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# Living Openly: 2 Narratives of Black and White Lesbians Living in Cape Town

Rebecca Gant  
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LIVING OPENLY:

2 Narratives of Black and White Lesbians Living in Cape Town

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements for South Africa: Multiculturalism and Human Rights

SIT Study Abroad, a program for World Learning

Cape Town, South Africa

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## Abstract

After apartheid, South Africa created an amazingly progressive Constitution that was one of the first in the world to include gay rights. The passing of a law legalizing same-sex marriage, as well as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act work to create a world of equality and acceptance of homosexuality, at least on paper. Unfortunately, a far different reality exists, as the failed implementation of these provisions has created a large dichotomy between Constitution and public opinion, with many individuals remaining unsupportive of gay rights. My project originally sought to explore the effects of this discrepancy through listening to the narratives of lesbian women living in Cape Town.

I wanted to hear the life stories of various black and white lesbians in South Africa in order to determine whether or not they felt that the Constitution's extremely liberal policies had actually made a positive contribution to their lives. I also wanted to explore the effects of race on the day-to-day experiences of lesbians in Cape Town, asking whether or not the women felt that they were received differently by their communities due to their skin color. In order to gather this information, I conducted interviews with two different women, one of which was a black lesbian and one of which was white. As I began conducting interviews with my participants, the objectives of the paper expanded beyond the issues of the Constitution, with a shift to obtaining individual and personal narratives of the day-to-day experiences of being lesbian in Cape Town today. Each interview was carried out as more of a guided conversation, with each participant steering the discussion in whichever way they thought best to accurately describe their experiences. I wanted each interview to be personal and specific to the individual, so the interviewees do not always focus on issues of race, violence, etc. if they feel it does not apply to their situation.

The findings of the interviews were somewhat contradictory to the initial research articles and journals that I found, as all of the women cited issues with violence against lesbians and an unsuccessful government, but none of them felt that it was a defining factor in their lifestyles. There was also an overwhelming consensus that the experiences of black lesbians and white lesbians were vastly different, as issues of transparency, lack of privacy, and homophobia being far more prevalent in mostly black communities and townships, leading to greater feelings of insecurity and fear of violence. While there are common threads throughout each narrative, the stories of the two women prove that there is no generalized picture of a lesbian. Each woman continues to identify and define themselves based on individual characteristics including, but definitely not limited to, their sexuality.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

In the last few decades, the world has been looking to South Africa as a symbol for change and the empowerment of previously disenfranchised and marginalized groups. With the implementation of an impressively advanced Constitution, this nation seemed to adopt ideals that were far ahead of the rest of the world. This was especially true in regards to the various pieces of gay rights legislation which were passed, and South Africa soon set a precedent by becoming the first country in Africa, and the sixth in the world, to legalize same-sex marriage in 2006. This landmark triumph was given the celebratory treatment it deserved, but the reception of LGBTQ individuals in the real world was not always reflective of the Constitution's statutes. Due to this, as well as the phenomenon of corrective rape and other violence committed against lesbian women, the topic of lesbian life in South Africa is one which has been given much attention by researchers and journalists alike. From the coming out stories and issues of identity, to fear of violence and group mobilization, numerous studies have been done about the so-called "lesbian experience."

Although previous work had been done on lesbians in South Africa, one approach seemed to have less exploration than others: the narrative. So much of the writing was from academics setting out to answer a particular question, focusing strictly on violence or solely on identity issues without actually asking lesbian women what they felt was most influential to them. Since there has been so much focus from around the world on the issues of the lesbian community in South Africa, obtaining narratives from black and white lesbian women is both extremely relevant and informative to the current climate of discussion. In providing agency to women and an outlet to disclose the effects of sexuality on one's day-to-day experiences, a greater understanding of what it means to be a lesbian in South Africa can be reached. This also provides another lens through which to approach some of the problems within the nation, such as the failed implementation of the Constitution's same-sex laws or the proliferation of hate crimes and violence. In placing the emphasis on the personal experiences of lesbian women, it was also my hope that their stories and opinions could be heard without my preconceptions perpetuating any stereotypes or creating a single story.

The objective of this paper is to serve as a medium for lesbian women to share their life stories and honest opinions, discussing the issues they believe are pertinent to their own lives, as well as the broader lesbian community in Cape Town. One of my main goals during the research portion was to create a safe space where my participants would trust me and feel comfortable opening up about their personal experiences, and I hoped my interest in the topic would serve to highlight my motives. My interest in the topic of LGBTQ rights began during my time spent at university in the United States,

where I found a place in various gay rights organizations and gay-straight alliance groups. One of the themes that emerged in my discussion with various gay and lesbian-identifying individuals was a frustration with the way that heterosexual individuals often placed them within boxes, assigning labels and assuming characteristics based on stereotypes or presuppositions. Returning to this conversation inspired me during my interviews, as I wanted to present these narratives in a way which showed the uniqueness of each woman. Although both of my interview subjects shared the common thread of being lesbian, both of them have completely different personalities and experiences to draw upon. Another one of my objectives for the paper was to make this fact accessible to readers, presenting their narratives in a way that demonstrated the fact that both women are comprised of more factors than their sexuality and cannot simply be defined by who they choose to love.

In conducting research for my topic, I employed the use of both primary and secondary source materials. My primary sources included the two interviews that I conducted with Tracey, a white lesbian involved in social activism and human justice, and Tatenda, a black lesbian working on her graduate thesis. In addition to the primary source material, I read various secondary sources, including but not limited to web pages, academic journals, news stories, and dissertations. I used these sources to present and support my argument when applicable, but most of the secondary sources were used to provide background and contextual information regarding the experiences of lesbian women in South Africa.

### **Structure of the Paper**

This ISP consists of five different sections, beginning with the literature review. The review uses academic articles that discuss scholarly opinion of the government's response to gay rights, the ways in which lesbians create identity, and how lesbian women navigate an often homophobic society. This section will provide a brief overview of the existing literature surrounding the experiences of lesbian women in South Africa, giving context for my topic and why it is necessary to conduct further research on the subject. The next section will describe my methodologies used to gather information, as well as succinctly presenting the two narratives provided by my interview subjects about the effects of governmental policy and race on their day-to-day experiences as lesbians. A section on ethical reflexivity will be included here, discussing the ethical issues that were considered during the project and how I dealt with any issues that arose during research. The next section will be the body of the paper, in which I present my findings and analysis. Next will be the conclusion where I discuss the ways in which my original objectives were fulfilled, and finally I will have a section to make recommendations for further study.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Going into this project, I knew that there would be some ethical and logistical limitations to this study that I would have to consider. One of the largest limitations which came into play during the research and interview period was the lack of time. Four weeks was not a lot of time to be able to do the necessary amount of research to have a comprehensive understanding of gay rights and the lesbian community in Cape Town before I began doing interviews, so I had to begin this project with a more basic understanding of the previous studies done. The limited time also made it difficult to build relationships with my interview subjects before I began speaking to them. Due to the fact that I asked my participants very personal questions about their sexuality, race, religion, political views, etc. I would have really benefitted from some more time to build up a stronger sense of trust between myself and the women I interviewed. I was approaching them from outside of their community and outside of their country, so I would have liked to spend some time getting to know each woman personally before asking them to open up to me, but since this opportunity was not available to me, I decided to be upfront and open about myself during each interview. I allowed each participant to ask me anything they wanted to know about me before the interview began and provided them with some background information on my interest in the topic. This created a very trusting environment with the two women that I interviewed, and both of them were very enthusiastic to tell their stories.

The limitation of time constraints also made it difficult to find a variety of women to interview who represented a wide array of lifestyles. Although Tracey and Tatenda were not the same race, both women seemed to be from fairly middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds, placing them in a position of privilege within the lesbian community. Had I been able to form relationships with women of lower socioeconomic class, or women living in townships or geographically disadvantaged areas, I would have obtained extremely different accounts. An individual living in an area with more visibility and threat of violence would have provided a unique perspective on issues such as how they choose to identify, the reality of coming out to their community, or their experiences with homophobia.

Another limitation to my study was the fact that I am a heterosexual, white American who has never had to personally deal with some of the issues facing lesbian women in Cape Town today. I never wanted the women to feel as if I was attempting to exploit or take advantage of them or their stories, and I was always very aware of the power dynamics that were at play between researcher and subject, especially when interviewing black lesbian women who might have been more vulnerable to any negative consequences that could have come from their interviews with me. Not only could my outsider position have affected the willingness of participants to open up to some of my questions, but



it also caused me to form a bias in the way I was approaching the topic. I had spent most of my life looking at gay rights through the Western perspective, so I recognize that I was not always able to be objective during my research of gay rights in South Africa. I attempted to always be aware that my own presuppositions and experiences might shape the results that I found or the way that I chose to report my findings.

Although there were limitations to my study, the two individuals who I interviewed provided extremely personal narratives and informative accounts of their day-to-day experiences living as lesbian women in Cape Town. I was very lucky that each woman felt comfortable enough with their own sexuality and identity to share with me and participate in the study, and for the most part I never felt as if the differences between myself and the subjects created a sense of distrust or an unwillingness to be open and honest.

## Glossary

1. LGBTQ: acronym standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
2. Corrective rape: the act of rape committed against a lesbian woman with the purpose of “curing” her or turning her straight
3. Heteronormativity: the belief that males and females have particular gender roles in society and must maintain certain values; homosexuality does not comply to these values and therefore is seen to challenge the idea of heteronormativity
4. Lipstick lesbian: a lesbian who is generally seen as being more feminine
5. Butch lesbian: a lesbian who is generally seen as being more masculine

## Literature Review

The scholarly research that has been done on LGBTQ issues and the lesbian experiences in South Africa have informed my study, but there has been very little emphasis placed on the narratives of lesbian women. The various areas of focus seen in previous works have concentrated mainly on the mobilization of LGBTQ communities, legislative decisions, issues of homophobia and discrimination, and identity theories. Although all of these have been very beneficial for providing contextual and historical background for my topic, the lack of narratives or accounts of day-to-day experiences has pushed me to explore this facet of lesbian life in Cape Town. In order to interpret these accounts and understand the ways that lesbian women experience life specifically in a South African context, it is necessary to first explore the surrounding literature and previous work relevant to the topic.

