Not Chickening Out: Moving Towards Queer Liberation in Pretoria, South Africa

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Note to the reader: The following essay discusses processes of power like homophobia, transphobia, cissexism, racism, and colonialism. In connection, the following essay also discusses intense material including sexual violence, murder, and other violence.

Over the course of my summer in Pretoria, South Africa with OUT LGBT Well-Being, I learned tactics for community organizing, histories of queer liberation movements, and strategies for meaningful legal research. On my third day, however, I learned how to eat with my hands.

My co-worker MacMillan had taken me to grab lunch at one of his favorite spots. We'd quickly become close friends, but in that moment, we were still getting to know each other, and I appreciated his willingness to show me around.

"This is a very common South African dish," MacMillan told me as the lady behind the counter handed me a Styrofoam box. "Pap, it's called. Everyone eats it, for lunch, for dinner."

We slowly walked back to the office – I was marveling at the beautiful weather – and we encountered another friend and co-worker of ours named Lesego. The three of us took a seat in the conference room, and broke open the Styrofoam containers.

Pap is a stiff corn porridge that is usually served with meat and some kind of sauce – I watched Mac grab a handful of pap, fill it with sausage, and dunk it in the sauce. I did the same.

"This one is easy," said Lesego, watching me chew but speaking to Mac. "You can take him anywhere; he's easy. Do you like it?" he asked of me.

I laughed, and nodded, thoroughly reassured by Lesego's comment even as I tried to keep my eyes from watering at the shock of the spice. I was working hard to be "easy" – I felt strongly that it was a priority to ensure I wasn't a burden. I didn't want to ask undue educational labor from people who were not offering it – or expect my hosts to teach a white American activist how to eat. Lesego offered me validation: I saw his comment as proof that I was adapting to my circumstances with some measure of independence. I was so proud in that moment.

Then I moved to stand and fetch a jug of water, and promptly knocked my lunch to the floor.

"Maybe not so easy," cackled Lesego, laughing raucously as I sopped beef sauce out of the carpet with a towel. "But at least he cleans up after himself."

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"Why didn't you just put some food out?" asked Moude, a few days later, as I was attempting to explain why I was late to the office. Moude – the office administrator for OUT – is always stylish, always wise, and always witty.

Admittedly, a trail of cornmeal from the bed to the door would have been much more effective – I had spent the better part of an hour attempting to prod the angry chicken lodged stubbornly under my bed with a broom.

OUT's offices themselves are wired with a pepper-spray system – should anyone attempt to harm the office, the thought goes, it's better to incapacitate everyone than to risk anything worse. In thinking about Fenway Health's grand glass entrance in Boston, this was a particularly stark contrast for me to take in.

I wish I could say that was a one-time occurrence, but the chickens that lived on the property with me were the most courageous creatures I've ever encountered. The poultry had a deeply ingrained caution-be-damned attitude, and would dart between my legs if I left the door open for more than a minute. They were constantly on high alert, and would take any chance they could to get in the house. I'm not sure what they thought was waiting for them in there, but much to my frustration, the birds were both vigilant and persistent.

It is odd to compare the frustrating chickens to an organization as noble and brilliant as OUT, but OUT is also both vigilant and persistent. It must be constantly on the lookout for opportunities – for funding, for advocacy work, for institutionalizing support for queer persons – and sometimes that means OUT pursues opportunities as narrow as the gap between my leg and the doorframe the morning the chickens invaded. The organization exists to provide medical and advocacy services to queer folk in South Africa, and because there isn't a lot of support – either governmental or civilian – for that kind of work, OUT's programs must constantly assert themselves in spaces where they might not quite be welcome. In my experience, LGBTI advocacy organizations in the U.S. may wrestle with a similar problem, but they have also received a measure of social, economic, and political capital through which institutionalized opportunities have begun to present themselves.

OUT's initial mission was to provide health services and HIV-related resources to queer persons. My site supervisor, Johan Meyer, oversees the onsite medical clinic and health outreach programs that still form the backbone of the organization. My direct supervisor, Lerato Phalakatshela, manages the Love Not Hate campaign, which is a relatively recent addition to the 21-year-old organization. The campaign advocates for an end to hate crimes against LGBTI persons, and provides services like legal referrals, court support, support groups, and case management to survivors of hate crimes. It is responsible for the first parliamentary lobbying effort on behalf of LGBTI persons in South Africa, and it relies on the support of other LGBTI-related civil society organizations that act as campaign partners.

