

African Studies Keywords: Queer

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Abstract: “Queer” is a relatively recent and somewhat controversial term in African studies. Yet it is proving to be productive, not only for understanding African subjectivities of sexuality and gender, but also for situating Africa’s position in the larger economy of knowledge. Otu and van Klinken explore the productive tensions between “queer” and “Africa,” and aim to read Africa as queer and to read queer from Africa. Thus, rather than imagining Africa and queer as polar opposites, the authors seek to harness the critical, productive, and creative affinities between these two terms that are vital for the project of decolonizing and queering queer Africa.

Résumé : Le terme « Queer » est relativement récent et quelque peu controversé dans les études africaines. Pourtant, il s’avère productif, non seulement pour comprendre les subjectivités africaines de la sexualité et du genre, mais aussi pour situer la position de l’Afrique dans l’économie plus large du savoir. Otu et van Klinken explorent les tensions fécondes entre les termes « Queer » et « Afrique », et visent à lire l’Afrique

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comme queer et à lire queer comme l'Afrique. Ainsi, plutôt que d'imaginer l'Afrique et le queer comme des opposés polaires, les auteurs cherchent à exploiter les affinités critiques, productives et créatives entre ces deux termes qui sont vitaux pour le projet de décolonisation et d'identité de l'Afrique queer.

Resumo: No contexto dos estudos africanos, o termo “*queer*” é relativamente recente e alvo de alguma controvérsia. No entanto, tem-se revelado muito útil não só para compreender as subjetividades africanas quanto à sexualidade e ao gênero, mas também para situar a posição do continente africano na economia mais ampla do conhecimento. Otu e Van Klinken analisam as tensões produtivas entre os termos “*queer*” e “*áfrica*”, propondo uma leitura de África enquanto *queer* e uma leitura de *queer* proveniente de África. Assim, em vez de imaginarem África e *queer* como polos opostos, os autores procuram tirar partido das afinidades essenciais, produtivas e criativas entre estes dois termos, que são vitais para o projeto de descolonização e de afirmação da identidade *queer* em África.

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“Africa” and “Queer” as Oppositional?

“Africa” and “queer” are two categories of analysis and thought that often are antagonistically opposed. On the continent, popular narratives frequently frame queerness as “un-African,” while in other parts of the world Africa is often perceived as an anti-queer continent. A recent articulation and collision of both narratives can be found in the discourses around and about the anti-LGBT+ bill—officially known as the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill (2021)—that is currently being considered by the Ghanaian parliament. On the one hand, leading political and religious actors in Ghana argue that the bill is much needed to defend the purity of Ghanaian cultural traditions. In the words of MP Samuel Nartey George, “We owe it to ourselves and the people of Ghana to uphold that which gives us our identity as a people ... May we unite in this fight against the scourge and perversion that homosexuality presents. So help us GOD” (quoted in Bhalla 2021). This quote exemplifies the way in which African postcolonial leaders, in the words of Achille Mbembe, are “riding the phallus” (2021:190). That is, they successfully promote and popularize an invented hetero-patriarchal narrative in which African identity and authenticity are affirmed and claimed vis-a-vis the liberal, secular, and “immoral” West and its “gay agenda” (Awondo, Geschiere, & Reid 2012; Coly 2013; Epprecht 2009; Fumanti 2017; Ndjio 2013; Tamale 2013). Ironically, demonstrating what has been dubbed postcolonial amnesia (Bajaha 2015), this move willfully ignores

traditions of sexual and gender diversity that have long existed on the continent (Murray & Roscoe 1998; Morgan & Wieringa 2005), thus reproducing colonialist perceptions of Africa as a heterosexual continent (Epprecht 2008). In Western media, on the other hand, Ghana's bill is represented as "a homophobe's dream," and as "the worst anti-LGBTQ bill ever" (Gregory 2021). This exemplifies a narrative in which the West uses LGBT+ rights in order to reaffirm its own self-image as progressive and modern by contrasting itself to its Other, the African continent, which supposedly is "the worst place to be gay" (Mills 2011; also see Otu 2017). Arguably, this representation directly or indirectly reinforces longstanding ideas of Africa's "backwardness" and perpetuates imaginaries of Africa in which the West, in Mbembe's words, "represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity" (2001:2).

