

A different fight for freedom:

A history of South African lesbian and gay organisation from the 1950s to 1990s

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Prologue: Linda Ngcobo's funeral

There were hundreds of mourners at the funeral service for Linda Ngcobo in Soweto's Phiri Hall on Saturday 13 February 1993. Ngcobo died unexpectedly of AIDS-related renal failure at the age of 28. He was a founder-member of GLOW, the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand, and the organiser of the annual Miss GLOW drag show, the highlight of gay Soweto's calendar. He was also a loyal son who lived with his family in their township home, and a choir-member in the charismatic African Apostolic Church of which his father is an elder and lay preacher.

And so, on the day of his funeral, two communities gathered to bury Linda Ngcobo and lay claim to his spirit. Among the congregationists, the men wore suits and women dressed from head to toe in white; in the charismatic African style of prayer, they chanted and swayed and thumped, moving up to heaven with the force of their faith the body lying in the coffin before them. They sat, a sea of white waves, on chairs in the hall. Behind them stood at least two hundred men and a smattering of women; black gays and lesbians from Soweto, Ngcobo's comrades from GLOW and the clandestine gay networks that criss-cross this sprawling township.

Some of Ngcobo's gay comrades came in jacket and tie. A few arrived in full explosive drag. A few more represented that peculiar androgyny of township drag borne of scant resources and much imagination, nodding at gender-inversion

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with no more than a frilly shirt, a pair of garish earrings, a touch of rouge, a pair of low-heeled pumps, a third-hand wig. Most, however, wore t-shirts with the GLOW logo, a pink triangle framing a raised, clenched fist. For, in the township tradition of the slain freedom-fighter, this was to be a political funeral: an expression of grief that was also a consecration to further struggle.

Earlier in the week, at a memorial service organised by GLOW, a confrontation had erupted between Ngcobo's friends and his father; offered an opportunity to speak, the old man had railed against his son's gay friends, damning their sin. The GLOW members were furious, and decided to organise their own feast after the burial rather than attend the family one. Ngcobo's father showed remorse; he and his family had always known about and accepted their son's homosexuality, and, he apologised, he had been moved to speak by the heat of the moment. GLOW was welcome at the funeral, he added, and a space had been made in the programme for the gay organisation to speak.

And so, in Phiri Hall, a strange truce held. Neither Ngcobo's friends nor his church was prepared to relinquish their claim over his body. In the GLOW part of the programme, veteran black gay activist Simon Nkoli spoke, making explicit Ngcobo's homosexuality in what was as much a memorial to a dead comrade as an impassioned plea for tolerance and a call-to-arms for rights. In the traditional style of funeral oration, Nkoli peppered his speech with hymns, and, despite the controversy (and even blasphemy) of his words, the congregation joined in with his call-and-response. After Nkoli's speech, a young GLOW member in drag led the gay mourners through a modified version of 'We are a gentle, loving people'. Here was a group of conservative church people, witnessing the spectacle of a man in womens' clothing singing at the funeral of the son of one of their elders! Here was a moment of power, if not revenge, for the gay people of Soweto; here too a rare moment of tolerance.

During Nkoli's speech, the GLOW banner was unfurled behind the coffin, effectively screening the church elders, seated on the raised stage behind the banner, from the congregation. It was as if GLOW had replaced the church as the institution watching over Linda Ngcobo. After the GLOW section of the programme was over, the church service resumed; a preacher labelled GLOW as Ngcobo's 'friends of the flesh' and explained how the departed had 'repented for his sins' on his deathbed. But still the GLOW banner stood its ground, held prominently and tautly above the coffin.

And now the gay mourners devised a brilliant, if subconscious, theatrical ruse. Two people were required to hold the banner; Ngcobo's friends arranged for its bearers to be relieved, unnecessarily, every two minutes. And so, as the preacher railed on about repentance and sin, a constant procession of gay men, many in drag or demi-drag, paraded up and down the central aisle of Phiri Hall. The aisle became a ramp, the gay guys models, performing their identity before the white-clad congregation, reminding the congregation, even as the preachers preached about friends of the flesh, that they were there and proud, friends of Linda Ngcobo and part of the community, like it or not.

There were moments, as the vast funeral procession moved from the hall down to the Avalon Cemetery, Soweto's anarchic dustbowl of a burial ground, that were reminiscent of any of the dozens of political funerals that had taken place there before. A group of t-shirt-clad comrades toyi-toying before the coffin; the singing of more conventional freedom songs interspersed with 'Hey hey, ho ho, homophobia's got to go!'; the clenched and raised fists protruding out of impossibly-packed busses; the tensions, of course, between a political movement and a family laying claim to a departed soldier.

Linda Ngcobo's death, like all deaths, like all AIDS-related deaths, violent deaths, deaths in detention, deaths of heroes and untimely deaths, was a coming of age for the young men and women mourning him that day. Linda Ngcobo's funeral was as brazen and complex and contradictory, yet as inevitably affirming, as the black gay movement Ngcobo himself had helped found and entrench. Ngcobo was one of the first black men to declare his homosexuality publicly and draw others around him; he was also the first black gay leader to die an AIDS-related death. His death caused panic, confusion and fear. But his funeral did, undoubtedly, consecrate a social and political movement that had been growing in black urban communities since the mid-1980s; one with its counterpart in a white movement that had itself been germinating, slowly, in South African soil for over four decades.

Linda Ngcobo's funeral raises more questions than this account of lesbian and gay organisation in South Africa could ever answer. What is the history of gay identity that led to this moment of consecration in a dusty township cemetery, and where is it to be found? Given the history of apartheid South Africa, where identities were so rigidly defined, why is a 'gay identity' so elusive and undefinable? Given the specificity of class, race and ethnicity in South Africa, is it even possible to pin down a 'gay identity' using the terminology of Western culture? When I — a white man — called myself 'gay' and Linda Ngcobo — a black man — called himself 'gay', did we mean the same things? When I call myself 'gay', do I mean the same things as middle-aged white men and women who participated in a homosexual subculture in the 1950s and 1960s? Is it right to tell a history in such a way that makes of these men and women my fathers and mothers? Is there a line of consciousness that leads from middle-class white homosexuals who called themselves 'queer' in the 1950s through to hip young black kids who now call themselves 'queer', with a new subversive edge, in the 1990s?

And are there homosexual 'norms' which can be picked out of random points of South African history and strung together into a coherent narrative of gay identity? Lesbian and gay historiography is now split between 'essentialists' and 'constructionists'.¹ The former group, believing that there is an essential gay consciousness linking all gay people, would probably answer 'yes' to the above questions. The latter group, believing that sexuality is determined by specific cultural, historical and social contexts, would probably answer 'no'. While this account does attempt to tell the 'story' of gay social and political life in South

Africa from the 1950s to the present day, it does so from the 'constructionist' perspective: the narrative coherence of the story which follows is undermined, quite consciously, by the understanding that it is impossible to identify a single, cohesive 'gay' identity.

This account is of necessity episodic and subjective. It is by no means exhaustive and is not an empirical study. Given the sparse documentation of lesbian and gay history in this country, I have had to construct a narrative from fragments: the vivid but subjective memories of a half-dozen older men and women; a wonderful red leather-bound scrapbook bequeathed to the Johannesburg Gay Library which happens to include much information about Durban; incomplete newspaper-clipping files; the ideologically charged interpretations of activists; the work of the very few other people who too have attempted to document homosexual experience in South Africa.

Despite all the above problems and limitations, the funeral of Linda Ngcobo compelled me to continue with the project none the less. As I stood in Phiri Hall behind the black gay mourners behind the hymn-singing congregants, I felt a proud commonality with Linda's black friends around me, despite our differences; we were all gay, all South African. My strongest feeling was this: we cannot afford to 'lose' Linda Ngcobo as we have lost to obscurity so many before him. In his name, some beginnings at South African gay and lesbian history must be attempted, fragments though they may be.

As I stood at the back of Phiri Hall I realised, too, that even if this account cannot tell the 'whole story', it can, at least, restate the very issues the funeral itself raised: the interplay of sexual identity with the politics of race, class and gender; the different relationships of middle-class white people and working-class black people to a homosexual subculture; the marginality and invisibility of lesbian voices in both black and white gay subcultures; the relationship between outrageous sexual dissidence and gender inversion on the one hand and 'straight-acting' conformity on the other; the choices, faced by gay South African politics, between confrontation and accommodation; the division between political advocacy and social support; the relationship between activism and acting out, as seen so clearly, at Linda Ngcobo's funeral, in the confusion of toyi-toying drag queens and ramp-walking comrades.

Finally, this is a history of gay and lesbian organisation rather than of sexual identity in South Africa. As such, it focuses on those who have called themselves 'queers' or 'moffies' or 'gays' or 'lesbians' or 'dykes' — on those who have self-consciously identified themselves with homosexual subcultures rather than that far greater number who have engaged in homosexual sex or homophobic relationships on the margins of these subcultures. Because these subcultures have, until very recently, been white, male and middle-class, this account reflects, to a large extent, white, male and middle-class experience. Rather than claiming that women and black men belonged to a subculture when they patently didn't, I hope to show why they did not, and how their later entry into the subculture worked to transform and reconceive both style and ideology.

One

The roots of a subculture: the 1950s and 1960s

Between drag queens and child-molesters

By the mid-1950s, the public image of homosexuals swung between two stereotypes: the child-molester and the drag queen. While *Drum* and *Golden City Post* sold newspapers by focussing on the coloured 'Moffie Drag' subculture in and around Cape Town, printing sensational 'exposés' of coloured drag queens and competitions, a 1956 police swoop of the Esplanade, Durban's pre-eminent cruising place, resulted in the arrest of 30 men who were charged with indecent assault. In his judgement, the magistrate, JL Pretorius issued sentences ranging from six to 15 months, declaring that 'your type is a menace to society and likely to corrupt and bring about degradation to innocent and unsuspecting, decent-living young men and so spell ruin to their future...'²

Between these two stereotypes, however, homosexual subcultures existed in the major cities (Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban) relatively unharassed — and had done so at least since the war a decade previously. Just as gay communities were established in urban centres in the United States in part because of the uprooting impact of the depression and World War II, the various urbanising influences of South Africa — first the mining rushes that created Johannesburg, then the flood of people from the rural areas in the 1920s and 1930s — meant that there were people in the cities, away from their families and home communities, able for the first time to practise 'personal autonomy': to 'come out' as part of a homosexual subculture.³

With the exception of Cape Town, where there had long been a 'moffie' culture based in the Cape Malay communities, these subcultures were white, male, and generally middle-class. But, in South Africa's apartheid history, the influx of white people into the towns was paralleled by the system of black migrant labour: the single-sex compounds, where men were divorced from home communities, created 'breeding grounds' for 'circumstantial homosexuality'. Certainly there were those black men who practised homosexuality for lack of a more appealing heterosexual alternative, but there were also those who 'found themselves', and who remained in town, living homosexual lives, rather than returning to either wives or the possibility of marriage in their rural areas. Given South Africa's history of 'separateness', there were very few places where mobile white homosexuals and migrant black homosexuals met. Not surprisingly, those spaces that did exist were the much-mythologised 'melting pots' of South Africa's past: Fietas and Sophiatown in Johannesburg, District Six in Cape Town.

American gay historians have noted that World War II played perhaps the single most important role in the creation of a self-identified gay subculture.⁴ In South Africa too, the war, with its concentration of transient men in uniform, had a formalising effect. In the port-cities of Durban and Cape Town, gay men found public space within the quayside subculture that blossomed around docked warships. In Johannesburg, gay life sprouted in Joubert Park, where there was an army

camp during the war, and the area became known for its bars; even though these bars were 'straight', they were patronised by gay Johannesburgers looking to meet off-duty soldiers. That, says 'Gareth', who was in his late teens at the time, 'is how Joubert Park became the first gay place in Johannesburg. Most of the bars closed up as soon as the war ended. But the people who had moved into flats around the park to be near the bars remained.'

The end of the war saw a far larger percentage of single people living away from their families. The Hillbrow/Joubert Park area, with its proximity to town and its cheap high-density accommodation, became an obvious and acceptable neighbourhood for young people to live alone. Not surprisingly, gay men and lesbians flocked there. Cruising areas too developed during the war because of their proximity to soldiers and sailors: Park Station adjacent to Joubert Park in Johannesburg, the Esplanade alongside the docks in Durban, the Sea Point Promenade and Gardens area in Cape Town. Along with a few of the bars, these cruising venues remained active after the war and, in all three cities, gay men continued to have public meeting places into the 1950s.

'Sporting Women': Lesbian subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s

Lesbians, despite being entirely ignored by both the law and the media, experienced far greater pressure to remain closeted and had far fewer public gathering places. In South Africa, as in the West, a homosexual male's entry into the gay subculture is often via the bar or the cruising ground.⁵ In North America and Europe, lesbian bars and subcultures did exist in the 1950s — most notably in Greenwich Village in New York, but also in smaller cities like Buffalo and Vancouver.⁶ Particularly during the 1960s, these communities folded into the burgeoning Women's Movement, and lesbians found, in feminism, a philosophical framework for living lives independent of men.

While there is a history of women's organisation in South Africa, it has focussed primarily on workplace rights and the anti-apartheid struggle (the famous 1956 march of 20 000 women on Pretoria's Union Buildings being a case in point). In the 1950s and 1960s, it certainly did not address itself to issues of sexuality; neither did it situate itself within feminist ideology. With no feminist movement in South Africa and little bohemian subculture to speak of, lesbians thus found it even more difficult than gay men to find space.

Nevertheless, alongside and often intersecting with more visible gay male subculture, lesbian communities existed after the war in South Africa's major cities — often in the form of small cliques of friends organised by profession (teachers, nurses, lawyers). Entry into these cliques was by word of mouth in the workplace and often required much intrepid inventiveness. 'Hannah' is a businesswoman who moved to Johannesburg after the war. Through a close gay friend she met while working, she was introduced to the gay male subculture; through a personal newspaper advertisement ('Lady interested in motor mechanics wishes to meet same'), she met her first lover and became involved in a tight-knit circle of lesbians.

'Ellie', her lover of 16 years, is a physical education teacher who 'picked up' her first lover in 1955 while working in a record store: the pick-up was an art-student who introduced Ellie to a 'bohemian artsy' world in which there were many gay men and women. Through surreptitious conversation in staffrooms and at sports meetings, Ellie met many other lesbian teachers too.

It was a fiercely clandestine world. 'Jackie', a teacher who met Ellie at a swimming gala, remembers that

you only came alive on the weekend. During the week you kept up all pretences. I had my hair set every week, and wore high heels, skirts and make-up. I wouldn't have dreamed of going to a movie in town in slacks.

For many lesbians of this generation and class, wearing slacks in public became the yardstick of liberation, and both Ellie and Jackie remember vividly the thrill of first wearing slacks to town.

The cliques developed, says Hannah, as a safety mechanism: 'women who had jobs just could not afford to be disclosed.' Occasionally, there would be interaction between the cliques: Ellie, for example, became involved at one point with a group of women from Pretoria,

very Afrikaans, very insular, civil servants who were terrified of being found out. They were an outdoorsy crowd. Their idea of a Sunday afternoon was to get together over a weekend and go hiking and fishing at Hartebeespoort Dam.

There were, however, some public 'safe' venues open to lesbians. In the late 1950s, for example, a woman called Chick Venter ran a club near Park Station in Johannesburg. 'It was downstairs in a basement,' recalls Ellie, 'and very rough. The walls were covered with fishnets with bottles hanging off them. That was the style in those days.' While most of Chick Venter's clientele was male, it was one of the few venues at the time where 'unaccompanied women' could go. Ellie, with her 'arty' connections, also became involved in the coffee-house scene: the East African in Jeppe St, for example, was a largely-straight venue frequented by gay people.

On the whole, though, lesbian social life at the time revolved around private parties in flats. In Johannesburg, cliques developed around certain party-givers, one of whom was Hannah, outspokenly open and well into her 30s by the mid-1950s. Hannah lived in Reynard Hall, a building almost exclusively occupied by lesbians and gay men and renamed 'Radclyffe Hall' by Hannah's set. 'The Well of Loneliness was our Bible,' says Ellie, and, in an attempt to emulate the lesbian author, pipe-smoking was a fad for a while. Hannah remembers that

I had a helluva lot of parties. There was always terrific music, and tens of beautiful women crammed into my little flat. I had very young people mixing with me. Because they were living at home and couldn't let their hair down, they used my place as a gathering point. As we say in gangster-talk, it was a 'safe-house'.

In those days, the women recall, the butch scene was far more entrenched than it is now, and gendered rituals were *de rigueur*: the butches wore slacks, kept their hair short, and were expected to get drunk; the femmes wore dresses, bobbed their hair, and were in great demand. Because there was a general antipathy in the subculture to wearing dresses, however, the rituals often became wonderfully stylised: since almost everyone wore slacks, regardless of gender assignation, at some parties guests were required to wear pink or blue bowties to signify their roles. Today, says Hannah, 'when I go to a party people say "do you want to lead or shall I?" It's become very liberal now. Those days you knew where you were and you stayed there.'

Apart from the flatland party scene and the occasionally welcoming bar, club or coffee-shop, the other significant gathering place for lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s, as now, was to be found in the sporting clubs. In smaller cities, this was often the only option: 'Cleo', a woman active in Durban in those years, remembers that

the only way you could meet someone was through cricket — there was no other place... We knew that 'those girls' played cricket, so we joined too... The girls used to play at Albert Park, and every week we'd have a 'Plaza Night': we'd meet at someone's home for supper, a few drinks, and a game of darts.⁷

Cleo recalls too that womens' soccer teams were also havens for lesbians, but for a 'rougher' type.

In Johannesburg, Hannah responded to an advertisement for a 'No-Man's Cricket Team', and became a member of the Kennet Club in Kensington:

You'd go there every Saturday to practise, but it was also a social gathering. You'd arrive and quickly cast your eye around. But of course, you'd never actually mention that you were queer, which is the word we used those days. Everyone knew the score, but it was very hush-hush.

At the same time, Ellie and Jackie were members of a womens' hockey team. The hockey league was more formal and serious. But, says Jackie,

while the cricket teams were more obviously gay, there were a lot of gay women in the hockey teams too. There were some teams that were well-known for gays. Like the Transvaal Scot-ties — they were the captains of gay. But it was also never discussed. There were lots of hockey parties where no husbands or boyfriends ever came, and that was the perfect place to find someone. But even there, we all wore our little dresses, which was ridiculous, because sporting women are incredibly butch, even the femme ones.

Lesbian communities thus did exist, but were much more clandestine than their gay male counterparts. Firstly and most obviously, heterosexual institutions like marriage were far more restrictive for women than for men: there was room in society

for the 'gay bachelor', for independent and transient men, but the pressure on women to marry and bear children was — and remains — greater. Secondly, the lesbian cliques that did exist tended to involve women in the service professions who needed to go to great pains to keep their identity secret. And thirdly, there were men in the gay community who had the economic independence to become 'community leaders' by taking the attendant risks of public life. Many of the male 'entertainers', for example, were wealthy: they had the means and the space to throw large parties. In contrast, lesbian parties, in Johannesburg at least, took place in cramped flats and on balconies rather than on patios and around pools. 'Heather', a Johannesburg teacher, recalls that

we were all poor and hard-working. You have to remember that in those days women as a matter of course earned much less than men. And also, we were by definition independent. We didn't have men to look after us. So we had to earn a living. And for middle-class women in the 1950s that was unusual. There were very few professions open to us, and we could not afford to lose our jobs — there was no hubby to go running back to. This dictated how we ran our lives.

**'Queens, tarts and sailors':
The gay bar and party scene in the 1950s and 1960s**

For men active in the 'scene' there was, as there is now, a far greater variety of options: bars, outdoor cruising places and private parties. In Johannesburg, after the demise of the wartime Joubert Park scene, the gathering place in the late 1940s became the bar at the Carlton Hotel — a huge, square tomblike venue crowded with enough people that, according to one habitu , 'the queens could find their corner and carry on undetected.' Later, the scene shifted back to Joubert Park, to the Astor on Smit Street, and then, in the late 1950s, the lounge-bar at The Waldorf Hotel, on the corner of Rissik and Bree, took over. 'Joe', who moved from Durban to Johannesburg in 1959, recalls:

It was a place with atmosphere, with the strict dress code of jacket and tie. A social club, where everybody knew everybody. In later days you'd see someone in his suit disappear into the toilets and re-emerge in jeans and a casual shirt for the club.

In those days, none of the bars were owned by people from within the gay community: the gay 'crowd' would decide upon a venue — usually the lounge-bar of a swank hotel — and colonise it. Then, the management would see a lucrative and dependable clientele — 'we didn't drink beer,' says Joe, 'we drank gin or *parfait d'amour*'. If the management responded with a modicum of civility, the word would spread. Of course, this strategy did not always work: an oft-recounted episode in Durban gay folklore, for example, revolves around a set of particularly flamboyant men who, in 1959, attempted to take over the Ulundi Bar at the Royal Hotel, the poshest place in town. Their method, recalls Joe,

was for a massive train of silly queens to flounce through the Royal's lobby, enter the Ulundi, and send up any unfortunate BMs ['baby-makers' — gay slang for heterosexuals] who were there. Needless to say, the queens had outclassed themselves this time, and the management would have none of it and gave them a Royal kick in the arse.

