible sinful activity in Jo'burg. And I said, 'Get me on the next bus! I'm going there!''

Zimbabwe and South Africa are separated by nothing more than the Limpopo river. Zimbabweans and South Africans are the same people, with similar histories and interconnected economies. How is it that their cultures have adopted so different an approach to the same issue? There are many possible explanations: the porous and hybrid nature of urban South African life, where essentialist patriarchy no longer holds much truck; the role of popular culture in South Africa, where gay issues and subjects have become immensely popular on the TV talkshow; the influence, particularly, of American ideas and styles in the country.

A lot has to do, too, with the moral authority that Nelson Mandela and the ANC carry. Shortly after the 1994 elections, GLOW organizer Polly Motene, who lives in Soweto, told me that 'attitudes have changed among those who read the newspapers, because there has been more publicity about gay people.' Motene's father, for example, is a local ANC activist, 'and he was astonished when he heard about how the ANC supports gay people.' But Motene also offered a caution: 'Most Sowetans haven't heard a thing about the gay clause in the constitution. For them, homosexuality remains a white thing, and we black gays are just freaks, *stabane* with two organs.'

Also shortly after those first elections, Beverly Ditsie, a trendy young black lesbian who writes a column in *Outright*, the gay magazine, explained the downside of ANC support for gay causes: 'Right now there is quite a lot of dissatisfaction on the ground with the government, because it is perceived to be going out of its way to reconcile with whites rather than looking after its own people. And so if you tell people that Mandela supports gay rights, they'll either get angry with you and tell you that you are lying, or they'll just say, "Oh there he goes, looking after everyone except for us again," because of course gayness for them is a white thing, so it's further proof that he is ignoring his own constituency in favour of whites.'

But while she offered a bleak picture of the persistent homophobia in township society, Ditsie did acknowledge that things had changed since 1990, when, as one of the public spokespeople of that first gay march, she found herself the victim of violent and sustained gay-bashing in her native Soweto after appearing on television. More recently, she has participated in a TV experiment called 'Livewire'; six young people from wildly differing backgrounds were thrown together in a commune and videotaped for a few months in a rather spurious sort of guinea-pig trial for integration in South Africa. The show attracted much attention, not least because Ditsie—the only black woman in the commune—made no bones about her sexuality.

'I found,' she says, 'that attitudes began to change towards me in Soweto. People began to see me as their representative on the show, because I was black, because I was strong, because I knew what I wanted.' She went onto a radio call-in show to talk about the experience, 'and people would phone in and say, "You really spoke well for us." I'd ask, "who is 'us'? The answer would sometimes be black people, sometimes women, sometimes gay people. It all become one thing, one struggle...'

## 6

In the early 1990s, in the sleepy township of KwaThema, east of Johannesburg, a vibrant gay subculture developed because an older woman, Thoko Khumalo, had a gay nephew and decided to open her home to his friends. Ma Thoko's place, a standard four-room apartheid-built matchbox, became a tavern and a haven for the township's gay kids, particularly for those who had been turfed out of their own homes. In townships, space is at a premium: families

often sleep eight to a room, and children only leave home when they marry. Unlike in middle-class communities, there is simply no space to be gay. Ma Thoko proved that gay subculture grows around space; the fact that she was a person of standing in the community (she died in 1994) meant that if she declared herself to be 'Mama GLOW', her wards would be afforded a fair deal of respect.

In 1990, at a party at Ma Thoko's, as the township's gay kids danced and socialized and neighbors popped in for a drink and a chat, I met a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl from the township, Phumi Mthethwa. Now, seven years later, Phumi is one of the leaders of the South African gay movement—an executive member of the NCGLE, she went with Simon Nkoli and Sir Ian McKellen to discuss the issue of homosexuality with Nelson Mandela in 1995. A business student and a paralegal, she is petite, suave and soft-spokenly articulate (she chooses to dress in beautifully tailored men's suits): I will wager that, before she is 40, she will represent gay men and lesbians in parliament.

