

Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa

During five hours of being raped, Millicent Gaika recounts, “I thought he was going to kill me; he was like an animal. And he kept saying, ‘I know you are a lesbian. You are not a man, you think you are, but I am going to show you, you are a woman. I am going to make you pregnant. I am going to kill you.’”

—Zara Nicholson (2010)

At 13 [Kekeletso] Khena was a self-described tomboy. Too young to define herself as a lesbian, she was nonetheless gangraped by seven men for looking like one. Her rapists repeatedly told her that she was paying a debt for all women like her.

—Gail Smith¹

Feminist academic debates about butchness in the global North have largely been focused on gender in relation to important concerns over semantics, generation, and class.² How to talk about butchness, gendered generational differences among lesbians, differences and similarities

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¹ The quotation from Gail Smith is taken from “Hating Girls Who Love Girls,” which was posted on the Behind the Mask website in 2003 but is no longer available online.

² See, for instance, Kennedy and Davis (1993), Burana, Roxxie, and Due (1994), Halberstam (1998a, 1998b), Halberstam and Hale (1998), Hale (1998), and Munt (1998).

between lesbian and FTM communities, and class distinctions in butch-femme identifications have been important themes of this scholarship. In contemporary South Africa, however, these debates are not particularly salient. Instead, those South Africans concerned with specifically lesbian masculinities are focused on the violence lesbians face; conversations center not on terminology and communities but on the gendered and sexualized perceptions of those who target lesbians for violent attacks. Why does butchness evoke violent responses in contemporary South Africa, and how are activists analyzing and fighting escalating levels of rape and murder?

Lesbians often challenge gender expectations through their expressions of masculinities and sexualities, leading to increased visibility in their communities. And many South African lesbians, especially those in the former townships outside urban centers, pursue sexual relationships with “straight” women that are deeply emotional and intense. These relationships facilitate intimacy and affirm lesbians’ masculine expressions. However, visibility and relationships paradoxically put lesbians in grave physical danger. Lesbians are perceived as both threatening and unavailable by men in their communities, and same-sex relationships and expressions of butchness often lead to physical attacks and rapes targeting butch lesbians, as illustrated in the epigraphs above.

Lesbians are raped in ways intended to be punitive, or “corrective” or “curative,” because they undermine monolithic notions of masculinity and heterosexuality and refuse men’s proposals and advances.³ Inseparable from this are perceptions of homosexuality as un-African or as an influence of the global North, backlashes against a perceived increase in rights in contemporary South Africa, and religious and cultural intolerance for challenges to conventions of gender and sexuality. Equally important but less attended to are the ways lesbians also expose the vulnerability of male masculinities, since putatively successful masculinity depends on men’s need to control women and force them to follow gendered conventions of heterosexual conduct. Butch lesbians’ relationships with straight women also both paradoxically affirm and undermine masculinities and claims to male bodies. Lesbian relationships and the violence that surrounds them point to the instability of the parameters of masculinities and men’s exclusive claims to them.

This article is based on thirteen years of research on gender liminality conducted from 1997 to 2009 in South Africa, which consisted primarily

³ I represent here the varied terminology that has been debated, recognizing its limitations, but I believe it also speaks to intentions to punish women or to correct or cure lesbianism through rape, despite the impossibility of the latter.

of participant observation, interviews, and reciprocal work with activist organizations.⁴ South African lesbian communities contend with powerful histories of violence and exploitation—not only overt violence but also ideological violence at the hands of researchers and reporters, which continues today. Thus, while I have interviewed many lesbians about their gendered expressions and their experiences of sexual violence, I stopped conducting formal interviews on this subject in 2003 because I feared they could replicate trauma and endemic objectification. While I have returned to South Africa at least every other year since 1997, for periods of time ranging from two to eighteen months, and while I continue to work with South African activists addressing sexual violence in lesbian communities, in writing this article I chose to concentrate primarily on the increasingly numerous analyses of the subject produced by black lesbians themselves.

This article makes two theoretical interventions into contemporary feminist and Africanist scholarship. First, it suggests that butch lesbians are targeted for sexual violence because of the tripartite threat they pose: to heterosexuality (through their relationships with women), to gender norms (through their expressions of masculinities and disregard for femininities), and to sex (through challenging expectations surrounding somatically female bodies). Second, it postulates that vexing paradoxes are inherent in lesbian masculinities. In the expressions of masculinity found in lesbian butchness, sources of strength and power also create vulnerabilities to sexual violence, a juxtaposition that sometimes proves fatal. These interventions come from the perspectives of lesbians themselves and from activist academics working to critique and conceptualize South African masculinities and related discourses. Considering these analyses of butchness can point us not only toward the bases of punitive and corrective or curative rape and murder but toward ways to confront and end it.

Understanding male masculinities

Scholarly discussions of varied male masculinities, while exploring historical, geographical, and cultural specificities of what it means to be a man,

⁴ I use pseudonyms to protect narrators here. Most of these interviews were conducted jointly with my research partner Sam Bullington between 1999 and 2003 in English in Soweto, Johannesburg, and Cape Town and transcribed by me; see Bullington and Swarr (2010) for a discussion of our methodologies. I prefer not to list specific dates, in order to preserve anonymity.

have widely assumed that manhood relies on a male body.⁵ Masculinities are usually understood as composed of appearances, traits, and behaviors socioculturally agreed upon as associated with males. But what happens when female masculinities, particularly lesbian masculinities, undermine the idea that one must have a male body to identify as masculine and claim masculine privileges? What if sex is simply one corporeal expression of masculinity? Masculinities are not fixed, transhistorical, or biological. Furthermore, pluralizing “masculinities” denotes the multiplicity of expressions of masculinities and their lack of unanimity. South African heterosexual men have refigured their conceptions and performances of masculinities as informed by articulations of apartheid, racism, and violence. Though not explaining or simplifying violence, these qualities, histories, and locations set the context for lesbian masculinities and contests over claims to them.

