Transgressions in *Kenyan, Christian, Queer:* Response to the Roundtable

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Having spent some time with the contributions to this roundtable—digesting and contemplating their praises and criticisms of my book—I ended up thinking about the contribution of *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* to the field of religious studies. That question seems a relevant one to take up in my response to this roundtable in a journal called *Religious Studies Review*. Although I never intended this book as a methodological contribution to the study of religion per se, going from the roundtable contributions it appears that it is somewhat perceived and welcomed as such—as exemplifying a methodological innovation. Reflecting on this, I believe this innovation can be captured, in good queer spirit, as a number of transgressions: of academic disciplines, of distance toward sources and research subjects, and of religion as the object of analysis.

Transgressing disciplines

The strong interdisciplinary nature of my book is recognized by almost all contributors to this roundtable. Two of them (Parsitau and Nogueira-Godsey) use the term "transdisciplinarity" to describe my methodological approach. As Trad Nogueira-Godsey puts it, the book "utilizes an interdisciplinary set of methodological tools that draw from Queer Studies, Religious Studies, and African Studies, and also cuts across these disciplines to form a truly interdisciplinary, or possibly even transdisciplinary perspective." The difference between inter- and transdisciplinarity is a much debated one in relevant literature, but the common idea, also reflected in the above quotation, is that transdisciplinarity goes further than interdisciplinarity. Where the latter refers to the integration of methodological and theoretical tools from other disciplines within a certain discipline—something that has been happening in religious studies long before the term interdisciplinarity became fashionable –, transdisciplinarity moves beyond the idea of well-defined "disciplines" all together, transcending their traditional boundaries and transforming the ways in which academic knowledge is produced.

I located *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* at the intersections of three academic fields: African studies, queer studies and religious studies, and I mobilized a diverse set of analytical tools and hermeneutical lenses from these various fields in order to unravel and interpret the multifaceted relationships between queer activism and religion in the context of Kenya. This approach is informed by my understanding of "religion" as a category of analysis, which in Kenya and in Africa more generally (but certainly not only there) is complex and fluid: not separated from, but closely connected to and part of the spheres of popular culture, social practice, and politics. My specific selection of methodological and theoretical tools and lenses from a range of disciplines was informed by the material and sources I worked with as part of my case studies, ranging from literary texts, social media, audio-visual production, autobiographical stories, and more "strictly" religious expressions such as worship and preaching. Biko Gray captures the liberatory effect of this move eloquently when he describes the book as presenting a "methodological deliverance, a liberation from bounded and (more or less) stable disciplinary formations."

Indeed, this liberation afforded me the freedom to queerly embrace methodological multiplicity, and it rendered the process of writing a deeply creative and stimulating exercise. One of the productive intellectual effects of this transdisciplinary approach at the interface of at least three fields was that I could put religion squarely in the fields of African and queer studies, Africa in the fields of queer and religious studies, and queerness in the fields of African and religious studies. In other words, it enabled me to contribute to *religionizing* African and queer studies, *Africanising* or *decolonising* queer and religious studies, and *queering* African and religious studies.

Although religious studies, by the nature of religion itself, has a long tradition of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work (Fredericks 2017), there is one disciplinary boundary that tends to be quite strongly policed: between religious studies (or the study of religions) and theology. I received my academic training in the Netherlands at a time

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that there was a strong polarization and a push toward the institutional separation between these two (see Meyer 2020). Although I found the assumptions underlying this development—such as that theology is confessional, faith-based and engaged, while religious studies are secular/agnostic, objective, detached and "scientific"—always somewhat simplistic and unproductive, for some time I was under the impression that in order to establish my academic career I needed to fashion myself as a "scholar of religion" and leave my initial training and interest in theology behind. It was only during the work on the project that resulted in this book that I was able to overcome, intellectually and methodologically, this deadlock. As I have recently argued, decolonizing religious studies requires recognition of a plurality of knowledges and an embrace of partiality. As a result of that, "the traditional boundaries between the study of religion/s and theology become increasingly fluid and perhaps obsolete, as it allows for a more creative and imaginative borderland thinking about the methodological divides that have haunted the field" (van Klinken 2020, 151). Transgressing the boundary between religious studies and theology, and including—without necessarily privileging—theological analysis, reflection and meaning-making in my writing is one of the innovative aspects of the book's methodological approach, and again it was a liberatory move. It allowed me to undertake constructive work, reconstructing in Damaris Parsitau's words "a theology of hope, solidarity, affirmation" and outlining what Gray considers to be "the most forward-looking and creative contribution of the text," that is, its "preamble to queer Kenyan theology."