In the early 1960s, this pattern changed somewhat. In Johannesburg, for example, as the Waldorf declined in influence, the bar at The New Library Hotel on Commissioner Street took over, promoting itself very much as a gay venue. In Johannesburg in the early- to mid-1960s too, several gay-owned men-only dance clubs came and went, the most well-known being The Farmhouse, out of town on the road to Pretoria. Also in the 1960s, a gay man named Leo Smith opened a club in his mother's flat in Rissik Street. While the bars remained straight-owned enterprises within hotels, the clubs — which were to epitomise the 1970s — were exclusively gay business ventures.

In Cape Town and Durban, bar-life was more varied than in Johannesburg, possibly because the passage of sailors — both those in the navies and those on the merchant shipping lines — continued after the war ended. In Cape Town, for example, the equivalent of the Waldorf was the Grand Hotel, which was all-gay on Friday and Saturday evenings from 5pm to 7.15pm. 'Robert', a businessman who moved to Cape Town as a young man in 1958, remembers that

everybody would go to the Grand, and you'd even find a sailor or two there if he had a feel for that kind of thing. But then, when the Grand closed at 7.15, the more adventurous bunch would move on to The Delmonico on Riebeeck St, which was a favourite sailor's pickup joint, a big Spanish building with a band that was great fun. Or you would go to Darryl's or the Navigator's Den down by the docks. It worked like this in those places: first the prostitutes would come, then the sailors would follow, and then the gays.

First the prostitutes, then the sailors, then the gays. This sequence says much about the marginal identity gay men, irrespective of class, had in society at the time. Certainly, middle-class gay professionals like Robert patronised the dockside because of the possibility of sex and a fascination with 'rough trade' and men in uniform. But, faced with the opprobrium of their peers, they also went to the waterfront because it was perhaps the only place they could be at ease once the Grand closed. Buttoned-down and suited in the day, they joined the world of outcasts at night. The fear of being rejected in their leisure-time, by the very society in which they strove for advancement during their work-time, dominated many gay men in those times — as it still does today.

In Durban, the same combination of prostitutes, sailors and homosexuals could be found in the lounge of the Royal Playhouse, which had a very dramatic setting: you walked up the broad sweep of front steps into an interior courtyard, which had, Joe remembers,

a sky of spangled searchlights and a gallery with a restaurant on either side. There must have been 100 tables all told. Right next door was The Mayfair, which was all-gay on a Saturday night, so you'd shuttle between the two. [The Playhouse]... had a very uneasy mixture of a third each queens, sailors and tarts. You'd be at a table with several queens and there'd be sailors at the next table. It could be dangerous, of course. But it could also pay off.

There was clearly a code to be observed with sailors, and you had to be careful. Joe recalls that

the Royal Navy was always a better bet than the South African Navy. They wanted a good time and they didn't ask you for money. The South African chaps, on the other hand, were terribly paid and in need of finance, and, if they didn't bop you on the nose, they made no bones about asking you for rent.

Even in smaller port cities, sailors played a significant role: in Port Elizabeth in the 1950s, for example, the bar at the Palmerston Hotel, patronised mainly by prostitutes and sailors, became the only public venue in the city where gay men were welcome.

Once the sailors made friends with on-shore gay society, they were assured not only of some extra pocket-money, but hospitality and entertainment too. In Durban, for example, there was an 'entertainer' who had Sunday night soirées that always included a half-dozen sailors. There, remembers Joe, 'you'd find queens of shall we say the lower order dishing the dirt. And you'd find sailors either sitting around awkwardly or serving drinks.'

Those 'entertainers' who did include sailors in their soirées were looked down upon by others: in Durban, while the 'lower orders' — hairdressers and the like — went to one 'entertainer's' home, the more respectable went to another's. And in Cape Town, there were famous fancy 'do's at the home of a gay couple in Constantia — jacket and tie and invitation only — as well as more ramshackle, open-ended affairs in the northern suburbs. All the 'entertainers', however, went to great pains to be discreet, 'to protect the safety of our guests', as Joe tells it.

Another oft-told piece of Durban lore involves one of the flamboyant 'Ulundi' set, who danced naked in the garden at a party, which resulted in a complaint from the neighbours, a visit from the police, and ensuing arrests and shattered lives. 'That,' says Joe, 'simply was not on. In those days we were allowed to do our own thing provided we behaved. So we behaved.' Certainly, this ethos required a fair amount of self-censorship on the part of the 'entertainers' themselves. Hannah remembers, for example, that

Gay women, and particularly butch gay women, were not welcome at many gay male parties, because the men thought that we would attract unfavourable attention from the neighbours. So if you were butch you were ostracised, even though who they

were trying to kid I do not know. The neighbours always knew exactly what was going on anyway.

Hannah, an 'entertainer' in her own right in lesbian circles, also took her own precautions: 'As long as there were no men present, the women felt safe from the law too. If the cops raided us we had a perfect excuse: we were having a kitchen tea.' 'Lucille', an accountant, explains the reasons for such intricate deception:

You have to remember, these were the 1950s. A girl was expected to sit with her knees tightly crossed until her wedding night. These were the days when a girl might be fired if she was so much as having an extra-marital affair. So you can imagine how beyond the pale a gay life was. Our lives were ruled by fear.

Gareth concurs:

We lived by stealth. We'd look at the flamboyant queens who didn't give a damn, and while we might secretly envy them for their freedom, we thought they were silly, foolish things — and a great danger to us. At all costs we had to remain hidden!

So strongly did Jackie feel this that, when the false rumour spread around the staffroom that she was having an affair with a colleague, 'I just got into my car and thought, "I'm going to crash this car and end it all," because it was so horrible, so terrible, that someone knew.'

Cottages, health clubs and café-bios: The cruising scene

A significant part of gay life in the 1950s and early 1960s — perhaps even more significant than now, given the lack of other options and the extent of social opprobrium — revolved around cruising. And, as is the case today, the cruising scene was the place at which closeted homosexuals, men who have sex with men but do not identify themselves as gay, came into contact with the gay subculture.

There were, of course, the public areas — Park Station in Johannesburg, the Esplanade and Albert Park in Durban, the Burg Street area, Gardens and Sea Point Promenade in Cape Town. 'The Wall', along Sea Point's promenade, and Graaf's Pool, the all-male swimming area, have together remained South Africa's cruising mecca. By day Graaff's Pool tended to be an unusual mix of older Jewish men (obeying the religious diktat of single-sex bathing) and younger gay cruisers and socialisers; by night it became the busiest gay place in town.

As well as the outdoor cruising areas and the public toilets — the most famous of which in Johannesburg was the vast City Hall 'cottage' — there were indoor locations that, as *loci* of sexual commerce, became very important gay meeting places: the 'health clubs' and the café-bios.

In Johannesburg, there were two 'health clubs': the London and the Atwater, both of which were active from the late 1950s into the 1960s. In their research into these, Galli and Rafael (see 'Johannesburg's "Health Clubs"' in this volume) report that they ostensibly existed to provide 'health services' — like massage and

sauna — but were largely patronised by men looking for homosexual encounters. Galli and Rafael's informants are disparaging about the clubs — they use words like 'filthy', 'rat-infested' and 'sleazy dump'. But, for five pounds, one could spend the night — in the baths, parading the corridors, or in private cubicles with beds. Because of their 'health-club' cover and their privacy, they were, according to Galli and Rafael, frequented by 'closettes', an 'older crowd' who were not integrated into more open gay society. As with all cruising venues, a large proportion of married or bisexual men patronised the 'health clubs', while the more open younger people went to the bars. As with gay culture abroad, 'the baths' became an important gay meeting place, but they have never been as central here as in Europe or the United States. In 1993, there were only two such commercial ventures catering to gay men, both in Johannesburg. A third, in Cape Town, was run out of a private suburban home.

The café-bios were very important white cultural institutions in the 1950s and 1960. These were, according to one of Galli and Rafael's informants, 'ordinary cinemas where you could eat, smoke and have it off while watching a movie.' They were very popular with working-class teenagers, and so became patronised by gay men looking to buy sex. Joe recalls that, in one downtown Johannesburg block opposite the City Hall on Pritchard Street, there were three café-bios:

There certainly wasn't a gay scene inside. It was very rough and straight, with kids drinking and smoking. But if you were interested in that sort of thing, you'd hang around outside and catch them as they were going in or out. Then you'd whisk them off to the City Hall to do business.

In Johannesburg at least, 'rent-boys' (also then known as 'LK numbers', after a well-known property rental agency called LK Jacobs) had a very specific social assignment: they were usually teenage Afrikaner boys, either from the working-class suburbs to the south and west of the city, or from outlying country areas. Joe recalls that

a great deal of rent came from Newlands (a working class suburb), and I'm convinced the culture was passed from one boy to another in the schools there — it became known that this was an easy way to make some extra pocket money. There was a famous drive-in cafe in Newlands, and some gay people would go there to pick these numbers up. But this was too close to home, and the rent-pieces might be with someone who they didn't want to know, and so it was safer to wait for them to come to your turf — Park Station.

In Cape Town, the 'rent' was also often working-class Afrikaner boys, but there was, in addition, a large population of coloured sex-workers, who did much business both with married coloured and African men and with white clients. Most of this activity took place in the Burg and Loop Street area and was, interestingly, an important gay meeting place even for those who were not looking to buy sex: one

of Lewis and Loots' informants, an Afrikaner from out of town, reports that he 'started talking to the Muslim boys who were renting. That's how I became aware of the gay scene.' (See 'Moffies en manvroue') This was in the 1970s, but older gay men report that such interaction was happening as early as the 1950s.

From Bantry Bay to Hanover Street: Neighborhoods, race and class

As with the Joubert Park/Hillbrow area in Johannesburg from the 1940s onwards, Cape Town also developed several proto-gay neighborhoods in the 1950s. White gay men, for example, tended to congregate around the Atlantic seaboard, in Sea Point and Bantry Bay. The greatest attraction was — and continues to be — the cruising area. As was the case with 'Radclyffe Hall' and other blocks in Hillbrow, whole blocks in the Sea Point area became 'gay residences', one of the more well-known of which was Peps (now the very upmarket Bantry Court) in Bantry Bay. Robert, who took a room there in 1958, remembers:

It was like a big family. There were about 50 flatlets, and 46 of them were occupied by gays. We were in and out of each other's business all the time, and we'd congregate down by the water, at a circular paved area we called The Bullring. If there wasn't anything else on on a Saturday night, you can be sure there'd be a gathering down there. I made great friends at Peps. If you were ill, seven or eight people would pop in to give you chicken soup. If there was a party, word spread like wildfire. Everyone knew that Peps was a bit odd, but we were never bothered.

While white gay men gathered around Sea Point, coloured gay men became very much part of the texture of District Six, particularly along its main road, Hanover Street, where many gay men rented rooms and socialised by going on 'salon crawls' — visiting the many gay hairdressing salons. Gay life thrived in District Six, and in other coloured neighborhoods like Athlone, Woodstock and Salt River. Unlike the parallel white culture, however, the participants were working class and the bonding point was drag. Salon madames like Joey Costello held 'Drags', as the parties were known, at which famous female impersonators like 'Eartha Kitt' and 'Kewpie' would perform. The Drags were highly ritualised affairs, with half the participants in drag and the other half in mens' clothing. Later, once they were publicised by *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, they became splashy affairs at places like the Kismet Theatre in Athlone. (see Chetty's 'A drag at Madame Costello's')

Within the coloured communities of the Cape Peninsula there were also, starting in the 1950s, renowned all-gay drag sports clubs, like the District Six Netball Team which participated in the womens' league, frequently (and not surprisingly) sweeping up all the awards. These netball teams, like the drag-performers, have been a constant in Western Cape coloured culture, and have their latest incarnation in the Lavender Hill Netball Team, which was competing on the Cape Flats in the early 1990s.

The history of 'moffie life' in Western Cape coloured culture is perhaps South Africa's richest and most untold, and there are several possible reasons why gay life flourished and was tolerated in these communities. According to Chetty, one answer may lie in the tradition that the annual Cape Coon Carnival has to be led by a moffie, and that 'mocking and subverting the conventions of gender and sexuality are very much part of the ritual.' There are other possible reasons. One is the influence of the Muslim Cape Malays in the region: while the Koran explicitly condemns male homosexuality, many gay Muslims maintain that their culture has always implicitly tolerated it as a preferable option to heterosexual adultery. Another possibility is that sexual dissidence is more tolerated in a hybrid, creole society like that of the coloureds than in supposedly coherent societies with strong patriarchal mythologies and traditions, like those constructed by the African and Afrikaner nationalist movements in South Africa.

Except for the commercial activity around Burg and Loop Streets, there was very little interaction between the coloured and white gay communities in Cape Town. Robert and Joe both remember that there would, occasionally, be a coloured man at a party, usually the 'affair' of a white man, and, in Joe's words, 'tolerated on sufferance'. And, despite the fact that there were white people involved in the 'shebeen-scene' in neighborhoods like District Six in Cape Town and Sophiatown in Johannesburg, there is little evidence of white people at the moffie drag parties at salons like that of Madame Joey Costello.

Nevertheless, before the apartheid clampdown of the 1960s, there clearly was some interaction — the most obvious indicator being that the *moffietaal* slang of the coloured community became the accepted lingo of white gay people too in the 1950s, first in Cape Town and later in other parts of the country. Even Johannesburg women like Ellie and Jackie, who had little interaction with any gay men, white or coloured, remember the infiltration of words like 'nora' and 'dora' and 'hilda' into their clique's vocabulary in the late 1950s.

Even within the white gay subculture, class boundaries were rigidly defined. It appears that middle-class men found it far easier to enter a gay subculture than working-class men: because they had space, because they had economic independence, and because they had access and exposure to education which offered them alternatives to the heterosexual paradigm. While it is more than likely that working-class gay white men had their own social structures, they are defined by the middle-class gay subculture only marginally as 'rent' or 'rough trade' — labels that assign to them the role of the 'other'. As the subculture expanded in the 1970s and 1980s, however, this was to change somewhat.

The relationship between class and sexuality among women appears to be different. Perhaps because there was an imperative for working-class women to work — and thus leave home in many cases — there has always been a substantial working-class component to South Africa's white lesbian culture. Although this study was unable to find working-class women active in the 1950s and 1960s, many of the middle-class women interviewed mixed socially with working-class women. And there were, at the very least, two clubs in Johannesburg largely fre-

quented by white working-class lesbians: Chick Venter's establishment, described above, and another club, Spiders' Web in Jeppe Street, which ran for a while in the early 1960s.

If there was a black working-class lesbian culture in the 1950s and 1960s, it remains inaccessible — to this study at least. There is, however, the interesting biography, published by *Drum* and *Golden City Post* in 1955, of Gertie, a cross-dressing lesbian gangster from the Cape Flats who had many 'girlfriends'. (see 'Lesbian gangster' in this volume) At the time, Gertie claimed to have a lover, for over a year, who 'does not know that I am a woman.' Such a scenario seems unlikely, and it can be assumed that, even if there was no black lesbian subculture in which Gertie participated, there was at the very least a group of 'heterosexual' women who were quite prepared to play along with the charade.

Nevertheless, despite evidence of the existence of working-class homosexual activity in both black and white communities, the formalisation of homosexual subcultures into a gay movement after the Forest Town raid of 1966 was an entirely white middle-class initiative, informed by the style, ideology and particular concerns of this sector of the population. Only in the 1980s did black men and women begin to play an active role in gay politics.

Two

'Men at a Party' and the Law Reform movement

'Mass sex orgy' in Forest Town!

'350 IN MASS SEX ORGY!' blared the *Rand Daily Mail* on Monday 22 January 1966. That weekend, police had raided a large gay party in Forest Town, a quiet and respectable old suburb to the north of Johannesburg. Nine men had been arrested for 'masquerading as women' and one for 'indecent assault on a minor'. Two years later, the South African Police was to report to a Parliamentary Select Committee investigating homosexuality that, to their 'disgust' and 'repulsion', police officers had found 'a party in progress, the like of which has never been seen in the Republic of South Africa...' (see Retief's 'Keeping sodomy out of the laager' for a full account of the official response)

Joe, who was there, recalls that 'it was the biggest party we had ever had, very glamorous and very uncontrolled'. It was clearly an 'A-list' gay do, organised by three socialites who shared the house. But, says Joe,

the hosts made sure everyone would be there by even circulating maps at the New Library bar. That's how everyone knew about it. And that was the party's downfall: it was well-known that Priscilla [the police] would hang around the New Library to pick up information about the gay scene. So of course they found out about it.

In the style of South African gay parties since the 1940s, the Forest Town bash was a 'bottle-party': guests would arrive with bottles labelled with their names, which would then be stored behind the bar. The raid began when a police sergeant managed to persuade one of the hosts to sell him liquor. Immediately, the police arrested the handful of drag queens who were present: when they were unable to prove that they had arrived at the party — which was, after all, private and thus beyond the ambit of the law — in mens' clothing, they were taken off to the police station and charged with masquerading as women in public. The rest of the party-goers were held at the Forest Town home for a few hours, photographed (which in itself was a severe form of intimidation, given the enormous fear of disclosure) and released.

Prior to the Forest Town raid, in the 1950s, there had been periodic 'swoops' on public places, the most infamous being at the Esplanade in Durban in 1956. There had also been frequent raids on parties, usually because of complaints of 'disturbing the peace'. The 1966 raid, however, was the largest, most organised and most publicised the police had ever attempted. Why this happened in 1966 remains a mystery: gay life had not become significantly more public in the mid-1960s, and, before the raid, there had not been a visible increase of police interest in the subculture. Retief offers the most plausible explanation: led by Prime Minister Verwoerd's clampdown on the liberation movements and his formalisation of apartheid, the South African authorities were consolidating Afrikaner 'Christian

National' control over the country, expelling from the laager anything that was deemed threatening to white civilisation.

The choice of a raid on a sophisticated gay party in Johannesburg's plush English-speaking northern suburbs lends substance to this theory. Although this study has been unable to find documentary evidence, gay men who were active at the time recall that, in Johannesburg, Afrikaans cultural and religious organisations were agitating about the fact that wealthier Jewish and English men were corrupting their youths: most 'rent-boys' were young Afrikaners, often fresh in from the *platteland*, and most of their clients were wealthier English-speakers. If this is true, an interesting connection could be made with black homophobia in the 1980s and 1990s: the nationalist notion that homosexuality is a decadent, upper-class import 'contaminating' the purity of a mythologised — either Afrikaner or African — race.

Whether or not the police deliberately targeted Johannesburg's liberal northern suburbs, the impression following the raid was definitely one of decadent, immoral high-living. Newspapers fixated upon the fact that prominent professionals, doctors and lawyers were present at the 'sex orgy', and, reports Retief, the police head office immediately sent a circular to all SAP divisional commissioners warning that 'there are indications that homosexuality and gross indecency is being practised between male persons throughout the country and that offenders are now pursuing an organised *modus operandi*.' The conspiracy-rhetoric is typical of the times: Nationalist control over South Africa was consolidated through the construction of bogeymen, and to the black conspiracies, communist conspiracies, English conspiracies, Jewish conspiracies, could now be added the 'queer conspiracy'. With the very same rhetoric as it had already deployed in the 'fight against communism', the SAP now recommended that informers be used to infiltrate 'queer parties'.

The authorities, however, were faced with a problem: while sodomy as well as a range of other 'unnatural' offences was illegal according to the common law, gay men could only commit statutory offenses when in public: this meant masquerading as women or soliciting at cruising spots. If, then, the authorities were to enter private homes and crack down on this organised ring of 'queer parties', they would not have the necessary legislation behind them: apart from picking up a few drag queens, as they did at Forest Town, they would have to leave empty-handed.

Thus, after much consultation with the police, Verwoerd's Minister of Justice, PC Pelsler, proposed draconian anti-homosexuality legislation to the House of Assembly in March 1967. The motion was deferred and then proposed again in 1968, when, as an amendment to the Immorality Act, it sought to make male and female homosexuality an offense punishable by compulsory imprisonment of up to three years. This would have had the effect not only of bringing lesbians into the scope of the law, but of making homosexuality itself statutorily illegal, whereas previously, only public male homosexual acts had been regulated by statute.

'Everyone Pitched In': The Law Reform Movement of 1968

Following the proposal of anti-homosexuality legislation, a wave of panic swept through South Africa's homosexual communities, particularly among lesbians, who had previously been ignored by the law. Jackie recalls:

We were terrified. There was a rumour that women would not be allowed to live together. I remember going absolutely cold and thinking, how are we going to live if we can't live together?

Gareth started looking at the possibility of immigration: 'We feared a witch-hunt, and all my friends were packing,' he says and, in fact, at least six of his acquaintances actually did leave the country. The terms of the legislation were so harsh that Pelsler was prevailed upon to refer the matter to a Parliamentary Select Committee, which was charged with hearing evidence on the nature of homosexuality and proposing final legislation a year later. The Select Committee published notices calling on members of the public to submit evidence, giving assurances that all evidence would be confidential: the point being, of course, to encourage homosexuals themselves to testify.

