

Masculinities, political organizations and political organizing: Queering anti-apartheid struggle

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Abstract

In this chapter, we explore the functioning and structuring capacities of masculinity in political organizing in apartheid South Africa, paying particular attention to the flows, complexities, challenges, disturbances, generativities and invitations inhered in different masculinities. More specifically, we focus on the 1980s – one of the most brutally violent periods of the apartheid regime – and what the queering of anti-apartheid struggle meant during this time. Central to our analysis are the life and letters of Simon Tseko Nkoli, who is today the best-known queer anti-apartheid activist. In focusing on Nkoli, we consider how masculinity operates and structures liberation movements, and what progressive enactments of gender might mean for infusing these movements with an intersectional politics that takes seriously the personal-political dialectic. We conclude by reflecting on the relevance of the movements and struggles that Nkoli represented for today's political organizations that strive towards a necessarily ambitious kind of liberation.

Keywords: Simon Nkoli, Queer politics, South Africa, Apartheid, Anti-apartheid, Organization

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Introduction

Political organizations and political organizing more generally are major sites for the organizational practices and processes of men and masculinities – albeit with many and vastly contrasting political aims, projects and hopes. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on political and social movement settings, which in turn construct men and masculinities in very different and often adversarial ways. Nunes (2021) has contended that organizing politically entails assembling, expanding, coordinating and deploying the collective's capacity to act. However, he goes on to warn, political organizations are oftentimes sites of trauma, and therefore there is a risk that an organization's *power to* manifests as the *power over*. Instead of sites of empowerment, organizations can be oppressive. Men's political organizing and involvement are illustrative of this. Indeed, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, some men's social movements developed as a backlash to second-wave feminist political organizing and the perceived loss of hegemonic male privilege (Leek & Gerke, 2020; Morrell, 2002). These anti-feminist men's rights movements reject feminist analyses of structural gender power dynamics and construct men as the victims of gender hierarchies that supposedly privilege women (Leek & Gerke, 2020).

Moreover, even organizations with liberatory intentions carry the risk of asserting power over rather than an emancipatory power to. A prescient example here can be noted in how hegemonic supremacist heteropatriarchal masculinities have, in some instances, suppressed heterogeneous gender expression within political organizations with emancipatory goals, whether this be the abolitionists in the United States (Davis, 1983), anti-colonial movements throughout Africa (Kelley, 2002) or the so-called Pink Tide in Latin America (Friedman, 2007). In each of these instances, the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, which, among other figurations, privileges patriarchy and heterosexuality, functioned by and large to foreclose other non-deterministic gender performances within the context of emancipatory political organizing.

However, men's movements have also been enabled by feminist and profeminist politics, formed to organize around sexual and gender-equality, and consciousness-raising,

such as anti-patriarchal and/or queer politics (Leek & Gerke, 2020; Messner, 1997; Morrell, 2002; Peretz, 2017; Ratele et al., 2011). In this chapter, we use “queer” as an umbrella term to denote both an orientation and a community of those who identify as LGBTQI+.

Pro/feminist men’s organizing could also include organizing against war, racism and environmentalism, and for social justice more broadly. In many instances, these anti-patriarchal men’s movements began with groups of men who organized in solidarity with feminist movements to promote gender justice and address violence against women (Leek & Gerke, 2020). While many men came to feminist and profeminist organizing from a position of male privilege, many movements of men from marginalized identities – such as queer men – drew on and allied with feminist aims to understand and resist their own oppression (Leek & Gerke, 2020; Peretz, 2017).

Men’s political organizing and involvement in social movements, we might say, take many forms. Leek and Gerke (2020) assert that the boundaries of what constitutes “men’s movements” are complex, but generally the term refers to a kind of organizing that is self-consciously focused on mobilizing men as gendered subjects around issues impacting men and boys. Theorists have cautioned, however, against sweepingly labelling men’s mobilizations around gender concerns as “movements” as much of this type of organizing is focused on personalized concerns like self-improvement, rather than explicitly political demands (Leek & Gerke, 2020).

In contrast to self-avowed men’s movements and organizations, we can think more generally of movements and organizations involving men that comprise political organizing in which men may be dominant in terms of numbers or authority but where gender is not a formal organizing principle (Morrell, 2002). Such movements and organizations that involve men include anti-racist, anti-colonial, decolonization, and more recently, decolonial struggles, groupings and campaigns. In the United States, an example of these kinds of movements can be observed in the broad-based Black Power movement (which included organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party). Organizing through the Black Power lens flourished in the early 1960s to early 1970s. Prominent figures within the Black Power movement included Malcolm X (who is regarded as the inspiration

for the movement), Angela Y. Davis and Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) (see Davis, 1983; Farmer et al., 2019; Nasheed, 2021).