On a Friday evening in May 1997, I accompanied Phumi to Ratanda, a hardscrabble alcoholic little township in the cornfields south of Johannesburg, serving the farming centre of Heidelberg. Phumi was to be a judge in the 'Mr and Miss Gay Ratanda 1997', organized by the Ratanda Gay and Lesbian Individuals, a group of about twenty young men and women that had grown around another Ma Thoko-type personality, Flatta Mosele, a flamboyant 24-year-old woman who ran a local community arts centre and had fashioned herself as the township's 'Mama Gay'.

None of Ratanda crowd had heard of the constitution, let alone that it guaranteed them equality. Except for Flatta: 'I know,' she said, 'the constitution says everyone has the right to live, and that you can do anything you want and you have the right to be happy. So I just turn that around for me, and I say it must mean that I have the right to be a lez.' She looked surprised and somewhat incredulous, when Phumi and I told her that the constitution actually explicitly protects her 'right to be a lez'.

We met her backstage in a community hall where the show took place. The 'Mr Gays' could pass; tough-looking little sweethearts in gangster-wear, practising their swaggers backstage and spinning, menacingly, on the heels of their soft-leather shoes. The 'Miss Gays', small-town girls, had neither the attitude nor the resources of big-city snap-queens: they represented that singular township androgyny borne of scant resources and much imagination, nodding at gender inversion and conjuring fantasy with no more than a frilly blouse, a pair of palazzos, low-heeled pumps, straightened hair, a little lipstick. Nobody had shown up to watch them, but no matter. There was a grim optimism to their lives, spiked with ebullience whenever the DJ plays the Fugees' 'Killing Me Softly'.

Times are hard in Ratanda. Isaac Lebona, a domestic servant, was raped by boys who wanted to prove that they could do it; they sliced his right eye out. Japie Tshabalala, a high-school student, has been playing netball since he was six, but his dreams had been shattered: he was dropped from the Heidelberg

town-wide team when it was discovered he was a boy. The gay men see themselves as 'girls' who participate in the sexual commerce of the township by being *skesanas*—queens—who go after *injongas*, straight-acting homosexual men who play along with the charade that their 'wives' are real women.

Sex is the central, defining aspect of their identity: 'We gays are everywhere now in Ratanda,' said Stephen Tsoari, who leads the group with Flatta. 'Everyone knows us. We spread the word by proposing to men in taverns. They go with us, and they see how nice it is to fuck us, then we show them what we really are and they become gay too.'

Do they practise safer sex? 'I will ask my man to wear a condom,' said Isaac. 'But if he does not, I will let him fuck me anyway. I am too scared that if I refuse him he will beat me.'

They were all 'out' and they had, they insisted, no problems with the community. Phumi Mthethwa was unconvinced: 'I know this syndrome. It's just that they have made this big thing of being open, so they need to pretend everything is okay. But it isn't, I can see. We've got a lot of work to do.'

Where black gay communities have cohered in townships, it has always been around characters like Ma Thoko Khumalo, Pule Hlohoangwane or, in the case of budding Ratanda, Flatta Mosele. As soon as these characters are no longer around, though, the subculture collapses—as it did in kwaThema once Ma Thoko died.

In Umtata, the capital of the formerly-independent homeland of the Transkei (birthplace of both Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki), an official in the department of health named Vera Vimbela formed Lesbians and Gays in the Transkei (LEGIT) in the early 1990s. She tells the story of how she had been stripped naked in her rural village after having proposed, as a young woman, to another girl: when it was discovered she was not *stabane*, a hermaphrodite, and thus didn't have male organs to explain her behaviour, she was thrashed and hounded out of the community. A huge, imposing bulldyke who zoomed around town on a serious motorbike, she attracted a coterie of gay men around her. Now she is undergoing a sex change and has found the Lord; LEGIT has collapsed.

Similarly, in Soweto in the early '90s, a vibrant community developed around an older gay man, Junior, and then fell apart once he lost interest in it after some arcane romantic intrigue. Junior, in his fifties, still runs a catering company that employs gay men. In 1991, to help augment his employees' income and to provide some sort of social space, Junior also set up a 'stokvel', or revolving credit union, called the Jikaleza Boys. It worked like this: the members would take turns to hold monthly parties where they would keep the takings from the bar. While the Jikaleza Boys was up and running, there was at least one huge gay party a month in Soweto.

