

# ON GLOWING STRUGGLE

Abri de Swardt

Above and inside the first Lesbian and Gay Pride March in Johannesburg, orchestrated by the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), a queer bird lingered. Proceeding on Saturday the 13th of October 1990 through the inner city from speeches at the Institute for Race Relations in De Korte Street, Braamfontein, to a picnic at Pieter Roos Park adjacent to Empire Road via Hillbrow, the march was understood as being of a national – and indeed continental – nature, an inception in each instance. The march was “not just an event”, as founding activist Bev Palesa Ditsie clarifies, but a “movement, a philosophy born of an understanding of all our intersectional struggles.”<sup>1</sup> Emboldened by the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela months earlier, the march made public the confluences of the anti-apartheid and queer rights struggles, asserting the contribution of queers to imaginative political transition.<sup>2</sup> Central to this proclamation was the GLOW-bird, a four-person puppet of a cattle egret in flight, an unlikely queer icon this essay excavates from disregard.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ditsie, Bev Palesa. 2019. Love Letter to my queer family, *Mail & Guardian*. 24 October. [Online]. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-10-24-00-love-letter-to-my-queer-family/>

Ditsie is consciously using terminology not available at the time of the march, much like my use of ‘queer’ in this writing at times stands for the LGBTQIA+ community, who were then only labelled as either ‘lesbians’ or ‘gays’.

<sup>2</sup> A genealogy of pre-democratic queer political movements in South Africa develops from the collapse in 1986 of the glaringly white, apolitical Gay Association of South Africa (GASA, established 1982) amid pressure from international gay rights groups supporting subjugated South Africans: Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) formed that year by a small collective of white anti-apartheid activists in the Western Cape, among them Ivan Toms of the End Conscription Campaign, was restructured as the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA) in 1987; GLOW, co-founded in 1988 by Simon Tseko Nkoli with several chapters in Johannesburg, Soweto and the surrounding reef, was revolutionary as the first local gay organisation with a multiracial membership and Black leadership structure, followed in 1992 by the Capetonian Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians (ABIGALE) led by Midi Achmat and Theresa Raizenberg.

Themed ‘Unity in the Community’, the march, as per the manifesto read by GLOW’s co-chairs Simon Tseko Nkoli and Donn  Rundle, mobilised “[a]ll South Africans who are Committed to a Non-Racist, Non-Sexist, Non-Discriminatory Democratic Future” to “unite in the fight for the basic human rights of all South Africans, including lesbians and gay men”, through a series of challenges directed at the “parliament...the law...the political organisation...the liberation movement...the religious tradition...the media...the employers...the health services and welfare organisations...educational institutions...parents and teachers”.<sup>3</sup> The extent of confrontation necessary demonstrates how systemic the stigmatisation of queer lives was, marked by “stereotyping” and “myths”.<sup>4</sup> Thus a belated, nascent freedom, equality and justice had to be summoned through the dream of a solidarity aimed as much at instilling a sense of collective dignity and pride among sexual minorities<sup>5</sup> and gender dissidents, as at the dual promises of the decriminalisation of homosexuality and constitutional protections. As advocate Edwin Cameron warned queers, “[w]e exercise the freedom we think we might have in South Africa not by right but by favour, by indulgence.”<sup>6</sup> That Cameron’s statement reads as contemporary points to the insufficiency of the subsequent 1996 constitutional amendments to end queerphobia, now often intensified to endemic hate crimes,<sup>7</sup> as well as to the fractured, weary and evacuated state of latter Pride. In considering the legacy of the initial marches Jasbir K. Puar’s enduring question on the congratulatory, claimed manifestation of rights – “[w]hat happens when ‘we’ get what ‘we’ want?” – should be raised to ask how liberated and shared the present might be.<sup>8</sup>

The frontline of the ‘Unity in the Community’ Lesbian and Gay Pride March, Johannesburg, 13 October 1990, with Simon Nkoli (second row, far left), Phyllis Dlamini (centre front), Bev Palesa Ditsie (third row, far right) and Donn  Rundle (second row, far right), with the GLOW-bird further back. Image from *Pride: Protest and Celebration* (2006), p. 21



<sup>3</sup> *First Pride March*. 1990. Donn  Rundle. dir. Johannesburg: Direct Action. Donn  Rundle Collection, GALA Queer Archive.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> The march also challenged the invisibility of sexuality in the daily life of individuals, as the past co-ordinator of GLOW, Tanya Chan Sam quips, “I don’t preface, ‘I’m lesbian’, when I buy a loaf of bread. So the only way to make oneself known is through gay activism.”

Chan Sam, Tanya. 1993. Coloured School Days, in *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse, assisted by Kim Berman. COSAW Publishing: Johannesburg. p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Cameron cited in Gevisser, Mark. 2012. A different fight for freedom: A history of South African lesbian and gay organisations from the 1950s to the 1990s, in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron. Routledge: London & New York. p. 61.

Cameron’s caveat was delivered during an address at a March 1986 fundraiser by the Benefit alliance for the National Law Reform Fund. The fund aimed to dissolve the ruling by a committee of the Tricameral President’s Council on revising the Immorality Act regarding three issues: the “possible widening of the criminal prohibitions conduct to include gay women”; how society should “express its abhorrence to homosexuality”; and what “programmes of rehabilitation or forms of punishment would be desirable” (*ibid.*: 60). Although P.W. Botha’s State of Emergency operations halted the continuation of the committee’s investigation, the politicisation of queer life was hereby accelerated.

