Queer as Africa: Representations of Queer Lives in Selected Nigerian, Kenyan, and South African Literature and Film

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Abstract

This thesis contests the notion that nonnormative sexualities are 'un-African' by examining a range of representations of queer African lives on film and in literature, produced by Africans for Africans, as a means to interrogate the role played by the interconnected histories of colonialism, religion, and the policing of queer intimacy, specifically in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Through a close reading of a selection of texts from these three countries, this thesis takes a cultural-historical approach to exploring the complex struggles engaged in by queer people in Africa to protections under the law, and to represent themselves in literary and cinematic narratives. The first chapter is focused on the Kenyan film *Rafiki* (2018), directed by Wanuri Kahiu, which tells the story of queer love between two young Kenyan women who face the vehement condemnation of their relationship from their homophobic community. The film was banned in Kenya, but the director was granted a temporary injunction by Kenya's high court in order for it to be screened in Nairobi. This made *Rafiki* the first queer film ever to be screened in Kenya, and viable for an Academy Award nomination. The second chapter focuses on the bold assertion of a queer African identity through the short story collections *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* (2013) and *Queer Africa 2: New Stories* (2017). Written by various authors from the African continent, and compiled and edited by Karen Martin and Makhosazana Xaba, both collections offer a wide variety of fictional narratives focused on queer experiences in Africa. The second chapter has a focus on stories from Kenyan and Nigerian authors and explores notions of home, queer belonging, and visibility. The third chapter presents a close reading of the South African film *Inxeba* (2017), also known as *The Wound*, directed by John Trengove and adapted by Trengove and Thando Mgqolozana from Mgqolozana's novel, *A Man Who Is Not A Man* (2009). The film depicts the traditional Xhosa initiation ritual, *ulwaluko*, and is set in the rural Eastern Cape. *Inxeba* is an important case study in the history of queer representation in Africa, as the film hit a nerve with many, interrogating what South Africans believe about culture, traditions, masculinity, and the right of artists to represent sacred ritual in art. This thesis pays attention to the historical entanglements between homophobia, imperialism, and Christianity – relationships that continue to affect the experiences of queer people in Africa and attitudes towards them and interrogates why queer individuals are still being left out of efforts towards creating a new normal in postcolonial Africa. This thesis suggests that increased visibility is a key aspect of queer activism in Africa – through the act of representation, sharing lived experiences, and telling queer stories.

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Introduction: Africa is Queer

Homosexuality is not un-African; what is un-African is homophobia.
Wanuri Kahiu.

Representation is an essential tool used to enact change, increase visibility, and validate identities. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks notes that due to the dominance of whiteness in the history of representation: "we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy" (1). When we queer this view, we can recognise how patriarchal, heteronormative society perpetuates the same hegemonic norms in terms of queerness and nonnormative sexualities. The images and representations of queer people, throughout history, have been used to reinscribe heteronormativity and perpetuate an idea of queerness as an identity that is both second-class and immoral. As Sanya Osha notes, "homophobia and the oppression caused by the entrenchment of heteropatriarchy continue to be a serious impediment towards sexual decolonisation" (96). Although queerness has always existed in all societies, the category of that identity has not. According to Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro, and Vasu Reddy in their introduction to *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism:*

> African non-heterosexual sexualities and gender diversities are . . . neither static nor uniform; rather, they are dynamic, multifarious, and resilient. While identity seems to be an ongoing component of self-definition, African queer identities are fundamentally under construction, changing, discursive representations that reflect the tensions between the personal and the oppressive power of social structures. (1-2)

As Matebeni *et al*. observe, the ongoing construction African queer identities and self-definitions are closely linked to the burgeoning forms of representing queer lives on the continent. Queer people can fight the systems that oppress them by sharing stories and experiences, which calls attention to the expanding desire to create a new normal. As Marc Epprecht notes, "Queer politics and the struggle for sexual rights are a very new development in most of Africa, dating generally from the 1990s. Africans, however, have known for a very long time about people who somehow do not fit the heterosexual ideal" (*Unspoken* 2-3). Historically, representations that depict queerness as something destructive, damaging, and shameful mar the development of acceptance. Furthermore, in African countries, queerness has been compelled into a state of invisibility and when that invisibility is challenged, efforts at more accurate representations of queer lives are met with antagonism and attempts at suppression and erasure. Queerness in Africa is still largely considered a social taboo because

of its perceived ties to whiteness and colonialism. Therefore, the representations of queer lives in film, television, and literature in Africa broadly are still unsubstantial. As this thesis will explore, however, African filmmakers and writers are making efforts to change this situation.

The relationship between many African countries and their queer citizens is a contentious one. According to Abadir M. Ibrahim, "36 African countries criminalise sodomy and the list includes those that impose life imprisonment and the death sentence" (265). The toxic legacy of colonisation in Africa, which involved the imposition of both imperial laws and Christianity on indigenous cultures, resulted in the erasure of indigenous ways of being, cultural norms and laws, and the widespread policing and thus politicisation of queer intimacy. Nonnormative sexualities and same-sex relationships have existed for centuries in Africa, whether or not the people involved identified as queer or homosexual but, as Ibrahim notes, in many postcolonial African countries, "one of the major arguments that are being voiced against the protection of LGBTI rights is that homosexuality is 'un-African'" (266). Cheryl Stobie observes:

> Non-normative sexualities are subject to legal and social censure worldwide. Out of some 196 countries (Rosenberg 2014), at least 76, or possibly up to 81, criminalise homosexual acts ('79 Countries' 2015). Out of a total of 54 African countries, homosexuality has been declared illegal in 38, and the death penalty can be applied in four of these ('Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual' 2014). Despite this rampant homophobia and abuse of human rights, however, sociological and anthropological accounts, life writing, literature, and film from many of these countries testify to the presence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals. ("She Who Creates" 63)

As Epprecht, Stobie, and many other researchers drawn on in this thesis have demonstrated, queer Africans have always existed, despite the negative connotations attached to this identity. Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi observes, "African politicians and cultural purists have repeatedly asserted the foreignness or un-African nature of nonnormative sexualities by placing same-sex desires outside of *African customs* and *traditions"* (xvi).

Two of the countries focussed on in this thesis, Kenya and Nigeria, both have strict laws against LGBTIQ+ people and behaviours, whereas, in the third, South Africa, nonnormative sexualities are not criminalised. The situation faced by LGBTIQ+ citizens, however, is vexed. South Africa was "the first in the world to ban discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation," but public discourse around queer people and behaviours is still fraught with complexity (Munro *South Africa* vii). Attitudes towards queer people are often condemnatory, with queerness viewed as a capitulation to corrupt Western lifestyles. As anti-

imperialist rhetoric combines with patriarchal norms and deep-set religious ideologies, these condemnations often result in the violent policing of nonnormative sexualities. The policing of LGBTIQ+ people in Africa impedes adequate representation in, as well as the production and dissemination of, and access to, queer African literature and film.

This thesis seeks to examine representations of queer African lives on film and in literature, produced by Africans for Africans, as a means to interrogate the role played by the interconnected histories of colonialism, religion, and the policing of queer intimacy, specifically in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. By examining a range of African fiction and films, I hope to articulate a clearer understanding of the complex struggle for the right of queer people in Africa to protections under the law and to represent themselves in literary and cinematic narratives. In their paper "The Struggle over Representation," Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain that "filmic fictions inevitably bring into play real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships. Films which represent marginalised cultures in a realistic mode, even when they do not claim to represent specific historical incidents, still implicitly make factual claims" (206). Filmic and literary representations help depict lived lives and experiences which can help change and shape societies.

As a queer white man from South Africa, I recognise the complexity in my own contribution to this research. As Makhosazana Xaba states, regarding positionality and writing: "if you want to write about what you don't know, something outside of your 'positionality', then research it first, live in it, with it, listen to it, ask it questions, ask questions about it, learn to speak its language, understand it well enough before you start writing" (qtd. in Xaba and du Preez 136). Haley Hulan, noting the importance of incorporating a historical study in one's analysis, explains:

> New Historicism is an area of critical theory which focuses not only on the texts that one is examining but the social and historical context in which those texts were created and viewed. New Historicism connects the fictional with real history and real people, which is the most important aspect of any project that examines the usage of literary tropes by virtue of the nature of tropes themselves; tropes are patterns in fiction which arise from various circumstances. (18)

Thus, the analytical approach taken in this thesis is intersectional, historical, and cultural, rather than a strictly theoretical one, as drawing solely on Western queer theory will not in itself

illuminate adequately the veracity nor the complexity of queer representations in differently situated African countries and cultures.[1]

Definitions and Language Used

Throughout this research, I have discovered many different definitions of the various ideas and concepts that inform this work. The following section examines the contemporary usage of these key terms and definitions as these steer my understanding and analysis throughout. The section also seeks to create a sense of uniformity and cohesion regarding the key terms used throughout this research.

Representation

bell hooks notes the vital importance of accurate forms of representation and the qualities for liberation they possess:

> Without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure. Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. (2)

Representation matters because when it is done positively, it helps dismantle problematic stereotypes. hooks coined the phrase "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to describe what she called "the interlocking political systems that are the foundation" of society in the United States (*Understanding* par. 2). Such a foundation also exists in many African countries, where one of the most urgent tasks is the reconstitution of societies impacted by centuries of imperialism. As Osinubi points out, "emergent representations" of queer Africans in literature and film have "been framed as interventions in cultural politics or expressions of dissent due to the politicization of queer intimacies" (viii). hooks's work on race and representation is thus useful to examining queer representation in Africa and the efforts of queer African filmmakers and writers to liberate queerness from the combined effects of neo-imperialism, patriarchy, and heteronormative hegemony.

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality,' in 1989 has drawn attention to the multidimensionality of experiences of oppression, especially among those who are marginalised or silenced in their societies due to their race, class, gender, and sexuality (139).

According to Stuart Hall, representation is "the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events" (172). Noting that, as humans, we may interpret the world differently from each other, Hall states, "we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world roughly in similar ways" and, "because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together" (173). Hall states that "the relation between 'things', concepts and sign lies at the heart of production of meaning in language" and "the process which link these three elements together is what we call 'representation'" (174).

Hall's explanation of representation, and his notion of "conceptual maps" as a "system of concepts" (173), are useful when considering that queerness has always existed, but the language attached to the concept to give it meaning and understanding has, historically, been negative. When queer people attempt to share their stories and their lived experiences they are required to challenge these negative "conceptual maps" particularly when engaging in acts of representation. This may be linked to Xavier Livermon's important notion of the "cultural labor" required to shift embedded notions of queer identity, as will be discussed later in this introduction ("Queer" 300). For instance, in the Netflix documentary *Disclosure* (2020), Jen Richards recalls that when dealing with her own transgender identity she had no positive media representations on which to draw. She explains that when she revealed her transgender identity to a friend, their "only point of reference was this disgusting, psychotic serial killer" named Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (19:15). Having no positive point of reference highlights the damaging ways nonnormative sexualities and gender identities have been misrepresented throughout history. In Africa, these negative conceptual maps are further complicated by the impact of the history of racism and colonialism on the continent, as will be explored in detail later.

Sanya Osha explains how "a series of erasures and misrepresentations have been visited on black sexuality since the advent of coloniality," which "amounts to sexual stigmatisation" (92). Although African individuals, communities, and countries must dissect and interrogate their attitudes towards homosexuality and queerness, it is also necessary to obtain increased visibility of nonnormative sexualities. This can happen in a number of ways. As discussed by Cheryl Stobie, international publicity has helped curb prosecution and discrimination in countries like Senegal, where same-sex relationships are illegal. She notes that there is

"potential significance of an analysis of queer activism from the outside of specific African countries in solidarity with sexual minorities within these contexts, both working in tandem to effect progressive shifts in law, popular opinion, and attitudes towards queer individuals and behaviour" (63). Therefore, this thesis takes as its starting point the idea that the representation of queer African lives in Africa, by Africans themselves, is a vital aspect of queer activism on the continent towards social change. As Susan Stryker notes, in the documentary *Disclosure* (2020), "having positive representation can only succeed in changing the condition of life" when such representations are "part of a much broader movement for social change. Changing representation is not the goal. It's just the means to an end" (1:42:23). Stryker's focus here is on the lives of transgender people, but her inference about the work of representation can be applied to other members of the LGBTIQ+ community too. Although positive representation in Africa is pertinent to progressive change in public opinions, queer representation is also far more complicated on the African continent than in many Western countries, because of the historical entanglement of queerness with its policing under colonial rule, as will be explored in detail throughout this thesis. As the situation in South Africa makes clear, there can be legislative protections in place for queer individuals, but negative public opinion often has a far more pervasive effect on the lived precarity of queer lives.

When public opinion outweighs the reach of the legislature, positive representation can help towards systemic change, as will be explored throughout this thesis through an examination of Kenyan, Nigerian, and South African legislation as regards the rights of queer citizens. Although public opinion in countries like Kenya and Nigeria affects legislation – homophobic public opinion supports the constitutional oppression of homosexuality – in South Africa, it is the opposite. Despite widespread anti-homosexual public opinion, the South African constitution affords protection for queer people. In Nigeria, it is illegal for men to be homosexual, while the legality as pertains to women is uncertain.[2] There are no protections for LGBTIQ+ people regarding discrimination, and homosexual activity can result in a prison sentence of up to three years. In Kenya, it is also illegal to be homosexual.[3] There are no protections in terms of discrimination, and punishment involves prison sentences of five to fourteen years. Although there are harsh laws in Kenya, "the measures have not been widely enforced" (Ingber par. 7).[4] In both countries, the public discourse is extremely anti-homosexual,

[2] See "LGBT Rights in Nigeria" at https://www.equaldex.com/region/nigeria.
[3] See "LGBT Rights in Kenya" at https://www.equaldex.com/region/kenya.
[4] According to Sasha Ingber, "Human Rights Watch said it was aware of just two prosecutions against four people in the last decade. Instead, the organization says, the laws have served as a pretense to mistreat LGBTQ people,

with over ninety percent of people surveyed of the opinion that Nigerians and Kenyans should not accept homosexuality.[5] Homosexuality is legal in South Africa, and same-sex marriage and protections against discrimination are afforded to South Africans. The public discourse over the rights afforded to LGBTIQ+ citizens is fraught with difficulty, however, with public opinion and attitudes leaning towards anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments. Therefore, when we see queer representation in film and literature from Africa, we need to acknowledge such efforts to liberate queerness from the combined effects of neo-imperialism, patriarchy, and heteronormative hegemony. Representations of queerness in some African countries, such as Nigeria, have also been marred by depictions that associate nonnormative sexualities with evilness, witchcraft, and immorality.[6] As Julius Kaggwa notes: "if we are relentless in our educational work, to change hearts and minds, we will make incremental and lasting attitudinal changes concerning differences in sexual development" (Matebeni *et al*. 7).

Grant Andrews draws attention to the crucial political component to representation:

> Representation, particularly the type of representation that challenges concepts of the assumed incompatibility of same-sex sexualities and an essentialised 'Africanness,' are in many ways still viewed as politically important in the South African context. By asserting the black, queer subject and their place in South Africa, these texts offer vital counternarratives to widespread homophobia. (3)

Therefore, various forms of representation are needed to ensure stereotypical views of queer Africans are not perpetuated and reinforced. The belief that nonnormative sexualities are un-African has been debunked through a historicisation of sexuality in Africa, as will be explored throughout this thesis. Sylvia Tamale notes, "the mistaken claim that anything is un-African is based on the essentialist assumption that Africa is a homogeneous entity. In reality, however, Africa is made up of thousands of ethnic groups with rich and diverse cultures and sexualities" (par. 7). Beyond the African continent, we have seen increasingly accurate queer representation throughout contemporary history in groundbreaking Western television shows such as *Ellen* (1994-1998)*, Will and Grace* (1998-2006, 2017-2020), and *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005). These shows have helped gradually shift the conversation around the acceptance and visibility of gay

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who report harrowing accounts of being forced into sex, discriminated against at work, suspended from schools, pressured into paying off authorities and other abuses" (par. 7).

[5] See the survey "Should Society Accept Homosexuality?" <https://www.equaldex.com/surveys/pew-global-attitudes-on-homosexuality-2013>

[6] The Nigerian Nollywood film *Emotional Crack* (2003) is an example of this type of depiction. See Lindsey Green-Simms and Unoma Azuah's "The Video Closet," to explore the condemnation of films depicting same-sex attraction and sexuality in Nigeria.

and lesbian communities and projected queer narratives into mainstream spaces. We have also seen the discussion around the precarious lives of people in the transgender community and their gradual access to acceptance, visibility, and autonomy through shows like *Transparent* (2014-2019) and *Pose* (2018-2021). Using the model of Western media and how more nuanced representations can make queerness visible and change possible, queer African filmmakers and writers are now making space for their own new normal.

The New Normal

In this thesis, I use the definition of heteronormativity articulated by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their essay "Sex in Public." According to Berlant and Warner, heteronormativity is "privileged" through interlocking "structures of understanding" which enshrine heterosexuality as the invisible norm. Berlant and Warner do not equate heteronormativity with heterosexuality but instead explain how, because heterosexuality is privileged throughout society, any sexuality other than heterosexuality "can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has" (312).[7] As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner suggest:

> Queer social practices like sex and theory try to unsettle the garbled but powerful norms supporting that privilege – including the project of normalization that has made heterosexuality hegemonic – as well as those material practices that, though not explicitly sexual, are implicated in the hierarchies of property and propriety that we will describe as heteronormative. (*Intimacy* 312)

As this thesis will explore, there is a desire to create a new normal by resituating African queer narratives within the postcolonial cultural work of African film and literature made by Africans for Africans. The new normal is complex, however, and often involves developing queer African identities representing themselves against the many historical entanglements and powerful social structures that oppress them. The new normal includes depicting fully-formed and realised identities in film, television, literature, and life. In terms of queer African sexuality, this also consists of defining queer African people as sexualised beings.

Creating a new normal is complex because it seeks to subvert the privileging of heteronormativity that has previously disenfranchised queerness. It is further complicated

[7] See Berlant's *Intimacy* (2000) for the full definition Berlant and Warner use.

because some queer people model their own lives on what has historically been considered normative, whereas other queer people seek to dismantle social norms completely. The use of the term 'new normal' within this research pertains to the use of representations that seek to make queer Africans visible, legitimate, and fully realised as both queer and African, which includes the privilege of deciding for one's self what that realisation means within a particular culture while cognisant of the continent's historical entanglements.

Entanglement

The use of the term historical 'entanglements' in this research draws on the work of Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist, and public intellectual Achille Mbembe. In his seminal work, *On the Postcolony* (2001), Mbembe notes that:

> what Africa as a concept calls fundamentally into question is the manner in which social theory has hitherto reflected on the problem (observable also elsewhere) of the collapse of worlds, their fluctuations and tremblings, their about-turns and disguises, their silences and murmurings. Social theory has failed also to account for *time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians. (8)

Mbembe calls attention to how we look at history in Africa as a phenomenon that has happened rather than an enfolding of past and present that is continuously happening. The complexities of African colonial history continue to shape, inform, and affect contemporary African societies. Mbembe observes how "all human societies participate in a *complex* order, rich in unexpected turns, meanders, and changes of course, without this implying their necessary abolition in an absence of center" (8). He suggests that Africa as a concept has a history of being viewed as a place of chaos but as he also observes:

> the torment of nonfulfillment and incompleteness, the labyrinthine entanglement, are in no way specifically African features. Fluctuations and indeterminacy do not necessarily amount to lack of order. Every representation of an unstable world cannot automatically be subsumed under the heading 'chaos.' (8)

Mbembe explains: "while we feel we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not*, we still know absolutely nothing about *what they actually are*" (9). According to Mbembe, "an *entanglement*" is what constitutes what he describes as the "postcolony," a period that "encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals,

inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another" (14).[8] Regarding his notion of the postcolony, he notes that his "central concern was to rethink the theme of the African subject emerging, focusing on him/herself, withdrawing, in the act and context of *displacement* and *entanglement*" (15).[9] He observes how:

> this time of African existence is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society. This time is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones. (16)

Through his exploration of power and subjectivity in Africa, Mbembe points out that "everything remains to be learned about this continent" (18). Drawing on Mbembe's work is crucial in understanding how queer African self-representation is instrumental in defining a clearer understanding of Africa because queerness has not always been visible but rather hidden within the entanglements of African and European history.

Queerness

Queerness, as a means of naming, developed from the use and reclamation of an old slur. Some scholars, activists, and individuals use 'queer' as an umbrella term to signify various communities that fall under the moniker of non-heterosexual. But there has been much debate around this usage. Although the term 'queer' aims to be inclusive in its definition and intention, some people feel that it is a capitulation to heteronormative binarisms. As Xavier Livermon observes:

> Ossified identities, created and imposed by colonialism and apartheid, and variously contested and given meaning and significance by various different communities themselves, are under increasing pressures as people seek to (re)define themselves according to new sociopolitical realities. A significant part of this redefinition involves the appropriation and use of Western-origin identifications such as "straight" and "gay" and their relationship with local vernacular terms describing nonnormative sexual practices. ("Queer" 305)

[8] The French word, 'durées' translates to the English word 'durations'.
[9] According to Mbembe, "*Displacement* is not simply intended to signify dislocation, transit, or 'the impossibility of any centrality other than the one that is provisional, ad hoc, and permanently being redefined'" (15).

The single-use word groups together various communities that strive for individualism in their own right. It also situates heterosexuality as the default sexuality by way of individualising it and, as mentioned above, combining various communities while ignoring their particularity. In *South Africa and the Dream of Love To Come: Queer Sexuality and the Struggle for Freedom* (2012), which analyses the complexities of queerness in South Africa comprehensively, including a thorough historicisation of South Africa's relationship to nonnormative sexualities, Brenna M. Munro explains her understanding of using the word 'queer,' with which I ideologically align, and which I will draw on in my own use of the term. Munro states that the word 'queer' is:

> marked by its Euro-American cultural point of origin, and some critics argue that it is impossible to use it without engaging in a form of academic neoimperialism. I rely on it, however, to enable discussions of identities, practices, intimacies, or affects that do not fit into 'regimes of the normal' – whether local, national, or global – and to bring our attention to forms of stigma that are produced at the intersection of race, sexuality, and imperialism. (xix)

I will use queer, queerness, nonnormative, and the acronym LGBTIQ+ throughout this thesis to represent the various sexualities and identities that exist within Africa and its history while acknowledging the complexities around these labels as described by Munro. According to Marc Epprecht, queerness is "often perceived as a threat to the morals of black African society," as will be explored in detail in the next section (*Unspoken* 3).