Almost immediately, a small group of gay professionals, led by prominent gay advocate, began organising in Johannesburg and Pretoria. An 'action group' was formed, later formalised into the Homosexual Law Reform Fund, known euphemistically as 'Law Reform'. Law Reform's task was very simply-defined: to raise the R40 000 needed to retain a firm of attorneys to prepare evidence and lead the case against the proposed legislation before the Select Committee. Gay people were asked to make contributions and to submit testimony not to the Select Committee directly, but to Law Reform's lawyers: in this way, Law Reform could control and coordinate the evidence being presented to the Select Committee while at the same time guaranteeing the confidentiality of those who gave evidence.

By April 1968, the Law Reform group was already engaged in frenzied activities throughout the Pretoria-Johannesburg area, holding house-meetings to explain the purpose of the organisation and raise funds. On 3 April, Joe attended one such meeting:

We were told that this was a crisis, and so we had to forget our differences and pull together. It was very impressive, very factual and non-hysterical, and the stress was on pragmatic, co-ordinated action.

The following week, on 10 April 1968, Law Reform called a public meeting at the Park Royal Hotel in Joubert Park — the first gay public meeting ever held in South Africa. It was publicised by word of mouth and by very discreet pamphleteering in the bars. About 100 people attended. There was strict screening at the door — to prevent intrusion by either police or the media — and, once more, gay people were urged to give money and submit evidence through Law Reform's legal team.

The campaign was run by a core of roughly 20 people. Meetings were held almost every evening, and the organisation spread until there were informal Law

Reform cells all over the country, with core activists addressing house-meetings set up by sympathetic acquaintances. There were three major subcommittees: the Legal Committee, responsible for co-ordinating testimony and preparing representations to be given to Parliament; the Data Committee, responsible collecting a body of research on the nature of homosexuality; and the Fundraising Committee, which was the point at which most people became involved. Joe, who was secretary of this committee, notes that,

fundraising drove the whole thing. The fundraising lists were the link between the grassroots and the organisers, and fundraising parties were the places where people met.

By September 1968, when the Parliamentary Select Committee's report was published, a total of R27 000 had been raised. Alexis Preller, one of South Africa's pre-eminent artists, donated a painting worth R1 000, and dozens of people held parties at which the hat was passed around, or gambling evenings at which a percentage of the take was donated to the fund. Said Hannah, host of several parties:

Suddenly, gay life flourished and there were more parties than ever before. People seemed to forget their differences, and everyone pitched in. People were meeting with people they would never have previously passed the time of day with. Suddenly differences were suppressed.

Ironically, the threat of repression galvanised the gay subculture, creating community as never before. Joe also noted another difference:

You found that the latest subject of conversation was not likely to be the latest hairdo, but how you could get letters out in bulk. And I think for many people it was empowering: for someone who has been nothing but a little queen serving in a shop to find herself now actually working to put pressure on the government to respect gay rights. I think it opened a window in many individual lives.

Despite the fact that 'the little queens', as Joe calls them, pulled their weight with fundraising and envelope-licking, the organisation was far from democratic, and was tightly run from the top by the committee. While there were several women involved it was also very much a male environment. As with The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis,⁸ the homophile movements a decade earlier in the United States, this was a professional organisation aimed at influencing lawmakers rather than organising gay and lesbian people themselves.

Gay and lesbian South Africans organising against the proposed legislation in 1968 might well have found the ammunition they needed within this country's own liberation movement: as gay activists in the United States used the liberation ideology of the civil rights movement, gay liberationists in South Africa might have found their manifesto within the African National Congress' Freedom Charter (as they did successfully two decades later), with its invocation of rights for all and its

forceful salvos against discrimination. And they might have used, as a model for action, the anti-apartheid Defiance Campaign of the 1950s.

But several forces militated against this: firstly, and most obviously, the Freedom Charter and its authors were banned, and there was an enormous stigma, in white South Africa, to left-wing politics. Secondly, the middle-class white gay men who began organising in 1968 had little access to black homosexuals beyond illicit meetings in cruising places. These black homosexuals might have introduced South Africa's own liberation struggle into the gay rights movement, but, in the late 1960s, they barely existed themselves as an organised or even informal entity. Thirdly, as Retief notes, the authorities themselves had defined homosexuality as a white problem, ignoring even the possibility of black homosexuality; not wishing to complicate things, the Law Reform movement responded in turn.

Fourthly, and most importantly, the Law Reform movement was narrowly defined around a single issue: its aim was to prevent the proposed anti-gay bill from becoming law. As such, it was self-consciously — and, in terms of its own goals, appropriately — accommodationist in its approach. In fact, the explicit decision was taken not to turn the issue into a 'political' battleground, and the Committee decided against calling upon the white parliamentary opposition to enter the fray: not even Helen Suzman, Parliament's lone advocate for human rights, was canvassed. According to Joe, the thinking was that

if we launched a political attack against the government, we would be shot, because we then would have given the Nationalists the opportunity to behave like the great moralists of the country and make the opposition look like Sodom and Gomorrah. And so we focussed all our attention on the National Party itself. We worked, in a way, within the National Party.

Law Reform's greatest coup in this respect was the retention of Advocate Dawie de Villiers, a government supporter and Nationalist hero for having successfully defended South Africa's case for retaining control over South West Africa at the World Court in the Hague in 1965. Joe remembers that

it was comforting to know that somebody so high-profile and so close to the government was on our side. I think that was a major reason for Law Reform's mobilisation successes. People were impressed. They thought, 'well, if De Villiers is on our side, we can't lose.'

'Keeping our dirty habits off the street': The effects of the Law Reform movement

In June 1969, gay patrons of the Stonewall Inn bar in Greenwich Village, New York, rioted after a police raid. The 'Stonewall Rebellion', as it became known, heralded the beginning of a grassroots gay liberation movement in the United States. In South Africa, the late 1960s saw unprecedented gay and lesbian activity. But, unlike the United States, this activism was not radical or mass-based.

In response to the threat of criminalisation, some gay South Africans — urban, white and middle-class — had organised themselves for the very first time, not surprisingly very much the way gay Americans had in the 1950s: quietly and professionally, attempting to protect themselves by carving a niche within apartheid South Africa while not disrupting the status quo.

And on these terms they were successful. The evidence the Law Reform movement presented, particularly in the field of psychology, persuaded the Select Committee to drop the legislation. Instead, only three amendments to the current law were proposed. The first was that the age of consent for male homosexual acts was to be raised from 16 to 19; designed to prevent 'child-molestation' by protecting teenage boys. The second was to outlaw dildoes. And the third was the infamous 'men at a party' clause, which criminalised any 'male person who commits with another male person at a party any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification.' Most absurd was the definition of a 'party': 'any occasion where more than two persons are present'. Clearly, this was designed to give the law precisely the teeth it needed when raiding parties such as the one in Forest Town in 1966.

These three amendments were passed into law in March the following year, 1969, and despite the fact that they ranged from the discriminatory to the downright ridiculous, they were widely hailed as a victory for common sense. An editorial in the *Cape Times* stated, for example that

Witchhunts directed against those thus afflicted [with homosexuality] would make the republic look ridiculous in the eyes of civilised people everywhere, apart from the gratuitous suffering it would have caused. At first sight the Select Committee appears to have produced humane, common-sense provisions for dealing with a problem that is as old as Western Civilisation.⁹

In South Africa in 1969, even sympathetic liberal commentary saw the need to protect 'innocents' from the 'problem' of homosexuality. The *Cape Argus* wrote, for example, that

the essence of the approach... was that innocent members of society must be protected against the effects of homosexuality without penalising homosexuals for deviations from social norms they could not help.¹⁰

The *Bloemfontein Friend*, however, felt compelled to point out to its readers that the law 'does not imply that homosexuality between consenting adults will be permitted [because] it continues to remain an offence under common law',¹¹ and, in Parliament, Minister Pelser warned that, contrary to some interpretations, the new law in no way condoned homosexuality: there would be 'no relaxation' in the legal position concerning homosexuality, and while there were moves in other countries to legalise homosexual practices, 'this we cannot allow.'¹²

The message from the authorities was clear: the status quo remained. The Law Reform movement had not, in fact, been successful in reforming the law. Rather, it had simply staved off even more repressive legislation. And, with its three new provisions, the law had actually tightened its grip on the freedom of gay people. In fact, following the passing of the law, Law Reform's legal counsel advised that gay society proceed with renewed caution, as any gatherings could be construed as 'parties' under the new legislation, and even dancing could be viewed as an 'act calculated to stimulate sexual passion': gay clubs that offered dancing could thus be charged with inciting people to illegal activity.

Nevertheless, gay people felt immense relief after the panic and rumours that had spread earlier in the year about laws forbidding two women to live together and mandatory three-year jail sentences for people caught at gay bars or parties. And, according to those who were active at the time, there was a palpable sense of personal victory: 'We had done it ourselves,' says Gareth. 'We were threatened and we fought back and won. For the very first time. It felt great!'

But despite the ebullience, the Law Reform movement collapsed as soon as the Select Committee published its findings. Joe recalls that even at the Park Royal Hotel public meeting following the publication of the Select Committee report in September 1968, attendance was down by over 50%:

It was very sad indeed. The whole thing just seemed to evaporate. Everyone went back to their little cliques and bridge clubs. All the mixing and interaction and socialising just ended.

For the urban gay men who were involved, in one way or another, with Law Reform, the experience had provided a remarkable opening: common ground — in the form of a shared threat — had been found with gay people other than those in one's immediate social circle, and there had thus been the stirrings of a potential gay collectivity. But Law Reform was unable to serve as the basis for an ongoing gay movement for the very reason it had been successful in the short-term: it was a narrowly-defined, single-issue campaign aimed at blocking potential legislation rather than at building an enduring gay and lesbian community.

Law Reform's lack of democratic process meant that, once the leadership burnt out, there were no eager young turks with a sense of ownership of the movement ready to take over. Essentially, the small group of professionals who motivated Law Reform were not interested in much more than maintaining the status quo: they did not necessarily feel that the situation before Pelser's proposed legislation in 1967 was intolerable, and so, once things were perceived to have returned to this status quo, they did not see much more to fight for.

Nevertheless, despite Law Reform's instantaneous evaporation and the sense that things had gone 'back to normal', the passing of the amendments to the Immorality Act did have a profound — if not immediately perceptible — effect on gay society. Even though there were undoubtedly sporadic raids after 1969, it appears that the authorities changed tack considerably. The 1968 enquiry into homosexuality had proven to the police that the extent of homosexuality in South Africa meant it was impossible to eradicate.

Rather than attempting to wipe homosexuality out, the authorities now simply sought to minimise its social effect, and thus their campaign focussed on public places: toilets were closed early, popular cruising venues were more rigorously patrolled and subjected to perpetual sweeps. The effect was to move the subculture indoors, into bars and clubs which, contrary to the expectations of Law Reform's counsel, were left alone. It seemed, says Joe,

as if the intention was to segregate us from society, to prevent 'normal' people from coming into contact with us as much as possible. So as long as we kept our dirty habits off the street we were safe.

Ronnie Oelofsen, who opened the Dungeon club in 1969, says that 'as long as there were no minors on the premises and you were not selling liquor, you were safe. The only time I have ever been raided was when I showed a banned movie one Sunday night.' And Hannah, who owned and ran a club in downtown Johannesburg in the early 1970s, remembers the regular visit from a vice squad colonel assigned to keep an eye on her:

He would come by every now and then for his bottle of whisky. He said he had no objection to the club because he preferred to know that everyone was under one roof, rather than at Zoo Lake or Joubert Park getting beaten up.

Keeping the queers indoors not only meant keeping them under control — it also meant keeping them out of sight of religious conservative lobbies who had precipitated the anti-gay legislation in the first place. Although this severely curtailed the freedom of movement of gay people who cruised, it also had another unexpected — and perhaps more positive — effect: it formalised gay culture, creating as never before gay venues that became safe and dependable community meeting places for those white men and women who were allowed in. Certainly, it also stratified gay society: those who were black or who could not afford either the entry-fee or the risk of being spotted in a gay place were left, quite literally, out in the cold. But, indoors, a new phase of gay community began.

Three

Expansion of a subculture: the gay 1970s

'Bloody Sweaty Queers': The disco scene

The flourishing of gay commercial life in the form of clubs and bars was accompanied, in the case of Hillbrow in Johannesburg at least, by the formalisation of an area where gay people had always lived into a clearly identifiable 'gay neighbourhood', with gay bars, gay businesses, and a new level of tolerance from other inhabitants. As the neighborhood grew, the authorities decided to view Hillbrow's densely-populated flatland too as a 'gay venue' of sorts, choosing not to apply the same pressure on its streets as they did on other outdoor areas.

The 1970s were boom years in South Africa: even as blacks in the country became more politically marginalised by the entrenchment of apartheid (the fuse finally blowing in 1976), white South Africa experienced unprecedented economic growth, resulting in even higher standards of living. Which meant more expendable income, and thus a boom in the leisure industry, gay and straight alike. Clubbing, always more costly than nipping off to the pub for a drink, became the vogue. The new economic climate also meant that a higher number of young white people were able to leave the confines of family and become part of an urban gay subculture.

This had important consequences for the demography of gay society: for the first time, significant numbers of Afrikaans men and women, often coming in from the platteland, joined the subculture — not only in Johannesburg, but also in Bloemfontein and Pretoria. Even in provincial hubs like Pietersburg, Potchefstroom and Welkom, small gay subcultures developed. With its high concentration of civil servants and army personnel — relocated people without direct family connections — Pretoria had always had a large, overwhelmingly Afrikaans, gay population; in the 1970s this population formalised into something of a subculture, an indicator being the establishment of the capital's first exclusively gay venue, which opened in the early 1970s and is still running as Club Equisite.

Equisite, located on the top floor of a double-story building in the 'motor-town' part of the city (meaning that the area is deserted at night) has become, over the years, Pretoria's gay community centre: by the early 1990s, a gay restaurant and even a gay church were housed within its confines. In those days, it was known as the *spookhuis* (ghosthouse), and habitués called themselves *spoke* (ghosts), because, as one regular told a researcher from the Human Sciences Research Council, '*wanneer alle ander ordentlike mense al slaap, dan loop die spoke rond*' ('when all other respectable people are asleep, then the ghosts walk about').

Another informant added: 'Everybody spook[s] at the spookhouse. I suppose because in a certain sense its the ghost in the closet, you see, and it's coming out of the closet as well.'¹³

The demographic changes in gay subculture led to a heightened openness, in Johannesburg as well as Pretoria. 'Andre', a bank clerk who moved to Hillbrow from the Western Transvaal aged 17 in 1971, puts it like this:

When an Afrikaans boy from the platteland comes out of the closet, he has to leave his home and family in a very big way. Just to be gay he has to fight all that conservative Afrikaner moralism and Calvinism. He is expelled, in a way. So he finds a new family among other gays in the city. And he has nothing to lose by being open — he's lost it all already. I find this very different from some my English gay friends who grew up in Jo'burg. They are still very much part of the life where they come from, so first of all they have to be more discreet and second of all they've got a foot in both camps.

For many English-speaking suburban gay men, the rupture was not so radical, and they did not need to become entirely part of a subculture. While there was certainly a need for secrecy in the army and the civil service, many other Afrikaner gay men coming to the cities in the 1970s immersed themselves entirely in the gay subculture, thus strengthening and formalising it.

Another reason for the flourishing of gay life in the early 1970s was the fact that these were the halcyon years of the gay rights movement in Europe and North America. While there was no attempt to establish a similar rights movement in South Africa in the 1970s (with one notable doomed exception, which is explored below), the idea of a 'gay life', revolving around clubs, bars and neighborhoods, was being imported into South Africa by gay people who had travelled abroad and experienced the exhilaration of Amsterdam, New York or San Francisco.

In the first couple of years of the decade, then, South African cities saw the arrival of the 'gay club': The Stardust in Durban, Wings in Cape Town, and, of course, that flagship of gay nightlife in Johannesburg, the Dungeon or 'Big D'. There had been gay dance venues previously — like the Farmhouse, the Hideaway and the Midniter in Johannesburg — but these new venues were unusual: because of their size, because of their longevity (most lasted for the better part of a decade, and the Dungeon is still running) and because of the new openness they embraced.

The Dungeon advertises itself as 'the longest-running club in South Africa': it opened just weeks after the passing of the Immorality Act Amendment in 1969 and has not been dark a single weekend since. It is situated in an incongruous castle-like building in downtown Johannesburg that was opened by Paul Kruger at the turn of the century. In the early days, its decor befitted its name, and chains and skeletons adorned the walls. Over the years, however, owner Ronnie Oelofsen has filled it with an eclectic mélange of posters and artifacts: shirtless torsos riding into the sunset, AIDS education posters, religious iconography (including a very prominent Star of David) and even a blown-up autographed photo of Foreign Affairs Minister Pik Botha wishing the 'Big D' the best of luck! The Dungeon is still unlicensed — patrons bring their own bottles and deposit them at the bar — and, unlike the other gay clubs that have emerged briefly during its tenure, it has a rather naive atmosphere vaguely reminiscent of a high-school dance. The Dungeon,

says Joe, 'was always a clean place; the kind of place you took your date to, not the kind of place you went to camp.'

In the early 1970s, the club was open four days a week — Sunday was Movie Night, and 300 people would regularly attend. Being unlicensed meant it did not have to obey segregation laws, and even in the early 1970s, there was a smattering of black men: usually transplanted Malays from the Western Cape who found in The Dungeon the only welcoming Johannesburg venue. (Black gay activist Simon Nkoli disputes this, and recalls having been turned away from the venue in the early 1980s.) Very significantly, the Dungeon has always attracted a large lesbian clientele: the club continues to be at least 50% female.

The Dungeon's clientele is also predominantly Afrikaans, and Oelofsen attributes this to a tradition he impulsively started on the club's opening-night: the inclusion of a set of *sakkie-sakkie*, Afrikaans folk dancing. From 1969 to the present day, the disco music is interrupted nightly for hits like Nico Carstens' 'Outa in die Langpad'. Another tradition Oelofsen started in the club's first year was the drag competition, and, in 1970, the first Miss Dungeon was held. Oelofsen recalls:

It was wonderful, quite unlike anything we'd ever had before. All the contestants and the judges went off to the revolving restaurant at the top of Hillbrow tower — in full drag! Then they came back and did the show. They had to walk the ramp and answer questions like, 'What would you do if you were a real woman?' Of course, the style then was very kappies-en-rokkies — it was like having a bunch of Afrikaner huisvroue on stage! Now things have become more professional and sophisticated.

That the Dungeon has only been raided once in its 24-year life — and then only for showing a banned movie in 1969 — is the result not only of the management's strict rule-keeping, but also of a conscious attempt to maintain friendly relations with its neighbours and the authorities. Every year, for example, Oelofsen gives his venue to a group of inner-city town councillors to host a senior-citizens' party: the blue-rinse set take their tea under the posters of bulging crotches, and the Dungeon is left in peace.

The Dungeon soon outlived its competition — most notably The Midniter, a hippyish gay club in Anderson Street, and The Hideaway in Berea. Through the 1970s, it became the 'old faithful' foil to funkier clubs with more drugs, more adventurous music and more camping — like the Anaconda, Mandys (which was to be the scene of a momentous raid later in the decade) and Blood Sweat and Tears (known in the vernacular as 'Bloody Sweaty Queers'). These clubs were almost exclusively male, but one or two, like Square One in Joubert Park, were co-owned by lesbians and had large female clienteles too. Hannah, one of Square One's owners, notes, however, that

the women were always more difficult than the men. They were more irregular, and always trouble. They'd be the ones to do the drugging or have a quick little brawl. They were always showing off.

The Pinking of Hillbrow: The Butterfly and the T-Bar

The bar scene had continued unabated since the 1960s: in Johannesburg, Rocky's at the Continental and The New Library were the most popular until the opening, in the early 1970s, of The Butterfly at the Skyline Hotel on Pretoria Street in Hillbrow. Almost immediately, this became the jam-packed neighborhood watering hole of Hillbrow's fast-growing gay community. 'Jock', a gay man who lived in Hillbrow at the time, remembers that

it was always full. People would walk in there on Saturday at noon with their Checkers bags filled with ice-cream and butter and stuff. The idea would be just to have a quick drink. But you'd get involved. You'd stay until late on Saturday night. And so you'd always see people leaving the bar with soggy Checkers bags.

It was a notoriously rough place, particularly by the door, which, after the demise of Park Station as a pick-up venue, soon became Johannesburg's premier 'rental area'.

What The Butterfly was for gay men the Together Bar — or T-Bar — was for lesbians. It opened around 1974, in Hillbrow's seedy Hilton Court Hotel, and was, says Julia Beffon, who was to frequent it later in the decade, 'every girl's answer to The Butterfly'. The T-Bar remained Johannesburg's number one lesbian pub until 1989, when, according to Beffon, 'the management decided to upgrade it and kicked the women out. Later they tried to get the women back, but there was a complete boycott of the place.' While several other lesbian bars flared briefly during the 1970s and 1980s, none were as popular or as enduring as the T-Bar and, since its collapse in 1989, nothing has replaced it.

As with The Butterfly (and earlier lesbian hang-outs like Chick Venter's and The Spider's Web), the T-Bar had a 'rough' reputation: 'There were lots of tough types,' says Beffon. 'Once, after I beat someone at pool she went and ripped my car up.' The bar, run by the hotel management and not by lesbians, was grimy, unkempt and roach-infested, but it had a regular clientele from all walks of life.