<sup>7</sup> As of October, there have been twenty known murders of queer individuals in South Africa during 2021, named here in memoriam: Bonang Gaetae, Nonhlanhla Kunene, Sphamandla Khoza, Nathaniel ‘Spokgoane’ Mbele, Khulekani Gomazi, Andile ‘Lulu’ Nthuthela, Lonwabo Jack, Lucky Kleinboy Motshabi, Phelokazi Mqathana, Lindokuhle Mapu, Aubrey Boshoga, Masixole Level, Anele Bhengu, Lulama Mvandaba, Motse Moeketsi, Sheila Lebelo, Thapelo Sehata, Sam Junior Mbatha, Sisanda Gumede and Zimasile Zubair Shabangu. As is evident in the sequence of names, Black South African queers bear the brunt of hate crimes. In the hope of countering such oblitative violence queer advocacy groups are urging government to implement The Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill delayed since a second draft was approved by cabinet in 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Puar cited in Rao, Rahul. 2020. *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford UP: Oxford. p. 2.

Cameron's 'we' historically critiqued the complacency of white middle-class gay men in being habitually metonymic of the spectrum of queer lives, a capture complicated by GLOW's slogan 'SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES'. Once more the reclamation 'ourselves' demarcates representational contestation: on the one hand, racism within white gay circles "bluntly" perceived the first few marches as overtly political, "conflated" as "black affair[s]", despite most participants being white.<sup>9</sup> Whereas within Black communities queerness was seen as unAfrican and taboo, an irrefutable nonexistence "to be detested" as "mad, sick", or even as "middle class" affectation "influenced by the Whites."<sup>10</sup> For Rundle, through "building Pride we were also building GLOW", linking the organisation to the dais of the march, and in turn, to marching as a method "very much part of South African culture", enunciating "[w]e are the people, and this is how we want our issues dealt with"<sup>11</sup> By then choosing to represent themselves in the march through the GLOW-bird puppet – a form neither human, nor capable of speech – GLOW quietly embraced and defamiliarised the representational strategies at the juncture of grassroots uprising driven by anti-apartheid resistance art and the "semiotic warfare eventually known as 'queering'" developed during the AIDS-crises.<sup>12</sup>

The GLOW-bird during the 'Unity in the Community' Lesbian and Gay Pride March, Johannesburg, 13 October 1990. Image courtesy of Donn  Rundle Collection, GALA Queer Archive



<sup>9</sup> Gevisser, *Defiant Desire*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Nkoli, Simon. 1990. The Slow Race to Liberation, *Glowletter*. March. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive. p. 9 - 10.

<sup>11</sup> Rundle, Donn . 2006. Our biggest concern was that there would only be twenty or fifty people..., in *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, edited by Shaun de Waal & Anthony Manion. Fanele: Johannesburg, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP: Durham & London. p. xiv. Freeman cites the coalition Act Up's demarcation of AIDS as an "epidemic of signification" to point to the importance of visual tactics in queer activism (ibid: xv).

Puppeteers Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones recall in a personal interview that they were approached by GLOW to create the “biggest puppet we’d ever built at that time” following a fundraising performance for the march of *Starbrites!* (dir. Barney Simon), an interregnum “regeneration fable” at the Market Theatre with puppetry by Handspring Puppet Company.<sup>13</sup> Kohler & Jones had been members of the predominantly exiled cultural worker group, Medu Art Ensemble, in Gaborone from 1978 – 80, and saw a correlation between the urgent debates of Medu and the allure of GLOW in restructuring culture. They were “drawn to GLOW because of Simon”, whose detentions during the 1976 Soweto student riots<sup>14</sup> and the mid-1980s Delmas Treason Trial<sup>15</sup> affirmed the simultaneous primacy of non-racialism and queerness to his leadership.<sup>16</sup> Medu’s ethos of narrative immediacy and co-operative functionalism, epitomised in Thami Mnyele’s declaration that the production of art is no “different from the act of building a bridge”, being the “work of many hands”,<sup>17</sup> resonates with puppetry as a “minor” art, Deleuze and Guattari’s category of dynamic cultural forms immanently “political” and “collective”.<sup>18</sup> Made afterhours with the help of fellow GLOW-members, the GLOW-bird was scaled to the dramaturgy of the city at a wingspan of nearly five meters and synchronised to the march through the interdependent choreography of its puppeteers.

## TWO BIRDS, TWO BODIES

That an animal form was elected by GLOW should not surprise, as within the law homosexuality was entrenched as a pleasure ‘contrary to the order of nature’,<sup>19</sup> equivocated to other ‘unnatural’ acts like bestiality.

---

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview, July – August 2021.

The puppet was “an ‘official project’” of GLOW “as far as GLOW was concerned”, Kohler & Jones add, rather than of Handspring, the company they co-founded in 1981. Material costs were “to be raised” by the organisation, but “never materialised”.

<sup>14</sup> For three months on account of suspected ‘terrorism’ under the Internal Security Act.

