



On the Scene in Soweto: Navigating Queer Nightlife and Social Networks in Soweto,
1980 - 1999

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Abstract

This dissertation represents the continuation of my academic project to chart the largely unwritten histories of queer nightlife practices in South Africa, this time with a focus on the practices of Queer Sowetans in the period following the 1976 Soweto Uprising. As a result, this dissertation begins with an exploration of the social and musical practices that went into crafting the scene in Soweto, before exploring the translocality of queer Sowetan nightlife practices, both through the construction of province-wide social networks, and the eventual migration of many queer Sowetan's into Hillbrow, an area which has previously been written to have been a statically white queer nightlife district. This dissertation is primarily organised by the concept of queer nightlife scenes, and as such, also represents an intervention in ongoing debates about conceptualising queer practice through various concepts including subculture, scene and clubculture. In doing so, this dissertation challenges a number of trends in the existing literature, and gestures towards new and evolving historical practices in the writing of South African nightlife practices. Through a number of original oral histories, the re-reading of a wide array of archival interview transcripts and extensive archival work, this dissertation seeks to establish new histories which, while existing in the archives, have yet to be written in any cogent, nightlife-focused study.

The major findings of this dissertation show that not only did Soweto itself possess a distinct and vibrant queer nightlife scene, but that this scene was distinctly translocal, fluid and participatory in nature. It further shows that, in tandem with the development of a 'new' South African youth culture in the period following the Soweto Uprisings, queer black youths were developing new 'modern' cultures and practices within queer sexual politics. By bringing to light histories lost within the archive, this dissertation explores the nightlife scenes within which queer Sowetans lived out the identities which were being asserted for the first time.

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Acronyms:

AMAB - Assigned Male At Birth

AWB - Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement)

GAA - Group Areas Act

GALA - Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (formerly Gay and Lesbian Archives)

GASA - Gay Association of South Africa

GLOW - Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand

HUMCC - Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church

LGBT - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

NLAA - Natives Land Amendment Act

POWA - People Opposing Woman Abuse

PLUR - Peace, Love, Unity and Respect

SAA - South African Airways

SHOC - Society for Homosexuals on Campus

TAP - Township AIDS Project

TDS - Ted Dinard Society

TOGS - Transvaal Organisation of Gay Sports

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Prologue:
Queer People and the Soweto Uprising

I remember when the time came to go and march and they wanted all the boys and girls to join in. The gays said ‘We’re not accepted by you, so why should we march?’ But then they said they didn’t mind and we could go to the march in drag. You could wear what you like.¹

The Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976 has been well documented, along with its impact on broader South African society. On the day, high school students protested the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in some subjects and the poor quality of the Bantu Education system overall. The uprising is understood as one of the key moments turning the tide in the fight against apartheid, and its legacy has been memorialised in modern South Africa. Literature on queer life in Soweto has often cited the Soweto Uprising as a moment of significant transformations to the position of queer youths in the township, and an increased willingness amongst all of Soweto’s youth to rebel against their elders, and to push for the increasing liberalisation of social politics both locally and nationally. A number of the participants in this dissertation were also participants in the Soweto Uprising, distributing political flyers in the weeks leading up to the Uprising, caucusing with the Uprising’s leaders, and lending their voices to the conscientization of youth across the township.² One participant told me:

I was already going to gay [shebeens by] the time [of the Uprising, so I would find] familiar faces in meetings during student protests.³

Black queer youths in Soweto were present, and active members of one of the most significant acts of rebellion against the apartheid system. Their bodies and voices constitute as much a part of the Soweto Uprising as straight participants, and the impact of their contribution to the Uprising represents a turning point in the gendered and sexual history of Soweto. While limited accounts have stated that “1976 gave [queers] a lot of confidence,” it

¹ Hugh Mclean and Linda Ngcobo, “‘Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi’ (Those who fuck me say I’m tasty)”, in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* ed. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron. (Braamfontein: Raven Press, 1994) 180.

² Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

³ Ibid

is also true that ‘queers’ lent something to the Soweto Uprising, rather than simply being passive recipients of the transformations to Soweto’s youth culture that came from the Soweto Uprisings.⁴ The result of this was a shift in the position of LGBT Sowetans around and following the Soweto Uprising. 1976 reflected an important change in the social and political environment of Soweto, where tradition and authority were being questioned *en masse* by the youth. It is within the context of these shifts that this dissertation begins.

While not the subject of this dissertation, the assertion is still significant: popular histories of the Uprising do little to recognise the gendered and sexual dynamics at play in the student rebellion, and an awareness of the role of sexual minorities brings us closer to understanding youth culture leading up to and following 1976. For this dissertation, the yet-uncharted visible presence of queer people - some of whom were in drag - displays a fledgling queer community that was sufficiently large to have been able to demand their rights to participate. Following this, and in tandem with rapid changes to youth culture after the Soweto Uprising, a queer scene began to take root.

⁴ Mclean and Ngcobo, “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi,” 180.

Introduction

“The [1990s] township gay scene has its roots in a generalised youth rebellion that found expression first in 1976 and then in the mid-1980s. And, once a white gay organisation took root in the 1980s and a collapse of rigid racial boundaries allowed greater interaction between township and city gay people, ideas of gay community filtered into the already existent township gay networks.”⁵

This dissertation centres on the experiences of queer Sowetans between 1980 and 1999 as they moved through nightlife spaces in both Soweto and Johannesburg and, by applying scene theory, charts the development of social worlds in both areas in which queer Sowetans were able to access and participate in queer lives under apartheid. It addresses the cultural, musical and social practices which furnished these scenes, and, most centrally, provides a history of the creation of these queer worlds and their eventual evolution and migration from Soweto to Johannesburg. Moreover, this dissertation seeks to intervene in the existing literature on subcultures, clubcultures and scenes, and this conceptual intervention forms a significant portion of the first two chapters - emphasising first the failings of conventional understandings of scene theory to adequately capture the nature of nightlife in Soweto, and secondly the essential nature of social networking to their maintenance, rather than simply music. Ultimately, this dissertation will conclude that 1) a queer scene, in its infancy, existed in Soweto between 1980 and the late 1990s, 2) that it led to the development of strong social and cultural networks of queer Sowetans which enabled key mobilities between Soweto and Johannesburg and 3) that this scene would eventually take root in Hillbrow, leading to the carving out of black queer spaces in the ‘greying’ white gay entertainment districts of Johannesburg.

My previous research into 1980s Johannesburg has indicated the city in general was host to a wide variety of queer ‘formal venues’ in inner-city neighbourhoods such as Marshalltown, Yeoville and Hillbrow. Yet it is not commonly known that Soweto’s LGBT+ residents also had access to vibrant and diverse queer spaces in the 1980s and 90s. At first, I had intended for this dissertation to focus exclusively on the queer recreation within Soweto’s

⁵ Mark Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom” in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, ed. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1995) 69.

borders, in an attempt to chart the nightlife histories of an area which is often discussed in monolithic terms which have undermined the writing of queer histories of recreation. However, over the process of my research, it became clear that Soweto's queer nightlife was not, in fact, constrained to the physical boundaries of the township. Rather, queer Sowetans were highly mobile, and their nightlife practices expanded to encompass nights out in Johannesburg, Kwa-Thema, Vosloorus and many other urban and peri-urban areas in Gauteng. The result of this discovery has been an expansion of my research to encompass both Soweto and Johannesburg and tracing the movement of queer sowetan nightlife practices into Johannesburg from the late 1980s - maintaining a focus on the origins, heritage and practices of Sowetans as an organising characteristic rather than a strict geographical boundary. Doing so has allowed this research to encompass far broader social dynamics, such as the black-queering of Hillbrow in the 1990s, and the creation of Johannesburg-based, Soweto-facing social networks of predominantly black queer people in the late apartheid era.

Therefore, being 'On the Scene in Soweto' relates less to physically being in Soweto, and more to the common elements of solidarity building, fostering strong social networks and renegotiating religious, cultural, class and racial identity to carve out spaces of queer solidarity and opportunity both within Soweto's borders and in areas such as Hillbrow, Braamfontein and Kwa-Thema. In both the Shebeens of Jabavu and the Clubs of Hillbrow, it was the gradual process of networking, negotiating and black-queering that led to the creation of queer spaces. Whereas in Soweto, racial solidarity encouraged queering, in Hillbrow sexual solidarity motivated the 'greying' of spaces previously reserved for white queer recreation.

At its conclusion, this dissertation will have answered a number of key questions, including: How can one broadly conceptualise and define queer nightlife in Soweto? How was the scene discovered, navigated and communicated amongst queer Sowetans? What was the relationship between formality and informality in the scene - to what extent were formal venues, if at all, important for the scene? And finally, how did movements between Soweto and inner Johannesburg affect these factors - what changes took place to these aforementioned dynamics with increasing movements to Johannesburg? As a final consideration, this dissertation will also loosely offer a chronology of the development of black queer nightlife practices in Gauteng from the 1980s to late 1990s: From embryonic friend groups and isolated nights in queered shebeens in the mid-1980s, to province-wide

social networks established at the turn of the decade, to the explosion of black queer nightlife practices in the inner city and the increasing integration of black queer people into the budding rave scene of the mid-1990s. As a final note, this dissertation does not maintain a close focus on the impacts of the HIV pandemic as it affected queer nightlife in Soweto, primarily because the pandemic does not feature significantly in the recollections of participants on the scene. HIV will be briefly addressed however, in the conclusion, which will speak to the difference between its impact on archetypal scenes from the West, and on Soweto.

Literature Review

Soweto is among the most intensively studied urban areas in modern South Africa. As is well-known, it began as a small settlement amid farmland in Klipspruit (now Pimville) around 1905, following municipal attempts to displace African residents from central Johannesburg. It wasn't until the 1930s that it started to develop as a large township, beginning with Orlando West, followed by Jabavu and Moroka in the late 1940s. By the mid-1960s, more townships had developed around the core, and the Johannesburg City Council named the area 'Soweto,' an abbreviation for 'South Western Townships.' By the 1980s, Soweto had come under the administration of the Bantu Affairs Department. As is widely recognised, Soweto was specifically designed as a centrepiece of Apartheid spatial planning, with the explicit aim of residentially segregating black people from Johannesburg, while keeping black Africans in close enough proximity to serve the labour needs of the city. It may be argued that Soweto developed into a city of its own, albeit one with significant non-urban characteristics and without necessarily replicating every aspect of mid-20th-century capitalist urbanism.

Early historical studies of Soweto predominantly focused on its economic history, including demographics, the rental economy, urban migration patterns, and spatial planning.⁶ By the 1980s and 90s, Soweto's political history was becoming an established theme, one that still largely dominates. Political biographies and the salience of ethnicity in political discourse formed a predominant strand.⁷ Naturally, the 1976 Uprisings have been the subject of an extensive range of studies, with notable recent contributions exploring how experiences

⁶ P. L Bonner, Lauren Segal, and Sean Fraser. *Soweto: A History*. (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1998)

⁷ David Grinker, *Inside Soweto: Memoir of an Official, 1960s-80s*, edited by Boris Gorelik. (Johannesburg, South Africa: Eastern Enterprises, 2014)

of violence affected memories of the Uprisings, the process of commemorating the Uprisings, the role of students and their responses to Afrikaans as a language of instruction, and the Uprising's role in wider southern African protest ideologies.⁸ More recent studies have chronicled the ways in which the 'top-down' approach of urban apartheid's spatial planning began to fail from as early as the 1970s, with backyard shacks becoming widespread - significant for processes of subverting surveillance and facilitating queer backyard parties.⁹ Wider studies on township cultures of sport, music, literacy, and art have often shed important light on how popular culture and political resistance reinforced one another.¹⁰

This dissertation adds to existing cultural and social histories of Soweto by further emphasising recreation and its connection to the broader political context of post-Uprising Soweto. Finally, the dissertation engages frequently with levels of mobility between Soweto and other areas in Gauteng which indicates the failure of urban apartheid in restricting the movement of black residents in and out of Soweto. For all this, however, our understanding of gender and sexuality in the everyday lives of Soweto's inhabitants is still in its infancy. This project joins a small number of scholars just beginning to explore the township's queer histories, explored below.

South African Queer and Nightlife Studies

Since the mid-1990s, Southern Africanist gender historians have ushered materialist social history in new directions. They began to shed light on the hitherto concealed influence of sexuality and gender identities in shaping the history of southern Africa. Pioneering queer works delved into the extensive history of 'dissident' black African same-sex practices, tracing their origins in indigenous cultures, their prevalence among urban hostel migrants, and the subsequent efforts by colonial and apartheid authorities to stigmatise, regulate,

⁸ Ali Khangela Hlongwane, Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, and Mthobi Mutloatse. *Soweto '76: Reflections on the Liberation Struggles: Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of June 16th, 1976*. (Houghton [South Africa]: Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust, 2006); Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-Memories of June 1976*. Updated with new material. (Northlands, Johannesburg : Picador Africa: 2017); Julian Brown. *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976*. (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2016); John Stuart Kane-Berman. *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction*. (London: Ravan, 1978.)

⁹ Gavin Steingo, "Sound and Circulation: Immobility and Obduracy in South African Electronic Music," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 24, no. 1 (2015) 106-107; Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.)

¹⁰ David B Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1985); Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Archie L. Dick. *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures*. (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Gavin Steingo. *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Peter Alegi. *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*. (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004).

reform, and often criminalise such practices.¹¹ Early researchers focused on "third sex" individuals, queer males who adopted the identity of 'skesanas' (or mine-wives, derogatorily labelled 'stabane' or hermaphrodites) through cross-dressing - practices that date to at least the early 20th century.¹²

Explorations of more contemporary history uncovered the existence of vibrant queer subcultures in several South African cities, including Soweto, by the 1980s.¹³ While these communities gave rise to a multitude of venues and queer collectives with a striking level of sonic and structural diversity, existing research has often focused on how such communities navigated intricate racial dynamics in a segregated - and then desegregating - society.¹⁴ From these communities, various rights-based activist organisations emerged, with notable examples like GLOW, Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church, and Johannesburg Pride, all of which played essential roles in the battle against institutionalised repression, homo- or queer-phobia, and the challenges posed by the HIV pandemic.¹⁵ Another strand traces the concerns of the impact of key queer publications, of which Link/Skakel (later renamed EXIT) was the most prominent. Importantly, the initial focus on male same-sex worlds has evolved to encompass the experiences of lesbian networks, examining how their realities are shaped by intersecting racial identities.¹⁶

This body of work provides key background and much insight into the history of queer political activism. However, they are often contained to small geographical or demographic groups, with little work done to explore the social geographies and 'scenes' of queer life. The

¹¹ Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2004).

¹² Epprecht, *Hungochani*; Patrick Harries, "Symbols and Sexuality: Culture and Identity on the Early Witwatersrand Gold Mines," *Gender and History* 2, no. 3 (1990) 27 - 35; T. Dunbar Moodie, "Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines," *Journal of South African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988) 228 - 256.

¹³ Graeme Reid and Liz Walker, 'Sex Then and Now: Exploring South Africa's Sexual Histories'. *South African Historical Journal*, 50. (2004) 77-83.

¹⁴ Gordan Isaacs and Brian McKendricks, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa: Identity formation, culture and crisis* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992); Iain Edwards and Marc Epprecht, *Working Class Homosexuality in South African History* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2020); Andrew Tucker, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).; Glen Elder, "Of Moffies, K*ff*rs, and Perverts: Male Homosexuality and the Discourse of Moral Order in the Apartheid State", in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 56-66; Daniel Conway, "Queering Apartheid: The National Party's 1987 'Gay Rights' Election Campaign in Hillbrow", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, no.4 (2009) 849-863

¹⁵ Mark Gevisser, "Queer Soweto," in *Soweto Inside Out: Stories about Africa's Famous Township* ed. Adam Roberts and Joe Thlolo (Cape Town: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2004) 91-92; Donald Donham, "Freeing South Africa: The "Modernisation" of Male-Male Sexuality in Soweto." *Cultural Anthropology* 13, no.1 (1998) 3-21.

¹⁶ Zethu Matebeni, 'Exploring Black Lesbian Sexualities and Identities in Johannesburg.' (Unpublished PhD thesis. University of the Witwatersrand, 2011)

existing literature on Black queer practices in the city's liminal zones is rich for the earlier 20th century, but the afterlives of these phenomena have not been fully explored in later decades. Work on the 1980s and '90s tends to prioritise white middle-class gay male history, political activism and the legal struggle for acceptance.¹⁷ The majority of studies conducted on black queer life in late apartheid Johannesburg speak only generally of 'Reef townships,' with significant bias awarded to KwaThema, in Ekurhuleni (likely due to the fact that both GLOW and MaThoko's famous tavern was based there).¹⁸ In light of this, this dissertation expands on the existing literature's focus on Kwa-Thema by shifting the geographical parameters of black queer studies to include Soweto more clearly. As this dissertation progresses, a number of dynamics and concepts will be explored which could no doubt be extrapolated to be true for these other townships - however the evidence, in this dissertation lies in exchanges between Soweto and Central Johannesburg.

While a handful of journal articles, chapters, and unpublished dissertations point to isolated aspects of queer life in Soweto, overall these works do not adequately engage with Soweto's queer scene as a whole and lack the frameworks of social geography from which to build an understanding of Soweto as a queer environment.¹⁹ Recent work has been done to better explore the social worlds of lesbian women in Hillbrow in the early 1990s, as well as queer house parties in Soweto in the early 2000s.²⁰ However, no research has successfully identified the venues and contributors that made a queer scene in Soweto possible in the first place. In addition, the aforementioned literature deals with the relationship between queers, music and nightlife only sparingly. Ultimately, while the existing literature deals with threads of this dissertation, no such work has been done to bring these strands together into a multidisciplinary study rooted in queer historical experience. South African queer histories

¹⁷ Isaacs and McKendricks, *Male Homosexuality*; Tucker, *Queer Visibilities*; Conway, "Queering Apartheid"; Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron, *Defiant Desire* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1994); Carl F. Stychin, "Constituting Sexuality: The Struggle for Sexual Orientation in the South African Bill of Rights". *Journal of Law and Society* 23, no. 4. (1996) 113–132

¹⁸ Mclean and Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi"; Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom"; Tanya Chan-Sam, "Five Women: Profiles of black lesbian life on the Reef," in *Defiant Desire* ed. Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1994); After Nines! The Play. AM 2894: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹⁹ Mclean and Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi"; Xavier Livermon, "Soweto nights: making black queer space in post-apartheid South Africa" *Gender Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21, no. 4 (2014) 508-525; Jonathan Botes 'Queering Johannesburg: Hillbrow and Soweto as Contrasting Spaces of Queer Interaction, 1966–1996'. (Unpublished MA thesis. University of the Witwatersrand, 2020); Hugo Canham, "Mapping the black queer geography of Johannesburg's lesbian women through narrative," *PINS: Psychology in Society*, 55 (2017) 87.

²⁰ Jonathan Botes, "'The Great Lesbian Monster Show': GLOW's Lesbian Forum Navigating Johannesburg, South Africa, 1991–1995," *Social and Health Sciences*, 21, No. 1-2 (2023); Livermon, "Soweto nights."

generally tend to prioritise nightlife scenes, instead focusing on politics and social life, while South African nightlife studies generally tend to ignore queer experiences. Similarly, nightlife has been absent from the limited examples of sexual geographies of queer South Africa.

Conceptualising Queer Scenes:

This dissertation is primarily organised by the concept of a nightlife ‘scene,’ which describes musical communities, brought together by shared tastes, values and cultural practices. Scenes capture the amorphous, less visible nature of dance music communities, and in particular the practice of selective participation that trademarks queer communities.²¹ As will be shown later in this dissertation, queer nightlife in Soweto witnessed varying degrees of participation from straight Sowetans and took place in a far more varied range of venues than merely nightclubs and shebeens. Thus, the social and sexual geographies of the scene are similarly ‘boundless,’ and reflect social and cultural practices that are better described by scene than subculture. In order to make a case for scene as an organising concept, I will begin with a brief history of subcultural theory, and the major critiques that exist as they relate to queer experience before gesturing towards scene (as opposed to other alternative formulations) as the best conceptual framework for this research.

Subcultural theory was first developed by the Chicago School of Sociology in the early 1900s, beginning as strands of criminology and ethnography which sought to understand urban youth cultures, specifically concerning demography and culture.²² By the 1960s, Subcultural theory had turned more specifically towards criminality and youth deviance. Early authors such as Frederic Thrasher (1927), Milton Gordon (1947) and Albert Cohen (1955) ultimately concluded that subcultures were comprised of particular group identities, framed antagonistically against the ‘mainstream,’ and marked by specific behaviours. However, a number of early problems existed with subcultural theory - including a lack of spatial analysis, a determinist characterisation of ethnicity and race (and thus, identity) as constitutive of membership or participation, and an overarching framing of subculture as socialised delinquency.²³

²¹Jodie Taylor. *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*. (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2012)

²² J. Patrick Williams. *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) 14, 7.

²³ Gary Clarke, “Defending ski-jumpers: a critique of theories of youth subcultures,” in *The Sub-cultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 169-175.

Subcultural theory was later expanded through works which came out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies based at the University of Birmingham, which ultimately viewed subcultural styles as “manifest representations of an ideological struggle between the classes.”²⁴ Hyper-focused on style, this ‘new subcultural theory’ focused on the semiotics of post-World War 2 British youth culture, from punks to skinheads and mods, bringing together Gramsci’s theory of Cultural Hegemony, Marxist Structuralist conceptions of class and ideology, and Althusser’s theory of cultural and social power structures.²⁵ The result was a theory which argued that youth subcultures represented a struggle for *visible* differentiation from both a working-class childhood and the popular, bourgeois ‘mainstream.’²⁶

From this, a few initial queer critiques can be made. First of all, the emphasis placed on ‘visibility’ is problematic when applied to queer life, as some members of the queer community may still participate in queer life without being ‘visibly’ out. They may choose to perform their gender and sexual identities differently depending on which spaces they find themselves in, or who they find themselves around. The following chapter will explore this very phenomenon, highlighted by the intentional sartorial non-coherence taken on by queer Sowetans when socialising in Soweto, and the multiple competing performances of style and gender which coloured queer Soweto’s nightlife practices. Moreover, because they find commonality with other queer people from the ‘invisible’ signifier of queerness, there exists less of an imperative to appear visibly similar. Rather, as argued by Taylor,

...experiences of gender and sexual otherness imbue their cultural production with personal, social and political meaning in multiple and unique ways that defy spatial limitations and stylistic coherence.²⁷

Perhaps more fundamentally, queerness cannot be neatly defined as a ‘premeditated’ act of cultural resistance, motivated by dissatisfaction with one’s upbringing or class identity in the same way that British countercultures might be. Even in more recent South Africanist works on youth subcultures and gangs in Soweto, subcultures are often framed as responses

²⁴ Williams. *Subcultural Theory*, 14

²⁵ Ibid 25

²⁶ Ibid 28 - 29

²⁷ Taylor. *Playing it Queer*, 61

to general dissatisfaction aimed at poverty or the Bantu Education system, amongst others.²⁸ For example, participants in this dissertation do not speak of dissatisfaction with their upbringing or a desire to rebel. Rather, they speak of a need to commune with people similar to them, with ‘similarity’ attributed to a sensed queer identity and a shared array of social desires.²⁹ Ultimately, when separated from its more idiomatic usage, ‘subculture’ specifically refers to the analysis of youth cultures in a way that prioritises coherence, style and intentionality in a manner that is largely incompatible with the experiences of queer people in nightlife. If a focus on delinquency, visibility and relatively opaque boundaries of membership has failed to capture queer identities, musicological inquiry, and the more broad problem of cultural practice, what alternatives exist?

The late 1990s saw an uptake in critiques of subculture, with the emergence of David Muggleton’s ‘post-subculturalism’ which was followed by Andy Benne’s “neo-tribe theory (1997).³⁰ These alternate formations (and others) have argued that subcultural theory can no longer ‘stand up’ to a declining willingness for youths to commit to any single subcultural identity.³¹ Most significant to my research has been a turn towards clubcultures from authors such as Sarah Thornton (1995) and Steve Redhead (1997) which emerged in response to the booming ‘rave scene’ of the late 1990’s UK.³² Perhaps most importantly, clubcultures assign specific importance to ‘taste’ and ‘authenticity’ as unifying elements, in contrast to class position or behaviour, as subculturalists do, indicating a turn towards social histories.³³

²⁸ Phil Bonner, 'The Russians on the Reef, 1947-1957: Urbanisation, Gang Warfare and Ethnic Mobilisation', in *Apartheid's Genesis 1935-1962*, ed. P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993); Clive Glaser, "Swines, Hazels and the Dirty Dozen: Masculinity, Territoriality and the Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1960-1976," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, no. 4 (1998) 719 - 736. Clive Glaser, "We Must Infiltrate the Tsotsis': School Politics and Youth Gangs in Soweto, 1968-1976," *Journal of South African Studies* 24, no. 2 (1998) 301 - 323; Steve Mokwena, 'The Era of the Jackrollers: Contextualising the Rise of Youth Gangs in Soweto' (Project for the Study of Violence Seminar Paper no. 7, University of the Witwatersrand, October 1991);

²⁹ It can be argued that there still exists an aspiration for visibility, but I would argue that this is a different sort of visibility - one that strives for exposure of overlooked identities, rather than a sort of contrarian assertion of dissatisfaction with the mainstream. This is besides the point however, as my argument seeks to prove the subculture is an inadequate concept, not that there is no ‘truth’ in subcultural theory.

³⁰ David Muggleton, "The Post Subculturalist" in *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*, ed. Steve Redhead, London: Routledge (1976) 82-95

³¹ Williams. *Subcultural Theory*, 34

³² Sarah Thornton. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Steve Redhead. *Subculture to Clubcultures: An introduction to Popular Cultural Studies*. (New Jersey: Wiley, 1997).

³³ Thornton. *Club Cultures*, 3.

Clubcultural analysis, however, lacks an awareness of geography, often writing the club as monolithic, “otherworldly environments” onto which communities of tastemakers impose their practices.³⁴ More recent works on clubcultures have critiqued this, and made the case for the decentring of the ‘club’ from clubcultures, which has made significant strides in bringing clubculture closer to an understanding of African dance music practices:

...the vibrations, and frequencies of dance music, demarcate an inner and outer sphere. This form of inner sphere can come about anywhere. It does not necessarily require dedicated spaces such as dance halls, music clubs, ballrooms or discos. The club can be any... temporarily repurposed [space], like township *shebeens*... and in Africa, above all, churches...³⁵

However, the emphasis placed on shared musical taste by clubcultures is not compatible with the sort of queer nightlife which appears to take place in Soweto. The desire to be around other queer people, to socialise and find sexual partners invariably would have superseded *distaste* for certain musical styles. This is not to say that taste is irrelevant to understanding queer scenes in Soweto (and certainly, scenes are musical communities), but rather that it ought to be expanded to understand *tastes outside of music* - taste in potential partners, in crowds, fashions, dance styles and in venues.

From this, I turn toward scene theory, and its specific emphasis on broader shared tastes, fluid membership, and community-building as an alternative conceptual framework for understanding queer nightlife in Soweto.³⁶ Scenes are geo-cultural sites of musical practice, built around certain tastes, but which evolve into far more fluid spaces of congress. Scenes, in their infancy, emerge as tight-knit social communities, built around shared tastes in music, and in the cultural practices associated with them. At inception, it is not just musical taste, but also the desire for sexual identification that fosters a queer scene. While not entirely musical, these communities are not entirely sexual either - they “are not hermeneutically sealed from other forms of lesbian and gay culture, but rather feed into and out of multiple cultural sites predicated on gender and sexual difference.”³⁷ Thus, the scene creates worlds of “visual,

³⁴ Ibid 21.

³⁵ Johannes Hossfeld Etyang, “In the Labs of The Century - Part 1” in *Ten Cities: Clubbing in Nairobi, Cairo, Kyiv, Johannesburg, Naples, Berlin, Luanda, Lagos, Bristol, Lisbon. 1960 - March 2020*. Ed. Johannes Hossfeld Etyang, Joyce Nyairo and Florian Sievers. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020). 20

³⁶ Taylor. *Playing it Queer*.

³⁷ Ibid 176.

kinetic and verbal modes of signification,” in the form of dance styles, the rituals of cruising and, perhaps most importantly, mere presence.³⁸ As the scene grows, people are attracted to it for a variety of competing reasons - some seek sexual partners, some seek community, some hear that the music is better, and so on.

Importantly, Michael Warner cautions against naive assumptions of agency or intentionality - scenes are “disclosed in practice,” and are not “intended or designed world[s],” nor are they ‘individual worlds.’³⁹ Therefore, while musicians, DJs and dancers might foster the scene (or in a shebeen, the bar staff, the regulars and the neighbours), at some point other desires and practices are imposed upon the scene. In other words, the scene develops a character of its own that is not exclusively musical or sexual. The many straight women who attended the Miss GLOW Drag Pageants in Soweto and Marshalltown were probably not looking to ‘vogue’ to house music or find a sexual partner, but they did seek to participate in (or even gawk at) cultural practices which were foreign and exciting to them.⁴⁰ Their annual attendance at drag balls made them participants in (and to some extent, members of) the queer scene in Soweto, regardless of whether their musical tastes, sexual preferences or cultural practices aligned with those who ‘built the scene’ at its inception.

While such a phenomenon might be incompatible with formulations of subculture, or even clubculture, queer scene theory is significant in its expansion of participation as it is discussed in subcultural theory, choosing instead to emphasise participation without scrutinising *motive*. A number of the participants in this research were not residents of Soweto or only participated in the scene occasionally - while subcultural and clubcultural analysis might seek to disqualify them from membership or contribution to the scenes discussed in this dissertation, scene theory does not:

Queer subcultures cannot be placed in relation to a parent culture, and they tend to form in relation to place as much as in relation to a genre of cultural expression, and ultimately, they oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay culture.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid 42.

³⁹ Michael Warner, quoted in Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 63.

