

A QUEERING-TO-COME

Kirk Fiereck, Neville Hoad, and Danai S. Mupotsa

Next I had to learn how to control my ancestors. If you can't control your ancestors, they can destroy your body. In the beginning, before I understood how to work with my ancestors, I used to roar like a lion when [the spirit of Nkabinde—an ancestral spirit—was] moving up my spine and gripping the back of my neck. . . . So I had to struggle with the spirit of Nkunzi and learn to keep him under control and this went on for nearly two months of [izisangoma] the training and I am still learning.

—Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*

My lover's nipples meet me affectionately,
a wound my body had not known it missed.

I am caged with her. And I am with him.

The three of us rolling under covers
on a three-quarter mid-morning bed.

We laugh. Tickle. Hands stroking.

Feeling out where we bleed into each other.

She does not know he is here.

He touches her.

She does not know that we are three.

Or four. Or five.

That we bleed into many, sometimes

—Vangile Gantsho, *red cotton*

I return to the experience of the quotidian, to how I would like to experience the quotidian. A quotidian that is the possibility of gathering into a livable, pleasurable social. We gather to practice freedom as we work across difference.

—Keguro Macharia, “Pleasure (in 5 Movements)”

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This special issue has a performative relation to the concerns it hopes to bring to the fore: the problems of finding a usable past for both the lived experience and the study of African sexual subjects, and how queer theory elaborated from Africa can inform queer theory's Euro-American silent ethnocentrism (see Camminga 2017; Matebeni 2014; Matebeni and Msibi 2015; Mupotsa 2015; Musangi 2018; Nyanzi 2013; and Osinubi 2016). Our three opening epigraphs—from a memoir, a poem, and something that approaches a manifesto, respectively—suggest some of the lineaments of the queer customary: its temporal complexity containing ancestral time, the present, and invitations to futurity. Both caged and free, experientially singular but “bleeding into many,” the queer customary not only invokes the historical determinants of what Keguro Macharia (2017) above terms the *quotidian* as it lodges in the body, but also suggests an undoing of those determinants in freedom as a practice. The epigraph from Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's memoir animates a cosmology beyond the imaginaries of secularism and invites a consideration of sexual and gendered self-fashioning that draws on indigenous religious practices and experiences that defy the conservatism often attributed to matters deemed “traditional.” In turn, Vangile Gantsho's poem holds a similar proliferation of hauntings in something more like the apparently synchronic time of the erotic encounter refusing the hetero/homo binary and its attendant bourgeois couple form, or at least suggesting that such forms are riven with contradictions. Finally, the Macharia quotation from “Pleasure (in 5 Movements)” sutures those two experiences of the everyday into a more social desire for freedom “across difference.”

We hope that these three epigraphs together capture what we are calling the *African queer customary*. That said, it is possible that we might come to find that the queer customary is out of joint with itself, and that the more political work of the *quotidian*, the customary, must remain deferred or aspirational. As Sokari Ekine (2013: 78) notes, “Two distinct yet interlinked narratives dominate discussions of queer sexualities: one claims that queer sexualities are ‘unAfrican’ and the other treats Africa as a site of obsessive homophobia.” We hope to deploy an idea of the customary and its more complex, improvisatory notion of time to do something else—to see how African sexual subjects might make and remake themselves under conditions not of their making, holding onto African singularities but hopefully also opening up into elsewhere.

John Comaroff and Simon Roberts (1981: 78) defined the customary as “the undifferentiated repertoire of the normative.” Mahmood Mamdani ([1996] 2018: 25) argued for “customary law” as “the theory of decentralized despotism.”

This issue hopes to work the former definition against the latter, disarticulating the customary from its colonial and, in many instances, postcolonial codification/ossification into customary law. We define the *queer customary* as those practices and desires and their representations that reference (while inhabiting and inflecting) the heteronormativity of customary categories. Simultaneously, the *queer customary* refers to queer studies' secret normativities—even in their ostensible anti-normative guise—thus transgressing the expected boundaries and forms of the field. Queering the customary specifically entails the unsettling of expected roles, subjectivities, and forms of personhood that are normatively proscribed by customary practices—within queer studies as well as other local communities—and discourses that are simultaneously enabled by those very same practices and discourses.

