

Book Interview

Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities

Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture

By Andy Carolin | Books

Leila Hall – a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Assistant Editor of *The Thinker* – talks to Dr. Andy Carolin, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at UJ, about his recently published book, ***Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities: Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture*** (Routledge, 2021).



Leila Hall (LH): Congratulations on your book! Before we talk about it, could you introduce yourself and tell us something about the work you do?

Andy Carolin (AC): Sure, thanks Leila. I'm currently a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at UJ. I have a PhD in English Literature and my research focuses on representations of gender, sexuality, race, and history in South African literary and visual texts.

LH: Your preface describes the events that unfolded at the 2012 Jo'burg Pride and how this gave rise to your book project. Could you describe what happened at this pride event and tell us about the questions that this event sparked for you?

AC: Ever since pride marches started in the early 1970s, there's been a growing conversation around what the purpose of pride marches should be. There's this tension around whether they should be about protest or celebration. And what we saw in 2012 was this tension coming to the fore in quite a violent and unsettling way. In 2012, we saw the organisation the 1 in 9 Campaign – a feminist, anti-rape movement – staging a protest as part of the Jo'burg Pride parade and demanding a minute of silence to draw attention to the specific vulnerability of Black lesbian women. Part of the protest was what they called a 'die-in', where they arranged their own seemingly lifeless bodies with life-like mannequins on the ground, in order to disrupt the progression of the parade. It was this that generated threats of violence and intimidation, with many of the white pride organisers shouting aggressively at the Black protestors, saying things such as 'this is our route', 'go and find your own',

and the insistence that the protestors 'go back to your *lokshins*' [locations], which of course evokes such an incredibly disturbing racial history of spatial planning.

Obviously there was significant commentary in the press for two or three weeks afterwards. Much of the critical response to this event relied on the same, sometimes quite obvious, historical tropes of racism and sexism that shape much of the post-apartheid imaginary. There was almost a sense of 'well, of course it would happen here'. But I had a feeling that there was just something too easy about this analysis – it was too insular and too obvious. So I started to consider what it would mean to think about this particular event as a local instantiation of a transnational sexual politics. This moment in time was not isolated, but was rather the convergence of countless cultural flows that are simultaneously past and present, local and transnational. That's what started coming up for me.

There is a pervasive attitude of being 'post-race' among many white people, an attitude that so many of the party-goers embraced at that Jo'burg Pride in 2012. And I kept thinking to myself that this moment has a history, and that history can be linked back to colonialism and apartheid, sure, but it can also be linked to the type of post-race whiteness we see in publications such as *Gay Pages*, which draw their visual repertoires from cultural flows in the Global North. These might be a contemporary circulation of specific images of wealthy gay men, but it is also the result of historical processes that have shaped the raciology of post-apartheid cultural life. So, these were some of the complexities that I wanted to start unpacking. At the time I had no idea where it would go and now, about eight years later, we have the book.

LH: This book is published in a series by Routledge – 'Gender in a Global/Local World' – and at the heart of your exploration is trying to understand the relationship between the global (the transnational) and the local in the making and representation of same-sex cultures in post-apartheid South Africa. Can you tell us more about this?

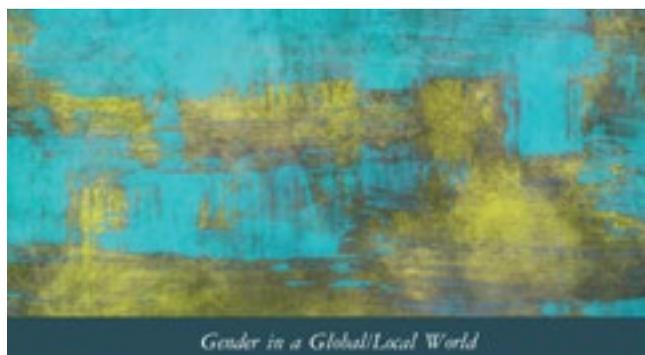
AC: What I wanted to do was to start undoing some of the binary thinking that we have around the homophones 'routes' and 'roots' – playing with Paul Gilroy's formulation. I wanted to think through the binaries of both local and global, on the one hand,

