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Sthembiso Mkhize; Anele Mthembu

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Unpacking pervasive heteronormativity in sub-Saharan Africa: Opportunities to embrace multiplicity of sexualities

Sthembiso Pollen Mkhize
Gauteng City-Region Observatory, University of Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Anele Mthembu
EThekwini Municipality, Development Planning Department, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract
This article provides a critical review of research on geographies of sexuality and acknowledges how sexual identities are constructed through an intersection of multiple dimensions in the sub-Saharan Africa region. Although the region is experiencing a gradually changing landscape regarding the rights of queer people, ongoing discriminatory practices attached to heteronormativity suppress the expression of non-normative sexual identities. Upon exploration of queer theory and a review of literature on the challenges facing queer people, this article argues for reimagining an African society that embraces a multiplicity of sexualities. It also advocates for tackling hetero- and binary-defined norms by presenting counterarguments and scenarios that demonstrate the significance of deconstructive and non-binary approaches towards sexuality and space in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords
queer, geographies of sexualities, heteronormativity, sexuality, space, sub-Saharan Africa

I Introduction

Heteronormativity is a familiar term in research on geographies of sexuality that is used to capture the imposition of certain beliefs about sexuality through social and spatial organization, as well as to make visible the processes that privilege heterosexual attractions and relationships as the default, normal, and superior form of sexuality (Barker, 2014; Hubbard, 2008; Robinson, 2016; Warner, 1991). The term heteronormativity was coined by a queer theorist, Michael Warner, to describe the social processes through which heterosexuality is treated as normal whilst treating those that fall outside this standard as abnormal and of lesser value (Warner, 1991). Browne and McCartan (2020) assert that everyday spaces are

Corresponding author:
Sthembiso Pollen Mkhize, Gauteng City-Region Observatory, University of Johannesburg and University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Email: sthembiso.mkhize@gcro.ac.za

structured by societal expectations of what sexuality should be, and these hegemonic ideologies continue to play a key role in shaping spatial arrangements. In addition, these norms, practices, and societal expectations prevailing in everyday spaces constrain certain sexual expressions that diverge from the "norm," leading to the legitimation of fear of those who do not conform.

As such, heteronormativity has become a useful term for exploring embodied socio-cultural and spatial configurations of gender identity and sexuality to illuminate the privileging of heterosexuality in social relations (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Robinson, 2016). Browne and McCartan (2020) assert that geographers interested in sexuality have paid attention to the way in which sexualities are made and articulated in different places, suggesting how heteronormativity is often resisted, recreated, and enforced. "Heteronormativity" was then introduced in the field of geography by feminists and geographers of sexuality to interrogate how public spaces became heteronormative when social and cultural norms constituted through repeated heterosexual acts such as heterosexual handholding and kissing, especially in specific sites and locales (Browne and McCartan, 2020; Hubbard, 2008; Luibhéid, 2008; Peake, 2017; Tucker and Hassan, 2020).

While there was already a large body of work on same-sex sexualities by geographers and social scientists before the adoption of "heteronormativity," geographers of sexuality used the concept of heteronormativity to explore complex sexualized relationships between space and bodies (Peake, 2017). In their analyses, they expanded from their initial interrogation of exploring the relationship between public space and sexuality to understanding the impacts of normative heterosexuality on those who are not heterosexual. Exploring sexual identities that fell outside heterosexuality endorsed the significance of comprehending the range of desires and bodies that are considered normal and coherent while others are not. Moreover, the development of this literature in the field of geographies of sexuality gave greater recognition and representation to the multiplicity of sexualities and the fluid and contextual nature of sexual identities (Hubbard, 2008; Peake, 2017).

Research on sexualities in the global South has highlighted ways in which sexualities are articulated and the many challenges faced by queer[1] people due to discrimination (Brown et al., 2010; Elder, 1998; Tucker, 2009, 2020). Much of the work that aims to rethink queer life in the global South without "talking back" on the experiences of the global North has focused specifically on sub-Saharan Africa, a part of the world where prejudice, discrimination, and violence against queer people are perceived to be especially severe (Brown et al., 2010; Milani and Lazar, 2017; Tucker, 2020). The everyday realities of queer people are very much affected by popular homophobic discourses of heteronormativity that inform widely shared norms of masculinity and femininity, negative attitudes towards homosexuality and sometimes hostile reactions, which are often pervasive towards queer bodies (Hendriks, 2016; Naidu and Mutumbara, 2017).