I once accompanied Junior's catering company on a job, to cater for a family that had just had a death, in a relatively well-to-do household in the Phiri section of Soweto. In the kitchen, the queens ruled: in demi-drag, they established a hive of activity, with all the requisite drama, attitude, and—it

must be said—efficiency.

Through the swinging doors into the living room, though, one entered the entirely different world of a stolidly bourgeois township living room, with tea-drinking aunties sitting on heavy dark-wood over-upholstered furniture covered in plastic dust-cloth. When one of the aunties ventured into the kitchen, I struck up a conversation with her. What did she think of gay people, I asked her? 'Oh no,' she responded. 'We don't have that thing here.'

## 7

A spring Sunday evening in 1997: the sounds of a gospel band drift out across Sunnyside, a highrise suburb of Pretoria, South Africa's capital city and the heart of Afrikaner conservatism. Inside, the congregation of Deo Gloria is at prayer. A burly man with a beautiful baritone is marshalling the band through Afrikaans hymns with all the bellicose discipline of a sergeant-major. He is, in fact, an officer in the South African National Defence Force. Pretoria is a company town: most of the Deo Gloria congregants work, in one way or another, for the government: they are in the army, in the civil service, in the education system. They have the neat, buttoned-down and unstylish appearance that characterizes Pretoria. The older women wear the kind of crimplene two-piece skirt-suits that all conservative Afrikaans women wear to church; the older men have the blousoned and blow-dried look of queens of another era. Most of the men have moustaches; the younger women are in pants, brushcuts, and lumberjack shirts. Several are with children.

Given the city's conservatism, perhaps it is unsurprising that church plays such a central role in gay life. The charismatic Deo Gloria congregation broke away from the Reform Church of Equals in Christ, which follows the liturgy of the mainstream Calvinist church to which most Afrikaners belong. The Reform Church has over 400 weekly congregants, mostly male and all white. Because of its young, willowy strawberry-blonde pastor, Sue Welman, about half of the congregants at Deo Gloria are women, and it has a smattering of black members too.

Sue Welman is, in fact, a licensed marriage officer: she earns her keep marrying heterosexual couples. She has married several couples in her congregation too, although she does not give them an official marriage license: 'As soon as the law changes,' she told me, 'they can come back and get the stamp from me.' The marriage of one of her lesbian couples was broadcast on a magazine programme on national television.

Despite the fact that both Deo Gloria and Tsietsi Thandekiso's HUMCC are charismatic, Pentecostal churches, they have little to do with each other. Welman's approach is very different from Thandekiso's, perhaps because of their different congregations. While the black pastor from Hillbrow built his congregation around being openly, assertively gay, articulating an explicitly gay theology in his sermons, you will not hear the word 'gay' at Deo Gloria—the full name of which is, in fact, the Deo Gloria Family Church. Certainly, Welman

will tell anecdotes in her sermons that involve her lover Diane, and some couples will pray arm-in-arm; apart from that, though, a visitor would discern little outward evidence that this is a homosexual congregation.

In fact, there is much dissent in the church about the public role Welman now plays (she is frequently on television, specifically as a gay Christian voice to counter the African Christian Democratic Party's campaign against the equality clause in the constitution) and about whether the church should participate in Pride marches. One of the people who does not like her public profile is Hentie, the army officer: 'I disapprove of it,' he says, 'because we are here to pray, not to make politics.' He is closeted both in the military and with his family: 'I know my mother has seen Sue on the television, but she's never said anything to me about it. I think she is just so happy I'm back in church that she doesn't ask any other questions.'

After the service, I accompany a group of church regulars back to the home of Charles Steenkamp, a caterer who seems to play the role of the congregation's clucking can-do auntie. About twelve of us sit in a circle: 'Has life become any easier for you since the ANC came to power?' I ask. The answer is a resounding negative. But what about the constitution and its protection of gay rights? Sue Welman tells of how, when one of their congregants died of AIDS, the insurance company paid his lover out upon seeing the 'Holy Union' certificate that she had issued them when they were married in the church. The others don't think there has been any change at all.

