



SYMPOSIUM

Queerly Kenyan

On the political economy of queer possibilities

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*A posterior glance at different moments,
objects, and spaces might offer us an anticipatory illumination of queerness.*
—Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

When approached through the normative terms of dominant discourses on sexual rights and homophobia, whether in Africa or elsewhere, religion and queer politics may indeed appear antithetical: global liberal elites often blame religious conservatives for rampant homophobic violence; nationalist elites and religious leaders promise to secure autochthonous moral values by eradicating “sexual perversion”; and, in turn, some LGBTQ+ activists, to foreclose religious judgment, seek state recognition through the secular terms of law. Yet it is precisely this normative assumption, uncritically shared across the divides of a politics of homosexuality, that emerging queer cultural productions so forcefully debunk. Reclaiming religious aspirations as central to the pursuit of queer emancipation, emerging forms of self-fashioning, storytelling, and community-making often forego the normative presumptions of queer secularism. Calling for a nuanced understanding of Christianity’s entanglements in queer politics, Adriaan van Klinken’s *Kenyan, Christian, queer* (2019) challenges secularist ideologies that construe sexual emancipation and public religion as irreconcilable opposites. In detailing how this occurs, the book demonstrates a very keen dialectical

imagination: it shows how a most outspoken Kenyan critic of religious homophobia borrows the very means and modes of charismatic leadership from Pentecostal evangelism, turning himself into a “queer prophet” of sorts; how a controversial queer rap video adopts and adapts stylistic elements from gospel performances, rendering “fluid boundaries between gospel and hip hop” (66); or how various queer subjects make religion central to their lives, by either keeping it separate from or reconciling it in various ways with their sexual selves. So, elements of queerness and Christianity overlap and mix in generative ways. And it is in these overlaps and mixtures, the author shows, that queer Kenyans find potential for a world otherwise—for queer world-making. In its distinct focus on the intersection of queerness and religion in Kenya, this book is, no doubt, the first of its kind. It offers a unique contribution to queer African studies—a relatively new yet radically imaginative community of scholarly and political debate—but also, more broadly, to a growing literature of queer studies from the global South.

The book focuses on four case studies, each analyzing a “cultural production” that emerges from—and



contributes to—what Keguro Macharia (2015) calls a “queer African archive.” Such an archive, Van Klinken suggests, emerges from myriad responses “to social and political homophobia . . . presenting a range of lgbt activist strategies and opening up alternative queer imaginations” (2019: 17). These include analyses of the controversial political presence of the famous Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, who came out as gay in 2014 (chapter 1); the music video “Same Love,” launched in 2016 by queer artist George Barasa and the artist group Art Attack and banned, shortly after, by the Kenyan government (chapter 2); an anthology of over two hundred life stories of Kenyans who identify respectively as gay, lesbian, transgender, queer, intersexed, or bi, published by the activist art group The Nest in 2015 (chapter 3); and a short ethnographic study of the Cosmopolitan Affirming Church in Nairobi—which, since its opening in 2013, has represented an important place of worship dedicated to queer Kenyans and Ugandan queer refugees (chapter 4). Interspersed between the book’s main chapters are four interludes in which Van Klinken reflects on the experiences, exigencies, and erotics of fieldwork—important reflections for a cosmopolitan archive of queer encounters on the continent.

Central to Van Klinken’s argument is the notion of “queer world-making”—that is, practices and discourses that entail an incipient potentiality for a future unplagued by homophobia, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. The book zooms in on Kenyan queer activists and artists, “the implicit and explicit ways in which they counter homophobia and challenge popular religious and political narratives; the agential ways in which they negotiate the politics of religion, sexuality, and citizenship; and the subversive ways in which they mobilize and empower themselves, creating space in a society where their existence and rights are considered, at best, a non-issue” (2019: 3–4). Attending to the potentialities for a queer future that inhere in such narratives, negotiations, and mobilizations, Van Klinken shows, is to “cruise utopia,” in the sense given to this phrase by queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009). There is something quite provocative about this phrase. For Muñoz, “to access queer visibility, we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (2009: 22). The scope of this exercise is to identify the possibility to craft a radically different world as a “not-yet-conscious” potentiality latent in the material conditions of the present. “The not-yet-conscious,” Muñoz argues,

“is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present.” (21) Van Klinken does precisely this: he attends carefully to not-yet-conscious possibilities for queer worlds, possibilities that, in contexts of homophobia, can be too easily overlooked, foreclosed.

