

VOLUME 1



LOOKING THROUGH THE PRISM

Narratives of queer dignity in South Africa

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Narratives of queer dignity in South Africa

ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

This series has been prepared by the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Unit of the Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria.

The Centre for Human Rights (the Centre) is an academic department of the Faculty of Law at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It also doubles as a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO). It therefore functions as a teaching, training and research department as well as implementing human rights projects akin to the style of an NPO. The Centre’s reach is within South Africa and beyond, particularly on the African continent. The Centre enjoys ‘observer status’ with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Centre has also submitted cases before the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights. It, therefore, identifies itself as a pan-African organisation. It specialises in human rights law and human rights issues on the African continent, while linking these to global human rights knowledge streams and discourses from other regions of the world.

Formed in May 2016, the SOGIESC Unit’s mandate is to advocate for and work towards equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, non-violence and non-heterosexism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other non-binary and gender nonconforming people. The SOGIESC Unit has been responsible for presenting statements at the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights on LGBTIQ+ issues; drafting soft law instruments and a model law on intersex rights for possible adoption by regional bodies; conducting research on and promoting awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues; organising a yearly advanced human rights short course on sexual minorities rights; and convening a strategic litigation and advocacy workshop for LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders in Africa.

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FOREWORD

In 1996, South Africa became the first country in the world to constitutionally prohibit unfair discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Along with the eradication of apartheid and the day-to-day renegotiation of race relations, this unique constitutional inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people has truly earned South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s fond nickname for the country ‘Rainbow Nation’.

In the 25 years since that historic dawn, LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa have had to push through several social and legal challenges – from violence to institutional discrimination – in order to emerge as a vibrant and leading community in Africa helping to promote equality, non-violence, and decriminalisation for LGBTIQ+ people across the continent. While there are still a number of issues in South Africa that stand in the way of full realisation of LGBTIQ+ rights, the country has become a haven for persecuted sexual and gender minorities and allies from across Africa who seek an environment where they can thrive and self-actualise without the fear of state or societal harassment or persecution.

In celebration of the lives of LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa, the narratives in this photo collection offer a glimpse into queer life in the Rainbow Nation. The narratives shed light on the issues and concerns of LGBTIQ+ persons as they navigate their daily lives under the South African Constitution. Whether it is finding a career path, navigating academic studies in a new country, or finding love and friendship, these narratives bring together a collection of moving, joyful, and sometimes sad stories told from an often poignantly personal perspective.

Many of the themes in this series question conventional perspectives on queerness, self-expression and sexual and gender diversity. Despite the existence of extensive legal protections for LGBTIQ+ rights in South Africa, there is still a need for positive change in knowledge, attitudes and practice in addressing LGBTIQ+ issues and concerns by the general public and policymakers for the better enjoyment of rights by LGBTIQ+ persons.

While the photographs and interviews serve to depict the specific individuals featured in this collection, they are the distinctive representation of the experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons in the wider South African context. They can be seen as part of a growing movement challenging the traditional, confining categories into which representation of the queer experience in South Africa has been polarised between the binaries of glitzy or violent that are often showcased in the media. Instead, these narratives attempt to show the everyday-ness of queer life beyond the headlines, while at the same time demonstrating its difference from the everyday. In the words of one of the interviewees, Sohela: ‘Being queer is not just like being everyone else, it has this tiny difference where there is real scope to question things much more widely and I think that is something worth celebrating.’

Prof Frans Viljoen
Director, Centre for Human Rights
September 2021

INTRODUCTION

‘[H]uman dignity, like art, must be understood within a person’s own social and cultural context’
- C Craven, ‘How the visual arts can further the cause of human rights’

South Africa continues to remain a contradiction when it comes to the protection of human rights. On one hand, its history of apartheid has created a fierce social culture around the protection of individual rights, particularly against violations by the government. On the other hand, there are still worrying social attitudes towards the rights of groups vulnerable to violence in South African society, particularly women, migrants, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) community. In several instances, this attitude has led to sudden bursts of violence.