One of the most important tools for understanding the experiences of lesbian women in Cape Town is the extensive writing that has been done on the Constitution's progressive same-sex legislation. As early as 1996, South Africa became one of the first country's to include gay rights legislation in its Constitution, and only a few years later the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act was passed in 2000 (Government Gazette, 2000). The purpose of the act was to prohibit the discrimination of any peoples based on race, gender, sexuality, or level of ability and to generate a general sense of equality amongst South Africa's citizens. The inclusivity of the LGBTQ community in the country's new Constitution made South Africa a beacon of hope and brushed over its past of oppression and mass human injustice. Unfortunately, the liberal legislation put forth in this document was not mirrored by public opinion, creating a space where the reality was far different from the equality promised and there was very little social cohesion. In her article, Clare Nullis discusses the consequences of the legalization of same-sex marriage which occurred in 2006, referencing the backlash received from the public and citing the presiding judge as he proclaims that the court case "forced us to confront the deep-seated prejudice and intolerance against gays and lesbians... it's been quite a frightening process to see the level of hatred that has been openly expressed against this minority" (Nullis, 2006: 1).

The addition of new legislation has done nothing to quell the homophobia, fear, and opposition emanating from the people, and while it is important to have official laws in place there can be no change until the Constitution's ideals are implemented in the public sphere. Bridget Ncgobo, a black South African activist, has written extensively on this idea, explaining that one must first change the *culture* before addressing litigation in order to bridge the widening gap between the legal rights and the lived rights of the LGBTQ community (Ncgobo, 2012). Shireen Hassim echoes and expands on this

argument in “After apartheid: consensus, contention, and gender in South Africa’s public sphere,” as she notes the impossibility of creating a nation built on tolerance and equality using legislation alone because the change must first come in the minds of the citizens (Hassim, 1989). Many researchers who write on this subject are overwhelmingly in agreement that the promises upheld in the Constitution are often not reflected in the lived experiences of individuals, creating a hypocritical and contradicting society where discrimination is still prevalent. The concept of a dichotomy existing between legislation and public opinion was very important to me during my own research, as I wanted to use the narratives of lesbian women to determine whether or not they felt any sense of protection against homophobia or discrimination from their government and the Constitution. By approaching this topic through the lens of individual stories, I was able to see how South Africa’s laws were actually embodied in day-to-day experiences.

In addition to information regarding the inclusion of gay rights in South Africa’s Constitution, most of the scholarly articles and sources I found during primary research addressed the issues of violence, homophobia, and discrimination directed towards the lesbian community. In a statement given at the Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, Beverly Ditsie notes that even with protective laws in place, she still finds that the:

right to life, to bodily integrity, to freedom of association and expression-are violated. Women who love women are fired from their jobs, forced into marriages, beaten and murdered in their homes and on the streets, and have their children taken away in hostile courts (Ditsie, 1995: 105).

The discrimination suffered by lesbian women is all-too prevalent and often seen in the form of corrective rape and murder. One of the most publicized hate crimes in recent years was the rape and murder of Eudy Simelane, a star on the national female football team who was raped, beaten, and stabbed before she died (Kelly, 2009). The story of her murder, as well as similar stories of violence at the hands of homophobic individuals are consistently present in dialogue about lesbian life in South Africa, with other authors such as Bridget Ngcobo and Letitia Smuts using both Eudy’s murder, as well as numerous other case stories, to highlight the threat of violence which exists in daily life. Ngcobo references a 19 year-old girl who was stoned and beaten to death by a group of men for simply being a lesbian, while Letitia Smuts’ article about lesbian identity references Sigasa and Moosa, a lesbian couple who were both murdered in 2007 for their sexual preferences (Ngcobo 2012, Smuts 2009). All of these articles and findings are very important for understanding the struggle faced by lesbian women today, as well as underlining the previous point that the Constitution’s progressive ideals are not always represented in the actions of the public. However, so much focus has been placed on this aspect of violence that there seems to be a dark cloud hanging over every discourse about the

lesbian community. It is necessary to recognize that oppression and fear of violence are indeed factors in the lives of women living openly in Cape Town, but it is my hope that through the narratives a very different story will emerge. I felt that so much of what I had read had focused solely on the violence or solely on the discrimination, making it appear as if being a lesbian was the only identifying factor for every woman and that each person experienced these injustices on a daily basis. So although I used this information to provide context and background for my interviews, I did not want to focus on the violence as being the most important entity in each woman's lives, instead asking them to tell me whether or not it even played into their experiences at all.

Some of the only works I have found which share close correlations to this topic of my choosing are those which focus on lesbian identity and the differences in experiences of black and white lesbians in South Africa. Letitia Smuts' dissertation entitled "Lesbian Identities in South Africa: black and white experiences in Johannesburg" was especially helpful, as it not only addresses the ways in which lesbian women find identity within the various groups that they occupy, but it also examines the effects of race on their experiences (Smuts, 2009). Smuts first highlights the idea that lesbian women in South Africa often have difficulty determining a classification with which they most identify, as the country is extremely gendered and racialized. The importance of gender and skin color creates a society where women are always cognizant of the fact that they are female in addition to being aware of how their race affects their opportunities and reactions from peers (Smuts, 2009). Due to these interconnected identities, lesbian women must choose between being seen first and foremost for their sexuality, their gender, or their race and putting other identities to the wayside. Smuts feels that black lesbians especially have a more difficult time navigating these various identities, as they must choose whether to align themselves with the struggle for their sexuality or the struggle for their race, unable to commit to both camps. According to Smuts, this conflict of interest can oftentimes result in a confused identity, or one that is fluid and constantly fluctuating.

She also claims that a large gap exists between the experiences of black lesbians and white lesbians in South Africa, first and foremost because "black and white lesbians tend to be separated culturally, politically, and in those cases where black and lesbian cultures have a spatial presence, geographically" (Smuts, 2009: 33). This initial separation of white and black lesbians has created a community segregated by race where the experiences of one group are not always seen in another and there has never been a strong sense of unity between black and white lesbians. These cultural, political, and geographical differences have created variations in their day-to-day experiences as well, seen most prevalently in the rates of violence and discrimination inflicted upon each group. Generally, the author

argues that black lesbians experience far higher rates of violence and hate crimes due to the more conservative nature of many black African cultures. Smuts also continues to explain the importance of class in the experiences of lesbian women, which happens to be closely interconnected to race due to the racialized nature of South African's society. Most of violent crime perpetrated against lesbians occurs in impoverished areas where the poor public transportation and heightened visibility lends itself to more vulnerability, and since the most impoverished group in the country is black South Africans, they comprise most of these vulnerable positions (Smuts, 2009). I have found this article to be one of the most helpful out of the many that I have looked at because in focusing on lesbian identity and lived experiences of individuals, it comes the closest to offering a small understanding of the day-to-day lives of lesbian women in Cape Town. It addresses the fact that not every lesbian woman in the so-called "lesbian community" shares the same identity or even chooses to claim sexuality as their number one factor in classification, which is one of the hypotheses that I set out with at the beginning of my study. In addition, Smuts also touches on the differences that exist between black and white lesbians, showing that race, sexuality, and gender are in fact not mutually exclusive and are strongly connected. Not only did this article explore many of the facets of lesbian life in Cape Town that I hoped to find in my own study, but it also provided a strong foundation for me to build upon previous research and formulate my own ideas and findings.

Natalie Donaldson's dissertation follows many of the ideas put forth in Smuts' article about identity and the black/white experience, as she focuses on the dissonance existing between black and white lesbians in South Africa. Donaldson agrees with Smuts' statement that the existing differences during apartheid has led to greater differences in daily experiences, but Donaldson feels that it stems from the failure of the lesbian community to mobilize or politicize during apartheid (Donaldson, 2011). She explains that many lesbian groups which organized against apartheid legislation were unsuccessful and soon collapsed due to internal divisions between blacks and whites, as well as the pull for black lesbians to align themselves with their race over their sexuality. Since black lesbians did have the added factor of race relations to consider, they were often given more political and media attention, which was a double-edged sword for the lesbian community. Sheila Croucher underlines the dissonance between black and white lesbians in her article, "South Africa's Democratisation and the Politics of Gay Liberation," citing the two different groups as a "white camp interested in gay social activities only, and a black camp which put its weight behind all movements that are truly committed to the liberation of all South Africans" (Croucher, 2002: 319). The fact that the two different race groups were seen to possess differing motives that were often in conflict with one another meant that

group cohesion was never reached, with black lesbians being more vocal and active in mobilization. This put black lesbians on the map for fighting oppression during apartheid, but the added attention created a heightened sense of visibility and vulnerability. Not only did the added visibility of black lesbians lead to more overt discrimination and violence directed towards the group, but it also made white lesbians experience political invisibility and caused many whites to remove themselves from their “lesbian community” (Donaldson, 2011). All of her thoughts on identity and race differences amongst lesbians in South Africa closely follow or expand upon the ideas seen in Smuts’ article, so Donaldson’s discussion of lesbian representation in South Africa was also a very helpful article to pull from for my research. It agrees with the argument that black and white lesbians have very different day-to-day experiences, but claims that it stems back to apartheid differences and the difficulties of mobilizing a community which was already divided by race.

Another piece that was helpful during my research was Alexandra Gibson’s article “Beyond coming out: lesbians’ stories of sexual identity in the context of a historically white university,” as it supplemented Donaldson and Smuts’ writings and demonstrated the influence of coming out on lesbian identity. Gibson writes about the western idea that the “coming out story” has become synonymous with identity and is often thought to be the turning point for gay and lesbian individuals to find stability in their sexuality. Although Gibson recognizes the importance of the coming out narrative, she argues that “it becomes clear that claiming a lesbian identity is more than just about ‘coming out’ and rather about an on-going process of identity management” (Gibson, 2010: 1). The idea that the coming out narrative is not always definitive or representative of lesbian identity is one that I will support through the narratives of my two interview subjects.

