

VOLUME 3



LOOKING THROUGH THE PRISM

Narratives of queer dignity in South Africa

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Title:
Volume 3: Looking through the prism:
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ISBN: 978-1-991213-02-0

Date of publication:
xxxxxxx

Published by:
Pretoria University Law Press (PULP)
www.pulp.up.ac.za

Website:
<https://www.chr.up.ac.za/soqiesc-unit>

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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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The SOGIESC Unit of the Centre for Human Rights is grateful to our interviewees for their willingness to share their stories and images. We are also grateful to **Prof Frans Viljoen, Dr Nkatha Murungi, Yolanda Booyzen** and **Dr Rudo Chigudu** for their additional contributions to the project.

The development and production of this photobook series was funded under a grant provided by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in South Africa.

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 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

ASTRID

My name is Astrid. I go by @desirelines on the internet – where I show my bondage work. But I mean that’s only a part of my life. I was raised in Kempton Park, in the East Rand of Johannesburg and, as soon as I turned 18, I hightailed out of there and moved to the Cape. I’ve been living in Cape Town for almost 10 years.

I went to study an undergrad in molecular biology at Stellenbosch and then I did my post-grad and I got my PhD in March 2020. In my day-to-day life, I’m a data scientist. I transitioned from molecular biology into programming and that’s been really cool because I wasn’t exposed to programming at all as a child. I learned to code when I was 23.

It was while I was doing my PhD and trying to get insights from some data that I realised, ‘Okay, this programming thing is actually really cool like, it’s really fun and nice.’ I didn’t think I would ever be a programmer. I would say that doing ‘rope’ and holding emotional spaces is more my heart’s work. But yeah, I mean, it pays the bills and it’s a very dignified and financially rewarding way to pay bills.





Personally, I've had a pretty hectic life. A lot of ups and downs, especially regarding my sexuality and gender. My parents were divorced when I was five, and it was a very abusive dynamic. My childhood is a very dark period for me and my queerness. I couldn't really fully accept it for the longest time. In the past few years, I've really come to embrace it fully and I don't want to live any other way other than totally queer and just myself.

Growing up, I had a gay uncle - my uncle Wayne, who passed away in 2017. He was sort of my first exposure to the queer community, even though I was raised incredibly religiously. I was raised of in a cult, a fundamentalist cult. He was this window out of that cult. He was this queer person who was living his life in Cape Town. He had a husband, Billy, who's my uncle and they were really this representation for me of just pure love. They just loved me and they doted on me and they treated me like a little princess. When it came to going to church and school, it was preached that being queer was wrong. I would think, 'No, these people are just pure love'.

By the time that I started experiencing life as a sexual being, I was just having boys pushed on me. I needed attention and love and I liked the attention. So, when boys gave me attention, I was like 'Okay, this must be it.' After several years, I think I was 23, I had sex with women for the first time. And I thought 'Oh, this is it.'

The first life imagery and erotic feelings I had, I always wanted to watch lesbian porn as a teenager, and I wanted to read lesbian erotic literature. That was my thing, that lit erotica.

But I thought it was because I liked things that were out of the norm. I didn't think it was because I'm gay. And my brother's For Him Magazine (FHM)'s were very interesting. I used to steal them, It's so funny, years later I realised. He told me he wasn't really that interested in them and I would be surprised. For me, it was as if electric shocks went through my body when I looked at the FHMs.

So, around 13 was when I had the first inklings that I like girls, but I didn't think of myself as a lesbian. 23 was when I first looked at women, and since then, I've just been deep in it.

There was a time when I was holding kink spaces where I wasn't really ready to do that, and I should actually not have. I think I gave too much of myself to it. But I would say now, it's a wonderful privilege to be able to just hold space for people discovering themselves because that is really what kink is. I see it as a big sandbox, and there's lots of different tools and toys in the sandbox. It's about figuring out what your most fun expression of yourself is.



For some people that's rope, for some people that's being flogged, for some people that's no tools at all, but more like an intentional power exchange. It's all over the spectrum. So, it's really wonderful to have that sandbox for myself to play in and just to feel whatever expression I have. As long as it's not hurting someone. It's safe and it's consensual, it's negotiated, and there's a lot of communication around it. But it's also great to hold space for other people to discover themselves, to figure out what they like and it's really an honour and a privilege to be the person that people trust enough to come to.

But it's also a big responsibility to assess where others are at. You can't just prescribe how you do it. It's more of a case of 'These are the ways we do it, these are the tools that we have. How would you like to express yourself? How would you like to experience yourself and someone else that you're interacting with?' With the provision that we want to do this consensually and with communication and transparency.

I was in a hetero relationship from 18 until when I was 22, and it was very vanilla - that's what we call the opposite of kink. So, my ex-boyfriend gave me the permission to go to kink parties and observe. I took him up on that and, it was a very good introduction for me to not be allowed to partake because just observing, without partaking, was a very good approach for me personally. I got to see how these people interact with each other and witness the communication styles.

It started with watching and the reason why I wanted to go and be in the room with these kinky people was because it was mostly out of anthropological interest. But also because I've always been a slut. I've always just been sexually curious. I say 'slut' with the most joy and self-love imaginable. I haven't always, but I do now. Being in that vanilla relationship really brought the kinky person in me out because I wasn't allowed to express it. It became a very strong need to get her out and it also coincided with me exploring more of my queer side.





