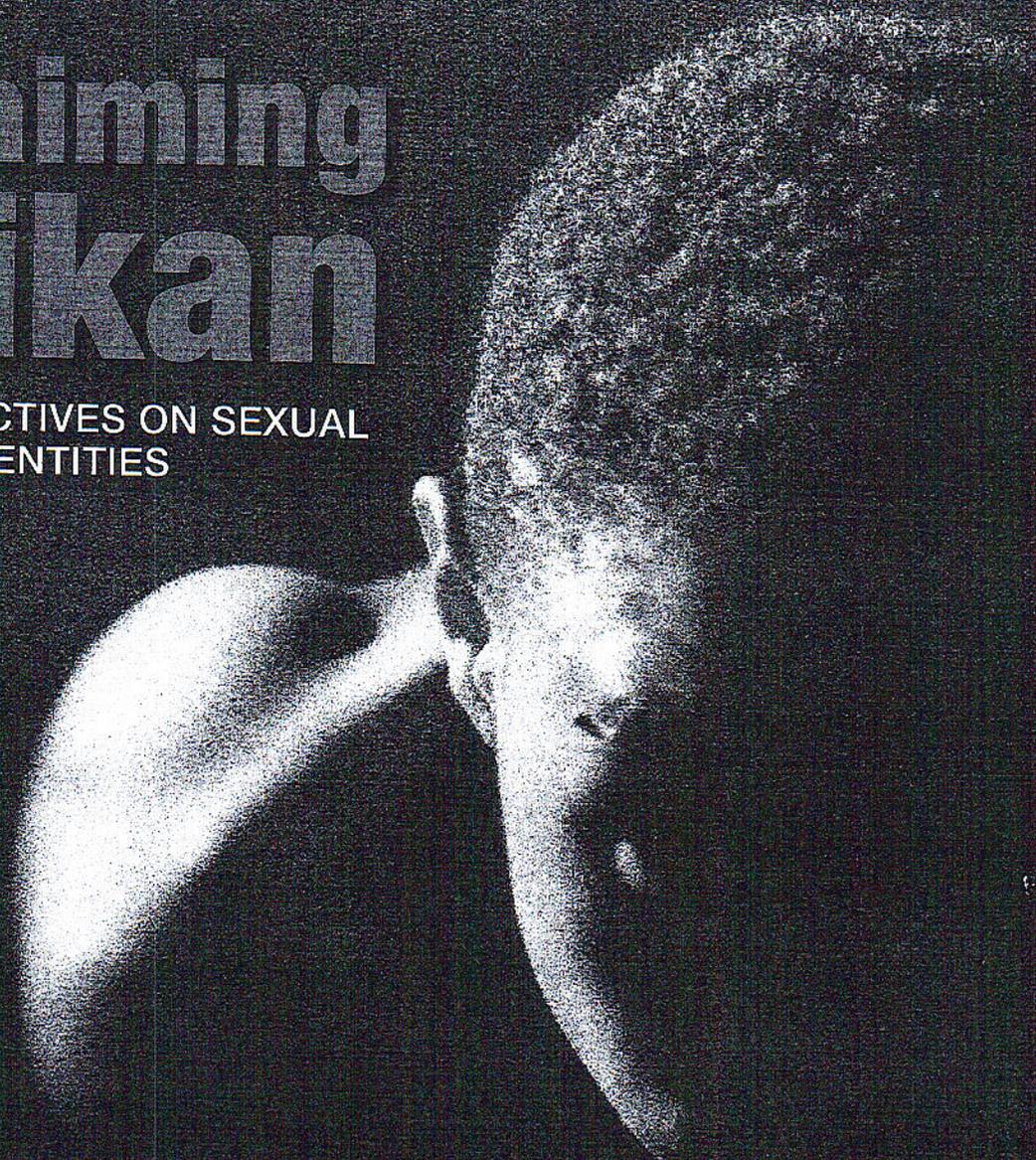


Reclaiming Afrikan

QUEER PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUAL
AND GENDER IDENTITIES



CURATED BY
ZETHU MATEBENI



QUEERING QUEER AFRICA

by Stella Nyanzi

Queer Africa is much more than Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

It is lazy to always start our queer African narratives with either this French philosopher or his American compatriot. Departures to Jeffrey Weeks, Denis Altman, Gilbert Herdt and Peter Aggleton still fit into western hegemony over queer studies. Sprinkling the menu with Audre Lorde, Sonia Correa or Serena Nanda is a commendable effort but not nearly enough. Stretching this tapestry of authorities to include queer scholars with masculine names from the Global South outside Africa would be an exercise in missing the gist of my introduction. In fact queer Africa should transcend Marc Epprecht, Rudolf Pell Gaudio, Wieringa Saskia, Ruth Morgan and the bold Africanist non-Africans who generously contribute to the growth of knowledge about non-heteronormative sexual orientations and non-conforming gender identities.