This special issue addresses key topics at the intersection of queer studies and ideas and practices of “the customary,” more specifically, with a geographic focus on the continent of Africa. As such, we hope to further some of the ideas raised in Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraine-George's (2016) essay on the intersection of African and queer studies in the recent *Area Impossible* issue of *GLQ* (Arondeker and Patel 2016). Such ideas include how queer studies/theory is strengthened through understanding queerness from/within Africa. What presumptions within Euro-American queer studies/theory scholarship contribute to Afro-pessimist and/or Afro-optimist scholarship and viewpoints? What of an Afro-pragmatist perspective, and how might Afro-queer scholarship chart such an ostensibly impossible path? How might the customary be a space for political pragmatism? Or perhaps the queer customary might be an idealist pragmatism oriented toward ideals-to-come like queer democracy, or freedom—ideals to strive for, but that nonetheless must forever be beyond our reach lest they repeat the failures of the European Enlightenment from which they also derive. Our hunch is that an understanding of gender and sexuality as at least partially customary forms and processes can illuminate the normativity debates in Euro-American queer theory in novel ways, as well as challenge the legal liberalism that has increasingly come to stand in for much of queer politics today.

Obviously the queer customary is not only African. As same-sex-desiring and gender-variant subjects in much of the North Atlantic world and beyond are unevenly and contestably becoming subjects of legal liberalism through state recognition and international human rights law, the queer customary remains and shifts in those spaces, too: the tea dance, the turkey baster, the pride march, the rise of “throuples” in queer communities that inhabit while transgressively inflecting coupledness, dating apps, and on and on, are all potential sites of and for what

could be called the *queer customary*. Macharia (2017) plays with the queer customary as pleasure:

Ordinary. Banal. Quotidian.

Ordinary:

adjective

1. of no special quality or interest; commonplace; unexceptional:
2. plain or undistinguished:
3. somewhat inferior or below average; mediocre.
4. customary; usual; normal:

Banal:

adjective

1. devoid of freshness or originality; hackneyed; trite:

Quotidian:

adjective

1. daily:
2. usual or customary; everyday:
3. ordinary; commonplace:

By invoking the customary, we distinguish this category from the hegemonic realm of customary law, which has sometimes been particularly oppressive with regard to nonconforming genders and sexualities. The customary exists “beneath and beyond” as well as “before and belatedly” to overlapping regimes of customary, constitutional, and international law (Hoad 2016: 10). Customary practices and discourses are not just those authorized by customary norms, although they many times reference them, inflecting them toward unexpected ends that are not overdetermined by customary authority, and sometimes working the different sites and levels of customary authority against each other. For example, Stella Nyanzi and Margaret Emodu-Walakira (2009) explore how Baganda women take the customary practice of widow marriage (for instance, when a woman’s deceased spouse’s brother marries her) as a highly ambivalent issue—as both a kind of “evil” and “solution” with regard to women’s adjustments to widowhood in relation to issues of property and inheritance (also see Okech 2019). Nyanzi (2013: 953) later asks, “What is this ‘traditional family’?,” noting the variety of nuclear and extended family models, all of which trouble heteropatriarchal national fantasies and are often the fantasy-object from which homophobic law and policies emerge (also see Macharia 2013 and Tamale 2009). This beneath and above is

again echoed in Neo Musangi's (2018) recent article on how women in their family married women.

When South African Olympic athletes Caster Semenya and Violet Raseboya married in January 2017, they had a "customary" wedding with the acceptance and participation of family members, which included *lobola* (bride-price) exchange and Caster's family welcoming Violet as their *makoti* (newlywed bride). As Michael W. Yarbrough's (2018) work shows, in South Africa the transactions between civil and customary law in the making of ideals of same-sex marriage reshape forms of personhood, intimacy, and relation. This is what Xavier Livermon (2015) refers to as "useable traditions. Likewise, Malawians Tiwonge Chimbalanga Kachepa and Steven Monjeza were engaged in a "customary" ceremony in 2009. The practices surrounding the event expressed overt community buy-in or self-determination of the customary (White 2015). This included the local pastor serving as an *ankoswe* (traditional marriage counselor) and the admission of Tiwonge into the church congregation as a woman (Biruk 2014), woman here referring to a sexuated position as "bride" (see Muptosa 2015; Musangi 2018; Mupotsa in this issue) that is not biologically determined or contained within a "dual sex-gender system" (see Oyěwùmí 1997). Such practices were and are oblique to hegemonic customary authority and community norms that may have assigned Tiwonge a male gender before successfully performing the markers and gaining general recognition of her womanhood as a bride by church congregation members. In this way Tiwonge and those in her community collectively both disarticulated customary practice from customary authority and inflected community normativities, themselves never singular or monolithic in their constant (re)interpretation.