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) which gained prominence in South Africa in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s is another example of a movement involving men. Renowned names in the BCM include Steve Biko, Mamphela Ramphele and Barney Pitsoana (Badat, 2009; Hirschmann, 1990). While women were involved in anti-racist struggles in South Africa and the United States, and evidence exists that there were contestations around gender in anti-racist organizations, these struggles tended to foreground race over other categories of political analysis and engagement. In consequence of this, while men dominated power positions in the anti-racist Black Power movement and BCM, like the anti-apartheid movement and organizations that we discuss later, these were not always movements that aimed at transforming gender relations and masculinities.

In this chapter, we are concerned with examining the masculinized *power over* (in contrast to the enabling form of positive *power to* effect social change) within anti-apartheid organizations in South Africa. In particular, we re/turn to the 1980s – among the most violent and brutally oppressive periods of the apartheid regime (which prevailed from 1948 to 1994), exemplified most sharply in the 1985 State of Emergency (Imma, 2017) – and what hegemonic masculinity meant for anti-apartheid organizations during this time. Our objective is to reflect on what the efforts to queer anti-apartheid struggle can teach us about (we might say, among *non-queered*) political commitment, organization and struggle historiography. As such, we consider what studying (usually, also, hetero-patriarchal) masculine performance on the political left, rather than the right – as is so often the case (Oxlund, 2008) – can offer to organization efforts that are concerned with an intersectional, intensively affective approach to liberation.

In what follows, a brief overview of how hegemonic masculinity functioned within anti-apartheid organizations is offered. Attention then turns to queer masculinity and what gender and sexuality meant for (which is to say complexified, disturbed or invited) and within anti-racist anti-apartheid organizing. Central to our attention is a consideration of what the life and letters of Simon Tseko Nkoli (1957–1998), undoubtedly the best-known queer

anti-apartheid activist, teach us about organizing within a non-queered broad political movement and masculinity. We conclude by proffering remarks on what Nkoli means for gender liberation today, both within and beyond political organizations.

Masculinity and anti-apartheid organization

Although the history of anti-apartheid organizations is well documented, the gendered and sexual dynamics of these organizations are less so. When examining the anti-apartheid struggle, as Elaine Unterhalter (2000) observed, the construction of masculinities “cannot be understood outside the complex workings of race, class, and formations of the state in different periods” (p. 162). What is especially pertinent in that sentence for us is what is left out, namely sexualities. As Ratele (2009a, 2009b) has shown, sexualities were key in private apartheid as much as public apartheid. Private apartheid involved racism in intimate life, evidenced in laws of racially defined sexual immorality; where public apartheid involved racism in public and work life, for instance, in segregated education, residential areas zoned for different race groups and job reservation for whites (Ratele, 2009b; Shefer & Ratele, 2011; Stevens et al., 2013). For example, regarding racism in sexual life, while an immoral deed is usually taken to refer to a sexual act, Ratele (2009a) has shown that under colonial and apartheid regimes there was “a peculiarly South African idea of immorality” since the laws and mores around immorality in the country paid “very close attention to race relations” (p. 294).

Anti-apartheid resistance, like the anti-colonial and nationalist liberation struggles before it, was undergirded by different images of heteronormative manhood (Suttner, 2005), such as the warrior, the militant and the hero (see Langa & Eagle, 2008; Unterhalter, 2000). Masculinities in these forms were further consolidated when the apartheid government banned anti-apartheid organizations, meaning that there was considerable risk and danger in being associated with these organizations (Suttner, 2005). Linking heroism – and, indeed, a willingness to die for political liberation (Suttner, 2014) – to one’s gender identity was, for

many Black people (oftentimes men), experienced as empowering because being Black meant the structural and symbolic denial of not “merely” one’s manhood but one’s humanity.

It needs underlining that although various images of masculinity –militant, militaristic, warrior, or heroic – undergirded many of the most prominent anti-apartheid organizations, such as the South African Students’ Organization (SASO), Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), African National Congress (ANC), liberatory masculinity was not necessarily associated with violence. For a long time, anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles were peaceful, preferring petitions, letters and marches, to other modes of political engagement. At the same time, in denying the right to life and freedom of Black people, colonialism and apartheid systems must be understood as always inherently violent – in economic, cultural, psychical, spiritual and physical senses. From the 1960s though, the apartheid State increasingly relied on overt violence, including the violent removal of Black people from “white South Africa”, which included killing Black people (Hallett, 1984; Lodge, 2011; Platzky & Walker for The Surplus People’s Project, 1985; Time, 1960). As such, anti-apartheid organizations began to resort to more violent resistance tactics (Davis, 2018). Indeed, it was in 1961, following the Sharpeville massacre, that the armed wing of the ANC, known as uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), as well as that of the PAC, known as the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), was formed (Cornell et al., 2022). Struggle masculinities, resultantly, assumed a more violent character during this time.