While the region has seen a gradually changing landscape with regard to the rights of queer people, there are ongoing heteronormative practices that suppress the expression of non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Bond, 2016; Epprecht, 2018; Ngidi et al., 2020; Reygan and Lynette, 2014; Sigamoney and Epprecht, 2013; Tucker, 2020). Since 1990, out of all 46 countries in the region, 10 countries have changed their laws to allow queer people to publicly express their gender identities and sexualities (Mendos et al., 2020; Mkhize, 2021). Despite attempts to criminalize same-sex sexual practices in countries where it has never been illegal, 11 countries continue to withstand and maintain the absence of state-sponsored homophobia in contemporary politics (Hendriks, 2016; Mendos et al., 2020).

The institutionalization of heteronormativity in spaces in sub-Saharan Africa has also been driven by structural arrangements that have the authoritative power to define who belongs and to decide what bodies are allowed to do, when and where (Browne et al., 2009; Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020; Wahab, 2016). Although space is not only defined by the powerful, but individuals remake it by inhabiting it in their own way whilst changing the terms of inclusion from below. However, structural arrangements such as heterosexual-accommodating laws

and norms dictate whether a person can enter a space or not; whether they can be safe in particular spaces; what they can and cannot do in safe or unsafe spaces; and what tactics they might have to adopt to negotiate the policing that they are subject to (Bettani, 2015; Bhagat, 2018; Brown, 2018; Browne et al., 2009; Reygan and Lynette, 2014). Homes, a perfect example for explaining this notion, are structurally arranged spaces, and for many, a home is a place of comfort, a retreat from the world, and a place to be oneself (Browne et al., 2009). However, the literature shows that for (some) queer people in sub-Saharan Africa, a home can be very uncomfortable and alienating since it is shaped by assumptions of heteronormativity that are present in their social relationships with parents, siblings, and others around the home (Browne et al., 2009; Carolissen and Kiguwa, 2018; Gorman-Murray, 2006).

The gender roles and sexual relations of heterosexual masculine men and feminine women are naturalized, and sexual relations between LGBTIQ + individuals are considered abnormal and as being deviant forms of sexual expression (Robinson, 2016). Similarly, public spaces are perceived as locations that are meant to be equally accessible to all people, irrespective of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation—however, non-normative sexual identities often experience significant inequalities when navigating public spaces because of widely communicated norms of heterosexuality that legitimate homophobia and pose a threat to queer expressions (Brown, 2018; Pertzel, 2020). Interestingly, queer people are not afraid to change the definitions of who belongs in public spaces, as they demonstrate their visibility by just being there and being themselves. Recent research suggests that attitudes towards non-normative sexual identities continue to change in several areas of social life in sub-Saharan Africa, from media representations of queer life to hosting LGBTIQ + pride parades, to the repeal of discriminatory legislation and the extension of marriage and civil partnerships to same-sex partners (Bond, 2016; Macheso, 2021).

This article is written as a contribution to the scholarship on geographies of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. While acknowledging the large body of work written by scholars on the geographies of sexuality and same-sex sexualities in Africa, this article draws on a review of literature on the challenges of being queer in sub-Saharan Africa to understand the impacts of normative heterosexuality on those who are not heterosexual, and to acknowledge how queer Africans consistently challenge discrimination that comes with heteronormative attitudes. First, we review and apply queer theory to understand the deconstructive approaches to hegemonic sexual definitions and to expose institutional and interactional dimensions of power and privilege in suppressing non-normative identities and expression. Second, we provide a review of literature on the 'unjust' experiences of queer people and explore how the geographies of sexuality have been approached in sub-Saharan Africa. Learning from reviewing the literature, this article argues for reimagining a society that embraces a multiplicity of sexualities through destabilizing notions of power and privilege attached to heteronormativity and we offer a synthesis of recommendations based on potential opportunities and scenarios from literature to challenge discrimination attached to heteronormativity in sub-Saharan Africa.

II Queer theory

The association of 'heteronormativity' with queer theory has been deployed in sociological discussions that seek to expose the embedding and reproduction of heteronormativity in social structures and relations (Bell, 2009; Browne et al., 2009). Queer theory critically interrogates the meanings of sexual identity and disrupts what is perceived to be a "natural order" or "normal" and celebrates the differences and multiplicity of sexualities and identities in society (Kumashiro, 2003; Warner, 1991). Additionally, as a lens for extricating the various factors that feed into heteronormativity, queer theory helps us understand how particular structural elements give certain individuals power and privilege over others (Few-Demo et al., 2016). Geographers have mobilized queer theory to explore how space and place are implicated in heteronormativity, and their work has put the lives of queer people on the "disciplinary map" (Oswin, 2008). However, much of the theorization of sexuality is West-centric, parochial, and can be patronizing towards African scholars and theorists (Epprecht, 2013; Oswin, 2008; Steyn and Van Zyl, 2009; Tucker 2009).