I would start playing with women at these kink events. The first time I was ever flogged was by a woman. I went to this naked party at a bar where everyone was naked, and this woman flogged me. It was my sort of initiation into actually playing in those spaces.

It's not just about kink, it's like meditation. It's creating an emotional world for someone. It's just connecting with my partner's body. It's like so many other things.

For us, the kinky thing is 30% of it and the rest of it depends on your definition of kink. Creating an emotional world for someone could be considered a kinky thing. I don't know. It's the same as sex. Sex could be as small as having an intention or having a kiss with someone, or sharing that sexual energy all the way through. So, the act itself is not as important as the intention.

I think the best gift I gave myself was to get out of Kempton Park, get of my family unit, and go and start my own life. At that time, my instinct was very much I need to do well in school, I need to make sure that I've got the marks so I can get bursaries so that I can go and study and get out of here. So, that was my ticket out of the life that I was prescribed. To just go and study something totally out of the sphere of anything my family had ever done.

Up until that point, my family was extremely conservative. There was a lot of shaming around sex, sexuality, and gender issues. It wasn't as if my mom and stepdad were necessarily deliberately shaming me, it was that my emotional and moral education was outsourced to the church.

It was very much about me doing well in school, and would only get love and attention and affirmation when I did well in school. That was my way to feel valid in the world. So then I went off and studied. From the age of 18, until now, I've been without my family. I've seen them once or twice a year, maximum for a few days. But other than that, I've been doing my things on my own, and it's been really rough.

I replaced the institution of religion with the institution of academia as a way to give my life structure. I found myself in this academic institution for most of my adult life. I finished my PhD last year. That was 10 years. 9 years in this space, which has rules, it has ways you behave and ways you are not allowed to behave. It has the structure that I desperately needed to feel valid and to feel safe. But it was also really bad for me because academia can be a toxic space, you know? So, it was a very familiar dance that I was used to - If there's something wrong with me, I'm not working. I need to get out of the space, but I need to plot my exit because I can't just drop off because I would have owed the government a million Rands. Let me figure out how I'm going to get off. Coding was really the thing that enabled me to get out of that space.

During my PhD, I went through the most. I did some really trashy and toxic people. I became a sort of, but not really, a sex addict.. I became very escapist with how I would have sex. I was having a lot of sex with a lot of different people, partially out of curiosity, but also partially out of the need to just feel something. So, I would have all these random weird sex things happen, and through that process of needing to pursue more and more sort of risky sexual activities, I was raped on a date. And it's not that I'm blaming myself for being raped. I didn't ask to be raped. My emotional and mental state was—but also that pain and those things that I went through—they very much still hurt. I can still feel that pain very, very viscerally.

I know what I can go through and overcome. And now that I'm on the other side of all of that, I've been doing a lot of therapy, doing a lot of healing. My relationship with Sim has been the most healing, restorative, challenging, and wonderful thing ever in my life. My wife is the best. Now that I'm on the other side, I can look back and just look at myself with less judgement, and just a lot of empathy and love, and just celebrate, like 'Shit, man! I survived these things and I'm actually okay, I'm safe.'

Sometimes you forget that you're safe when you are on the other side.



GREYSON

My name is Greyson Thela, and I was born and bred in Kimberly. I am the youngest of two boys at home. I've got a black belt in karate. I am mostly a bit of an academic and I am a human rights defender in general, but an LGBTIQ+ defender and activist in particular. I am currently working within civil society, within the NGO space, and I was previously at the University of the Free State. The work that I do is basically LGBTIQ+ advocacy, LGBTIQ+ visibility and LGBTIQ+ inclusivity.

Growing up, I always knew that I was a little bit different from everyone in my class and my friends, but I just didn't have the language to describe what it was. At that particular point in time, the one word that spoke to my sort of diversity is the fact that I framed myself as lesbian woman, up until I realised and saw other people like me who felt the same way I felt and actually verbalising it- the word for what you are feeling is called transgender. So, it was in my first year at the university where I finally came out as a trans person. Half of the work I do is fuelled from the lived experience and the other half is worked at making sure other people don't have the same lived experience I had growing up as a kid and transcending into my adulthood. I have realised over the past couple of years, that similarly to apartheid where your identity as a black or non-white person was the greatest danger of all,

being LGBTIQ+ in Africa has become the greatest danger of all.

And these are just some of the reasons that fuels me in doing the work that we are currently doing.





My coming out process was quite unique because, reflecting now on my childhood, the first time I came out as a man, was at the age of five or six. I did not verbalise it then but it was expressed in my actions of a particular day. My brother and his friend were doing the gardening and quite a lot of masculine individuals will do that kind of work topless. I thought, ' I am going to be like that.' That's when I went into the bathroom, I took my shirt off and I took toilet paper and wrote the word 'penis' and put it in my pants and I went and stood with my big brother outside. This was obviously new to him, so he called me and told me I must go get dressed and take that thing out. That was my first identification of who I am today. But as the years progressed, I instead framed myself as a lesbian woman and started verbalising this at the age of sixteen.

There is a festival in my hometown where people buy and sell their goods. I happen to be a collector of watches. I love watches. So, I saved money and I bought this beautiful watch. When my mom picked me up, I was so excited and I showed her the watch. Instead, she said the watch was so masculine. She took the watch and threw it out the window as we were driving. I was so hurt and that fuelled a lot of anger in me.

When we got home, I thought, 'By the way, I am like Michael Jackson' and I went to my room and slammed the door. I mean that was my coming out process.