⁴⁰ Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom,” 65

⁴¹ Jack Halberstam, 2005, cited in Taylor, *Playing it Queer*, 56

An expanded understanding of *participation*, which sees not only DJing and dancing but also mere attendance as constitutive of both partaking in and helping to build a scene is important, as it opens scenes up to much larger groups of individuals, who all help to invest in and spread the (sub)cultural capital that sustains a scene. This also implies that being ‘on the queer scene’ does not automatically define someone as queer, nor does it necessitate identifying as queer. Certainly, male sex workers - who have been well-documented to have fluid and changing perspectives on their sexualities - are staples of most queer scenes, in spite of their largely financial motives.⁴²

Finally, scenes are keenly *geo-cultural* in their boundaries.⁴³ The spaces and vicinities that host scenes often become placeholders for more concrete definitions of the scene; For example, ‘the Soweto Scene’ versus the ‘Marshalltown Scene’ (or even Dube versus Meadowlands). When comparing scenes, local vernaculars often adapt to imply cultural styles, lifestyles, behaviours and so on, without any real attempt at consensus-making, and certainly without intention. A study of scenes thus constitutes a historical study of this very process, following threads of social networking, taste (musical, cultural, sexual) and practice as they wax and wane in centrality to the cultural capital that scenes hold, and the allure they have over larger groups of people.

Studying scenes means studying social, musical and cultural practice, while also studying the very specific local and geographical contexts motivating the development of the scene in the first place. Perhaps most importantly, scenes are distinct from subcultures in that participation, desire, music and the spaces that host them replace the previous emphasis placed upon style and resistance.⁴⁴ Further, while scenes are ostensibly musical communities, I argue that, especially in Soweto, musical taste was not a prohibitive condition for participation - in many ways then, scenes constitute the social worlds built around primarily musical spaces, but which do not foreground any single aspect of these spaces, be it musical taste, social desires, sexuality or cultural practices.

This broad conceptual framework of a scene will be revisited several times throughout this dissertation, and its aptness will vary: In Soweto, my research has found no significant or

⁴² Jeffrey Weeks, “Inverts, Perverts and Mary-Annes” in *The Sub-cultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 268-281.

⁴³ Taylor. *Playing it Queer*, 180

⁴⁴ Ibid 58.

distinctly queer musical history which can be written into Soweto's queer nightlife - rather, it will highlight the merits of writing queer experiences into the existing, heterosexual musical histories of the township. However, expanding the notion of scene to encompass a wide array of tastes and desires allows for Soweto's scene to be understood in its entirety - as a collection of social, cultural and musical practices, geographically rooted in Soweto and yet highly mobile, playing host to a wide array of queer people who came together for a variety of reasons. The significance of the scene is thus in this very 'coming-together,' and the resulting evolution of queer social worlds in Soweto and beyond.

Methods and Sources

Primary research for this dissertation consists of a mixture of oral testimony (that is, direct memories by participants of the events and times) and oral history (second-hand understandings of past events by those not present). I conducted 5 life history interviews, as well as 4 limited digital correspondences with participants, organisers and DJs from Soweto and Johannesburg's queer and rave nightlife scenes between the 1980s and late 1990s. The extent of these people's involvement in the scenes discussed in this dissertation varied, however at minimum, participants were well-connected and deeply involved in at least one of either the Soweto scene, GLOW social networks, or the Rave scene of the early 1990s. Participants included:

- Lerato "Lakuti" Khathi - a lesbian woman from Rockville, who began studying at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1990. Lerato moved to London in 1997, and has gone on to become one of the most famous and world-renowned DJs in the international queer underground scene.
- Bongane "Cecil" Nyathi - a gay man from Rockville who was active on the scene between 1983 and 1993. Bongane served as the president of GLOW in 1992. Bongane was exceptionally active on both the Soweto and Johannesburg scene in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.
- Tanya Chan-Sam - a lesbian woman, originally from Cape Town, who moved to Johannesburg in the late 1980s, and served as vice-president of GLOW alongside Bongane. While not particularly active in Johannesburg's nightlife, her testimony, alongside Khadija's, provides key insights into lesbian social lives at the time.

- Khadija - a lesbian woman who was an active member of the GLOW womens' and black lesbian forum.
- Alpha Rasekgala - a gay man from Naledi who took over from Bongane as one of the key organisers of GLOW's activities in Soweto in the early 1990s. Alpha occasionally joined Bongane and his friends on nights out in both Soweto and Johannesburg.
- Fabio di Cosmo - a straight man who was a frequent participant in the queer and rave scenes in Johannesburg from the mid-1990s. Fabio is the co-owner of And Club, the most popular 'underground' club in Johannesburg, and a resident DJ at its Friday-night party, Toy Toy, which has a relatively small but extremely loyal queer patronage.⁴⁵ Since February 2024, the author has hosted 3 queer club nights at And Club, with the support of Fabio.
- Gary "VR" Van Riet - a gay man who was an exceptionally popular and active DJ in Johannesburg's queer scene in the 1980s, and who played a key role in some of the earliest raves held in Johannesburg in the 1990s.
- Stuart Hillary - a gay man and DJ who was the co-founder of Krypton, a gay 'mega-club' located in Rosebank in the 1990s. After the closing of Krypton, Stuart would go on to found Therapy, a popular gay club night in Braamfontein. Although Therapy is now defunct, it maintains a loyal digital fan base, and occasionally throws pop-up events, which loyal patrons from decades past attend.
- Graeme "G-Force" Hector - a straight man and DJ who was instrumental in the founding of a number of the earliest raves in Johannesburg in the early 1990s. Graeme is also the co-founder of Toy Toy and one of its resident DJs.

While I had hoped to interview more people who were active in the Soweto scene of the 1980s, I faced significant barriers in gaining access to interviewees. I employed several strategies to attempt to reach a broader network of participants, including speaking to record labels, DJs, club organisers, archivists, journalists and photographers and ultimately invited over 30 people to participate. Despite having established a long list of names and contacts, many potential participants were unable to confirm availability or willingness over the 4 months of research.

As a result, during my research, I turned towards extensive archival work, which included the re-reading of several archival collections of interviews conducted by researchers

⁴⁵ Author's opinion, based on their own frequent attendance and knowledge of the contemporary queer scene as a DJ and queer nightlife organiser.

on behalf of Johannesburg's Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA), as well as broader archival collections from the era. These collections include:

- After-Nines the Play (AM 2894)
- Joburg TRACKS (AM 3160)
- African Women's Life History Project (AM 31714)
- Nkateko (AM 2661)
- Graeme Reid Collection (GAL 0037)
- Queer Publications in Johannesburg (1976 - 2000) (AM 2907 and AM 2723)
- The Township AIDS Project (AM 2623)

Although previous researchers have made use of some of these archived transcripts and collections, few (if any) have been analysed specifically from the perspective of research on nightlife in Soweto and Johannesburg, and as such, will provide novel insights. Importantly, insights from these transcripts speak to the social and cultural influences which affected queer social scenes in Soweto, and the 'character' of the scenes. It is important to note that these interview transcripts occupy an interesting position within a discussion of research methodology, sitting somewhere between primary and secondary sources. While these transcripts record life histories and personal testimonies through the lens of Oral History, I did not conduct the interviews, and as such, could not direct them towards the specific angle of inquiry I wished. They are, as such, archives that I have read from new perspectives and 'against the grain' but are unfortunately somewhat limited by the specific objectives of each respective interviewer.

Contemporary discussions on the use of oral testimonies and histories raise several methodological concerns, particularly in the context of research on culturally sensitive topics like sexuality.⁴⁶ First, my position as a middle-class white queer male presents both opportunities and challenges. I only speak English and have limited experience in Soweto, factors that could have affected my ability to understand and connect with participants. To address this, I drew from Gillian Hart's suggestion to embrace transparency and repositioning when dealing with the researcher's positionality in oral histories.⁴⁷ This approach encourages

⁴⁶ Anna Green "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 9; Sean Field "Turning up the Volume: Dialogues about Memory Create Oral Histories" *South African Historical Journal*, 60, 2. (2008): 175-194; Paul la Hausse, "Oral History and South African Historians," *Radical History Review* 46, no. 7 (1990): 346-356; Alessandro Portelli, "On the peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal*, no.12 (1981): 96-107.

⁴⁷ Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalisation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 2 - 8

open dialogue and being receptive to challenges and questions, enhancing the research process's complexity and interrelated nature. It's worth noting that my queerness, while not a panacea for all challenges, does provide a foundation for understanding certain nuances of queer life in Soweto. Throughout the interviews, I found more similarities than differences between myself and the participants and easily established common understandings and rapport with all participants. Perhaps most importantly, through transparency about my genuine care for nightlife histories, and my own position as a nightlife professional, it was easy to establish trust and understanding throughout interviews.

Oral history methods that rely on fallible human memory often face criticism over questions of accuracy. However, as argued by Michael Frisch, oral history values the creative aspects of memory and interpretation - whether it diverges from facts or meticulously records them, both nevertheless uncover the cultural significance of events.⁴⁸ In other words, in fields such as social and cultural history, the cultural significance of memory is more material than its empirical accuracy. The 'perceived' or 'remembered' cultural processes that are described by participants are themselves facts and speak to the participatory nature of nightlife and social scenes. If an address is not remembered exactly, it's possible that it wasn't relevant - for example if a venue was largely reached by foot rather than driving, or if it stood out so much from its vicinity that the address was never needed.

With this said, in order to maintain a healthy degree of criticality towards the testimonies of participants, much time has been spent throughout this dissertation to fact-check and confirm the claims of participants. This involved digital and archival research, confirming details with other participants, and frequent reference to secondary literature. Further, I made sure to generally remain critical of the reliability of participants throughout interviews. Outlandish and dubious testimonies have not been recorded in this dissertation unless explicitly confirmed by other sources.

Barring a few notable criminal trials and parliamentary inquisitions, Black queer identity under apartheid was very rarely documented. Even queer publications rarely spoke of black queer experiences and social life - at best, occasionally covering legal cases or the activities of the better-known associations. As a result, my archival work largely relied on

⁴⁸ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990): 22.

piecing together fragments of field notes, organisational documents, personal correspondences and meeting minutes, gathered from diffuse archival collections.

Methodologically... it is necessary to make use of what Jack Halberstam calls “a scavenger methodology” that attempts to “combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and ... refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.” This, Halberstam suggests, is necessary because queer subjects have often been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies.⁴⁹

This means the dissertation proceeds with sensitivity to archival ephemera and fragmentary materials that can augment oral testimony. With this said, my methodological approach to this research has involved extensive archival and primary research which, at its nexus, reveals a relatively coherent image of black queer nightlife scenes in both Soweto and Johannesburg during the period of study.

Chapter Outline:

This dissertation will proceed from this overview of the literature and conceptual framework as follows. In the first chapter, I explore the history of the social practices of queer people in Soweto as they moved between a variety of homes and shebeens which had become known as queer spaces on the scene in the 1980s. The chapter will explore the geographies of the scene, how people encountered the queer scene, and write the social and musical practices of queer people into Soweto’s broader musical history. Following this, the second chapter will explore, in a loose chronology, the expansion of queer Soweto’s social worlds through processes of intensive social networking, along with initial forays into Johannesburg’s inner city. In doing so, the chapter will foreground the social processes which led to increased interaction between queer Soweto and queer Johannesburg and how uniquely queer social networks enabled increasing political conscientisation and the ‘modernisation’ of queer identity politics on the Soweto scene. The final chapter will then look towards the development of black queer spaces in the predominantly white Johannesburg scene, in tandem with the explosion of dance music culture through the budding rave scene of the early 1990s. This chapter, significantly, will break from trends in existing accounts of the inner city’s queer

⁴⁹ Jonathan Cane, “Cruising Queer, Old Joburg,” *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 42, no.1 (2019): 15.

history by making the case for a far more nuanced, and participatory form of involvement in the ‘white gay city,’ which highlights the multiple different strategies employed to carve out new, black, queer spaces in the city.

Chapter 1:

Navigating and Constructing Soweto’s Queer Scene from the 1980s

This chapter will begin with a brief overview of the queer cultural practices which took place in Soweto before the 1980s, before establishing, for the first time, a history of a number of the shebeens of Soweto’s burgeoning queer scene in the post 1976 era. In doing so, it will explore the musical practices of queer Sowetans at the time, writing these practices into existing accounts of Soweto’s musicology. Further, this chapter will explore brief isolated overviews of the process of discovering the scene, the relationship between the scene and shebeen queens, and the behavioural and sartorial practices that took place, in order to provide a cultural overview of what being on the scene meant for participants. Finally, this chapter will evaluate the applicability of scene theory to this newly established history of nightlife practices in Soweto’s queer history, concluding by arguing that Soweto’s queer nightlife venues of the 1980s and ‘90s can be considered to comprise a scene, but one that does not replicate the archetypal modalities of gayborhoods and central queer commercial spaces such as those found in Western cities such as New York or London.

To date, little work has been done to chart a ‘scene’ out of Soweto’s queer shebeens, which are largely discussed as isolated examples of queer cultural life in the township, as opposed to multiple venues which collectively contributed to the creation of a scene.⁵⁰ As such, this chapter is written in the spirit of creating a more comprehensive archive on queer social life in Soweto in the 1980s. Data for this chapter has been collected from the following sources: archival interview transcripts from a variety of archival collections within the GALA archives, life history interviews conducted between April and June 2024, newspaper and magazine articles retrieved from gay publications from the 1980s such as

⁵⁰ Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom”; Jonathan Botes, “The Pink Inner-City” 113 - 129 ; Isaacs and McKendricks, *Male Homosexuality in South Africa*”; Edwards and Epprecht, *Working Class Homosexuality in South African History*; Tucker, *Queer Visibilities*; Elder, “Of Moffies, K*ff*rs, and Perverts, 56-66; Conway, “Queering Apartheid.”

EXIT and Link/Skakel, as well as ephemeral mentions of queer nightlife in Soweto from organisational notes from groups such as GLOW and the Township AIDS Project.

In writing the history of Soweto's queer scene, I look towards the ontological challenges that come from trying to write Urban Histories of Soweto to suggest that the aforementioned insufficiencies in existing theory when describing queer social life and 'scenes' in Soweto are a result of its complicated history as a 'peri-urban urban' site and is, as such, a product of apartheid spatial planning. The musicological and spatial history of Soweto established in this chapter, combined with the insufficiencies in existing histories of its queer social life will make it clear that the methods and theories of urban history and queer urban social geographies may be somewhat inconsistent with the spatial and social realities of Soweto.

Certainly, Soweto was specifically engineered to keep black people out of Johannesburg and to replicate specifically non-urban modalities. However, by all accounts, it has developed into a city of its own, without necessarily replicating the traditional form and characteristics of what Western theories of metropolitanism might expect. I suggest a potential remedy to this tension by looking towards the work of Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton, co-editors of *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*. The book specifically seeks to advance discussions in cultural geographies by deprioritising metropolitan queer experiences:

Investigations of real and imagined geographies of sexualities... have traditionally been structured around centres and margins. Much less has been said about other liminal or in-between spaces... [which] may be of great significance, with respect to representations and politics of sexualities, for it is in such spaces that hegemonic sexualities may be least stable.⁵¹

Most significantly, Alan Sinfield suggests an expanded understanding of metropolitanism to highlight the transformative possibilities opened up by non-metropolitan sexualities. If, as he argues, a metropole refers to a "city in relation" to its periphery, such that it enacts influence culturally, economically and socially, then the metropole is engaged in

⁵¹ Richard Phillips and Diane Watt. "Introduction" in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000): 1.

both a semantic and material exchange with the non-metropolitan - a process he suggests is open to the study of “junctures between” both spaces.⁵² I suggest that Soweto exists specifically as one of these junctures - spatially distinct from Johannesburg, yet certainly not rural or suburban. Sinfield suggests something similar when he argues that:

Conversely, subordinated groups living at or near the [metropole], and especially non-white minorities, may be in some aspects non-metropolitan.⁵³

The conclusion here is that, by conceptualising Soweto as a juncture between metropolitanism and non-metropolitanism, it becomes possible to understand Soweto as a place where “hierarchies of class, race, gender and age” are accommodated, rather than in metropolises, where he argues that models of queerness assert queerness as “a question of identity and promote interaction only amongst equals.”⁵⁴ This metropolitan model is best understood as it exists in contemporary queer politics:

It breaks from assigning one partner to the inferior role of “boy” or “wife”, and - without regard to their sexual behaviour - insists that both are men who should have equivalent privileges, not the least of which is autonomy.⁵⁵

Certainly, the *skesana* subculture of the 1960s to late 1970s did not replicate this metropolitan model. However, from 1976, with an expanding queer scene within which social and sexual politics could be navigated through venues such as shebeens, queer identity began to become established in more ‘metropolitan’ forms.⁵⁶ Throughout this dissertation, movements between the Soweto and Johannesburg scene form a key dynamic in the evolution and ‘modernisation’ of both scenes - as the social worlds established in Soweto branched out and began to participate in simultaneous processes of black-queering Hillbrow and expanding queer Sowetan social networks throughout the rest of the province.

⁵² Alan Sinfield, “The production of gay and the return of power,” in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000): 21.

⁵³ Sinfield, “The production of gay and the return of power,” 21.

⁵⁴ Phillips and Watt, “Introduction,” 10.

⁵⁵ Sinfield, “The production of gay and the return of power,” 27.

⁵⁶ Donham, “Freeing South Africa,” 3-21.

Ultimately, by understanding queer identity in post-1976 Soweto as existing within a juncture between metropolitanism and non-metropolitanism, it becomes possible to view the queer scene as one in flux, caught in a historical moment of ‘modernisation,’ transition and fluidity. This then implies that the archetypal queer scenes of New York, London and even Cape Town, in their predominantly capitalist, socially progressive and ‘club’-centred formulation are not analogous to the sort of scene that developed in Soweto in the 1980s.⁵⁷

And that, perhaps, is the point about gay and lesbian life in Soweto, as in all urban South African townships: it is integrated into city life rather than corralled off into a western-style gay ghetto...⁵⁸

As pointed out by Jon Binnie, the literature surrounding these archetypal scenes often assumes a uniform class of wealthy, white men with discretionary income and social mobility.⁵⁹ While it is possible to write histories that better accommodate the intersectional diversity of the queer scene, the problem in much of the conceptual work that attempts to understand how queer sexualities affect the development of urban and social spaces remains: the archetypal scenes of the West require money, spending power and control over the urban geographies of a city. Materialist interpretations of the development of queer social scenes, in tandem with both the colloquial and academic assertion that archetypal scenes are centred in dense, metropolitan areas lead to an assertion of capitalist materialism as the mechanism through which scenes are constructed. As argued by Sinfield, this also leads to an erasure of far more complicated, less centralised and more discursively discordant social and physical worlds. This conceptual intervention concludes as a word of caution: the Soweto scene did not replicate the metropolitan model of queerness but was not entirely rural or ‘regressive.’ It exists at a juncture in history where Soweto was beginning to lead nationwide political transformations, and where Sowetans were slowly beginning to exercise a claim to increasing agency in both Soweto and most of Johannesburg. The result for this dissertation is thus a Soweto scene which does not entirely align with the formulations of scene or subcultural theory, but, as explored in further chapters, evolved in response to movements towards the more metropolitan environment of Johannesburg

⁵⁷ Jon Binnie “Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality and the Production of Queer Space” in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995.) 182–199.

⁵⁸ Gevisser, “Queer Soweto,” 96-97.

⁵⁹ Binnie “Trading Places,” 165.

It should be noted that the historical accounts of the Soweto scene of the 1980s and 1990s in this chapter come almost exclusively from gay men, as queer women appear to have been less able to come out and engage with the scene in Soweto. As Lerato tells me, her “gay life began in Braamfontein.”⁶⁰ The reasons for this are many: while welcome at shebeens, single women were often assumed to be in attendance for occasional sex work, and the risks of violence were higher for women.⁶¹ Further, while gay men were at risk of sexual or physical violence, violence against queer women has historically been more likely in Soweto, in particular corrective rape.⁶² The primary research conducted for this dissertation skews towards male respondents when discussing nightlife during this period - of the 8 original interviews I conducted, only 2 respondents were ‘on the scene’ in Soweto, both of whom were gay men. The archives face a similar problem. However, this is not to say that queer women did not live or socialise in Soweto, but that the nightlife scene was less commonly the site of this socialisation. For example, in his article on gay shebeens in Soweto, Jeremy Zipps notes that lesbian women were largely absent from Lee’s Place, even though “at the UDF people’s concert in February [1984], lesbian couples were very much in evidence.”⁶³ Zipps states “why they are open in public but not present at shebeens is something of a mystery to me.”⁶⁴

Queer Soweto before the 1980s

Importantly, the queer Sowetans who were building a scene for themselves in the early 1980s were not forging ahead into uncharted territory - Soweto had been ‘queered’ many years prior and was the site of several evolving queer sexual practices. One interviewee speaks of a small network of gay men from the late 1960s who would share the use of a rented room in a worker's hostel in Meadowlands called *Mzimhlophe* to have sex and socialise after nights out.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024

⁶¹ Refiloe Serote, “TAP Funding Proposal,” AM2623 D1.2, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa

⁶² After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

⁶³ Jeremy Zipps, “From Orlando East on to Chiawelo,” Link/Skakel, May 1984, 9. Accessed via Exit / Link-Skakel, AM2723 GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

⁶⁴ Zipps, “From Orlando East on to Chiawelo,” AM2723.

⁶⁵ “Francis,” Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa; This hostel still exists and is in Meadowlands East Zone 5, Meadowlands East, 1804

Whatever [male lovers] we got for the day or night we would take to the place that we had in Meadowlands... A guy we knew owned a room in the hostel. We used to call the room our flat. This guy, the owner of the flat, had another place to stay in town. So we would just go there occasionally, when you were right,⁶⁶ and by then I had a car... Not all of [the neighbours] [knew what we were doing]. They would just see well-dressed gentlemen... [We knew] some [gay men] who were staying at the hostel. They would also come and do their thing in the flat... People in the hostel - they just drink for themselves. They're not curious about other people's lives. At the hostel you just live your life... It was cool.⁶⁷

Further, The existing literature on Soweto's queer history focuses primarily on isolated accounts of small subcultures of queer life from as early as the 1960s, principally the involvement of queer males as 'mine-wives' or '*skesanas*.'⁶⁸ This literature has been explored in the introductory chapter. These dynamics involved cross-dressing and sexual role-playing, and were intertwined with the social and cultural attitudes of both queer and straight Sowetans towards queer sexualities, in which queers were often viewed as a 'third-sex': even the common slur '*stabane*' implies hermaphroditism.

In sum, black townships during the apartheid era found it easier to understand gender-deviant boys as girls or as a biologically mixed third sex. By the early 1970s, a network of boys who dressed as girls existed in Soweto, many of whom came to refer to themselves in their own slang as *skesana*.⁶⁹

The existing literature on gay life in Soweto primarily discusses the hostels as spaces where *skesana*'s would cruise, and sometimes partake in sex work.⁷⁰ Here, Francis' testimony shines a light on dynamics in which gay men would take advantage of the agency that stemmed from the cheap rents and traditionally heteropatriarchal environment of the

⁶⁶ "Right" here is used to refer to having successfully found a sexual partner.

⁶⁷ "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008.

⁶⁸ Mclean and Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi," 158 - 186

⁶⁹ Donham, "Freeing South Africa," 9.

⁷⁰ Mclean and Ngcobo, "'Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi,' 158 - 186.

hostels to gain increased access to queer sexual freedoms for those not belonging to the *skesana* subculture. In later years, Francis and his friends would start using a standalone house in Diepkloof, rather than the hostel.

While these practices and the *skesana* subculture have largely been constrained to research about queer life in Soweto up to the 1970s, archival evidence does suggest that ‘whoring on the mines’ remained common, albeit less central to queer culture in Soweto up until the 1990s.⁷¹ The existing literature, however, only speaks of Soweto (and, more frequently ‘the Reef’⁷²) in general terms, without any sense of geography or musicality. Townships such as Soweto have been largely treated as monolithic, with only passing comments distinguishing between the popular *shebeens* of Dube and the ‘married gays’ of Pimville.⁷³ As discussed in this dissertation’s prologue, it appears that there was a strong presence of queer youths at the Soweto Uprisings of 1976, again indicating that, while embryonic, groups of queer people had already established social networks and a presence in Soweto prior to the 1980s.

Shebeens and the Scene 1980-1995:

Writing histories of Soweto’s queer scene ought to begin with Simon Nkoli’s account of the first gay shebeen in Soweto. In 1983, in response to the racial apathy of GASA (the Gay Association of South Africa), the largest gay social/political organisation at the time, Simon and several black gay men met at Lee’s Place in Orlando. While the pink GASA membership card was supposed to guarantee cheaper entrance to gay nightlife venues in Marshalltown such as the Dungeon and Mandy’s, black GASA members were consistently denied entrance. The complaints of members such as Simon Nkoli were frequently overlooked. He thus decided to start a black interest group within GASA, to increase black recruitment and encourage more progressive racial politics in the organisation. This attempt largely failed at encouraging a more progressive GASA - when Simon was arrested and put on trial at the Delmas Treason Trial, GASA did not speak in support of him as their member, and would later close down, to be succeeded by GLOW in following years.

⁷¹ After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

⁷² A term used to describe most townships surrounding Johannesburg, interchangeable with ‘the Rand.’

⁷³ Mclean and Ngcobo, “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi,” 174.

We decided to meet every second Saturday of each month, and it was an instant success. Once we had a fundraising party in Soweto and more than 200 people showed up. We would also go to shebeens together, and, at Lee's Place in Orlando East, we started the first gay shebeen, where we met every Sunday, joined by one or two of the more progressive white GASA members... [These new attendees were] ordinary people, mainly in their early 20s, and most joined GASA immediately.⁷⁴

Simon's account of the formation of what he believed to be the first queer shebeen in Soweto is significant, as it provides insights into the grassroots process of building a scene within Soweto: In August 1983 "he obtained an interview with City Press, the black Sunday newspaper... giving his personal address and calling upon black gay men to contact him; within a week, he says, he was 'deluged' with responses, and arranged a special meeting: 82 people attended."⁷⁵ Through word of mouth, networking, and the democratic process of queering venues through persistent attendance, Soweto's queer residents developed a network of queer and queer-friendly shebeens which provided key spaces for socialisation, cruising and political conscientisation:

The extent of the gay subculture in Soweto is surprising as is its similarity to the Johannesburg sub-culture. There are some half-dozen gay shebeens throughout Soweto - by "gay" I mean that at most only a quarter of the patrons at any one time are non-gay.⁷⁶

The queer scene of the 1980s appears to have been composed primarily of a number of queer shebeens and home-based social activities scattered throughout several neighbourhoods of Soweto. In 1987, with the founding of the Township AIDS Project, the Ipelegeng Community Centre became another significant venue on the scene, but largely only for organisational or political purposes.⁷⁷ Because of the illicit nature of shebeens, and the relatively uniform layout of Sowetan houses constructed during apartheid, the shebeens discussed rarely vary in terms of decor, lighting, layout or space. Whereas a study of the layout of nightlife venues in Johannesburg offers rich insights into cultural and musical

⁷⁴ Mark Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 52.

⁷⁵ Ibid 52.

⁷⁶ Zipp, "From Orlando East on to Chiawelo," AM2723.

⁷⁷ Serote, "TAP Funding Proposal," AM2623 D1.2, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa

practice, the same cannot be said for shebeens in Soweto. Over the course of interviews, I attempted on multiple occasions to establish distinctions between the character and environment of different shebeens, but the resounding consensus was, to quote Bongane: “...they were all the same.”⁷⁸ While initially frustrating, this highlighted that queer shebeens were largely blank slates, made queer through the patrons and the social practices they established and networks which they moved through in the 1980s. Similarly, their musical practices are reported to have been unexceptional and indistinct - this is to say, music did not help to distinguish between venues:

“[In Soweto I was] following the crowd, while in Hillbrow the music is what you’d follow”⁷⁹

The ‘crowd’ Bongane speaks of - these social networks - will be the focus of the following chapter, while this chapter will provide the fragmented, ephemeral histories of the shebeens in which they first emerged, before looking towards the cultural practices that furnished these shebeens with their queer character. For now, a brief summary of the role of social networks to the fostering of nightlife scenes will suffice: as argued in the introductory chapter, scenes are communities built around shared tastes, often within spaces of musical practice such as shebeens, nightclubs and live music venues. In defining ‘membership,’ scenes rely heavily on participation and integration into social networks - being ‘seen,’ ‘known,’ and ‘present’ is enough to consider someone ‘on the scene,’ regardless of intention or practice. Furthermore, while scenes are primarily understood as musical communities, queer scene theory expands this definition to incorporate sexual identity and cultural practice in loose terms. Finally, scenes are unplanned, impromptu social worlds which are then built around the venues that host these diverse groups of participants. The ‘crowd’ is the defining aspect of the ‘scene,’ which is at once both a social group and a ‘physically real’ cluster of venues and social spaces.

This section will largely present a sort of historical collage of the primary research conducted for this dissertation, with an emphasis on the recollections of participants who visited these shebeens and their memories of what the social scene was like at each venue. In doing so, it will reveal the diversity of venues and the desires that they accommodated for -

⁷⁸ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

⁷⁹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

from Lee's Place, primarily popular amongst Soweto's politically-minded queer youth, to Wandi's which offered respite for closeted older men who had found themselves coerced into heterosexual lifestyles by cultural and social expectations. Mhlanga Rocks and Heartbreakers are the two venues which come closest to traditional 'club' environments, though still with distinctly Sowetan social and cultural modalities.

Of the scene at the time, Alpha tells me that the period between the 1980s and 90s was exceptionally isolated and that it was difficult to identify queer neighbours or acquaintances.⁸⁰ He remembers multiple occasions where he would go to a GLOW meeting or a shebeen, and recognise someone from his neighbourhood, having had no prior notion that they might be queer. In this way, he identifies social networks such as friend groups and GLOW as essential to helping queer people in Soweto identify each other, and to begin to build friendships.⁸¹

Alpha was introduced to queer life through Hendrik, a friend he made at boarding school in Limpopo in Grade 11, who he soon found out was from Meadowlands.⁸² This friend told him that "all the gay guys are in Meadowlands," and, during their next school holidays, they met up with the Ted Dinard Society, which is the subject of the following chapter.⁸³ This group of well-networked queer Sowetans became particularly influential and mobile in the late 1980s, but at this time were largely contained to Meadowlands and the Soweto scene. Upon their first meeting, Alpha was shocked at the diversity of queer people he was interacting with, and surprised that he could find such a group of people in Soweto.