Nkoli, Simon. 1993. This Strange Feeling, in *The Invisible Ghetto*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Twenty-two activists associated with the United Democratic Front of community organisations were arrested on 23 September 1984 while at a funeral of protesters shot by police in Sebokeng township.

They were kept in detention and charged with treason nine months later, and subsequently trialled in the secluded town of Delmas for over 420 days before the trial was declared invalid and all acquitted.

De Waal, Shaun & Martin, Karen. 2007. Simon Nkoli’s prison letters to Roy Shepherd, in *Till the time of Trial: The prison letters of Simon Nkoli*, edited by Shaun de Waal and Karen Martin. GALA: Johannesburg, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>17</sup> Mnyele cited in Medu Art Ensemble. 2019. *South African History Online*. [Online]. Available: <http://sahistory.org.za/article/medu-art-ensemble>

<sup>18</sup> Hroch, Petra. 2011. Performing Spaces of Hope: Street Puppetry and the Aesthetics of Scale, in *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope*, edited by Tonya K. Davidson, Ondine Park, and Rob Shields. Wilfrid Laurier UP: Waterloo, p. 246.

<sup>19</sup> This statement is echoed not only in the Roman Dutch common law from which South African legislation evolved, but also within anti-sodomy regulations derived from the 19th century Indian Penal Code spreading throughout the British Empire. Rahul Rao contextualises anti-sodomy laws as part of a broader colonial mechanism of regulating the social body, which included handling the “sexual relations of prostitution and concubinage, the control of venereal disease, the proper rearing of children and management of the household, and the ‘improvement’ of the population through the use, among other things, of eugenicist practices of selective sterilisation” (*Out of Time*, 8).

The GLOW-bird then functions to renaturalise the queer body exposed to the effects of the law, through the transformative familiarity of what Kohler, Jones & Cameron deem “our orientation as a normal and natural variant of the human experience.”<sup>20</sup> In seeking to reform a hostile public, rather than assimilating to it, the GLOW-bird is deployed as metaphor, nestling in the “imagination as messenger and promise.”<sup>21</sup> “Animals came from over the horizon,” John Berger proposes, “[t]hey belonged *there* and *here*”, a migration between the wondrous, anticipatory realm and everyday subjection.<sup>22</sup> This distance is incarnated in the postdiluvian white dove, bearing the gift of land/ing, a fatigued figure which GLOW had originally wanted as the GLOW-bird. Paired with the somewhere-over-the rainbow, the dove adjoins the most evanescent of attributes – hope, forgiveness, peace, joy – braided as divine freedom. Retrospectively this choice would have been another glimmer of the Rainbowism of early South African democracy:<sup>23</sup> amnesiac and celebratory, in keeping with the impossible ‘unity in the community’.

However, Kohler “felt it was a bit too clichéd”, burdened by “so much Christian symbolism”.<sup>24</sup> The white dove is part of an aviary of “animal victimology” which posits all creatures as instinctively blameless “dwellers in the realm of unfreedom”, an “eternal” immobility which Fahim Amir cautions diminishes the “polymorphous and monstrous agency” of animals.<sup>25</sup> Rather than prematurely conclusive, the GLOW-bird revised as cattle egret by Kohler insists upon the presence of animals in processes of political struggle. Even in altering the design, the GLOW-bird sticks as conciliatory in reports published within the organisation: bookended by gay bars the “front of the march was turning past Garbo’s as the rear was still near Connections”, in the “middle was a white dove.”<sup>26</sup>

Solidarity Fax with drawing to GLOW  
from Paul Robeson Campus Centre,  
Rutgers University, Newark, 11  
October 1990, featuring the ‘Unity  
in the Community’ Pride Poster  
designed by Andrew Lindsay. Image  
courtesy of 1990 Pride Scrapbook,  
Donné Rundle Collection, GALA  
Queer Archive



<sup>20</sup> Basil, Edwin and Adrian. 1990. Law reform and Gay Rights, *Glowletter*. June. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Berger, John. 1980. Why Look at Animals?, in *About Looking*. Pantheon Books: New York. p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*: 6.

<sup>23</sup> Rainbowism refers to the notion of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s designation for post-apartheid South Africa, as a pacifying conceit of imagined unity oblivious to ongoing injustice.

It should be noted that the march was led by a bakkie festooned in a billowing, bundled band of balloons, released at the picnic. Not quite a rainbow, the balloons were interlinked in segments along the colour spectrum. The rainbow flag emerged as part of an American queer iconography – it was designed by Gilbert Baker for the 1978 San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>25</sup> Amir in conversation with Sohrab Mohebbi. 2021. Primary Resistance: Fahim Amir, *Mousse*. 76. [Online]. Available: <http://moussemagazine.it/fahim-amir-sohrab-mohebbi-2021/>

<sup>26</sup> Dianne. 1990. 800 March, *Glowletter*. December. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive. p. 2.