Queer theory has been argued to be linked to the Euro-American views that display perceptions of the West/global North as most liberating and as reference points of progress to confront exclusionary discourses of heteronormativity in the global South (Anzaldúa, 1991; Milani, 2014; Tucker, 2009). Murray (2009) asserts that queer theory has generally ignored Africa (Murray, 2009). However, Epprecht (2010) commends queer theory as an effective approach to sexuality research globally but notes the problems and weakness of its application in the African context because of its roots in the United States and Europe. Arguably, Gunkel (2010: 15) notes that "we cannot afford not to apply queer theory as a tool of analysis despite recent efforts to exclude it from sexualities research in the African context". In Gunkel's (2010) work, queer theory was used as an analytical lens to understand how the colonial era shaped post-apartheid homophobia in South Africa and how homophobia in townships functions through homosociality[2] under compulsory heterosexuality. This suggests that queer theory has elements applicable to sub-Saharan Africa that could be used to better explain and comprehend the region's multiplicity of sexualities. Seely (2020: 1234) asserts that "it is within the global South that some of the most promising possibilities for revitalizing queer theory can be located, by providing an occasion to rethink entrenched assumptions about the relationships between sexuality…and the ideals of freedom". Although queer theory has been most relevant for practice in countries in the global North, it can still be used to unmask how heterosexuality imposes itself as a norm in the global South, offering a useful conceptual apparatus for understanding the historical production of normality-versus-deviance in the colonial project in Africa (Milani and Burnett, 2021).

Pindi (2020) has put African feminism in dialogue with queer theory and argues that they share an intersectional approach to deconstructing interlocking oppressions of sexuality that perpetuate the erasure and intolerance of non-heteronormative identities. In the postcolonial perspective in sub-Saharan Africa, social identities are framed through historical experiences and places that are central to shaping identities (Gunkel, 2010; Moolman, 2013). Research shows individuals who have multiple marginalized identities are often further marginalized within their groups as well as by the larger social structures (Battle and Ashley, 2008). In addition, Battle and Ashley (2008: 5) argues that "heteronormativity is more than the processes of patriarchy, heterosexism, and compulsory heterosexuality; it also contains elements of racial and class 'othering'". Queer theory not only permits a more inclusive analysis of diverse identities, but it also allows for fluidity and variance in the operationalization of society, providing a more holistic picture for imagining multiplicative interactions of social positionalities and identities (Few-Demo et al., 2016). Using relevant strands of queer theory to challenge norms that continue to reproduce inequality and discrimination, and to uncover heteronormative assumptions, this article critiques hegemonic representations of sexualities in sub-Saharan Africa in order to destabilize heteronormative and discriminatory practices in spheres of everyday life.

III Space as an enabler or curtailer of queer life

Geographical studies of the spatial expressions and experiences of queer people began to surface in the late 1970s (Browne and McCartan, 2020; Houlbrook, 2001; Oswin, 2008). Binnie (1997: 223) argues that individual persons do not have pre-existing sexual identities, neither do spaces because "space is not naturally and authentically 'straight' but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized". Such spatially embedded heteronormativity promotes perceptions that queer identities are "unnatural," "ungodly" and, within the African context, "un-African" (Hassan et al., 2018; Vincent and Howell, 2014). Spaces in sub-Saharan Africa are not neutral; they have been historically constructed along spatial, colonial, and racial boundaries of exclusion (Hassan et al., 2018; Tucker, 2009). The presence of queer life in locations that are exclusive, and discriminating has forced people (both hetero- and homo-sexual) to realize the power and privilege heterosexual bodies have over their queer counterparts (Few-Demo et al., 2016; Oswin, 2008).

While it has been understood that space takes on meanings that are intimately and intersectionally connected to notions of race, class, gender identity,

and sexuality, geographers of sexuality have done much to expand this conceptualization of space production to include queer bodies (Binnie, 1997; Livermon, 2014). In addition, much of the earlier work in sub-Saharan Africa has been relatively focused on privileged White queer communities, especially in South Africa (Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2008). Recent work, including Matebeni (2017), shows how Black lesbians demand the right and space to be seen and heard within the White male "gay" space, the Black African space, and within society. Mbasalaki (2022: 8) argues that the "racialization of the queer body as White and the sexualization of the Black body as 'straight' reveals how the White queer body is emblematic of human rights protection used to position the country as the progressive queer-friendly tourist destination (for White queer tourists), while the Black queer body remains a threat to African culture and tradition". In addition, Livermon (2014) posits the idea of "usable space," which speaks to the process of innovation, flexibility, and vitality central to Black queer survival and livability, particularly if the concept is understood in relation to the Black heteronormative spaces that Black queers must inhabit and negotiate daily.