Then I get introduced to these people, [and I realised] there [was] a group of gay guys. Being in Naledi, [my life was just] me, boarding school, back home, me, boarding school... I never knew that we are [sic] this many.⁸⁴

Having successfully 'entered' the scene, Alpha was exposed to "new faces every time," and felt as though he had finally encountered "gay Soweto."⁸⁵ For him, this was the only 'crew' that understood him properly, and he remembers feeling more cared for than ever

⁸⁰ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

before. The scene he became a part of was fiercely loyal and giving, and would meet up every weekend, often spending the whole weekend together. It is through this social circle that he was able to access the shebeens discussed in this chapter: “that's how I started knowing, okay, we can move from here to the next shebeen...”⁸⁶ Importantly, Alpha tells me that without chance encounters like these, queer Sowetans were highly unlikely to ever discover the queer scene of their own volition.⁸⁷ Without being given ‘real’ direction, or being escorted by a queer person, queer Sowetans were largely isolated and closeted.

The process of creating queer spaces out of certain *shebeens* seems to be consistent with global historical trends, where a democratic process of ‘queering’ space through the mere presence of queer people, combined with the interests of business-savvy owners, led to a sort of mutualistic relationship where queer patrons came to be tolerated:

specifically chosen Shebeens [were transformed] into township gay hangouts. As with the [white] bar owners in the 1950s [in Johannesburg and Cape Town], the Shebeen Queens saw in this new clientele a regular and dependable source of income, and encouraged their patronage.⁸⁸

Lee’s Place, in Orlando, was perhaps one of the most popular of the queer shebeens in Soweto, and a prime example of this dynamic of Shebeen Queens identifying queer people as a dependable new clientele. It was the meeting place for Simon Nkoli’s GASA black interest group in 1983, and in 1986 hosted the launch of GLOW. While it was the site of two notable events in black queer political organisation, participants claim that it was largely a social space, and not a ‘political bar’ in the same way that the Skyline would become some 10 years later.⁸⁹ It appears to have been succeeded by the Ipelegeng Community Centre as a social space for GLOW’s Soweto contingent to socialise after meetings. Of the layout of the shebeen, Paul Mokgethi-Heath says:

It was a four-roomed house [as most shebeens were]. But it was [one of the] four-roomed house[s] that are doubled. And then at the back of Lee’s house

⁸⁶ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Mclean and Ngcobo, “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi” 178; Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom,” 68.

⁸⁹ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

that was her garage and a big room and that is where they were operating... The owner [understood that we were gay] and was welcoming. And because also a lot of gay guys frequented the place... he was really supportive.⁹⁰

Lee's popularity with the GLOW crowd meant that it was covered more extensively in white gay media than most shebeens. Some white men (including journalists for the GLOW-affiliated popular gay newsletter, *Link/Skakel*) would visit, and its location in Orlando East made it slightly more accessible to white men living in Johannesburg:

Lee's Place" in Orlando East, 20 minutes from [Johannesburg], has a definite gay bias - to the extent that Lee, the shebeen queen, laughingly calls herself the 'mother of the queens.' Entrance is free, subject to [the] approval of the shebeen queen or king. Turnover is from the (legal) sale of alcohol and soft-drinks. Prices are reasonable, although I must add that the whisky was no better than that decanted at Johannesburg discos.⁹¹

For some Sowetans from other neighbourhoods, Orlando East was prohibitively far, and thus Lee's wasn't attended frequently. Bongane, for example, was robbed on his way home late at night when he left too late to catch a taxi to White City.⁹² Further, Lee's reputation as a 'queer shebeen,' seems to have not reached all queer Sowetans, and it appears to have largely been popular with politically connected queer Sowetans. Paul Mokgethi-Heath only discovered Lee's was a queer shebeen after attending the GLOW launch in 1986.⁹³ Interview participants do not speak in depth about any musical practices when speaking of Lee's place - in fact, the only clear account of the musical environment of Lee's comes from an article in *Link/Skakel*, which states:

The shebeen could be seen from a block away in the dim light... Disco music drifted from the house as we pulled up. The building was a standard four-roomed Soweto dwelling, with a garage, carport and two rooms forming a small complex at the back... Bottles of beer were offered. We

⁹⁰ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

⁹¹ Zipps, "From Orlando East on to Chiawelo," AM2723.

⁹² Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

⁹³ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

chatted to people, and found that many were from Springs and many other places far afield. Everyone knew everyone. Laughter in-tempered [sic] conversation now and again as jokes were made. Later, dancing in the crowded shebeen (the garage), uninhibited affection and dancers surrounded us. The bright lights and smiling faces made a change from the dimly-lit, straight-laced discos of Johannesburg. So is the uninhibited way in which fellow patrons indicate they're into you.⁹⁴

Photographs from the launch of GLOW at Lee's Place in 1986 reveal similar insights: it appears that Lee's was largely a social space, where people drank and conversed, with no dedicated space for dancing. Figure Two shows two patrons speaking and drinking beer, while right behind them, five people are seen dancing and laughing. This reflects the ways in which a probable lack of space for different social activities led to a mix of dancing, conversation and drinking in the confined space available to patrons. Figure One shows a number of men sitting underneath a window, decorated with lace curtains - rather than the traditional 'nightclub decor' of lasers and dancefloors, Lee's took on the appearance of a home environment, as did most shebeens in Soweto.

⁹⁴ Zipps, "From Orlando East on to Chiawelo," AM2723.



Figures 1 & 2: The Launch of GLOW at Lee's Place, 1986. Courtesy of GALA

It appears that queer shebeens “started mushrooming” in the mid-to-late 1980s, with more queer shebeens entering the scene rapidly.⁹⁵ Additionally, further research has indicated that by this time some shebeens were queer-friendly by design, rather than incidentally. ‘31’, located on 31 Majolo Street in Kwa-Thema, was run by an openly gay man from his mother’s house, for example.⁹⁶ **Wandi’s in Dube** is another example of this, as a popular shebeen for older, closeted queer men, run by a bisexual man. Amongst younger queer men from Soweto, it mostly functioned as a place to find sexual partners. Bongane remembers Wandi being very nurturing and protective of younger gay men who came to the shebeen.⁹⁷ Participants have suggested that the older men who frequented Wandi’s had been pressured into straight marriages, and came to Wandi’s as a way to envision living out their ‘lost’ queer lives, and to “see themselves with younger, prettier boys.”⁹⁸ Wandi would regularly warn the younger men that these men were unlikely to be caring or consider lovers and that their intentions were selfish:

[He told me] they’ll fuck you up, they won’t look after you.⁹⁹

By the mid-1990s, Wandi’s had become a “tourist attraction type of a place,” likely due to its enduring reputation as a queer venue.¹⁰⁰ By this time, the venue was less of a shebeen than a restaurant, serving African cuisine and catering for sit-down diners rather than dancers. Research could be done in the future to assess the impact of tourism on shebeens in Soweto, as some sources have indicated that, by the 2000s, there was a growing interest amongst white Europeans and South Africans in visiting queer Soweto.¹⁰¹ Even in the 1980s, Simon Nkoli would almost always arrive at queer events in Soweto with a number of European journalists in tow.¹⁰² This dynamic raises questions of the impact of tourism on local scenes, and how shebeens might have responded or been ‘changed’ by these new social and economic forces. However, in the 1980s, the shebeen largely functioned similarly to most others discussed. Here, Wandi’s accommodated for a specific need amongst a certain

⁹⁵ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

⁹⁶ “Sicelo,” Interviewed by Unknown Interviewer, c.1998-2002. After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

⁹⁷ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹⁰⁰ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

¹⁰¹ Gevisser, “Queer Soweto,” 96-97

¹⁰² Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

generation of queer Sowetans who might have previously been unable to access queer social life.

In the late 1980s, **Mhlanga Rocks in Mofolo** became a popular new venue for Soweto's queer scene. Described as a "typical" shebeen which "came about very late," Mhlanga Rocks appears to have been active until at least 1993. While it wasn't 'queer by design,' Themba, the brother of the shebeen's neighbour was a queer man who explained to the owners that LGBT sowetans didn't have a place to go in the neighbourhood and suggested that they attempt to fill that gap in the market. What might have begun as an informal 'queering' where the owners did their best to make patrons feel welcome - as was common in many of the queer-friendly shebeens at the time - quickly became a more formal and structured queer organisation of the venue: Between 4 pm and midnight on Sundays, the shebeen would host regular drag shows and dance competitions which were attended religiously by many queer Sowetans.¹⁰³ Over the years, Mhlanga Rocks became increasingly famous, to the extent that the owners asked Themba to take over management of the shebeen, as an emerging industry of international pink tourists were beginning to visit, in the hopes of witnessing queer life in Soweto.

Because of the regular drag shows, Mhlanga Rocks was able to establish itself as a far more consistent 'player' in the queer scene, with a reliable day and time where queer nightlife could be accessed in Soweto. Further still, the drag shows led to the venue gaining notoriety amongst 'after-nines' or 'DL' men, who would regularly cruise both drag queens and other male patrons.¹⁰⁴ Much like Wandl's, Mhlanga Rocks developed a specific reputation for the sexual environment that it was host to - the sorts of musical and cultural practices of drag, or of providing a safe space for younger queer men invariable affected the sexual geographies of these shebeens, and led to specific crowds of gay men frequenting the venues.

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; "After-Nine" refers to gay, bisexual, bi-curious and straight men who participate in gay sex, while not living as out queer men. The term mocks the fact that they normally only do so at night, or after 9pm. Similarly, 'DL' refers to men who have sex with men on the 'down-low.'



Figure 3: Mhlanga Rocks, Mofolo. Courtesy of GALA Archives

Heartbreakers was a popular disco club in **Molapo**. What immediately stands out to me is the fact that Bongane describes it as a club, rather than a shebeen. Heartbreakers and Mhlanga Rocks are the only two venues that come up that appear to have invested significant energy in fostering the sort of cultural practices expected of queer nightlife such as dedicated spaces for dancing and hosting regular drag shows. These two venues thus stand out as examples of alternatives to the shebeen environment as they took place in Soweto.

By many accounts, the Pelican, a Jazz club situated near the Orlando Railway station, was the first nightclub in Soweto, founded in 1972. The existing literature doesn't name any clubs in Soweto outside of the Pelican Jazz Club, and no evidence of this club can be found in the archives. Only two participants were even able to confirm that they had heard of Heartbreakers - Bongane, whose testimony informs this brief history of the venue, and Lerato, who had heard of the venue, but never attended it.¹⁰⁵ Throughout apartheid, Soweto's nightlife spaces were routinely faced with harassment, both from police and the *Makabasa's*,

¹⁰⁵ After first hearing of Heartbreakers from Bongane, I revisited the archives, conducted further research and re-contacted a number of participants. I also reached out to a number of other people for informal correspondences in an attempt to corroborate the information presented in this chapter - none of this additional research was fruitful.

an Orlando-based gang armed by the police who targeted activists.¹⁰⁶ Black nightlife, during the apartheid era, was considered a dangerous space for political mobilisation, rather than simply the expression of culture, specifically because it tended towards musical and cultural cross-pollination.¹⁰⁷ Heartbreakers' relative invisibility to the archive and history is thus likely the very reason that a disco club could successfully operate in Molapo during the height of apartheid: with nightclubs illegal and often facing intimidation from both apartheid police and gangs, keeping a low profile was perhaps the only way the venue could operate.

While 'not as queer as the shebeens,' the venue was very sexually mixed and was known for being friendly towards queer participants.¹⁰⁸ The club would allow underage teenagers in during the afternoon, but when the sun went down they'd be chased out, while the adults partied into the night. Bongane explains that, because it was more sexually mixed, LGBT patrons would identify themselves through flamboyant, anti-trend fashions and dance styles, which would make themselves easily identifiable in the crowd. It's worth noting that, in Heartbreakers at least, rather than attempting to 'fit in' or remain invisible, queer participants actively partook in processes of making themselves visibly stand out more. This provides insights about safety and the sort of space which had been fostered, indicating that, overall, queer Sowetans were sufficiently comfortable in the venue to be able to perform flamboyance, femininity and queerness in their dancing and fashion choices. In the late 1970s, the Pelican hired a DJ and began to play disco music - it would be around this time that Heartbreakers emerged as well.¹⁰⁹

A number of other venues are mentioned briefly throughout interviews and the archives. This summary of findings serves to highlight an important point in this research about the range and diversity of queer venues on the Soweto scene, in terms of geography, practice and memory. Although the most 'rich' history available lies with the previous four venues, the venues discussed hereafter were still important to members of the scene, and allude to levels of mobility and choice which are important in characterising a scene.

¹⁰⁶ Sean O'Toole, "Imaginary Republics: Dancing after Dark in Johannesburg," in *Ten Cities: Clubbing in Nairobi, Cairo, Kyiv, Johannesburg, Naples, Berlin, Luanda, Lagos, Bristol, Lisbon. 1960 - March 2020*. ed. Johannes Hossfeld Etyang, Joyce Nyairo and Florian Sievers. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020) 227-8.

¹⁰⁷ O'Toole, "Imaginary Republics," 228.

¹⁰⁸ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Atiyyah Khan, "The myth, music and magic of Club Pelican," News 24 Online, Published 21 February 2022, <https://www.news24.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/arts/the-myth-music-and-magic-of-club-pelican-20220221>

For one, **Big Mike's**, in **Molapo**, is named in the existing literature but does not come up in any of the archival or primary research conducted for this dissertation.¹¹⁰ **KwaScotch** was a long-standing gay shebeen in **Jabavu**, which was open for at least 22 years: Bongane first visited KwaScotch sometime around 1977, and the venue was advertised in the January 1999 issue of EXIT: “White City, Jabavu, Soweto (Near the Swimming Pool).”¹¹¹ To Bongane’s memory, the venue was primarily a straight space, but was still a safe environment for queer people, largely due to the flamboyant gay man who ran the shebeen.¹¹² Jabavu was also home to **Johanna's**, a shebeen run by a lady who was very accepting of queer Sowetan’s lifestyles:

And there’s a lady who was not far from Scott’s. She was familiar with our lifestyle. She knew about us and what we were up to. She accepted us and accommodated us. ... She was a kind lady. She would even go to our funerals or if there was something. Her name was Johanna. We would just get there and feel free; feel at home.¹¹³

In **Chiawelo**, a shebeen named **Tlak’s Place** appears to have been open from around 1984, as per the following account of the shebeen in a copy of Link/Skakel:

‘Tlak’s Place,’ in the new suburb of Chiawelo, is more spacious inside than Lee’s, but without the benefit of an outdoor area. Capacity, at something upwards of 100, is similar. The music in which the patrons revel is up-to-date disco. The disc jockey also serves as barman.¹¹⁴

In **Meadowlands**, a Shebeen called ‘**Boys Place**,’ run by an openly gay man known as ‘Boy’ was relatively popular, and was incidentally robbed three times.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Mclean and Ngcobo, “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi” 178.

¹¹¹ EXIT, January 1999, 17. Accessed via Exit / Link-Skakel, AM2723 GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹¹² Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹¹³ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹¹⁴ Zipps, “From Orlando East on to Chiawelo,” AM2723.

¹¹⁵ “Boy,” Interviewed by Unknown Interviewer, c.1998-2002. After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.; Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

...[Boy] was our close friend. When you are [sic] at his place you would feel at home.¹¹⁶

A number of participants, such as Bongane and Alpha remember visiting Boy's Place but don't share any significant memories of the shebeen.¹¹⁷ Also in **Meadowlands**, **Tsidi's Place** became popular in the late 1990s as a meeting point for artists and queer people and was a popular venue amongst Zanele Muholi and her friends.¹¹⁸

Outside of the shebeens discussed so far, private gatherings at people's houses were the most popular form of queer socialisation, in what appears to be a continuation of pre-1976 queer life. Participants speak of homes in Jabulani, Rockville, Senoane, Orlando West, Diepkloof and Meadowlands.¹¹⁹ These household gatherings would largely be organised around a braai or informal dinner furnished by music, drinking and socialisation, and could happen at any point in the 'chronology' of a night out - either before or after heading to a shebeen or someone else's house. Most commonly, these gatherings would turn into days-long social events where attendees would sleep over and continue to spend time together, sometimes for as long as an entire weekend:

...The first time I met them they were going to Rockville to Andries' house and he was hosting there. And me being me, not being used to staying 24 hours out, around 10 pm I'm like 'Taxis are finishing, I need to go back home.' They're like, 'No, we're going to leave in the morning'... that was not the brief!¹²⁰

Archival interview transcripts speak of a man named Joshua who would host regular 'drag parties' at his home in Soweto, where men would flirt and eventually "book" their sexual partners with handkerchiefs, in a manner which resembles the 'Hanky Code,'

¹¹⁶ "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008.

¹¹⁷ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024.

¹¹⁸ Sean O'Toole, "Camp, drag, and activism in South African art," e-Flux, Accessed 13 May 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/401159/camp-drag-and-activism-in-south-african-art>; Tsidi's Place was located on 818 Rev Frederick S. Modise Dr, Meadowlands East.

¹¹⁹ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008.

¹²⁰ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024.

popularised in 1970s American gay scenes.¹²¹ These parties appear to have been particularly popular amongst men staying in Hostels in Soweto. Of the Hostels, in the 1980s, informal male prostitution in mine hostels remained common, with one archival participant reporting to have regularly made between R200 and R300 per day, enough for him to pay for his brothers education through sex work.¹²² Once again, these anecdotes provide insights into the forms of cultural practices and the Western influences that informed behaviour on the Soweto scene.

Lesbian participants such as Khadija and Tanya would infrequently attend home gatherings, and both refer to these social events as far more accessible to women and people living in Johannesburg. The specifically male-centric environment of the shebeens was more difficult to enter, reflecting an image of lesbian social life in Soweto which was largely oriented around homes and day-time social groups.¹²³ Notably, because shebeens largely replicated home environments already, there was little difference between these spaces, and thus the spaces occupied by queer Sowetans largely maintained a level of consistency in their decor, layout and musical practice, with the only major difference between the two types of spaces likely being how ‘open’ they were to people outside the social group. One such home event, and a highlight for the queer scene at the time, was Bev Ditsie’s 16th birthday, informally known as her ‘coming out party.’

That was a big moment because we invited all the other gay boys that we knew in Soweto and all the other lesbians that we knew... It was just like one of the shows. You know we were [at a ball], dressed up. [It was] a big part and - you know when you are teenagers you just do wild things... it was the coming out of the [group].¹²⁴

¹²¹ “Sicelo,” Interviewed by Unknown Interviewer, c.1998-2002. After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.; The Hanky Code was a system of displaying coloured handkerchiefs or bandanas in the back pockets of one’s trousers, with specific colours and patterns of handkerchiefs signifying an interest in different sexual practices. The side of the trousers the handkerchief was worn on would signify whether the individual was looking to perform or receive a certain sex act. For example, a dark blue handkerchief connotes anal sex - when worn on the back left pocket, it indicates that the man is looking to perform penetrative anal sex.

¹²² “Thami,” Interviewed by Unknown Interviewer, c.1998-2002. After Nines! The Play. AM 2894, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹²³ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024; Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

¹²⁴ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

Ultimately, this overview of the experiences of participants in both interviews and the archives, and the resultant oral histories of venues in Soweto's queer scene has provided key insights into the social, cultural and sexual character of a number of venues on the scene. Further, it makes clear the variety of social opportunities for queer Sowetans, who could move between home environments, shebeens and a limited number of proto-clubs within Soweto, with their movements largely being influenced by a desire to 'follow the crowd.' Venues such as Wandi's and Lee's accommodated for different social needs within the scene, while Heartbreakers and Mhlanga Rocks began to host spaces of dancing and 'queer-clubbing' within the environment of Soweto. Some venues, such as KwaScotch, had enduring, 20-year long periods of operation, while others were short lived. As alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, by the late-1980s it appears that more shebeens began to emerge, but the scene the 1980s appears to have been centred on Lee's, Kwa-Scotch, and Wandi's, with the neighbourhoods of Orlando, Meadowlands and Jabavu. It is, as a final consideration, worth noting that even naming the venues on the scene is a significant step in the recording of the history of queer nightlife in Soweto: The only shebeens explicitly mentioned in the existing literature are Big Mike's (Molapo), Mhlanga Rocks (Mofolo, closed by 1993) and Lee's Place, which was the venue of the first GLOW meeting.¹²⁵ Later in this chapter, these novel Oral histories established in this section will be brought together to evaluate the question of a 'scene' in Soweto, alongside the following history of queer musical practice in Soweto.

Writing Queer Practices into Soweto's Musical History 1976-1990

"People would dance... yoh!"¹²⁶

The music that soundtracked Soweto's queer scene was largely a reflection of popular tastes in Soweto at the time, as well as popular gay music from the 1970s and 80s. Participants speak frequently of the music of Brenda Fassie, Stimela and Yvonne Chaka Chaka, as well as popular Western disco hits from artists such as Sylvester and Gloria Gaynor.¹²⁷ Most shebeens would make space for dancing or would have that space made by participants who would either move outside or push tables out of the way. At times, karaoke appears to have been popular, indicating a more participatory form of music appreciation than

¹²⁵ Mclean and Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi" 178; Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 65.

¹²⁶ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024.

¹²⁷ Ibid; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

mere dancing and drinking.¹²⁸ By all accounts, the musical atmosphere of the shebeens was largely unexceptional, and it doesn't appear that a uniquely queer soundscape took root in Soweto. Moreover, seminal works on Soweto's musical history completely lack an awareness or consideration of queer experiences in Soweto.¹²⁹

I argue that, for the most part, historical studies of music in South Africa disproportionately emphasise a 'consumption-production' dichotomy wherein the histories of taste, dancing and listening are largely de-emphasized. I suggest that this, alongside homophobia and the obfuscation of the closet, further contributes to the invisibility of queer musical practice in Soweto's ethnomusicological literature. This section thus places the testimonies of participants within the broader history of musical practice in Soweto, while also explaining, through a close reading of seminal texts in South African ethnomusicology, why these testimonies have been ignored so far in the literature. By gesturing towards a new movement towards studies of music appreciation societies in South African township, I highlight the historical and musicological merit of studies of Soweto's queer nightlife, despite the diverse and ambivalent role music played within the scene's shebeens. As a result, this section will write the limited musical practices spoken of by participants into the broader musical history of Soweto. In doing so, I highlight the continuities between the queer scene and straight Soweto, placing the queer nightlife practices of the post-1976 era into broader historical context while advocating for the importance of the consumption of music both in constructing nightlife scenes, and in broader Southern African musicological study.

The musical history of Soweto can be, somewhat crudely, traced back to the Sophiatown evictions of the mid-1950s, spurred on by the Group Areas Act of 1950.¹³⁰ With these evictions came the population of a number of new Group Areas primarily comprised of former residents of Sophiatown - while Coloured residents were sent to Eldorado Park, Indian residents to Lenasia and Chinese residents to central Johannesburg, the majority black population of Sophiatown was sent to Meadowlands, which would soon be incorporated into Soweto. Sophiatown's well-documented musical history speaks to a tradition of musical innovation, with the pre-1950s *Marabi* as the oft-cited (yet reluctant) bedrock for a variety of

¹²⁸ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024

¹²⁹ Christopher Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Jazz, 'race' and Society in Early Apartheid South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012); Ansell, *Soweto Blues*; Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*

¹³⁰ O'Toole, "Imaginary Republics," 220.

jazz-infused musical styles, often taking influence from US Jazz and part of a legacy of black-led primordial South African club-genres including *Kwela* and *Simaje Manje* (or *Mbaqanga*).¹³¹

Sophiatown and its particular brand of high life represented the culmination of four decades of musical innovation, one in which US Ragtime and Swing merged with indigenous sounds to create an authentic local idiom - Jazz for short. This sound would deeply figure and influence the dance scenes that followed, the culture it spawned still an important reference point for contemporary musicians, fashion designers and photographers.¹³²

With the Group Areas Act came restrictions on where mixed-race and black Jazz Bands could perform, further pushing Sophiatown's musical tradition towards Soweto, amongst other townships.¹³³ What began as a spiritual continuity of Sophiatown's highlife quickly became its own musicological tradition, uniquely influenced by the economic, ethnic and social dynamics at play in Soweto.¹³⁴ Sean O'Toole argues that "Jazz in Soweto was not simply a key modernist musical form; it was also enraptured dance music," gesturing towards my argument in the introduction that terms such as 'club cultures' and 'dance music' ought be expanded within the Southern African context.¹³⁵ Speaking of its Jazz's popularity, O'Toole argues that "dancing bodies late at night express a different solidarity to bodies tightly packed in a political march" - a form of solidarity which was also to be found in the queer shebeens of the 1980s.¹³⁶ Sports stadiums, which would host occasional Jazz festivals, were also important formal venues for musical practice in Soweto in the 1960s and 70s, such as the Moroka-Jabavu Stadium, the Orlando Stadium and the Jabulani Amphitheatre in Moroka, which hosted the 1974 Soweto National Jazz Festival.¹³⁷ However, formal venues alone cannot adequately tell the story of Soweto's musical history.¹³⁸ Instead, it was the informal, ad-hoc spaces of *stokvels*, shebeens, hostels and community centres and were

¹³¹ Rangoato Hlasane, "Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations: The Most Beautiful Black City in Africa?" in *Ten Cities: Clubbing in Nairobi, Cairo, Kyiv, Johannesburg, Naples, Berlin, Luanda, Lagos, Bristol, Lisbon. 1960 - March 2020*. ed. Johannes Hossfeld Etyang, Joyce Nyairo and Florian Sievers. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2020): 194-195.

¹³² O'Toole, "Imaginary Republics," 220.

¹³³ Hlasane, "Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations," 193.

¹³⁴ Ansell, *Soweto Blues*; Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*

¹³⁵ O'Toole, "Imaginary Republics," 222.

¹³⁶ Ibid 226.

¹³⁷ Ibid 225;

¹³⁸ Ansell, *Soweto Blues*.

regularly transformed into arenas of dance, musicality and activism, which came to define musical culture in Soweto.¹³⁹ Little has been said by musicologists of the musical landscape of queer Soweto, thus leading to a lack of writing on the spaces that might have uniquely contributed to musical practice within a queer scene during the era of Jazz and Marabi.

By 1970, Soweto's population was nearing 1 million people.¹⁴⁰ At the time, the most popular genre coming out of Soweto was *Mbaqanga*, a fusion of *Kwela* and *Marabi* styles, heavily influenced by Western pop music, "defined by a roaring, melodious bass supported by electric guitars."¹⁴¹ *Mbaqanga* talent scouts would regularly move through the hostels and mines searching for musicians to sign to labels such as Gallo-Mavuthela, with groups tending to reflect the multi-ethnic, urban sensibilities of Sowetans. Thematically, music produced and played in Soweto pre-1976 tended to reflect on rural-urban dynamics such as migration, interlaced with rural praise songs and Western instrumentation and musical sensibilities.¹⁴² For the queer scene of the 1980s, there exist two key continuities from the pre-1976 era which are significant - firstly the centrality of shebeens as spaces of the confluence of music, socialisation and politics. Secondly, the ways in which Western influences affected the development of uniquely black South African musical cultures - either through new genres or through the combination of existing genres and practices in the environment of the shebeen or hostel.

Following the 1976 Soweto Uprisings, popular music in Soweto took a more political edge, reflected by groups such as *Harari* (which featured Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse). Their more 'political sound' was characterised by a "synthesis of Hard Rock, US Funk, *Maskandi* guitar," and the inclusion of the omnipresent musical innovation of the 1980s, the synthesiser.¹⁴³ The inclusion of US funk as an influence is significant, as around the same time, US Funk was being incorporated by queer black American DJs into the production of early disco music.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, Sowetan queer people were becoming increasingly socially active and willing to express queerness as a social identity rather than as a sexual activity.¹⁴⁵ These coincidental shifts to musical practice and queer identity politics in Soweto

¹³⁹ Hlasane, "Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations," 197.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 196.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 197, 194.

¹⁴² Ibid 197.

¹⁴³ Hlasane, "Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations," 198.

¹⁴⁴ Grant Tyler Peterson, "Clubbing Masculinities: Gender Shifts in Gay Men's Dance Floor Choreographies" *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 5 (2011): 613.

¹⁴⁵ Donham, "Freeing South Africa."

are significant in that they represent the Soweto Uprisings as a historical moment which, amongst many other legacies, would encourage the development of a queer *scene* within Soweto. Most of the shebeens discussed earlier in this chapter emerged in the post-1976 era, and were only made possible through increasing social organisation and networking amongst queer Sowetans. Here, I indicate that this emergence also coincided with transformations to musical practice in Soweto, before gesturing to ways in which these transformations were adopted by the Sowetan queer scene.

In post-1976 South Africa, artists such as Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Chicco Twala and Brenda Fassie would come to emerge within a new musical landscape, not unhindered by the increasing fervour for music from the US:

South African talent was in abundance, but American hits had a strong hold on us... [Brenda Fassie] didn't have her own unique style. So we gave her a Donna Summer album for inspiration, to help her find her own voice... The challenge was to sell South African music to locals. So in the winter of 1983 we went on an aggressive marketing campaign of the Brenda Fassie brand. We took her to the townships where she performed Weekend Special on top of tables in the shebeens. The patrons loved her and within a month the townships were buzzing...¹⁴⁶

The style of township pop which emerged through songs such as Weekend Special would eventually come to be known as 'Bubblegum,' a somewhat derogatory term used to refer to music with little substance or flavour. It is worth noting that 'Bubblegum' is similarly used to describe Western pop music from this era, highlighting again the 'Westward gaze' of music in this period. The limited texts available on queer life in Soweto at the time reflect a similar emergence of Western dance hits, disco and local musical styles in the scene of the 1980s:

¹⁴⁶ 'Staff Reporter,' "Special team behind the MaBrr magic," Mail & Guardian Online, Published 2 August 2013, <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-08-02-00-special-team-behind-the-mabrr-magic/#:~:text=Their%20backing%20band%20%E2%80%94%20collectively%20known,Makhene%20sisters%20%E2%80%94%20Phyllis%20and%20Pam.>

1970s disco sounds scratching through the static of an overextended hi-fi system... The guys are dancing with each other, voguing a home-brew version of black gay American dance styles.¹⁴⁷

It was the time when that disco song, [Gloria Gaynor's] 'I am what I am,' was on the hit parade and that gave us [queer people] strength.¹⁴⁸

And so, the music of post-1976 Soweto, can be characterised by a covert political flair, a Westward gaze and, importantly, a reliance on the economies of the informal to gain popularity.¹⁴⁹ Bubblegum, influenced by both American disco and earlier black South African musical trends tracing back to Sophiatown and the rural areas from which early residents had migrated, came to define one of many competing sounds of the 1980s. Importantly, the music emerging from Soweto during this era would commonly be played alongside its Western influences, creating a soundscape which was uniquely multi-national and genre-diverse, pulling together Bubblegum, Disco, and early House music. This musical diversity and its political undertones would also take root in the queer scene at the time. Bongane distinctly remembers that the drag shows at Mhlanga Rocks would always begin with Gloria Gaynor's *I Am What I Am*, a popular disco anthem released in 1984, with clear connotations of gay pride:

I am what I am
I am my own special creation
So come take a look
Give me the hook or the ovation

It's my world that I want to have a little pride in
My world and it's not a place I have to hide in

...
I don't want praise, I don't want pity
I bang my own drum
Some think it's noise, I think it's pretty

¹⁴⁷ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 67.

