

# Queering Borders: An Afrikan Activist Perspective

Bernedette Muthien

## BIOGRAPHY

Bernedette Muthien is based in Cape Town, South Africa, and is member of the pan-African gender network, Amanitare. She is co-convenor of the International Peace Research Association's Global Political Economy Commission. She also serves on a number of international advisory boards, including the international journals *Human Security Studies* and *Queeries* (Africa Editor), as well as the International Resource Network of the Centre for Lesbian & Gay Studies, CUNY. A former anti-apartheid activist who spent time in prisons during her adolescence due to youth and student leadership, Bernedette's life's work is centred on consciousness transformation in the intersecting areas of genders & sexualities, justice & peace. She believes in accessible research and writing, and has published both academic and creative writing (especially poetry) locally and abroad. She is founding Director of a registered NGO, Engender: [www.engender.org.za](http://www.engender.org.za)

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview of academic work that focuses on queer sexualities in Africa and argues that binary categories, particularly those imported from outside Africa are not adequate for addressing African sexualities.

## KEYWORDS

Africa, Activism, Inbetweenities, Fluidities, Bisexual, Lesbian, Queer, Transformation

### planetary piss?

i yearn to float with ducks  
on open air waves  
nip pluck tuck everywhere  
neither here nor there  
i am both none inbetween  
kiss her fuck him desire  
only a dream  
sitdowncomic pencilling  
shower songs  
thru unwooded electrical storms

### neutron?

i am an infinite ravine  
engorged rivers erode my scar tissue  
lickmarbling the craters  
on all sides  
nations in-habit my being  
as i moisten for his mastery  
and fingertip her open-legged vulnerability  
all the while aware  
of all our innocence  
made of nothing but  
air  
+/- i am charged  
with no sides

Any field of study only has relevance if actual people, and communities of people specifically, are able to use it in concrete ways. Hence theorising entirely for theory's sake, however intellectually stimulating to some of us, has absolutely no relevance to the daily, lived realities of grassroots (or 'ordinary') people. Scholar-activist Lorna Israel offers caution on this dualistic view, a view derived from lived experience in both activist and academic (rarely intersecting) environments: "It's as if 'ordinary' people [are not seen] to be 'theoretical' about their 'experience' and the theoreticals hopelessly devoid of being experiential - fluidly speaking, an experience is as theoretical in as much as the theoretical is very much experiential. They should not be put on oppositional grounds".

While I agree with Israel entirely, especially to avoid dichotomising theorising and experience, the inextricable experience-theory dance is not often slow and close, but rather loose and jagged, and often exploitative, rather than co-creational. Hence my own passionate commitment to participatory, action-based research methodologies, that seek mutual skills exchange.

In the broader African context, and particularly in South Africa ten years into democracy, systemic transformation is of critical importance. Questions relating to how one transforms societies from inequality, injustice and systemic violence into societies of reconciliation, diversity, justice and non-violence, are issues most pertinent to many of us. Violence is a daily, lived reality for non-heteronormative people the world over, and in Africa especially, but even closer to home in South Africa specifically. Here, as is the case everywhere, lesbians are subject to what this author calls "curative rape", the rape of women perceived of as lesbian by men as an ostensible 'cure' for/of their (aberrant) sexualities. Other men also, even more ironically, subject some gay men to this 'curative rape'. Hence theorising about non-heteronormativity, and lesbianism in particular, cannot be divorced from the ordinariness of 'curative' rape for many lesbians the world over, and South Africa specifically.

Further questions to contemplate include how relevant a field of Lesbian Studies is to ordinary people, what is a Lesbian, and who defines Lesbianism? The word 'lesbian', as are most of the concepts encompassed within the rainbow or alphabet soup of Greek letters LGBTQI, were coined and developed outside African realities. In South Africa Nguni speakers have long (erroneously) referred to homosexuals as *stabane* or 'hermaphrodite' (intersexed). The original inhabitants of Southern Africa, the Khoisan, were *not* heteronormative, and genders and sexualities were seen as fluid and dynamic, rather than as static binaries. This fluidity applies to most ancient indigenous peoples the world over, from Native American *berdache* to Indian *hijras*. Definitions usually work in negative terms, which define self in relation (and usually opposition) to another. Hence, homosexual means not heterosexual, and lesbian thus non-heterosexual, or homosexual, woman. However, employing a linear definition of lesbian may exclude the infinite varieties of sexuality choices that are inbetween and vary over time and with circumstances.

