



Subversive pleasures, spaces of agency: Some reflections on lesbian and gay service-delivery work in eThekweni

Vasu Reddy

The exchange between Patricia McFadden and Charmaine Pereira in *Feminist Africa 2* is an entry point to my thinking in this commentary. McFadden wrote that African women's sexuality is to a large extent policed through claims around cultural norms and traditions in which women's bodies are classified as dirty and immoral if their bodies do not fall under the rubrics of reproduction or prescribed female roles as wives and mothers. McFadden also linked sexual violence and fear of female sexuality with women's political agency. In Pereira's critique of McFadden, she rightly challenges McFadden's universalising of the African experience and African patriarchy. Pereira also questions McFadden's notion that the liberation of women's sexuality and pleasure is the single most important dimension of all African women's full liberation as human subjects. Pereira argues that the circumvention and policing of women's sexual pleasure cannot account for all the problems women encounter within a broad system of economic, political and social domination.

Key for me in the above exchange is the idea that *sexual pleasure* becomes a focal point in making sense of changing configurations of gender, sexuality and identities in the African context. "Sexual pleasure" is all too often simply reduced to meanings in relation to physical pleasure and sexual identity within the context of heteronormativity. But the notion of "sexual pleasure" is much broader and should encapsulate the full realisation of pleasure in relation to sexual orientation, political power and agency. While McFadden makes some association between pleasure and power, she relies mostly on Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic as power (1984) (which is also limiting to an extent), rather than considering the relationship between sexual freedom, the realisation of pleasure and political power. In this sense, the notion of what is "sexual" as powerful and political becomes reactivated.

What are these connections, and what consideration is to be given to the relationship between pleasure and agency? My thinking about sexual pleasure is linked to an understanding of social power and the pleasure principle as a

cultural and political phenomenon in relation to gay and lesbian identities, which are often viewed as immoral, sexually dissolute and promiscuous.

I explore this aspect in order to explain how space – in particular, the strategic deployment of space – can serve to reinforce sexual pleasure as a process, consequence, or effect that is connected to the liberation of the sexual subject. I engage my experiences and understanding of the broad emancipation of gays and lesbians in relation to *how* the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community Centre (hereafter Durban Centre) *actively* promotes service provision for gays and lesbians. Such provision, I argue, is integral to a new imagining of lesbians and gays as a response to our abject status (and construction as “un-African”). My point is that sexual pleasure for gays and lesbians in our country is intimately connected to our developing freedom as sexual subjects. “Sexual power” cannot stand on its own, and where Pereira argues that further analysis involving psychoanalysis and history is needed, I am suggesting that “sexual power” encompasses not just the physical, but the social and cultural, connected to the struggle for citizenship. For me, sexual power and pleasure are not end products, but effects that are linked to the simultaneous development of a rights-based approach to identity politics. Here I describe how our collective involvement as a centre in gay and lesbian service-provision and mobilisation is leading to gradual empowerment for gays and lesbians. An effect of this empowerment, I believe, is our challenge to heteronormativity, and our celebration of sexuality and sexual cultures that associate sexual pleasure with affirmation of our identities, as opposed to subordination.

Social exclusion and discrimination faced by gays and lesbians in apartheid society have often promoted specific patterns of spatial clustering, in which histories of sexuality and spatiality are intertwined in heteronormative representations of the world (especially in the context of the apartheid state). Such representations have reflected a systematic policing of gender and sexuality in terms of spaces that gay men and women could or could not occupy, resulting in their generalised exclusion and prohibition. Two points follow from this. First, space may become safe (in terms of the threat of homophobic violence) for gays and lesbians who rarely feel safe, and who often have limitations imposed upon their movements, even after homosexuality is decriminalised. Second, this leads to questions concerning how identities are spatialised, and the significance of space in enabling and/or constraining an individual’s identity.

