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Archive and method in Queer African Studies

Keguro Macharia

abstract

This writing considers the relationship between archive-production and archive-use and method in Queer African Studies. It turns to three sites. First, it examines an early document from Kenya's archives to examine what official archives can see and know, and how they might be used. Second, it draws attention to the often-overlooked archive of 1960s African liberation narratives that address and enmesh the figure of the homosexual within decolonising imaginations. It does so to question the privileging of the 1990s as the most crucial period in generating homo-themed discourses in Africa. Finally, in a 'litany of complaints', it suggests possible ways in which Queer African Studies might position itself alongside other fields of study, even as it generates its own archives and methods attentive to African histories and, more crucially, to the lives and bodies it seeks to make more possible.

keywords

archive, method, intimacy, homophobia

"No. Can't write it out. Not now."

Samuel Delany, *Flight from Neveryon*, 1994

On 15 August 2014, Disebo Mpho Makau was killed in South Africa. I cite from a fact sheet issued by the human rights organisation Iranti-org (Queer Vernaculars Visual Narratives, 2014):

Iranti-org has just received news that on the 15 August, a young Lesbian known as Gift, from Ventersdorp in the North West Province was brutally murdered, raped, she was strangled with a wire around throat, and her perpetrator forced a hose-pipe into her mouth, forcing water into her body. Her neighbour found water running in his yard and discovered Gift's body. She lived with her family in Extension 2.

Gift Makau was 18. Her name sticks in my head, in part because Makau is a familiar name. It was the last name of a good friend in

primary school. The name's familiarity makes Gift — what a beautiful nickname — proximate, intimate, possible within the worlds I inhabit.¹ I start with Gift Makau, with the impossibility of her now-truncated life, to enmesh this writing.² To suggest why it might matter. Gift is one of many names — some known, many unknown — that collectively populate and haunt Queer African archives. These are the names behind the numbers, the faces hidden from view, the stories that so often remain untold. Collectively, these names, faces, and stories form an archive of disposability, an archive that is not admitted into official view, an archive whose presence undoes much of what we might mean by archive.

To open a meditation on archive and method with Gift's murder might seem wrongheaded, if not obscene. What, after all, might archive and method have done to prevent her murder, or even to prevent similar murders in the future? To some extent this question is unanswerable and, frankly, it

swerves from the argument I'm going to pursue. I open with it to suggest the uneven stakes of this argument. While I want to resist the routine despair that proclaims that academic writing cannot intervene in real-world situations, especially in moments of crisis, I want to acknowledge the scenes where academic writing must stand silent in shared grief, aware of its limitations. Possibility is gone for Gift, but many others remain.

This meditation unfolds in two parts. In the first, I return to a moment in Kenya's history to explore what colonial archives might offer to contemporary Queer African Studies.³ Moving between anecdote and analysis, I track the limits of the archives and probe the limits of our desire for those archives (that 'our' remains to trouble this excursion). I build on Anjali Arondekar's trenchant observation that "the turn to the archive ... has emerged as *the* register of academic arrangements, recording in its proliferating avatars the shifting tenor of academic debates about the production and institutionalization of knowledge" (2005:10). This turn to the archive also subtends sexual minority organising in Africa: against claims that homosexuality is 'un-African,' activists, artists, and intellectuals have attempted to produce archival evidence of same-sex acts in African pasts.⁴ Intellectual production and activism meet at the archive. What kind of encounter is produced?

Subsequently, I turn to the problem of method in Queer African Studies. I am interested in probing the relationship between archive and method: more specifically, how might African archives — however those are defined — demand and produce the methods we need? As a still-emerging field, what can Queer African Studies draw on and learn from? How should we go about doing what we do?

What follows is largely speculative and provisional but not, I hope, useless.

