

## The Pink Inner-City

### Creating Queer Spaces in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, during apartheid

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## Abstract

Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city and economic heartland, has a rich history of queer subculture. The paper focuses on Hillbrow in the 1970s and 1980s when it was regarded as the gay centre of Johannesburg and analyses how queer people formed their own urban culture in this inner-city suburb through the creation of gay and gay-friendly clubs and bars, secret house parties and public cruising. These processes are examined in the context of the *Immorality Amendment Act* of 1969 which criminalized gay men. The paper also analyses the racial dynamics between black and white queer people in Hillbrow, and how these complicated the production of queer spaces in the city. By making use of archives and interviews this research highlights the importance of Hillbrow as a safe space for queer people during apartheid.

**Keywords:** Johannesburg; Hillbrow; urban culture; queer subculture; gay; lesbian; cruising



From the early 1950s the apartheid state asserted greater control over the country's urban areas, principally by enforcing stricter racial segregation. Johannesburg, the economic heartland and most populous city, was arguably the main experiment for these policies. Black people were removed to the periphery of the city, so that the inner-city could conform to apartheid ideology, that is, to secure white privilege and power. During apartheid's golden decade (early 1960s to early 1970s), it appeared these objectives had been achieved. The anti-apartheid movement that had flourished in Johannesburg's black areas during the 1940s and 1950s had been silenced through repression. However, beneath this veneer of quiescence and urban order, other forms of dissension were crystallising to reshape urban forms and culture.

This paper examines the flourishing of queer<sup>1</sup> subculture in Hillbrow, an inner-city suburb of Johannesburg, and how this contributed to the production of transgressive spaces that challenged apartheid's ideal of white cities. Apartheid was a regime that sought to control, separate, oppress and violate black bodies,<sup>2</sup> and concomitantly to idealise whiteness – the central figure in which was the heterosexual white male who valued the racist and heteronormative ideological foundations of the National Party (NP). However, the project of creating a culturally and ideologically monolithic white community, premised on the values of Christian Nationalism, was challenged on various fronts, including by increasingly visible queer spaces. The vibrant queer subculture that emerged in Hillbrow in the 1970s and 1980s was dominated by white gay men, and for the most part was not explicitly anti-apartheid, but rather called for just the protection of gay men. The presence of queer black bodies in these spaces was not always welcomed by whites, but as their number grew in the 1980s the character of queer subculture and spaces in Hillbrow began to change substantively. This paper seeks to rectify the lack of fundamental research on the creation of queer space in Johannesburg by highlighting how and why these spaces were created. This paper highlights the importance of queer space in Johannesburg as a space of safety for a marginalised group of people who have until recently been overlooked in South Africa's history. The paper reimagines the inner-city as a space sought after by queer people due to the anonymity that was found, and as such became safer for them than elsewhere in the country. In doing so, Hillbrow and surrounding neighbourhoods became havens for Johannesburg's queer population.

Johannesburg's queer subculture developed as queer people sought solidarity and sexual experience with other queer people in the city at a time when their sexuality was deemed illegitimate. South Africa's multiple periods of urbanisation - Johannesburg's early mining rush, then rural people entering cities in large numbers in the 1920s and 1930s - meant there were new people in cities, away from their families, and able to practice what Mark Gevisser noted as "personal autonomy" and help create a "homosexual subculture" with more ease.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term *queer* will be used throughout this paper when referring to multiple groups of people who refer to themselves as either gay, lesbian, trans, etc. When referring to just one group, or individual people, I will use terminology that describes them in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Carolin Andy (2017), "Apartheid's Immorality Amendment Act and the fiction of heteronormative whiteness", *Tydskrif vir Letturkunde*, 54(1), online. URL: [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0041-476X2017000100007](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0041-476X2017000100007) (last accessed 06.08.2021).

<sup>3</sup> Gevisser Mark (1994), "A Different Fight for Freedom: A History of South African Lesbian and Gay Organisation from the 1950s to 1990s", in M. Gevisser and E. Cameron (eds.), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, Braamfontein, Ravan Press, p. 18.

Homosexual subculture, and more broadly queer subculture can be categorised as a counter subculture which differs from “mainstream social groups” of heteronormative society.<sup>4</sup>

Katie Mooney suggests that “human identities are not determined by a single hegemonic factor” but rather a collection of “identities including race, ethnicity, gender and generation” and, I would add, sexual orientation.<sup>5</sup> Through collective identities, subcultures are formed amongst people who find strong similarities in their difference from mainstream society. During the 1970s and 1980s, Hillbrow became the epicentre of queer subculture in Johannesburg and arguably in the whole country. This paper explores how queer men and women were able to create their own spaces of transgression at the time and in the face of increasing state surveillance. Indeed, this was a period during which queer subculture flourished in the city as evidenced in the opening of a plethora of clubs, bars, and restaurants in and around Hillbrow which catered to the city’s vibrant queer community. Cruising continued unabated for gay men whilst private homes became spaces where lesbians were able to socialise.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on the production of these spaces, the paper examines the transgressive character of queer subculture within a repressive, racist and heteronormative political system.