These bipolar narratives and their underlying discourses demonstrate how sexuality and gender—as the primary domains of queerness—have again emerged as (or continue to be) key sites where the struggle over the question of African identity in a globalized and postcolonial world, as well as the question of the relationship between Africa and other parts of the world (in particular, the West) is enacted. As Peter Geschiere has argued, contemporary African debates about sexuality raise critical challenges to African studies generally, an important one being "that any effort toward a deeper understanding of recent confrontations over same-sex issues requires a surpassing of the binary oppositions that keep haunting the social sciences—not only homo/hetero, but also more general ones like traditional/colonial or African/Western" (2017:8–9). With much of the contemporary contestation centering around same-sex sexualities, it is important not to overlook gender variance in scholarship on queer Africa, and in particular to highlight trans subjectivities which frequently are excluded from, or marginalized in, the queer discourse (see Camminga 2019; Camminga & Marnell 2022; Jobson et al. 2012; Mbugua 2013; Thomann & Corey-Boulet 2017). The same applies to sex worker communities, which operate in a liminal social and sexual space, with obvious queer affinities (Mgbako 2016; Van Staple 2020).

As a result of these fierce contestations, even scholars who do acknowledge and foreground cultures of sexual and gender diversity on the continent have sometimes argued that "queer" is not the appropriate conceptual language to theorize these cultures and traditions, because of queer theory's etymology and heavy dependence on Western theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. For instance, arguing that queer theory "awaits a rigorously theorized indigenous term or terms grounded in African culture and contemporary struggles, sensitive to lessons learned through decades of Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial critiques of power and the sociology of science," Marc Epprecht has pointed out that "it is important to acknowledge but not to promote queer theory as a research strategy in Africa" (Epprecht

2008:171, 16; for a response, see Spurlin 2010). This argument, which is somewhat reminiscent of earlier debates about feminism in Africa, has led African queer scholars and thinkers such as Keguro Macharia (2016) to launch “A Litany of Complaint” which critiques how their quest for queer knowledge, (self-)understanding, and existence is denied or systematically pigeonholed. However, as part of the “global trajectories of queerness” (Tellis & Bala 2015), and of the ongoing decolonization of queer studies (Hawley & Altman 2001; McEwen & Milani 2014), many African sexual and gender diversity activists, artists, and scholars have embraced “queer” as a political and theoretical term to name their struggles, especially in Anglo-phone contexts.¹ Sokari Ekiné and Hakima Abbas, as editors of the *Queer African Reader*, acknowledge the limitations of the term “queer” in relation to African neo-colonial realities, yet they adopt it to denote a radical political and epistemological frame: “We use queer to underscore a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks” (Abbas & Ekiné 2013:3). Thus, although these scholars appear to struggle somewhat with the western genealogy of queer terminology, they nevertheless adopt it for a radical project of thinking through, and working toward, sexual and gender diversity in Africa. The same applies to Zethu Matebeni’s volume, *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives*, where the spelling of “Afrikan” with a “k” serves to emphasize “the need to reclaim our existence and being in this continent,” and where “queer” with some reluctance is used to conceptualize “an inquiry into the present, as a critical space that pushes the boundaries of what is embraced as normative” (Matebeni & Pereira 2014:7).

This trajectory of an appropriation of “queer” to label African activism and scholarship regarding sexualities and genders has stimulated the emergence of a new interdisciplinary sub-field of African studies, which has come to be known as queer African studies, or African queer studies (Amory 1997; Macharia 2009, 2015; Currier & Migraine-George 2016; Matebeni, Monro, & Reddy 2018; Nyeck 2020; Spronk & Nyeck 2021). The naming of this field and the order of the two key words already raise critical conceptual questions, about what the subject of this field is, what the adjective does, and what the aims of this field are, to queer African studies, or to Africanize queer studies. In any case, one offshoot of this emergent interest is the Queer African Studies Association, inaugurated in 2015 as a coordinate organization within the African Studies Association (USA). Although this field has been characterized by a strong focus on South Africa as an apparent key site of “the dream of love to come” (Munro 2012; see also Spurlin 2006; Tucker 2009; Livermon 2012; Morison, Lynch & Reddy 2019; Sizemore-Barber 2020; Riley 2021), recent years have witnessed an increasing body of scholarship on queer subjectivities and politics in other parts of the continent, such as Democratic Republic of Congo (Hendriks 2018, 2022), Ghana (Dankwa 2021; Otu 2022), Kenya (Ombagi 2019a; van Klinken 2019), Nigeria (Gaudio 2009; Munro 2016; Onanuga 2021), Mozambique (De Araújo 2021a, 2021b), and Uganda

(Rodriguez 2019; Rao 2020). Methodologically and thematically, the focus is wide-ranging, from social movements and community organizing (Broqua 2012; Guéboguo 2008; Mbaye 2018; Nyeck & Epprecht 2013; Lorway 2015; Vrede 2020) to creative forms of visibility and activism, such as through arts (Meiu 2022), literature (Adenekan 2021; Azuah 2009, 2019; Mwangi 2017; Ofei & Oppong-Adjei 2021; Zabus 2013), film (Johnstone 2021; Ncube 2020, 2021; Ndjio 2021; Otu 2021; Scott 2021; Green-Simms 2022), social media (Gunkel 2013; Mwangi 2014; Onanuga 2021), sports (Ndjio 2022), autobiographical storytelling (Baderoon 2015; Oloruntoba-Oju 2021; Ombagi 2019b; Stobie 2014; van Klinken & Stiebert 2021), and material objects (Meiu 2020). Other studies foreground how, in fact, invisibility, silence, and secrecy can afford strategic possibilities of negotiating queer expressions in ways that counter expectations of queerness as defined by overt resistance and protest (Nyanzi 2015; Oudenhuijsen 2021).

