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Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology

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Abstract

This article addresses a methodological question: How to develop African queer theology? That is, a theology that interrogates and counter-balances popular representations of queer sexuality as being "un-African" and "un-Christian". Answering this question, the article specifically engages with African feminist theological work on storytelling as spiritually empowering and theologically significant. Where African feminist theologians have used her-stories to develop her-theologies, this article suggests that similarly, queer autobiographical storytelling can be a basis for developing queer theologies. It applies this methodology to the Kenyan queer anthology Stories of Our Lives (2015), which is a collection of autobiographical stories narrated by people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) or otherwise queer in Kenya. The article concludes with an intertextual reading of Stories of Our Lives and Mercy Oduyoye's autobiographical essay about childlessness, pointing towards an African narrative queer theology of fruitfulness.

Key words

African theology, narrative theology, queer theology, autobiography, LGBTI

Introduction

The prevalence of homophobic and heteronormative traditions of thought in contemporary African societies, including in African Christian circles, and their devastating impact on the lives of African LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people, has now been well-documented.[1] It has also been observed that, with a few exceptions, African Christian theology as a field of scholarship has hardly addressed this problem in a substantial way, and has generally maintained a silence and taboo surrounding homosexuality and sexual diversity in Africa.[2] In view of this situation, this article addresses a methodological question: How can African queer theology be developed – that is, a theology that interrogates and counter-balances popular representations of queer sexuality as being "un-African" and "un-Christian"?

Building on feminist, postcolonial and queer scholarship on autobiographic storytelling as a way to reclaim and perform epistemic and political agency, in this article I specifically engage with African feminist theological work on storytelling as spiritually empowering and theologically significant. Where African feminist theologians have used her-stories to develop her-theologies, I suggest that similarly, queer autobiographic storytelling can be a basis for developing queer theologies. The article applies this methodology to the

[1] E.g. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (eds.), Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); Marc Epprecht, Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance (London: Zed Books, 2013); Kapya Kaoma, Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia: Democratic Contestation of Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[2] For an overview and critical discussion, see Adriaan van Klinken and Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "Taking up the Cudgels against Gay Rights? Trends and Trajectories in African Christian Theologies on Homosexuality", Journal of Homosexuality 59/1 (2012), 114–138. Van Klinken and Gunda acknowledge that some African theologians have begun to break the silence and taboo on homosexuality, such as Mercy Oduyoye, Musa Dube, Esther Mombo, Isabel Phiri, Ezra Chitando, and Masiiwa Ragies Gunda.

Kenyan queer anthology Stories of Our Lives, which is a collection of autobiographical stories narrated by people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) or otherwise queer in Kenya, that have been collected and published by Nairobi-based arts collective, The Nest. The key argument is that the stories collected in Stories of Our Lives challenge the myths of queer sexuality as "un-African" and "un-Christian", as well as the myth of Christianity as inherently "homophobic", as they give insight into the strategies of, and resources for Kenyan LGBTI people to narratively negotiate their sexual and religious selves. Moreover, I argue that, and demonstrate how, Stories of Our Lives can be read as an African narrative queer theological text. The implication of this argument is that African queer theology is not to be developed "out of the blue", but is already present in the stories of African LGBTI people of faith.

The following section begins by introducing the Stories of Our Lives project and puts it in a wider context of autobiographical storytelling as an activist political strategy. In the subsequent section, I discuss storytelling as a crucial methodology in African Christian theology (henceforth, African theology), with particular reference to the writings of Emmanuel Katongole and the work of African women theologians. In the following main section I analyse the narrative theologies found in Stories of Our Lives which, I argue, challenge the overall silence and taboo surrounding homosexuality and sexual diversity in African theology. In the concluding section, I engage in an intertextual reading between Stories of Our Lives and one key text of storytelling in African theology, an autobiographical essay by Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye about her childlessness. This intertextual reading identifies a common ground for feminist and queer theology in Africa, and points into the direction of a queer theology of fruitfulness. I realise that it may not be self-evident to bring a Ghanaian theological text and a Kenyan collection of LGBTI life stories into conversation with each other. I set up this conversation on the following basis: first, they

have in common the genre of autobiographical storytelling; second, through storytelling they both explicitly raise theological themes; third, as much as each text originates from particular experiences in Kenya (East Africa) and Ghana (West Africa) respectively, they both claim to be relevant to broader African realities.

