On living as Zoe: The story of being foreign in so many ways

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On living as Zoe: The story of being foreign in so many ways
Zoe Black* speaks with Jesse McGleughlin

Zoe Black* and Jesse McGleughlin

abstract
In this short interview Jesse McGleughlin interviews activist Zoe Black. They explore notions of belonging, home and ‘foreignness’ in relation to nationality, sexual orientation and occupation. Black’s experiences as “a black, migrant, woman sex worker who loves women” are explored through nuanced references to US slavery abolitionist Sojourner Truth.

keywords
belonging, home, foreign, migrant, woman who loves women, sex work

“I sell the shadow to support the substance”
– Sojourner Truth, 1864

“I’m trying to kill off Zoe.”
“Who is Zoe?” I ask.
“Zoe is my pseudonym,” she says.

This is one of our first exchanges. “Zoe”, she tells me, is her activist name. It is the name she uses when she’s telling a story that might get her into trouble – when the life history she’s sharing has the potential to kill her.

“Zoe seems to get more attention than I do,” she says. “Why are you resurrecting her, Jess?” she asks me. “One day, I really will have to kill her off,” she says, laughing. But both of us know it isn’t funny. Perhaps she means that one day, living these two realities – living in hiding – will kill her, if she does not kill it first.

I begin with this exchange because it frames a series of conversations between Zoe and myself [let’s call her Zoe as this is the name that she has asked to be called] about her experiences navigating violence and belonging in South Africa. Zoe introduces herself in meetings as a “migrant sex worker from Zimbabwe” and sometimes, in safer public spaces, as a “woman who loves other women”. These words also frame the type of violence that we spoke to each other about: both a physical violence and an emotional violence brought about by leading a double life, a life on the margins and periphery. In our...
conversations she explains herself to me, a white American Fulbright Scholar who was in South Africa on a ‘short stay’ visa and supporting advocacy on the decriminalisation of sex work.

When I first met with Zoe we discussed her experience migrating from Zimbabwe to South Africa, her work as a sex worker, navigating her sexuality across borders, and making the choice to leave her children in search of a better life for them. As she was speaking, her account of negotiating difficulties and dangers and strategising to sustain herself in a hostile social order reminded me of another woman who had faced similar challenges. I asked her if she had ever heard of Sojourner Truth, the abolitionist, former slave and iconic black woman who refigured depictions of the black enslaved female body in the United States of America.

In her famous speech in 1851, Truth flexed her arm and drew attention to her physical power: “Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?” she said. But in a portrait she sat for in 1864, she presented herself as “the epitome of middle-class femininity, in a neat gown and demure white shawl and cap” (Hutchinson, n.d.) Truth staged this portrait for her own purposes. There were tensions at play in the image; Sojourner Truth had spoken about “masculine” strength, but in this picture displayed “feminine gentility”. She was born a slave and yet her image conjured up a vision of the “respectability” she claimed for herself. Below the portrait read the words “I sell the shadow to support the substance”. The portrait was used to fund Truth’s speaking tours and was part of her process of self-definition. Her strategy existed in stark contrast to campaigns in which abolitionists used photographs of victimisation (such as the image of “a scourged back ... scarred by whipping”, to draw attention to the plight of slavery) (Painter, 1996).

Truth’s words “I sell the shadow to support the substance” are powerful and provocative. Truth sold her image – produced and reproduced herself – in order to challenge slavery. That she sold “the shadow” calls attention to this legacy of enslavement. Her words evoked a history in which black peoples’ bodies were branded with numbers and placed on auction blocks. The specificity of the word choice requires attention. Truth did not sell herself; instead she sold “the shadow”. This was both a challenge to a legacy of buying and selling black people in the United States and an attempt to control the way in which she was perceived and historically remembered.

I asked Zoe if she knew about Sojourner Truth because the words “I sell the shadow to support the substance” seemed relevant to our conversation about living in hiding and selling sex. Zoe hadn’t heard of Truth before, but when I read her the quotation she nodded and scribbled it down in her notebook. “I’ll remember that,” she told me. Of course, the quote’s immediate relevance was in relation to sex work. Selling the shadow can offer a critique to the notion that selling sex is selling oneself or one’s body, rather than just a service.