The History of Nonnormative Sexualities in Africa

According to Munro, "homosexuality in Africa is bound up with a contradictory modernity that has been produced both within and against imperialism, and this is what makes the question of gay rights in Africa so politically fraught" (*South Africa* xiii). In *Unspoken Facts: A History of Homosexualities in Africa*, Marc Epprecht explains how "same-sex behaviour is a universal phenomenon that takes place regardless of how conservative a culture may appear or its leaders may claim it to be" (218). Throughout history, not only has homophobia and homophobic rhetoric been used to maintain power in African societies, but both also offer insight to the entangled histories of sexuality in Africa. The maintenance of power through the policing of African sexuality began with colonialism but continues to this day. According to Epprecht, "the first people to claim that same-sex sexual relations are 'unAfrican' were not Africans themselves, nor even in some cases had they ever been to Africa. They were European men"

who saw homosexuality, and African sexuality itself, as something of an immoral abomination (*Unspoken* 12). As Eno Blankson Ikpe notes:

> There have existed stereotypes regarding the sexuality of black people which have settled in Euro-American minds. Black people are supposed to be carnal, passionate, lustful, lewd, rapacious, wanton, lascivious and sensual. . . . [An] image has been created that the Black man is sexually out of control. This image developed in the early days of European adventure in Africa when they found the freedom of sexual expressions in Africa diametrically opposed to the sexual repression which was fostered by Christianity in Europe. (Ikpe 26-27)

According to Epprecht, "In colonial times, Africans' supposed stunted or brutish sexuality was thought to oppress and degrade women, engender laziness and stultify intellectual growth in men, threaten public health and safety, and impoverish culture and the arts (no love or higher emotions, just lust and steely transactions)" ("The Making" 768). Therefore, the history of colonisation coincides with the history of the policing of African sexuality. Through colonisation, Christianity arrived, and brought with it the idea of eliminating homosexuality and cleansing African cultures. Christianity, however, is not seen as something that needs to be rooted out as a foreign import. In contemporary Africa, "African sexualities experience slightly different forms of violence from the imperial/colonial kind, which are often mediated by factors of history, culture (and sometimes religion) and also positioning within the current wave of globalisation" (Osha 96).

Epprecht notes that "homosexuality in some form or another is part of human nature" and, as such, has always existed in Africa because "humans come from Africa" (Epprecht and Egya 372). His extensive historical research reveals rich evidence of nonnormative sexualities existing throughout the cultures of the African continent.[10] Sylvia Tamale's research also

[10] In *Unspoken Facts*, Epprecht explains that same-sex activity was noted, enacted, and accepted for a myriad of reasons, including, as a means of "population control due to the risk of famine (24). He suggests that in some cultures "women's lesbian-like sex play may have also reflected their relative freedom from male authority" (24-25); that sexual play between boys and girls, as a means to "prepare for marriage," was known in Zulu, Xhosa, and Shangaan cultures (27), often understood as "mere accidents stemming from physical closeness" (30); and that the phenomena of mine wives, boy wives, and other forms of homosexualities were encouraged as a means to stop unwanted pregnancies and the spread of diseases (58). Other examples of queerness throughout African history include the notion of female spirits occupying male bodies, which would be linked closely to what we would understand as a transgender identity today (35); and the "ritual gender inversions" amongst the Venda people, where women in charge at initiation schools were "called 'masters' (*nematei*) while senior men who instructed boys were known as 'mistresses' (*nyamungozwa*)" and where these women had young brides (36). Epprecht notes here that we can "reasonably speculate that some of the people who fulfilled these unusual gender roles did so in part because they offered a respectable cover for unusual sexual tastes" (36-37). Other examples include "intentional male-male sexual acts could take place as a form of *muti*" where it was "used to cure impotence, to improve soil fertility, or to advance political ambitions" (37) and "battle preparations could also entail sex with males, not just amongst the warriors going into the fray but right up to the highest level of command"

demonstrates evidence of nonnormative sexualities throughout the continent's history:

> African history is replete with examples of both erotic and nonerotic same-sex relationships. For example, the ancient cave paintings of the San people near Guruve in Zimbabwe depict two men engaged in some form of ritual sex. During precolonial times, the "mudoko dako," or effeminate males among the Langi of northern Uganda were treated as women and could marry men. In Buganda, one of the largest traditional kingdoms in Uganda, it was an open secret that Kabaka (king) Mwanga II, who ruled in the latter half of the 19th century, was gay.
>
> The vocabulary used to describe same-sex relations in traditional languages, predating colonialism, is further proof of the existence of such relations in precolonial Africa. To name but a few, the Shangaan of southern Africa referred to same-sex relations as "inkotshane" (male-wife); Basotho women in present-day Lesotho engage in socially sanctioned erotic relationships called "motsoalle" (special friend) and in the Wolof language, spoken in Senegal, homosexual men are known as "gor-digen" (men-women). But to be sure, the context and experiences of such relationships did not necessarily mirror homosexual relations as understood in the West, nor were they necessarily consistent with what we now describe as a gay or queer identity. (Tamale par. 8-9)

Although, as Tamale suggests, nonnormative sexual relationships in precolonial Africa are not the same as the contemporary understandings of queer relationships, these examples are nevertheless proof of the existence of sexualities in Africa different from historically heteronormative hegemonic sexuality.

As Epprecht points out, the history of sexuality in Africa "was clearly more complicated than the idealised heterosexuality that contemporary African leaders now claim as African tradition" (*Unspoken* 41). He notes a "striking irony" behind the idea that homosexuality in Africa is a Western import when "many of the first Europeans to observe African cultures closely were shocked by African willingness to bend the supposed natural laws of sexuality" (*Unspoken* 41). Therefore, as Epprecht observes, it is, in fact, *homophobia* that was imported to Africa, rather than homosexuality itself. Attitudes shaped by homophobic beliefs have influenced the representations of queerness throughout history.[11] According to Epprecht:

> the word *homophobia* was coined in 1969 at the time of the emergence in the United States of the modern gay rights movement and sharp political reactions against it. To apply the word to the historical past therefore is, strictly speaking,

as was seen amidst the Ndebele and Ngoni warriors (39). In *Hungochani*, Epprecht notes the evidence of male-male sex in Bushmen and Khoi cave paintings "confirm that same-sexual practices not only existed in pre-modern milieux but were common enough to be socially acceptable" (26).

[11] As Epprecht explains, "external factors such as colonial institutions like prisons and migrant labour camps played a role in giving rise to new forms of same-sex relationships." (Epprecht and Egya 372).

> anachronistic. The attitudes and behaviour it describes, however, clearly existed long before they had an explicit name. (*Hungochani* 134)

Epprecht notes that, "dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries," many European countries persecuted homosexual acts that were deemed sinful and unnatural by the law of religion (*Hungochani* 134). Epprecht explains that this "hostility towards same-sex sexuality, or indeed, any kind of intimacy that might call into question sharply dichotomous gender roles for males and females" was brought over to Africa in the laws and attitudes disseminated during colonisation (*Hungochani* 135). As I will show, this can clearly be seen in the British penal codes enforced in African territories where Britain took control. As Munro observes, "In various postcolonial locations, imperial-era laws about sexuality are still on the books, and are being both contested and defended, while new, extreme antigay laws are also being written" (*South Africa* xvi-xvii). The reality, where some former colonies have changed their laws regarding nonnormative sexualities, while others still retain colonial laws, will be explored throughout this thesis by comparing the legislation policing queer lives in South Africa with laws in Kenya and Nigeria.

South Africa has one of the most inclusive constitutions regarding protection for LGBTIQ+ people, but so far that has not changed public attitudes informed by the historical entanglements of colonially-imported homophobia. Makhosazana Xaba succinctly explains the complexities of queerness in contemporary South Africa:

> We live in a country whose period we call 'post-apartheid' but the majority of what is 'post' about apartheid are its laws and policies, which is different from saying nothing has changed. What I am referring to are the values and mind-sets of many South Africans who are racist, sexist, classist and homophobic to name a few, as if we do not have the best constitution in the world. Reality is lagging behind our new laws and policies. (qtd. in Xaba and du Preez 145)

As Gibson Ncube notes:

> South Africa is an exception in Africa in that its constitution offers comprehensive protection to individuals who identify as LGBTIQ. This exceptionalism has unwittingly reinforced the narrative of the rest of the continent as being backward and homophobic, while South Africa is liberal and progressive. However, the freedoms and protections enshrined in South Africa's constitution remain substantially *de jure* paper freedoms, largely inaccessible to LGBTIQ communities and individuals who are not in privileged economic classes and racial locations. ("Film" 61)

Despite the differences in legislative protections, public attitudes in the three countries that are the focus of this thesis are still unwaveringly homophobic. Ncube suggests that the "waves of

anti-queer animus have swept across the African continent, especially in the last decade or so," make it important to analyse why "countries like Nigeria and Uganda have enacted stringent laws that criminalise queer sexualities" ("Film" 59).

Through the legislative and social power of colonialism and then apartheid, all cultures in South Africa became homophobic but now express homophobia in different ways. Homophobia across all cultures in the world exists mainly because of longstanding attachments to religion and patriarchy. As religion and patriarchy are inherently linked, the connection that contemporary homophobia has to South Africa's colonial past is evident in the longstanding beliefs and attitudes. Munro draws on Grant Farred's observation of queer politics in post-1994 independent South Africa to observe "that the present, which is supposed to be severed from the apartheid past, is inhabited and structured by that past" (*South Africa* xxxiii). Therefore, despite current South African legislation outlawing homophobia, the deep-set attitudes against homosexuality have been embedded into the social fabric of all South African cultures.

Since 1994, South Africa has embarked on a steady but uneven programme of decolonisation and transformation due to multiple factors. One of the significant factors in this unevenness is that Christian religious belief is so thoroughly grounded in most communities in South Africa. As Gibson Ncube observes "several scholars have argued, colonial laws and imported religions, Christianity especially, are, in essence, the basis for the current homophobic legislation in force in many African countries" ("Film" 60). According to Munro:

> After apartheid, South Africa established a celebrated new political order that imagined the postcolonial nation as belonging equally to the descendants of indigenous people, colonizing settlers, transported slaves, indentured laborers, and immigrants – and it also specifically included gays and lesbians as citizens. (vii)

Thabo Msibi observes that, "the collapse of apartheid has provided many freedoms to many groups that were previously marginalised. However, theses freedoms have been (and continue to be) limited by various factors, including sexual orientation" (50). Munro notes that:

> Gay identity, is, however, an inherently ambivalent symbol for nationalism, because it is so deeply associated with cosmopolitan modernity, or, to borrow Bruce Robbins's phrase, 'feeling global.' While 'being gay' or 'being lesbian' was reimagined in the 1990s as distinctly South African, the very 'newness' that made these sexualities apt symbols for a transformed nation is also easily understood as 'foreign' – and, in this context, as 'un-African.' (*South Africa* ix)

The LGBTIQ+ community in South Africa continues to experience horrific violence, often inflicted, as Msibi points out, by men who are fearful of the historical pressures of masculinity:

"this violence, whether verbal, physical, implied or potential, is largely caught up in notions of masculinity, and is highly gendered" (50). Msibi explains that although there has been much progress with the constitution in South Africa and its rights-based approach, there is still the presence of danger and fear that looms in both the queer communities and the communities which uphold patriarchal, heteronormative ideals. By merely existing, queer people in South Africa challenge a system seeped in power and privilege. Msibi explains that:

> South Africa is still very much a patriarchal society, with ideas around manhood still deeply entrenched. This may therefore shed some light onto the rising homophobic violence, particularly targeted at lesbian women through 'curative' rape, since homophobic violence is largely based on the notion that 'effeminate gay men betray the superiority of masculinity, and masculine lesbian women challenge and try to usurp male superiority, and therefore these individuals need to be punished for being a threat to the 'natural' social order.' (51)

Internalised homophobia might even be seen as a by-product of this misogynistic thinking. For example, the notion in the gay community of not seeking out or dating effeminate men because they are not seen as masculine enough. This alleged infringement on the norms of society is often met with horrible violence as a way to change queer people or prove one's masculinity. The violent crimes committed against queer people directly breach the protections afforded to queer South Africans by the constitution. As Ariana Puzzo notes:

> Rates of rape are extremely high in South Africa and LGBTQ women are sometimes targeted for what is known as 'corrective' rape, where men allegedly believe forced sex can change a woman's sexuality. Women who identify as lesbians are considered primary targets, but non-traditional gender expression broadens the number of individuals within the LGBTQ community who may experience 'corrective' rape. (par. 4)

Although the South African constitution protects queer people, "homophobia and homophobic violence continue to be publicly sanctioned," and queer people still live precarious lives in South Africa (Msibi 52). As Ingrid Lynch and Matthew Clayton point out, "legal equality is far-removed from the lived experiences of those South Africans who do not conform to heteronormative and masculine ideals, with homophobia often manifesting itself in violence" (280). Therefore, while the constitution legally protects queer people, the public opinions and attitudes render their environments unpleasant and, in some cases, unsafe. As Nonhlanhla Dlamini points out, this was illustrated in 2006 by former President Jacob Zuma's public remarks about gay men: "In his address he told his supporters that 'When I was growing up, *unqingili* (homosexuals) could not stand in front of me' because he would knock them off.

Zuma's 'manly' speech made at his Zulu cultural fan-base legitimizes a brand of Zulu ethnicity intricately linked to dominant masculinities" (Dlamini 3). As Abisola Balogun and Paul Bissell point out, "hegemonic masculinity is patriarchal heterosexual masculinity. Masculinity and sexuality are not easily separated; this is because once a man does not conform to the hegemonic form of masculinity, the first thing to be questioned is his sexuality. (114) Consequently, despite the changes that occurred in 1994, it is still difficult for queer people to exist openly in South Africa, especially since Zuma, as the former the leader of the country, openly asserted a homophobic attitude oppositional to the constitution he had sworn to uphold. The leadership of a country has power and influence over its constituents and therefore influences public opinion. As Taylor Mitchell points out, "the problem, rather, is rooted personal beliefs of those who have the power to choose whether they want to protect LGBTQ rights under the constitution, or employ censorship laws to infringe upon them" (par. 11). Like Jacob Zuma, the former leaders of Kenya and Nigeria, Daniel arap Moi and Olusegun Obasanjo respectively, have also made harmful remarks. They "have both described homosexuality as unnatural, ungodly, and un-African, and the anathema to the morals of the 'African culture'" (Balogun and Bissell 114). Balogun and Bissell note: "given that Africa is not homogenous and there exists a multitude and variety of cultural expressions and practices, it is problematic to make the assumption that there is a singular way in which African masculinity or sexuality is and can be enacted" (119). But, because homophobia, as a viable means of maintaining power over African societies, proliferated through the spread of Christianity, homophobic attitudes and rhetoric are still inflected in articulations of power, due to what Mbembe would call the entanglements of time in the postcolony. As Sylvia Tamale suggests:

> [t]he 'homosexuality is un-African' myth is anchored on an old practice of selectively invoking African culture by those in power. African women are familiar with the mantra. 'It is un-African' whenever they assert their rights, particularly those rights that involve reproductive autonomy and sexual sovereignty. (par. 6).

Tamale also suggests that "the current wave of anti-homosexuality laws sweeping across the continent is therefore part of a thinly veiled and wider political attempt to entrench repressive and undemocratic regimes" (par. 13).

There is fear present in heteronormative patriarchal communities, which are often guided by the belief that the improving the rights of queer people challenges or threatens power and privilege. Ingrid Lynch and Matthew Clayton observe how:

> Patriarchal power is intertwined with a heteronormative social order that privileges heterosexuality and rigidly defines normative gender identities, gender roles, sexualities and sexual relations. Heteronormative assumptions, for example, inform the privileging of reproductive sex and heterosexual relationships, perpetuating the marginalization of those who do not conform to these requirements. (280)

The increased visibility of queer people, and the cultural conversations engendered by such visibility, can help to dismantle negative attitudes towards queer people in South Africa and beyond. As Xavier Livermon notes, "black queerness destabilizes the heteronormativity of blackness by presenting black queer relationships as equivalent to heterosexual ones" ("Queer" 309). For the purpose of this study, I have chosen two films and two collections of short stories to analyse the variety of ways in which queer Africans are attempting to make their lives and experiences more visible. According to Zaharah Devji, "establishing the *African* queer is critical to the movement" of acceptance. Devji notes that "the fundamental step towards acceptance" is obtained through visibility (358). The "cultural labor" involved in increasing this visibility is explored in the next section (Livermon "Queer" 300).

"Cultural Labor" and the Visibility of Black Queer Africans

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore the complicated relationship between queerness and Kenyan culture, specifically the desire for authenticity and visibility in a society that frowns upon people who differ from cultural traditions and expectations. I do this through a close reading of the Kenyan film *Rafiki* (2018). Directed by Wanuri Kahiu, *Rafiki* tells the story of two young women who fall in love with each other and face the violent censure of their union from their homophobic community. The film was banned by the Kenyan Film Classification Board, but the ruling was contested by Kahiu, and the film was granted a temporary injunction by Kenya's high court in order for it to be screened in Nairobi for the minimum seven days required for it to be considered for an Academy Award nomination. This made *Rafiki* the first queer film ever to be screened in Kenya. Through a detailed discussion of both the content of the film, and the filmmaker's struggle to allow it to be screened in its country of origin, I explore *Rafiki* as an important attempt towards making Kenyan queerness visible, both in Kenya and on the world stage.

In the second chapter I explore queer literary formations in two anthologies of short stories – *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* (2013) and *Queer Africa 2: New Stories* (2017), edited by South African writers Makhosazana Xaba and Karen Martin. Many of the

stories in the *Queer Africa* collections express a desire for the wider acceptance of queer people and queer narratives within Africa. The anthologies assert a queer African identity. Although born from the first collection, this idea for acceptance serves as an impetus for the concept of the anthologies as a whole:

> *Queer Africa* brings together historical and contemporary stories, affirming and disquieting stories, urban and rural stories. It features characters who are rooted firmly in their countries and cultures, and others who could live anywhere in the world. At its heart, the collection celebrates the diversity and fluidity of queer and African identities, offering a sometimes radical reimagining of life on the continent. (GALA "Queer Africa")

Through a close reading of three short stories from the second collection, I seek to determine the efficacy of the collections' progressive representations of queerness towards creating a new normal for queer African storytelling. In this chapter, I also explore the notions of home, queer belonging, and visibility, namely in Nigeria and Kenya.

In the third and final chapter, I look at the complex ways in which queerness and masculinity intersect and clash through a close reading of the South African film *Inxeba* (2017) also known as *The Wound*. The film depicts the traditional Xhosa initiation ritual, *ulwaluko*, and is set in the rural Eastern Cape. *Ulwaluko* is an ancient and sacred ceremony, personal to the initiates (*abakwetha*), and their families, who honour the secrecy that surrounds a practice centred on the journey toward full adult masculinity for *AmaXhosa* men. *Inxeba* is focused on a closeted relationship between two men, Xolani and Vija, whose role it is to help the initiates through this passage from boyhood to manhood. Their secret relationship is disrupted by a young gay initiate, Kwanda. From Johannesburg and openly queer, Kwanda's character illustrates the impact of class and modernity on indigenous South African cultures. *Inxeba* posits the simple, yet provocative, suggestion that queer people have always existed in South Africa, and have participated in sacred traditional ceremonies for centuries. As the vexed lives of Xolani and Vija demonstrate, queer Xhosa men have had to navigate their own passage to adult manhood, and the behaviours it requires of them, carefully, for fear of discovery or persecution. There has been much debate about *Inxeba* in South Africa. It drew the ire of many cultural leaders, but also met with praise from other sectors of society. The film illustrates how queer intimacy is often met with the threat of exposure and punitive violence. *Inxeba* is an important case study in the history of queer representation in Africa, as the film hit a nerve with many, raising questions about what South Africans believe about culture, traditions, masculinity, and the right of artists to represent sacred ritual in art.

As Gibson Ncube points out, both *Rafiki* and *Inxeba* "gesture towards the need for open discussion of non-normative sexualities and genders in Africa. They demand that viewers rethink not what it means to be queer in Africa, but what it means to be human, to be different and to embrace freely that difference" ("Film 71). As the controversy over the *Rafiki*'s distribution and screening in Kenya is similar, in many respects, to that experienced by the creators of *Inxeba*, it will be very fruitful to compare these two recent queer African films.

To fully understand the complexities of the films and texts chosen for discussion and how these make visible the lives of queer Kenyans, Nigerians, and South Africans, this section draws on the work of Xavier Livermon, who studies the intersections of blackness and queerness, specifically in South Africa. Livermon's notions of "cultural labor" and "discursive visibility" will inform the thesis as a whole ("Queer" 300, 315). As Livermon observes, currently "black queer South Africans are not able to enjoy fully the privileges encoded in the South African constitution as *black* and *queer*" (314). This loss of privilege, he continues "is because cultural politics consistently mark the black queer body as the constitutive outside of blackness and the queer body is subsequently racialized as white," leaving black queer South Africans "outside both the representational and the material realities of queerness" (314-315). Livermon highlights what needs to be done towards obtaining freedoms as a queer, black, South African. He notes that:

> To experience freedom in postapartheid South Africa, the black queer body must enter either a deracinated queerness or a blackness divorced from sexuality. Realizing this, black queers struggle against definitions of blackness that are inherently exclusionary and heteronormative. These exclusive definitions of blackness mean that freedom for most black queers remains elusive. To create possibilities for freedom, black queer South Africans enter the discursive realm and enact forms of cultural labor, even forms of belonging, to destabilize the heteronormative construction of blackness. By claiming discursive visibility in the public sphere, black queers work to create the possibilities for freedom.
>
> This possibility for freedom as an explicitly queer subject has implications for black queers worldwide. Black queer South Africans are not estranged from the state by their blackness, nor are they estranged from the state by their queerness. They are, however, estranged from realizing the freedoms enabled by the postapartheid South African constitution by their black queerness. ("Queer" 315).