In the difficulties of substituting such symbolic overdetermination, the GLOW-bird takes flight in the freedom from the signification of freedom, of those freedoms hitherto inconceivable, of the potential of GLOW itself.<sup>27</sup> As such, the GLOW-bird inhabits the force which Jack Halberstam elaborates as wildness, an “undoing that beckons and seduces”, something other than the template of freedom.<sup>28</sup> Wildness does not “promise freedom, nor does it name a new mode of identification,” instead it motions a bewildering, less recognisable “rubric for passions, affects, movements, and ways of thinking that exceed conventional oppositions”, intensifying queerness.<sup>29</sup>

Cattle egrets are “[h]ighly gregarious”, “very common resident[s]”, natal and nomadic across all of sub-Saharan Africa outside the Kalahari.<sup>30</sup> They are “all white when not breeding”, with black bills when young, as seen in the markings of the GLOW-bird in fledgling pride, perhaps the unlocked lipstick of the aging queen.<sup>31</sup> In Afrikaans cattle egret translates to *bosluisvoël*, or tick-bird; in isiZulu *umLindankomo*, the guardian that waits for cattle, a bird that does not rest. This nomenclature derives from cattle egrets perched atop mammals to feast upon insects flushed by their grazing, and closer upon their epidermal parasites, like the GLOW-bird ravenous for homophobes brimming the march. Unlike the commensalism of the cattle egret transported upon an unbothered other, the GLOW-bird does not settle, soaring above the march in a proximity of restless association. The GLOW-bird heralds the capacity of relation before assuming liberation. “[W]e require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations”, Donna Haraway urges through her prompt of “making oddkin”, cultivating bonds of belonging and responsibility in excess of reproductive “genealogical and biogenetic family”, in order to “become-with each other”.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> In their essay “Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi (Those who fuck me say I’m tasty): Gay sexuality in Reef townships”, Hugh McLean and Linda Ngcobo lament GLOW’s unrealised potential insofar as its “ideology and activities” were at the time of the mid 1990s “unfortunately rather removed” from the realities of the majority of its township constituency for whom, outside of the network of safe space that GLOW held for socialisation, could have offered “real and consistent involvement” in political change through its working groups, if not curtailed by “too many practical problems related to transport, communication, distance, dispersion and lack of money” (*Defiant Desire*, 180).

<sup>28</sup> Halberstam, Jack. 2020. *Wild Things: the disorder of desire*. Duke UP: Durham and London. p. 3..

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*: 31.

Through refuting reduction, wildness in the process, “runs the risk of reproducing the terms that it seeks to displace” potentially reaffirming exclusionary practices dependent upon regulating marginalised bodies as “mad, bad, and unruly”, which in the context of the march could mean a perception of the GLOW-bird not as naturalising queerness, but as dehumanising queer persons (*ibid*: 46).

<sup>30</sup> Maclean, Gordon Lindsay. 1985. *Robert’s Birds of Southern Africa*. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund: Cape Town. p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>32</sup> Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP: Durham. p. 2 – 4.

Although ‘chosen family’ is the staple mutuality of queer community, if not queer survivability, the GLOW-bird traverses the isolation of the category of the human towards the virulent “[b]odily, ethical and political obligations” of “companion species”, from the Latin *cum panis*, “at table together”.<sup>33</sup> The GLOW-bird is heading for the picnic after the march. At the picnic we relax into one another. Nibbling and babbling, we share. On the ground, we keep expanding community.<sup>34</sup>

At a certain level, the GLOW-bird’s flight is a ruse. The wood and fabric puppet was beamed aloft by a union of protesters, making visible a labour and risk distinct from the automation of floats. Beneath the cattle egret, the GLOW-bird is too the members of GLOW, embodying a form of hybrid puppetry that Paul Piris names “co-presence”. Characterisation multiplies to a “body schema encompassing two bodies”: the “actual” protesters dressed for the march and the “apparent” bird.<sup>35</sup> Literary scholar Mark Mathuray, who was then a first-year student in medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand and co-founder with Phylia Dlamini of the Society of Homosexuals on Campus (SHOC),<sup>36</sup> anecdotally recounts in a personal interview that the GLOW-bird mediated his “whole experience” of Pride.<sup>37</sup> He had spent “almost all” his time with “Basil and Adrian on the march”, accompanying them from their arrival, and “after a while” he had offered assistance – “give me one pole...and I’ll take over for a bit” – suggesting a loose relay of marcher-puppeteers.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*: 29.

Haraway’s first example of companion species in *Staying with the trouble* is actually the domestic rock pigeon, of which the homing white dove is a variant. However, I am interested in the tendency of the cattle egret to partner with other non-human animals, and what that means as a strategy for queer relation, rather than the ways in which the dove has been rendered at service to mankind. Here one can ask, as Haraway does, who “renders whom capable of what, and at what price, borne by whom?” (*ibid*: 23).

<sup>34</sup> Haraway counteracts human exceptionalism by stating how all living beings become compost, returning to the soil together in “hot compost piles” (*ibid*: 4).

<sup>35</sup> Piris, Paul. 2014. The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York. p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> SHOC differentiated themselves from the prior campus organisation the Wits Gay Movement, which was, as Mathuray notes, a “social organisation for white gay men”, in order to focus on multi-racialism, lobbying and education. Specifically, its objectives were directed at conscientising the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Black Student Movement (BSM), on the importance of queer sexual rights to the ‘national agenda’. SHOC was aligned with GLOW, and actively contributed to the March organising committee.

Personal interview, October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*.