Prison intimacy

I spent the fall semester of 2008, from September to December, immersed in the Kenya National Archives. At the time I was researching the intimate production of colonial modernity: how embodiment, intimacy, and sexuality circulated in official colonial documents. Secretly, I was hoping to stumble upon a hitherto-undiscovered archive of queer Kenya,

something beyond too-suspect reports found in anthropological and historical accounts.⁵

My searches for 'homosexuality', 'unnatural offences', and 'indecentry' bore little fruit on the Archive's computer system, a function, perhaps, of how archival processes produce and value knowledge. So I abandoned that particular route. A few years later, a historian friend, Brett Shadle, encountered and passed on a document from Kenyan archives that documented an account of sodomy in prison.

Intellectual production and activism meet at the archive. What kind of encounter is produced?

In a letter dated May 9, 1912, S.R. Hill, an assistant superintendent of Prisons in Mombasa at the Kenyan coast, writes to his boss, H.R. Tate, superintendent of Prisons:

The attached Police file refers to the case of unnatural offence which I reported on the 6th instant. Convict No.2987 Bakari Masai reported the matter to me at 9 a.m. on the 6th, the offence was supposed to have been committed at 10 p.m. on the 4th.

The convict gave me as his excuse for not reporting the matter on Sunday morning, when he had ample opportunity to do so, that it was not his place to report irregularities or misbehaviour by Convicts, there being three convicts in the cell in possession of good conduct badges, who were supposed to do so.

In short, the statement made to me by Convict No.D 168 was to the effect that at 10 p.m. on the 4th instant Convict No.D 284 who slept near the wall at one end of the cell left his bed, and after turning down the lamp went to the other end of the cell and sat down on Convict No.3188's mat. After a short conversation they both lay down on the same mat, covering themselves with a blanket. Convict No.3188 was naked, No.D 284 was wearing his trousers only.

This statement is corroborated by Convict No.D 210, although his statement does not appear in the Police file.

In dealing with a case of this nature I think that a full and searching inquiry should be made, so as to strengthen the hands of the Prison administration in the suppression of

the offence, an offence so common in Convict prisons, but so difficult of detection.

This letter begs for interminable analysis. Why did Bakari Masai wait two days to report what he saw? If, as he claimed, the prison cell contained three monitors, what compelled him to report this incident, especially since he claims it was not his 'duty'? Why didn't any of the three monitors report this incident? Who were these two convicts he reported? Where did they come from? How do their absent geo-histories of ethnicity and race inflect this passage? Indeed, how do Bakari Masai's own absent geo-histories of race and ethnicity inflect this encounter? What actually happened between the men who shared blankets, the naked one and the one with trousers?

In his response to the assistant superintendent, the Police superintendent queries what actually happened. Replying on May 10, 1912, he writes:

In the case of an unnatural offence it is necessary to prove that penetration has been effected otherwise a case for sodomy cannot be made out.

In the case in point this fact cannot be proved, and further steps cannot be taken by the Police.

This demand for evidence — "penetration has been effected" — acknowledges, unwittingly, the prison ecology that the assistant superintendent did not (could not?) register and also demonstrates the relationships between colonial officers and African prisoners. If Hill, the assistant superintendent, is too eager to punish those who commit unnatural offences, he is also willing to accept African eyewitness testimony. In contrast, Tate, Hill's supervisor, demands physical evidence, perhaps because he knows a little more about prison and geo-historical ecologies of desire and sex. Moreover, Tate might be unwilling to believe African witnesses. Remember, we still cannot explain why Bakari Masai did not report the two prisoners earlier, and we do not know why he chose to report them when he did. We also do not know what actually happened between the two men.

By insisting on this unknowability, I deviate from the longstanding method of 'salvage anthropology' that has dominated scholarship on African homosexuality. As anthropologist Kath Weston (1993) describes, salvage

anthropology scavenges through archives to find evidence of same-sex desire and gender-breaking norms. Insisting 'we have been everywhere', it accumulates scenes and sites and objects to ground a politics in a shared past of intimacies. It travels to the past to know what it knew before it went there. In the process it refuses surprise, wonder, fantasy and discovery.