Black township masculinities in South Africa, the site of the lesbian masculinities under consideration here, have emerged in conversation with contradictory apartheid and colonial forces. Under repressive regimes, black men were deemed incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities of white male masculinities (Van Onselen 1984). Conventional male masculinity—conceptualized as autonomy and independence—was also compromised by the policing and surveillance of black men’s daily lives and the violent assertion of state authority in demeaning ways. Writing in 1979, Sowetan antiapartheid writer Mtutuzeli Matshoba describes in his short story “Call Me Not a Man” how he felt black South African men were emasculated by the police: “By dodging, lying, resisting where it is possible, bolting when I’m already cornered, parting with invaluable money, sometimes calling my sisters into the game to get amorous with my captors, allowing myself to be slapped in the mouth in front of my womenfolk and getting sworn at with my mother’s private parts, that component of me which is a man has died countless times in one lifetime” (18). Matshoba shows in this passage that apartheid had lasting effects on the constitution of Sowetan male masculinities, as well as how dependent masculinities are on relations to women: mothers, sisters, “my womenfolk.”

This juxtaposition of contradictory masculinities through the calculated and specific assertion of state authority was a means of denying black men the ability to express masculinity as economic protectors and providers. The pathologization of black men as hypersexual, innately lascivious, sex-

⁵ See, for example, the scholarship of Paul Smith (1996) and Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and Raewyn Connell (2005), as well as South African works by Robert Morrell (2001) and Lahoucine Ouzgane and Morrell (2005).

ually violent, and physically strong further complicated apartheid masculinities. Biomedicine worked to differentiate black male bodies and psyches from those of white males in forms such as craniometry and serology (see, e.g., Dubow 1995; Baldwin-Ragaven, de Gruchy, and London 1999). Such masculinities were thus shaped by histories of state violence. And the constitution of what Thokozani Xaba (2001) calls “struggle masculinities,” codified through the fight against apartheid, were also based in superiority to women that needed to be constantly proven.

Since the end of apartheid, racism, poverty, and an unemployment rate of at least 34 percent (Forgey et al. 1999) have continued to inform male masculinities.⁶ Graeme Reid and Liz Walker (2005) articulate this transition in the following way: “If colonialism and apartheid shaped the masculinities of the past, the transition to democracy in South Africa in the 1990s has had the effect of unsettling and unseating entrenched masculinities: Masculinities, which were, in the main, patriarchal, authoritarian and steeped in violence” (189). It is widely argued that colonial, apartheid, and transitional masculinities for South African men of all races have been largely violent and authoritarian. Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy, and Relebohile Moletsane (2010, 49) suggest that violence and excessive force in the form of apartheid fearmongering, conflicts between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress, gang control, and xenophobic violence are periodic and related parts of the context in which masculinities are articulated: “These are crimes based on the identification of people as members of a particular group, stigmatised and othered as such, and where mass permission may be granted to annihilate, destroy, or maim people in the name of ‘renormalising’ community.” Such means of normalization and control intrinsic to masculinity have taken many forms and have continued to the present, bridging colonialism, apartheid, and the transition to democracy.

As Mark Hunter (2005), Adam Ashforth (1999, 2005), Katherine Wood and Rachel Jewkes (2001), and others suggest, during the transition, deteriorated masculinities and self-esteem were bolstered through violence against women. In their study of masculinities and multiple sex partners in KwaZulu-Natal, Wood and Jewkes illustrate that men’s strength is also their vulnerability. In constituting relationships, “the fact that ‘successful’ masculinity was partially constructed through the young men’s ability to access and control the ‘right’ women made them vul-

⁶ This unemployment rate is based on the 1996 census in South Africa. More recent estimates are higher, though statistics are difficult to confirm. For instance, Mark Hunter (2005, 396) estimates unemployment at 32–40 percent.

nerable as they were dependent on their sexual partners submissively following the rules or being effectively coerced by their strategies of access and control. In turn, achieving female compliance with these rules formed an essential part of notions of ‘successful’ masculinity as defined by dominant (male) peer culture” (2001, 327). The juxtaposition of standards of success and the inevitable vulnerability in attaining it demonstrates that masculinities are not an independent show of strength but indeed might be understood as relationally dependent on men’s ever-shifting control of women.

The ability to engage in such relationships in many former township contexts in South Africa depends on the success of romantic proposals. This process is a formal and gendered initiation of a relationship in which a butch woman or heterosexual man “proposes” love and attraction to a potential partner or lover. The rejection of such a proposal illustrates cracks in masculinities, which can subsequently facilitate violence. Elaine Salo and Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006) put it this way: “While heterosexual masculine regimes appear hegemonic to notions of gender, personhood and sexualities in Africa, their dominance is fragile and contested from multiple sites in society” (2–3). Masculinity’s much-theorized lack of solidity has become increasingly apparent, and on multiple scales.

The complex of factors addressed here has led to what many Africanists have referred to as a crisis of masculinity. Walker (2005) explains: “Liberal versions of sexuality, which mark South Africa’s new democracy, have had a number of highly contradictory consequences for women and men, as old notions of masculinity and male privilege have been destabilized. The transition to democracy has precipitated a crisis of masculinity. Orthodox notions of masculinity are being challenged and new versions of masculinity are emerging in their place” (225). In describing this so-called crisis, Walker demonstrates her view (and the view of many others) that it is borne of contradictory historical bases and holds nascent possibilities; in effect, “contemporary expressions of masculinity are embryonic, ambivalent and characterized by the struggle between traditional/conventional male practices and the desire to be a modern, respectable, responsible man” (226).⁷

⁷ See also Mark Hunter’s careful analysis of the paradoxes of rights in contemporary South Africa and the false juxtaposition of rights against tradition. “Rather than thinking of ‘rights versus tradition’ (or a ‘crisis of masculinity,’ another common phrase), we need to recognize how masculinities and femininities are interrelated and constantly changing when so many aspects of getting by . . . are recast and contested in a context of tremendous inequalities and a world with limited work. And, even further, we need to think through how this world, like masculinity itself, is not natural but powerfully produced” (2010, 177).