Black queer people in South Africa should be able to exist without the worry of persecution, oppression, and discrimination, but "homophobia is fuelled by both a lack of awareness and a lack of the promotion of Constitutional values and rights" (van Vollenhoven

and Els 283). Livermon's work is valuable because he explores exactly what is entailed in obtaining the freedoms that should be ensured under the constitution:

> Freedom must be understood not as a set of political, economic, and legal rights that exist a priori waiting to be conferred on an abject population but as a sociocultural construct that is given meaning and contested in communities through citizens' actions. Freedom in this context refers to the ability of black queer individuals to create forms of visibility that work to enable what Judith Butler calls 'livable lives.' These livable lives are constructed through public naming and performance of gender and sexuality dissidence with the understanding that such public disclosures will not result in the curtailment of or loss of life. ("Queer" 300)

Livermon highlights how black queer individuals can also obtain these freedoms through visibility, which "is about recognition, since 'it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings'" ("Queer" 300). Livermon suggests that that "Queer visibility, then, is not only about finding acceptance for difference within black communities but also about a defiance and a subversion of blackness in ways that are potentially transformative, thus creating the very liberation promised by the constitution and giving freedom its substantive meaning" ("Queer" 301). Furthermore, Livermon notes that, in South Africa and elsewhere, "Black queers create freedom through forms of what I term cultural labor. The cultural labor of visibility occurs when black queers bring dissident sexualities and gender nonconformity into the public arena" ("Queer" 300). As noted throughout this thesis, representations of queer African lives and realities are vital to creating visibility which Livermon notes "refers not only to the act of seeing and being seen but also to the process through which individuals make themselves known in the communities as queer subjects" ("Queer" 300).

All three texts chosen for close examination in this thesis enact some form of cultural labour. *Rafiki* enacts its cultural labour through its depiction of a same-sex relationship in Kenya. It is unclear whether any of the actors involved are queer themselves, and whether they had any input in how the story is told, but the film itself, which adapts the short story, "Jambula Tree" (2006) by Uganda writer Monica Arac de Nyeko, is born from another form of cultural labour: short stories. The editors of the *Queer Africa* anthologies explored in the second chapter enact cultural labour to make queerness visible through an assertive African identity. The anthologies include stories from various authors, some of whom openly identify as queer – cementing the work of cultural labour throughout the production of the anthologies (Livermon "Queer" 300). *Inxeba* exemplifies Livermon's notion of "cultural labor" on the screen and off

the screen ("Queer" 300). The film itself extends the visibility of black queer South African men into one of the most protected and sacred areas of South African masculinity – the initiation of men. Furthermore, off-screen, the film's production involved many queer people, including the director John Trengove, producers Batana Vundla and Elias Ribeiro, screenwriters Thando Mgqolozana and Malusi Bengu, as well as two of the main actors, Nakhane Touré and Niza Jay Ncoyini, who have all contributed in their own ways to the film's success. According to the website *South African History Online*, "Extensive research was undertaken by the film crew, including interviews over 6 months of Xhosa men, varying in sexual and class identity" (par. 9). Therefore, all the queer people involved in creating the film have a hand in telling their own stories through "cultural labor" (Livermon "Queer" 300). As suggested by the nature of the relationships depicted in the film, which will be explored in detail in the third chapter, *Inxeba* positions the complexities of being black and being queer in South Africa front and centre.

Both the films and the anthologies recognise what Livermon and Butler suggest is key to becoming viable beings: visibility – which flourishes through "cultural labor" (Livermon "Queer" 300). Furthermore, Candace Volger notes how:

> paradigmatically, self-expressive intimacy is a private affair of selves, although models of ethics or politics that stress storytelling, emotions, identification, and empathy suggest that the very patterns of self-expression and self-enhancement that make intimate life a haven can be used to draw us – at least by an act of imagination or feeling – into the public world as well. (48)

Volger's assertion shows the importance of representing the private lives of queer Africans on screen and in print due to the work done by such texts in realm of identification and imagination. Furthermore, through the "cultural labor" of all three chosen texts, queer black people are visible in spaces where they have always been rendered invisible – and queer black Kenyans, Nigerians, and South Africans are telling their own stories (Livermon "Queer" 300). Andy Carolin notes that the documentary about leading gay rights and anti-apartheid activist Simon Nkoli, *Simon & I* (2002), which explores the history of postapartheid sexual rights and struggles, "reinforces not only the interconnectedness of political struggles, but also Nkoli's significance as a historical figure through which this interconnectedness could be made visible" (5).[12] This idea of interconnected political struggles is vital to all forms of queer activism including the collection and dissemination of queer literature such as the *Queer* Africa

[12] *Simon & I* is directed by Beverly Palesa Ditsie and Nicky Newman.

anthologies and the creation of queer films such as *Rafiki* and *Inxeba*, which make the historical struggles in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa visible.

Despite the potential for *Inxeba* and *Rafiki* to create visibility and a sociocultural context for queerness in South Africa and Kenya, however, the films have raised a furore in their respective countries. As Livermon suggests, "the possibility of humanizing and destigmatizing queer relationships, of course, does not completely overturn preexisting [sic] homophobia that casts queer bodies as outside blackness" ("Queer" 306). As Gibson Ncube points out, *Inxeba* and *Rafiki* "are part of a growing body of cinematic products grappling with various facets of what it means to be in Africa and what it means to be both African and queer" ("Film" 56). Ncube also notes how "watching films such as *Inxeba* and *Rafiki* thus becomes a self-reflexive exercise in which viewers are perpetually questioning not only what they are viewing but more importantly their own ways of thinking, especially in relation to non-normative gender and sexual identities" ("Film" 75). The reception and debates surrounding the films and the anthologies, which help with understanding the way forward, will be explored in a detailed discussion in the subsequent chapters. By looking at these selected queer texts, I hope to explore the various foundations being built around queer African studies in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, and to demonstrate the importance of representation in the struggle towards creating liveable lives for queer Africans.

Chapter One – Queering Kenya: The Politicisation and Policing of Love in Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki*

Introduction: Becoming "Something Real" in Conservative Kenya

Wanuri Kahiu's 2018 film *Rafiki* tells the coming-of-age story of two Kenyan teenage girls who fall in love with each other in a historically conservative and anti-LGBTQ+ society. At a key moment in the film, two girls, Kena and Ziki find themselves on a rooftop where they are admiring the vastness of Nairobi. They sit down at their makeshift picnic spot and begin to sift through their thoughts while they get to know each other better. They operate with an air of ease and comfort between them as if they have known each other longer than this meaningful encounter. There is also no denying their mutual attraction. Their conversation turns to sharing their hopes for the future. Kena tells Ziki of her dreams to go to school to become be a nurse, while Ziki, who comes across as a free spirit, shares her ideological desires rather than her practical plans: "I don't know, I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to go to all those places where they've probably never seen an African and just show up there and be like, 'Yo, I'm here and I'm a Kenyan from Africa!'" (20:17). Kena, without hesitation, responds: "but you're not the typical Kenyan girl that they'd be looking for" (20:35). Ziki's hyper-feminized and colourful appearance is stereotypical of what is classed as the behaviour and demeanour of a 'normal girl' in a heteronormative patriarchal society. Kena, however, reads between the lines and realises that Ziki is in fact not a typical Kenyan girl while simultaneously acknowledging that she too is the same. Kena's tomboyish appearance situates her in this space of atypicality. By being attracted to each other, both girls operate and live beyond the boundaries and expectations of Kenya women, as will be explored in detail later in this chapter. Emily Yoshida notes that the moments on the roof are "some of the film's strongest moments, as the two talk about what they want from their futures" and "both agree with certainty that they don't want to be 'ordinary Kenyan girls,' as their hand-holding and enchanted gazes into each other's eyes become furtive kisses and embraces" (par. 4). The rooftop scene is also symbolic of the more pressing desire for young queer Kenyans to be free and authentic in their own country. As Akash Deshpande observes:

> their romance starts to blossom only after their direct interactions with another. Both of them, [sic] want an escape from the reality they're in, especially the lives that the women of their society were assigned to. The mutual quest for

> freedom from the societal prejudices forms a stronger bond between these two souls. They bond and confess to one another with a complete realization of their identity. Still, what starts out as a breezy, chatty romance doesn't take long to get testified [sic] in the world around them. (par. 3)

There is a stark difference between the two girls and the way that they operate in their community, which, I think, stems from their respective upbringings. Ziki, raised in an affluent household where her parents are still married, lives a very privileged life. On the other hand, Kena's parents are divorced – her father has remarried and there is less privilege afforded to her. Although there are restrictions placed on the girls, there is also difference as to how they approach these social rules. As Leigh Monson observes:

> Kena is resistant to breaking social norms while Ziki exhibits a much freer, devil-may-care attitude. Their chemistry is awkward but palpable, and their relationship only becomes more interesting the more their class differences – notably Ziki's unexamined social privileges – shape who they are and who they will become. This is contrasted with a community dynamic that is predominated by gossip and suspicion, outwardly professing love in a tight-knit church congregation but more strongly characterized by ostracism and violence toward those who threaten cultural norms. What's particularly fascinating is that not only does this community come bearing sticks, but it also at times expresses heterosexual courtship as a complimentary carrot, as a way for Kena to escape poverty and elevate her station. (par. 3)

When comparing Ziki and Kena's families, the noticeable difference between the two is their adherence to traditions and norms. Where Ziki's family is strict, conventional and comprised of what is considered a normal nuclear family, Kena's family has veered away from normalcy with its blended makeup. Ziki's upbringing is guided by her family's societal expectations of her, but she is indifferent to her parents. As she says to Kena: "My parents don't think the same way. I don't want to be like them. Just staying at home and doing typical Kenyan stuff. Doing the laundry. Having babies" (20:43). Both Kena and Ziki understand that they share the knowledge that they are different and that much of their identities will be given up if they subscribe to Kenyan heteronormative patriarchal ideals. As they talk together on the roof, Ziki initiates a pact for just the two of them: "We will never be like any of them down there. Instead, we're gonna be…" to which Kena asks, "Something?" Ziki continues her pact, but is stuck in thought when Kena suggests, "Something real?" (21:08 – 21:31). They understand that they are different from other people "down there," in their identities and solidarity and this pact originates from their awareness that they are no longer alone. Their mutually affirmed pact, just like their meeting, is almost dance-like and only complete with both of their input, interest and belief in being authentic as the only means possible to live a happy life. Throughout the

film this idea of being or becoming "something real," meaning being openly queer in Kenya or at least not afraid to explore this desire, is sewn into the core of the narrative. This desire for authenticity in the two young women mirrors the struggle everyday queer Kenyans face when battling at the intersections of authenticity and the oppressive hegemonies.

In this chapter, I make use Brenna M. Munro's approach to the analysis of queer African texts as stories framed within larger politics. Munro explains that her examination of a number of queer African texts is "in dialogue with contemporary African anti-homophobic writing from a range of locations," while also partaking in another discourse, namely feminism ("States" 192). She observes that "this literary formation is nonetheless shaped by feminist politics: the desire for women to be able to make sexual choices freely, to exist outside the institution of marriage, and to have worth without being mothers" ("States" 192). Munro's focalization of the intersectional politics of feminism and queer literary formation, allows attention to the ways in which *Rafiki* is replete with, and in dialogue with, other social discourses which are framed within the politics of gay rights in Kenya namely feminism, heteronormativity, classism, and sexism. This observation not only helps us understand the meaning and intent of the film, but also helps distinguish what the film means to the development of queer rights in Kenyan society. This chapter explores the ways in which the depiction of two queer Kenyan girls who seek to be accepted as their true selves in their homeland, which constantly opposes this desire by means of patriarchal, heteronormative, and religious oppression, is symbolic of the larger fight queer Kenyans face for acceptance. It also seeks to situate the film within the context of Kenya's entangled history of homosexuality, religion, and colonialism. Therefore, this chapter will provide a close reading of the film's depictions of the difficulties of being queer in Kenya while acknowledging its interconnected social themes that allow for it to be used as mechanism to propel Kenya (and on a larger scale, Africa) towards a progressive new normal that affords legitimacy to homosexual rights, love, and belonging.

Not Your Typical Kenyan Film

The word 'rafiki' is Swahili for 'friend,' but as the film progresses it deals not only with friendship but also with the personal, familial and societal ramifications for two young women who go beyond a friendship and form an intimate same-sex relationship. This relationship is not only viewed as immoral and repugnant but is also illegal in Kenyan society. What is clear is that the film acts like a showcase – depicting ordinary Kenyan life but from a definite queer angle. The film, directed by one of Kenya's leading filmmakers, Wanuri Kahiu, has garnered

both a positive and a negative reception. *Rafiki* was selected to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018, but it was banned in its country of origin days later after its release at the festival. This censorship derives from Africa's complex colonial history where non-normative sexualities within the African continent are still viewed as un-African, as well as a capitulation to the values of Western society. Ironically, *Rafiki* also became the first Kenyan film to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival. The Kenyan Film Classification Board (KFCB) banned the film in Kenya, however, on the grounds that, according to the head of the KFCB, Ezekiel Mutua, it goes "against the law, the culture and moral values of the Kenyan people," by promoting lesbianism (Mutua qtd. in Peralta par. 9). The ban originated after Kahiu refused to edit the ending of the film in the ways the KFCB suggested. She explained in an interview that the KFCB regarded the film's original ending as presenting the protagonist as too hopeful and not remorseful: "They felt it was too hopeful. They said if I changed the ending to show her [the main character Kena] looking remorseful, they would give me an 18 rating" (qtd. in Clarke par. 7). An 18 rating, according to the KFCB, ensures that the minimum age of viewers is 18 years old.[13] As Guy Lodge points out, "it's a film that would be most aptly and valuably targeted to the generation about which it has been made," (par. 2) but the controversies surrounding the film's banning and the 18 rating makes it difficult for teenagers to access. An air of shame surrounding the efforts to watch the film without judgement, or the risk of being labelled gay or lesbian for their support or association of the film, most likely will cloud in any teenagers who attempt to watch the film. On the other hand, a film about the love between two queer Kenyan teenagers would be a source of hope for many closeted queer people in Kenya as it is representative of change.

Kahiu argues that the hopefulness in the film, and others like it, is crucial: "those kind of stories are incredibly important to tell not only because we need to see images of ourselves so that we know we are worthy of hopeful existences, but so that other people can start to see us as that" (qtd. in Pfeifer par. 10). Kahiu therefore refused to edit the film, which prompted its ban. Kahiu then sued the KFCB as "the ban was not only an affront to her constitutional rights but would also keep the movie from being considered for the Oscars" (Peralta par. 10). The ban meant the film was ineligible for consideration as Kenya's submission for the Best International Feature Film at the Academy Awards, because it could not be screened in theatres

[13] It is pertinent to note that it would be beneficial, both in terms of financial gain and the efforts to spread the film's message, for the film to receive an 18 rating rather than be outright banned. The 18 rating, however, still impacts the film negatively. The fact that the KFCB suggested that the director of the film, which is not sexually explicit, should change its ending in order to settle for an 18 rating highlights their pervasive anti-LGBT attitude.

in its country of origin for the minimum requirement of seven days. Kahiu did gain a small win in her fight against the KFCB, however, when "Kenya's high court issued a temporary injunction, allowing *Rafiki* to be screened for seven days, from September 23 to 29" 2018 (Peralta par. 10). The seven-day screening then permitted in Nairobi made *Rafiki* not only the first queer film ever to be screened in Kenya but, as Odie Henderson notes, it is "the first film with a positive message about homosexuality to play in Kenyan theaters" (par. 1).

Despite the negative criticism from the KFCB, the film was a success when it was allowed to be shown to Kenyans in Kenya. The first screening was sold out about half an hour before it was due to start which resulted in another cinema being opened for the continuous influx of people at the screening (Thiam 02:30). Although the film made history, subsequently it has remained banned in Kenya after the temporary injunction was lifted. Since the film's initial release and the reiteration of the ban, Kahiu is still fighting to allow the film to be screened in Kenya. Corinne Ahrens points out that

> Kahiu has been resilient in her fight to show her films and has decided to continue challenging the ban in Kenyan courts. Kahiu argues that the government's ruling encompasses broader freedom of expression implications, and *Rafiki* should not be banned in its country of origin – nor any country, for that matter. (par. 6)

The film was dealt another blow because, as of May 2020, Kahiu has lost her efforts for her fight for Freedom of Expression. The Kenyan High Court ruling resulted in the continuous ban of the film two years after its initial release. Kahiu intends to appeal the ruling and to continue her fight for the film to be screened in its country of origin. Despite these setbacks, as Leigh Monson notes, "*Rafiki*'s release was a huge win for the Kenyan LGBT community, marking a precedent in LGBT rights that can now be used as a foothold for further gains" (par. 1). As Justin Chang observes, "the familiarity of this story, of course, is also a sign of its ongoing relevance" (par. 3). This fight can sometimes be difficult with many obstacles in the way, including laws from the country's colonial past that continue to police the lives of all queer Kenyans.

"Stand tall like the jambula tree": A Comparison of *Rafiki* and "Jambula Tree"

The film itself is based on the short story, "Jambula Tree" by Monica Arac de Nyeko, which takes place in Uganda, and tells a similar story to *Rafiki*. The short story garnered praise and acclaim, namely when it went on to win the 2007 Caine Prize for African Writing. Although it

is published in *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* (2013), this well-known short story has also previously been published outside the anthologies – it was first published in *African Love Stories* (2006). The editors of the *Queer Africa* anthologies, however, included it in the first anthology to allow for the story to be "re-read in a context that foregrounds [its] queerness," as explored in the next chapter (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* viii). I will discuss the *Queer Africa* anthologies in more detail in the next chapter. What is important to note here is that there are notable differences between Kahiu's film *Rafiki* and its source material. The latter, set in the 1960s in Nakawa, Kampala portrays a far more developed and intimate understanding of the love that evolves between two queer Ugandan girls than its film adaptation does for two young queer women in contemporary Kenya. The storyline of two girls involved in a same-sex relationship in a community that reacts negatively to that relationship, however, shines through both the short story and the film. The short story is written in an epistolatory style with the protagonist Anyango writing to her childhood love interest, Sanyu, with heartfelt emotion and care. She writes with an intimate recollection of the interconnectedness of their queer love, class differences, and feminism. Arac de Nyeko explains that the short story's central idea is about community outrage. The reaction to the two girls engaging in a same-sex relationship in Uganda is over the top but also clear as to why it occurred – due to the historical complexities of same-sex sexuality. Speaking in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian*, Arac de Nyeko explains that "if you look at the reality, not only in Uganda, but in many African countries, I think the reality that "Jambula Tree" represents is very real. It's a difficult subject and there is a lot of hypocrisy around the subject; hypocrisy in the way that we look at this subject of morality [sic]" (par.7).

"Jambula Tree" ranges over the entire childhood of two girls and illustrates their mutual fondness, friendship, and deeply felt connection. Both the film and the short story use the character of the local gossip, Mama Atim, as a malevolent, watchful presence – ready to police what she deems as immoral. Throughout the short story, Anyango recounts the desires the two girls have where they promise to stay true to themselves. They have a collective disdain for the way their community operates in terms of class and gender. In a pivotal moment in the short story, similar to the rooftop scene featured in *Rafiki* with Kena and Ziki, Anyango reminds Sanyu about how their community "Nakawa is still over one thousand families on an acre of land they call an estate. Most of the women don't work. Like Mama Atim they sit and talk, talk, talk and wait for their husbands to bring home a kilo of offal. Those are the kind of women we did not want to become" (92). Anyango continues, reminding Sanyu of all the patriarchal rules they are encouraged to follow such as beauty standards, competing with other women,

and showing unwavering duty to men. She remembers how the two of them agreed to fight against the rules enforced on them: "You said it yourself, we could be anything" (Arac de Nyeko *Queer Africa* 92). Anyango also remembers when the two girls were younger, an incident occurred where a bully, Juma, hurt Anyango, and Sanyu came to her defence. This defence of Anyango results in Sanyu's suspension and the two girls' mothers questioning Sanyu's actions. The two mothers are also friends and infer that the incident involved both of their daughters. They decide to separate the two girls, but their persistent connection keeps them coming back to each other even as the years pass and they end up attending different secondary schools.

The short story is replete with the desire for queer Africans to be themselves in communities that refute and disapprove of this authenticity. The story also touches on the idea of public shaming and how something private, such as the two girls engaging in sex, becomes shame attached to them everywhere they go because their community has been led to believe same-sex attraction, desire, and intimacy is wrong and immoral. Anyango often recollects moments that occurred before Sanyu was forced to leave the community and move to London. This departure was for their collective safety after their relationship was made known to the community by Mama Atim. There is an air of shame that their families feel after the night the two girls are discovered together as their "names became forever associated with the forbidden" (Arac de Nyeko *Queer Africa* 91). The scandal does not deter Anyango from reminding Sanyu of their shared history. Writing to Sanyu is a way to reconnect and rediscover the beauty of their union before Sanyu returns to the community from London. Anyango reminds her of the shame that still follows them to this day while also defiantly recounting the moment they first explored their attraction:

> Mama Atim says this word 'immoral' to me – slowly and emphatically in Jhapadhola, so it can sink into my head. She wants me to hear the word in every breath, sniff it in every scent so it can haunt me like that day I first touched you. Like the day you first touched me. Mine was a cold unsure hand placed over your right breast. Yours was a cold scared hand, which held my waist and pressed it closer to you, under the jambula tree in front of her house. (Arac de Nyeko *Queer Africa* 96)

It is worth noting that the condemnation of the young women's relationship by the law and the community is the same in both the short story, set in the 1960s in Uganda, and the film, set in contemporary Kenya, illustrating the expansive longevity of homophobia and the continued precarity of being queer in Africa.