On my first day in South Africa, Johan and his partner Charlie picked me up from the Oliver Reginald Tambo Airport in Johannesburg. They dropped me off at my accommodations, and half an hour later, Lerato picked me up. We were headed to a township called Eersterust, where I was to assist Lerato in facilitating a safe space for trans women and nonbinary femme persons.

Lerato and I hit it off immediately, and I was excited to hit the ground running, just a couple of hours after I'd gotten off the plane. The meeting was to be held at the home of a woman named Mella; we arrived, and Mella promptly offered both of us steaming bowls of delicious stew. We sat and chatted for a while as guests began arriving – Lerato was happy to see that people were in attendance. Usually, he expressed, there were more guests, but this was a new location for the safe space, and often any change in location brings fewer attendees, as it is difficult to know whether a new location will be entirely safe.

Lerato is particularly passionate about setting up safe spaces for LGBTI people, and Love Not Hate offers some funding to any organization or person looking to establish one. This program exemplifies OUT's vigilance in opportunity-seeking: whenever the chance to support queer communities presents itself, the organization makes an investment, regardless of expected attendance.

In setting up this "safe" space, Lerato expected fluctuations in his own safety and in the safety of the group. He was careful to hold the meeting only on fenced-in property, and was anxious to lock and re-lock the gate after each car arrived. OUT has learned a lot about how to keep itself, its membership, and its community as safe as possible. OUT's offices themselves are wired with a pepper-spray system – should anyone attempt to harm the office, the thought goes, it's better to incapacitate everyone than to risk anything worse. In thinking about Fenway Health's grand glass entrance in Boston, this was a particularly stark contrast for me to take in. Although I've had unsafe experiences in the U.S. because of my sexuality, my advocacy here has never demanded pepper-spray wiring.

Lerato eventually decided against doing any kind of formal programming, as the evening had taken more of a relaxed tone, and instead we distributed flyers about OUT's programs and contact information, and copies of Pretoria's LGBTI newspaper. After several hours of chatting, eating, and getting to know the guests, Lerato brought me back to my accommodations so I could rest and unpack.

OUT's commitment to a constant pursuit of opportunities was evident to me during a trip to the township Hammanskraal with the Peer Outreach program, under the Health & Wellbeing branch of OUT's work. The Peer Outreach team provides free HIV testing services to men who have sex with men, and does so by visiting town centers, shopping malls, and rail stations throughout the Gauteng province. We drove down early in the morning, and set up our bright pink tents in the parking lot of a strip mall near the town center. The tents are emblazoned with the words "OUT LGBT Well-Being," and this means that the work of the Peer Outreach team is twofold. The team members provide HIV tests, condoms, and information about sexual health to the community, but they also publicly claim space for queer people. It was never quite clear with whose permission the team set up its tents, but at one point, Happy Phaleng, the Peer Outreach Coordinator, left to scope out new places for the Peer Outreach team to set up its tent in the future; any park or parking lot might be an opportunity to do good.

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At first, the majority of the work I was doing for OUT was administrative. I pulled and sorted client files, took minutes, wrote summaries, and made myself useful around the office. Early in my internship, the organization partially moved offices, choosing to designate its old office exclusively for the medical team and health outreach services, while moving its administrative team and Lerato (manager of the Love Not Hate campaign) to a new office a block away. At first, I split my time between the two offices, but as the summer progressed, I spent most of my time at the new office working with Lerato directly. I got to know the work of the organization better over time, and accordingly, my responsibilities shifted.

Before I joined the team, I was under the impression that the Love Not Hate campaign had more than 20 staffers. It wasn't until I arrived that I realized every aspect of the campaign was being run by Lerato alone.

