

CHAPTER TWO

Playing on the Pavements of Identities¹

Bernedette Muthien

Be daring, be different, be impractical,

be anything that will assert integrity
of purpose and imaginative vision
against the play-it-safers, the creatures
of the commonplace, the slaves of
the ordinary.

Sir Cecil Beaton

planetary piss?

i yearn to float with ducks
on open air waves
nip pluck tuck everywhere
neither here nor there

i am both none inbetween
kiss her fuck him desire
only a dream

sitdowncomic pencilling
shower songs
thru unwooded electrical storms

may 2000

walk the talk²

This chapter is an exploration and discussion of my identities, in particular my sexual identities, and the ways in which these identities interact with race/ethnicity, culture, nationality, sexuality, class and spirituality, in an increasingly globalised world. It is my attempt to practically apply the ancient feminist mantra that the personal is the political and vice versa. And hence I will employ autobiography as a genre to explicate and problematise my myriad identities. Through my personal (and necessarily political) experiences I will attempt to practice what I preach, or walk the talk. While I studiously attempt to be as linear as possible, as a curtsy to my phallogocentric social science training, I fear that my polymorphously perverse personality may not allow this at all times.

But what is identity? Debbie Epstein asserts that identity 'is something we have to work at, something which is never complete, but always in process' (1998:52).

It is precisely due to the complexities of human beings that identities are never homogenous. Class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other markers combine to influence and complicate identities. For example, educated Black gay men differ from each other in terms of physique, ideology, spirituality and a host of preferences and orientations. So too some men may take pride in their embodiment of some aspects of conventional femininity, such as gentleness, while some women may choose to adopt behaviours traditionally ascribed to males, such as aggression. Hence the categories referred to in this chapter, such as sexuality, should be viewed in their complex plurality.

The term race is often based on racist physiology, and does not necessarily contradict the hierarchised and dichotomised categories of Black and White. Epstein suggests

that ethnicity should be regarded as a set of processes through which relational differences between groups are constructed and held in place ... they will differ over time and in relation to socio-economic and political change, and will also carry varying salience for different (groups of) people at different times. Ethnic groups do not, therefore, depend on ties which go back into the far distant past ... Ethnic groups are formed and exist through economic, political and cultural practices and material relations of power. No ethnic group is monolithic ... There are many differences within any ethnic group, along lines of gender, religion, language, caste or class (1998:51).

Whether the identities of Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda are based on caste or class, ethnicity, or on resources, and whether their identities preceded colonisation, is contested by Rwandans themselves, some of who argue that their *ethnic* identities

are colonial constructs. So too South Africa's Xhosa and Zulu speakers have their precolonial origins in a common Nguni language and culture, a culture which itself drove their own centuries of colonial conquest against the nomadic Khoisan of Southern Africa, in search of more land as their populations increased dramatically.

Thus Epstein prefers the concept of ethnicity to that of race, since race 'implies an essentialist biological basis...and implies a kind of homogenous unity of the categories "White" and "Black" which is misleading' (1998:51). Thus the term ethnicity refers to individual and group identity, which may be constructed from a range of factors.

Audre Lorde (date?:90) also cautions against the use of Black as a monolithic term:

I see certain pitfalls in defining Black as a political position. It takes the identity of a widespread but definite group and makes it a generic identity for many culturally diverse peoples, all on the basis of a shared oppression. This runs the risk of providing a convenient blanket of apparent similarity under which our actual and unaccepted difference can be distorted or misused. This blanket would diminish our chances of forming genuine working coalitions built upon the recognition and creative use of unacknowledged difference, rather than upon the shaky foundations of a false sense of similarity.

However, since apartheid attempted to use science to justify the brutal implementation of its racial hierarchies³ (not entirely unlike Victorian anthropology), I do employ the terms race and Black to discuss the formation of my early racial identity, an identity which has, since nineties political liberation, of necessity become more complex, as Epstein's notion of ethnicity and Lorde's problematisation of Black implies.

who am I? - which shades of rainbow compose my shadows

So who am I? I was born into an impoverished family, seventh of eight children to an Indian father and a Catholic Coloured mother. During 1968, after my first two years in a racially mixed suburb, Plumstead, we were moved to a semi-detached two-roomed council house in only the second Indian township in Cape Town. I attended Coloured (mixed race or *mulatto*) schools in the harshly racist and poorer northern suburbs of Cape Town during the late seventies and early eighties, a time of intense political struggle.

Black consciousness crafted my early racial identity, a Black identity I still ascribe to at present. During the anti-apartheid struggle, activists who were not classified White by the apartheid regime, identified as Black, based on the teachings

of Steve Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement here. Biko, drawing on Frantz Fanon's thinking,⁴ posited that Blacks would not be liberated until they were able to counter the internalisation of their oppression and found pride and strength in their Blackness, their Africanness. Until then they would be shadows of, and dependent on, European norms and standards, forever chasing metaphoric and actual colonial skirts, in search of breadcrumbs from the colonial larder. Unifying all people who were not classified White was strategically important in South Africa under apartheid, in large part to oppose the colonial divide-and-rule strategies, the racial hierarchies and concomitant hierarchised privileges and deprivations that South Africans were forced to subscribe to. By calling all people, who were not classified White, Black, we strived to forge a united front against the racist regime, to deny it the divisions it sought to sow amongst the oppressed, and to claim our common ancestries and rights to liberty. We sought strength, unity and pride in our collective Black identities, even if we spoke different languages, and were differently privileged or deprived by the apartheid state⁵. What centrally united us was our common oppression and disenfranchisement (none of us could vote). And the fact that racist laws restricted our movement, including access to land and services.

And as we spat out our bitterness with a force that crushed
we taught them a truth they dared deny,
in our land black is a people
not a colour.

Roshila Nair, UNTITLED (www.fito.co.za)

Hence the historic use of the term Black, which a number of activists still defiantly employ. As Nelson Mandela put it, during a speech in 1953:

In June 1952, the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress, bearing in mind their responsibility as the representatives of the downtrodden and oppressed people of South Africa, took the plunge and launched the Campaign for the Defiance of the Unjust Laws (later called simply the Defiance Campaign). Factory and office workers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, students and the clergy: Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Europeans, old and young, all rallied to the national call ... By the end of the year, more than 8,500 people of all races had defied ...

You can see that 'there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain tops of our desires (1986 (1978):34,42).

The Basic Policy Document of the ANC Youth League, published in 1948 and to which Mandela was a significant contributor, states:

... that South Africa is a country of four chief nationalities, three of which (the Europeans, Indians and Coloureds) are minorities, and three of which (the Africans, Coloureds and Indians) suffer national oppression ... It is to be clearly understood that we are not against the Europeans as such – we are not against the European as a human being – but we are totally and irrevocably opposed to White domination and to oppression (Mandela, 1986:26).

So too the 1955 Congress of the People published a leaflet with the following introductory lines:

WE CALL THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA BLACK AND WHITE
LET US SPEAK TOGETHER OF FREEDOM! (Mandela, 1986:46)

Beyond our apartheid legacies, Black remains an ethnic identity that resonates with me easier because I am neither Coloured nor Indian, but mixtures of both. Added to this is the fact that the construct Coloured is composed of African (including Khoisan) and European. So choosing to be Black is my continued attempt at reclaiming my political Othering, i.e. I am not White and I am proud. Cherrie Moraga eloquently muses about her own *mestiza* condition, and the political subversiveness of her identification with her Mexican mother rather than her White father:

Had I been born a full-blood Mexican, I sometimes wonder whether I would have struggled so hard to stay a part of la raza ... I am that raging breed of mixed-blood person who writes to defend a culture that I know is being killed. I am of that endangered culture and of that murderous race, but I am loyal only to one. My mother culture, my mother land, my mother tongue, further back than even she remembers (1993:127, 128-129).