In the 1980s, the kinds of struggle masculinity observed in anti-apartheid organizations were especially militaristic (Xaba, 2001). Those anti-apartheid combatants who were involved in armed struggle were expected by their organizations to enact a politically combative masculinity predicated on physical strength, bravery and toughness, with comradeship forged through these masculine values (Langa & Eagle, 2008). The non-comrade – the politically uninvolved man – was, by implication, unconscientized, fearful and disloyal (see Mtebule, 2002, as cited in Langa & Eagle, 2008). Those who refused to, did not, or could not adequately take up this kind of politically combative masculinity were assumed to embody a widely denigrated peaceful character (which was read as acquiescent to or collusive with racist structures) (see Cornell et al., 2022).

However, there was gender trouble even within the most masculinist anti-apartheid organizations. For instance, in both MK and the APLA, female combatants received the same military training as male combatants (Axelsson, 2015). Although the militarized masculine norms meant that these female combatants tended to mute their femininity in whatever ways they could (see Bridger, 2018), they nonetheless challenged the seemingly rigid fixity of anti-apartheid masculinity, thereby demonstrating the fissures within masculinity. Women were also involved in many other organized anti-apartheid struggles, some of which were violent, while others were not (see, e.g. Bonnin, 2000; Cornell et al., 2022).

We can see, then, how a normative struggle masculinity altered not only over time (for more detailed examples here, see Unterhalter, 2000; Xaba, 2001) but was also undermined from within anti-apartheid organizations themselves. Indeed, such masculinity was not embodied in a smooth or predictable way. It underwent shifts, ebbs and flows; at one moment failing and losing, and overcoming and making gains at another – enduring challenges at the very moment it was being consolidated. We might conclude that even in its most hegemonic form, anti-apartheid masculinity was always plural and metamorphosing (Suttner, 2014).

Queer anti-apartheid organization

The history of queer life in apartheid South Africa has, by and large, been written from a metropolitan, predominantly white urban milieu (Batra, 2016). Yet we should not take the limited literature on Black queer life during apartheid to mean that the experience of being Black and queer was uniform during this time (Reddy, 2001). There is a growing body of research that is concerned with this very issue, and in particular how Black queer experiences informed, interacted with and expanded organized anti-apartheid resistance.

Queer anti-apartheid organizing dates back to at least the 1960s. In 1968, for example, the Law Reform Movement was established to fight the apartheid government's attempts to amend its racist legislation (e.g. the Immorality Act) to include queer life (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995). It was in the 1980s, however, that apartheid forces began to police

sexualities with increasing violence, which resultantly saw developments in queer organizing (Currier, 2012; Ngubane, 2016). In 1982, the first lesbian and gay organization in the country, the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), was established. GASA was a mostly white, middle-class organization. Of significance, GASA refused to support explicitly anti-apartheid organizing (Carolyn, 2018). This is not to say that GASA members were not oppressed by apartheid. Indeed, the 1986 GASA convention was raided by the apartheid government's Vice Squad (Batra, 2016). Nonetheless, GASA was plagued with internal white racism and was politically inept. An inference can also be made that GASA did not think of being lesbian or gay as having anything to do with being white or Black. Apparently, there was little conception of multiple jeopardies (King, 1988) or intersectionalities of systemic homophobia and systemic racism (Bowleg, 2013).

In response to the racism within GASA, the Black-led, multiracial Gay and Lesbian Organization of Witwatersrand (GLOW) was founded in 1988 (Imma, 2017; Ngubane, 2016). GLOW's organizational requirements sought to reflect South Africa's most pressing emancipatory requirements, meaning that GLOW responded to the movements and shifts within South Africa's transitional landscape (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995). GLOW, therefore, took the community education focus of 1980s' queer organizing into an explicitly political activist realm in the 1990s (Batra, 2016).