I argue that the construction of physical spaces for gay and lesbian people in the post-1994 economy is about the assertion of our identities, about a form



of “protection”, and a form of “compensation” against compulsory heterosexuality. The translation into practice of gay and lesbian equality in the form of systematic claims to citizenship has an important political resonance in the area of space. It is in this sense that I suggest gay and lesbian spaces have indeed become queer, because they articulate a new cultural context for politics, criticism, consumption, and the production of identities. For us, identity is negotiated through a recognition of that which is supposedly other, including that which is other in terms of space.

By foregrounding the Durban Centre (a community-based organisation located in the eThekweni CBD, and at which I have been a long-time volunteer), I illustrate how the material contours of space and place influence and accommodate sexual practice, and by extension, identities, as a particular political construction. Rather than simply drawing on space as a metaphor, as an imagined “boundary”, “border”, or “limit”, I seek instead to focus on material space in relation to our sexuality. By “material space”, I mean physical space in terms of who occupies it, the work being conducted from such space, and the opportunity this relation presents to assert or experience a specific identity – in our case, queer African identity.

As a concept, space may also highlight cultural practices, such as the use of the “cottage” (public lavatory), parks as pick-up grounds, and clubs, bars and other negotiated spaces, such as cruising grounds.¹ These homoerotic (and sexualised) spaces in which gay and lesbian subcultures are directed towards sexual release, amusement and sexual pleasure, are equally imbued with meanings in a political and politicised sense. While these dimensions are relevant to an understanding of how sexuality is motivated and performed, I limit my discussion to the community-based organising of the Durban Centre, which focuses on service delivery for gays and lesbians in an urban space.²

As a Centre, our space is by all accounts not a neutral zone, but one constructed by forms of power and governed by oppositions between private and public space, family and social space, leisure and work space. In Foucaultian terms, a conception of space is expressed ontologically by distinguishing between two sites: *utopias* and *heterotopias*. The former, he claimed, are unreal. More “real” are what he defined as *heterotopias*, places that contain all other places, represented, contested, and inverted in all their constructions (cited in Fabion, 1998). It is in this sense that I suggest, therefore, that Foucault’s scheme may be read into our gay and lesbian community-centre space as a particular counter-site, which asserts an alternative envisioning of



spatiality, directly challenging heteronormative spaces that exclude and marginalise gays and lesbians. It is in this sense also that commercial activities such as bars and clubs, specialised shops and other amenities within the urban gay sphere have become queer spaces, safe havens from violence and spaces to be oneself, which Duncan identifies as areas that are “sites of resistance” (1996: 4). By viewing our Centre as a space that illustrates a specifically queer heterotopia, I conceive it as a politicised space that reinforces the political construction of our sexualities and identities. Our Centre work positions gay and lesbian identities as historical and social formations, but the visibility we propagate also calls into question the active prohibitive forces of apartheid (and, increasingly, those within the democratic project), cultural silencing and oppression. These memories and realities reinforce the point that our sexual pleasure and identity formation are primarily about our *becoming*, a possibility that to some extent is future-oriented. This echoes Stuart Hall’s idea that our identities are indeed less about who we are, or where we come from, and more about what we might become (1996: 4).

Service delivery for gays and lesbians became a visible phenomenon in the post-apartheid state, and especially since the first democratic elections in 1994, although its history to a limited extent pre-dates the post-apartheid context. Service delivery refers to a political and politicised intervention that indicates not merely concrete and tangible outcomes such as condom, dental dam or lubricant distribution. It is understood as the implementation of a developmental (and by implication, a political) approach to promote individual and community well-being and pride, and to build individual and community capacity. The move towards constitutionality, expressed in human rights terms in the post-apartheid democracy, coupled with the subsequent decriminalisation of same-sex conduct, has led to service provisions where activism and service delivery have been incorporated into our work as a regional-based service provider.