My identity as Black is ironically denied to me in the United States by some African-Americans, even if they have less pigmentation. The irony is twofold. On one level because African-Americans are (historically) descendants of Africans enslaved in North America, but largely economically and otherwise privileged in relation to their African counterparts, which poses the question whether they, irrespective of degree of pigmentation, are more Black than African citizens who, irrespective of degree of pigmentation, are not White. On a second level because African-Americans are as genetically bastardised with White European genes as Cape Flats Coloureds, begging the question about their own internalisation of

apartheid racial hierarchies and colonial divide-and-rule strategies on this continent. Ultimately, one should question who has the right to name whom what, and whether it is appropriate that inhabitants of developed countries, irrespective of degree of pigmentation, have the right to name and hence judge Others from developing countries (or even Others from developed countries, for that matter).⁶

Here at home in the Western Cape, despite the demise of (legal) apartheid, racism is still rife. This was the only province, of nine in the country, which at the time of writing in 2001 was still governed by a political party with its origins in the apartheid regime. The vast majority of Coloured people in this province identify with, and support, this racist political party, in part due to their internalisation of apartheid racial hierarchies which saw them, despite disenfranchisement and other depredations, relatively privileged in relation to those classified 'African'. But also in part due to post-apartheid realities, where the province is no longer a 'Coloured preference area', with jobs and housing (however minimal) reserved for Coloureds. Instead now, with the repeal of racist laws designed to keep so-called Africans in barren regions ironically called homelands, Coloureds find themselves competing for scarce resources with other relatively less advantaged residents, including refugees and other immigrants from all over the continent (legalised and illegalised). And thus burdened with the ravages of globalisation and the post-apartheid state's neoliberal economics, Coloureds find an easy home with the rhetoric of a racist party in opposition to the national ruling party.⁷ In this racist province that I call home, I still defiantly identify as Black. As African.

The resurgence of discussions about an African Renaissance has helped to problematise the notion of African. Are only (descendants of) indigenous peoples African? What is indigenous? The Khoisan were the first (known) inhabitants of Southern Africa.⁸ Nguni speakers ruthlessly colonised the region from the north. Followed with at least equal ruthlessness by Europeans from the coasts. All centred on resource appropriation: land, livestock, minerals. Are Nguni speakers, classified 'African' during apartheid, indigenous? Are descendants of the Khoisan, classified 'Coloured' during apartheid, African and/or indigenous? Are descendants of European settlers African? It may be easier to perceive of descendants of indigenous peoples (including Khoisan and Nguni speakers) as African. The place of local White citizens in the African Renaissance remains contested. There are some who say that their continued economic and other elitisms mark them Other, i.e. not African. And yet others who maintain that they should adopt the label European-African, in similar fashion to African-Americans and the less known Afro-Germans. Perhaps the Whites who fought against apartheid, who languished in apartheid prisons and lost limbs and lives, are apt examples of the possible place of Whites in the African Renaissance. That if Whites choose to relinquish their

historic and material privilege in favour of equitable distribution of power and other resources, that they can truly then claim a place in the African Renaissance.

At the time of writing this chapter, I worked for one of three local universities, an institution founded on colonialism, slavery and exploitation,⁹ and characteristically reluctant to transform. Yet I still broadly identify with my working class origins.

Our poverty was largely due to apartheid policies of privilege and exclusion, which had the province classified a 'Coloured preference area', effectively excluding other Black residents from employment and social services. From the sixties to the late eighties, my father struggled to find work here without the necessary state permits.¹⁰ State-provided housing, however minimal, also posed a problem, since the home had to be registered in the name of the father, and be located in an area according to the father's racial classification. There was only one Indian residential area in the Western Cape at the time, for middle class Indians who could afford to purchase their homes. During the late sixties, the height of the implementation of the Group Areas Act, and under pressure to relocate indigent Indians resident in areas reclassified for Whites, the apartheid state created a second Indian area, with basic two-roomed cramped damp dwellings, devoid of the luxuries of sewerage systems and indoor plumbing, let alone paved streets and other basic services. I was two years old at the time. My youngest brother was born in this township, and both our lungs remain charred by the effects of regular winter flooding, damp walls, as well as leaking, exposed asbestos roofs. My adult bronchial problems stem from repeated bouts of pneumonia that still have me struggling with asthma, my younger brother's from the tuberculosis epidemic that at present is competing with HIV/AIDS as the leading cause of death in the Western Cape. Still we were privileged. At least we had a roof, even if asbestos, a leading cause of mortality in some areas here. Others had to make do with corrugated iron shanties, or even less. How did we manage to survive all this? I honestly can only shake my head, and shudder. No amount of intellectual analysis can help me comprehend, on an emotional and psychic level, why some human beings degrade, oppress and enslave other human beings. Not even adolescent studies of the holocaust during WWII. Shudder. Horror. And more activism.

As a proletarian child I always felt embarrassed by my non-standard Afrikaans and English, my non-standard tattered hand-me-down clothing and one-pair-of-shoes, invariably school shoes, a year. I remain awkward in the company of those who never starved, who never argued over the last vienna (hotdog) during good times, who never had to violently debate whether to buy a half loaf of brown bread or a candle by which to finish homework during darker days. An internationally celebrated Black South African artist, Willie Bester, speaks of still being followed

suspiciously by department store detectives, usually Black themselves. The stranglehold of where we come from still follows us like unshakeable shadows. And continue to construct who I am, which shades of rainbow compose my shadows.

In our home my father needed to eat spicy food every day, and on my mother's bredie (stew) nights, he would cook his own curry, much to our delight as we could then sample his dish as well. And while my friends in the community were married off to adolescent men from Durban¹¹ immediately they began menstruating, my family resolutely refused all marriage proposals for my two older sisters and I. I grew up with the sound of the *bilal bank*, the Muslim call to morning prayers, as my daily alarm clock at 5am, traditional Indian music slightly later on Sunday mornings through paperthin walls. Hindi swear words interspersed the mixmash of Cape Flats Afrikaans and English. Second-hand wardrobes consisted of cheap synthetic saris, pink and blue denim miniskirts, and the lace scarf headdress favoured at mass and Catechism classes. This was my culture, sweetmeats and tomato bredie, mieliepap (maize meal porridge), roast potatoes and chips (French fries). This mad kaleidoscope is what I was founded on, and remains imbued in my personality (state of being and personhood).

Growing up in this Indian area and attending Coloured schools was damaging to the few mixed race families like us. In the Indian area my mother was despised by both my father's Indian family, as well as her Indian neighbours. My mother was called Bushman and Hottentot. My siblings and I were called various other names. We clearly understood that we were not Indian, that we were not desirable, that the Indian community in which we found ourselves despised us.

School in neighbouring Coloured areas¹² was a nightmare of daily beatings by other children. Of having one's lunch opened, if one was lucky to have leftovers from the previous evening's dinner to take to school on often-stale bread, when available. Of having the leftovers inspected for chillies or spices. Of being shown signs symbolic of Satan because we were (erroneously) believed not to be Christian, and even if Catholic, were not Protestant, which implied demon worshippers due to Catholicism's myriad of iconic representations. I knew and felt that I was not Coloured, that the Coloured community despised me.

And hence my identity as neither Indian nor Coloured, but Black. It is only in the construct of Black, that is not White, that I have found a comfortable and safe home. It is in this political/ideological home that I fought against apartheid, languished in apartheid prisons during the early eighties all over Namibia and in Cape Town, sacrificed my youth and innocence.

At the time I experienced both Indian and Coloured communities as racist, largely politically conservative and hostile to the liberation struggles that were being

waged on numerous fronts. In primary school my essays were thrown back at me due to political content and subject matter that dealt with the oppression of so-called Africans and other Black people. In secondary school some teachers flung my essays in my face, either failing me or not grading me at all. It was only during the student uprisings of the early eighties, which saw radical students pitted against conservative teachers who were too used to keeping their jobs and maintaining the status quo, that I found valid expression for my political instincts and writings.

At fourteen I read my first poem in public, hoisted onto a makeshift wooden platform by my elder brother and other student leaders, confronted by the disciplined silence of thousands of very angry students. Since I lost all my adolescent writings during my protracted imprisonment and detentions in Namibia and Cape Town during the early eighties, I wrote this poem in tribute to that heady idealistic time:

there are many stories
many instants on a breeze
i's of many tornadoes

but to stay with process
let me pluck a birthing grunt
from my sagging breast
and offer this to you as a budding scab

i was 13/14 on the edge of the eighties
with class boycotts filling our growling abdomens
against the injustices of racial hierarchies & white supremacy
pressed on a makeshift wooden platform with someone else's poetry in my
hand
a sea of hungry faces lapping at rhythm & rhyme
i opened myself like a gutted charred fish
gave them my caviar
and with a giddy glow
gently swallowed them
whole

march 2001

iambi¹³

As a prepubescent girl I was really angry about my feminine lot, the restrictions, the constraints, the limitations, of being dutiful daughter, wife, mother, always Other to a Man. And for a few innocent years inhabited the fantasy persona of a free androgyne (non-gendered innocent), perhaps even a boy, the pilot, the scientist, the artist, all free from the controls of girlhood. But during early puberty I realised that I was indeed a girl, and the shock of this discovery, this acknowledgement of my fate as a woman, had me vow to never get married, never to be enslaved by a man, as I saw my mother and sisters-in-law were voluntarily enslaved and abused by the men they professed to love. In townships in the Western Cape there is a common colloquial expression, which evinces how entrenched gender-based violence in our society is: *'Hy slaan die liefde in'* (he beats in love).