However, discourses surrounding the constitution of heterosexual black masculinities have also been interrogated for the ways this “crisis of masculinity” has been “tacitly racialized” (Posel 2005, 250). Helen Moffett’s (2006) critical analysis of representations of sexual violence in South Africa includes the following observation: “[One] hears repeatedly that apartheid and its ills (such as the migrant labour system) ‘emasculated’ black men, left them ‘impotent’ and experiencing a ‘crisis of masculinity’; and although these remarks are embedded in unquestioned patriarchal discourses, they carry a grain of truth. But these answers explicitly exclude white men, thus implying—however unwittingly—that they do not rape” (136). Moffett is carefully attentive to factors that coconstitute masculinities, such as poverty and unemployment, but she points out that they are not simple causes for rape. Deborah Posel (2005) similarly notes that “the post-apartheid politicization of sexuality has been closely intertwined with a perceived crisis of masculinity” (240). In a critique of the South African media furor following the rape of a nine-month-old baby by six men in 2001 (widely referred to as “baby rape”), Posel scrutinizes what came to be seen as a “scandal of manhood.” For her, media attention to baby rape did not reflect feminist analyses of violent masculinities. Instead, sensationalizing discourses about baby rape revealed “wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of the national subject and the moral community of the country’s newly established democracy” (239). Taken together, these theorists offer important critiques of the racism and sensationalism surrounding South African violence and masculinities during and since the transition.

South African butch masculinities

In South Africa’s urban townships, where contemporary masculinities are produced, many lesbians identify strongly as butch. As with heterosexual masculine men, lesbian masculinities are means to assert agency, claim masculine privileges, and declare romantic desires. Yet while male masculinities inform and shape South African lesbians’ understandings of gender and their constant conversations about butchness, they are not simply copying men but are creating masculinities. In an interview with me, Zindzi Mthembu articulated how this idea works in her own life: “So I’ve always been this butch woman. I’m not saying I’m a man, I’m not a man—I’m a woman, attracted to another woman. But I’ve got this man-ish thing in me, that people out there, even if I don’t have to tell them that I am a lesbian or I’m a girl or what, they always have this question of ‘You look like a boy.’ . . . So all my actions, the things that I do, the

way I act, the way I dress identifies me as a lesbian, and as a butch lesbian.” For Mthembu, the particular ways that butchness allows her to be publicly identified as a lesbian are paramount. To her, both being a woman and being masculine, according to her own definitions, are critical components of her lesbian identification. Butch lesbians like Mthembu challenge the idea that women must be feminine and heterosexual and that only people with male bodies can strongly express masculinities. Busi Kheswa’s (2005) interviews with lesbians in the Johannesburg area are similarly illustrative on this issue. Kheswa comments that the “dominant way of living a same-sex life for women is within the butch-femme subculture. The butches are the most visible and they look tough, like *tsotsis* (slang for township gangsters). . . . Women have to choose; they have to be either butch or femme” (211). Kheswa goes on to explain the notion of butchness through an interview with Zozo, a self-defined butch police officer who discusses her gender this way: “It is because of my physical structure and that is why people sometimes are confused if I am a woman or a man. My attitude is manly; sometimes I tell myself that in my relationship I am the man. I tell myself that I have the power” (211). Combining Zozo’s conceptions of herself with feminist theorist Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) ideas about gender performativity reminds us that, far from imitating men, butches exploit conceptions of masculinities for which there are no ideal models or originals, constantly redefining what it is to be masculine.

Northern influences and constitutional protection on the basis of sexual orientation have contributed to a growing sense of pride in lesbian communities in South Africa, shown most directly in value placed on “coming out” and visibility. Growing pride about butch lesbianism has dual effects. In her autobiography, lesbian *sangoma* (traditional healer) Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde (2008) describes this juxtaposition in her own life: “I am also the kind of lesbian that is targeted by the men who are raping lesbians. In my dress code and my mannerisms and my attitude I am a butch lesbian. That is the way people see me in the lesbian world. The way I dress makes me feel powerful in myself and makes me recognisable to other lesbians. I like the fact that there are masculine or butch lesbians because they give lesbians visibility in the township” (146).⁸ Seeking visibility has become increasingly common since the end of apartheid and the advent of protected lesbian rights. But the pursuit of visibility simultaneously makes lesbians targets of violent assaults and rape in their communities. Multifaceted violence makes lesbian visibility, embodied and engendered

⁸ Nkabinde’s role as a *sangoma* and the ways that gender is expressed by *sangomas* through possession by their ancestors are critical to her expressions of butchness (Nkabinde 2008).

through butchness, a site of paradoxical ramifications. In an interview (in Kheswa 2005, 213), Thembi explains, “When one finds out that she is a lesbian somehow in her mind she thinks that she has to behave like a boy. I used to behave like a boy but once I knew I was a lesbian I became worse. I would even press my breast with bandages so that they did not show or even grow. I would shave my hair and I was so butch-looking and handsome.” For Thembi, visibility as a lesbian was connected to butchness in a behavioral and corporeal way. Butch identification allowed her visibility, explained her attitude, and facilitated her body modification.

This physical modification should not be simplistically labeled as “transgender” in a Northern sense. Though in some cases transgender identifications are embraced and members of these communities choose gender-liminal or transsexual identifications, these are not commonly articulated among black butch lesbians, especially in township contexts.⁹ Zozo explains it this way: “I am not trying to be man. I know that I am a woman. I will stay one” (Kheswa 2005, 217). Instead of fitting Northern labels or medicalized categories, butchness has come to encompass physical and social manifestations of masculinities that bridge sexual orientation and gender identification. It is also important to note that butchness has temporal and generational components. In Kheswa’s interviews, for instance, some lesbians say that, while butchness facilitates their visibility, lesbian masculinities are not always lifelong.

The relationality of gender makes relationships critical to understandings of butchness, and in township contexts masculine-feminine dynamics are commonplace.¹⁰ Butch-femme relationships are widely known, but equally relevant to our considerations here are butch lesbians’ relatively common relationships with straight women.¹¹ In South Africa (as elsewhere in the world), attraction to someone of the same sex does not necessarily classify you as lesbian or gay. Masculine women who have sex with women identify as lesbians, but most feminine women who have sex

⁹ For further discussion of transsexual identifications, including narratives by black female-to-male transsexuals, see especially Morgan, Marais, and Wellbeloved (2009).