The other relevance, however, is in the way Sojourner Truth plays with the idea of shadows – of doubleness, of self and of replication. Indeed, Zoe’s first words to me, “I am...
trying to kill off Zoe,” indicate a complex interplay between herself and her shadow. There is, perhaps, a third relevance: Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree, but gave herself the name Sojourner Truth. There is something powerful in the process of naming oneself. Zoe chooses to call herself Sojourner Truth. There is, perhaps, a third relevance: Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Baumfree, but gave herself the name Sojourner Truth. There is something powerful in the process of naming oneself. Zoe chooses to call herself Sojourner Truth. However, a problem arises: Zoe both does and does not exist. There is a play – a slippage – between these states of being. Zoe is an ‘illegal’ Zimbabwean migrant without papers in South Africa. By the State’s definition, she does not exist, or if indeed she does, she is classified as ‘undesirable’ and can be deported immediately.

This is the violence that Zoe and I spoke about – the State’s crushing power to determine who matters, and then who gets to be visible. Pumla Dineo Gqola’s meditation on rape (2015) offers a useful framework here; she writes about the concept of the “unrapeable”; the idea that some categories of people, like sex workers and married women, are constructed as “unrapeable”. If Zoe is considered “unrapeable” – if violence perpetrated against her is not considered violence – where does that leave her categorically? How, despite this, does she make mattering?

We ask you to read with an understanding that the stakes are high, and that language is slippery. If Zoe cannot exist, there is a slippage, a feeling of in-between, a hesitancy to be named and fixed. Our conversation reflects a complicated relationship to boundaries and borders and to the notion that belonging is ever possible.

The Conversation: October 5, 2015

Jesse: What is your name and where are you from?
Zoe: My name is Zoe Black. I am from Harare in Zimbabwe.
Jesse: How do you describe your identity?
Zoe: I describe myself as a woman. I am from Zimbabwe. I am a woman who loves women. I am still trying to get comfortable with the term lesbian. It sounds very rough and raw. I am all that but... yeah...
Jesse: What do you understand queer to mean?
Zoe: I think queer is everything that is between male and female, everything in between for me is queer. I know there are different definitions. It is people living out of the box, out of the binary, and out of the norm.
Jesse: Would you describe yourself as queer?
Zoe: Not my favourite word, but yeah.
Jesse: Is there a word that you like?
Zoe: I am a woman who loves other women. Who likes and is attracted to other women.
Jesse: How did you come to understand queerness in Zimbabwe?
Zoe: It was difficult to understand queerness in Zimbabwe. I read that last week Mugabe was at the United Nations and just like slams, “We are not gays”. It is really difficult to find your identity. You are in this thick-walled closet. You don’t know yourself.
Jesse: Was your sexuality the reason you left Zimbabwe?
Zoe: I think it was one of the main reasons why I wanted to move. I felt like I was so trapped. I felt very isolated and very empty because this thing was growing in me and I couldn’t hide. In my 20s, I was so content being a housewife and a mother. When I got into my 30s, I could now feel like this thing was going to burst out of me. It was really, really building up. There was a lot of tension and a lot of animosity and a lot of confusion and a lot of stress. Because I didn’t understand what was happening to me. But as soon as I moved, I could now feel ‘Oh, this is what is happening to me’.

There were other reasons I migrated to South Africa. After 10 years of marriage and having four kids, I lost a fifth one. I ran away from him, packed up everything, and went back to my mother’s house. Life was very tough. It was difficult, difficult to make ends meet. It was very stressful. I was selling brooms, and selling everything. The economy was very bad.

After that, I decided to come to South Africa. South Africa has always been the ‘place of gold’, the land of dreams, you know, where anything is possible...I thought I needed to look for a better prospect, a better life, and that was about a year and a half ago. I thought it would be very easy to get a job.
Jesse: What did you do for work when you arrived?
Zoe: I came here and I ended up in Camps Bay. I had an opportunity to sell stuff... I sold art on the beach. I used to sell hats because I was always determined that I will use my hands, my legs, and other parts of my body to get where I need to. Opportunities are limited but you need to be able to survive. When you realise you can sell sex and make money out of it and then send more home, that was very enlightening. To say, wow, I need to take this as work that I can do.

Jesse: You told me that you are an undocumented migrant. Can you talk about your experience applying for migration status?

Zoe: When I applied for my papers, I was afraid to talk about my sexual orientation. I was scared of the South African Department of Home Affairs. I think it was the fear of being judged and the fear of someone saying “You just became a lesbian because you’re in South Africa”. So on my application I wrote that I was looking for a better life. But they thought I was applying for economic reasons only. They rejected my application because they said that people in Zimbabwe are not really suffering.

When I tried to fix my statement and apply for refugee status because of my sexual orientation, they asked, “How can you prove it?” and I was like, “Do you need to prove that?”