Inevitably, for me, this analytical position also raises a question of *contextualization*: How and to what extent potentialities for a queer world thus identified can indeed realize themselves, actualize some of their promises, in the political economy of the present? Or, to put it differently, how do such emerging potentialities draw upon and, in turn, transform the wider sociopolitical contexts in which they emerge? Let me emphasize that to raise this question is not to insist on an “empiricist historiography” that, as Muñoz and others observed, has long denounced “utopian longing” (2009: 17). Nor, for that matter, do I mean to slip into the trodden discourse of Afro-pessimism. Rather—and precisely to avoid an uncritical queer romanticism—it is to further articulate (not just celebrate) how queer potentialities can and indeed should transform actual historical worlds beyond the “here and now” of their occurrence in an image or a text. For Muñoz—a dialectical thinker of a strong Marxist bent—attending to queer utopia is precisely about an ongoing critique of, and hence also a deep engagement with the present (along the lines of Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics”). To understand how potentiality emerges or, for that matter, how it comes to realize itself, we need to know more about the relationship between queer cultural productions and the political economic contexts in which they occur.

For Muñoz, thinking about queer utopia is also paying particular attention to how queer potentiality can be annihilated, foreclosed by the state, market, or—why not?—new forms of homonormativity. Consider one of his key examples: the historical transformation of New York City’s Times Square since the 1980s—a context so avidly revisited nowadays by television shows such as *Pose* or *The Deuce*. This was a context in which—as Muñoz learns from Samuel Delany’s famous book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*—radically queer sexual possibilities existed: men and women of different racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds, who lived quite segregated lives in the city’s geography of sharp inequality and violent discrimination encountered each other in Times Square’s numerous porn theaters, peep shows, bathhouses, or cruisy public spaces. Their intimacies, Muñoz



says, congealed in microcosm the potentiality for a queer utopian world, less burdened by racist and heterosexist forms of oppression. Attending to such intimacies is cruising utopia. But cruising utopia cannot remain separate from a critique of—even mobilization against—the wider structural circumstances which condition, limit, and, more often than not, eradicate queer potentiality. It is no surprise then that, in the face of such proliferating queer intimacies, Rudolph Giuliani and, later, Michael Bloomberg, as New York City’s mayors, implemented “the draconian rule . . . that rezoned the vast majority of public sex out of the city” (Muñoz 2009: 53); nor is it surprising that conservative, middle-class gays have supported such moral purification campaigns.

Similarly, in my view, we must see the cultural productions and socioeconomic predicaments of queer Kenyans today as indispensable from the struggles in which most Kenyans find themselves embattled. Hence, while the book’s focus on the second and third terms of its title—Christian and queer—are at the center of its interventions, more can be said about the first term: Kenyan. *What does it mean to be Kenyan?* And why have debates on this question revolved so strongly around issues of sexuality? I do not mean to ask how different LGBTQ+ subjects identify or how they relate to the signifier “Kenyan”; Van Klinken already outlines this elegantly in his discussion of queer life narratives (2019: 115ff.). Rather, I am more interested in the historically salient insistence on this question—*What does it mean to be Kenyan?*—in contemporary political culture and everyday life: how it coopts sexuality as a principle of exclusion and how it shapes the fields within which queer counternarratives emerge.

Indeed, in recent decades, debates over citizenship have proliferated in Kenya. They emerged in relation to, among other things, asylum seekers from Somalia; Kenya’s own internal “Somali question” (“Are Kenyan Somali’s really Kenyan?”); the struggles of Makonde or Nuba ethnic groups be recognized as citizens, after having been denied, for generations, national ID cards because of their colonial origins elsewhere on the continent; anxieties over Al-Shabaab and ISIS terrorist “infiltrations” in the country; or, of late, speculations that the government is selling citizenship (e.g., IDs, passports, etc.) to wealthy foreigners as a way to pay off international debts. Debates over the meanings of citizenship have coincided with a growing emphasis on sexuality as a principle of inclusion: intensifying disputes over sex education, HIV/AIDS, abortion, “gayism,”

female genital mutilation, forced marriage, widow inheritance, or queer refugees from Uganda and Tanzania. Questions about sexuality and citizenship then intersect saliently not only in moral panics and populist protests, on the street or on social media, but also in the regulative practices of the government and nongovernmental organizations ever so preoccupied with surveying, medicalizing, or criminalizing intimate lives. Why, then, is being Kenyan so centrally tied to a discourse of (homo)sexuality, even if in the negative, as its disavowal, its constant moral repudiation? And how can the possibilities emerging from queer cultural productions discussed in Van Klinken’s book interrogate, critique, and transform such contexts?