Other examples of the queer customary can be found in the shifting roles of authority embodied in the practices and politics of traditional healers in South Africa (Nkabinde 2008). Additionally in South Africa, Xhosa-speaking black gay men from lower-class, middle-class, and poor families in townships have been choosing to undertake *ulwaluko* (male initiation and circumcision rituals). Those undergoing customary rites of passage are engaged in processes that generate a range of contested, ordinary, and plural forms of sex, gender, sexuality, performance, experience, relation, persons, and intimacy (see Qambela Forthcoming). These plural forms were undeniably entwined with these customs. What is "queer" emerges within the vernacular of these rituals and traditions (Qambela 2019). It also refers to ways of using and inhabiting space (Ombagi 2019). While these subjects are regularly marginalized during these processes because of their sexuality, their desires to undergo these customs were not determined solely by the hegemonic notions of masculinity that such customs are intended to enforce. Rather,

these young men trouble the heteronormativity of manhood by reengaging the semiotic processes of these customary practices and discourses (Fiereck 2018).

We have assembled a multidisciplinary representation of scholars from literary studies, anthropology, and sociology, with a focus on contributions from scholars based in African institutions. A special issue on the topics of African queerness and the customary is timely. The African Studies Association recently formed a Queer African Studies Association. *Research in African Literatures* just published their first queer issue (Hoad and Osinubi 2016). The Center for Constitutional Rights saw its case against Scott Lively for his role in the drafting of the Ugandan “Kill the Gays” bill finally dismissed in 2017 on jurisdictional grounds, but more such cases are on the horizon as Uganda reconsiders the bill at the moment of writing. Given these developments, it will be increasingly necessary for all gender and sexuality scholars who focus on queerness to understand where specific idioms and forms of cultural particularity—such as the antinormativity debates, customary forms, traditionalisms, and tribalisms—overlap and, most critically, where precisely they diverge. Here one must extend the Foucauldian insight that any sexuality is a classed sexuality to the other powerful forms of group belonging (see Nyanzi 2013).

This special issue presents a series of theoretically informed articles that are situated within existing scholarship on queerness in a range of African contexts, without taking the designation African for granted, and explore the “non-normative” (Matebeni and Msibi 2015), or secret normativities of particular strands of Euro-American queer theory that are customarily antinormative. Such “secret normativities” exist in the uncritical adoption of performativity theory that ignores the normative structure of the performative. As Jacques Derrida (1995) reminds us, such a structure requires an exhaustive normative context for a successful performative to instantiate that which it names, even an antinormative one (Morris 2007). For example, in Euro-American queer studies, there is an unmarked (secret) normative assemblage of personhood (which includes norms of body, psyche, self, subject, individual, and public and personal personae) that structures both normative and antinormative performativities (El-Tayeb 2011).

The suppressed presence of the customary disarticulates existing African and queer studies as a focus on the customary renegotiates the constitutive “outside” of both queer liberalisms and African ethnonationalisms. As same-sex-desiring and gender-nonconforming African subjects use indigenous and queer studies’ customs in their self-fashioning, they contest the secret normativities and ethnocentrisms of Euro-American queer studies scholarship, or even undo some of the heteropatriarchal norms of African ethnonationalisms. Those ethno-

nationalisms, similar to customary law, are/were partly produced by colonial and postcolonial encounters and enterprises. Simultaneously, that coinhabiting of queer and customary practice positions such subjects as not entirely assimilable to codes of legal liberalism, the right to culture or self-determination notwithstanding. The recursive, quotidian temporality of the customary resists both the teleological temporality of LGBTQIA+ citizenship and the anchoring eternities that tradition, invented or otherwise, brought into being. This recursive quotidian space of the customary lives beyond and beneath the spaces of governmentality: to bring the customary formally into the law renders it no longer customary. The customary is not civil society either, yet civil society actors can inflect and transgress those norms in registers we would label as the queer customary. We inevitably risk the romance of the incommensurate, but also realize that despite the commensurabilities that the operations of law and capital make inevitable, particularly when they act in concert with one another, that there is nonetheless space for dissonance—in a word: noise.

The essays in this special issue address inter alia how customary queer cultural production might serve as a basis from which to critique late capitalist forms of value production (material, ethical, and semiotic) and exchange. The queer customary is nothing if not an urgent engaging of the conditions of the reproduction of everyday life right now. On this contorted and moving time/space of the queer customary, we are bound to a series of enabling and constraining inheritances. We inherit the always already multiplicity of this issue's objects of focus. We inherit "the customary," as we do "the queer," in their multiple temporal and spatial disjointedness. We struggle with the ongoing legacies of colonialism, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism that weaponize nature and ourselves against one another, alongside more recent violent histories sewn long ago of both industrial and financial capital—of identities and datafied selves; of commodified bodies and derivativized, specular persons. All of these histories and their deployments are ones that preclude any simple or unified notion of the queer or the customary.