By using archives and interviews with key figures in Johannesburg’s queer community, I highlight the everyday interaction of queer people in Hillbrow, and how they were able to circumnavigate oppressive laws and create safe spaces in which they were able to express their sexuality. I draw extensively on the impressive Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action<sup>7</sup> (GALA) collections (University of the Witwatersrand) on multiple aspects of queer life in South Africa and use oral interviews which I have conducted as well as transcripts found in GALA. The archival collection in GALA is the only available collection of its kind in South Africa, bringing together gay and lesbian activists’ collections which have largely been sponsored to GALA. The collection houses transcripts from past interviews, newspaper articles related to gay and lesbian history in South Africa, as well as personal artifacts such as diaries and letters. As such, GALA is fundamental to understanding and researching queer history in South Africa.

Existing literature on queer histories and queer people in South Africa grapples with issues pertaining to heteronormativity and queer people within heterosexually codified spaces. Perhaps the quintessential piece of queer literature is Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron’s edited collection *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, which was published at the dawn of democracy. It was a pioneering collection that lifted the veil on the lives of lesbian and gay South Africans across all races and classes, documenting sexual politics as well as erotic agency within apartheid South Africa. Since then, there has been a significant growth in the body of queer scholarship. However, much of this literature has tended to focus on broad issues affecting queer lives in South Africa such as on the persistence of discrimination and violence. Another key area of research has been on the politics of queer communities,

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<sup>4</sup> Mooney Katie (2006), “*Die Eendstert Euwel*” and societal responses to white youth sub-cultural identities on the Witwatersrand, 1930-1964, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Mooney K., “*Die Eendstert Euwel*”..., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Gevisser M., “A Different Fight for Freedom...”, *art. cited*, p. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> A gay activist archive with a collection of interview transcripts, community histories, and cultural materials related to gay life in South Africa. The archive is the only one of its kind in South Africa, and as such is the largest collection of queer historical material which can be found in the country.

especially their varied involvement in the anti-apartheid struggles and in the democratic era.<sup>8</sup> This paper analyses queer subculture within a particular urban locale which has received little attention in South African history.

The urban spaces in which queer people gathered, specifically during apartheid, are an important aspect of this research. Joubert Park became a well-known area during the Second World War for its bars which were often patronized by gay men hoping to meet off-duty soldiers. Hillbrow and Joubert Park, with their cheap high-density accommodation and close proximity to the Central Business District (CBD) became prominent locations for gay interactions.<sup>9</sup> These areas would also witness the gradual influx of black men, creating more regular opportunities for interaction between white and black gay men. The consequent transformation of Hillbrow contributed to white flight, which, in turn, led to the abandonment of clubs and bars.

Approximately one-kilometre square in extent, Hillbrow has historically been a densely populated area of high-rise apartment buildings. Following the removal of height restrictions placed on buildings in Johannesburg in the 1950s, the suburb experienced a “developmental spurt” with a proliferation in the erection of residential flats.<sup>10</sup> Between 1945 and 1965 there was a 250 % increase in the number of flats in Johannesburg. Whilst all flat owners and occupants were white, there was space in the inner-city for black residents too, as the *Native (Urban Areas) Amendment Bill* (No. 12 of 1954) allowed “up to five Blacks to reside on the top of a block of flats or other building in an urban area” in the country.<sup>11</sup> These “locations in the sky” were reserved primarily for domestic workers, making most relations between races in Hillbrow a “master and servant” dynamic.

Due to the large number of relatively cheap apartments available, and their proximity to Johannesburg’s Central Business District, many Hillbrow residents were young and single, or newly married couples.<sup>12</sup> Hillbrow’s high density and predominance of young, mostly single, people meant that it had always been a stimulating neighbourhood with an active nightlife. The inner-city has historically allowed for a permissive attitude to activities which did not conform to the NP’s conservative ideology, including non-heteronormative sexualities. The influx of a younger generation following the Second World War generated a desire for clubs

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<sup>8</sup> See: Nicol Julia (1991), “Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists”, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 7(11), pp. 45-46; Gevisser Mark and Cameron Edwin (1994), “Defiant Desire”, in M. Gevisser and E. Cameron (eds.), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, Braamfontein, Ravan Press, pp. 3-13; Morrell Robert (1998), “Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24(4), pp. 605-630; Reddy Vasu (1998), “Negotiating Gay Masculinities”, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 37, pp. 65-70; Cock Jacklyn (2003), “Engendering Gay and Lesbian Rights: The Equality Clause in the South African Constitution”, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 26(1), pp. 35-45; Hoad Neville, Karen Martin and Graeme Reid (eds.) (2005), *Sex and Politics in South Africa*, Cape Town, Double Storey Books; Carolin A., “Apartheid’s Immorality Act...”, art. cited; Conway Daniel (2009), “Queering Apartheid: The National Party’s 1987 ‘Gay Rights’ Election Campaign in Hillbrow”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35(4), pp. 849-863; du Pisani Kobus (2012), “Shifting Sexual Morality? Changing Views on Homosexuality in Afrikaner Society during the 1960s”, *Historia*, 57(2), pp. 182-221.

<sup>9</sup> Gevisser M., “A Different Fight for Freedom...”, art. cited, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Morris Alan (1999), “Race Relations and Racism in a Racially Diverse Inner City Neighbourhood: A Case Study of Hillbrow, Johannesburg”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25(4), pp. 670-671.