South Africa's liberal constitution enshrines laws that respect everyone's sexual orientation, which has resulted in the strengthening and growth of visible social organizations that advocate for queer rights across the sub-Saharan African region, such as Outright International, The Other Foundation, Coalition of African Lesbians, and Pan Africa International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. Among many new freedoms that the queer community has enjoyed in South Africa, one was the creation of spaces in which they felt they could give expression to their sexual identity and non-conformity with heteronormative practices (Visser, 2003). In post-apartheid South Africa, the new political dispensation encourages Black queers to claim their rights and subjectivity by increasing their visibility as explicitly sexual objects (Livermon, 2014). In research by Canham and Langa (2017), Black lesbian working-class women, who live at the intersection of multiple oppressions, claimed that they were stronger than any form of oppression. They expressed joy and a sense of security in socializing as groups, creating an alternative space where they could express themselves in ways that affirmed who they were.

In Uganda, which upholds its Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009,[3] Chéry (2017) refers to queer Ugandans as "identity fugitives" to describe their inability to share their whole selves in public domains because of pervasive heteronormativity and the prevalence of violence against queer people. However, queer Ugandans publicly created a "sacred" space of refuge to protect themselves and to honor the queer people killed in the Orlando massacre that happened in the United States in 2016. Similar events have taken place in Zimbabwe, where queer identities and non-normative sexualities have become increasingly visible in heteronormative spaces, and the country has witnessed an emergent queer mobilization and sexual-identity politics in recent years (Muparamoto, 2021). These examples suggest that queer people in sub-Saharan Africa continue to challenge heteronormative spaces and threaten the proliferation of conservative beliefs that undermine queer life (Chéry, 2017).

IV Being queer in sub-Saharan Africa: Heteronormative and discriminatory practices

Social norms that regulate sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa continue to suppress diverse gender and sexual expressions. Ideologies based on religion, the colonial legacy, and modern African popular culture and media enforce heteronormativity (Tamale, 2014). Furthermore, several late twentieth-century thinkers argued that homosexuality is non-existent among indigenous Africans and that the concept itself was abhorrent (Dlamini, 2006). This argument holds that homosexuality is un-African, an ideology that perpetuates hate crimes and discrimination against queer bodies in Africa (Kalamar et al., 2011). Ibrahim (2015) asserts that colonialism introduced the now widespread religious and legal norms that police sexuality and gender in Africa, which were sponsored by Western/American evangelical groups and anti-gay rights discourses.

Several sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria, Uganda, South Sudan, and Mauritania, legislated against queer identities and same-sex

sexual activities to silence the voices and experiences of those engaging in them (Bond, 2016; Msibi, 2011; Tamale, 2007). Murray and Roscoe (1998: xi) argues that "among the myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental in African societies is one of the oldest and most enduring". This myth has also been promoted by many Africans and the claims suggesting homosexuality is "un-African" are based on the premise that sexual orientation or consequent sexual behavior violates basic principles and values of African reality (Dlamini, 2006; Matolino, 2017). Arguably, same-sex practices and identities have had a long history in Africa given "that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, is a Western import" (Awondo et al., 2012: 148). In addition, penal codes and articles criminalizing homosexuality in a number of sub-Saharan African countries are copied from laws of the former colonial powers (Wahab, 2016). However, homophobia is unjust, and this is an insight that can be realized in the West and elsewhere too. Although we can trace its many origins, many Africans own their homophobia as something that they believe to be consistent with their values and beliefs, rather than a false thing from the outside that has tricked them into believing that they are homophobic because of colonialism.

As such, colonialism played a significant role in shaping some of the African countries' legislation against homosexual behaviors and sexual expressions. Vilakazi and Mkhize (2020) argues that since the dawn of independence in the 1950s, African countries' common mistake was to embrace their colonial masters' penal codes in their own social and legal communities. Such penal codes are layered with religious and cultural fundamentalisms that did not accord with what colonialists considered European values, which were then imposed on African beliefs (Ndjio, 2013; Vilakazi and Mkhize, 2020). This colonial-inflected identity has manifested itself in most sub-Saharan African countries, and in Malawi, Kenya, Senegal, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe, homosexuality has been criminalized (Ndjio, 2013; Ngidi et al., 2020; Tamale, 2014). This prohibition entails sexual and physical abuse towards queer people, vandalism of queer people's property and possessions, gay bashing, hate speech, and predominant heteronormative mannerisms that exclude them from engagements and socializations (Ngidi et al., 2020). Those perceived to be different are considered as a consequence of their "difference" and are easily targeted to "merciless and savage attacks" (Judge, 2018: 118).