One day, Lerato and I were packaging copies of research that OUT had conducted on experiences of discrimination by LGBTI persons for distribution to university libraries, the national Department of Justice, and other community partners. There was a knock on the door of the conference room, and one of the clinicians entered. She explained that they'd received a client from a rehab facility nearby, and that he was interested in pursuing a legal referral for case management. She asked if we'd be able to interview him. Lerato assented and set aside the bundle of reports he was sorting through.

Although there have been protections for LGBTI persons under South African law since 1994, reporting a hate crime can be a complicated process. Occasionally, the South African Police Service might not fully investigate a hate crime, or their investigation might be retraumatizing to a survivor. To help address this, OUT tries to match people seeking assistance with lawyers who will supervise criminal proceedings and ensure the process unfolds fairly.

Lerato and I jointly interviewed a man (referred to hereafter as Carl; his name has been changed for the sake of anonymity) about his experience. He was a gay survivor of sex trafficking who had escaped his captors two days prior to our first conversation, and he was worried that should he report his captivity to the police, they would dismiss the case because of his sexuality, or that they would arrest him for having performed sex work.

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I hadn't had an opportunity to prepare or confirm that I was asking the right questions. Lerato, characteristically, was impossible to catch off-guard, and asked considered, relevant questions as if he hadn't just been stuffing envelopes with me.

The process of securing legal representation for Carl was a crash course in survivor-centered advocacy. Carl revealed to us that his captors had taken his apartment keys, identification documents, and all of his money, heightening the urgency with which his case needed to be processed. When Carl left, Lerato expressed that he might be unable to offer too much of his time to this project, as a grant was up for renewal, and other Love Not Hate projects demanded his attention as well. Subsequently, as the days progressed, I found myself gradually assuming more responsibility for managing Carl's case.

I didn't feel prepared for this work, no matter how many late nights I spent researching Carl's options in the South African legislature. I felt that I needed far more training, and far more experience; without a concrete understanding of police jurisdiction law, or sex trafficking law, or pro bono legal work in Pretoria, I didn't know where to start.

Standing in front of the clinic sign for the office at 1081 Pretorius Street.

After the interview, I decided to simply write down everything that I knew - I prepared a report summarizing the presented information, articulating Carl's options for legal restitution, examining relevant statutes, and outlining potential legal arguments and related case law. Lerato and I then contacted the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Unit at the University of Pretoria's Center for Human Rights. I conducted further interviews with Carl, prepared more reports, sent more emails, placed more phone calls, and ultimately secured a lawyer who agreed to provide Carl with support during the investigative process.

Through the course of this work, I learned a lot about legal operations in South Africa, and about how to create spaces that offer support and safety to survivors of trauma. This was an emotional process for me; to assist someone in finding justice in a material way is both daunting and empowering. I was extremely glad for Lerato's support as I did research, made phone calls, and held meetings. The work felt precious to me; every case I researched was the story of a person's quest for justice. To be actively assisting in one such story, I felt centered, even when that meant spending three hours trying to decipher one confusing turn of phrase in an obscure subsection of South African criminal law.

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Lerato and his partner Thabo have been together for a number of years. On our way back from a government meeting in Johannesburg, Lerato told me about their relationship. The two of them met on Facebook; Lerato hadn't expected to fall in love, but it happened, and now the two of them share an apartment and plan to marry sometime in the future.

Lerato is ambitious. He is ready to change the world. He studied at the University of Pretoria, where he headed the LGBTI students' group, and at our first meeting he revealed that he wants to be a politician someday – perhaps the first gay president of South Africa. He views his personal ambitions as a means to an end. His goal isn't personal celebrity; rather, Lerato has a vision of a South Africa and of a world that is inclusive of queerness, that celebrates queerness, and that creates better lives for its queer and otherwise disenfranchised residents.

Lerato and I traveled to join one of our colleagues, Thabiso Mogapi Oa Tsotetsi of Action for Social Justice International, and support him in some of his direct advocacy work on cases of LGBTI hate crimes in two cities. Thabiso's selflessness is the fire in his belly, and it is the source of his fearlessness: he gives so much of himself to protect other queer people. He funds the organization he founded out of his own pocket.