¹⁰ An important contribution to this conversation is found in the photography of Zanele Muholi, whose work in black lesbian communities documents a range of relationships and gender expressions and challenges the terrain of lesbian representation (see, e.g., Muholi 2004, 2006, 2010). This observation also draws on Muholi’s “Lesbo Rape—Hate Crimes [update],” which was published on the Behind the Mask website in 2005 but is no longer available online.

¹¹ Some lesbians eschew butchness in favor of a nongendered lesbian identification, but these are usually women who leave the townships for urban centers and who may have more connections with white and/or Northern lesbian communities.

with butches self-identify and are identified as straight. Specific roles and responsibilities in relationships reflect butch-straight and butch-femme dynamics. In an interview with me, butch lesbian Mpho Dladla explained that in relationships, “[one partner] will always be weaker than the other one, you see. And then the stronger one, sure, will have to take initiative and take the part of being a butch. But that doesn’t mean if you are a butch you’ll rule the other [person’s] life. No. You just take that stand and be a woman who is in love with another woman but takes responsibilities and is stronger than the other woman.” For Dladla, lesbian relationships, like heterosexual relationships, must have a dominant partner. In her view, butchness means clarifying expectations, privileges, and responsibilities in relationships. Butch lesbians have financial obligations to their partners and may be expected to provide gifts for the women with whom they are in relationships on their birthdays and at the end of the month when they are paid (Kheswa 2005, 216). Butches are also often expected to be exempt from housework, laundry, and cooking.

These roles are fluid and can vary within relationships, but they can also be a source of conflict. Evashnee Naidu and Nonhlanhla Mkhize (2005) suggest that one in four South African lesbians and gay men experiences domestic violence. Violence among lesbians in relationships, sometimes as an articulation of violent masculinities, has been minimally researched. But the important film *Rape for Who I Am* (2006) documents groups of black lesbians discussing abuse they have experienced at the hands of their partners. One woman explains her understanding of why some lesbians are violent: “That’s the kind of love they know. They think that when you love someone, you beat her up.” Another woman in the film interjects, “You control the person. When you love them, you control them.”

The dynamics of butch-straight relationships are further complicated by the concept of *stabane*. In South African township vernacular, this term refers to an intersexual person—that is, to be called *stabane* is to be thought of as having a body that is not strictly male or female. In some instances, lesbians and gay men may be stripped and examined by members of their communities to determine if they have both a penis and a vagina (see, e.g., Krouse 1993; Gevisser and Cameron 1994). Accusations of *stabane* are based in the heterosexist assumption that sexual encounters require male and female bodies. And currently it seems that some South Africans expect intersexual bodies to explain the existence of same-sex desire, while others simply use the concept as a derogatory taunt (Swarr 2009).

The relationship between same-sex desire and intersexed bodies his-

torically and cross-culturally has been well documented. In this context, because of the assumption that self-defined gays and lesbians may be physically intersexual or *stabane*, many straight women expect penetration by a penis during sex with butch lesbians, or at least facilitate the impression that they expect lesbians to have penises. Sexual enjoyment usually necessitates an immediate experience of the body, and this can be gender-affirming or destructive, depending on the interaction. In other words, sexual encounters themselves produce gender. If a lesbian identifies as masculine and her partner affirms her masculinity during sex, this can affirm a masculine gender identification. However, if a partner is disappointed that a lesbian cannot penetrate her, for example, or complains about her lack of a penis, a sexual encounter can undermine a lesbian's masculine gender identification. Lesbians are not always forthcoming in their descriptions of their bodies, but such honesty about anatomy is perhaps not even desired. Given the lack of expectations of discussions of corporeality, lesbians' bodies are best understood as cocreated within relationships. Particular gendered body parts (such as penises or breasts) may be ignored or created collectively, which produces gender interactively and relationally. Given these conditions, is a fantasized penis that both partners believe they feel between them any less real than one found on a male body? This collaborative gendered creation is tangible for both partners. In some ways, butches' gendered bodies are actually produced through their sexual encounters with straight women. That is, butches' representation of their bodies as male and straight women's perceptions of butches' bodies as male let them be, for a time, gendered male.

Challenging masculinities

South African lesbian butchness complicates the notion of female masculinities. Perhaps the best-known theorist of the topic is J. Halberstam (1998a), for whom female masculinity refers to "women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine" (xi). But what happens when we also problematize the notion of what it means to be a woman? This consideration of contemporary South Africa differs from Halberstam's theorization in that I avoid relying on and potentially essentializing sex or gender embodiment (i.e., "female") and instead discuss self-defined *lesbian* masculinities here. This is necessitated, in part, by the sexed ambiguities associated with South African lesbians' bodies discussed above. Butch lesbians are not necessarily "women" or "female" but instead prefer specifically lesbian masculinities defined through their township locations. Their masculinities rely on the conjunctions of gender with race, sexuality,

class, history, and location. The masculinities that lesbians embody and engender are specifically South African; they are not simply female but intertwined with articulations of butchness and masculine corporeality.

While relationships shape how butches see themselves, it is also crucial to address violence in this context because violence shapes both the parameters of relationships and contestations over masculinities. Statistics are difficult to ascertain, but most scholars and activists agree that South Africa's per capita rates of rape are among the highest in the world (see, e.g., Simpson and Kraak 1998; Park, Fedler, and Dangor 2000), with perhaps 1 million rapes occurring annually (Walker 2005, 228).¹² At the same time, rape statistics have been widely disputed by those in positions of power, undermining efforts to expose the extent of rape in South Africa and, I argue, facilitating its increase. For instance, in 2000, as part of an ongoing public exchange of letters with Tony Blair (then British prime minister), Thabo Mbeki (then president of South Africa) suggested that rape statistics in South Africa have been highly exaggerated and are "very false" (Mbeki 2000).¹³ Perhaps even more memorable were the comments of Penuell Maduna, minister of justice, and Steve Tshwete, minister of safety and security, immortalized on a US television program on rape in South Africa, dismissing reported rape statistics during an interview by stating, "We've been standing here for 26 seconds and nobody has been raped" ("Verbatim" 2000). Clearly statistics have been contentious, prompting defensiveness from national leaders and outrage from antirape activists.¹⁴ However, extensive and emotional public debates about precise statistics have detracted from the most important point in such analyses: "the critical issue is the undeniably high rate of rape in South Africa."¹⁵

The context of South Africa's high rates of violent crime and low rates

¹² It is often surmised that only one in twenty rapes is reported (Walker 2005, 228; Mkhize et al. 2010, 4), which is explained by multiple factors, including the extremely low conviction rate for rape, which some estimate at 7 percent (Rachel Jewkes in "MRC" 2009), as well as intimidation by rapists; fear of retaliation; and concerns about social, medical, police, and court stigmatization and inaction (Human Rights Watch 2011).

