

## profile

### Gay Leathermen in South Africa: An exploratory study

TL McCormick

## abstract

There are vibrant gay leathermen subcultures worldwide. Leathermen appropriate the iconography (but not the behaviour) associated with motorcycle, military and police protocols, and are an easily recognisable community. They have been studied as examples of resistance to both heteronormativity and hegemonic forms of gay male culture. This exploratory study on gay leathermen in South Africa is the first of its kind. Leathermen only became publicly visible in 2009, with the establishment of the SA Leathermen Facebook page (SALM). This article presents selected findings about the leathermen subculture in South Africa, drawing from signifying texts and images posted on the SALM Facebook page (2009-2015). It argues that in being aligned with the broader gay and lesbian community, there is an unstable 'fit' between the 'ethos' of the leathermen subculture and the 'public face' of homosexuality in South Africa.

## keywords

South Africa, leathermen, Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochism and Masochism (BDSM), gender, homosexual, transgressive

## Introduction

As a queer scholar with an academic interest in what Rubin calls the "sexual rabble" (1993:13),<sup>i</sup> I present my tentative and exploratory findings on the leathermen subculture in South Africa. Leathermen subculture is hidden generally from mainstream society (because of its association with homosexuality and Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochism and Masochism (BDSM) and marginalised specifically within the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community, because of its transgressive leathersex practices that members refuse to 'confine', and which cannot easily be de-radicalised and assimilated (Barrett, 2017:3671). Having self-identified as a queer scholar, in this article I firstly explain what 'queer' and 'queer theory' is. This is followed by a brief overview of BDSM. I then trace the historical antecedents of the leathermen subculture that will include an exposition of its transgressive potential. Then in my take of the data, I explore the politics of 'the public' guided by the question: How does SALM relate to the larger gay and lesbian community?<sup>ii</sup>

### 'Queer' and 'queer theory'

'Queer' is often used to describe an identity. There is no such thing as a 'queer' identity: it refers to anyone who is at odds with the norm, who resists conventional kinship relations,

and who irritates the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality. 'Queer' can refer to a person's sexual orientation, but also refers to any person who feels they are 'othered' by societal norms. 'Queer' includes a diverse assortment of gender performances and sexual practices that are considered 'abnormal'<sup>iii</sup>. Examples of queer gender performances include, but are not limited to: dragging, transvestism, lesbian butchness, cross-dressing, and people who do not behave in gender-appropriate ways such as effeminate men and masculine women – who may or may not be homosexual. Examples of queer sexuality (as manifested in 'people'), include but are not limited to: bisexual people; and transsexual, transgender and intersex people. Examples of queer sexual practices which may be homosexual or heterosexual-orientated include, but are not limited to: promiscuity; men who have sex with men; porn actors; people who practice BDSM; leathermen; and sex workers. These examples of resistance to heteronormativity are not bounded or limited to these 'types' or behaviours. Resistances to what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' are continually enacted everywhere in the world by 'ordinary' men and women. Such subversion, Butler (2004;25) argues, cannot be measured and "resists calculation". Additionally, subversions are punished; for example, a 'sissy' boy faces bullying and accusations of homosexuality.

It is exactly this 'population' (but not exclusively) that Rubin (1993) calls the 'sexual rabble'<sup>iv</sup> and which theorists of the queer zone in on – for it is here that the fiction of gender and sex is exposed. Identities are not binary (male-female, homosexual-heterosexual), but fluid, flexible, easily imitated and are a performance for which there is no stable referent. The fiction of gender and sex are materialised in an 'erotic pyramid' (Rubin, 1993:13), which values heterosexuality and gender-appropriate behaviour above all 'other' queer sexualities and inappropriate gender behaviours. The higher a person's status on the erotic pyramid the more 'rewards' they receive from society and the state, but the lower a person's status on the erotic pyramid the fewer (and in some cases no) 'rewards' they receive from society and the state. Early iterations of queer by Butler (1997) and Warner (1999) emphasised that the meaning of queer should never be stabilised, assimilated – and should always remain subversive.