<sup>11</sup> Mather C. (1987), “Residential Segregation and Johannesburg’s ‘Locations in the Sky’”, *South African Geographical Journal*, 69(2), p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Morris A., “Race Relations and Racism...”, art. cited, p. 671.

and bars outside of the scope of the NP. Recently moving out of their family homes, this new generation of youth were readily enveloped into Hillbrow's bohemian party scene.

In this paper, we will examine the creation of queer spaces through historical periodisation and the development of queer spaces in Johannesburg from informal spaces to more structured ones. The movement of queer people from public cruising spaces into rigid clubs starts the process of a noticeable queer community in Johannesburg, and is an ideal point to start an examination into queer space in the city. Racial barriers which existed under apartheid were crucial in how queer spaces were structured, and with the racial breakdown in the 1980s came another focal point in the progression of queer space in Johannesburg. Whilst there were spaces in the inner-city which were deemed queer-friendly, queer people still had to navigate these spaces in a way that kept them safe. The analysis looks at how queer people adapted clothing to help navigate the city, and as an identifier to express their own sexual interests whilst not drawing attention to themselves from heteronormative society.

## Cruising and Clubs

Cruising spaces had always been important spaces for sexual interaction between gay men. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s cruising spaces had become popularized due to the proximity of soldiers in and around Johannesburg's inner-city.<sup>13</sup> Public parks, the bathrooms at Park Station, the post office at Joubert Park, and the Union Grounds were a few of the well-known locations where men could find other men willing to quickly and discreetly engage in sexual exploration with each other, occasionally across racial boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

Hillbrow and the neighbouring Joubert Park were sought after destinations for a young generation of gay men due to their cheap high-density accommodation, close proximity to the CBD, and reputation for being transgressive spaces. During the Second World War the bars in these areas were patronized by gay men hoping to meet off-duty soldiers who were stationed nearby.<sup>15</sup> Percy<sup>16</sup>, a black gay informant, recalls the importance of transient soldiers during his own sexual exploration. Through the 1940s and 1950s Percy, as well as other black men from Johannesburg's surrounding townships, would go to the Union Grounds to have sex with soldiers. Walking along the Union Grounds' fence during nights when it would be too dark to see what was happening, Percy and others would be approached by soldiers patrolling the ground who would then ask, "how much?". The response would always be "twenty-six", indicating "two shillings and six pence" in order to have sex. The white soldiers would then pay the amount and the two would engage in penetrative sex through the "diamond mesh wire fence".<sup>17</sup> Despite the transactional nature of these encounters, Edwin Cameron, a white gay man who helped establish South Africa's first Gay Pride March, notes that these men would not consider themselves to be sex workers, but rather view their interactions as one of the few ways men could have discreet sex with each other across racial boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Paola Tabet

<sup>13</sup> Gevisser A., "A Different Fight for Freedom...", art. cited, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA), AM3160(A), B2.2.3, Queer Tour Drafts/notes/routes.

<sup>15</sup> Gevisser A., "A Different Fight for Freedom...", art. cited, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>17</sup> Percy. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 30 July 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>18</sup> E Cameron. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 2 July 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

supports Cameron's notion that they would not have considered themselves sex workers, noting that cultural norms differ and that in some cultures receiving money and material gains in exchange for sex is not always considered sex work.<sup>19</sup> Percy further recalls the importance of Joubert Park's post office, another popular cruising location in Hillbrow's vicinity, as a "pickup point" which introduced him to white men in the city who were able to provide refuge from the police:

Even at Joubert Park, the police would raid and would arrest a lot of the boys masquerading at the post office. That was the pickup point. Because you would go out there late in the evening and whites would come and pick people up there. I would go with the [black] boys [to the post office] but was not interested in... whites. I just wanted to go there because these [black] boys wanted us to go as a group... Then I met quite a number of whites... who'd get boys at the station and invite to their place and say, "Come on Percy, we've got so many boys, you can pick and choose".<sup>20</sup>

Closeted<sup>21</sup> gay men who did not want to subsume themselves completely into Johannesburg's gay subculture, found anonymity in these spaces. Speaking of his own cruising experience in the 1980s Levi<sup>22</sup>, a suburban white gay man, recalls the secrecy one expected when cruising:

I mean you didn't have forty-two cameras in every corner those days... there was a kind of subtle underworld... It's like kind of weird, just public loos were pretty much available in Hillbrow at that time... and you kind of took chances you'd meet people there.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the risks involved, such sexual encounters continued throughout apartheid. And the dangers were numerous. Cruising spaces became sites for gay bashing, and stories circulated about how men were "being gay-bashed, or beaten up, or mugged".<sup>24</sup> The dangers of cruising were often ignored in favour of the guaranteed sexual experiences which could be found for men who wanted instant gratification, and as such they existed as spaces in and around Johannesburg throughout the NP's rule.

Following the promulgation of the *Immorality Amendment Act* of 1969, cruising became particularly risky as the police were given greater powers of surveillance over homosexuality in the country. The law targeted gay men who were engaged in any sexual activity in which two or more were present.<sup>25</sup> The immediate consequences of the Act were tighter control and surveillance of gay urban areas, such as cruising locations, clubs, bars and parties throughout the 1970s.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tabet Paola (2012), "Through the looking glass: sexual-economic exchange", in F. Grande Omokaro and F. Reysoo (eds.), *Chic, chèque, choc : transactions autour des corps et stratégies amoureuses contemporaines*, Genève, Graduate Institute Publications, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Percy. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 30 July 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>21</sup> Queer people who have not told others, normally those close to them, about their sexuality.