Another known puppeteer was the actor, theatre director and playwright Robert Colman.

Stationed at the rear pole, Mathuray went on to perform the GLOW-bird for the remainder of the march. From beneath the tail, he had a “piecemeal vision” of the bird, “I couldn’t walk away farther enough...to see the whole bird”, instead witnessing “the bones, the bits” that comprised it, a fragmentary positioning which pivotally made distinct for Mathuray how “perspectives determine experiences”.<sup>39</sup> This closeness also produced a disorientation: “it looked like this weird hybrid of a swan, a pterodactyl,<sup>40</sup> and a duck! And I was like ‘what the fuck?’ And I remember there was no colour on it as well, and I thought, ‘well at least they could’ve painted rainbow colours or something!’”<sup>41</sup> Mathuray’s chimeric GLOW-bird is another expression of wildness, an unforeseen embodiment which several marchers “were a bit skeptical about”, as “they weren’t quite sure what it meant, and what it was doing there”; yet others “absolutely loved it”, and Mathuray, being part of the bird, “completely loved it.”<sup>42</sup>

Grafting into and enlivening another consciousness, puppetry foregrounds the metamorphosing faculty of touch. The GLOW-bird is held by, and holds, the march. Puppets engage “something quite different to, and more fundamental than, storytelling,” Jones states – the “quest for life itself.”<sup>43</sup> In puppetry touch is breath. And, with bated breath, the audience knows the precariousness of this exchange. What is required can be withdrawn, and so the march demands a different temporality of touch to sustain queer desire. In Mathuray’s evocation the GLOW-bird extends “this very historic” present of the march into the “prehistoric”, hauntingly refusing the extermination of a queerness as old as time.<sup>44</sup> Puppets are therefore “engines of empathy”, per Jones.<sup>45</sup> This drive implicates more than the conjectured intimacy of mimesis through the puppeteers surrendering autonomy over intention. By opening up to unscripted, material relations the puppet can operate its handlers who become “danced by a reality” not their own.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

Mathuray additionally draws attention to the disjunctions between the photographic documentation of the GLOW-bird in the GALA Queer Archive and the experience of the march itself.

<sup>40</sup> The genus name of this dinosaur derives from the Greek *pteron* and *daktulos* for ‘wing’ and ‘finger’ respectively.

<sup>41</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jones, Basil. 2014. Puppetry, Authorship, and the Ur-Narrative, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York. p. 62.<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>45</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>46</sup> Kathy Foley cited in Posner, Dassia N. et al. 2014. Introduction, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York. p. 14.



Jones remembers how a spring storm struck Johannesburg during the march. The GLOW-bird's wings were "caught by the wind", making the puppet "very difficult to control" as it kept threatening to "tak[e] off like a glider."<sup>47</sup> Drenched in the rain, the GLOW-bird also "became very heavy", and Mathuray felt he "could not hold" the bird "any longer".<sup>48</sup> However this "conjoined euphoria" brewing throughout the march reached a "sudden fever pitch" with the downpour, and "overtook" what he had imagined his capacities to be.<sup>49</sup>

The GLOW-bird during the 'Unity in the Community' Lesbian and Gay Pride March, Johannesburg, 13 October 1990. Anticlockwise with Adrian Kohler at the breast pole, Robert Colman on the left wing pole, Mark Mathuray at the belly pole, and Basil Jones on the right wing pole. Image courtesy of Donn e Rundle Collection, GALA Queer Archive



Of the storm, Dlamini imparts "[i]t felt like a blessing...[n]o-one ran for shelter or tried to cover themselves. People started to tear off the paper bags they wore."<sup>50</sup> For a moment, it felt as if the whole world was gay!"<sup>51</sup> Subsequently a condensed sequence of gestures marks the GLOW-bird's flight not as a simulation, but as a "sensuous abstraction" persistent beyond what Roland Barthes refers to as the rudimentary "antimony of *animate* / *inanimate*."<sup>52</sup> The GLOW-bird figures nature too as a pose.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>49</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>50</sup> Several marchers appeared with paper bag masks over their faces, present in pride but anonymised as they were either closeted or lived in fear of exposure (especially to family, or at work) as the march would be widely broadcast.

<sup>51</sup> Dlamini, Phylia. 2006. None of us knew what to expect, in *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, edited by Shaun de Waal & Anthony Manion. Fanele: Johannesburg. p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Barthes, Roland. 1982. *Empire of the Signs*. Hill and Wang: New York. p. 60.

Barthes is contrasting Western puppetry conventions to the Japanese Bunraku theatre, in which puppets without any supports extending from their bodies are directly handled by three visible puppeteers who are each fully or partially cloaked, with voice delivered from an onstage platform by a narrator outside this triad.