¹³ Such statements must be seen in the context of justifications given for violence against women, evident in then-president Mbeki's quip that if his sister were to support political rival Kenneth Meshoe of the African Christian Democratic Party he would "beat her" ("Mbeki Was Only 'Joking'" 2004).

¹⁴ Some of this debate was articulated in an open letter to Mbeki endorsed by thirty-one organizations. The "Letter to President Mbeki about His Questioning of the Stats Organisations Use" was published on the rapecrisis.org website but is no longer available.

¹⁵ This quotation is taken from a 2004 publication by the Rape Crisis Town Trust that is no longer available publically but is on file with the author.

of conviction have been well documented elsewhere.¹⁶ Many scholars have linked these high rates of crime with male masculinities in their analyses of, for example, gun violence (Cock 2001) and the far-right political party Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Swart 2001). Robert Morrell (2001) summarizes the constitution of what he labels “brittle masculinities” (18) in contemporary South Africa as based on various historical forces: “For white men, the uneven distribution of power [under apartheid] made them defensive about challenges (by women, blacks, and/or other men) to their privilege. For black men, the harshness of life on the edge of poverty and the emasculation of political powerlessness gave their masculinity a dangerous edge” (18). As Morrell and others point out, rape is one manifestation of how “brittle masculinities” are often less a matter of expressing sexuality and more a matter of gendered power and control. However, as Moffett (2006) postulates, casually linking South African racial histories and sexual violence in public discourse “offers no critique of the patriarchal frameworks that shape [masculine pride and] unwittingly lays the blame for sexual violence at the door of those who were discriminated against under apartheid” (134).

South African democratization has brought many changes, particularly the introduction of equal rights for women under the law. While these are widely seen as important steps forward for women, such constitutional guarantees have also been accompanied by significant backlash. Two organizations formed at this time give particular insight into the relationship of sexual violence and misogyny to South Africa’s political transition. First, the South African Association of Men (SAAM), founded in 1994 by white men who felt threatened by postapartheid political changes, opposed laws that protect women from violence, such as the Prevention of Family Violence Act (no. 133 of 1993). Members claimed that men are victims of marital violence as often as women and suggested that such laws formed part of the “broader feminist assault on men” (John Loftus, in ANC 1995; see also Lemon 1995).

Another organization with even more direct bearing on sexual violence is the South African Rapists’ Association, formed in Sebokeng around 1994 by a group of young men disillusioned by the fact that they were no longer active in the political struggle against apartheid. One member explained: “We rape women who need to be disciplined (those women

¹⁶ Some of this documentation appears in studies by the Institute for Security Studies and the South African Police Services. These studies are not available publicly but are on file with the author.

who behave like snobs), they just do not want to talk to most people, they think they know better than most of us and when we struggle, they simply do not want to join us” (in Goldblatt and Meintjes 1997, 14). Here, we see evidence of punitive rape—rape intended to punish women for stepping outside of men’s social control. Individualism in women, as a result of increasing political and legal rights, and women’s confidence in their equality, seems to increase their likelihood of being raped.

Punitive rape has taken many documented forms in South Africa. Gang rape is not uncommon, making up an arguable one-third of rapes.¹⁷ Its most notorious form is “jackrolling,” a practice of violent gang rape originating with a gang called the Jackrollers in the Diepkloof area of Soweto. Violent sexual assaults are often linked to men’s policing of gender and sexual norms, as demonstrated in recent attacks on women incited by their choice of clothing. For example, a number of well-publicized group attacks on women for wearing pants occurred in Umlazi, outside Durban, carried out by men referred to as “pants mobs.” In one such attack, Zandile Mpanza was “allegedly assaulted, stripped naked and paraded through the township’s streets for wearing a pair of pants. The young woman’s house was also burnt by her attackers” (Stolley 2007). In another case, at least four women were sexually assaulted for wearing miniskirts at the Noord Street taxi rank in Johannesburg in February 2008; Nwabisa Ngcukana, for instance, was “stripped [and] paraded naked while more than 100 onlookers jeered and laughed, doused in alcohol and sexually assaulted” (Vincent 2008, 11). Both of these horrific situations demonstrate mass control of women and enforcement of gender norms and femininity through physical assaults that create a climate of intense fear for women (Dosekun 2007).

In the resulting community discussions about women’s clothing, the response of South African President Jacob Zuma was that “it might be worth considering a dialogue on dress codes before there is more victimisation” (“Flogged, Stripped” 2009). It seems obvious that Zuma’s suggestion to impose dress codes would police women by enforcing gender norms and overlook deeper problems of sexual assault and patriarchy. But this comment pales in comparison to Zuma’s own personal history, which represents the direct culpability of some South African politicians in facilitating rape. In 2005, Zuma was charged with the rape of a family friend, and in the heated and public trial that followed, “Khwezi,” a pseudonym for a woman who identified publicly as HIV positive and a

¹⁷ See, e.g., Vogelman and Lewis (1993), Chan Sam (1994), Vetten (2000), Walker (2005), Wood (2005), and Hunter (2010).

lesbian, was subjected to public outrage and degradation as Zuma's supporters "demonstrated outside the court, verbally attacked his accuser and sang, 'burn the bitch, burn the bitch'" ("MRC" 2009).¹⁸ Zuma was acquitted of rape in 2006 and has served as president of South Africa since 2009. Pumla Dineo Gqola (2007) describes the events surrounding the accusation and trial of Zuma as "unsurprising" and argues that "such moments are enabled by the continuum through which masculinities and femininities are thought and sanctioned in contemporary South Africa" (111).