In this special issue, Macharia's article stretches across temporalities in a Kenya partly routed through the black diaspora to think the inheritance of intimate disorganization and its potentialities through disjointedness, but also urges us to forget or abandon the study of a racist and colonial archive of sexuality and, *pace* Ann Stoler (1995) and Joseph Massad (2007), perhaps even sexuality itself, especially in the form of the homo/hetero binary, which can rightly be seen as an ongoing imperial project, which replicates its injuries in every invocation of its histories, no matter how critical.

What can/must be abandoned in ways that are not just the production of

alibi? Is it possible to forget entirely or ignore the colonial archive of sexuality? Or will those abandonments necessarily return as hauntings (Matebeni 2014)? We would like to abandon the fantasy of representativity—both geographic and temporal as well as semiotic. What of the unrepresentable, the atemporal, the unconscious of the antagonisms of everyday life for everyone, everywhere? Most queer African studies, with a few important exceptions like the work of Wendy Belcher (2016) on Ethiopia, are twentieth-century focused, though an idea of the customary with its lost origins and persistent reworking of past practices messes with any easy historical periodizing.

Spatially, as one website would have it, “Africa is [not] a country.”¹ There are 57 countries on the continent, and close to 2,000 languages are spoken, with over 250 in Nigeria alone. What appears in this special issue on the queer customary is not even a scratching of the surface. If we think of “Africa” in the *longue durée* of the colonial encounter, two strands of historiographic thinking can be isolated: first, “Africa” was always and already queer, in the sense that African sex and gender norms and practices did not look like those of the emergent white, middle-class nuclear family (itself more of an ideological phantasm in the West than a lived reality for most people), and these differences in sex and gender norms may have been constitutive of racial and “civilizational” difference rather than merely evidence of it. This imputation of African queerness underwrote in frequently dystopian ways the ideological claim/justification of colonialism as an ostensible “civilizing mission.” It is not churlish to point out that humanitarian and human rights initiatives find a precursor in this earlier instance of well-intentioned Westerners telling African people what they should and should not do with their bodies. Relatedly, the South African historian Jeff Guy (1997) explains the emergence of customary law in what becomes the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal as “an accommodation of patriarchs.” However, T. J. Tallie’s (2019) recent book, by highlighting the agency of Zulu women in resisting the attempt to eradicate ilolobolo (bridewealth), certainly complicates Guy’s assertion. How such accommodations prefigure something like a global family values coalition that underlies the drafting of recent legislation in Nigeria and Uganda is a question worth posing. Alongside that fantasy stood what Marc Epprecht (2008) has established as the cognate but contradictory fantasy of “heterosexual Africa.” The field of queer African studies has inevitably inherited some epistemic habits from the endurance of a heteropatriarchal nationalism (Ekine 2013). Sharon Holland (2012: 56) has demonstrated “how the transatlantic slave trade altered the very shape of sexuality in the Americas for everyone.” How the African diaspora influences,

reframes, and transforms an object of conjuring like the African queer customary marks the site of another begged question.

Queer theory and to lesser but still significant extent queer studies has been mostly a knowledge project of the North Atlantic world of the last thirty years or so. That fact is an inheritance that is difficult to shake, though Macharia (this volume) urges us to try, without collapsing into a nativism that disavows its colonial history in ways that are more repetition than rupture. We hope that these essays can work an idea of the customary with its sense of adaptiveness to inherited normativities, but working multiple levels of authority within the customary to make these normativities anew can be an intellectual resource in, for the want of a better shorthand, “white” and “Western” queer theoretical thinking on its self-professed central intellectual problem—the normative—hetero and homo. Recent years have seen the inauguration of a project under the banner of “theory from the South,” though obviously there has always been theoretical thinking from what is now designated the global South (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). So in addition to making “South” contributions to queer theory of and from the North, we hope to advance that project of theory of, from, and for the South queerly, using the African queer customary as a kind of lever. What does it mean that queer studies’ inheritance of custom can be understood to be the antinormative stance with regard to the antinormativity debates? This issue asks readers to attempt new ways to think of and with these inheritances and how they continue to haunt us in ways that we cannot yet fully grasp. We hope the queer customary can also become a way to engage various articulations of queer and diaspora (Allen 2012; Tinsley 2008; El-Tayeb 2011). Some of these approaches can also mean a refusal, or a walking away, as Grace Musila (2019) tells us.