So how should one define lesbian? Many people I associate with define lesbian as the equivalent of gay homosexual, i.e. the opposite of heterosexual. While the construct queer embraces those who are non-heteronormative and includes the inbetween fluids and thus the construct lesbian does not necessarily include me, because I define myself as beyond binaries, as inbetween and fluid, dynamic and variable. Perhaps some may call me bisexual, but this term too subscribes to a notion of polarity, that I am both poles, when in fact I shift and change positions, not on a static linear continuum, but on an endlessly spiralling ellipse, that not ironically is ovoid, symbolic of female reproductive power. Is lesbian defined as orientation, or as preference? Are we victims of biology, or active agents with choice?

While I do respect those who identify as lesbian, we all know lesbians who sleep with men, and lesbians who, even if they don't act, enjoy sexual fantasies of men. The same applies to women who identify as heterosexual and, often silently, mentally or actually engaging sexually with other women. Many African women outside South Africa, who might identify as lesbian elsewhere, are married with children, and/or practice their same-sex sexuality in silence, due to the violences of post-colonial patriarchal homophobia. E.g. a leading African gender activist's house was bombed at least once, because she worked on sexualities broadly, and lesbian activism specifically, apparently outside of the general public view. One of her tasks has been to establish discreet national networks for gay men and women respectively. It is these clandestine sexualities activism that directly resulted in the attacks on her, and which warrants such extreme caution on her part. A further example is prior attacks on Engender's intersexed Board member, Sally Gross,

which necessitates similar personal safety measures. Personal violences against non-heteronormative activists are closely tied to the generic societal violences against those perceived of as not heterosexual, including 'curative' rape of women perceived of as lesbian, which is so prevalent that queer organisations in South Africa have entire projects dedicated to this form of gender violence specifically.

It is precisely the imperatives of hetero-patriarchy that keep both lesbians and their straight sisters in the flimsy boxes of their binaried sexuality. How much simpler it is to find safety in a homogenous identity, even if all identities are more complex upon further investigation. For example, archeo-anthropology shows that humans have always migrated across continents throughout time, and hence the idea of a homogenous race or nationality is flawed at best. We are each, all, hybridised, without any definite certainty about origins. The only thing we can ever really be certain of, at this stage, is that we are all born human. Even as some ancient spiritual traditions, such as Hinduism and Jainism, refer to inter-species reincarnation.

If we assume that sexuality, like any other identity, shifts constantly on the endless circumference of an infinite ovoid, then sexuality can never really be fixed, is not predetermined and primordial, does not hold us hostage physiologically. Because the field of physiology itself evinces that chromosomes and hormones are by nature fluid, and both 'male' and 'female' exists in *all* human beings. So that static polar genders of male and female are not scientifically accurate, and merely serve the interests of hetero-patriarchy, to divide and rule, in similar ways that science has been used to divide and conquer during colonial eras and under apartheid in South Africa. As Stephen Batchelor puts it:

Things are not as clear-cut as they seem. They are neither circumscribed nor separated from each other by lines. Lines are drawn in the mind. *There are no lines in nature...* [Everything emerges] from a matrix of conditions and in turn becomes part of another matrix of conditions from which something else emerges.

Is there such a construct as an African lesbian? Is the idea of an African in a globalized world possible? Mikki van Zyl reminds us that: "It may be worth mentioning the straddling of colonial boundaries by groups in each of more than 50 national (colonial) boundaries, and that as a continent, Africa arguably has the world's most diverse cultural and historic legacies with more than 2000 languages spoken".

Africa includes the range of Lesotho's lesbian-bisexual miners' wives in Cheryl Stobie's work to Ifi Amadiume's writings of women-to-women marriages in her native Nigeria. Stobie critiques the book *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, which offers a range of texts from the Eighteenth to the late-Twentieth Century, and examines a considerable number of sub-Saharan cultures, providing ample evidence of homosexual practices being indigenous over a long period. There is much fascinating material, including translations of ethnographic accounts of pre-colonial and colonial times, court records of male homosexual 'crime' in early colonial Zimbabwe, same-sex marriages, the concept of 'male lesbians' in Hausa (West Africa), adolescent same-sex sexual behaviour, cross-dressing, role reversal, and women who love women in Lesotho. Also of interest is an appendix with a list of fifty-odd African cultures with same-sex patterns, most of which have local terms for same-sex sexual practices or role and there is evidence for same-sex erotic relationships between co-wives, and between (heterosexually) married women in Lesotho.

Speaking of his native Dagara people in Burkina Faso, Malidoma Some asserts that gender has very little to do with anatomy:

It is purely energetic. The whole notion of 'gay' does not exist in the indigenous world. That does not mean that there are not people who feel this way that certain people feel in this culture, that has led to them being referred to as 'gay'... The great astrologers of the Dogon are gay... Why is it that everywhere else in the world, gay people are a blessing and in the modern world they are a curse? It is self-evident. The modern world was built by Christianity. They have taken the gods out of the earth and sent them to heaven, wherever that is...