Jesse: You tried to fix your statement to say you were seeking asylum because you loved women?

Zoe: I did go to PASSOP. I asked them to forward an appeal. They wrote down my statement “I am a woman who loves other women”, but they didn’t send it to Home Affairs.

Jesse: Why didn’t they send it?

Zoe: There was a postal strike. As a result, I was deported. It was hectic. I was detained for 18 days. I was in a cell with between 18 and 35 women at the most. It was traumatic ... Some women had been there for almost five weeks or five and a half weeks. It makes you think what freedom is. Why should we have borders when we really make other people suffer? Even if you are an economic migrant, you are also a human being who has a family to look after. Being around a lot of single mothers who were in the cell was really, really heavy. It was a lot of single mothers who have children to look after. And it was traumatic. I think it still affects me to this day a lot. Even when I am home alone on a bed, I still feel the cell is around me. I think your sense of freedom is somehow more limited now.

Jesse: That’s heavy.

Zoe: The fact that you are not documented and people at home are depending on you, life is depending on you. And you carry so much ... of wondering how people are surviving on the other side. You are that key. You have to be responsible for others’ survival. The moment you cross the line of being undocumented, you are virtually underground.

Jesse: In light of that, is there anywhere that you feel safe?

Zoe: I don’t feel safe. I think it’s very difficult to feel safe in this country [South Africa] ... life is life. The kind of things I see happening here, every day it’s a blessing to wake up in one piece and go to bed in one piece. Safety is a major concern.

Jesse: Where do you feel unsafe?

Zoe: I can’t say Zimbabwe or South Africa. I don’t think the world is a very safe place to be.

Jesse: Where do you feel you belong?

Zoe: Belonging is very difficult. I don’t think I belong here or there. Whether I am in South Africa as a migrant and I am not documented, I am here, whether I am belonging or not. At home, I am documented. I belong there. But the opportunities are not prevailing. Where I belong is maybe where I’m standing, or maybe where my children are.

I don’t find belonging in this world, because of borders and everything else. The piece of land is one. When you look at the map, it is just one. But because of divisions, and colonisation, and whatever happened, should I be limited to just a space where my passport or where the documentation goes? We are like a property of the country where we are born. When you look at your ID [Identity Document] or your passport, we are a property of the State. Why is our belonging just related to where you are sitting? You’ve got roots.

Jesse: Has your sense of belonging shifted when you realised you loved women?
Zoe: In Zimbabwe, you can see it [queerness] but you cannot talk about it, and you cannot express it. It’s known that it’s there but it doesn’t exist. But you get a place [South Africa] where it’s there. It does exist. You see it... It starts to be watered and cultivated and starts to grow and starts to show. And it can be expressed. I think it’s like two different climates. One doesn’t make it grow. It keeps it hidden, like a seed that is hidden and buried. And the other one waters it and nourishes it and makes it grow. And then now to be able to go home with that, you cannot go back with that. Because you need to unwater it and unnourish it and kill it, to be able to be in that environment.

Jesse: So, you must live in that in-between?

Zoe: Yeah.

Jesse: Does your identity as a sex worker intersect with your experience as a woman who loves other women?

Zoe: I think they are two different things. Sex work is how you make money and use the tool to make an income. It is work. When you are with a woman or your partner, it’s different. It’s different how you make love with someone and how you do work. It’s work. It’s labour. The job has to get done. Whether you love your job is up to you. But bills have to get paid...

That is why I found it very difficult to identify as a lesbian at first... until I met other lesbians in the support group at SWEAT\(^2\) who are sex workers. They were like “We are lesbians. We are selling sex!” and they are a confident bunch... [She laughs]. Who they are does not define what they do, whereas in the normal world, people are able to judge. They’re like “You’re with a woman, you are a lesbian”, and I am like “No, I am a woman who loves women”.

They make me more confident of my understanding of where I was, because I was trapped in a body which is wanting something else. It grows your confidence being able to be fulfilled intimately or sexually. It is very liberating. I was able to come to peace by hearing other peoples’ stories and how they are living every day... I think that is very important – to be at peace with yourself, not to judge yourself. Because the world is judging you already.

When I found myself poor, unemployed, broke, I found that there was a word called “sex worker.” I could relate to that because it is exactly what I was doing. But if I had another mindset of saying “I’m not selling sex, I’m just sleeping with a guy. And he’s giving me money”, I’m doing the exact same thing and I can’t relate to it. You open yourself up to say, this is where I fit. I can fit there, I can fit there.