I ask whether the church is actively trying to recruit black people to the church and Hentie explodes. 'Let's face it. In South Africa, the white man is under threat. We cannot get jobs, we cannot get promotions because of this affirmative action rubbish. Now this church is our sanctuary. It's the place where we pray! It's our own cultural space! Why *should* we have affirmative action here too?'

It is a fascinating insight into white South African gay consciousness. The objective reality is that the African National Congress has, legally at least, liberated gay South Africans, black and white alike. But as ever in race-obsessed South Africa, race identification overpowers everything else—class, gender and sexuality. People like Hentie have no sense of being empowered, by the new government, as gay people, because they feel so profoundly *disempowered* as white people. Hentie, an out-and-out racist, might articulate this more openly, but by failing to see how the new constitution gives them recourse to the law they never previously had, the others assent, silently, to his point of view.

Pretoria is filled with paradoxes. Despite its conservatism, it boasts a much larger gay scene than bigger, more liberal cities like Johannesburg. Lourens Smit, a gay Afrikaans man who moved to Pretoria from the small town of Lichtenburg, explains: 'You have to remember that Afrikaners come from very conservative Calvinist backgrounds. And most of us also come from the small towns. So when we come out of the closet, we really *break* from our home-cultures. We come to Pretoria and make new lives for ourselves. We've got

nothing to lose. We make new families and new homes. That's why Pretoria has such a lively life, compared to a much bigger city like Jo'burg.'

The life might be lively, but the New South African spirit has not yet hit Pretoria. When Gays and Lesbians of Pretoria (GLO-P) wanted to advertise its advice hotline on municipal buses with a slogan, 'Gay is Okay, but call us anyway,' the city council turned it down. 'We were told,' says GLO-P coordinator Dawie Nel, 'that the council doesn't accept advertisements that are religious, political or offensive. Since the hotline clearly isn't religious or political, I can only assume the council finds it offensive.' GLO-P has lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission, and intends using the constitution to sue the council.

Perhaps not surprisingly, too, the life in Pretoria is very white. Walk through Steamers, the throbbing gay bar that spills over three floors, on a Saturday night, and you'll be hard pressed to see a black face in the crowd of thousands. Pretoria has large black townships; why, then, are there no black people at Steamers? 'We really try to encourage black people to come here,' said Christo, the manager, to me, in 1997. 'But we're dealing with the legacy of the past. Black people just aren't comfortable enough yet...'

As at Deo Gloria, the atmosphere in Steamers is *gemutlich*; there is no heavy cruising, and the mixed male and female crowd are well-dressed and well-behaved, conducting themselves as if at a high-school dance or a small-town social. Downstairs on Thursday nights there is, quite incongruously, a raunchy strip show. Upstairs, equally incongruously, three regulars sit over their brandy-and-cokes. With their paunches, their long beards and their khaki safari-suits, they look as if they have just walked off the set of a Boer War movie.

Their names are Ben, Fanie and Gert. They are security guards. They have their own theory as to why the Pretoria scene is so vibrant: 'It's because it's white,' says Fanie. 'Why do you think all the gay people come rushing up here from Jo'burg every weekend? It's because they don't want to mix with *kaffirs* and they know they won't find any here.'

These three gay men, clearly out of kilter with both the style and the politics of the rest of the bar, are part of the small extreme who boycotted the 1994 election and even view the leader of the right wing in parliament, General Constant Viljoen, as a 'traitor to the Afrikaner people'.

They do not believe for a moment that the ANC is behind gay equality. 'It's just a vote-catching ploy,' says Ben, and, in a bizarre twist of ethnic pride, they claim that homosexuality is a solely white preserve: 'Oh come on,' scoffs Ben, 'there's no such thing as a black gay. Gay is a white thing. If a black says he's gay he's only doing it to get money.'

Strange how circles complete themselves: Ben, like those 'Africanists' who see homosexuality as a colonial depredation sully the purity of the African continent, views sexuality in entirely racial terms. South Africa under a black government, he says, will go 'down the tubes, just like the rest of this continent, where there is no infrastructure at all—no roads, no bridges, no telephones, no gay clubs, no electricity; nothing!'