GLOW's intersectional "queer Afropolitanism"ⁱⁱ was instrumental in consolidating the so-called gay left in South Africa. By 1991, the organization had branches in Kwa-Thema, Tembisa and Soweto, as well as the city of Johannesburg (Batra, 2021). GLOW played a crucial role in applying pressure on the ANC (and, albeit to a lesser extent, other prominent liberation organizations, such as the PAC and Azanian People's Organization, as well as political parties like the Democratic Party and Inkatha Freedom Party) so that queer rights were incorporated into its political agenda. This pressure helped shift several anti-apartheid activists' understanding of LGBTQI+ issues as white and middle-class issues (Carolyn, 2018), and to challenge currents of homophobia and heteronormativity within the ANC (Currier, 2012). Struggle masculinities within the ANC were thus presented with a fundamental challenge and were to some extent expanded through GLOW's attempts to build

solidarity by linking together sexual and racial liberation. In the early 1990s, when South Africa underwent a tremendously violent social transition from apartheid, GLOW worked with the ANC and several legal groups to secure LGBTQI+ rights in the country's Constitution (the so-called sexual equality clause, see Chernis, 2016; Gevisser & Cameron, 1995), and in 1996 South Africa became the first nation in the world to constitutionally acknowledge the rights and dignity of queer people (Batra, 2016). Such legislation does not, of course, guarantee that queer lives are valued in South Africa. This is most evident in many of today's ANC leaders' refusal to support LGBTQI+ rights (Ngubane, 2016), along with the appalling rates of violence endured by queer people in contemporary South Africa, especially Black lesbians and trans people (Reid, 2014). As such, queer struggles remain alive in South Africa today, and draw from a considerable – if often neglected – history of struggle in the country (Davids & Matebeni, 2017).

Simon Nkoli and the queering of organized struggle

Histories of anti-apartheid struggle tend to honour the kinds of hegemonic gender ideals that are understood – erroneously, in some cases – to have driven this struggle. The struggle heroes that are remembered most often and most publicly are typically those who embodied these ideals, such as Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe and Govan Mbeki. While men such as these are undoubtedly important figures, we should not ignore other kinds of gender performances that not only informed anti-apartheid organization but, as we have seen, disrupted hegemonic struggle masculinities, inviting new ways of doing masculinities and being men in the context of struggle. This does not mean that we must turn away from the role of hegemonic masculinities when we write the history of anti-apartheid struggle. Rather, our historiographies can assume a wider lens so that we might broaden our historical consciousness by interrogating how constructions of gender were enacted, struggled over, troubled, stretched and challenged within and between anti-apartheid organizations. In drawing from, as well as adding to, the growing number of studies that have taken up this task (e.g. Batra, 2016; Bonnin, 2000; Bridger, 2018; Carolin, 2018; Cornell et

al., 2022; Langa & Eagle, 2008; Imma, 2017; Reddy, 2001), we look in this section to the life and letters of Simon Nkoli, South Africa's best known queer activist.

Who was Simon Nkoli?

Simon Nkoli was born in Soweto in 1957, although he grew up in Sebokeng, a township located in the southern region of South Africa's Gauteng province (Morgan, 2017). He began his activist life in student politics. In addition to being detained for several months when he was 15 years old, he was actively involved in the 1976 Soweto Uprising, where young people protested against the apartheid government's racist Bantu Education Act (Nkoli, 1995). In 1980, Nkoli became regional secretary of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), which he had joined in the late 1970s. Nkoli (1995) later shared that he came close to losing this position when his sexuality became known.

During the same period, the 1980s, Nkoli was also central in queer activism. He was actively involved in both the UDF and GASA. His political activism halted in 1984, however, when he was arrested – along with around 900 other people – at the funeral of a comrade who was murdered by apartheid State forces for participating in a rent boycott in the township of Sebokeng (Munro, 2012; Ngubane, 2016; Nkoli, 1995). Although most of the arrested were released, Nkoli, as well as 21 other UDF members who were part of the boycott, were not. In what became known as the Delmas Treason Trial, these 22 men were charged with treason, murder and furthering the aims of the ANC. These were serious charges that, under the apartheid regime, carried the death penalty (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995). After four years in prison, Nkoli was acquitted in 1988. He founded GLOW in that same year and soon became a well-known, and internationally beloved, figure of queer liberation (Batra, 2016). On 30 November 1998, a day before World AIDS Day, Nkoli died, aged 41, from an HIV-related illness (Imma, 2017).

For Nkoli, the struggle for racial liberation was not to be considered alongside struggles for gender and sexual liberation. These were all part of the same struggle for human emancipation and thus needed to be considered together. As Reid (2014, n. p.) recalls:

I remember well the words of the late Simon Nkoli, gay rights and anti-apartheid activist, spoken at Africa's first gay and lesbian march in Johannesburg in 1991: "In South Africa I am oppressed because I am a black man and I am oppressed because I am gay . . . so when I fight for my freedom I must fight against both oppressions".

As Nkoli himself put it: "my baptism in the struggles of the township helped me understand the need for a militant gay rights movement" (Nkoli, 1995, p. 256). His insistence that racial emancipation is always, at the same time, a sexual and a gendered liberation served as an important challenge to hegemonic struggle masculinities.