What is very hilarious about me saying this is the fact that Michael Jackson wasn't even gay, but he seemed to be the media's representation of what persons outside of the binary did—someone like Michael Jackson had lipstick, long hair, and was feminine. That representation was what I identified with and that was when I came out. It has been an amazing experience because that process has made me who I am today. Just affirming myself and living my life as who I am has been the most fulfilling thing I have ever had to do in my life.

Home is so far. I don't go home as often. I have had the whole conversation with my family. My immediate family is very supportive. It took a lot of work as well, but they are very supportive. My extended family is still learning. For the community around my home, I've never found it necessary for me to have that conversation with them and say, 'Listen this who I am', just as they did not come to me and say 'I'm straight, just so you know'. So, I didn't feel the need of verbalising who I am to them. However, I did feel the need of doing that process to my family because my family needs to affirm who I am.

It is very funny how when a woman is born and affirms themselves as the sex assigned at birth and then grows up, gets married, and changes names, the whole family is congratulatory and adjusts to the new name. But the moment you change your name by yourself and say 'Guys, this is what I am from today onwards', they will tell you it is difficult to adjust because 'Eh we've always known you as this other name.' In coming out and affirming myself, my family needs to affirm me because I still have nieces and nephews who need to know and learn a different world to a world that we lived in. My immediate family and community is in Cape Town because, quite often in LGBTIQ+ spaces we say you've got your family you come from, born and bred, and then you've got your chosen family. Because you often find that you are kicked out of your home, they don't affirm who you are and then you go to people that are going to do what your family is supposed to do. We call that chosen family. So, the family that I have here in Cape town is beyond remarkable. Yes, we've got allies who don't affirm themselves as LGBTIQ+, but within the greater context of the people that I hang around with are LGBTIQ+ defenders, human right defenders. So, when we are together in spaces, there is commonality, we share the same vision. It speaks to where we want to take not only our lived experiences and other people's lived experiences but as a country as a whole. It is quite diverse in terms of—I have got friends who are sex workers, who are also human rights defenders. It is a vast environment that is very affirming. I must admit that I am very privileged in that I find myself living in a space where I cannot be victimised. Where I have 24-hour security cameras. That's the kind of space I find myself. I am privileged also in the fact that I am a man as well. My masculinity, I am privileged in that. Someone alluded this to me in an email saying that you as a man even have privilege in emails. They greet you in an email but only answer to women later. They respond to men very quickly. So, I do recognise my privilege within these spaces I found myself in.





I think my life has been about gender politics for as far back as I can remember. What is very important is that South Africa, even with our Constitution and the laws that we have, is not perfect. There are quite a number of issues with the Civil Union Act, Marriage Act, and PEPUDA right now. But they are going under review. Unfortunately, our counterparts within the Southern African region do not have the same luxury as we have and find themselves in a place where their identities cause jail time, criminalisation, and so on. What is very important to look at is that all of this boils down to the over-sexualisation of LGBTIQ+ bodies. If you intensely look at the laws, the laws criminalise sex, they don't criminalise your identity. Why is there a fixation on bodies and sex? For me that is very remarkable that you are hammering in on something so personal. And let's not even get started on Intersex and the genital mutilation that still persists in quite a number of countries. Within South Africa, it is not documented enough, not spoken about enough and it happens today. It is probably happening right now. Because legally you've got the National Registry which has male/female tick boxes, that is why parents and doctors mutilate their children because when you go back to Home Affairs, the child needs to go into one of these boxes. This is a huge problem in South Africa that needs to be spoken about.

Also, within our education system, within our higher education spaces and basic education, those should be institutions that speak to this particular lived experience from that level. Universities are a microcosm of the real world and that is where education really needs to be reformed. Because I really look forward to it. I mean in Cape Town, we wrote an article about an all-girls school that allowed the first transgender girl to enrol. That was very profound. I look forward to where the same thing is practised in all-boys schools. We have issues of police or private security handling bodies within higher education spaces when protests happen. It is very problematic. Where transwomen and transmen are being abused. There is a huge injustice in the disbursement of rights and products in higher education that filter through structural spaces. Is residency inclusive for trans and gender non-conforming persons who do want to affirm as either? Are student cards inclusive? Are there gender inclusive bathrooms? These are some of the things that need to structurally change so that people's behaviours can change. I am very passionate about education and the education system, changing and becoming inclusive. It is very unfortunate that currently gender studies is only pursued at postgraduate level in most South African universities. I actually think it should start not just as an elective, but from first-year onwards. Where you unpack gender studies intricately because you are going to go out into the real world, where you encounter a boss who might be LGBTIQ+, or work with communities who are LGBTIQ+ and your response has to be inclusive and intersectional and diversified. So, we need to hone a lot of spaces that produce an opportunity to learn and unlearn.



SIM

My name is Sim. I'm originally from Pretoria. I was born in Hoedspruit, the military base, which I sometimes jokingly say is part of the reason why I can't quite hear properly in one of my ears. Loud noises from jet planes do not do well for baby ears.

I grew up in Pretoria and I studied and worked in Johannesburg. The place that I worked at in Johannesburg was so intense. Being introverted and feeling often that I didn't fit into the world around me, quite viscerally. I just I felt so out of place and that was very painful as a teenager. But that being said, I've always worked hard when I needed to work hard. I'm a 120% sort of person and not always because I want to achieve a goal. For me, working in a community with others is super important.