The above questions prompt us to think also about the social anxiety that permeates questions of sexual citizenship and the specific logics of homophobia in the Kenyan context—in particular, its intersections with ethnicity, “class,” and economic precarity. One way to answer these questions would be to think of how queer aesthetic and cultural productions do not counter homophobia alone but question and oppose forms of oppression that are necessarily intersectional. As Martin F. Manalasan IV (2009: 45) points out, “there are huge limitations in the deployment of homophobia as a label in political maneuvers within the queer community,” in particular, because of the term’s resistance to intersectional struggles. Hence, for Manalasan, “there is no ‘pure and simple’ homophobia.” In the Kenyan context, for example, sexual oppression—its logics, tactics, maneuvers—remain indispensable from the politics of ethnicity and, of late, the pivotal role of “middle class”-ness as an ideology and practice of privilege. Consider, for example, Binyavanga Wainaina’s words in his short YouTube video *We Must Free Our Imagination*. His critique here revolves less around some abstract homophobia and more around its imbrication in a narrow colonial epistemology of classification and future-making: “We are now killing each other, many of us, in all kinds of ways. It’s not so much that a gay and lesbian homosexual is dying. It’s that people are dying in exactly the same boundary the *mzungu* [white person] made. The person who is divided like this is killing the other one the way the other person was divided. Up to now. Right? That is the bankruptcy of a certain kind of imagination that we have . . .”

Note here Wainaina’s reference to ethnic violence (i.e., killing each other within boundaries of colonial invention) and the implicit suggestion that ethnicity and (homo)sexuality share the same epistemological forms and



foundations as colonial constructs, boundaries, ontologized identities (see also Hoad 2007). Further, this “bankruptcy of imagination,” Wainaina suggests, is driven in the present by the centrality of a “middle-class” cultural discourse: “Who has the opinion?” he says in the same video, “The middle class.” Hence, freeing one’s imagination is not merely rallying against homophobia as such, but against colonial epistemological foundations, protected now by middle-class privilege. In such discourses, then, homosexuality always intersects with ethnicity, race, and class, among other things.

Another important element of an intersectional analysis of homophobia in Kenya is, to me, the issue of Islam. In a context in which, as Gregory Deacon (2018) has shown, political discourses positing Kenya as a “Christian country” have been pivotal to the production of ethno-religious alterity and abjection, Muslim Kenyans have long been marked as “non-Kenyans,” “traitors,” or “terrorists.” Discussing same-sex intimacies in Kenya, Mary Porter’s (1995: 147) notes quite suggestively how “As Kenya struggles to develop a national identity, with Christian Nairobi at its center, Swahili people have become a Muslim, ‘homosexual’ Other in opposition to which non-coastal Christian Kenyans may construct an identity.” And, certainly, her observation can be extended to how nationalist discourses have construed other Muslim Kenyans, especially Somali. “The nature of the criticisms,” Porter continues, “[was] that they [were] ungodly (as non-Christian), lazy, rude, deceitful, un-Kenyan, and . . . sexually deviant in immoral and perverted ways that involved the unconventional sexual preferences and/or extra-marital sexual activity” (147). For this context then, in my view, Christianity also requires an analytical de-centering in order to interrogate forms of intersectional, ethno-religious marginalization, less visible otherwise.

Van Klinken makes it clear that his is not a study of homophobia, preferring instead a “more positive and constructive angle” (2019: ix) that emphasizes LGBTQ+ creative political imaginaries. Even so, the author provides key insights into forms of homophobic sentiment prevalent in the Kenyan context, if only as background for understanding particular queer cultural productions: for instance, Prophet Owuor’s demonization of homosexuality, the government’s censorship of queer audiovisual productions, or the more intimate forms of homophobic violence revealed in queer life narratives. But, because understanding the cultural productions analyzed here does require an in-depth understanding ho-

mophobia—not the essentialized, ahistorical “African homophobia” of global liberalist discourse, but historically specific, contextual manifestations thereof (Murray 2009)—the exercise, I suggest, could be taken further. It could also interrogate the intersectional politics of queerness and reflect further on the inflections of homophobia with anxieties, fear, and aspirations over citizenship and social reproduction. For example, that so much social life in neoliberal Kenya can indeed be said to entail queer moments, temporalities, and subjectivities that emerge with the impossibility to attain normative kinds of wealth, family, and reproduction (Meiu 2015) is also relevant to understanding the sudden overinvestment in homophobic ways of imagining homosexual bodies. These questions emerge for me less as critiques of an otherwise rich book and more because the book’s very compelling and imaginative arguments inevitably prompt us to think further about their implications.

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