Puppetry is an insurgent technology against the dominion of the “word and against conventionalized forms of theatrical discourse,” Jones continues, as in puppetry “movement is...thought.”<sup>53</sup> This resonates with Famir’s thesis of “solidarity with animals”, in which solidarity means the “tenderness of species”, which can be enacted through “sidestep[ping] language as a prerequisite for political representation and recognition”.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the solidarity of the civil societies joining the first march, broadening its purview to amongst others the decolonisation of education, AIDS-awareness and stopping gender-based violence, the GLOW-bird does not communicate through sloganeering. From the front of the march the GLOW-bird, eclipsed by banners, wings them as airborne texts; as angelic visitations, but also as reminder of that which is unwritten, of that which does not have to become metaphor or translate to sentience in order to be valued. The GLOW-bird occupies, and occludes, political articulation with the politics of presence.<sup>55</sup> Jones asserts that being “able to insert animals as leading characters in theatrical narratives,” conspicuous in their “egregious absence”, has been “[o]ne of the most significant” feats of Handspring.<sup>56</sup> This insertion extends to how the GLOW-bird queers<sup>57</sup> the scope of queer activism – through pooled, elective affinities outside speciesism – invoking an ecology of liberation that refuses and displaces designated racial, sexual, gendered, collective, gravitational, and planetary enclaves.

---

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry*, 66 – 67.

<sup>54</sup> Amir & Mohebbi, *Mousse*.

<sup>55</sup> Another other way in which this occurred in the march was through noise, with some protestors blowing whistles for its duration to sound and dispel alarm. Mathuray mentions that as an inaugural Pride, it was “this quite scary space to be part of”, as “all of us could’ve been attacked”. Amidst fears that some “irate” citizens in Hillbrow would throw objects from their high-rise apartment balconies on marchers, which would bypass the defence the march as an assembly offered, Mathuray “looked up” and fathomed “I’m actually under the wing of the bird. And I thought ah, this is perfect, because here I am totally protected.”

Personal interview.

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>57</sup> Per the *Glowletter*, queering in an “organised gay and lesbian community” involves “dismissing the distinctions, defying the definitions, breaking the boundaries, and being bored with borders” which structure and position society. A lot more room to dance. 1992. *Glowletter*. October. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive. p. 4.

## ALMOST CERTAINLY NOT

Reappearing without the aeronautical skeleton in its wings – fluttering not like flags of capitulation, but raised as limp wrists – at the 1991 ‘Marching for Equality’ Lesbian and Gay Pride March, where a draft national Lesbian and Gay Charter was debated, the GLOW-bird disappeared altogether by the 1992 ‘Marching for Our Rights’ Pride,<sup>58</sup> which concentrated on including a clause within the African National Congress’s Bill of Rights to assure queers unequivocal protections towards the future South African Constitution. Asked if the GLOW-bird still exists, Jones responds “[a]lmost certainly not.”<sup>59</sup> The GLOW-bird was “not made to last”, and so had “probably just deteriorated” in storage.<sup>60</sup> The flight of the GLOW-bird leaves a wild absence, foreshadowing the dwindling influence of GLOW upon the march, and in turn the rupturing of GLOW itself.<sup>61</sup> With the advent of democracy in 1994 the march is reframed as a parade, inferring depoliticisation; by 1996 the new Constitution is instituted,<sup>62</sup> substantiating the rights for sexual minorities so fervently campaigned for; in 1998 GLOW disbands as Nkoli passes away of AIDS-related illness. In ensuing years, as the march shuffles from the city centre to the northern suburbs of Rosebank, Parkview and Sandton, with fleeting interludes in Newtown and Hillbrow before regional alternatives arise,<sup>63</sup> public space is traded for recreational ground, and eventually cordoned off and ticketed at Melrose Arch and Sandton City malls. Out of the pocket into the closet, away from the streets. This passage corresponds to the retreat of middleclass white queers to these neighbourhoods, while racialised queers are still subjected to violence, still needing to fight for their breath despite the provisions of the law. This impunity is outrageous – as Ditsie remarks, white queers could “finally openly celebrate their freedom without being encumbered by the rest of us and our struggles”.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> On both these second Saturdays of October the march commenced from the Great Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand to the waters of Pieter Roos Park.

<sup>59</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Some members of GLOW split-off to form organisations with more singular intentions: Nkoli co-formed the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality in 1994, which expressly focussed on law reform and decriminalisation; Nkoli would also later launch the Positive African Men working group towards destigmatising AIDS, drawing upon his experiences with the educational Township Aids Project; The Hope and Unity Metropolitan and Community Church was established to allow safe gatherings for religious queers; and Ditsie along with other Black lesbians from GLOW begun Nkateko in 1995 out of a frustration with the predominance of gay men and white women within the organisation.

<sup>62</sup> Following an Interim Constitution between 1993 – 1996, with a public process for revisions led by the Constitutional Assembly, the final Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was adopted on 11 October 1996 as the first democratic Constitution of the nation. Prior iterations in 1910, 1961 and 1983 were marked by dispossession of land and citizenship of Black people “hardly t[aking] into account the multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural characteristics of a South African society.”

Drafting of the Final Constitution. 2019. *South African History Online*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/drafting-final-constitution>

<sup>63</sup> Including Soweto Pride (since 2004, notably organised by the Forum for Empowerment of Women), Ekurhuleni Pride (since 2009), and Pretoria Pride (since 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Ditsie, Love Letter, *Mail & Guardian*.