Queer, Butler (1997:22) argues, should be "revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized". There is no such thing as "the queer discipline"; queer is not a unified theory or a delimited field, and alliances and collaborations occur across numerous approaches to the study of gendered and sexualised identities – as long as they are underpinned by a radical agenda.

### **BDSM in the public imaginary**

BDSM is often viewed by the normative public as deviant and a sexual free-for-all. This is a result of the images that enter the popular imaginary via textual productions from the realm of violent pornography, serial killers and sexual abuse – which is decidedly non-consensual. By association, BDSM is depicted generally as non-consensual violence, and specifically as violence toward the 'weak' (women and children) who could be coerced sexually. The misperception has largely been 'corrected' (mostly in the US where BDSM is even referred to as 'mainstream'). This is thanks to the 'rise of the internet' in the late 1990s, which provided a vehicle for activists to counter negative perceptions and myths associated with BDSM by re-writing biased and exclusionary histories, and making glossaries, self-help books and safety and instruction manuals available online.

BDSM practitioners coalesce around three distinct communities: gay males (and a small percent of lesbians) also known as leathermen/women; heterosexual males and females; and a pansexual community that embraces any type of sexuality (Weiss, 2011).

BDSM is an abstract 'catchall' that simultaneously describes the existence of a transgressive community, but also reduces the complexity of the sexual practices and performances found within this community. 'B' refers to consensual bondage, which is the physical restraint of a partner – complete or partially. 'D' refers to discipline, which is a set of consensual rules that the dominant sets for an obedient submissive. 'S' refers to sadism, where a dominant derives sexual pleasure from inflicting consensual pain on a willing submissive, and 'M' refers to masochism where a submissive receives consensual pain from a dominant. The enactment of BDSM takes place in numerous permutations of sexual fantasies that are enacted ('a play' or 'a scene') to achieve sexual pleasure (or not).

### **Leathermen: a gay hypermasculine subculture**

Leathermen and the spaces they inhabit are 'gay men only' spaces, where a hypermasculine 'look' is produced through the permutation of several different leather garments that draw from military, police and motorcycle gang protocols.<sup>v</sup> The leathermen 'look' can be traced to post World War Two motorcycle clubs in the United States (US), where returning servicemen, who were homosexual, resented homosexuality being associated with femininity and so started dressing like rugged masculine men in motorcycle gangs – and donned leather pants, boots and rolled-up, tight-fitting denim shirts, as epitomised by Marlon Brando in the 1953 movie *The Wild One*. Leathermen subculture is transgressive, because it resists both heteronormativity and mainstream gay male culture.<sup>vi</sup> Leathermen fetishise, specific leather apparel and their sexual practices draw from BDSM, but they also engage in what are called unique 'leathersex' sexual practices, which include symbolic elements associated with leather, such as boot polishing (Barrett, 2017).

Internationally, the leathermen community is predominantly gay, white and male – despite its membership being open to 'all' gay men. That there appear to be no leathermen of colour does not mean there are none. In the US context, and specifically with reference to BDSM, Smith and Luykx (2017) argue that black practitioners adopt a low profile so as not to 'shame' the black community whose status is precarious – even though some sections of the black population have been assimilated. Barrett (2017:2129) argues that the construction of whiteness within white-dominated subcultures (such as Leathermen) may "unintentionally restrict participation from gay men of color". Additionally, the gay male masculine persona is so dominant in the leathermen circuit that few women participate.<sup>vii</sup>