I felt my first job really exploited that, as they do. When you are a junior, they pay peanuts and they can work you to the nth degree. After just over a year, I realised everything that I had been promised when I started working there, including travelling throughout Africa, didn't happen because I'm a woman.

So, I spoke to my friend. I said, 'Look, I'm reaching the end of my rope. I'm looking for other work'. He said, 'Well, the place I am working at in Cape Town has got an opening and they're willing to hire if you're willing to move.' I went for the interview and it went well. And I thought, 'Okay, I can move, I need to find a place to stay,' and this all is happening in context of the fact that I had never been to Cape Town.

I'm an only child, and I think this is very important in my queer discovery. Look, my parents are flawed, and I know that they're human. But when I say that they really wanted me. I mean, they've always treated me like a person, sometimes too much like an adult and I can say it quite openly. But I've always been treated like an individual and I've always been incredibly curious and eager to learn, the sort of child that wants to bake because mom is baking or wants to help when dad is taking the car apart. Both my parents have been incredibly invested in me and really channelled their love and energy into me. My mom is incredibly feminine but carries incredibly masculine energy - you will not mess with her. People would start fights with her, pulling her and she'll defend herself like a G. It's scary now, she is a firecracker. My dad is very masculine presenting. He likes cars, he's a typical petrol-head if I am honest. But he's also so gentle and feminine, like I've never seen. I have seen that but not to an extent. A man so gentle with everything he touches. Nothing is handled roughly. Not even when he's working with tools, or when he's tapping on my shoulder because I'm studying.

These two energies poured into me.

They both have their own different upbringings, both really traumatic upbringings so they wanted to bring the least traumatic to mine. When I was younger, they gave me a long rope to discover myself. I guess they felt like that was a healthy way to do it.





In this process, the first memory I had was in pre-primary. The boys and girls were sort of asking each other out, mock dating each other, As an introvert, I wasn't super engaged because I didn't have a lot of friends. I think boys are cool, but girls are also very cool. In third grade, a boy was bullying me and I told my dad. My dad said, 'Oh, this boy really likes you', and I said, 'I don't really like this boy' and he replied, ' Oh, that's fine.' And I thought to myself, 'But do I like my friend? Yes, but it's fine, because we're all just human'. And I left it at that.

Everyone progressed quickly in terms of girls liking boys and boys liking girls. But I wasn't doing well connecting with my peers, and my closest friend at that point had moved away. I didn't really have other friends, and I was bullied a lot. My mom gave me a whole bunch of books to read and she said, 'Just immerse yourself in something else.' I remember this one book that I read that had these two female characters, and the one was dating this rock star, she was really cool but the other one was this really fierce, strong, and independent woman.

And I read this book, and at one point, this woman says,

'I'm a lesbian and I'm a strong, independent woman that speaks her mind and has no fear.' I didn't know what the word meant.

When I used it when I came back from summer holiday, in seventh grade, and everyone was talking about what they did and some of my classmates asked, 'Well what did you do?' and I told them I was reading a bunch of books, and I discovered I'm a lesbian, and they knew what the word meant but I didn't. It took me a week or two to figure it out and then I thought about it deeper, and I figured, 'Oh, I'm not connecting with any of the boys, I'm lesbian.' And this is where I'm at.

Since then, however, I realised that this boxed in my queerness, in a lot of ways, because I'm definitely not just a lesbian. But that is where it started and where the seeds started growing. I think a lot of that came from the fact that my parents only started enforcing some gender normativeness when I started high school, so I had many years of being treated quite neutrally. If I wanted to play with cars, it was fine. If I wanted to play with Barbies, it was fine. If I wanted to cook or fiddle with my dad outside, that was all accepted. The first time I understood rigid gender roles at home was when my body started changing. I was a little bit of a late bloomer and when I entered high school, by then I had already accepted a self-image of myself, that wasn't binary, especially when it comes to clothing. Clothing is the number one thing because I am an expressive person. But, even when I could buy my own clothes, I was making choices with my mom's voice in my mind, as opposed to just freely expressing myself and I felt intimidated. At the first job that I moved down to Cape Town for, there was also some queer stereotyping that made me incredibly uncomfortable. But I've slowly found pockets of community and certain individuals have contributed more than whole communities.