The one journalist and activist who seems to have come closest to my goal of exploring the narratives of lesbian women in South Africa is Zanele Muholi. As a black lesbian activist and a skilled artist and photographer, she uses her paintings, photographs, and unique voice to display various images and faces of lesbian identity. An article entitled “Zanele Muholi’s Elements of Survival”, written by Raél Jero Salley, discusses Zanele and her role in creating discourse about the various identities and senses of self that exist within the lesbian community. Salley explores the ways that Muholi uses visual material to “help people become aware of and begin to understand the complexity of a community” (Salley, 2012: 59). This article was somewhat of an inspiration to me, as it reminded me exactly why it was so important to obtain narratives of lesbian women in the first place. So much of her artwork is focused on showing that no one can be put into a box or judged based on the way that they look or how others think they *should* look. Her work informs the audience that even though each

woman shares the common bond of being lesbian, every individual is distinct, complex, and completely unique and should not be perceived solely as the umbrella term of 'lesbian.' Salley's article was very influential in my paper, as his illumination of Muholi and her artwork showed me that her objectives are reflective of the goals that I had when beginning this project.

While these articles, and many more, have been crucial in providing me with background and contextual information about the lesbian community in Cape Town, few of the articles I've found have actually explored narratives of lesbian women or looked at exactly what it means to be a lesbian woman in daily life. Focusing on violence, legislation, or racial stratification was never my goal, as I simply want to show that the "lesbian experience" is different from woman to woman and while these aspects might factor into their lives, there is so much more that goes into identifying a person. My main goal through my research is to show through my two interviews with lesbian women that sexuality is just one aspect of their lives which affects each person differently, and that each South African ultimately determines their own complex identity.



### **Methodology/Ethical Reflexivity**

Initially my research began by looking into various articles, journals, novels, etc. that I had read which referenced various lesbian or LGBTQ organizations in the Cape Town area. Some of the most promising organizations that I found were the Triangle Project and Gender Dynamix, and my original plan was to reach out to these organizations and either interview individuals working closely with each group or perform a practicum with their cooperation. Once I set to work trying to contact these groups, I realized it was more difficult than I previously believed, for some members or groups were no longer active or just did not work out with the logistics of my project. I then decided to shift focus and rely solely on interviews with numerous lesbian women that I was put into contact with through my adviser, Emma Arongudade. I also attempted to create connections through various guest speakers or authors that I met with the help of the SIT program, but unfortunately due to time constraints and other obstacles, I was unable to follow up with any of these individuals. Due to these limitations, my interview pool was limited to the four women that I contacted through Emma, and eventually this shrank to two women. Although my goal was to interview six lesbian women (three black and three white), the four weeks given for the ISP just did not provide enough time to form the connections necessary to find willing participants.

The number of interviewees also lessened due to the prior commitments of each woman, as all of them had obligations to their careers or schooling and it was difficult to schedule a mutually agreeable time for interviews. While I was worried that two subjects was a much smaller pool than I originally intended, limiting my project to the perspectives of each lesbian woman ended up being extremely beneficial, as I was able to spend more time with each woman and her stories. Having an opportunity to focus more on each narrative provided me with a much more holistic understanding of each of their experiences and ultimately contributed far greater to my research on various lesbian experiences than if I had conducted shorter interviews with more subjects. After deciding that I would only use two different subjects, I began conducting my interviews.

Each interview was carried out in a one-on-one setting and I attempted to create guided conversations to avoid simple “yes” or “no” answers. My main goal for the interviews was to have each woman focus on the aspect of being a lesbian in Cape Town that she found most important, allowing them to steer the conversations in whichever direction they felt deserved more attention. I felt this would provide a far greater insight into the everyday experiences of lesbian women than if I approached the conversations with specific answers I was looking for or if I attempted to direct the conversation to go one way or another. In order to achieve this conversational format, I asked open-

ended questions which required longer, more explanatory answers and which often prompted further questions both from my subjects and from myself. Some of these questions included, but were not limited to:

- 1) Tell me a little bit about what it was like for you growing up...what was your relationship to your parents/siblings/friends?
- 2) When did you first know you were a lesbian and what did the coming out process look like for you?
- 3) What do you feel is your most important identifying factor? Do you feel that the way others identify you is the way you would identify yourself?
- 4) Have you ever felt that you were the victim of homophobia, or felt threatened by those around you?
- 5) How much do you think gay rights legislation in the Constitution has contributed to your attainment of rights? Do you think the government has failed to implement these laws, or do you feel that public opinion in South Africa is right in line with the legislation?
- 6) What do you think the effects of race on your sexuality are (if there are any)? Have you seen other lesbian women having different experiences than you because they are of a different race?

All of these questions were formulated in an attempt to determine the everyday spaces occupied by lesbian women and their experiences in addition to provoking discussion about their views on the effects of public opinion and racial classifications on their sexual identity. These questions really lent themselves to interesting discussion probing into topics such as identity, racism, familial and community support, political agendas, etc. which contributed greatly to illuminating the life narratives of each woman. Their different answers and the questions that each woman decided to dedicate more time to also showed that even though both individuals belonged to the same "lesbian community", their experiences were completely different and the things that were most important to each woman greatly varied across the board. Each interview lasted approximately 40-60 minutes due to the open-ended nature of the questions and each woman was given a consent form to sign before the interview began. The consent form assured that the subject could terminate their participation at any given time and had the right to anonymity and privacy if requested. I also allotted time at the beginning of each interview to explain my interest in the topic, as well as inform the women that they could ask me any questions they might have about my involvement or personal experiences. I thought this would be a

good way of building trust and highlighting my motives for conducting the research before I asked each woman to share very personal information with me.

When all was said and done, I ended up having two different interviews. Tracey was a middle-aged white lesbian who worked closely with social activism and Tatenda was a black lesbian in her early 20's who was finishing schooling and working on a dissertation discussing the government's stance on HIV/AIDS amongst women who sleep with women. Both women were all able to provide various insights into the intersectionalities of race, gender, class, and sexuality. No compensation was provided other than the offer to purchase a coffee or tea in an attempt to limit my subjects to only those who truly wanted to participate in my study without expecting a monetary reward. Using the methodologies of interviews and guided conversations was definitely the best way that I could have conducted research for my specific topic, as I was interested in obtaining narratives, life stories, and day-to-day experiences of lesbian women. The one-on-one conversations was one of the only ways that I think I would have been able to gather as much information as I did while still keeping agency in the hands of the participants. One of the major weaknesses of this methodology was the necessity of working around many people's schedules and the difficulty of finding times that were suitable for everyone to meet. If I had used a different methodology, I most likely would have been able to find more participants or if I had done something such as an observation, it would have been much easier for me to budget my own time and work around my own schedule. This was the biggest limitation of the methodology and as previously mentioned, was the main reason that I ended up having two interview subjects instead of six.

The biggest ethical concern I had going into this project was my worry that the very personal subjects that were touched on during the interviews could place the women in compromising or vulnerable positions with others who did not agree with their opinions or lifestyle. In an attempt to eliminate this possibility, I chose to only interview women who were already living openly as lesbians to their peers and in their community. This, in addition to the detailed consent form that each individual signed, ensured that each subject would feel as comfortable as possible discussing personal topics with me and having them shared with the SIT staff. Another ethical concern which was previously mentioned in my **Limitations of the Study** was the fact that I was approaching the topic of lesbian narratives and identity in Cape Town from the perspective of a heterosexual white female living in America. I knew that my own prior experiences and opinions which I had formulated, both through personal observation and earlier research, would affect the ways that I interpreted the women's stories and decided to present my findings. I wanted to be as loyal as I could to the subjects and the

information that they gave me, but I also recognize that it is near impossible to approach any topic without past opinions affecting the results, so this was a major ethical concern when interviewing the women and writing up my ISP. I also never wanted my position as a white heterosexual woman to create some kind of power play between myself and the subjects, ensuring that they felt a sense of agency and control during their interviews. This is the main reason that I felt it necessary for each woman to have the ability to ask me any questions that they had, either about my study or my personal life, as I was asking them to share extremely personal stories with me. I understand that there can often be a very strong power dynamic between researcher and subject and I never wanted my participants to feel taken advantage of or that I had used my role to obtain certain information from them that they were not willing to give. I think I was able to lessen the effects of this power dynamic by being open with each interviewee about my motives for research and my background with the topic.

The final ethical concern that was raised during my research was actually presented to me both by my adviser as well as the women that I interviewed. When I first came to South Africa, my topic was “narrowed” to the LGBTQ community before I decided to focus in on the experiences of lesbian women in Cape Town. Looking back, I think the initial scope of my project was far too vast, as I really felt that I would be able to have an understanding of the lesbian community in Cape Town by simply interviewing a few individuals about their experiences with violence, homophobia, or community perceptions. After a discussion with Emma, I realized that at no point will I ever have a full comprehension of the lesbian community, nor is there a “lesbian community” that every woman who loves women can fall under. There are so many sub-categories to this one group of people that often gets clumped together, and after coming to this realization, I decided that instead of trying to understand a whole group of individuals, I would simply try to understand the two who agreed to interview with me. This is yet another reason that narrowing my scope to two interviews ended up being very beneficial, as I was able to look at the life experiences and narratives of two individuals who just happened to be lesbian women rather than spending my whole project attempting to research something as obscure as the lesbian community. Once I shifted my focus to narratives, my project became much more cohesive and I feel that I gained so much more insight and knowledge from this new approach than I would have otherwise.