During this very early and quite unconscious process of gender identification I realised that I could never be male, since I was too clumsy and not very good at sport and other 'male' pursuits, despite inevitable academic excellence, like *all* my six siblings before me. And yet I could never quite be a 'quintessential' girl, due to this same clumsiness, this natural inability to be balanced in my own body, to occupy physical and emotional space with the requisite confidence and comfort. As an adult I learnt to re-appropriate the terms 'nerd' and 'geek' and wonder if this, after all, is not the Third Sex, the ultimate Other? Kate Bornstein affirms my discomfort with the rigidity of polarities:

One answer to my question 'Who is a transsexual?' might well be 'Anyone who admits it.' A more political answer might be, 'Anyone whose performance of gender calls into question the construct of gender itself.' ...

Instead of imagining gender as opposite poles of a two-dimensional line, it would be interesting to twirl that line in space, and then spin it through several more dimensions. In this way, many more possibilities of gender identity may be explored ...

I don't know how to be a girl. And I sure don't know how to be a boy. And after thirty-seven years of trying to be male and over eight years of trying to be female, I've come to the conclusion that neither is really worth all the trouble (1995:121, 115-116, 234).

I learnt to 'behave like a girl', with great irony, from my now-gay immediately elder brother, whose affirmation I constantly sought, who taught me to serve his girlfriends tea and biscuits (when we could afford it), girlfriends he streamed through our tiny house like too-sweet candy. While, like them, I did adore my

brother and performed (social) acts entirely for his pleasure, I was never ever one of them, demure. My knock-knees and squint-eyed gaze still has me drop crockery, still has me bump into furniture, walls, doors, someone who inhabits texts more naturally than fabric. My next *serious* research project will be about the place/space of nerds/geeks in society, and realising our rights. It took decades of learning from the 'enemy', learning to skulk in the shadows of society, for me to feel attractive after adolescence, to learn the freedom of long light cotton dresses in summer and soft denim jeans and fleece jackets in winter. Today I still walk around furniture as one would traverse an obstacle course, always with flat soles.

At sixteen I sat on a pavement a block away from home, chatting with my boyfriend, sketching utopias and other lunacies. I suggested that, after Jane Armatrading's song, 'Me Myself I', that I would die happy if I kissed a girl one day. He readily embraced my exploration, and a year later Boy George was released on South African society. Boy George's cross-dressing caused a fashion revolution in some quarters of South Africa, with female models in (men's) suits adorning the covers of women's fashion magazines. A popular local musician, Heather Mac, clad in black (men's) suits and with short hair, was one of my adolescent icons. My predominantly heterosexual and quite avant-garde middle sister would break the severity of men's old black jackets with a swathe of lace, a style I often emulated, as little sisters are wont to emulate their elder siblings. I borrowed from the wardrobes of my father and boyfriends, and felt freer in men's clothing than I did in miniskirts and platform shoes. This fashion revolution during the early eighties encouraged me to be freer about my sexual preferences, to dodge the straitjacket of heterosexual conformity,¹⁴ to aspire to the explorations emblematised by the likes of Joan Armatrading and Boy George. I felt that I could breathe freer in open air and more relaxed spaces.

Thus my sexuality was formed, by curiosity, openness and relative acceptance and support from the people around me. My desperately butch (and straight) eldest brother would listen to the noise of cosmeticked Alice on eight-track cassettes in his phallic Valiant, while a brother immediately older than I was originally destined for the priesthood and now identifies as gay. It was the time of David Bowie and Elton John, a time of sexual exploration and relative openness (admittedly only for some as lucky as I). It was with my gay brother, and his exploring male friends, some of whom I occasionally dated, that I began dancing at (predominantly male) gay nightclubs. Fag hag they called me affectionately. Now in my thirties I am merely a hag, and more at peace with myself.

During my last year in high school, a time of intense political struggle, I attracted the devotion of another female student. Needless to say, giddy with adolescent boundary pushing and excited to encounter my first lesbian up close, I

encouraged her to explore her sexuality to its fullest. Since she iconised me and carried my poetry and photos around with her, it was inevitable that her parents would summon me to their home, ostensibly because I was encouraging her to be sexually deviant, and thus exposing her to hurt and humiliation. Like the dutiful daughter and political activist, I dressed carefully for the meeting (swopped regulation revolutionary jeans or dungarees for neatly ironed skirt) and declared to them my bisexuality as open, as not confined by traditional norms. Having no one else but themselves to blame for her sexuality, they castigated me severely and forbade her from further contact with me. I graduated from high school shortly after this incident and entered university on scholarship, a bigger and new space in which to test my politics, ideals and activism. My high school friend is now a respected activist and lawyer, an out lesbian, very loved by her family, and remains a friend I meet at poetry readings and sundry other dyke gatherings.

It was not until a few years later when I sought a space in the local lesbian subculture, as polyvocal as it was and remains, that I realised just how aberrant my sexuality is.

A young woman who prided herself in her strength, her expression of self, was harshly cast into one of only two prevalent roles at the time, a femme, the antithesis of the dominant butch. While I recognise the right of all those who desire role-play as a part of their lives, I loathed the rigid enforcement of this role on me by others I found attractive or wanted to be friends with. My embryonic feminism and socialism had no space in this world of nightclubs, alcohol and cross dressing (skirts and perfume for me, suit and cologne for my 'man'). Yes, I felt like a transvestite, neatly gartered and cosmetic, in my exaggerated femininity, playing weak to another woman, under constant threat of ostracism. From dressing in my father's clothing, mimicking my elder quite avant-garde sister during the height of the cross-dressing fashion, to the strait-jacket of this new role as femme. As Julia Beffon puts it in her chapter on butch/femme roleplay in lesbian relationships, 'Gay women who have a relationship which is a healthy partnership between two equals are as rare as, well, heterosexuals who have a relationship which is a healthy partnership between equals ...' (1995:205). Or as Mary Armour and Sheila Lapinsky put it, 'lesbians who are *for* lesbians are thin on the ground indeed. It seems that the misogynist and homophobic values of the heterosexual patriarchy are very firmly entrenched in our own communities' (1995:296).

internalised violence?

In my early twenties I met a post-hippy woman with long hair, who loved me for being a woman, but beat me regularly to release the stress of urban life. While I

respect those who *choose* to practice sado-masochism, I must confess that beyond the occasional silk scarf and fantasy, I hold little affection for either De Sade or Masoch.

Several women have personally subjected me to violence. During my early dyke days, to celebrate my personal strength and confidence, I chose to enter a dyke club alone on two separate occasions, expecting to meet my friends there. On both occasions a woman assaulted me. During the first incident my clothing was torn from my breast by a tall woman whom even the bouncer was too terrified to restrain. During the second incident I was bequeathed blue eyes for refusing to speak to another woman, and again no one intervened. On neither occasion did I provoke the assailants or retaliate (I was in shock, I think, and/or my belief in nonviolence runs very deep indeed).

Two of my five subsequent relationships with women were physically abusive, with a third extremely emotionally, verbally and economically abusive, teetering on physical violence at times. My abusive relationships were all with women who were fundamentally insecure and who needed to maintain control of me. They were *not* united by class, ethnicity, spirituality or geographic origin. Only their insecurities and abusive behaviour united them, and their absurd desires to control me.

Once I went to see a movie with a friend, who was violently offended when I would not fuck her afterwards. She sent me angry emails, I responded firmly. Until she finally realised that her behaviour constituted sexual harassment and that she had to respect my bodily integrity. I remained anxious for many months about engaging with her socially, especially on my own.

At the time of writing I left yet another party, a pro-Cuba fundraiser, after an incident during which I felt extremely disrespected by an acquaintance who is prominent in the gender-based violence movement. The message to me was clear: I can do anything I want to you, I can take anything I want from you, and you can do nothing to prevent me. I complained to two friends present, neither of who wanted to disrupt the party mood to intervene at the time. I felt disrespected, violated, angry. Waiting for a lift from a close friend I had called from a payphone on the street, I was accosted by several aggressive men demanding to know my price for sex, despite my dyke winter uniform of thick-soled shoes, black jeans and bulky fleece jacket. What arrogance and entitlement had these deranged men assume that I would fuck them, even for payment, escapes me. What arrogance and entitlement had this woman assume that she could fuck with me, even if I have a gentler demeanour, eludes me.

Thus violence begets violence in South Africa (as everywhere else), and I am learning to deal with nearly two decades of abuse at the hands of a few women, disrespect for my physical and emotional integrity, denial of my basic human rights.