Although there are many similarities between the short story and the film, there are, however, a few differences between them. Unlike the film, where Kena and Ziki are portrayed initially as pseudo-rivals, the short story presents the two girls as growing up together with an extensive friendship and history. This allows for the short story to pay particular attention to the emotional weight of the attraction between the two girls, unlike the film's depiction of the intimacy between the two girls, which will be explored in detail later in this chapter. As Anyango and Sanyu grow up, their connection to each other is expressed through attraction and infatuation. Anyango remembers how she noticed that Sanyu's breasts got bigger, and compared them to jambula fruits:

> You were not shocked. Not repelled. It did not occur to either of us, to you or me, that these were boundaries we should not cross nor should think of crossing. Your jambulas and mine. Two plus two jambulas equals four jambulas – even numbers should stand for luck. Was this luck pulling us together? You pulled me to yourself and we rolled on the brown earth that stuck to our hair in all its redness and dustiness. There in front of Mama Atim's house. She shone a torch at us. She had been watching. Steadily like a dog waiting for a bone it knew it would get; it was just a matter of time. (Arac de Nyeko *Queer Africa* 104)

Although Mama Atim catches the two girls and Sanyu's parents force her to leave Uganda, their connection never falters. This unbreakable connection is shown when Anyango describes how she received a letter from Sanyu who tells Anyango that she misses her – validating Anyango's longing and making her believe it is not one-sided. This moment with the letter is also threaded into the film – leaving the ending for both the film and short story open for interpretation. In both, the open ending is used to suggest a strong connection between the two women, despite the societal pressures and restrictions.

There is also a clear class difference portrayed and examined in "Jambula Tree" that is extremely subtle in *Rafiki*. Like Ziki, Sanyu is from a wealthy family but more attention is given to this fact in the short story. After Sanyu and Anyango are caught having sex by Mama Atim, she can leave the community and go to London whereas Anyango cannot. Sanyu's family life is also different from Anyango's – Sanyu's parents are still married and are wealthier than Anyango's divorced mother who gets no support from her ex-husband. Although the make-up of the families is similar in both the film and the short story, there is a difference between the protagonist's father in "Jambula Tree" as compared to *Rafiki*. He is not as present nor as empathetic in his daughter's life as Kena's father John Mwaura is in the film.

Although *Rafiki* takes a different approach to its source material, it still stands as a remarkable feat in the landscape of contemporary African filmmaking by showing a queer love

story set in a country (and a continent) that has historically struggled to accept and celebrate its queer individuals. Despite the pressures of control, erasure, and self-policing enforced by oppressive structures in Kenya, *Rafiki* illustrates the movement towards a progressive and accepting Kenya where LGBTQ+ individuals refuse to tolerate such mistreatment. *Rafiki* takes up cultural and political space for queer Kenyans in a society that has none to give and thus forms part of the ever-growing canon of contemporary African film and literature that seeks to be seen in the African continent and on the global stage. As Kari notes:

> For many in Kenya's creative and LGBT community, the film represents an important turning point in the recognition not only of Kenya's booming creative scene but also its LGBT community that has been growing more vocal; both within the arts and in the fight for equal rights. *Rafiki* joins a growing canon of queer stories being told in the country, with or without permission. It also follows in the footsteps of films such as South African [*Inxeba*] *(The Wound)* a gay coming of age story that was also banned for public viewing in that country despite receiving international acclaim [sic]. Africa, it seems, is ready to tell its queer stories [sic]. (par. 2)

Rafiki, because of both its success and the pushback against such success, is tantamount to the new normal in post-colonial queer Africa cinema. *Rafiki* strives to push beyond the limitations of how queerness has historically been portrayed on African screens and strives to reinvent the way we tell queer African stories. There is beauty in how Arac de Nyeko tells this story of the ability for queer love to withstand oppressive forces over many years. It speaks to the bravery and endurance that queer Africans have to obtain to achieve an authentic life in their countries that often do not understand or accept their natural ways of being. "Jambula Tree" epitomises the way ordinary queer love becomes extraordinary when expressed in places that oppose it. Just as Arac de Nyeko seeks to show how the reaction to a same-sex relationship in Uganda is outdated and connected to the larger narrative of Africa's vexed relationship with homosexuality, so too does Kahiu's *Rafiki* seek to illustrate the same in Kenya and more broadly, Africa. The love story in both narratives is nuanced and tender, but the reaction is not – it is simple, reductive, violent and harmful to both of the young women involved.

The Repurposing of Colonial Laws after Independence

Just as the film's director is challenging the Kenyan government on its treatment of LGBTQ+ freedom of expression, so too are Kenyans challenging their government on its treatment of LGBTQ+ people. The laws addressing homosexuality in Kenya remain severe in their anti-

queer sentiments and still contain varying degrees of criminalisation. Eric Gitari is a well-known Kenyan LGBTQ+ activist who has led the effort towards the decriminalisation of the penal codes against homosexuality. He states in "The Gay Debate: Decriminalising Homosexuality in Kenya" that Kenya's criminalizing of its queer citizens has a much longer history. This criminalisation of queer citizens did not develop with Kenya's independence but, like homophobia itself, was introduced by Western imperialism. British colonial rule not only came with the subjugation and rule over Kenyan people, but it introduced the concept of criminalising non-normative sexualities under the guise of moral purity. Before this colonial imposition, non-normative sexual practices were either largely ignored or quietly encouraged to remain hidden rather than criminalised:

> According to legal historians, what is today known as Kenya started off as the British East Africa Protectorate in 1896. The protectorate was ruled under British law; prior to that period, no formal legal structure existed. Further, the name Kenya did not exist until it was named so as a colony in 1920 and as a country in 1963 (upon independence). Criminalisation of same sex relations in Kenya dates back to between 1897 and 1902, when the British colonial authorities applied the Indian Penal Code that had been drafted by the British and which criminalised same sex relations. The Indian Penal Code was a novel colonisation project aimed at using legislation to model British values and common law to govern British protectorates and colonies abroad. (Gitari "The Gay Debate" par. 2)

British values were imposed on Kenyans as a means to control and change their behaviours to fit the colonisers' rule of law towards homosexuality. In the United Kingdom, The Buggery Act of 1533 was the first instance of a law against male homosexuality. It was a law that made sodomy illegal in Britain "and by extension what would become the entire British Empire" (Dryden par. 1). From the history of these laws that we can discern a lineage of colonial oppression that migrated to Kenya and which is still present to this day. According to the *British Library* website which has an expansive archive of LGBTQ History in the United Kingdom, "it was not until 1861 with the passing of the Offences Against the Person Act, that the death penalty was abolished for acts of sodomy – instead being made punishable by a minimum of 10 years imprisonment" (Dryden par. 2). The law was further amended to add The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, a mere 11 years before the formation of the British East Africa Protectorate. This law "went a step further once again, making *any* male homosexual act illegal – whether or not a witness was present – meaning that even acts committed in private could be prosecuted" (Dryden par. 3). Moreover, the parameters of these laws, such as the punishment of private acts, filtered down from British colonial rule into the legal and social

frameworks of independent post-colonial nations. This can be seen during *Rafiki* when Kena and Ziki are harassed in a private setting. As will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, this pivotal scene in the film is symbolic of the ways in which historical laws have remained an invasive part of contemporary Kenyan law. Jacob Kushner highlights that although the British have moved on from their problematic past, replete with damaging laws, some of their former colonies have not yet made that change:

> Britain's own laws against homosexual acts were revoked more than 50 years ago, and in 2013, the country passed legislation allowing for same-sex marriage. But around the world, its tradition of criminalizing homosexuality lives on, with versions of British penal codes still on the books in former colonies such as Egypt, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Tanzania. Sudan prescribes the death penalty for homosexuality. So does Mauritius and parts of southern Somalia and Nigeria. (par. 5)

As Sasha Ingber points out, "the anti-gay laws were imposed by British colonists and they remained a part of Kenyan law after independence in 1963" (par. 6). With the imposition of colonial laws LGBTQ+ Kenyans are still not safe from public persecution and ridicule.

There was some hope for LGBTQ+ individuals in 2010 when the Kenyan government held a referendum and enacted "an elaborate Bills of Rights that affords constitutional protection from discrimination" (Gitari "The Gay Debate" par. 8). Although the referendum resulted in a mostly inclusive change to the constitution, Gitari also highlights the hypocrisy of the Bill of Rights, namely in its exclusions of queer people. For instance, Gitari focuses on the absence of any mention of either sexual orientation or gender identity in Article 27:

> 'The State shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, health status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.' While being inclusive, Article 27 does not explicitly list sexual orientation or gender identity. On the contrary, the Constitution recognises only heterosexual unions in Article 45, which states that 'every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex, based on the free consent of the parties.' ("The Gay Debate" par. 8)

Although, as Ingber points out, the colonial laws are not widely enforced throughout Kenya, they "have served as a pretense [sic] to mistreat LGBTQ+ people, who report harrowing accounts of being forced into sex, discriminated against at work, suspended from schools, pressured into paying off authorities and other abuses" (par. 7). This mistreatment is a direct result of the exclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in Kenya's Bills of Rights, namely Article 27. As Monica Mbaru *et al.* have pointed out, "sexuality and gender have

become a cultural and religious battleground in Africa, being fought at the national, regional and international level" (178). Due to the reality of this risk hanging over the lives of LGBTQ+ Kenyans, there has been continuous efforts from activists in Kenya to decriminalise particular laws and penal codes in Kenya's constitution which violate human rights. A petition, "Petition 150 of 2016," was brought to the Kenyan High Court by Eric Gitari because of "his own interest but also the interests of the LGBTIQ community more broadly" ("EG v. Attorney General" par. 2).[14] Moreover, additional petitions were submitted by other people and organisations concerned with amending the laws. Adriaan van Klinken notes that Gitari's petition labelled the existing penal codes as unconstitutional and called for "the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the country" ("Homosexuality" par. 1). The various petitions resulted in the court case, *Eric Gitari v Attorney General & another [2016] eKLR*, which was brought forward by activist Gitari and various activist groups to the Kenyan High Court:

> The case stems from a petition filed in 2016 by activist Eric Gitari, with the support of organizations serving LGBTQ Kenyans. They argued that two sections of Kenya's penal code violated people's rights: Article 162 penalizes 'carnal knowledge ... against the order of nature' with up to 14 years in prison, and Article 165 castigates 'indecent practices between males' with the possibility of five years' [sic] imprisonment. (Ingber par. 4)

Unfortunately, the court case ended in a ruling which did not go in the favour of the activists as the laws are still upheld in Kenya.

As the court case illustrates, there are three main Penal Codes in Kenyan law which are still upheld from the colonial era, namely Penal Code 1930, Section 162 Unnatural Offences; Penal Code 1930, Section 163 Attempt to Commit Unnatural Offences, and Penal Code 1930, Section 165 Indecent Practices Between Males. According to the website *Human Dignity Trust*, "Section 162 criminalises 'carnal knowledge… against the order of nature', with a penalty of 14 years imprisonment. This provision is applicable to sexual intercourse between men" while "Section 163 prohibits attempts to commit the offences criminalised under Section 162, with a penalty of seven years imprisonment," and "Section 165 prohibits acts of 'gross indecency' between men, or the procurement or attempted procurement thereof, with a penalty of five years imprisonment" (*Human Dignity Trust*, "Kenya"). Gitari notes that, "government data shows 595 such prosecutions between 2010 and 2014" ("Kenya Leads" par. 5).

[14] According to "EG v. Attorney General," "On November 2, 2016 the High Court certified another Petition challenging the same provisions filed by four individuals and three civil society organizations (par.3).

Interestingly, the law only states that sex between men is criminalised whereas there is no mention of sex between women.[15] Therefore, when taking into account Kenyan law in terms of *Rafiki*, there is nothing actually illegal about Kena and Ziki's relationship. Their actions, however, are still punishable by Kenyan society and opinion. As Gitari notes: "Homophobic and transphobic human rights violations still occur with disturbing frequency" ("Kenya Leads" par. 6). He also observes that the political and religious elite are the entities stirring up homophobia within Kenya ("Kenya Leads" par. 6). This situation is addressed in the film, as will be discussed in more detail later. The homophobia stemming from these influential elites and their sectors results in direct repercussions for queer people in Kenya including discrimination, ridicule, violence, and, in some cases, death.

LGBTQ+ activism in Kenya has not been restricted to only the decriminalisation of necessary laws and penal codes, but also includes challenging the negative attitude of the majority of Kenyan society towards LGBTQ+ people inside and outside the country. As Gitari notes: "Consensual private same-sex intimacy is still a criminal offence in Kenya, a law which is used by perpetrators to justify human rights violations and informs public policy and attitudes towards suspected LGBTIQ people" but there have also been progressive changes made within the country regarding various laws ("Kenya Leads" par. 2). Surprisingly, "Kenya stands out as a leader on LGBTIQ equality within sub-Saharan Africa" ("Kenya Leads" par. 4). As van Klinken points out:

> In the past few years, the courts have delivered a number of legal successes. In 2014, the High Court ruled that a transgender organisation should be allowed to register as an NGO. The organisation had been denied to register three times by the relevant government agency, on the basis that it would be "furthering criminality and immoral affairs". The following year, a similar ruling was made for a gay and lesbian organisation … Thus the right to freedom of association was effectively applied to LGBT groups. Also, the right to protection against discrimination was applied to sexual orientation and gender identity…And last year the court of appeal in Kenya's second largest city, Mombasa, ruled that forced anal examination of people accused of same-sex activity is unconstitutional as it violates the right to privacy. ("Homosexuality" par. 14-26)

Although there has been some significant change, and progressive amendments have been made to the constitution, the reality is that Kenya still has anti-gay laws and this instils a set of

[15] The erasure of women with regards to the laws pertaining to homosexuality affords a form of legal privilege to queer women in Kenya, but also highlights the way in which they are largely ignored when it comes to the scope of advocating and validating the existence of queer women in male-dominated patriarchal society.

disadvantages against many people in the country while violating the rights afforded to them as stated in the Kenyan Bill of Rights.

The Hybridity of *Rafiki*

Separated into three distinct parts, the film begins with the sounds of a slow, quiet rustle depicting the city waking up to a new day. We are immediately introduced to the bustling neighbourhood in Nairobi where much of the film is based. The opening credits of the film are replete with shots of cityscapes interchanged with animations, art, and photographs of the characters. The opening credits are bright and colourful and are accompanied by the song, "Suzie Noma" by Muthoni Drummer Queen who has said that her song is "a celebration of female friendship and empowerment of women all over Africa. It's about building something with your girls for yourselves and for future generations. It's about us women building our financial security together and manifesting big dreams!" (qtd. in "Muthoni" par. 3) There is a significance to the opening sequence and Emily Yoshida notes that:

> Title cards splash the screen, depicting its two leads in icon-like artistic renderings, mythologizing them and their romance before we've even met them. Far from a spoiler, it sets the tone, like initials scrawled on the cover of a notebook or photos taped in a locker, of the kind of vision-board love the two young protagonists aspire to, no matter how impossible it may seem. (par. 1)

From the start, this opening credits sequence illustrates Kahiu's desire for *Rafiki* to depict contemporary every day Kenyan life through an Afrobubblegum lens with its mixture of colours. According to the mission statement on their website, the Afrobubblegum collective believes in:

> a fun, fierce and frivolous representation of Africa. To that end, we work to curate, commission and create fun work that celebrates joy. We are storytellers, clothes makers, graphic designers, musicians, lovers of life, joy harbingers, beauty mongers, hope sayers. With links to existing online presence, we celebrate the breadth of curators, collectors and creators already celebrating the joy, love and happiness of Africa through their work. (par. 1-3)

Rafiki is a part of the contemporary African film canon in the way that it is deliberately different from the tired old expectations of how Africa has been portrayed on the screen. Kahiu herself has noted that *Rafiki* is a departure from the dreary narratives of "poverty, famine, war, disease and those very incomplete single stories that are prevalent about the continent," and often depicted in films set in Africa (Kahiu qtd. in Obenson par. 6). Although the tone is bright and

vibrant, the film's subject matter is what distinguishes it as a hybrid retelling of everyday life for queer Kenyan individuals filled with love and happiness as well as the reality of oppressive forces.

The film's protagonist, Kena, who is played by Samantha Mugatsia, rides the streets of her neighbourhood on her skateboard – in sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt. Throughout the film, Kena displays a sense of contemporary fashion – her attire does not adhere to the traditional patriarchal expectations of what a woman in Kenya should wear. This is not without its problems for Kena, as will be explored in detail later in the chapter, with attention to the moment in the film when Kena wears a dress to church explicitly to please her mother. As Lodge observes, Kena is "an academically gifted tomboy with no female friends [and] spends her free time playing soccer and shooting the breeze with the raffish Blacksta (Neville Masati) and his gang – who blithely refer to her as 'one of the guys,' yet never for a moment consider that heterosexual romance might not be on her mind" (par. 4). Although Kena is considered 'one of the guys' amongst her friends, she has one particular friend, Blacksta, who has an unclear view with regards to the boundaries of their friendship. Blacksta desires more than a friendship with Kena, but his display of playful flirtatious desire belies a real sense of entitlement to, and ownership of, Kena. As Akash Deshpande notes "Blacksta who [Kena] spends most of her time with can't understand why the feelings from his side don't reciprocate from the other. She can't find a reason either. After all, both of them have been a part of a society where they're not exposed to any other type of relationship" (par. 2). Their friendship is tested when Kena's life unravels and Blacksta must decide whether he stands with Kena or against her.

In an early scene in the film, Kena meets up with Blacksta at his apartment before they make their way to the local café where they regularly socialize with other friends. The camera focuses on a poster she passes, of John Mwaura who is running for political office. John is Kena's father who owns a local convenience store and is also campaigning for local elections. It is at Blacksta's apartment where we meet Nduta who, in this moment, and throughout the film, is noticeably annoyed by Kena and Blacksta's relationship as she sees Kena as a threat to her own interest in Blacksta. Unaware of Kena's queerness, Nduta maintains a watchful eye over Kena while Kena is unaware of both Blacksta and Nduta's feelings towards her.

Kena and Blacksta meet up at the local café with their friend Waireri, with whom they regularly play card games. The café is also a site of importance in the film as it is where the first occurrence of homophobia as well as misogynistic rhetoric happens. While playing cards during the first scene shot at the café, Blacksta spots a young man named Tom who is presumed

to be gay. Blacksta refers to Tom as Waireri's girlfriend in an effort to tease him about being single. Waireri is clearly offended by this 'joke' in so far that he does not confront Blacksta, but rather goes on the attack against Tom and begins to berate him: "What are you looking at, faggot?" (05:16). Sitting comfortably in his ignorance, Blacksta laughs at Waireri while an uncomfortable Kena defends Tom, but in a way that does not draw too much attention to herself. She begins by asking quietly but clearly, "How is he hurting you?" (05:18). Waireri's outburst then develops into a tirade about his discomfort with gay people and makes an early connection for the viewer in terms of the intersections between religious convictions, traditional notions of masculinity, and homophobic attitudes. He asks Kena, "Do you think God is just watching men fuck each other?" (05:20). Uncomfortable with the situation, he promptly leaves the table. He is visibly bothered and does not want to carry on playing, but not before he purposefully shoulders Tom as he walks past him, illustrating not only his bigotry, but his fragile ego too. In an effort to avoid any more talk about sexuality, Kena leaves Blacksta and Waireri at the café to go to work at her father's convenience store. As she leaves the café she sees three girls talking amongst themselves and one of them catches her eye. Kena locks eyes with her, unaware the impact she will have on her life. Her name is Ziki, played by Sheila Munyiva, and she is vibrant in her appearance – with her colourful clothes and bright pink and blue braids in her hair. Akash Deshpande notes that "the instant attraction towards each other is apparent yet isn't contextualized from either side" (par. 3). As Leigh Monson notes, the film often says "so much through visual cues, symbolism, and nonverbal actions" (par. 5).

Much of the intricate, delicate moments of the film are made up of Kena trying to navigate the complexities of her identity and her family. Kena and her father John have a fragile relationship. They do not talk easily and this is due to the fact that Kena's parents are divorced. Kahiu demonstrates the strain in Kena's relationship with her father during a scene where John asks Kena at work how her mother, Mercy, is doing. Kena lives with Mercy in their apartment, which is decorated extensively with religious paraphernalia. Mary is a gentle, soft woman who still longs romantically for her ex-husband and continues to believe, naively, in the possibility of rekindling their relationship. There is no communication between John and Mercy, however, indicating that their separation was not amicable. Kena is uncomfortable with her father's questioning and avoids divulging too much of her mother's state of being. Her honest answers will only lead to conversations that she does not want to have with him.

Before Kena goes home she collects dinner from the local café, owned by the pompous Mama Atim. Nduta is Mama Atim's daughter and both mother and daughter have a reputation for watching, observing and gossiping over many of the locals who move through the

neighbourhood and patronise the café. In a community where "salacious scuttlebutt is a valuable currency in a locale this local and nothing is more likely to provoke scandal than rumours around someone's sexuality," Mama Atim holds a vast amount of social power (Mumford par. 4). As will be shown, in her interference in the relationship that develops between Kena and Ziki, this social power negatively impacts a person's life. In her first interaction with Kena, Mama Atim is shown to know more about her father than Kena herself when she informs an unaware Kena that her father's new wife is pregnant. Visibly shocked, Kena hurriedly collects the food and rushes home, leaving a gleeful Mama Atim at the café. The uncomfortable conversations, mentioned before, are not only reserved for her father, as when she arrives at the front door of her house, she is shown as apprehensive about going inside. She has a closed off demeanour when she is at home which highlights a fraught relationship with her other parent. Looking enthusiastically at Kena, Mercy asks, "Did you father ask about me today?" (09:26) to which Kena lies and states he never did. Kena does not want her mother to hold onto the idea of reconciliation. Kena, in an effort to spare her the pain of finding out that John has definitely moved on, does not tell Mercy about his pregnant wife. Later in the film, however, Kena and Mercy attend a church service when they bump into John and his new wife. Kena's fears come true when Mercy finds out about the pregnancy. She is distressed and runs home, followed by Kena not too far behind in an effort to comfort her. Kena is caught between the complexities of her parents and their relationship. Therefore, she decides to distance herself emotionally from both her parents. When Kena confronts her father about why he never told her about his pregnant wife he explains to her that he tried to the day before, but she left before he could. John wants to rebuild his relationship with his daughter so that she can have a relationship with his other child. There are indications throughout the film that John cares deeply for Kena, but her own sense of uncertainty about herself has inhibited the growth of this important relationship. She avoids being too personal in an effort to avoid attention to her inner struggles.