All walks of white life, that is to say. For in the 1970s, both bars were exclusively white. Nevertheless, what was notable is that, despite their edginess, they were not the 'preserves' of particular cliques or styles within the white lesbian and gay subcultures. By the 1970s in gay meccas like New York and San Francisco, there were already leather-bars, bulldyke-bars, clone-bars, drag-bars, working-class bars, etc. In Johannesburg, where the options were limited, you went to The Butterfly or the T-Bar no matter who you were or what you were into. The stratification took place within. Recalls Beffon:

While the tough types had knife-fights round the pool-table, the corporate ladies from the Northern Suburbs would be clustered together at a table doing their own thing. And so many school-girls! It was the one known place for gay women, so if you were coming out you headed straight there. The butch thing was

also incredibly strong there. The crowd was overwhelmingly female, but there'd be a few gay men, usually drag queens.

And Graeme Reid, who frequented The Butterfly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, remembers that there was a specific, highly-stratified geography to the place:

In one corner there was Houghton, in another Doornfontein, somewhere else Melville, and opposite them the Southern Suburbs. It was always jam-packed, and the trick was to find your place in society — or your aspirations — and stay there. Of course, if you were socially mobile, you could position yourself between Houghton and Doornfontein and enjoy the best of both worlds.

Of course, in the still-segregated 1970s, this geography did not include Soweto, Eldorado Park or Lenasia. But an article in *Exit* (South Africa's gay newspaper — see below), published upon The Butterfly's closure in 1987, speaks of a 'quiet revolution' that took place during the 1980s:

Not only did some of the tougher crowd vanish, but it became more multiracial. In the early days, even the barmen were all-white, and only the cleaners were black. Now there are blacks on both sides of the bar.¹⁴

And while there were no black women at the T-Bar in the 1970s, Beffon recalls that in the 1980s, 'you would see lots of Indian and coloured women.'

Indeed, as Hillbrow itself transformed, so too did these two bars. However, with the exception of a Hillbrow bar called Madame Jo-Jos, which existed briefly in the early 1990s, black lesbians have not been able to lay claim to another space since the closure of the T-Bar in 1989. In contrast, by the time The Butterfly moved upstairs and changed its name to The Skyline in 1987, it was almost exclusively black. While white gay men moved on in the early 1990s — first to Connections down the road and then to Champions in Braamfontein — The Skyline continued to play a vital role as the only predominantly black gay venue in what was by then a predominantly black neighbourhood.

As Hillbrow was to become a 'grey' area in later years — a white neighbourhood where black people could live, illegal but unprosecuted, in relative safety — it became a 'pink' area during the 1970s: a heterosexual neighborhood (most of the residents continued to be pensioners, young single heterosexuals and newly-arrived immigrants) where gay people could live in relative safety. It was the pioneering presence of gay people living in Hillbrow that turned the area into a tolerant 'liberated zone' of sorts, laying the ground for it to become Johannesburg's first deracialised neighborhood in the 1980s. The irony of this is that as soon as it did deracialise, most of the white gay people moved out, and those who remained were enveloped by the new multiracial culture; Hillbrow has thus entirely lost its gay flavour.

Alex Robbertze, a white gay man who moved to Hillbrow in the early 1970s and still lives there, laments the passing of those days:

When I started living in Hillbrow, I used to go to a gay butcher, a gay tailor, a gay greengrocer. There were gay or gay-friendly restaurants all the way up and down Pretoria Street. So you felt safe. You didn't really care. We'd often walk with linked arms or even kiss on the street. I wouldn't dare to do that now. That whole scene's gone now.

**'About parties, not politics':
Day support networks in the 1970s**

But the 'scene' that had sprouted in Hillbrow stopped way short of explicit political organisation. Pieter Bosman, who was later to found GASA, the national Gay Association of South Africa, recalls:

People would talk about the need to organise ourselves like in America, but no-one really did anything about it. Literature was very difficult to get hold of. One bookstore in town, Butch Ber- man, had the odd gay book: word would spread and everyone would rush down there. On the whole, though, our gay reading consisted of Gordon Merrick novels and those physique pictorial volumes. And if someone brought anything in from overseas, it was usually porn.

The only local attempt at establishing a gay rights movement in the early 1970s took place at the University of Natal in Durban, and its short life says much about the difficulties facing such attempts at that time. In April 1972, a symposium on homosexuality was held on campus, at which a member of the Students' Representative Council, Mark West, announced the formation of the South African Gay Liberation Movement. In a statement to the press, West said: 'I believe, as do my followers, that homosexuals should come forward and demand their rights. We should not be forced to meet in dark bars.'¹⁵

This was the first time in South Africa that a gay person had publicly placed gay rights within a framework of human rights and used the word 'liberation'. Not surprisingly, the authorities responded swiftly and, immediately following this announcement, the police began an investigation into the fledgling movement.

Three weeks later, West announced that he had been forced to sign a statement disbanding the Movement after a visit from the police, who had 'explained' to him that, as sodomy was a common-law offense, the Movement would be breaking the law by inciting people to illicit activity.¹⁶ Even though the anti-sodomy laws were 'sleeping' and seldom applied, this brief incident illustrates just how effective a deterrent they could be: the authorities had no qualms using them when needed to keep gay organisation in check.

Nevertheless, by mid-decade, other more successful attempts were being made to create a gay community broader than simply the bars and the clubs. Interestingly, these attempts took place in Durban which, of South Africa's three principal cities, had the least developed bar and club scene and nothing approaching the 'gay neighbourhoods' of Johannesburg and Cape Town. In 1976, a gay man

called Bobby Erasmus founded South Africa's first gay organisation since the Law Reform days of 1968: the fancifully-named Gay Aid Identification Development and Enrichment, or GAIDE.

The organisation started out as a social club, and soon branched out into social support services. Office space was rented in the centre of town, a telephone information and counselling line was started, and a monthly newsletter was also distributed to all members. Stephen Roche, who joined GAIDE in 1977 and later went on to found GASA's Natal Coast branch, recalls that the organisation was

very dynamic. It got the job done. What was most remarkable was how open we were. Our meetings were held in Committee Room Three in City Hall, slap bang in the middle of everything, and we were never harassed.

GAIDE members were recruited through get-togethers and parties. Echoing what people say about Law Reform's impact on the gay community in 1968, Roche notes that the organisation

provided alternative milieu for the community, drawing together a greater cross-section, as opposed to the self-selected cliques going to the bars and clubs. GAIDE cut right across class, and there were people ranging from high-powered professionals to post-office workers.

GAIDE did not cut across race. Very significantly, however — and quite unique in the history of male-dominated South African gay organisation — GAIDE did boast a high percentage (40%) of active women involved on both a social and organisational level. Roche attributes the success of GAIDE to the presence of a few powerful personalities but also, very significantly, to the fact that:

it was about parties, not politics. At that point we didn't fuss about whether or not we were going in the right political direction, we just got on with it. The politics was covert rather than overt: it had to do with providing people with a safe place in which to test themselves, with providing role models for coming out, and with bringing people together on the basis of common need and a commonly-shared oppression.

Unlike the ill-fated Gay Liberation Movement launched on Natal University's Durban campus four years previously, GAIDE neither sought nor received any publicity. Erasmus realised that the success of his organisation would be in the establishment of a support structure for gay people rather than in that of a political action group. Not only were the authorities more likely to tolerate this approach, but gay people themselves proved more receptive.

The tension between activist and social support functions has characterised South African gay organisation ever since. Since the late 1960s, in the United States and Western Europe, the two functions have always managed to co-exist. In South Africa, however, the experience of GAIDE — and every popular gay organisation that followed it — is that, in the creation of a formal gay subculture,

activism has had to play a secondary role to social support. This lack of diversity is possibly due to the small number of gay people who have been prepared to 'go public' as leaders, but it is also due to the level of political oppression in South Africa: any talk of 'rights' was regarded with suspicion not only by the authorities, but by the conservative white gay community itself, which eschewed any identification — either overt or implicit — with the broader liberation struggle. But even in the largely black gay organisations of the 1990s, which have embraced strongly liberationist politics, the tension between political activism and the maintenance of social space still exists, as shall be seen below.

Very importantly, despite an unprecedented level of gay activity in places like Hillbrow, the 'space' that gay South Africans had claimed within larger society in the 1970s was fragile and new. Abroad, the gay liberation movement of the 1970s was built on nearly three decades of gay life in San Francisco, New York, London or Amsterdam. By 1972, when the New York-based Gay Liberation Front organised the first Pride March, there were already in place a plethora of formal and informal support-structures. Of those who had already availed themselves of these structures, a small number were now 'ready' to take to the streets. In South Africa, on the other hand, support structures consisted of a handful of bars and clubs, where the emphasis was more on the finding of sexual partners — always a primary need — than on building community. Thus, more politicised gay South Africans found themselves in a dilemma: on the one hand there was the urge to join a growing world-wide gay rights movement, but on the other, there was the need to build community in South Africa first with the establishment of social groups and structures. Nearly 20 years later, this need still exists.

Perhaps unintentionally, GAIDE did play a political function, largely due to the work of a heterosexual Durban psychologist who was involved with the organisation — Leonie Woolfson, whose masters thesis on lesbianism was based on the case-studies of several Durban women.¹⁷ In late 1978, at roughly the time of GAIDE's disintegration, Woolfson's work received much coverage in the national media, and, at a large public meeting on the University of Natal campus, she called for an end to the repression of homosexuals.¹⁸

GAIDE collapsed in 1978 when Bobby Erasmus emigrated — yet another example of South African gay organisations' dependence on powerful leaders, and these leaders' failure to set in motion a broadbased movement. GAIDE's newsletter, however, had subscribers all over the country, and, in the next few years, similar initiatives were to sprout in the Transvaal and the Cape. These tended to be smaller in scale and purely social rather than also providing counselling services.

In Johannesburg in 1978, a sudden run of plays with homosexual themes prompted journalist Henk Botha to start South Africa's first commercial gay magazine, *Equus*. The magazine had a circulation of about 3 000, and was distributed at gay venues and even, for a while, through the Central News Agency, South Africa's largest commercial publications distributor, which was fooled at first by the 'For Ladies Only' strap on the cover. *Equus* was glossy in appearance, and, while it included fiction, gay interest articles and advertising for gay venues, its *raison*

d'être was clearly the male photo-spreads. It folded, however, after only six issues — because of financial problems exacerbated by the Publications Control Board banning several issues of the publication as 'undesirable'.

At roughly the same time as *Equus*, several newsletters circulated, based on the GAIDE model. The most successful was also the most unlikely, *The Gaily Male*, published by a group of gay Afrikaans men in the remote Northern Transvaal town of Potgietersrus. The home-printed publication consisted of personal advertisements, some terrible short-stories, and pornographic pictures with the offending body-parts inked out. *The Gaily Male* functioned as a pen-pal club, primarily for Afrikaans men in the far-flung platteland, but, in 1981 and 1982, the newsletter organised two weekend social get-togethers in the Waterberg, attended by more than 200 people each from all over the country. It was at these weekends that the members of many of the small social groups first met each other and hatched the idea of a national gay organisation.

From 1979 to 1981, the preferred form for these social groups was the 'supper club'. The first of these was formed in Johannesburg in 1979 and called itself, jokingly, the Azanian Mens' Organisation (it later changed the name to the Alternative Mens' Organisation). In 1981 another group formed in Johannesburg, calling itself Unité, consisting of men and women. And in August of that year, a group of Cape Town men started the 6010 Supper Club in Cape Town. John Pegge, one of the founders, recalls:

We would hire a restaurant once a month and take it over. The motivation was to make a space. We were mainly middle-class white men who had contact with Western Europe and America, and we saw the value of social organisation outside of the bar and the club.

The late 1970s: 'Sensuality and defiance' — and backlash

Perhaps because of this new level of social activity from 1979 onwards, public censure of homosexuality seemed to increase. In July 1979, for example, four students were expelled from the Potchefstroom Teachers' Training College for 'homosexual activity'¹⁹ and, two months later, rugby hero Naas Botha prefigured society's later response to AIDS by publicly saying that 'I do not see any place in society for the homosexual... I think it is a modern-day disease and our duty is to cure the disease'.²⁰ The following year, more anti-gay invective was to be found in the media when the Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk announced it would be debating the homosexual problem. That year too a sensational murder trial put homosexuality into the public eye: Dr Desirée Smith had killed her husband and his lover upon coming home and finding them *in flagrante delicto*. Smith was acquitted on the grounds of having mistaken them for intruders: in a flood of articles explaining the trauma of women who discover their husbands are gay, the media treated Smith with sympathy and her victims with disdain.²¹

Most alarming to the gay community, however, was the fact that, after a decade of hassle-free existence, gay nightclubs were being targeted and raided; the

authorities' pact to leave gay clubs in peace, made in 1969, seemed to collapse, probably because of the incredible popularity of clubs such as The New Mandy's and Zippo in the late 1970s, even among heterosexual clubbers, and the rampant and defiant sexuality these clubs celebrated. Gay people, writes Jimmy Beaumont,

were perceived as being the arbiters of style, fashion and music taste. Their clubs set the pace for others to follow. The 'dark disco' of the era was blatantly sexual; it throbbed with sensuality and defiance; every song was distinctive, and a skilled DJ could manipulate his audience like a piper, building up rhythm till the dance floor exploded in a frenzy of whistles, shouts, passion and naked, sweating torsos. 'Cruising the Streets' by the Boystown Gang became a classic, with its hard porn lyrics ('Up against the wall, you asshole; you too, cunt' and 'Stuff that big sausage in me...') and a pelvic beat that invited, or insisted on, dancefloor intimacy.²²

Gay identity, says Beaumont, was 'more obvious and blatant' in such clubs, particularly 'in the drug use, which filled venues with happy people and the smell of stale socks'. Although the grounds for the raids were always drug-swoops, liquor-busts or searches for minors, it was clear that their real reason was to curb this defiant new sexuality. At a raid at The New Mandy's over the Christmas holidays in 1978/9, for example, patrons were manhandled, photographed, verbally abused, and kept locked up in the building until morning. There were a few black gay men present at the club, and they came in for the harshest treatment. Many South African gay people refer to the 1979 Mandy's Raid — and not the 1966 Forest Town Raid — as South Africa's 'Stonewall'. This is because clientele, and particularly the drag queens, fought back (there are stories, perhaps apocryphal, of police officers with head-wounds incurred by high heels), and also because it was this raid — and a subsequent one the following year at the same club — that, more than anything else, prompted some gay people to move beyond the 'social support' model and begin talking of rights once more.

In the next two years, there were several more raids on Mandy's and other Johannesburg clubs and, in direct response to this new clampdown, an expressly activist gay organisation, Lambda, was launched at a large party at Club 2001 in Johannesburg in late 1981. Like GASA which was to follow it, Lambda attempted a difficult balancing act: to be an activist organisation aimed at protecting the rights of homosexuals while at the same time remaining 'apolitical'. Its founder and chairman, Alex Boyiatjis, made the following public statement: 'We are not aiming to run protest marches or set ourselves up as militants but we don't want to be a silent minority any longer.'²³ The contradictions in this statement were to plague and finally wrack the growing gay political movement for the rest of the decade.

Four

The 1980s: gay rights and gay politics

GASA: The birth of a national organisation

In many respects, the early 1980s signified an opening-up for South Africa, socially as well as politically. At the beginning of the decade, President P.W. Botha began instituting his 'reform' programme (balancing it, however, with heightened repression) and, in the aftermath of the Soweto upheavals, a massive upsurge of black liberationist activity swept through the townships. For the very first time since the National Party came to power in 1948, there was a tangible sense that the decades of Afrikaner Calvinist rule were coming to an end, and that the strict apartheid packaging off of people would give way to a more liberated and integrated society. It would be hyperbolic to call the early 1980s a 'Summer of Love' equivalent to the 1960s in Europe and North America. But at least in South Africa's urban centres, the very tenets of apartheid Calvinism were being challenged. Those years saw the beginnings of deracialisation and the establishment of anti-apartheid countercultures that questioned, vociferously, the religious and political restrictions of the previous 40 years.

White urban gay men, having consolidated their subculture in the 1970s, participated in this new counterculture and, by 1982, were ready to assert themselves politically. But, as we shall see, the failure of gay politics in the 1980s was that it was overtaken by the march of black liberation in those same years, and that it was unable — or unwilling — to align itself in any way with that march. Nevertheless, between 1982 and 1984, GASA, the Gay Association of South Africa, had formed a national organisation that constituted, for the very first time, something approximating the kind of gay grassroots movements to be found in Western Europe and North America.

Certainly, these roots were very much within only one sector of South African society — white, middle-class men. And certainly, there were dilemmas over political involvement and crises over poor leadership and management, both of which ultimately led to the organisation's downfall. But, during its active years, GASA facilitated a groundswell of gay activity that focussed the gay community and provided a basis for the more radical and politically explicit lesbian and gay activism that was to follow it.

GASA was formed in April 1982 out of three Johannesburg organisations: Lambda, the political group formed two months previously, and AMO and Unité, two 'supper clubs'. All three groups had been insignificant local initiatives, but within months, the new organisation had established nine branches across the country. By May 1983 there were over 1 000 paid-up members, and interest groups ranging from sports clubs to religious societies to support and counselling services. There was also *LinkiSkakel*, the monthly newspaper that was to become *Exit*, and regular public get-togethers — 'Gay Days' and 'Jamborees'.

In October 1982, for example, only six months after GASA's founding, more than 3 000 people attended a Gay Jamboree at the Transvaal Country Club in Kyalami. While the focus of this Jamboree was entirely entertainment — live music, dancing, braais, competitions, even mud-wrestling — it was an implicit political act. 'This is the first time in South Africa that gay people in this country will be gathering outdoors en masse for a day of fun and enjoyment,' reported *The Star*.²⁴ And, it must be said, The Kyalami Jamboree attracted at least three times as many people as the Pride Marches — more explicitly political acts — that have characterised public lesbian and gay life in the 1990s. Nearly three years after that first Gay Jamboree, in May 1985, GASA held a convention at the President Hotel in Johannesburg; to the usual fairground activity was added a symposium, with speeches on gay rights and gay activity in South Africa, and a gay art exhibition. Like its organisers, the convention was almost exclusively white and male. But, with its mixture of culture, academic debate and social events, it was a public exploration into the nature of gay life in this country the likes of which has not been repeated since.

In 1983, GASA opened its national office in Hillbrow, and its bank of large picture-windows, on the first floor of Burton Court, decorated with the GASA logo which included a pink triangle, soon became a local landmark. Alex Robbertze remembers:

There were worries that stones would be thrown at the windows, but it never happened. Once, someone suggested that we throw open the curtains and kiss for all of Hillbrow to see, and we did just that. We would often look out of the windows and see men, obviously out-of-towners, just standing there and looking up and pointing, as if they were tourists visiting a national monument!

The following year, GASA-6010 in Cape Town opened a community centre in the city, from which it was to run its counselling service, and GASA Natal Coast opened its offices in the Berea Centre in Durban. Several interest groups also developed and affiliated themselves to GASA, the first one being the Religious Fellowship Workshop, which held its first service in December 1982, and later transformed into the still-active Gay Christian Community. A group of gay Jews within GASA formed Yachad, and there were also groups, in the early years, for married gays and parents of gays. Gay organisations also emerged on two campuses in 1983, the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town. Perhaps the most successful 'interest group' affiliated to GASA was TOGS, the Transvaal Organisation for Gay Sport: in July 1984, an astonishing 1 000 people turned out to watch an all-gay rugby match between Pretoria and Johannesburg at the Rand Afrikaans University. TOGS has persevered long after GASA's demise: it still exists, and has over 200 members.

Also in 1984, Ann Smith, a GASA president and later its International Secretary, formed a womens' interest group in Johannesburg. She explains:

I was one of the few women in GASA, and I was constantly being asked to bring other women in to the organisation. But it was painfully clear to me that the reason women didn't join up was because it was a very male world, and they did not feel welcome. So my lover and I set up the group with the explicit intention of creating a safe space, within GASA, where women could be with one another and discuss their issues.

The group lasted for only a few months, and Smith believes that the problem was ultimately one of class: she says the professional and working-class women she brought together within her home were incompatible, and the initiative collapsed.

At roughly the same time, in 1983, another lesbian group, unaffiliated to GASA, emerged at the University of Cape Town. LILACS (Lesbians in Love and Compromising Situations) was an offshoot of the gay students' association on campus and the product of feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s. That too collapsed after a couple of years, but in this case, report Armour and Lapinsky, because of tensions 'between those members who favoured serious political debate (including feminist and political content) and those wanting only to jorl'. (See 'Lesbians in love and compromising situations' in this volume) Several other lesbian initiatives — like Sunday's Women in Durban and the GLOW Lesbian Forum in Johannesburg — have faced similar problems, as shall be explored below.

The social aspect of GASA was undoubtedly its major draw-card. People joined because of the parties, the get-togethers, the 'Members Only' Sunday evenings at Jamesons Bar, the free passes into clubs. Henk Botha, one of GASA's founders and later editor of *Exit*, believes that

GASA worked for one reason only: it provided people with a way of getting together. Before, you could meet friends and sexual partners only through the bars. Now, you could also meet them at GASA get-togethers — and not only at GASA parties; also at GASA meetings, sports gatherings and the like.