Nigeria, Malawi, Ghana, and South Sudan are examples of countries that have maintained heteronormative institutions that perpetuate harm, discrimination and violence through their penal codes, including the death penalty for "crimes" related to homosexuality. Tanzania, Southern Nigeria, Malawi, and Zambia sentence defendants to life imprisonment for non-conformity with heterosexualized norms and standards (Tamale, 2014). In Uganda, citizens and members of parliament have power and an influential call to re-endorsing the Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009, which if endorsed would carry a life sentence for "crimes" related to demonstrating varying sexual expressions that aim to challenge widely shared norms of heterosexual femininity and masculinity (Tamale, 2014; Van Heerden, 2019; Vilakazi and Mkhize, 2020). In addition, the Ugandan Constitution prohibits discrimination on a number of grounds, including sexual citizenship (Mudarikwa et al., 2021). These laws show that heteronormativity and patriarchal discourses and practices in African countries continue to suppress sexuality and negate homosexuality as un-African (Reygan and Lynette, 2014).

The late and former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, described people expressing same-sex identities and sexual behaviors as "worse than dogs and pigs" (Muparamoto, 2021). The former President of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, counseled the citizens to persecute sexual minorities (Ngidi et al., 2020). In South Africa, former President Jacob Zuma condemned same-sex marriage publicly as a "disgrace to the nation and to God". These remarks by State Presidents are consistent with other sub-Saharan African countries' experiences of hate speech against queer identities. In Kenya, high levels of homophobia and transphobia are encouraged by religious organizations and leaders who publicly condemn homosexuality (Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020). In Uganda, the day-to-day lives of queer people are adversely affected by

condemnation from members of the public, religious leaders, and government officials and spokespeople. Discriminatory practices in several sub-Saharan African countries are deepened by the hostile attitudes of several regional governments that claim queer rights are against their nation's cultural and religious value systems (Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020; Nkosi and Masson, 2017). Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2020) argues that the attitudes of religion and African spirituality towards sexuality, in general, affect the way queer people are treated in most sub-Saharan African countries.

Research by Human Rights Watch (2016) suggests that queer people are victims of homophobic and transphobic attacks due to the lack of awareness of same-sex and transgender identities in sub-Saharan Africa. Violence against queer people in sub-Saharan Africa has often been based on non-conforming sexual identity and preference, and on oppressing those who challenge accepted social norms around sexuality (Gentlewarrior and Fountain, 2009; Moagi and Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020). Studies suggest that being queer on the African continent constitutes a threat to the hegemonic systems in place that favor heteronormativity and social norms around heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Ibrahim, 2015; Valocchi, 2005). Although a growing number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa have decriminalized homosexuality, queer people continue to face oppression, and laws on same-sex marriage which have not been legalized in the whole region, except in South Africa, deny their freedom of association and limit their access to services unless their identity is hidden (Dworkin and Yi, 2003; Hassan et al., 2018).

Perpetrators of violence and discrimination often feel vindicated and validated when they threaten and assault queer people given the protection afforded to them through state-sponsored homophobia and the heteronormative legal system that favors heterosexuals (Ngidi et al., 2020). An example of this is "corrective rape" or "curative rape," which is often targeted against lesbian and bisexual women and transgender men (Doan-Minh, 2019). Thomas (2013) argues that the sexual violence these individuals are subjected to is used to "punish" them for their non-conformity with institutional norms and practices around heterosexual femininity. Further, perpetrators often justify their acts of sexual violence as "curing" a person of their actual, or what they perceive as actual, sexual, or gender identity. Solangon and Patel (2012) found that sexual violence against gay men often occurs in armed conflicts that arise due to their non-conformance with accepted sexual expressions in heteronormative spaces.

In South Africa, the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2006 positioned the country as the most progressive when it came to queer rights (Van Heerden, 2019). However, hate crimes and discrimination against queer people persist (Mkhize and Maharaj, 2020). Reygan and Lynette (2014: 716) have stated that "although the laws regulating same-sex relationships have been radically transformed in South Africa, homophobia nevertheless remains an everyday reality and more so if normative masculinities are challenged in the process". Van Heerden (2019) reinforces this assessment by claiming that there is limited evidence to substantiate the effectiveness of South Africa's progressive Constitution, especially since discrimination and hate-driven crimes are reportedly commonplace in rural and poorer communities.