In the case of LGBTIQ+ persons in South Africa, violent hate crimes and other forms of social discrimination have continued against the community despite shifts towards the legal protection against discrimination for LGBTIQ+ people. For instance, in early 2021, a string of excessively violent murders led to the murders of Bonang Gaele, Nonhlanhla Kunene, Sphamandla Khoza, Nathaniel “SpokGoane” Mbele, Andile “Lulu” Nthuthela, Lonwabo Jack, Buhle Phoswa and Lucky “Kleinboy” Motshabi.¹ The legal recognition for the equality of LGBTIQ+ persons appears to be insufficient in effecting material change to address these questions of discrimination, harassment and persistent violence. These hate crimes and other forms of discrimination are so well documented that they have spilled into other disciplines including the visual and performing arts.

Our work at the SOGIESC Unit of the Centre for Human Rights has often focused on academic and policy engagement (including encouraging and supporting litigation before the Equality Courts), but we also understand that visual arts, especially photography, can be utilised to create awareness of human rights violations in a more visceral way. Certainly, engagement with legal methods and the scholarly analysis of human rights principles have their uses in the advancement of knowledge, but this approach is often susceptible to prioritising form over function; and prone to focusing more on the state and less on the affected community. As such, even when policies change, social attitudes remain the same.

¹ P de Vos ‘The religious fig leaf that conceals the justification of hate crimes against the LGBTQ community’ (2 May 2021) <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-05-02-the-religious-fig-leaf-that-conceals-the-justification-of-hate-crimes-against-the-lgbtq-community/> (accessed 1 September 2021).

Visual arts can be an effective medium of communicating the nature of human rights, their function within social, economic, and political systems of the state, and the mechanisms they provide to access a life of dignity in a way that is accessible to everyday people in society and that focuses on the affected communities. This ideal informed the conceptualisation and development of this series. Our approach to the photography and interviews was designed to ‘centre’ the person featured and present their stories as authentic representations from the queer community. It was also important to include narratives from lesser documented community members including transgender women and men and LGBTIQ+ persons who still have to conceal their identities.

This project does not just seek to share the challenges facing the LGBTIQ+ community in South Africa, but also to highlight the various experiences, encounters and moments in the lives of LGBTIQ+ persons. These moments range from understanding one’s sexual orientation or gender identity to inflection points in relationships with family, friends, and lovers. The narratives in these series are a journey of discovery into the unique and yet ordinary lives of an everyday LGBTIQ+ person.

We have tried to preserve the narratives in the form that they were shared with us as much as possible – and any imperfections are ours. However, we hope that through this collection, you will have an even better appreciation of the human experience in all of its diversity and in all of its sameness. And we hope that, in turn, this appreciation will inspire you to work towards the better protection of LGBTIQ+ persons in South Africa and across Africa.

Thiruna Naidoo and Dr Ayodele Sogunro
Centre for Human Rights
September 2021

SYLVESTER

I am the boy the doctors called a girl based on my biological features! So, growing up, I really experienced a different life to that of a typical girl who is raised to be a woman. When I was 9 years old, I played football with boys and never associated myself with girls or even girl's clothes. I used to fight with my older brother about clothes. During Christmas Eve, my parents used to buy pink and white dresses - to them they were raising that girl the doctors told them I was. But I didn't feel the attachment to that. I grew up feeling, probably, 'I am a different kid' but I didn't know what that was all about. When I went to high school (boarding section), they asked our parents to buy a red T-shirt and black skirts, but I always sneaked a pair of black shorts that I would always wear instead of the skirt. It is in high school that I met girls that liked girls and so I identified as a lesbian for some time because that is what I knew. This was the closest thing I could relate to. It was in my senior year that a friend of mine explained the transgender terminology and trans identity to me. It was then that I realised "transman" was the best description of how I felt. I got to know I was trans that late in life because the society I grew up in never exposed me to different gender identities other than male or female.

