

# Article

## Questions of visibility and identity: an analysis of representations of the *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant

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### **Abstract**

The *Mr Gay South Africa* competition is a nation-wide event aimed at increasing LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) visibility in South Africa. The success of the 2009-2010 crowned winner on the international gay pageant stage has drawn attention to this newly-instated annual event. This paper analyses online queer press sources to offer a reading of what the pageant represents in relation to the role that the media plays and a historical contextualisation of queer visibility in South Africa. It argues that the pageant, although geared toward achieving positive visibility, propagates an assimilationist strategy that ensures the perpetuation of gay identity – as representative for all queer identity – as based on an essentialised and commercialised transnational understanding of homosexuality. The paper ultimately concludes that online representations of the pageant resist the potentially positive development of sexual visibility in South Africa.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

South Africa's transition into democracy saw momentous shifts in every sphere of society. Most notable amongst these shifts, from a perspective of the advancement of queer (see below) rights, was the change in policy regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. The period between 1993 and 2006 was marked by dramatic legal moves from the legally-entrenched curtailing of the rights of queers to constitutional protection on the basis of one's orientation and a flourish of increased social visibility for queer people (Reddy 2006:147). The struggle against the pre-1994 state-enforced criminalisation same-sex-sexual-conduct formed a part of a broad context of

a struggle for political liberation (Reddy 1998:65). As a contributing force behind queer visibility the first Lesbian and Gay Pride March in 1990 set a primary goal of challenging the media to ‘present images of homosexuality in responsible and appropriate ways that counter the dominant negative myths’ (de Waal and Manion 2006:15). However, authors continually stress the importance of recognising the diversity of sexual identities within South Africa (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992, Gevisser and Cameron 1994, Hoad et al 2005) in an effort to escape the western-influenced transnationalisation of gay identity (Hoad 1998:34) to the point of mistaken emphasis placed on the demographic of white/middle-class/urban/male as the ‘essential’ gay South Africa identity (Gevisser and Cameron 1994:3). The slow increase in mainstream media visibility and the continued development of a print (including *Exit* and *Gay Pages*) and online (including *GaySpeak*, *MambaOnline*, *The Pink Eye*, *The Pink Tongue*, *Queer Life*, and *Behind the Mask*) queer press has helped achieve a wider appreciation for sexual diversity in the country. Whether these media representations are ‘responsible and appropriate’, however, is partly the focus of this paper. Contemporary understandings of sexuality are subject to, and the results of, systems of social and economic commodification and commercialisation (Sigusch 1998:343), and the media, as a part of such systems, aid in the construction and perpetuation of social understandings and attitudes (Hall 1997:21). Recognising the continuing role that the media have in ‘educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire’ (Kellner 2003:9) is the basis of this paper.

Throughout this paper I use the term ‘queer’ to refer to all those identities that fall into a spectrum of sexual variance from the heterosexual norm. Originally used as a marker of oddness and then later adopted as a pejorative term for gay men, queer has been ‘reclaimed in recent decades with anger and pride to signal an activist insurgence against homophobia and other forms of oppression, especially those relating to gender and sexuality’ (Giffney 2009:2). ‘Queerness’ often functions as an umbrella term for non-heteronormative sexual identities, but has also become intrinsically linked to a fundamental questioning and challenging of normative assumptions around desire, actions, feelings, subjectivities, norms, identities and ethics (Giffney 2009:2). Whilst the *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant uses the term LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) to refer to all such identities, my choice of queer is a conscious decision to draw attention to the problems of limiting identity diversity to an acronym consisting of five

letters. Queer is partly encoded with a history of self-conscious resistance, and in my use of it I hope to draw attention to the limitations of using ‘gay’ or ‘LGBTI’ as a mediated synonym in a country with so many social anxieties – including the concern over whether *queer* is actually appropriate in a situation where limited, socially-motivated political resistance exists. The use of ‘gay’ at later points in the paper refers specifically to men with a socially constructed ‘gay identity’, as is represented and conveyed by the pageant. My use of queer speaks to the recognition that sexualised self-identification is historically complex and not easily categorised. Although discussions around the reclaiming of ‘queer’ as a positive marker of resistance are rooted in Euro-American academic discourse from the 1990s (Stobie 2007:16), research documents it being used as a common phrase of self-identification within South African lesbian subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s (Gevisser 1994:21), despite its existence as a pejorative term in heteronormative culture. It is, however, this ambiguity and uncertainty which underlies my choice to use the term. As a concept, queer ‘demands self-reflexivity and personal engagement’ (Giffney 2009:2). Recognising criticisms levelled at the use of queer (see, for example, Giffney 2009:5), I do not propose that queer replace all labels of self-identification or analysis. Rather, my use of the term is to encourage self-reflection and an awareness of the interconnectedness of identities, with an embedded desire for a shift to a ‘politics of values’ (Bornstein 1997:16).