As the old feminist dictum has it, for Nkoli, the personal was always political. Throughout his life, Nkoli actioned this axiom by ensuring that the personal operated politically by centring queer rights within anti-apartheid struggle. In exploring how Nkoli did this, and what this meant for masculinity in the context of anti-apartheid organizing, we turn to the prison letters he wrote to his romantic partner and comrade, Roy Shepherd.

Although Nkoli wrote many letters in prison – to comrades, friends and family – his letters to Shepherd offer an intimate portrait of how his queer masculinity informed his political organizing. Letters, for Nkoli, were psychologically comforting at a time when little support was available to him. He reflects that while in prison "what helped me most was that I received so many letters" (Nkoli, 1995, p. 255). As Martin (2020) argues, Nkoli's letter writing is indispensable for constructing an "affective historiography" of queer liberation struggles in apartheid South Africa. Many of Nkoli's letters to Shepherd have been archived by the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (Morgan, 2017). In what follows, we draw from this particular archive, as well as key moments in Nkoli's activist life, to establish an affective, historiographical consideration of queer anti-apartheid struggle which, for Nkoli, was always also a wider struggle for human emancipation.

The Delmas Treason Trial

At first, many of the UDF comrades with whom Nkoli was imprisoned during the Delmas Treason Trial were not aware that he was queer (Imma, 2017). He writes to Shepherd:

Johnny's girlfriend came on Friday as well, so I was the only one sitting there on the benches looking at other people talking to their friends, parents and lovers, wishing that I could have courage to interfere as they always do when my lover is around. I suppose they all don't recognise him because a gay relationship is not supposed to be real.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 32)

Prison guards who were aware of Nkoli's sexual orientation would taunt and mock him (Nkoli, 1995), constantly inferring that his comrades would not accept him. Not being accepted by his comrades was a fear that Nkoli did, indeed, hold (Martin, 2020). However, during the trial, it was discovered by the prison warders that one of the trialists was involved in a sexual relationship with a convicted prisoner (Nkoli, 1995). Upon learning this, several other trialists expressed dismay. One condemned it as "disgusting", while others feared it would delegitimize their struggle in the eyes of the international community (Martin, 2020). It was in response to these reactions that Nkoli told his comrades that he, too, was gay, and condemned their homophobia (see Morgan, 2017).

As expected, many of the trialists did not respond kindly to Nkoli's intervention. Some of them even suggested that Nkoli be tried separately. All of this took a considerable toll on his mental health (Imma, 2017). The most prominent of the trialists, however, came to Nkoli's defence, at first on the basis of his deft organizational skills and political commitment. Eventually, though, these arguments found their rhetorical basis in the fact that the struggle against homophobia could not be separated from struggles against racism (Morgan, 2017). This would become the official stance of the trialists, many of whom had not hitherto considered queer struggles (see Munro, 2012). Later, Patrick "Terror" Lekota, a fellow UDF leader and defendant in the Delmas Treason Trial, was moved by Nkoli to join the fight to incorporate queer liberation into the ANC's political agenda (Imma, 2017). Far from delegitimising their struggle, as many of the trialists had feared, Nkoli brought this

struggle much-needed international attention. Imma (2017) recounts that because of Nkoli, several letter-writing campaigns were initiated all over the world, with the Simon Nkoli Anti-Apartheid Committee, founded in Toronto, Canada and Sweden's International Gay and Lesbian Association expressing its unconditional support for Nkoli. He also received support from anti-apartheid organizations based in Britain and Holland (Nkoli, 1995).

Nkoli challenged his comrades' solidarity, rattling it so that it could be consolidated and expanded (Imma, 2017). He did so by undermining the kinds of hegemonic masculine performance that many of his comrades had understood to be synonymous with struggle. By demonstrating how political commitment was dispersed across different masculinities and, indeed, genders and sexual orientations more generally, it became clear that such commitment needed to, in turn, reflect the emancipatory demands of all people. To queer struggle in the manner exemplified by Nkoli builds upon and widens the scope of struggle, opening up new possibilities for solidarity and politicized consciousness.

The Gay and Lesbian Organization of Witwatersrand

Prior to his imprisonment, Nkoli was an active member of GASA (Imma, 2017). He was, however, always dissatisfied with the organization's insufficient political disposition. This was noted early on when he founded the Saturday Group in 1984, wherein gay Black men who were associated with GASA could discuss political issues that pertained to their lives (Martin, 2020). The Saturday Group collapsed soon after Nkoli went to prison (although it reformed later after his acquittal; Batra, 2021). As he writes to Shepherd, "I am so sad that Saturday Group has vanished to nowhere. But as soon as I come back from Prison – nevermind for how long – I will start a new progressive gay organisation" (Morgan, 2017, p. 17). Even more devastating to Nkoli, though, was GASA's refusal to support him during his imprisonment on the grounds that he was arrested for his anti-apartheid political activity (i.e. the rent boycott), rather than for queer-related activism (Batra, 2021). With GASA being the largest and most influential queer organization in South Africa at that time, Nkoli's sexual

identity, which he had always understood and actioned in fundamentally political ways, could only find an organizational form in GASA's politically regressive mandate. Throughout his letters to Shepherd, Nkoli grapples with whether or not he should resign from GASA. In one letter he writes,