Transgressing distance

The anthropologist Joel Robbins has commented that theology, like feminist, queer and other forms of engaged scholarship, allows for writing in a "community building idiom" and for establishing "a real community of interest between themselves and their subjects"—something that he perceives to be "extremely difficult" for anthropologists to achieve (Robbins 2006, 287). To some extent, this point could also apply to religious studies, as far as it has tended to define itself as objective, neutral, and detached. Indeed, in the academic study of the religion there is a long methodological tradition concerned with "manufacturing distance," to use the title of a recent book by Driscoll and Miller (2019).

Intuitively, in the process of researching and writing this book, I realized that I did not want to follow this path of manufacturing distance between myself and the subjects—my research participants—and the sources—the empirical material—I was working with. My discomfort with such detached approaches was informed by both intellectual considerations and embodied experiences. Intellectually, as a white European scholar working in African contexts, I am committed to forms of decolonial scholarship in which processes of othering, which have long dominated Euro-centric forms of knowledge production (certainly so, but not only, in African studies), are critically interrogated and sought to overcome. I did not have a blueprint for how to do this, but reading Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, the following line stuck to my mind: "the theoretical and practical recognition of the body and flesh of 'the stranger' as flesh and body just like mine, the idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others, long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness" (Mbembe 2001, 2). As an ethnographer, I try to address this fundamental problem by principally recognizing the bodily and human nature that I have in common with whoever I meet in "the field." Of course, such a commitment is always complicated by the complex processes of othering that are inherently part of fieldwork relationships. Yet in the context of the fieldwork that resulted in *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*, I also discovered from an early stage that I did have a lot in common with many of my participants: not just an abstract human nature, but a progressive political orientation, an LGBT-affirming Christian religiosity, an embodied queerness, a *joie de vivre*. This recognition, which I believe was mutual, expressed itself through flirtations and hugs, humor and fun, dancing in clubs and churches, open and engaged conversations, shared tears of joy and pain, the sharing of food and—incidentally—of beds. Although I could not have planned this, my intellectual and personal disposition enabled me to allow for this to happen, to welcome it, and reflect on it. Through these embodied interactions, many of my participants who initially were strangers became friends. My reflection on this dynamic and its significance was further reinforced by something that happened in my personal life, my diagnosis with HIV, somewhere halfway of the process of researching and writing the book. This experience, although not directly related to any fieldwork experience, did profoundly shape my research: it made the recognition of the body and flesh of my Kenyan queer interlocutors as flesh and body just like mine much more existential, and it made me realize that I could not write about the stories of *their* embodied, sexual and erotic lives without writing about the story of *my own*. This realization resulted in my decision to include four interludes in between the main chapters of the book—experimental pieces of writing, partly autobiographical, partly auto-ethnographic, partly confessional, as narrative exercises in self-reflexivity and accounting for positionality.

Going from the contributions to this roundtable, these interludes are perhaps the best-received parts of the book. All the contributors acknowledge the courage and vulnerability that it took to write and publish these pieces which reveal intimate parts of myself, and which in Elias Bongmba's words

present a "paradigmatic display of [bodily] coevalness." Various contributors discuss at length the epistemological, methodological, and political significance of the interludes, describing them as "powerful disciplinary interventions" (Gray), "new pathways and important signposts" (Nadar), and as "unsettling traditional ways of knowing" (Hoel). I highly value these positive appraisals and praises, as they affirm my own feeling that it was of critical importance to take the risk of turning the ethnographic gaze toward myself, reveal the messiness of my fieldwork practice and expose the vulnerability and nakedness of my academic self. I particularly appreciate Nogueira-Godsey's comments about the workings of the interludes in the book as a whole, when he recognizes that they "imbue the case studies with the humanity of the researcher" and, somewhat counterintuitively, "allow the reader to more easily access the lives of the participants." This also provides me with a basis to respond to Gray's question why I chose not to maintain the auto-ethnographic voice throughout the text: my hope and intention was for the auto-ethnographic interludes to speak to the main chapters and vice versa, inviting the reader into an intertextual reading of one vis-à-vis the other.