¹⁴⁸ British Sgxabai, quoted in Ibid 68.

¹⁴⁹ Hlasane, "Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations."

And so what if I love each sparkle and each bangle?

Why not try to see things from a different angle?

Your life is a sham

'Til you can shout out, I am what I am¹⁵⁰

While the lyrics might at face-value appear as a generic assertion of self-worth, the use of phrases like “bang my own drum,” “pride,” and “each sparkle and each bangle,” allude to distinctly queer liberatory politics which often relate to assertions of femininity and pride in non-conventional identities. Bongane himself refers to hearing this song as a key moment of political conscientization, which encouraged him to live ‘out and proud.’ It is significant that this moment of conscientization came from a disco song, and that it was played in a queer shebeen in Soweto - Disco has long been understood to have its roots as a ‘gay man’s’ genre:

Disco culture provided some of the first popular social spaces where gay men could claim a space for their sexuality and out their forbidden desires to one another... Disco was invented by largely unacknowledged Black [American], gay DJs.¹⁵¹

Further, in the US the popularisation of Disco as an ‘underground’¹⁵² style of dance music coincided with the decriminalisation of gay bars in New York in the late 1960s / early 1970s, leading to an explosion of its popularity within queer urban centres, first in New York and later most of the Western World.¹⁵³ Disco would reach Johannesburg soon after, aided by gay SAA flight stewards who would smuggle queer records back from layovers in New York and London.¹⁵⁴ However, it would only become popular in Soweto in the late 1970s as it became more commercially popular. Craig Jennex argues that ‘diva-worship’ - queer men’s gravitation to ‘big-voiced,’ authoritative, flamboyant women in music (such as women in Opera, disco vocalists or, for a more modern example, Lady Gaga) is an important, unifying element of queer musical practice:

¹⁵⁰ Gloria Gaynor, “I am what I am,” Track 1 on *I am Gloria Gaynor*, Chrysalis Records, 1984, Vinyl.

¹⁵¹ Peterson, “Clubbing Masculinities,” 613.

¹⁵² Underground here refers to non-commercial / ‘anti-commercial’ popularity and is often associated with subversive social scenes.

¹⁵³ Peterson, “Clubbing Masculinities,” 613.

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Lee, “From Heaven to the Dungeon, Mapping the Production of Gay Spaces in Johannesburg’s Inner-city Nightlife in the 1980s.” (Unpublished Honours Thesis. University of the Witwatersrand, 2022), 115.

the ability of the icon to “bring together people like me” serves as a fundamental attraction of their adoration. To be sure, a crucial aspect of music participation is that it provides individuals with a significant sense of belonging and group membership.¹⁵⁵

Certainly, in Soweto, artists such as Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Brenda Fassie also performed the role of a diva to be worshipped, with Brenda’s proximity to the queer community in the late 1980s playing an important role in the black-queering of Hillbrow’s nightlife spaces, which will be discussed in a following chapter.

Despite the fact that the musical cultures of queer Soweto appear to have developed in tandem to those of straight Sowetans, queer Sowetan musical practice in the period before the 2000s is yet to be the focus of any academic study.¹⁵⁶ The work of famed South African ethnomusicologists such as Chris Ballantine and David Coplan does much to write previously uncharted histories of black musicians, the music industry and its relationship to black popular culture over the last 100 years.¹⁵⁷ However, it is worth noting that both authors place a heavy emphasis on the processes of the production and performance of musical culture, rather than its consumption and enjoyment. Both have very little to say about the audiences and dancers who enjoyed and participated in the music cultures they write about.

For example, Coplan argues that African Musicians “provide their audiences with modes of self-recognition in a world of insecurity, uncertainty, and change,” with little mention of the musical cultures that audiences generate themselves, through taste or scene-building.¹⁵⁸ He later speaks of township Hip-Hop “splash jams” of the early 2000s as populated by audiences of “adoring neighbourhood fans,” whose presence is framed as passive rather than participatory.¹⁵⁹ Further, throughout *In Township Tonight*, Coplan represents the relationship between musicians and audiences as strictly top-down: audiences take on dance styles as dictated by lyrics or performers, in a dynamic of intentionally

¹⁵⁵ Craig Jennex, “Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia” *Popular Music and Society*, 36, No. 3, (2013) 355.

¹⁵⁶ See: Livermon, “Soweto nights,” 508-525

¹⁵⁷ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*.

¹⁵⁸ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 334.

designed cultural practice controlled almost exclusively by the producer. Similarly, Christopher Ballantine's *Marabi Nights* suffers a similar problem, where audiences are largely framed as passive recipients of South African musical innovations between the 1920s and 40s. The majority of Ballantine's work follows a similar trajectory as Coplan's, writing about cultural shifts, political conscientisation and the apartheid government's repression of Jazz in the following decades as events that were primarily led by or affected musicians, rather than the scenes of participants he describes earlier in the book.¹⁶⁰

The result is a body of ethnomusicological literature which only infrequently engages with audiences as autonomous 'taste-makers': Coplan is only occasionally attentive to the perspectives of 'audiences,' for example, when he discusses changing attitudes towards commercially successful artists in the post-apartheid era, or when he highlights the cultural impact of Kwaito on township youth cultures in the 1990s, arguing that Kwaito's success relied on the creation of an "entire domain of style, including verbal, body attitude and movement, and fashion codes..."¹⁶¹ Similarly, Ballantine, does successfully attribute the development of Marabi to a fervour for black American culture amongst urban black middle-class audiences, indicating some awareness of the relationship between taste and musical culture.¹⁶² Further, his historical analysis of "Concert and Dance" spaces in *Marabi Nights* functions in many ways as an overview of a geolocal musical scene, consisting of unique dance and social practices, and largely led by the tastes of scene participants, rather than musicians.¹⁶³

Both authors do, therefore, write with an awareness of the tastes of audiences, but this awareness is applied infrequently. These isolated examples from Coplan and Ballantine's works represent valuable embryonic attempts to chart scenes, rather than the personal or industrial history of black musicians in South Africa, but my overarching critique remains: South African musicological studies of black musical practices too frequently distinguish between the production and socialised appreciation of music in a manner which prevents a clear history of the social and cultural worlds which were built out of musical practice.

¹⁶⁰ Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*.

¹⁶¹ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, 329-331.

¹⁶² Ballantine, *Marabi Nights* 12-16.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 11-39.

Based on this close reading of seminal texts in South African ethnomusicology, I argue that the queer scene in Soweto has been overlooked in seminal texts for a variety of reasons. While queer shebeens were musical spaces, they lacked ‘musical producers’ (musicians or DJs) on which focus could be placed in works such as those by Ballantine, Coplan or Gwen Ansell. Existing trends in South African ethnomusicology have been shown to emphasise the productive elements of musical culture, and as such have not developed strands of focus which are likely to view the decentralised musical world of queer Soweto as worthy of study. While it seems unlikely that none of Soweto’s iconic musicians identified as queer during the period of study, the obstacle of the closet has likely rendered these identities lost to history. Further, the bartenders of any given shebeen would most frequently be in charge of the music - not necessarily as ‘DJs,’ but more so as musical curators.¹⁶⁴ This can be attributed, in part, to the broad period under study, which coincides with the historical moment of the ‘rise’ of the DJ in nightlife cultures. In the early 1980s, DJ culture was only just emerging internationally, and, when coupled with the financial and technological barriers to organising spaces for DJs, it makes sense that Soweto, in particular, might have lagged behind.¹⁶⁵ The sort of sound and lighting equipment expected of a traditional nightclub, as well as turntables, mixers and even a broad collection of vinyl records all come together to form formidable costs, even in the contemporary era.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, shebeens were largely ad hoc, repurposed home environments which were likely to lack the space and infrastructure for DJs to emerge. The result then is a form of musical scene which was incompatible with the conceptual approach of seminal South African works in ethnomusicology, precisely because they were built around music appreciation and socialisation, rather than music performance and production.

Recently, more work has been done to explore South African Jazz Appreciation Societies in townships, and the social and musical identities formed by their members, as well as electronic musical festival-goers' tastes and practices in the 2010s.¹⁶⁷ In a stark shift from

¹⁶⁴ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; Zipp, “From Orlando East on to Chiawelo,” AM2723.

¹⁶⁵ However, the mid-1980s did see DJs and electronic dance music emerging in Hillbrow, and it appears that those members of the Soweto scene who were drawn towards these cultures gravitated towards the city centre, rather than attempting to build these cultures within Soweto. Subsequently, these individuals employed a range of strategies which enabled increased mobilities in the city centre, which will be explored in a later chapter.

¹⁶⁶ Gavin Steingo, “Actors and Accidents in South African Electronic Music: An Essay on Multiple Ontologies,” *Contemporary Music Review*, 37. No. 5-6. (2018) 554-574.

¹⁶⁷ Brett Pyper, “Space, place, sound and sociability: Situating South African jazz appreciation societies,” *Situating popular musics: IASPM 16th International Conference Proceedings* (2011) 201-206; Thomas Olver, “Underground on the Highveld,” *Croatian Musicological Society* 53, no. 2 (2022), 489 - 528

the passive ‘audience’ discussed by Ballantine and Coplan, these Appreciation Societies are written as autonomous social groups which have constructed themselves around practices of listening to and enjoying music. Brett Pyper argues that, for these societies:

...jazz provides a pretext and catalyst for heightened sociability. Music and dance play a key role in attaining this heightening, but much of the significance of these events lies in the sociomusical institution within which the music is deployed... For the participants,... jazz serves as a significant marker of identity and as a nexus of social relations. With whom one listens to jazz goes beyond informal leisure camaraderie and signals symbolic, social, and – to a degree – financial capital.¹⁶⁸

Pyper’s argument approaches a conceptual framework close to that of a scene. The act of listening and socialising around Jazz is given more weight than the act of producing Jazz music. The “sociomusical institution” is the subject of the study, rather than the music. In this way, Pyper draws existing strands of South African ethnomusicology towards social history and argues for the inclusion of music scenes in the study of South African music:

...listening to jazz, no less than performance of the music, is socially enacted, culturally and historically contingent, and implicated in the transformations occasioned by modernisation, musical commodification, transnational circulation, and a range of adaptive processes in various national and local contexts.¹⁶⁹

Thus, Soweto’s queer music scene, and much of Soweto’s music scene can be better understood through a sensitivity towards appreciation and ‘listening,’ as opposed to mere production. A prime example of this lies in the history of Kwaito: while borne of producers such as Senyaka, the “godfather of African Rap,” in Soweto and Thembisa around 1993, a number of key spaces for enjoying Kwaito were in Hillbrow, as Kwaito fans sought out more dancefloor-oriented, nightclub-esque spaces.¹⁷⁰ By the mid-1990s, the influential label Kalawa Jazmee Records had been founded, leading to the emergence of several iconic Kwaito

¹⁶⁸ Ibid 202-203

¹⁶⁹ Ibid 205.

¹⁷⁰ Hlasane, “Dangerous Combinations and Skeem Sam Foundations,” 200.

producers such as Oscar ‘Oskido’ Mdlongwa and Mandla ‘Spikiri’ Mofokeng, as well as several popular acts including Bongo Maffin, Crowded Crew and Boom Shaka. Kwaito would soon find homes in the Hillbrow-based Razzmatazz and Yeoville’s Tandoor (transformed from an Indian restaurant to music venue in the late-1990s) as Hillbrow and Yeoville began to change in demographics in a process commonly referred to as the ‘greying’ of the city as urban apartheid declined.¹⁷¹

It is safe to say that by the early 2000s, the rigid typologies of Apartheid life, that had determined who could like what kind of music and dance in what locality, were being upended.¹⁷²

Thus, even with Kwaito, a sensitivity towards the practices of fans reveals a far more fluid social and cultural world of listening and enjoying the genre which cannot adequately be established by only paying attention to producers. By this time, most of the dance-minded queer Sowetans who were on the scene were moving towards Johannesburg’s inner-city, slowly beginning the process of building a black queer scene there, in tandem with the fall of urban Apartheid. Razzmatazz, for example, would become a significant nodal point in black queer social lives in the inner-city, and will be discussed in depth in the last chapter of this dissertation. Most significantly however, is the fact that when Kwaito emerged and dance floors were in demand for Sowetan music fans, they moved towards Johannesburg’s inner city - reflecting once more that non-conventional nature of musical scenes in Soweto where dancefloors were simply unavailable..

Ultimately, the queer scene which began to establish itself in the post 1976-era inherited the same musical traditions as broader Soweto’s musical worlds, and began to implement similar practices within queer spaces. By reoriented South African ethnomusicological practice towards a focus on music appreciation, the histories of queer Sowetan music scenes become more clear: acts of listening, dancing, singing karaoke can be understood not just as musical practice but as social practice, forming a marker of identity and belonging on the queer scene. This musical history of Soweto provides a number of key insights into both the social geographies of the township during the apartheid era and of the influences and dynamics at play in the processes of cultural production in Soweto. From

¹⁷¹ O’Toole, “Imaginary Republics,” 229.

¹⁷² Ibid 230.

Marabi and Kwela, to Jazz, Bubblegum and Kwaito, Soweto's musical evolutions were products of the very history of Soweto - early genres were pioneered by its initial migrant workers and former Sophiatown residents whose music reflected on and drew inspiration from rural areas across South Africa, while later genres looked outwards, towards the West and the music charts, as Soweto's residents began to resist spatial apartheid and the isolation of black townships.

However, the testimonies of most queer participants reflect a 'backgrounding' - rather than foregrounding - of music and taste in the movements of queer Sowetans on the scene. While shebeens, clubs and home environments were soundtracked by music, they were spaces that people gravitated to for what they could provide socially, with a relative ambivalence to the music played. The conclusion to this section is thus somewhat ambiguous - the queer scene in Soweto largely appears to have followed a similar historical journey as straight Soweto through the development of genres and the use of informal spaces as meeting points. Further, traditions of political subtext being read into popular music at the time are similarly evident in Bongane's interpretation of popular disco hits. I suggest that there is space for both sentiments in an evaluation of the scene - music was omnipresent and often invoked significant memories and feelings of queer liberation, but at the same time, music itself was less important than the confluence of music, alcohol, social spaces and community building in the creation of a queer scene in Soweto. Here, I echo Brett Pyper's argument about Jazz Appreciation societies where

...jazz provides a pretext and catalyst for heightened sociability. Music and dance play a key role in attaining this heightening, but much of the significance of these events lies in the sociomusical institution within which the music is deployed...¹⁷³

Queens, Queers and Pantsula's: Life on Soweto's Queer Scene

There appears to be a daily [sic] high incidence of what we know as the classic queen. This is a phenomenon well-known in under-developed [sic]

¹⁷³ Pyper, "Space, place, sound and sociability," 202.

countries. Even in southern European countries such as Spain, the overtly status-conscious, bitchy, gender-confused queen is a fact of life. In this respect, gay Soweto is ten to fifteen years behind gay Johannesburg (not that status-conscious, bitchy queens don't exist in the latter). Closetry is found everywhere, even in gay shebeens. Many uncamp young men shy away from allowing evidence of their homosexuality slip through. But the majority of male gay Sowetans are not particularly camp and open in their affections in the [shebeens]. The non-gay men and women who have dropped in for a drink seem quite bemused by the same-sex vibe around them. However, the sentiment that an absence of non-gays was more desirable was expressed several times within my hearing.¹⁷⁴

Having established the geographical and musical dimensions of Soweto's queer scene at the time, as well as the social processes through which the scene was navigated and discovered, brief consideration should be given to the 'colour' of the queer cultural practices that took place on the scene. Most of these have already been alluded to - dancing, singing karaoke and sleepovers were all key elements of the scene. This section will briefly examine the relationship between the scene and 'Shebeen Queens' - the women who ran shebeens - as well as fashion and drag, in order to further furnish this chapter with accounts of both relationships between queer and straight people, and the performance of gender on the scene.

The role of shebeen queens in fostering spaces for drinking in townships has been well documented, generally with emphasis placed on the economic function of running a shebeen, the social and political necessity of spaces for drinking under apartheid, and of the long-standing cultural heritage of women as beer-brewers.¹⁷⁵ With MaThoko's iconic status as a mother-like figure to queer people in Kwa-Thema, I assumed that most shebeen queens performed similar functions for members of the queer scene.¹⁷⁶ While Johanna, as mentioned above, did appear to support and engage wholly with the queer scene - going so far as to attend queer funerals - most shebeen queens did not, painting a more complicated relationship between them and their queer patrons: Bongane speaks of the familial and close relationship

¹⁷⁴ Zipps, "From Orlando East on to Chiawelo," AM2723.

¹⁷⁵ Iain Edwards, "Shebeen Queens: Illicit Liquor and the Social Structure of Drinking Dens in Cato Manor," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, No. 3 (1988): 75-97.

¹⁷⁶ John Marnell, "Radical Objects: MaThoko's Post Box & The Birth of the Black LGBT Movement in South Africa," GALA, Published 16 February 2015, <https://gala.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/RADICAL-OBJECTS-Mathokos-postbox.pdf>

that was often developed with Shebeen Queens, who would at times refer to their gay patrons as ‘*Abantwana Bantu*’ - The People’s Children.¹⁷⁷ However, he emphasises the ultimately financial nature of their relationship - “[of course] they loved us, they made money from us!”¹⁷⁸ It appears that, outside of the famous MaThoko and Johanna, Shebeen Queens did not regularly establish networks of support for queer people, outside of helping to provide for some of their social needs. It was not, for example, common for patrons to sleep over at queer Shebeens if it got too late, or for Shebeen Queens to attempt to support queer people who might have been kicked out of their family homes.

So, while the shebeen queens were not necessarily ‘contributing to’ or sustaining the networks of support that emerged from the Shebeens, they were happy to provide the space within which these networks began to become established. However, the Shebeen Queens remained essential to queer life in Soweto - without their willingness to open their shebeens up to queer people, much of the scene would never have existed. This complicated, ambivalent dynamic harkens back, once more, to my argument about participation, rather than intent, defining scene membership. Most shebeen queens were not intentionally working to create spaces of refuge and socialisation for queer people in Soweto, they were merely seeking to keep their businesses profitable. However, their intentions don’t preclude them from becoming important contributors to the scene, and sometimes even becoming queer icons in their own right.

In terms of fashion, both Bongane and Paul speak about the general gay styles of the time avoiding popular trends, and instead emphasising very ‘fancy,’ high-brow fashions such as suits and gowns.¹⁷⁹ It was common for the most fashionable members of the scene to make their own clothing, such as Tshidi, a popular genderqueer¹⁸⁰ person who was loosely involved in GLOW.¹⁸¹ Most significantly, it appears that most people on the scene had their own distinct styles, and the avoidance of trends went so far as to involve not looking similar to one’s own friends.¹⁸² Paul, for example, would primarily wear formal wear, such as suits

¹⁷⁷ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024, Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹⁸⁰ This is the author’s own description, based on interviewee testimonies. The term ‘genderqueer’ has only recently come into use, and would not have been the term Tshidi would have used to describe themselves.

¹⁸¹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹⁸² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

and trench coats, while Bongane himself never gravitated to the sorts of flamboyance and femininity that were popular amongst gay men at the time and instead chose to dress in the style of *MaPantsula*, a popular masculine / gang-related youth subculture of the townships, which remains somewhat popular today.¹⁸³ In our interview, he appears keenly aware of the increased access to straight spaces and authority within queer spaces which his sense of style, and general masculine performance of gender awarded him. He speaks of frequently being confused for a straight man, facing less intimidation on the streets, and being more emboldened in his political efforts as a result. He was thus emboldened to hand out flyers promoting the first Pride March in parks in Soweto, and could do so without much threat of violence.

These accounts of varying sartorial choices represent an important departure from many accounts of fashion and gender performances in queer Soweto at the time, which tend to emphasise the *skesana-injonga* polarity - a continuation of 1960s attitudes towards queerness in Soweto which presumed that ‘passive’¹⁸⁴ gay males were intersex, and thus were expected to perform femininity through crossdressing and the performance of traditionally female gender roles.¹⁸⁵ Certainly, feminine and genderqueer males¹⁸⁶ still existed in Soweto, but the diversity of the performance of both gender and fashion indicates a far more complicated gendered environment in queer Soweto.

The literature on Soweto’s queer social politics up to the 1980s speaks frequently of “mine-wives,” cross-dressing, the inferiority of the ‘submissive’ partner, and exclusivity in sexual roles.¹⁸⁷ As has already been addressed in this chapter, Donald Donham suggests shifts to queer social politics in Soweto around the 1990s - the causative factors he speaks of all link closely to Sinfield’s argument about metropolitanism encouraging a specific model of queer identity.¹⁸⁸ In addition to this, it appears that drag pageants and performances were exceptionally popular and well attended amongst both queer and straight Sowetans. The first Miss GLOW drag pageant was held at Mhlanga Rocks in 1988, and was later held at the

¹⁸³ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

¹⁸⁴ ‘Bottoms,’ or gay men who prefer the receptive role in penetrative sex.

¹⁸⁵ Donham, “Freeing South Africa,” 9; Mclean and Ngcobo, “Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi” 178.

¹⁸⁶ Here, I use ‘male’ to refer to biological sex, rather than the gender identity of being a man. Male as in Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB)

¹⁸⁷ Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom”; Edwards and Epprecht, *Working Class Homosexuality in South African History*; Elder, “Of Moffies, K*ff*rs, and Perverts.”

¹⁸⁸ Donham, “Freeing South Africa.”

Soweto Ipelegeng Community Centre in Jabavu in 1991.¹⁸⁹ By the mid-1980s, “drag shows [had] become the central bonding point of gay township life,” with an average of more than 200 attendees at the annual Miss Glow Pageant in the late 1980s.¹⁹⁰ For one, these pageants seemed to be equally popular with straight attendees, in particular straight women. The Ipelegeng Community Centre would eventually form a long-lasting allyship with queer people in Soweto, becoming the site of the Township Aids Project’s offices, and hosting a number of AIDS conferences including Soweto’s first regional AIDS conference for Lesbian and Gay Men on the 8th of October 1992. By 1992, the pageant had moved to Champions Bar, in Braamfontein.¹⁹¹ The drag pageants that took place in Soweto, and later Braamfontien, would take a similar form to those that took place in New York in the 1970s and 80s, with competitions for best dressed, a question and answer portion, and vogue ‘battles.’¹⁹² Ultimately, by the time of the height of the queer scene in Soweto, the performance of both gender and sexuality was far more diverse and complicated than that of the 1960s, in what Donald Donham calls a process of ‘modernisation.’¹⁹³

Ultimately, much of the social and cultural practices established on Soweto’s queer scene in the 1980s come together to paint a discordant and incoherent picture of life on the scene, precisely due to the embryonic and decentralised nature of the scene. As has been shown both through the music and physical geography of the scene, there was no ‘centralised sociocultural authority’ to direct the scene towards certain practices, or to ensure a level of coherence in practice. The ambiguity of the role of the shebeen queens indicates this discordance - queer shebeens were emerging for the first time, and their owners were free to determine what their role in the queer scene would be. The scene was thus being built through practice rather than design.

In this way, the scene at the time was characterised by a shared desire to assert one’s sexual identity, to find one another and to assert one’s presence in Soweto. By seeking to disobey trends in fashion, queer ‘scenesters’ were all participating in a shared cultural practice, but one which was purposefully visually discordant. Similarly, the expansion, complication and modernisation of gendered and sexual practices in the late 80s reflect a

¹⁸⁹ Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom,” 68.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 68.

¹⁹¹ Ibid 68.

¹⁹² Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024.

¹⁹³ Donham, “Freeing South Africa.”

shared interest in further asserting queer identity, but in such embryonic stages that consensus had not yet been reached. The point here is that the queer scene of the 1980s was so young that uniformity and coherence were impossible to achieve, and thus the scene exists in a historical moment where queer Sowetans were first beginning to assert themselves on venues and social worlds through which queer cultural practice could be explored. From this, and as will be explored in later chapters, they moved on to different social worlds depending on the sort of scene they wished to participate in - from raves and bars to queer churches and political organisations. The queer scene in Soweto is thus an example of initial attempts to build black queer scenes in Gauteng, and reflects early developments in the very process of scene construction.

Conclusion: Towards A 'Scene' in Soweto

Following this chapter's geographical, musicological and cultural overview of queer nightlife spaces in Soweto, the question at the end of this chapter becomes how these spaces contribute to a sense of 'scene' amongst participants. Ostensibly, Soweto's queer residents had access to a vibrant and diverse social life, including impromptu meetings at friend's houses, annual drag pageants and several popular shebeens - "many [were] regularly attended on weekends by several hundred people."¹⁹⁴ As this chapter has shown, Soweto's Queer Scene did not take the form of the sort of Western, archetypal 'gaybourhood' which is most frequently spoken of by sexual geographers today.

Therefore, the turn towards scene theory at the beginning of this dissertation approaches a better description of Soweto's queer nightlife. While music does not feature heavily in the experiences of participants, the shebeens that populated the queer scene still constituted musical communities, soundtracked by Soweto's popular music, furnished by dancing, karaoke, drag shows and rituals of cruising and socialisation. These musical spaces, the shebeens, were essential to community-building but were not necessarily spaces occupied by taste-makers and dancers so much as queer people seeking each other out, connecting over - amongst other things - musical taste, shared identities and cultural practice. In the introduction to this dissertation, I argued that queer scenes are neither entirely musical nor entirely sexual environments, that they exist within the broader contexts of local queer

¹⁹⁴ Mclean and Ngcobo, "Abangibhamayo Bathi Ngimnandi" 178.

cultures and create their own social worlds of signification, which foster social and cultural practice through participation. Importantly, because scenes are not ‘planned,’ people gravitate towards them for different reasons, resulting in a diversity of spaces and practices. Being ‘on the scene’ is thus best understood as knowledge of, and movement through, the different environments that comprise these social worlds.

The ‘proof’ for the existence of a scene, therefore, lies in the very distinctions - drawn by both participants and this chapter - between different social spaces in Queer Soweto: for Bongane to ‘know’ that Wandí’s Place was where older men went to find younger, effeminate sexual partners, or that Mhlanga Rocks was where After-Nines would seek out gender diverse sexual partners, or that Heartbreakers was where young queer disco fans could dance while the sun was up indicates a diversity of choice and a knowledge of the geocultural terrain of the queer scene that confirms its very existence. Similarly, for people to know Johanna would be kind and caring, that Wandí would offer advice to younger queers and that Themba of Mhlanga Rocks would continue to expand the offerings of the shebeen to provide for his clientele (and his fellow queer people), indicates that the scene was ‘run’ by a host of characters who could be known and who contributed in varying ways to the maintenance of the scene’s diversity. For Bongane to say that he was “following the crowd” in Soweto further shows that the scene was maintained by social networks, and that shebeens and home environments served as nodal points for the coming together of these networks throughout the 1980s.

Ultimately, this chapter has explored the histories of a number of queer venues in Soweto, as well as the cultural practices, musical tastes and social activities that resulted in the construction of queer worlds in Soweto. This research contributes in new ways to the existing literature on queer social life by shedding light on the cultural geographies of queer Soweto, while maintaining a close focus on both the history of Soweto and the contribution of queer participants to that history. In doing so, this chapter has gestured towards the insufficiencies of existing formulations of queer social organisation, namely subcultural theory, while suggesting scene as an alternative, which when located in the unique ontological character of Soweto as peri-urban space, shines light on the specific conceptual elements of both scene and subculture which can be used to describe Soweto. The queer scene in Soweto did not take the same form as archetypal queer scenes in more centralised

urban environments of the time, precisely because of the specific historical and geographical context of post-1976 Soweto, but constitutes a scene nonetheless.

Chapter Two:

In Search of Safety and Solidarity: Queer Soweto's Gauteng Social Networks

I remember one or two incidents that happened in Orlando Station and also in Phefeni. We were waiting for a train... and these guys at the station started saying 'Oh! Look at these guys, look at [what] they are wearing, what's wrong with them?' And everyone in the station was laughing, and people were saying comments. So we had to gather together and make sure that... you know if these guys try to do something, that we are there for one another.¹⁹⁵

For Soweto's queer residents, the possibility of harassment or discrimination motivated the development of close-knit social networks as a means of ensuring both safety and solidarity while moving through both Soweto and Johannesburg. While it appears as though acts of violence such as assault or robbery were relatively uncommon, and more likely to happen if someone left a shebeen alone, late at night, the possibility of being identified as queer, and thus facing mockery and intimidation was ubiquitous, informing the mobilities of groups of LGBT people.¹⁹⁶ It is difficult to locate empirical evidence for the levels of violence and intimidation faced by queer people in Soweto at this time, as hate crimes against queer people were not regularly reported or prosecuted. It is, however, worth noting that almost all interviews and archival collections used for this dissertation reference violence, discrimination and intimidation as a part of everyday life for queer Sowetans, whose movements through both Soweto and Johannesburg were influenced by these risks:

Me and my friends were coming from [a friend's apartment] to Skyline Bar. We rushed to the taxis and when we got there, and we felt safe for a moment, all of a sudden the taxi drivers started swearing at us... When we

¹⁹⁵ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, 12 December 2007. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹⁹⁶ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

realised that this thing was serious we decided to keep quiet, but they continued swearing at us. For no reason one of them just spat on me...¹⁹⁷

In a way, when I was a teenager I started [realising] that probably, maybe there might be something wrong with me, and also when - especially in [Soweto], when you had all these hate speeches; [sic] people when they were bashing you, calling you names; hey stabane!¹⁹⁸

Beginning as small circles of friends, with a sensed (if unspoken) shared queer identity, these groups would lay the groundwork for a tradition of grassroots community organisation which would extend as far as political and religious organisation in the following years. From as early as their teenage years, Soweto's queer youth were establishing sociocultural traditions of solidarity building and network maintenance which would aid them in the sustenance of exceptionally broad and far-reaching networks in the late 1980s. This chapter focuses on a number of these social groups, which became essential to the social lives of queer Sowetans, providing a history of their growth, their intentions, and their impact on queer life in both Soweto and Gauteng. Told through the testimonies of several interviewees and archival research, this chapter sheds light on the processes through which an initial need for social groups as a means of ensuring safety and solidarity resulted in the creation of communities of black queer people across Gauteng, as well as the often complicated, conflicting motives affecting them. By exploring social networks of varying scales - from small groups of friends to large organisations such as GLOW or the HUMCC - this chapter will explore the particular social and cultural organisations that sustained the queer social lives of Sowetans in the 1980s and 90s.