Gasa has done nothing for me since I was arrested . . . That has frustrated me a little and I know you are not going to be happy to hear such a story from me – but however . . . some individual members of Gasa are seeing me – . . . I will remain a member of Gasa always.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 26)

Oscillating on this matter for some time, he eventually concedes that

I don't want it when people start talking about me. That's why I become too scared when Gasa started debating about me as if I USED TO LIVE. I am still living . . . I am sorry to tell you that I have decided to resign from Gasa as soon as I come out.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 38)

GASA came to represent an anti-human politics that Nkoli could not bear. However, unlike his anti-apartheid comrades with whom he was imprisoned and whose idea of anti-racist politics had shifted because of Nkoli's queer politics, GASA refused to expand its emancipatory purview, remaining committed to a "single-issue" and thus closing itself off to related struggles (i.e. those against apartheid's racial capitalism) that the majority of queer people in South Africa face (see Munro, 2012). It was for this reason that Nkoli, demonstrating a profound and psychologically demanding political commitment, left GASA. This act is made all the more courageous when we consider that as politically blinkered as GASA was, there were almost no other organizational protections for queer people in South Africa at that time. In leaving GASA, Nkoli presented a different kind of counter-hegemonic heroic masculinity.

After his release from prison in 1988, Nkoli co-founded GLOW, whose non-racial, Black-led and anti-apartheid politics served as a remedy for GASA's ineffectual, "colour-blind" politics. Significantly, GLOW was aligned with the UDF (see Carolin, 2018), which ensured that anti-apartheid struggle organizations were to explicitly engage with and take up the struggles of queer people. As noted earlier, GLOW was instrumental in ensuring that when the ANC assumed governance in South Africa, the rights of queer people would be constitutionally honoured, a pioneering landmark (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995; Martin, 2020). Moreover, Nkoli was involved in founding the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, an organization that was also central to ensuring that queer rights were constitutionally enshrined in South Africa (Munro, 2012).

The manner by which Nkoli organized his political commitments emphasizes how organizing must be held to an intersectional politics. A failure to do so need not mean that we accept a one-dimensional view of liberation, or that we resign from politics altogether. These failures point to new, important avenues for organizing struggle, avenues that render struggle in necessarily broad-based (and thus broadly appealing) terms. We saw this with GLOW, which sought to radicalize both queer and anti-apartheid struggles by refusing to pry them apart from one another.

HIV and AIDS activism

Although learning of his HIV-positive status in 1985 while on trial, Nkoli's attentiveness to HIV and AIDS was noted long before he publicly disclosed his own status in 1990 (Munro, 2012). In his prison letters, Nkoli reprimands Shepherd for referring to a man by his HIV status exclusively (Martin, 2020). He also fantasizes about a time when same-sex relations are not, within the popular imagination, associated with AIDS, a time when "Aids will never come as part of our discussion" (Morgan, 2017, p. 44). HIV and AIDS became central to Nkoli's political organizing when he was released from prison and began to notice not only the pervasiveness of the AIDS epidemic but also the kinds of cultural stigmas attached to the disease. From 1990, he led and raised funds for the Township AIDS Project (Batra, 2021),

where lawyers and public health advocates worked on community-oriented AIDS education initiatives (Morgan, 2017).

Nkoli (1995) was steadfast in his critique of the ANC government's handling of the AIDS epidemic, demanding always that State policies be attentive to sexual health and the stigmas surrounding sexual health. In his Open Letter to Nelson Mandela, Nkoli (1990) connected struggles for HIV and AIDS medical treatment in South Africa with global struggles of this kind, reminding then-president Nelson Mandela (at a time when it was not popular to level critique at his leadership) that in South Africa, the rights of all people were to be secured as per the much-celebrated Constitution (Batra, 2016). Although his letters were now public – rather than monitored and censored by apartheid prison authorities – Nkoli remained committed to an ethics that sought to politicize the personal. His public disclosure, community education programmes and frank political commentary proved essential for securing funding for, and improving access to, HIV and AIDS medication in South Africa, while also playing an important role in debunking widespread conceptions at the time that AIDS was an “unAfrican” disease (see Martin, 2020).