The *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant is a recent nation-wide event for the queer ‘community’ in South Africa, with the premise of being a contest to find ‘a gay man of impeccable character, taste and style...[a] candidate of whom the LGBTI community – in all [its] diversity – can be proud’ (Mr Gay South Africa Group 2009). The competition has evolved to become a profitable international tourism feature, now explicitly positioned as one of the key events to showcase South Africa’s ‘liberal and welcoming outlook’ (World Tourism Organisation 2012). This paper seeks to critique the concept and image of this competition, looking at its founding 2009-2010 season, through an analysis of the available popular queer online representations. This will be done in relation to a contextualisation of the current queer-related political climate in South Africa, the goals of the contest, and the role that online popular queer media may play in assisting/impeding ‘progress’. The purpose behind this critique is to locate this pageant and representations of it within contemporary South African ‘anxieties of identity’ (Creed 1995), considering issues of race, gender, class, and culture (in the broadest sense

of the word). Whilst these features are by no means indicative of all the elements of one's identity, I seek to use them within this critique to highlight some of the tensions of contemporary South African existence. Recognising that visibility within the media is representative of wider socio-political negotiations (Gamson 2002:326), I argue that through an analysis of popular queer representations it is evident that both the pageant and the surrounding media content are symbolic of an assimilationist approach to LGBTI issues, ultimately perpetuating a westernised, homonormative, monolithic identity. This, in turn, is unproductive for understanding and fairly representing the complex experiences that many queer South Africans face in relation to questions of identity, culture(s) and social expectations.

I have chosen this mediated focus for two reasons: first, many queer people in South Africa who experienced this event would have done so through the media sources available to them, as the actual event was accessible only to the elite few who could afford to travel to the pageant competitions and the finale in Pretoria. Second, the pageant was sponsored by specific queer publications, with the editor of *The Pink Tongue* sitting on the judging panel (Mr Gay South Africa Group 2009). The pageant as a 'community'-representative event can only be understood in relation to the educating and informing roles that the media play (Kellner 2003:9). The organisers list six media sponsors: *Exi*; <sup>2</sup>*t*; *Gay Pages*; <sup>3</sup>*gayspeak*; <sup>4</sup>*MambaOnline*; <sup>5</sup>*The Pink Tongue*; <sup>6</sup>; and *The Pink Eye* <sup>7</sup> (Mr Gay South Africa 2010a). Of these sponsors, only *Exit*, *gayspeak* and *MambaOnline* were readily accessible at the time of writing this paper as online news sources with information relating to the pageant. Despite *The Pink Eye* being an online glossy magazine, its website had been offline for some time, and *The Pink Tongue* had no pageant-specific information available. Similarly, *Gay Pages* is a quarterly print magazine which published an article on the pageant several months after the finale. Consequently this paper will focus on the pageant as represented by *Exit*, *gayspeak*, *MambaOnline* and an 'unofficial' queer news source *Queer Life*. <sup>8</sup> Whilst there are numerous websites which specifically cater for issues that queer people may face, such as religious or community-project related sites, this project is concerned with explicit representations of the pageant. A separate project is necessary if one is to understand the full extent of representations, and issues surrounding the availability of media in general.

Whilst the subject of this paper may be regarded as a celebratory and somewhat frivolous beauty pageant, I seek to remain conscious of the social

responsibilities that the media may have in building a democracy. I aim to build the arguments of this paper on the first Pride march's premise that the media needs to help combat negative myths if true equality is ever to be achieved (De Waal and Manion 2006:15).

### **The South African context: history and representation**

Within contemporary South Africa society, the relationships between sexuality, race, gender, age, ethnicity and class cannot be understated in realising the complex situation that exists. As a partial result of multi-cultural histories, political changes across several centuries, and a contemporary constitutional emphasis on pluralism, tension exists between visibility and invisibility; identity and anti-identity; struggle and celebration; and the desire for and resistance to a sense of 'community'. At the same time that 'whiteness' was being privileged over 'non-whiteness', heteronormativity was violently asserted by the conservative white Afrikaans apartheid government in state institutions, aided partially by the Immorality Act of 1969, which made it illegal for any man at a party, which was defined as a gathering of two or more people, to engage in 'any act which [was] calculated to simulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification' (Cameron in Tucker 2009:42). Existing alongside this official position were the variety of cultural discourses which similarly opposed homosexuality, including the still-present argument that homosexuality is 'unAfrican' (Kwesi and Webster 1997:93, Reddy 2001:83, Cock 2005:201, de Waal and Manion 2006:22).<sup>9</sup>

The result of these measures and discourses was a set of diverse histories which were mediated by institutionalised and non-institutionalised segregation (see, for example, Cage 2003 and Rudwick 2010). White queers living during apartheid, whilst being part of the favoured racial demographic, did not have sufficient strength, support, community cohesion or political momentum to begin to challenge socio-political perceptions of them (Tucker 2009:46-47). The racial separation of black queers from white queers (and other racial demographics that fell between these socially-constructed opposites), and the arising class difference as the result of social privilege, resulted in no single, unified sense of queer community or rights movement (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992:xiii, Cage 2003, Tucker 2009). Similarly, these social divisions resulted in no 'common experience of sexual oppression' for South African queers (Jara and Lapinsky 1998:1), with the effect that in the 1990s, when a gay rights movement began to emerge, the majority of queers, who were (and still are) poor, 'remain[ed] marginalized from the social and

economic mainstream' (Jara and Lapinsky 1998: 8).

The transition into a democratic state was pushed by a variety of groups and organisations, and aided by decades of local and, to an extent, international discontent. Neville Hoad et al (2005) present a detailed account of the intertwined organisations and groups dedicated to changing sexual and gender policy in the country. Although no official unified 'gay rights' movement existed in South Africa (Tucker 2009:47), the legalised persecution of homosexuals during the apartheid regime led to the development of certain organisations which were focused on instilling a sense of pride and equality in South Africa, drawing inspiration from a worldwide gay rights movement (Cage 2003:4). As a result of these groups aligning themselves with the anti-apartheid struggle, the final Constitution of 1996 included an equality clause specifically geared toward sexual identity equality which extended to all citizens regardless of race, class or context (Cock 2005:188). Legal equality has also been afforded to queer people through the Civil Union Act of 2006, passed by a parliamentary majority of 230 to 41 (Stobie 2007:15). As one of only ten countries in the world currently allowing same-sex marriage, and the only one in Africa, South Africa's current legal position toward gay rights is certainly progressive.