Thirty kilometres south of Johannesburg is Ennerdale, one of the city's 'coloured' townships. South Africa's two-million strong 'coloured' community, largely based in the Cape Province, has always been more accommodating of homosexuality, and the annual Coon Carnival—Cape Town's Mardi Gras—has long been led by a *moffie* (the word, in fact, originates in the 'coloured' community, where it specifically means 'transvestite'). Perhaps this tolerance is because of the community's hybrid, creole nature; perhaps because the strong influence of Muslim culture (which comes from Malay slaves) has always tacitly encouraged homosexuality as something preferable to heterosexual adultery.

In September 1995, the working-class citizens of Ennerdale found banners festooned all over their township: 'MISS GAY TRANSVAAL COMPETITION. CLUB STEPPING OUT. SATURDAY NITE!' Gay 'coloureds' have little to do with black gay people. And so, in the build-up to the Miss Glow drag finals, which were to take place the night before the Pride Parade, it was not surprising to find an entirely separate 'coloured' event. The girls paced their way through crudely choreographed numbers (including a Roman toga scene replete with a gladiator in shabby costume-hire), they studiously counted the beats, turning mechanically in unison; a Las Vegas extravaganza with all the self-conscious charm of a school concert. The deejay's vinyl kept on scratching, the emcee's mike was filled with static, and the crowd just loved every minute of it.

Certainly, each queen brought her gay fan club, but Stepping Out was a straight club; the gathering place of the working-class community in which it is situated. The local gangsters squatted on the floor laughing embarrassedly and pretending not to look, while the local bottle-store owner's wife, standing behind them, effused: 'God I love these *moffies!* The world needs more *moffies*. Gentle—and sweet! But when they need to, they can put their tits on the table and fight! Oh god I love these *moffies*.'

Excusing herself ('I must go backstage and give little Nadia a good-luck kiss'), she introduced me to her husband, the bottle-store owner: pot-bellied and in a maroon jersey, wielding a home videocam as if he were the proud uncle at a family wedding. How did he feel about the *moffies*? 'Ag, I'm used to it by now.'

Outside the club there were the usual drunken Saturday-night brawls; inside, a friendly ease, even in the tiny backstage dressing-room, where the girls, clustered around a mirror, air-kissed each other good luck, helped each other out with the finishing touches of make-up, and buttoned each other's more inaccessible hooks.

Earlier, getting themselves ready, the girls talked about race. Why did the coloured and the black drag scenes have so little to do with each other? 'We want to become part of GLOW,' one says, 'but you know, it's so... national-

ized.'

Another laughs apologetically. 'That's the coloured word for black,' she says. 'This New South Africa!' Sure enough: at the Miss GLOW finals a few weeks later, there was almost a brawl backstage when the winner, a black queen named Thabo resplendent in an emerald ballgown, was announced. 'That cow!' the ringleader of the 'coloured' contestants shrieks. 'She won last year, in the very same dress! We're just not bloody black enough to be queens, are we?'

Christopher, the emcee at the Club Stepping Out competition (who doubles as a primary-school teacher during the week), explained that 'in the old days whites liked coloured men. But now with the New South Africa they're all running after blacks.' Meanwhile, coloured gays are staying away from blacks, Christopher adds, 'because there's this idea that they sleep around a lot more and so it's easier to pick up the virus from them. It's a problem, this racism...'

Indeed. Given the pathologies of South African society—the logical consequences of decades of enforced racial separation—it would be unrealistic to expect instant integration within gay communities. In cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town there are, of course, a smattering of mixed-race couples; there is also a brisk trade of sexual commerce between younger black and older white men. And there is the anything-goes Gotham City in Hillbrow, a mixed gay sex club where desire seems to overpower race.

At Angels, Cape Town's major gay club until it closed in the mid-1990s, a 'straight' downstairs and a 'gay' upstairs encouraged coloured men to fraternize the club under cover and move upstairs without very much notice. But Cape Town's enormous 'coloured' gay scene is concentrated, not in the city, but in clubs out on the Cape Flats where most 'coloured' people live. Perhaps one of the most vibrant black gay organizations in the country has been ABIGALE—the Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians in Cape Town. Formed by a 'coloured' lesbian couple, Medi Achmat and Thereza Raizenberg, it managed, for many years, to bring black and coloured gay people together in Cape Town: its most successful activism, in fact, was the picketing of a large gay club in Cape Town, Strawbs, that discriminated against black patrons.