However, little did I know that embracing my true self as a transgender person in Uganda was the beginning of a new era in my life. Since I used to play a lot of sports, I got a scholarship in some university but in their rules a 'girl' was expected to behave and dress up as one. My gender expression did not affirm to what a typical girl's expression should be so I could not join that university. I then went to one of the progressive universities in Uganda (Makerere University) but even there, school life was hard for me as a trans person. I nearly dropped out of campus because every time I would walk around on campus, someone was talking about me and saying hateful statements. Students in my class and around campus looked at me like an alien. There are a lot of traumatizing moments I can't explain here but it was difficult for me and there is no single time I felt comfortable being in school in Uganda as a trans person.



My experience of South Africa started in 2019 and being here for a while was really eye opening. My first encounter was with hotels. I am not sure if this hotel was outsourced but it was so fascinating, the way that they were so accommodative to trans people. I was staying with a transwoman, and no one cared about how she dressed or looked at us abnormally which would have been the case in my country Uganda where you will find some hotels are even refusing to host our meetings. Back home, you will be verbally abused daily, and people will backbite you when you enter a hotel. South Africa really struck me and fascinated me as a trans person because this is a more diverse community and I had never seen that before. I then came back to South Africa to study. I prayed people here are accommodating and accepting of trans people because that was my issue back home.

I think coming to South Africa and finding that the Centre for Human Rights was accommodative to me as a trans-person was the best experience ever for me. I've not received this acceptance back home. This is the most I have been comfortable studying and I feel I can't compare the two countries really.

A positive thing I've been mentioning to my colleagues that really shook me was the fact that my university department has a gender-neutral toilet for its employees. Back home, except in offices of NGOs that work with LGBTI persons, you will never find a university that has gender-neutral toilets.



SO, AS A TRANS PERSON COMING TO THE CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS WHO DIDN'T HAVE TO THINK OR HIDE OR BE NERVOUS WHEN GOING TO A WASHROOM, THIS WAS A GOOD THING FOR ME. IT SHOOK ME.

Hmm, I thought all was good in South Africa, but I guess this was because I was coming from a country that is more oppressive towards LGBTQ persons, even in their laws. It was shocking for me to discover that even in South Africa which I called progressive, not everyone has really reached that level of understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ persons. I met some refugee LGBTQ friends who shared some of their stories with me. This is when I realized there are many people in South Africa who are both transphobic and homophobic. Another incident that shocked me was, I attended a Zoom workshop where a doctor – a South African doctor – was advocating for conversion therapy. This was the last nail in the coffin. I'm not betting on the fact that the country has progressive laws. But there is a lot that still must be addressed for example gender affirming health care, safe and security plus other social services geared towards LGBTIQ+ people in South Africa. My last words to everyone out there: never hate a fellow human being for embracing their sexual orientation, gender diversity or gender expression. Respect people's rights and provide services to everyone irrespective of their gender identity or sexual orientation because we are also humans and deserving of equal rights and protection.



SHEREE

I am 23 years old. I am currently in my final year at UCT. I'm studying occupational therapy. I'm from KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

My hometown is very small, with small-minded people and there is no queer culture there at all. I think that definitely influenced me in terms of my sexuality. Also, expressing myself through my clothes, hair and jewellery is not possible there. If you are different in any way, people see it as bad. So when I moved to Johannesburg, there was a lot more diversity which I think allowed me to grow into myself. However, it wasn't until I moved to Cape Town that I really started thriving and living authentically as myself because...

CAPE TOWN IS SO ACCEPTING AND DIVERSE AND LIBERAL AND PEOPLE DON'T EVEN LOOK AT ME TWICE WHEN I AM OUT ON THE STREET WHICH IS REALLY NICE. CAPE TOWN IS DEFINITELY WHERE I FEEL MOST AT HOME.

Growing up, I kind of had sexual encounters with girls. I would kiss girls and stuff like that but never really took that to mean being queer or gay or anything like that. In my Grade 11 year we moved to Johannesburg. When I moved schools there was this girl who showed interest in me and at first I insisted that I don't like girls. But the more we spent time together, the more I realised I liked her and developed feelings which then eventually led to us getting into a relationship. That was in 2014, I was 17 years old.

My dad just stopped communicating with me when I was 10, which was difficult to go through. He and my mom were never married. I would see him on weekends only at first and one day, it just stopped and I haven't heard from him since then and I still don't know why. There still hasn't been any communication from him.