V Approaching geographies of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa

Research suggests that addressing the issues of the global South from positions of privilege in the global North can be problematic, as this undermines the privilege of the global South to recognize and fix any problems without the interference of "Western" knowledge systems and experiences (Brown et al., 2010). Tucker (2020) emphasizes the need to comprehend geographies of sexuality from within an African context in order to avoid the dangers of assuming findings from countries in the global North. Given that there is now a growing body of literature on geographies of sexuality and same-sex sexualities in sub-Saharan Africa, the region stands in a good position to better appreciate how queer people inhabit and engage with spaces, and to develop appropriate strategies for overcoming the discrimination and violence they experience in these spaces and find strategies to overcome inequalities in relation to

discrimination and violence in spaces they engage in (Epprecht, 2013; Tucker, 2020; Tucker and Hassan, 2020). In addition, Tucker (2020) asserts that there is, indeed, a diverse conceptualization of sexual subjectivities and ways in which hegemonic systems of heteronormativity could be challenged in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, the following sub-section presents a synthesis of recommendations for scenarios and opportunities for challenging heteronormativity in sub-Saharan Africa.

1 Synthesis of recommendations: Potential opportunities and scenarios

Queer people are often affected by the systematic arrangements of power that society awards them, suggesting ways in which sexuality can be expressed and lived in different spaces and places (Cresswell, 2010; Peyrefitte and Sanders-McDonagh, 2018). Brown et al. (2007) assert that power in spaces should be explored to understand the practices of resistance that cannot be separated from heteronormative domination and privilege. Queer theory plays a significant role in challenging the hegemonic structures of power relations governing sexual identities, as well as their embodiment by highlighting narratives and practices that contest heteronormativity (Peyrefitte and Sanders-McDonagh, 2018). In addition, queer theory informs a non-binary approach to the literature on geographies of sexualities and the conceptualization of space as fluid and not fixed. For instance, rethinking the measurements of sex, gender, and sexuality when conducting social surveys and censuses in sub-Saharan Africa, as they are currently structured to ignore the existence of any gender or sexual identification other than heterosexual male/female, or heterosexual man/woman (Gauteng City-Region Observatory, 2022; Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). Such an innovation would reveal the presence of LGBTIQ + individuals in population-level demographic datasets, thus more accurately capturing the complexities of the entire population. It is imperative that population-level research tackles binary-defined norms by presenting counterarguments that demonstrate the significance of a non-binary approach to sexuality and space so that those claims that there are no queer people in Africa can be debunked and make invisible groups more visible.

Queer theory has exposed how notions of human rights and equality based on identity politics are negotiated and constructed by discourse as well as by social and political circumstances (Fobear, 2014). Geographic scholarship on sexuality has followed international trends in connecting the rights discourse to social justice agendas (Laliberté, 2015). Tucker (2020) points out the significant work by Jones (2012) and Laliberté (2015) on how processes operating at an international scale, such as human rights discourses, interfere with different divergent place-based interests within countries and within and between communities. International human rights discourses continue to affect legislative efforts to stop the criminalization and discrimination of queer people in Africa (Tucker, 2016). Wilde et al. (2007) argues that queering international law can extend its normative framework to include non-heterosexual experiences and identities and broaden human rights legislation so that it prohibits homophobic discrimination and offers protection for a diversity of sexual expression and identity. In addition, challenging normative assumptions of international law through queering current processes of power would be valuable to critique underlying heteronormative practices present in legal structures, especially in countries that have already legalized homosexuality without offering same-sex marriages or consensual same-sex relationships.

For most African countries, the impact of laws against queer identities that date back to the colonial era is pervasive, with queer people subject to widespread threats and violence because of their sexualities. Since the laws criminalizing homosexuality were mostly instituted during the colonial occupation of Africa, dismantling these laws, and adopting a rights-based approach to sexual minorities, could be seen as a further step towards decolonizing discrimination in countries that embrace pervasive heteronormative practices (Fobear, 2014). Vilakazi and Mkhize (2020) also suggest challenging hegemonic heteronormativity in Africa through a post-colonial queer feminist lens, which provides the necessary tools for confronting post-colonial power through direct action, advocacy, public education,

sensitization, and the transformation of a mindset fearful of non-heteronormative sexual expressions. It is essential for LGBTIQ + activists and allies to take on a bigger role in ongoing conversations and research that challenge hegemonic heteronormativity. Moreover, revisiting penal codes through the post-colonial and intersectional lens would encourage engagement with and participation in ongoing processes of vision-making which would enable the application of queer theory in an African context. Challenging the boundaries of a post-colonial homophobic society could also be initiated through opening dialogues and engagements to create safe spaces that are welcoming and friendly towards queer people (Tamale, 2014).