The resolute silences that accompany all this violence encourage its constant replication.

During the nineties South Africa entered the *Guinness Book of Records* for our shockingly high rape statistics, which is one indicator of the excessive levels of gender-based violence in our society. Predictably, Black queers are specifically targeted for sexual assault by sociopaths in local townships, as evinced by at least one testimony from 'Bongie':¹⁵

Sometimes these *tsotsis* (gangsters) and these Jackrollers (a notorious Soweto gang) go out in gangs and rape women. These Jackrollers go particularly for lesbians, and when they catch one they say 'We'll put you right.' So it's really dangerous for a young woman living in the townships to be open as a lesbian.

This extreme violence is a way of controlling Black women's sexuality, of 'curing' Black lesbians of their 'deviance', of having their sexuality operate outside of heterosexual and patriarchal norms and control. And is emblematic of generic societal violence directed at women, in attempts to control our sexuality, as part of our productive and reproductive powers. At least one of my close friends is a survivor of this 'behavioural therapy' by a township gang, and luckily did not contract HIV/AIDS during the assault, and later learnt to love the beautiful baby born of this violence. A number of my other friends are survivors of rape and sexual assault by men, and at least one friend had the son she conceived during the assault adopted.

When some dykes internalise traditional aggressive masculine behaviour, disrespecting their sistahs and perpetrating violence on their bodies and souls, they internalise the values of female objectification and violence embodied in society at large, and spewed forth by popular media daily. If violence is about power and control,¹⁶ and even gender-based violence activists are hurting their sistahs, physically or through their silence, the dyke community in South Africa has a long way to go in creating safer spaces for queer women to commune peacefully with each other.¹⁷

heterophobia

During my early twenties, mere months before I began engaging in this form of involuntary sado-masochism, I *went all the way*¹⁸ with a male dancer and choreographer, who possessed a body Michelangelo might have crafted, but with cultural stereotypes of women's role in society harking back to the Stone Ages. And while my first penile penetrative experience with this particular man, and subsequent forays with a handful of other men over the years, was predominantly

satisfying, I chose to exit these relationships due to my inability to comprehend and suffer prevailing practices of predominantly heterosexual masculinity. While I was fervently heterophobic at the time of writing, an orientation as valid as any other, I also continuously struggled with my (un)conscious desires for hard-bodied men, even during congress with the loveliest women imaginable. Armour and Lapinsky (1995:297) cite Adrienne Rich's notion of a 'lesbian continuum', which problematises the difficulties of definition, especially of defining women who love women:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman's life and through history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desires genital sexual experience with another woman (Rich 1984:227).

While Armour and Lapinsky warn readers about the dangers of Rich's lesbian continuum potentially 'desexualising' lesbianism, it may be useful to note that sexuality is not necessarily concomitant with sex and sexual expression. That sexuality includes asexuality and/or celibacy. And that sexuality, as an identity, of necessity may shift over time and with place or circumstances, as in Epstein's conceptual understanding of all identities as fluid.

Iambi – conceptualisation

Sowhereto my sexuality? Freud coined the term polymorphous perversity to explain those who did not fit his rigidly heterosexist paradigm. I have re-appropriated this concept, for its irony, to describe my own mutable and multiple sexual (and other) identities, which shift and change like the winds in Cape Town on a good day.

But let me begin with sex. Usually sexed individuals are viewed as either female or male, on opposite ends of an ironically straight line. What distinguishes female from male are macro and micro physiology, with macro physiology crudely referring to genitals and reproductive organs, while micro physiology is usually ascribed to chromosomes and hormones. Female chromosomes are usually XX and male XY. However, physiologists will attest that no human being possesses 'perfect' XX or XY hormones, but a smattering of both. The same applies to the hormones, oestrogen and testosterone, with women now being encouraged to supplement their bodies' testosterone stores to increase their sex drive. And we see Hollywood icons of masculinity like Tom Cruise surviving breast cancer, a condition that usually afflicts men with a so-called excess of oestrogen. Hence sex, a biological construct, is not perfectly polar, but operates on a continuum or

spectrum. Macro physiology is complicated by those born intersexed or hermaphroditic, i.e. those who possess, to varying degrees, both female and male sex organs. Due to society's rigid policing of gender roles, intersexed babies are usually and erroneously operated on well before puberty, when their hormones 'naturally' lean either way, if at all.

It is no small irony that one of the goddesses of eloquent transgenderism, Jeanette Winterson, poetically deconstructs the term hermaphrodite in her novel *Art & Lies*:

The winged word, Hermes, god of Eloquence and Thieves, Mercury, to give him his Roman name ... The male drill in the female stock, the art of making fire, fire by the rapid twirling of the stick in a stone. The word made out of fire and fire from the word, Sappho, 600 BC, or call her Hermaphroditus? The boy-daughter, girl-son, the male drill in the female stock, born out of a night of lust between Hermes and Aphrodite. The boy-daughter, the girl-son, the union of language and lust (1994:73-4).

I find it most affirming that the dyke icon, Sappho, thus personifies intersexuality,¹⁹ between sexes, between genders, between sexualities.

In South African townships Black queers are erroneously feared to possess both male and female sexual organs (hermaphroditism), one of the ways traditional African culture attempts to explain their sexual 'deviance'. As one young woman, Thandazo Kunene, explained to Tanya Chan Sam:

My family does not discuss homosexuality, and if they do, they talk about *stabane* and all that. So maybe I was scared to face up and say I like girls better because then they would call me *stabane*. I knew that logically I couldn't be *stabane* because that is a hermaphrodite, someone with both male and female genitals. Yet I was afraid of the stigma and sadness of *stabane*. I laugh when I think of how confused I was as a teenager; I even went to the dictionaries and looked up the word *stabane* and learned the word 'hermaphrodite'. It fascinated me and yet I couldn't understand why (1995:188).

In the same volume Vera Vimbela also testifies of being labelled intersexual:

They assumed that because I had proposed to the girl I must be *stabane*, a hermaphrodite, with both male and female genitals. I was taken to a hut where a woman forced me to undress and examined me. When they discovered I was 'normal' the chief ordered that I be lashed (1995:194).

Tanya Chan Sam's interview with another woman of colour, Tilla Jantjies, echoes my own experiences as a child, of hearing dykes referred to as a man-woman, implying intersexuality, and how intrigued I was by that: 'Sure, my family teases me: they've always called me a *manvrou*, a man-woman' (1995:189).

Gloria Anzaldua reclaims her own sexual and other hybridities:

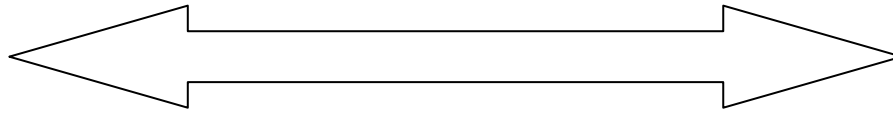
There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half-and-halves are not suffering from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot quality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *heiros gamos* (mythical native hermaphrodite): the coming together of opposite qualities within (1987:19).

Judith Raiskin argues that

The evolutionary development of the mestiza and the homosexual offers a synthesis of contradictory powers. The ability to live with ambiguity and contradictions allows the mestiza and the homosexual to serve as mediators and translators. As 'supreme crossers of culture,' homosexuals link people with each other ...

The impulse of Anzaldua's challenge of racial, sexual and national hierarchies is transcendent. While deconstructing these categories, her vision ... is ultimately utopian. It is a vision that, while grounded in modernist longings for salvation, does not locate that salvation in a desire for coherence, simplicity, or stasis. Anzaldua uses the tools of postmodern deconstruction to offer a new dream that in its slipperiness, its nonmateriality, can sustain us when the old fictions of identity or their dismantling threaten our psychological survival (1994:161, 163).

Like physiological sex, the constructs of feminine and masculine genders, are also roles that are socialised and acculturated. We have all placed ourselves somewhere along the continuum and move between the poles at will and as necessity and desire dictates. And if genders are socialised, does this mean that sexuality is also socialised? I know too many lesbians who engage in sexual relations with men at various times. Are they bisexual or lesbians-who-sleep-with-men-occasionally? Thus I would argue that sexuality too can be placed along a continuum, and that people variously hop and slide between the two binary oppositions of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

continuum of sexualities

SEX	FEMALE	MALE
chromosomes	XX	XY
hormones	oestrogen	testosterone
GENDER	FEMININE	MASCULINE
SEXUALITY	HOMOSEXUALITY	HETEROSEXUALITY

Then there's bisexual, from ambisexual, which implies balance. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* describes 'bisexual' as 'sexually attracted by persons of both sexes'. I would more appropriately define it as attracted (sexually and/or otherwise) *to* persons of both genders. There are degrees of bisexuality, which shift and change over time and with circumstances. That bisexuality has so thoroughly been coopted by popular media and in aid of consumerism does not detract from this particular life choice or preference as a valid expression of personhood and politics. The number of films with lesbian themes and sub-themes, including the more recent *Being John Malkovich* and the more entertaining *Gaudi Afternoon*, does not detract from the subversiveness of so-called lesbian lifestyles, and lesbians do not necessarily become coopted by a consumer culture or become less political for it.