GASA's founders also believe that the *Link/Skakel* newsletter and the counselling service — later to become GAB, the Gay Advice Bureau, which still operates as an autonomous body — were also crucial mobilising tools: they provided a link to the urban subculture for isolated gay men. In 1982 and 1983 GASA thrived particularly in provincial towns where there was no competition from bars and clubs — Welkom, Bloemfontein, Kimberly, East London, Port Elizabeth, Pietermaritzburg — and in these towns, the organisation was purely social in nature.

GASA and the politics of the 'apolitical'

While GASA's white male constituency might have been ready for a more public social life, it remained politically conservative. Says Henk Botha,

For this reason, GASA made it quite clear that it was apolitical and wouldn't enter the political sphere. Because that was a minefield. That's why we grew so quickly. If we had taken a

political line, we would have collapsed much earlier than we did.

GASA's avowedly 'apolitical' stance was a major attraction. Ironically, it was ultimately the reason for its collapse: it attempted to remain outside the political fray at a time in South Africa's history when this was untenable. It was thus ousted from the world gay community and destabilised by a growing anti-apartheid and black gay movement within South Africa.

For GASA's architects, being 'apolitical' meant two things: firstly, remaining non-aligned in broader South African politics, and secondly, following a moderate, non-confrontational and accommodationist strategy. Among its 11 points, the GASA Mission Statement, drafted in 1982, stated that the organisation aimed to provide a 'non-militant non-political answer to gay needs'. A recruitment ad in *Link/Skakel* underscored this: 'Remember, GASA is not a militant organisation planning protest marches through the city streets, and your membership will not imperil your privacy.' The antipathy towards a 'political' label, we see, was directly linked to fear of exposure.

Nevertheless, GASA's Mission Statement encompassed several explicitly political functions, including 'uniting all gays under a democratic banner to offer an identity and foster confidence and self-respect amongst gays', 'changing the distorted, prejudice and uninformed image held by the broader public' and 'encouraging law reform by setting a positive example to the authorities and the non-gay society.'²⁵ And, within months of its formation, GASA faced its first political challenge: in November 1982, a 'lesbian scandal' erupted in the South African Railways Police and a witchhunt followed: the Railways Police Commissioner, Lt-Gen Hannes Visagie, announced that gays were 'not welcome' in the force. After a five-month investigation, four women and nine men were dismissed and a further 60 officers resigned of their own accord — presumably to avoid disclosure.²⁶

GASA faced a dilemma: its mission statement required it to challenge this 'distorted, prejudiced and uninformed' action, and yet it was 'apolitical'. There was also little advocacy for lesbian issues within the organisation. Thus, when the scandal broke, GASA failed to respond: in fact, that month, a GASA member justified the lack of response to a newspaper by saying, 'If we started waving banners, we would only increase the animosity towards us.'²⁷

Finally, largely due to the work of Ann Smith, GASA issued a statement that 'lesbianism is not illegal' and that 'the dismissal or forced resignations of women because of lesbianism is a flagrant case of discrimination against women, as it involves moral issues which are not legal ones.'²⁸ The issue had been highly contentious within the organisation, and GASA's activities went no further than writing a letter to the SA Transport Services and issuing a media statement. GASA defended this 'soft-peddling' in a *Link/Skakel* editorial:

An organisation which has only about 1 000 members is highly vulnerable to official censure. Had GASA made representations on a political level, we may well have been annihilated.'²⁹

Over the next couple of years, GASA did make occasional public statements. When the police raided Scants, a gay club in Johannesburg in October 1984 and arrested seven people, GASA objected publicly. The following year, Minister of Transport Hendrik Schoeman received a pair of cufflinks at a function in Springs and said 'cufflinks are things that moffies wear'. When asked to elaborate, Schoeman quipped that 'moffies are guys who sleep in pink pyjamas and keep their gloves on when courting'.³⁰ Once more, GASA objected, and Schoeman retracted his statement and apologised.

There is no doubt that through these public utterances the organisation played a watchdog role, increasing its public profile while keeping homophobia in check. But GASA's salvos were erratic, eccentric, and rather arbitrary: the organisation deliberately shied away from taking up the cudgels in a more direct and ongoing way, as such a policy would have forced it into a more confrontational role, and, in the repressive 1980s, might have jeopardised its legality. GASA's primary motivation for remaining 'apolitical' was, in the words of Ann Smith, that

*we saw that in this country, political protests were immediately banned, and if we were banned, not only would we discredit the gay movement, but we would not be around to provide vital services to gay people.*³¹

'Not really welcome and we knew it': Black men in GASA

GASA's political conservatism was not only hampering its ability to act publicly according to its own mission statement, it was also causing internal dissent among its membership. This rift was exacerbated when Simon Nkoli, a black man with a background in anti-apartheid liberation politics, joined GASA in 1983. Nkoli, who was simultaneously active in the radical Congress of South African Students (COSAS), recalls that he had fought from the start for a more activist gay politics in GASA. As one of only a handful of black men in GASA at the time, Nkoli also rubbed up against discrimination within the gay community GASA claimed to represent:

The best thing about membership was that, apparently, your little pink card got you into clubs at discounted prices. I got my Link/Skakel in the mail, and it was a feast of possibility: the Dungeon, The Butterfly, Mandys. I tried Mandys and they said 'no blacks'. The Dungeon. 'No blacks.' I showed them their ad in Link/Skakel: 'All GASA members welcome at a discount.' 'I'm a member of GASA,' I'd say. 'Yes,' they'd reply, 'but you're black. What if the police come?' The only place I managed to get in was somewhere in Jeppe Street: I was the only black person there and I felt so intimidated that I never went back.

Because GASA did not seem to take black recruitment and issues very seriously at all, Nkoli decided to form a black interest group within the organisation. He obtained an interview with *City Press*, the black Sunday newspaper, in August 1983,

giving his personal address and calling upon black gay men to contact him; within a week, he says, he was 'deluged' with responses, and arranged a special meeting: 82 people attended. Nkoli recalls:

What was fascinating was how different their language was to the white middle-class members of GASA. They said things like 'we have to fight for our rights! We have to mobilise!' They were ordinary people, mainly in their early 20s, and most joined GASA immediately. We decided to meet every second Saturday of each month, and it was an instant success. Once we had a fundraising party in Soweto and more than 200 people showed up. We would also go to shebeens together, and, at Lee's Place in Orlando East, we started the first gay shebeen, where we met every Sunday, joined by one or two of the more progressive white GASA members.

But problems began as soon as these newly-organised black gay men started meeting in the GASA offices in Hillbrow: there were complaints that the black people meeting there every Saturday were making too much noise, and that this was endangering GASA's lease of the building. It was also proposed that GASA limit the number of black people allowed to enter because of the danger of theft. A member of the GASA executive at the time recalls that

the white GASA members were mad as hell: these black kids would come in, drink all the booze, light fires in the middle of the office to cook their food, make a noise, and leave a helluva mess! I have to say that the grievances against this new group of members were legitimate. But perhaps they could have been more sensitively dealt with. There was a different way of doing things, and, if we really wanted black people in the organisation, we should have been more accommodating.

The above point is critical: irresponsible as the black group may well have been, there was little tolerance for — or understanding of — these new members, who were undergoing the exhilaration of coming out much as GASA's white members had in the 1970s. The great difference was, however, that whereas white gay men from the 1970s onwards had several meeting places to choose from, black gay men were still unwelcome in the bars and clubs. And even if they were permitted to enter, most did not have the financial means to do so. While some gay-friendly shebeens did exist in Soweto, these were unstable and capricious, and so Nkoli's group within GASA was their only option. Also, unlike their white counterparts, most still lived with their families and thus did not even have private spaces in which to explore new-found sexual liberation. GASA's offices thus came to serve the social function for these men that *The Butterfly*, *Mandy's* and *Zipps* served for their white comrades.

According to Nkoli, the new black members were 'incredibly offended' by the proposal to limit their entry to the GASA offices. They decided not to meet there any more, gathering rather in Soweto in people's homes on a rotating basis.

But, Nkoli maintains, 'the damage had been done: almost as quickly as they had joined up, the black members resigned. They were not really welcome, and they knew it.'

The extent to which black people were unwelcome was made clear to Nkoli during a hiking-club trip to Pretoria later that year. Upon arrival at the venue it was discovered that it had a whites-only policy (this was 1983, after all, and the Separate Amenities Act was still in full force). Rather than leaving in outrage, however, the white GASA members went in anyway, instructing their four black comrades to wait in the car. Nkoli disobeyed, however, and entered. In the ensuing ruckus, GASA came under much fire from some of its own membership. And while the association took a policy decision to avoid segregated venues in the future, Nkoli claims he was suspended from the organisation: the grounds being that he had broken the law and thus placed GASA in jeopardy.

What particularly galled black members, says Nkoli, was that

GASA was using us to blacken up its image. Every time there was a function in a private house, the picture would be taken with the few darkies prominently displayed, and would be sent overseas.

Earlier in 1983, GASA had applied for membership of the International Gay Association, but was turned down after intense lobbying by the Scottish Homosexual Rights Group (SHRG). SHRG took issue with GASA's 'apolitical' stance — how could the organisation claim to be 'non-racist', it asked, if it did not actively oppose apartheid? SHRG accused GASA's white gays of having 'sold out to the authorities in return for the police ignoring the (segregated) gay bars and discos'.³² GASA was thus given a probation period: a year in which to prove it was truly non-racial.

But rather than fully integrating into GASA, Nkoli and the few remaining black members remained, in his words, 'affiliated but separate', and, in May 1984, they formalised themselves into The Saturday Group. According to Nkoli,

our main reason for existence was to provide counselling for black gay people trying to come out, but we were completely nonracial, and we had white members and even, for the very first time in a South African gay organisation, some black women. We had a telephone counselling service, and we would also pay house-visits when asked. We also organised parties — a birthday party, for example, would become a major gay event.

In Durban, GASA Natal Coast also claims to have attempted to bring black people into the organisation. Stephen Roche of the Natal organisation maintains that, unlike the situation in Johannesburg's townships, there is 'no visible gay activity whatsoever' in Durban's sprawling townships of Umlazi and KwaMashu. Of South Africa's three major cities, Durban remains alone in not having any form of organised black gay subculture. Nevertheless, McLean and Ngcobo claim that *isingqumo*, the gay slang that is spoken in townships on the reef, originated in Durban. Linda Ngcobo also noted before his death that

there was definitely an African gay network in the Durban townships. When I used to go down there, I always became involved in the life of shebeens and house-parties. It was very closed, though. You had to be Zulu to get access. But I was Zulu and there was no problem.

Clearly, then, the perception of no gay activity in Durban's townships has been a function of organised white gay subculture's inability to penetrate these townships; there was no Simon Nkoli to facilitate the interaction and, very importantly, the war that has wracked these townships since the mid-1980s has made residents particularly suspicious of outsiders. GASA Natal Coast did attempt, briefly, to make contact with Durban's more accessible gay Indian subculture. Says Roche:

In around 1986 GASA was approached to judge a drag show at The Airport, an Indian nightclub in the Butterworth Hotel. We discovered that this was very well-run, and that, although it was largely straight, many gay Indian men went there. So we raised the possibility of a gay night at The Airport. But it never happened, I think because of the immense closetry in the Indian community.

Roche and several Indian men who grew up in Durban all believe there has never been an exclusively gay Indian space in the city; once more, without the critical primary socialising function of a bar or a club, political mobilisation remains impossible. In the 1990s, Roche, who teaches at the largely-Indian University of Durban-Westville, facilitated a gay and lesbian support group on campus; in 1993, this group had an informal membership of 20, seven of whom were Indian men and three Indian women.

Murderer or hero?: The Nkoli affair and its aftermath

The large response first to Nkoli's letter in City Press in 1983 and then to The Saturday Group in 1984 proved that the growing homosexual community in the townships was ready to become part of a gay organisation. But, almost immediately following the formation of The Saturday Group, Nkoli was arrested after a rent boycott demonstration in his home-township of Sebokeng, and held in custody for two years before being charged, with 21 other prominent United Democratic Front activists, with treason. As soon as Nkoli was arrested, The Saturday Group fell apart. In the very month of his arrest, GASA was admitted into the International Gay Association; the way GASA was to deal with his arrest, however, was not only the reason for its expulsion a year later, but, ultimately, for the disintegration of the movement.

GASA leaders are adamant to this day that Nkoli had been a minor player in the South African gay movement in the years before his arrest, and the evidence suggests that they are correct. Nevertheless, he became a *cause célèbre* after his arrest: the confluence of his open homosexuality and his imprisonment as a soldier against apartheid made him immensely appealing to liberation-oriented gay organi-

sations around the world. In Nkoli, gay anti-apartheid activists found a ready-made hero. In Canada, the Simon Nkoli Anti-Apartheid Committee became a critical player in both the gay and anti-apartheid movements. Through Nkoli's imprisonment, too, progressive members of the international anti-apartheid movement were able to begin introducing the issue of gay rights to the African National Congress. The highly respectable Anti-Apartheid Movements of both Britain and Holland, for example, took up Nkoli's cause, and this was to exert a major impact on the ANC's later decision to include gay rights on its agenda.

But while Nkoli was being celebrated by the gay world abroad, he was at best ignored and at worst abandoned by South Africa's own gay movement. GASA claimed not to be supporting him because of his minimal role in the South African gay movement and because of its 'apolitical' constitution. The real reason, however, was that Nkoli's politics were intensely threatening to the organisation's conservative white membership, who feared that any support of Nkoli would be construed as support for the illegal liberation struggle. They did not, on the whole, support the anti-apartheid cause in the first place.

Publicly, GASA tried to ignore Nkoli's imprisonment. But, by 1986, when he was formally charged with murder (he was acquitted during the ensuing trial), the pressure of his international support and the fact that his few supporters within GASA had mounted a vigorous letter-writing campaign to gay organisations worldwide protesting GASA's hypocrisy, forced the organisation to deal with the matter. In August 1986, GASA leader Kevan Botha announced, at that year's International Lesbian and Gay Association convention, that his organisation had withheld support for Nkoli because he had been charged with common-law murder and GASA could not sanction criminal activity. This statement was a revealing indicator of how entrenched GASA was in the apartheid perception of extra-parliamentary activity as criminal activity rather than as the only available means of black protest and resistance. It only further served to alienate GASA from both the international gay movement and the growing body of progressive gay activists at home.

In a hard-hitting response to GASA's 'apolitical' defense, gay Hillbrow priest and Nkoli confidante Father Don Dowie wrote, in *Exit* in 1986, that the 'apolitical' label was nothing more than an excuse used by GASA members to skirt the race issue:

We are involved whether we like it or not, and to adopt a self-consciously apolitical posture is in itself a political declaration and will be seen as such by blacks, if we achieve a standoff in the persecution and harassment of gays at the expense of our wider social commitment.

Blacks, said Dowie, stayed away from GASA precisely because

to many blacks, a concern by blacks in gay affairs seems frivolous, irrelevant and divisive. They will only allow credibility to the gay cause if we can show them that they matter to us and that we are prepared to defend their right to be human.

Dowie's comments were remarkably prescient: in the years to come, senior officials of both the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress were to dismiss gay issues as bourgeois frivolities and irrelevancies. His comments were also symptomatic of many gay South Africans' growing discontent with GASA's 'apolitical' label. In 1986, impelled by Nkoli's involvement in the Delmas Treason Trial and by President P.W. Botha's declaration of a State of Emergency, progressive gay South Africans began forming explicitly political organisations in direct opposition to GASA.

But by the time the Nkoli affair reached a head in 1986, GASA as a national organisation was in state of collapse anyway. According to its executive, the row over its politics was the least of its problems: it had over-extended itself and had been mismanaged, and was in deep financial trouble. Already, in July 1985, it had 'unbundled' its single largest asset, *Link/Skakel*, which was now set up as an independent newspaper, *Exit*. In August 1986, GASA dissolved as a national organisation, and was replaced by the 'Gay Forum', a network of 35 gay organisations that had its first conference in Welkom the following month. Later, this body was known as the 'Gay Alliance'; it never took root, however, and was replaced by two local networks, The Johannesburg Forum and The Cape Town Forum, in the late 1980s.

After the national collapse of GASA, GASA Rand did continue in Johannesburg, as did two other regional branches of the association: GASA-6010 in Cape Town and Gasa Natal Coast in Durban. In October 1986, Gasa Natal Coast held the first of its annual Gay Pride National Festivals. In the style of GASA's large gatherings since the Kyalami Gay Day of 1982, this event — which was to be repeated annually in Durban until 1991 — was more of a festival than a march, and consisted of a fairground during the day and cabaret and competitions at night culminating in the inevitable Mr Centrefold. More than 1 000 people attended the first Durban festival, and, in the years following, average attendance was around 600. Like GASA in the rest of the country, GASA Natal Coast was overwhelmingly white and — despite the experience of GAIDE in the mid-1980s — overwhelmingly male.

Despite the continuation of regional GASA branches working along the old-style support-group/gay festival lines, the Nkoli affair and the spiralling political situation in South Africa prompted a new kind of lesbian and gay politics. In 1986, a new black group appeared on the scene: the Rand Gay Organisation, founded by Alfred Machela in April of that year. Machela claimed that his organisation had over 300 members. In August 1986, the RGO was admitted to the International Lesbian and Gay Association. It was never heard of again, and Machela now lives in Stockholm.

Also in 1986, in direct response to the imposition of the State of Emergency in June, a group of white gay anti-apartheid activists in Cape Town — some of whom had had leadership positions in GASA-6010 — formed Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO). Although this group numbered barely more than a half-dozen, their prominence within the anti-apartheid structures of the Western

Cape, coupled with the fact that they were the first to fold gay rights issues into the anti-apartheid struggle, meant that they were to have an immense impact on the South African gay rights movement.

Directly challenging the 'apolitical' nature of GASA, a LAGO pamphlet, distributed widely at anti-apartheid rallies in the Western Cape, stated that the group was formed to 'situate the lesbian and gay struggle within the context of the total liberation struggle'. LAGO also made a point of supporting gay political trialists — Nkoli as well as Ivan Toms, the conscientious objector who had been a founder-member of both LAGO and the banned End Conscription Campaign (ECC).

Toms' much-publicised battle with the SADF proved to be an important mobilising point for left-wing gay politics in South Africa: not only because the South African Defence Force deliberately used his homosexuality to smear him, but because the ECC requested him not to publicise his homosexuality. This demonstrated the persistent homophobia of the military establishment and also the reluctance of anti-apartheid organisations to deal with gay people in their midst. Also, with its presence at rallies in the Western Cape and its pamphlets, LAGO challenged the 'homophobic ethos' of supposedly democratic organisations based on the principles of non-discrimination. LAGO lasted 15 months before being replaced by OLGA, the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists, which was to play a vital role in lobbying the African National Congress.

'AIDS Crisis Overstressed' GASA-6010, the gay movement and AIDS activism

Despite the new presence of LAGO in Cape Town, GASA-6010 remained strong. Even more so than in Johannesburg, Western Cape gay politics was acutely divided between those who were interested in political activism and those involved in social support services. The activists who had left GASA-6010 to form LAGO in 1986, however, had always been a minority in the organisation. When 6010 was formally constituted in July 1982, it defined its functions psycho-socially: 'to promote the gay individual as a respectable member of society, and to allow the gay individual a better opportunity to evolve as an integrated and respectable member of society.'³³ A 24-hour telephone counselling service was set up and, since then, 6010 (it was to affiliate with GASA and become GASA-6010 a year later) has concentrated almost exclusively on counselling and social support services.

John Pegge, one of 6010's founders and the director of its counselling services, explains:

Facilitating the coming-out process has always remained 6010's primary function. We have defined ourselves as a social service organisation precisely because this is the critical first step towards the development of a gay identity. Only once gay people have come out and feel comfortable with their sexuality, can they become involved in more explicitly political activity.

Pegge notes, however, that the 'single most difficult aspect of coming out since the 1980s has been the spectre of AIDS.' In 1984, GASA-6010 set up an AIDS Action

Group and, since 1987, GASA-6010 has also run primary health care clinics at its community centre, staffed by volunteer medical personnel and receptionists. By 1993, the HIV-clinic, was offering testing, counselling and post-test treatment, and was the only one of its kind in South Africa catering specifically to gay people. Since 1987, GASA-6010 has also conducted extensive safer-sex outreach in Cape Town's bars and clubs, and has held annual AIDS Candlelight Memorials.

GASA in Johannesburg played down the threat of the AIDS epidemic — while it published a safe-sex poster in 1983, the first mention of the epidemic in *Link/Skakel* was a headline blaring 'AIDS CRISIS OVERSTRESSED'.³⁴ GASA-6010 thus became a shrill voice in the dark. Pegge, Isaacs and Miller have written that, because of the government's inadequate AIDS policy,

*AIDS prevention and care would fall upon the limited, politically fragmented resources of a gay minority itself. With the lack of a central powerbase, including no sense of political and legal identity... a perceived sense of state alienation and a social context of pervasive oppression, the task of achieving such a strategy for the gay minority was and remains awesomely difficult.*³⁵

Added to these problems is the fact that state and non-governmental bodies alike have decided to play down the 'gay' aspect of the epidemic in an attempt to persuade heterosexuals that they are at risk. While this might make sense in terms of promoting a safer-sex programme for the wider population, it means that there is little funding and materials specifically for gay people.