Organizing against systematized oppression is never a process that is locked in place. It shifts in accordance with the socio-political conjuncture. For Nkoli, his emancipatory organizing extended well beyond the walls of his prison cell and official apartheid legislature. As with all of his organizing, his entry point into post-apartheid activism was the politicization of the personal. He was among the first Black men in South Africa to speak publicly about his experience of living with HIV (Imma, 2017), which was said to have caused him more anxiety than when he disclosed his sexual orientation to his UDF comrades in prison (Martin, 2020). As Imma (2017) argues, Nkoli's was a “precarious visibility” that carried with it possibilities for social change along with immense psychological discomfort and the risk of depoliticizing his message via commodification. Nonetheless, Nkoli's exemplary commitment to liberation was characterized by a willingness to move with history and to organize through a politicization of the personal, no matter how challenging this was.

Struggling masculinities

When looking at Nkoli's life and letters, we are offered a nuanced understanding of how queer masculinities operated within and upon anti-apartheid organizing. Like hegemonic struggle masculinities, we should not consider queer masculinity in a monolithic fashion that ignores the contradictions, concessions and resistances that define how these masculinities were embodied and performed in the struggle against apartheid. Nkoli's queerness was lived out in a plethora of ways. He offered a tender, vulnerable sort of masculinity that is not readily associated with the liberation struggle. As he writes to Shepherd regarding his trial:

I will try to be a good witness Roy, though I am feeling too scared to stand in the witness box. I don't want the people to look at me when I am giving evidence and the prosecutor shouting at me.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 29)

Such vulnerability was not, however, the sole determinant of Nkoli's masculine performance. Indeed, he expresses frustration with such simplistic associations when he writes that:

I'm getting annoyed everytime, because people keep on saying I am BEAUTIFUL. Handsome – gentle – sweet hearted. They complain about me, for having no fights. They say I never get angry. I'm so polite. Why should I fight – or scream? In fact they are all a bunch of liars – twice I kicked Jacob. Can't they see that I am aggressive – that's why I kicked Jake!

(Morgan, 2017, p. 23)

The fluidity of the gender constructions that Nkoli adopted within his queer identity opened him up to a similarly nuanced engagement with struggle. For Nkoli, struggle was absolutely necessary for liberation. However, he repeatedly acknowledged that struggling politically was a taxing necessity, one that could be left behind in a truly liberated society. In other words, although Nkoli's liberatory imagination was undoubtedly shaped by struggle, he appeared to always allow himself space to dream of a world beyond struggle. For example, he is unafraid to acknowledge to Shepherd that his trial, politically important as it was, was also dull ("The trial is quite boring today . . . I am absolutely bored", Morgan, 2017, p. 36), as were many of

the political meetings that the trialists held (“after church we had some discussions – heavy political discussion – I hate this kind of discussions sometimes” Morgan, 2017, p. 21).

Nkoli’s letters are replete with references to jubilation, literature, clothing, love and food as much as they emphasize the importance of emancipatory political organizing. There are many times in his letters that Nkoli expresses an awareness of this tension:

This is going to be a Marathon trial. Please Roy for my sake, don’t ever get yourself into politics. I will die at once if I hear that you detained. Please my Roy, it won’t be wise for both of us to be in prison, while now I know that when I am released I am going to fall in your arms.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 17, sic)

Nkoli exemplified a sort of queer struggle masculinity that operated alongside, against and within the kinds of hegemonic struggle masculinities that tend to be remembered in most apartheid historiographies. His queer gender identity engaged directly with, and indeed transformed, hegemonic anti-apartheid struggle masculinities, and thus offers insights into how struggle can be extended and consolidated, if also put to the test, when it reckons with a plethora of gendered ways of being and doing.

Conclusion: gender liberation and political organization today

At the beginning of this chapter, it was observed that in contrast to self-conscious anti-feminist and profeminist/feminist men’s movements and organizations, in more general movements and organizations involving men, gender was usually not the primary category of socio-political engagement. However, even though gender was and is not always privileged in progressive organizations involving men (we gave the example of anti-colonial, Black Power and BCM), since colonialism and anti-Black racism sought to deny the humanity of colonized subjects, we can understand the reclamation of gendered identities as part of reasserting humanity within liberation struggles. The trouble is that the kinds of masculinity

that were desired within these struggles were all too often heteropatriarchal. This is where Simon Nkoli's embodied struggle is instructive.