and past and present, on the other. It was important to understand how historical cultural flows have a bearing in the present, even if those historical cultural flows seem at first to be quite rooted and embraced as some form of authentic timeless essence. Actually, of course, those cultures that have the appearance of timelessness are themselves the result of myriad cultural flows in the past. So, for instance, in the one chapter titled 'Same-sex sexualities and the idea of Africa', I focus on the truism that same-sex sexualities are 'unAfrican'. I try to trace the connections between what it means to talk about sexuality in Africa in the present, not only contrasting it with the past but also showing how the past in fact shapes the present in sometimes unexpected ways. It is of course homophobia and institutionalised heteronormativity that were brought to Africa as part of the colonial project, rather than same-sexualities themselves – and I think that's been attended to quite successfully in recent scholarship. But I wanted to go further and

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trace, for example, the peculiar dalliance between notions of fundamentalist Christianity and 'authentic' African tradition. Many social conservatives articulate, in the same breath, both Christian values and a seemingly timeless 'tradition' to define the borders of what constitutes moral and 'authentically' heterosexual African identities. And I found this to be a fascinating relationship, given the centrality of Christianity during colonialism. Homophobia was institutionalised in Africa through the colonial project, and now homophobia has been institutionalised in much of post-colonial Africa through some of the anti-colonial movements themselves. By historicising this, I hope to show that the homophobia that we see in South Africa today has a history of being deployed for ideologically expedient purposes.

One text that demonstrates this is the film *Inxeba (The Wound)*. The film was read by many commentators and critics as being a very uniquely South African event – I say 'event' because of the practices of reception, the legal action, and the protests that surrounded the release of the film. Similarly, the debates surrounding the film and the tensions between different claims to rights-based discourses were seen as uniquely South African. And yet, if we take a step back, we can read many of these discourses not as grounded in a South African exceptionalism, but instead as the result of global cultural flows that are characterised by transnational ideas around Christianity, essentialist claims to nationalist African identities, and liberal internationalist human rights discourses. These factors certainly have a specificity in the South African context, but they can't be separated from global discourses. I found that what the film was doing – rather than offering us a uniquely South African event



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– was offering us something far more complex, and a way of thinking through how cultural flows come to constitute a very specific notion of the local.

What I try and do in the book is theorise ‘restlessness’ to try and bring together these two almost disparate axes – that of space, so the relationship between the local and the global, and that of time, the relationship between the past and the present. And through this notion of ‘restlessness’, I try to bring them together in a coherent analytical frame. To go back to your question around this particular Routledge series, which speaks to thinking through gender in a global/local world, what I wanted to bring to this was an emphasis on transnational cultural flows that can be both contemporary and deeply historical.

One of the issues that I look at is around the constitutional recognition in 1996 of the right to equality and the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I raise some concerns about the historiography through which 1996 and the adoption of the Constitution has almost become the defining moment in our sexual rights history: the point towards which everything moved, and the point from which everything henceforth flows. Popular histories in South Africa have developed certain mythologies about 1996 that are ahistorical and that don’t map the longer cultural movements that are specific to South Africa, but are also deeply tied to transnational histories of advocacy and identity. So I argue that what the notion of restlessness does is it complicates how we think about the cultural forces that produce same-sex sexualities in South Africa, highlighting transnational resonances and historical trajectories that might not have been immediately visible.

LH: The idea of ‘restlessness’ is something you refer to throughout the book. How would you explain this term to someone who’s never come across this concept?

AC: ‘Restlessness’ as I theorise it in the book would recognise that identities are produced through the intersection of multiple cultural flows, that are related both to geopolitics and historical temporalities. Cultural studies scholars have done such important work arguing that identity is always socially constructed. What I’m interested in thinking about is how to

make explicit connections between the historical and contemporary cultural flows that produce those identities, and that become visible once we start scratching the surface. In the book, I theorise it in the following way: ‘To refer to restlessness is to point to a range of cultural flows that are simultaneously rooted and transnational, disparate and uneven, precarious and contingent, historical and contemporary, and orientated more towards connections and movement than any inward-looking ossification of the nation-state’ (Carolin, 2021: 2).