Nduna et al. (2017) suggest that destabilizing heteronormativity would require a different perception of sexuality in contrast to the negative mindset in several African countries that stigmatizes homosexuality as a Western social import. Cognitive psychologists believe that language affects how people think (Boroditsky, 2001), and political psychologists suggest that language shapes how people respond to social and political issues (Pérez and Tavits, 2017), thus, this means that there is a possibility that language could impact political opinions. Heteronormative language in sex education and sexual health continues to attribute power to heterosexual bodies and stigmatize homosexuality by positioning heterosexual sex in the context of normal relationships as the only acceptable and safe form of sexual activity. While language influences how the public responds toward gender equality and sexual liberation, it is also meaningfully associated with the construction and maintenance of attitudes towards gender identity and sexuality (Msibi, 2012; Tavits and Pérez, 2019). Epstein and Johnson (1994: 41) argues that the normalization of heterosexuality is encoded in language through statements such as "heterosexuality rules OK!" and a hidden curriculum that silences the existence of queer people. Education in sub-Saharan Africa remains hetero-centric (Nduna et al., 2017), and challenging inequalities in education, religious discourses and practices are vital for recognizing that spaces are made up of diverse social groups, sexualities, and individuals. According to Okech (2013), there is a need for the creation of a new non-binary language to breed a conducive environment in which marginalized voices can be heard. Deconstructing gendered/sexualized language should be prioritized to reduce stereotyping and discrimination against queer people. Discourse and language use should be scrutinized to prevent using offensive terminology or expressions.

As mentioned previously, in sub-Saharan African countries where homosexuality is criminalized, national leaders have used hate speech to describe queer people in ways that perpetuate violence, but this does not mean their powers do necessarily regulate all aspects of queer life. Their arguments have been fully supported by the public and have often been based on conservative African culture and traditions, conventional religious interpretations, and "moral" prescriptions about heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Nyanzi, 2013). Challenging traditional assumptions about homosexuality being un-African through *ubuntu*[4] principles would be significant to dismantle the constructs of sexuality and space within African locales. The African philosophy of *ubuntu* stems from the idea of common humanity, solidarity, and reconciliation, and its meaning is clearer when its social value is highlighted through respect, human dignity, and humanistic orientation. Mobilizing this philosophy could significantly dismantle the constructs of sexuality and spatial differences in African locales. While *ubuntu* as an African philosophy of life is crucial for transformation and resilience, embracing its principles has the potential to contribute towards post-colonial queer engagements and deconstructing spaces of sexualities and research pertaining to sexual diversity in sub-Saharan Africa. Seely (2020) shows how the principles of *ubuntu* have remained a political ethic forged in the decolonial, anti-apartheid, and ongoing encounters of hegemonic struggles in Zimbabwe and South Africa. This currency of *ubuntu* represents an opportunity to challenge "Africanism"—a term associated with ubuntu, compassion, and love; however, in most cases, this has not been applied to afford queer people the same dignity and respect in sub-Saharan Africa.

Documenting the experiences of queer people presents unique perspectives on sexual diversity as well as space distinct to sub-Saharan Africa (Tucker,

2020). Such distinct lived experiences have been captured by Livermon (2014) and Visser (2008), in which they narrate the evolution of queer experience through appropriation in heteronormative spaces. The purpose of appropriation is to enable queer people to create possibilities for autonomy and non-heteronormativity. A good example is the autonomy experienced by queer people in some nightclubs, where heteronormative ideas and social constructs are somewhat invisible, allowing heterosexuals and queer people to co-exist. A recent study regards a South African bar called *The Mystic Boer* as one of the most appropriate "gay-friendly" environments where queer and heterosexual people are able to interact (Rothmann, 2018). There are also instances where queer people are accepted and recognized in their neighborhoods or other public spaces. In Johannesburg, there is a place called *KwaMai Mai Traditional Market*, one of the city's most established traditional medicine markets where Zulu 'traditional' taxi drivers chill, and enjoy tasty meat platters served with a good helping of music. Although the market was predominantly a space to de-stress for traditional taxi drivers, it has become the coolest 'new' chilling spot for queer people. This denotes that the intolerance of stigma and discrimination against queer people is on a gradual increase, especially in spaces of appropriation as previously claimed heteronormative spaces are evolving and becoming more tolerant towards queer people.