A final preliminary comment about the use of the term 'queer'. Using this term in African contexts is contested, given its associations with a largely white and Western body of theory.[3] However, African activists, writers and academics have recently adopted the term[4], and there exists an emerging field of African Queer Studies.[5] The book Stories of Our Lives uses 'queer' as an umbrella term referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, or who otherwise transgress sexual and gender normativities. In this article I follow this usage, specifically taking up Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas' notion that the term queer "underscore[s] 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".[6] I further follow Gerald West's suggestion that queer theology in African contexts builds on, and engages with, African traditions of liberation theology, specifically applying these to issues of sexuality.[7] An important principle of liberation theology is granting an epistemological privilege to the poor, and similarly queer theology is to grant an epistemological privilege to people with non-normative gender and sexual identities. This is why attending to their stories and lived experiences is so crucial.

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[3] For an overview of the debates, see Adriaan van Klinken, "Queer Studies and Religion in Contemporary Africa: Decolonizing, Post-secular Moves", The Scholar & Feminist Online 14/2 (http://sfonline.barnard.edu/queer-religion/queer-studies-and-religion-in-contemporary-africa-decolonizing-post-secular-moves/).

[4] Ekine Sokari and Hakima Abbas, eds., Queer African Reader (Dakar: Pambazuka Press, 2013); Zethu Matebeni, ed., Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities (Cape Town: Modjaji, 2014).

[5] Keguro Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies," Agenda 29/1 (2015), 140–146,

[6] Ekine and Abbas, Queer African Reader, 3.

[7] Gerald O. West, "Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy", in Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 155 (2016), 216–224.

Kenyan Queer Storytelling

In 2015, Nairobi-based art collective The Nest published a queer anthology, Stories of Our Lives.[8] This volume is the result of a two-year project in which members of The Nest conducted life story interviews with people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) or otherwise queer in Kenya, resulting in an archive of over 250 life stories from across the country.[9] As stated in the introduction to the book, the collected stories defy the culturally, socially and politically enforced silence on queer sexuality, and they nuance and complicate the stereotypical representations of LGBTI people that abound in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa. They further allow exploring "the consciousness, ambition and expression of many queer Kenyans in their daily interactions with family, friends, school, workplaces, religion and ideas of the future, and in diverse social contexts in Kenya".[10] Thus, Stories of Our Lives is another example of the relatively recent trend among African activists of documenting 'queer Africa' through the building of archives of queer life stories, in order to contest the widespread allegations that homosexuality is 'un-African', and to counterbalance sensationalist media accounts featuring queer Africans as victims of socio-political homophobia.[11]

The Stories of Our Lives project is inspired by the notion, well-developed in postcolonial, feminist and queer studies, that narration is a way to "reclaim the agencies of people who have been excluded from cultural and political centers and for whom epistemic

[8] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives (Nairobi: The Nest Arts Company, 2015).
[9] In Stories of Our Lives, 'queer' is used as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and other Kenyans with a non-normative gender or sexual identity. In line with this, in this article I use 'queer' and 'LGBTI' interchangeably.
[10] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, xiii.
[11] For similar publications, see Anoma Azuah, ed., Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (Jackson: Cooking Pot Publishing, 2016); John MacAllister, ed., Dipolelo Tsa Rona (Gabarone: Setso Publishing, 2016); Kevin Mwachiro, *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community* (Nairobi: Goethe Institut, 2014); Makhosazana Xaba and Crystal Biruk, eds., Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbian and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals (Johannesburg: GALA, 2016).

and political agency remains a struggle".[12] Obviously the latter applies to LGBTI people in Kenya who, as pointed out in the preface to Stories of Our Lives, are simply denied existence or are caricatured in popular representation. For them, "Telling their own stories enables them to claim epistemic authority as well as to counter the objectified, dehumanized representations of them circulated by others".[13] Indeed, the stories give insight into the social, material, emotional, sexual and spiritual lives of queer Kenyans, their hopes and fears, desires and pleasures, expectations and frustrations. Certainly, the enormous variety of experiences shared in the stories cannot be reduced to a narrative of Kenyan queer victimhood. On the contrary, the stories demonstrate in manifold ways the agency and creativity found in queer Kenyan lives.