A feature of our Centre is its urban location and the symbolism this suggests in respect of how we, as gays and lesbians, organise ourselves in relation to the city and town. Parker (1999) has demonstrated, in relation to emerging gay communities in Brazil, how social organisations of same-sex relations are configured in urban life. Parker’s observations have special resonance for our Centre. In extending his observations about Brazil to South Africa, I interpret the formation of the Durban Centre as representative of what he terms “both the social organisation of sexual space and the sexual organisation of social space”. In appropriating this view, I am not suggesting that our community



centre functions as a homoerotic space where people meet for sex. Rather, our space prioritises a particular aspect of the “sexual”, namely sexual orientation as a form of gendered identity.

The history of the Durban Centre may be traced to that of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE). The latter was a voluntary association of 74 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered organisations in South Africa, and the only national organisation of its kind in South Africa with the explicit political agenda of mobilising gay and lesbian people. Formed in December 1994, the NCGLE successfully lobbied the Constitutional Assembly (the body that drafted the South African Constitution) for the insertion of sexual orientation as one of the protected grounds for non-discrimination in the Constitution. The NCGLE was mandated to work for legal and social equality for its members, as determined by its annual National Conferences. Its work included law reform, lobbying, litigation, advocacy, employment equity, and leadership training and development (work now subsumed in its incarnation as The Lesbian and Gay Equality Project). The NCGLE made significant public and policy interventions in arenas such as the Defence Force, police services, immigration, education and health. For strategic reasons, much of the work of the NCGLE was located in Johannesburg and Cape Town. However, the Coalition had a number of provincial branches, the most active being our KwaZulu-Natal (KZ-N) Coalition.

Formed in April 1995, the KZ-N Coalition lobbied and advocated for lesbian and gay equality beyond the period of the adoption of the 1996 Constitution of South Africa. Although its membership was primarily made up of individuals, affiliate members included local university gay and lesbian organisations and gay and lesbian churches. The work of the KZ-N Coalition was done exclusively by a core group of volunteers who met regularly at peoples’ homes to plan activities.

Between 1995 and 1999, the KZ-N Coalition held public meetings and consultative forums in which many people from the Durban metropole and more rural areas, such as Newcastle, Ladysmith, Richards Bay and Ulundi, participated. The initial brief and mandate of the KZ-N Coalition was to lobby for the inclusion and retention of “sexual orientation” in a clause of the Bill of Rights in the new South African Constitution. This goal was met when then-President Nelson Mandela signed the Constitution into law at Sharpeville on 10 December 1996. The second brief, emanating from constitutionality, was the process of decriminalising homosexuality, a process of developing legislation to



remove discriminatory clauses from the statute books (for example, opening the way for adoption and custody rights, rights to pensions and medical insurance of same-sex partners, and so on). The post-1996 work of the KZ-N Coalition thus focused on matters related to the decriminalisation of same-sex conduct.³ At the same time, gay and lesbian people in KwaZulu-Natal asserted and articulated the urgent need for a service-driven community centre that would also provide a safe space for gay and lesbian people in Durban.

On 9 August 2000, National Women's Day in South Africa, the Durban Community Centre was established by Nonhlanhla Mkhize, myself and our late comrade Ronald Louw, with office space rented from the Treatment Action Campaign (hereafter TAC). We now operate as an independent organisation, with our own space. However, the history of the Centre's emergence demonstrates our close relationship with social and human rights movements focused on HIV/AIDS and gender.

A few months later, the Centre's application for funding from the AIDS Foundation of South Africa was approved, facilitating the establishment of the first gay and lesbian service-oriented community centre on the east coast of South Africa (and quite possibly, Africa). Much of the political work of the KZ-N Coalition is now characterised by our centre projects, which focus on capacity-building in gay and lesbian communities, public education and training from a human rights perspective, lobbying and advocacy, sexual and mental health and legal advice. Our mission is "to empower the LGBT communities by providing services, training and support to enable them to claim their rights to equality, dignity and freedom within the context of transformation".