The representation of AIDS in the media in the mid-1980s says much about the perceived role that homosexuals have played in the spread of the epidemic: before 1985, the epidemic was characterised as 'The Gay Plague'; in March of that year, however, newspapers began reporting black HIV-cases in Soweto, and mediaspeak immediately transformed 'The Gay Plague' into 'The Black Death'. One newspaper ran the following headline: 'Gay Plague Spreads to Townships'. Even though the article gave evidence that one of the people with AIDS discovered in Soweto was a heterosexual man believed to have brought the virus from Zaire, the next paragraph read: 'AIDS is mostly prevalent in homosexual groups and Soweto has its own gay community, some of which have had contact with white gays.'³⁶ The imputation was clear: black gay men who moved between the white gay subculture and the townships were responsible for importing the epidemic into heterosexual black society.

As with the other GASA branches, 6010's organisational structure was predominantly white and male. But because it was located in the Western Cape, where there is a large coloured gay subculture, its client services were — and continue to be — heavily patronised by coloureds, who are less likely than whites to have access to private medical and psychological care. Pegge estimates that at least 60% of 6010's average 1 000 clients a year are coloured. Very few of these coloured clients move from being clinic visitors to being members of the organisation, and

this, as we shall see, became a major reason for the establishment of the largely-black ABIGALE in 1992.

6010 (it reverted to its original name after GASA's collapse) still exists: it has remained a powerful regional initiative precisely because its role is so specialised and narrowly defined around counselling and HIV-treatment.

'Every gay here is a criminal': Law Reform revisited

While GASA-6010 and GASA Natal Coast continued to function regionally, the collapse of the national organisation in 1986 made space for two new forms of gay political activity. The first found the notion of single-issue gay politics to be untenable in South Africa, and attempted to bring gay rights issues into the broader human rights struggle: this was characterised first by LAGO, and later by OLGA and GLOW in 1989. The second, looking back to the 1968 Law Reform movement, insisted on fighting specifically for the reform of laws that discriminated against homosexuals.

In April 1985, after President PW Botha decriminalised interracial sex as part of his reform programme, he asked the President's Council (a nominated mixed-race upper house of Parliament that replaced the whites-only Senate in 1983) to investigate the Immorality Act. The Council set up an Ad Hoc committee and in August 1985 put forward its recommendations. The committee equivocated on the subject of homosexuality, suggesting that 'more thorough investigation' was required on three issues: 'the possible widening of the criminal prohibitions on gay conduct to include gay women'; how society should 'express its abhorrence to homosexuality'; and what 'programmes of rehabilitation or forms of punishment would be desirable.'³⁷

Panic, of the type experienced in the mid-60s, set in once again in gay society; explicit in this ruling was the sentiment that homosexuality was abhorrent, requiring rehabilitation at best and punishment at worst. And so, as in 1968, a law reform movement was launched, this time called the National Law Reform Fund (NLRF). It aimed to make submissions to the President's Council, 'to present every scrap of evidence to convince the authorities that gays exist and that they can be (and to a large extent are) worthy members of the community.'

In Johannesburg, an alliance of 20 organisations formed a fundraising incentive called Benefit; at its launch in March 1986, human rights advocate Edwin Cameron put the case for this new activity most succinctly:

The shocking truth is that many gays in South Africa have to a great extent been living a dream that is in fact a legal nightmare. The simple fact is that male gays in South Africa have no legal right to practise their gayness. Almost every gay here this afternoon is, according to South African law, a criminal.

The message was clear: the 'victory' wrought by the law reform movement in 1968 was a hollow one, and a gay subculture had flourished in the 1970s and early 1980s only because the authorities had chosen to ignore it. Said Cameron:

We exercise the freedom we think we might have in South Africa not by right but by favour, by indulgence. We are dependent on, at best, the goodwill of the police to meet and act as we do; and at worst we are dependent on their blind eyes, their lack of knowledge or their inefficiency.

As in 1968, middle-class gay white men responded with alacrity to the possibility of their freedom being abrogated. However, now there was a tradition of public gay gatherings — established by GASA — upon which Benefit could draw. Benefit's March 1986 launch at Shaft 8 at Crown Mines outside Johannesburg took the form of a large gay festival, attended by 1 200 people, and was replete with fairground activity, live entertainment and competitions.

Unlike 1968, however, there was not the same government focus: PW Botha's campaign to smash anti-apartheid resistance overtook all else and the gay issue was forgotten. The NLRF had raised R59 000 by January 1987, but had nothing to spend it on: it was thus transformed into the National Law Reform Charitable Trust. Three trustees were appointed, and it was decided that this money would be used in future to 'market gay lifestyles' and to intervene, in any possible way, in the gay law reform struggle in South Africa. Of the R59 000 raised, however, only R10 000 was spent, and there was much dissatisfaction within the gay community: talk abounded of misappropriation of funds.³⁹

Also unlike 1968, there was the sense of a 'larger struggle' even within the NLRF's activities. Although the NLRF and Benefit were entirely white middle-class organisations, Cameron's keynote speech in March 1986 employed the concept of 'freedom', explicitly referring to the critique of white gay culture that had been developed through the Simon Nkoli controversy: that white gay South Africans were 'living a dream', looking after their material interests and comforts while ignoring the issues of discrimination and oppression — their own, and that of others around them.

An electoral 'victory' and the end of an era

This critique of self-interest reached a head in 1987, when the white parliamentary elections were to prove to be a watershed for South African gay politics. At the same time as the growing anti-apartheid movement called for a boycott of these elections, *Exit* called upon gay voters to exercise their power through the ballot box. Every candidate in the election was asked whether he or she supported gay rights, and, in constituencies where there were significant number of gay voters, candidates from all parties scrambled to join the gay rights bandwagon. 'Yes' responses were received from 23 candidates of the liberal opposition Progressive Federal Party and from ten National Party candidates.

It was a fascinating display of gay political power, and in largely-gay Hill-brow, National Party candidate Leon de Beer won the seat from Progressive Federal Party veteran Alf Widman: de Beer had made much noise about gay rights, while Widman had equivocated. Recalls *Exit* editor Henk Botha:

Like most gay people in the constituency, I would never have voted Nat. But it was an exciting moment for us. Here was this handsome, charming man, and he was talking in favour of gay rights. It was the first time any candidate was prepared to stand up openly and support gay rights.

By 1987, Hillbrow was rapidly integrating, and already had a significant black population. De Beer, as a member of the pro-apartheid governing party, was taking a stand on this issue too. If gay voters defected in droves to the National Party, it was not only because de Beer was charming, handsome and pro-gay: it was in part because he represented a party trying to contain and manage the deracialising process.

Exit trumpeted that gay voters in Hillbrow could 'sway power, even to a candidate like Leon de Beer who represents an unpopular and repressive party, if he comes out strongly enough in favour of gay rights.' While the paper claimed to 'want every privilege afforded to whites to be extended to our black brothers and sisters,' it was unrepentant: 'we will use any vehicle to campaign for gay civil liberties, even if it means resorting to the whites-only democracy of South Africa.'⁴⁰ Gerry Davidson, *Exit's* current editor, notes in her history of the publication that 'to many, the message was clear: white gay rights were the only ones *Exit* (and by extension the GASA elite) was interested in.' (See 'Exit' in this volume)

For the first time white gay South Africans behaved like an organised political minority, and the effect had been felt. There was immense power to that. But this was 1987. It was no longer possible to maintain a gay civil liberties struggle separate from the larger struggle for racial equality. Ironically, the greatest moment of victory for single-issue 'apolitical' gay politics was also to be its death-blow. The GASA era was dead.

Five

Lesbian and gay subcultures in the 1990s

From 'Dark Bars' into the streets: Opening up space

Since the collapse of a largely white, politically conservative GASA and the emergence of a black gay subculture in the late 1980s, there has been a radical shift from the 'apolitical' and accommodationist single-issue politics that characterised gay life from 1968 onwards to an assertion of gay rights as human rights — equivalent to all the others being fought for at this time of profound constitutional and social change in South Africa. From 1988 onwards, a complex of lesbian and gay organisations that may be described as 'charterist' developed: charterist, because they aligned themselves ideologically with the adherents of the ANC's Freedom Charter and because they set about developing their own Charter of Lesbian and Gay Rights.

This new politics was heralded first by LAGO and OLGA in the Western Cape, small groups of white activists within the liberation movement. Then, as black gay South Africans identified a movement in which they might participate as equals and obtain services specifically appropriate to their circumstances, more mass-based largely-black organisations were founded: first GLOW in Johannesburg in 1988 and then, four years later, ABIGALE in the Western Cape in 1992. The new alignment has also included lesbian-feminist organisations like Sunday's Women in Durban and student groups at the English-speaking universities.

The standard-bearer of this new politics is the annual Lesbian and Gay Pride March, organised by GLOW, which has taken place in Johannesburg every year since 1990. In the 1960s, gay men and lesbians embraced either in dark parks or behind bolted doors. In the 1990s, some are beginning to embrace, defiantly, on the streets in full view of the national media at the annual march. In 1968, that first public meeting of Law Reform at the Park Royal hotel was strictly controlled to prevent unwanted entry by police or the media; in 1992, the police are called out to protect lesbian and gay marchers and the media is encouraged to record them. In 1966, police raided a party and arrested nine men for 'masquerading as women' in a private home in Forest Town; in 1992, the Pride March is led by drag queens.

In 1972, when University of Natal student Mark West tried to found a Gay Liberation Movement because 'we should not be forced to meet in dark bars', he was subject to police harassment. In 1992, many gay men and lesbians still choose to meet in dark bars, but now also have the opportunity to establish a public political identity outside of these bars and on the street. A pride march, as a moment of public expression, is the perfect analogy for coming out of the closet: out of those dark bars and dark corners of dark parks into the full glare of sunlight and television cameras. As such, it best symbolises the new gay liberationist politics in South Africa.

In organising the march, GLOW has quite self-consciously fused two traditions: certainly, there is the carnivalesque tradition of the annual New York Pride

March or Sydney Gay Mardi Gras, but there is also South Africa's own tradition of the anti-apartheid protest march. And, by invoking these two traditions, the march has managed to bring into the public view an unprecedentedly wide cross-section of lesbian and gay people.

The march is growing slowly in size (from 1 000 marchers in 1990 to nearly 2 000 in 1992) and in representativeness — even though the majority of marchers are still white men, the number of black participants has increased from 5% to 25%, and about 40% of marchers are women. Nevertheless, it can in no way be seen as a microcosm of the totality of homosexual experience in this country: powerful though it is as an annual public expression, it is no more than a surface manifestation of the aspirations of a small group of people, black and white, who have embraced a new liberationist politics. South African lesbian and gay communities remain, on the whole, invisible to the public eye, still subject to their characterisation as 'unapprehended felons' by the law, sinners by the church, and deviants by society in general.

However, a look at lesbian and gay activity in the 1990s demonstrates a growing openness and increasing diversity in the face of this opprobrium. This can be seen, firstly, in the very architecture of public lesbian and gay spaces. In Johannesburg in the 1970s, gay bars and clubs put up rolls of barbed wire outside their cloistered premises to keep police out and made a point of stopping unfamiliar faces at their dungeon-like doors and asking them if they were gay. Now, although there is a downturn in commercial gay activity (there is nowhere near the number of gay venues as there was in the early 1980s), those that do exist are far more open. Champions, opposite the station in busy Braamfontein, spills out onto a large apron of grass, a public park in fact, and when the weather is fine this park becomes an outdoor extension of the bar, in full view of passersby. Likewise, a new lesbian venue in Rosebank, Harlequins, is located on the premises of a college and has big sliding glass doors rather than blackened portholes; outdoor cafe tables rather than steps leading down to a dingy basement.

Some clubs have diversified their activities, becoming 'community centres' of sorts rather than simply places to dance, drink and get laid. A case in point is Club Equusite, Pretoria's longest-running gay club where, on a Sunday afternoon in the early 1990s, you could see between 30 and 60 gay men and lesbians clutching Bibles as they climbed past the dancefloor with its smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke from the night before, up to the Lace Restaurant on the second floor. Here, with a few basic rearrangements of the furniture and a few deft reinterpretations of the Scriptures, the Rev Hendrik Pretorius has built South Africa's first and only registered gay church: the Reformierende Gemeentes van Gelykes in Christus (Reforming Congregations of Equals in Christ). Pretorius, who resigned publicly from the staunchly Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church at the Lesbian and Gay Pride March in 1990, has put into place a veritable queer vicarage, with deacons, elders, pastoral counselling and even gay marriages.

The church, like the nightclub in which it is housed, is participatory theatre: people come together to define common values, to act out their beliefs and to

bond into a community. Certainly, the values defined at Saturday night's rave might be in direct opposition to those defined at Sunday afternoon's church service, but, insist the congregants, they are not mutually exclusive. Says 'Louwrens', a deacon of the church:

Clubs have become of necessity the only safe spaces where gay people can gather. But, often, being gay means dancing and drinking and having sex. That's how society has decided we are, so that's how we behave. But we have other needs too, spiritual and political, and there's no reason why the club, which is the only space we have, can't also be used for these needs.⁴¹

And clubs are not the only space where this new openness and diversity can be seen. In the townships, precisely because of the lack of space and the closeness of humanity, gay parties and shebeens, when they do exist, are always in full view of the neighbours. In kwaThema, a township outside Springs on the East Rand, gay men meet publicly and outdoors in at least five shebeens and hold Miss GLOW competitions for all at the community centre (see below). In Soweto, a gay catering company, staffed by gay men takes care of weddings and funerals every weekend: while stolid and churchy mourners or celebrants gather in the living-room, the gays rule the kitchen, turning their work into an assertion of public identity that cannot be avoided. Linda Ngcobo's funeral, at the Phiri Hall in early 1993, is perhaps the best example of this new township openness.

And in sport, another leisure-time activity of vital importance as a gathering space, particularly for lesbians, there has also been a shift. In the 1950s and 1960s, closeted lesbian activity took place beneath the jolly-hockeysticks facade of the soccer and hockey teams. In the early 1990s, though, the womens' softball league games at Bezuidenhout Park and Sturrock Park in Johannesburg constituted perhaps the largest outdoor gatherings of lesbians to be found in South Africa. In softball at least, the sporting women are no longer as closeted: large groups of lesbian friends accompany the players and picnic during proceedings.

In the womens' softball league, there are white and some 'coloured' teams; given the popularity of soccer in black communities, however, the womens' soccer league, which also has a strong lesbian flavour, is predominantly black. Unlike in softball, the teams themselves are racially mixed, and there are also three well-known township teams with predominantly-lesbian membership: the Mamelodi Sundowners from Pretoria, and Leeds United and the Soweto Womens' Soccer Club or 'Gloria Team' from Soweto. But, given the newness of open lesbian culture in the townships, it is perhaps not surprising that the words of a member of the Gloria Team echo those of white women like Jackie and Hannah four decades previously: 'It is just so difficult to expose yourself that even there it is not always safe to come out to women you suspect are also gay.'⁴²

In the Western Cape, the latest permutation of the famous District Six Netball Team, black men in drag who participated in the netball league in the 1950s and 1960s, is to be found in the Lavender Hill Netball Club on the Cape Flats. More conventionally, TOGS, the Transvaal Organisation for Gay Sport, competes

every weekend with other members of the Transvaal Road-Runners Association. Says Jonathan Selvan, head of TOGS Roadrunners:

The presence of our members in the Transvaal Road-Runners Association has a profoundly political effect. The TOGS club is one of the backbones of the association, and everyone knows it is gay. And so, at every single road-runners meeting, TOGS puts forward a gay title. You could say we have our own gay march every weekend ... the presence of gay athletes helps break the stereotyped gay image. Of course, there are campy people in TOGS and they are very welcome — sometimes they are even our best sportsmen. But there are also a lot of regular guys. Our political message is that gay people can be sportsmen, and good ones at that too.

It is worth restating here that, in a society where homosexual activity remains criminal, merely gathering for social or support reasons does constitute a profoundly political act. And so there is implicit politics in the sports teams; in the religious groups (not only Pretorius' church but also the GASA-era Gay Christian Community and Yachad, which still operate in Johannesburg); in the counselling and support services, like 6010 in Cape Town and the Gay Advice Bureau in Johannesburg; in the Cape Town Women's Centre, which existed briefly during 1992; in the gay-initiated HIV-support groups like Body Positive, Friends For Life and, most recently, the Gay Mens' Health Forum, formed in 1992 by Simon Nkoli.

Whatever their 'apolitical' claims, even the monthly PAWS parties, held on a rotating basis at private homes and spread by word of mouth through Johannesburg's white gay community, have a political function. So too the Spring Ball, which took place in 1990, at which 200 lesbians, including many older women, attended a party at Durban's Westridge Stadium. So too the Durban-based 'Company of Friends', a group of older women who got together, raised money by running a bar in a private home, and set up a corporation to buy a property on the South Coast to which they would all retire.

Much of this new openness is, of course, a product of the times. Certainly, there is evidence, since the unbanning of the liberation movements, that South Africa's censorship apparatus, relieved of the responsibility of 'protecting' South Africans from subversive political material, is trying to justify its continued existence by clamping down on homosexual material. Retief reports that a Cape Town lesbian and gay book distributor, Otherworld Books, is continually harassed. And, in early 1993, two safer-sex videos were banned, largely because of the explicit gay sex in one. Nevertheless, the unbanning of the liberation movements and the inevitable process of change since 1990 has meant a total collapse of the Afrikaner Calvinist hegemony that governed South Africa for five decades.

With the collapse of such stringent controls and the entry into a phase of 'transition', new space has been made for open lesbian and gay activity. It is no coincidence that the first pride march took place in 1990, just months after the unbanning of the liberation movements: it was a product of both euphoria at the

possibility of a new dispensation and the practical fact that, since the ending of the States of Emergency that lasted from 1985 to 1990, protest marches were once more legal. While the new liberationist gay politics has its roots in the 1980s, and was set up in direct response to the 'apolitical' line of GASA and the moral imperatives of joining the broader anti-apartheid struggle, it is significant that this new politics only found popular support at the very moment of the collapse of the apartheid regime. It is as significant that this shift came about at the very moment black homosexual activity began to formalise into a flourishing township gay subculture.

'A rhythm of joy': Lesbian and gay subcultures in the townships

It is a November Saturday afternoon in kwaThema in late 1990, and it could be any weekend afternoon township party: 1970s disco sounds scratching through the static of an over-extended hi-fi system, the orange-and-white striped marquee in the yard, the plates of *pap*, the laughter, the hostess barking genial orders from her chair. Look closer, though, and you'll notice that the guys are dancing with each other, voguing a home-brew version of black gay American dance styles. In a corner, two women have salvaged a quiet space from the revelry to embrace, and on the *stoep* a group of teenage boys are earnestly discussing outfits for the next drag show.

The reason for the party is a meeting of the kwaThema chapter of GLOW. Over 20 years after those first, clandestine meetings of Law Reform in 1968, when white middle-class professionals got together to oppose legislation criminalising homosexuality, a group of young black gay men and lesbians party, on a township street, within full view of neighbours who pop over for a drink, and even send their children round for an afternoon of festivity. The hostess is a woman in her late 40s named Thoko Khumalo: she has a gay nephew and has declared herself to be Ma GLOW, 'the mother of the gay people'. Her home is a gay shebeen, a haven for the township's lesbian and gay youth. Of all the Reef's townships, kwaThema has, rather unexpectedly, given its low-key and peri-urban nature, the largest and most visible gay population. This, says Simon Nkoli, is because 'kwaThema gays and lesbians have a place to go — Ma Thoko's'.⁴³

British Sgxabai, an early black member of both GASA and The Saturday Group, began organising kwaThema in the early 1980s. He died in November 1991, of wounds incurred from a family feud over his sexuality — further proof that, despite the relative tolerance level in the township, being openly gay can be fatal. A year before his death, Sgxabai spoke of 'the early days' in kwaThema:

When I first came out, being gay was unusual. But I knew a few people, and... got people to organise at my place. We'd make parties. There were about 30 of us. I'd invite guys from Daveyton and Kathlehong too. We'd march in the streets and we didn't give a damn. It was the early 1980s, and groups of us would walk defiantly through the streets of the township. It was the time when that disco song, 'I am what I am' was on the hit

*parade and that gave us strength. We were confronting the community to take seriously the words of a song they all listened to on the radio.*⁴⁴

McLean and Ngcobo describe the homosexual subculture that developed around the mines, and one of McLean and Ngcobo's older informants, Junior, recalls being in an all-male *stokvel* (credit union) in the early 1970s in which there was much homosexual activity. Based on his experience, Junior started an explicitly gay *stokvel*, the Jikaleza Boys, in 1991. (See 'Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi' in this volume)

From the early 1980s, there have been the traceable beginnings of gay organisation in the townships. With the advent of Simon Nkoli's black group within GASA, shebeens like Lee's Place and Mhlanga Rocks in Soweto became gathering places for gay people: just as white gay men 'turned' bars into gay haunts in the 1950s, black gay men were now transforming specifically-chosen shebeens into township gay hangouts. As with the bar-owners in the 1950s, the shebeen queens saw in this new clientele a regular and dependable source of income, and encouraged their patronage. As soon as gay people in a township had an identifiable place to go, more crept out of the closet. By 1993, Lee's Place and Mhlanga Rocks had closed down, but several others had emerged in townships around Johannesburg: Big Mike's in Soweto, the Swazi Inn in Thembisa and The Bold in Sebokeng. Parallel to this, as the cities began to desegregate, some previously-white gay venues started attracting increasingly black clienteles.

