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Marnell, John, *Seeking Sanctuary: Stories of Sexuality, Faith and Migration*. Publisher: Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2021. Pp.285. ISBN # 978-1-77614-712-0.

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John Marnell's *Seeking Sanctuary: Stories of Sexuality, Faith and Migration* explores the role of faith in identity construction of migrant LGBTs of the LGBT Ministry at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein, Johannesburg via life-story interviews. The book has a foreword by Kapya Kaoma, an introduction, and six chapters with the fifth chapter comprised of 14 life stories of migrant LGBT people in South Africa. Each of the 14 stories comes with an animal illustration by Sophie Kollo, believed by the narrators to capture the essence of their personalities.

Marnell makes counter-narratives and counter-discourses of progressive faith communities and politicization of faith available, hence troubling the wider claim/presumption of LGBT identities and expressions as being prohibited by religion (Christianity, Islam, or whichever dominant religion in a region) and of "African homo/transphobia" as a homogenous phenomenon. This is a marked departure from the exploration of the role religion plays in perpetuating homo/transphobia through four interlinked discourses: "that LGBT people are abnormal, immoral, anti-family and unAfrican" (14). Ideas like this have been explored in works that focus on South African LGBT whose lives, like the migrants', are also riddled with challenges, including trans/homophobia. Siya Khumalo's *You Have to be Gay to Know God*, for example, gives an account of what it feels like to be a gay South African caught in the middle of religion and politics while Melanie Judge's *Blackwashing Homophobia: Violence and the Politics of Sexuality, Gender and Race* mirrors a violent South Africa dealing with lesbian subjectivity.

Marnell traces the checkered history of the LGBT Ministry at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Johannesburg with its difficulties in starting, its structure, triumphs, challenges, oppositions (from within and outside the church), the progress made so far and aspirations for the future. The ministry has been able to provide a safe space for LGBT people, allowing for the growth of the ministry/community at

its own pace and meeting some of their needs like help with documentation of migrants and trainings towards self-empowerment. Insufficient funding means that the ministry is not able to cater for as many as they would like to. Some members are still undocumented (about 40%), some are still battling with substance abuse and unemployment. However, they are not lacking in a community that they can identify with.

As Marnell points out, life as a LGBT migrant is precarious in South Africa. It is a life different from migrants' countries of origin but it is a life of in-between-ness where the Domestic Home Affairs' (DHA) bureaucracy and sometimes insensitivity or lack of training/professionalism in dealing with the LGBT makes it difficult for the absorption and proper documentation of migrants seeking refugee status on the basis of their sexuality. Arising from improper/lack of documentation, most of the migrants that were studied face challenges involving holding down jobs or finding one and this tells on their living conditions which in turn escalates certain kinds of unsavory treatment, including homophobia. It is a chain reaction.

The life stories stand out. There are 14 of them. Only one does not record experiences of homophobia but admits to being aware of the homophobic experiences of less fortunate LGBT people. It would seem therefore that the financial statuses of the narrators play a major role in the treatment they receive generally – the more financially stable they are/become, the less the homophobic attacks. Although Marnell does not make this direct inference, it would appear that the biggest hurdle needed to be scaled by the LGBT people would be financial stability.

Identity (re)construction, which *Seeking Sanctuary* set out to study, is best reflected in the animal representations/illustrations which the interviewees have chosen as capturing their essence. One sees the efforts at self-description and redescription, even reinvention. In the face of trans/homophobia and the precarity of living on the edge as mostly undocumented migrants, job seekers, men and women negotiating difficult relationships with families and finally finding acceptance and kinship in the LGBT Ministry, the LGBT people have chosen to reenact their lives using animal qualities/characteristics which they find appealing and/or relatable to their experiences as well as projecting futures they look forward to.

Hence, five out of the fourteen interviewees identify as brave, strong, energetic lions. Two identify as chameleons who adapt, blend into surroundings and sometimes hide in order to fit in. The remaining seven identify as Zebra (attractive, beautiful, mostly a prey, adds value and character); Sheep (softness, mother, nurturing, big hearted, gentle); Impala (hunted, afraid, no protection or peace, only

suffering); Dog (nurturing in the way it looks after her pups, loyal, protective, tries to bring everyone together); Dove (gentle, kind, purity of soul and heart); Cat (takes a while to get comfortable around someone, but totally loyal once done, shy and quiet but very caring, defends territory if threatened); and Leopard (strong yet graceful, depends only on self for survival, waits patiently for right moment to strike, have had to learn patience and perseverance).

It is striking that each story makes an attempt to capture an Edenic childhood before the narrator's sexual awakening. Things go downhill from there until the narrators migrate to South Africa. For most, it continues downhill until they find stable jobs, begin to process their documentation as migrants, and are introduced to the LGBT Ministry where they find succor and family. The LGBT Ministry's most significant contribution to the lives of the 14 interviewees appears to be the gift of kinship, new "family ties" and "home to the wanderer". *Seeking Sanctuary* is therefore a fitting title for these stories of sexuality, faith and migration. The migrants' search for belongingness gets anchored with their interactions with the LGBT Ministry. All their problems do not go away, of course, but they are better equipped to weather the storms of dealing with families and coming out, navigating the dark waters of trans/homophobia in their various spheres, and more importantly, acceptance of oneself as concurrently LGBT and religious.

Due to the limitation imposed by the methodology utilized – life story interviews withholding details which the subjects are not comfortable sharing, few/limited number of subjects and the study of only one church LGBT Ministry, it is difficult to deploy the findings in establishing a pattern of socio-religious behavior. However, the book does well in promoting the idea that religious spaces must be utilized to fight for social justice for the LGBT community. Whereas such spaces have been deployed to cause much harm to the LGBT community, the case of the LGBT Ministry at Holy Trinity Church shows that it can be different and positive. Progressive religious spaces like this are needed to support and lead in the fight for loving ministry to the LGBT community in order to "heal emotional scars inflicted by their conservative counterparts" (220) and provide a spiritual acceptance and anchor which the LGBT are often denied.

References

Judge, Melanie. 2018. *Blackwashing Homophobia: Violence and the Politics of Sexuality, Gender and Race*. New York: Routledge.

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