In some of these studies, “queer” is used as a synonym for LGBT+ identities, while in other studies the term is deployed to call into question the supposed stability of these Western categories and to draw attention to the ambiguity and fluidity of indigenous African conceptualizations of sexuality and gender (Epprecht 2004; Gaudio 2009; Moreau & Tallie 2020). Yet other work explores the tensions and frictions between indigenous expressions of sexual and gender variance and Western LGBT+ categories, such as in the case of *travestis* in Côte d’Ivoire who recently began to be framed as transgender by sexual minority activists (Thomann & Corey-Boulet 2017), or in the case of “small town gay identities” that negotiate traditional values and customs with modern discourses of LGBT+ equality and rights through “everyday practices of gayness” (Reid 2013). Clearly, scholarship in queer African studies demonstrates the rich diversity and complexity of gendered and sexual subjectivities and the related embodied and performative practices that exist on the African continent, in addition to the ways in which these have developed historically and in the context of contemporary politics and advocacy. The task at hand is “to queer both ‘sexuality’ and ‘Africa,’ letting them speak to one another and engage in a productive relationship” (Hendriks & Spronk 2020:6), and to generate a creative, discursive “vortex” between the categories of “queer” and “Africa” that destabilizes rigid and essentialist categorizations (Currier & Migraine-George 2016:283). This productive exchange, Keguro Macharia (2019) reminds us, can also be fractious, generating unforeseen possibilities, opening up the potential for both “queering African studies” and “Africanizing queerness” (Geschiere 2017:9).

Reading Africa as Queer

Before further discussing the “fledgling yet flourishing area of queer African studies” (Munro 2015:169) in more detail, it is important to acknowledge that beyond the recent invocation and reconceptualization of queer terminology in contemporary Africa and the valid point that the modern English term “queer” has travelled to the continent from elsewhere, there is a more

fundamental notion in which Africa can be argued to “always” have been queer, in the sense that it has been, and continues to be, seen as the Other to European/Western modernity. To regard Africa as queer requires, first, to critically engage with the longstanding history and ongoing legacies of othering Africa—the notion of Africa as a constant “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) and as being “out of time” (Rao 2020). The racial othering of Africa, an outsidersness that justified colonization and slavery, solidified Africa’s “queer” position in the Euro-American imagination. Moreover, the sexual politics of European exploration, mission, slavery, and (neo)colonialism meant that this racial othering also was a sexual othering (Thomas 2007). If “queer,” in Halperin’s words, demarcates “not a positivity but a positionality vis-a-vis the normative” (1997:62), Africa has been and continues to be positioned as a fundamentally queer continent, because whatever the sexual conventions are in the Western-dominated world (and they have changed considerably over the years), Africa appears to be at odds with them: either too much into polygamy and/or promiscuity (and God forbid, even into “sodomy”!), or too heteronormative and homophobic. Furthermore, in reading Africa as queer, we are complicating and interrogating the extant Euro-American notions of Africa as an anti-queer continent, which only serve to reinforce the logic of the West as progressive and liberal, as well as the currently prevailing notions on the continent that reflect a reified African heteronationalism, or even anti-homonationalism, driven by a postcolonial cultural amnesia and an ongoing coloniality of being (Hoad 2007). One way to overcome these reductive and essentializing discourses is by acknowledging, foregrounding, and reclaiming the multiple manifestations of queerness in African cultures and societies, while also being cognizant of the heterogeneous dimensions of homophobia. Long before the term “queer” had been coined in English, African languages had words for expressions of sexual and gender ambiguity and fluidity—and even if they did not have words for it, these expressions were tolerated, if not quietly celebrated as sacred, in traditional “cultures of discretion” (Epprecht 2004). Moreover, contemporary queer African activists, artists, and thinkers creatively reclaim some of these histories, while taking inspiration from other socio-political struggles for dignity, freedom, and life on the continent and its diaspora, thus inspiring an emerging discourse of queer pan-Africanism (van Klinken 2020). As Zethu Matebeni and Jabu Pereira (2014:7) put it, this is a matter of creating “our own version of Afrika—a space that cuts across the rigid borders and boundaries that have for so many years made us feel disconnected and fractured.”