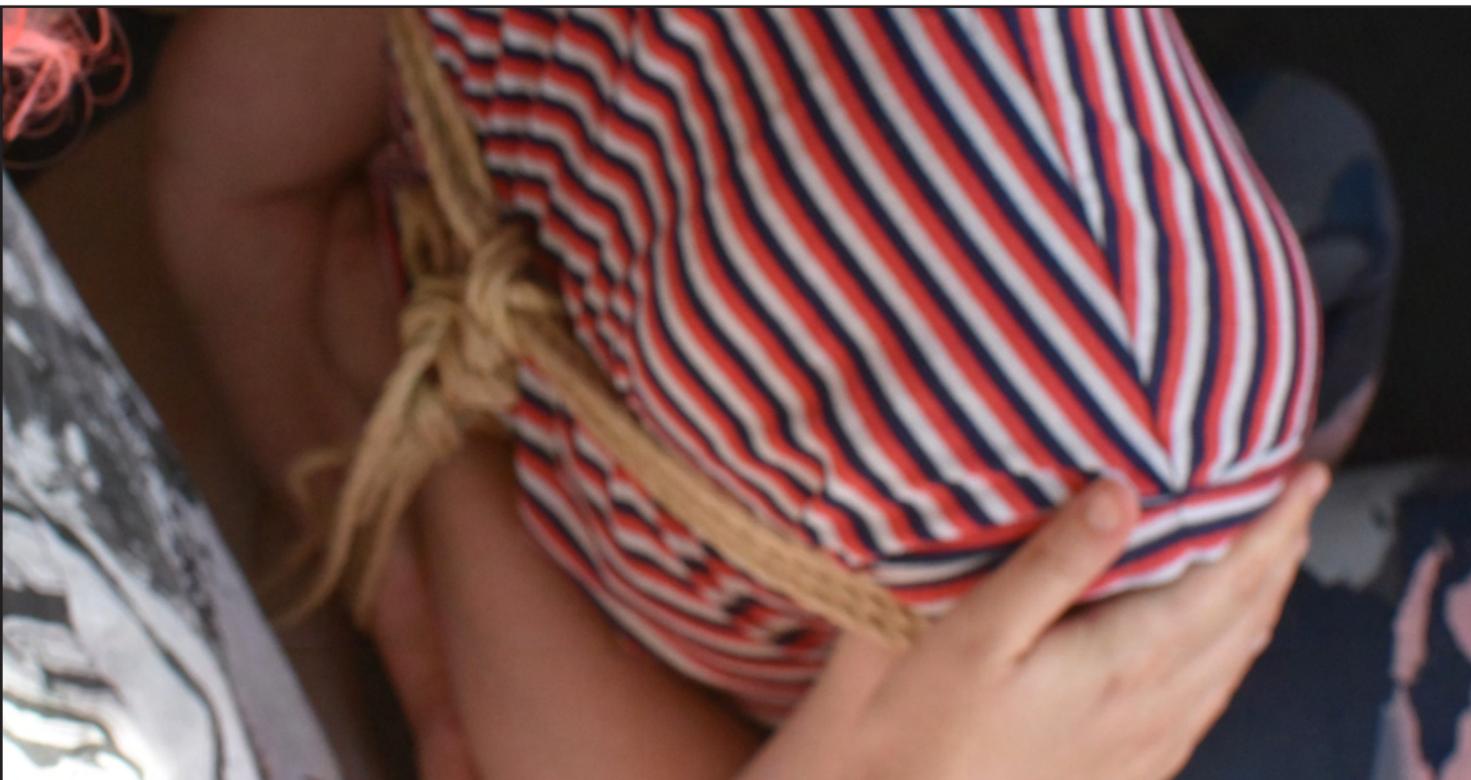
But I've definitely found community in queer friends and seeing it being expressed in different ways. I also think seeing it being expressed as more than just a stereotype, like butch, dyke lesbian. It was so nice to go beyond that and to see a richer world where queerness is not defined by binaries, where queerness does not just boil down to either gay or straight, or in the middle, with no sliding scale and very little challenge to gender identity. So, currently, I find a lot more representation amongst people that I know and that feels wonderful.



My first sexual experiences were with other woman and my understanding of it was very open ended. How I approached anything sexually was to go with the flow. Let's think of new things. Let's play on fantasies, if that's the case. My sexual identity built itself on being very open.

When I moved to Cape Town, somebody on Facebook shared a rope event, like a workshop. I knew one or two of the people involved and whose space it was and I thought to myself, yeah, this is a another cool expression.

The only other medium that I can think that gives me the same feeling hyperfocus while also being able to let go has been photography. So the two function very closely in that it's this expression of kink, it's a sexual expression and I say that was photography as well. It's an extension of me if I pull out my camera. But it also contains the inherent eroticism and it is also healing and it helps self-cause giving yourself confirmation and affirmation.



They are mediums that both allow you to share with others and create spaces within spaces and get a point of view across by means of cultivating an atmosphere, and that's been incredibly powerful. And because I've always been open, there's been this primed default of openness, making the leaps into these different spaces, sometimes by chance. I would just be very open to whatever came out of the experience and go in with very little, expectations of what I'm going to receive out of it. That has helped.

EVA

My name is Eva and I am from everywhere. I was born in Johannesburg, raised in Kimberley, and my family is from the Western Cape. I'm currently studying live performance at AFDA. In terms of my identity as a queer coloured woman, I had to subdue myself in Kimberley. Now that I'm 23 years old and it's Cape Town, there is more of a liberal sense of society here. I can be who I am. And that has impacted me because I'm very good at code-switching and I'm dialling down certain aspects of my personality and who I am, and especially my sexuality when I'm around certain people and certain things. So, being everywhere and being in different places and living in Pretoria for two years has given me this skill. I've learned how to shape shift in order not to cause ruptures.

I think I was about 11 years old in a Physical Education swimming class and I felt really uncomfortable getting undressed in front of everyone. I thought that it was just like me and my body. But then I realised that I didn't want to see anyone else get undressed.

And then at the age of 14, I fell in love with my best friend, well I had a crush on her.

And then I thought it was just because we were very affectionate. But it wasn't that. It was me catching feelings.





I definitely chastised myself. I suppressed it for the longest time. And coincidentally, at age 15, I got 'saved' at a Christian youth church. And then at age 17, I met a girl and I thought, this is wrong. This is a complete sin. What is wrong with you?

And I tried with everything in me to not feel that because, according to what I was being brought up in a very staunch Christian home, that was not okay.

And that it was something that had to be exorcised.