Kena also avoids this attention when hanging out with her friends, never delving beyond a superficial level of friendship. It is Blacksta who informs Kena that Ziki is the daughter of John's political opponent, Peter Okemi. As is shown repeatedly, Kena and Ziki are thus expected to be rivals themselves, but when they come face-to-face with each other it is the complete opposite. As Emily Yoshida observes: "When Kena and Ziki get together, time gets a little unstuck, the world gets softer, more impressionistic" (par. 4). The young women first meet when one of Ziki's friends tears a poster for John's campaign off a wall. Kena witnesses this, becomes territorial, and begins to shout and chase after them. As they run from Kena,

Ziki's friends escape but Ziki decides to stop and confront Kena. They stare at each other in silence as Kena is uncertain of what to say. Ziki laughs then runs off after she is called by her friends.

After this initial meeting Ziki attempts a truce. She waits for Kena with her friends outside John's convenience store hoping to apologise for her friends' actions in tearing down John's campaign posters. They exchange pleasantries all the while exuding an obvious fascination with each other: "Kena watches her with glamorized shyness. Ziki is more a hothead and a flirt, the first to break through the two girls' silent, smiling glances from across the street and suggest they go hang out" (Yoshida par. 3). Ann Hornaday observes that "Mugatsia and Munyiva have an endearing, unforced chemistry (the scene where they get to know one another is particularly delicate), and Kahiu films them against a glorious backdrop of Nairobi's streetscape, club life and domestic interiors – a vibrant, multilayered collage of light, color, texture and motion" (par. 4). They go to the café to talk and to get to know each other better over a soda, but they are, of course, under the watchful eyes of Mama Atim and Nduta. Not one to hold her tongue, Mama Atim voices her bewilderment at the two girls together: "Both politicians' daughters? Here at Mama Atim's? Today, the sun will rain! Wonders of the world" (17:50). Kena and Ziki, made uncomfortable by Mama Atim's invasion of their private moment, leave for somewhere else where they can be alone together. Although Mama Atim's invasive commentary on the two makes them uncomfortable, it is this uncomfortableness that leads them to the sublime rooftop picnic, discussed earlier, where they make their pact with one another.

After their rooftop encounter, Kena goes home to be confronted by her mother about the time she is spending with Ziki. (21:42). Kena admits to doing so and then tries not to seem too excited when Mercy suggests she should bring Ziki over as she would like to meet her. Mercy also notes, "something is different about you, Kena" (22:09) while Kena, maintaining her need for privacy, tells her that nothing is different. Unrelenting in her inquiry about her daughter's changed attitude, Mercy does not believe her and asks, "is it a boy?" (22:21). Kena, embarrassed, assures her that it is not a boy. Class differences, however, shift Mercy's attention from Kena's love life to her social life. Mercy informs Kena of her high regard for Ziki's family, the Okemis. She tells Kena that she should choose her friends wisely as people like Blacksta will only bring her down compared to the Okemis who could lift her up. Mercy's sentiments towards characters like Blacksta and the Okemi family highlight the power and class dynamics which exist between the two girls. Here also lies the contrast and difference between the two girls – it is not just in their appearances and personalities, but in their social standing too.

Kena seems to ignore the importance placed on the class differences by her mother and continues to exist outside the boundaries of what is expected of Kenyan girls by playing soccer with Blacksta and other men. After their rooftop moment, Kena and Ziki are drawn to each other and always find themselves in close proximity. This magnetic pull has Ziki noticing the soccer game happening. Unafraid, she walks up to them and asks if she and her friends can join the game: "Can we play?" (23:22). Blacksta denies Ziki's request which ignites her defiant nature. She asks why it is not possible for them to play with the men while Kena is allowed to play. Blacksta responds, unaware of the patriarchal talking points he enforces, by saying "Who Kena? She plays like a guy! [and] you girls will distract us" (23:30). Blacksta nevertheless proceeds to agree to let Ziki play after Kena persuades him. Kena's persuasion can be read in two ways. Firstly, Blacksta's agreement for the girls to play with them could be a way for him to seem reasonable to Kena for whom he has latent feelings. Secondly, Kena's insistence on allowing Ziki and her friends to play provides a way for her to spend more time with Ziki. They are all playing together, but the game is brought to a standstill as it begins to rain resulting in the group scattering. Seeking shelter from the rain, Kena runs off to an abandoned minivan overgrown with greenery and flowers with Ziki following not far behind.

Throughout the film, Kena moves between the same spaces: her home, the convenience store, the local café, the streets of Nairobi, and the soccer field. The presence of public opinion in all these spaces never allows her to be herself. After meeting Ziki, however, the film begins to attend to spaces within the city where Kena finds she can be herself – on the roof overlooking the city and then in the abandoned minivan. The minivan has a cosy feel to it, indicating that it is where Kena frequently spends her time. It is clear that the minivan is a place of safety for Kena where she can detach herself from her everyday life and issues like her parents' separation and her indifference to societal expectations. She allows Ziki, who is desperate for shelter from the rain, to join her in her place of safety. Their rooftop encounter has afforded Kena trust, as well as longing, for Ziki. In this moment, the minivan is not only a source of shelter from the rain for Kena and Ziki, but it also serves as the birth of a shared space that seems to offer the two young women some protection from reality and the harsh criticism that their blossoming relationship would face. After the excitement of getting out of the rain and into shelter is over, the two of them begin to settle down, and their sudden realisation of their proximity is palpable. There are longing glances between the two and Kena is confronted with the prospect of intimacy with Ziki which shakes her a bit. She abruptly leaves the van, but not before Ziki asks if they will see each other again. Kena smiles, confirming their next meet up, and leaves her private space to go back home where she would normally struggle to be happy, but this time

she arrives home elated. The impact that Ziki has on Kena becomes more visible. As Odie Henderson observes:

> Several times, lens flares from the sun invade the frame containing Ziki, presenting her as the center of Kena's galaxy. Ziki's astonishingly festive coif becomes a complementary personality symbol, the yin to the grungy yang of Kena's skateboard and backwards baseball cap; Kahiu often introduces these characters into scenes by their trademarks. (par. 2)

Kena's elation is thwarted, however, when she is confronted with the reality of how broken her family is. On her return home, she finds her sleeping mother on the couch with an open suitcase in front of her. The suitcase is filled with memorabilia of her parents' marriage: a palpable demonstration of Mercy's nostalgia for a life that no longer exists. Kena quietly packs the suitcase away before she gets into her own bed. Alone in bed, Kena is shown bursting with happiness from all that happened in the minivan as her feelings for Ziki are not only confirmed as real, but as mutual too.

As their relationship develops, Kena and Ziki begin spending more time with each other. Gwilym Mumford notes that their initial friendship "soon progresses into something more, carefully disguised as matiness" (par. 5). This includes regularly visiting each other's houses under the safe guise of friendship. Not only do Kena and Ziki get to know each other more as their secret relationship develops, but they get to meet and know each other's family. Kena meets Ziki's mother, Rose Okemi, who is warm to her, but clearly judges her appearance, which further highlights the class differences between the two families. When Kena and Ziki are together, they try not to draw attention to the fact that they are attracted to one another. There are moments, for example, when Kena brushes Ziki's arm in the tuk-tuk on the way to the fair, which leave them both flustered. Their reactions to each other and the way that they operate in public are particular to the experience of courting as queer. Kena and Ziki attempt to be as free and open as possible, but their conservative environment make them and the viewer cognizant of looming judgement. This fact is proven when Nduta and Mama Atim are shown watching the pair as they drive off in the tuk-tuk, thus enforcing the precarity of their relationship, which carries such potential for attracting both shame and violence. At the fair, the pair flirt with and touch each other constantly, a scene which is presented as an intimate montage replete with moments of interchanges of looks and glances. Ziki then reignites the notion of wanting to be real and authentic, as the pair sit down to relax and talk. Ziki asserts: "I want us to go on a real date. Like real! I've seen how you look at me," (27:51) which cements the pair as a new couple. Kena and Ziki are sitting on the promenade near the fair where they

take their emotional intimacy towards the physical as Ziki dances for Kena. There is a covertly sexual and thus private nature to Ziki's dance. Although the two are on the promenade they are secluded enough behind big pillars not to attract attention. Kena is fixated on Ziki who is wearing a t-shirt bearing the words 'bad news' which is a suggestive foreshadowing for Kena.

In the next scene, the camera follows Kena and Ziki as they walk into a makeshift nightclub where they continue their date. The nightclub is colourful and vibrant and it is filled with people painting neon colours onto each other's faces. The colours during this scene are energetic and alive almost as if to show how the pairs' feelings towards each other are enhanced in this setting. The nightclub is another space where the two girls openly express themselves and where queer viewers can feel a sense of visibility and a sense of joy by viewing queer happiness on screen. Kena and Ziki are, in this moment, the "something real" that they strive for throughout their relationship. As Guy Lodge notes: "One lovely nightclub scene bathes Kena and Ziki in blacklight, casting them as wild neon-pink entities in the darkness, and finding an outward expression for the hot, briefly iridescent euphoria that first love – particularly one daring to speak its name in a still-hostile environment – makes us feel inside" (par. 8). Recognizing the use of colour, Justin Chang observes multiple instances, beyond the nightclub scene, where the use of colour is important to the depiction of the relationship. He notes that "there are the lovely pastel-hued braids" worn by Ziki "and also the flowers growing over an abandoned van that becomes a refuge for her and her girlfriend, Kena," which illustrate the soft delicate nature of their love. Colour in the film represents not only the freedom of love between the two young women, but it is also symbolic of oppressive structures: "even the pastor at Ziki and Kena's church wears a purple shirt as he preaches to a community that will show its own truer, uglier colors before the movie ends" (par. 2). Leigh Monson's description of the use of colour in the film is also tethered to the idea of religion:

> Royal purples invade the background as a pervading symbol of religious authority, but hot pinks and yellows dominate the landscape and Kena's and Ziki's outfits, demonstrating how they belong even as the imperialism of Christianity wants them out. Close-ups on Kena's and Ziki's faces are comparable to Barry Jenkins' work, opening windows of extreme empathy into characters who only seem to find it in one another. (par. 4)

After they take a break from dancing, Kena and Ziki find a more private area of the nightclub and decide to talk more about their future together. Their chemistry is tangible, as they get physically and emotionally closer to each other. The build-up of longing, attraction and intimacy the two feel for each other ends in them kissing. This is one of the few scenes in the

film where physical intimacy between the two is shown. Guy Lodge notes that their intimacy is normally "expressed only in innocent kisses and close but clothed contact" and that "their sweet sexual naivete feels fully character-informed rather than censor-compliant" (par. 5). Therefore, the display of same-sex intimacy in the film is far from corrupt or explicit, as the KFCB has argued in giving their reasons for banning *Rafiki*.

The pair end their rendezvous, but as they are saying their goodbyes, involving an intimate embrace, they let their guards down. John appears, in the background of this shot, glaring at them. He does not immediately react to their embrace, but rather walks away. John is a calm, level-headed man who is not reactionary towards his daughter's relationship. When he confronts Kena the following day about spending time with Ziki, he does not appear to be bothered by the fact that they are both girls. He is more concerned about Kena's safety and the fact that Ziki is his opponent's daughter, which he knows will have a negative effect on for his election campaign. Kena starts to realise that her father is more open and understanding than she thought.

There are noticeable differences between John and Ziki's father, Peter Okemi. This is shown when Kena goes to Ziki's apartment so that they can find out their exam results together. They stand outside the apartment and Ziki, who has already seen their marks, tells Kena that she received very good marks and that she can become a doctor. In the background of their joyous moment, Peter Okemi shouts for Ziki to come back inside while expressing his dissatisfaction with her spending time with Kena. John is thus juxtaposed against Peter Okemi who is not only his political rival, but also holds the space as his moral rival – he is unsupportive of their daughters' relationship and is abusive to Ziki whereas John on the other hand is supportive and comforting to Kena. Their attitudes towards their daughters are expressed differently. Peter is belligerent and cold whereas John is comforting and helpful.

Later that evening the pair meet at the café, where they join Blacksta and Waireri, to celebrate their results. The alcohol is flowing and Waireri makes offhand remarks about Ziki being his future ex-wife, highlighting the ownership over women to which Waireri, like Blacksta, thinks he is entitled. As Blacksta and Waireri become more intoxicated they continue with their crude remarks thus creating an uncomfortable environment for Ziki and Kena. Their celebration comes to a standstill when Tom, who has clearly been beaten up as he has bruises and lacerations on his face, walks by the group. Waireri, unable to ignore his opportunity to humiliate and berate him, says, "Now he walks even more like a fag," followed by shouting, "Homo!" at an unresponsive Tom (38:27). Ziki becomes visibly more uncomfortable, turning to Kena with a concerned look. Kena then abruptly gets up and leaves the table. She leaves

Ziki behind and makes her way to the abandoned minivan. In a moment of déjà vu, Ziki follows Kena, which she was clearly expecting as, to Ziki's delight and surprise, Kena has organised "a real date" for the two of them in the minivan. She has decorated their hideout with lights creating a romantic ambience and another opportunity for them to share some unrestricted time together in a secluded private space. This minivan date is one of the few moments of physical intimacy in the film. Kena and Ziki begin kissing and exploring each other's bodies and, while there are no explicit depictions of sexual activity, the film suggests that the pair make love and fall asleep in each other's arms. As Monson observes "cautious too is the coy manner in which Kahiu, likely fearing a smackdown from the classification board, illustrates their eventual lovemaking (not that such circumspection made any difference to the censors)" (par. 5). The screen fades to black, signifying the end of part one of the film.

As they wake up the next morning Kena, in a rush to leave, is asked by Ziki to stay. The sun is shining brightly through the windows of the minivan and Ziki in this moment says, "I wish this was real" to which Kena replies, "It is" (42:55). Ziki appears to be concerned and notes that it will not be the same, "when we go out there" to which Kena responds "Don't worry. We'll do this again" (43:05). The notion of being more than their reality and living authentically is threaded into these rare and precious moments in the film when the two girls are left alone to enjoy each other in seclusion. These moments are a comfort for them as they are not living their realities.

As she walks home after her night with Ziki, Kena bumps in to Blacksta, who notices that she is wearing the same clothes as the night before and asks her if she's been out all night. She tells him that it is, "something like that" (44:12). This leads a curious, and jealous, Blacksta to ask Kena about the man he presumes she is seeing. Kena is confused by his question, and his jealousy prompts Blacksta to reveal that he is, in fact, interested in her romantically. He insists that "one day you will see for yourself" (42:26) which further instantiates his feelings of ownership. Kena is still confused when Blacksta states he can provide her with everything he *thinks* she wants and needs, including "money in your account, mortgage, title deed" (42:35). Kena challenges him and asks, "You think that's all I want in life?" Blacksta, reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes, declares: "That's what everybody wants" (42:40). His statement is representative of the entitlement to which men, embedded in patriarchal societies, feel that they have to women's bodies when they offer to provide a perceived value to their lives. Blacksta thinks that if he provides Kena with money and capital he can take ownership of her and that she has to be his wife regardless of her feelings towards him. Kena is not only disinterested in Blacksta, but she has an already established relationship that she is working towards

maintaining. Blacksta, however, certain of his social power, cannot grasp that Kena is uninterested. When she tries to leave, Nduta approaches the two friends asking why Blacksta has not responded to her. He ignores her and continues to plead with Kena to answer to his desires. Nduta persists in her efforts to gain Blacksta's attention but he is dismissive and rude to her, which clearly indicates that he never had any serious intentions with her. Kena, caught in the middle of something in which she does not want to be involved, promptly leaves the two. Nduta, who clearly holds a grudge against Kena, whom she sees as her romantic rival, also leaves, but not before she tells Blacksta: "You don't have to be mean to me" (45:09). Blacksta is left alone filled with regret.

In the next scene, Kena and Ziki build on their growing closeness developed after their initial sexual encounter. They are outside Kena's apartment building – Ziki sits on a couch and Kena sits between her legs on the ground – while Ziki braids Kena's hair. There is a growing public display of their closeness and comfort with each other. This moment is striking in that it allows them to be openly intimate under the guise of girls braiding each other's hair which is something that is normally seen as platonic and non-sexual. Ziki's friends, however, like Mama Atim and Nduta also act as another source of watchful eyes scrutinising the actions of the pair as Kena notices them watching her with Ziki. One of Ziki's friends, Elizabeth, complains to the other about Ziki and Kena's relationship and wonders when Ziki will come back to them. Throughout the film, Kahiu draws attention to the fact that wherever the two young woman are there are many people, friends, family members, acquaintances and the general public, who act as reminders for the two to be wary of expressing their relationship openly. This illustrates the precarity of Kena and Ziki's relationship. They live with the constant risk of being exposed – in public or even at home.

Kena fulfils her mother's request, and takes Ziki home to meet Mercy. Kena's house has a more relaxed feel compared to Ziki's – the two of them are much livelier and talkative with Mercy than they would be in the Okemi household. It is important to note that Kena has not actually been inside Ziki's home – highlighting how Ziki's home is closed off to Kena. Inside Kena's house Ziki flirtatiously convinces Kena to try on a dress – the specific item of clothing she never wears – for the church service they are to attend later in the day. It is a sweet scene – the suggestion is that Kena does this for Ziki, stepping outside of her comfort zone because she cares about her enough to take risks, and feels safe enough with Ziki to do so. After trying on the dress, she goes to show her mother who is elated at this sight. Mercy exclaims, "Doesn't she just look like a proper woman? All we need is a nice rich doctor and all my prayers will have been answered today" (46:07).

The irony in Mercy's statement is apparent – Kena wishes to become a nurse or a doctor herself, not marry one. Mercy sees Ziki only as a positive influence on her wayward daughter in helping her to conform closer to the conservative, patriarchal aspirations she has for Kena. The notion of Ziki being a "positive influence" on Kena allows the young women to hide their romantic relationship under the guise of friendship, especially with Kena's mother. Mercy, blinded by her religiosity, remains unaware of her daughter's feelings for Ziki. Her hopes for Kena to find a husband and establish a family of her own both symbolise and enforces the dual forces of religion and patriarchy in her home and in Kenyan society more generally. Mercy's conservative views demonstrate how Christianity and patriarchy work hand in hand, and are entrenched in families and society not only by men, but women too. As Kahiu's film shows, in Kenyan society any person who does not follow or adhere to these beliefs is disregarded and labelled an outcast. The rhetoric that entangles religion and patriarchy resurfaces when Mercy, Kena, and Ziki attend the church service, with Kena still in the dress – which itself is a symbol of the presence of oppression for dissenting queer people.

During the scene in the church, the camera moves from face to face, focussing on the reactions of various characters during key moments of the pastor's sermon which is about marriage, family, and the sin of homosexuality. The statements he makes coincide with visual attention to specific characters and who they represent in the film. Kahiu's approach to this scene is a clever and thoughtful way to bring attention to the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals exist in Kenyan society, and how they occupy the most religious and conservative of cultural spaces by remaining hidden in plain sight. When the pastor praises God for giving him a wife who is "beautiful, clever, courageous, and wise" (44:38) the camera shifts its focus, from Rose Okemi, to Mercy, and then to John's new wife. As the pastor continues by saying that, "there are Kenyans who are challenging the government because of their stand on same-sex marriage" (44:46), the camera shifts its focus to Kena and Ziki who are sitting next to each other, before ending on Tom in the closing of the statement. The presence of Tom, Ziki, and Kena in church, and the film's attention to how they are both shamed and frightened by the pastor's words, illustrates the harmful effect and power of words, particularly religious preaching, in the policing and condemnation of homosexuality. The pastor continues his sermon by asserting the power of God's laws over the laws of human society, noting that even if the law in Kenya were to change that God's condemnation of homosexuality is eternal: "They say it is a human right. What is a human right? Are we going to ignore God? Don't choose to be lost! Because God's laws don't change like human laws or your country's" (47:00).

Despite the impact of the pastor's words, or perhaps in defiance of them, Ziki tries to be affectionate with Kena during the sermon but before she attracts unwanted attention, Kena stops her. Kena, always more aware than Ziki of how their actions will be scrutinized, knows that the church is the least private space for them. Ziki appears not to understand this and becomes visibly upset by Kena's rejection. Meanwhile the pastor tells the congregation to turn to the word of God. He reads: "God left them to follow their shameful desires. Even women changed their natural ways to unnatural ways and men did the same thing. They left women for unnatural ways and desired other men. They did shameful things with other men and as a result of their sin, they suffered" (47:31). The tension between the young women increases. Kena becomes more uncomfortable after Ziki's further attempts to be affectionate, including the very visible act of trying to hold her hand during the sermon. Unable to talk to Ziki to tell her to stop, Kena gets up and leaves the church service mid-sermon and the motif of the image of Ziki following Kena is reiterated. This time, it results in the pair garnering attention from several members of the congregation, including Mama Atim and Nduta, with the latter going so far as to follow the pair outside to spy on them. Outside and away from the confines of the church, Kena confronts Ziki about her actions. As Leigh Monson notes, there lies a difference between the two: "Ziki, the extrovert, wants them to be more open about their relationship; Kena, wary of the likes of Mama Atim, preaches caution" (par. 5). Ziki questions Kena's rejection asking, "Is it wrong for me to show you how I feel?" Kena replies, "No, it's not, but you can't do it here," where both their families are (48:17). Ziki is obviously frustrated about their circumstances and takes it out on Kena: "When are you ever going to do stuff without thinking of who will see or what they'll say or what's going to happen after? Just be you" (48:35). This is a key question in a film that returns, again and again, to the question of societal condemnation and individual freedom. The pair discover there are not only external forces which make up the complexities surrounding their union, but internal beliefs too. Kena, who does not hold as much social power in terms of her class status, is far more aware of the precarity of their situation. She explains to Ziki that it is irresponsible to display affection in public, but the pair do not seem to agree with each other. Ziki leaves Kena alone, but staying true to the themes of the film, their outburst is witnessed by Nduta.