<sup>22</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>23</sup> Levi. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 19 August 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Gevisser A., "A Different Fight for Freedom...", art. cited, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Retief Glen (1994), "Keeping Sodom out of the Laager: The Policing of Sexual Minorities in South Africa", in M. Gevisser and E. Cameron (eds.), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, Braamfontein, Ravan Press, p. 103.

Entrapment by the police became a regular occurrence.<sup>27</sup> Police justified their “repressive measures directed at [white] lesbian, gay and bisexual people [as a way] to treat homosexual activity in public places as a nuisance and to charge transgressors with sexual offences” which were often not linked to their sexuality, but included public indecency, sexual assault, and immoral soliciting.<sup>28</sup>

Demanding safe space for queer people came from the experience and recognition from gays and lesbians who felt alienated in the city. But the “right to the city [did] not demand all rights for all people” and, as such, queer black bodies were excluded from these spaces during the 1970s as gay white men sought to make their own spaces accessible only for themselves.<sup>29</sup> Demanding a “right to the city” first took form in Hillbrow’s clubbing scene which began to thrive in the early 1970s. Kanika Batra suggests that this had become possible for two reasons: the first was that Hillbrow had become known for its bohemian reputation born out of increased urbanisation into the inner-city from mostly young, liberal whites.<sup>30</sup> The second reason can be traced to a relative tolerance by police in permitting clubs to operate in order to more easily assert control over queer activities, and to keep them hidden from the public eye. This tended to keep gay men away from cruising areas and sent them indoors into club spaces:

The flourishing of gay commercial life in the form of clubs and bars was accompanied, in the case of Hillbrow in Johannesburg at least, by the formalisation of an area where gay people had always lived into a clearly identifiable “gay neighbourhood”... and [had] a new level of tolerance from other inhabitants. As the neighbourhood grew, the authorities decided to view Hillbrow’s densely-populated flatland too as a “gay venue”... choosing not to apply the same pressure on its streets as they did on other outdoor areas.<sup>31</sup>

Batra argues that the NP and police found it easier to control the movement of queer people if they remained indoors and hidden from society.<sup>32</sup> Hannah, who ran a club in Johannesburg for queer people in the early 1970s, recalls a regular vice squad colonel who would visit to keep an eye on her and the club: “He would come by every now and then for his bottle of whiskey. He said he had no objection to the club because he preferred to know that everyone was under one roof, rather than at Zoo Lake or Joubert Park.”<sup>33</sup> Whilst police knew of these clubs, they allowed them to remain in operation, as it seems that the intention “was to segregate [homosexuals] from society... so long as [homosexuals] kept [their] dirty habits off the street [they] were safe” from prosecution”.<sup>34</sup>

This notion of having everyone “under one roof” highlights the mindset of the police that it was easier to control Johannesburg’s queer population if they were all kept in one space

<sup>27</sup> Republic of South Africa, *Annual Report of Criminal Offences*, Pretoria, Central Statistical Services, 1982.

<sup>28</sup> Retief G., “Keeping Sodom out of the Laager...”, art. cited, p. 106.

<sup>29</sup> Marcuse Peter (2016), “Whose Right(s) to what City?”, in N. Brenner, P. Marcuse and M. Mayer (eds.), *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*, Oxon, Routledge, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Batra Kanika (2016), “Worliding Sexualities under Apartheid: From Gay Liberation to a Queer Afropolitanism”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 19(1), p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Gevisser M. and Cameron E, “Defiant Desire ...”, art. cited, p. 37.

rather than scattered throughout the city. Due to Hillbrow's bohemian essence, with a flourish of liberal minded white people entering the city, the gay subculture was able to develop relatively unimpeded. Gay clubs, bars and restaurants that gained prominence throughout the 1970s, managed to maintain themselves as "exclusively gay business ventures", and gave space in which a gay clientele were able to congregate.<sup>35</sup> Hillbrow's rapidly growing gay community contributed to the opening of several popular clubs through the decade: the *Dungeon* first opened a few weeks after the *Immorality Amendment Act* of 1969 passed, *Rocky's* at the Continental and *The New Library* both opened in the early 1970s, and later still, *The Butterfly* at Skyline Hotel would become one of the most packed gay venues in the city. The *Together Bar*, or *T-Bar* as it was often called, was opened for lesbians in 1974 in Hillbrow's Hilton Court Hotel.<sup>36</sup>

In 1969 Ronnie Oelofsen opened the *Dungeon Club*, which became one of the longest running gay clubs in Johannesburg. The club opened a few weeks after the *Immorality Amendment Act* of 1969 had been promulgated, and on its opening night played *sakkie-sakkie*<sup>37</sup> music which contributed to its predominantly Afrikaans clientele. Oelofsen claims that *The Dungeon* was able to operate because of a strict set of rules it followed: "As long as there were no minors on the premises and you were not selling liquor, you were safe. The only time I have ever been raided was when I showed a banned movie one Sunday night."<sup>38</sup>

