



## Review

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*Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities 1994–2004*, Volume 1.  
Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn. eds. Kwela, Cape Town, 2005.

Human sexualities in representation require our serious, uncomfortable critical attention; the local articulations of such identity formations in contemporary South Africa seem to beg analytical research and theoretical explication, given events at the current historical moment. In this volume from the Social Identities South Africa (SISA) series, Mikki van Zyl and Melissa Steyn have made an admirable attempt to bring together a collection of essays which aim to do exactly this.

Framed by Van Zyl's introductory chapter (which relies heavily on Judith Butler's work on gender as performance, as it attempts to trace the contours of the current historical moment in South Africa both diachronically and synchronically), the various essays are situated in a variety of social science disciplines ranging from psychology to law. Van Zyl places the debates about sexuality both within the framework of the South African Constitution as well as the context of similar debates within the greater African context. However, given the brevity of these remarks, the effect is largely rhetorical and polemical, doing little to illuminate exactly what effects the African social, political, economic and scientific context(s) in particular might have on a re-reading of South African sexualities.

Many of the contributions also seem to wish to interrogate the boundaries of genre by merging autobiography with criticism, sometimes with uneven results. The work of Bernadette Muthien ("playing on the pavements of identities") constitutes an attempt to situate subjectivity interstitially; this essay, which merges auto/biography and criticism, is ambitious in its attempt to both articulate and interrogate the existing constructions of identity in various critical theoretical traditions. However, as with Van Zyl's introduction, as well as her own contribution ("fat like the sun"), there is a discomforting assumption of a self-knowing subject at odds with the post-structuralist feminist discourse invoked through figures like Butler. The description of lives by the subjects themselves is often taken at face value, thus seldom really analysed or

interrogated, with the result that inconsistencies of term usage go unremarked upon. However, it may be that the theoretical framework chosen does not easily accommodate the admirable political aims of the projects: the reclamation of individuated selfhood cannot be easily effected through analyses that seem gesturally situated within post-structuralist debates in late twentieth-century feminist theory on subjectivity. This problematic is unsatisfactorily unresolved in both the Van Zyl and Muthien pieces, and is further complicated by the inconsistency of term usage in the discussion of the engendering of subjectivity through discourses of class, “race” and sexuality, among others.

Certainly, the personal is political, but one is often unsure to what extent the reader is required to suspend interrogation of work presented in a manner that suggests the authors have suspended interrogation of their subjects. Oliver Phillips’ work on the lives of ten white men through the epochal political and social changes in South Africa suffers from similar problems. Opening with self-description, he goes on to “chart ... the broad articulation of racial, economic, gendered and sexual identities in the [thirteen] men’s lives over the period of constitutional transition” (156). However, it is never articulated beyond nomenclature what Phillips understands the whiteness of his subjects (or his own self) to be, other than the formulaic “structural advantage” mentioned; the relationship between “race”, gender, class and sexuality, therefore, while central to the concern of his work, remains vague in the overwhelming mass of self-narration and salvation narratives. In contrast, Muthien is at pains to demonstrate how “race”, gender and class are mutually constitutive of one another, and largely inextricable from performative sexualities. This could merely be the result of disciplinary distinctions between the two authors, although one would have hoped for some pre-publication dialogue between authors whose work was to appear in a collection with the politically committed project of this one.

Early in her work, Van Zyl is keen to explore the politics of representation of sexualities, problematising the essentialist logic that binds human practice with theoretical insight. However, what is never raised by her introduction is the need for fine, nuanced criticism in lucid, well-constructed prose; the already muddled understandings of sexualities which abound in the public domain cannot be clarified in bad writing, as evidenced by much recent media discussion on these topics.

In this regard, Rachelle Chadwick and Don Foster’s examination of a Rape Crisis volunteer’s representation of her sexuality in terms of her work with rape survivors, is to be commended for its careful attempt to renegotiate the terms



we use in speaking of sexualities, and the idiom they deploy for the critical exploration of representations of such. Whether their experimental work on Rape Crisis (as a space in which to articulate the coming to terms with identity) succeeds is not really at issue, given their larger project. They also grant their subject the right to articulate a conception of herself as *sujet en proces*<sup>1</sup> without necessarily leaving her construction of self uninterrogated.

Sylvester Charles Rankhota's contribution on "how black [sic] men involved in same-sex relationships construct their masculinities" is perhaps emblematic of much of the collection. Overly descriptive, the work relies on complex critical theory emerging from the "Occident" to explain sometimes very fraught local articulations of identity, when it is not entirely clear that the problematics of the "Western" theory have been adequately negotiated. At times irritatingly anecdotal, Rankhota's subjects are described as "gay Zulu men involved in same-sex relationships in the Pietermaritzburg area", though none of these descriptors are read as discursive constructions, and so are never unpacked. Similarly, notions of "a dominant version of patriarchal masculinity" loom indistinctly in the background, and the respondents' testimony is often taken as "truth". Despite this potential flaw, valuable material is still dealt with in this chapter; it is slightly odd, though, that the subjects in the study come across as little more than "native informants".

William Leap's material on the ways in which understandings of sexuality can be spatialised also tends to be too descriptive. Examining visual representations by several subjects of "gay Cape Town", Leap shows how various queer identities map the city differently, thus exploding the (self-constructed and self-serving?) myth of Cape Town as a "gay haven". However, perhaps Leap's own transient familiarity with the particular history of the oldest colonial settlement in the country accounts for his inability to probe thoroughly into the ways in which the sexual economies of colonialism and apartheid continue to have effects in a divided city increasingly implicated in the neo-liberal capitalist global economy.

Cheryl Potgieter's chapter on black South African lesbians is perhaps the most sophisticated and nuanced analysis in the collection. The analysis demonstrates a finely balanced critical reading of subjects' responses, and is able to work interrogatively with the status of narrative evidence without denying the validity of subjects' self-construction. Potgieter's work is also the only piece which adequately demonstrates an understanding of "race" (in this case Blackness – note the capital) as social construction rather than as phenotypical



reality. The essay's sophistication lies in its ability to analyse human experience in the light of theoretical framing, but also to show how being human is infinitely complex and cannot merely be accounted for by recourse to social science or critical theory. Similarly, Craig Lind's examination of how current debates on and conceptions of sexuality in South Africa demonstrate the confluence of discourses of law, politics and human science, is admirably skilled in its exposition of theoretical complexity without arcane abstraction. It is fitting that the collection closes with his lucidly written piece.

Altogether, this collection is certainly worth acquiring, in spite of its methodological and theoretical shortcomings. It seems the problem with all such anthologies in contemporary South African social science is that they reflect the different levels of competence and the varying facilities with prose current in our institutions. In the attempt to reflect the range of work done within certain fields, researchers with varying levels of expertise and experience are often brought together within the same collections. Moreover, some of the chapters clearly emerge from long-standing and thorough research at the centre of the authors' professional lives; other papers seem more provisional, as if they were parts of graduate research work. This collection certainly contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual (LGBTi) identities in South Africa. However, we need to move beyond the descriptive aspect of LGBTi identities to a more considered analytical engagement in this field. Cheryl Potgieter's nuanced article in this collection is illustrative of the direction such scholarship should take in future.



## Footnotes

- 1 This phrase of Julia Kristeva's refers to the process of coming to subjectivity, and negotiating subjectivity in linguistic and other acts. The literal translation into English ("subject in process") loses the multiple senses of the original French, with its play on the legal, linguistic and psychoanalytic senses of the subject.

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