It might be argued that the three prison monitors didn't report the incident because it took place at the Kenyan coast, a location with a long history of sexual and gender dissidence (Amory, 1998). This explanation accords with claims that homosexual acts were acceptable in African pasts. This claim attempts to distance itself from European histories where, if one follows a Foucauldian line, homosexuality was both pathologised and criminalised in the 19th century. Thus, redeemed, pre-colonial African homosexuality is placed within what anthropologist Gayle Rubin (2011, Chapter 5) describes as a "charmed circle", a set of acceptable acts and identities that hierarchise sexual practices and identities, "grant[ing] virtue" to "dominant groups" and "relegat[ing] vice to the underprivileged."

With few exceptions, leaders of mainstream, well-funded queer NGOs in Africa have followed models set by U.S. organisations such as the Human Rights Commission by allying themselves with a politics of respectability. The claim that homosexuality was acceptable in pre-colonial Africa is used to create a trajectory that extends from those acceptable homosexuals to today's acceptable, professionalised homosexuals. This genealogy of respectability reproduces the logics and practices of the charmed circle, creating a zone of sexual and gender dissidents whose class locations, ethno-racial identifications, labour practices, geographical positions (urban, rural, peri-urban, diasporic), and legal status (refugee, exile, migrant, stateless) exclude them from the homosexuality that seeks legal approbation through decriminalisation.⁶

More significantly for this meditation, the claim that homosexuality was acceptable in pre-colonial Africa attempts to embed contemporary fights against anti-homosexual legislation within anti-colonial frames developed during the height of African decolonisation. Simply, the struggle for queer rights is framed as part of an ongoing struggle for African liberation.⁷ Implicitly, this position

suggests that African liberation discourses were silent about the figure and role of the homosexual. The task now is to include this figure within a paradigm that had not yet considered it. In fact, the ascendant narrative within Queer African Studies privileges the 1990s as the moment when the figure of the homosexual enters African political discourse (Amory, 1997; Hoad, 2007; Currier, 2010; Ireland, 2013). Such a narrative positions Africa as belated, having had to wait for Stonewall in the U.S. before it could develop any contemporary homo-themed discourses.⁸

This ascendant narrative is incomplete, if not wrong.

By the end of the 1960s, within a significant body of African political writing, the figure of the male homosexual had emerged as criminal, anti-liberation, and apolitical.⁹ Within decolonising and post-independent Africa, in African-authored works the figure of the male homosexual is found most often in prison narratives or in proximity to the prison. Writing about his experience in prison, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda (1962:133) condemns the "incorrigibles" who force "boys" to submit to "unnatural desires"; Kenya's J. M. Kariuki distinguishes between political prisoners and "ordinary criminals" who "commit sodomy with each other" (1963:172); and South Africa's Dennis Brutus dismisses the prison queer as "that most perverse among /the perverted" (1968:9). Despite this very small sample size, I'm arguing that by the end of the 1960s the figure of the male homosexual had been enfolded within Africa's political imagination.

Within this political imagination the male homosexual was understood to be indifferent to freedom struggles and complicit in anti-freedom criminality. The point here is not that homosexuality was criminalised by the colonial state, but that at a historical moment when those struggling for freedom were all defined as criminal, when contingent alliances were being formed across ethnic, class, and racial lines, the homosexual was understood as refusing to participate in broader struggles for justice. Instead, the homosexual figure within prisons was understood to be complicit with repressive power. If Queer African Studies is going to contend with what Tom Boellstorff (1994) terms political homophobia, it needs to account for the multiple genealogies of this homophobia,

including those found at the heart of African liberation narratives.