Prior to these processes, gay white men in Johannesburg and Durban had already begun to establish traditions of political organisation, largely stemming from the era of political crackdowns on gay men's lives, starting with the 1966 Forest Town Raid, the Immorality Amendment Act of 1969 and later, the Mandy's Christmas Raid of 1979. The result was an increased sense of need to organise amongst gay men, who also had the resources and social statuses to be able to do so. With lesbian women's lives restricted to

¹⁹⁷ Pat, Interviewed by Busi Khweza, 11 June 2003. Black Lesbian Oral History Project. AM 31714 A2.1.1.3: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

¹⁹⁸ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, 12 December 2007

small, insular parties and black queer men largely excluded from these groups the same historical processes motivating for organisation were less present. The 1980s was thus characterised by limited, occasional involvement of lesbians in gay men's organisations, and black men such as Simon Nkoli often being sidelined within groups such as GASA.

By the end of this chapter, a few themes will emerge. Perhaps most compelling is that of a vibrant and multi-layered social life wherein queer Sowetans had relatively easy access to sex, solidarity, and social spaces. In extension of this, it appears that, due to the manner in which these networks offered solidarities, queer Sowetans experienced relatively little fear of legal or political repercussions for their sexualities and mobilities - in contrast, the threat of petty theft and homophobic violence remained prominent, and motivated these uniquely tight social circles. Another key dynamic to note is the interrelated nature of all of the groups discussed in this chapter - while the social groups were distinct from one another, it was common for them to interact and to have shared members. The founding members of the HUMCC, for example, were primarily GLOW members and some members of the informal Ted Dinard Society.

Moreover, it is important to note that this chapter explores the translocality of networks of queer Sowetans in depth - paying close attention to the high degrees of mobility and the broad geographical area across which queer Sowetans began to branch out and build social worlds. This conceptual expansion is significant:

[Translocal scenes] interact with each other through the exchange of recordings, bands, fans and fanzines. While they are local, they are also connected with groups of kindred spirits many miles away... These serve to produce affective communities that transcend the need for [shared spaces] as a necessary requirement for scene membership.¹⁹⁹

This implies that the Sowetan queer scene of the 1980s existed even as its members began to spread throughout the province, eventually establishing significant nodes of queer practices in Hillbrow and most of inner city Johannesburg. Still members of the "affective community" of early queer practice in Soweto, their movements represented the expansion of

¹⁹⁹ Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) 8-9.

the scene, rather than a sort of defection from it. This chapter thus explores these very movements and expansions through the practice of social networking, before the final chapter looks specifically to the scene which groups of queer Sowetans and black queer people from across Gauteng established in Johannesburg in the late 1980s.

Finally, a significant merging of social and political language, practice and motives is apparent in all groups discussed, from interviewees referring to birthday parties as “grassroots political work,” to Lesbian social groups emerging from within GLOW as a response to growing calls for intersectional recognition of the struggles of black queer women.²⁰⁰ Outside of the smallest friend groups, all social networks discussed in this chapter appear to have motivated their existence through political discourse, while continuing to function as primarily social groups. Comprised less so of activists than politically literate queer people, the language of politics became a significant tool in the discussion and expansion of these groups, in a way that reflects a connection to contemporary politics in conflict with a desire for primarily social fulfilment.

However, this chapter does not purely offer a history of these social groups as they emerged and expanded. More generally, this chapter will explore, in a loosely chronological order, the journey of queer Sowetans from insular, localised friend groups in their early queer lives to broad, multi-located social, political and religious organisations in their adulthood. In doing so, this chapter suggests a chronology for the expansion of Soweto’s queer social life into Gauteng and attempts to chart the processes through which it became integrated into the inner-city’s queer world, forming a number of Soweto-facing, Hillbrow-based queer social organisations. At its conclusion, this chapter will have provided an ethnographic overview of the evolution of queer social life from the perspective of queer Sowetans. As a result, this chapter will avoid representing Soweto’s social scene as static, and rather highlight its fluid, evolving nature as it responded to changes in both global and local politics, and moved out of Soweto.

As a result, this chapter begins with an analysis of the Ted Dinard Society (TDS), a small group of friends based in Meadowlands, Soweto. Members of the TDS would go on to be founding members of GLOW, Johannesburg Pride, the Hope and Unity Metropolitan

²⁰⁰ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024; Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

Church (HUMCC), and later, GLOW's Soweto Chapters. Their journey from a small network of friends to an informal support group regularly travelling into Hillbrow illustrates key dynamics in the transformation of queer social lives in Soweto from the relatively embryonic desires for companionship and solidarity, to greater desires to integrate oneself more fully into 'the gay world.' Following that, this chapter will explore three social groups - GLOW, the GLOW Women's Forum and the HUMCC - as they expanded across the province.

The Ted Dinard Society:

Safety and Identity Formation in early queer social networks in Soweto

In their embryonic state, the social networks formed by queer youths in Soweto took the form of relatively small, insular social groups of queer people who would socialise together, moving between neighbourhoods in groups, or meeting in each other's homes. The need for safety from discrimination, and social affirmation for a sensed 'difference' from most teenagers, resulted in a withdrawal from other groups of youths, and the occupation of spaces generally not used in the social lives of young people in Soweto, such as the home environment. Importantly, the early formation of these groups was not exclusively motivated by the risk of violence, but also by more subtle processes of alienation or exclusion from larger groups of students. Rather than the social lives of straight teenagers, which far more commonly took place outside, and were oriented around sports such as tennis or soccer, and popular street games such as *mgusha* and *dibeke*, queer teenagers' social lives were spent inside, in temporarily queered spaces such as living rooms.²⁰¹

...we would hang out in our own spaces... we would have these little parties. And sometimes they would come to my house and we would have a party and go and buy food and drinks and just stay there and chat all together... We would sort of rotate and know that today they are coming to my place and so it's gonna be a day-party and we would be together. And they would play music and do all sorts. But all of us, when it's 17:00 we must start packing and we must start cleaning the house... And I used to laugh because all of us we had to have something to do, because now if I am cleaning the dishes quickly; Tshidi must scrub the floors, the other one must

²⁰¹ Mgusha is a game where people jump in between a string made of pantyhose tied together; Dibeke is a ball game played in equal teams which alternate between kicking and catching.

put on polish, the other one looking for six o'clock that if my mom comes here at six she must just find the house clean.²⁰²

Not unlike straight friend groups, these networks emerged through shared values and physical proximity. However, they were uniquely guided by a sense of shared queerness, even if one's sexuality had not been fully 'realised' at the time:

I started [noticing] this guy [from school] and he was always a sissy... But I then started realising that I might also be different because probably I act most similar like him...I started getting to know him a bit and getting close to him... So we ended up becoming friends. So after school we would go to my grandmother's house and just spent time together. And then from there I would then take him home, or I would go to his and just spend time... We never talked about [being gay,] but we just understood that we were both different.²⁰³

At once both outcasts and wishing to cast themselves 'further out' into a queer world, groups of queer Sowetans would come together in amorphous and fluid ways, rarely self-describing each other as queer, but rather reading into one another's behaviours, dress styles and accents to identify queer opportunity. In a dynamic labelled by Mark Gevisser as "*before-five, rather than after-nine,*" the home environment thus became a key space for the development of these social networks, both in youth and adulthood.²⁰⁴ These temporary home environments became safe havens for queer socialisation, furnished by the distribution of queer media such as newsletters, books and cassettes. The consumption and discussion of queer media became essential for the fostering of a queer consciousness amongst these social groups and had significant influences on the cultural and social practices they would take on as they began to move out of the home. Tshidi, one of the group's members, idolised Boy George, while Bongane maintained a years-long fascination with Sylvester, the American genderqueer disco vocalist.²⁰⁵ Further, Paul Mokgethi-Heath speaks of 'gay magazines'

²⁰² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁰³ Ibid

²⁰⁴ Mark Gevisser, Interview with Paul Mokgethi Heath, 12 December 2007. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁰⁵ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

produced both locally (likely Link/Skakel) and internationally being distributed amongst the group as a form of early conscientisation. In this light, Paul's social group would take on the name "the Ted Dinard Society", after a gay character in the popular soap opera, *Dynasty*. This character was killed in a fight with his lover's father, a story which Paul claims resonated with the group,

...because of the tragedy that happened at the end [of his story and] feeling sorry for Ted and now [his lover] being alone... So we said that has sort of a meaning for us that as gay people we are always not accepted. Our families have got issues with our sexuality, even with the people that we might [expect to] be safe [with].²⁰⁶

The TDS consisted of about 9 people, mostly from Meadowlands, who came together over their shared sense of being 'different' - identified by their shared mannerisms, flamboyant fashion styles, and rejection by straight social groups.²⁰⁷ In its embryonic form, it was the social group that both Alpha and Bongane interacted with on the Soweto scene. By 1983, Bev Ditsie had joined the group and Paul had left high school. The group was slowly beginning to explore Hillbrow and would meet monthly in their families' homes. Conversations were furnished with gossip, 'boy-talk' and discussions about queer life generally. By this time, they no longer felt the need to be finished by 17:00 and would speak more openly with their parents about their friend groups, having also largely come to terms with their sexualities.

Most of us had already accepted ourselves and we knew that, no all of us, we're gay here and some of the guys were even open about their own sexuality even to their families... [There were about ten of us] and now we also had a woman, Bev was there as well. So we needed to have a bit of structure.²⁰⁸

Although most of their time together was spent simply 'hanging out,' the group began to function as a support group, having decided that they needed to operate with more

²⁰⁶ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

²⁰⁷ Ibid

²⁰⁸ Ibid

‘structure’. At times, money would be shared to ensure that everyone could attend the same parties, that they could all get to inner-city Johannesburg together, and that everyone could celebrate their birthdays by pooling resources for a *braai*, for example. By 1985, the group began to regularly travel to the Carlton Centre in Johannesburg, always “picking each other up until [they were] all together” and then taking a train from either Orlando or Phefeni Station.²⁰⁹ Here once again, the need for safety and travelling in groups encouraged a more substantial group presence in the inner city, emboldening the TDS to explore gay clubs such as the Butterfly Bar. With these increased forays into Hillbrow, the TDS took a more ‘organised’ and political character. Many of the group’s members were beginning to hear rumours of the formation of GLOW and were beginning to develop political consciousnesses which fed into the groups’ conversations and activities.

Their large presence when moving through Hillbrow would embolden them to seek out more information about the ‘gay city,’ despite their youth and racial difference from the majority of Hillbrow’s residents. Similarly to how the group could claim space on trains or throughout Soweto, they could do so in Hillbrow. This boldness would eventually lead to them becoming regulars at the predominantly white Butterfly Bar, where they would be handed flyers regarding the formation of GLOW, and hear rumours about Simon Nkoli - the black gay activist who had been arrested in the Delmas Treason Trial. Having learnt that other black queer people were moving through the queer city, they became even further emboldened, and many members of the TDS decided to attend GLOW’s first meetings, integrating themselves into much larger and more diverse social networks.

In a similar manner to the TDS, other queer social groups were emerging for a variety of participants in the 1980s. For Bongane, a small group of queer shebeen regulars became his regular social circle, and they would develop rituals such as attending weekly Sunday drag shows at Mhlanga Rocks. Lerato’s queer social world only came to fruition in Johannesburg when she began attending Wits University and was structured almost entirely around late-night dancing at clubs, house parties and warehouse raves. Edgar, an older man, would move through both Soweto and Johannesburg with a nameless group of queer men, who, around the 1960s and 70s, appeared to have sustained a much looser network of support. Edgar’s social world has been discussed in more depth in the previous chapter, and

²⁰⁹ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

serves as an important example of the embryonic traditions of networking that existed before the time of the TDS.

Ultimately, while the origins of social circles such as the TDS were relatively natural, they were subconsciously motivated by a need to share space with people who were similarly 'different' from most people. The consumption of queer media became a key process in establishing queer social identity, and, crucially, began to motivate Soweto's queer networks to look outwards - either towards queered shebeens or the gay inner-city. In this process, when queer youths' social worlds began to venture out of the home environment, a more urgent and needs-based imperative for maintaining these networks would make itself clear - primarily as a response to the aforementioned risks of socialising alone as a queer black person. With these movements 'out of home,' social groups found themselves opened up to sexual or political opportunities, which enabled a further realisation of gay life within both Soweto and the inner city.

Soweto in GLOW. GLOW in Soweto:
Social and Political Organisation in Gauteng

...It was [just] a space where you could meet other people, and where you could just talk about other things.²¹⁰

As small, locally-contained social networks such as the TDS began to move outwards, expanding both their ranks and physical reach, they invariably came into contact with the broader political and social worlds of queer life in Gauteng, most clearly centred on the inner city. Through this process of reaching out into broader queer worlds, groups such as Paul's and Bongane's came into contact with GLOW at different stages of its development. At the beginning of my research, I questioned the extent to which GLOW could be understood as a solely political entity. Because its history has been largely recorded as that of political activism, a substantial portion of the literature on GLOW appears to assume that those who attended and participated in GLOW activities were all coming together under shared political intentions, rather than for various, often competing, reasons.²¹¹ At the very least, work has yet

²¹⁰ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²¹¹ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom"; Botes, "The Pink Inner-City"; Botes, "The Great Lesbian Monster Show"; Shaun De Waal and Karen Martin. "Simon Nkoli's prison letters to Roy Shepherd" in *Till the*

to be done to explore the social function of GLOW in any particular depth. What follows in this section is both an oral history of coming to know GLOW from the perspective of queer Sowetans and an exploration of GLOW's function as a social network in itself.

GLOW is perhaps the most famous queer organisation in South African history - its role in founding the first Pride March in Africa on 13 October 1990, its high-profile members such as Bev Ditsie and Simon Nkoli, and its broad reach across Gauteng made it an essential and unavoidable aspect of gay South African life in the 1990s. Every interviewee speaks of GLOW in some capacity, regardless of the extent of their involvement in GLOW - indicating its ubiquity and central role in the fostering of a queer scene in Gauteng.

Paul was first exposed to GLOW in its embryonic form at the Butterfly Bar in Hillbrow in 1986, where he heard rumours of, and was given flyers about, a group of gay men organising a political group.²¹² He and other members of the TDS decided to attend a meeting at Wits University, motivated primarily by the desire to understand what other gay people are speaking about and what their social culture is, rather than by an explicitly political desire to organise. Paul's time at early meetings, and at the launch of GLOW at Lee's Place in Orlando in 1988, was largely spent socially - he met his first boyfriend at a GLOW meeting, drank, met new people and began to integrate himself into a multi-racial queer community. It wasn't until 1989, with early conversations about GLOW members potentially convening the first pride march in Africa, that Paul felt as though his time at GLOW was truly a political activity.

And I think for me when I started becoming politically minded and being aware of really what was happening, it was in 1989 when we were now starting to talk about why can't we have a march where people can come and... be in the open and talk about political issues; how about now, challenging the government and talking about homosexuality...²¹³

Similarly, Khadija, a lesbian woman who moved to Johannesburg from Cape Town in the early 1990s, was attracted to GLOW through its women's forum, primarily as a way to

time of Trial: The prison letters of Simon Nkoli, ed. Shaun de Waal and Karen Martin. (Johannesburg: GALA, 2007)

²¹² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²¹³ Ibid

find queer friends in a new city.²¹⁴ She first saw the forum advertised in the classifieds section of the Mail and Guardian, and quickly became a regular attendee at their Saturday afternoon meetings. While the meetings of the forum did contain discussions of violence against lesbians and gays and their position within broader political movements, Khadija remembers them quickly turning into social gatherings and a way to network with other lesbians. For Khadija, while the ‘colour’ of these meetings was political, they primarily existed as opportunities for socialisation.²¹⁵ The people she met through this group quickly became her friends, and she would regularly go to cinemas or on picnics with them, outside of GLOW meetings. They would sometimes go clubbing at venues such as Champions in Braamfontein, but it seems as though her social circle had a preference for house parties, which would regularly draw 60-70 people.²¹⁶ Infrequently, she would attend house parties and braais at houses in Soweto, alongside other members of the lesbian forum.

Bongane however, was introduced to GLOW in the late 1980s by Paul, who had since become far more integrated into the group’s activities. Bongane, as a more politically motivated participant in the scene, was drawn to the character of Simon Nkoli, and recounts their first meeting with reverence, explaining that meeting Simon had a sort of instant impact on him, leading him to quickly become involved in organising the first Pride March and expanding GLOW into Soweto.²¹⁷ Although GLOW performed both a social and political function for Bongane, he was far more drawn to the activist elements of the group than mere socialisation.²¹⁸ In part, this was likely due to his early exposure to activism as a participant in the 1976 Soweto Uprisings, as well as his close friendship with Simon Nkoli, who was by far one of the most politically active and influential members of GLOW throughout the 1980s and 90s.

Ultimately, these three testimonies highlight conflicting intentions for involvement in GLOW - at once both a social group and political organisation. People came to GLOW looking for various things, and used the organisation to achieve various individual and collective goals, which varied from mere kinship and sex to large-scale political activism. This dynamic does not seem to be unique to GLOW - Lerato, who only briefly engaged with

²¹⁴ Khadija, Interview by Author, 29 April 2024.

²¹⁵ Ibid

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

²¹⁸ Ibid

GLOW, highlighted a similar dynamic with SHOC - the Society of Homosexuals on Campus, at Wits University, which she claims “lacked... political credence” and was largely a space for networking and hookups.²¹⁹ Invariably, social networks such as GLOW (and even SHOC) had micropolitical impacts - the fostering of communities of support, of spaces to find and interact with other LGBTQ+ people in the context of repressive legislation is an important cornerstone of grassroots political organisation. However, the processes of integrating oneself into GLOW, and of the mixed intentions of GLOW members, have yet to be explored in any depth, running the risk of misrepresenting the realities of GLOW as an organisation.

Rather than arbitrarily separating social and political activity, the above argument highlights the social processes which enabled GLOW to create far broader social worlds than a small clique of vigilant political activists. This broad network was occasionally mobilised for political ends, but my argument highlights the importance of such networks as grassroots political and social work, worthy of appreciation in their own right. By foregrounding social processes such as networking, community-building, ad hoc support for one another, the sharing of queer media, and even gossip, flirting and sex, the lived realities of GLOW are made more clear - as sustained by continuous social work, rather than by ‘big political events’ which are so frequently recorded as constitutive of GLOW’s history.

Importantly, these social and political images of GLOW did not exist uncontested or passively in the same spaces. There was certainly a political ‘core’ to GLOW, and its politically-minded members actively worked to encourage political action amongst the less political, broader circle of GLOW’s social network. In the early 1990s, Bongane and Bev Ditsie were tasked with expanding GLOW Chapters into Soweto, ultimately establishing groups in Meadowlands, Pimville and White City/Jabavu amongst others, indicative of an awareness amongst GLOWs political ‘core’ that the maintenance of diverse social networks was essential to their goals.²²⁰ While these groups would frequently come together under the banner of ‘GLOW Soweto,’ they also operated and met separately at times. Here, the dual social/political function of GLOW chapters is most clear - while these groups were ostensibly ‘chapters’ which organised and met independently, their activities largely consisted of

²¹⁹ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024; SHOC differentiated itself from the Wits Gay Moment which was primarily a white gay social movement, and focused on educating and conscientising the Black Student Movement and the National Union of South African Students. SHOC worked with GLOW often, and contributed to the Pride planning committee.

²²⁰ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

relatively inconsistent/occasional social gatherings, instead of structured, organisational meetings. Rather than discrete political organisations, these GLOW chapters functioned as social groups which were frequently mobilised for joint political and social benefits. Bongane describes these social events, most frequently birthday parties, as a form of strategic grassroots organisation. While Paul only vaguely speaks to the pseudo-social nature of GLOW prior to the first pride march, Bongane appears to have ‘weaponised’ this dynamic in the pursuit of significant political objectives: primarily, the coaxing-out of ostensibly politically disengaged queers (such as After Nines) into social settings, within which he could begin to speak about queer politics. As Tanya says,

The focus of GLOW was political education through networking.²²¹

While ‘apolitical’ queers might avoid a traditional GLOW meeting, they would happily attend a party, which was rife with sexual opportunity. These parties appear to have been situated in the middle of a sort of socio-sexual economy wherein the more effeminate gay men who appreciated the activism of GLOW would gladly attend any party celebrating a GLOW member, subsequently attracting the After-Nines and bi-curious men who sought to take them home for the night. Further, the emphasis placed on the social function of these chapters enabled their rapid growth - while they might ‘launch’ with only 10 people, the chapters would quickly expand to include a wide array of both consistent and occasional participants. However, as alluded to, these parties were neither purely social nor political - political conversations would take place alongside gossip and small talk, Simon Nkoli would often bring European journalists along, and birthday speeches were frequently used as an opportunity for incitement: at his own birthday, Bongane began by saying:

I am an activist. I am fighting against apartheid. I am fighting against Homophobia. *Stabane* or not.²²²

So, while GLOW appears to have primarily functioned socially, politically savvy members were able to strategically navigate these social worlds to further the political intentions of GLOW. Certainly, members such as Bongane joined for primarily political reasons, and their relationship to GLOW and its social function was thus somewhat different -

²²¹ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

²²² Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

however, it appears as though, for the most part, the politics came secondarily to what was essentially a powerful, geographically broad social network of gays and lesbians.

By the early 1990s, however, this strategic merging of the social and political spaces created by GLOW had an unintended side effect. As a political character, former GLOW president, and a prominent activist, it had become nearly impossible for Bongane to socialise without hearing about the troubles facing queer people in both Soweto and Hillbrow. His social world had become inextricably tied to the political needs of others, such that night's out were spent hearing about traumatic, heavy issues such as corrective rape and violence, ultimately leading Bongane to withdraw from nightlife spaces altogether. In the same vein, Khadija notes that towards the mid-1990s GLOW began to fragment, as core members such as Bongane and Paul began to move away or involve themselves more heavily in other political organisations, such as Simon's involvement in the Township AIDS Project.²²³ She claims that the mutual desire to socialise and foster networks is what kept the last generation of GLOW members together, as it began to transform into an informal, less active organisation. She remembers, through her involvement with POWA (People Opposing Woman Abuse), regularly running into GLOW members at conferences or meeting them out at birthday parties - "whatever was happening, you'd see GLOW people."²²⁴ Ultimately, even as GLOW began to fracture and lose its political 'might,' the tradition of network building sustained its last generation, highlighting the significance of the social worlds it was compelled to build in order to achieve its political aims.

The GLOW's Women's Forum and Black Lesbian Social Networks in Gauteng

Looking more specifically towards lesbian social lives, historical accounts of (predominantly white) lesbian life in Johannesburg exist from as early as the 1950s, shedding light on social worlds which primarily centred around private house parties.²²⁵ On the whole, before the 1970s, lesbian social worlds tended to be exceptionally private, insular, and politically disengaged. Sexual geographers have often turned to essentialist descriptions of female homosexuality to explain the dearth of lesbian spatial and political organisation in the mid 1900s, arguing that:

²²³ Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 19.

Women have rarely had... territorial aspirations: their world attaches more importance to relationships and their networks are ones of solidarity and affection. In this gay men behave first and foremost as men and lesbians as women. So when gay men try to liberate themselves from cultural and sexual oppression, they need a physical space from which to strike out. Lesbians on the other hand tend to create their own rich, inner world and a political relationship with higher, societal levels.²²⁶

While somewhat problematic in its assertion that lesbian women don't *desire* queer spaces, the above argument does highlight a form of gendered chronology in the spatial realisation of queer communities, and suggests that spatial organisation might begin with gay male communities, and only later become available for lesbian involvement. In contrast, Mark Gevisser argues that this was largely motivated by gendered class dynamics - while male 'bachelors' could be tolerated, single women could not, and those single women with jobs relied heavily on their employment as a means to social independence.²²⁷ Thus, the risk of being fired for being a lesbian was life-threatening, and prevented lesbian women from becoming public figures, activists, or even socially outgoing.

In this vein, by the mid-1980s, with transformations to gender relations more broadly, lesbian women slowly began to integrate themselves into the increasingly visible political and social lives of gay men. While oral histories of the process of women joining these organisations are still inaccessible, surveys conducted by Graeme Reid in 1996 of HUMCC members indicates that lesbian women (and especially those from Soweto) were far more involved in a wide array of LGBTQ+ organisations than their gay male counterparts by the late 1990s - almost every lesbian surveyed was a GLOW member, with many also involved in the Gay Archives, Pride Planning Committee, and Transvaal Organisation of Gay Sports.²²⁸ In stark contrast to the isolation of the 1960s, by the 1990s lesbian women were

²²⁶ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 140, cited in Tamar Rothenburg, "And She Told Two Friends": Lesbians Creating Urban Social Space" in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 152.

²²⁷ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 22.

²²⁸ Surveys Conducted by Graeme Reid, June 1996. GAL 0037: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

claiming space publically, and within the conflicting gendered and sexual dynamics of predominantly gay male organisations.

Thus, by the 1990s, lesbian organisational networks began to integrate into larger male organisation such as GLOW and the HUMCC, with the expressly political intentions of carving out increasing spaces for visibility and solidarity. In contrast to Bev Ditsie merely joining the TDS in the late 1980s, lesbian women began to organise more directly for distinct and autonomous social worlds within the overarchingly male queer worlds of Johannesburg. These networks seemed to emerge more commonly among adult women, and less emphasis was placed in interviews on the development of a lesbian consciousness through these groups - rather, they were places lesbians went to find each other, having already come to terms with their lesbian identities.

Without the Women's Group and GLOW, I would have been very alone moving to Jo'burg.²²⁹

The most significant of these moves towards lesbian organisation was the GLOW Women's Forum, an oft-overlooked offshoot of GLOW which was specifically oriented towards the discussion of lesbian experiences. Officially founded in 1991, and primarily composed of white, middle-class women, the group faced much resentment from GLOW in its early years, with reactionary gay men claiming that the women were fostering division within the organisation.²³⁰ As a result, the Women's Forum officially separated from GLOW in the latter half of 1993.²³¹

The lesbian social groups that emerged in Gauteng at this time were "definitely insular [and contained] a core group."²³² Years later, when a younger generation of lesbians joined the Lesbian Forum, they struggled to integrate into the existing group. Similarly, when Khadija joined the forum in 1991, she noticed an older group of lesbians with whom she felt like she couldn't relate to. She remembers that navigating the gay scene as a lesbian opened her up to far more conflicts over class, race and safety and that lesbians had to "operate"

²²⁹ Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

²³⁰ Botes, "The Great Lesbian Monster Show," 3.

²³¹ Ibid, 2

²³² Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

differently in the gay scene, largely avoiding clubs.²³³ Despite her quite rapid integration into GLOW and other activist networks such as POWA, she (and the friends she made through the Women's Forum) never visited Marshalltown and preferred to remain part of a relatively insular, day-focused social group of primarily lesbian women.

Around 1992 Tanya Chan-Sam, a lesbian woman from Cape Town, joined the GLOW Women's Forum with the intention of shifting the focus from Hillbrow, as a response to the successful movement of GLOW's 'male' chapters into Soweto.²³⁴ Tanya, who served as the vice-president of GLOW when Bongane was president, thus began to visit Soweto more frequently for chapter meetings in the form of braais and house parties. Tanya mentions that this older generation of lesbians was far less willing to attend events in Soweto, and didn't seem interested in interacting with the younger lesbians who were attempting to transform the Women's Forum.²³⁵

Of the comparative politics of lesbian and gay GLOW members, Tanya says that the formal Women's Group lagged behind, and remained largely elite and Johannesburg-centric, even while the men's chapters were successfully evolving in Soweto. Although some women from different groups would strike up friendships and exchange books or music, these relationships don't appear to have ever resulted in long-term integration between groups of lesbians within GLOW. In its early years, the Women's Forum remained primarily white and suffered from internal cliques which created barriers to cross-racial and class solidarities.

They had houses, [and] different class and racial positions. They just did not integrate [and there was] no real solidarity.²³⁶

From this, Tanya explains that there was a growing sense with the Women's Forum that a (loosely) separate Black Lesbian forum was necessary, resulting in an increased movement of this younger generation of Lesbians into Soweto to establish 'black lesbian chapters.'²³⁷ This was likely due to the increased danger that lesbian women faced when

²³³ Khadija, Interview by Author. 29 April 2024.

²³⁴ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

²³⁵ Ibid

²³⁶ Ibid

²³⁷ Ibid

moving through both Soweto and Johannesburg. Especially in Soweto, she claims, it was important for lesbian women to integrate themselves into relatively insular, large groups of queer women for their safety. Further, many Shebeens in Soweto did not allow women to drink there alone, as the assumption was that single women in shebeens were sex workers.

However, the gendered and racialized dynamics which were causing internal conflict between white lesbians and lesbians of colour were also at play in how GLOW related to both women's groups. Tanya provides many insights on the evolving gender and racial dynamics of both GLOW and the Women's Forum, explaining that at its inception, the Women's Forum was implicitly expected to perform a gendered role of support for larger GLOW events.