Where The Nest deliberately conceived Stories of Our Lives as a political project, they had not intended the project to be theologically significant. However, as much as many of the stories in the volume are about sex, love, intimacy and relationships, they are also about religion, faith, and God (which of course confirms the insight, developed in queer theology, that language about sex and love, and language about faith and God, are closely connected and often conflate[14]). The stories provide insight into the manifold ways in which people negotiate their sexual and religious identities, the different experiences they have with faith communities and religious leaders, and the ways in which they understand themselves in relation to God. Indeed, a member of The Nest expressed to me her surprise about the "evolved theologies" many of the participants had come up with.[15]

Storytelling in African theology

[12] Shari Stone-Mediatore, Reading across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 150.
[13] Ibid. 150.
[14] Susannah Cornwall, Controversies in Queer Theology (London: SCM Press, 2011).
[15] Interview with NN, Nairobi, 4 March 2016.

Storytelling is an important methodology that African theologians have adopted to develop culturally and socially relevant forms of theology, inspired by the strong narrative and oral traditions of African cultures.[16] Storytelling is not only a method for developing a culturally relevant theology, but is also politically significant as it allows foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of people and communities who otherwise do not become part of the theological discourse, granting them an epistemological privilege.

Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole has argued that African theology should take the stories of "ordinary Africans" as a starting point to write a "theology from below".[17] He makes this argument in an essay developing a critique of metanarratives, in particular the idea of the African Renaissance that was proclaimed in the 1990s by political leaders such as Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Thabo Mbeki in South Africa – a narrative that in his opinion is announced from the top and is narrowly concerned with economic development through industrialisation and liberalisation. Raising the question where his "semi-literate, rural mother" and many other Africans stand in this picture, Katongole suggests that they may experience the renaissance as a catastrophe, and he argues that their stories present a challenge for Christianity not to engage in "fanciful story-telling" but instead "to write theology in such a way that an ordinary African may be able to locate herself within it".[18] The task of theology more generally, according to Katongole, is "to challenge the various metanarratives that claim validity simply because they come from the top, but which fail to take people's life histories seriously", and he emphasises the fundamental need for theology "to remain on the ground – within the realm of small stories, within the narrative context of the African's ordinary struggles and aspiration".[19]

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[16] Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, Towards an African Narrative Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).
[17] Emmanuel M. Katongole, "'African Renaissance' and the Challenge of Narrative Theology in Africa", Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 102 (1998), 32.
[18] Ibid. 31-32.
[19] Ibid. 35.

Katongole's argument can be easily applied to another metanarrative in need of deconstruction – the narrative of 'heterosexual Africa', and the related idea of homosexuality as 'un-African'. This narrative does not simply come from the top but is fiercely defended by many 'ordinary Africans' (thanks to political and religious leaders fuelling it). The unavoidable question, then, is who counts as 'ordinary African', since many people at a grassroots level apparently buy into a politically invested narrative that writes LGBTI people out of African cultures and societies and denies them their citizenship, human dignity and rights. As Stories of Our Lives testify, the narrative of heterosexual Africa has been catastrophic for many LGBTI Kenyans who, while growing up, found out that their experiences and desires do not fit into this normative, powerful narrative. Yet the same stories testify that in many respects, these LGBTI individuals are 'ordinary Kenyans' and 'ordinary Africans', too. Thus, extrapolating Katongole's argument one might say that African theology should be written in such a way that African queer people can locate themselves within it, and that queer life stories are the starting point for this.

A model for such a narrative theology from below has been provided by African women (or feminist) theologians.[20] As Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye points out,

> African women [theologians] accept story as a source of theology and so tell their stories as well as study the experiences of other women including those outside their continent, but especially those in Africa whose stories remain unwritten.[21]

African women's theology emerged from the late 1980s as an attempt to bring in the experiences of women into male dominated African theological discourse and to foreground

[20] The preferred term among these theologians to refer to their work is 'African women's theology', but Oduyoye and others have also used the label 'feminist' to name their work.
[21] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 10.

the hitherto largely invisible roles of women in African communities and churches. Thus storytelling was adopted as an important method to reveal the "hidden histories of women of faith in Africa" and as key to reclaiming and reimagining history as her-stories.[22] Moreover, storytelling is a deeply theological method – a way of reconstructing what Sarojini Nadar has called "her-theologies".[23] This method takes various forms: one, the reading of biblical stories in the light of contemporary African women's experiences and perspectives; second, reconstructing the biblical themes and religious motifs in women's stories into a more or less systematic theology from the grassroots; third, the sharing of and reflection upon autobiographical stories – about experiences of struggle, vulnerability and liberation in the context of the family, culture and society, the church and the academy – by professional theologians themselves, as a way of practicing narrative theology. Through story-telling, African women theologians have brought women's experiences and perspectives into the theological debate, and have addressed critical issues of gender and sexuality in African cultures and societies. However, until to date this has happened in a largely heterosexual frame. In recent years some theologians have begun to address issues of homosexuality, but this work is still at an early stage.[24] Queer stories remain generally untold and queer voices remain largely muted in African theology, in the same way as once women's voices were muted. Against this background I suggest that Stories of Our Lives is an important text, as the stories presented here provide stepping stones towards developing an African narrative queer theology. In the next section I identify these stepping stones, following the second method of developing narrative theologies mentioned above: reconstructing the biblical and theological