In Matric, I got expelled from school, because of the relationship with my girlfriend at the time and this incident is actually how I kind of came out to my family. Well I didn't come out, I was forced out. That was really genuinely difficult and my relationship with my family was not good. My mum and I didn't speak for months.





The story is that I was a bit reckless with my girlfriend and we had sex in the bathroom at school and someone reported this. It was this big thing and they called both our parents in for meetings and I knew it was really bad. I remember the principal asking what I want to study and I said occupational therapy and the principal said she would never let me touch her child. It was really bad and it was difficult to hear what she was saying and to have my parents there listening and not defend me. My mother was really disappointed and called me a whore and said that I couldn't even stay a virgin before my 18th birthday. I had to finish Matric at home by myself. When I went in for final exams, I wasn't allowed to speak to anyone, not even my friends and I had to wear civvies. It was really a hard time and my relationship also ended so I was dealing with heartbreak on top of everything. It was definitely double standards because it was a queer relationship. There were many instances of straight couples in the school who had sex at school or who would be super affectionate in class and kiss but somehow nothing ever happened to them. As much as I know what we did was wrong, I just felt like the punishment and the way it was handled was so harsh and it had to do with the fact that we were a queer couple.

NTHATI

When I was maybe 10, I really loved making stuff. I made jewellery, I made sculptures, not that they were good at all. I painted this thing that's on my wall in my house. I just liked making stuff. And I really liked to dress boldly, I was that person on Civvies Day that was like, 'You need to see my outfit!' You know it has to stand out. And then when Lady Gaga stepped on to the scene I was obsessed, I was like, 'This woman is it, right?' And she was not the only one, but I remember because I actually made like a 30-page file, documenting Lady Gaga's style, and I wrote stuff about why I liked each outfit. I wrote a whole essay on the meat dress when I was just in Grade 7. I just really loved her, I loved that clothes could be so expressive, you didn't have to talk or know anyone, and you could look at their clothing and could tell something about them.

In high school I did visual arts and design. I ended up doing a course in garment construction at the Design School for South Africa on Thursday nights while I was in Grade 11. I learned a lot but then I just didn't know if I liked constructing clothing. But I am glad I have the experience and I am glad I know how clothes are made. Then in Matric when we had to choose what we were going to specialise in for our final year project, I chose graphic design because I like words as well. I like the idea of copy writing and being able to come up with cool slogans. I just felt that it would be easier to make statements through graphic design, so I did that. Then the following year I learned a lot of horrible things about the clothing industry, not that I was completely unaware of but it was like 'Woah, I cannot be a part of it.' I learnt horrible things about the clothing and textile industry in terms of labour, in terms of the environment, in terms of the capitalist agenda of it all, so I just decided that I didn't want to be a designer anymore. But I still love clothing. I still love expressing myself through clothing though I've gotten shy about it. I enjoy styling and doing those type of things. It is really where it comes from, I like pretty things, weird things, and interesting looking things.

Maybe in Grade 8 or 9 I realised I was queer. It was at break time and we were having a conversation, just teenage talk, hypersexualised - you know teenagers. Talk like 'Would you date a girl?' I would say 'Yeah, I don't see why not.'





I never blocked it out of my imagination but at the time I also had never seriously dated or really done sexual things - not even kiss anyone. It was at the age of 17 when I had my first girlfriend and then other people's reactions were like 'Woah', so then I was like 'Oh okay this is kind of problem I guess.'

Most recently in 2017, I was an au pair in North Carolina. That was difficult. That was the worst 6 months of my life. It was extremely challenging as a black and queer woman living with a white lesbian couple. The challenge was not my queerness but rather my blackness and perceived inferiority as a result. This was the first time I truly experienced marginalised people oppressing another marginalised person. The clashes were about me being from Africa even though they knew that before I got there. They kept comparing me to the previous nanny who was from Brazil. There was a lot of mistreatment and she received special treatment because being Brazilian is better than African in their eyes. Despite this I learned a lot of queerness and delinking from colonial ways of being through volunteering at Time Out Youth Centre, an organisation that housed queer and particularly trans, vulnerable youth. These were some of my first real honest experiences with trans youth, transitioning and the risk that can come with simply trying to live your truth, even in a first world country.