The dominant role of predominantly white South African queers is as empowering as it is also colonising because queer Africa is much larger than this one nation. Miniscule articulations of alternative South African queers as only Black raped lesbians, or brown coloured effeminate men are important, but also gagging of varied ways of being queer and African. South African lenses cannot be the only frames through which queer Africans from

the other fifty-five countries make meaning of our queer lives and realities. To queer "Queer Africa", one must simultaneously reclaim Africa in its bold diversities and reinsert queerness: two non-negotiable strategies that encapsulate the politics within this project. In this essay, I grapple with some complexities and possibilities within Queer Africa.

WHERE DO I FIT IN THIS QUEER WORLD?

With energetic passion and inquisitive curiosity, I insert myself into academic production of knowledge as a queer African scholar. Many citizens of the queer African communities that I engage with furiously kick against my claims to being a queer African scholar. "She cannot speak to us as one of us for she is not one of us," a butch lesbian once growled through a microphone, as her index finger pointed firmly at me, during an activist workshop in Kampala. "On whose authority do you speak for or about homosexual communities in Uganda?" a feminist academic asked after a presentation I gave in Cape Town. "Nothing for us without us!" a gay colleague passionlessly told me when I turned to him in frustration.

I needed to understand why queer Africans had problems accepting me as one of them; after all I was an active producer of queer African knowledge. If queer is indeed an open invitation to all of us opposed to essentialist patriarchal heterosexist heteronormative binary

◀ *Chromotherapy*, 2013

**Stills from a performance by artist:
Selogadi Mampane**

Photographed by Collen Mfazwe, inkanyiso.org

configurations of sexual orientations and gender identities, why did I repel queers? Whose right is it to determine who, what, where, when and how queer is? If queer is allowed to be queer, why are boundaries of inclusion and exclusion forcibly drawn – and usually based on essentialist readings by others of the perceived body under scrutiny?

My body was variously scrutinised, read and found wanting as a queer African subject. But what is my body's first reading by others? What, in their reading, necessarily disqualifies me from being a legitimate queer African scholar? Is it my Africanness or my queerness that is lacking? Do others read me as well as I read myself?

I am a loud-mouthed full-bodied Black African woman with skin the colour of hot millet porridge. I wear brightly coloured three-piece dresses made of *kitengi* fabric with grotesque yet pretty African artistic patterns. My skirts are full and ankle-length. My blouses curve well across my big bosom. Headpieces sit as crowns atop my kinky dreadlocks that silently speak of resistance and defiance to strictures of feminine propriety. Uncritical readings of my body scream "African cisgender woman". My apparel is also stereotypically interpreted as signifying my heterosexuality and subservient monogamous marriage to a singular man.

Beyond race, skin colour, hip size and a simplistic interpretation of my physical presentation, I claim Africa as a geo-social political position. I am from the Buffalo clan of

the Baganda ethnic group from Uganda in East Africa. My feminine clan-name is Nyanzi. My bequeathed names from the ancestors are Basambye and Bategeeza. My Christian colonial name is Stella, although my mother also named me Diana after the first wife of Prince Charles. Our family name is Nyanzi. Stella Nyanzi, my public label, is both an affirmation and erasure of parts of who I am. While it affirms my colonised, Christianised, patrilineal and Africanised clan-leanings, it also invisibilises my feminised, ancestral and matrilineal heritage. While my African roots cannot be denied, my Africanness is variously questioned by my colonisation, Christianity and westernisation.

When I claim my space(s) as a Black African, woman, wife and mother, nobody contests this. However, the expectation is that as a Black African heterosexual cisgender woman and mother, I should stay in my place – on my side of the line. Because I am a Ugandan and a Christian, the first expectation is that I am heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic and bi-phobic. Queer Africans outside Uganda immediately associate me with the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2014). Thus I get quickly rejected from queer citizenship. And yet I persistently shatter these essentialist deductions and assert my claim as a queer African scholar. In doing so, I generate dis-ease, discomfort and antagonisms.

"Heterosexuals have no part in this queer world, for they are the oppressors," many LGBTI

people object. Many others also insist that "queer" is a western paradigm through which neo-imperialism is sustained in Africa (Nyeck and Eprect 3-5).

WORKING WITHIN AND BEYOND THE FRAME OF THE LGBTI ACRONYM

Is there a place for heterosexual cisgenders in Africa's queer movement? Is there room for heterosexuals or cisgenders? When firm boundaries are drawn between homosexuals and heterosexuals, isn't this a simplistic re-styling of essentialist schisms? Isn't this another polarisation of binary oppositions – this time based on sexual orientation?

Where do bisexual people fit within the dual division between homosexuals and heterosexuals? Given the instrumentalisation of bisexuality as a protective decoy for some homosexual Africans living in highly homophobic national regimes, widespread neglect and denial of bisexuality erases a significant component of queer African subjectivities and experiences (Stobie). Furthermore, the neglect of those same-sex loving Africans who are bisexual by choice rather than circumstantially is a disservice to the growing queer movement in Africa. Bisexuality allows unpretentious recognition of polyamory; highlighting the problematic nature of simplistic readings of heterosexual presentations (Kajubi et al.). The shame and betrayal associated with bisexuality in the politics of queer identities can be tackled within a queer space that acknowledges

the dynamic fluidity, movement and flux between and within sexualities, as well as the creative and enabling potential of individual African queers to mediate and move across sexual identities, partaking of diverse practices as they move along and between nodes on the continuum. One potential queer re-reading of all heterosexuals is their potential for bisexuality.