Lesbians like Khwezi are often both invisible and hypervisible in public discourse, and analyses of varied sorts point to alarmingly high rape statistics among lesbians more broadly. For instance, Beverly Palesa Ditsie recounts being attacked as early as 1990: "I remember the first time I was threatened and nearly attacked in my home. The men were adamant that they had every right to teach me a lesson for daring to come out as a lesbian and demand human rights. There were at least 10 men, but my grandmother walked out with her iron rod and stopped them before they even entered the yard; only she and God know how she managed that" (in Mkhize et al. 2010, vi).¹⁹ These and similar accounts document the ubiquity of rape targeting lesbians in South Africa over the past twenty years.

Scholars and activists increasingly suggest that since the end of apartheid, homophobic crimes, including rape, may be increasing (Reid and Dirsuweit 2002). For example, Zanele Muholi, then speaking on behalf of the Rose Has Thorns, a campaign promoted by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, documented over forty cases of violence against black lesbians in Johannesburg's townships during 2003 (Mufweba 2004). Funeka Soldaat, a longtime gay and lesbian rights activist and organizer for Cape Town's Triangle Project and the FreeGender campaign, states that "most of the lesbians in the community where I stay (Khayelitsha) have been raped, and there are a lot of lesbians in the townships" (in Williams 2003). Mkhize and her coauthors (2010, 46–47) refer to ten notable public cases of lesbian murders from 2006 to 2009 in a list that is more representative than exhaustive, and some activist groups have

¹⁸ See especially accounts and analyses of this trial in Ratele (2006), Reddy and Potgieter (2006), and Mkhize et al. (2010).

¹⁹ See also Beverly Palesa Ditsie and Nicky Newman's important film *Simon and I* (2001).

produced similar lists using many additional documented cases from before, during, and after this period.²⁰

The February 2006 murder of nineteen-year-old Zoliswa Nkonyana in Khayelitsha is just one example of this brutality. Nkonyana was stabbed and stoned to death by a mob of men in front of her stepfather for being a lesbian: “It took two weeks for the news of the murder of a young Khayelitsha lesbian, Zoliswa Nkonyana, to filter from the streets to the media. . . . In what gay lobby groups have termed a classic hate crime, the 19-year-old was clubbed, kicked and beaten to death by a mob of about 20 young men on February 4. The youths, aged between 17 and 20, chased Nkonyana, pelted her with bricks and finally beat her with a golf club a few metres from her home” (Thamm 2006). The depth of the violence that Nkonyana faced in her death is beyond statistical measure. In fact, it has taken a glut of public instances of violence to finally draw attention to statistical rates. Cases such as the brutal rape and murder of lesbian couple Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa in 2007 and the 2008 gang rape and murder of Eudy Simelane, a well-known player for South Africa’s women’s soccer team, have brought increasing attention to the intensity and degrees of violence facing lesbian women in the former townships.

As with broader statistics about rape, it is clear that attempts at quantification are incomplete; it is possible “to comment on reported murders of black lesbians, but it is by no means certain that murders and assaults that become part of the public record are the only ones that occur. This is even truer of sexual assault, of homophobic assaults with knives, stones, or guns, and of instances of hate speech” (Mkhize et al. 2010, 20). The broader picture of violence facing lesbians is well known within communities at risk. Nkabinde (2008) summarizes it this way: “There are no safe lesbian spaces anywhere” (146).

Lesbians are explaining the causes for the rapes and assaults they face based on their experiences with their attackers and their activism. Mkhize and her coauthors (2010, x) argue that the rationales for homophobic crimes include the following: “Explanations for the continuing marginalisation of lesbians (and gay men) in communities range from the per-

²⁰ Mkhize and her coauthors include the following murder victims in their account: Zoliswa Nkonyana, Madoe Mafubedu, Sizakele Sigasa, Salome Masooa, Thokozane Qwabe, Eudy Simelane, Khanyiswa (Lhoyie) Hani, Daisy Dube, Sibongile Mphelo, and Girly ‘S’Gelane’ Nkosi. “In public campaigns the list of victims is longer” and includes Simangele Nhlapo, Fanny Ann Eddy, Gugu Dlamini, Lorna Mlosana, Busisiwe Sigasa, “and many given simply as first names” (Mkhize et al. 2010, 47).

ception that homosexuality is un-African, to beliefs that gays and lesbians cannot be afforded the same constitutional protections and rights provided to the rest of society (such as the right to marry), the perception and attitude that homosexuality should be criminalised, and religious and cultural intolerance emanating from varied notions of what is correct or proper gender behaviour and what is not.” Intersecting beliefs about the origins of homosexuality, backlash following the political transition, religious and cultural oppositions, and sexist perceptions of the inappropriateness of challenges to gender and (hetero)sexuality are enforced through sexual violence.²¹ South African social justice organizations widely view sexual violence as a pervasive concern affecting South Africans’ daily lives and are attending to the role of sexualities and masculinities in their work. However, in addition to producing statistics and chronologies, activists have endeavored to “unpack the language and strategic implications of engagement with such violence rather than describe such attacks instance by instance” (Mkhize et al. 2010, 20).

In concert with this unpacking have been important and growing critiques of representations of lesbians in public discourse. For instance, as Mary Hames, director of the Gender Equity Unit at the University of the Western Cape, pointed out at a roundtable focused on violence against lesbians, “I think we must be careful, sensitive about issues like this, because I believe even [in] an audience like this, there’s a lot of voyeurs just looking into other people’s pain” (Mkhize et al. 2010, 29). Such voyeurism—found in interpersonal relations, transnational activism, research-based publications, and especially media outlets—homogenizes black lesbians and positions them as victims. Not only does this kind of representation objectify survivors, it can produce chilling exposure to additional violence. The insensitivity and ignorance of journalists—especially their identification of survivors, their friends, and their families by printing names and photographs in media accounts—is culpable in facilitating and even encouraging violence (37).

Rejected masculinities

Within the context of rapes targeting lesbians, butchness forms a primary consideration that has been largely unexplored. Nkabinde summarizes her concerns in a statement that recalls the epigraphs that began this article:

²¹ Confronting the myth of homosexuality as un-African, Marc Epprecht’s (2008) important work reframes this debate, suggesting that it is homophobia and not homosexuality that is a colonial or Northern import.