## Research Findings and Analysis

In first formulating a research question, I had to consider both the historical and contextual information already in existence about the LGBTQ, and more specifically lesbian, community in Cape Town. After finding numerous articles pertaining to coming out stories, issues of violence and hate crimes, problems with gay rights legislation, and chasms between black and white lesbians, I realized that very little effort had been put into collecting narratives and life stories of lesbian women. It seemed that all of the research done on this group in South Africa had a very focused field of vision, and I thought that it was equally as important to try to capture the general experiences and opinions of a few individuals who are often placed under the larger umbrella of the lesbian community. One of the pieces of literature which most strongly informed my decision to investigate narratives of lesbian women was the question posed by Zanele Muholi in her photographic collection, *Only Half the Picture*, when she asked “what do we see when we look at ourselves” (Matebeni, 2013: 1)? Zanele is one of the most prominent figures in discourses about lesbian women and sexuality in South Africa, using her artwork to capture the many voices and faces which comprise the generalized lesbian community. This question was very important to me, as it not only raises the question of identity and the role that sexuality plays in this, but also provides agency to lesbian women to show exactly who they are and how they view themselves. This idea is presented throughout Muholi’s many compilations of photographs and art pieces which show that there is never one face or one individual who can represent an entire group of multifaceted women who identify themselves very differently.

This was the inspiration for the goal of my research, which was to capture some of the day-to-day experiences of various lesbian women in Cape Town through their life narratives. I hoped that the narratives of each participant would come alive for those unfamiliar with the topic and illuminate my argument that although all of these women share the common thread of being lesbian in South Africa, they each experienced different coming out stories, acceptance from their peers and community, successes in finding love, and varying levels of self-identification through their sexuality. One can never fully understand the complexities of the sub-groups and multiple identities existing within the lesbian community, but it is my goal that these narratives will provide an insight into the specific experiences of two lesbian women navigating the intersectionalities of race, sexuality, gender, class, etc. in a post-apartheid South Africa.

## **The Coming Out Stories**

The coming out narrative is one which provides some of the most varied responses from individuals, as the decision to reveal one's sexuality to their peers differs from person to person. Although the coming out story for gay men and women can often be empowering or self-validating, Alexandra Gibson recognizes that this process of accepting a homosexual lifestyle has "become a central metaphor, in western contexts, for the recognizable process gay men and lesbian women undergo in order to claim a relatively stable and enduring sexual identity" (Gibson, 2010: 1). Her article "Beyond coming out: lesbian' stories of sexual identity in the context of a historically white university" discusses identity and the ways that one ascribes identity to themselves is often different from the ways that others determine their identity. Her quote about the role of coming out stories in the formation of a lesbian identity is very telling, as the process of coming out has become a staple of the lesbian narrative and often one of the first questions asked of lesbian individuals is, "how did you come out?" While this is an important narrative to tell, and arguably one of the most interesting ways to gain insight into an individual's sexual identity, there is a danger in believing that the story stops here. As Gibson goes on to write, claiming a stable identity as a lesbian woman goes so far beyond the coming out story, instead being "an ongoing process of identity management" (Gibson, 2010: 1). As the narratives of my two participants Tracey and Tatenda show, coming out stories vary for each individual, as do their importance in establishing an identity. For both women, "coming out" is an ongoing process which neither shaped their experiences as lesbian women nor seems to be a central determinant of their sexual identity.

In order to fully appreciate the 'how' and 'why' of each woman's decision to come out, it is beneficial to comprehend the influences of Tracey and Tatenda's upbringings and relationships to those who provided them with their first understandings of sexuality as children. Tracey, a 45-year-old social activist had a somewhat strained relationship with her parents during childhood, as she was sexually abused at a young age and never felt the support of her family through this difficult time. Although Tracey felt that she knew she was a lesbian at a young age, experiencing her first crush on a female schoolteacher at the convent where she was educated, she took the route of many individuals raised in heteronormative societies and decided it would be more pragmatic to be with a man. As she puts it, her decision to marry and have a child with a man was more logical than emotional and she says, "I fell into being a heterosexual because I didn't think there was a choice really." It wasn't until her days working at the rape crisis center before the realization struck that "you don't have to be what people say you have to be" and she met the woman who was to be her first female partner. During this

time, Tracey's supposedly heterosexual lifestyle began to more truly reflect her desires, but her coming out story looks very different from what one might imagine as the typical tale. Generally, the coming out story is thought to be one where the child sits down his parents, friends, peers, etc. and tells them that he/she is not heterosexual, at which point there is typically an affirmation of love and acceptance or a negative reaction to the news. However, not all coming out stories are the same just as not all people are the same, and Tracey's coming out narrative shows how varied the individual experience is as well as highlighting the idea that the process of coming out does not hold equal weight or importance for everyone. In relating her decision to initially come out, Tracey cites the rape crisis center as being the first place she felt comfortable "com[ing] out so to speak because a lot of the women were lesbians anyway." With most other people in her life, such as her parents and family members, the formal conversation simply never took place where she told them that she was a lesbian, but the lack of formality has never stopped her from living her life openly or feeling confident in her sexuality.

While being a lesbian is not something that she openly speaks about at work, Tracey believes that most of her co-workers are aware of this facet of her life and have been there to share in her happiness and help with relationship troubles. During our interview, one of the most interesting points that was raised was Tracey's reasoning for why she never told her children that she was a lesbian. In her explanation of this, she says, "I don't think it's a big deal. I wouldn't sit down with them and have a conversation where I say, 'hey look, I'm a heterosexual.'" Prior to this statement, I had been wondering why she wouldn't want her children to know what I felt was such an important part of her life, but after listening to her rationale, Tracey's decision made much more sense to me. This idea that being homosexual was so out of the norm that one had to sit down with everyone they love and tell them about it actually has the potential to overly-legitimize the 'otherness' of a non-heterosexual lifestyle, as it's true that no one would ever have to go out of their way to let people know that they were straight. The decision to forego the formal coming out story does not mean that those important in her life do not know she is a lesbian, but rather underlines the idea that it is just another part of Tracey's life which in no way completely defines her. For Tracey, the coming out story did not serve as the primary source of identification or self-validation, and supports Gibson's idea that "claiming a lesbian identity is more than just about 'coming out'" (Gibson, 2010).

Tatenda, a young graduate student completing her research on the government's HIV/AIDS policy and how it caters to women who have sex with women, experienced a different coming out process, but one which also showed that her identity was affected by so much more than this one

narrative. Tatenda's childhood was one of much happiness and joy, as she had a close-knit relationship with her parents and found many good friends throughout her youth. One of the few things she cited as being negative experiences in her upbringing was her attendance at an almost all-white school, where she dealt with a hostile and tense environment being one of the few black girls there. Even this did not appear to taint her overall memories of growing up, as she was originally from Zimbabwe and her parents' university education and more liberal mindsets created a strong buffer for her from the "white privilege South Africa and the subtle racism." The support of her parents throughout these years was very influential in the way that Tatenda viewed the poor race relations in South Africa, and this strong relationship with her mother and father was also beneficial in her coming out story and her realization of sexual identity. Unlike many individuals who say that they have known they were gay, lesbian, transgender, etc. from a very young age, Tatenda claims that she never really knew until she went away to varsity. She had always been attracted to women, but also to men, and just felt that for so many practical reasons, being with a man would make navigating society so much easier. Tatenda explains that she did find that she was more attracted to women than men:

but it was one of those things where I was like, actually, surely it's more pragmatic in society to be with a man because generally they make more money and I want everyone to be happy at my wedding. I don't want them to just tolerate me.

Once she went away to varsity, she found that the realization of her lesbian sexuality was a continuous process which was not an overnight transition or acceptance as some make it seem. In fact, she feels very strongly that it is almost disingenuous to claim knowledge of a sexual identity from a very young age, and finds it necessary to remember that "people don't realize that they're looking back on their lives from the position that they're in now." Recognizing that she was a lesbian was something she had to work through and define, and definitely didn't think that it would have been possible to do so at such a young age.

Once she did begin her coming out process of opening up to friends and family, she experienced a somewhat unique reaction of having almost no reaction at all. Most of the people that she ended up telling simply did not think it was a big deal, as they felt that Tatenda's sexuality was not her defining characteristic and never felt the need to treat her any differently or respond in a dramatic way. I feel that this reaction also stemmed from Tatenda's own opinion on the matter of coming out, as similarly to Tracey, she never had a huge struggle with it because she simply did not think it was a big deal. The coming out process is in no way this clean, non-dramatic, or casual for everyone who goes through it, but the two coming out narratives from Tracey and Tatenda prove Gibson's argument that coming out is not the most definitive aspect of lesbian identity. Their coming out narrative also helps



to support the main point of my paper, which is to show that sharing the common bond of being lesbian women in Cape Town does not necessarily lend itself to having the same, or even similar, experiences-each woman is different and cannot be put into a box or prejudged based on the superficial similarities that they share when sexuality might not even be their most important characteristic.

## **Identity**

Due to the racialized and often gendered history of South Africa, the ways in which people self-identify and the differences/similarities to how others would identify them has always been a source of conflict. Going back to the system of racial classification put into place during apartheid, identity was one of the most important things for an individual to hold, as it afforded people different opportunities and had the ability to completely change one's standing in society. If anything, identity has become even more important in post-apartheid South Africa, as the ability to choose one's own identity or group has become a source of agency and validation for many people. One of the problems that occurs in this new drive to self-identify is the dichotomy that often appears between what one chooses to identify with, and how others want to classify them. This dissonance is commonly seen amongst members of the lesbian community, as those outside the community are quick to latch onto the umbrella term of "lesbian" in an attempt to determine who these women are or what they are like. In reality, lesbian individuals might identify first and foremost as a teacher, a mother, a sister, or an artist and their system of classification may have little or nothing to do with their sexuality or who they choose to love. Through my interviews with Tracey and Tatenda, I have found that while both of them admit that their sexuality is one aspect of their lives, it is not the most important one and there are other identities which provide a stronger sense of self.

