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Discourse and politics in the production of homosexual subjectivities in South Africa: a Queer Theory analysis of selected English non-fiction texts

(1992-2008)

Tracey Lee McCormick

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that the current contradiction between the constitutional rights of gay and lesbian people in South Africa and the daily, continual experiences of homophobic violence and discrimination necessitates an alternative analysis of the contradictory nature of gay and lesbian rights in South Africa. In order to do this, I draw on Queer Theory to analyse the link between discourse and politics in the production of homosexual subjectivities in six South African English non-fiction books between1992 and 2008 that have never before been the focus of a dedicated research investigation. I cover this period because it encompasses various epochs in which the shift in the priorities and issues on the gay and lesbian rights agenda can be identified and in which the evolving image of the public face of homosexuality can be mapped. The unique South African political and historical contexts in which each book was written is central to understanding the specificity of gay and lesbian identity construction.

I draw on Queer Theory (Foucault, Butler, Rubin) as a critical hermeneutic which has as its aim to provide insight into the complexity of identity and difference from a post-structuralist point of view in order to analyse the link between discourse and the production of subjectivity.

In my analysis of the six non-fiction texts I demonstrate how representations of gay and lesbian identities vary depending on the political imperatives of the gay and lesbian movement and the level of homophobia that existed at the time of the production of each text under investigation. I make evident those instances where Queer Theory is useful as an analytical tool for examining identity and difference, and where it is not in the South African context. I point out the limitations of an identity politics approach to understanding and resisting discrimination against gay, lesbian and queer people. Finally, I argue that from a Queer Theory perspective, rights based and identity politics approaches to political change have the potential for the assimilation of difference into a normative paradigm.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Tracey Lee McCormick

23 July 2012

For Lesley

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