This rather favourable historical legal context sits in stark contrast with the reality for the majority of queer citizens. Whilst constitutional inclusion affords theoretical equality, the 'assertion of a public gay identity is particularly problematic' (Cock 2005:202). The openly vocalised homophobia of President Jacob Zuma (BBC 2006), and his government's silence on matters relating to gay rights in Africa, succinctly captures a social situation where a belief that homosexuality is reprehensibly unAfrican is prevalent. Other countries, we see in the media, are fighting for the decriminalisation of homosexuality<sup>10</sup> or the right to marry (such as the ongoing debate in America). As these already exist in South Africa, a sense of unity and solidarity surrounding a particular queer cause does not exist (to suggest that no progress is needed is, of course, absurd). Similarly, any sense of 'public gay culture' that is emerging reflects the 'deep social cleavages' of the past and present (Cock 2005:205), potentially contributing to existing uncertainties around belonging within South Africa. Many of my peers living in the major cities are not concerned with being open about their sexuality – this, however, is a luxury that the majority of queer people in South Africa are not afforded. The reality for many queer people includes the horrific trend of 'corrective rape', where a lesbian-identified woman is raped

(often by a gang of men) in attempts to ‘cure’ her of her lesbianism (Kollapen 2009:3, also see Cameron 2007, ActionAid 2009, Mkhize et al 2010. Human Rights Watch 2011).

These intersections of discourses of race, class, culture, history, location, gender, sexuality, and age are captured in media representations. The fact that queer people continue to face discrimination and horrific abuse in some contexts suggests that there is still a vital need for visibility in both the mainstream and queer presses. Whether this visibility is best captured in the ideology of a ‘LGBTI community’ is discussed below. However, the site of media representations is the focus of this paper. To date, queer-related issues hardly feature in ‘regular’ mainstream television, radio and print media. The introduction of a queer plotline in *Generations*, the most-watched soap in South Africa, was met with general outrage and threats of violence (Mofokeng 2009). The story of Zoliswa Nkonyana, the 19 year old woman who was beaten to death with a golf club by a group of men because she was lesbian, took over two weeks to reach mainstream press (Cameron 2007) By contrast, other attacks based on race or nationality frequent ‘breaking news’ slots. Although reports on violence against lesbians have since been regular in national news sources, and have been documented in sources above, this form of visibility remains disturbingly limited to a framework of contextualised violence, to the exclusion of other forms of mainstream representation.

In relation to media representations, a popular historical understanding<sup>11</sup> in South Africa has been that ‘the gay experience’ has been that of white, middle-class, urban men (Gevisser and Cameron 1994:3). Partially as a result of the continued western commercialisation and commodification of sexuality (Sigusch 1998), in which the ideal queer consumer has neatly coincided with this historical ‘essentialised’ gay identity (Sender 2003:335), this understanding still exists within the South African context – to the point where South Africa is positioned, within an international, commercially-mediated mainstream, as a ‘progressive queer-friendly tourist destination (for white queer tourists)’ (Livermon 2008:302), and queerness itself is racialised as white (Livermon 2008:314). This is reflected in the World Tourism Organisation Report on ‘LGBT Tourism’, which includes a case study on Cape Town as a destination, explicitly presenting the *Mr Gay South Africa* competition as a key event of the year. This positioning stems from the explicit view that queers have ‘higher disposable income and frequent travel patterns’ (WTO 2012: 21). Similarly, the only readily available queer-

oriented glossy magazines, *Gay Pages* and *Wrapped*, and the few popular Anglo-American gay-themed films that circulate, largely cater for young, white, urban gay men. The commercialisation of this identity in these magazines and films serves to ingrain the perception of the ‘homogeneous nature of the (white male) queer’ (Rushbrook 2002:184). Not only is this problematic from a perspective of gender, but also from a perspective of understanding ‘mainstream’. There exists a chasm between the availability of material in urban areas and in rural areas, as well as between different cities. The liberal nature of a space like Cape Town, with a reputation for being an international gay tourist destination, will offer different resources when compared to a more conservative city. The newspaper *Exit*, which is often distributed free at night clubs in major cities, certainly reflects a more diverse range of content when compared to other available media sources: the cover pages reflect identities other than white muscle-men, and issues regularly address topical issues such as health and how to connect with other queer people. This publication, however, is not free from largely catering for urban white men: a visit to the website shows adverts for a dating community, healthy living with HIV, a sex chat line, and a fetish website – all of which feature attractive, muscled, white men as their ‘faces of’. The Internet has, of course, played a monumental role in enhancing queer visibility, with people from all sexual orientations theoretically more able to explore their potential identities (or indeed lack thereof). Indeed, websites such as *Behind the Mask*<sup>12</sup> speak to the diversity of South Africa, and the online work of religious organisations such as the *Reformerende Kerk*<sup>13</sup> reaches out to religious queer people who may be experiencing crises of faith and identity. However, only 10.8% of South Africans have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats 2009). Flourishing in a sector of privileged access, Internet usage arguably perpetuates transnationalised patterns of consumption, and so popular queer news sources function within pre-existing notions of identity and privilege.