At this point, I might conclude that my decision to transgress, rather than manufacture, distance to my research subjects appears to have been productive and meaningful at various levels. However, contemplating the contributions to this roundtable and some of the critical issues that are raised in some of them, also made me wonder about possible downsides. Gray observes that I have "completely delivered" myself over to my conversation partners and their words and productions. It appears that he sees this as a positive thing, as it illustrates my methodological commitment not to theory and concepts, but to my sources. However, taken together with Sarojini Nadar's critical comments both about the absence of certain voices and about me missing opportunities to critique queer activism, I ended up wondering whether, indeed, I may have delivered myself too much to my sources and the human subjects behind them. Of course, I could rebut Nadar's criticisms by explaining that the public argument between Shailja Patel and Binyavanga Wainaina, and the former's accusation of the latter of misogyny and lesbophobia, only unfolded on Twitter when the manuscript was in the final stage and that I was not able to examine the nature and ground for their acrimony. All I could do, at that stage, was to acknowledge (which is not the same as dismissing) the existence of these accusations and to flag that my interpretation of Wainaina as a queer prophet should not be read as if he is a saint. In response to Nadar's other criticism, that the book "renders black lesbian life largely invisible or slightly marginal," I could point out that lesbian and bisexual women's voices may, indeed, be relatively marginal—which is somewhat illustrative for LGBT activism in Kenya more generally at the time of my research—but are certainly not invisible: the *Same Love* video prominently features a female couple, and I discuss their performance in detail; *Stories of Our Lives* includes a good number of stories by female narrators, some of which I discuss in-depth; and in Cosmopolitan Affirming Church, women play an active role. Interestingly, in the case of CAC, women have become more prominent in the life of the church after I completed my research. Moreover, only while I was completing the manuscript, the film *Rafiki* which centers around a lesbian love story in Nairobi was released—too late to be included alongside *Same Love*. As such, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (as any other book) by definition captures a particular moment in time: it represents those forms of activism that were available and accessible to me while I was working on the project. Parsitau asks about "whose activism and agenda" is reflected in the case studies that I selected, and she points to the class and gender struggles within the Kenyan LGBT community. This is an important question to raise, but, in fact, the four case studies already do present an array of different queer activisms and agendas; some of them come from "exceptional people," to use Nadar's phrase, who enjoy certain economic and class privileges, but several others from very "ordinary" queer Kenyans (although I do consider them exceptional, too, and perhaps even more so). For instance, the religion-critical interventions by Wainaina are at odds with CAC's commitment to spearhead an LGBT-affirming Charismatic Christian movement; some of my sources represent a politics of "coming out" and expressing a public gay identity, while others negotiate such politics in very different ways; some of my subjects embody queerness in bold, colorful, radical and transgressive ways, while others are rather mainstream in their gender, sexual and otherwise political orientations and expressions. As such, the book offers an insight into the multiple and sometimes conflicting forms that queer world-making takes in Kenya. Gray may want me to give an "existential phenomenology" of this queer world that emerges—but I would honestly struggle to offer a more systematic account, not just because I am not a philosopher but primarily because my research subjects represent a wide range of queer arts of resistance.

Although I can rebut, or at least contextualize, the criticisms raised by my discussants—and I very much appreciate their thoughtful points—I am still left with this question of (a lack of) distance to my sources. Thinking about it, I agree that I could have made more effort to critique the queer activisms I discuss in the case studies. Yet I did choose not to do so, not because I was "completely delivered" to my sources—in fact, my role as curator of the case studies and as an interpreter of the words and images included therein should not be underestimated. Rather, I chose not to do so because it was not my priority and interest, it was not part of what I primarily intended this book to achieve: demonstrating how Christianity—Christian language, ritual, text, and symbol—provides a set of "imaginary resources" for Kenyan queer struggle as a praxis

of liberation, to use Mbembe's words that I took as epigraph to the book. Thanks to my transgression of distance, one of my research participants could make me the greatest compliment I could possibly receive, when he declared me to be an "ambassador of the Kenyan lgbtq community" (see Interlude 4). His message is a testimony that in my research I have been able to establish something like a community of shared interest, and it confirms, in Nina Hoel's words, that "trust is the central bond that underpins relationality" in the relationship between the ethnographer and their participants.