It was different when I got to Tuks – University of Pretoria. That was when I experimented, going out and trying to, kiss girls. But I kept on cutting it off because I kept on telling myself that this was wrong. And then we had the UP and Out march, and that was the first time that I felt, 'I'm here and I'm queer.'

My mom and dad were a struggle activists. My dad spent some time in jail. My mom was also part of the protests at University of Western Cape. So they're very much of the belief that there is no more struggle to be fought. 'We fought for you guys to go to school'. So when we did the topless protest and the Rape Awareness Week, I didn't even know I was going to be in the paper. That was a shock to me because I was in the Mail and Guardian and they saw that. My mom was very disappointed in me because she thought that I was doing it for show, but it was something that was very dear to my heart. It affected me in terms of never wanting to protest again. I didn't go to a single protest after that because I wasn't sure where it would end up. I wasn't sure it was going to be in the papers again. That has impacted my identity as an activist.

After Rape Awareness Week, I was exhausted, I was done. I am in despair of how tired I was, not because of the protesting itself but because of the backlash that you get from it. There was just seven of us but over twenty police officers were there. I think just the lack of support or camaraderie from our peers and especially the Student Representative Council at that time really took a toll on me because it felt like we were all screaming at a wall. Those protests taught me to choose my battles because I can't constantly be exhausted, because if I'm exhausted, then what's left for me?

I definitely think now is the right time for queer bodies, specifically queer bodies of colour, to step into the light and tell stories. Stories that aren't only about queer pain.

It's time we move away from that narrative. There is a very definite narrative and we can never ignore the narrative that queer pain exists, that pain is a thing. Queer will always be there but there is so much happiness to be spoken about, celebrated, published and to be read about. And we're getting there.





PHARIE

My name is Pharie Sefali. Born and bred here in Cape Town. I spent all of my life in Cape Town, I never moved out of Cape Town. I'm currently working at the Triangle Project, under the community engagement and empowerment programme. Previously, I worked at different organisations doing work around violence in the community and bringing peace to the community.

When I was first aware of the LGBTIQ+ community, I would go to church to pray for them. I used to pray that God forgive their sins and their certain behaviours and all of that. I was that person. I was the leader of the church cell and I used to say 'I have friends who are LGBTIQ+ who I pray for all the time'. So that was my life growing up, until I went to an all girls' school. In school, because I played soccer and my body was thin and tomboy-ish, the girls liked me. The only way to fit in at the school was to play the part and to be the tomboy that they wanted. So I became the coolest person as I bought a different flavour. I just came into being lesbian and I dated the first girl there.

Fortunately, I grew up as a tomboy, so I didn't have to come out to my family until recently when I decided that I wanted to get married. Then suddenly it was as if they did not expect me to marry a woman. But I had to come out to them and say, 'Listen I am actually lesbian and I am marrying a woman.' I didn't get any backlash from them, it was something that they had at the back of their minds. But I did get backlash from the community. People said things like 'I thought you were going to change'; 'I thought this was a phase'.

What is confusing to them is that I am also a traditional healer, so people assume it is a spiritual thing. They assume it is one of my spirits (man spirit) who wanted a woman spirit. I explain that,

'No it has little to do with my spirituality, it is who I am, it is what I am.'

The only backlash that I'm getting is from the staunch traditional healers, who are partly Christians, who don't actually believe that we can associate sexuality with spirituality. And so, living as a Sangoma, and when I have to go to a ceremony, there is that pushback I have to do all the time, about correcting them or their ideologies. I tell them, 'Okay, you accept the fact that a spirit is fluid, right? But you can't accept me expressing my sexuality, as a human being but you accept me as a person with a spirit?' It is very complex.

Being a Sangoma is also culturally rooted. We have to do traditional rituals and those traditional rituals are patriarchal. When I need to slaughter as a spiritual person, then they say things like, 'Whoa, but you have this sin around, you can't touch anything.' Those are the type of struggles that I'm experiencing but, outside that, I was always fortunate and I didn't experience any harsh hate crimes where I get kicked out or disowned because of my sexuality. I got disowned by family – but for other things other than my sexuality.





I think, to be honest, my childhood prepared me for the stability I have today because, everything that happened in my childhood, other people wouldn't have survived it. I lost my parents at a young age, at around 8. Mom died when I was 8 and my dad died when I was 4. So I was staying with family members, and at the time I also experienced sexual molestation. I realised when I got to primary school that actually, I have been raped, and I do not have a mother, and all of my friends have. So I resented them. I resented everything, I resented the world. And then at that time, I started stealing, taking things just for me to feel angry. When I'm angry, I feel okay. So I was that kind of child. Very naughty, deliberately, to get a reaction. So I got beaten a lot and I got yelled at a lot.