Oelofsen may also have been able to keep the club in operation without much query from police due to his relationship with inner-city town councillors, who he allowed to use the venue for senior-citizens parties.<sup>39</sup> *The Butterfly*, located at the Skyline Hotel on Pretoria Street in Hillbrow, opened in the early 1970s and quickly became one of the most frequented gay clubs in Hillbrow, well known for its status as a "rental area" where one could find men cruising following the decline of Park Station as a cruising location.<sup>40</sup> Throughout the 1970s many gay clubs and bars opened in Hillbrow and its surrounds, and the area gained a reputation of being gay-friendly. They were spaces in which gay men were able to transcend heteronormativity and construct their own subculture within apartheid's carefully manufactured heteronormative state.<sup>41</sup>

## Greying the pink city

Whilst many white gay men could easily access Hillbrow's clubs and bars in the 1970s, black and poor men were unable to gain entry and were still left to cruise, a practice which continued throughout apartheid.<sup>42</sup> The social stratification that came with white-only clubs and bars which required entrance fees meant that a majority of those in attendance were middle-class white gay men. Robert Morrell notes that "working class, black and gay men were excluded from... hegemonic masculinities" but have at various times fallen under the "umbrella of hegemonic

<sup>35</sup> Batra K., "Worlding Sexualities under Apartheid ...", art. cited, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>37</sup> Traditional Afrikaans folk dancing music.

<sup>38</sup> Gevisser M., "A Different Fight for Freedom...", art. cited, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>41</sup> Carolin A., "Apartheid's Immorality Act ...", art. cited, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



masculinity” and have been able to exclude others, most notably women, as they have benefitted from patriarchal structures of society.<sup>43</sup> Morrell further notes that hegemonic masculinity produced by the state is constantly produced and contested, an idea which was evident in Hillbrow’s gay clubs during the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> Whilst white gay men were challenging the state’s heteronormativity by claiming space in Hillbrow, they were still reproducing racial and gender discrimination. Poor whites could gain access to cheaper bars in Hillbrow, something queer black people were denied. At least until the early 1980s, these spaces thus maintained apartheid’s segregation, reflecting the politics of most whites at the time, including white gay men.

Hillbrow’s reputation as the “entertainment magnet for white suburbia” began to decline from the early 1980s as the apartheid system faced challenges on multiple fronts.<sup>45</sup> As the township-based struggle against apartheid reached new heights, the state was increasingly unable to enforce key pieces of apartheid legislation, such as the *Group Areas Act* and influx control. Worsening housing shortages in black areas and the willingness of landlords to rent their apartments to black tenants caused an increasing number of black residents to seek accommodation in Hillbrow.<sup>46</sup> The influx of black residents into the inner-city, as well as the flight of white residents, turned the once white cosmopolitan city into a “grey” location in Johannesburg; neither white nor black, but a mix of multiple races.

Edwin Cameron remembers Hillbrow in the 1980s as being a “crossroad of class and race” with men of “mixed-race descent, rather than Africans” found frequenting the area more often.<sup>47</sup> Research suggests this, but Levi remembers it differently, saying that he never saw many people who weren’t white in Hillbrow during the 1980s.<sup>48</sup> Saul Dubow reflects on the process of Hillbrow’s “greying” during the 1980s:

In inner-city Johannesburg, the cosmopolitan suburb of Hillbrow began to go “grey” during the 1980s as Indian and coloured apartment-seekers, followed by Africans, ignored the strict provisions of the Group Areas Act... In the shifting geography of segregated spaces, the government was effectively relinquishing control of inner-city Johannesburg in the knowledge that its real urban support-base was considerably suburbanized.<sup>49</sup>

The gradual racial integration of Hillbrow caused alarm among many of South Africa’s right-wing politicians but was welcomed by progressives. There was a mixture of views amongst white South Africans over the racial integration of Hillbrow during the 1980s.

The economic and political crises of the 1970s, as well as differing views on the implementation of apartheid policy resulted in a division in the NP between the more pragmatic, reformist *verligtes*<sup>50</sup> and the more rigid, conservative *verkramptes*<sup>51</sup>. The ascendancy

<sup>43</sup> Morrell R., “Of Boys and Men ...”, art. cited, p. 608.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 609.

<sup>45</sup> Morris Alan (1999), *Bleakness and Light: Inner-City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg*, South Africa, Witwatersrand University Press, p. 82.

<sup>46</sup> Morris A., “Race Relations ...”, art. cited, p. 673.

<sup>47</sup> E. Cameron. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 2 July 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>48</sup> Levi. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 19 August 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>49</sup> Dubow Saul (2014), *Apartheid, 1948-1994*, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, p. 242.

<sup>50</sup> Roughly translated as “enlightened” ones.

<sup>51</sup> Roughly translated as “conservative” ones.

of the *verligtes* during the early 1980s contributed to the decline of prosecutions for violations of the Group Areas Act, with only three people prosecuted in Johannesburg's inner-city in 1981. The *verligtes* realised that the survival and growth of the NP was ultimately dependent on a move away from the fundamental tenets of apartheid, as well as "a need for the government to widen its potential support base" by increasing parliamentary access to Indians and coloureds.<sup>52</sup> For this purpose, in 1984, the tricameral parliament incorporated Indians and coloureds into "the central parliament by way of separate parliamentary houses".<sup>53</sup> These superficial reforms, which acknowledged the impossibility of maintaining apartheid, enjoyed minimal support among whites, who tended to retreat into secure, all-white enclaves.