[I had to say] we're not the triangle sandwich brigade... Egg Mayonnaise sandwiches? What!²³⁸

Not only does this highlight the internal gender dynamics of GLOW, and the possibly diminutive light in which queer women were viewed at times by the larger GLOW group, but it also highlights cultural and racial expectations which were placed on GLOW in subtle, yet still damaging ways. Tanya claims she had to defend the decision to cater a Black Lesbian Forum event in Soweto with *Pap en Vleis*, rather than the sort of foods which the predominantly white Women's Forum might have supplied at meetings in Hillbrow.²³⁹

The black lesbian forum pushed for continued visibility within larger GLOW events, for example, performing as a group at GLOW's annual drag pageant, which was apparently the most popular event of the year amongst the Lesbian community.²⁴⁰ She explains that the growth of the Black Women's Forum relied heavily on word of mouth, which she admits might have contributed to the emergence of cliques. However, in spite of this process of increased integration and visibility, by the 2000s, many black lesbians still preferred the insular, and secluded lives of lesbians of previous decades:

²³⁸ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

²³⁹ Ibid

²⁴⁰ Ibid

[The harassment I faced in Johannesburg] affected me such that I don't trust a man and as a woman I know that I should not go out at night because I'll be the first target. So I try to be home in time. You might get me wrong but I feel that all these horrible things that are happening are done by men. I don't think it was women who climbed a ladder and stole in my house, so I will say 99% of these horrible things that are happening are because of men.²⁴¹

All my friends are lesbians, we meet at the ritual ceremonies and that help[s] us to be together and we are able to use the ancestors... We meet in parties and have fun. We are planning house parties because many nightclubs are closing down in Jo'burg... I want to open a ladies club some day... And we should take turns in organising these parties. And it is open for every lesbian whether you are a sangoma or not...²⁴²

In both the 1990s and 2000s, other forms of social groups, most notably sports teams, provided valuable alternatives for lesbian women who wanted to stay out of the predominantly male and political worlds of gay organisations such as GLOW, while remaining connected to a lesbian community. Participants with political backgrounds speak of these sports teams as relatively apolitical, exclusively social and “unstimulating.”²⁴³ These discussions continued into the late 1990s, as evidenced by the formation of *Nkateko*, “a short-lived organisation for black lesbian, bisexual and transgendered gay women in Gauteng. It was founded in 1996 by Beverley Palesa Ditsie and the group had a strong presence at the 1997 Johannesburg Pride...”²⁴⁴ *Nkateko*'s members came from “...Soweto, East Rand, Kwa Thema, Vosloorus, Berea, Hillbrow, City centre, [and] Yeoville,” who mostly met in the inner city.²⁴⁵ *Nkateko* dissolved roughly 18 months after its founding, and doesn't seem to have made a lasting impact on the social lives of lesbians at the time. Excerpts from *Nkateko* newsletters do, however, provide insights into the attitudes of members at the time.

²⁴¹ Pat, Interviewed by Busi Khweza, 11 June 2003. Black Lesbian Oral History Project. AM 31714 A2.1.1.3: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁴² Ndlovu, Interviewed by Nkunzi Nkabinde, Date Unknown (circa. 2003) AM31714 A2.1.2.2: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁴³ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024

²⁴⁴ *Nkateko* Collection Notes. AM2661: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁴⁵ *Nkateko*: Serving the needs of Black Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Gay women in Gauteng. (Pamphlet). AM2661: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

...I have noticed, however, that the numbers at social gatherings organised by Nkateko exceed, by far, the number of people that come to meetings to engage in discussion about the shape that the organisation needs to take. In my opinion, as black lesbians we need to party as hard as we can but we also need to show the same amount, or better still, more enthusiasm to, tackle head on the problems that stare at us from one day to another.²⁴⁶

When I first heard about Nkateko I thought 'lesbians all over the place, oh my God!' I guess at first I just wanted to meet more people like me so as to exchange ideas and make friends... I have realised that much work needs to be done within the organisation including marketing it which is what I am doing right now.²⁴⁷

...since I joined the organisation, it has become an eye opener for me... My social life was full but now its so exciting, I have met very interesting individuals who indulge me in conversation on topics that I have never debated before...²⁴⁸

In a similar manner to GLOW, it appears that most members joined in search of a broader social network into which they could integrate, once again at the sensed expense of political 'credence.' Ultimately, the lesbian social networks of Johannesburg and Soweto paint a complicated picture, caught somewhere in the middle of global chronologies of lesbian social organisations as they relate to overarchingly male gay social worlds. While attempts at organisation in the form of a GLOW Women's Forum did take place, they were largely dominated by cliques of wealthier, older women, while simultaneously subjected to the gendered expectations of gay men within GLOW. Further, attempts to integrate more substantially into Soweto resulted in further rifts within the Women's Forum. The result was a lesbian social world for queer Sowetans which appears to have remained relatively stagnant and insular across the period of the 1960s - 2000s. An apparent dichotomy had appeared by the 1990s, where lesbian social worlds still primarily relied on either unsatisfactory

²⁴⁶ Nkateko News (August 1997). Disgruntled Lesbo, Meadowlands: Letter to Editor. Page 3. AM 2661: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁴⁷ Nkateko News (August 1997) Buyi Kubheka, Letter to Editor. Page 3, AM2661: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁴⁸ Nkateko News (August 1997) Goitsimang, Letter to Editor. Page 4, AM2661: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

integration into male worlds, or relative isolation from the queer majority altogether. This exploration of the discourses at play in the formation and expansion highlights important discussions about the intersectional experiences of black lesbians in Soweto, and the attempts made to create lesbians social worlds which better cater for them. Importantly, while the Black Lesbian Forum did exist, it appears that most of GLOW's womens activities continued to take place in Johannesburg, and thus required increased risk and mobilities from Sowetan women who wished to take part.

*Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church:
Queer Religious Networks in the Inner City.*

...the HUMCC is not only a church. It is a total lifestyle advice centre for the growing number of black people who are leaving the rural areas and townships, and coming to Johannesburg - and Hillbrow in particular - to experience life in the 'big city'... A great number of our followers come to Hillbrow after they have been kicked out of home because of their sexual orientation, and the fact that they have fled to Hillbrow often means that they are alone and in need of comfort and counselling.²⁴⁹

While the HUMCC was located in Hillbrow, it was a popular focal point for black LGBT people all across Gauteng - of a survey of 34 HUMCC members in 1996, only 9 were residents of Johannesburg's inner city, while 11 were either residents or former residents of Soweto.²⁵⁰ The overwhelming majority of these respondents cited the HUMCC as their primary venue for socialising with other queer people, with the Skyline and Champions Bar in second and third place.²⁵¹ Limited respondents from Soweto mention either *stokvels*, funeral associations or the home environment, as well as the cinema. A number of respondents cited additional affiliation with either GLOW or GALA (which at this time was known as the Gay Library.) Clearly, the HUMCC, in a similar manner to GLOW, offered an intentional combination of social and political support for queer black youths which provided for possible gaps in their queer lives.

²⁴⁹ Quote from Tsietsi Thandekiso in Unknown Author, "Tsietsi Thandekiso: A Man of the People", Outright Vol 3 Issue 3, April 1996. AM2733 C1: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁵⁰ Surveys Conducted by Graeme Reid, June 1996. GAL 0037: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁵¹ Ibid; A number of respondents generically stated "clubs" or "bars."

The following exploration of the HUMCC's history, despite its geographical distance from Soweto, highlights important dynamics in community and solidarity-building, the construction of support networks, and the translocality of the Soweto queer scene. Founded in 1993 out of Paul and Bongane's shared desire to discuss their religious and sexual lives, and likely also out of a desire to rekindle the sort of social networks they had established in Soweto (which by this time had likely been lost to GLOWs intense political activity of the early 1990s), the HUMCC began as a small group of queer black people who would meet at Paul and Bongane's shared apartment in Berea.²⁵²

And basically, when we started the group it was all about support as well. And also trying to find out about our own religions and our own issues, the battles that we are faced with; and you know our struggles with our Christianity and our own selves as well... So we would meet... once in a while on Sunday afternoon; and we would talk and just find out how was your week? What were the challenges? How was work and what are your issues or your problems? And we would also share problems... that we shared in our own churches that Sunday morning.²⁵³

The group grew quickly, and by 1994 there were roughly 18-20 people who would regularly meet and discuss their lives within the context of a religious support group for LGBT people. The fact that, within a year, the group could expand to this size is reflective, again, of the key role that different social networks played in providing queer black people access to queer cultural life. By this stage, the group would rotate between different apartments, which had become untenable due to the number of attendees. After hearing that there was a disused meeting hall on the second floor of the Harrison Reef Hotel building - where the Skyline was located - the group asked if they could use their space, having already established a good relationship with the manager due to their regular patronage of the bar. In spite of management's warnings that the space was small and dilapidated, they moved their group to the space, cleaned and repaired it, and began to use it for a nominal fee. Towards the

²⁵² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁵³ Ibid

end of 1994, realising that demand for an LGBTQ+ religious community was increasing, they began to search for a pastor to guide the group:

...we saw that this group now is really really getting stronger and becoming... big, so we said, 'Now what are we going to do? We are not pastors, we are not... we've just been following... We need to have a structure and we really need to know what is happening.'²⁵⁴

Around this time, an Anglican minister, Brother Tsietsi Thandekiso had begun to integrate himself into Hillbrow's queer social world, and had become a regular at the Skyline on the weekends, already popular amongst regulars as someone to speak to about their personal issues.

So somebody said, did you know that Bro. Tsietsi is a priest? ... So I then approached him with [Bongane]. We said, Bro. Tsietsi we have started this group now and we meet here at the... hotel... So we would like to invite you to come and see what we're doing. And then one Sunday afternoon he came and fellowshiped with us... And then afterwards [he] started coming regularly as well. So then we asked him... how about leading us now as you are a minister, even though you are not practising your ministry now... So then by the end of '94, he agreed.

From the end of 1994 onwards, Brother Tsietsi became the leading pastor of the group. In 1996, the group became affiliated with the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, a denomination of LGBT-affirming Protestant Churches, and took the name the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC). In 1997, Brother Tsietsi passed away from AIDS-related illness, and Paul took over leadership. That same year the manager of the Harrison Reef Hotel offered the 7th-floor ballroom to the HUMCC, allowing the church to distance themselves from the Skyline and establish their 'legitimacy' as a religious group. They further attempted to do so by changing their meeting times from 5pm on Sundays to 11am.

²⁵⁴ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

However, Paul remembers there being distinct benefits from the period between 1994 and 1997 when the church was located just one floor above the Skyline. Curious gay men, unsure why or to what extent the HUMCC was operating as a religious community would frequently ‘wander up’ from the Skyline, to look, to potentially cruise, or to take a break from the club itself.²⁵⁵ He remembers a specific man, David, who would frequently get very drunk and wander into the group’s hall and fall asleep while Bro. Tsietsi was preaching. One Sunday, he arrived sober, and testified that his life had been changed by his exposure to the religious community, welcomed in spite of his intoxication, and subsequently returned to following services as a participant. In this way, Paul remembers being above the Skyline as a form of outreach or community service that the group was able to provide to the Skyline’s patrons. On Saturdays, members of the group would drink in the Skyline and proselytise, welcoming patrons to sleep overnight at the Skyline after it closed and to join their service the following day.

By 1995, the HUMCC had evolved into a fully-fledged hub of black queer life in Gauteng, and thus deeply ingrained in ongoing discourses about queer cultural and social practices at the time. Graeme Reid recounts that in June that year, a visiting member from Durban suggested that the HUMCC put on ‘*umamma*’ classes for the *skesana*’s in the church, with the intention of teaching them how to “be more appropriately and attractively effeminate in ways which would encourage their masculine partners (*injongas*) to be more faithful to them.”²⁵⁶ This suggestion was ultimately rejected by the HUMCC, but is an important reflection of a very particular historical moment in the evolution of queer cultural practices in Gauteng at the time. While the “*skesana-injonga* polarity” remained popular in Durban, and some townships such as Soweto in the mid-1990s, it was coming to be seen as increasingly conservative and out-of-date. In rejecting the suggestion, the HUMCC - an urban, progressive organisation - was partaking in evolving dialogues about black queer culture, a role it had been coming into since its founding. The church, founded with the discourses of queer liberation politics in mind, by active members of GLOW such as Cecil and Paul, thus became a network for the mediation of various different gendered and sexual discourses over the 1990s - a process that invariably informed the transformations spoken of in Donald Donham’s

²⁵⁵ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁵⁶ Graeme Reid, *Above the Skyline: Reverend Tsietsi Thandekiso and the founding of an African gay church*. (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010) 73.

account of evolving homosexual cultural practices in Soweto.²⁵⁷ Graeme Reid's chapter "Guys, until Friday!" speaks more directly to the HUMCC's processes of navigating (and normalising) queered performances of gender which did not opt-in to the forms of polarity which were standard for the previous decade, but the important thing to note, for this chapter, is the fact that the church did hold the power to do so, and thus played an important role in the transforming sexual and gendered discourses of the time.

The dogma of the church expressed a modern version of 'gay identity' that suggested an alternative to these gender structured relationships. In particular, for those men who are socially constrained by 'compulsory effeminacy...' the church offered a message that there were alternative ways of behaving as gay men and lesbians, that fell outside the active/passive; masculine/feminine; *injonga/skesana* dichotomies...²⁵⁸

In addition to its role in intervening in prevailing, homonormative discourses, the HUMCC functioned as "an alternative home, a place of refuge from hostile families, an institution that actively sought... to intervene between congregants and their kin."²⁵⁹ Through this, the church became connected with MaWilliams, "mother of gays and lesbians" in townships across Gauteng, and particularly Vosloorus - often the first to know about the arrest or exile of young queer black people, and thus the person upon whom the duty to inform the person's parents of the arrest fell to.²⁶⁰ Performing a similar role as MaThoko, MaWilliams (along with the HUMCC) became a crucial intermediary for the negotiation of familial relationships as they related to queerness. Her role in conscientising and reconciling parents with their queer children led to the fostering of familial relationships both within the church and, more broadly, in Gauteng. Together, MaWilliams and the HUMCC would advocate for coming out as both "theologically based and socially desirable," while ensuring that the church existed as a significant-enough safety net and surrogate family should 'disclosure' to one's family result in violence or rejection.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Donham, "Freeing South Africa," 3-21.

²⁵⁸ Reid, *Above the Skyline*. 89.

²⁵⁹ Reid, *Above the Skyline*. 99.

²⁶⁰ Reid, *Above the Skyline*. 102.

²⁶¹ Reid, *Above the Skyline*. 115

...it was pointed out that most of the congregation are young men and women and the church should have functions and entertainment that will appeal to the youth. Regular discussions were also suggested. Apart from helping to build the church community, these social functions could also serve to promote the church to non-members and the general public.²⁶²

A number of historical processes have been excluded from this history of the HUMCC in the interest of both brevity and focus on the process of the growth of queer black social networks. These include the process of founding and legitimising the church under its parent organisation, the homophobia the HUMCC faced from other churches, and the formation of a Durban chapter in 1996.²⁶³ Rich accounts of the organisational history of the HUMCC can be found in Graeme Reid's book, *Above the Skyline*. It should, however be noted, that the initial process of the founding of the HUMCC has not yet been the subject of any historical study - this is to say that existing accounts of the HUMCC do not focus on the embryonic, and network-based expansion of the church as it began in Bongane's apartment, and it's growth into a formal church above the Skyline. The insights provided by the accounts of Paul and Bongane are significant in that they relate to the broader argument of this chapter - that social networks were essential during this period in black queer sexual history, that they grew rapidly, and that they played exceptionally crucial roles in the fostering of queer social and cultural identity at the time.

Conclusion

...many political activists in organisations like GLOW... make no bones about the fact that these organisations do serve very important social functions, and that only [sic] assume more activist roles after they have taken care of more immediate psychological and social needs. The GLOW Lesbian Forum... became a place where lesbians - particularly young ones just out of the closet - could find support and seek mentors.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church, Workshop 15 September, 1996: Summary of the group reports. AM2733 A11: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁶³ Reid, *Above the Skyline*. 137 - 164.

²⁶⁴ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 80.

Beginning with the story of the TDS, and looking towards three case studies in queer social organisation in Gauteng in the late 1980s, this chapter has explored the multiple competing strategies employed to establish networks of support, sociality and activism from the perspectives of black queer youths from Soweto. These examples of queer social networking and organisation provide insights into the process through which queer identities came to be formalised, and moved towards Johannesburg's inner city, while simultaneously becoming increasingly integrated in prevailing discourses about queer identity within South Africa. Much like Tim Davis' study of queer politics in Boston, this chapter has explored how

...activists participating in each of the above cases sought to find ways to create political and cultural change in society as a whole while simultaneously altering the internal landscape of gay, lesbian and bisexual politics.²⁶⁵

By tracing the journey of TDS members such as Paul Mokgethi-Heath from a small group of friends to becoming a member of GLOW and a founding member of the HUMCC, this chapter has also provided insights into the process through which social networks enabled the increasing integration of queer Sowetans into Johannesburg's queer world. Similarly, Bev Ditsie, another TDS member, would go on to join GLOW, speak at the first pride march in 1990, and found Nkateko. Bongane, who was not a TDS member, would found the HUMCC alongside Paul, be elected as President of GLOW and develop the GLOW Soweto Chapters with Tanya Chan-Sam. Here, the initial desire to join social groups such as the TDS or to explore Soweto's queer shebeens as a means to gain access to queer solidarities and social lives, is shown to have transformed into much more far-reaching desires to explore the queer worlds of Gauteng. Having been compelled to establish traditions of network-building for the sake of safety and increased mobility, the people discussed in this chapter were, in fact, undergoing a sort of grassroots political training, developing the skills necessary to establish much broader social networks in the following years. The establishment and expansion of these social networks should be understood as existing in the historical moment where the shebeen scene of 1980s Soweto was beginning to exert translocal influences, and thus moving out of Soweto and into Gauteng more broadly. Many of these social groups would regularly

²⁶⁵ Tim Davis, "The Diversity of Queer Politics and the Redefinition of Sexual Identity and Community in Urban Spaces" in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 277.

interact on the shebeen scene, and would eventually come to interact once more on the Hillbrow scene.

Importantly, while networks such as the GLOW Lesbian Forum and the HUMCC were primarily centred on Johannesburg's inner city, with an influx of queer Sowetans, came shifts to both the geographical and political focus of each social group. The subsequent speed at which these groups grew is, once again, testimony for the ways in which these groups were in demand, were sought out, and were able to provide for the social needs of a wide array of queer people at the time. Further, while the language and intent of political activism was regularly employed by all groups throughout their history, they clearly functioned as primarily social units, attractive to most participants for their parties, gatherings and networking opportunities. This should not be misconstrued as an argument that frames their work as apolitical - rather, the sort of political work most commonly taking place was grassroots solidarity building, rather than large scale petitioning, campaigning or protest. This is to say that, often, the goals of black queer social and political organisation at this time focused more on the expansion and solidification of social networks of queer people, and the gradual formation of queer political awareness, rather than any 'outward-facing' political work.

With all this said, the networks established in this chapter should not be assumed to be representative of a utopian sense of community and solidarity - invariably, there were rifts, cliques and feuds which affected both the 'strength' of these networks, as well as the lived mobilities of individuals who found themselves 'excluded' from a particular network. Further still, by the turn of the century, many queer Sowetans still felt excluded, and caught in rifts between different microcosms of queer life at the time:

And again, there is discrimination among the Soweto lesbians - the ones who are playing soccer and the non-soccer players.²⁶⁶

I don't involve myself with other lesbians because they don't care about anything. I also heard that some of the lesbians sleep with men, so that can

²⁶⁶ Stability, Interviewed by Nkunzi Nkabinde, Date Unknown, Circa 2003. AM 31714 A2.1.2.5: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. Braamfontein, South Africa

be dangerous because men turn to think that we all do. So I spend my time with gay men because they seem more matured and focused.²⁶⁷

The little time that I get [to relax] I visit my friends. I don't party, I am busy even on Sundays. So I sit with my friends and we share about life and our dreams for the future.²⁶⁸

I'm talking about... gay[s] and lesbians of Soweto and the gays and lesbians from [Johannesburg]. They are silly, they have to stick together because they are gay so if they are going to point [at] each other, [what] does that mean...²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Nunu, Interviewed by Busi Kheswa, Unknown Date, 2003 AM 31714 A2.1.1.4: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. Braamfontein, South Africa

²⁶⁸ Ibid

²⁶⁹ Stability, Interviewed by Nkunzi Nkabinde, Date Unknown, Circa 2003. AM 31714 A2.1.2.5: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. Braamfontein, South Africa

Chapter Three:

Black Queer Nightlife Practices in the Inner City:

Desegregation and Dancing in the 1990s

[It was both a] black and white [gay village]. Because there you still see Connections up there, and you walk down then you see Butterfly, which became Skyline. And we go through down there, and on the other hand the Garboz, and at the corner there, there was this other restaurant... you [would] meet a lot of gay people [in Hillbrow]... And I felt safe... So for me at the time it was sort of like a real gay little Pretoria street; a gay village.²⁷⁰

The history of queer nightlife and social life in Hillbrow and the inner-city has, somewhat simplistically, been written as exclusively white and male in the existing literature.²⁷¹ While it's certainly true that white male nightlife practices predominated the area, it remained exceptionally popular amongst black queer people from Soweto and other parts of Gauteng, who frequented the area regularly and consistently. Venues such as the Skyline, and its predecessor, the Butterfly Bar, have been correctly understood to have been sites of complicated and evolving demographic and practical transformations between the 1970s and 1990s, but this grace has, confusingly, not been extended to the other venues and areas within the inner-city.²⁷² The result has been a writing of black queer experience in the apartheid inner-city that assumes a lack of agency, a passive acceptance of marginal space for black experiences, and a sort of childlike 'gratitude' for any queer space at all, regardless of its possible insufficiencies. By analysing the mobilities and practices of several queer Sowetans who regularly socialised, had sex and danced in the inner city, this chapter will make the case for a far more nuanced, and participatory form of involvement in the 'white gay city,' which highlights the multiple different strategies employed to carve out new, black, queer spaces in the city. Paul Mokgethi-Heath first started visiting Johannesburg's inner city in early 1985, along with the TDS. By 1988, he had moved to Hillbrow, and by the early 1990s he had begun to feel as though the group had some sort of ownership over the inner city:

²⁷⁰ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, 12 December 2007. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁷¹ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 42.

²⁷² Botes, "The Pink Inner-City,"; Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom."

I [could] handle the streets, I [could] do whatever... It's my area, I know it,
I know the corners... so this is my place... And I felt safe.²⁷³

This chapter focuses on this sentiment - of changes over roughly 20 years as queer Sowetans began to arrive in Hillbrow, building social and sexual lives within the inner city, carving out their own scenes within the city within the context of both the 'greying' and 'pinking' of parts of Johannesburg. Beginning with a socioeconomic overview of the decline of urban apartheid in Johannesburg, this chapter will explore key sites and dynamics in the process of carving out space for queer black life in Johannesburg's inner city. This chapter will thus explore three different geo-local sections of the queer scene of the 90s: the black queer scene in Hillbrow, the commercial scene of Braamfontein and Marshalltown, and the emergent, ostensibly multiracial Rave scene of Rosebank and Marshalltown. In doing so, this chapter will explore oral histories of the development of these scenes within the context of the fall of apartheid, shedding light on the musical practices and processes of scene construction which took place in the 1990s.

*Grey and Pink: The decay of apartheid urban policy and transformations to inner city
Johannesburg*

The Group Areas Act (GAA) of 1950 and the 1952 Natives Land Amendment Act (NLAA) represented the legislative articulation of the "Stallardist notion that Africans could only be temporary sojourners in urban areas outside the bantustans."²⁷⁴ Together, the two acts ensured that people of colour were forced to live on the urban periphery and that their ability to move through urban areas was heavily policed. Further still, the NLAA created provisions for the state to expel 'surplus labourers,' ensuring that the urban environment was overarchingly white.²⁷⁵ This is evidenced, for example, by the racial composition of Hillbrow before 1977, where almost all 50,000 residents were white.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

²⁷⁴ Paul Maylam, "The Rise and Decline of Urban Apartheid in South Africa," *African Affairs* 89, no. 354 (1990): 68.

²⁷⁵ Ibid 69.

²⁷⁶ Alan Morris, "The Desegregation of Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 1978-82," *Urban Studies* 31, no. 6, (1994): 821

However, from as early as the 1970s, the Apartheid state's economic growth rate was suffering:

...the 'apartheid boom' began to tail off in the early 1970s ... real growth rate which averaged 5,7 per cent in the 1960s, was negative in the first half of 1976 and zero in 1977... Total investment declined by about 13 per cent between 1975 and 1977 as the state was forced to cut back spending on its projects.²⁷⁷

Not only did this generally weaken the state's ability to enact apartheid policies, but in terms of urban segregation, it severely limited the state's ability to construct housing in segregated areas. The maintenance of urban apartheid was exceptionally costly - the state bore the cost of constructing and maintaining segregated areas and was unable to keep up with the rate of migration to Johannesburg. By 1978, while Gauteng's peri-urban 'locations' for people of colour were experiencing housing crises, Johannesburg's inner-city was experiencing a housing surplus, largely due to early instances of white flight in response to the lifting of rent controls in 1978, the aforementioned recession, and changing social perceptions of areas such as Hillbrow.²⁷⁸ Further, areas such as Hillbrow and Berea were officially designated as 'grey areas' in the early 1980s.²⁷⁹ As Stefan Chavez-Norgaard argues:

That designation led to building and neighbourhood redlining, with dire consequences for residents: A lack of public services and bans on state-backed mortgage and financial lending. Property values plummeted.²⁸⁰

The result was the beginning of a rapid departure of white middle class residents from the inner city, which was only further exacerbated by the increasingly racially mixed nature of these neighbourhoods: As white pensioners and ex-pats were leaving, coloured and Indian families were beginning to move into the inner-city illegally - prepared/forced to incur the

²⁷⁷ Morris, "The Desegregation of Hillbrow," 823 - 825

²⁷⁸ Ibid 826

²⁷⁹ Stefan Chavez-Norgaard, "Ponte, Speculation and Dwelling: Residential Reappropriation in an Emergent Johannesburg" in *In Whose Place? Confronting Vestiges of Colonialism and Apartheid*, eds. Hilton Judin, Arianna Lissoni and Ali Khangela Hlongwane, (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2024): 5.

²⁸⁰ Ibid 5.

risk of eviction, and to pay higher prices than white tenants were expected to.²⁸¹ Thus, from as early as 1978, the process of racial integration had begun in Hillbrow and its surroundings.

Politically, the 1973 Durban strikes and the 1976 Soweto Uprising were “probably the key events leading to the eventual near-collapse of the main pillars of urban Apartheid in the 1980s.”²⁸² In both cases, the black population was explicitly challenging the foundations of apartheid ideology and the coercive power of the apartheid state, beginning the process of “shattering... an urban Apartheid system weakened by its own contradictions.”²⁸³ Through these two national crises, as described in 1981 by the then Minister of the Interior:

The Southern African problem had been internationalised and the opinion of the international community could no longer be disregarded in the context of domestic reforms.²⁸⁴

The result was the emergence of a schism within the National Party, throwing the party's ideological position into disarray, and representing the emergence of a pro-capital ideology within the NP. The significance of this lies in the factional attempts to encourage reform - in 1979 the Riekert Commission suggested that an ‘African proletariat’ be allowed to live in urban areas as ‘insiders,’ and in 1981 some NP MPs spoke in favour of legally recognising coloured and Indian residents of Hillbrow.²⁸⁵ Nonetheless, between 1978 - 1982, Indian and coloured inner-city tenants were frequently harassed and evicted under the GAA attempting to fight back through eviction refusals, repeated (unsuccessful) legal battles and collective action through Actstop (the Action Committee to Stop Evictions).²⁸⁶ In 1982, the Govender Judgement ruled that in order for evictions to take place under the GAA, suitable alternative accommodation had to be accessible, marking the “conver[sion of] the *de facto* nature of mixed areas like Hillbrow into a *de jure* status.”²⁸⁷ The NP thus resigned itself to the realities of urban desegregation - specifically in the interests of encouraging the involvement of coloured and Indian people in the Tricameral Parliament, and out of fear of further adverse publicity and legal challenges.

²⁸¹ Morris, “The Desegregation of Hillbrow,” 827.

²⁸² Maylam, “The Rise and Decline of Urban Apartheid in South Africa,” 70.

²⁸³ Ibid 84.

²⁸⁴ Morris, “The Desegregation of Hillbrow,” 823

²⁸⁵ Ibid 832

²⁸⁶ Ibid 832

²⁸⁷ Ibid 832.

Thus, in the 1980s, a number of attempts at reform were made, ultimately further laying the foundation for the fall of urban Apartheid - beginning with the 1983 introduction of the Tricameral Parliament, which intended to increase coloured and Indian support for the state through their 'integration' into the political system, and secondly, the 1986 end to pass laws.²⁸⁸ The end of pass laws, in particular, empowered black people to further 'flout' the GAA, in the face of housing shortages in townships, although it should be noted that pass laws rarely caused issues for black gay men from as early as the 1960s.²⁸⁹ Prior to the 1980s, black gay men would make a point of being "settled" by night time, either at hotels or at white friends' houses, and would thus avoid persecution for their movements into the inner city.²⁹⁰

The eventual decline of urban apartheid, beginning in the late 1970s, allowed for an explosion of urban subversive social spaces which were becoming increasingly multi-racial and cosmopolitan in nature.²⁹¹ In Johannesburg, areas such as Hillbrow and Bellevue quickly became sites of a broad range of alternative and subversive cultures, allowing for the spatial development of a queer community within the city.²⁹² The historical process of both national and urban decline in the powers of the apartheid state thus laid the foundation for the emergence of gay spaces in Johannesburg. However, more work needs to be done to explore the corollary, intersectional process of black-queering of Hillbrow, which was taking place from the 1980s onwards. Regardless, urban segregation remained in place in the townships - the desegregation of areas such as Hillbrow and Bellevue was thus relatively unique, and gave rise to unique contexts encouraging the growth of alternative and subversive spaces:

²⁸⁸ Morris, "The Desegregation of Hillbrow," 823; Maylam, "The Rise and Decline of Urban Apartheid in South Africa," 79.

²⁸⁹ Conway, "Queering Apartheid" 853; "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁹⁰ "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁹¹ Morris, "The Desegregation of Hillbrow," 823

²⁹² For more on Bellevue / Yeoville see: Maria Suriano, William Dewar and Clara Pienaar-Lewis, "Yeoville as a Transgressional Space: Voelvry and the Afrikaner counterculture of the 1980s," in *Politics and Community-Based Research: Perspectives from Yeoville Studio, Johannesburg* ed. Claire Bénit-Gbaffou, Sarah Charlton, Sophie Didier and Kirsten Dörmann. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019)

As a district in which the Group Areas Act (GAA) was being openly flouted by thousands of Indians, coloureds and Africans, Hillbrow was on the 'cutting edge' of apartheid's social, political and geographical demise.²⁹³

...during 'the 1970s and 1980s, inner-city residential areas continued to enjoy a bohemian reputation, a flourishing urbanism unknown anywhere else in South Africa'.²⁹⁴

The relationship between the process of the 'greying' of the city, and what Gevisser calls the 'pinking' of the city should be briefly noted:

As Hillbrow was to become a 'grey' area in later years - a white neighbourhood where black people could live, illegal but unprosecuted, in relative safety - it became a 'pink' area during the 1970s: a heterosexual neighbourhood (most of the residents continued to be pensioners, young single heterosexuals and newly-arrived immigrants) where gay people could live in relative safety.²⁹⁵

Overlooking the suggestion of chronology and causality, it can be said that the processes of both 'pinking' and 'greying' were mutually reinforcing, and both dependent on and constitutive of the process through which Hillbrow and the inner city came to become a contested space. In line with this process, the people discussed in this thesis began to relocate from Soweto to Hillbrow as early as 1987. Moving for an array of reasons, including a desire to be closer to the queer inner city, wanting to live away from home after coming out, and often, wanting to live with their romantic partners, people like Paul and Bongane began to establish homes for themselves in Hillbrow within the context of the decline of urban apartheid.²⁹⁶ Ultimately, the decline of urban apartheid should be understood as one of many sociocultural processes taking place during the period of study, further encouraging queer Sowetans to test the limits of their social worlds and move further into the inner city as participants rather than visitors.