Alone with her frustration and sadness, and left without Ziki, Kena only has her friend Blacksta who sees her alone and offers to help cheer her up with a bike ride, but his motives are clear. He takes advantage of her loneliness and takes her to watch the sunset at the top of a hill. The sunset is beautiful and prompts Kena to relive the precious moments she shared with Ziki. Wound up in her own desires, she thinks about the future she envisioned where she would

leave behind the life she does not want to live. Kena daydreams about Ziki and imagines that they are enjoying the sunset together when she confesses the recurring notion of wanting to live an authentic life, out loud: "I wish we could go somewhere where we could be real" (50:49). Unaware of the layered meaning in Kena's words, Blacksta responds asking, "What do you mean, 'real'?" (50:55). His confusion jolts Kena back to her senses and back to her unwanted reality where she brushes off Blacksta's question. Kena returns to her neighbourhood where she spots Ziki, who has reunited with her friends, signalling that their "something real" is now even further away than it was before. In addition, their public lovers' quarrel, as witnessed by Nduta, will have dire consequences for them both.

The Purpose of Pacing and Violence in *Rafiki*

Rafiki contains a particular use of swift pacing and violence, which go hand in hand, to portray the complicated attitudes towards queerness in Kenyan society. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Kahiu is a member of the Afrobubblegum movement, and as such has stated that she "rejects the idea that all art on the continent needs to be issue-led," and "what is needed are new visions of Africa" (Clarke, par. 17). She has, however, as will be discussed in detail in this section, made use of both violence and an issue-led narrative in *Rafiki*, and for important reasons. The fast pacing of *Rafiki* and its attendant lack of emotional build-up, however, highlights the sense of what is missing from the film: the notion that pleasure and joy needs to be reached for and not forced nor rushed. Considering how difficult it is to enunciate one's queer love in Africa, there is little attention to the delicate complexities and tensions experienced by the characters while falling in love, beyond the details already discussed, and a failure overall to dive deep into the process of the two girls' courting. The rooftop scene is an example of a moment of honest vulnerability, but it is a singular scene that, ironically, highlights the film's lack of emotive depth as a whole. Kahiu is not herself queer, and this may account for the lack of emotional complexity in the depiction of the love affair between the characters throughout the film. Her deft use of violence, however, which will be discussed below, is indicative of her attempt at an authentic portrayal of the precarity of queer Kenyan lives.

The film's pacing is extremely fast. The editing and transitions from scene to scene often seem scattered. Although it sets in motion the intersection of characters and their relationships to reach the climactic violent scene towards the end of the second part of the film,I would argue that the film's swift, disruptive pacing also inhibits complexity and

emotional weight. *Rafiki* in its entirety appears to be made up of moments composed as vignettes rather than a nuanced, cohesive storyline with scenes that naturally build upon each other. The scenes cut and change often, and the passage of time is mainly shown by a change of setting. It can appear disorientating which, again, could be construed as a stylistic choice by Kahiu. Emily Yoshida notes that *Rafiki*'s:

> story line doesn't stray too far from what's become a familiar LGBT romance template: love blossoms but is beset by external forces that conspire to snuff it out. The cultural particulars of growing up gay in Kenya (which trends extremely conservative when it comes to gay rights, and where same-sex sexual activity is illegal) give it dimension. (par. 2)

Despite the "dimension" afforded to the film by its use of a queer narrative in Kenya, the pacing hinders the emotional weight of the narrative. There is little space for the viewer's knowledge of the characters to develop, as seen in other contemporary queer African films.[16] Recent films such as *Carol* (2015), *Moonlight* (2016), and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), which met with both popular and critical acclaim globally, illustrate an important cornerstone of contemporary queer filmmaking – where the attraction between the characters, and the emotional tension it creates, is crucial to the long-term impact of the film. In contrast, there is a disjuncture with *Rafiki*'s emotional impact primarily due to how quickly the two girls become a couple.

The film was received in the rest of the world to wide acclaim because of its origin and the progressiveness of its queer narrativisation. The host of the podcast, *AfroQueer*, Selly Thiam, suggests that the film allows both queer and non-queer Kenyans to see an "honest and relatable depiction of what it would be like to discover queer love in Nairobi (Thiam, 05:52). For many queer viewers from Africa, however, who are familiar with negotiating queer love in contemporary urban African spaces fraught with homophobia, the film's use of a swift montage of scenes to illustrate a developing love affair may be insufficient in terms of what is left out – distinctive character development, individual detail, emotional intensity and thus viewer involvement. For example, when the two are labelled as a couple in love with each other, they are granted only so much as a montage to show the development of their relationship. There is no full exploration of their growing attraction to each other nor their personal feelings about the situation. It is just thrust upon us a matter of fact. Their union, albeit filled with sexual chemistry from the skill of the actors involved, feels rushed and disingenuous at times because,

[16] The film, *Inxeba* (2017), which will be explored in the third chapter is an example of an African contemporary queer film that holds a lot more emotional weight, which is developed throughout the film.

as a viewer, you are offered no time to become fully immersed in how this powerful bond came to be. There may also be the element of trepidation, which Kahiu may have felt when dealing with portraying some aspects of the narrative, such as queer intimacy. As Emily Yoshida points out:

> these sequences also possibly belie Kahiu's working with in her country's strict content standards, the intimacy sometimes feels as though it's straining against its own elliptical depiction. This forces a more poetic, suggestive treatment of Kena and Ziki's love, but for an audience used to far more explicit onscreen treatments of gay sex (or sex in general), it may come off as a little nervous. (par. 5)

Despite what Yoshida suggests about the lack of explicit sex as the reason why the film may come off as nervous, I would suggest that the film's lack of emotional complexity is hindered by its pacing. The source material is rich with the exploration of the slow evolution of queer intimacy and Kahiu makes use of some of this but as a whole it is not enough. The pacing of the film affects the quality of the narrative in terms of resonating with queer viewers' emotions.

One element of queer filmmaking, especially contemporary queer African cinema, that I think is paradoxically beneficial to the development of the new normal is this inclusion of and focus on violence against queer people. While Kahiu's depiction of Africa partakes of the Afrobubblegum collective's contemporary vision for altering the nature of story-telling on the continent, she also includes a notably violent scene involving Kena and Ziki, as well as various other depictions of violence. These scenes depict the everyday psychic and physical violence faced by queer Kenyans, all of which contradict the turn against violence and death in queer narrativesbeing voiced increasingly by queer Western audiences. Contemporary Western queer scholarship often articulates the need to move away from queer narratives where the focus is on violence, strife, or even death.[17] For instance, Ralph J. Poole suggests that queer films with explicit violence towards queer characters "continue to propagandize the conflation of sex, violence, and queerness," and he asks "whether they opt to work with, against, or beyond common stereotypes" (2-3).[18] Because there is a longer tradition of making queer film in the West, the argument against the inclusion of violence with a demand that different stories now

[17] Like the Bechdel Test, a new form examining queer characters has developed called, The Vito Russo Test, which examines how LGBTQ characters are portrayed and represented on screen. See *GLAAD*'s "The Vito Russo Test" for an explanation of the criteria in order for a film to pass the test. There is also a representation test called The Deggans' Rule, which examines the representation of race in a television show. See Nick Douglas, "The Bechdel Test, and Other Media Representation Tests, Explained" for a list of other representation tests and criteria.
[18] The turn against the use of violence or death in queer media is a reaction to the powerful history of the "Bury the Gays" trope which goes all the way back to the Hollywood censorship codes of the 1930s.

need to be told, has resulted in positive stories with happy endings becoming more prominent. As Haley Hulan, in her paper "Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context," suggests, the *Bury Your Gays* literary trope is a Western tradition where the violent or unhappy endings of queer films were often a way of punishing queer characters for being homosexual. It was used throughout the history of Western filmmaking to assert the heteronormative status quo where gay characters in films would either die, commit suicide or return to heterosexual life. Hulan also suggests that the trope "originated as a tool for queer authors to write queer narratives without facing negative consequences associated with the 'endorsement' of homosexuality" (Hulan 24). Hulan suggests that over time, the *Bury Your Gays* trope has evolved. She notes that it has "gone from something queer creators can use to skirt oppressive societal standards and laws to something that is used to exploit queer characters and storylines for a straight audience. (Hulan 19). Although the opposition to the trope and thus to depictions of violence against queer people in Western media can be valid, it also belies the different realities faced by queer people in different parts of the world. When considering the use of violence in contemporary queer media, such as Channel 4's *It's a Sin* (2021), or the French film *BPM (Beats Per Minute)* (2017), both of which depict the failures of Western governments to adequately respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s, the violent scenes shown in these narratives are accurate representations of historical events and illustrate the importance of attending to the realities of violence (be it psychic or actual) in narratives that focus on the history of the queer community. The development of progressive changes in contemporary queer politics and queer representation relies on the attention and focus of queer historical analysis. Considering the entanglements of religion, sexuality, and patriarchy in Africa, I would suggest that the widespread turn against the inclusion of violence in discussions of Western queer media is a very privileged and ethnocentric response, coming from Western viewers, and cannot be a blanket response to queer media everywhere.

In Africa, queer film is still very much in its inception, given the colonial history of the continent. Although the inclusion of violence in fictional media depicting queer characters is now viewed by many Western audiences as reductive, stereotypical, and even triggering, I would argue that, in the context of African queer filmmaking, the inclusion of the threat to queer lives from verbal, psychic, and physical violence better helps paint a picture of the realities faced by queer Africans.[19] As Odie Henderson notes:

[19] Gibson Ncube suggests in "Are We Bound to Violence?: Looking at Depictions of Toxic Queer Masculinities in South African Films" that "we need to ask why violence is a viable avenue to channel shame and homophobia" (par. 14).

> Kahiu never shies away from the inherent danger the lovers face. When violence befalls Ziki and Kena, Kahiu's tight framing is as harrowing as the act itself. The canvas of the screen is often used as a representation of feeling rather than narrative, with scenes cropped so we can only see pieces of the action. It makes the most intimate moments seem larger-than-life, which is exactly how they must feel to our heroes. (par. 3)

Despite Henderson's assertion that the intimate moments are larger than life, I would have to disagree. The montage of their dates together, and their moments in the minivan, short change the development of the girls' relationship overall, which seems rather rushed and glossed over. This is why the moment on the rooftop stands out, as a scene which exudes poignancy in its gentle attention to their nascent connection. The emotional impact of the film could have been improved by including more scenes of such steady attention.

In contrast, violence, in the film, slowly escalates: from the verbal abuse that Tom faces at the café, to the psychic violence of the sermon, to Elizabeth's confrontation of Kena, to the physical violence at the minivan. This violence is not condemned by either the police, nor the church, nor the families, with the notable exception of John. Moreover, whether it be overt like the attack on Kena and Ziki, or barely visible, as in the case of Tom who walks by Kena at the café – his face covered in bruises and lacerations – without so much as an acknowledgement that someone has attacked him, it is representative of the precariousness of being queer in Kenya and of the continent's fraught relationship with queerness.

There are two particular scenes of violence which require attention, as they are interlinked and also highlight the spectrum of violence to which queer characters in the film are exposed to: the scene of Elizabeth's confrontation and the attack on the two young women in the minivan. When Kena is outside her apartment building, she is confronted by Ziki's friend, Elizabeth. As Kena is drinking water from a tap, Elizabeth attacks Kena and hits her head. She warns Kena: "Stay away from Ziki. Are you a fucking lesbian or something? I see the way you look at her and it's sick! Whatever it is that you're trying, you'll not get away with it. Look at you. You're nothing" (52:30). Kena fights back and the two begin to tussle. Ziki and her other friend hear the commotion and step in and try to separate the two. Ziki defends Kena and lambasts Elizabeth, which prompts her to scream, "How can you choose her over me? (53:04). This outburst, which verges on sexual jealousy, suggests that there might be more at play in Ziki and Elizabeth's relationship than simply friendship. Elizabeth's friend pulls her away, leaving Ziki and Kena alone. To show that she still cares, despite their previous disagreement outside the church where Kena was angered at Ziki's attempt at a public display of intimacy,

Ziki takes Kena to her apartment to treat her lip that split during the fight. Overcome by Ziki's care, Kena confesses to Ziki that she loves her. They kiss, but this intimate reunion is interrupted by Ziki's mother, Rose, signalling the omnipresent danger of exposure. They are embarrassed to have been caught and begin stammering when Rose orders Kena to leave their home. Just like John, Rose is not surprised by the intimacy between their daughters, but she does, however, take a different approach to handling the situation. She blames Kena and threatens to call someone, but before she can Ziki and Kena run away, leaving Rose locked inside. They make their way to the only place of safety that they know: the abandoned minivan. Elizabeth, Ziki's friend, and Nduta, who are at the café, notice the two fleeing girls. Nduta begins to talk to them about Kena and Ziki, once again illustrating the recurring risk of being exposed and how often threats to their psychological and physical safety come from people in their very own neighbourhood.

When Kena and Ziki are in the minivan, they are able to relax, except this time they realise how they have exposed themselves to Rose. Kena asks Ziki what she is going to do now after this confrontation with her mother. Ziki, full of adrenaline and panic, suggests "We could have our own place. Just me and you. You got really good grades on your exams so you're going to be a doctor and I can get a job" (56:01). They are basking in their excitement and optimism for the future and begin embracing one another, which in turn leads to them kissing. This rare moment of security, however, is interrupted violently when Mama Atim, accompanied by Nduta and a mob of homophobic supporters, confront the two girls in the minivan where Mama Atim knows they will be, as throughout the film she also polices their movements. She utters one of the worst insults in a film that depicts the frequent verbal abuse of queer Kenyans by their community: "The politicians' daughters stuck together like dogs!" (56:55). The mob is then provoked into violence by Mama Atim's words, and while the girls are still in the minivan, they begin hitting the outside and pounding against the windows. Kena and Ziki are then pulled from the minivan. The scene is distressing in enacting how the young women's lives and relationship are placed at severe risk from the moment they are discovered together. The external reality of Kenyan's society enters into and destroys their cherished private space. Their efforts to avoid their subjugation have been destroyed by the politicisation that Mama Atim has thrust on their very innocent relationship. Violence erupts at the minivan as the mob, composed mainly of men and a few women, subject Kena and Ziki to public punishment and humiliation: throwing the two girls around and hitting them until they both drop to the ground, culminating in a violent hate crime.

Although I think that the attack should be classed as a hate crime, the film shows that what happens to the young women is not afforded any care or concern from the law. When asked about why she included this scene in the film, Kahiu noted that it is essential "to remember that 1 in 5 LGBT people in Kenya are violently attacked because of how they identify" (qtd. in Pfeiffer, par. 20). She explains that although she would have like to have left violence out of her film, it is a reality that people need to be cognizant of: "it was important to also tell the story of the harm that is caused as a result of the way you choose to love" (qtd. in Pfeiffer, par. 20). Despite Kahiu's assertion that "the film in and of itself […] is just a love story," it is led inside and outside the content on screen by its direct engagement in the discourses around the complexities of being queer in Kenya (Kahiu qtd in Pfeiffer, par. 7). Taking note of Kahiu's intentions, I think that this is what secures the film as a hybrid: it is both a love story and a story about the fight for personal freedom.

The Politicisation and Public Policing of Private Love

This section draws on the work of Lauren Berlant notably her exploration of intimacy within the history of how the private, such as identity and love, was made public. This shift from private to public led to the policing of private acts and, in turn, to the politicisation of queer identities.[20] Throughout the film, as noted in this chapter, there is the recurring notion of the two girls striving for "something real" in their journey together often culminating in rare moments alone in private settings which, as Berlant notes, are extremely important: "Domestic privacy can feel like a controllable space, a world of potential unconflictedness (even for five minutes a day): a world built for you. It may seem of a manageable scale and pacing; at best, it makes visible the effects of one's agency, consciousness, and intention" (6). Because Berlant emphasises the importance of domestic privacy here, it is clear how the pacing of the film could have been improved. More attention to those private moments the two girls share would give their union more emotional weight and complexity – while cementing the film's long-term impact in contemporary Kenyan society. The society the young women live in, however, has its own interpretation of what is real. Nonnormative sexualities, relationships and identities are viewed as a disruption to the real world which causes direct conflict, discrimination, and queer intimacy is often met with the threat of exposure and punishing violence. As Lauren Berlant

[20] Politicisation in this instance is used with the acknowledgement that everything in the naturalised world is politicised and therefore the personal is political too. Politicisation is used to describe that which exists beyond the norm and thus becomes *overtly* political.

notes of the rise of queer identity politics: "there is a history to the advent of intimacy as a public mode of identification and self-development" (3). In terms of queer narratives and lives, all over the world, there is a long history of the nation state being empowered to police, condemn, erase, and punish the behavior of consenting adults whose private intimacy is deemed to be counter to religious beliefs and the public good. Berlant takes note of Jürgen Habermas's argument that "the bourgeois idea of a public sphere relied on the emergence of a mode of critical public discourse that formulated and represented public interests within civil society against the state" (3). Furthermore, Berlant notes that:

> The development of critical publicness depended on the expansion of class-mixed semiformal institutions like the salon and the café, circulating print media, and industrial capitalism; the notion of the democratic public sphere thus made collective intimacy a public and social ideal, one of fundamental political interest. Without it the public's role as a critic could not be established. (3)

As Berlant notes, this tendency in capitalist bourgeois society towards making the private public, means that those spaces, and the people who occupy them, face scrutiny when they do not adhere to specific hegemonies, namely queer people in private spaces in heteronormative patriarchal societies. This can be seen clearly in *Rafiki*. Berlant makes note of the development of political geographies where certain spaces are allocated for queer individuals and that these spaces produce:

> systematic effects of violence. Queers are forced to find each other in untrafficked areas because of the combined pressures of propriety, stigma, the closet, and state regulation such as laws against public lewdness. The same areas are known to gay-bashers and other criminals. And they are disregarded by police. The effect is to make both violence and police neglect seem like natural hazards, voluntarily courted by queers. (315)

These "untrafficked areas" (315) are what allow sexual preference and sexuality to be rendered both invisible and locatable, and it is this that poses a threat to those who occupy such spaces because of potential violence and harm – demonstrated clearly in *Rafiki*. The violence, humiliation and ridicule that Kena and Ziki face is a perfect illustration of how the private space of queer love is policed, made public, and thus politicised by the people in a heteronormative patriarchal society who feel entitled to act in this manner. The film, as I will discuss below, also provides an example of the "police neglect" (315) of violence done to queer people. The failure, and the success, of the heteronormative patriarchal hegemony is wrapped up with the dogmatic beliefs of those who purport it. As Berlant observes:

> When states, populations, or persons sense that their definition of the real is under threat; when the normative relays between personal and collective ethics become frayed and exposed; and when traditional sites of pleasure and profit seem to get "taken away" by the political actions of subordinated groups, a sense of anxiety will be pervasively felt about how to determine responsibility for the disruption of hegemonic comfort. (7)

Both during and after the attack on them, Kena and Ziki's lives are drastically altered as their private matters are made public without their permission, which is recognizable in both queer narratives and queer lives.

Kena and Ziki call out for each other during the attack and, while on the ground, a defenceless Kena looks up and sees a familiar face: Waireri. She calls out for him to help them, but he ignores her cries and flees. Waireri symbolises the ignorance surrounding nonnormative sexualities, in that he is wrapped up in his heterosexism which makes him unaware of Kena's queerness.[21] When faced with the violent publicization of his friend's private life, a sense of panic ensues and the fear of association derived from his own bigotry results in Waireri leaving Kena to fend for herself. After the assault is over, the scene cuts to shots of the two young women at the local police station where they are both treated as if they are in fact the criminals. The public outing and attack on their relationship is an example of the frequent psychic and physical violence that polices queer love and the pain to which many queer African people are subjected. Furthermore, for queer viewers all over the world, this scrutiny and degradation of Kena and Ziki's humanity is immediately recognizable. In the police station, the two girls sit far apart from each other so as to avoid any more unwanted attention which could provoke further attacks. A pair of police officers watch the two as they wait for their parents to arrive. The policeman goads: "Between the two of you which one of you is the man?" (59:03), prompting shared laughter between himself and the policewoman. The scene is distressing, depicting a society united in condemnation of two innocent girls, and illustrating the patriarchal binarism with which queer people are faced constantly in many homophobic societies. The girls are subjected not only to physical violence and to humiliation, by having been assaulted, but they are also subjected to psychic violence and humiliation by the people who are supposed to protect them. Kena tries to reach out to Ziki to console her, but Ziki is still in shock and rejects Kena. This image of Kena reaching out to Ziki is a direct juxtaposition of the scene of the two of them in church when Ziki reached out for Kena. This attack not only shows the

[21] According to Epprecht, heterosexism is "blindness to or ignorance about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgender issues. It describes culture where people assume that 100% heterosexuality is normal, natural and good (*Unspoken*
215).

attitudes that the local people hold towards anyone going against societal rules and expectations, but it reiterates the stark difference between the girls' parents, as mentioned earlier in the chapter.