An implication of this for this paper, then, includes the extent to which the chosen media representations actually have an impact on social consciousness – both within the demographic which the websites target, and beyond. The parameters of this research do not extend to an analysis of the number of readers each of the websites have, nor an attempt to provide tangible ethnographic insight into the ways in which content may impact on identity formation or behaviour manifestation.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the chosen websites may have a small number of readers, my intention is rather to comment on

the way in which the pageant, and the surrounding media sources, represent queerness in South Africa. I do not seek to extend conclusions about the pageant to demographics which have no self-identified invested interest in it. Rather, by focusing on media content which forms a part of an internationally (and problematically) commercialised and marketed image of South Africa, I seek to explore the potential implications of these forms mediated interpretations of community, identity, and belonging.

### **The pageant**

Although by no means an in-depth description of the existing social and media situations in South Africa, this contextualisation is important for appreciating the tumultuous environment of which the *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant is a part. The pageant itself was initiated in 2009, becoming the only competition of its kind in South Africa endorsed to select a representative to the *World Wide Mr Gay* pageant (MambaOnline 2009). The pageant sought to find a gay man to represent the entire LGBTI community in South Africa. The official entry form lists the following basic ‘characteristics’ as necessary for an application to be considered (all verbatim):

1. A healthy body and mind
2. A successful career in whatever field
3. Socially matured
4. Communication skills – must be able to command a room!
5. Must be able to carry himself in all company – gay and straight
6. Must be able to travel and be an Ambassador for the LGBTI Community in SA internationally
7. Intelligent – with a reasonable general knowledge
8. Keen to be involved in the gay community
9. Proudly a gay SA man – out and proud
10. Someone that can endeavor life and swallow pieces whole

(Mr Gay South Africa 2010b)

The vague nature of these characteristics is discussed below. What is evident, however, is that the pageant is structured around the issues of visibility and representation. Emphasis is placed, both in this competition and in its link to the international contest, on the community-representative quality of the selected winner (whilst physically looking the part, of course). A perceived social basis of the newly-formed pageant, then, was that despite the legal recognition of rights regardless of sexual orientation, there was still

a lack of adequate media representation for sexual minorities, and the realisation that increased media visibility had the potential to change social perceptions. Colleen Ballerino Cohen et al illustrate that a general academic and social opposition exists towards beauty pageants: both academia and society often regard such pageants with contempt and yet hold a simultaneous 'morbid fascination' (1996:6) with them. However, such pageants, they argue, should be regarded as cultural artefacts worthy of attention. Although the competitions themselves may appear to be light-hearted and frivolous, they are representative of wider social values and cultural meanings (1996:8).

Cohen et al argue that pageants 'showcase values, concepts, and behaviour that exist at the center of a group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place' (1996:2). If one regards *Mr Gay South Africa* as an exhibition of a specific 'type' of gay identity in South Africa, one can appreciate that the pageant functions as a microcosm of existing social attitudes, and showcases certain values which exist in the queer press and queer 'community'. The pageant can be understood as a site of struggle for publicity and visibility (1996:2) where power is mapped according to the values of the hegemonic ideology. But, as in everyday existence where citizens experience 'intersecting systems and structures' of cultural values and political issues (1996:11), it is a site where this power is 'produced, consumed, *and* rejected' (1996:8). Certainly there is value in viewing the construction and intentional representations of the pageant as neither positive nor negative, but rather as a reflection of attitudes existing in society at large. Indeed, the perceived visibility that the pageant offers theoretically has the potential to increase queer civil rights protection and the possibility of providing an empowering image of identification for a group that often receives no positive validation at all (Hennessy in Gamson 2002:311).

Indeed, research into the field of pageants in the South African context suggests that this is often an explicit intention of many smaller competitions. Graeme Reid highlights the prominence of small-town gay beauty pageants, which function as 'public expressions of gay identity' (2003:9) and act as spaces of resistance to persistent social stereotypes. In writing about 'Miss Gay' pageants Reid argues that these are developments of a familiar form, in that pageants act to enable 'individuals to express aspirations, a particular sense of self, a style, within the constraints and uncertainties of social and political transformation' (2003:18). Reid suggests that these pageants

showcase men presenting images of feminine fashion, and often function to ‘[educate] the local community about gay life’ (2003:9). Alongside this form of pageant there exists the historically popular drag pageant, which Mark Gevisser describes as being a ‘central bonding point of gay township life’ (1994:68). These two ‘types’ of pageants have different intentions, and in turn are distinct from the *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant. Although Reid’s paper investigates gay male portrayals of *feminine* beauty, the underlying observation can be extended to the *Mr Gay South Africa* competition in all that these forms of pageants act as sites for defining, reinforcing, or challenging ‘fashionable’ manifestations of popular conceptions of what it ‘means’ to be gay.

It is important to note, then, that within the South African context gay-related pageants act as sites within the public sphere where claims about the ‘nature’ of same-sex identity are enacted and fought over (Reid 2003:10). The view, then, that *Mr Gay South Africa* offers visibility, increases civil protection, and offers an empowering image for all queer South Africans needs to be measured against the media that the pageant actually utilises, as well as the overall strategy and ideology employed by representations which frame the pageant. The interpretation that the pageant may be regarded as a microcosm for society risks an implicit assumption that it functions as an event which represents a homogenous identity group. Indeed, working within the confines of what media is available, the pageant perpetuates the image that homosexuality, and indeed all things ‘LGBTI’, are epitomised by the long fought-against image of the essential South African gay identity. The 16 finalists for the 2009-2010 competition<sup>15</sup> hardly represent racial diversity. Race is a contentious issue, and one needs to question whether it is necessary to be politically correct and have a fair ‘sampling’ of all ethnic groups. This inadequate racial representation was acknowledged by the organisers, however, as the official *MambaOnline* interview with winner Charl van der Berg posed the question, ‘*Why do you think so few gay men of colour took part in the Mr Gay SA pageant?*’ (MambaOnline 2010). One reader wrote in response to this,<sup>16</sup>

Please could somebody tell me why did the colour issue have to be brought into his interview, was it needed. I am a gay man of colour and I am sick of the colour issue that is always asked to the white community, could we please move on already !!!!!