The 'Marching for Equality' Lesbian and Gay Pride March, Johannesburg, 12 October 1991. Image from *Pride: Protest and Celebration* (2006), p. 50



Ditsie's cry finds its most brazen manifestation in the historic rift during Johannesburg Pride 2012. With banners reading *NO CAUSE TO CELEBRATE* and *DYING FOR JUSTICE*, the feminist organisation One in Nine<sup>65</sup> staged a die-in at the intersection of Jan Smuts Drive and Bolton Road, blockading the parade with the bodies of Black lesbians and gender non-conforming queers – doubled by a troop of stuffed puppet proxies – in the hope of halting the revelry for a minute of silence to commemorate queers lost to hate crimes. The parade did not pause en route to Zoo Lake, but advanced over and around the intervention, with white organisers and some of those parading attacking and expelling the demonstration. One in Nine afterwards called for the boycott of Pride, which has “ceased to be a space for charting new futures.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Found in 2006 in solidarity with Fezekile Kuzwayo, known as Khwezi, during the trial in which she accused then deputy president, and soon to be President, Jacob Zuma, of raping her, One in Nine continues its work against gender-based violence and femicide. The organisation's name derives from a 2005 statistic on the number of rape survivors in South Africa who report the crime to police, pointing to how incredibly victims are treated, leading to re-traumatisation.

<sup>66</sup> Shelver, Carrie. 2012. *LGBT Activists Disrupt Joburg Pride 2012.wmv*. [Online]. Available: [http://youtube.com/watch?v=Hnixp-T\\_Hnw](http://youtube.com/watch?v=Hnixp-T_Hnw)

In reaction, the Johannesburg People's Pride movement was galvanised in 2013, arranging a Pride march premised on the 'Unity in the Community' route through Braamfontein and Hillbrow, but concluding in speeches at Constitution Hill. Although significant for reframing Pride around social justice, intersectionality and accessibility, while being critical of the pink-washed racism of Jo'burg Pride, People's Pride was just sustained for two editions.

Even before the equality clause was officially enshrined, Nkoli stressed that the constitutional amendment does not “mean that Lesbians and Gays are now free in South Africa, just that we are beginning a new form of struggle to change people’s attitudes.”<sup>67</sup> Sizwe Mpofu-Welsh dissects former Justice Albie Sachs’ estimation that the “history of the twentieth century in South Africa is in a sense the history of the tension between Constitution and revolution,” consolidated when “we got a revolution through the Constitution,”<sup>68</sup> as a form of ‘constitutional triumphalism’, which is “dangerous because it underestimates the extent to which apartheid has managed to persist in...unsuspecting guises under democracy’s shroud.”<sup>69</sup> To reclaim Pride would mean to march for the many ways in which the Constitution has almost certainly not yet liberated queer life, to recognise the cost of Pride, of the injunction to be “seen, scened” and “platformed”;<sup>70</sup> to work against the “major vacuum” of struggle fatigue, filled with “even more misunderstanding of who we are”;<sup>71</sup> towards Pride being a “microcosm of the society we wish to live in, and not a mirror of the divided one that we currently” inhabit.<sup>72</sup> Then we will be “pulled irresistibly to the front of the march”, to the “togetherness of the struggle”.<sup>73</sup>

The GLOW-bird roams in the First Lesbian and Gay Pride video tape produced by Direct Action which Nkoli widely screened abroad to garner international support; in archival encounters enclosed, mediated, and miniaturised; in the cattle egrets clustered on their island at the past cruising grounds of Zoo Lake; in imagined transition; as social motion, as wreckage, as dust. Unfurling as an eruption beyond the march, the GLOW-bird is an event in itself. In his poem ‘We Are Too Young To Contemplate Our Death’, then GLOW-treasurer and human rights lawyer Graeme Reid writes of the accelerating, disorderly sensations of epidemic grief: “You have pushed me into the/ future; dealing with your death/ I now live thirty years ahead/ as I contemplate/ your dying.”<sup>74</sup> Thirty years after the withdrawal of the GLOW-bird, its queer commitments of distributed touch, of politicised picnicking, of plural presence, of odd attachment, linger budding.

<sup>67</sup> Nkoli, Simon Tseko. 1995. What the Stonewall Award meant to me. *Glowletter*. December/ January. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive. p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> In *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law* (2009).

<sup>69</sup> Mpofu-Welsh, Sizwe. 2021. The Futures of the Constitution Part 2, *Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research Podcast*, 29 April. [Online]. Available: <http://witswiser.podbean.com/e/the-futures-of-the-constitution-part-2/>

<sup>70</sup> Mokgopa, Kneo. 2021. UnThere: Pride is a deathly labour. *The Daily Maverick*. 30 June [Online]. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-30-unthere-pride-is-a-deathly-labour/>

<sup>71</sup> Ditsie, Beverly. 2021. I Helped Found Africa’s First LGBTQ+ Pride March. 30 Years Later, I’m Still Fighting for Our Lives. *Global Citizen*. 30 June. [Online]. Available: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/beverley-ditsie-south-africa-lgbtq-rights/>

<sup>72</sup> Our Manifesto. 2013. *JHB People’s Pride*. 10 June. [Online]. Available: <http://peoplespride.blogspot.com/p/pride-movement-of-protest-celebration.html>