²⁹³ Conway, "Queering Apartheid," 849

²⁹⁴ Kanika Batra, "Worlding Sexualities under Apartheid: From Gay Liberation to a Queer Afropolitanism," *Postcolonial Studies* 19, no. 1 (2016): 40-41.

²⁹⁵ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom" 42.

²⁹⁶ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

Early forays into the inner city:
In search of black spaces, in search of queer spaces

From as early as the 1960s, queer Sowetans were making their way into the inner city as visitors - brought there for work, social or sexual desires. With urban apartheid in full swing, most black queer activity would take place at cruising sites such as Joubert Park or Zoo Lake, or in hotel rooms rented to avoid breaking pass laws.²⁹⁷ During the period between the 1960s and 1980s, it was less possible for black queer people to live in the inner city and, as such, black queer people were primarily temporary participants in the white gay city.

We would go around Joubert Park and Park Station. Around Joubert Park was a military base full of men. There were mainly white guys there. The military base was right there at the bottom. I was not so keen on soldiers, but Pat was really into them. The back of the Nursing home was the spot to do your thing. You would just wink to a guy who was cruising in his car. Anyway, we knew that if you were in that area, you were there for one reason only. Park Station was a fishing²⁹⁸ pond. I had a friend who worked at the first-class train and he would give us access to the train... You see in Joubert Park; there was a place where you would just get there and sit there. When someone passes by who was into men, you would just see them by winking and you know what it's about. Then you would just stand up and go to the car. The person who came there used to do so because they knew what they wanted... The military base was just there at the bottom... Pat would tell me that by the fence you would see them doing their thing. It was happening there.²⁹⁹

Cruising the city by day enabled queer Sowetans to gain access to queer sexual and social opportunities without persecution by the state, especially if they had business in the city. Of pass laws and their application in the 1970s, one participant explained that none of his friends who cruised the streets of Johannesburg were ever arrested for being out after curfew -

²⁹⁷ "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

²⁹⁸ Another term for Cruising

²⁹⁹ "Francis," Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

they were “sharp” and had “that sensitivity” to successfully navigate the realities of urban apartheid without facing persecution, regularly cruising white men in Joubert Park, and thus breaking both the Immorality Amendment Act and Natives Urban Areas Act at the same time.³⁰⁰

[My friend] had many white friends who had apartments and houses in the city. One had a house in Observatory, where we felt very welcomed and could visit anytime, including at night. Then you could make it a point that by then you are settled wherever... At times we would go to a hotel, like Johannesburger, and so on.³⁰¹

By the 1970s, the South African government had come to understand that Hillbrow was a primarily gay area, “choosing not to apply the same pressure on its streets as they did on other outdoor areas.”³⁰² Further, with the economic boom of the early 1970s, disposable income and rich social lives became increasingly accessible to white gay men, enabling the rapid growth of a ‘gayborhood’ with several queer-owned small businesses, restaurants and clubs. In turn, this geo-local concentration of queer men enabled the growth of a distinctly white South African queer subculture, primarily driven by Afrikaans men moving from the *plattelands*³⁰³ to the ‘big city.’

When an Afrikaans boy from the platteland comes out of the closet, he has to leave his home and family in a very big way. Just to be gay he has to fight all that conservative Afrikaner moralism and Calvinism. He is expelled, in a way. So he finds a new family among other gays in the city. And he has nothing to lose by being open - he’s lost it all already. I find this very different from some of my English gay friends who grew up in Jo'burg. They are still very much part of the life where they come from, so first of all they have to be more discreet and second of all they've got a foot in both camps.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ “Francis,” Interview by Zethu Matebeni and Paul Mogkethi-Heath, 17 November 2007 & 18 January 2008. Johannesburg Tracks AM3160: GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

³⁰¹ Ibid; The Johannesburger Hotel was located on 60 Twist Street, Hillbrow and was built in 1975.

³⁰² Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom” 38.

³⁰³ ‘Plattelands’ generally refers to rural Afrikaans areas on the outskirts of Gauteng such as Magaliesburg, Witbank and Secunda. The Plattelands are generally associated with Calvinist conservatism and the dominance of the ‘Suster’ churches (NGK, Hervorm and Gereformeer).

³⁰⁴ Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom” 39

The exact cultural character of white, Afrikaans Hillbrow has been the subject of many studies, which have highlighted the ways in which Afrikaans culture was either rejected or integrated into queer practices by, for example, playing *sakkie* music at the *Dungeon* or how certain bars would come to be known as Afrikaans or English.³⁰⁵ While black queer culture in the inner city has not yet been explored in any depth, it is worth noting that the existing queer scenes in areas such as Hillbrow and Marshalltown were already in flux and the sites of ongoing cultural transformation between two different ‘factions’ in white apartheid society. At the time, the negotiation of English and Afrikaans cultural practices through queer nightlife would have ‘primed’ participants and venues to accept the further negotiation of black queer practices some 10-15 years later. Thus, by the mid-1980s, with urban apartheid in decline, the area around the Carlton Centre became a popular spot for black youths to socialise, creating social and physical spaces for queer Sowetans to lay a claim to the city gradually.³⁰⁶

And then we would arrive in the city, we would go to [the] Carlton [Centre], maybe get a drink. And then just walk around and spend our afternoon there. It was just time for leisure and just meeting people. And then there was a club now that was opened; the Razzmatazz... That was 1985... It was a youth club... and everybody was talking about it. You know the youth... even in Soweto. Ey!.. It was a booming place at that time...³⁰⁷

Razzmatazz was a popular black youth club near the Carlton Centre and a popular spot for the TDS when they were first beginning to travel to the inner city.³⁰⁸ In 1984, after reforms pushed through by the National Taverners Association, black-owned venues were able to receive liquor licences, enabling the establishment of clubs such as Razzmatazz.³⁰⁹ By moving in a large group, the TDS was able to journey into central Johannesburg while protecting one another, opening their social worlds up to the opportunities presented by a more dense, cosmopolitan urban environment. While Razzmatazz was not a queer venue, it was popular with queer black people, and was often the site from which burgeoning sexual

³⁰⁵ Lee “From Heaven to the Dungeon”; Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom”; Botes, “Queering Johannesburg.”

³⁰⁶ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁰⁷ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

³⁰⁸ Ibid

³⁰⁹ Khan, “The myth, music and magic of Club Pelican.”

identities began to emerge - most likely due to the sexual diversity of the inner city more generally:

But [for] most of the guys, that is when they started realising they are coming out. Because we would meet all these you[ng] boys and things, others who do not know who they are at that time, and you would propose and somebody would say 'oh it means I am also gay' or whatever...³¹⁰

After multiple visits to Razzmatazz, the group began to hear about Hillbrow's queer character and began to explore Hillbrow more intentionally. At this stage, groups such as the TDS were still primarily Soweto-based. However, by beginning to engage with the inner city more frequently, they began to negotiate space for themselves within the inner city, and, more specifically, the white gay city, while still conscious of the fact that it wasn't 'their' city. This is most clearly seen in their arrival at the Butterfly Bar (which would become the Skyline), in 1985:

Now we hear of this club called the Butterfly... But at the time still - the Butterfly was [sic] there were all these white men that would come in there. So now we're scared of going in, we're scared of going inside the place. We would push each other; go and check what is happening... And then Norman [the barman] started realising that; 'no these boys on Saturday afternoons they are here, what is going on? They are scared.' And so Norman would call us... and say 'come; what is going on?' 'What are you doing here, you little boys? This is not your place.' So we told him that we're gay, but now we see all these big people and all these whites, but we're scared of coming in. So Norman, he would usually call [us] and say 'come; don't run around here and do all these [things] because these people are going to chase you. You come, sit here and drink your Cokes and things and I will chat to you. And if the manager comes or anything I'll tell them you are my boys and you are visiting me.' So it was a sort of strategy when

³¹⁰ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

we go there we'd look [if] Norman [was] there. We were not used to Steven³¹¹, and [he] was sort of strict.³¹²

Paul highlights two important dynamics in this retelling of the access his group began to receive to the Butterfly at their young age. First of all, how, despite being a queer space, the Butterfly remained somewhat prohibitive to young black queer youths from Soweto. Racial politics, as well as obstacles in terms of age and familiarity within the scene, created soft barriers to entry, rendering the Butterfly a somewhat inaccessible space. While there were a few Black men at the Butterfly at this time, they were older and kept to themselves - rather than purely racial, Paul and his friends faced barriers by virtue of their combined racial, generational and class position. Secondly, as is true for many first visits to gay bars, the TDS relied on the friendliness of a barman to gain access. In a similar way to how, in previous chapters, the guidance offered to Bongane by Wandi, of Wandi's Place in Dube, helped to guide him through his early forays into queer shebeens, it was through striking up a relationship with Norman that the TDS was able to gain access to the Butterfly Bar.

Once they began to frequent the Butterfly, they slowly became integrated into some sort of social life within the bar. What might have begun as discomfort, prejudice or rejection slowly evolved into a scene within which they were (at least partially) participants. They soon became familiar faces on Saturday afternoons and began to speak to patrons more frequently. Their access to the Butterfly then began to open their eyes to worlds of queer social and political life that they had previously not been exposed to. Through both conversations and flyers distributed at the Butterfly, the TDS came to learn of GLOW in its embryonic form - a group of gay men, seeking to organise in response to Simon Nkoli's involvement in the Delmas Treason trials. This gestures towards a consistent theme in this dissertation, which is the important role of queer nightlife spaces in creating key networks for the development of queer political consciousnesses:

...It was important for us to just go there and just to be with other people that we know we're sharing common ideas; and people... that we're all gay

³¹¹ A different barman, who was less friendly to the TDS.

³¹² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

in these[sic] place. So there are no hassles, nobody is bothering you, nobody is asking you questions. So that is what we really liked most.³¹³

In 1987, the Butterfly changed its name to the Skyline Bar and moved from the ground floor of the Harrison Reef Hotel to the first floor. With this change, it began to serve black patrons more openly and became increasingly popular with black queer people. Over the next 10 years, the Skyline would become particularly popular within GLOW and activist circles, which would eventually lead to increasing challenges to its' male-only door policy.³¹⁴ The Skyline was informally known as a 'rent-boy' bar, as somewhat 'seedy' and a spot for 'old alcoholics' because it opened on weekdays and had long operating hours.³¹⁵ By the late 1980s, the Skyline's clientele was overwhelmingly black.³¹⁶ This, along with the HUMCC moving into the Harrison Reef Hotel in 1994, meant that by the mid-1990s, black queer people, and especially Sowetans, had established a significant base of operations for themselves in Hillbrow.

From this, and especially in the early 1990s, black queer social life in Hillbrow began to blossom, with a number of venues catering for black queer tastes. It was during this period of roughly 4 years that more queer Sowetans began to move to the inner city.³¹⁷ Thus, by 1992, most participants had moved to the inner city. Hillbrow and the 'white' gay city had become significantly more accessible - through geographical proximity, the carving out of a few black queer spaces like the Skyline, and the work of groups such as GLOW and the HUMCC to cultivate black queer networks within the city, to which commercial venues began to respond. Within the context of the decline of urban apartheid, and the gradual process of asserting space for black youths and queer black people, it became increasingly viable for Sowetan 'first-movers' to claim up even more space - this time, residentially. What followed in the period from 1992 - 1996 was a rapid expansion of black queer life into the inner city.

³¹³ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

³¹⁴ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

³¹⁵ Lee, "From Heaven to the Dungeon," 53-54

³¹⁶ Botes, "The Pink Inner-City.," Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 42

³¹⁷ While empirical data confirming this doesn't exist, I report this increased movement on the basis of reports from interviewees, and the explosion of black queer nightlife practices in the period following the early 1990s. Further, Graeme Reid's surveys, conducted in 1996, indicate that at least 11 participants out of 39 had either moved to Hillbrow from Soweto in the 1990s or were former Soweto residents who regularly socialised in Hillbrow.

One of the most crucial dynamics emerging from these tight-knit social networks and early movers into the inner city was the regular sleepovers in apartments leased by members of these networks.³¹⁸ Especially in the early 1990s, when the city's queer nightlife was particularly vibrant, it was common practice for entire weekends to be spent with more than 10-15 people sleeping in 2-bedroom apartments. This importantly highlights the ways in which these social networks enabled new forms of mobilities that necessarily contravened the intentions of apartheid spatial planning and the very real dangers of late-night commutes across the province.

It was just the three of us [in the new flat]; sometimes... When it [was the] weekend then it's party time; because everybody, guys from Soweto - everybody from Soweto would come, the guys who want to go to Skyline, and everyone clubbing; they [came] with their bags. All the guys from Tembisa, everyone from Sebokeng who wanted to galavant and have fun for the weekend, they come to [our flat] with their bags. [If you want peace and quiet] then move out! When it's Friday you will never have... peace because all these guys...³¹⁹

In the early 1990s, as Bongane moved to Hillbrow and gradually abandoned his work organising in Soweto, his flat in Hillbrow quickly became another site for weekend-long sleepovers, regularly hosting up to 15 people. On an average weekend, people would arrive on Thursday afternoons with their bags and would head to popular venues such as the Skyline, bringing men back in the evenings and having sex in the apartment.³²⁰ This process would repeat throughout the weekend, with people sharing meals in the day, and heading, as a group, to different bars every night. Bongane's position of leadership in GLOW also meant that many gay men trusted him, and felt comfortable relying on him for accommodation or support during weekends.

He claims that this dynamic emerged because of how important it was to always stay in a group as gay black men. He explains that at least 6 or 7 gay men would travel together into Johannesburg, and, in the case that someone received a phone call asking them

³¹⁸ Khadija, Interview by Author, 29 April 2024.

³¹⁹ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa, 12 December 2007.

³²⁰ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

to come home for any reason, the whole group would escort them back home, laughing and “voguing on the streets” before returning to Hillbrow.³²¹ These sleepovers represent a key form through which the social networks of GLOW, the HUMCC, and tight-knit friend groups would manifest themselves physically, allowing black queer people mobilities into Johannesburg’s inner-city gay life, and ensuring safety and solidarity in the process. To place this dynamic into the history of gay social lives in Gauteng before the 1980s, Johannesburg’s queer social lives of the 1950s - 1970s saw apartments as the primary social space, while from the 1980s onwards, inner city apartments became nodal points which enabled access to several venues and spaces which hosted queer life.³²² Ultimately, early attempts to carve out black queer space in the inner city were sustained by tight-knit networks which had established physical bases in the form of apartments and the Skyline.

Dancing and Raving in the Inner City 1990 - 1996

So far, this chapter has established the historical and socio-cultural processes taking place in the inner city, and particularly Hillbrow in the period from the 1950s-1990s which enabled, over time, increased black queer mobilities into the city, and subsequently the processes through which nodal ‘bases’ for black queer life were established. Venues such as the Skyline and Razzmatazz, sleepovers at friends’ flats and the general decline of urban apartheid were crucial in laying the foundation for a more assertive and active population of queer black youths in Hillbrow from the early 1990s.

Further, a more nebulous ‘sense of revolution’ was taking root amongst black queer youths, spurred on by the rise of Nelson Mandela to political office, and the sense that apartheid was truly coming to an end. Lerato tells me that the pre-1994 era was full of young people living “like there was no tomorrow,” knowing that they were participating in massive political and social transformations to the apartheid regime. In this context, urban, black and successful celebrities such as Brenda Fassie, who was an out bisexual woman, became key motivators for even more assertive claims to the city. In Hillbrow in particular her celebrity status empowered her, and the group of gay black men she socialised with, to demand greater accommodations and power within the bar scene.³²³ Lerato says Brenda’s involvement in this

³²¹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

³²² Gevisser, “A Different Fight for Freedom,” 20

³²³ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

scene was hugely significant - “it gave the kids impetus” to start their own parties in the townships of Gauteng, and to participate in the dance music scene more actively.³²⁴

When exploring the venues, events and practices of the black queer scene in the 1990s, a few important distinctions need to be made. Firstly, it appears that Pretoria Street in Hillbrow emerged as a centre for black queer nightlife practices, with several distinctly black-oriented spaces such as Boobs, emXhoseni and the Skyline. These spaces were brick-and-mortar venues and were regular meeting spots for queer Sowetans who were living or partying in Hillbrow. Connections, which was opposite the Skyline, also appears to have been popular, but not much is said of the venue, or its changing clientele as white queer people began to leave Hillbrow. Importantly, inner-city Johannesburg itself was host to a variety of queer and musical scenes, and it appears that those black queer participants who were affiliated with GLOW largely kept to a very limited number of venues - namely, the Skyline, emXhoseni and Connections.

Secondly, while popular, other parts of the inner city remained predominantly white, but with a regular black patronage. Champions, in Braamfontein, was the most popular of these venues, along with Mrs Henderson’s and Idols in Marshalltown, and Connections in Hillbrow. Amongst queer Sowetans, these clubs were attended less frequently than Hillbrow’s black queer clubs, because they tended to be more expensive. and would play more European-focused music. These venues were more commercially-oriented and attended less for their music than their queer character. Further, they were not truly ‘clubs,’ and are more commonly described as bars or pubs with dance floors.³²⁵ This distinction is not arbitrary - the physical geography of a nightlife venue significantly impacts practices of dancing and socialising and changes how DJs play their music. Most of these bars had darkrooms, cruising spaces which were designed to facilitate anonymous sex between men, and as such, these venues were more commonly attended for their ability to help queer people find sexual or social connections within the queer scene than for clubbing.

The third ‘category’ of spaces are those built around the emergent ‘rave’ club culture in Johannesburg in the early 1990s. Most significantly, these spaces were predominantly built around occasional events as opposed to permanent physical venues.

³²⁴ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³²⁵ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024; Gary van Riet, Personal Correspondence, June 2024.

Events such as Fourth World and clubs such as Krypton and Embassy, both in Rosebank, were popular with an entirely different and more racially and sexually diverse group of dance-music fans, including Lerato's crew of ravers. This separate scene of ravers was in many ways distinct from a purely 'queer' scene, and was brought together by musical taste more than other factors - this group emerged in ways most clearly identified in the introduction to this dissertation, as a truly 'musical' scene.

While these three geo-local 'scenes' will be discussed separately to ensure clarity in terms of their distinct sociocultural histories, it is worth noting that their borders were not strict - Krypton, for example, would become one of the most iconic gay clubs of 2000's Johannesburg, amongst both 'ravers' and more commercially-minded queer dancers. Similarly, Lerato, the most rave-focused of participants, was a regular at Champions and Idols (formerly Mandy's) but would distinguish her time on the Champions scene and the rave scene by stating: "[The rave scene] was where I would go to *really* dance."³²⁶ Here, 'being on the scene' is not represented as static - rather, different parts of the broader 'queer scene' are understood to provide for different desires in Lerato's queer life.

Hillbrow as a centre for black queer nightlife

Pretoria Street in Hillbrow has long been understood as the centre of queer life within the inner city from as early as the 1970s.³²⁷ Between the '70s and '90s, a wide array of gay restaurants, cafes, cruising clubs, gay-owned businesses, bars and social spaces lined the streets, as well as both the GLOW and GASA offices.³²⁸ This geo-commercial concentration of queer residents was so clearly identifiable that in the 1987 Municipal Elections, the National Party nominated a pro-gay candidate in Hillbrow.³²⁹ The processes explored earlier in this chapter have highlighted ways in which this queer reputation not only motivated less policing from the apartheid state, but also encouraged black queer Sowetans to explore the area, and begin to establish their queer lives there in the 1990s.

Speaking generally, Bongane explains that the musical scene in Hillbrow was different from Soweto's in some key aspects. Foremost, the multi-racial environment of

³²⁶ Lerato "Lakuti" Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³²⁷ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom."

³²⁸ Ibid

³²⁹ Conway, "Queering Apartheid."

Hillbrow meant that more white and Afrikaans musicians were played and that there was a sort of ‘insistence’ that “Afrikaans culture [be] respected” in venues such as the Skyline.³³⁰ Secondly, Bongane states that due to the diversity of venues in Hillbrow at the time, people on the scene were more empowered to seek out specific musical experiences:

[In Soweto I was] following the crowd, while in Hillbrow the music is what you’d follow.³³¹

This is significant, as it represents the arrival of musical taste as a factor in the movements of queer Sowetans through the inner city, something which did not appear in Soweto’s shebeens in the 1980s. Here, the beginnings of a scene within which taste can influence and transform the movements of people and the behaviour of organisers on the scene are evident and located most clearly on Pretoria Street, Hillbrow, and its surrounds. As the centre of the black queer scene, Pretoria Street was within walking distance of a number of key nightlife venues - the Skyline, ‘Boobs,’ Connections and emXhoseni - as well as other hubs for black queer life such as the HUMCC.

Clubs such as ‘Boobs,’ named after a black DJ with the same name, were a direct response to the assertiveness of black queer Sowetans who were attempting to claim space and contribute to Johannesburg’s burgeoning dance music culture. Located in a small venue in Hillbrow one block away from the Skyline, ‘Boobs’ was most popular for the parties they threw every Wednesday which would attract large numbers of black queer youths, along with straight participants. Attendees were drawn to the club for its distinctly ‘black’ character - both in terms of demographics and due to its particularly South African approach to dance music. Genres such as House and Techno, which are traditionally Western imports³³², would be mixed with Kwaito and other Black and South African interpretations of what was slowly becoming a whitewashed, European dance music industry.³³³

³³⁰ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

³³¹ Ibid

³³² The racial and cultural heritage of these genres is complicated. Although pioneered by African American producers from Chicago, Detroit and New York, they were quickly coopted by European Dance Music scenes in London, Brussels and Berlin, and their history has subsequently been whitewashed. When speaking of these genres as European or Western, I refer to the commercial exports of these genres, rather than their strict ‘origins.’

³³³ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

The Butterfly Bar's rebrand to the Skyline in 1987 is also representative of changing social dynamics within the scene, and the Skyline became a frequently contested venue in the 1990s as black queer youths, primarily from Soweto, began to challenge and transform the venue into one that served their needs on the scene. At the time, much speculation surrounded the rebrand - over the course of my previous research, one participant claimed that the popularity of the newly-established Connections, just down the road, 'killed' the Butterfly.³³⁴ If this is the case, the rebrand would have been a response to a drifting clientele, and thus Skyline's management would have likely been more receptive/vulnerable to the desires of black queer youths moving into the city. Two anecdotes suggest this is true: Firstly, although the Skyline attempted to operate a male-only entrance policy, it was regularly subverted by lesbian women such as Bev Ditsie in 'bad' or 'unconvincing' drag, of which the barmen were aware.³³⁵ Especially at times when women would show up with the 'GLOW Elites' such as Simon or Bongane, the management chose to turn a blind eye rather than kick women out.³³⁶ Secondly, when they did enforce their male-only entrance policy, they often faced resistance in terms of walk-outs or arguments at the bar. Most significantly, the Skyline once refused Brenda Fassie entrance. In response, she chose to go to another, neighbouring venue called emXhoseni, and began to both socialise and put on impromptu performances there.³³⁷ Skyline subsequently lost business amongst black queer men and began to loosen its gendered admission policy.³³⁸ In both instances, black queer youths were challenging the boundaries of the Skyline's admission policy to transform the venue into one that served their needs more clearly. Lerato similarly challenged 58's ³³⁹ gendered admission policy by staging a sit-in outside the venue, ultimately resulting in the venue allowing women inside, except for in cruising spaces.³⁴⁰ Throughout the early 1990s, especially in Hillbrow, queer Sowetans were causing "good trouble," forcing venues to keep up with the times and to accommodate their desires on the scene.³⁴¹

The Butterfly/Skyline's rebrand also came with it moving up a floor, into a larger space which could facilitate dancing more than the Butterfly. Paul speaks briefly of the

³³⁴ Lee "From Heaven to the Dungeon," 55.

³³⁵ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

³³⁶ Ibid

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ Ibid

³³⁹ Located on 58 Pretoria Street, 58 was a late-night restaurant and 'alternative' nightclub with a downstairs cruising area / darkroom. It isn't mentioned by many participants, but was a part of the Pretoria Street gay strip.

³⁴⁰ Lerato "Lakuti" Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁴¹ Ibid

environment of the Butterfly bar, noting that there was never any dancing - primarily because the layout of the venue wasn't conducive to dancing.³⁴² Its large, round bar took up most of the floor space, and there were small tables littered throughout the rest of the available space.

...the change was that Skyline was on the first floor; and it was more of a bigger space, and it was - with all the nice decoration and glittering and... now they put on the red carpet. So we used to call it Mandela's Place... We'd say we are now presidents...³⁴³

The move to the first floor of the Harrison Reef Hotel facilitated more dancing by dividing the venue into two sections - a bar and seating area, and a second open space with pool tables and an ad hoc dancefloor.³⁴⁴ Further, the Skyline installed a Jukebox, allowing patrons direct control over the musical character of any given night out. One participant recounts many nights spent listening to the same song on repeat, without repercussion, and emphasises the significance of having this level of control over the music to his experiences of nightlife in the city at the time.³⁴⁵

Moreover, with the rebrand came a slightly different social atmosphere, which was far "more social" and "good for connect[ing with queer people]."³⁴⁶ New faces at the Skyline would regularly be bought drinks by other patrons, for no other reason than to keep them in the bar and to make it easier for the regulars to get to know them. This conviviality was, in part, aided by the fact that the Skyline was slightly less accessible from the street than the Butterfly. The sign leading to the Skyline simply stated: "Shoe Clinic," ensuring that word of mouth became the primary way new patrons gained access to the venue.³⁴⁷ Existing literature has often spoken of the Skyline as exceptionally cliquey, although participants seem to primarily refer to these cliques as limiting sexual opportunity, rather than socialisation.³⁴⁸ Ultimately, the nicer decor, the more social and musical environment and the symbolic act of 'moving up' the stairs and walking on a red carpet, in tandem with Nelson Mandela's rise to political office all seem to have come together to represent a sensed increase in social

³⁴² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

³⁴³ Ibid

³⁴⁴ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

³⁴⁵ Ibid

³⁴⁶ Ibid

³⁴⁷ Ibid

³⁴⁸ Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom," 42

standing, further empowering challenges to policies which did not serve the interests of queer Sowetans.

The subsequent shifts to the Hillbrow scene were significant - the newly established emXhoseni required a password at the door: “abangani,” meaning ‘friends’ in Nguni languages.³⁴⁹ Further, emXhoseni stands out as a “breath of fresh air” for queer Sowetans who were socialising in Hillbrow in the 90s, offering a dramatic alternative to the environments of the Skyline or the commercial clubs.³⁵⁰ Described by participants as a shebeen, rather than a pub or club, it was popular for its predominantly black clientele, the fact that it played popular black music such as Kwaito, Bubblegum, House and Disco, and had cheaper drinks.³⁵¹ Further, it was set up like a shebeen, and participants speak of sitting on crates and drinking, as opposed to the ‘plush’ atmosphere of the Skyline, or the ‘club-like’ environment of the commercial scene. While not a strictly queer venue emXhoseni, much like Razzmatazz some 6 years earlier, became the site of frequent negotiation of burgeoning sexual identities, and would frequently be cruised for ‘new faces.’ The environment was such that it was common for both queer and straight patrons to socialise, dance together and spend time in each other’s company, without any instances of homophobic violence or intimidation. emXhoseni thus stands out as an interesting example of many of the cultural practices of Soweto’s gay shebeens of the 1980s being replicated within the far more urban environment of Hillbrow, and thus providing important alternatives to the carving out of black queer space in venues with white, Afrikaans cultural heritage.

Further, the tradition of throwing queer house parties mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation continued, this time in Yeoville, coming together to create a scene which Lerato describes as the ‘black side’ of her nightlife experiences.³⁵² Musically, this ‘black side’ was soundtracked by Kwaito, House and proto-house, Bubblegum and other ‘South African music,’ a trans-local interpretation of contemporary musical culture at the time. As mentioned in the first chapter, disco ‘hits’ such as Gloria Gaynor’s “I Am What I Am” were popular in Soweto, and a similar tradition of appropriating, reinterpreting and reconfiguring Western dance music styles for black South African tastes took place in Hillbrow.³⁵³ Similarly, some

³⁴⁹ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁵⁰ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

³⁵¹ Ibid

³⁵² Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁵³ Ibid; Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024

participants briefly mention ‘voguing,’ a popular queer dance style developed by black queer clubbers from Harlem, New York between the 1960s and 80s, as a form of dance popular in Hillbrow at the time.³⁵⁴ Importantly, it seems as though Vogue was more common as a form of cultural expression, rather than a club-oriented dance style; this is to say that queer black youths would vogue on the streets or in restaurants, as a way of performing flamboyance and femininity, rather than as a way to connect with music. With the shifts to Skyline’s management style and the emergence of Boobs and emXhoseni, dancing became more possible in Hillbrow’s queer nightlife venues, in a way that platformed black queer musical tastes for the first time.

Multi-Racial, Commercial Queer Venues in the City

With the centre of black queer life located on the Pretoria Street strip, three popular, more multi-racial venues should be briefly explored as commercial sites of confluence for multiple, broader queer and dance music scenes in 1990s Johannesburg. Champions was the first gay bar that Lerato went to, and it opened her eyes to the gay world for the first time - it was here that she first encountered Rent Boys, commercial gay music and a large community of queer people dancing together.³⁵⁵ Located on the corner of Rissik and Wolmarans Street, inside the Old Academy Theatre, the venue was most popular on Friday nights, where it would be “boys only.”³⁵⁶ She describes the music as unrevolutionary, and largely focusing on commercial gay pop music from the UK, such as Bronski Beat. Bronski Beat was most popular for their hit song “Smalltown Boy,” which tells the story of a young man moving to ‘the big city’ in search of a gay life:

You leave in the morning with everything you own in a little black case
 Alone on a platform, the wind and the rain on a sad and lonely face
 Mother will never understand why you had to leave
 But the answers you seek will never be found at home
 The love that you need will never be found at home.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024, Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁵⁵ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁵⁶ Lee “From Heaven to the Dungeon,” 56.