During our conversation, Tracey was quick to say that she did not identify herself most prominently as a lesbian woman, but rather should be classified through her work with social justice. The various organizations and projects she has been a part of means so much more to her than her sexuality and she feels that in order for people to understand her as an individual, her background with activism is the most important characteristic to see. While social justice is her primary identifying factor, she also identifies very strongly with theater, as she has written, produced, and directed numerous pieces which lie near and dear to her. Tracey's involvement with the theater, as well as with social justice organizations, show that she believes that her interests and passions are what's most important in defining her sense of self and formulating her identity. As Tracey articulates, "the kind of fact that I'm a woman and I'm a lesbian are things that just happen to be and are not my overwhelming

defining characteristics.” Unfortunately, she does feel that others do not necessarily understand this point of view and oftentimes those around her quickly identify her based on features that she does not see as being of the utmost importance. In a similar vein to Tracey, Tatenda did not feel that being a lesbian was her most defining feature, saying “For some people, sexuality is everything to them but I’m more interested in the fact that I’m a feminist and how that affects how I understand my sexuality. I’m more interested in the fact that I’m an African woman and that I’m black.” As a black lesbian female, the many identities and spaces occupied by Tatenda provide a good example of the idea brought up in Smuts’ paper “Lesbian identities in South Africa: Black and White Experiences in Johannesburg.” Smuts claims that black lesbians have a more difficult time determining identity than white lesbians because stemming back to the apartheid era, they were always forced to choose between identifying with their race’s struggle or their sexuality’s struggle (Smuts, 2009). It did not seem as if her numerous classifications led to any kind of conflict of identity, as Tatenda seemed very confident and assured of her identity as a feminist African woman, but it is important to take note that the competing identities of lesbian, black, and female were all present in her life.

What was very interesting about Tracey’s experience is that she never really felt as though her peers or people in her community identify her as being a lesbian, simply because she doesn’t look like what the ‘typical’ lesbian has been made out to be. This follows Natalie Donaldson’s claims in her article about lesbian identity that ‘lipstick’ lesbians often receive less attention, both positive and negative, than ‘butch’ lesbians because they more easily blend in with the heteronormative population (Donaldson, 2011). Tracey’s account supports Donaldson’s idea that a difference in appearance between more masculine and feminine lesbians has the ability to completely shape how others view you and the ways that those around you form their own opinions about your sexuality or identity. In stark contrast, Tatenda has found that in her experiences, others do classify her firstly as a lesbian woman, which is something she has tried to stay away from for her whole life. One of the reasons that she has never identified primarily as a lesbian is because of her belief that “to hone in on your sexuality...is almost overly legitimizing that it’s different,” creating an atmosphere where a non-heterosexual lifestyle is immediately outside the norm. Since Tatenda deals with from the issue of other people defining her in a way that she would not define herself, she does not want to accept the label of lesbian that others throw on her. The terminology itself is problematic to this young graduate student, for she has found that all of these labels and terms have certain political histories behind them, and ascribing to them means denouncing any agency you once had in defining yourself. This creates a space where the heteronormative values of femininity and masculinity are determined by others instead

of by the individual (Donaldson, 2011). When others immediately identify her as a lesbian, it forces her into a box where “people then feel like they can tell you who you are or what they expect you to be.” The necessity of maintaining agency in self-identifying is very important for Tatenda, and although Tracey experiences similar conflicts of personal v. group-given identities, she understands the contextual and historical reasons for the classification which is most often thrust upon her.

Tracey suffers from the same problem afflicted upon Tatenda, as others often do not identify her in the way that she would identify herself, but the defining characteristic that informs others’ classifications of her is very different. Due to the fact that she is not immediately recognizable as a lesbian, Tracey has found that most often people see her and define her first and foremost as being a woman due to the importance of gender in South African society and the prevalence of the patriarchy system. Not only did Tracey say that “there’s things you can and can’t do because you’re a woman. And you get told things because you’re a woman,” but there is a deep lack of mobility, privacy, or safety for females living in this country that makes gender one of the most commonly used identifying factors. This identification is not even so far off the mark, as living as a woman in this country means being constantly aware of the fact that you’re female, with reminders from men that you pass on the street and the stories of rape and violence committed against women that occur all the time. In her own life, Tracey admits that she’s “very aware of the fact that [she’s] female...and [she doesn’t] realize how much she’s] aware of it until [she’s] not here.” Being a woman means always having to be alert and aware of one’s actions, but this still does not necessarily mean that being female is her main classification or the principle determinant in her identity.

Tracey and Tatenda are two very different women with varying interests, friends, and families, but both individuals have a very strong sense of identity which has been shaped by their past experiences and priorities. Although both women are openly lesbian and live as such, neither one finds it necessary to define themselves based solely on their sexuality. Recognizing it as part of their everyday existence, Tracey and Tatenda feel that so much more goes into their definitions and identities than who they love, as it is just one small facet of the complexities of their personalities. The interviews with both women help to show that there is no single story of lesbian identity and in fact, there might not be a cohesive ‘lesbian community’ under which all lesbian women can be categorized.

## **The Constitution**

After the end of apartheid in 1994, the South African government created one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world which stood as the symbol for change after an era of

complete oppression and human injustice. With the implementation of numerous laws and proposals enacted to combat discrimination and equalize the citizens of the nation, South Africa's Constitution became a beacon of hope for the new democratic agenda that everyone looked to with expectations. This was also the first time that the government began recognizing gay rights as a human right, becoming one of the first countries to include gay rights legislation in the written document. One such provision was the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act passed in 2000, which was one of the first in the world to specifically address issues of prejudice against homosexual communities (Government Gazette, 2000). This advanced piece of legislation made it illegal to discriminate against anyone based on race, gender, sexuality, or ability and further prohibited the use of hate speech or harassment. Soon after, South Africa became the first African country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2006, painting the image of the rainbow nation as one of tolerance and acceptance, leaving behind its marred history of oppression (Kelly, 2009). Unfortunately, the institutionalization of these rights was not always upheld day-to-day in the public sector and in some cases the passing of progressive legislation was met with quite a strong backlash. The ideals put forth in this document are not always shared by the general public, creating a massive dichotomy between the Constitution's world and the reality for many gay and lesbian women still facing discrimination and oppression. As is evidenced by the proliferation of homophobic hate crimes and a continuing prejudice against LGBTQ individuals, there is still much work that needs to be done before the necessary social cohesion is reached. As Tracey and Tatenda navigate through their daily lives, the Constitution's failures and successes become a part of their everyday experiences and both offer interesting opinions as to why such a breakdown has occurred.

Tracey does admit that the Constitution is an amazingly progressive document which, if enforced correctly, could be a wonderful source of equality and protector of human rights. The issues with the document arise when the provisions put forward by the government are not supported by popular opinion, creating a huge rift because many individuals in society are just not ready to accept and back the liberal legislation. In fact, it almost seems as if the gay rights provisions in the Constitution were included so quickly as a response to the end of apartheid that the rest of society was unable to change the mindsets that they had held quickly enough to match the Constitution. This trend has not gone unnoticed, with many researchers and academics commenting on the severe gulf existing which has greatly lessened the strength of social cohesion. One scholar discusses this in her article, "After Apartheid: Consensus, Contention, and Gender in South Africa's Public Sphere," declaring that "it has proved remarkably difficult to build a common public sphere in South Africa in which the

democratic values of tolerance and mutual respect are genuinely embraced” (Hassim, 1989: 454). As Tracey worries, “the gap between legislation on paper and reality in South Africa is quite wide and it’s frightening...people shouldn’t get complacent about their rights.” People are beginning to feel somewhat settled as more time passes after the end of apartheid in 1994, but there still remain numerous political parties in South Africa which maintain an air of homophobia and would love to legalize homosexuality if possible. Tracey believes that having one’s rights on paper does not mean that they are safe and protected, and not enough people are cognizant of this fact. She warns others:

you’ve got to be quite vigilant about it...just because we’ve got it all, a) doesn’t mean it’s being enforced properly and people are protected by it, and there’s a group of people who would be quite happy if it wasn’t.

When asked about the reasons that she felt the Constitution was not as effective as it should be in securing rights for lesbian women, Tracey explained that it was a combination of factors which led to the failure of the document to translate into a tangible reality. Not only did she think that the government was not pushing or enforcing their legislation enough, but social opinion simply lagged behind the progression of the Constitution.

Too many individuals had just not reached the more liberal state of mind necessary to enforce within themselves this concept of non-discrimination and equality for all, and without people policing themselves, it is quite difficult for the ideals in the Constitution to find a footing in society. For instance, after the passing of the bill to legalize same-sex marriage, the judge presiding over the case remarked that the public’s reaction “forced us to confront the deep-seated prejudice and intolerance against gays and lesbians...it’s been quite a frightening process to see the level of hatred that has been openly expressed against this minority” (Nullis, 2006: 1). Many South African citizens simply were not ready to accept same-sex marriage or other gay rights legislation as part of their new reality, leading to so much of the backlash that has occurred in the years after the implementation of the law. Furthermore, there still exists a homophobia within government itself that makes it quite difficult for government to enforce gay rights legislation as one unified body. In discussing the lack of support coming from the government, Tracey attributes it to her idea that:

there’s enough people in government who are homophobic and who don’t think gay people should have rights anyway, so even if they don’t do it consciously, they’re not standing up for it as much as they could.

This, along with the existence of other conservative religious groups and political parties, hold back other social movements and contribute to the overall abandonment of the Constitution’s statutes.

Without a strong enough foundation of support in the government, it is difficult to expect the average

citizen to implement the very same laws, for “it kind of filters down into society because society looks at government.” Tracey also believes that although implementation of the Constitution is weak in all areas, it specifically fails in regards to rights given to black lesbians. For all of its shortcomings, Tracey does recognize the huge potential within the document, and even feels that the Constitution does in fact give her more access to rights than she held previously. If nothing else, it is able to provide a legal backing for her which gives her more confidence in facing any potential oppressors. For example, should there ever be an issue of discrimination at work, she would have no difficulty standing up against the perpetrator because she knows that legally she would be supported by the Constitution. In the same vein, she feels that having gay rights written on paper is the catalyst needed for some individuals to finally be able to express themselves by coming out or living more openly and comfortably with their sexuality. As Tracey says, “I do think that having people who come out with the backing of the kind of legal frame behind them, does help people who feel they cannot do it.” The power provided by the Constitution could make all the difference for someone who feels they cannot come out without the official support of the law, so in this way the document actually has the ability to positively impact someone’s confidence or mental state.