What we hope the queer customary would enable is neither a simple antinomy between normativities and their antis, nor an oversimplification by parsimonious readings of the work that “cultural particularity” and notions of “the local” have traditionally done in scholarship defined by David Graeber (2014) as “vulgar Foucauldianism.” In the place of these approaches, the authors we have collected here rework such antinomies and frugality. They do so by inhabiting and inflecting an African as well as a Black Atlantic history of diagnosing and rehabilitating pathological norms to attempt to turn the machineries of chattel slavery as well as industrial, postwar political regimes of nationalism and financial capitalisms’ focus on race-as-property as well as circulation as an exclusive space of capital accumulation against themselves.

We begin the special issue with Danai Mupotsa’s “Conjugality,” the essay

that most thoroughly lays out the time/space of the customary in analytic and meditative terms by asking what forms of knowledge inhere in the hybrid form of an African “bachelorette party,” allowing the impossibility of the translation of cultural idiom to become visible. Macharia’s “belated : interruption” follows and outlines the stakes of what it might mean to both finally and only start to think African queerness in a venue such as this one.

Next, Ruth Ramsden-Karelse’s “Moving and Moved: Reading Kewpie’s District Six” gives readers a sense of when national and civic appropriations of queerness as forms of self-fashioning that were aspirational, customary, unevenly tolerated—both partially normative and defiantly transgressive—are archived and redeployed in a landscape of shifting interests from giving a new national constitution a historical life to processes of gentrification. The case study is South African, but liberal constitutionalism, national appropriations of queerness, and processes of gentrification have much wider geographies. For example, these readings of the queer customary are similar to the granting of legal personhood to environmental entities like rivers and mountains in New Zealand and India (Fiereck 2017), which references indigenous norms of personhood but inflects them in new ways. The emergence of environmental personhood in liberal constitutionalisms globally mirrors the processes Partha Chatterjee (2004) identified in his division of post-colonial sociality into political society and civil society. In his examples, humans in political society address conditions of injustice produced by civil society. In this way, the environmental customary as well as the queer customary reference aspects of sociopolitical processes that the constitution of civil society produced as suppressed presences throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods and aim to rework them toward unpredictable, decolonizing ends.

Edgar Fred Nabutanyi’s “(Un)Complicating Mwanga’s Sexuality in Nakisanzze Segawa’s *The Triangle*” takes a recent novelistic retelling of the story of Mwanga, the last kabaka (king) to rule Buganda—and the story of the most explicit instance of African queerness being used to justify colonial rule in the history of the British Empire—to suggest that the alterity of the past can neither be used to find an authentic African precolonial queerness nor to assert that such a thing could never be. Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki’s “Through the Lens of Modernity: Reflections on the (Colonial) Cultural Archive of Sexuality and Gender in South Africa,” an essay in productive tension with Macharia’s, searches for traces of African customary queerness in a colonial archive that wishes to eradicate precisely such practices, desires, and forms of knowledge.

Cal (Crystal) Biruk’s “‘Fake Gays’ in Queer Africa: NGOs, Metrics, and Modes of Theory” reads the NGO world as a site of the customary where the figure

of the “fake gay” emerges in “ritualized practices associated with neoliberalism (monitoring and evaluation, paperwork, counting) [that] operate as queer sites of multiplying possibilities and emergences.” In “After Performativity, beyond Custom: The Queerness of Biofinancial Personhood, Citational Sexualities, and Derivative Subjectivity in South Africa,” Kirk Fiereck tracks multiple scales of determinism and freedom in positing citational sexualities and derivative subjectivity as terms that reveal “how black LGBTQ-identified and other gender non-conforming South Africans juxtapose the queer with the customary as well as the financial as they constitute forms of queer biofinancial personhood that are paradigmatic of financialized capitalisms globally.”

The special issue concludes with Laura Edmondson’s “The Fabulous Pan-Africanism of Binyavanga Wainaina,” an essay that analyzes Wainaina’s only play, *Shine Your Eye*, to rethink questions of theatricality, visibility, and queer agency in the context of Wainaina’s commitment to a queer pan-Africanism. Wainaina was Kenyan, but his pan-Africanism moves beyond the confines of national space. Binyavanga Wainaina died much too young on May 21, 2019: a complicated figure of African queer celebrity, whose exceptionality usefully contrasts with our focus on the quotidian.

We see these essays as both invitations and caveats: carefully delineated points of possible entry into the growing experiential and epistemological archive of African queer self-fashioning as it deploys the customary with all its ambivalences in the context of dystopian and enabling global forces.

Notes

1. See *Africa Is a Country*, africasacountry.com (accessed January 21, 2020).

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