By the end of the decade, though, ABIGALE had disintegrated—evidently because of conflict between the black and the coloured members. In Pretoria, a short-lived attempt to form a union between the white members of GLO-P and a black group from Atteridgeville, one of the city's townships, led to an acrimonious split: the Atteridgeville group, called Actors, claimed they were the victims of racism; GLO-P co-ordinator Dawie Nel explains that 'there was a conflict of interest. They wanted a social club, and we were more interested in providing services, like a mental health clinic and a hotline, to the community.'

In Johannesburg, Bev Ditsie led a group of black lesbians out of GLOW to form Nkateko ('success' in Tsonga), a short-lived 'black lesbian empowerment group', because they felt that white men and women were dominating the organization. Their opening event was a Miss Sappho competition, which took place at Club Chameleon, a short-lived lesbian venue in Johannesburg, in

mid-1997. On a Saturday evening, about 50 young black women gathered: students, young professionals, stylish township kids. The light was blue, the sound R&B.

Why a beauty pageant for a black lesbian empowerment group? Tebogo, Bev's younger sister, explained that 'our biggest problem among lesbians is that our butches feel they need to behave like real men, and in our African culture this means beating up their girlfriends and of course—just like any "real" African man—practising polygamy and having as many "wives" as they choose.'

And so, said Bev, 'we're trying to reach the middle ground. The whole idea behind it is to show that you don't need to be just butch or just femme to be a lesbian. You can be both.'

The Miss Sappho hopefuls were compact and shy, jaw-achingly beautiful with their fashion dreads and high cheekbones. Their butch-wear was sophisticated, meticulous in detail: they dragged like gangsters did in another era. In femme-wear some faltered endearingly. During the question session, Zanele, a magnificent femme, was asked by the emcee: 'What do you think of interracial relationships?' A white woman, one of only three or four in the audience, rushed up and kissed her. Zanele beams, somewhat defiantly. 'I think that if you love someone, you make your own world with them, doesn't matter about colour.'

Zanele was crowned first princess, I like to think, not only because of perfect bone structure and musculature, but because of the way she answered that question.

## 9

Veliswa is an icon of the changing South Africa: 32 years old, she is the first black female attorney at one of South Africa's largest and most venerable corporate law firms. She and her lover, Lulama, a medical student, are part of a burgeoning gay buppie scene in Johannesburg: their friends are doctors, professionals, artists, high-level bureaucrats.

Like most in South Africa's new black elite, Veliswa comes from humble beginnings: her father is a retired policeman in the rural Transkei. Because of her family's conservatism and because of the difficulties of simply being a black woman in her professional environment, she is not out of the closet. But, she insists, 'I am not a victim. That equality clause in the constitution is important to me. I'm aware of it and I know its value. I'll use it if I need to.'

For Veliswa, being free in post-apartheid South Africa is 'all rolled up in one. Under apartheid, there were so many ways I wasn't recognized: as a black person, as a woman, as a lesbian, even as a South African, because coming from the Transkei I wasn't even allowed South African identity papers. But now my country says the highest law is the constitution, so it can't discriminate against me on any of the above grounds. Finally, I feel like I can participate in my society. I used to look on with detachment and anger, but I wouldn't do anything. Now, I suddenly have opinions! If I don't like something, I say so! I can

feel it happening. I'm becoming a full citizen.'

Activists feel that this sense of empowerment, of liberation, has paradoxically been something of a death-knell for the gay and lesbian movement. 'There's general euphoria,' says Nomfundo Lumphondwana, a lesbian activist, 'that "We're free! We're in the constitution! So let's party!" This results in political apathy.' She says that the NCGLE 'gets daily calls from gay people asking, "Do you know someone who can marry us?" They don't even know that they're not allowed to get married yet! They think they're free and they're not!'