I think I have learnt a lot from other queer people, particularly trans people and gender non-conforming people. I learnt so much from people in our community about how other oppressed groups can successfully delink themselves from systems of oppression and that idea makes me really happy.

IT IS NOT DEFIANT, BEING QUEER. IT IS NOT AN ACT OF DEFIANCE, IT IS NOT A CHOICE OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT BUT CHOOSING TO LIVE IT OUT, BOLDLY AND EVEN KNOWING HOW DANGEROUS IT CAN BE IN SOME PARTS OF THE WORLD IS REALLY COOL AND INSPIRING TO ME.

And I just feel like other groups of oppressed people could learn so much from this community. I learned so much from seeing other people's experiences, especially people who have it harder than me.

SOHELA

The first time I really realised I was queer, I think I was in Grade 9 or 10, when there was actual interaction with other queer people, and I very specifically remember the moment of realisation just being standing in front of a mirror and daring to say the words. And this was such a scary moment.

My parents are straight. My mom is Muslim, and my father is Hindu and when they got married this was socially unacceptable and my mom was disowned, kicked out of her house and my father also faced a bit of tension at home. This is a story that they have always told me. It is a story that I have grown up knowing and understanding. But it is not just a story, I can relate to it, considering my queer identity and how intolerance and prejudice work but also a story of how these can be overcome and how, in a very clichéd way, love is love and love can conquer those things. It also reflects how two people and the community that then steps in to support them are capable of overcoming great challenges. It is the story that informed how I think about my life and the type of activism I want to do and just the type of person I want to be.





Being able to express my queerness has been an incredibly liberating experience. I think this is because being queer means you are pushed, to some extent, to question ideas of family or gender regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, because you are in that way different from the dominant way of being. It is almost like an invitation to keep questioning things. It is not just being like, 'Well I specifically want to marry a woman', but also saying 'How else does the way we think about relationships as a society constrain us?' or 'How else does the way that we think about what women should do or what looks good or how people should behave restrict us?'

BEING QUEER IS NOT JUST BEING LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, IT HAS THIS TINY DIFFERENCE WHERE THERE IS REAL SCOPE TO QUESTION THINGS MUCH MORE WIDELY AND I THINK THAT IS SOMETHING WORTH CELEBRATING.

I have always hoped that being involved in human rights law will mean that it will be an easier journey for me. This is a space you assume would be more welcoming. That hasn't always been the case, unfortunately. We have a long way to go, and I am hoping to be able to help us get there. I look at our law classes and see the amount of woman in programs like this and the amount of queer people who are able to come through openly and I think that change is happening slowly but surely. I like to watch legal hearings, like the Constitutional Court hearings on YouTube - which is great and makes it accessible. Something that a lot of people have been noticing is that almost every single advocate, especially senior counsel are men and often white men. While I can't speak to their sexuality, of course, this is something that very much makes you feel unseen as a queer woman and a queer woman of colour as well.

There was this moment in Grade 10 when I was at a debating tournament and we were lucky enough to have our finals held at the Constitutional Court. Up until that point my goal in life was, one day, to become the president or something like that. But as I walked into the imposing and yet welcoming environment of the court, I had a moment of clarity that this is where the power and the capacity to change things resided, and that clarity set me towards a career in law, human rights, and constitutionality. But then there was this other moment that somewhat undermines the first. I think I was in third year in university and I went to a club with some of my friends and girlfriend. My girlfriend and I were thrown out of the club by some of the bouncers because we kissed. In that moment, I felt incredibly powerless. There I was, a third year law student who understood and cared deeply about human rights, who understood the law and could teach the bartender all about the illegality of the situation – and yet none of that was going to stop them from grabbing us and pushing us outside of the club. Afterwards, we considered calling the police or informing the South African Human Rights Commission but these just felt like inaccessible, unrealistic options. These two moments made me realise how powerful the law and rights and things like that can be, but at the same time how ineffective they can be when people don't have the ability to access them.