[22] Cf. Isabel A. Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar, eds., Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002).
[23] Sarojini Nadar, "Her-Stories and Her-Theologies: Charting Feminist Theologies in Africa", Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae 35 (2009), 135–150.
[24] E.g. see Lilly Phiri, "Born This Way: The Imago Dei in Men Who Love Other Men in Lusaka, Zambia," in Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa, ed. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 157–170.

themes in the stories narrated by queer Kenyans. This method is particularly suitable because many of the stories themselves touch on theological motives and biblical themes, with several of the narrators in Stories of Our Lives appearing to be grassroots narrative theologians.

Narrative theology in Stories of Our Lives

Many of the accounts in Stories of Our Lives make reference to religion and discuss matters of faith, mostly in a Christian frame.[25] This does not come as a surprise, given the highly religious nature of Kenyan society. What might surprise, however, in spite of the religiously inspired homophobic rhetoric prevailing in Kenyan society, and the exclusion that many storytellers narrate to have encountered in faith-based schools and communities, many of them also testify of their ongoing religious commitment, their active participation in faith communities, and/or their relentless belief in God. True, the picture here is not one-sided and straightforward. Several narrators tell to attend church less frequently or to have given up on attending church completely, because of the conflict with their sexuality; others suggest that they keep going to church while also practicing their sexuality while believing they live in sin. A few storytellers indicate to have intellectual reservations about belief in God. Most accounts, however, do point in the direction of some integration of sexuality and faith. This does not necessarily come in the form of any articulate thoughts on how queer sexuality can be justified from biblical or theological perspectives. Yet the stories indicate various explicit or implicit ways of thinking that enable people to somehow reconcile their sexuality and faith. I will identify these below, as they provide insight into the narrative grassroots theologies among LGBTI Kenyans.

[25] The majority of the Kenyan population is Christian, but there is a significant Muslim minority. This is reflected in Stories of Our Lives. For the purpose of this article, I focus on the accounts referring to Christianity.

God as Love

One of the notions most prevalent in the stories is the association of God with love. The first example emphasises the universality of God's love:

> I believe that God loves everyone, so I don't think it's a big deal to be gay and serve God at the same time. I think I love God, nothing will change that. I'm gay, nothing will change that.[26]

The suggestion here is that divine love includes and embraces "everyone", regardless of sexuality or gender identity. The second example puts it in a more intimate way, foregrounding the narrator's personal knowledge of being loved by God, in line with the genre of autobiographical storytelling:

> I know God loves me. I know he loves me the way I am. Don't let anyone tell you as a gay person that God doesn't love you. It's religion that has something against homosexuality, not God.[27]

Interestingly, the narrator himself is apparently aware of the pastoral and political significance of sharing his story, as from his personal experience of divine love he calls upon gay people generally to know that they are loved and accepted by God whatever other people say. The distinction made in this quote between 'religion' and 'God' is significant as it demonstrates how particular images of God are sometimes used by storytellers to criticise the church, or institutionalised religion, and distance themselves from it. Thus, referring to the

[26] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 35.
[27] Ibid. 304.

discrepancy between the belief in God's love and the experience of hatred in the church one narrator tells to have quit the church: "I felt that God loved me no matter what, no matter who I was but I didn't feel the same from the church".[28]

The association of God with love is often related to another recurrent notion in the stories, of God as creator. Sometimes this is expressed in a rather general way:

> I believe in God because He's the creator. He's the provider. If you get something, you thank God, if you don't get anything, you still thank God. God is everything. He doesn't care if you're Muslim, Hindu or Christian. Even if you're a sex worker, you just know God is looking at you and providing for you. My mother was Muslim and my father was Christian, I never been to a church or a mosque, but I believe in God. Whenever I get good money, I give to the needy and I know God will reward me for that.[29]

This quotation reflects a religious worldview, deeply rooted in African thought, in which human existence has its origin in God who created and maintains the world. Earlier in the story, the narrator introduced himself as an HIV positive gay male sex worker who ran away from home at the age of fourteen and since then has been leading a tough life on the streets. Not being raised or currently involved in any faith community, he believes that God looks at, and provides for anyone regardless of religious affiliation and sexuality, and will reward one's good deeds.