Like I said, work is work. And being a person outside of that, you are a mother, you are a lover, you are a friend, a companion, an activist. The work does not define who you are... Zoe is there to make noise, be controversial, be the activist. Let’s speak freely, let’s talk safely, let’s talk what’s real. Let’s not hide behind. Let’s be raw. Let’s be real... Behind closed doors, we are one persona. We live in such a schizophrenic society. People are one persona, the next persona. People have these multiple personalities they never want to show.

Jesse: How do you deal with this doubleness? This schizophrenia? I want to go back to this question of belonging: what is the way you make spaces to belong amidst a feeling of not belonging?

Zoe: I am a very fluid person. That has helped me integrate into communities and live with people.

Jesse: Is it just about adaptability?

Zoe: It’s adaptation for survival.

Jesse: But what about a more emotional belonging? A feeling of loving and being loved? A feeling of this is my community? I’m asking you about an emotional survival.

Zoe: That is complicated. I am very lonely. You become someone with layers and layers of secrets and you have to keep them under cover. You cannot reveal yourself. You cannot expose. You become more dodgy. You’ve got this split personality. You need to keep your secret and your story intact. And not expose or reveal who you really are. The more you do that, you end up hiding from yourself. And even if you are with your partner or someone else who is going to come into your life, it’s difficult to deal with emotionally because you are living on two scales. I think that’s where a lot of violence comes in. That feeling of being constantly undercover and under the radar, physically and mentally, it’s very draining.
Criminalisation, being a migrant, everything, all the notions of belonging, everything – you need to be in hiding, it’s a form of violence. It’s mental. It’s stressful. You are hidden. You are thinking of the next lie to keep yourself under cover. You are living a lie. I am not the only one. There are thousands.


Months after I return to the United States, I share this transcript with a friend. He writes me back, uneasy. He sees the utility of Sojourner Truth to the piece. He writes that Truth’s insertion offers the reader a historical lens to understand the fluidity of identity and the impossibility of inserting self into defined categories. But he’s sceptical: “I felt you had a ‘project’ in mind: to cross-apply this conceptual frame you’ve built onto the lived experience of Zoe, whether or not it fit.”

Immediately, I am regretful. To apply a framework onto Zoe, to fix her within Truth’s narrative, has the potential to collapse her complex experience into categories that she does not claim, to overwrite and simplify her words.

I think it’s worth noting that I did not start with Sojourner Truth. I came to think about Truth through my conversations, and friendship, with Zoe. It is Zoe who offered me a way into this framework. And Zoe, both in our initial discussions and in the many drafts she read, seemed to resonate with Truth.

But still, this is a precarious project. I must be careful. There is a long history in which scholars misinterpret and misuse peoples’ stories for their individual projects. Still, I think that Truth may be useful to us. But I imagine that you as the reader may feel this tension. After all, Zoe does not fit neatly into my framework. She resists it and complicates it and explodes it. It is not enough.

Acknowledgement

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Notes
1. People Against Suffering Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP) is a not-for-profit human rights organisation devoted to fighting for the rights of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in South Africa.
2. Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) is South Africa’s leading sex worker human rights organisation.

References

ZOE BLACK is an activist born in Zimbabwe. She is a former Western Cape Media Liaison and a member of Sisonke, an organisation birthed by Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). Her current work centres on advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. As a member of the steering committee of the Asijiki Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work in South Africa, she has presented and spoken widely on different platforms about sex work. She has worked closely with organisations such as Women’s Law Centre, Sonke Gender Justice, Triangle Project and PASSOP and consults for different organisations focusing on sex work, LGBTI issues, migration, and feminism. Currently based in Cape Town, she also works as an artist and designs jewellery using recycled materials.
JESSE MCGLEUGHLIN is a youth organiser with a background in social movement history. She recently moved to New York City where she advocates for community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. Before that she coordinated education programmes for recently resettled refugee youth and their families. In 2015, while living in South Africa, Jesse advocated for the decriminalisation of sex work at Sonke Gender Justice in Cape Town. She also facilitated literacy interventions and an oral history project on legacies of apartheid with high school students in Kayamandi Township on a Fulbright Scholarship. She graduated from Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, United States of America in 2014 with a degree in Africana Studies, where her senior honours thesis focused on Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer’s activism in the early 1960s’ US South. Jesse is interested in histories of race and racialisation, migration, youth power, and modes of performance and protest. Email: jessemcgleughlin@gmail.com