Sobanfu Some reflects on the *ordinariness* of Dagara women's sexual-spiritual intimacies: Sexuality, including woman-to-woman sexuality, is so integrated into the spiritual life of the Dagarat that her people have no word to specify 'lesbian' or even 'sex'... Like many other Africans, the women of Dagara do not sleep with their men. Women need to sleep together, to be together to empower each other... then if they meet with men, there is no imbalance... We have a female father

who gives us male energy. She looks like a male. Anything we feel or experience that we haven't dealt with is expressed. This women's group ritual balances their male/female energy. It is so we are not completely male or female.

Alicia Banks cites an article entitled "Inside Gay Africa" to describe how the Watutsi still have a reputation for bisexuality in the cities of East Africa, Zande women risked execution by pleasuring each other, sometimes with phalluses fashioned from roots and in this same part of Zaire, homosexuality had a mystical element to it while Bisexuality is also quite common among the Bajun tribes of east Africa. So while the word lesbian may have ancient Greek origins, the practices it describes are certainly universal, and definitely includes Africa. However, what is clear from many of the citations above is that sexualities are not necessarily divorced from spiritualities or other aspects of life and being human, as well as the fact that sexualities have always been fluid in especially pre-colonial Africa and many other ancient indigenous societies.

Rather than a narrow focus on lesbianism, and lesbian studies, it may serve Africa better if we re-historicize and re-claim pre-colonial fluidities, as at least one way of moving beyond the stranglehold of colonial, and still-prevalent, binaries, oppressions and violences. In this sense alone queer studies broadly offers a more comfortable reception, rather than home, entirely because it offers greater inclusivity, even as it suffers of the same dis-eases of power and exclusion as any other field of study. Lorna Israel refers to the irony of a notion of pre-colonial, defined in relation to the colonial:

As for going to the beginning of it all - especially the heavily romanticised notion that there was something unique, originary and therefore pure and integral during the pre-colonial period is just that: a very romantic notion because by ascribing to it a sense to time called pre-colonial you have exactly located its time zone within the bounds of the colonial period so it is theoretically and empirically impossible to disentangle the two - remember the one re-reading does not exactly belong to a pre-colonial moment and how will we ever know that there is such a time called pre-colonial when, precisely, such designation belongs to the very time that confines somebody designating it?!

To the question, "Are we now post-lesbian?" gender activist Mikki van Zyl replies:

Post-what lesbian? We never even got started here, and maybe that is a good thing. There is such a thing as discourses being damaging. That doesn't mean I'm not a revolutionary... I believe lesbian studies are still based on a particular (Westocentric) paradigm of gender and heterosexuality. Our biggest 'enemy' is heteropatriarchy, and that is where it must be located... [Sexualities studies] must be inclusive of all marginalized sexual identities provided it is located in a dismemberment (!) of heteropatriarchy. To quote Marianne Thamm - I have nothing against the penis, it's the life support system that comes with it which I object to."

Lesbian scholar-activist, Yvette Abrahams, offers this challenge: "How does the identity we choose help us to live in practice? What is the relevance of identity studies to daily life as a queer person, or for that matter to our struggle against homophobia, for full sexual health and freedom"? In one documentary short (at the Out in Africa Film Festival 2005 in Cape Town), Gail Smith says, "I don't even think we have begun to theorize how we undermine homophobia as a system. We need to approach it in the same way we analyze racism or sexism". And for South Africa that is perfectly true". I believe that adopting and living any non-heteronormative identity and lifestyle is a subversion of hetero-patriarchy, and hence contributes towards transforming society. If one's identities and lifestyles attempt to transcend status quo binaries, it may prove to be all the more revolutionary, even as it may be more challenging to hold one's ground in opposition and coercion from both perceived polarities.

In her seminal essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", the late Audre Lorde wrote:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. [original emphasis]. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish...In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. *Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower*. [emphasis added].

In walking the transformative talk, may this queerly fluid and inbetween activist, who identifies as polymorphously perverse for its ironically subversive and transformative potentials, leave you satisfied with the moment, fully aware that any authenticity is merely an ideal...

## I Q

u're in the centre  
of your war against conflict  
and yet the silences of an entire alphabet  
around one Greek letter  
closes the infinite spiral  
of balkanisation  
decapitating  
this (in)voluntary bastard's  
air  
supply

31 august 2003  
italy, for lepa

## **picture perfect**

there's a thumbprint  
on a face without a pupil  
and lines of identity  
circling the frame  
greyscale  
with some swatches  
of peach  
life's a finger supper  
snap

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