God as Creator

[28] Ibid. 27.
[29] Ibid. 95.

The same basic idea of God as creator and provider is reflected in other stories, sometimes phrased in more personal ways directly related to sexuality. For instance,

> God knows why He created me. God knows why I feel the way I feel, because this is not something induced. … So I don't think God made a mistake making me. It's humans who make a mistake in judging me. I believe God exists, and that's it.[30]

This reflects a deep sense of sexual orientation as part of how one is intended to be by God. Another narrator explicitly suggests that sexual diversity is part of God's design of creation. Referring to other people trying to make him believe that God does not like queer people, he states: "But I looked around me and I realized God is a diverse God, and people were trying to standardize Him and His creations".[31] The implicit theological notion underlying these narratives is the concept of the Imago Dei, that is, the idea that human beings – including their sexuality – are created in the image of God.[32]

The notions of God as love and God as creator merge together in the following account of someone who states that his faith has "grown stronger" because of his sexuality:

> If He didn't want me to be gay, then I wouldn't be this way. You are born this way, you cannot be made into anything else. You can't help who you are attracted to. I guess it's God's will. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have met the wonderful people I have met because of being gay. I think it's an opportunity I was given to get to meet these people, and would I have it if He was so against it? So I reconciled with it and I

[30] Ibid. 313-14.
[31] Ibid. 304.
[32] Cf. Adriaan van Klinken and Lilly Phiri, "'In the Image of God': Reconstructing and Developing a Grassroots African Queer Theology from Urban Zambia," Theology and Sexuality 21/1 (2015), 36–52.

am happy. I pray to God, and I love Him very much. I think He loves us just as we are.[33]

This account, like several other stories, reflect a sense of what has been called "gay Christian essentialism"[34], where gay and lesbian Christians draw from the notion of creation to claim not just to be 'born this way' but to have been created this way by God. In other words, that their sexuality is part of God's design and plan, and that God therefore loves them the way they are, including their sexuality. Such an essentialist understanding of sexuality may not be in line with current queer theory and theology, which are deeply influenced by poststructuralist lines of thought.[35] Yet clearly, as the above quotation demonstrates, such an understanding is a deeply affirmative belief enabling people to accept themselves and reconcile their sexuality and faith – something that needs to be acknowledged if African queer theology grants an "epistemological privilege" to the people whose voices and experiences it claims to represent.[36]

Queering Jesus Christ

Where there are many references to God in Stories of Our Lives, only a few narrators do refer to Jesus Christ. However, the three accounts in which Jesus Christ is mentioned are each rather interesting, because of their transgressive, more radically queer nature.

In the first account, the narrator explicitly states to be searching for an alternative understanding of the Christian faith, beyond the traditional theologies preached in churches; however without knowing where to find it:

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[33] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 77.
[34] R. Stephen Warner, A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 199.
[35] Annamarie Jagose, Queer Theory: An Introduction (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
[36] West, "Towards an African Liberationist Queer Theological Pedagogy", 216.

> Maybe there is a different way of looking at Christianity, Jesus and religion, but as at now that is very distant to me. It is so frustrating to me because I think Jesus would be an awesome person being God. I would like to know him better but I don't know how to begin to know him. … The significance of this is just amazing; that someone can be nailed on a cross and die for someone else. I think that person is the perfect guy. I want him in my life. I would like to know Jesus in a different way.[37]

The expressed desire to know Jesus "in a different way", that is, a way that is affirmative of queer identity and sexuality, underlines the need for a theology that makes sense of Kenyan LGBTI experiences. The suggestion made in the above quote is that such a theology could centre on the sacrificial and atoning death of Jesus on the cross – the belief that Jesus died 'for us', which is at the heart of the way in which many Kenyan and other African Christians understand the essence of the Christian faith. Indeed, it has been suggested that the notion of substitution makes the classic doctrine of atonement a queer doctrine because, in the words of American theologian Patrick Cheng, it "erases the boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' … [and] dissolves the boundaries of sexuality and gender".[38] So intuitively the above quoted storyteller, in his quest for an alternative understanding of the Christian faith, has identified a stepping stone towards a grassroots African queer theology.