The life and letters of Nkoli point to a different kind of struggle masculinity that has received relatively little official remembrance, but nonetheless played a crucial role in emancipatory organizing in South Africa. If we are to give nuance to apartheid historiography, we are compelled to remember and engage critically with Nkoli's struggles as well as the collective struggles of which he was a part. Certainly, Nkoli was exemplary of how affect and struggle as well as organizational politics and the personal were always part and parcel of the anti-apartheid liberatory imaginary. He writes:

Well, I am sorry to hear that you cried when you read my first letter.
Don't cry over me Roy. I am taking this situation as part of life in the struggle
for a better society in the future. Remember that there is no easy walk to
FREEDOM.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 15)

As Martin (2020) recounts, at Nkoli's funeral, Zackie Achmat – a well-known queer community activist – made a rallying call to “cry, rage, mobilise. Don't only mourn” (p. 685). The conventional, masculinized, liberatory command: “Don't mourn, organize!” is thereby challenged – and extended – in this case. Mourning is, for many, a precondition for organizing and should not simply be dismissed as apolitical. Struggle masculinities that disallow affectivity may in fact hamper collective organization. The kinds of masculinity exhibited by Nkoli throughout his life demonstrate new, potentially more freeing, ways of being within – and also, crucially, beyond – struggle. As such, Nkoli did not limit his gendered identity expression to a narrow understanding of struggle. Instead, he used struggle to imagine, act and organize for a world in which all identities could be free:

By reading Danielle Steel [an American romance novelist] I learn so
much about how some people suffer because of love – but one also learns to
be brave, and courage is dwelling in me. I've learnt that I should wait – pray –
wait – pray – wait – pray – suffer – communicate with other people –
remember – think – recall the past – think of the future – And I am still living.

(Morgan, 2017, p. 27)

It is, however, important that Nkoli's remarkable – and, indeed, well-archived – legacy does not eclipse the collective nature of queer struggles in South Africa. As Chernis (2016) argues, the relatively extensive focus that Nkoli's life has received should not diminish efforts to broaden our understanding of the queer personal–political dialectic in South Africa. We are urged to examine the lives of other queer activists during, before and after the 1980s. Doing so may nuance further how identity and struggle – the personal and the political – are able to take form through the registers of one another. In recent years, we have seen several examples of queer and feminist activists challenging hegemonic masculinity within political organizing. In the wave of the student protests that swept South Africa in 2015 and 2016, tensions were evident around the intersections of race, gender and sexuality among student activists (Davids & Matebeni, 2017; Khan, 2017; Mashayamombe & Nomvete, 2021; also see Hussen & Shefer, this volume). Indeed, as the student movements developed, there were noted instances of sexism, homophobia, heterosexism and transphobia that emerged within certain activist spaces (Ndelu et al., 2017). As a student who was involved in the RhodesMustFall movement at UCT reflected, “The fact that I was gay, it was also a problem. I cannot separate my gayness from my blackness, and that is what they are expecting me to do” (Cornell et al., 2018, p. 188). Within the student movements, then, divisions arose between “students who identified as Black, queer and transgender feminists and sections of the movement who identified more explicitly with patriarchy” (Ndelu et al., 2017, p. 2). In response, many queer and feminist activists within these movements disrupted and resisted currents of heterosexist patriarchy and transphobia within their organizing – the Trans Collective at the University of Cape Town, being one notable example here (see Davids & Matebeni, 2017; Khan, 2017; Ndelu et al., 2017).

We might then conclude that by connecting a non-deterministic kind of gender enactment to the ever-shifting demands of political organization – no matter how psychologically burdensome this was (Martin, 2020) – Nkoli was able to undergird his political activism with an astonishing kind of hope; a belief in a better future that was not inevitable, but that was always a horizon of possibility. Nkoli was, of course, not the only

person to do this (Chernis, 2016), but the wealth of archived materials makes his life and thought an exemplary instance of queering struggle that extends the purview of liberation in an intersectional manner and that was able to push collective struggle beyond itself. As he put it: “But I think I’ll be free at the end of this trial – most of us, maybe all of us. We must keep on hoping Roy” (Morgan, 2017, p. 36).

In this chapter, we have considered the *queering* of anti-apartheid struggles among *non-queered* political organizations and organizing. Our analysis speaks not only to specific queer and anti-racist struggles but to intersectional and affective approaches to liberation more broadly. These issues and challenges are both intensely historical and persistently relevant for gender liberation, within and beyond political organizations and organizing.

Notes

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ⁱ In March 1960, the South African Police fired on a crowd of people engaged in a peaceful protest in Sharpeville against oppressive pass laws, killing 69 people, many of whom were children.

ⁱⁱ Refers to the enlargement of the geo-racial spread of gay liberation, described by Batra (2021) as “a worlding of sexualities that was first, simultaneously local, national, and international and next, openly political and community oriented” (p. 143).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Bantu Education Act was a South African segregation law involving the racist compartmentalizing of education. The Act enforced the racial segregation of educational institutions.

^{iv} The student organization was affiliated with the United Democratic Front (UDF), an anti-apartheid coalition group.