Tatenda agrees with Tracey on the basic level that the Constitution in no way reflects the reality that gay and lesbian individuals live with every day, contributing to the “glaring gap between legal provisions for the LGBTQI community and the lived experience” (Ncgobo, 2012: 1). The main difference between her and Tracey’s discourses is that she feels part of the problem lies within the Constitution itself, deeply embedded in the very legislation that is meant to give more rights and promote equality. Tatenda believes that the Constitution was the result of sexual and gender politics, “but the gender and sexual orientation politics is not necessarily reflective of the politics that people live on the ground.” Due to this breakdown between paper and reality, the social mores that individuals actually live by are not represented in the Constitutional mores, contributing to the frightening gap that Tracey also mentions. She also maintains that it is important to remember that “the Constitution yes, was a result of compromise, but they were speaking to an elite group of people and in that elite group of people there is relative equality.” So while the goal was to promote equality, many individuals who could have benefitted most from this were never consulted or asked to provide input or suggestions for better implementation. Although the Constitution is a great theoretical document, Tatenda explains the bitterness felt by many in saying, “we look up to the Constitution, but it becomes a source of resentment because this Constitution is supposed to represent me, but my reality’s different.” In this way, it almost begins to undermine itself because the ideals that it promises are in no way fulfilled,

causing mass disillusionment in society. Tatenda also takes an interesting stance on the document by explaining her views that some of the legislation put forth in the Constitution actually imposes ideas on people of what society is supposed to be like, making them feel as if it is dictating how they live their lives.

One of her examples is the way in which women are given more rights and opportunities than they had previously, challenging the traditional ideas of African masculinity where the man must provide for the family and the woman has her place in the home or with the children. This causes some men to feel as if some of their power is being taken away by the liberal provisions in the Constitution, sparking some of the fear and hatred which often erupts into violent acts. For Tatenda, the biggest issue with the Constitution's inability to produce tangible results is the fact that "on paper, that reality that you see in the Constitution can only function in a society where everyone has opportunity and people are not shackled by poverty and the humiliation that is poverty." With so many individuals in South Africa suffering from poverty or structural unemployment, it is no surprise that some individuals do not have access to the resources or opportunities necessary for the proposed equality in the Constitution. Offering a slightly different perspective than Tracey, Tatenda does not feel that the dissonance between Constitution and reality is a result of the government's failure to implement the legislation. As she articulates, it is one thing to enforce legislation in regards to something such as socioeconomic rights, for it is more tangible and has physical results, but anti-discrimination laws are much more difficult to police. As she says:

It's one thing to implement legislation when it comes to socioeconomic rights, so it's one thing to have a health policy. But a policy on non-discrimination...you can have that at work, but the gap in terms of public perception...that's norms dissemination.

It is possible to enforce anti-discrimination in the workplace, but how does one monitor the discrimination or harassment which occurs in daily life, existing in the snide remarks of passersby or prejudices caused by homophobia? As researcher Bridget Ncgobo argues, in order to produce positive change, South Africa as a nation must address the culture and not just litigation because no one will adhere to laws they do not believe in (Ncgobo, 2012). Due to the difficulty of completely changing individuals' mindsets, it is necessary for the public to first mature into a place where they would support gay rights legislation rather than attempting to force people to abide by rules they do not morally condone.

## **Discrimination and Violence**

Often, it is difficult to engage in a discourse about what it means to be lesbian in South Africa without discussing the issues of violence which seem to affect every woman who loves women. So much of the previous research that has been done in regards to the lesbian communities in South Africa has focused on the abundant, and terrifying, attacks on women who have been blatantly targeted due to their sexuality. Issues such as public beatings, murders, and the all-too-common phenomenon of corrective rape have been some of the primary concentrations of researchers and journalists, and the media has also latched onto the hot-button topic and drawn much more public attention to this outpouring of violence towards lesbian women. One of the most publicized cases was that of Eudy Simelane, a star of the national football team and openly lesbian activist who was brutally raped, beaten, and murdered simply because of her sexual preferences (Kelly, 2009). Although this one woman briefly became a symbol for the issue through the media's wide coverage of her death, her story is not dissimilar to that of many others who have also been subjected to cruelty such as this. In her research, journalist Annie Kelly spoke to many lesbian women about their experiences with this type of sexuality-driven violence, finding that many individuals she spoke to admitted that their lives were shaped by it, with 86% of the black lesbians in the Western Cape citing that they constantly lived in fear of sexual assault (Kelly, 2009). The fear is understandable, with so much of the violence committed in intensely brutal ways and in public spaces that are clearly meant to send a message. The violent acts and hate crimes targeted towards lesbian women is indicative of the complete breakdown between the Constitution and the public sphere, with anti-discrimination laws passing in government while homophobia remains a deep-seated reality for many people.

While the issues of violence, homophobia, and discrimination are indeed extremely important problems which must be addressed, the fact remains that all of the writing, research, and reporting done on these topics creates an association between lesbian women and a culture of violence and fear. It becomes quite easy to formulate a single story of the lesbian experience based on prior research and findings conducted about lesbian women in South Africa, but it is important to remember that the proliferation of violence and hate crimes does not necessarily define each individual's lives in the way that it appears. This was my guiding motive for approaching the subject with the two women that I interviewed, as I wanted to determine how much the violence seen in newspapers and on the television is actually a factor in their day-to-day lives. I recognize that the culture of violence is more present in certain locations, communities, and socioeconomic groups, but Tracey and Tatenda were able to



provide insight into their individual and personal experiences with the discrimination and violence that is so often thought to be part and parcel to living openly as a lesbian woman.

Tracey offered a very unique perspective to the issue, as she had been the victim of sexual assault on numerous occasions, neither of which was directed at her due to the fact that she was a lesbian. Initially, I expected that her prior experiences with violence would have made her hyper alert and sensitive to the proliferation of hate crimes towards lesbians, but Tracey explained that she felt her experiences were not a result of her being a lesbian, but rather were the result of her being a woman, saying, “for me I don’t think it’s come from a place of homophobia, I think it’s just a vulnerability thing.” If anything, these unfortunate encounters highlighted the idea that being a woman in South Africa often feels unsafe, leading to the constant awareness of gender that Tracey previously admitted affected her. In her opinion, the prominence of violence against women is a direct result of the intense system of patriarchy existing in South Africa that places men in a far greater position of power and solidifies the gender roles given to both men and women. The feeling of superiority on the part of men, as well as the desired submission of women, becomes quite problematic and is used as a justification for violence such as rape. If a woman is a lesbian, a man will rape her in an attempt to cure her, but if a woman is straight, a man will rape her to remind her who’s in charge. Either way there is a rationalization used to validate their actions. Tracey feels that the patriarchal system especially contributes to the treatment of lesbians, for “lesbian women are seen as kind of opting out of that system,” creating situations where others try to correct the behavior through this mantra of “by god we’ll beat you into it or rape you into it whether you like it or not.” Tatenda references a very similar ideology that rape and violence is not a phenomenon strictly amongst lesbian women, but rather is an issue which could affect any female living in South Africa. Specifically focusing on the topic of rape, Tatenda feels that it is not a lesbian issue, because as she says, “corrective rape is definitely a phenomenon. But so is rape.” It is a woman’s issue and is something which must be approached and dealt with from this angle. Previous activists have recognized this link between women’s rights and lesbian rights, articulated by Beverly Ditsie at a Human Rights Conference where she proclaimed that anybody who is a proponent of women’s rights must also be in turn a proponent for one’s right to their sexuality (Ditsie, 1995). This supports Tracey and Tatenda’s claims that the two are more intricately linked than many believe, with certain issues within the lesbian community being issues of women everywhere. Tatenda also echoes Tracey’s sentiments that there is always a level of justification from the perpetrator as to why rape or other violence occurs, and this happens whether the woman is a lesbian or whether she is straight. When asked to further explain, Tatenda stated, “I feel like lesbians

are raped because they're lesbians and the justification is 'you think you're a man' but when other women are raped, the justification is 'you think you're better than me.'" The testaments from both of these women underline the idea that so much attention has been given to issues such as corrective rape and violence against lesbian women, but these are not mutually exclusive with being a straight woman in South Africa, and are not defining characteristics of the lesbian community.

She also feels that at the end of the day, it all comes down to access to resources, saying that if you are a woman and are poor, you are far more likely to be exposed to sexual violence, with the "socioeconomic context that you're in affect[ing] how much homophobia you experience.". Having economic privilege affords women safety, providing individuals with the means to isolate themselves or escape from an uncomfortable situation, but women who are impoverished are exposed to more public space, and therefore more opportunity for violence to occur. This claim is supported in Smuts' article about lesbian identity in South Africa, which argues that class plays into the struggle against violence because individuals who are poor must rely on public transportation and have a heightened visibility within their communities (Smuts, 2009). Tatenda expands this thought to include all women in South Africa and not just lesbian women, claiming that "a lot of the focus is on corrective rape and hate crimes, but at the end of the day if you're a woman and you're poor, you're more likely to be exposed to sexual violence." Even more than just feelings of personal safety, the access to various organizations offering support or protection is limited to those without the financial means. Grassroots organizations such as iHawu have been established in various locations by black lesbian activists, but very few economically disadvantaged women actually are able to access these organizations which have been set up to fight against hate crimes (Ncgobo, 2012). In this sense, having greater access to money and resources can have the ability to buy a sense of safety which is typically available for those with privilege.

As with Tracey, Tatenda has never been the victim of a hate crime or any form of corrective violence, and luckily enough has not had to deal with much homophobia from her peers or community. She feels that instead, any homophobia is manifested in the form of sexual harassment, dealing with catcalls, jeers, or uncouth statements from men and women as she interacts with her girlfriend in public spaces. Which spaces she occupies also makes a large difference, with locations such as the Waterfront offering an opportunity to relax and enjoy time with her partner, while any appearances in the center of town usually leads to derogatory remarks and unwanted attention. Overall, Tatenda does feel very stable in her identity as a lesbian woman and has been able to avoid many situations where she might feel threatened or where there would be a possibility for violence to happen. Even though neither

woman has experienced extremely blatant discrimination or sexual violence driven by homophobia, they are both very aware of the existence of such violence and often note the variation of spaces where it is more present.