(*cumpuppy* on MambaOnline 2010)

Van der Berg attributes the lack of ‘gay men of colour’ to the difficulty of

being an openly gay man ‘of colour’ living in intolerant cultures. He credits the organisers of the pageant as going ‘out of their way to attract more entrants of colour as they wanted the competition as representative of the entire LGBTI community as possible’ (MambaOnline 2010). However, as discussed above, all discussions surrounding the competition in ‘official’ media affiliations are distinctly positioned to cater for the privileged, essentialised demographic.

The corporate positioning of the pageant is one of an alignment with the existing cemented notion of the ‘gay community’ as a sector of society defined by wealth, social status and international urban appeal: the target market for sponsors is specifically stated as adults between the ages of 25 and 40, living within a middle- to upper-income bracket and of a quality of life characteristic of a living standard measure of 8-10 (GaySpeak 2009). Both the pageant organisers and Van der Berg seemed content with 2<sup>nd</sup> runner up Iggi Mnisi’s presence in the competition, portraying him – as a black contestant – as wholly representative of all suppressed people of colour. As an image-conforming urban-based professional, Mnisi similarly represents a marketable and profitable sector of society, one which is already visible in the media. One must realise, of course, that the pageant is a business, and that seeking international-standard sponsors may prove to be fruitless when catering for a lower-income bracket that does not match an overall international commercial understanding of homosexuality, namely that of the ‘affluent, white, male, thirtysomething, genderconforming’ consumer (Sender 2003:335).

‘Genderconforming’ is an important aspect in the image that is presented by the pageant, suggesting an assimilationist ideology behind the formation of the competition. Indeed, the requirements and representations of the pageant reflect this. The assimilationist ‘streak’ in gay politics in South Africa argues that ‘except in the matter of sexual preference, we are just like everyone else, and should be treated like everyone else’ (De Waal and Manion 2006: 9). Steven Seidman argues that the creation of the ‘good sexual citizen’ involves creating a ‘safe space of social tolerance’ (2002:137) for “normal” gays who leave heterosexual marriage and family ideals, as well as dominant gender divisions uncontested’ (Goltz 2010:96). Connell proposes that within patriarchal culture there exists a hegemonic masculinity, the ‘configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination

of women' (2005:77). The South African hegemonic masculinity is one that values 'aggression, competitiveness, [and] emotional ineptitude' (Nixon 1997:296). Homosexuality, within this patriarchal ideology that pervades all aspects of South African existence, is 'the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2005:78).

Applying this concept of hegemonic masculinity to the pageant can assist one in understanding how the competition is a product of assimilationist politics. Homosexuality is continually conflated with effeminacy (Halperin 2000, Connell 2005:79), and a strategy for gay men to resist the negative implications of a 'failed' gender-performance has been to develop a masculinity complicit with the hegemonic project and be assimilated into the gender system (Connell 2005:79). One of the requirements for the pageants is, obviously, outward beauty. This is partly defined by the 'temple of a body' requirement of all contestants. All of the webpages dedicated to the pageant feature such an image of 'the gay man' – well-muscled men, in model poses, wearing as little as possible, all undeniably and unmistakably *masculine*. The importance of the body for a gay man lies in its status as a 'last-ditch defence against merging with the feminine' (Dyer 1993:136) where the valued aesthetic of 'lean, taut, sinuous muscles [...] designed for movement, for sex' (Bordo 1999:171) is on display for all those who may assume that a same-sex desire strips one of the capacity for the characteristics that this hegemonic masculinity so favours: physical superiority, control, and power. Online representations of this are often positioned against the 'undesirable' characteristics of this complicit masculinity. The most common instance of this is the inclusion of photographs of drag queens that hosted various regional competitions to illustrate what the contestants do *not* epitomise.

Indeed, the inclusion of drag queens and over-the-top performers appears to be a standard international feature of pageants that favour the 'Aberzombie archetype' (Philebrity 2008) – a reference to the macho heteronormative image of the Abercrombie fashion label, whose adverts feature chiselled models engaged in traditionally masculine physical activities. This, as commentators on the Philadelphia's *Mr Gay* contest observed, largely reinforces stereotyped perceptions of what the 'gay community' comprises (Philebrity 2010), but also symbolically serves to emphasise that which the pageant *does not* want to present as a viable business and social image. The *Mr Gay SA Pageant* is part of a social context where same-sex marriage, the 'holy grail of gay assimilation' (Tucker 2009:85), has already been achieved.

That same-sex couples have the option to marry is certainly an achievement worth celebrating. However, with this step towards ideological assimilation, it is a mere issue of commercial image that is needed to reinforce a masculinity indistinguishable from the patriarchal ideal. This ‘Aberzombie archetype’ that all the media articles about the pageant feature and worship epitomises a masculinity complicit with the hegemonic project. There are no images, on any of the webpages, of gay men who deviate from this norm.