ANONYMOUS

I work in media as a screenwriter and a filmmaker but, growing up, media was an influence on my sexuality just in terms of having a language of expression. It was never an influence in terms of who I'm attracted to and who I like. I knew who I was before I had a language to describe it.

My first kiss was when I was seven, with this girl called Maddie in the swimming pool. I remember having a crush on a contestant on America's Got Talent. It was the sort of thing which as a young person you don't have the vocabulary for, but you know how you feel and nobody influenced you. You didn't even have the dialogue or the labels. I remember being 13 and having a crush on the person that became my partner when I was 18. Nobody told me about this stuff, you just know what you like and what you don't like and who you're attracted to and who you're not attracted to.

My parents had a sense of my sexuality but it was not something we discussed. I just never feel the need of coming out at the dining table and saying, 'Listen, this is who I am seeing' when it was a girl, because I didn't do that when I was seeing boys either. When I did go into my first queer relationship, I would pose questions to my parents. I remember at the time Desmond Tutu's daughter got married to a woman and I would ask my parents 'Oh look at this. What do you guys think of it?' And they'd be like, 'Oh if it is a woman and woman sure, they can raise kids'. So, I would just probe at them and sort of see the possibilities of what that would look like. My mom always knew I was pretty much tomboyish one minute, girly another minute. So, she was probably aware of my expression of identity. A lot of my friends were guys, at the time, but when my previous partner came around the house, my parents wouldn't ask too many questions. So they didn't really have an opposition to it openly. But I told my siblings, 'Hey, I'm dating this person' and they also saw pictures because I was open about the relationship on social media. So it wasn't a secret.





IF FREEDOM IS NOT PRESENT, THEN I DON'T WANT TO BE IN THAT SPACE. IF I CAN'T EXPRESS MYSELF FREELY AROUND PEOPLE THEN I WON'T STAY IN THAT SPACE. I WON'T WORK IN THAT SPACE. SO IT IS ONE THING ABOUT ME. I VALUE FREEDOM OF CHOICE, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, JUST BASICALLY LIVING IN TRUTH.

I feel like the world people think of as primitive are actually the systems that worked best, like living in communes, assisting each other financially, people sharing meals and property. I feel like those things used to work so much better than today where everyone is grinding and hyper-individualised. This doesn't work. I feel like we need each other and I think it is what's interesting about the LGBTIQ+ community and other people that have found safety in community. Going back to the idea of community is why people advocate for each other, because they are forming new systems and new families.

And I think this model could work for everyone. Men could have these conversations with other men. And if they sat down and spoke to each other and there was a 'man community', maybe we wouldn't have half the problems we have in society. So, everyone is learning from the framework of the LGBTIQ+ community and they're seeing that community makes sense. Because, at the end of the day there's no need to discriminate. Because at the end of the day, we are mixed and everyone affects everyone else, you know?

REU

I think it really is interesting because I think in some way all queer people know that they are queer from a young age in some way or from something. I definitely knew I was different. But in the environment I was brought up in, very Afrikaans Christian, that's a kind of environment where any identity other than, cis, straight boy or a straight girl, isn't acknowledged. So, you learn to contextualise these feelings as negative things when, in fact they're just you being you. Like, there's nothing wrong with not liking sport or being attracted to feminine expression. It is just you. But in that kind of environment, it is always painted as something negative, something that you need to change about yourself to be valid. And the thought that you know that you need to repent, that you need to be the ideal person, that you need to change the fundamental thing about who you are just to fit in just ends up doing a lot of damage, you know?

'Who are you right now?' is always going to be a bit of a complex question when you're talking to someone who is queer. Especially queer puberty which is the early 20s to late 20s. Identity is a hugely difficult thing to come to terms with especially when there are all these barriers around you that make it seem like you have an obligation to present as something else. So, I'm just waiting for class to start and trying to come to terms with myself. I've also arranged something with my therapist, but I actually think I'm fairly certain – I'm not usually certain about a lot of things. I'm usually a nervous wreck. But about this I feel pretty certain. I do have doubts, of course, like 'What if I'm just imagining this?' or 'What if it is just me trying to pin my depression onto something I can actually handle in some way?' But at the same time, I keep thinking, 'If you think this actually is an hallucination or something, then stop thinking of yourself in terms of trans.' This past vacation, I've been experiencing a lot of depression and I've finally been able to explicitly tie it to dysphoria. So, at the moment, I'm trying to come to terms with being trans because it is still very early. I have great supportive friends, luckily. I met them via UP and Out. I mean, obviously not every person you meet there is going to be great, but you do make some very, very good friends.