LH: The intersections between race, gender, and sexuality are central to your study. Could you talk about these intersections in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, with some examples from the texts you analyse?

AC: There are sometimes surprising continuities in how gender is constituted and performed in different settings, and how circulating discourses about race impact on this. So, one particular chapter looks at how white masculinities were produced both during the apartheid period and in the present, exploring the different race politics that underpin these constructions. Another chapter unpacks how masculinities can also be rooted in an African nationalist framework. In the book, I try to tease out both the differences and continuities between these iterations of masculinity. So, for instance, while I locate the masculinities that might be depicted in the magazine series *Gay Pages*, or Michiel Heyns’ novels *The Reluctant Passenger* and *Lost Ground*, within discourses of whiteness, I also try to highlight how these very notions of masculinity have echoes with the ones depicted in films such as *Inxeba (The Wound)* and *Ibhokwe (The Goat)*. I try to show how idealised notions of masculinity are themselves mobile forms that can be expediently packaged and deployed for political and ideological purposes. One of the points that I make in the book is that these continuities can sometimes be deeply unsettling for us. We start to see potential overlaps between how white apartheid-era masculinities were produced, and certain essentialist formulations of masculinity rooted in problematic notions of ‘authentic’ Africanness.

Similarly, one chapter focuses on women in the Indian diaspora, and draws on the novels *Saracen at the Gates* and *The World Unseen*. Another chapter

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focuses on photographs of Black women. Across these chapters, I point to recurring discourses of cultural authenticity that position same-sex sexualities as somehow unAfrican or unIndian. I try to show how the very notion of ‘cultural authenticity’ is a fiction that is produced and deployed in the service of a conservative patriarchal project that, even if it isn’t universal, certainly has powerful resonances across contexts, across cultural histories, and across texts.

While race is a social construct, of course, it’s a construct that – given the specific histories in South Africa and in many other places around the world – continues to have a significant material impact on how people have access to certain resources. To put it simply, inequality in South Africa continues to be deeply racialised. Sceptical of the post-race whiteness advanced by publications such as *Gay Pages*, the book set out to confront the ongoing raciology of post-apartheid cultural life, even as this raciology is mapped historically and transnationally. The book is divided into very specific chapters that theorise and argue in relation to race itself: there’s a chapter on whiteness, another on the Indian diaspora, another on Black women. So, in many ways, the book itself stages a conversation with historical and contemporary circulations of race.

What emerged for me during the study was the importance of reflecting more critically on the complicity of some white gay men during apartheid. For instance, there was the Law Reform Movement in the 1960s that advocated against oppressive intensifications of state policing of same-sex sexualities. The Law Reform Movement was dominated by white men. But it was fundamentally a conservative project

because it didn’t challenge the underlying raciology of apartheid; it didn’t draw attention to the brutality and systematic discrimination that millions of South Africans experienced on the basis of race. Instead, the Law Reform Movement presented itself within terms of an acceptable middle-class whiteness that advanced sexual rights even as it remained largely silent on race. There was also the Gay Association of South Africa’s refusal in the 1980s to explicitly support Simon Nkoli when he was imprisoned as part of the Delmas Treason Trial. This organisation also tried to insist that it was somehow apolitical in relation to apartheid – a political strategy geared towards securing for itself a certain privileged position in the social order. Another example is the 1987 elections for the Hillbrow Constituency. The local gay press at the time – as well as many gay voters – supported and advocated for a National Party candidate, who eventually won the election, simply because this candidate promised reform on gay rights. So, what we saw in the final years of apartheid was white gay men and women voting in their own interest – for the very party that operationalised apartheid – despite the fact that there were progressive anti-apartheid candidates on the ballot who were not caught up in the same evil history of the National Party. So, if we think about this history cumulatively, we see that white gay men have a complicated relationship to the apartheid state apparatus that is not entirely separable from complicity. While many white gay men might acknowledge the histories of homophobia and sexual moralism, I don’t think that many of us are willing to acknowledge how local efforts towards sexual rights may have contributed to the legitimisation of what was a crime against humanity.