Toward method: A litany of complaints

Introducing a special issue of *Agenda* on sexualities, Vasu Reddy (2004:6) argues that "The need for innovative work on sexuality in Africa cannot be overstated." He hints at how this work should be conducted by calling for a "politics of analysis that considers the empirical context of sexuality" (Reddy, 2004:5). He notes that African sexuality seems "to be associated with pain, suffering, mourning and death", contrasting this with the 'West' which seems to associate sexuality with "pleasure, desire, sensuality (indeed freedom)" (Reddy, 2004:5). In Africa, he continues, "sexuality for most people is a facet closely aligned to social control, legal restrictions, cultural proscription, sexual violence, and to a large extent, also disease." We might extend Reddy's observation to ask how these negative affects (pain, suffering, mourning) and various forms of control delimit and produce what is understood and studied as sexuality.

Let me extend Neville Hoad's (2007:2) apt observation, "in certain historical moments, certain corporeal practices come to be represented as *sexual*", by drawing from black diaspora thinkers who have mapped how Africa is understood as saturated with sex and sexuality. African bodies — those racialised as black and those 'blackened' because they live in Africa — become "the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" full of the "potential for pornotroping" (Spillers, 1987:67). Bodies and lives marked as queer take on the burden of incarnating sex: as sex acts (thus the tedious question of who penetrates whom), as gendering sex (more tedious questions of who 'plays the man'), as sexual transgression (as those who 'seduce' the young and the unwilling), as frivolity (of privileging 'non-purposive' sex that is not dedicated to heteropatriarchal reproduction), and as focusing too much on sex, imbuing with too much significance what is better left private and unspoken.

I have been struggling to approach the question of method. I can only approach it circuitously, understanding this labour as provisional, as work to be undertaken by many minds and bodies engaged in ongoing conversation, attempting to listen to each other, and

willing to take conceptual and methodological risks. I will attempt not to be prescriptive, although some degree of prescriptiveness is necessary. I am not sure that what will emerge will be immediately useful, but I hope it can provide some general guidelines.

the overwhelming focus on same-sex acts has sidelined important African feminist work on how gendered and sexed and sexualised bodies become invested with political significance.

Methods are not simply procedures produced apart from available archives — they are not objective practices to be applied to inert material. Instead, methods are generated from paying close attention to what exists in and is formed as an archive. As Stuart Hall (2008:92) argues,

Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past; and the present always puts its questions differently from one generation to another. The archive has to be rich, varied and in a sense 'eclectic' enough to bear the weight of different contested interpretations and to allow them to battle out their differences in relation to the different texts and inter-texts which the archive itself makes available.

We must continue asking what material is now being assembled as an archive, what material already exists in our collective (and contested) archives, and what questions our present demands that we ask of the archive. The 'present', to use Hall's term, is a political position, the temporality within which livability is produced and bodies are enfolded. What types of enfoldments do we want to make possible?

Secondly, what is now emerging as Queer African Studies has been insufficiently attentive to African feminism, often dismissing feminist work as heteronormative or gender normative. This dismissal is regrettable: we have learned our Butler and Sedgwick and Berlant, but not our Nzegwu and Mama and Oyewumi. African feminist scholarship has mapped the changing meanings of sex, gender, and embodiment during colonial modernity (Nzegwu, 2006; Oyewumi, 1997; White,

1990). This work might not directly mention queer populations — the acronymed LGBTIQ — but it tracks how bodies gain and lose meaning over time, how sex and sexuality become attached to bodies as they move through space, how power circulates and shifts as it genders and un-genders. To make a polemical claim: the overwhelming focus on same-sex acts has sidelined important African feminist work on how gendered and sexed and sexualised bodies become invested with political significance.

Thirdly, what is now emerging as Queer African Studies has tended to dismiss insights from Postcolonial Studies. This dismissal is evidenced by the proliferating bibliography of work that uncritically cites colonial-era travel narratives and ethnographies to stage polemical claims about pre-colonial same-sex desires. I am not claiming that these sources cannot be used; rather, they should not be used uncritically. We might note, for instance, that such archives tend to stabilise ethno-racial identities in ahistorical ways. We know from Africanist scholarship, for instance, that many so-called ethnic groupings took shape during colonial modernity, as more provisional geo-proximate populations merged to contest colonial incursions or were merged by colonial regimes. Is it possible to recognise the ideological and material violence enacted in colonial-era archives — the missing names, the indifference to African desires, the production of populations as opposed to individuals (Vaughan, 1991) — even as we mine those sources for whatever information they might provide?