Leathermen is described by scholars as a hypermasculine gay subculture (Halperin, 1995; Rubin, 2000; Mosher *et al*, 2000; Hennen, 2008; Barrett, 2017). Hypermasculinity is a term commonly used to reference heterosexual males who see the characteristics associated with exaggerated forms of dominant masculinity, such as physical strength, sexual aggression, disdain for women (except as sexual objects), violence, and danger, as signifying the positive traits of being 'manly' (Parrott and Zeichner, 2003; Shabazz, 2009). As a subculture, leathermen achieve their 'manliness' in ways that can be read as in opposition to such descriptors of the performance of gender and heteromascularity. These include the conduct of leathersex practices in safe and consenting environments, developing muscular bodies to attract other men, and the wearing of leather garments that draw inspiration typically from the most masculine of heterosexual cultures (motorbikes, police, military) – without enacting the violence often associated with such cultures (Barrett, 2017). Leathermen's practices, while exposing the myth of hypermasculinity (and the real danger for women), subvert some of the stereotypes around performances of hypermasculinity by 'refusing' the normal codes of social violence and aggression which attach to these, and by producing their own cultural meanings of gender and masculinities. At the same time, the construction of leathermen hypermasculinity is a strategy of resistance to the circulation of ideas found in negative stereotypes of gay men as being 'effeminate' or 'pansies'.<sup>viii</sup> In

leathermen couplings, both partners and participants are 'butch' and the leathermen mantra is to 'look like the man' you want to attract (Barrett, 2017). There is much to be learned from a study of leathermen subculture as it shows what masculinity could look like if it was decoupled from aggressive hypermasculine behaviours, where consent is problematically not called into question (Halperin 1995; Rubin 2000; Mosher *et al.* 2000; Hennen 2008; Barrett 2017).

One of the public performances of gender by the leathermen community in which its codes and practices are observed by members is participation in an international pageant. The HIV crises of the late 1980s and 1990s decimated many leathermen communities in the US, more specifically in San Francisco (Rubin, 2000),<sup>x</sup> and one way for the community to show unity was by holding a leather pageant where the presentation of leather was foregrounded. This has become an institution in the leathermen subculture, and communities worldwide, South Africa included, hold regional and national pageants in order to decide who will represent their country at the annual 'International Mr Leather' pageant. The word 'pageant' is used intentionally, in spite of its female connotations. What is distinguishable about the leathermen pageant is that while it draws on the normative pageant protocols, it also 'mocks' the conventional all-female pageant and its exercise in objectification.<sup>x</sup>

The consensual leathermen subculture in South Africa has never been the focus of an academic study. As this is a new study with a very large data set, which I have not yet fully 'occupied', I present one finding from the data that I have identified as telling of the gendered performances and sexualised practices of the leathermen subculture in South Africa. I collected my data from the only place where there is a public visible presence of a leathermen community: the South African Leathermen (SALM) Facebook page. Leathermen are not completely invisible, and they can be 'summonsed' in the virtual world: intentionally through a focused search in Google, or unintentionally by perusing linked web pages associated with deviance or sex. The SALM community can be recognised as being produced by leathermen, for leathermen, and about leathermen. The SALM establish a virtual community presence through the use of visual and linguistic signifiers which 'align' with the protocols of the international leathermen community. These include: a constitution, an alliance with the gay and lesbian movement, consensual sex, safety, adherence to rules, gay men only and specific leather looks.

### **'Purist leather' vs 'Rainbow leather'**

On searching with the phrase 'leathermen South Africa' in Google in 2016, I was immediately directed to the SA Leathermen Facebook page (SALM). I was able to view all posts going back to the origination of the page in 2009. The visibility and accessibility of what is a previously a subterranean community is evidence of the power of social media as a platform for a 'liberating form of self-making' (Agenda briefing). Such an investigation would have been much more difficult, but not impossible, prior to the age of the internet. Twenty years ago, the first exploratory discussion of what was then called S/M in South Africa was published.<sup>xi</sup> Despite the author (Noyes, 1998) having a bleak view of S/M as a form of sexual violence, the article is important because Noyes, firstly, identifies the internet as a powerful means to give voice to the sexually marginalised, and secondly, because he identifies historically (via anecdote) the most active S/M community in South Africa as being white gay leathermen.