John arrives at the police station to pick up Kena. As he walks in, he stares at her bruised and battered face and then immediately requests to know the whereabouts of the office of the chief of police. This surprises the police officers. It is clear that John sees the attack on his daughter and Ziki as an injustice whatever his own feelings may be about her sexuality and its likely effect on his campaign. Unlike John's immediate concern for his child, Peter and Rose Okemi walk in soon after and treat their daughter horribly. Peter walks straight up to Ziki and slaps her across her face, with Rose looking on. He then turns to Kena and warns her to stay away from his family. Peter and Rose usher Ziki out of the police station without another word. Defying the orders of the police officers and Peter Okemi, Kena chases after the Okemi family. She runs to their car and pleads with Ziki to speak to her. Rose, who clearly still blames Kena for the shame brought on her family, asks Kena, "Haven't you had enough already?" (57:40) Kena continues to plead with Ziki, who is still hurt and embarrassed. She turns away and ignores Kena. Ziki's optimism is destroyed and Kena's worst fears have come true. The reversal of the image of Ziki chasing after Kena is symbolic of this unfortunate change between the two of them. As the car drives away Kena still holds on to hope for her relationship with Ziki and walks after the car, but she is left alone in the middle of the street. John appears and consoles her in the only way he knows how. Gwilym Mumford points out that John is "forced to weigh up his acceptance of his daughter against his wider desire to effect change in his community" which not only grants his character more complexity, but again highlights his difference from Peter Okemi (par. 6). He holds Kena, takes off his jacket, and puts it over her, surrounding her with his comfort, all the while telling her that, "It's okay. It's okay" (58:08).

In this moment, John exceeds viewer expectations in terms of what one would think a man entrenched in the system of heteronormative patriarchy, whereas Peter Okemi is symbolic of the patriarchal hegemony in Kenya. John warns Kena that "any problem arising from Kena and Ziki's friendship would be more harmful to him than to his opponent," (Monson par. 2) signalling to the power dynamics and social capital disparities between the two men running for office. This suggests that, due to the grassroots style of John's campaign, that the scandal of the Kena and Ziki's same-sex relationship could destroy his chances of political leadership.

Peter Okemi on the other hand, possesses enough wealth and social status to rectify the issue of the girls' relationship.[22]

After the ordeal at the police station, John takes Kena home to her mother and tells her that Mercy is already aware of the situation. This clearly frightens Kena and she begs him to come inside the house with her. Seeing the pain in her face, he agrees to go in with her, albeit reluctantly. As the two step inside, John tells Kena to go and clean herself up to which her mother responds, "How will it help? She will never be clean" (58:56). John vehemently defends his daughter to his ex-wife asking, "Why don't you save that anger for those guys who almost beat her to death? They should be at the police station, not our daughter" (59:03). As Guy Lodge observes, "John's tender, non-judgmental relationship to his daughter stands out for its unspoken currents of concern and understanding" and there is "tension between his obligations to family and politics" (par. 6). Mercy, entrenched her religiosity, does not back down. She expresses her disappointment in the entire situation: "They will probably blame me for this just like they blamed me when you left me" (59:27). Her statement reveals that she not only longs for her past life where she appeared to have the picturesque family which followed all the rules of tradition (and patriarchy), but that she believes that John is the blame for her family's destruction. She concludes: "She is full of demons and it's because of you" (1:00:02). Unable to handle her parents' arguing, and once again distancing herself from them, Kena leaves the apartment. She finds refuge at Blacksta's apartment where he welcomes her. He sees that she is badly beaten up and comforts her. She has found comfort in a place where she least expected it, but considering his history, his motives are clear. It is another opportunity for Blacksta to try prove his "worth" to Kena while still ignoring not only her already established wishes, but also now her identity.

A few days after the violent attack Mercy actualises her idea of her daughter being "full of demons" when she forces Kena to partake in a prayer ceremony in an effort to cure her. The scene pictures Kena surrounded by many emotional churchgoers praying over her while she is on her knees. She seems unbothered and almost defiant, but the inclusion of this scene, despite its short length, is important as it illustrates the hold religion has over the identity and the actions taken by the religious community to police queer identities and relationships. It is a community where homosexuality is reduced to something unnatural and fixable which results in Kena's private struggles with her sexuality becoming even more publicised. The scene is a

[22] This is explored later in the film after the violent attack the girls face. Rather than take a comforting approach to his daughter's bad experience like John does for Kena, Peter Okemi uses his wealth to send Ziki away from Kenya to go to live London. He exiles his daughter to keep her away from Kena.

reference to the idea, prevalent in many Christian communities, of 'praying away the gay.' The notion of curative prayer for the sin of homosexuality highlights the denial and disrespect directed at queer individuals due to religious efforts at purity. The effort to fix someone, who is not broken, through religion is a form of both policing and politicisation as it seeks control over a person who does not follow heteronormative ideals. Moreover, the film's inclusion of the conversion prayer scene affords it the same level of serious critique as other instances of homophobia directed towards queer people in the film. Although it is not as visceral or reactive as the verbal abuse or the mob violence directed at queer Kenyans in the film, the violence contained behind the façade of religious purity is clear. The performance of the act of cleansing is shown to be just as psychically damaging and can, in fact, lead to instances of physical violence. When "curative" practices such as conversion prayer and therapy do not succeed in cleansing, reforming, and converting a queer person into a confirmed heterosexual, other forms of conversion methods may be introduced such as exorcisms, violent beatings, corrective rape, and death.

As time passes the bruises on Kena's face are slightly faded but there is clearly still hurt and pain – not just in her body, but her ego seems to be somewhat crushed. Kena is not cleansed as her mother hoped – but she is, however, more authentic, accepting, and honest with herself. This is illustrated when Kena tries to talk to her mother, but Mercy ignores her. This unresponsiveness is hurtful to Kena prompting her to leave. As Kena leaves the house, however, her mother is conflicted. She wants to comfort and be there for her daughter who is hurting, but doing that goes against her faith which she holds tightly to her existence. Kena makes her way to her father's shop to see that his campaign posters outside have been defaced. Kena points out that he is losing the political race and therefore offers to take the blame so that he does not lose votes. He points out to Kena that although he wants the position there are some things that he could never do (1:07:55). He is inferring that blaming Kena for his loss would compromise her safety and bring more ridicule and pain to her. They embrace each other and both cry. John is visibly more confident and comfortable with his relationship with Kena. His comfort and care for his child has obviously repaired and improved their relationship as she too is comfortable with him.

The acceptance and approval which Kena receives from her father after being exposed and punished publicly enables her to be open in public – she refuses to hide her feelings, including those she has for Ziki. Her new-found openness and freedom affords her the ability to be more assertive and certain with her intentions. When Blacksta once again tries to convince Kena to be with him, she rejects him – not because she is unable to be truthful with him about

her sexuality out of fear of persecution, but because she is no longer afraid of hiding from that persecution. He is defensive in his retort to Kena's rejection, which highlights his expectations for Kena:

> Blacksta: Hi, Kena. Let's go for a ride. Just a short ride.
> Kena: Maybe later.
> Blacksta: Why?
> Kena: I love that girl.
> Blacksta: Why do you like hurting the people that care about you? I'm the one who's here. Me! It's okay. Don't worry. (1:08:33)

Blacksta views the act of providing comfort and a place for Kena to take refuge from society as enough of a reason for Kena to be with him. He becomes visibly upset that Kena will not accept his advances. Like her mother, but this time in terms of his patriarchal masculinity, Blacksta believes that he can 'cure' Kena. He serves to remind the viewer that his way of thinking is ingrained in the fabric of the heteronormative patriarchal society. Kena is clearly in need of a friend, but she has just lost the only one she thought she had. Blacksta's rejection is another form of how Kena's love is incessantly policed. When Kena tells Blacksta of her love for Ziki, she no longer cares about that which used to affect her negatively. This echoes Berlant's suggestion that "To live *as if* threatening contexts are merely elsewhere might well neutralize the ghostly image of one's own social negativity; and the constant energy of public self-protectiveness can be sublimated into personal relations of passion, care, and good intention" (5-6). Because Kena has been publicly exposed and violently punished, she no longer has the ability to neutralize her public image. Therefore, as a result of this public policing, Kena is only left with the choice of being.

The Reality of "Real" Love

In her efforts to salvage the closest thing to real she has experienced, Kena goes to visit Ziki to try reconcile their relationship. When she arrives at the door, Rose Okemi greets her and reluctantly lets her into the apartment to see Ziki. The clear parallels between both girls' parents are shown as John Mwaura and Rose Okemi are more aligned in that they seem to understand their daughters. They are both less reactive and volatile to the incident that occurred compared to how Peter Okemi and Mercy react, albeit that Rose initially took to blaming Kena. There are hints that Rose understands Ziki but, due to the obvious power dynamics in her relationship with Peter and the societal expectations it seems she feels she *has* to be against the relationship

between Kena and Ziki. Kena walks into Ziki's room where Ziki is packing her clothes into a suitcase. When Kena walks in, Ziki is unable to look at Kena, but they begin to talk:

> Kena: Are you going?
> Ziki: They're sending me to London.
> Kena: But you can stay here.
> Ziki: I get to travel like I always wanted. It's exactly what I wanted.
> Kena: That's what you *always* wanted?
> Ziki: Yeah. (01:07:30; my emphasis)

Kena immediately questions Ziki who in turn is immediately defensive: "Kena, stop being naïve. What did you expect was going to happen either way? Are you planning to marry me? Are we going to have this beautiful family? (1:08:10). Kena, with her new-found openness, wholeheartedly believes in their future together and responds with a simple, "Yes." This exacerbates Ziki's turmoil and internal conflict prompting her to plead with Kena saying, "I want my normal life back" (1:08:36). Kena is in disbelief at Ziki's surrender of their shared dream to be free, authentic, and real together. The core thread of their future narrative is being packed away into a suitcase and shipped overseas to London by Ziki's father and societal opinion. As they have both seen what happens when they are in private, Ziki pleads with Kena to stop her insistence on them being open and authentic. She is understandably scared of what could happen if they attempted to be out and open. Kena becomes increasingly defeated resulting in her lashing out at Ziki: "How am I stopping you? Of course, you're just a typical Kenyan girl" (1:11:46) inferring that Ziki is succumbing to what her parents want and not fulfilling her own desires that she expressed on the rooftop. Reaching her breaking point, Ziki screams for Kena to get out and leave. A reluctant Kena leaves her room and the apartment, thus ending their relationship and their hopes for something real. As Kena is leaving, she passes Rose in the lounge without saying anything to her. Rose then goes into Ziki's room after overhearing the end of their relationship and, perhaps surprisingly, comforts her. Ziki pleads with Rose not to make her go to London, but Rose insists that she cannot allow her to stay. Rose cries with her daughter as she tries to comfort her through this pain that she realises is not only hers to bear, but her daughter's too.

In the next scene, Kena makes her way back to the minivan. She is sitting alone but not for long, as she is joined by Tom. He says nothing to Kena, but there is a sense of solidarity as he sits there with her. Kena is no longer able to hold in her pain, hurt, and anger and begins to cry. Odie Henderson observes the meaning of Tom's presence at the minivan:

> the film never reveals whether he is gay or just perceived as such – [he] becomes a rather blatant symbol of the country's homophobia. He never gets a line of dialogue, which bothered me initially because I saw his existence as an empty gesture. But, late in the film, Kahiu upended my expectations in a scene where he quietly sits next to a battered, heartbroken Kena. As the two share the frame, neither making eye contact with the other, I hoped for some exchanged words. Instead, the scene ends in silence and I realized that the visual of a shared solidarity was more powerful than anything that could have been said in that moment. (par. 5)

Throughout the film, there is the presence of the oppressors policing queer people, but Tom in this moment is symbolic of how queer people, and queer solidarity, exist regardless of the efforts to say otherwise. Tom and Kena symbolise the way queer Kenyans are there to stay – as the screen fades to black signalling the end of the second part of the film.

A "Real" Future For Queer Kenya

The third and final part of the film begins in a hospital a few years later where Kena can be seen walking down the corridor, dressed in full hospital scrubs. She has successfully become a nurse attending to patients, fulfilling one of her dreams expressed earlier in the film. She checks in on a new patient at the hospital who is revealed to be Mama Atim. Both Kena and her tormentor are shocked to see one another, but Kena maintains her professionalism. On the other hand, Mama Atim immediately goes on the attack and asks, "Is this where you came to hide?" suggesting that Kena left their neighbourhood for a larger, more cosmopolitan area (1:12:10). Even at her weakest moment, Mama Atim tries to inflict shame in Kena. Her homophobia rules her thoughts and all rationality is expunged as she refuses to be treated by Kena. Treating Kena as the sick one, she states that Kena will not touch her (1:12:14). Kena respects her wishes and leaves, but not before Mama Atim, unrelenting in her need for gossip, informs Kena that Ziki is back in town. This information rattles Kena and at the end of her shift she is pictured at her locker where it is revealed to the viewer that she has kept a postcard with a message that says, "I miss you. Z" (1:13:05). This indicates that the pair's connection to one another has not faltered over the years, despite their relationship coming to its abrupt and tumultuous end.

Kena goes back to her old neighbourhood, arriving there on the back of a motorbike taxi. She sees Blacksta and they acknowledge each other, but it is nothing more than a greeting, which is a stark difference to their former friendship. When visiting her old home, it is clear that nothing much has changed but Kena has visibly changed. She has longer hair and a more mature style, but she also carries herself with a sense of ease and confidence that was not

present in her younger self. As she walks through the house Kena, looks about her, reminded everywhere of her past and therefore, to relive another part of her past, makes her way to Ziki's old apartment. She just walks by, but does not go in.

Kena then makes her way to a lookout spot on top of a hill where she can still see Ziki's old apartment from a distance. The sun is setting and she is still focused on remaining far from the apartment indicating a sense of trepidation in that going in will surely open old wounds. As she stares on, a voice is heard calling out her name, "Kena," (1:15:18) and the unknown person's hand appears on Kena's shoulder. She turns and smiles showing a sense of familiarity with this person, who remains unseen to the viewer, leading us to believe that it is Ziki reuniting with her. As Kena's smile disappears from the screen, the song "Stay" by Njoki Karu which speaks of a profound love, plays as the film fades to black and ends with the lyrics: "Run with me, we can turn the wind golden. Dance with me, with the clouds beneath our feet. Love me still, love me leave me breathless. Stay with me, stay and let us weep" (1:16:30). The brief third part of the film suggests that Kena has found a way to live comfortably and, presumably, openly, by the way she carries herself. The ending sequence also suggests not only that has she maintained contact with Ziki, but they reunite. Kena is happy and it is clear that she is finally "something real."

Conclusion: A Qualitative Critique of *Rafiki*

Rafiki and its success speaks to the larger question of whether a film is successful because it is critically a good film or because of the politicisation and/ or label attached to it. In terms of global contemporary queer cinema, I would suggest that *Rafiki* is not as revolutionary, striking or provocative as its counterparts. It is, however, revolutionary and striking in terms of African queer cinema due to the fact that it is a queer story set in a predominantly anti-queer country. As Guy Lodge notes "along comes *Rafiki* to remind us that LGBT narratives in the mainstream are not to be taken for granted" (par. 1) which highlights why the film is so special. Although it is presented as a love story, it is also a queer film featuring queer characters set in Kenya, starring Kenyan actors and directed by a Kenyan woman. That fact alone makes it a remarkable film in the African cinema landscape. It acknowledges the existence of queer people in Kenya which is what so many of the religious and political elite have tried to prevent. Its subsequent banning, un-banning and then the reiteration of its banning has in itself pointed the spotlight on the larger conversation about the freedom of expression in Kenya.

Rafiki has polarised both its supporters and adversaries, sparking debates around appropriateness of the depictions of sexuality in Kenya. Kahiu has described the film as a love story, but acknowledges that there are political aspects attached to her film. As she states, "if it's black or queer…more levels of politicization are assigned to it" (qtd in Pfeiffer par. 10). Although Kahiu prefers not to label her film as a political one, it is important to note that the history of the screening and reception of *Rafiki* was highly politicised due to the polarising effect the release of the film had on Kenyan society. In most societies, when films like *Rafiki* are labelled queer and seek to take up social and cultural space, they are by definition political: whether they intend to be political or not. As long as societies are structured by patriarchal heteronormativity – anything outside of that realm is inherently political.

The film does, however, succeed subtly in the ways that it challenges certain stereotypes of non-queer Africans response to queer Africans. It seeks not only to show elements of the various opposing factors of queer people in Kenya, but it also shows the progressive support that they have. The progressive elements posit the film as one that helps create a new normal in postcolonial Africa. As Odie Henderson notes: "To feel seen is a potent, potentially life-changing emotion, and only those who were never in the dark would have a moral problem with it. *Rafiki* makes this serious point quite effectively, never losing its ebullience" (par. 7). Although, as Leigh Monson points out, "*Rafiki* will probably always be better known for the story of its release than for the contents of its runtime" (par. 1), I believe that in terms of its content *Rafiki* also has the ability to put queer Kenyans and the issues that they face, on the map. It allows queer Kenyans to see themselves expressed on a global stage and, in the words of Ziki, to say "Yo, I'm here and I'm a Kenyan from Africa!" *Rafiki* grants queer Kenyans the knowledge to know that they are real.

Chapter Two – How Queer is Africa? Representations of Queer Lives in *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* and *Queer Africa 2: New Stories*

Introduction: Why *Queer Africa?*

One of my main questions, while engaged in this research, concerned the varied impact of different forms of media on queer representation. Brenna M. Munro notes, "given that gay sexuality has become a deeply contested symbol of political change and social transformation, the coming-out novel offers a rich template for writing the 'new' nation" (xxiii). If the coming-out novel offers a rich template, what are we to make of the impact other forms of queer narratives have on queer representation? Do they also provide a rich template for writing this "new" nation – or do they offer something more substantial? It is also essential to consider the rapid change in the consumption of art and media when interrogating a literary form's ability to offer something new. Furthermore, it is essential to question whether queer narratives in other mediums, outside of the novel, offer an alternative, nuanced template to the postcolonial nation. A short story holds power in its brevity to portray meaning, thought, and value. According to Makhosazana Xaba, "the short story makes me see and touch within a limited space of time and a few characters" (qtd. in Xaba and du Preez 140). This chapter explores how two anthologies of short stories, namely *Queer Africa: New and Collected Fiction* (2013) and *Queer Africa 2: New Stories* (2017), both edited by Makhosazana Xaba and Karen Martin, reflect various forms and approaches to narrativising queer experience on the continent and what these add to writing new attitudes to queerness in Africa more broadly.

The title of the anthologies is a bold and assertive one – an ambitious proclamation of a queer African identity. The anthologies are a valid attempt at representation and signify a way for queer African people to say: "we're here, we're queer, and we have always existed." Therefore, in this chapter, the concept of the anthologies will be referred to as the "*QA* anthology." There are three iterations of anthologies which fall under this moniker, namely the first anthology, which will be referred to as *Queer Africa,* the second anthology, referred to as *Queer Africa 2*, and the third book *Queer Africa: Selected Stories* (2018). The third iteration of the *QA* anthology is a compilation with no new stories but borrows nine stories from *Queer Africa* and thirteen stories from *Queer Africa 2*. Because there is a difference in the composition

of the three books, the term "*QA* anthology" will be used to distinguish between the intention of the anthologies as a concept and each specific anthology in discussion.

With the release of three books, the *QA* anthology has a three-pronged approach to the publication of its short stories. Firstly, in their introduction to *Queer Africa* the editors explain their decision to include a range of previously published prose, including K. Sello Duiker's "Chapter Thirteen," (an extract from his novel *Thirteen Cents*), Richard de Nooy's "The Big Stick," (an extract from his novel of the same name), Wame Molefhe's "Sethunya Likes Girls Better," (a short story from Molefhe's collection *Go Tell the Sun*), Monica Arac de Nyeko's "Jambula Tree," Natasha Distiller's "Asking For It," Martin Hatchuel's "Pinch," and Lindiwe Nkutha's "Rock" as well as new stories (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* viii; 214). Furthermore, they suggest that the inclusion of work previously published elsewhere "gave our anthology a broader range of content and country coverage. But is also gave individual stories a different home in which to live" (Xaba qtd. in Salafranca par. 16). The inclusion of previously published work, however, also highlights that there are still a limited range of queer stories in Africa, which will be explored later in this chapter. This limitedness calls attention to the precarious state of queerness across the continent, but the *QA* anthology is nevertheless an ambitious starting point. Secondly, *Queer Africa 2* hopes to stretch the parameters of queer storytelling in Africa by including all brand new stories. Lastly, *Queer Africa: Selected Stories* hopes to make the anthology as a whole, more visible and more available globally compared to the first two anthologies. The first two anthologies are published in South Africa whereas the third is published in the United Kingdom, thus offering the *QA* anthology more exposure. All three iterations of the anthology are representative and point to a sense of how more visibility is needed but also highlight major setbacks in some African countries such as restrictive and oppressive laws and disapproving public opinion with regards to queer African rights and freedoms.

According to Sally Ann Murray, *Queer Africa* is "possibly the best known and most widely reviewed anthology of queer short fiction in South Africa" (5). The first anthology which consists of "18 historical and contemporary stories by writers from six African countries," has an author make-up of 10 South Africans, three Ugandans, two Zimbabweans, and one writer from Zambia, Botswana, and Nigeria respectively (Igual 3). The second anthology comprises 26 stories from seven countries, namely Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Somalia, and Uganda. The collections demonstrate no homogeneity in queer experiences in Africa, thus providing an opportunity to explore the diversity and specificities of queer lives as represented in the work of differently situated African writers. The stories

seek to subvert Africa's monolithic identity by showing the differences between specific countries' queer experiences. According to Barbara Boswell, from the introduction of *Queer Africa 2*, "the stories collected in this volume give a kaleidoscope peek into the many ways in which Africans inhabit 'queerness', giving fine grained texture to the lives and experiences of those whose humanity is routinely denied" (1). In many African countries, attitudes towards queer people are bound up by both African tradition and a lived conviction that queerness is an invasion resulting from the long history of colonialism – not only in the physical sense but also in the mental sense.