Historically, traditional taxi drivers demonstrated the heteronormative and patriarchal position that society and culture afford them. However, in the present day, they have embodied co-existence in spaces with queer people. Rothmann (2018: 11) further asserts that there are contexts which are overtly conducive to being "more gay," with cautions against being "too much" because one has to avoid "forcing" discussions of homosexuality on heterosexual individuals as the "existing line of tolerance is already very thin". In addition, spaces that allow queer and heterosexual individuals to interact also become exclusive and secretive environments (Maake et al., 2021; Rothmann, 2018). Although the traditional market has become one of the most accepting public spaces for queer people, there are instances where they are verbally insulted if they act "too queer". In addition, it is clear that while previously claimed heterosexual spaces have become conducive and safe for queer people, they are still characterized by discrimination and some acts of heteronormativity because they limit queer people from fully expressing themselves without the feeling of being judged or told that they are doing "too much". This highlights the opportunity for awareness in society through creating more integrated social settings, with a "mixed contingent" of individuals that would "adapt" to each other, rather than "only one to the other" (Rothmann, 2018).

VI Conclusion

This article provided a critical review of research on geographies of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa and highlighted the intersections that explain the politics of identity and citizenship for queer people. The literature suggests that although the sub-Saharan African region is experiencing a gradually changing landscape regarding queer rights, there are ongoing heteronormative practices that continue to suppress the expression of non-normative sexual identities. The article presented arguments claiming that homosexuality is un-African, but also highlighted that homosexuality has had a long history in Africa and that homophobia was sponsored by colonizing states through religious and cultural fundamentalisms. Upon exploration of queer theory and a review of literature, this article has argued scenarios for challenging a society that embraces a multiplicity of sexualities through destabilizing notions of power and privilege attached to heteronormativity. In addition, it also offered a synthesis of recommendations based on potential opportunities and scenarios for challenging heteronormativity in sub-Saharan Africa. Most prominently being to rethink how sexualities are articulated whilst tackling binary-defined norms by presenting counterarguments that would demonstrate the significance of a non-binary approach towards sexuality and space in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the scenarios presented include embracing the principles of *ubuntu*; deconstructing gendered and sexualized language at home and in education and legislative documents; exploring norms of sexuality through postcolonial

lenses and relevant strands of queer theory; and creating spaces where queer and heterosexual people can evolve through a mutual appropriation to create the potential for autonomy and non-heteronormativity. Within the growing body of literature on geographies of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, most research has focused specifically on South Africa; consequently, there is a need for detailed studies in other countries in the region to locate and explain incidents of heteronormativity and homonormativity in a geographical perspective.

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ORCID iDs

Sthembiso Pollen Mkhize https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4360-3234

Anele Mthembu https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0622-1907

Notes

1. This paper positions lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, asexual, ally, questioning, pansexual (LGBTIQ+) people under the "category" of queer to indicate the endless proliferation and unsettled nature of sexual orientation and gender identity, and to escape labels of identification that tend to "fix" individuals.
2. The concept of homosociality describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex.
3. The Anti-Homosexuality Bill (2009) prohibits any form of sexual relations between persons of the same sex and the promotion or recognition of such relations in public institutions and other places through or with the support of any governmental entity in Uganda or any non-governmental organization inside or outside the country.
4. *Ubuntu* is a concept that originated from one of South Africa's languages, meaning that a human being can only be a human through others. It stems from the idea of common humanity, solidarity and reconciliation, and its meaning is clearer when its social value is highlighted through respect, human dignity and humanistic orientation (Mokgoro, 1998).

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Author biographies

Sthembiso Pollen Mkhize (he/him/his) is a Junior Researcher at the Gauteng City-Region Observatory. He holds a Master's degree in Population Studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As an emerging researcher, Sthembiso has strong interests in LGBTQ + youth health, geographies of sexualities, queering social surveys, experiences of violence and mental health. His research agenda continues to broaden and extend across multiple constructs that lie at the heart of promoting quality of life and wellbeing, health, social justice, inclusion and visibility for marginalised individuals. Email: sthembiso.mkhize@gcro.ac.za

Anele Mthembu (she/her) is a Professional Planner with the South African Council for Planners. She holds a Master's degree in Town and Regional Planning from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which allowed her to gain research and technical experience as an Infrastructure, Skills and Development Graduate Intern at eThekwini Municipality. Her current research interests are focused on exploring land-related debates, disaster management in the various spheres of government, as well as human geography from an urban planning perspective. Email: anelemthembu@gmail.com