There were two cases on which our work in Potchefstroom and Kroonstad was primarily centered. The first, in Potchefstroom, was the case of a then-17-year-old lesbian student who had been raped, stabbed, and left for dead in a field by a man who lives two houses down from her family's. She survived, but lost the use of her right arm;

we met with her family, and her father showed us the school journals in which she attempted to write notes in class but could not because of her injuries. Despite the fact that we had pictures of her attacker, as well as his name, address, and contact information, the police had not arrested him. She had to walk past the house of her attacker every day on her way to school.

The day after we met with her family, we visited the local police station to ask why they had not investigated this case. We marched into the center of the building and Thabiso began knocking on doors, demanding to see the station commander. It took half an hour of our disruption before the commander finally agreed to sit down with us.

I still have the recording of that conversation on my phone. In our conversations with the station commander Thabiso was passionate, critical, and angry, while Lerato was calm, measured, and supportive. I listened as Thabiso and Lerato painstakingly extracted information from the commander. The perpetrator's cousin was on a police force in the area, which complicated things. The investigating officer had been on leave recently, which complicated things. At one point, the commander sat back, confident he had handled all the questions with which we had armed ourselves. Thabiso leaned forward, and gracefully mentioned several news stations with which he'd been speaking. Politely, with subtlety, and almost magically, Thabiso informed the commander that should progress continue to be stalled, the community of activists that were watching the case would take a much more public interest in it. The commander promptly sat forward again. By the close of the conversation, we had received a commitment from the commander that the case would be pursued with renewed vigor. He seemed eager to shake our hands as we stood to leave.

The second case that we focused on was the case of the gang rape and murder of a lesbian woman named Nonke Smous. We met in the living room of Nonke's aunt, with a number of brilliant LGBTI activists. The group talked at length about the lack of progress in Nonke's case, and expressed fear about the simple fact that, for the most part, the perpetrators of these acts were walking free. There was still ash in the grass a short walk from the house, where Nonke's body had been burned by these men. There was a portrait of Nonke propped up in the corner of the house, and it would have been impossible to recognize her from the photographs of her burnt, tortured body that had been shared with me by community members.

We talked for a while about what had happened, and what the police had done (or not done) thus far. It was haunting to be talking about such matters so near a portrait of the murdered woman. The sadness that twisted through the room felt not quite like resignation, but also not quite like hope. Eventually, it became increasingly dark outside, and after a thorough review of our strategy for interfacing with police officers the following day, we ended the meeting.

If there's one thing a stressed-out queer knows how to do, it's party. After a quick stop at the town liquor store, Thabiso, Lerato and I messaged all the folks we'd met with that day and invited them to come drink with us at the guesthouse we were staying in. We processed our feelings in community with one another and with a lot of wine, and other LGBTI people we hadn't known stopped by, too. Queerness means seizing opportunities for justice and existence where they don't exist, but it also means seizing opportunities for community and celebration whenever possible. It means allowing ourselves to heal and to build new families and forge new connections. Queer folk the world over put their lives on the line for others while finding ways to live for themselves, too. This, I feel, is crucial to building the sustainability of our fight for liberation.

The following day, Thabiso, Lerato and I visited an antagonistic courtroom and several more police stations, where we had tough conversations with uncooperative people. Some of those with whom we spoke

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were completely unfamiliar with the "LGBTI" acronym, and when they realized the acronym was connected to homosexuality, we were promptly asked to leave. Thabiso has been doing this work for a fair amount of time, and he had offered Lerato and me tips on steeling our nerves and emotions. Nonetheless, it was so hard to hear that the three men who had been arrested for Nonke's murder had been released because a forensic lab had allegedly lost the DNA samples taken from Nonke's body. Nonke's family is still awaiting justice now.

A few days after my return to the U.S., Thabiso sent me a news story announcing the successful conviction of a South African man for strangling a 16-year-old gay boy with a shoelace after he came out at school. Thabiso had worked hard on that case, and this victory was deeply significant.

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Back on my first day, during the drive from Oliver Reginald Tambo Airport to Pretoria, Johan and Charlie had told me that Stanza Bopape Street, right near where I would be staying, had been known as Church Street up until recently. They expressed some displeasure at the "loss" of Afrikaans history that the name change represented.