Nowhere, however, has a gay community become as much part of an African community's fabric as in kwaThema — aided in no small way (until her unexpected death in mid-1993) by Thoko Khumalo's vociferous sponsorship. Not only did the gay kids patronise Ma Thoko's, but they have 'taken over' several other venues in the township too: at a shebeen called Three One, for example, gay patronage is encouraged and welcomed. Says Lucky, one of kwaThema's gay youths: 'We bring Three One much business. Whenever we are there, the place comes alive. When we go out, our togetherness makes a rhythm of joy.'

As early as 1989, only months after its formation, the kwaThema GLOW chapter decided to transform the township's annual Penny-Penny Guy Fawkes Day at the kwaThema Community centre into a much-publicised Miss kwaThema GLOW drag competition. The youths rehearsed for months, more than 200 people came to watch, and the proceeds were donated to GLOW. Comments one participant: 'It wasn't just the gay people who came. Everyone knows that we are the best entertainment to be had in kwaThema and they love watching us.' Drag shows have become the central bonding point of gay township life, and it is the annual Miss GLOW finals, at which the winners from all the chapters compete, rather than the annual Pride March, that is the highlight of the black gay calendar on the reef. A precursor to Miss GLOW, organised by Linda Ngcobo, took place in 1987 and then, in 1988, the first Miss GLOW was held at the Mhlanga Rocks shebeen in Mofolo, Soweto. They have taken place annually ever since, and the last two — at Soweto's Ipelegeng Community Centre in 1991 and Champions Bar in 1992 — attracted around 30 entrants and over 1 000 spectators each.

Most of the kwaThema chapter, like most of GLOW's 200-odd black membership, is under 25: evidence of the youthfulness of the budding township lesbian and gay subculture. Sgxabai explained this youthfulness:

*People are freer now there's the pride of being oneself. Today's kids are more independent; more inquiring. I'm sure it had a lot to do with the independence that came with the liberation movement and the upheavals of the 1980s.*⁴⁵

McLean and Ngcobo note that the 1976 uprising had a similar impact on gay people of Sgxabai's generation, because it

shook society to its roots and, as a profound rupture of traditional hierarchies, had the effect of splitting young people from the roots and conventions of their elders. Suddenly, young people found themselves in opposition to many things their parents stood for — and this meant challenging not only conservative politics but all conservative mores.

Thus the current township gay scene has its roots in a generalised youth rebellion that found expression first in 1976 and then in the mid-1980s. And, once a white gay organisation took root in the 1980s and a collapse of rigid racial boundaries allowed greater interaction between township and city gay people, ideas of gay community filtered into the already-existent township gay networks. A few gay men and lesbians, like Nkoli, moved into Hillbrow. As the neighborhood started deracialising, they began patronising the gay bars and thus hooking in to the urban gay subculture — despite this subculture's patent racism. GLOW's kwaThema chapter was founded, for example, when a group of residents returned from the Skyline Bar with a copy of *Exit*: 'When we saw the publicity about this new non-racial group,' explains Manku Madux, a woman who, with Sgxabai, founded the chapter, 'we decided to get in touch with them to join.'

'Homosexuality is un-African': Homophobia and Black Consciousness

As gay township activity has become publicised, a backlash of sorts has emerged from the black nationalist tendency within the liberation movements, claiming, in the words of a much-quoted banner outside Winnie Mandela's kidnapping and assault trial in 1991, that 'Homosex Is Not In Black Culture' and that it is a decadent white contamination of black society. According to this particular strain of nationalism, homosexuality has been imported into black communities by inhuman labour systems, perverse priests, and white gay activists looking to expand their constituency and the validity of their cause. This ideology has its roots in the patriarchal notion that colonialism emasculated or feminized the black man, and therefore locates much of Black Power, quite bluntly, in the penis: in a remasculation, or reassertion of black virility.

While it is incontestable that the colonial project was emasculating, this ideology has had serious consequences for the politics of gender and sexuality

within South African liberation movements. Not only does it find homosexuality untenable (the image of an effeminate, limp-wristed 'stabane' — a man who wishes to be a woman — is obviously intensely threatening), but it also tends to negate the possibilities of female resistance and liberation, relegating women to the roles of mothers and wives of comrades rather than allowing them to be comrades themselves. There is thus more than a little irony to the fact that the most infamous avatar of the 'Homosexuality is un-African' ideology is Winnie Mandela, a woman who managed to use her Mother-of-the-Nation-and-Wife-of-the-Leader status to become an independent leader in her own right.

During her trial, a large part of Mandela's defense was predicated on the assertion that she was 'saving' black youths from the homosexual advances of white Methodist minister Paul Verryn. She buttressed this defence with the implication, made manifest in the words of the poster displayed outside her trial, that homosexuality was a condition alien to black society.

Mandela was not the first senior ANC official to code homosexuality as un-African: in 1987 National Executive Committee-member Ruth Mompoti told the British publication *Capital Gay*, 'I cannot even begin to understand why people want gay rights. The gays have no problems. They have nice houses and plenty to eat. I don't see them suffering. No-one is persecuting them.'⁴⁶

Quite apart from her blatant homophobia (in the same interview she asked, 'Tell me, are lesbians and gays normal? It is not normal. If everyone was like that the human race would come to an end.'), Mompoti was giving expression to the notion that homosexuals do not need special rights because they are already well-off: in short, white. She could not accept that there might well be homosexuals living in those very oppressed black communities she had committed herself to liberate. Her comments created a storm of protest in the progressive British Anti-Apartheid Movement, and, a few months later, statements by other ANC officials attempted some damage control. Later, in 1991, largely due to the lobbying work of the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists in Cape Town, the ANC Constitutional Committee included a clause specifically outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its draft Bill of Rights. The ANC Bill of Rights now entrenches 'the right not to be discriminated against or subject to harassment because of sexual orientation'.

Nevertheless, despite an angry open letter by GLOW to the ANC denouncing Winnie Mandela's homophobic defence, the ANC did not specifically condemn her defence, even though the draft Bill of Rights had already been published. This was not only because, at the time of her trial, Winnie Mandela was briefly rehabilitated within the ANC (Nelson Mandela had recently been released from prison and they were not yet separated), but also because, despite its commitment on paper to sexual equality, the ANC was not yet ready to assert that homosexuality might well be an organic part of African culture rather than an unpleasant reality imported by decadent white society.

In the 1990s, the leaders of two other liberation movements rendered the ideology behind this reticence explicit. Asked by *Exit* magazine in 1991 whether

the Azanian Peoples' Organisation (AZAPO) had a policy on gay rights, national publicity secretary Strini Moodley responded: 'At this present time AZAPO does not consider homosexuality a priority. It seems to us that this phenomenon is largely affecting the more affluent sections of the community.'⁴⁷ As with Mompoti's statement, Moodley expressed not only homophobia (the fact that homosexuality 'affects' sections of a community much as an epidemic might) but also the notion that this was an affliction to which the 'affluent' were particularly prone, much like consumption in the 19th Century.

The subtext of Moodley's statement was made even clearer in 1992, when Pan-Africanist Congress Secretary-General Bennie Alexander said that

*homosexuality is un-African. It is part of the spin-off of the capitalist system. We should not take the European Leftist position on the matter. It should be looked at in its total perspective from our own Afrocentric position.*⁴⁸

Alexander is not denying that homosexuality exists in African communities; rather, he is asserting that where it does exist it is a spinoff of apartheid capitalism. And in this assertion, he is aided and abetted, perhaps unwittingly, by a line of thought that runs through left-wing South African labour historiography: that the homosexual activity rife in mining hostels is the product of — or response to — the migrant labour system, the very cornerstone of apartheid capitalism. Men sleep with men in the hostels, the interpretation goes, because the hostels are unnatural prisons in which they have been wrenched away and cordoned off from their families and communities to work as slaves for the white economy.⁴⁹

'Circumstantial homosexuality' is a reality in mining hostels as much as it is in prison, and there is much worth in the work that academics such as T Dunbar Moodie⁵⁰ and Patrick Harries have done in documenting the play of sexuality in these slave-quarters. Harries, in particular, recognised the subversive and pleasurable possibilities of these homosexual relationships, writing that they

*reflected a forceful rejection of employers' demands that miners invest their libidinal energies in their work and that they value the virtues of sexual restraint. The homosexual relationship contradicted the imposed morality of industrialism and established an alternative propriety. These gender relationships provided workers with their own sense of hierarchy and status and with their own indices of prestige, power and pride. Bukhontxana (thigh-fucking) gave men a sense of security, upward mobility and self-worth in the constrained world of the colonist.*⁵¹

But McLean and Ngcobo take issue with the notion that mine-sex stopped at thigh-fucking, documenting accounts of less-ambiguous penetrative anal sex too. They also document, for the first time, the workings of African homosexuality outside the mining compounds, and they criticise Moodie for 'falling short' by making male sexuality on the mine seem to be

rather too much like a mechanical and necessary substitution for heterosexual life in a situation where there are no women. [Moodie] makes no real concession to the fact that some men may in fact have enjoyed sex with other men or might even prefer it to having sex with women.

The analysis of circumstantial homosexuality has been subsequently used — by people like Alexander — as a metaphor for all that is wrong and unnatural with an undeniably heinous system. The fact that formal gay activity in the townships only took place after the establishment of white organisations like GASA, and that the anti-apartheid activists who have impelled the ANC to take on issues of sexual equality are almost exclusively white only lends substance to the ideology.

But it is entirely wrong to suppose that homosexual activity in the townships is a recent phenomenon, imported by white gay activists and 'dinge queens' (gay slang for white men who desire black men); indeed, black gay men and lesbians protest that such an analysis robs them of the agency for their own desire. Despite the recent upsurge of a township gay scene, homosexual activity — if not lesbian and gay organisation — has existed in black societies from long before the advent of formal white organisation, and certainly predates the founding of GLOW in 1988 or of Simon Nkoli's Saturday Group in 1984. As early as 1955, for example, *Drum Magazine* reported that the Cato Manor shantytown, outside Durban, was the place 'Where Men Are Wives'. According to Chetty, 'within the shantytown, *Esinyameni*, the Place of Darkness, was identified as the centre of Sodom where at one time colourful marriage ceremonies frequently took place.'

In Cape Town there has been an identifiable and public black gay subculture since at least 1950: although this subculture is rooted in coloured communities, it has always included a few African men: Chetty, for example, cites the case of David 'Lulu' Masikana, a famous African drag queen who participated in the Cape Carnival in 1963. Indeed, in the 1950s when apartheid was just beginning to be institutionalised, the distinction between 'African' and 'coloured' was almost negligible, particularly in the Western Cape. Hybrid though their roots may be, coloured people are embraced as Africans by some of the very adherents of Africanism who decry homosexuality as 'un-African'. Bennie Alexander, for example, comes from the very same hybrid stock as the coloured moffies that Chetty proves to be so integral a part of Western Cape culture: if they are 'un-African', so is he.

Western Cape history notwithstanding, there is also some evidence of rural African homosocial activity that exists independent of the migrant labour system and that is entrenched in traditional tribal hierarchy: the Lovedu Rain Queen in the Northern Transvaal is a hereditary leader who keeps as many as 40 wives. There is some work being done on the phenomenon of lesbian sangomas, and there has also been some documentation of an instance of lesbianism in rural Southern African culture: the 'mummy-baby' relationships that anthropologist Judith Gay recorded in Lesotho, in which relationships between young girls and slightly older ones include a form of sexual initiation and the basis for a lifelong support structure outside of heterosexual marriage.⁵² Gay Africanism, a discourse only in the very early stages

of development in South Africa, maintains that it is the censure of homosexuality that is a colonial import, brought to this continent by missionaries, and that there is irony to the fact that latter-day Africanists have assimilated this Judeo-Christian biblical propaganda and reconstructed it as pre-colonial African purity.

Whatever its roots, however, it must be conceded that homosexuality is as taboo in many African cultures as it is in many Western cultures. But the sometimes-violent censure of homosexuality within black cultures must not be confused as evidence for the non-existence of homosexuality: the very fact of censure indicates that it exists.

Six

*Lesbian and gay politics in the 1990s***Sexual Politics and the politics of liberation**

The ideology of the new alignment of liberationist lesbian and gay politics is perhaps best expressed by a manifesto, drafted by GLOW, which has been used for the annual Johannesburg Pride Marches. The manifesto calls upon 'All South Africans who are Committed to a Non-Racist, Non-Sexist, Non-Discriminatory Democratic Future' to:

- *UNITE in the fight for the basic human rights of all South Africans, including lesbians and gay men.*
- *MOBILIZE against discrimination.*
- *ASSERT the role of lesbians and gay men in the current process of political change.*
- *CONFRONT South Africa with the presence of its lesbian and gay community.*
- *DISPEL MYTHS nurtured by years of discrimination and stereotyping.*

The manifesto then goes on to issue ten 'challenges', including a challenge to Parliament to 'decriminalise homosexuality'; a challenge to the law to 'recognise longstanding lesbian and gay relationships by giving them all the benefits afforded heterosexual couples'; a challenge to political organisations 'to support a Charter that protects lesbian and gay people from discrimination'; and a challenge to the liberation movement 'to embrace the struggle for lesbian and gay liberation as part of its commitment to free society from all forms of oppression'.

Immediately, we note not only a shift in rhetoric (the use of words like 'confront' and 'challenge', and the embrace of concepts like 'non-racist', 'non-sexist' and 'non-discriminatory'), but also of targets. This new agenda calls, as did past gay agendas, for legal reform and the dispelling of myths, but it also confronts the current process of political change head-on, calling upon lesbians and gays to 'assert their role' in this process and challenging the process, too, to take cognisance of the need for lesbian and gay rights. In fact, by challenging the liberation movement directly to 'embrace the struggle for gay and lesbian liberation', this new movement sets itself up in direct dialogue with organisations like the ANC in a way that the white gay organisations would have found untenable a decade earlier.

Certainly, there is strategy as well as conviction behind such an approach: just as the Law Reform movement of 1968 positioned itself 'within the National Party' because it saw that as the best way of gaining results, the new lesbian and gay liberation movement is positioning itself within the broad anti-apartheid coalition because it understands that the ANC will be the future government and it recognises, as no gay movement has before, the value in courting this sector.

This approach has paid off. Running parallel (and largely due) to the shift in lesbian and gay politics, the African National Congress has included gay rights in its pantheon of human rights, thereby bringing the call for gay liberation into the mainstream of political activity in South Africa. More recently, other political parties have followed the ANC's initiative in proposing specific constitutional protection for gays and lesbians, and in 1993, the multiparty negotiating forum approved a draft constitution that included a clause outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

There are several reasons for the ANC's acceptance of the principle of equality for gay people, firstly and most importantly, the dogged insistent lobbying of the Cape Town activists in LAGO and OLGA. Perhaps OLGA's most important symbolic action on this score was to apply, in 1989, for affiliation to the United Democratic Front, the broad-based coalition of grassroots movements that led the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. A member of the Western Cape UDF Regional Executive, who was present at the meeting at which OLGA's application was considered, remembers its impact:

Sheila Lapinsky was a well-known activist in the region, but when she entered the UDF meeting with this OLGA application, there was a range of responses, from giggles to disbelief. I think most of the regional executive saw this gay thing as a 'white thing'. But they dealt with the proposal seriously and responsibly, and I think it helped enormously that OLGA's people, like Lapinsky and [Ivan] Toms, had such credibility as comrades. And so OLGA's application was accepted, for moral and strategic reasons: moral, because OLGA motivated the worthiness of its cause, and strategic, because the whole point of the UDF was to make its constituency as broad as possible.

Another major reason for this new-found acceptability of gay politics was Simon Nkoli's coming out during the Delmas Treason Trial: as Nkoli records in his memoirs, his interaction during the trial with senior UDF officials like Popo Molefe and Terror Lekota had a major impact on their thinking. And, while work of local lesbian and gay activists aided the cause within South Africa, ANC members in exile were being exposed to what the PAC's Alexander calls 'the European Leftist position on the matter'. Liberal European notions of gender rights and the political legitimacy of gay rights had immense impact on senior ANC lawyers like Albie Sachs and Kader Asmal, who have hence become gay issues' strongest lobbyists within the ANC. And the storm that surrounded Ruth Mompati's homophobic statements to *Capital Gay* in 1987, coupled with the fact that many of the British and particularly Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement's most committed officials were gay, persuaded many senior ANC officials in Europe of the moral imperatives of equal rights for gays and lesbians.

Nevertheless, given the evidence up to 1993, it would be premature to suppose that the lesbian and gay movement can be assured of support from a future ANC government. Official ANC support of gay issues has been at worst grudging

and at best half-hearted; the Winnie Mandela issue being a case in point. While senior ANC office-bearers have sent messages of support to the annual Pride Marches (including one from secretary-general Cyril Ramaphosa in 1991), they have evaded repeated invitations to address or participate in the marches. Support on paper might be acceptable, but open and public identification is not. One senior ANC official explains that 'while the leadership might have accepted gay rights, the people have not. We have to be conscious of this. Our priority at the moment is winning an election.'

Indeed, while high-profile activists like Nkoli might be able to remain within the ANC as openly gay people, grassroots members of the ANC continue to work within a liberation culture that remains profoundly sexist and patriarchal. Thulani, for example, is a member of the kwaThema GLOW chapter and student activist on the East Rand. He recalls:

When I was a member of my school's Students' Representative Council in 1987, my comrades were suspicious because I didn't have two or three girlfriends like the rest of them. So the rumour went round that I was gay, and they tried to expel me.

Since that experience, he has remained outside of ANC youth structures because 'I am scared I will encounter the same problems.'⁵³ In the early 1980s, Nkoli, who was on the regional executive of the Congress of South African Students, encountered similar problems, also arising from the fact that he did not have the requisite status as a womaniser. Once it was discovered he was gay, a special meeting of the entire region was called to discuss the issue. He managed to retain his position because of his credentials and the support given to him by one or two friends who were, by then, national leaders of the student movement.

As gay issues gain credibility and lesbian and gay comrades come out, this situation is slowly changing: even if ANC leaders do not show public support for the pride marches, the ANC's official position has forced the organisation to at the very least consider the issue. The ANC journal, *Mayibuye*, has featured the issue quite prominently⁵⁴ and local branches have sent contingents and banners to the pride march, adopted resolutions condemning the homophobia in Winnie Mandela's trial, and arranged for meetings to be held with lesbian and gay activists. Most of these, however, are urban branches with large white memberships: while the Ye-oville or Observatory branches of the ANC might be considering the rights of homosexuals, the issue remains unspoken within the township structures of the organisation.

Nevertheless, a milestone event occurred in late 1992, when Funeka Soldaat, an ANC Youth League activist in Khayelitsha, outside Cape Town, joined ABIGALE and facilitated interaction between the organisation and the Youth League. Thami Magelana, a Youth League leader in the township, recalls that

Funeka suggested a meeting to discuss the issue of homosexuality. And it was fascinating to hear the youth ask questions once they got over their initial shock. And as a result they have committed themselves to help Funeka be open and fight for the

*rights of lesbians and gays. They actually said they would give help in terms of organising lesbians and gays in the township and encouraging them to be open and accepted by the community.*⁵⁵

Since then, ABIGALE has been working hand-in-hand with the ANC in Khayelitsha, and, by mid-1993, the organisation had recruited dozens of new members in the township.

The new style and ideology of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the 1990s has also vastly increased media exposure of homosexual issues in the country. In the 1950s and 1960s, as noted previously, the public image of the homosexual swung between the freak-show drag queen and the criminal child-molester. The 1968 Parliamentary debate over whether homosexuals should be further criminalised, widely reported in the media, only underscored this latter image. In the 1970s, media coverage was characterised by sensational exposes of the sordidness and sadness of supposedly 'gay' life, which was seen to be both dangerous (repeated accounts of 'gay murders' have graced the pages of South African newspapers since the 1940s) and decadent, particularly as the druggy and oversexed club-scene blossomed at the end of the decade. In the 1980s, this picture of danger and decadence was tinged with the new colour of retribution, with 'tragic tales' of gay 'AIDS Victims', even though, with the advent of GASA, the media did begin to give a 'political' angle to gay stories rather than simply consigning them to the 'human-interest' pages.

Certainly, the 1990s have seen a fair share of the kind of sensationalism that has characterised the coverage of homosexuals since the 1950s. With a recent spate of cruising-related murders in Cape Town and at the Zoo Lake and Emmarentia Dam in Johannesburg, violent death has become, once more, an over-used trope for the dangers of gay existence. And, after the first pride march in 1990, both the Sunday papers and TV newscasts were filled, not unsurprisingly, with images of the most grotesque drag queens present. But, since 1990, there has been an astonishing change in the nature of coverage, particularly on national television.

