

Asserting Difference, Asserting Sameness: Heteronormativity, Homonormativity, and Subversion in South African Pride Events

By Sarah-Ann Moore



Image by Heather Mason

*“I am black and I am gay. I cannot separate the two into secondary or primary struggles” -
Simon Nkoli*

In recent years, South African Pride events have been the subject of much criticism. While not wishing to dismiss the possible value of such events, the following discussion will seek to demonstrate some of the ways in which the neoliberal, assimilationist political agenda currently dominating LGBTIQ+ movements in South Africa fails to subvert heteronormative and homonormative systems of power. Recent events have prompted such a discussion, most notably the disruption of the 2012 Joburg Pride parade, where activist organisation One in Nine aimed to disrupt the parade in order to protest systemic violence targeting black lesbians in South Africa - calling for one minute of silence for black, queer victims of violence (Hengeveld & Tallie, 2012; Tallie, 2014). This protest was met with animosity and violence from the predominantly white parade attendees (Hengeveld & Tallie, 2012). Such events speak to the contested nature of Pride as a site of protest and celebration in and around queer communities. Similar tensions surrounding Pride, its history, and its evolution in South Africa

will be explored, with the view to interrogate how such events may illustrate the conflict between heteronormative and homonormative precepts, and subversive political engagement.

The politics of identity feature prominently within LGBTIQ+ movements and are often closely associated with notions of community. Notably, the concept of a ‘community’ identity is strongly promoted in the rhetoric of Pride (Craven, 2012). However, if a community is understood as a group characterised by shared experience, shared oppression, and collective needs and interests, such a group becomes increasingly difficult to identify (Craven, 2012). Although certain discursive moves have been undertaken in an attempt to accommodate such limitations (observed, for example, in the modifications the acronym LGBTIQ+ has undergone over time), notions of community nevertheless maintain principles of inclusion and exclusion, as evidenced by some of the tensions characterising Pride (Craven, 2012). As such, it is necessary to mediate between a need for unity and an appreciation of difference. Such mediation becomes particularly vital in relation to groups that face high levels of discrimination and marginalisation (Craven, 2012).

Strategies to secure certain rights for queer persons within the existing social order have relied heavily on perpetrating the appearance of ‘normality’, where differences should be minimised and similarities exalted (Verloo & Lombardo, 2007). Similarly, current critiques of South African Pride events point to the adoption of a neoliberal and assimilationist agenda, which effectively reduces the performative and political power of such events through an almost exclusive focus on partying and celebration. Although celebration is not inherently detrimental to social progress, it must be coupled with a political agenda in order to effectively trouble and destabilise systems of marginalization and oppression (Schutte, 2012). In seeking to establish a system of equal rights, LGBTIQ+ movements in South Africa have failed to adequately address the enormous disparities in political power and influence which characterises different groups of South African citizens (Elshtain, 1975). Oftentimes, a neoliberal and assimilationist approach assumes that within a racist, sexist, and economically stratified context, all individuals will have equal access to certain rights and privileges (Richardson, 2008). Failure to acknowledge and address such disparities is clearly evidenced in the history of Pride in South Africa.

Mirroring the broader political agenda in South Africa, the first few Pride marches in Johannesburg (the first of which took place in 1990ⁱ) were firmly rooted in issues pertaining to serious political protest (de Waal & Manion, 2006). However, a perceptible shift occurred in 1994 when the name of the event was changed from a ‘march’ to a ‘parade’ (de Waal & Manion, 2006). It was suggested that the event had become ‘too political’ (or rather it was

perceived as too political) and it was believed that a shift in terminology would make the event more ‘accessible’ (Craven, 2012; de Waal & Manion, 2006). Although a period of depoliticisation within South African social movements in the mid to late 1990s has been well documented, such a shift also speaks to an assimilationist agenda to appear non-threatening so as not to frighten heterosexuals and white, cisgender homosexuals alike (Craven, 2012).

Until 2002, the annual Joburg Pride parade took place in and around the inner city of Johannesburg with the route regularly traversing areas including the CBD, Braamfontein, Newtown, Hillbrow, and Yeoville (de Waal & Manion, 2006). In 2002, the parade was moved to the Zoo Lake area in the suburb of Rosebank. Arguments in favour of this move centred on the need to accommodate increasing numbers of parade attendees and after-march events, and perceptions that the inner city had become an ‘unpleasant’ space. In comparison to the CBD and its surrounds which have increasingly become home to black residents, the suburb of Rosebank is almost exclusively white (Craven, 2012; de Waal & Manion, 2006). In 2013, the parade moved again to the highly affluent Sandton district, largely home to white residents, and also increasingly the centre of the economic elite. In 2016, Pride was held in Melrose Arch, with organisers citing issues of safety in justifying the decision to continue to host Pride in areas of privilege, stating that a “backlash from a small minority” was an acceptable cost in order to ensure that “everyone is comfortable and safe” (“Major changes as Johannesburg Pride 2016 moves to Melrose Arch”, 2016). Such changes in location speak to issues of white privilege, and also suggest undercurrents of racism in the organisation of Pride.