Rumours of increased crime, decreasing housing prices, and a fear of racial mixing in the inner-city subsequently led to the "white flight" from the city, with many of the inner-city's white residents moving to Johannesburg's elite northern suburbs. Hillbrow's "racial transformation" quickly became associated with depreciation and urban blight through the 1980s.<sup>54</sup> White flight was inextricably linked to capital flight which saw "large-scale business enterprises, mining houses, banks and other financial institutions, and real estate holding companies" abandon the inner-city and relocate in the expeditiously urbanizing northern suburbs.<sup>55</sup> This outward migration of the white middle class, including the queer white community, caused the abandonment of "old iconic bars and nightclubs located in Hillbrow... such as Skyline".<sup>56</sup> Hillbrow's white middle-class queer community had dispersed into northern suburbia, leaving the suburb without the commercially flourishing queer identity that it had been nurtured throughout the 1970s.

Until this period, black queers were usually apprehensive about entering this renowned queer space. Coming from Soweto, Paul Mokgethi remembers being fearful during his first few times going to *the Butterfly*, a gay bar in Hillbrow:

[T]here were all these white men that would come in there. So now we're scared of going in, we're scared of going inside the place. We would push each other; go and check what is happening. Now I do not want to go, I am scared.<sup>57</sup>

S'Bu remembers being harassed by a bouncer for publicly kissing his girlfriend, confirming fears about being unsafe in the inner city. The incident occurred before S'Bu's transition, so it was seen as two black girls kissing each other in what was regarded as an openly gay space. Yet the bouncer still intimidated them, and told them not to "do this shit here".<sup>58</sup> But the political changes in the country were also being manifested in the formal white space of Johannesburg. Paul and his friends had eventually gained access to *the Butterfly* and become friendly with the bartender because of their sexuality. They became frequent customers of the

<sup>52</sup> Morris A., "Race Relations ...", art. cited, p. 673.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> "Rather share the franchise than the pool", *Frontline*, 30 April 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Murray Martin J. (2008), *Taming the Disorderly City: The Spatial Landscape of Johannesburg after Apartheid*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, p. 127.

<sup>56</sup> Banham Hugo (2017), "Mapping the Black Queer Geography of Johannesburg's Lesbian Women through Narrative", *PINS (Psychology in Society)*, 55, online. URL: [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1015-60462017000300006](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1015-60462017000300006) (last accessed 06.08.2021)

<sup>57</sup> GALA, AM3160 (B): C4.1.1., Joburg Tracks, Tracks Interview: Paul.

<sup>58</sup> S'Bu Kheswa. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 04 October 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

Butterfly, but they still remained side-lined from its white clientele. *The Butterfly*, like many gay bars and clubs in Hillbrow, was separated by cliques. In one corner you might find the [white] *butch* lesbians, with the [white] *femmes* in another, one corner could be saturated with gay men from Doornfontein, and those from Melville somewhere else, and the people from the Southern suburbs in a different section in the bar. In the 1980s black patrons were now included in the mix due to the racial breakdown taking place in Hillbrow, but their social stratification within bars and clubs was allocated according to race rather than class or place.<sup>59</sup>

People had varied experiences of this process of “greying”, often determined by their own navigation of the space. When questioning him on the increased presence of black bodies and people of colour in Hillbrow and its surrounds, Levi doesn’t recall noticing their presence in the 1980s, most likely due to the clubs he would have patronised, but by the 1990s he believes that Hillbrow had already begun to gain a reputation as being crime-infested, leaving him with fewer gay clubs and bars he felt were safe to frequent in the area.<sup>60</sup> If the 1980s can be defined as the “greying” of the Hillbrow, the 1990s had been the decline and subsequent loss of a pink, multi-racial inner-city.

Black queer residents moving into Hillbrow during this time became more active in the area’s clubs and bars. Skyline, after initially declining following the white flight, became a domain for many of the black queer residents in Hillbrow. Skyline’s patrons in the second half of the 1980s were 95 % black. The increased number of black residents in Hillbrow “had fundamentally altered the clientele” of Hillbrow’s clubs and bars, with most of them being the domain of queer black people with a few whites.<sup>61</sup>

## Negotiating risks in the city

Despite the growth of gay clubs in Hillbrow, queer life remained at risk. This was especially true for queer women who often resorted to hosting private parties in their homes. In order to gain access to these parties women had to be invited by someone they knew, and as such these parties were separated based on profession, such as teachers, nurses, lawyers, and other professional cliques.<sup>62</sup> Hannah remembered that queer women felt safe from raids as long as there were no men present, as gay men often attracted unwelcome attention from neighbours.<sup>63</sup> Whilst the majority of lesbian social organizing took place in houses, there were some “safe” public spaces available for lesbians, the most prominent of these in Johannesburg was run by a lady named Chick Venter. A “rough” club with “walls covered in fishnets and bottles” near Park Station, with a mostly male clientele, Chick Venter’s venue was one of Johannesburg’s few clubs where “unaccompanied women could go” beyond the clique-based houses.<sup>64</sup>

But it was not only queer women who made use of homes as spaces of safety. White-owned residences were occasionally regarded as spaces of safety for black men too. Homes

<sup>59</sup> Gevisser M., “A Different Fight for Freedom...”, art. cited, p. 42.

<sup>60</sup> Levi. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 19 August 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>61</sup> Morris A., “Race Relations ...”, art. cited, p. 692.