My investigation into the SALM Facebook page and its particular focus on 2012-2015<sup>xii</sup> is a snapshot of a moment in time – with all the limitations that come with this (de-historicised, 'self-explanatory', anecdotal, banal and 'messy'). I explore the politics of 'the public' (Warner 2002) that unfold on the Facebook page that is guided by the question – how does SALM 'fit' into the larger gay and lesbian community? I answer this question by

focusing on the annual leather pageant, which is at the heart of the community. I argue that the 'pressure' on leathermen to try and 'fit in' with the larger gay and lesbian community, opens up a contestation between what I call 'purist leather' and 'rainbow leather.' This question is significant to understanding how the tensions between gender, sexual difference and race in contemporary South Africa are resolved in the context of the resistance by leatherman to inclusivity, assimilation and 'respectability' (Halperin 1995, Warner 1999, 2002, Rubin 1993, 2000, Barrett 2017).

In my analysis of the SALM page, it is obvious that the 'real' conversations and contestations occur out of public view.<sup>xiii</sup> In 2011 the SALM Facebook page was linked to the *Gay South Africa Facebook* page, a tacit acceptance by the broader gay and lesbian community. A post in 2013, however holds the tell-tale signs of differences within SALM, arising as a result of this tacit acceptance. Following months of predictable and urbane posts – an announcement on the SALM site addresses its community in what is a very different register from what has come before (discussed below). The post brings into question the possible existence of below the surface tensions about race, gender and sexual practices within SALM.<sup>xiv</sup> The post is strongly suggestive of behind the scenes debates and possibly even 'in-fighting' around SALM's positioning as a radical but exclusive gay male community.

The first image that indexes 'leathersex' appeared in 2012 (to advertise a raffle for a lucky winner to receive the prize of a 'travel sling belt') (Figure 1). A submissive white naked man is depicted as on his back, with his knees and neck bound by the 'travel sling belt', accentuating his bottom. My reading of the image is that it is a representation of not only transgressive leathersex, but also of an implicit refusal to compromise a radical sexual identity. The inclusion of this risqué picture might well have caused a stir or unwanted attention: this was the only visual depiction of transgressive sex evident on the SALM public Facebook page. As gender performance and sexual practice are embedded in the subculture, I identify this as an example of one of the 'compromises' that leathermen are compelled to make in occupying a marginalised position in LGBTI cultures, that is by keeping their transgressive sex out of the public eye. The leather pageant, which is the focus of much of the activity, by contrast, works as an apparently inoffensive form of collective-legitimation and celebration of shared identity that unites Leathermen and is evidence of solidarity-building across geographies and marginalised sexual minorities.

Next I discuss the signifying practices that are clustered around the leather pageant and how these demonstrate how public spectacle works as a representation of SALM as a sexual subculture and its values. The pageant provides the means through which participation by the wider gay and lesbian community is mediated or controlled and subsequently negotiated. I rely primarily on the posters and images posted on the Facebook page in reflecting on what can be read as tensions around practices around gender, race and sex, produced as a consequence of the community's visibility, and as evidence of contestation over inclusive participation in South Africa.

In December 2012, an advert was posted depicting the five white finalists for the Mr SALM pageant (Figure 2). The fact that all the finalists for the 2012 Mr SALM were white men seemed to cause consternation within the SALM community. Almost exactly one year after this advert appeared, there was an announcement by the moderator of the SALM page:

I would like to thank South Africa Leather members in Cape Town who joined us for the Special General Meeting today, we have made a huge step forward as a leather community: SA Leather membership isn't limited to gay & bi<sup>xv</sup> members anymore – now anyone interested in the leather/BDSM/fetish lifestyle and community can join!!!” (Figure 3)