Lesbians are contracting HIV because of rape. Men don't accept lesbians. They think they have to teach them a lesson by raping them. They call it "corrective rape." Black lesbians who have been raped say that during rape the rapists insult them saying things like, "Ja, you! You thought you were a man!" Or, "You are a lesbian because you have never had a great penis!" Men think that if they teach a lesbian how to have sex with a man it will change her behaviour. But will a woman who is raped feel like sleeping with a man? Has being a lesbian got anything to do with men? It's not about wanting to sleep with men or not wanting to sleep with men. Maybe that is what is so threatening to men. Some men just don't understand that women prefer women. It is ignorance. Men are so ignorant. Part of it is that they are scared. Women are doing things for themselves and they are scared of women being powerful. Women used to depend on their husbands but now men are afraid of women taking their power. (Nkabinde 2008, 145)

Here, Nkabinde describes "corrective rape" and the gendered myths that inform it, including the intertwined conceptions that heterosexual intercourse will transform lesbians' sexual orientation, that lesbians see themselves as men, and women's power and independence constitute a threat. A phallic preoccupation is also apparent here, both in the contestations over what it means to be a man and how this conflict will be resolved through rapists' violent use of their penises. Both punitive and corrective or curative rape are seen as enforcing gender norms through punishment and example, but also as transforming both gender and sexual orientation.

Contentious relationships between men and lesbians are critical to understanding the role of rejection in these considerations of masculinity. In a nongovernmental policy study of violence among Xhosa youth in the Eastern Cape by Wood and Jewkes (2001), physical violence, including rape, was noted as a common means of enforcing expectations within relationships. Furthermore, "most reported violence was associated with girls' rejection of a male 'proposal' to become involved in a 'love affair,' their actual or suspected sexual 'infidelity,' their attempts to end relationships, their sexual refusals, their acts of resistance to boyfriends' attempts to dictate the terms of the relationship, and their efforts to undermine their boyfriends' sexual success with each other" (319). Extending the works of scholars such as Wood and Jewkes necessitates considering the multifaceted nature of men's violence targeting lesbians. Speculations on the causes for rape targeting lesbians abound, but sometimes the reasoning is overt:

[In] many cases of rape, assailants do give “reasons” for the attack—these include punishment for behaviour or attitude, the need to assert authority, and the assertion of “rights.” It would be possible to argue that many rapes are accompanied by a “punitive” or semi-“curative” discourse—the survivor will be a better-behaved woman and/or give the perpetrator more respect or sexual attention after the assault. The notion that the rape will transform the sexual identity of the survivor (as well as “punish” her for being lesbian) is, however, only recently overt in the experience of black lesbians who have been sexually attacked and/or threatened. (Mkhize et al. 2010, 45)

This intersection of punitive and corrective or curative rape in the experiences of black lesbians is critical. According to many South African lesbians, masculine men target them for violence for two related reasons that I explore below. First, many men see butch lesbians as competition for straight women’s affections. And second, lesbians reject men’s romantic proposals and are sexually inaccessible, breaking the rules of heterosexuality. Intertwined with and often overshadowing both of these rationales are contestations to gender and sex, specifically accusations that lesbians are becoming or acting like men.

It is important to note that many butch lesbians’ straight lovers have relationships with butches and men simultaneously. Mthembu explained this in an interview with me: “The straight women always want us. . . . I’m talking from experience. Like they always think that I’m this boy. . . ’cause you find that straight women, they won’t come to a femme woman and want to go out with her, but if you look like this boy and how, wow. Then you’re on. They can go out with you, straight as they are. To them, you are this boy and you’re cute and you’re sweet and that’s what they say about lesbians. They say, ‘You know, I rather go out with a lesbian, ’cause lesbians are sweet.’” Straight women often find butches to be sensitive and may prefer relationships with lesbians, whom they see as less violent and more loving. But these same straight women also find social affirmation through heterosexual relationships. Concurrent relationships may lead directly to violent competitive conflict over specific straight women. Men expect women to be monogamous with them, though their claims to masculinity are strengthened by having multiple partners themselves. As Ashforth (1999) points out in reference to Sowetan contexts, “Such exclusivity is a point of the utmost honour for virtually every man [in Soweto,] and it is only in the context of the most casual coupling that a ‘girlfriend’ could be accepted as having other lovers” (52). Men also feel threatened and emasculated by their ex-partners’ relationships with

lesbians; homophobic men are paradoxically threatened by and demeaning of such relationships, and lesbians may be raped or beaten as a result.

Proposing emerges again here as rife with complications that affect lesbians. In an interview with me, Buyisile Mfazo explained the intentional humiliation that butches face from *tsotsis* in the townships:

When you are a butch lesbian, you are threatening to their territory. You are threatening their power that now you want to be a couple. So [what] they want to prove to you from time to time, even when you are with your girlfriend in the streets, is that [you are not a man]. They propose the butch one; they want to once more reassure you that you are woman and that to them, whether you are a man at home, it's none of their business. To them you're still a woman and they're going to propose you and . . . stuff like that.

The complex dynamics of these interactions are directly related to gendered expectations about what it means to be a woman and the ways that proposing and control are linked. Here butch lesbians are confronted by *tsotsis* who assert that despite lesbians' relationships with women, the privilege of initiating romance should be restricted to masculine men. In this instance, romantic proposals stand in for relational dominance, and men enforce their power through both discourses of confrontation and sexual violence. Butch lesbians, who challenge men's access to particular women and their exclusive claims to masculinities, are punished for transgressing the dual gender system and compulsory heterosexuality.

As documented attacks increase, some lesbians suggest refusing to have relationships with straight women in an effort to avoid potential violence and reduce rapes. When a group of black lesbians initiated the Rose Has Thorns campaign against homophobic violence in 2003, one participant advised: "Gangs are after butch lesbian women and having a relationship with their girlfriend is not helping the situation, so be safe [rather] than sorry and stay away from straight women."²²

The second related reason given for violence directed toward lesbians concerns their sexual inaccessibility. Lesbians are seen by some heterosexual men as outside their control. As a result, some corrective or curative rapes are intended to enforce dominant social roles and expectations of appropriate femininity and sexuality. Activists Busi Kwesi and Naomi Webster (1997) explain, "As lesbians our sexual orientation incites violence with men who believe our sexuality is a challenge to their 'manhood.'