<sup>62</sup> Gevisser M., “A Different Fight for Freedom...”, art. cited, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

had become spaces which were not merely used for sexual encounters, but also spaces of refuge from the apartheid states pass laws.<sup>65</sup> Phil, an informant of Mark Gevisser, recalls pretending that he was the domestic worker's boyfriend which, at worst, would have her "charged with contravening pass regulations, but at least she [and Phil] would evade the far more severe Immorality Act" should they be caught.<sup>66</sup> Peter's Place was a space where many young men would head for safety, often filling up with boys who missed the last train:

From the way Phil tells it, you might indeed *plan* to miss the last train back to Soweto: "Oh brother, he said, slapping this thigh, 'those were the days! His room would be full, so full of young men who are afraid to be roaming the streets at nights". As was often the custom, Peter raised his bed on sandbags and bricks to protect him from demons, and he would make a bedding all around him for everyone coming in. I remember one time it was so full that you couldn't open the door. I slept against the door, but in the morning, when I woke up, I was next to the bed, maybe even under the bed, because those were the days, if you have got someone gay next to you, you'd enjoy yourself for all the dry months that you never had a gay person with you!<sup>67</sup>

These spaces provided young gay men with safety, but also sexual experiences which were tough to find elsewhere, and as such places like Peter's Place became havens where boys could escape the confines of apartheid, and at the same time "find comfort with another boy".<sup>68</sup> Evidently access to white-owned homes in the city provided a level of safety for queer black citizens. These spaces were crucial for the safety of queer people who were routinely targeted as "an explicitly homophobic youth subculture of violent 'moffie-bashing'<sup>69</sup> emerged in South African cities" in the 1950s and continued throughout apartheid.<sup>70</sup> Whilst it was possible to find safe spaces around other queer people, accessing the city as a queer person could be dangerous with violent beatings regular in the city.

*Exit*, a gay South African magazine, reported an increase in homophobic violence towards the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s.<sup>71</sup> Levi recalls that known cruising locations in the 1980s came with their own sense of danger, stating that:

I remember being in a hijack ... I felt vulnerable because I shouldn't have been there in the first place ... I was parked by the tennis court and I saw this guy who I thought was kind of cute ... and I parked my car [next to his, facing opposite directions] ... and the next thing he reversed back suddenly. I couldn't know what he was doing, my windows were open and next thing I have a gun at my head, a guy had come from behind that [the man in the other car] had obviously seen and he drove off.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Pass laws refers to internal passport legislation put in place to segregate the population, manage urban development and regulate migrant labour. It severely restricted the movement of African citizens, but also other groups, by requiring them to carry a passbook when outside their home regions or particular areas. See Shear Keith (2013), "At war with the pass laws? Reform and the Policing of White Supremacy in 1940s South Africa", *The Historical Journal*, 56(1), pp. 205-229.

<sup>66</sup> Gevisser Mark (2014), *Lost and Found in Johannesburg. A memoir*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 165. The Immorality Act consists of two laws. The first, in 1927, prohibited sexual relations between Whites and Blacks and was amended in 1950 to prohibit all relations between Whites, Blacks and "Coloureds". The second act in 1957 reaffirmed this prohibition and banned pimping, brothels and sex with persons under the age of 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> A derogatory way to say gay-bashing in Afrikaans.

<sup>70</sup> du Pisani K., "Shifting Sexual Morality? ...", art. cited, p. 189.

<sup>71</sup> Batra K., "Worlding Sexualities under Apartheid ...", art. cited, p.48.

<sup>72</sup> Levi. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 19 August 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

Cruising spaces in Johannesburg were targets for gay-bashing. The move from cruising locations to spaces in the city behind closed doors made finding sexual encounters safer for men, but women still often required other means to meet as clubs and bars mostly catered towards men.

Lesbian socialisation had a further element to it, that of dress and style. S’Bu Kheswa, a transman from Soweto who moved into Hillbrow in the 1980s, first came out to his family as a lesbian:

[When I came out] there was no drama about [me coming out]. There was no stop this, or chase you out of home, anything like that. There wasn’t such things. You know ... there were no problems, because traditionally for instance, with funerals and things like that, girls must dress this way and do this, at home they never, never put me in those things, so I would go to things in my trousers, in my butch look, nobody ever said “you can see all women are covered, where’s your cover?” there was never, never, never an issue.<sup>73</sup>

Two things are important to note here. Firstly, having the safety and general acceptance of their family, S’Bu was able to come out and not face familial persecution and ostracization at home. Secondly, S’Bu, like other queer women, used dress as a defining factor of their identity, and tried to maintain a masculine appearance:

One day ... there’s this group of guys just standing by the corner, they are my neighbours, so as I’m passing this one guy comes to me “hey, you know, as you were walking this way I really, really thought you were a guy, until you were closer that I saw your chest”. That crushed me, you know, that crushed me completely, that there’s something that gives me away [as a woman].<sup>74</sup>

Divided into *butch* and *femme*, queer women would often play normalized gender roles in the household, with one woman doing the stereotypical masculine routine, whilst the other played the role of the housewife. Perhaps more of a way for *butch* lesbians to signify their sexuality through dress and presentation, the *butch/femme* divide articulated a social construct within queer relationships, but further signified the roles they also wished to take part in within society, the workplace, and amongst other people outside of their queer circles.