The NCGLE is somewhat responsible for this state of affairs. Its strategic approach, in getting the equality clause passed, was to work the backrooms of power; to slip the clause in without attracting much notice. To use the equality clause as an issue around which to mount a mass mobilization campaign would have thus been seriously counterproductive. Most gay people want marriage—a mass campaign would have inevitably focused on this demand and could have caused the backlash that the coalition justly feared.

'Our strategy,' explains Kevan Botha, 'is to have everything in place, so that gay marriage is a de facto part of South African life, even if it isn't called that. Then, when we lobby for marriage itself, we can avoid the backlash by saying, "Look, it's already there! What's the fuss?"' Strategically, this makes sense; the fallout, though, is a gay community that wants marriage now and believes it is entitled to it, and is thus somewhat alienated from national gay leadership.

It remains a conundrum why, at this moment of constitutional gay liberation, there has not been an efflorescence of gay political and cultural activity in South Africa, particularly in the black community. GLOW, the standard-bearer of gay black aspirations for nearly a decade, has collapsed and, but for the Skyline and the HUMCC, there is no formal black gay subculture in Johannesburg. White gay subculture has the usual institutions: bars, sports groups, churches, publications, a weekly radio show, a burgeoning gay sex industry—pornography was banned under apartheid, and the growth of a sex industry is, in fact, the single most visible change in urban white gay life. Perhaps the reason why there is not a flourishing gay political movement is because of 'liberation apathy'. But it also has to do with something else: in Western society, gay people put themselves into gay worlds; their homosexuality becomes their dominant identity. Gay Africans, like straight Africans, do not leave their home cultures unless they are forced to; they find, rather, ways of reconciling their differences with the values of their home-communities.

This has profound political implications for the gay and lesbian movement in South Africa. Unlike in Western Europe or North America, the call for gay equality does not have the status of the special pleading of an identifiable political minority. Gay rights in South Africa are not ghetto rights. They are, rather, general human rights, indivisible from the rights to education, housing, freedom, non-discrimination, etc. They are abstract notions that apply to all rather than concrete values that can be pinned to one particular group of people, given to them only if they behave well or wield political clout ('the gay

vote'), as in the United States, and snatched away from them with equal ease. There is the tantalizing possibility that South Africa, with its fusion of individualist Western rights-politics and African communal consciousness, might show the world a far smoother way of integrating gay people into society, even if this is at the cost of the kind of robust gay subculture that dominates cities like New York and San Francisco.

There are reasons, though, why precisely such a robust, combative subculture might be necessary. For as long as Nelson Mandela led the ANC, he—together with people like Desmond Tutu, of the same generation—remained the moral authority of our society. Now that his generation has retired, there is certainly going to be a splintering of the ANC's monolithic hegemony. As was so clearly evidenced by that 1998 NEC meeting, one split could well be along 'moral' lines. There is already, within the ANC, much quiet discomfort about South Africa's very liberal abortion laws, its lax censorship regulations, its abolition of the death penalty and its acceptance of homosexuality. Christians and Africanists are already beginning to unite behind a Mugabe-type banner against the liberal, Westernized atheists who are the ANC's elite; even the constitution can be changed with a two-thirds majority. There is thus an argument for gay civil society to mobilize itself and lobby vociferously for the setting into place of as much legislative reform—and as much judicial precedent—as possible while the window of tolerance remains open.

'I'm in the constitution!' I went to that drag queen after her performance at the Pride Parade, to find out what, exactly, her new empowerment meant. She was reeking of cheap booze, but still astonishingly articulate: 'My darling, it means sweet motherfucking nothing at all. You can rape me, rob me, what am I going to do when you attack me? Wave the constitution in your face? I'm just a nobody black queen.' She paused, and her face lost its mask of both bravado and bitterness. 'But you know what? Ever since I heard about that constitution, I feel free inside.'

The astonishing possibility of the South African constitution is that its stand on gay equality has the potential of making all South Africans, gay or straight, feel this way. Albie Sachs—one of the drafters of the South African constitution and the strongest adherent for the inclusion of gay equality—explained to the September 1999 ILGA Gala Banquet that, given South Africa's diversity, 'if we become intolerant, we don't stand a chance. The only way this country can survive is by acknowledging people for who they are.' The gay equality clause in the constitution 'wasn't just for gays; it was for all of us.'