The representations of the pageant create a distinct homonormativity: these ‘mainstream’ gay representations present an image that is ‘a firm and absolute commitment to a fixed gay identity’ (Goltz 2010:94), which in turn, is complicit with the demands of hegemonic masculinity. Reflecting on the observation that pageants should be understood as microcosms of the tensions in society, one can almost begin to understand the resistance to choosing, for example, a contestant who resists gender conventions and does not fall into the desired image constructed by the homonormativity of a complicit masculinity. In a context fraught with negative stereotypes, it is perhaps reasonable to expect a rejection of any image that may reinforce heteronormative disdain. The problem with this homonormative construction, however, is that it has a ‘depoliticizing effect on queer communities’ (Goltz 2010:99): the process of assimilation into the hegemony of patriarchal culture requires the ‘taming, constraining and privatization of queer sexuality’ (Goltz 2010:102) to the point of breaking away from notions of gay community altogether (Goltz 2010:97). An intrinsic contradiction therefore, exists between the pageant’s vision and its construction/representation: it aims to produce a suitable representative for the entire queer community in South Africa, yet through its representation limits this to qualities characteristic of tamed, homo- and heteronormatively palatable gender expression.

The pageant’s goal of visibility has certainly been achieved on all of the websites: during the months leading up to the finale both *MambaOnline* and *GaySpeak* included full features on certain contestants, dedicating headlines to the progress of the regional competitions. Visibility was even extended to the ‘heterosexual mainstream’. Initial lack of coverage of the pageant resulted in the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation accusing the South African media of being homophobic, leading to an article published on *News24.com* (Masinga 2010).<sup>17</sup> Following Charl van der Berg’s win at *World Wide Mr Gay* several more mainstream news sources printed and aired articles, including *News24.com* (News24 2010); *Beeld* (Beeld 2010); a segment on the show *Kwela* on the subscription channel *KykNet* (Mr Gay World

2010); and a radio interview on *Outspoken*, a subscription radio service (Outspoken 2010). The *News24* and *Beeld* articles, however, largely focused on the representative from China in light of the Chinese government trying to prevent him from competing, and not on Van der Berg and the South African context at all. Province-specific local media may have run articles relating to Van der Berg's win, but these were not accessible to the majority of queer people spread out across the country. Nonetheless, one may argue that the pageant certainly gained visibility for the gay 'community' in South Africa. This visibility was achieved, however, at the expense of queer identities that exist beyond the region of the homonormative image offered. Those queer South Africans who do not fall into the commercial profile of the pageant remain invisible; those who do not mesh with the assimilationist image remain unnoticed by both the mainstream and queer press.

These representations are a far cry from the goals of the gay rights 'movement' in the 1990s. De Waal and Manion (2006) preserve the attitude of the 1996 Pride march in the form of an 'open letter to the closed community'. Addressing the growing concern that a new homonormativity was developing in South Africa, Steven Cohen created a banner that read 'give us your children...what we can't fuck we eat'. Understandably controversial, Cohen wrote in response to criticism that

[s]ome gays are so surprised to be out there that they have to saccharine their image – they buy into the demands that heterosexual society makes of us freaks – they try to be better than straights, beyond reproach. [...] Mincing on the march, Vasili and I were confronted with a horrible truth about beautiful moffiedom – some of us have already become what we despise: judgemental moralists and finger-pointing accusers. [...] The queer voice is a chorus which must include activists, drags, drugged dead-heads, freaks, perverts and fucked-shut sluts. (Steven Cohen in De Waal and Manion 2006:98)

The true 'nature' of sexual diversity in South Africa can of course never be captured by a single representative. However, the ideology of the macho, 'normal', gender-conforming gay man presented in the articles about the pageant indicates that, from the ideological perspective of the pageant, representing any form of sexual diversity is by no means desirable.

In a turn of events that almost seems to be an intrinsic part of contemporary pageantry, it was revealed that Van der Berg had been involved in making pornography in the past. This story only surfaced after he won the South African title, and interestingly did not deter him from winning the international

title despite the competition distancing itself from the pornography industry (Pridebook 2010). Arguably it was his vocalised stance that sexuality is a ‘private matter’, which reportedly gained him ‘great favour with the judges’ (Exit 2010), that prevented this deviance from the sexually-discreet nature of the homonormative model counting against him. Alternatively, it may have been the solo nature of the pornography that prevented him being associated with anything so overtly homosexual as the image of gay sex, which is not commercially viable in the heterosexual ‘mainstream’ (Sender 2003). Such speculation is secondary, however, to his response about the private nature of sexuality. Far from a queer approach to gay culture, which would ‘disclaim difference and oppose classification of all kinds’ (Herdt 1997:9), this statement reflects the strategy of disavowing anything that may be deemed as ‘anti-assimilationist’ and the inherent threat therein to civil-rights strategies (Gamson 2002:328). Indeed, all post-international-win articles featuring on the chosen websites emphasise Van der Berg’s ‘admirable’ answer and leave no room for the possibility of his sexual exploits being related to a negative stereotype of gay promiscuity. Following this ‘scandal’ the pageant updated the entry requirements to include a compulsory full disclosure of any pornographic activity that one may have been involved in (Mr Gay South Africa 2010b).