Shay, a white lesbian who frequented Hillbrow in the 1970s, born into white suburbia, had a similar experience when dressing as a signifier:<sup>75</sup>

[I wore] skirts and sort of blouses and things like that. It was unusual [for me]. I knew everyone was going to give [me] a look because [I] wasn’t dolled up with [my] hat and gloves and all of this. And then at that point I cut my hair which was very unusual which it was at that time when women were wearing these bangs and curls in the front and all this kind of jazz. And my *parents were quite cool with that as well* ... I walked into a barber shop ... I said “Solly I want you to cut my hair”. And he looked at me and said “don’t be daft, I can’t cut your hair” ... I approached lots of hairdressers and they said “no my dear your hair is so beautiful don’t cut it blah blah” ... and again if you walked down the street with short hair people kind of looked at you as though you were

<sup>73</sup> S’Bu Kheswa. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 04 October 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> The use of clothing and other stylistic elements such as hair or make-up to allow others to know ones sexuality.

something that had come out a hole in the ground of something like that ... I worked with machines and spanners ... [so] it was a marvellous excuse to go to the MD and say "Look I can't climb up and down these ruddy great machines in skirts, can I wear slacks?" And he kind of looked at me and said "God that's a most unusual request but if you have to you have to. But please make it look as elegant as you can".<sup>76</sup>

What these stories highlight is how heteronormative society perceives them, but also how they are still willing to maintain who they are even through heteronormative backlash, although this is hinted as being due to a strong support group which each of them mentions. When they did navigate space, *butch* women had to be more conscious of their surroundings and the people they interacted with in order to find safety in a city which would rather render them invisible.

Coming out through style allowed women to subvert heteronormative space around them, highlighting their distinct disdain to heteronormativity, and allowing other women to notice their sexuality. Whilst there were risks involved, presenting themselves as *butch* became a way of showing who they were, and that they could be approached, something that would unlikely have been as possible in heteronormative spaces without the signifier.<sup>77</sup>

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This paper explored how queer people navigated and created their own space within an overwhelmingly heteronormative society which criminalized non-heteronormative sexualities. As an initial position, this research set out to explore the ways in which queer people were able to define their own space within Hillbrow, and how everyday life was experienced. With the use of archival materials and interviews with queer people who navigated these spaces, this research found that queer spaces in Hillbrow were vibrant and characterised by ever-changing transgressions. What is clearly identified in this research is that there was no homogenous experience for queer people living in Johannesburg in the timeframe studied, and that class, race and gender contributed to various experiences for all queer people.

Following the promulgation of the *Immorality Act* of 1969, the 1970s witnessed a proliferation of clubs, including multiple gay clubs in Hillbrow and its surrounding areas as men sought to move away from public cruising areas and into the safety of gay-friendly spaces. Gay clubs helped stratify Hillbrow and its surrounding areas as a gay-friendly location within Johannesburg, but one which was only accessible to white men, and occasionally white women in the 1970s.

Due to the racial stratification of apartheid, urban spaces throughout South Africa had been white spaces, and this was largely the case in Johannesburg until the 1980s when the inner city had started to deracialize. Spaces such as Park Station become identifiable cruising locations, but were subject to raids, and black people found in them after hours were subject to Pass Laws, meaning they either had to leave the city on the last train out, or find white spaces

<sup>76</sup> GALA, AM3160 (B): C4.1.1. Joburg Tracks, Tracks Interview: Shay. Emphasis mine.

<sup>77</sup> S'bu Kheswa. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 04 October 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

in which they were accepted, such as Peter's Place.<sup>78</sup> The gradual process of deracialization changed the inner city's queer space; as many queer white people left the city, queer clubs slowly shifted out of the inner city and found their way into the suburbs. Queer black people who moved into the city did find refuge in the few clubs which did remain, most notably the *Skyline*, but otherwise had to reframe themselves in a changing Hillbrow.

By the 1960s Hillbrow was a transgressive space dominated by a single, youthful population. Coffee bars, clubs and late-night bookstores made Hillbrow a mecca for white suburbia seeking to join the bohemian residents.<sup>79</sup> In this transgressive space multiple gay bars had begun to flourish as men were effectively moved indoors as police started raiding cruising spaces. Police appeared to not interfere with the presence of gay clubs so long as they remained indoors and away from spaces visible to the public.<sup>80</sup> However, clubs and bars were only accessible to white people during the 1970s, and only by the 1980s with the collapse of the *Group Areas Act* in Hillbrow, were black people able to go to clubs and bars.<sup>81</sup> The influx of black people in Hillbrow changed the racial dynamics of the inner-city, and as white people left for the suburbs their space were quickly rented to people moving in from Soweto and elsewhere.<sup>82</sup> Gay spaces that remained had to change policies for customers, and as such queer black people were allowed to access these once white-only spaces.

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<sup>78</sup> Percy. Interview by Jonathan Botes, Johannesburg, 30 July 2019. Transcript in possession of author.

<sup>79</sup> Silverman Melinda and Zack Tanya, "Case Study: Hillbrow & Berea", *Land Use Management and Democratic Governance in the City of Johannesburg*, 2007, p. 16.

<sup>80</sup> Gevisser M., "A Different Fight for Freedom...", art. cited, p.37.

<sup>81</sup> Dubow S., *Apartheid...*, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>82</sup> Murray M. J., *Taming the Disorderly City...*, op. cit., p. 127.

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