Many queer readings of sexual identities in Africa misread dynamic gender identities of bodies in flux (Jobson et al.). The limited fixing of transgender subjects into “only this” or “only that” definition is dangerous to the queer movement in Africa. Trans – whether transvestite, transgender or transsexual – experiences facilitate the destabilising of gender identities between the two polarised divisions of men and women, male and female, masculinity and femininity. The queer movement in Africa is much richer for having opened up spaces of freedom for trans men, trans women, drag kings, drag queens, mtf (male to female), ftm (female to male), as well as transsexual people. To this extent, we must celebrate specific local movements for freeing ourselves from the chains of heteropatriarchal gender binaries. However, where is the space for the trans person transitioning into queerness? Why must transitioning always and only be restricted to a change from one of the two gender categories into the other one? Why limit the transition only from male to female and from female to male? Where is the space for articulating gender neutral, gender fluid, gender

dynamic and gender queer subjectivities and experiences? Why is the concentration around gender about being either male or female, but much less about being neither one of these, or indeed being both of them? Furthermore, why are trans experiences only validated when the gender non-conformance is bodily?

Intersexuality is a viable component of the queer African movement which easily mobilises empathies of heteronormative societal members (Swarr, Nyon’go, Munro). Because of anatomical disjuncture evident in some intersex individuals over the lifecourse, it is relatively easier for them to find the acceptance of heteronormative societal members. Unlike homosexuality, transsexuality and transgenderedness, blame for intersexuality is quickly shifted from the individual to nature, ancestors, divinities or God’s creative abilities. Evidence of intersexuality – however complicated, be it hormonal, gonads, genetic, anatomic and physiological – is relatively more palatable to critics who contend against accepting the science of homosexuality, transsexuality and transgenderedness.

Thinking beyond the loaded westernised frame of the LGBTI acronym, queer Africa must necessarily explore and articulate local nuances of being non-heteronormative and non-gender conforming. Language and language-ing beyond the English medium into diverse African languages and tongues is important towards queering queer Africa (see Leap and Boellstorff).

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Likewise fissures among Anglophones, Francophones, Lusophones and Arabophones must be sutured in and across the continent. Euphemisms, metaphors, similes, proverbs and riddles must be re-read queerly, alongside gestures, silences, erasures and invisibilisation.

Cultural and indigenous understandings of gendered spirits of ancestors who may possess individuals offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities. Queer Africa must reclaim such African modes of blending, bending and breaking gender boundaries. This necessarily calls for expanding the spaces for multi-spirited people, *sangoma*, traditional healers, spiritual guides and spirit mediums that facilitate local understandings of fluid genders (Nkabinde, Morgan and Reid). Likewise, cross-dressers, transvestites and other social groups that creatively transgress

gendered boundaries of dress, clothing and fashion – whether across, within or beyond genders – offer poignant opportunities to study contemporary and/or historical modes of enacting alternative genders.

QUEERING SEX WITHIN AND BEYOND THE ANUS

While the study of anal sex is important to queer knowledge production, queer sexual practices extend much wider. The overt concentration on anal sex among same-sex loving men attests to the dominant androgynous positioning of men within the hierarchy of queer knowledge generation, advances of the anti-HIV/AIDS industry and the relatively more reticent roles of women, trans and intersex persons focusing on other aspects of queer life beyond disease and health. Vaginas, tongues, fingers, thighs, breasts, ears, feet, dildos, sex toys, whips, and ice-cream are but a small proportion of the myriad body parts and accessories that play vital roles in the queer African sexual scene. Queering sex beyond the anus is important specifically because many same-sex loving Africans never eroticise their anuses and rectums throughout their lives. Queer Africa must underscore the linkages between anal sex and heterosexuality (Lane et al., Kalichman et al.). This knowledge would complicate anti-sodomy laws that are narrowly translated as targeting homosexuality. Likewise, such queer knowledge would demand a nuanced approach to the efforts of the safe sex industry.

Queering queer Africa demands a widening of thematic focus for widening knowledge (Nyanzi). The canvas of possibilities demanding queer production of knowledge from Africa include relationships, pleasure, intimacy, parenthood, education, voice and expression, representation and visibility, housing and shelter, movement, migration, exile and asylum, employment, income generation, livelihoods, family, ritual, health, spirituality, religion, faith, ritual, violence, security and safety, nationalism, ethnicity, and globalisation. The methods of queering queer Africa necessarily demand innovation, creativity, multi-disciplinarity and a combination of academic scholarship, social activism and the diverse lived realities of local queer Africans.

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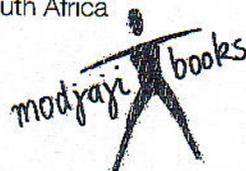
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