To remain consistently bisexual, to whatever degree(s), remains subversive in terms of the politics of identity formation based on Self-Other, and the intrinsically necessary devaluation of the Other in order to value the Self. Most heterosexuals and homosexuals, rigidly policing either end of the sexuality continuum, frown opprobriously on bisexuals who consistently choose to assert their sexual preference(s).

In this respect South Africa, despite its impressive constitution, still has a long way to go in terms of inserting the B and T into the G&L discourse,²⁰ and thus officially beginning to recognise sexual preference beyond the polarities of homo and hetero.

Asexual. A sexual being. Celibate. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines asexual as 'without sex or sexual organs' and 'without sexuality'. More accurately this same tome defines celibate as 'committed to abstention from sexual relations ...' In her comments on earlier drafts of this paper, anthropologist Judith

Stevenson asserts that ‘asexual can be a physical or biological phenomenon, whereas celibate is a social one’. Stevenson mentions cases where people are denied sexual partners, such as in prison (in solitary confinement, for example), and wonders how I would classify masturbation, which is an excellent and most debatable question. Typical of my reluctance to be hemmed in, I employ the terms asexual and celibate interchangeably, with its meaning more related to voluntary abstention from sexual relations, which of necessity implies a form of sexual expression and sexual choice. This too may shift and change over time and with circumstance(s). And this too is a space that I have occupied from time to time, through either conscious choice or by dint of circumstance.

Polysexual. Pansexual. Omnisexual. My current dictionary describes poly as ‘denoting many or much’. And pan as ‘the whole of’, probably derived from the Greek mythological god Pan, ‘god of flocks and herds ... god of nature or the universe’, from where the word panic is thought to originate. The same dictionary defines omni as ‘all; of all things; in all ways or places’. And thus poly-pan-omnisexual would be yet another form of sexual expression which encompasses the diversity of the universe.

Since the time of my adolescent appreciation of Boy George, I have fancied myself trans-gendered, as in beyond (surpassing) gender, different to transsexual, which is a condition where the inhabitants of socialised bodies desire themselves to inhabit bodies of the opposite sex. But while this remains an adolescent fancy, I have not been able to conceive of a state of being that is truly able to transcend the socialised and acculturated genders.²¹ Transgender(ed) activist, Kate Bornstein, writes of Native American transgendered people who carry the European label ‘*berdache*’, and describes gender attribution, gender assignment, and gender re-assignment surgery as ‘both phallogentric and genital’ (1995:22, 26). Bornstein also refers to ‘most shamanic cultures, (where) there exists a ceremonial rite whereby spiritual leaders, like the Siberian (adolescent) “soft man”, need to live part of their lives as another gender before attaining the rank of spiritual leader’ (1995:48). More on shamans by Bornstein,

There are fools, there are fools, and there are fools. Where the traditional fool blurs the lines between genders, the shaman sees no lines. To the shaman, or holy fool, there’s no us vs. them: in the shaman’s eyes, we’re somehow united. The shaman could be called a gender transcender (1995:93).

Nancy Bonvillain documents ‘A Third Gender’, common in ‘many native cultures’ across the world, and North America in particular, where they are referred to as Two-Spirit:

The third gender was decidedly a social concept (rather than a biological one). It included males and females, who ... assumed social roles other than (or sometimes in addition to) the roles usually associated with their sex ...

Male Two-Spirits adopted women's clothing, and females dressed as men did ... In some cultures, Two-Spirits who performed both men's and women's occupations changed their clothing to fit the gender identity usually engaged in any given work. For instance ... Two-Spirits wore men's clothing when hunting and women's dress when gathering ... deceased male Zuni Two-Spirits were buried in women's dress and men's trousers ...

Their sexual activity and marriages usually involved relationship with members of the gender other than the one they resembled socially (2001:232, 235-6).

Bonvillain notes that Two-Spirits evince the 'flexibility of native American gender systems that, unlike the Euro-American model, were not threatened by individuals choosing to reject gender roles usually associated with their sex' (2001:237). However colonisation, with its imposition of two rigid gender categories, decimated the Third Gender, as one spiritual leader attests about events during the 1920s, as cited in Bonvillain (2001:238):

When the people began to be influenced by the missions and the boarding schools, a lot of them forgot the traditional ways and the traditional medicine. Then they began to look down on the *winkte* (Two-Spirits) and lose respect. Some (changed their ways) and put on men's clothing. But others, rather than change, went out and hanged themselves.

Bonvillain cites Hindu mythology which portrays 'both heterosexual and homosexual experience as natural and joyful' (2001:281):

In fact, homosexual or transsexual behavior is depicted in numerous episodes in Hindu mythology. The pantheon of deities includes some who are sexually ambiguous, combining aspects of maleness and femaleness, or who transform themselves from one gender to the other ... Samba, the son of Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu), is a homosexual and transvestite ...

Bonvillian (2001:281-2) and Bornstein (1995:131) refer to *hijras* in India, people thought of as 'neither men nor women'. Bornstein cites Serena Nanda:

Whereas Westerners feel uncomfortable with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in such in-between categories as transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphroditism, and transgenderism, and make strenuous

attempts to resolve them, Hinduism not only accommodates such ambiguities, but also views them as meaningful and even powerful.²²

Bornstein asserts (1995:98, 101, 106):

I think it's time for us to use our status as Third to bring some harmony into the world. Like other border outlaws, transgendered people are here to open some doorway that's been closed off for a long long time. We're gatekeepers, nothing more.

The Tao gives birth to One.
One gives birth to Two.
Two gives birth to Three.
Three gives birth to all things.

Lao Tzu, *Tao-Te Ching*

Given any binary, it's fun to look for some hidden third, and the reason why the third was hidden says a lot about culture. The choice between two of something is not a choice at all, but rather the opportunity to subscribe to the value system which holds the two presented choices as mutually exclusive alternatives. Once we choose one or the other, we've bought into the system that perpetuates the binary. When for example, I lived my life saying I was a man or a woman, I was tacitly supporting all the rules of the gender system that defines those two identities. I supported those rules in order to belong, or rather to *not* be an outsider, a non-belonger.

The continued oppression of women proves only that in any binary there's going to be one up and one down. The struggle for equal rights must include the struggle to dismantle the binary (my emphasis).

Judith Halberstam asserts that 'we are all transsexuals except that the referent of the *trans* becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer)' (1994:212):

We are all transsexuals ... and there are no transsexuals. I want both claims to stand and find a place in relation to the postmodern lesbian body, the body dressed up in its gender or surgically constructed in the image of its gender. What is the relationship between the transsexual body and the postmodern body? Both threaten the binarism of homo/hetero sexuality by performing and fictionalising gender.

The breakdown of genders and sexualities into identities is in many ways, therefore, an endless project, and it is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by its transitivity, that sexuality manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals. There are no transsexuals (1994:225-6).

Bornstein emphasises gay and lesbian ‘violation of gender codes’, and hence that they ‘share the same stigma with “transgendered” people: the stigma of crimes against gender’ (1995:134-5):

So let's reclaim the word 'transgendered' so as to be more inclusive. Let's let it mean 'transgressively gendered'. Then, we have a group of people who break the rules, codes, and shackles of gender ... It's the transgendered who need to embrace the lesbians and gays, because it's the transgendered who are in fact the more inclusive category (my emphasis).

Ultimately, and beyond Freudian irony, I prefer the term queer to describe myself. The use of the term ‘queer’ in this chapter is an acknowledgement of the radical queer movement’s understanding of sexualities as inclusive of the entire spectrum of sexualities that are not heterosexual, such as (am)bisexuality, androgyny and transgenderism. The term queer is more inclusive than the conventional terms ‘gay’ and ‘homosexual’ that do not account for alternatives to the dichotomies of gay-straight and hetero-homo, which usually refer to men to the exclusion of women. It is also more radical since it directly confronts (and affronts) the dominance of heterosexism by re-appropriating the historically pejorative ‘queer’.