Thus, as *Queer* is the keyword and operative term here, in this essay we are committed to exploring what shape and form it takes when it encounters Africa as an idea and a way of being in the world. Of course, naturally, the West has emerged as the provenance of queer, and whatever discursive formations inform its contours and contents. Since Teresa de Lauretis (1991) introduced queer theory as the discursive domain from which to render queer as distinct from gay and lesbian, this theoretical formulation has exploded, not only in the West but beyond its geographical and

ideological confines. In emphasizing the dynamism of queer at the time, de Lauretis suggests that the term, “juxtaposed to the ‘lesbian and gay’ ... is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often convenient, formula” (1992:iv). De Lauretis’ iteration of queer not only situates its genealogy in the West, the United States to be specific, but sets in motion a project that mainstreams queer as an analytical device for explaining non-heteronormative lives.

Aware of this genealogy, which has markedly emerged as the dominant origin narrative of queer, we suggest that the arrival of the term in postcolonial Africa enacts another genealogy of queer that at once jettisons yet remains uncomfortably entangled with the dominant narrative of queer emanating from the West. In that pursuit, we ask whether the appearance of queer or its deployment in Africa strips from it the western denotations that enrobe it, or if it retains those traits that are decidedly Western? Hence, what does queer mean in the African context? How is queer transformed by its appearance in Africa? Are queer and Africa truly hostile toward each other? In what ways does “queer” in an African sense enable acknowledging that homophobia is not a monolith? We pose these questions against the backdrop of current debates on the place of queerness in Africa—debates that implicate the meanings of queer that are trafficked into Africa by heteronationalist and queer humanitarian organizations in the contemporary moment.

To juxtapose queer with Africa and Africa with queer presents a fundamental paradox for us, exactly because we see critical and constructive affinities between these two terms. Arguably, this puzzle is deeply rooted in how ideas travel and how the situations or the contexts through which they travel both transform and are transformed by these ideas. Given that queer is employed variously as a concept, identity category, and theoretical device, we agree that it has the ability to permutate as it travels. By being in transit, then, queer generates frictions, sometimes revealing those strange affinities and entanglements that allegedly exist between opposing or antagonistic factions. The Kenyan queer literary theorist Keguro Macharia brilliantly uses “frottage” to capture these frictions. For him, the “conceptual and affective proximity: the rubbing produced by and as blackness, which assembles into one frame multiple histories and geographies” (2019:5), presents us with an opportunity to think about collisions generatively. In the spirit of Macharia’s intervention, we view queer in and from Africa as spawning these rubs, tensions, proximities, and entanglements, as it travels and encounters Africa in its multiple complexity.

Reminiscent, then, of what the literary scholar Edward Said conceptualizes as “traveling theory” in his essay bearing the same title, queer and Africa have always been transient, taking on different hues and textures. “Like people and schools of criticism,” argues Said, “ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (2014:15). Said recognizes the nourishment derived from ideas dispersing, be it consciously or unconsciously, or through mundane or unintentional

acts of borrowing. He does not end there, however. In fact, he proceeds to ask “whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation?” (2014:15). In this essay, we are of the view that the recesses and excesses of queerness in Africa are reminiscent of the “gains or losses” that occur when ideas, terms, and theoretical frameworks travel into different contexts.

Reading “Queer” from Africa

Most inquiries into the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of African queer studies demonstrate the multifarious and contradictory shapes that queer takes in and across continental Africa, and the uses and abuses, if you will, of queer as a category, concept, and a way of being on the continent (cf. Currier & Migraine-George 2016, 2018; Macharia 2015; Migraine-George & Currier 2016; Ncube 2018; Nyeck 2020; Osinubi 2018; Robertson 2021). One only has to look at Kwame Otu’s (2022) ethnography on queer self-fashioning in Ghana, which explores how a community of self-identified effeminate men in Ghana, known in local parlance as *sasso*, navigate homophobia amid the increased visibility of LGBT+ human rights politics, to understand these complexities. In this study, the contradictory shapes and processes about which we write come to life. Otu demonstrates how the *sasso* involved in his study strategically navigated homophobia by fashioning homosexual and heterosexual selves depending on the situations, which were often precarious, in which they found themselves. Thus, when engaging with LGBT+ human rights organizations, for instance, *sasso* were likely to unapologetically embrace queer identification. The moment they left these contexts to engage with their families, churches, and other facets of society, they selectively refrained from deploying these labels. While these vacillations enacted by *sasso* evoke how African queer studies demonstrate the multifarious and contradictory shapes of queerness trans-continently, they also point to how an African reading of queer is coterminously a “conjunctural analysis,” to echo the cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall. In an interview with Doreen Massey, here is how Hall describes what he calls “conjunctural analysis.” We quote the description here at length for the purposes of our analysis of how reading queer from Africa invites a conjunctural viewpoint:

A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. [...] A conjuncture can be long or short: it’s not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime—though these have their own effects. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed [...]. Crises are

moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. (Hall & Massey 2010)

We find Hall's description of conjuncture to be productive precisely because it signifies what reading queer from Africa evokes. In this moment in African time, queerness, we argue, emerges to highlight how Africans enter and interact with queer formations, sometimes unevenly, sometimes uncomfortably, and in ways that highlight those "social, political economic and ideological contradictions" that Hall mentions "are at work in society." Hence, if we regard reading queer from Africa as necessitating a conjunctural analysis, then it is also to make comprehensible the paroxysms that queer politics incites, and how these contest with the multiplicity of "vernacular" queer presences on the continent.²

Stella Nyanzi and Zethu Matebeni, for instance, offer examples of queer as conjunctural, when they unpack the inadequacies of queerness and the political projects it incites in the context of Africa. In doing so, these scholars respectively illumine some of these contradictions while simultaneously showing those different forms that queer takes when it meets Africa. Nyanzi, in her essay entitled, "Queering Queer Africa," offers a useful entry point for elucidating the complex entanglements between Africa and queer. Frustrated by the treatment meted out to her by self-identified queer Africans, Nyanzi befittingly asks the following question in her essay: "If queer is indeed an open invitation to all of us opposed to essentialist patriarchal heterosexist heteronormative binary configurations of sexual orientations and gender identities, why did I repel queers?" Drawing on her experience—as a heterosexually inclined person cum queer activist and scholar—in the queer movement in Uganda, Nyanzi implores us to confront what it means to queer Queer Africa. She offers the following response in her essay: "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" (2014:65–66).

Here, we suggest that these "two non-negotiable strategies" are perhaps what distinguish queer in Africa from its Global North variant. As Rachel Spronk and S. N. Nyeck (2021:393) put it, African queerness is not "an end goal tied to outcomes that are standardized." This distinction also marks queer in and from the standpoint of Africa as unconventional. Our deployment of unconventional here is therefore ironic, given that queer is often construed as unconventional and non-normative. With this paradoxical backdrop in mind, we agree that the encounter between queer/Africa and queer/Global North creates a contact zone of possibility and impossibility; one that not only highlights the rubs and tensions (à la Macharia) but also the worlds these frictions enable. In this contact zone, we are able to diagnose how what is deemed or imagined as radical can be potentially unradical, reactionary, and hegemonic. Matebeni's dissatisfaction with Global Northern categories like queer and LGBT+ and how they homogenize by creating precarious and violent environments for non-heteronormative South Africans exemplifies this

point. Like Nyanzi, Matebeni articulates this quite clearly when they suggest that queer, in its operational form in Africa, necessitates the oft-reductionist politics of LGBT+ activism that holds the vibrant and diverse non-normative subjectivities and formations hostage. Matebeni's essay, titled "How Not to Write about Queer South Africa," which is a riff off of the late queer Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's essay "How to Write about Africa" (2005), does not merely problematize the deployment of queer in South Africa, in particular, but also the visceral consequences such deployment leaves on non-heteronormative bodies.

The nomenclature queer/LGBT+ may make visible those communities that are supposedly invisible, but it also enables foreclosure by homogenizing non-heteronormativities. Matebeni's concern, therefore, highlights a crucial paradox for us, which is how visibility under the banner of queer has the tendency to expose non-heteronormative bodies to the violence exacted by homonegativity. In other words, on whose terms is visibility politics being pursued, and for whom is visibility the practical task of freedom? Evident in Matebeni's much warranted apprehension toward LGBT+ politics in South Africa, particularly, are the ways in which "radical" queer politics incites violence on bodies for whom the pursuit of queer freedom is undertaken. The queer of color theorist Chandan Reddy calls this "freedom with violence" (2011), in his analysis of how queer political projects in the Global North not only endanger queer people of color but also deepen their already precarious states. In the same vein as Reddy, Matebeni points to how the LGBT+ acronym itself, construed as inclusionary, is precisely the platform on which the exclusionary tendencies of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and transphobia become tangible. While some will argue in this neoliberal moment that gains and wins have been made in making LGBT+ issues visible, it also must be understood that the neoliberal project of LGBT+ humanitarianism in Africa is different from the neoliberal project that binds LGBT+ visibility politics in the Global North (e.g., Biruk & Trapence 2018; Biruk 2020). Against this backdrop, we invite a historicization of queer in Africa that recognizes how neoliberal efforts, exemplified by the programs of structural adjustment and economic recovery in the eighties and nineties, modified the contexts in which African queer politics plays out today. M. Jacqui Alexander has brilliantly suggested that rather than helping to eradicate the problems they were intended to target, these structural adjustment programs structurally "readjusted violence" (Alexander 2005). We read the exacerbation of homophobia in places like Ghana and elsewhere on the continent as evidence of this structural readjustment of violence. In other words, neoliberal projects to mainstream gender created a contact zone where gender issues are read solely as women's issues, an interpretation that not only fossilized gender as women but made it impossible to read gender capaciously.