Church Street had been so named because there was a church on the square to which the road runs. Stanza Bopape was an anti-apartheid activist whom the apartheid state had brutally tortured and murdered at 27 years old. In learning this history, I was reminded of arguments that white conservatives in the United States are making with regard to the Civil War monuments that litter the South.

It is difficult to articulate the extent to which the systematic privileging of whiteness impacted my experience. White people in South Africa have far greater access to LGBTI-related resources than black people.[1] My position as a white American is not one that affords me the ability to make meaningful critiques of this circumstance, and my goal in addressing the racial hierarchies I observed is not to offer a comprehensive theory of restitution or resolution; rather, it is important to contemplate the relationship between queerness and Westernization, colonialization, and whiteness. Furthermore, in offering these thoughts, I do not wish to conflate socio-racial whiteness with Afrikaans ethnic identity; the distinction between the two identities is not meaningless.

Dawie Nel has been the director of OUT LGBT Well-Being since 2002, which means that he has been its director for 15 of the organization's 21 years. He occupies a position of singular authority: Dawie reports to the board of directors of the organization, but the board of directors tends to be largely hands-off, convening irregularly. Dawie, like Johan, is white.

One evening, Dawie called me into his office and asked me to explain the DACA program. He didn't fully understand the program, but was of the opinion that DACA recipients should be deported, and he asked me to explain the thought behind its creation. I did my best, and Dawie announced that while he dislikes Trump for reasons he did not name, he didn't understand the opposition to Trump's immigration policies, or to his insistence that a wall be built on the U.S./Mexico border.

"Don't you think," he asked, arms crossed, leaning back in his chair – "don't you think that the left has become rather fascist? All of these activists… all of this 'political correctness'… people need to be free to say what they want."

A part of me is always caught off-guard when I hear that opinion from the mouths of gay white men. I remember the power of the word "f*ggot," and I remember how I feel when that word is used against me. I remember the societal and structural violences enacted against queer bodies by people who think that word's use is defensible. It is the dehumanization of gay men, accomplished with language like "f*ggot," that allowed the U.S. government to ignore the HIV/AIDS epidemic.[2] I understand "political correctness" to be a process of recognizing, valuing, and supporting each other's humanity, and thus its meaning is both complex and evolving. It is not some hard-and-fast or enforceable set of rules; rather, it is a call towards inclusive language. I was perplexed by the fact that Dawie did not share my perspective.

In responding, I tried to clearly and respectfully articulate the ways in which I disagreed with his assigning the idea of "political correctness" to fascism. I did my best to defend my perspective to the director of the organization that was employing me, but it was a strange moment. Dawie bid me good evening and we each left the office.

Afterwards, I got a meal with MacMillan, who had overheard the entire exchange. We discussed the nature of allyship that evening, and talked about the role whiteness may play in its own deconstruction: it isn't a role of leadership, but instead a vigilance in preventing the normalization of racist attitudes in white spaces, and the deconstruction of white spaces themselves. Privilege, we decided, means more than access to resources – it means the ability to challenge oppressive systems without risking that access.

I had the opportunity to speak with Pierre Brouard, the Deputy Director of the University of Pretoria's Centre for Sexualities, AIDS and Gender one day while Lerato and I had other meetings at the university. Pierre and I had an amazing conversation; we spoke at length about a variety of theoretical perspectives. I was perplexed by Pierre's expressed aversion to being thought of as "white." He espoused a desire for society not to construct itself with labels affiliated with gender or sexuality, and most importantly, to construct itself without race categories. He recognized that this was a current impossibility, as inequalities between labeled identity groups exist, but the future he works towards is one that does not organize identity along racial lines. Instinctually, this gave me pause – what motivations might a white person have for no longer wanting to be recognized as white, in the wake of whiteness's history of violent colonialism?

In reconsidering our conversation, however, I recognize that Pierre's perspective was far more complex than I allowed. In my conversation about Trump with Dawie, it felt as though Dawie was allowing his whiteness to more thoroughly inform his perspective than his queerness. Pierre was calling on white people to end our tendency to allow our whiteness to supplant and overrule every other aspect of our identities, and to instead allow ourselves the understanding that our liberation is tied up in the liberation of all peoples.