The favouring of such an ideology, combined with the prioritising of a distinct homonormative image in the images of the pageant, acts to perpetuate a depoliticised understanding of ‘gay culture’ in South Africa. The lack of invested interest in politics is reflected in the fact that only a *MambaOnline* interview with van der Berg deals with his ‘duties’ and views as the newly-voted representative of the LGBTI community. The content of the articles on *GaySpeak* focuses on the entertainment factors of the pageant, informing readers of the various parties and events revolving around a competition. Whilst *QueerLife* and *MambaOnline* provide news articles, no official pageant-related source exists where the public can access the contestants’ views, engage in an ‘interactive’ discussion about the issues facing the LGBTI community, or offer input about what ‘they’ as the community members themselves wanted from a representative. In the brief radio interview with van der Berg, he spends time talking about his emotions, and only poses one question related to politics of the pageant – what does it *mean* to have won the competition? Van der Berg’s response of being a ‘voice for people who do not necessarily have a voice’ may be genuine, but is somewhat of a regurgitation of the foundation of the pageant (Outspoken 2010). The

*MambaOnline* interview with van der Berg is a standard ‘getting-to-know-you’ formula, which does not test his knowledge of genuine issues facing LGBTI people in South Africa, nor challenge him in any regard (*MambaOnline* 2010). The apolitical nature of the representations is captured by the seemingly socially-conscious user *1985minotaur* commenting that

Beauty queens (and the question about the ‘reign’ of this one implies even the interviewer knows Mr Gay SA is little more than a beauty contestant) need to accept that they are not ‘scholarship winners’; they are there to ‘look pretty’,

and the equally outraged user *altf4*'s response that

This guy is a slightly better than average looking idiot who is way outta his league. He is just proliferating stereotypes of the gay community. Should be voted off the island! (*MambaOnline* 2010)

The emphasis that the radio interview and *Gay Speak* places on the pageant’s link to Pride perhaps epitomises the apolitical and commercial ideology that truly lies behind the pageant. Pride, although it may have begun as a genuine resistance to hegemonic oppression, has recently been described a visual manifestation of the commercialisation of the gay identity (De Waal and Manion 2006:115) which simply caters for the ‘resourced community’ with no thought for the ‘real gay world’ at all (Phybia Dlamini in De Waal and Manion 2006:175).

At this point it may be argued that I am being overly critical of this pageant. It is, after all, a beauty pageant, and Van der Berg’s win should be celebrated as a step towards greater recognition for the progress that South Africa has made. The negative history surrounding queer identities has indeed needed a competitive positive image. The politics of affirmation (Manning 1996:99) that the pageant propagates is intended to be such a strategy. It may be argued that the use of a well-entrenched identity as a platform for increasing LGBT visibility is an admirable strategy. Richard Dyer argues that stereotypes have an important role to play in ordering society and expressing values to the point of making ‘visible the invisible’ with the potentially positive effect of removing anxieties around Otherness (1993:16). The visibility that Van der Berg’s win gained in the mainstream media, however small, may be regarded as a positive step towards creating an increased level of tolerance in a society that is constantly on edge. The perceived alternative of non-representation would indeed be tragic, as the ‘symbolic annihilation’ (Gamson 2002:312) that would accompany the invisibility of queer identities altogether would serve no purpose in changing

the horrendous social reality of fear, stigmatisation and oppression for the majority of queer citizens. Indeed, Van der Berg, based on the media representations that I have analysed, seems to be an admirable person who is passionate about life and an ‘out and proud’ gay man in a country that, socially and culturally, is opposed to his very being.

Whilst I agree with the observation that one should regard such a beauty pageant as a microcosm for social anxieties, and that visibility should be strategised as a ‘series of political negotiations’ (Gamson 2002:326), I would argue that the *Mr Gay Pageant* is a dangerous construction on the basis that it perpetuates already present attitudes and widens the gap between those already visible and those who remain invisible, and it perpetuates a discourse of gayness that does not speak to local experiences. Certainly, a thorough ethnographic study would have to be conducted if one is to fully engage with what constitutes local, as opposed to foreign or international, experiences. However, in reading the pageant and the surrounding media, one is struck by the predictability of content: advertisements for before and after parties at upmarket, mainstream clubs; content on fashion and dress codes; and discussions around the prizes the winners receive. This observation is not to discredit the valuable feature articles on health or safety which appear on the websites on occasion. Within the focus on the pageant, representations are restricted to a decidedly mainstream, familiar, image of assimilated gayness. Certainly I did not come across any representations of the ‘less desirable’ sub-identities that Steven Cohen recognised. The pageant seeks to represent all ‘LGBTI’ people in South Africa, and yet the ‘local experiences’ – the anxieties and challenges of everyday belonging – for those who do not relate to the identity presented by the pageant remain disturbingly invisible. The pageant and the queer media covering it seem intent on exclaiming ‘we’re here and we’re gay’, but this is done in a manner that is ultimately ‘approved’ by society at large. As Joshua Gamson observes, ‘[c]ultural visibility, especially when it is taking place through commerce, is not a direct route to liberation; in fact, it can easily lead elsewhere’ (2002:312).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Sociological reasons motivating the formation of this pageant, which exist alongside the obvious capitalist reasons, need to be explored in a paper much more detailed than this discursive analysis of media representations. I would venture, however, that a ‘duality of experiences’ (Isaacs and McKendrick 1992:6) for the essentialised and commercially ideal demographic