This is important to me right now, but it isn't really part of my history. It is a part of what's happening right now. So, one of my friends, he is twenty one and he is dealing with leukaemia. He was diagnosed recently, and they can't really do anything to treat it. So, the other week he casually revealed that, he doesn't know when he is going to die and it might be any time this year. It might be tomorrow, in a week, or in months. We stayed up until 4:00 a.m. because we were just talking the entire night and we trying to come to terms with him possibly being unexpectedly gone whenever. I'm being shown that this person who you see as so valuable and such a good friend is possibly going to go away. It just does a lot in your mind. So at that point, I didn't feel like I had anything to lose, so I just came out to him as trans. We kind of said farewell, but we're still chatting just because, we don't know if we can probably ever say farewell. He just told me he was proud of me that I felt comfortable enough to come out to him as trans. He accepts me and all that is fantastic. And I don't know, I just feel that what makes it such a big thing – especially if you're struggling to grapple with your identity and your thoughts kind of become very self-focused – is that something like that comes and you realise that the other people in your life aren't just standing still. They all have dynamic lives of their own. And you don't know really if you can count on their always being there. So in the end, you have to make a conscious decision to disregard fear and to be your full self around this person. It just broke me out of this mental bubble I'd been in where everything is about me and thinking if I come out and somebody doesn't accept me, it is going to be this whole huge mess. But it just helped me break out into a space where I could recognise myself as only a single person. And yeah, it is strange. A lot of the time you take yourself way more seriously than you actually are, you know? I mean, in the end, I told myself, 'It isn't like I'm Barack Obama or Donald Trump or anything. Me just deciding I'm going to identify as the other gender actually isn't going to cause a huge stir.' But it does feel like it because it is such a huge weight on your mind. But just having a person who you love, and who you respect to put some context in your life in such a huge way shakes things up.

AND I THINK IT IS WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS SOMETIMES, EVEN IF IT IS UNPLEASANT. YOU NEED TO HAVE THINGS SHAKEN UP SO YOU CAN SEE WHICH PART OF YOU RISES TO THE SURFACE.

KGOMOTSO

My name is Kgomotso Letsoalo, some people know me as Bryce - it is basically just a nickname I got back in high school. I am originally from Polokwane and I am Pedi-speaking. I was in Joburg for a couple of years and now I am based in Cape Town. I am an outgoing person. I enjoy entrepreneurship, consulting, as well as playing soccer. I did ballroom dancing when I was younger, but I left it because I was uncomfortable being in a feminine role – I couldn't dance certain parts because I just wasn't comfortable in a dress and heels so I had to quit. I went to basketball because that was what was more comfortable at the time. I also played a bit of chess.

THE OTHER DAY I WAS LOOKING FOR CLUBS TO JOIN AND I SAW BALLROOM DANCING AND I WANTED TO SIGN UP, BUT I THOUGHT ABOUT IT AGAIN AND ABOUT BEING FORCED TO WEAR CLOTHES I AM NOT COMFORTABLE IN. LIKE 'WHY HAVEN'T WE STILL MOVED ON AFTER ALL THESE YEARS?'

When can we get to a point where one can say, 'Okay sure, this person is only comfortable dressing like this. Can they still do what they love without having to change themselves?' So, I had to choose basketball again, but I really do hope in the future we can allow boys or girls or non-binary people to do things without having to change themselves to fit into a certain role.