LH: In the book, you also talk about the difficulties of addressing race: how to talk about its continued social impact without normalising and perpetuating racialised discourses. Can you speak a little more about how you approach this in your study?

AC: I think we have a certain responsibility to fight against the ‘post-race’ whiteness that we see in publications such as *Gay Pages*. We need to develop analytical tools to complicate how we think about the circulation of discourses about race. The question you ask about the importance of a nuanced approach to race is relevant for my book, but it’s also important for a broader progressive politics: around the world we’re

seeing a global reckoning with race and histories of racial oppression. An explicit focus on race allows us to engage with and expose the ongoing privileges of whiteness in multiple contexts, hopefully contributing in some way to the work of anti-racism. This has implications for campaigns such as Black Lives Matter in the United States, as well as Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa and the UK.

While this book is a study about sexuality, it is probably equally a study of race. I'm hoping that the discussion of race and the idea of restlessness will have resonances in other contexts too. For example, there's currently an ongoing debate about the New York City Pride Parade and the decision by the organisers to exclude police officers from marching as part of the event for the next few years. This decision has been taken to recognise the experiences of many queer people of colour in the United States who have experienced police brutality. This marks a particular intersection that draws together transnational discourses about human rights and visibility with context-specific histories of racism that have powerful resonances in the present. I would hope that ideas such as restlessness could enrich the analyses of these sorts of social phenomena and the recognition, through an intersectional lens, that history and the ideological mobility of sexual identities are far more complex than they may initially have seemed. By really going to the roots of these contestations, we will hopefully bring new relations into view that will at least complicate how we think about, for example, the relationship between policing and sexual rights activism in the United States. So, it's my hope that inasmuch as this book is a study of the post-apartheid moment, that it also offers a way of thinking through this broader global reckoning with race.

LH: That leads perfectly to my last question – in general, what do you hope this book will achieve in terms of scholarship and our thinking around issues of sexuality and race in post-apartheid South Africa?

AC: One of the things is its emphasis on a dynamic historicity. The book resists the impulse to focus only on 1996 and the adoption of the Constitution's Equality Clause. Across the book, I look at multiple texts that engage with sexual rights and same-sex sexualities outside of the hegemony of this historical moment.

So, for example, the novel *The World Unseen*, which is set in 1951 and depicts the relationship between two women in the Indian diaspora in Pretoria, operates outside of the traditional ways of thinking about sexual rights histories in South Africa. Furthermore, this setting also falls outside of the high point of the post-Stonewall sexual rights movement. In an earlier chapter in the book, I also look at the relationship between the sexual rights and anti-apartheid movements between the 1970s and the 1990s. I use the selected cultural texts to resist the idea that sexual rights in South Africa were somehow inevitable – an argument that many scholars have made, and which oversimplifies many of the cultural forces at play. A focus on a restless historicity reveals that whether to recognise sexual rights in South Africa was caught in the crosshairs of volatile and intersecting cultural forces – and certainly far from inevitable.

LH: Thanks so much. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

AC: One of the things that I hope this book achieves is to bring attention to some of the really impressive work being done by authors, photographers, and filmmakers in South Africa, who are contributing to a more complex cultural history of sexuality. For instance, there is Oliver Hermanus' beautiful film *Moffie* (which had an underwhelming release due to Covid, but has now been picked up by an American distributor). There is also the aesthetically innovative and bold film *Kanarie*, the extraordinary photography of Siphumeze Khundayi, and Zinaid Meeran's award-winning, though largely neglected, novel *Saracen at the Gates*. It is these works and many others that make up the rich archive of same-sex public culture that forms the basis of my book.