Transgressing religion

Last but not least, let me briefly attend to third transgression in *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*: religion as a transgressive force. My point here is that religion, and in the case of this book specifically Christianity, appears to transgress established binary schemes of analysis and interpretation, such as conservative versus progressive religion, and public versus private religion. In the introduction to the chapter about Cosmpolitan Affirming Church, I mention in passing that the first time I attended their service, I was somewhat taken by surprise about the "rather traditional, evangelical type of theology" that was reflected in the sermon. It had been a while since I listened to a preacher warning his audience that they might end up going to hell if they would not become born-again and give their lives to Christ. Admittedly, this was a guest preacher from outside the community, and the content of his sermon does not necessarily reflect CAC's general theological discourse. Yet evangelical and Pentecostal language and form do dominate religious worship in this "queer church." If Binyavanga Wainaina during his life would ever have attended CAC (which he has not, as far as I know), he may have immediately repeated his criticism of the "Pentecostal frenzy" that has come to define Kenyan Christianity. Although church leaders and members were keen to emphasize that homosexuality was not caused by demons, at least on one occasion I witnessed deliverance from whatever other evil spirits they had discerned in someone's life. The same church, later in my fieldwork surprised me with a drag queen contest taking place during worship—an ethnographic vignette I discuss at some length, as it provided a fascinating example of Christian queer world-making in the context of this Kenyan LGBT church. Thus, lived religion, theology, and (sexual) ethics in the context of CAC appeared to be progressive, transgressive, and queer at one moment, but rather mainstream if not conservative at others, and frequently it appeared to be both at the same time. Religion appears to be a queer thing, indeed, to use the title of Elizabeth Stuart's book (1997), as it refuses to match our conventional academic labels and schemes of interpretation.

Bongmba, in his contribution to this roundtable, discusses the insights the book provides into understanding the nature of public religion in contemporary Africa. Public religion, that is, religious expressions in the public sphere which aim to affect certain social and political interventions, is often associated with the politics of homophobia in African societies (e.g., see van Klinken and Chitando 2016). My book complicates and nuances that picture, by demonstrating how religious symbols and language, as a publicly available social, cultural, and political archive, are used by a wide range of actors, for a diverse set of socio-political agendas. In Bongmba's words, the presented case studies of creative queer activism in Kenya reveal the role of "the arts to affect the precepts, power, and praxis of religion." This opens up new ways of thinking about public religion, as it is not just a site that preserves hegemonic religious programs by reasserting their dominance in the public domain, but also a site of contestation and critique, and of alternative, transgressive imaginations. Obviously, space for this to happen is partly dependent on certain conditions in the countries concerned, such as regarding freedom of expression and the liberalization of the media. Yet as the ban of queer films such as *Same Love*, *Stories of Our Lives*, and *Rafiki* by the Kenyan Film Classification Board illustrates, the abilities of the authorities to effectively control public space are limited, not at least thanks to the possibilities provided by the internet. Again, religion is a queer thing as it evades the regulation by political and religious authorities and opens up a space of multiple possibilities.

Conclusion

Three of the six discussants (Gray, Hoel, and Nogueira-Godsey) quote exactly the same sentences from Interlude 1, in which I narrate my experience of being subjected to an attempt of deliverance by a Kenyan charismatic prophetess. The quoted sentences capture the thoughts that passed through my mind, while I was kneeling in front of her while she pushed and prayed over me to cast out an evil spirit she had discerned in me: "Should I let my body collapse and fall on the floor? Should I start crying? How to create the impression that I was, indeed, being delivered? Could I fake deliverance?" One might think that it is a coincidence that these sentences are quoted thrice in this roundtable—if not for Gray, who argues that they provide the hermeneutical key to the book as a whole. As he points out insightfully, my refusal to fake deliverance mirrors the refusal of Kenyan LGBT communities to fake deliverance, but in both cases "the refusal to *fake* deliverance is not the same as *refusing* deliverance." He reads *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* as a book *about* and *of* deliverance, and as an invitation to the reader to

experience the same—deliverance into otherwise possibilities, methodologically, intellectually, and politically.

Keeping in mind the adage to never argue with a sympathetic reader, I am grateful for this constructive and creative interpretation of my book. And, indeed, I hope that the book will deliver on these expectations. I do not consider myself a prophet, but the Kenyan queer activists I got to know and learn from through my research, they certainly are. They prophesy deliverance, in the way that Cornel West understands it:

> To prophesy deliverance is not to call for some otherworldly paradise but rather to generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom. (West 2002, 6)

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