²² This quotation is taken from Musa Ngubane's "Expectations of the Rose," which was posted online but is no longer available.

Our existence undermines the established order of male dominance” (93). One particularly damaging assumption is that women have a sexual need for men and that this must be forced on them. Threats of rape are daily occurrences for most of the butch lesbians I interviewed. Dladla, for instance, reflected: “It’s hard because some guys . . . say, ‘Ah, *wena* [Zulu slang for “you”], you’ve become so butch; that’s because maybe you’ve never been with a man. So we’ll just give you a taste and then you’ll come straight.” In the small communities within South Africa’s former townships, where most people know one another and many travel by foot, these are not empty threats. And according to survivors’ accounts, men are particularly enraged by women’s rejections of their proposals, and they often view such rejections as insulting and demeaning.

Further, lesbian masculinities are intertwined with claims over male bodies as associated with masculinities. Anonymous men speaking about violence against lesbians in the film *Rape for Who I Am* (2006) ask, “How can a lesbian be raped? She’s a man,” implying that a female body is a prerequisite for rape. Another declaration also recalls implications of *stabanane*: “They raped you because they want to see are you a real lady or a guy.” These statements conflate lesbians’ sexual desire for women with male bodies and force the separation of gendered bodies and sexuality through rape.

Sexual violence has both emotional and physical consequences. Emotionally, butch identifications make rape difficult to discuss. Butch lesbians have to cope not only with the trauma of rape itself but with the way it undermines their claims to masculinity. Butchness further increases lesbians’ feelings of isolation, because to admit being raped is sometimes seen as an admission of weakness and a loss of power, a concession many butches actively avoid and that is made all the more acute by the infinitesimal conviction rates for reported rape. Lesbians also face particularly severe corporeal risks from rape. All women are at risk for HIV transmission during rape, since HIV is most easily spread through violent sexual contact, and it is rarely possible to negotiate safer sex during assaults. Further, high instances of gang rape exponentially increase risk of HIV infection, due to both the exposure to multiple assailants and the physical trauma of repeated rapes. These risks are coupled with the growing number of intentional infections of lesbians with HIV, considered part of the punishment for same-sex attraction and desire. For instance, in an interview with me, Muholi shared the following anonymous survivor’s testimony: “He forced me to take off my clothes and told me that he wanted to prove to me that I was a woman that he always wanted to have a child with, and added that he was going to rape me and give me AIDS as well.

I cried, and that did not stop him from raping me.” This same survivor also faced difficulty getting postexposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV transmission, having to visit three separate sites in Johannesburg to find appropriate antiretrovirals. Furthermore, the doctor, who eventually examined her after she was forced to wait for him for about six hours, questioned her at length about how she reconciles her lesbianism and her Christianity. In cases such as these, which are becoming increasingly common, lack of treatment following rape contributes to the trauma of rape and to the risk of HIV infection, and it may decrease the likelihood that lesbians will seek treatment and assistance for rape.

Reconsidering masculinities

Important projects targeting men and reconfiguring masculinities as a means of combating gender-based violence have received increasing attention in recent years.²³ Many of these allow those who identify as men to come together to consider what it means to be a man in group settings, and some solicit members who perpetuate violence against women. For men like Bongani Khumalo, founder of the South African Men’s Forum, confronting male violence is a “moral” imperative focused on responsible fatherhood and nationhood, though some critics suggest that this group’s approach is based in potentially problematic notions of the kinds of masculinities that should be part of the new South Africa (Posel 2005, 249). Initiatives that attend to male masculinities, such as the South African Men’s Forum, the 5 in 6 Project, ADAPT (Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training), and Men for Change, need to centrally address the relationships between homophobia and sexism, not merely to fight violence directed at lesbians but also to uncover the bases of heterosexist masculinities and ways to challenge them. A unitary masculinity is being contested in South Africa, and those who are contributing to its reconceptualization should consider both how to envision nonviolent masculinities and how the challenges posed by lesbian masculinities can point to directions for such change. Detaching masculinities from sex (male or female) can better exemplify their instabilities.

Such men’s groups might partner with lesbian-focused initiatives such as the Forum for the Empowerment of Women, the Triple Seven Cam-

²³ See, e.g., Breslin (1997), Daphne (1998), Nkosi (1998), Morrell (2001), Posel (2005), and Walker (2005).

paign, and FreeGender, among others.²⁴ These projects place lesbians and violence against them at the center of their work. Activists and scholars involved with these groups, including those theorizing these issues, have pointed to the importance of creating alliances, and some are promoting strategies such as hate crimes legislation, documentation and monitoring cases of corrective or curative rape, and black leadership (Mkhize et al. 2010, 50–54).

Butches' self-definitions and theorizations of their experiences also illustrate how gender is being produced in South Africa. The antagonism between butches and men goes well beyond simple homophobia and sexism. Butchness threatens what it means to be a man, a concern that has been heightened and racialized in contemporary South Africa, and threatens the status that accompanies claims to masculinities. Butches may share heterosexual men's ideas about gendered roles and responsibilities, proposing, and violence. However, the commonalities of these masculine identifications are undermined by heterosexual masculine men's rape, harassment, and assaults of butch women. These attacks reflect the danger butches pose to norms of gender and sexuality and call male masculinities into question through articulations of lesbian masculinities.

Analyzing the tripartite threat to heterosexist masculinities posed by butches—first, their masculine gender expressions and eschewal of feminine expectations; second, their claims to male bodies through binding and the expectation that they have a penis; and, finally, their relationships with women and rejection of relationships with men—offers important contributions to conversations about sexual violence and the enforcement of patriarchal masculinities. The paradoxes of lesbian masculinities challenge the stability and monolithic conception of masculinity, as butch lesbians are affirmed in their masculine expressions through romance and disabused of these same expressions through sexual violence. In this way, conceptions of successful masculinities show their coincident power and vulnerability, dependence and control. Understanding the nuances of gender—particularly the production of masculinities and sexed bodies—shows us the instability of masculinities and their inconsistencies and points to necessities of and possibilities for social change.

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²⁴ See, e.g., Nkabinde (2008), Matebeni (2009), Mkhize et al. (2010), and Thomas (2010).

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