Flowing from this position is the promotion of diversity, particularly sexual diversity that challenges inequality, oppression and discrimination within the context of mainstream society. Our focus goes beyond the cityscapes, and includes surrounding "townships", as well as small towns in KwaZulu-Natal, such as Newcastle. We work in areas such as Chatsworth (predominantly "Indian"), Wentworth (predominantly "Coloured"), and Lamontville (predominantly black "African"), addressing class and race issues that are often neutralised in gay and lesbian work. By working with people from these largely working-class areas in community halls, schools and churches, our organisation demonstrates the political nature of our identities. Simultaneously, our work demonstrates that services become an extension of space.

Coupled with these values is the pedagogic imperative that informs our work. By this I mean nurturing a community by providing access to information



on a range of issues, while at the same time developing healthier self-concepts. This challenges the LGBT person to raise questions concerning their identity, and responds to the homophobia of the hegemonic heterosexual population. By confronting issues of classism, sexism and racism in the context of homophobia (through regular interactive workshops), we are beginning to offer an internal critique of the diversity and difference that characterise our heterogeneous communities. We recognise and address the important issues of racism and classism in our gay and lesbian communities, as well as deep divisions within these along race and class lines.

The mission statement of our organisation reinforces the view that service provision is a political “coming in” (as opposed to “coming out”) to society. In this sense, we believe that the provision of services may indeed be informed by the same logic that informed gay and lesbian liberation (the freedom from homosexual oppression), and therefore constitutes further development of the emancipatory project. The extension of services, therefore, is a refined development of rights in the legal sense. If we accept that rights are products of social relations and historical circumstances, then we also believe that services reinforce the ideal of citizenship, which may be broadened to include *social* as well as *civic* rights. In order to fully grasp what “services” imply, I turn to the strategies we deploy.

Our initiatives promote systematic social change as a strategic process to challenge homophobia, underpinned by an overall strategy to challenge anti-discriminatory practices. In order to reinforce this, the organisation fosters strategic partnerships and networks with organisations that subscribe to human rights (such as the Gender Aids Forum, TAC, the South African Human Rights Commission and several others). Human rights lobbying, training and gender equality are driven by our campaigns co-ordinator, who is responsible for the lobbying function of the Centre. This work ranges from issuing a press release on homophobia to a co-ordinated campaign dedicated to a particular issue, such as our current campaign to challenge the common-law definition of marriage. Another strategy is to offer direct services to the gay and lesbian community as a way of empowering individuals within that community. This entails direct visits to targeted communities within and outside the city-centre, and focuses on developing our organisation by building the leadership capacity of black African gays and lesbians.

The above strategies are translated into the following broad areas. Personal counselling and support groups entail face-to-face, group and telephonic



counselling. These services ensure that a number of people (such as those visiting the Centre, or those able to phone us) gain access to services. Given the impact of HIV/AIDS, most especially in the KwaZulu-Natal province, sexual health support services entail HIV/AIDS counselling, HIV/AIDS lifestyle workshops, prevention and treatment, buddy systems and condom/femidom distribution. The Centre provides information services such as books, magazines, material geared towards gay tourism for South African nationals and international visitors, materials development and training manuals. Another unique service is the provision of legal advice by a qualified attorney on a range of matters relevant to LGBT people (such as the design of a will, domestic partnership agreements, and so forth). In the area of community development, the Centre's volunteer outreach programme offers training and education on a range of LGBT issues.

The mission, objectives, strategies and services of our Centre reinforce the link between space and identity insofar as it is in the material spaces of physical buildings that homosexual identity is promoted as "queer", not in a pejorative way, but rather in a way that constructs and affirms our queer identity formation as political. The services offered by our Centre confirm ideas about the affirmation of our identities in visible and politicised spaces that are not cruising grounds for sex (as some of our opponents would have people believe), but instead *identity-affirming* and enabling spaces. The anti-homosexual hate speech of many African leaders is also a denial of enabling spaces for gay and lesbian people in Africa.