Although Tracey has never found herself the victim of a hate crime or homophobic attack, she does find that in certain circumstances she will not disclose her sexuality because she just doesn't feel safe. In many interactions with men at bars or other locations, a fear exists that to deny a man's advances and share with him her sexuality would cause a negative situation that she was not equipped to deal with. There is a level of pride involved for the men in these encounters, and as Tracey articulates, "being turned down by a heterosexual woman is bad enough, but being turned down by a lesbian woman..." Even though violence against lesbian women has never afflicted Tracey, her fear is not unfounded, as she has seen in many conversations with black peers that they do in fact experience rape and other violence more often because of their sexuality. She recounts some of her experiences dealing with women who have found themselves to be victims of rape, saying:

I've had a lot of conversations with black lesbians, most of whom still lives in places like Khayelitsha or Yanga. And the ones I've known personally who've been raped has been definitely because they're lesbians. The men who are doing it say "I'm doing this because you're a dyke," they make it very clear.

Tracey feels that the color of her skin awards her a level of safety that not all lesbian women in South Africa are fortunate enough to have, and she recognizes that things such as violence, homophobia, and corrective rape occur with much more frequency to black lesbian women. This idea has been discussed with much vigor by previous researchers and journalists, with studies conducted showing that many black lesbians living in Cape Town and Johannesburg have personally been victims of sexual violence or have received threats from various sources (Kelly, 2009). Tatenda offers another interesting perspective on this idea, as she is a black lesbian woman but finds her situation to be quite different from that mentioned by Tracey. Tatenda has throughout her life been able to maintain a privileged lifestyle, able to live comfortably and more importantly, having access to various resources which provide her with a greater sense of safety. One of the most prominent advantages that she has is the fact that she can drive and owns a car, eliminating the necessity of using public transportation and allowing her to avoid locations where much of the violence against lesbians takes place. This also allows her the opportunity to remove herself from any situations where she feels unsafe, showing that mobility truly is one of the most influential factors in obtaining a feeling of security.

As researcher Letitia Smuts has shown, this could truly be a saving grace for Tatenda, as most black lesbians experience hate crimes and violence in very public spaces, such as taxi rinks, bus stops,

and even in the middle of the road (Smuts, 2009). All of these locations are ones which would be near impossible to avoid for those relying on public transportation, showing the massive role that a car can play in affording women some security and rights to their physical body. In her own words, Tatenda describes the freedom that this privilege provides her, saying, “I do not walk. I do not have to take a taxi and if I want, I’ll get in my car and go to a restaurant and inhabit these spaces where fortunately enough I can do whatever I want.” On the occasions where she has had to walk, Tatenda definitely notices a difference, not only in the way that others respond to and approach her, but also in her own sense of safety. These experiences provide her with a glimpse into what life is like for many black lesbian women whose financial and socioeconomic positions do not afford them necessary protection, and Tatenda recognizes that she has a completely different experience from others due to her privilege.

### **Black and White Experiences**

As referenced in previous conversations with both Tracey and Tatenda, a stark contrast exists between the experiences of lesbian women in South Africa dependent upon one’s skin color. Due to the social constructions of race implemented during apartheid, as well as the various systems of oppression and racial stratification, a stark divide was drawn between those with privilege and those without. Under apartheid classifications, anyone who was not white, male, and heterosexual was considered to be without this privilege. Although white lesbians in South Africa must fight against homophobia, as well as the added difficulty of being female in a patriarchal society, black lesbians are in many instances considered three times the “other” when the ever-present layer of race is included (Donaldson, 2011). For many black lesbians, there is a heightened vulnerability thrust upon them by their skin color which unfortunately results in a higher level of exposure to harassment and violence than their white lesbian peers. This keen susceptibility to intolerance and discrimination can oftentimes lead to different experiences than those shared by white South Africans living openly in their communities. The persisting racial tensions from apartheid contribute to these differences, but the new class inequalities resulting from racial stratification also play a large role in determining the treatment of lesbian women (Smuts, 2009). During my time of research, it appeared as if one’s race had the ability to completely determine their experiences as a lesbian woman in South Africa, and it was my hope that my interviews with Tracey and Tatenda would shed light on the true effects of race on perceptions of sexuality.

For Tracey, the narratives and experiences of black and white lesbians have always seen to be vastly different, and one of the main variances she noted were the issues of safety and violence

afflicted against certain groups. As she spent much of her time working at a rape crisis center where most of the women were lesbians, it was easy for her to recognize the demographics of the individuals who most often appeared for counseling, and many of the victimized women were black. One of the most difficult parts of this realization for Tracey was the fact that she recognized that the only reason that they face violence and she does not is because of the privilege of safety which her white skin affords her. In her discussion of this topic, Tracey claims, “the only reason they’re being attacked is because they happen to have the same lifestyle as I have, and the only reason it’s happening to them and not me is because I have white skin and they haven’t.” In acknowledging that race is the only factor separating her from a more violent and fearful world has caused some guilt on her part, as well as a questioning of why certain women should be more at risk simply because of difference in pigmentation.

Often in conversation with black lesbians, Tracey experiences this guilt and finds it so unfair that she has the ability to blend into the heteronormative, white values of South Africa in order to find safety and opportunity, but black women cannot. She articulates this very passionately as she says:

It feels to me so unfair that I can kind of say what I want, do what I want, sleep with who I want without being in danger of my life, while a woman who’s the same age as me, same education as me, same work as me just can’t have the same experience. It just feels so inherently wrong.

Interestingly enough, Tatenda agrees that most black lesbians do experience far higher levels of discrimination, violence, and homophobia than white women, but does not seem to include herself in this category of black lesbians. The privilege that she has and her ability to remove herself from any situation which could potentially be dangerous or threatening exclude her from the group of black lesbians unto which violence is usually enacted. Many black lesbians unfortunately occupy spaces where more violence occurs, with the highest rates of violence and discrimination taking place in impoverished areas or townships. Smuts explores the reasons for higher rates of violence towards black lesbians specifically by looking at the close correlations to class. For Smuts, the trends seem to follow a pattern, for most violence occurs in impoverished areas, and due to the institutionalized racism of apartheid, the most impoverished group in South Africa is blacks (Smuts, 2009).

Unfortunately, most of the women that inhabit the most dangerous spaces are black, and the added visibility of living in a township can have extremely negative consequences, as most black lesbians experience hate crimes in very public places such as taxi rinks and bus stops (Donaldson, 2012).

Tatenda speaks to these areas and the experiences that some women of her skin color must go through by determining that she truly does not know how they have the strength and courage to live openly. In

thinking about life in a township for black lesbian women, Tatenda ruminates, “I’ve sat there sometimes...and the fear I would have if I had to live in the middle of town or live in a township...the absolute fear. I don’t even think I would be able to be like, ‘I’m a lesbian.’” To her, these areas are more suitable to a warzone than conducive to living happily and safely as a lesbian woman, and she feels that she would be unable to come out if this was the environment she was born into. For Tatenda, the most frustrating aspect is the fact that for many of the women living in unsafe locations not advantageous to their lifestyle, there is no opportunity for relocation. She wonders, “that’s your home and that’s your community, that’s who you are. So what are you supposed to do?”

This recognition was also iterated by Tracey and transformed into some feelings of anger, as she wonders why more white lesbian women are not utterly outraged by the treatment of their black lesbian peers. The idea that the black woman sitting next to you who was raped could have been you had you been born a different race is one that should work to bond the lesbian community together, and Tracey does not understand why it often does not have this effect. In conversation with her white lesbian friends, Tracey often asks them, “why aren’t you completely and utterly outraged? Why aren’t you at marches? And none of them can tell [her] why.” As an admittedly broad generalization, Tracey feels as though a lot of the white lesbian women she has encountered simply do not seem to understand or care about the varied experiences of black lesbians and the ways that many are exposed to a completely different life than many dream of. The lack of community amongst white lesbian women towards their black peers is not unique to the present generation, as Natalie Donaldson writes about the dissonance existing during the apartheid era which made mobilization or politicization near impossible (Donaldson, 2012). This idea that “they’re one of us” is not shared by many white lesbians in South Africa, and it seems that the ties of sexuality are not enough to unite black and white lesbians together. In fact, during the apartheid era, there was a perception that the lesbian community was legitimately split into two different groups: “a white camp interested in gay social activities only, and a black camp which put its weight behind all movements that are truly committed to the liberation of all South Africans” (Croucher, 2002: 319). Tatenda echoes this sentiment, but feels that the main reason for the lack of relationships between black and white lesbians is that “the spaces you occupy are different, especially in Cape Town because the majority of lesbian spaces are white.” This geographical factor has already been proven to be influential in separating white and black individuals, with similar issues arising during apartheid and severing opportunities to create a bond between the two groups. This idea is discussed in Smuts’ paper, where she states, “black and white lesbians tend to be separated culturally, politically, and in those cases where black and lesbian cultures have a spatial presence,

geographically” (Smuts, 2009: 33). In addition to the physical and geographical differences which lead to the dissonance, Tatenda believes that there has never really been a strong connection between black and white lesbians because meaningful relationships are generally formed between members of the same race. As she explains:

Solidarity is all one thing-it’s one thing to go to a march and another thing to go to Pride, but when it comes to meaningful relationships and connections, there’s still that idea that people immediately think about the color of my skin.

Even admitting that she is guilty of it herself, Tatenda notices that oftentimes people are more comfortable with members of their own race, with white women seeking out other white women and black women seeking out black women with the hopes that they will have more in common. For Tatenda, this preconceived idea that individuals with the same skin color will be able to relate better to your own experiences and opinions greatly contributes to the split existing between black and white women in the lesbian community. Tracey also discusses this gap, but explains that the difference between black and white is not the only split existing within the lesbian community that is so often thought of as being a homogenous group under which to classify all non-straight women. In fact, there is no such thing as a cohesive lesbian community, as there are too many sub-groups and categories existing within this one group for any kind of broad judgment to be made about those who identify as lesbian. Many personalities and characteristics exist within the lesbian community in Cape Town, but the difference between the experiences of black and white lesbians has always been present and dividing.