From Macharia, Matebeni, Nyanzi, and Alexander we glean those modalities of queer and those queer modalities engendered by Africa's interface with queerness in the contact zone, especially the contact zone produced in, to use Patricia McFadden's term, this "neocolonial and neocapitalist

collusionary moment” (2011). These range from representations of non-heteronormative subjects as victims of intolerant, backward, and homophobic Africans to the skewed understanding of queerness as limited to the acronym LGBT+, which, as Nyanzi points out, “misread dynamic gender identities of bodies in flux” (Nyanzi 2014:66).

We position ourselves in the contact zone, that unnerving space that calls on us to meditate on how ideas, concepts, and categories that travel come to acquire a life of their own, particularly as they transit through time and space. The innovative theoretical possibilities that Africa presents to us, as a place from which to create a renewed relationship to queerness, is advanced in various works. For example, Adriaan van Klinken’s book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019) touches on the unexpected affinities between religion, in particular Christianity, and queerness in Kenya that result from their frictions/rubs. The book is an ethnographic portrait of how queer Kenyans mobilize Christianity, while at the same time retaining seemingly paradoxical connections to their Kenyanness and queerness, modalities of being often construed as oppositional but which turn out to have considerable productive affinity. Graeme Reid’s (2010) earlier study of a “gay church” in Johannesburg, led by a black Pentecostal minister, offered a somewhat similar analysis of the creative intersections of Christianity and queerness in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. These works are of critical importance, because where queerness in Western thought tends to be antagonistically opposed to religion, and is thought of as a secular category, thinking queerness from Africa foregrounds religion—broadly defined—as a productive site and category. Because in African societies religious ritual, language, symbol, and gesture transgress boundaries and interrogate binary categories and dualisms—such as of “spirit” and “mind,” “religion” and “the secular,” and “private” and “public”—religion is unruly, wild, and constantly in flux (Chidester 2012). Nyanzi capitalizes on this when she argues that “queering queer Africa” involves reclaiming the spiritual and sacred dimensions of queerness in African traditions. In her assessment, the “cultural and indigenious understandings of gendered spirits of ancestors who may possess individuals [...] offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities” (Nyanzi 2014:67). As a case in point, we can refer to the self-identifying “lesbian prophetess” Jacinta, who is prominently featured in the documentary film *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (Obinyan 2020) and who calls on the power of the Holy Spirit to legitimize and perform queer Pentecostal prophecy. As much as the church that she is part of is connected to a transnational, originally American LGBT+ Christian network, this is a black Pentecostal Christian organization that foregrounds the intersectionality of sexuality and race in a progressive Christian narrative, and which pursues an explicitly queer and anti-capitalist pan-African vision (van Klinken 2019). With regard to Islamic contexts, South Africa is home to the continent’s (if not the world’s) first LGBT+ affirming mosque, led by an openly gay Imam, Mushin Hendricks, who has embarked on a “queer Jihad” of

reinterpreting the Quran and Islamic tradition (Kugle 2005; also see Kamrudin 2018; Piraino 2018).

Beyond these innovative but relatively rare explicitly LGBT-affirming religious spaces, studies in other contexts have demonstrated how the charismatic nature of Pentecostal Christianity allows for performances of queerness, despite the ostensible homophobia characterizing the same form of Christianity (Homewood 2016, 2020; Nadar & Jodamus 2019; Richman 2021). Thus, Nathanael Homewood reads the seemingly heteronormative spaces of charismatic churches in Zimbabwe as conducive sites for the performance of remarkable counter-intimacies that demonstrate the fluid boundaries between spiritual and erotic desire among people with a range of sexual and gender expressions, thus adding to the “innumerable ways of being queer” in contemporary Africa (2016:248). With regard to Islamic contexts, Rudolf Gaudio’s (2009) ethnographic study of a community of ‘*yan daudu* (“men who act like women”) among the Hausa in Northern Nigeria provides somewhat similar insights into how religious language and ritual enable unique queer sensibilities and subjectivities centering around the claim that “Allah made us.” Likewise, the literary work of the Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa (2006, 2008, 2012) illuminates the queer forms of intimacy and desire ingrained in Islamic North African cultures, while the writings of Afdhere Jama (2015) and Diriye Osman (2013) do the same with regard to Islamic Somali communities. These writers use literary styles to creatively engage with Islamic beliefs and rituals as sites of queer agency, creativity, and intimacy, and to develop an emerging queer African Islamic discourse (Ncube & Van Klinken *in press*).