³⁵⁷ Bronski Beat, “Smalltown Boy,” Forbidden Fruit, 1984, 7” Vinyl Single.

Members of the white gay scene of the 80s described Champions as the beginning of a shift to the musical character of queer nightlife in the city - as more of a bar than a club, it played more commercial music and, while a popular spot for dancing, it did not appear to prioritise the sort of ‘underground discotheque’ atmosphere characteristic of the 80s.³⁵⁸ At Mrs Henderson’s, a club located at 133 Commissioner Street, Lerato encountered a dark room for the first time. Henderson’s, which Lerato would go to practically every weekend, was known popularly as an alternative and more punk-facing venue, with a sexually and racially mixed crowd.³⁵⁹ She briefly mentions a black DJ, DJ Nono, who played a slightly more diverse range of music at the time, which she feels better catered for crowds of colour. Her sound, which Lerato describes as “proto-house, with pop for good measure,” was more diverse and ‘challenging’ than typical DJs of this era, and Lerato argues that she began to push the musical character of the club to evolve, while still constrained by the largely commercial audience.³⁶⁰

Connections, while based in Hillbrow, was another more commercially oriented venue, which Tanya says was “popular with everyone.”³⁶¹ Although it was located on the Hillbrow strip, black queer people often faced difficulty gaining access to the venue, due to the security’s instructions to not let in ‘trouble-makers’ and people who didn’t look queer. One participant explains that they do not believe this to have been a malicious or racist attempt to exclude people of colour. Rather, it was often the case that black queer people did not perform their queerness in similar ways to white queer people, and thus did not fit the image that security staff were told to expect.³⁶² As a result, black queers would often rely on Simon Nkoli or other ‘famous’ queer Sowetans to confront the security staff and reassure them that they were in fact queer. Connections would close around 3 am, and was a popular final venue for dancers before heading to their friend's places for sleepovers and after-parties. Connections hosted the Miss GLOW pageant between 1992 and 1994, which was massively popular, leading to the venue being packed to the point of being standing-room only.³⁶³ One of the resident DJs was a black lesbian, who was involved in ‘diversifying’ the sound of the venue.³⁶⁴ It is worth noting that black DJs, whose stories have been lost to posterity, are

³⁵⁸ Gary van Riet, Correspondence with Author, June 2024

³⁵⁹ Lee “From Heaven to the Dungeon,” 45.

³⁶⁰ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁶¹ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

³⁶² Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024

³⁶³ Tanya Chan-Sam, Interview by Author 29 April 2024.

³⁶⁴ Ibid

frequently cited as having instrumental roles in changing both the musical and social character of these clubs when they played, in contrast to Hillbrow's Pretoria Street strip, where patrons and dancers' practices tended to motivate change.

While most interviewees do not speak directly to the role of DJs or dance music culture in aiding the development of these social networks, Tanya does tell me about a key moment in black lesbian dance music culture in Johannesburg, when a black lesbian DJ, who typically played at Connections in Hillbrow, was booked to play at Kippies, a nightclub near the Market Theatre. Traditionally white and straight, the venue's booking of this DJ was seen as a watershed moment for the DJ, who spent weeks asking all of the black lesbian networks she had access to show up in numbers for her set. Her gig was met with much excitement from the Black Lesbian community, and the 75-capacity venue had over 200 black lesbians jostling to enter the venue. This DJ, and many others who have been alluded to in this chapter, played a role in diversifying the sound of the Commercial Scene, playing Kwaito and Township Pop amongst the more popular commercial sounds of pop and house music.

Thus, the commercial scene is best understood as a broader collection of predominantly white nightclubs which had been set up to facilitate archetypal forms of queer nightlife practices. Large venues were populated with darkrooms, dedicated dancefloors and bars, and were predominantly soundtracked by commercial gay pop hits. These clubs were generally more expensive than those in Hillbrow, and were sometimes difficult for queer black youths to gain access to. However, participants still remember these venues fondly, and as important parts of the broader queer scene - reflecting a level of ambivalence towards the challenges faced and differences between the commercial scene and the Hillbrow scene. The commercial scene was not so removed from black queer practices that it existed separately, it was just different, and represented a collection of venues over which black queer people had less influence. With this said, black queer DJs appear to have used their position of authority over the music played in these clubs to diversify the sound, and the clubs overall.

Multiracialism and the early Rave scene - A black lesbian's testimony

Accurate chronologies of the inception of the rave scene in Johannesburg are highly contested, most likely because a number of the DJs and promoters involved in this process are still active, and are potentially trying to secure their legacies on the scene. During personal

correspondences with these promoters, I received multiple competing accounts of the ‘first’ rave, the ‘best’ rave and the ‘longest-standing’ rave during this era. With this said, most sources agree that the first rave in Johannesburg, named ‘Acid House Rave,’ was hosted in 1991 by gay DJ and resident at the popular 1980s gay club Zipps, Gary “VR” van Reit.³⁶⁵ Held in the Market Theatre Complex by a group of DJs who had come from the 1980s gay club scene, the rave was a response to the turn towards mixed-use bars with dancefloors which played more commercial music. From this, the rave scene began to expand and was bolstered by the invitation of a DIY Rave crew from Nottingham to throw a party at Wayne’s World in the Magaliesburg later that year.³⁶⁶

The next year, Johannesburg’s first ‘rave crew’ - Activ-8 - was founded, consisting of Graeme ‘G-Force’ Hector and DJ Christos, amongst others.³⁶⁷ Their first rave, named Luna-Sea, was also held in the Market Theatre complex, to much success. The Activ-8 Crew would go on to host several other raves at similar venues, including the Wembley Arena in Turffontein and an empty “light-industrial tower block” on End Street, Marshalltown.³⁶⁸ The following year, in 1993, Fourth World would open its doors in Doornfontein, becoming the “first Johannesburg dance venue to focus entirely on ‘machine-made, acid-laced, and 4/4-propelled grooves.’”³⁶⁹

By 1995, the rave scene had several nodal points, including ESP (at 96 End Street, having taken over from Idols and Mandy’s, two gay bars from previous decades), Krypton in Rosebank run by DJs Stuart Hillary and Alan Inferno and The Castle (formerly the Dungeon, an iconic Afrikaans gay bar of the 1980s).³⁷⁰ It is worth noting that both ESP and the Castle took over their venues from gay clubs and that Krypton was run by iconic gay DJs from the era. At least in terms of management and legacy, the rave scene’s nodal points relied on queer nightlife networks from the past. Of Krypton, Jon Monsoon writes:

³⁶⁵ Gary van Riet, Correspondence with Author, June 2024; Graeme “G-Force” Hector, Correspondence with Author, June 2024.

³⁶⁶ Graeme “G-Force” Hector, Correspondence with Author, June 2024.

³⁶⁷ Sean O’Toole, “Imaginary Republics,” 222.

³⁶⁸ Ibid

³⁶⁹ Ibid

³⁷⁰ Jon Monsoon, *Stars Bars and Guitars: A Journey in South African Music*. (Cape Town: Struik, 2008), 34-36.

As a straight person, you got in only by knowing the right people and, even then, on the understanding that you would behave and respect the territory.³⁷¹

From 1996, the rave scene began to explore the inner city, with club nights such as Not, 206 and Next Step hosted by an array of organisers including Blunted Stuntman, Pierre Armageddon and Missile Miles.³⁷² By this time, many past ravers had begun to feel as though the raves were becoming too ungoverned, too ‘druggy’ and unreliable, and thus began to prefer to attend brick-and-mortar clubs in Rosebank. Embassy, which first opened in 1992, was the first of the Rosebank-based queer rave clubs and was quickly followed by Krypton in 1994.³⁷³ From 1994 onwards, Krypton became known as the most ‘reliable’ club on the scene, and would often be the venue ravers would find themselves in if the rave they had chosen to attend ended up being unsuccessful.³⁷⁴ Krypton’s popularity was further encouraged by the decline in popularity of Idols in 1993 - with a sustained desire to rave in queer venues, Idols’ (and Mrs H’s and 58’s) patronage began to move towards Rosebank in a pattern which is consistent with the white flight of the era.³⁷⁵

Lerato’s ‘gay life’ began when she moved to University in 1990 and began to live in student accommodation in Braamfontein.³⁷⁶ Despite growing up in the same neighbourhood and at the same time as Bongane, she did not frequent any gay shebeens, citing the gender dynamics explored in previous chapters as a possible barrier to her entry into Soweto’s gay life. Further, she was very conscious of the unique risks of living as an out lesbian woman in Soweto and thus hadn’t come out to anyone before moving to Johannesburg. For Lerato, a tight network of ‘ravers’ became the vessel for her to understand both her sexuality and the role that dance music played in creating liberatory spaces for her. While she did not feel comfortable expressing her sexuality in Soweto, her time spent at the University of the Witwatersrand exposed her to a world of music, queer and student politics, and a significant degree of mobility between both social and musical worlds.

³⁷¹ Monsoon, *Stars Bars and Guitars*, 34.

³⁷² Ibid 35.

³⁷³ Stuart Hillary, Correspondence with Author, June 2024.

³⁷⁴ Fabio Di Cosmo, Interview with Author, 13 June 2024.

³⁷⁵ Stuart Hillary, Correspondence with Author, June 2024.

³⁷⁶ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

Between 1990 and 1997, her community of ravers was highly mobile, moving between the aforementioned ‘black’ and ‘commercial’ scenes in Johannesburg, while establishing their roots in an emergent rave culture which travelled between warehouses in the CBD, and nightclubs in Rosebank. Her specific group of ravers would frequent house parties in Yeoville, record stores on Rockey Street³⁷⁷ and occasional nights out reaching as far as Pretoria. She remembers frequently partying throughout the weekend, “three days straight,” as her group moved between bars, clubs, warehouse parties and house parties without much rest.³⁷⁸ Lerato remembers the advent of early raves resulting in a perceived ‘overnight shift’ to dance music culture in Johannesburg.³⁷⁹

...Suddenly Preston was running Fourth World, Mel opened a record store in Yeoville... [It was this] hardcore sound and breakbeat music [which became] instantly popular... [We now had]... this rave thing [with] queer people mixing [with others] and dancing.³⁸⁰

Gary VR echoes Lerato’s sentiment, arguing that the early rave scene was “the beginning of the blending of the gay and straight [world’s of dance music]” in Johannesburg.³⁸¹ Interestingly, both Lerato and Gary, in retrospect, express regret over this ‘blending,’ reflecting a historical moment where, in the 1990s, it was exciting to bring separate worlds together through dance music. In contemporary dance music scenes (and the testimony of Lerato and Gary, who are both DJs) the most frequent complaint is that these worlds are now too mixed and lack space for liberatory queer environments.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway from the increasingly mixed scene of dancers is the coalescence of post-apartheid era social cohesion with the transformative atmosphere of the rave scene. Lerato speaks of the influence of party drugs such as LSD and Ecstasy in creating a relatively welcoming and ‘loving’ environment where the politics of contemporary South Africa fell away to a sort of apolitical ‘humanism.’ Raves are typically

³⁷⁷ Rockey Street was a popular ‘bohemian’ high street in Bellevue, and has been well-documented to have been a site of the confluence of alternative Afrikaans men, black youths and a multi-racial group of LGBT people. In many dance music scenes, record stores form important nodal points for socialisation and the sharing of music cultures. Accessible by day, they are one of very few non club-oriented dance music spaces accessible to people on the scene.

³⁷⁸ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁷⁹ Ibid

³⁸⁰ Ibid

³⁸¹ Gary van Riet, Correspondence with Author, June 2024.

understood to be safe spaces for excessive drug use and “uninhibited dancing and socialisation,” and, during the early 1990s, were governed by a ‘PLUR’ (Peace, Love, Unity and Respect) ethos.³⁸² Kavanaugh and Anderson have explored the means through which drug usage and dancing have come together to form social-affective solidarities between groups of ravers, creating transformative and liberating experiences which often defy societal expectations and the mainstream:

In [rave cultures], prior frames of reference and identification such as social class, occupation, locality, and religion have been abandoned. Instead, forces of emotional renewal - signified by the trivialization of work, increased focus on sensual pleasure, political apathy, consumption, peer networks, and the importance of appearance - are the newly emergent bases for solidarity that reinvigorate social life with vitality and effervescence... Association with drugs reinforced rave's group solidarity and oppositional identity, as drug use often relieves the feeling of being immobilised by mainstream institutions.³⁸³

Importantly, they argue that drug use often constituted an essential form of cultural practice in the process of building these solidarities.³⁸⁴ In this way, they write drug usage as not simply about heightening experience or enabling longer stints of uninterrupted dancing, but as a shared practice which built common practices between a disparate group of participants. Lerato’s experiences of the scene at the time reflect similar practices:

[There would be] children of staunchly right-wing families... you know, AWB families... [they] would come to these raves, take ecstasy, and have these moments of self-discovery.³⁸⁵

Here, Lerato speaks to what Luis Manuel-Garcia labels a “strategic vagueness” in the politics of dance music communities, where language and feelings of inclusion tacitly seek to overwrite or obscure political meaning,

³⁸² Brian Wilson, “The Canadian Rave Scene and Five Theses on Youth Resistance,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 27, No. 3 (2002) 388-390.

³⁸³ Philip R. Kavanaugh and Tammy L. Anderson, “Solidarity and Drug Use in the Electronic Dance Music Scene,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 49, No. 1 (2008) 185.

³⁸⁴ Kavanaugh and Anderson, “Solidarity and Drug Use in the Electronic Dance Music Scene,” 190.

³⁸⁵ Lerato “Lakuti” Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

enabling dancers to temporarily enjoy a moment of belonging unburdened by the difficult work of “identity politics,” while at the same time enabling them to ignore the exclusions and injustices taking place on those same dance floors. Such vagueness helps to sustain social worlds that can feel exhilaratingly expansive and yet also precarious, liable to disintegrate as soon as their underlying tensions are exposed.³⁸⁶

The result of this obfuscation, Manuel-Garcia argues, is a social world within which ‘stranger-intimacy’ or “gestures of social warmth, sharing, and vulnerability between strangers that occur with surprising frequency and intensity at electronic dance music events...” becomes an important cultural practice.³⁸⁷ In Lerato’s retelling of conservative, Calvinist-raised Afrikaans youths coming into contact with her black lesbian ravers, she speaks to this intimacy, where political realities are obscured, and moments of intense, ephemeral intimacy between strangers become commonplace. Perhaps most importantly, while Lerato might understand these experiences as representative of a ‘new South Africa’ on the eve of democracy, the Afrikaans youths she speaks of may not even remember the experience. Here, the role of party drugs further complicates the ‘realities’ of the social exchange. This sentiment is echoed by several additional contributors. Sean O’Toole writes that Activ-8 Raves, some of the first in the city, were

...millennial, druggy and optimistically non-racial, even though it attracted few black ravers...³⁸⁸

Similarly, Fabio di Cosmo, a DJ and nightlife organiser, tells me that the non-racialism of these raves was more of an ethos than a reality and that the raves felt more like a space for liberal, white youths to ‘work out’ their angst, guilt and confusion about the legacies of apartheid and the transition to democracy.³⁸⁹ While the demographic realities and racially transformative nature of the rave scene is clearly contested, what can be concluded is that through dance music communities in the inner city, Lerato was able to access social

³⁸⁶ Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispereta, *Together Somehow: Music, Affect, and Intimacy on the Dancefloor*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023) 1.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁸⁸ Sean O’Toole, “Imaginary Republics,” 220.

³⁸⁹ Fabio Di Cosmo, Interview with Author, 13 June 2024.

worlds which, then and now, could be remembered as transformative to her. Dancing to songs such as Larry Heard's "Can You Feel It?" which begins with a recording of Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech, alongside Afrikaans teenagers, "captured [her] feelings" of transformation and imminent social change.³⁹⁰ This was further compounded by the general feelings of novelty and change buzzing through the fledgling electronic music scene in Johannesburg, as well as the already-explored ubiquity of activist language and traditions in the social lives of most youths at the time. Ultimately, while the fledgling rave scene was not a devotedly 'queer' scene, through social-affective intimacies and solidarities, aided by the normalisation of drug usage, the raves became key spaces in the expansion of a dance music scene which was queer-friendly and oriented around dancing. Significantly, this scene relied on the infrastructure of queer nightclubs of the previous decades, and established nodal points in newly established queer clubs such as Krypton. The rave scene thus provides key insights into the expansion of the queer scene in the late 1990s, as well as the ways in which a non-racial ethos of hedonism was navigated by queer people of colour through dance music practices.

Conclusion

By the 1990s, Joubert Park had come to be known as a 'rough' and unsavoury cruising spot. While it remained a site for wealthier gay white men to cruise younger black men, these black men were no longer happy to engage in sexual encounters of this nature.³⁹¹ A far cry from the 1960s, when Joubert Park was Francis' main 'beat', the queer world of the 1990s was one where sexual opportunity, and true social and sexual solidarity were accessible, and black queer people could demand more of the bars, beats and clubs they moved through. This chapter has covered this 30 year period, and shown that queer Sowetans were consistent participants in the inner city's nightlife and sexual life, in stark contrast to previous assertions of black queer passivity in the Johannesburg scene. Instead, it has charted the process through which the scene was transformed and made better and more suitable for black queer sexualities. Joubert Park's loss of favour represents this, and shows the manner in which queer Sowetans were not only 'always present' in the city, but that they were suitably active members in the scene to be able to transform it.

³⁹⁰ Lerato "Lakuti" Khathi, Interview by Author, 2 May 2024.

³⁹¹ Bongane Nyathi, Interview by Author, 1 May 2024.

At its conclusion, this chapter has shed light on a loose chronology for black queer movements into the inner city from as early as the 1960s until the late 1990s. In the 1960s and 70s, while pass laws were still enforced, queer Sowetans such as Francis were still moving into the city regularly; to cruise, attend the theatre and drink with friends - but they were doing so on borrowed time. Dependent on the apartments of white friends, cruising spots which were only active during the day, and a company car, people like Francis were exceptions, and were forced to be savvy about their movements for fear of legal repercussions. With the loosening of pass laws and the arrival of the 1980s, groups of queer Sowetans such as the TDS were able to visit the inner city more frequently, testing the waters so to speak, in venues such as Razzmatazz and the Butterfly. However, with the fall of urban apartheid and the movement of many queer Sowetans into their own apartments, a sufficient foothold was gained, allowing black queer youths to begin to transform the nightlife scenes of the city as participants rather than sojourners.

The differences across these 40 years are subtle, but significant - rather than white friend's apartments, black queer youths were sleeping over in other Sowetan's apartments. Rather than drinking at the Butterfly Bar, they were drinking at the Skyline, and could choose from a variety of venues including emXhoseni, Boobs, and Connections. If they had money to spare and wanted to immerse themselves in the more sexually-charged and commercial environment of the commercial scene, they could do so. If they were daring, the rave scene, full of drugs and liberatory dancing environments, was available to them as well. However, by the 2000s, these scenes had all but disappeared:

Hillbrow has changed, all the gay clubs are no longer there... And it's [even more] jam packed now... where there were stores - now there's a whole [market]... No [the gay village] is just gone, it does not exist anymore.³⁹²

Unfortunately, the desegregation of Hillbrow does not represent a utopian vision of a 'new' gay village for a fledgling multiracial South African democracy. Rather, this chapter has shed light on a brief period in South African urban and nightlife history within which multiple coincidental sociocultural processes left urban Johannesburg in flux, and thus open to

³⁹² Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

the negotiation of various racial, sexual and social practices. This historical moment allowed for the carving out of a variety of different nightlife scenes, including a distinctly black and Soweto-facing queer scene in Hillbrow, a commercial and multi-sexual scene in Braamfontein and Marshalltown, and a somewhat short-lived countercultural Rave scene across the city in occasional venues.

By weaving the testimonies of black queer Sowetans into existing and new histories of the emergence and maintenance of these scenes, this chapter has challenged existing narratives which either write queer black participants out of these histories or as passive ‘background characters.’ Certainly, the black queer scene in Hillbrow could not have emerged without a large group of black queer youths, primarily from Soweto, who were willing to challenge and reshape the ‘white’ gay city of the 1980s into one that kept up with their politics, practices and tastes. Clubs like Boobs and emXhoseni exist as evidence of the strength of this network as distinctly black nightlife spaces which were able to operate and profit during this time. Further, the evolution of the Skyline from the Butterfly Bar, its expansion to include a space for dancing, and its installation of a jukebox all paint an image of the increasing influence of black participants on the nightlife of Hillbrow in the 1990s. Further, the commercial and rave scenes of the era were also the sites of evolving black queer nightlife practices - Simon Nkoli’s activism through the Township Aids Project would often bring him to Champions and Connections for outreach work, the Miss GLOW Pageant took place at Connections between 1992 and 1994, and Lerato’s experiences of multi-racial raving were instrumental in her process of exploring dance music in the transitioning post-apartheid state.³⁹³

Ultimately, this evolving inner city scene was enabled by a number of interrelated social and political forces. With the desegregation of Hillbrow in the mid-1980s and the social processes of establishing tight networks of black queer support, queer Sowetans were emboldened to move further into the inner city, to lay a claim to the city, and to transform the city’s nightlife into a variety of scenes in which they could participate. These transformations were furnished by changes to the musical and social character of queer life in the city, which was becoming increasingly hospitable to the demands and practices of queer Sowetans, suggesting that by the turn of the century, they were ‘real’ members of the scene, rather than

³⁹³ Alpha Rasekgala, Interview by Author, 14 June 2024.

temporary, and passive visitors. Thus, by the mid-1990s, the queer inner city was comprised of a far more complicated and diverse population, with queer Sowetans motivating a number of key transformations to the city they inherited.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to establish a cultural, historical and musicological overview of the nightlife practices of queer Sowetans in the era following the Soweto Uprisings, and to evaluate whether these social practices constituted a scene. While I had initially intended for this dissertation to explore such dynamics exclusively within the geographical boundaries of Soweto, my primary research revealed, quite quickly, that the social lives of queer Sowetans expanded far further than the borders of Soweto, and was comprised by high levels of physical and social mobilities between Soweto and inner city Johannesburg, alongside other townships such as Vosloorus and Kwa-Thema.

Conceptually, I began this dissertation with an overview of the multiple evolving discourses surrounding subcultural and scene theory and showed that queer scene theory represents several key interventions into the existing literature, primarily due to its ability to describe more adequately fluid forms of participation and practice, as well as a response to the insufficiency of subcultural theory in describing diverse sexual and gender identities. The conceptual framework for this dissertation concluded by establishing that ‘scenes’ are geo-local communities, loosely organised around music and nightlife practices, but more so defined by groups of participants who come together within unintended social worlds of cultural practice and geographical knowledge. Scenes are not defined by the intentions or identities of those who participate in them, but rather by the act of coming together to participate.

As a result, this dissertation began with an exploration of the history and geography of the broad number of queer shebeens which emerged in Soweto from the 1980s onwards. The first chapter brought a number of shebeens into historical inquiry for the first time, and explored the ways in which these shebeens emerged, were navigated, and the cultural practices that took place within them. Of particular interest is the wide variety of the ‘types’ of shebeen available to people on the scene at the time - from ‘cruisy’ venues to dance clubs and drag venues, the shebeen scene had a diversity which provided for a wide array of interests at the time. Importantly, the shebeens were not the only site of queer recreation at the time - house parties, birthdays and occasional drag shows were well-attended and paint a picture of a vibrant, if sometimes hard-to-discover queer scene at the time.

The first chapter concluded that, although this scene did not resemble the archetypal ‘metropolitan’ scenes of New York or London, it still constituted a scene - albeit one caught in a specific historical moment of intense social and political transformation within Soweto, and affected by the relative lack of density of the township. Notably, the Soweto scene appears to have diminished in popularity amongst the ‘scenesters’ whose testimonies make up this dissertation by the time they became more mobile and had increased access to Hillbrow. Perhaps because Hillbrow represented ‘greener pastures’ and a more exciting environment, it seems as though the Soweto scene was one built out of necessity, and was somewhat abandoned when it became possible to do so. This does not, of course, preclude the scene of any importance, but rather displays the ways in which the scene existed as the result of a certain chronology in the development of black queer social practice more generally.

The second chapter explored the social and political networks established by queer Sowetans as they began to branch out of Soweto and expand their social worlds across most of Gauteng. In doing so, I provided a history of social and political networking as a mechanism for expanding queer worlds outside of Soweto. In their most embryonic form, these networks served to ensure safety from intimidation. However, they quickly grew to encompass fledgling activist tendencies, social solidarity and a desire for religious community, in many ways serving to supplant the social and religious communities queer Sowetans were being ostracised from by virtue of their queer identities. In this way, networks such as GLOW, the HUMCC and the GLOW Women’s Forum existed as supplements to the nightlife-focused queer scene, and ensured that at all times of the day, queer Sowetans could access queer social lives that were fulfilling and diverse, while also enabling and encouraging new mobilities.

The final chapter then turned towards an evaluation of the breadth of the queer scene as it existed in Johannesburg’s inner city in the early 1990s. The focus of the chapter was to explore, for the first time, the processes of carving out black queer space in a queer nightlife scene which has often been written as statically white and male. Through the social networks established in the second chapter, and within the economic and political context of the ‘greying’ of the inner city, it became possible for black queer people (including a large number of Sowetans and former-Sowetans) to make a claim to venues such as the Skyline and

even the commercial scene, while also existing in sufficient numbers to encourage the emergence of a number of black-facing venues such as Razzmatazz, emXhoseni and Boobs. Further, the chapter explored oral histories of the cultural practices of Sowetan participants in these scenes - from Lerato's experiences as a raver to Bongane and Alpha's time in Hillbrow. The result was an exploration of the diverse histories of queer nightlife practices in 1990s Johannesburg which specifically platformed the experiences and practices of queer Sowetans, once again expanding the discussion of Soweto's scene to encompass a range of translocal nightlife practices.

Histories of the impact of HIV / AIDS are notably missing from the testimonies of participants and some of the archive, and the absence of these histories in testimonies is the reason for their absence from this dissertation. Rather than 'write in' the legacy of HIV / AIDS to the history of the queer Soweto scene, I chose to take the relative silence from participants as reflective of a lack of sensed connection between the two. This is not to say that HIV / AIDS did not affect the scene - to be sure, many of the founding members of the HUMCC died of AIDS related illness, as did a number of members of the TDS as well as the shebeen scene.³⁹⁴

In the archetypal, centralised nightlife scenes of the West, high rates of HIV transmission, fear and poor education about the virus and the deaths of many gay men resulted in a decline of gay men's nightlife practices.³⁹⁵ By 1988 in Manhattan, New York, the multi-thousand capacity venue the Saint was regularly drawing in only a "few hundred souls" and, when annual membership renewals were sent out, over 700 returned marked "Return to Sender - Occupant Deceased."³⁹⁶ The Saint eventually shut down on 1 May 1988. However, as opposed to the archetypal scenes of the West, it doesn't appear that AIDS significantly impacted the growth or development of the Soweto scene: if anything, the establishment of the Township AIDS Project following the slow dissolution of GLOW resulted in the emergence of yet another pseudo-political social network within Soweto. The TAP's activities included regular petitioning and pamphlet distribution at a number of the shebeens and inner city venues discussed in this dissertation, as well as their own 'educational fun

³⁹⁴ Paul Mokgethi-Heath, Interview by Mark Gevisser and Busi Kheswa. 12 December 2007

³⁹⁵ Mickey Weems, *The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit*, (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2008): 122.

³⁹⁶ Ibid 122.

nights,' held at a number of venues across Gauteng.³⁹⁷ These educational parties were part of a long, international tradition of queer parties held for political causes, dating back to as early as the mid 1950s.³⁹⁸ These parties, held to raise funds and spread educational materials about HIV, emerged in earnest in the early 1990s in Johannesburg, likely spurred on by TAP's extremely broad network of international gay organisations. More work could be done to chart the impact of HIV on South African queer nightlife practices generally, and the responses of cultures of cruising, hedonist parties and drug usage to the risks of the virus. For this dissertation, however, it is sufficient to note that, in the memories of participants, HIV had little impact on the processes of scene-construction and, if anything, encouraged new modalities of nightlife and recreation to encourage AIDS awareness.

In many ways, this dissertation serves as an important intervention in a number of trends that have emerged in the existing literature on queer South African histories, including a general lack of comprehensive studies of queer nightlife practices, a significant emphasis on political histories, a lack of attention awarded to lesbian social lives and a 'flattening' of queer South African experience to that of political and legal organisation. Further, this dissertation has, throughout its chapters, intervened in a number of more isolated trends in the existing literature, including a de-emphasis on listening and participation in black musicological writing and the assertion of Hillbrow as a static, white gay city without awareness of black queer practice.

Further, by foregrounding nightlife and musical practice, this dissertation sheds important light on the recreational histories of queer Sowetans, an endeavour yet to be taken by other historians working on queer experiences in the apartheid era. It should be noted that, generally speaking, nightlife histories which focus on dance music are largely absent from the South African academy, save for a few studies on Jazz and Kwaito which have been referenced throughout this dissertation. The second chapter of this dissertation thus engages extensively with existing musicological literature on Soweto, and makes a case for the further writing of participatory music histories in Soweto. More could also be done to explore the yet uncharted histories of queer musicians in South Africa, as well as Soweto, in the apartheid era.

³⁹⁷ Tseko Simon Nkoli, "Township AIDS Project - June Report 1995," AM2623 D1.3, GALA: Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, Braamfontein, South Africa.

³⁹⁸ Weems, *The Fierce Tribe*, 105.

Ultimately, at its nexus, this dissertation offers a loose chronology of the expansion of black queer social lives throughout Gauteng in the period following the 1976 Soweto Uprisings. From small social groups and a budding queer shebeen scene, to province-wide social and pseudo-political organisations which provided a key network of solidarity and mobility to queer Sowetans as they began to move towards Johannesburg's inner city. From this, this dissertation has explored the ways in which the 'greying' of the inner city, and the networks established by queer Sowetans allowed for the creation of pockets of black queer nightlife institutions within the previously 'white gay city'. This chronology is significant, as it approaches an image of urban migration, social liberalisation and the evolution of queer sexual politics from the perspective of Soweto, and places emphasis on the translocality and fluidity of the Soweto scene.

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