Significant manoeuvring behind the scenes is suggested as the reason for the announcement about opening up the membership to a racially inclusive leather community, one which in effect also erased the leathermen subculture as a predominantly gay white men only space. This can be linked to the broader context of gay and lesbian political organising at the time, which has “declared its desire to build a movement that served the interests of the majority of South African gays and lesbians” (Oswin, 2007:650).<sup>xvi</sup> In the South African context, the racial and gender exclusivity of a leathermen subculture could be perceived as running counter to the ideals of such a movement. The pressure for the ‘leather’ sub-culture to be assimilated as a ‘lifestyle’ choice informs, what I call the ‘struggle’ between ‘purist leather’ and ‘rainbow leather’ on the SALM page. ‘Purist leather’ refers to preserving the ethos of the ‘original’ leatherman subculture, which is limited to white gay men who choose to display hypermasculine behaviour. ‘Rainbow leather’, as advocated by the moderator on the page, should be pansexual - open to people of all races, genders and sexual orientations and gender expressions, who are interested in the ‘leather/BDSM/fetish lifestyle’ and speak for ‘leather’ on the African continent.<sup>xvii</sup>

The dramatic shift to a more open community, ‘agreed’ (or not) by SALM’s membership, is apparent in 2014 from two posters advertising the 2015 leather pageant which now surprisingly targeted leatherwomen. The emphasis on gender inclusivity does away with exclusively male participation in the pageant. The first poster boldly invites women to compete, “Be the first to make history!!”, and is accompanied by a picture of a woman clad in leather holding a whip (Figure 4). The step away from ‘purist leather’ is notable: since the inception of the SALM page in 2009, women have been off limits. The second advert asserts a vision of what ‘rainbow leather’ envisions the community to look like (Figure 5). The South African flag fills the top quarter of the page, and below this a leathermen and leatherwomen are depicted holding hands – urging people to enter the Mr and Ms SA Leather pageant. At the bottom of the poster, small text indicates commitment to safety, health care, advice and an organisation that represents a pansexual leather community in Africa.

SALM is now virtually unrecognisable in the vision of community that the posters present. I argue that the open pansexual movement ‘rainbow leather’ was proposing caused a ruckus and a rupture and subsequently, the moderator left SALM and created his own webpage that represented ‘rainbow leather’, under the name ‘SA Leather South Africa’ (SALSA) in 2015 where the leather pageant was followed.<sup>xviii</sup> The finalists and judges of the pageant reflected the greater inclusiveness that ‘rainbow leather’ espouses. The finalists for the Ms and Mr SA Leather 2015 pageant were two black women, two white women and two white men. The judging panel were two white women from the US, two white males (one from the US and one from Germany), and two white men from South Africa. The winners, a black leather woman and a white leather man are pictured in full leather garb, with the black women embracing the leatherman (Figure 6). The winners were proudly congratulated on the SALSA site, as the ‘leaders’ of leather, as they would represent South Africa at the ‘International Mr Leather’ and ‘International Ms Leather’ pageant in the US. The winners were lauded by *Mamba online*, a “gay lifestyle portal”, the day after the competition, when it was proudly announced that “Africa crowns its first black leather titleholder”.

Alas, ‘rainbow leather’ had a short internet life, and the SALSA webpage closed down a few months after its inception in 2015.<sup>xix</sup> ‘Purist’ leathermen thus reclaimed the SALM page - and it ‘returned’ to its exclusive leathermen ethos.<sup>xx</sup> I argue that the strong contestation over the image of ‘gay leather’, as reflected in the pageant posters on Facebook, is about ‘the public’ consumption of these images and what they say – not about leathermen, but about the gay and lesbian community by association.<sup>xxi</sup> For example, when the venue for the 2014 pageant was changed from an inner city gay bar to a scout hall in the suburbs of Cape Town (with all its leafy, family orientated connotations) the decision can be read as signifying that the ‘rainbow leather’ (and by association the broader gay and lesbian

community) did not want to be associated with the ‘underbelly’ of the leathermen gay male scene, the sex, the drugs, the cruising, the promiscuity and the ‘inner city’ (where historically gay leather bars were located). When *Mamba online* congratulated the crowning of the “first black leather titleholder”, they are tacitly accepting a gay leather community that reflects the diversity of the progressive gay and lesbian community, one that is inclusive and ‘respectable’. As *Mamba online* is a well known ‘gay lifestyle portal’ – by extension gay leather is given the ‘lifestyle’ stamp of approval (which means that you keep your sex private<sup>xxii</sup>). That sex should generate politics is not what *Mamba online* is interested in, rather as a ‘gay lifestyle portal’ they aim to create an image of the gay and lesbian community that is coherent, fun, trendsetting, aspirational and ‘normal’ (Warner, 1999).