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In 2014, South Africa developed a government structure intended to help prevent LGBTI hate crimes and develop a supportive response. The National Task Team (NTT) convenes to provide guidance to and supervision of Provincial Task Teams (PTT) and their post-harm counterparts, the Rapid Response Teams (RRT). Nonprofits, medical representatives, and advocacy groups sit on the teams alongside the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DoJ&CD), the South African Police Service (SAPS), and other government bodies.

I certainly was not expecting to sit on a PTT, let alone alongside the Deputy Minister of the DoJ&CD on the NTT. When Lerato first informed me that we'd be making the trip to Johannesburg for a government meeting, I expected to sit behind Lerato, taking notes and observing the conversation.

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The drive was long, but pleasant – we'd been joined by our dear colleague Denise Zambezi, of Access Chapter Two, another LGBTI advocacy organization that works closely with OUT. Lerato laughed at the constant questions I was posing to him – I'd done my research, and was familiar with the individuals who'd be present for the meeting of the PTT, but the documents I'd found describing the mandate of the task team had been vague. I'd just completed a project reviewing the organization's founding

Working on a legal research project which quantitatively analyzed the ability of the South African Equality Court system to secure justice for LGBTI persons.

My heart leapt to my throat, in confusion and surprise. I did my best to smile and introduce myself before taking my place at the table beside Lerato. I hadn't prepared for this – as an American undergraduate intern, what on earth did I have to contribute to such a critically important discussion? What right did I have to take that seat, one which had been fought for by black African activists?

texts, as they'd come up for review, and already I felt that my offering of feedback on documents of such great importance was too significant a responsibility.

I was petrified as we parked, exited, and walked to the DoJ&CD building,where the PTT meeting was to be held. It was a vast, tall edifice, across the street from another imposing government building, and the prospect of sitting behind Lerato to take notes was intimidating enough – what right did I have to access the space?

Lerato signed both of us in with the security guard, and I felt a first twinge of realization that something was not as I expected when he wrote "OUT Representative" beside my name, rather than "OUT Intern." We entered the conference room, and I looked around with a note of panic – there wasn't any seating besides the chairs laid out around the vast square table. I recognized the faces of a number of critically important LGBTI activists and organization directors from my web searches in preparation for the day. *Oh well,* I thought to myself, *I'll just pull a chair back.*

Lerato and I approached the table, and I moved to drag a chair away. Then, Lerato announced to the room:

"Hi all, apologies for our delay in traffic. Please welcome Paul Sindberg to the task team as my co-representative from OUT."

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I took notes furiously during the meeting but remained largely silent, panicking every time Lerato asked for my input. In no way was I prepared for the responsibility of contributing to a discussion on the provincial-wide strategy for preventing hate crimes.

After the four-hour session, I was overjoyed to meet several of the icons of the South African queer liberation movement. Dr. Mveleli Gqwede, popularly known as "Dr. Love" and a controversial public figure in the gay rights movement, gave me a hug and welcomed me enthusiastically to the space; given that I had known about Dr. Love for months prior to my summer in South Africa, this was a surreal experience.

On the way back to Pretoria, Lerato explained his motivation for introducing me the way he had, and for having me take a seat beside him on the committee.

"Look," he said. "I know this was a lot. But I have nobody else at OUT who can attend, and they give me two seats."

"And Paul," he continued. "You are an American. Perhaps your presence will teach them that other people are watching."

Over the course of the summer I would also sit on the NTT, an NTT working group to allocate the 12-million-rand biannual budget, and a PTT working group to develop a yearlong program strategy. My strategy became simple: do a ton of research in advance, take notes on every aspect of the conversation, and only speak when asked to do so. Whenever a volunteer was needed to take notes or support the group in a non-contributory fashion, I would volunteer; I quickly learned that I needed to memorize the spelling of every participant's name, as well as the names of every major region and town in Gauteng province. I made flashcards, but I still made mistakes on a few occasions taking notes on a board in front of the group. Mercifully, everyone was friendly, understanding, and more than willing to laugh with me as I attempted to correct myself.