Yet another case in point, in the context of African indigenous religions, is the self-described “lesbian sangoma” Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde who in their autobiography *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me* invokes the motif of ancestral spirit possession to legitimize and perform gender-transient Zulu indigenous healing (Nkabinde 2008; also see Stobie 2011; van Klinken & Otu 2017). A similar indigenization of queerness through the category of spirits can be found in Akwaeke Emezi’s acclaimed novel *Freshwater* (2018), which adopts the Igbo concept of *ogbanje* (spirit-child) as a narrative framework to explore the transient and fluid gendered and sexual modes of being embodied by the main protagonist (Magaqa & Makombe 2021).

These various African queer subjects demonstrate that to think queer from Africa is to affirm Africa as a site of critique of the inflexible and disenchanting Euro-American concepts trafficked to the continent, from Christian and civilizing mission to contemporary LGBT+ and human rights crusades. They also invite us to interrogate dominant Western notions of queerness as anti-normative, by drawing attention to the complex ways in which norms are simultaneously and subtly inhabited and subverted, embodied and transgressed (Hendriks 2021). Africa is a site of critique and alternative possibilities, because it has long been characterized by significant levels of instability, fluidity, and performativity of desire, gender, and sexuality, and by a rich interplay of body, spirit, and mind in indigenous conceptions of

personhood. As much as there is a need to be critical of the exportation of identity politics such as that represented by the ever-expanding LGBT+ acronym, we also need to acknowledge the ways in which such politics are creatively appropriated and resignified in local contexts. Lesbian prophetesses, gay imams, and trans sangomas, for instance, are far from “clear-cut identifications” but exemplify the agential, creative, and complex dynamics through which queerness in the twenty-first century is Africanized, and Africanness is queered (Geschiera 2017:26). Thus, even under the LGBT+ umbrella, one is likely to encounter expressions of sexual and gender diversity that do not neatly map onto Western notions but that, in fact, represent hybrid everyday assemblages. This underlines the need, as stated by Nyeck, for a “non-standardized examination of everyday life as a practice of queer agency and theorizing” (2021:2).

Another example of the palimpsestic character of queerness and Africanness, and the strange alliances and affinities between these two seemingly incompatible categories, is presented in Otu’s *Amphibious Subjects* (2022). That study elaborates on how a community of self-identified effeminate men in neocolonial Ghana, known in local parlance as sasso, navigates heteroeroticism and homoeroticism. Embodying “amphibious lives” because their practices of self and erotic-making reveal the unimagined connections between heteroeroticism and homoeroticism, sasso interrogate mainstream representations of Ghana as primarily heterosexual or homophobic by the heteronationalist Christian nation and LGBT+ human rights organizations, respectively. Drawing extensively on African philosophy, specifically formulations of personhood and community among the Akan people of Ghana, Otu offers a framework for indigenizing queer subjectivity-making, focusing on the complex lives of sasso. If, among the Akan, personhood-making relies on the vacillation and tensions (rubs) between the individuals and the community, then amphibious subjectivity serves as the logical premise on which to frame the queer subjectivities of the sasso as the result of their vacillation between heteroerotic and homoerotic formations.

The work of these scholars underscores those frictions that queer’s encounter with Africa and vice-versa yield. In fact, in foregrounding queer in and from Africa, this scholarship highlights those dangerous liaisons that exist between queer and non-queer formations. In varying ways, it recasts how Africa, used here advisedly, both extends and revises the discursive horizons of queer and queerness as part of the “new imaginaries of the self” that, according to Mbembe (2021:191, 195) are bringing about a “silent revolution” of sexual and gendered cultures on the continent (which, in fact, is becoming increasingly tangible and visible). Recent works that critically deepen and widen the conversations on the place of queer in Africa include Serena Dankwa’s *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana* (2021) and the historian T.J. Tallie’s *Queering Colonial Natal: Indigeneity and the Violence of Belonging in Southern Africa* (2019). Arguably, Dankwa’s book, in fact, queers trends in queer African studies to primarily focus on LGBT+ persons, especially gay men. Focusing on the