of white/urban/middle-class/young/gay/man is partially responsible. As I have already stated, authors have explored at length the diversity of the queer community in South Africa. The only representations of this essentialised, yet very real, queer ‘community’ have been in the forms of connections to a cosmopolitan and transnational westernised gay ‘culture’. The lack of positive representations in local popular culture (a lack which I certainly experienced during adolescence) is indeed a potential reason for the drive behind developing the pageant. The strategy that this has manifested itself as, however, is one of assimilation politics as opposed to a queer appreciation for the extent of diversity in the country. The pageant has reduced a potentially ‘queer community’ to a ‘LGBTI community’, which in turn is represented by the *man* selected by a panel of judges who have invested interests in the commercial resource of the white/urban/middle-class/young/gay/male identity. The online sources I was exposed to depoliticised the pageant. The finalists chosen were all cut from the same model. The contestants were presented as ‘ordinary people’ (Manning 1996:99), all part of a uniformly righteous ‘culture’ (Manning 1996: 102) that in every way barring sexual attraction was ‘the same as’ heterosexual normality. The lack of resistance to what is viewed as ‘normal’ resulted in the pageant reinforcing a decade-old homonormativity – except this time the locally produced image has been reinforced by the ‘international gay community’ and proudly embraced as a representative for all ‘queers’ in South Africa.

Whilst the assertion of a public identity is needed (Cock 2005:201), the monolithic identity that the pageant and representations of it promote cannot be regarded as positive. The pageant both reinforces and combats stereotypes: it capitalises on the stereotype of the white identity as *the* gay identity, yet through power invested in the image of the homonormative body resists other ‘negative’ stereotypes based on effeminacy and gender resistance. By pushing a strategy of depoliticised assimilation the pageant and the queer media effectively ‘obliterat[e] difference and diversity even as [they] apparently [embrace] it’ (Manning 1996: 107-8). Only those who can afford to buy into the mediated and marketed image presented by the pageant have had their visibility enhanced. What is immediately gathered from the representations of the pageant is that it has been set up within the spectrum of a transnationalised vision of the definition of ‘gay culture’ and ‘gay identity’: the link to the *World Wide Mr Gay* competition illustrates the investment that the CEO and Board of Directors have placed in securing a

recognised and identifiable image for an international market.

Of course, there is the overarching question of *do we actually want or need a unified community in South Africa?* Whilst there is no simple answer, what strategies of identity politics have suggested thus far are that sexual politics in South Africa cannot be fought by simply reworking the heteronormative standard. The pageant may have noble intentions, but these are undermined by complicity with hegemonic masculinity. My own personal sense is that a vision of solidarity is favourable over a vision of community and community representatives. Jacklyn Cock argues that the challenge is ‘to define a lesbian and gay identity as an inclusive African identity’ (2005: 205). This needs to be done by building upon a history of self-expressions that defy fixed identities (Gevisser and Cameron 1994:5), in an effort to begin to appreciate and acknowledge some of the anxieties that people may experience in relation to their sense of belonging, with the recognition that ‘so long as inequality and injustice of any kind remain, our own enjoyment of our freedoms must remain suspect’ (Edwin Cameron in De Waal and Manion 2006:6).

What value can be taken from the pageant, perhaps, is that it has people talking. The success of Van der Berg will undoubtedly draw in more interest over the coming years. However, if the pageant, in keeping in line with the approach of social responsibility that I have tried to maintain throughout this paper, seeks truly to produce a power that rejects heteronormativity, it needs to shift its standard away from the homonormative model that resists all things queer and unmasculine. In doing so, this segment of the queer press will instead begin to be filled with those identities which currently *are* invisible, fulfilling the task of educating those ignorant of the true extent of diversity. This will undoubtedly cause controversy within all ‘communities’, but the true spectrum of resistant sexual identities needs to be acknowledged if the organisers, and winners, of the pageant ever hope to truly ‘make a difference’ on the landscape of sexual politics in South Africa

## Notes

1. This paper forms a part of a completed 2011 Masters degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg campus) under the supervision of Professor Cheryl Stobie. It partly looks at the representation of gay-white-male identity in post-apartheid South Africa, and includes a set of collected narratives from people within this (self-identified) demographic, with personal participant responses to representations of the *Mr Gay South Africa* pageant.

2. [www.exit.co.za](http://www.exit.co.za)
3. [www.gaypagesa.co.za](http://www.gaypagesa.co.za)
4. [www.gayspeak.co.za](http://www.gayspeak.co.za)
5. [www.mambaonline.co.za/i\\_headlines.asp](http://www.mambaonline.co.za/i_headlines.asp)
6. [www.pinktongue.co.za](http://www.pinktongue.co.za)
7. [www.thepinkeye.co.za](http://www.thepinkeye.co.za)
8. [www.queerlife.co.za](http://www.queerlife.co.za)
9. In 2012 Zulu monarch Goodwill Zwelethini stirred up national debate when he labelled those who engaged in same-sex sexual activity as ‘rotten’ (see Mdletshe 2012).
10. Such as Papua New Guinea – <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-26/an-png-homosexuality/4155890/?site=sydney> (accessed July 26, 2012).
11. This, of course, is not the only historical understanding (see Gevisser and Cameron 1994:115).
12. [www.mask.org.za](http://www.mask.org.za) – not active as of April 2012.
13. [www.gaychurch.co.za](http://www.gaychurch.co.za)
14. As mentioned above, this paper forms a part of a broader project in which insight is given into actual viewer and reader responses.
15. Available from <http://www.gayspeak.co.za/GaySpeakEdition88/index.htm>
16. All user comments have been copied verbatim, and I have not corrected grammar or spelling from these through a desire to preserve the Online modes of expression.
17. The support of the pageant by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance is an interesting side point to note. Historically conservative, the organisation is seemingly invested in promoting a thoroughly heteronormative understanding of gayness (De Waal and Manion 2006 9). This gives insight into a segment of the support base of the pageant, and may be worthy of future investigations.

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