What struck me as being most interesting throughout these two conversations were the responses that I received from each woman, and the way that Tracey and Tatenda’s reactions to my questions actually strayed from what I originally thought I was going to find. Initially I assumed that Tatenda would have a more holistic image of what life must be like for a black lesbian woman in Cape Town, which I now recognize as being my own preconceptions affecting my research. What I found however, was that Tracey actually seemed to have a more thorough understanding of the issues and lifestyles within the black lesbian community, as her background in activism and social justice exposed her to a broader range of individuals who had oftentimes been victim to violence or poverty. Tatenda, although she is a black lesbian woman, had a more privileged and liberal upbringing which seems to have lessened the potential of being vulnerable to homophobia or discrimination. While she still deals with the day-to-day reality of being a lesbian woman in a conservative and historically homophobic nation, Tatenda can forego many of the dangers and fears which accompany many black lesbians’

experiences in cities and townships. This conversation, more than any of the others, proved to me that no woman can be categorized based on superficial attributes, such as skin color or sexuality because every individual has experiences specific to them and their lives. This also supports the argument that sexuality is not always an individual's strongest identifying factor for lesbian woman. As Tracey and Tatenda show, women living in Cape Town today have very different experiences and formulate varying opinions irrespective of the common thread of being lesbian.



## Conclusion

Before coming to South Africa, I felt that I knew exactly what I wanted to focus on during my independent study period, assuming that my experiences with LGBTQ communities at home would be able to inform my project and provide me with some legitimacy. Upon actually arriving in this new country, I realized that the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals were completely specific to South Africa's somewhat muddled history of oppression, racial stratification, conservative ideals, historical foundations, and drive to equality and redemption. Growing up in Southern California, I have always felt as if I was surrounded by liberal individuals supporting the most progressive ideals and legislation, especially in terms of the more recently publicized fight for gay rights. In seeing the intense desire of gay and straight allies alike for equal rights such as gay marriage, I felt that there was a serious disconnect between public opinion and the ideals held up in the Constitution. Our document was simply not representative of the majority's opinions, and it seemed that the government was seriously lagging behind the progressive principles of its citizens. What I found when coming to South Africa was that the exact inverse was true. Rather than being the ones pushing for change, the vast majority of South African citizens were against the rapidly progressing legislation put forth in the Constitution, especially that which pertained to gay rights. I found it mind-boggling that one of the first nations in the world to implement non-discriminatory provisions and same-sex marriage laws into their Constitution was also leading the pack in homophobic and violent acts committed against homosexuals. I started to wonder how this glaring dichotomy between the Constitution and the morals held up by social opinion affected the day-to-day experiences of individuals who had to live through it, perched in the precarious spot of being protected by laws that few people actually supported. It was then that I decided to focus my research on the narratives of lesbian women in an attempt to gather a fuller picture of what it means to be a lesbian in South Africa today.

As time went on, the goals and objectives of my research shifted even more and rather than focusing strictly on the disenchantment with the government and the Constitution, I wanted to know everything about the personal experiences unique to each individual woman. What places do you go, who is important in your life, how do you identify? These were all questions which I went looking for answers to, and in focusing my research on two different individuals I was able to gather a more holistic understanding of their experiences in South Africa than I had originally hoped for. Once I began speaking to Tracey and Tatenda, I realized that I wanted to demonstrate the fact that although both identified as lesbian women, it was impossible to generalize their experiences or simplify the complexities of each personality simply by classifying them based on sexuality. Each woman had a

different upbringing, different relationships, different levels of exposure to things such as tolerance, acceptance, oppression, or violence, and different ways of identifying themselves. After this initial contact, my objective for my independent study was to allow the women to speak for themselves through these narratives, and demonstrate that the women typically thought to exist within the “lesbian community” are so much more than their label.

While I would have liked to spend more time with each participant to obtain more complete interviews, I feel that I succeeded in my objective of attaining black and white lesbian narratives which contributed to my understanding of the dangers in following a single story and hopefully allowed each woman to maintain a sense of agency. In terms of the findings, the responses from Tracey and Tatenda were quite varied, but discernable themes and patterns emerged which provided real world examples for many of the ideas put forth in research articles I had previously read. Through my interviews with the two individuals, it can be discerned that while sexuality is often used to characterize lesbian women, it is not necessarily the most prominent factor that they would use to identify themselves. Accepted as an everyday part of their lives, sexuality serves more as another trait than a beacon for identification. Addressing my initial question in regards to the Constitution, both women found that there was quite a large gap between the promises made by legislation and the reality that people must live with every day, creating feelings of resentment amongst those who had been guaranteed equality and protection. The breakdown between paper and reality is greatly affected by the contrast seen in the mores of society and the mores of the Constitution, with the public not yet ready to support statutes too progressive for their liking.

Another theme which emerged during my time with Tracey and Tatenda was the consensus that the day-to-day experiences of black and white lesbians differ drastically. White lesbians have the luxury of choosing their own way of defining themselves, while unfortunately black lesbians are more often labelled by others and targeted by homophobia. As Tracey readily admits, her white skin affords her a sense of security and safety lacking in her black peers simply because of a difference in skin color. Even though Tatenda is black, she also manages to escape some of the danger and vulnerability of being a black lesbian in South Africa due to her socioeconomic privilege and the ways that she can use her position to avoid certain dangerous situations. What both women discuss is the high vulnerability of the impoverished black lesbian class, as most of the violent crime committed against lesbian women occurs in financially unstable areas such as townships. Both women have had very different experiences as lesbian women, both due to their race as well as their class, but the two agree

that black lesbians and white lesbians are two completely different groups of people in terms of their everyday experiences.

The country of South Africa is one built on contradictions, as one of the oppressively discriminatory regimes in history has given way to a rainbow nation whose foundation is one of the most progressive Constitutions to be crafted. Although the ideals put forward in this document are not always implemented, individuals such as Tracey and Tatenda still continue to live their lives openly and freely, dealing with the struggles inherent in their sexuality while also remembering to celebrate the joys which accompany it. Rather than allowing it to define them, being a lesbian is simply a part of who they are, and their testimonies have shown a few unique faces of the lesbian experience in Cape Town.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

One of the most beneficial ways that I think my project could have been expanded upon was the inclusion of more interview subjects with more time to dedicate to each. As I only had four weeks to conduct my research, focusing on two lesbian women was the best way to obtain a full picture of their individual experiences and I was able to devote more time to both of them. However, if future studies allowed more time to both find interview subjects and create strong relationships with them, more narratives of lesbian women could be collected and thus contribute to a wider understanding of the day-to-day experiences of lesbians living in Cape Town. Due to the limitations of the study, I was also only really exposed to women who received formal education, had access to cars, spoke English, and considered themselves self-sustainable, but a wider research pool would have also been beneficial to providing even more diverse opinions. If possible, gathering the narratives of women from various backgrounds and speaking different languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, etc. would have been just another window into the differences of lesbian experiences dependent upon one's culture, upbringing, and community. I would also recommend that any further research done on this topic includes testimony or interviews from various lesbian groups and organizations in the Cape Town area. I originally intended to work with a gay rights advocacy group based out of Cape Town called The Triangle Project, but once again time constraints and logistical factors limited my ability to contact and meet with willing organizations. I think that working alongside such a group would provide a very unique perspective to lesbian identity and narratives and would also be a great source for further personal interviews and contacts.

This study could have also been expanded upon by finding various individuals from other cities or rural areas near the Cape Town area in order to create a comparison and find stronger patterns and themes of similar experiences. The geographical element was one which was mentioned in both of my interviews, as both Tracey and Tatenda cited that their experiences were very different due to the fact that they lived in Cape Town, while those living in townships, rural areas, or other major cities might have entirely different opinions and lifestyles. My topic had to be narrowed to one specific location in order to make it cohesive and realistic given the time allowed, but if more time could be dedicated to the topic of lesbian narratives, collecting them from as many different locations or backgrounds would once again just further contribute to a broader insight the experiences of various women. Overall, with the time given by SIT and the parameters of the project, focusing on two women was the best decision because it really allowed me to spend more time with each woman and formulate a more comprehensive picture of the narratives that they provided me with.

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

**SIT Study Abroad**  
a program of World Learning



The purpose of this study is to explore the narratives of both black and white lesbian women living in Cape Town in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the everyday experiences of the lesbian community. I understand that I may be asked about sensitive topics such as my sexuality, race, religion, childhood, etc. and can at any time terminate the interview if I feel uncomfortable. I also understand that any images, videos, or recordings of me will be provided to SIT staff and may be shown at the researcher's home institution of Franklin & Marshall College. If I do not wish for footage/photos of me to be used outside of the SIT program, I must let the interviewer know.

**1. Rights Notice**

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

- a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature and date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's signature and date

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide**

- 1) So tell me a little bit about what it was like for you growing up...where are you from, what were your parents/friends/siblings like?
- 2) When did you first know you were lesbian, and how did the coming out process look for you?
- 3) Now that you have an established life as a lesbian woman in Cape Town, what do you feel is your most important identifying factor? Your sexuality, your gender, your race, something completely unrelated? And do you think the way that others identify you is the way you would identify yourself?
- 4) Have you ever felt like you were the victim of homophobia, or have you ever felt threatened by those around you? Especially when the news covers so many stories about corrective rape and hate crimes, how much do you feel this is actually a part of your day to day experiences?
- 5) In terms of the Constitution's progressive laws, how much do you think the legislation has actually contributed to your attainment of more rights? Do you think the government has failed to implement them, or do you feel that public opinion in SA is right in line with the laws?
- 6) What do you think the effects of race on your sexuality are (if there even are any)? Do you think you are treated differently as a lesbian woman because you are black/white, or have you seen other lesbian women having different experiences than you because they are of a different race?