Fourthly, the urgent demands of our present have tended to produce a presentist scholarship that ignores the production of blackness during colonial modernity. Indeed, Africa-focused studies of sexuality seem indifferent to insights from Caribbean-focused and Black Diaspora-focused areas of study. Thus, for instance, scholarship based on white European archives without a substantive focus on blackness is cited more regularly and with more respect than scholarship focused on black embodiment and sexuality. Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman appear more in our bibliographies than Kamala Kempadoo, Jacqui Alexander, bell hooks, Kobena Mercer, or Hortense Spillers. This schism has produced a dangerously skewed scholarship that cites white Euro-American scholars as 'theory' while producing African-based information as 'data' or 'evidence,' as Stella Nyanzi (2013) argues.

Finally, the overwhelming focus on, and privileging of, assembling an archive through data production and collection — be it producing anthologies of creative work, collecting data to solicit NGO funding, documenting injury to seek state and international intervention — has tended to produce work where numbers matter more than names and lives. The African queer, the focus of so much attention, has disappeared into a mass of acronyms and percentages. The very figure whose enfleshment matters has been disembodied in our studies. As Neo Musangi noted on Twitter, the rhetoric of “another lesbian” and “another queer” feeds into a mode of documentation that privileges the accumulation of injured and dead bodies over creating conditions of livability.

Concluding gestures

I am interested in promoting a Queer African Studies that centres Africa-based archives and methods, African thinkers and artists, African geo-histories and fractures, as these learn from and encounter other methods and archives focused on blackness, gender, sex, and sexuality. I worry that so much writing on Queer Africa has made names like Robert Mugabe, Sam Nujoma, Yoweri Museveni, David Bahati, Peter Akinola, and Martin Ssempe vernaculars, easily recognisable as African homophobes, while simultaneously rendering invisible African queers. I worry about ongoing schisms between activists and intellectuals, and how those schisms are exploited by funding agencies which continue to promote research methods that are indifferent to African intellectual production and methodological innovation. I worry that those of us invested in Queer African intellectual production lack the resources — space, time, institutional support — to think collectively and ethically about how we can imagine and inhabit livable spaces. I worry that we do not have any established Queer Studies programmes in Africa, that we find each other, when we do, by accident, coincidence, luck. I worry that we do not have the luxury to assemble together for a semester or longer to read and think collectively about the shape and future of Queer African Studies. I worry that we speak past each other because the urgencies of our geo-locations demand attention, and we can't spare the time to listen properly, with care and attention. I worry that our fractured

attentions and methods cannot speak to Gift's life or death.

We owe her better.

Notes

1. A helpful reviewer points out that 'Gift' translates Mpho. Still, the nickname-as-translation has a symbolic life: the doubling seen in some reports as Disebo Mpho 'Gift' Makau bridges lifeworlds and language worlds. On this, much more can be written.
2. On enfleshment, see Povinelli (2006).
3. 'Queer African Studies' or 'African Queer Studies'. Given Africa's entry into colonial modernity, the question can only ever be tautological.
4. Space does not permit me to explore the metonymic labour performed by 'homosexuality', as it ostensibly represents all forms of gender and sexual dissidence.
5. On the limits of these accounts, see Owusu (1978).
6. This argument merits more attention than I can provide here.
7. For an excellent example of this strategy, see the Mayibuye Pledge <<http://mayibuyepledge.org/>>.
8. I owe this critique to Manalansan (1995).
9. Significance here is evaluated in terms of influence as opposed to raw numbers as few African texts from the 1960s represented the male homosexual.

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