What is disavowed in the approach to gayness as a lifestyle, are the ‘messy bits’ that are integral to leathermen subculture: exclusivity, transgressive sex, and hypermasculinity. I feel that these ‘messy bits’ are what the short lived ‘rainbow leather’ was trying to counter. The ‘rainbow leather intervention’ has no traction as leathermen want their spaces to be exclusive (gay men only). Instead of trying to ‘impose’ respectability by ‘taking over’ SALM, ‘rainbow leather’ should rather have pursued an alliance, as is the case with leathermen communities worldwide (Barrett, 2017).

## Conclusion

In this article I presented an exploratory study of leathermen in South Africa, which has never been the subject of an academic investigation. Prior to 2009, this community was hidden from public view and within the gay and lesbian community. Social invisibility was a choice arising from their transgressive leather sexual practices with are based in BDSM, and leathermen’s resistance to assimilation or refusal to de-radicalise. I presented a finding of my investigation into the SALM Facebook page (2012-2015), a ready-made virtual (with all the attendant visual and linguistic signifiers) leathermen community – produced and consumed by leathermen. My answer to the question – how do SALM ‘fit’ into the larger gay and lesbian community – is found in resistance to assimilation and accommodation by SALM that I have described in the contestation between ‘purist leather’ and ‘rainbow leather’ in the annual leather pageant. At the same time there is a certain level of tolerance of leathermen by the gay and lesbian movement because their sexual practices are homosexual. Consequently there is an imperfect fit. I believe that the SALM chose to be allied to the visible gay and lesbian community, but this choice is made completely on their own terms and without compromising their identity as a subculture.

The leathermen subculture is not understood in mainstream communities (perhaps only as part of deviant BDSM), and is also misunderstood in gay and lesbian communities because it is seen as an example of an archaic culture that no longer has a place in mainstream lifestyle-orientated gay and lesbian communities in post-apartheid South Africa. This is perhaps a missed opportunity, as much can be learned from the study of leathermen. As a subculture, their social practices work to break down the dominant stereotypes in which masculinities are typically coupled with aggressive hypermasculine behaviours. Additionally, the leather pageant is an example, not just of ‘simply turning the table’ – rather it subverts a cultural phenomenon based on the presentation of women not only as objects available for consumption by the male gaze, but also as ‘perfect’ examples of femininity for the female gaze. These are some of the potential areas for future research in South Africa.

## References

- Barrett R (2017) *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berlant L and Warner M (1998) ‘Sex in Public’, in *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (2), 547-566.