This was a deeply educational experience, as I observed the ways in which these institutions work to support LGBTI persons. This space constitutes an institutional attempt to create opportunity for LGBTI persons, and contrasts with Thabiso's extra-institutional forging of queer opportunity. It was complicated – certainly, there is power in these task team structures, but at the same time, it was jarring to hear from SAPS about its progress towards successfully investigating LGBTI hate crimes while seeing in person its failure to do so.

It was also jarring to notice the disparities of experience between the people who sat on the task teams and their constituents. The working group to allocate the NTT's budget opened with a catered brunch, met

in a conference room festooned with crystal chandeliers, and retired to a buffet dinner after the meeting – while Thabiso was living with family and had sold many of his assets to finance his mission. How can institutions hold themselves accountable to the communities they serve? Is it appropriate for such an institution to be composed of individuals from a different socioeconomic background than its constituents? These are questions I think I must continue to consider far into the future.

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"I'm just sick and tired of that specific kind of foreigner," said Dylan, his glittery eyeshadow catching the flame of his lighter as he lit a cigarette. "...you know, those who wanna come in and call us all racists. Like their relationship to Africa is the same as mine."

Seth gave me a sidelong glance. In many respects, I certainly was that specific kind of foreigner. I was sitting on a couch with Seth – my friend – and two of his friends, Kyle and Dylan. Kyle is a producer and Dylan is a musician, both of whom are very active in the queer art scene in Johannesburg. We'd just come from a concert at which Dylan had performed with another friend of his and the queer U.S. rapper Mykki Blanco.

"I think," I said, "that so many Americans don't want to recognize that we're, like, totally racists, too. Like, Americans use places like South Africa to sort of, absolve ourselves of our responsibility to deal with the colonialism and racism in our own country. Like, we do it to position ourselves as less racist than others, and so like we can act superior to them. Which is colonialist, too, right?"

Kyle laughed, and Dylan smiled. Dylan and Kyle have two huge grey savannah cats – one stalked over to me and hopped up on the couch as Seth flipped on the TV.

The concert had been spectacular. Seth and I had moshed with Mykki Blanco, and we knew the cameras had caught us – perhaps we'd make it into Mykki Blanco's documentary on queer life in South Africa. Kyle had organized the concert, and Dylan's performance had also been spectacular. He'd hand-embroidered the skirt he wore. I was quite intimidated by them both.

Before I arrived in South Africa, Seth, Dylan, and Kyle had organized an event they called "Queer in Public." A number of beautiful, brave, and brilliant queer artists and activists dressed up in their most outrageous, club-kid inspired looks, and conducted a photoshoot throughout Johannesburg. It was an event about claiming space for queer bodies, celebrating them, and designating queer art as beautiful.

Just like those godforsaken chickens that darted between my legs at every possible opportunity, queerness mandates that we, too, make our own opportunities, and that we do so bravely. We must do this in our activism, we must do this to find love, and we must do this to build community. One of the most powerful things that my queer siblings in South Africa taught me this summer was that we can seize these opportunities in celebration, too. "Queer in Public" and the Mykki Blanco concert are examples of this, as is the party we threw in Kroonstad. Queer folk can strut into the club in high heels, mascara, and too much glitter, and find restoration and healing in our bravery.

I want to work towards a future that is inclusive, equal, and supportive. I have a lot to learn about that future, and a lot to learn about how to get there, but this summer demonstrated for me the fact that this future is queer and it is already being actualized by queer people. I will move forward in my mission to bravely seize even the most remote of opportunities, confident in the knowledge that I am not alone in this effort.

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I grabbed my glass of water off the coffee table and drank while Seth clicked on a music video by FAKA, another queer band from Johannesburg. The cat jumped onto my lap, which totally surprised me, and I dropped the glass, promptly spilling water all over the floor. Everyone laughed, and my mind flashed to my third day on the job, when I was also spilling things. Yes, I'm learning, and growing, and becoming a more fully realized person, but I will always be as klutzy as a drunken gazelle. Oh well, I thought to myself. At least I'd known that the pap we'd eaten for dinner that night was best consumed by hand.

Notes

1. Lind, Amy. Development, *Sexual Rights and Global Governance*. N.p.: Routledge, 2010. Print.

2. Sontag, Susan. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. N.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. Print.