It perfectly positions me as odd. As *mestiza* Cherrie Moraga²³ puts it

Personally, I had used *queer* not just to describe how I was a lesbian, but to describe that I was different, odd ... The ‘queer’ category included not only a range of sexualities but also a position of opposition to heterosexual dominance ... Rather than seeking integration into society ... *queer* was to draw alliances with those who considered themselves sexual outsiders on multiple levels of experience and self-conception.

Hence I choose the label queer. Alien. Inbetween. Neither here nor there. And if neither here nor there, then possibly nothing. Which evokes images of what John Fowles²⁴ has called the nemo or anti-ego, our intrinsic state of nobodiness and nothingness, our perpetual lack. In Fowles’s own words:

The nemo is a man’s (sic) sense of his own futility and ephemerality; of his relativity, his comparativeness; of his virtual nothingness.

All of us are failures; we all die.

The individual thing in front of the whole; my insignificance in face of all that has existed, exists, and will exist.

...(What constitutes a 'somebody' is the necessity) to make my name known; I must have power – physical, social, intellectual, artistic, political ... but power. I must leave monuments, I must be remembered. I must be admired, envied, hated, feared, desired. In short, I must endure, I must extend, and beyond the body and the body's life (1968:51).

Modern linear identity formation is based on the tenet 'I am because I am not', a value system in which the Self is juxtaposed with an Other, an Other which is ritually devalued in order for the Self to be valued. So if at one's core there is nothingness, projecting fears and other depredations onto Others may result in a false attachment of value to the Self. This flawed belief system, premised on binary oppositions, is at the core of our modern capitalist societies. And antithetical to the value systems founded on balance and harmony imbued in many precolonial societies, notably the Khoisan of Southern Africa.²⁵

Biko's Black Consciousness is one reaction to the Othering inherent in colonisation and modern imperialism. So is the intensely political activism of e.g. Cherrie Moraga, who writes about her/the condition of *mestiza*:

If my thoughts could colour my flesh, how dark I would turn. But people can't read your mind, they read your color, they read your womanhood, they read the women you're with. They read your walk and talk. And then the privileges begin to wane and the choices become more limited, more evident. I think that is why I have always hated the terms 'biracial' and 'bisexual'. They are passive terms, without political bite. They don't choose. They don't make decisions. They are a declaration not of identity, but of biology, of sexual practice. They say nothing about where one really stands. And as long as injustice prevails, we do not have the luxury of calling ourselves either.

Call me breed. Call me trash. Call me spic greaser beaner dyke jota bulldagger. Call me something meant to set me apart from you and I will know who I am. Do not call me 'sister.' *I am not yours* (1993:126, original emphasis).

I am as livid about racisms that remain virulent in my country. Despite sacrificing our lives combating racisms during apartheid, social and other spaces still largely, sadly, remain segregated, with the gender-based violence movement still dominated by the same educated bourgeois White women who learnt their

basics from Western feminists since the 1970s. These same White sistahs still only predominantly engage socially with each other, and mainly collaborate with each other, and effectively exclude and silence us Others. So too my so-called Coloured sistahs in the Western Cape, who, even unconsciously, exclude their Nguni-speaking sistahs from spaces. It is time that Black South African feminists/womanists claim their spaces in this country. And that more privileged women *consciously* grapple with their internalised racisms, seek redress for ancient wrongs, and relinquish inherited privilege and share power.

Moraga's anger informs my own identification with Black as a unifying ethnic construct during apartheid. Her dyke fury has me emphatically label myself dyke, especially before 'sexual orientation' was included in the list of prohibited discriminations in South Africa's post-apartheid constitution and Bill of Rights. But what this kind of rage also does is provide a kneejerk reaction to existing Othering and oppression, without offering viable alternatives, without recognising and respecting diversities.

In statically labelling myself Black and African, which I variously do, I deny my paternal heritage, my strange accent and surname, my appreciation of Indian music and addiction to Indian (spicy) food. I deny my own diversity. In calling myself dyke, which I also do from time to time, I deny my attractions to men, I deny the possibility of change and deny myself all hope. This denial is an antithesis of oppression and Othering. And will never lead to reconciliation and integration. In acknowledging difference(s) and diversity, within myself and in society more generically, personally and politically, and how these manifest over time and under changing conditions, I can envision transformation. I can integrate all my selves and find hope for a future that somewhat resembles ancient indigenous practices. In the words of ancient sages, 'as it was, so it shall be, time without end'. In the words of the 'renowned lesbian (separatist) feminist theorist', Sheila Jeffreys, 'A fundamental insight of feminism is the importance of holism and connectedness. Everything affects everything else. No one lives in a vacuum and no part of our lives is really quite separate from any other' (1993:xi).

While it may be politically strategic to choose an identity that is subversive (of the status quo) and unifying (of the oppressed) during a particular struggle, as some of us did during apartheid, it is equally politically strategic to choose multiple expressions of variegated identities to subvert a polarised status quo which only recognises binary oppositions. Hence while recognition and respect of and for differences are important, both historically and at present, the idealist in me yearns to move beyond these differences, to seek common ground, to find a new unifying path. This then is my struggle, for us all to be sistahs, siblings, and still political, still radical.

playing the queen

Several great queens ruled in ancient Nubia, now roughly in the area of Sudan, and were known for their fighting spirit and strength, but were apparently deposed by others hungrier for power. While these ancient Nubian queens were the first women rulers in recorded history, their role and contribution to human civilization has been historically underplayed until recently.

A number of local, regional, continental and international organisations work to facilitate the translation of the principles embodied in three key world conferences²⁶ into the daily realities of African women and girls. As in most parts of the world, there are regular workshops on gender issues, amongst other topics, in Africa. During 2001 I was fortunate enough to attend a workshop in Africa, along with some thirty-odd female gender activists, all internationally respected practitioners from across the continent.

On the first day of the workshop I facilitated a discussion of sex, gender and sexualities as non-exclusive and variously located at any given time on a continuum. I interrogated the constraining linearity of Eurocentric positivism, and argued for greater respect for ancient traditions of thought and being, such as practised by the Khoisan of Southern Africa and Toltecs of Latin America, as well as the entire Buddhist half of the world, since time immemorial. We discussed present-day identity-formation centred on the binary oppositionality of Self-Other constructions. Participants readily embraced these notions, and asserted unavowed support for lesbians' struggles everywhere, but especially in their own communities.

One should note that the workshop dealt with the unfortunately unpleasant but decidedly realistic topic of gender-based violence, and that most participants worked actively in this field in their home countries. A large number of participants are survivors of various forms of gender-based violence, notably female genital mutilation or FGM (particularly clitoral excision and/or severance of genital labia in West, East and North Africa, as well as genital labial elongation in Southern Africa). Given this background, the women immediately forged ties with each other in the most loving, affirming and supportive ways possible, irrespective of race/ethnicity, sexual preference, class, nationality, spirituality, or other invidious distinctions.

A number of participants were bi-national, either through parents from different (usually African) countries or through marriage, but beyond the occasional jibe about various regional hegemony (e.g. Nigeria in West Africa or Uganda in East Africa, and South Africa in the South), the solidarity amongst participants was set in sistahty concrete.

Race and ethnicity was as diverse as the history of Africa will evince, from those who identified as Arab, to Whites from South Africa, to various degrees of

mixtures, including myself. In terms of spirituality, participants variously claimed themselves atheist, agnostic, Muslim, Christian (notably Roman Catholic), Buddhist, wiccan, goddess-worshipping, and merely spiritual. The life-long liaisons developed at this workshop gleefully transcended all these boundaries, and sought to establish a more common understanding of spirituality, universal responsibility and notions of god/dess(es).

Regarding class, sistahs from East Africa shared tales of hardship despite their relative positions as members of their countries' bourgeoisie. They could, for example, not afford basic foodstuffs such as butter and jam, an economic fact found disturbing by a White South African sistah from a more aptly bourgeois family. One sistah invited me to stay with her and in public generously offered to sleep next to me on a mat on the floor, probably as an indication of her respect for and acceptance of my sexualities.

Four women present at the workshop were out dykes, or women-identified women, including myself. Each of us attracted a number of admiring participants, with me wondering what determined attractions and how participants selected whom they were going to flirt with. The three participants who clandestinely flirted with me, and whom I maintained appropriate²⁷ relations with them throughout the workshop, all strictly identified as heterosexual. One participant, a gender activist of note in her country, is married with children. On our way to an evening social event, she asked loudly whether we were to 'choose partners', and promptly requested that I sit next to her, and on both the journey to and from the social venue, consistently pressed her thigh against my own. At the same social event, a wonderful sistah and fellow-activist, whom I have had a crush on for years, danced with me, gyrating her pelvis against my own, and asserted that 'this is how we do it in Africa', while others stared at me with naked desire. I was extremely flattered and would gladly have, *after* the workshop, left *my* husband for some of these sistahs, but alas it appears too common for apparently heterosexual women to flirt with other women at these dynamic all-women gatherings, and return to their straight lives immediately afterwards.