- Berlant L and Warner M (1995) 'What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?' in *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 110 (3), 343-349.
- Butler J (1997) 'Critically Queer' in S Phelan (ed) *Playing with Fire: Queer Politics, Queer Theories*, New York: Routledge, 11-30.
- Butler J (2004) 'Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification' in S Salih (ed) *The Judith Butler Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 243-261.
- Halperin DM (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hennen P (2008) *Faeries, Bears and Leathermen: Men in the Community Queering the Masculine*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCormick TL (2018a) 'Dragging up the past: Investigating historical representations of drag in South Africa', in *Gender and Language* (Forthcoming).
- McCormick TL (2018b) 'Yes master! Multimodal representations of BDSM bodies on a classified South African website', in *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* (Forthcoming).
- McCormick TL (2019) 'Where is the queer critique of same-sex marriage in South Africa?', in *African Studies* (Forthcoming).
- Mosher CM, Levitt HM & Manley E (2006) 'Layers of leather: The identity formation of leathermen as a process of transforming meanings of masculinity', in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, 3, 93-123.
- Noyes JK (1998) 'S/M in SA: Sexual violence, simulated sex and psychoanalytic theory', in *American Imago*, 55, 1, 135-153.
- Oswin N (2007) 'Producing homonormativity in neoliberal South Africa: Recognition, redistribution, and the equality project', in *Signs*, 32, 3, 649-669.
- Parrott DJ & Zeichner A (2003) 'Effects of hypermasculinity on physical aggression against women', in *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 4, 1, 70-78.
- Rubin GS (1993) 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in H Abelow, MA Barale and DM Halperin (eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 3-44.
- Rubin G (2000) 'Sites, Settlements, and Urban Sex: Archaeology and the Study of Gay Leathermen in San Francisco, 1955-1995', in RA Schimdt and BLVoss (eds) *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, Routledge: London, 62-82.
- Shabazz R (2009) "So high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it': Carceral spatiality and black masculinities in the United States and South Africa', in *Souls*, 11, 3, 276-294.
- Smith JG & Luykx A (2017) 'Race play in BDSM porn: The eroticization of oppression', in *Porn Studies*, 4, 4, 1-14.
- Thoreson RR (2008) 'Somewhere over the Rainbow Nation: Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Activism in South Africa', in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 3, 679-697.
- Warner, D.N. (2004) 'Towards a Queer Research Methodology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 321-337.



- Warner M (1999) *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and The Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Warner M (2002) Publics and Counterpublics, in *Public Culture* 14, 1,49–90
- Weiss MD (2006) 'Mainstreaming kink: The politics of BDSM representation in US popular media', in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50, 2-3,103-132.
- Wolfaardt S (2014) 'Submitting to the discipline of sexual intimacy? Online constructions of BDSM encounters', unpublished mini Masters Dissertation, Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria.
- Van Reenen D (2014) 'Is this really what women want? An analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and modern feminist thought', in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 33, 2,223-233.

---

<sup>i</sup> See McCormick (2018a; 2018b; 2019).

<sup>ii</sup> When I use the descriptor 'gay and lesbian community', I am fully aware that it homogenises the complexity found within numerous gay and lesbian communities in South Africa. However, the descriptor is used by and in these very communities, as well as by the popular media.

<sup>iii</sup> For clarity about the terms 'normal' and 'abnormal' within queer theory the reader could find the following readings useful: Berlant and Warner (1995), Berlant and Warner (1998), Warner (1999) and Warner (2005).

<sup>iv</sup> Rubin (1993) argues that hierarchies of sexual value operate in the same way as racism, ethnocentrism and religious chauvinism since they "rationalize the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble" (13).

<sup>v</sup>These include biker's jackets, breeches, chaps, pants, knee-high biker boots, harnesses, cuffs (biceps and wrists), belts adorned with motorbike insignia, Sam Browne belts, shirts, ties, gloves and Muir caps (also known as the Master's hat). Leatherman attire is tight fitting to show off physical strength, and leathermen are often photographed smoking large cigars – the phallic symbolism being intentional.

<sup>vi</sup> There are certain gay male looks and sets of behaviours that are palatable to society at large. These include, but are not limited to: 'straight looking', healthy, tanned, well dressed, immaculately groomed, fashionable, great taste, not campy, married, private, suburban, friends with women Warner (1999).

<sup>vii</sup> Internationally there is a vibrant gay female leather scene that organises their own events.

<sup>viii</sup>For example, stereotypes of male homosexual couples (and sex) pair an effeminate type man with a more conventionally or even butch (i.e. masculine) looking man. In such a configuration, the effeminate homosexual is viewed as a 'failed' man, which, by default, is associated with those traits that construct women as 'other': weak, soft, flimsy and deferent to a 'real' man.

<sup>ix</sup>Rubin (2000:71) argues that in the US it was believed by the population at large that leathermen had a higher prevalence of HIV, but explains that there are "no hard data demonstrating such a differential mortality rate amongst gay sexual subpopulations".