Such a move also speaks to very specific economic segregation, since the area is not serviced by public transport networks in the same way as the city centre, making it less accessible to people who lack private transport. Access to the event itself has also become increasingly restricted. In 2004 a decision was made to charge an entrance fee to gain access to the post-march festivities at Joburg Pride. Although this decision proved highly controversial and as such has not been repeated, other similar policies serve to marginalise economically disadvantaged individuals. For instance, in 2010, the Pride board made the decision to prohibit bringing food or drink into the official venue, effectively marginalising those individuals who cannot afford to purchase food and beverages at the event (Craven, 2012). Those wishing to attend all ‘official’ events of the 2017 Cape Town Pride Festival week would be required to pay between R250 (discount ticket) and R400 just to gain access to these events, excluding the cost of transportation, food, and beverages – which speaks to a failure to significantly account for economic stratification.

Further critiques of Pride have centred on the emergence of normative privileging of gender-conforming queer persons. Such an emergence is evidenced in the attempts to police the behaviour, dress, and forms of demonstration taking place at Pride events. Such questions inevitably seem to arise in relation to Pride events, most often resulting in privileged individuals (within homonormative contexts) attempting to pronounce what is considered ‘appropriate’ at such events (Craven, 2012). In most cases, the discourse around this seems to stem from the notion that LGBTIQ+ persons should ‘blend and not offend’ in the projection of their community to the outside world (Craven, 2012). Such issues have become particularly prevalent in recent years in relation to the place of transgender people in Pride events. Given arguments that the key to acceptability in broader society requires a certain pandering to heteronormative prejudices and attempts to alleviate fears concerning ‘deviance’, gender non-conforming individuals are further marginalised when members of their own ‘community’ decry the media focus on people in drag or in some way ‘outrageously’ dressed (although such depictions also point to media prejudices in their depiction of LGBTIQ+ persons) (Craven, 2012; de Waal & Manion, 2006).

Pride has also been implicated in silencing those persons without access to the means of setting the ‘community’ agenda (for example, boards and planning committees for both Joburg and Cape Town Pride consist overwhelmingly of white, affluent, gay cisgender men), thus entrenching inequalities and blocking any avenues for contestation (Davis, 2012; Tallie, 2014). Calls for a unified front in the face of high levels of homophobia and its increasingly violent manifestation also often serve to silence dissidence surrounding issues of secondary marginalisation. Video footage of the 2012 Joburg Prideⁱⁱ demonstrates the kind of reception received by activists seeking to point out such instances of marginalisation represented by the One in Nine campaign. Seeking to engage in peaceful protest and calling for one minute of silence on behalf of the many black lesbians and transgender individuals who have been murdered over the past few years because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, activists were pushed, sworn at, physically threatened with motor vehicles, and told to “go back to your lokshins” (Davis, 2012). The response to such a peaceful protest is highly representative of the racist undercurrent of Pride events in South Africa. Organisations such as Free Gender have been at the forefront of pointing out that events forming part of Cape Town Pride are exclusionary and fail to represent black LGBTIQ+ communities. In response to such critiques, new and separate Pride events (such as Soweto Pride, the People’s Pride, and Ekurhuleni Pride) have been established in order “reclaim our space within Pride” through both

marching and celebrating many intersectional struggles, including (but not limited to) those surrounding sexual orientation (Davis, 2012; Hengeveld, & Tallie, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the strategy of assimilation has resulted in certain victories for some members of the LGBTIQ+ movement (Eskridge, 2013). Pride serves as the most public event organised for and by LGBTIQ+ communities, and can serve as a useful vehicle in creating awareness for certain LGBTIQ+ issues (Gevisser & Reid, 1994). Moreover, there are few available spaces able to facilitate the coming together of multiple groupings within the LGBTIQ+ 'community' in South Africa. Thus, for many, Pride serves as an important community event by virtue of providing such a space (Croce, 2015; de Waal & Manion, 2006). As Marinucci (2010) contends, certain challenges to the status quo sometimes serve to deny or ignore the lived realities of some individuals, and the significance these might hold for them. It is important for engagement to remain cognisant that some individuals may have begun to protect, perceive, and value themselves through the emotional and relational vocabulary of an assimilationist agenda (Croce, 2015), and may be highly invested in a particular identity formation despite possible limitations and oppressions these may entail.

Nevertheless, lack of recognition must be addressed. There is a need to trade forms of duality with understandings of multiplicity. We need to acknowledge the usefulness of identity categories whilst still recognising that no particular category is inherently necessary; they all remain subject to potential revision (Marinucci, 2010). It is necessary to create spaces that allow for practices that adhere to *and* subvert heteronormative and homonormative precepts, thus serving to destabilise prevailing norms and expectations of group membership (Hindman, 2011). As queer persons we need to acknowledge that we have been complicit in creating new oppressions and forms of secondary marginalisation. There is an increasing need to examine the way we practice our politics if the tensions that currently operate within LGBTIQ+ communities are to be substantively addressed and significant redress is to occur.

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ⁱ Given the dangerous political climate at this time, many marchers opted to wear paper bags over their faces to hide their identity (Blignaut, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Footage can be viewed by clicking on the following links:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hnxip-T_Hnw&t=238s
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ugK3yazLwQ>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzBTRu_oVF4