At subsequent gatherings of African gender activists in various African locations over the ensuing years I have learnt from especially Nigerian activists that same-sex sexual practices during boarding school are the norm, but that they were all expected to exclusively practice heterosexuality upon graduation from high school, including marriage and children.

In after-hours social spaces at the 2001 gender workshop, straight participants were keen to informally discuss sexualities, and their own openness to it, while being adamant about their heterosexuality. They confirmed that some of their necessarily closeted clients sought advice and support for lesbianism, and that it

was extremely difficult to practice anything but compulsory heterosexuality in their home countries, or at least to be out about it.²⁸

A third participant, who subsequently married a relative, sent me gifts, regularly phoned me and sent me instant text messages on my mobile phone daily, along with electronic greeting cards and lengthy emails communicating her affections for me as a friend. Let me call her K. She called me 'gorgeous' and played pop songs for me on the phone. Said that should she ever explore the continuum, that I would be the chosen one. With soft cool hands she gently touched my arm during the workshop. Truly a generously gentle woman that I could have fallen in love with. But at the time destined to be married to a man, as arranged by their families. At the workshop I wrote during one informal group dinner:

and so you should long

there is the taste of chilli
 crisp fleshy pips
 in crunchy shell
 as i sense a whiff
 of your starvation
 on my naked skin
 dissected only
 by the straitjacket
 of your birth
 and choice

2001

Woman-to-woman marriages are fairly common, throughout history and to the present day, in West and East Africa in particular.²⁹ These marriages are said to occur between older women who choose younger women to bear children sired by men of the older woman's choosing. The older women are believed to be barren, or not able to bear children, and hence these marriages are believed to be for reproductive purposes only. The older woman provides the same kind of support to, and control over, the younger woman that a conventional husband would, and the entire society supports this mutual arrangement. Whether these relationships are sexual, which I, like Audre Lorde, assume they are, remains disputed by African scholars. But the sexuality of the female partners in the marriage is of less significance than the fact that this form of relationship defies the heterosexist model of the family espoused by European colonisation.³⁰

It is also commonly known in Africa that co-wives in polygynous societies engage in sexual relations with each other. Cheryl Stobie (2001:11-12) critiques the book *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*:

It offers a range of texts from the 18th to the late 20th centuries which examine a considerable number of sub-Saharan cultures, and provides ample evidence of homosexual practices being indigenous over a long period. There is much fascinating material, including translations of ethnographic accounts of pre-colonial and colonial times, court records of male homosexual ‘crime’ in early colonial Zimbabwe, same-sex marriages, the concept of ‘male lesbians’ in Hausa (West Africa), adolescent same-sex sexual behaviour, cross-dressing, role reversal, and women who love women in Lesotho. Also of interest is an appendix with a list of 50-odd African cultures with same-sex patterns, most of which have local terms for same-sex sexual practices or roles ... and there is evidence for same-sex erotic relationships between co-wives, and between (heterosexually) married women in Lesotho.

So too Stobie, quoting Muhammed,³¹ mentions that while ‘a bisexual *identity* is not found in the Arab world (it is) a widespread practice ... almost all Arab men are bisexual’ (2001:14, original emphasis). Powerfully asserting bisexuals’ rights, Stobie cites heterosexually married women having sexual relations with other women in Lesotho since at least the 1950s, and to the practice of bisexuality since at least the 1920s in Namibia.³² Roger Lancaster’s book *Life is Hard* similarly asserts that this is true in many Hispanic cultures, in particular Nicaragua, on which his book is based.

Despite these public records of same-sex relationships, evidence of the prevalence of bisexuality and homosexuality in Africa before *and* after colonisation, women like K still find it difficult to give free expression to their sexualities, to escape the stranglehold of colonially imposed heteronormativity. As I was concluding the first draft of this chapter, K sent me a parcel from Cairo containing, amongst other things, two music cassettes of love songs. Celine Dion’s ‘If Walls Could Talk’ is one of K’s favourites:

If Walls Could Talk – Celine Dion, from All the Way... A Decade of Song

Can you keep a secret
 These walls keep it secret
 What only we know
 But how long can they keep it
 Cos we’re two lovers who lose control
 We’re two shadows chasing rainbows

Behind closed windows behind closed doors
 If walls could talk
 They would say I want you more
 They would say never feel like this before
 And that you will always be the one for me
 ...
 If walls could talk
 They would say I want you more they would say never feel like this before
 And that you will always be the one for me
 If walls had eyes they would see the love inside
 They would see me in your arms in ecstasy
 And with every move they'd know I love you so I love you so...
 Stop the press, ... the secret's safe between me and you and these walls
 Can you keep a secret?
 If walls could talk they would say I want you more
 They would say never feel like this before
 And that you will always be the one for me
 If walls had eyes they would see the love inside
 They would see me in your arms in ecstasy
 With every move they'd know I love you so I love you so
 I love you so...

Despite the echoing silence, K's desire, irrespective of her taste in music, could never be clearer, as she said in two of her cellphone text messages to me, 'I long 4 u with an ache in my heart' and '...4 better or worse till death do us part'. Yet she feels compelled to marry her relative very soon. While she surfs IGLHRC³³ and other queer websites, and teases me with her longdistance love, she still chooses the strait-jacket of heterosexual conformity, leaving me with the entrails of my own desires. While I continue hop-skipping on the pavements of my identities. Saddened that others cannot choose the relative freedoms that I struggle for and with daily. If walls could speak, my continent's oral and written histories would be more honest, would offer its citizens more options.

inconclusion: 'what to do from here and how?'

In the words of Gloria Anzaldua:

*Enough of shouting against the wind - all words are noise if not accompanied by action...
 Women (however defined), let's not let the danger(s) of the journey(s) and vastness of the
 territory scare us - let's look forward and open paths in these woods...
 Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.*

Foreword to the Second Edition, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldua, eds.)

Let me leave you with something I scribbled in Madagascar in 2001 for fellow-activist dyke, Jude ...

preference?

tonight
 after digesting my heavy letters
 that visit me like ghosts in daylight
 you tic in your sleep
 imagining all the while
 that you are a dyke
 while i construct walls of energy
 round your fragility
 a light lager from the cholesterol
 of our inevitable consumptions
 as rain blankets the hillside lights
 tiny specs of hope
 and sundry domesticities
 amidst the aromas of open sewage
 and plucking quiver
 of live ducks

tonight i am an open vein
 under cloudy skies
 with your wisearms ticticking as you barely breathe
 while i try to be the dyke
 against our pasts
 and presents
 as i prefer
 this chain
 over that padlock

Oct 2001

Let us build the bridges we need to cross the man-made obstructions marring our progress. Let us find sufficient safety to toss off the dykes around us, the shackles that caress our wrists and ankles, artificial fibres that aggravate our skin.

iambi. Enjambment. And so I am jogging/hopping/skipping on ...

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Notes

1. Note: This chapter was written during 2001, and hence the reader should assume that this author has hopped significantly since then. Some of the political realities of that particular time, discussed in this chapter, may also have shifted significantly.
2. With immense appreciation for stimulating email and telephonic discussions with Cheryl Stobie, communications initiated after I tried to insert the B and T into G&L on a local gender listserv, with some public backlash and a few privately supportive emails. Many thanks to *companeras* Judith Stevenson, Vanessa Ludwig, Helene Combrinck and Vainola Makan for illuminating comments on early drafts. Also, always, in appreciation of my cherished friend Mikki's decades of contributions to honing my walk and talk.
3. Under apartheid, from the 1940s until the early 1990s, citizens were classified according to four key racial categories that were strictly hierarchised: White,

Indian (descendants of the Indian subcontinent), Coloured (mixed race), and African. State resources (e.g. education, health, pensions in amount per person) were strictly allocated according to racial classification, with Whites receiving significantly more than the other groups, Asians less, Coloureds even less, and Africans significantly the least. The Group Areas Act also forced citizens into residential areas (in-appropriately resourced) according to their race, with no exceptions allowed. Below also follows a discussion of Black Consciousness, a movement that sought to unite all South Africans of colour (i.e. who were not White) into the unifying category of Black, in order to subvert apartheid's divide-and-rule strategies. And hence, historically and in the anti-apartheid movement in particular, the term Black did not coincide with the apartheid designation African, despite the fact that institutions of apartheid attempted to have these terms coincide.