<sup>x</sup> The leathermen pageant has many similarities to the mainstream pageant. There are preliminary rounds, interviews with contestants, a bathing suit competition, a personality 'test', and also a mark for presentation 'skills.' However, there are also unique leathermen protocols such as pectoral presentation, physical image presentation, leather image, and bootblack skills where contestants polish the boots of attendees at the pageant for votes (Barrett, 2017).

<sup>xi</sup>There are only two other studies of BDSM in South Africa: Wolfaardt's (2014) unpublished MA mini thesis and Van Reenen's (2014) analysis of the best selling novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

---

<sup>xii</sup>My data set is from 2009-2016; however, the ‘struggle’ between ‘purist leather’ and ‘rainbow leather’ is confined to the years 2012-2015.

<sup>xiii</sup>Central to any investigation into web or social media is an understanding that there is a moderator who gate-keeps what is and what is not allowed to be publicly posted. The ‘real’ (or not) conversations and contestations are to be had on the private messenger apps associated with the various social media pages.

<sup>xiv</sup>This shapes how I present the data. For example, it is usually one person who represents the ‘behind the scenes’ contestations in the community via an announcement. I make this person representative of either ‘purist leather’ or ‘rainbow leather’, with the full knowledge that many people are involved – but they are hidden to me (and perhaps even hidden from each other).

<sup>xv</sup>That SALM is open to bisexual men, is SALM’s attempt at being ‘diverse’. There is no evidence in the data of the presence of bisexual men.

<sup>xvi</sup>From 1994, the gay and lesbian movement in South Africa linked homosexuality to a concrete identity and used constitutional lobbying to overturn homophobic laws (Thoreson, 2008). Such lobbying, Oswin argues, “took a deliberately conservative approach that has been characterised as elitist, unrepresentative, and male dominated” (2007:650). After the passing of the equality clause in 1994, the gay and lesbian movement re-positioned itself to overcome this stigma, and consciously included “race and class issues ... into the organization’s rights language” (Oswin, 2007:650). The present-day gay and lesbian movement “has largely abandoned its progressive-left affiliations. It now fights for assimilation and social acceptability” (Oswin, 2007:656).

<sup>xvii</sup>The reason why I use the word ‘rainbow’ to describe this iteration of the leather community, is because the South African flag features prominently – making a symbolic link with ‘the rainbow nation.’ This is not unique to the South African context, and Barrett (2017:3655) explains how in the US context the participants in leathermen pageants use patriotic symbols such as the ‘stars and stripes’ in their leather presentations. He argues that such symbols: “index counter-hegemonic discourses associated with marginalised sexual identities alongside hegemonic discourses of citizenship and patriotism most typically associated with forms of social and political conservatism (which are decidedly anti-leather).”

<sup>xviii</sup> This web page can be viewed at: <http://www.sal.qw.co.za/news.htm>, but it was frozen in 2015.

<sup>xix</sup> I have corresponded with the moderator of this site: he wrote that [rainbow leather] “stopped functioning because of lack of membership. A lot of the older guys [left for] Cape Town for a more quiet life, and no one else was picking up the reins. So it sort of just stopped. The old chairman ... has resigned and then it slowly just came apart.”

<sup>xx</sup>On revisiting the SALM page I found that all the posts and photos uploaded by the original moderator of the site (who ‘initiated’ the ‘rainbow leather’ ‘movement’), had been removed.

<sup>xxi</sup>Facebook is a public social platform and any person with a Facebook account can easily view any topic. Granted, not every Facebook user will be drawn to the SALM page. However, any person who ‘likes’ anything gay or lesbian will be algorithmed into a subset of linked gay and lesbian sites and the various subcultures that are aligned with them. In addition, if a person is directed to a leathermen image, a type of consumption could be produced that associates the gay and lesbian community with whiteness and deviant sexual practices.

<sup>xxii</sup>Warner (1999:31) argues that there “always seem to be some gay people who are shocked, shocked to find that others are having deviant sex. They will have you know that their dignity is founded on being gay, which in their view has nothing to do with sex”.