I have been a tomboy from a really young age. Probably since I was seven or eight. I know I had a crush on one of my best friends. Because I had older friends, usually two grades older than me, there was a friend of mine who came out as gay - the very same friend that I had a crush on. It just made it easier because they were already in high school, so they seemed to understand what being queer is. While I was still in Grade 6, I was like, 'Oh okay I get it, it is normal for people to do this' and I basically became comfortable with dating girls after that. I met these two queer women who were actually a married couple at the time and lived in the same complex as me. They invited me and my best friend over because they could see that these are normal tomboys. So, they brought us in for a talk and they asked us if we were queer, and we said 'Yeah, sure.' At the time, I said I was bisexual. I had a haircut and I was just looking all boyish. And they asked me 'Are you sure you are bisexual?' But now after a few years, I just realised that it was a safe option to be with guys, just in case—you know what I mean. But eventually I let it go and I realised that, actually, I am completely into women and from there on at about age 13, I just started dating girls properly.

The Allan Gray Orbis Foundation did a lot for me. I am really big on networking and creating connections and that scholarship actually allowed me to do that with like-minded people who are actually interested in entrepreneurship and making changes even beyond entrepreneurship. Most of them are into social entrepreneurship. People who want to make a change without focusing on making profit. They have given us exposure and mentorship, including support for mental health. We have personal leadership officers that actually check up on us every now and then and they actually check up on your goals. It has just been that one thing that actually pushes me to make progress. I feel if it wasn't there, I would probably still be the same person, but the growth would not have been as exponential as it now.

JOHNSON

My country does not tolerate our sexuality. So I had to hide it. I had to keep it in the background since my childhood when I discovered how I felt. I thought I could fight the feelings, thinking it was not right for me. Plus, I come from a strong Catholic background and when I got into secondary school, I became a born-again Christian. I was so much involved in church activities, especially the choir. So, to come out as a queer person in such a community has always been difficult, and I am not alone. Over time, I have been approached by many closeted church choir members, leaders and reverends, among others. Therefore, I have lived through it, trying to accommodate and appreciate myself well-knowing that I am alone in this.

My name is Johnson Mayamba, I am a Ugandan queer youth and journalist. I came to South Africa as a foreign student to do a master's in human rights. I find South Africa a good environment for queer persons. I first came in October 2019 and the freedom that was around me, and the people I interacted with gave me a different feeling from what I experienced back home. This is because back in Uganda, just standing up and saying you are a queer person makes everyone shun you. Everyone literally runs away from you because of the deep-rooted homophobia, stereotypes and stigma. Sadly, this includes closeted community members. But here, I have been embraced by the community. Even those that are not part of us still appreciate and respect what I am as a person, unlike in Uganda where even those you call your friends do not respect who you are.

So South Africa is a free environment, even though there are still few existing challenges the community faces such as rape and forced 'conversion therapy'. I have been able to feel free to speak what I feel and to express what I feel as a queer person. I have met friends who are in the community and I've been able to get to places where fellow community members meet and interact freely. This is different from what exists in my home country where you can't just meet anyone. Also, meeting places in Uganda are very important because you can never be sure when the police can storm the place and have you all arrested. And once you get into the police cells, it is a painful story altogether.



SO SOUTH AFRICA HAS BEEN FUN. THE ENVIRONMENT HAS BEEN FREE. YOU CAN MEET, YOU CAN INTERACT, YOU CAN ASSOCIATE WITH THE COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND EVEN ANYONE ELSE WITHOUT HAVING THE FEAR OF BEING ARRESTED THE NEXT MINUTE OR BEING POINTED AT SOMEONE BEING DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF THE SOCIETY.

The worst experience I have had is on the apps, yes dating apps. Some people are so much into catfishing. They demand that you give out your information; they show that they are interested in you, but when you set an appointment, even if it is just for meeting and interacting, some of them exhibit different agendas. Actually, the last person I met through the app was pushing very uncomfortable demands by asking for a high amount of money that I should pay if I were to continue being his friend, or if in any way we have to go further than being friends. So, I found that as something uncomfortable to me. It was more like I was either buying someone to be my friend or partner. I know that there are sex workers and if I am looking for one, I'll be open and say I need a sex worker. This gave me the impression that some of the community members either masquerade or are desperately in need of help.