4. Cf. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which he wrote when he was a mere twenty-eight years old, as well as *The Wretched of the Earth*, his subsequent book *Toward the African Revolution*, in addition to *A Dying Colonialism*. Cf. also Kwame Nkrumah's *Africa Must Unite*.
5. The apartheid government allocated different budgets to South Africans whom it classified differently, according to its strict racial hierarchy, with Whites at its apex, followed by Indians, Coloureds and 'Africans' (Nguni speakers) respectively. Thus, the amounts allocated to learners in schools saw White students receiving the most, with Indian and Coloured students receiving significantly less, and so-called Africans receiving negligible amounts. The same applied to other social services, from health, to housing and pensions.
6. California-based activist and anthropologist, Judith Stevenson, in commenting on early drafts of this chapter, poses the following challenging questions: 'But I must also ask you, doesn't 'othering' go in two directions? In other words, in this piece you are othering a group, and also tending to monolithicise them.' I could not agree more. *Mea maxima culpa*.
7. This chapter was written towards the end of 2001. Since then there has been major political shifts in the Western Cape, notably an alliance between the largely Black national ruling party and the former apartheid political party which had held majority support in the province since liberation, arguably for political expediency but couched in the spirit of reconciliation.
8. There are highly contested arguments that the Khoisan (pejoratively labelled Bushmen and/or Hottentots) are composed of two distinct cultural/ethnic groups, the Khoi Khoi and the San, with yet others claiming that the term Khoisan encompasses numerous cultural/ethnic groups speaking many dialects/languages. Some of these arguments centre on the arguably erroneous colonial perception of two distinct indigenous groups, one hunter-gatherer and the other pastoral(ist), with colonial classification and treatment meted out accordingly. Sistah and historian, Yvette Abrahams (2000), refers to her ancestors as Khoekhoe and yet another Namibian-based Khoisan group as Namas. Since I am neither an anthropologist nor an expert in this area, I will merely add the generous and insightful comments of my North American anthropologist friend, Judith Stevenson: 'the Khoisan are a 'blending' of two distinct cultural groups: Khoi Khoi and San. The San are the earliest inhabitants

of Southern Africa, at least by archaeological and linguistic analysis. There is evidence of San culture (hunter-gathers, egalitarian) to at least 50,000 years ago, and perhaps earlier. The Khoikhoi (herders, chiefdoms) appear about 2000 years ago.'

9. The University of Cape Town was founded and financed by Cecil John Rhodes during the late 19th century, to educate privileged Europeans. Statues of, and memorials to, this British settler still adorn the university, most of which depict his imperial gaze across the largely impoverished and historically Black Cape Flats. Rhodes's wealth was mainly derived from the exploitation of gold and diamonds in Southern Africa, industries built, and still sustained, on the backs of indigenous cheap labour. At one time the Prime Minister of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), he oversaw the sacking of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, in attempts to deny this evidence of ancient African civilisation, of which this is only one example. During apartheid the university, a bastion of White liberalism, only allowed Black students to register there if they possessed permits issued by the state, and if they could afford the fees. Blacks who could afford the fees, through scholarships and/or family wealth, were only permitted to compete for academic spaces with their White counterparts during the late 1980s. While student ratios are beginning to more equitably resemble the country's ethnic demography, faculty and management remain predominantly White. At official university functions, including the annual Steve Biko Memorial lecture, faculty, including renowned Black author and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, still don the traditional medieval garb, including headgear and staff in hand, which has even my White activist friends shriek in horror.
10. For example, to drive a truck, my father needed a special driver's licence issued by local apartheid authorities, which he could not obtain since he was Indian residing in a Coloured preference area. Only Coloureds and Whites qualified for the majority of employment sectors, from skilled to semi-skilled, in this province during apartheid. Some Africans could largely only do manual labour in most provinces, and also only with the necessary permits and under stringent conditions. Had my father resided in the Indian preference province, Natal (now Kwazulu-Natal), employment would have been easier. Senseless but true, I can merely shake my head and continue.
11. The East Coast capital of the province, declared an Indian preference area during apartheid, and in whose sugar cane fields Indian immigrants' cheap labour was employed since the late 19th century. Also the site of much of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi's activisms.
12. Since the Indian area we were forced to move to was second of only two Indian areas in this predominantly Coloured province, there were no schools designated for Indians, and my elder siblings felt compelled to have themselves reclassified as Coloured by the apartheid authorities (with the younger ones classified Coloured by parental choice at registration soon after birth), to enable us all to attend Coloured schools, the only ones accessible to us under apartheid at the time. In these Coloured schools (primary and secondary education) all the learners and teachers were Coloured, bar the very few Indian or Indian-Coloured learners from my neighbourhood who had no other school to attend at the time.

13. Enjambment. Identities are fluid and contemporary classification may not be particularly useful, but despite this some of us still have to place ourselves within particular boxes at particular times, even if they're very large.
14. For an exploration of heteronormativity in the African women's movement, see www.engender.org.za.
15. Tanya Chan Sam's rendition of oral testimony by five Black lesbians in Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron's edited anthology *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (pp 186 – 194).
16. Judith Stevenson's comment further elucidates: 'I agree, but I also think it's more complicated than just internalisation: rage comes from lots of places, both the political (social) and the personal. Of course the personal is political, but women (of all identities) sometimes strike out at children (boys and girls), or pets, or elderly relatives etc. so I think it sometimes has to do with the 'object' at hand and who they have power over.'
17. From November 2003 to March 2004 I conducted participatory research on violence against and between lesbians in Cape Town, with focus groups and personal interviews almost universally attesting to how very widespread the experienced violences are, across communities and socio-economic classes.
18. My first penile penetrative experience with an extraordinarily beautiful and gifted male lover, who was also terribly sexist and oppressive towards women.
19. For more information on intersexuality, visit www.isna.org, the Intersexed Society of North America. Information pertinent to especially South Africa can be found at www.engender.org.za (Sally Gross, intersexed activist and Engender Board member, is our tireless local spokesperson).
20. Bisexual and transgender(ed) into gay into gay and lesbian (exclusive) discourse.
21. Judith Stevenson, in commenting on an early draft of this chapter, further challenges: 'If we are all constructed and fluid, why is there a need to transcend? Can't we all just 'be'?'
22. Nanda, in *Neither Men Nor Women: The Hijras of India*, 1990, cited in Bornstein (1995: 131).
23. Interview with Rosemary Weatherston, 1997, on Boone et al. (2000: 65, 66-67).
24. Cf. *The Aristos: The Personal Philosophy of John Fowles*. 1968. Pan: London. In particular pp.49-60.
25. Cf. Riane Eisler's *The Chalice & The Blade*, 1995, and the extensive work of the late archaeologist-anthropologist, Marija Gimbutas.
26. The three world conferences are: The World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), The International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), and The Fifth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). While some states have never ratified the declarations emanating from these and other United Nations conferences, and a few others signed and then withdrew, most governments have signed the declarations, with some governments having registered reservations on certain articles.
27. It is considered inappropriate for facilitators to engage in romantic relations with participants during a workshop, partly due to power differentials and the real potential for sexual harassment.
28. Uganda and Nigeria are two African countries, apart from South Africa (which has recently (formally) established a relatively strong queer movement) with a

significant lesbian representation. Nigeria's leading lesbian activist remains largely closeted due to physical attacks against her (including her home being bombed).

29. Cf. papers from the Third International Conference on Women in Africa & the African Diaspora (WAAD), Madagascar, October 2001, in particular Grace Quansah's "Supimamme": Conceptualizing Same Sex Relationships and Motherhood amongst Women of African Descent in Britain', as well as, Anthonia Uzuegbunam's 'Conflict Management: Implications of Woman-to-Woman Marriage in Nigeria', in addition to Obioma Nnaemeka's 'Gender and Human Rights in Africa: Widowhood Practices as Site of Struggle'. Cf. also E. Tietmeyer's 1985 (1999) book on marriage between women, *Studien zur Gynaegamie in Afrika*, cited in Stobie (2001: 11-12).
30. Ifi Amadiume asserts that there is more than this to these relationships, cf. her books: *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1988) and *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (1997).
31. As cited by Stobie, the interview with Muhammed appeared in an article by Francois Gollain, 'Bisexuality in the Arab World: An Interview with Muhammed', in S. Rose and C. Stevens et al (eds.) *Bisexual Horizons: Politics, Histories, Lives*, 1996, London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp.58-61.
32. Cited in Stobie, Kurt Falk's 1920s article, translated from German, 'Homosexuality Among the Natives of Southwest Africa'.
33. International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. Note the omission of bisexual and transgendered.