A second stepping stone, presented in another account, is also concerned with Jesus Christ, but not so much his death but his life. Bringing to mind Jesus Christ as she remembers him from the New Testament gospels, this narrator recounts:

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[37] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 302.
[38] Patrick S. Cheng, Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 97.

> My favourite story in the Bible is the one where Jesus drank from the water pot of a woman accused of being a prostitute. Jesus did not care whether she was a prostitute or whether she was HIV positive. God sees us for who we are. He sees what is good in me. He is up there telling his angels that there are things that I am doing that are better than what the Christians who are pointing fingers are doing. There is no big sin or small sin before the eyes of God. Being a homosexual is irrelevant to him.[39]

It is not exactly clear what biblical story is referred to here, as the quote seems to conflate elements from different narratives about Jesus interacting with women found in the New Testament: the story about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman (John 4), the story about the Pharisees bringing a woman caught in adultery to Jesus (John 8) and the story about the woman publicly known to be a prostitute who pours perfume on Jesus' feet (Luke 7). The female characters in each of these stories were looked down upon in society because of their sexual history.

These and other New Testament narratives have frequently been used by African women theologians to illustrate the counter-cultural relations that Jesus established with women, transgressing the gendered and sexual conventions of his time and accepting these women as they are. The reading of such narratives by these theologians is often characterised by a hermeneutics of identification, with women in contemporary contexts being written into the biblical stories about Jesus' interaction with women. Hence, Mercy Oduyoye and Elisabeth Amoah write that Jesus through his counter-cultural behaviour "has become for us [African women] the Christ, the anointed one who liberates, the companion, the friend".[40] The above quotation from Stories of Our Lives reflects a similar pattern of identificatory and

[39] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 164.
[40] Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elisabeth Amoah, "The Christ for African Women", in With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 43–44.

in fact emancipatory reading. The comment of the Kenyan narrator – who describes herself as "a lesbian, a sex worker activist and mother of three children"[41] – that "Jesus did not care whether she [the woman in the narrative] was a prostitute or whether she was HIV positive" exemplifies the creative way in which many Christians in Africa engage the Bible, directly reading their own context into the text. The fact that HIV was unknown in the time of Jesus is irrelevant. What matters is the direct identification with the text, which is visible in the quotation when the narrator, having referred to 'her' – the woman in the text – immediately shifts to the current context and uses the first person pronouns, 'us' and 'me'. The Bible may once have been a tool of imperialism in Africa but has now been widely and popularly adopted as an "African icon" and has become a "people's Bible".[42] Black Africans have appropriated and reclaimed the Bible from Western missionaries, and African women have appropriated and reclaimed the Bible from a male dominated church. The above quotation reveals that also sexual "outcasts" have now begun to appropriate and reclaim the Bible, in this case from a heteronormative and homophobic society and church. The quotation reflects an empowering reading: Jesus' accepting attitude towards a woman stigmatised in society is interpreted as that "God sees us for who we are" and that one's sexuality – or HIV status, or involvement in sex work – is "irrelevant" to God.[43] Thus Jesus is presented as revealing the image of an accepting God who liberates LGBTI people from the prejudice and discrimination they encounter almost on a daily basis.

A third stepping stone towards a narrative queer Christology is presented in yet another account, in which the narrator explicitly refers to Jesus himself as being "fucking queer". Elaborating on this, she states:

[41] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 162.
[42] Gerald West, The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
[43] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 164.

> Christ was a very odd man. He was odd, because He was a thirty year old man, wasn't married, didn't have kids, was celibate—as far as the reports go—and He was uprooting married men from their homes to walk around the country with him, leading rallies (…), sitting with prostitutes, having His feet washed by them. He was a strange, strange man. (…) He was fucking queer. Not in the sexual way, but in that way that He was so outside the boundaries that usually surround a man of His age.[44]

Rather than speculating about Jesus' (homo)sexuality, the narrator suggests that his life, as narrated in the New Testament, was at odds with the heteronormative conventions of the society and culture he was part of. Not only did Jesus transgress the expectations of marriage and family life himself, but he also encouraged others, such as his twelve male disciples, to do so. Further elaborating on this, the narrator makes the critical observation that Christians – "a bunch of people who claim to follow such a queer man"[45] – fail to recognise the queerness of Christ. This reference to Jesus Christ as being queer echoes recent writings in Western queer theology. [46] It radically disrupts the tendency of churches, in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa (and beyond), to rigidly stick to heteronormative conventions and to make Christ, in the words of American queer theologian Robert Goss, into "a symbol of homophobic oppression and violence".[47]

The above quoted narrative accounts exemplify three different ways in which Jesus Christ is reclaimed by Kenyan queer Christians as a source and symbol of queer politics. Alongside the references to God as love and God as creator, this lays a crucial foundation for the development of an African queer theology.