<sup>73</sup> Dlamini, *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Reid, Graeme. 1993. We Are Too Young To Contemplate Our Death, in *The Invisible Ghetto*, 17 – 18.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A lot more room to dance. 1992. *Glowletter*. October. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.
- Amir, Fahim. 2021. Primary Resistance: Fahim Amir. Interviewed by Sohrab Mohebbi, *Mousse*. 76. [Online]. Available: <http://moussemagazine.it/fahim-amir-sohrab-mohebbi-2021/>
- Bathes, Roland. 1982. *Empire of the Signs*. Hill and Wang: New York.
- Basil, Edwin and Adrian. 1990. Law reform and Gay Rights, *Glowletter*. June. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.
- Berger, John. 1980. Why Look at Animals?, in *About Looking*. Pantheon Books: New York.
- Chan Sam, Tanya. 1993. Coloured School Days, in *Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse, assisted by Kim Berman. COSAW Publishing: Johannesburg.
- De Waal, Shaun & Martin, Karen. 2007. Simon Nkoli's prison letters to Roy Shepherd, in *Till the time of Trial: The prison letters of Simon Nkoli*, edited by Shaun de Waal and Karen Martin. GALA: Johannesburg.
- Dianne. 1990. 800 March, *Glowletter*. December. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.
- Ditsie, Beverly. 2021. I Helped Found Africa's First LGBTQ+ Pride March. 30 Years Later, I'm Still Fighting for Our Lives. *Global Citizen*. 30 June. [Online]. Available: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/beverley-ditsie-south-africa-lgbtq-rights/>
- 2019. Love Letter to my queer family, Mail & Guardian. 24 October. [Online]. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-10-24-00-love-letter-to-my-queer-family/>
- Dlamini, Phylia. 2006. None of us knew what to expect, in *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, edited by Shaun de Waal & Anthony Manion. Fanele: Johannesburg.
- Drafting of the Final Constitution. 2019. *South African History Online*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/drafting-final-constitution>
- First Pride March*. 1990. Donn  Rundle. dir. Direct Action: Johannesburg. Donn  Rundle Collection, GALA Queer Archive.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP: Durham & London.
- Gevisser, Mark. 2012. A different fight for freedom: A history of South African lesbian and gay organisations from the 1950s to 1990s, in *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron. Routledge: London & New York.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2020. *Wild Things: the disorder of desire*. Duke UP: Durham and London.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke UP: Durham.
- Hoch, Petra. 2011. Performing Spaces of Hope: Street Puppetry and the Aesthetics of Scale, in *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire, and Hope*, edited by Tonya K. Davidson, Ondine Park, and Rob Shields. Wilfrid Laurier UP: Waterloo.
- Jones, Basil. 2014. Puppetry, Authorship, and the Ur-Narrative, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dasia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York.
- Jones, Basil and Kohler, Adrian. 2021. Personal interview. July – August.
- Macleane, Gordon Lindsay. 1985. *Robert's Birds of Southern Africa*. John Voelcker Bird Book Fund: Cape Town.
- Mathuray, Mark. 2021. Personal interview. October.
- McLean, Hugh and Ngcobo, Linda. 2012. Abangibhamayo bathi ngimnandi (Those who fuck me say I'm tasty): Gay sexuality in Reef townships, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*, edited by Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron. Routledge: London & New York.
- Medu Art Ensemble. 2019. *South African History Online*. [Online]. Available: <http://sahistory.org.za/article/medu-art-ensemble>
- Mokgopa, Kneo. 2021. UnThere: Pride is a deathly labour. *The Daily Maverick*. 30 June [Online]. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-30-unthere-pride-is-a-deathly-labour/>
- Mpofu-Welsh, Sizwe. 2021. The Futures of the Constitution Part 2, *Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research Podcast*, 29 April. [Online]. Available: <http://witswiser.podbean.com/e/the-futures-of-the-constituion-part-2/>
- Nkoli, Simon. 1990. The Slow Race to Liberation, *Glowletter*. March. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.
- 1993. This Strange Feeling, in *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse, assisted by Kim Berman. COSAW Publishing: Johannesburg.
- 1995. What the Stonewall Award meant to me. *Glowletter*. December/ January. GLOW Collection, GALA Queer Archive.

Our Manifesto. 2013. *JHB People's Pride*. 10 June. [Online].

Available: <http://peoplespride.blogspot.com/p/pride-movement-of-protest-celebration.html>

Piris, Paul. 2014. The Co-Presence and Ontological Ambiguity of the Puppet, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York.

Posner, Dassia N. et al. 2014. Introduction, in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, edited by Dassia N. Posner, Claudia Orenstein, and John Bell. Routledge: New York.

Rao, Rahul. 2020. *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*. Oxford UP: Oxford.

Reid, Graeme. 1993. We Are Too Young To Contemplate Our Death, in *The Invisible Ghetto: Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa*, edited by Matthew Krouse, assisted by Kim Berman. COSAW Publishing: Johannesburg.

Rundle, Donn . 2006. Our biggest concern was that there would only be twenty or fifty people..., in *Pride: Protest and Celebration*, edited by Shaun de Waal & Anthony Manion. Fanele: Johannesburg.

Shelver, Carrie. 2012. *LGBT Activists Disrupt Joburg Pride 2012*.wmv. [Online]. Available: [http://youtube.com/watch?v=Hnixp-T\\_Hnw](http://youtube.com/watch?v=Hnixp-T_Hnw)