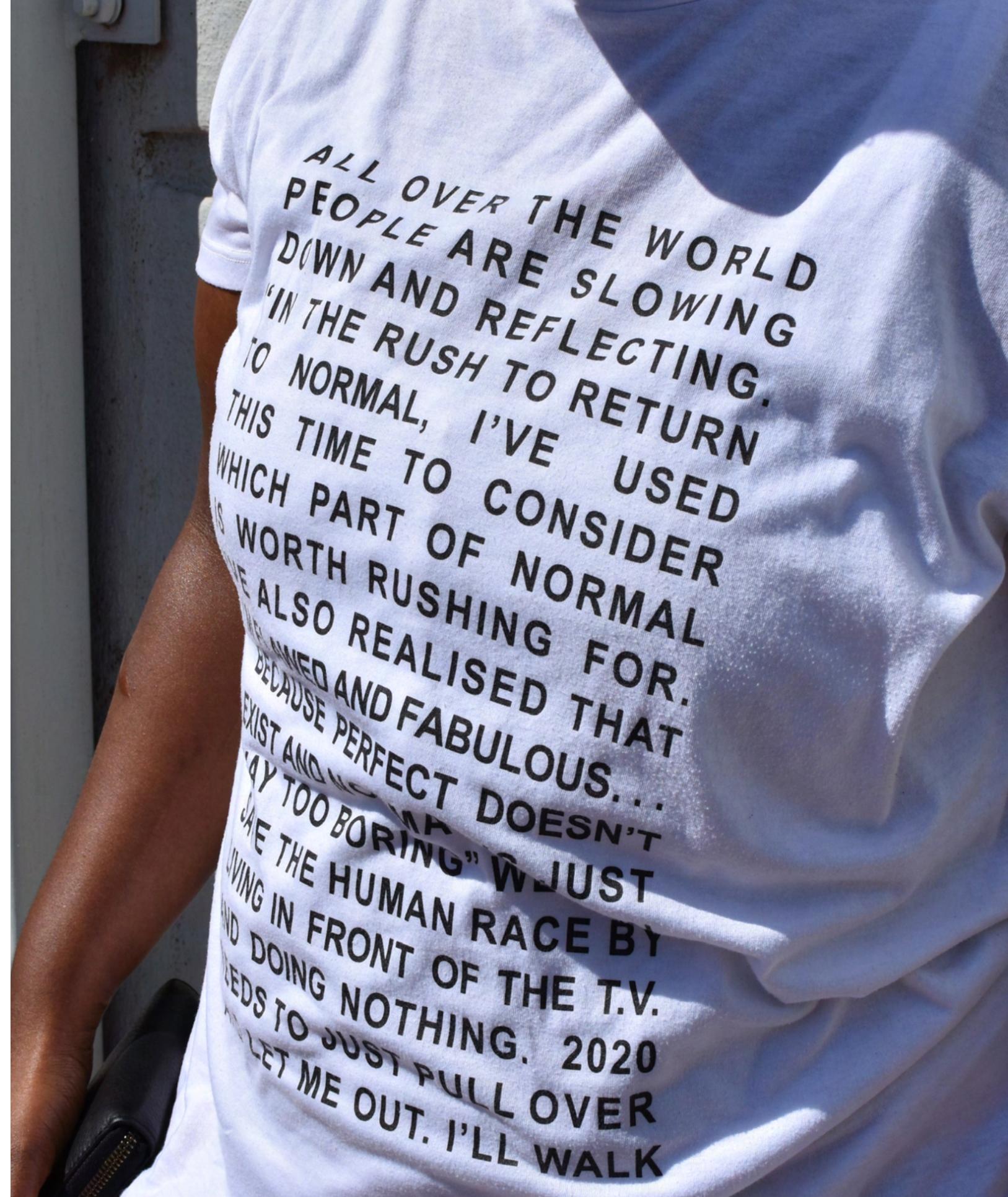
At the same time, the only thing that kept me going was soccer. In between all of that, I was playing soccer and, at about 14 to 16, I started going to church properly. Church gave me that stability but immediately after I started high school, I changed the whole church thing because now I am starting to understand my own sexuality and my own ideology.

I came back to Cape Town because my sister was getting married. I didn't even go to the wedding because I was drunk. So my aunt saved me by saying 'Listen, you need to make a decision about your life,' and I told them I want to go back to school. I was 20 years old in grade 11 and I went to the worst school. That's where my activism started. I was problematic and to 'tie' me, they had made me the head girl of the school and we used to do illegal marches to the Department of Education because we wanted our school to be better, and because they kept threatening us that they were going to close down the school. Then Equal Education approached me to say, 'Listen this is how you do things.' And since then, I never look back and I think the school is still operating today.

I passed matric and I went to study at UWC. I chose social work because I needed to heal, and to be able to help people. I used to see psychologists at the age of 10, 11. I was going through a lot. So I wanted to help and it brought me back memories of my own life as a child. Then when I started at University, that's when the calling started, it was weird, to be a Sangoma.

When I did my third year social work, I realised that I don't want to be a social worker because I can't change the world. I was doing my practicals at the time and I had young kids who used to come and they'll say, 'I'm being raped' and I would call the Social Development and ask for shelters and they would say, 'We don't have a space.' And then I have to send the same kids back to where they are being molested. And every time that happened, I used to cry a lot and I used to go back from my sessions and go back to drinking. I dropped out. That's when I started being a community journalist, which helped to widen my perspective.

My idea was that I want people, those who have money, to know what is happening in our community so they can help. I used journalism for activism. I didn't write about tabloids or scandals. I wrote about the real issues that were happening. I wrote about equal education. I'm a traditional healer, I am a lesbian, and I didn't finish school. I don't know how I survived. But yeah, it got me to where I am. Now I am using that opportunity. I can put both worlds together to an extent. I'm coordinating a traditional healers programme which encourages universities to look at students who are healers or who are going through the journey, and give them identity courses instead of quickly sending them to see a psychiatrist. Because they need the spirituals, so they should be treated just like Muslim students who need to perform their prayers and Christian students who have churches. Traditional healers should also be like other students who go to university and who come from different African countries, and they need a space to continue their own rituals within their comfort zone. And now, understanding LGBTIQ+, spirituality, and sexuality and how these link, I am educating people about that and it's amazing really.