Our work brings into focus not just the idea of the homosexual, but also the homosexual as *person*, in relation to a built environment, a constructed space that claims and affirms our presence. The ideological import and effect of gay and lesbian spaces (better still, queer spaces, as I suggest) is not coincidental, in that our Centre's status as a *public* space conveys a variety of meanings to the public. I have claimed that queer spaces affirm queer identity as something to be tolerated, understood and celebrated. Apart from designating gays and lesbians as an interest group that lays claim to these spaces, I believe that our service-driven Centre promotes an identity politics based on the ongoing struggle for citizenship. Our Durban Centre suggests, following a reworking of Foucault's heterotopic model, the possibility of space as "compensation", a form of counteraction against heteronormative spaces that have excluded, marginalised and silenced gays and lesbians. Space, it seems, in the work demonstrated by our organisation, holds the key to possibilities for agency and



full “assimilation” in South African society. The strategic point of mobilisation and a rights-based approach to identity for gays and lesbians should ultimately and ideally lead us towards the closure of our organisation.

However, as noted by McFadden, politicians in Africa invoke the notions of “culture” and “tradition” to defend the oppression of women, gays and lesbians. More recently, Zulu monarch Goodwill Zwelithini, addressing more than 20 000 young women at the annual Reed Dance festival at his Enyokeni Royal Palace, had two messages for the nation. One was his virulent attack on homosexuals: “The Zulu nation would not be this big, with millions of people, if there was the problem of gay people that we have today. This new behaviour is quickly becoming a threat in our nation because it encourages people not to have proper families that have children. We have a huge responsibility as a nation to teach our children to distance themselves from homosexuality.” At the same event, he also criticised the government for the Children’s Rights Bill, which seeks to ban virginity testing. On this subject, he said: “I have many daughters who have been tested, but none of them have complained of being sick or humiliated after undergoing this process. I want to thank young people who have heeded the call and conducted their lives in a manner that has saved them from contracting HIV/AIDS. Please abstain from sex.”

These opinions confirm the spectre of oppression, and reveal culturally informed, moral, patriarchal and sexual anxieties that prevail in our society in spite of the existence of a democratic project. Sadly, for the majority in our society, African homosexuals constitute “improper” bodies and homosexuality a “subversive” pleasure. Underlying this moral and sexual panic is the persistent construction of our sexuality as a vector of disease. Such thinking confirms that for us, sexual pleasure cannot be detached from the urgent need (and responsibility) to mobilise, educate and continue with our liberatory project.

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Footnotes

- 1 The spaces listed here are, of course, predominantly the domain of gay *men*. Many cruising grounds are emphatically not safe for lesbians/women, reflecting the gendered fault-line in this articulation of space.
- 2 An extensive body of literature exists on space and place in the context of sexuality and gender. Feminist readings of space in its social context have interrogated its relationship to the construction of gender and gender relations primarily in relation to the way the private and public realms have been demarcated and constructed, and especially in their interrelationship and politicisation of realms that have often been construed as private. Likewise, studies informed by queer theory have interrogated the interconnections between sexuality and space that explain how the creation of a gay space, in either the physical sense or in the creation of imagined spaces, offers queer people a space for freedom and liberation. I have located the Durban Centre within this matrix of understanding as public identity-based spaces (see for example, Bailey, 1999; Massey, 1994).
- 3 Here, for example, the criminalisation of sodomy had to be addressed, given the legal implications not only for homosexual but heterosexual couples, as well as the many rape survivors who found that assailants who had penetrated them anally were not technically guilty of rape, but could be charged under anti-sodomy laws. Clearly, legislation which meant that both rapists and consenting adults could be prosecuted for the same "crime" had to be dismantled.



Vasu Reddy

is a senior lecturer and Head of Gender Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College Campus). He is a co-founder, board member and Management Committee member of the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community and Health Centre (<http://www.gaycentre.org.za>).