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[44] Ibid. 312.
[45] Ibid. 312.
[46] Cf. Thomas Bohache, Christology from the Margins (London: SCM Press, 2008).
[47] Robert E. Goss, Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002).

Mercy Oduyoye on Childlessness and Fruitfulness

Earlier in this article, Oduyoye was quoted as emphasizing the importance of stories, especially the hitherto unwritten stories of women, as a source of theology. I also mentioned that one tradition in African women's theology is the use of autobiographical narratives. One key example of this is Oduyoye's essay "A Coming Home to Myself: A Childless Woman in the West African Space", which is a deeply personal text in which she shares and reflects upon an important aspect of the story of her life, her status as a married but childless woman.[48]

Belonging to the matrilineal Asante people in Ghana, Oduyoye at a relatively late age married into the patrilineal Yoruba people in Nigeria. Regardless of the differences in lineage system, both her own relatives and her in-laws started questioning her when, a few years in the marriage, still no children were born. However, neither their advice and prayers nor the visits to medical doctors and traditional healers proofed to be effective. The enormous concern with child-bearing, and the stigma surrounding childlessness that she experienced, is explained by Oduyoye with reference to cultural and religious factors, which she summarises in the idea that in Africa, "one is never really a full and faithful person until one has a child".[49] As much as this is the case in African traditional cultures, she argues that Christianity has reinforced this notion with its insistence on the biblical command to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). Experiencing little support from the church, Oduyoye realised: "I had to work things out for myself, believing that I am no less in the image of God because I have not biologically increased and multiplied".[50] Reviewing her own life story vis-

[48] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space", in Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honour of Letty M. Russell, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 105–120.
[49] Ibid. 113.
[50] Ibid. 116.

à-vis stories about women in the Bible, such as Hannah and Elizabeth, she came to appreciate that there are alternative ways of being fruitful. She concludes by stating,

> My concern is for a theology of procreation that responds to this challenge, a theology and eschatology that will speak to both those who reproduce themselves biologically and those who do not, a theology that embraces forms of fruitfulness, biological and beyond.[51]

Clearly, Oduyoye's quest for a renewed theology of fruitfulness is born out of her own experience as a childless African woman struggling with societal and cultural norms relating to gender and sexuality.

Reading Oduyoye's autobiographical account in relation to the collection of Kenyan queer life stories is productive for a number of reasons. First, her account exemplifies methodologically how a personal life story can be read as a theological text, and how in African feminist theology women's struggles with cultural norms and societal expectations regarding gender and sexuality are the starting point for both a prophetic critique of such norms, and for creative, narrative theological reflection. My suggestion here is that Stories of Our Lives – although not intended as a theological text per se – in a similar way can be engaged theologically, and that story-telling is as critical to developing an African queer theology as it has been for African women's theology.

Second, Oduyoye's essay draws attention to a theme that also runs through Stories of Our Lives: the concern with procreation, and the related socio-cultural pressure to enter marriage and start a family. The statement made by one narrator that "African women are

[51] Ibid. 119.

raised from childhood to belong to a man and to children"[52] echoes Oduyoye's experiences. Even her uncle, who had always supported her in her studies and career, held the view that "an Asante woman must get married and be the vehicle for the reincarnation of her ancestors".[53] Although none of the Stories of Our Lives narrators refer to the belief in ancestors that traditionally underlies the importance of procreation, their accounts demonstrate that also in modern Kenya the socio-cultural pressure to have children is strong, not only for women but also for men. This pressure is cited, for instance, by a gay male narrator as the reason for him to plan entering into a heterosexual relationship: 'I have to start a family; it is what is expected of me. My parents are very traditional; I feel obligated.'[54] What Oduyoye calls "the child factor in Africa" does not only affect women who remain childless, but also queer people who are under pressure to live up to parental expectations and cultural obligations. Indeed, this child-factor may not just translate in expectations and pressures that are hard to resist, but also in the use of violent force. This is exemplified by the account of a male-identifying transgender, who narrates how his mother arranged a family friend to have sex with him, after which he felt pregnant. Although his friends advised to get an abortion, the narrator recounts: 'I said to myself, "Even if I am trans, trans people also have babies. So I gave birth to a baby girl."'[55] While a lot of attention, especially in South Africa, has been paid to lesbian women being subjected to 'corrective rape', this account draws attention to what could be called 'procreative rape' – a form of rape primarily inspired by the socio-cultural norm that one is to procreate, if not voluntarily then by force. Both forms of sexual violence are obviously undergirded by similar patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies.