I think we have come to a point where the LGBTIQ+ community is looking for alternatives, other than a church because the church is where they get discriminated against, but spirituality itself is non-judgemental.

If you notice, people will say ‘Why suddenly are there so many LGBTIQ+ traditional healers?’

I always say that being a traditional healer is African and everyone who was born in Africa is supposed to be a traditional healer because of how we grew up before Christianity came. If you go to Mozambique, you will find a whole village of traditional healers and that’s the norm. So the reason why there are LGBTIQ+ traditional healers now is because they are okay with their spirituality and they are okay to express themselves. They feel at home within the traditional healing as they do not feel discriminated against and most healers understand that it’s part of spiritual processes for you to be gender fluid and how you express yourself and how you link that with your physical being. We get invited to different spaces because people want to hear what we have to say, and we want a sense of belonging. So if traditional healers can give people that, then why not? If they need an alternative, then it will be this spiritual alternative.

ASTRID & SIM

We are not married, we just call each other “wife” pretty much from the first time we had sex.

We met when I went to a workshop of Astrid’s and....

She was talking very loudly about her strap-on game for the record. My ears pricked up, like I thought she was gay but now I know she is gay- tell me more...

After the workshop, one or two times, everyone would have a late lunch/pre-dinner together and it was very nice. This is where that conversion was had and on that same day, I think afterwards, she invited me with a smaller subset of the class and I went. It was still going fine, and I was like, “Oh this person is really attractive” but also I am getting classes from this person and I am also very introverted so I don’t want to assume anything. I am just thankful to make new connections and I am always very happy to meet new people. I was going to miss one of the classes because I was going back to Pretoria to visit my parents and ‘coincy-dink’, I am going back to Joburg and that class will be presented by someone else and...

Do you wanna hook up, are we there?

You didn’t say that..

I didn’t say hook up but I said get together

I did not take that as hooking up, I did not assume this...

I was like we are going to share a room after this party that we are going to, and we are probably going to have sex but..

I think being aware of my queerness from a young age and sharing spaces with women who are not queer, I just don’t assume, even if it’s a queer woman, I am just like...





Maybe I was just too hopeful.

I am going to assume platonic until we establish non-platonic. I don't want to make anyone feel creeped out. I am scared of making someone feel creeped out. That went down and we eventually- I think you asked me on this date to see the blood moon. I really like the stars and the moon. I love cool interstellar things

You were like "Where would be a great place to watch it?" and I was like "Noortguit beach might be a good beach in terms of beaches" and you came to pick me up. We were sitting there with a bottle of wine, and I was like in between her legs. We were both looking up and at some point, she pulls me closer and pulls my pants down and like scoops up some sand in my pants. I was like "I have sand in my pants!" and there is nothing as unromantic as sand in my pants. At this point I was doing a lot of therapy around some of my past traumas and ways in which I deal with it. It was just a very interesting time from that perspective, and we got back to her place, and I got the sand out of my pants. Thank God! I think we were talking until 4 in the morning. I don't usually..

Like she was talking for so long, telling me all her childhood traumas and I was like, are we ever going to have sex?

I was like you need to know what broken person you are going to jump in with before we start this. Like if this level of crazy does not sit well with you, it's fine, we can still stop here. At some point she starts looking so tired and she is so beautiful, and I am like we are in bed, we had the wine, she has been giving me the eye for the last 2 hours, she barely...

She is ripe and ready and ...

She is ripe... and it just happened

And we just had the most beautiful sex and we have just been having the most beautiful sex ever. Like the most organic, the most close, intimate nasty like yeah fulfilling, gorgeous sex.

TAMARA

My name is Tamara. I'm 21. I'm just passionate about other people. I'm busy with my physiotherapy degree and hopefully next year, I will move to Australia. I've got family there. I went there on holiday and I am so happy that I saw the country

My family and my best friend have constantly been in my life. They have never given up on me or been disappointed in me. I didn't really know about being gay until I was about 13. But I knew I had like crushes on girls when I was about 12.

I stopped trying to figure myself out. I felt like it was stressing me out. Who I am, what I am supposed to be doing, what label defines me, I don't need to figure that out. I have always struggled with identifying with other people. I was good at school, but I was not good at making friends and I always learned to like myself enough.



GRIZZ AND EVA

GRIZZ

I forgot how I started. So, my board is like a friend who I can just count on whenever I can, because I know they can't just leave without me, you know. It's that one thing that can take you places and you can have fun with it and fight sometimes when you can't get the trick or when she makes me fall, but I love my board. And I really like decorating them myself, like just the bottom of the deck so that's also a way I can just be creative with my board because I also think of my hair as a way of expression so I always just change it up a bit sometimes. learned how to shape shift in order not to cause ructions.

EVA

My board is very special to me because I bought it myself, I bought the deck, I bought the grip tape, I got these trucks off my old board and I bought these wheels and then, I put it together. Uhm and it means a lot because it's an Element board and this right her is a.. I forgot his name for now but BAM.. that's his name and he is a very good skater, and my brother and I used to watch his show on MTV. It was called Jackass and he used to get up to stupid shit. Element is the brand that sponsored Nyjah Huston, or used to, and its special because I met Nyjah Huston when he came to Kimberly so yeah. I'll skate Element forever, if not Element then then Psycho.



ISBN: 978-1-991213-02-0