phenomenon of *supi-supi*, Dankwa offers insight into tropes of intimacy among “ordinary” urban working-class women outside of self-declared lesbian circles. Importantly, she does so without assuming the primacy and fixed boundaries of these sexual liaisons. Thus, her study on the one hand defies the representation of Ghana as heterosexual while simultaneously exposing how queer humanitarian overtures reinforce the hegemonic gay male, or indeed lesbian female, trope as the epitome of all things queer, and instead expands the conceptualization of queerness to include the fluidity and complexity of intimacy and desire in everyday contexts (for a similar study in South Africa, see Gunkel 2010, whose respondents commented that they “didn’t think of it as lesbian”). Something similar is done by Thomas Hendriks (2022:130) in his ethnographic study of masculinity and homosociality in the seemingly heteronormative context of the timber industry in the Congo, which turns out to be a space that opens up “possibilities for gender inversions, sexual transgressions, and queer experiments,” and by George Paul Meiu (2017) in his ethnography of what he calls “ethno-erotic economies” in the tourist industry on the Swahili coast of Kenya. Hendriks (2018:853) proposes to think about queerness in terms of desire, rethinking the latter beyond what he considers the “limiting framework of sexuality,” and understanding it instead as “a self-affirming predatory force that joyfully queers the ‘normal’ world.” The historian T.J. Tallie also widens the conversation in queer African studies to include the critical category of indigeneity, which is often excluded from queer discourses in Africa. Akin to our intervention that queer, when situated in Africa, takes on different meanings, Tallie shows how settler colonial enactments, in fact, queered indigenous practices because they were construed as deviant and antithetical to white colonial virtues. In other words, they offer a roomier reading of queer, one that departs from homogenizing hegemonic explanations of the term. This roomier reading centers around “queer” as a polysemic category, the meaning of which will shift depending on the context. What African queerness looks like, and what it means, will intersect with, and therefore shift in relation to, social categories such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, and race; it will vary across urban and rural settings, across different linguistic contexts, and across communities within and outside of transnational discourses and politics of LGBT+ identities and rights. It appears as if there is indeed a productive value in thinking with “queer’s simultaneously identitarian and nonidentitarian connotations,” meaning that in African contexts, queerness can be “about both LGBTQI+ people and ‘out of line’ moments and desires, spatial and temporal orientations” (Meiu 2022:322). As such, African queerness reflects and reinforces the complexity, hybridity, and multiplicity of African subjectivities in our globalizing world.

Conclusion

Although it is a polysemic term, we propose that queer, from an African point of view, refers to the complex and creative interplay of body, spirit, and mind,

with multiple notions of desire, embodiment, intimacy, and pleasure emerging from the interstices of indigeneity and globality, tradition and modernity, effectively undermining any stable conception of sexual and gender identity, and interrogating narrow identitarian politics of LGBT+ emancipation. Although African LGBT+ activists do frequently adopt these politics for understandable reasons (such as access to global networks and resources), there is a risk of buying into an assimilationist framework of LGBT+ identities and rights that is implicitly universalist and Eurocentric and that presents yet another case of the teleology of Western neoliberal modernity. As stated in the *African LGBTI Manifesto* (2010):

As Africans, we all have infinite potential. We stand for an African revolution which encompasses the demand for a re-imagining of our lives outside neo-colonial categories of identity and power. For centuries, we have faced control through structures, systems and individuals who disappear our existence as people with agency, courage, creativity, and economic and political authority. As Africans, we stand for the celebration of our complexities, and we are committed to ways of being which allow for self-determination at all levels of our sexual, social, political and economic lives. The possibilities are endless.

(Re)constructing and (re)imagining these multiple possibilities, Africa may continue to represent “a state of exception” in a world rigidly structured by supposedly stable and often essentialized conventions, identities, and norms. Yet in that state of exception, African queerness and queer Africanness are imbued with a worldmaking potentiality. Unlocking this potential requires that Africans, in the words of Wainaina (2014), “free our imaginations,” interrogating and deconstructing the rigid categories and norms imposed on, and too often internalized by, them. It also requires scholars of Africa from outside of the continent to free their scholarly imaginations and confront the heteronormative regimes of knowledge that fail to do justice to the profound queerness of African lives and worlds, both historically and currently. Thinking Africa as queer, and thinking queer from Africa, alludes to the ways in which queer African studies can critically and creatively advance both queer and Africanist scholarship, by probing categories of analysis, decolonizing epistemologies, critiquing the sexual and gender politics in contemporary Africa and in global networks, and imagining alternative ways of being African, as well as queer.

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Notes

1. The term “queer” is occasionally used in studies in Francophone (e.g., see Geschiere 2017; Hendriks 2018; Mbaye 2018) and Lusophone (De Araújo 2021a) African contexts. Yet different from Anglophone African circles, in other parts of the continent, “queer” appears to hardly serve as a category of self-identification.
2. The phrase “reading queer from Africa” echoes the recent call for “reading sexualities from Africa” (Hendriks & Spronk 2020).