[52] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 198.
[53] Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself", 110.
[54] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 231.
[55] Ibid. 140.

Thirdly, an intertextual reading of Oduyoye's account and Stories of Our Lives points towards a common ground for feminist and queer politics in Africa. Indeed, Oduyoye herself has identified this common ground in another publication, where she states to be "rather horrified by the demonization of homosexuals" in African societies.[56] Elaborating on this she makes a crucial point:

> Homophobia, like the phobia of childlessness, is understandable in Africa for it cuts at the roots of Africa's main reasons for sustaining the heterosexual marriage institution – children. Hence, as long as procreation is linked directly with immortality and with the remembering of one's forbearers, I do not see a way out.[57]

Thus, Oduyoye identifies a root cause that is at the core of the stigma that both childless women and gay people experience in Africa: traditional African understandings that link procreation to immortality. What follows from this critical awareness is that addressing and overcoming such understandings is the shared concern for both African feminist and queer politics.

This leads to the fourth reason why Oduyoye's account is important for the purpose of this article: the main theological intervention that she outlines is relevant for an African queer theology as much as it is relevant for a feminist theology concerned with the fate of childless women. Oduyoye proposes an alternative, broader notion of procreation as fruitfulness, that is, as enriching and contributing to humanity. She captures this poetically:

> Increase in humanity.

[56] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "A Critique of Mbiti's View on Love and Marriage in Africa", in Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti, ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 354.
[57] Ibid. 355.

> Multiply the likeness of God for which you have the potential.
>
> Multiply the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ.
>
> Fill the earth with the glory of God.
>
> Increase in creativity.
>
> Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce "good," even "very good."[58]

Many of the stories in Stories of Our Lives can be read as testimonies of "the diversity of God's gifts"[59] and provide evidence of the ways in which queer people in Kenya and wider in Africa indeed enhance and enrich humanity. They do so, for instance, by sharing pleasure (sexual and otherwise), making love, forming friendships so strong that, in the words of one storyteller, "friends are becoming the new family"[60], setting up support networks, promoting LGBTI rights, and involvement in HIV advocacy. Yet they also do so by singing in church choirs, participating in faith communities, looking after parents and siblings, taking up studies, pursuing professional careers, and many other things associated with good citizenship. Clearly, LGBTI Kenyans in multiple ways contribute to society and add, in Oduyoye's words, to the fullness of humanity. On their turn, these queer Kenyan life stories underline the need to not only think of childlessness as a problem for women in heterosexual relationships but equally as a problem for people whose sexual lives transgress heterosexual patterns. They further call for a conceptualisation of fruitfulness beyond heteronormative frames. Such a queer theology of fruitfulness affirms the humanity of those who do, and those who do not reproduce biologically, and it acknowledges that people, regardless of their

[58] Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself", 118.
[59] Ibid. 119.
[60] The Nest, Stories of Our Lives, 233.

sexuality, gender identity and marital status, can be fruitful and reach "fullness of life" in many different ways.

Conclusion

From the perspective of African theologians' interest in storytelling, Stories of Our Lives draws attention to the hidden stories of faith of LGBTI people in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, and to the narrative theologies found in these stories. Against this background I have suggested that queer storytelling is key to the development of a grassroots African queer theology and to disrupting the silence and taboo surrounding sexual diversity in hegemonic African Christianities and theologies. Further work in this area is needed, with more stories to be shared from the full range of queer perspectives and identities and from different African countries, and with a further analysis of their explicit and implicit narrative theologies. If stories are "data with a soul"[61], than Stories of Our Lives and similar texts from other parts of the continent provide crucial insight into the queer Christian African soul. Disrupting dominant narratives of homosexuality as being un-African, and of Africa as being homophobic, these stories of faith, hope and love reclaim Africa as a queer place. Disrupting dominant narratives of Christianity in Africa being homophobic, these stories also reclaim Christianity as a religion allowing for African queer experiences and articulations of desire, sexuality and faith. Reading these autobiographical stories as counter-narratives, and as grassroots narrative theologies, then, is an enriching and productive methodology for African queer theology.

[61] Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul': Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology", Agenda 28/1 (2014), 18–28.

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