Following the 1992 march, both Agenda and Newline, the news magazine programmes of TV1 and CCV-TV respectively, broadcast in-depth documentaries on homosexuality in South Africa with a respect that would have been unheard-of a couple of years ago. Gay rights was dealt with as a political issue worthy of serious debate rather than as a 'humour-piece' served to lighten up the regular diet of riots, upheaval and violence. Furthermore, attempts were made to present images not of freaks or perverts, but of people who just happen to be attracted to members of the same gender. The Newline documentary highlighted images of couples at the March holding hands or embracing rather than outlandish images of drag and excess, and, according to a senior programmer at TV-news, the Agenda documentary on gay relationships 'went out of its way to find normal-looking couples who your average viewer would be able to identify with.'

There is an obviously loaded ideology behind the very notion of the search for a 'normal-looking' gay person. Certainly, the domesticated 'straight-acting' gay

couple is a remedial and positive image of homosexuality in a society saturated with images of queens and child-molesters. But it is also a safe image, easier to digest precisely because it is less threatening to the patriarchal and conservative gender-role values upon which this society is built. Nonetheless, there has been a clear attempt to give 'free and fair' coverage to homosexual issues. This is a response not only to the new high profile of lesbian and gay politics (through the pride march), but also to the fact that this politics has, since the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, gained a new respectability on the left — and thus a new legitimacy.

Support vs activism: Internal dilemmas of the lesbian and gay movement

Despite these advances, there was, in the early 1990s, nothing approaching the national network that GASA was able to cobble together in the early 1980s. During the late 1980s, there was an unsuccessful attempt to coalesce all the progressive lesbian and gay groups into an organisation called the Congress of Pink Democrats; more recently, the groups have realigned in a campaign to develop a Charter for Lesbian and Gay Rights. This too has been largely unsuccessful, for a major division exists within this new grouping of progressive, explicitly political organisations: the division between the social needs of members and the political imperatives of fighting for rights. Thus this new alignment is fluid and unstable, and is wrought by the very same dilemmas that have hobbled gay organisation for decades in South Africa. As formal gay South African organisation moves from its small white middle-class enclave into the broader society, and as it becomes more political in its demands and approaches, it faces precisely the same dilemmas that existed during the GASA years: how to provide effective public advocacy for sexual equality while at the same time providing for the more basic needs of its own constituency.

This dilemma is highlighted by GLOW's experience. Taking its lead from OLGA in the Western Cape, GLOW was founded on two principles: to 'build a gay and lesbian organisation that was nonracial and democratic in character' and to 'call on the gay and lesbian community to organise against all forms of discrimination'.⁵⁶ Almost immediately, this new agenda appealed to two very different communities: a city-based group of older largely-white activists on the one hand, and a township-based group of young black people on the other.

The former group became involved because, like those activists who had formed LAGO in Cape Town two years previously, they were disenchanted with the 'apolitical' line of mainstream gay organisation and wished to marry the gay rights movement to the larger human rights struggle in South Africa. Certainly, in this lot were to be found black activists like Simon Nkoli and, later, Tanya Chan-Sam. But the majority of GLOW's new black members — and thus the majority of GLOW itself — are young people for whom the organisation has a primarily — and much needed — social function. These are people who, despite the relative upsurge of gay venues in the townships and the fact that blacks are more welcome

than before in gay bars in the city, still find in GLOW gatherings one of the only 'safe places' to 'be themselves'; to meet friends and romantic partners. In this way, they bear a striking resemblance to the white gay men who joined GASA in droves in the early 1980s — with a couple of major exceptions.

Firstly, the fact that these black people, unlike GASA's white members, come from a highly politicised culture and environment, where words like 'struggle' and 'rights' are part of the daily lexicon, means that they are amenable to the liberationist politics that GLOW embraces, even if their primary interest in the organisation is social. Secondly, unlike their white predecessors in GASA, much of GLOW's black membership is of the African urban working-class. For gay people, human rights means, first and foremost, the right to privacy. This is difficult enough for white middle-class people who have the means to live independently, but it is almost impossible in the township where economic conditions and cultural norms dictate that most young black South Africans, gay or straight, remain within the walls of their overcrowded family homes. The political space of an organisation like GLOW is thus fraught with personal and social needs.

The division between 'activist' and 'support' functions is complicated by racial issues; by the fact that many black gay people recently out of the closet often feel alienated by the social ethos and intellectualism of the activist groups. Medi Achmat, a working-class coloured woman from Cape Town, explains why she and a few others founded ABIGALE in 1992:

Black and coloured working-class people didn't feel at home in GASA because it was so white and middle-class. Then OLGA came along, and we didn't feel at home there either. Even though they were part of the United Democratic Front and strictly anti-apartheid, they were still white and middle-class. Black people who went along found it too intellectual. No-one in OLGA took the time to explain the basics. It was all politics and no support. And so we decided to start ABIGALE as way of introduction for black people who have never before been part of a gay organisation.

As with the GLOW, which always links its Annual General Meetings to the far more popular Miss GLOW competition, ABIGALE makes a point of disguising more explicitly political or organisational activity as social gatherings. Says Achmat:

Our members, particularly the coloureds and blacks, don't want to sit in meetings. They want to socialise, and they have no space for this. So we have get-togethers, like bring-and-braais, and then everyone comes. Then in the middle of the festivities we'll have a meeting. And it doesn't matter if they're drunk. Actually it's better. That way we get more out of them!

This activist/socialising division should not, however, be viewed solely as a black-white split. Kleinbooie notes, for example, that his feelings of alienation from the largely-white Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA) at the University of Cape

Town had more to do with a difference in political culture than with the fact that whites wanted to be 'political' and blacks 'social'. In fact, Kleinbooi's experience was the very opposite: GALA's political activism, he maintains, was merely the cover for social activity from which he felt alienated because it was white and middle-class. Similarly, many political activists in organisations like GLOW and ABIGALE make no bones about the fact that these organisations do serve very important social functions, and that only assume more activist roles after they have taken care of more immediate psychological and social needs.

The GLOW Lesbian Forum is a case in point of the primacy of support functions over activist ones. The group was founded from a lesbian-feminist perspective and was intent on providing a safe space for women as well as lobbying for lesbian issues within a male-dominated organisation. But perhaps because of this very male domination, it became a place where lesbians — particularly young ones just out of the closet — could find support and seek mentors. Kim Berman, who was involved in setting up the Forum, comments that

we had no option but look after the immediate needs of our members; women who were very traumatised by having been rejected by their families. Almost every black teenager in the group had made at least one suicide attempt, and there was nowhere to refer them to. And so we became their support-structure, a sort of Lesbians Anonymous. Of course this is critical work. But it meant we had to put more expressly political concerns on hold.

The history of Sunday's Women, a Durban-based organisation of white women formed in the tradition of the American lesbian-feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, is fraught with similar dilemmas. The group started meeting in March 1989 because, says founder Leigh Phipson,

when I graduated from university and started working, I panicked a bit. I thought, how was I ever going to meet anyone? I wasn't into Images (a Durban bar frequented by lesbians), and I wanted an informal group of friends. So I set up Sunday's Women as a reading group for women, but also, very importantly, as a place where I could meet future girlfriends.

For over two years, Sunday's Women met twice-monthly at 'bring-and-share' gatherings: around 25 women would meet, eat, socialise, and then take part in an issue-based discussion. The group was very successful, and brought out a high-quality monthly newsletter which, by 1992, had over 80 subscribers. But the conflict over political versus social functions dominated discussion from the outset, and eventually, once Sunday's Women decided to align itself formally with progressive organisations and take part in the pride marches, several members left the group. The social aspect of Sunday's Women was, in fact, a major contributor to the group's eventual collapse in July 1992. Says Phipson:

The problem was, a lot of our members became involved in relationships, and when these broke up, it became too painful for either one or other member of the couple to come to meetings. Or on the other hand, a lot of women would join Sunday's Women just to meet lovers. And as soon as they coupled off, that was the last we saw of them.

ABIGALE seems to have been more successful in fusing social support and activist functions. Even though its 100-strong membership is largely-male, it is led and run by a lesbian couple, Achmat and her lover, who see themselves as 'die moffies se ma's' (the moffie's mothers). According to Achmat,

most of our members have been cast out, so they are looking for family, and the thing that binds them to ABIGALE is commitment to family. And so we are trying, unlike our own parents and all the parents of our members, to be good mothers.

Achmat acknowledges that this maternal assignation places a lot of difficult emotional pressure on her: her inner-city apartment, for example, has become something of a doss-house for ABIGALE members from the Cape Flats who need sanctuary — or just a place to crash after a night at the club. ABIGALE plans to establish a shelter and skills-training programme for Cape Town's gay men and lesbians who are either homeless or unemployed or both; that, says Achmat, will take some of the pressure off her and Trish. And, she adds,

any good mother's job is to teach her children how to care for themselves and each other. I make a point about teaching ABIGALE members to kiss and hug each other, to be affectionate. That way, they can begin to take over some of the support work I do.

Like the 6010 group before them in Cape Town, the ABIGALE activists see this social support work as a vital primary stage in lesbian and gay organisation, and maintain that more explicitly political work can only take place after it has been done: ABIGALE, says Achmat, is

not really a political thing. The idea is to make people feel comfortable, to give them support and space. The political identity will follow later, only once they have taken care of basic needs can our members become political activists.

Conclusion: 'We want people to feel free'

Despite Medi Achmat's description of ABIGALE as 'not really a political thing', the group had become, by 1993, South Africa's fastest-growing and most strident gay action group, and was beginning to become involved in more direct political activism. In April 1993, ABIGALE picketed Strawbs, Cape Town's most popular gay club, because of provable instances of a racist door policy.

The Strawbs controversy is proof that the racism Simon Nkoli experienced in gay clubs in the early 1980s still exists: even after the collapse of formal apart-

heid, racial divisions continue to dominate lesbian and gay communities just as they do all aspects of South African life. While the possibilities of cross-racial communication are greater, black people remain marginal to the formal white subculture, and insofar as there is now a township gay subculture, this exists parallel to — rather than integrated within — urban gay life.

One consequence of the continued racism of the white gay subculture is illustrated by the widely-held perception within it that the annual pride march is a 'black affair', even though, in 1992, a full 75% of the participants were white. Publicity campaigns in gay bars like Champions and Connections have revealed that the majority of white gay men who participate in Johannesburg's mainstream commercial gay subculture stay away from the march because they find it 'too political', too closely linked to the ANC, and — quite bluntly — too black. For many white gay people, then, 'black' and 'political' are conflated in a perception that links current-day gay activism to black liberationist politics: this liberationism not only heightens their fear of disclosure, but, through its association with the aspirations of South Africa's black majority, runs counter to their own deeply-entrenched conservatism.

But while most white middle-class gay people stay away, so too do most black working-class gays and lesbians. And this points, most strongly, to the dilemma in which current progressive lesbian and gay politics now finds itself: its expressly liberationist ideology alienates the conservative white gay subculture while its expressly political profile does not talk directly to the interests of recently unclosetted gay men and lesbians from the townships who need social space and support.

Perhaps this dilemma will resolve itself with the diversification of activities that will inevitably accompany the maturation of lesbian and gay subcultures in South Africa. It would be unrealistic to expect all these subcultures — the sports groups, the activist groups, the religious groups, the bar and shebeen scenes — to find common ground before having established themselves, firmly and irrevocably, in their own respective rights.

But that just leads to another dilemma. On the one hand, this country's lesbian and gay subcultures have not yet matured to the point of being able to constitute an effective, coherent and united political minority. But on the other hand, because South Africa is at a moment of profound constitutional change, there is the urgency for that kind of united lobby to make its presence felt right now, as right now is when the terms of a future South Africa are being negotiated, and whatever rights are negotiated in this window-period of transition will see South Africa well into the next century.

In May 1990, only months after the unbanning of the liberation movements, ANC constitutional lawyer, Albie Sachs spoke at an OLGA press conference in Cape Town and said:

What has happened to lesbian and gay people is the essence of apartheid — it tried to tell people who they were, how they should behave, what their rights were. The essence of democ-

racy is that people should be free to be what they are. We want people to feel free.

Sachs' sentiments are, three years later, still not entirely shared by his own comrades, not to mention the other parties sitting around the negotiating table. Neither are they shared by most of the other major opinion-formers in the country: in this overwhelmingly religious land, not even the more liberal English-speaking churches have taken an unequivocal stand supportive of homosexual rights. At this putative moment of concern for the rights of all South Africans, any call for gay rights sounds shrill, self-interested and with the potential to detract from the larger struggle for democracy. Even in Sach's own formulation — 'people should be free to be what they are' — one can hear the cadences of a liberalism that seems rather frivolous when compared with the more pressing issues of the powerless, landless, economically underprivileged black majority.

How, then, to resolve all the above dilemmas? Certainly, a partial answer is to be found in the agreement at the constitutional negotiations, to protect gay people in a future Bill of Rights. An equal rights provision in a new democratic constitution could provide the basis for local government allocating funds and space for community centres; or the basis for airtime on public television; or, most important, the basis for a review of laws that discriminate against homosexuals. All of the above would not only raise public consciousness about the issues facing gays and lesbians, but might also serve to activate an effective national political minority out of a disjointed range of subcultures. We might see, once more, the power of 'the gay vote' as experienced in the 1987 white Parliamentary elections, except this time with a broader base and sounder political agenda.

In the meanwhile, the bonding-agents of community — the sports clubs, counselling centres, religious groups, bars, clubs and social networks — will continue to make space. And activists from within this community will continue to organise slowly-growing pride marches, lobby political parties, recruit members and make noise. There might not be a 'gay moment', as there was in 1993 in the United States, with a President courting 'the gay vote' and nailing his colours (albeit falteringly) to gay issues, but there are — and will continue to be — a series of 'gay moments' in which homosexual South Africans assert themselves: on sports fields, in shebeens, in industry, in academics, in the law, in the media, on the streets. There will continue to be moments, growing slowly in number and less fraught with the anxieties of disclosure, in which lesbian and gay South Africans will be able to imbibe Sachs' 'essence of democracy' and feel safe enough to be 'free to be what they are'.

Which brings us back to Phiri Hall on Saturday 13 February 1993. Linda Ngcobo's funeral was one of the only expressions of true democracy I have ever experienced in this hitherto undemocratic land. For there, even as they paraded their difference before an intimidating crowd of swaying congregationists, hundreds of gay people asserted, incontrovertibly, that they were part of a community: part of the community that had come to bury Linda Ngcobo. They took up their rightful place in the hall, at the microphone, beside the coffin, beside the grave. And thus

they made sure that Linda Ngcobo — their Linda Ngcobo, the gay Linda Ngcobo, the activist Linda Ngcobo, the drag-queen Linda Ngcobo — will live and breathe freely in a future South Africa. What a tragic and ironic shame that Ngcobo himself won't be here to see it.

Notes

- * Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from personal interviews held between January and May 1993.
- 1 For an excellent synthesis of this debate, see Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey Jr. eds, *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (Penguin, 1991), Introduction.
 - 2 *Natal Daily News*, 23 July 1956.
 - 3 See John D'Emilio, 'Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II', in *Hidden From History*, p459. D'Emilio deals with the construction of gay communities in the United States more extensively in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago, 1983). An excellent account of the makings of gay community in Britain is to be found in Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the 19th Century to the Present* (London, 1977).
 - 4 See Allan Berubé, 'Marching to a Different Drummer: Lesbian and Gay GIs in World War II', in *Hidden from History*.
 - 5 For an account of how this has worked in South Africa, see Gordon Isaacs and Brian McKendrick, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa: Identity Formation, Culture and Crisis* (Cape Town, 1992).
 - 6 See Elizabeth Lapousky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, 'Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold', in *The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York and London, 1993). The Canadian documentary film, *Forbidden Love*, also offers a vivid portrait of North American lesbian communities in the era, particularly in Vancouver.
 - 7 *Sunday's Women*, September 1990.
 - 8 D'Emilio notes that these organisations cultivated an image of middle-class respectability and worked for social change through 'the good offices of professionals. They saw their task primarily as one of educating the professionals who influenced public opinion and only secondarily as one of organising lesbians and gay men.' (*Hidden From History*, p460)
 - 9 *Cape Times*, 19 March 1969.
 - 10 *The Cape Argus*, 18 March 1969.
 - 11 *The Friend*, 19 March 1969.
 - 12 *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 April 1969.
 - 13 Quoted in Willem and Evanthe Schurink, 'Some Characteristics of the Homosexual Subculture as Reflected by a South African Gay Club', paper of the Human Sciences Research Council, p11. The Schurinks have done an astonishing amount of work on gay (largely white and Afrikaans) subcultures in South Africa. See also 'Die Gay Assosiasie van Suid-Afrika: 'n Sociologiese Beskouing' (HSRC:1986); 'Gayness: A Sociological Perspective' (HSRC: 1986); and *AIDS: Lay perceptions of a group of gay men* (HSRC: 1990).
 - 14 *Exit*, July/August 1987.
 - 15 *Natal Daily News*, 20 April 1972.
 - 16 *Natal Daily News*, 18 May 1972.
 - 17 Leonie Woolfson, 'Aetiological and Personality Factors Relating to Homosexual Behaviour in Adult Females', Masters thesis, UNISA, 1975.
 - 18 Just under three years later, at the beginning of 1981, a second report into lesbianism was to be published, this time by W.J. Schurink, *Gay Vroue: n Sosiologiese Verkenning van die Leefwyse van n Aantal Lesbiërs aan die Hand van Outobiografiese Sketse*, (HSRC, 1981). Coming from a state research organisation, the report unexpectedly offered some particularly enlightened

conclusions: most notably that lesbians had a very high self-image and level of self-acceptance. Both the Woolfson and the Schurink reports are based on extensive interviews with white women; in 1992, however, a Ph.D thesis (C Potgieter-Theys, 'The Gender Construction and Social Identity of Black South African Lesbian Women', University of Cape Town, 1992) dealt explicitly with black lesbians.

- 19 *The Star*, 21 July 1979.
- 20 *The Star*, 1 September 1979.
- 21 *The Star*, 28 May 1980.
- 22 WJ Beaumont, 'Thoughts on Gay Pop Culture in South Africa', unpublished paper, 1992.
- 23 *The Star*, 9 January 1982.
- 24 *The Star*, 28 October 1982.
- 25 *Link/Skakel*, December 1982.
- 26 *The Star*, 4 April 1983.
- 27 *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 November 1982.
- 28 *The Star*, 4 April 1983.
- 29 Cited in *The Star*, 1 May 1983.
- 30 *The Star*, 29 November 1985.
- 31 *Weekly Mail*, 12-18 October 1990.
- 32 *Capital Gay*, cited in *Link/Skakel* September 1983.
- 33 'GASA-6010 Turns 10', *Exit*, August/September 1991.
- 34 *Link/Skakel*, February 1983, No 0110, 'AIDS Panic is Overstressed'.
- 35 John Pegge, Gordon Isaacs and Stephen Miller, 'Networking: A Prevention and Care Strategy for the Gay Minority in South Africa', paper presented to the Xth International Conference on AIDS, Montreal, 1991, p1.
- 36 *The Star*, March 1985.
- 37 *The Star*, 14 August 1985.
- 38 Reported in *Exit*, March 1986.
- 39 By 1993, the fund had accrued to more than R120 000, and, in that year, the trustees made over the assets to a new trust which will focus on lobbying the constitutional process to ensure a lesbian and gay equality clause in South Africa's new constitution.
- 40 *Exit*, June/July 1987.
- 41 *Weekly Mail*, 13 September 1991.
- 42 Kim Berman, 'Lesbians in SA: Challenging the Invisibility' in M Krouse and K Berman eds, *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa* (COSAW, 1993), pxvii.
- 43 This and all following information on kwaThema was originally reported in 'Township gays find a haven at Ma Thoko's', *Weekly Mail*, 10 November 1990, and 'Will British Sgxabai be the gay Biko?', *Weekly Mail*, 22 January 1991. 'Ma Thoko' died unexpectedly in 1993.
- 44 *Glow Letter*, April 1992, p2.
- 45 *Glow Letter*, April 1992, p2.
- 46 *Capital Gay*, 18 September 1987.
- 47 *Exit*, December 1991.
- 48 *Work In Progress (incorporating New Era)*, no 82, June 1992, p13.
- 49 See Charles van Onselen, *The Small Matter of a Horse* (Ravan Press, 1984) for an account of another form of homosexuality in black all-male societies. Van Onselen documents the way members of a gang in the 1920s practised homosexuality as a way of community bonding.
- 50 T. Dunbar Moodie et al, 'Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines', in *Hidden from History*.
- 51 Patrick Harries, 'Symbols and Sexuality: Culture and Identity on the early Witwatersrand Gold Mines', *Gender and History*, 2:3, p333.
- 52 J Gay, "'Mummies and Babies" and Friends and Lovers in Lesotho', in E Blackwood ed, *Anthropology and Homosexual Behaviour* (Haworth Press, 1986).
- 53 *Weekly Mail*, 10 November 1990.

54 See Mbali Mncadi, 'The Right to Choose: Gay and Lesbian Rights', *Mayibuye*, July 1992.

55 From video footage taken by Zackie Achmat and Jack Lewis

56 Graeme Reid, 'A Brief History of GLOW', unpublished paper 1992.