Through a focus on three short stories from *Queer Africa 2*, this chapter seeks to foreground the queer experience in countries where queerness has to remain invisible. The stories "Iyawo" and "Àwúre Ìfẹ̀ràn" depict queer lives in arguably the most dangerous African country to be queer – Nigeria. By exploring how these stories call attention to the specificities of queer lives in Nigeria, this chapter will also seek to investigate why, and in what ways, queer Nigerian identities have been left out of the scope of possibilities for freedom enjoyed by other independent African states. The story, "Pub 360" adds another dimension to my examination of queer lives in Kenya, as explored in the first chapter, while discussing how the story itself enacts the stark shift from the invisibility to visibility of queerness. Through a close reading of these three short stories, this chapter also seeks to explore and explain the complexities surrounding the representations of queer Africans in a way that does not feed into old tropes and stereotypes of writing about Africa.

According to Gabeba Baderoon, "*Queer Africa* is a collection of charged, tangled, tender, unapologetic, funny, bruising and brilliant stories about the many ways in which we love on another on the continent" (qtd. in Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* vi). The stories I have chosen to read closely are not overtly political stories but stories of everyday life and migration issues, covert love affairs, patriarchy and the need for love and intimacy despite the constant threat of violence. As Bibi Burger observes about *Queer Africa 2*: "Most stories, however, are gentler, subtly transporting readers to the everyday lives of queer people in Africa. This in itself is radical considering the violent and bureaucratic suppression they are often faced with" (172). The two stories from Nigeria explore the relationship Africans have with the diaspora. These stories are closely linked to the assertion that the *QA* anthology makes – to celebrate queer African stories in Africa. As the bold title of the anthologies suggests, there is a growing assertiveness towards being openly queer in Africa and to regarding Africa as a queer place. I hope to interrogate whether these stories answer the questions I have raised above – and to

discover whether they aid in the overall effort of establishing a new normal in terms of queer inclusion and normalisation in African literature.

Asserting a Queer African Identity

The birth of the idea for the anthologies came from Martin and Xaba. Martin is a "fiction writer, collage artist and professional editor" while Xaba is an author and a "former writing fellow at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research" (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* 208; 211). Both editors are acclaimed writers from South Africa who invited writers across the African continent and African writers living abroad to share their queer truths and experiences. *Queer Africa*, which took "three years to collect and assemble," represents the many lived queer experiences replete with historical entanglements and personal conflicts about being queer in Africa (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* viii). The anthologies have been well received at home and abroad. The first anthology is critically acclaimed and won the "LGBT Anthology Fiction prize at the annual Lambda Literary Awards, making it the first African-produced book to win [this award]" (Igual par.1). Moreover, according to the website *GALA*, *Queer Africa* "was translated into Spanish in the same year [and] is now used to teach literature and queer theory at prestigious universities in South Africa." Following its success, *Queer Africa 2* was published in 2017, consisting of more stories. It is also critically acclaimed and according to Otosirieze Obi-Young, "the second installment in Makhosazana Xaba and Karen Martin's efforts to highlight new African writing about queerness" was also shortlisted for the 2018 Anthology Fiction prize at the Lambda Literary awards (par. 4). For the editors, the first collection "celebrates the diversity and fluidity of queer and African identifications and expressions" and contains stories which "renew overrepresented aspects of African life by looking at them through a queer lens (*Queer Africa* viii).

By looking at aspects of African life through a queer lens, the editors strive to assert a queer African identity through the *QA* anthology. During a discussion with Derrick Higgenbotham and Zethu Matebeni in September 2013, Xaba stated: "in our societies, we go through waves of social and political consciousness [where] past struggles inform the present – although, of course, the present often splits from this heritage in radical and intriguing ways" (qtd. in Chetty par. 2). To understand why the naming of the anthology is ambitious, bold and assertive, it is important to call attention to the intention behind the usage of the word 'queer' to describe this additional kind of African identity:

> Matebeni asks Xaba, 'What does queer mean?' Her response is that 'being queer is a political term'. She invokes the idea of 'blackness', and the continuity between blackness and queerness, saying both have been historically – in the South African context – 'outside apartheid', and suggests a unity here: cast to the marginalia of society as an 'other' to an established centre, or as some form of deviant excess from a white heterosexual normality. 'Our understanding of sexuality keeps enlarging,' she says, noting the inclusive incorporation of contemporary gay cultures (homosexual, bisexual, transgender, cisgender, intersexed). She marks 'queer' as a 'political category that comes from social movements', which leaves a great deal to the speculation of the viewer; namely, the *texture* and *specificity* of this category and its co-existence and tension with other political signifiers. [sic] (Chetty par. 3)

The naming of the anthology is, therefore, ambitious and assertive as the editors wish to keep enlarging the idea of African identity and sexuality as they attempt to illustrate a reality for many queer African people. On the other hand, the intent of the anthologies is also indicative of what is holding queer African literature back and signalling what is needed: more stories about queer Africans produced through "cultural labor" (Livermon "Queer 300). As Xaba suggests, *Queer Africa*, and as a result the *QA* anthology, is a way for readers in Africa and around the world to see realities through various viewpoints: "*Queer Africa* invites us as readers to see our continent through different eyes, to experience the world through different bodies. The stories help to surface our shared humanity and to rethink what it means to be African and to be queer" (qtd. in Chetty par. 8). Furthermore, Matebeni suggests an "idea of 'queerness' representing a disturbance in the order of things, a *defamiliarisation* of the kinds of bodies and performances that are legitimated by our discourses" as explored in the following subsection (qtd. in Chetty par. 4). Both Xaba and Matebeni suggest that *Queer Africa* plays a role in the disruption of the heteronormative patriarchal hegemony of what African stories and narratives are supposed to be and how they are supposed to be told. As Xaba observes: "fiction offers an imaginative space that allows for a range of possibilities and ways of seeing and being. It bridges a gap" (qtd. in Salafranca par. 21). Ugandan writer, and winner of the Caine Prize, Monica Arac de Nyeko, author of "Jambula Tree," which is one of the previously published stories collected for the first anthology, also notes: "*Queer Africa* is an essential addition to the conversation currently taking place on the continent," highlighting how "we cannot draw fault lines that are too strong and stand on opposite sides of the fence and call that a conversation. We need to talk, see and hear each other" (Arac de Nyeko qtd. in Igual 10). Arac de Nyeko observes how contemporary literature can create the social space needed to have these conversations – queer Africans cannot and will not be silenced nor rendered imaginary and invisible on their continent anymore.

From these interviews with Xaba and Martin, it is clear they wish to alter the conversations around queerness in Africa by using the anthologies to tell every day stories about queer people living on the continent. They do this by including "the widest range of stories – female and male, cis- and trans-gender, urban and rural, contemporary and historical, joyful and troubled – without compromising literary values" (*Queer Africa* vii). The stories alter conversations around queerness in Africa as they try to move beyond a singular narrative for queer people in Africa – one of strife and violence – but rather towards a history where queer Africans live a life beyond their struggles. In the introduction to the first anthology, Martin and Xaba assert their wish to "productively disrupt, through the art of literature, the potent discourses currently circulating on what it means to be African, to be queer" (*Queer Africa* vii). In *Queer Africa 2*, the editors state that "the second anthology affirms our intention as expressed in the Preface to the first book" and they reiterate the quotation highlighted in the previous sentence (312). This confirms what I would describe as the aim of the *QA* anthology as a whole. The editors hope the anthologies will "confront the noisy political rhetoric that positions queerness as unnatural, amoral and un-African with intimate stories about individual lives, deeply embedded in the complexities of their contexts" (*Queer Africa* viii-xi).

Problematizing the *Queer Africa* Anthologies

It is clear the editors wanted the *QA* anthology to be as representative as possible as well as read by as many people around the world but there are realities that would prevent such good intentions. In his poem, "The Hollow Men," T.S. Eliot states, "Between the idea/ And the reality/ Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow" (72-76). This notion of intention and reality, and how they do not always match up, can be seen throughout the various problems surrounding the two anthologies, which will be explored further in this section. The first issue surrounding the anthologies is the complexities of equal representation for the fifty four African countries. As Xaba notes for *Queer Africa*, they "sent out a call for submissions and chose stories that met literary criteria" (qtd. in Salafranca par. 16). Because any anthology is going to be selective and, thus not entirely representative, it is clear to see why the *QA* anthology does not feature every single country on the African continent. As Martin notes, regarding the obvious omission of many African countries: "We had to accept that a lot of countries aren't represented in the anthology. This is a pity, but it was never our intention, only our hope, to cover as many different national contexts as we could" (Martin qtd. in Salafranca par. 17). The omission of countries calls attention to two interlinked issues which hinder the

anthology being read, published, and distributed all over the continent: the illegality of nonnormative sexualities in various countries and thus the restrictions on who might be willing to contribute to such an anthology. Nmachika Nwokeabia explains that there are complexities surrounding the "attention to representations of same-sex desire outside of its usual locus of study – in Southern Africa generally, and South Africa specifically, where anti-homophobic laws make discussions of homosexuality in Africa vary in content and tone that may not be permissible in other countries with stricter laws" (366-367). Therefore, as Nwokeabia suggests, as some countries do not even allow for the discussion of nonnormative sexualities, full and equal representation in the anthologies is not imaginable yet. As the editors explain, "In parts of Africa, stronger and stronger queer voices are making themselves heard – the voices of activists and artists, of communities and politicians. In other parts, terrifying violence, often sanctioned by the state, plagues queer people" (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* viii). It is difficult to know whether the imbalance of representation could also be due to the presumed focus on writing in English, which would prevent writing from Francophone countries being included. The editors do state that "writers must identify as African, and we allowed them to decide from themselves what this means," but the predominance of English stories indicates that language may have been an inhibitor (Martin and Xaba *Queer Africa* vii). In *Queer Africa 2*, however, the editors explain their "intention was to include stories from Francophone and Lusophone countries, as well as in other indigenous languages of the continent," and how they "invited writers to submit their 'literary translations into English' of previously published stories" (Xaba and Martin *Queer Africa 2* 311). The editors explain that they did not receive any submissions in translation, despite their call for language inclusion.

The naming of the *QA* anthology also has the potential for further issues, as it can easily be interpreted as a singular take on queerness in Africa as well as a monolithic view of the continent. This, however, as discussed above, is not the case nor the intent of the *QA* anthology. During Xaba's interview with Higgenbotham and Matebeni about *Queer Africa,* which was the birth of the concept of the *QA* anthology, Matebeni wonders "What was left behind in terms of content?" Kavish Chetty notes how Matebeni "considers the lacunae and disparities of representation with regard to the urban/rural divide, protagonal genders, and the focus on South Africa at the expense of other parts of the continent." Chetty observes that "the question, perhaps, is aimed at troubling the authoritative-ness of a volume which announces itself as 'Queer Africa'" (Chetty par. 6). Matebeni, however, finds the writing of *Queer Africa* refreshing with its use of storytelling focused less on the stereotypical ways of writing about queerness in Africa through the lens of violence and victimhood. As Chetty suggests, these

remarks call attention to how the *QA* anthology deals with "taking ownership of its identities and possibilities, triumphing in the everyday glories of its experience, rather than depicting homosexuality as a fragile life under endless threat of abuse, an alienated and melancholic literature" (Chetty par. 6). This idea of authors taking ownership is linked closely to the representation of how queer Africans are portrayed.

Binyavanga Wainaina, in his seminal essay "How to Write About Africa," highlights how Africa is often problematically portrayed by non-African writers in ways that tend to "treat Africa as if it were one country" (par. 3). He explains that writers often use stereotypes, outdated tropes, and misrepresentations which perpetuate the misconception of the continent as being singular and monolithic – removing any sense of agency. As explored in the previous chapter, there is a growing desire for a new normal in regards to portraying Africa and its specificities. Wainaina also calls attention to this by noting there are "taboo subjects" which writers do not use that would negate the common depictions of Africa. To write about the uncommon would show the rich autonomy and diversity of the people of various African nations and erase the essentialist view of Africa as a war-torn wasteland. To Wainaina, the taboo subjects are "ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation" (par. 5). Wainaina shows that when Africa has been written about negatively and stereotypically – authentic African lives and experiences are rendered invisible. Invisibility in these communities does not enable any individuals to gain any sense of autonomy over their self-expression nor does it allow them to acquire representation which, as mentioned before, is instrumental in shifting the discourse of queerness in Africa. It is also imperative to navigate queer African discourse with an intersectional lens to avoid further marginalisation within a marginalised group. The complexities of being queer and African are vast and nuanced which is what the *QA* anthology strives to exemplify. By using Wainaina's words about how to write about Africa, it is clear the anthologies have the same idea of how to represent the continent by telling authentic stories about Africa and queer Africans by Africans. They are poignant stories that are not seeped in violence and heartache that would be considered the stereotypical ways Africa is written about, as explained by Wainaina. The stories I have chosen to focus on, like the *QA* anthology as a whole, represent a distinctive collective theme of belonging and searching for one's place as a queer person in Africa.

Another issue that may concern the anthologies is their centralisation in South Africa as people other African countries are not afforded the same opportunities to read them. The

first two collections were published MaThoko's Books in South Africa, which is an imprint of the organisation, Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA).[23] The centralisation, however, highlights the vexed relationship the country has with the rest of the continent and calls attention to the general readership on the continent. It may also be due to the probable complications surrounding LGBTQ+ laws in many other African countries, such as Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda, to name a few. Whereas some African leaders have taken to the world stage to demonize the queer people of their countries, South Africa is at the forefront of sharing queer stories. Furthermore, print books are a lot more difficult to obtain in certain countries which excludes many queer Africans from reading the anthologies. Although the anthologies are easier to produce and publish in South Africa, they are also considered to be politically defiant in South Africa because, despite the protections and freedoms afforded to queer individuals after the change in legislation, public attitudes towards queer people have not changed. Public opinion still sees queerness as threatening, transgressive and anti-African. The centralisation in South Africa also calls attention to the progressiveness of the country, or its attempt at being the progressive leader, on the continent.

While the *Queer Africa* anthologies have won awards, are used in university syllabi, translated into other languages and centralised in South Africa – they do not appear to have much prevalence throughout the rest of the continent nor world. In an email correspondence, *GALA*'s information officer, Karin Tan, explained that the anthologies are available outside of South Africa through the website *African Books Collective*. The anthologies are also available in South Africa but "unfortunately due to our capacity and resources, we are even unable to maintain reliable distribution to outlet stores within South Africa, but *Queer Africa 2* is still available for purchase directly [through GALA]" (Tan).[24] Whereas the films *Rafiki* and *Inxeba* are easily downloadable, albeit illegally, from the internet, despite problems with screenings at cinemas in their countries of origin, the difficulty of obtaining the anthologies speaks to how the accessibility of African literature on the continent remains minimal.[25] Tan also explained that sometimes *GALA* recommends the third anthology, *Queer Africa: Selected Stories,* "to people outside of the country who are struggling to get a hold of the originals." Therefore, compared to the films, the anthologies are not widely accessible on the African continent –

[23] This organisation was formerly known as Gay and Lesbian Archive (GALA). Now known as the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action, the organisation still retains the acronym GALA. According to the website, *GALA*, the organisation's name is, as of 2018, being re-evaluated "in order to address the exclusion of other queer identities and orientations in the name."

[24] Email correspondence from 23 February 2021.

[25] Both films are also legally available to stream online: *Rafiki* (Showmax; Amazon; Kanopy) and *Inxeba* (Showmax; Netflix).

which is because demand is directly linked to the lack of readership. The anthologies availability and prevalence abroad would also help deter the idea that Africa is a war-torn place unable to facilitate liveable lives for queer people.

The limited scale of distribution and publication of the anthologies also speaks to the minimal scholarship surrounding the anthologies. The available scholarship mainly concerns the first anthology as the second was published relatively recently. As Matebeni *et al.* point out, "the marginalization of African-centred scholarship on LGBTQ and non-heterosexual subjectivities points to a pressing need for scholarship in this field" (4). Regardless of how little scholarship there is, the *QA* anthology is pertinent to the discourse surrounding queer Africans.

The majority of the short stories in both anthologies are from South African writers, however, *Queer Africa 2* has noticeably more Nigerian writers compared to the first anthology. Therefore, I chose three stories that concern countries that do not recognise nonnormative sexualities because by writing from and about those places circumvents the idea that queerness does not exist in such countries. As explained in the short story, "Poisoned Grief" by Zimbabwean author Emil Rorke, "the art of telling my stories lies in saying the right things the right way, but sometimes, and sometimes, more importantly, it lies in finding ways to say the things that are never said" (*Queer Africa* 29). I also chose the stories as they do not "rely on figures of victimhood that assume that those who are vulnerable are therefore without agency" as there is power in confronting one's struggle in real, personal ways (Butler *et al.*).[26] This confrontation is an important part of the formation of "cultural labor" for which queer Africans strive towards (Livermon "Queer" 300). Therefore, using close readings of three short stories, the following sections aim to discuss how these selected short stories interrogate the various entanglements that many queer Africans face with their experiences as queer Africans. The stories highlight the desire for queer Africans to live authentically within their identities. As the website *GALA* explains about *Queer Africa 2*:

> The stories are representative of the range of human emotions and experiences that abound in the lives of Africans and those of the diaspora, who identify variously along the long and fluid line of the sexuality, gender and sexual orientation spectrum in the African continent. Centred in these stories and in their attendant relationships is humanity. (GALA "*Queer Africa 2*")

[26] See *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) for a more thorough look into "the role of vulnerability in strategies of resistance" where the authors hope "to develop a different conception of embodiment and sociality within fields of contemporary power, one that engages object worlds, including both built and destroyed environments, as well as social forms of interdependency and individual or collective agency" (6).

I am mindful that close readings of the stories selected do not represent the entire queer experience in Africa but I hope it will allow a glimpse into specific experiences and interrogate the complex queer histories and realities of countries such as Kenya and Nigeria.

Contextualising Queerness in Nigeria

Because it is the most dangerous place to be queer in Africa, the writing from and about queer Nigeria is important.[27] Furthermore, a contextualisation of queerness in Nigeria is helpful in situating my close reading of "Iyawo" and "Àwúre Ìfẹ̀ràn." The similarities between Nigerian law and Kenyan law, which will become clearer in this section, helps with formulating an understanding of "Pub 360" and how all three stories call attention to the way queerness is rendered invisible in these two countries. This section will explore contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality and queerness and also present a historicization of homosexuality in Nigeria. This historicization of queerness is important as it reveals truths about pre-colonial Nigeria that allows for the intent of the stories to hold much more weight in debunking the belief that homosexuality is un-African. As one of the powerhouse countries in Africa, Dr C. Otutubikey Izugbara notes that:

> Nigeria, which easily qualifies as Africa's demographic giant, is a colonial invention. European colonialists, who paid little or no attention to ancient tribal cultural differences and similarities, produced the boundaries. Several different peoples were thus pooled together to form Nigeria. About 300 distinct ethnic groups make up the country. The Hausa/Fulani constitute 29%, the Yoruba 20%, and the Igbo 17% of the country. The remaining one-third belongs to other ethnic groups. The country's religious profile shows that Muslims comprise half the population. The Christian population is put at 40%. Indigenous worshippers, adherents of other religious groups, atheists, and agnostics form 10% of the population. (4)

Although it is one of Africa's leading economies, contemporary Nigeria still has a fraught relationship with homosexuality. Sexuality altogether is not openly discussed and considered to be private. The discussions surrounding sexuality are entangled with religious restrictions for Nigerians to adhere to the norms. Ebenezer Obadare, in his paper "Sex, Citizenship and the State in Nigeria: Islam, Christianity and Emergent Struggles Over Intimacy," observes the

[27] See Asher and Lyric Fergusson "150 Worst (& Safest) Countries for LGBTQ+ Travel" for an extensive study, reliant on specific criteria such a legalized same-sex marriage, worker protections, protections against discrimination, criminalisation of violence, propaganda and morality laws, and LGBTQ+ protections, which ranks Nigeria as the worst on their LGBTQ+ Danger Index.

complex nature of the history of sexuality in Nigeria. He suggests that it is embedded with a doctrine opposed to the acceptance of homosexuality. Obadare notes that "religious leaders construe a narrative in which moral decadence in the country, ostensibly epitomised by homosexuality and other forms of 'sexual deviancy', and use homosexuality as a scapegoat for the country's economic and social problems" (64). He also highlights how "sexual struggles (or struggles over sexuality) of the type currently being witnessed in Nigeria (and across Africa) are nearly always a foil for other forms of contestations – social, economic, political" (63).

The link between religion and patriarchy is well-established and results in the proliferation of anti-queerness. Nigerians who go against the norms enshrined by patriarchal rules are subjected to ridicule and questioning of their personal lives. Abisola Balogun and Paul Bissell observe patriarchy's dominance within Nigerian society and note that the country is:

> still highly patriarchal in the sense that male agency is privileged over the female. More so, the hegemonic male who is the dominant male in the Nigerian context is placed on a higher hierarchy than other males who do not quite meet the standard. This standard, dictated partly by social, cultural, and religious systems posits male dominance, where the man makes the majority and the most important decisions in society and holds power and authority. (116)

Therefore, the dominance of these ideas establishes an interconnectedness of sexuality, masculinity, patriarchy, and religion in Nigeria. According to Balogun and Bissell, "Masculinity and sexuality are inextricably linked, and are not easily separated" for which they explain that "much of what it means to be masculine is entrenched in a man's ability to prove his sexual prowess and, most times, in the heteronormative sense" (119). Balogun and Bissell also point out the complex struggle some Nigerian men face, and note that "men who express non-heterosexual masculinities in Nigeria must negotiate their sexuality in the midst of traditional and received cultural expectations of manhood. Therefore, they have to manage their identities in their largely heteronormative, homophobic, and criminal context" (114-115). The heteronormative hegemony in Nigeria is the oppressive force throughout the lives of many queer Nigerians, and is the cause of conflict in the characters of the stories explored later in this chapter.

In Nigeria, "religious and cultural forces heavily shape and influence the legal framework of the country" (Balogun and Bissell 115). According to Daniel Asue, "the primary argument that the country's two major religions put forth against homosexuality is that it is against nature and reason, and against the revealed divine truths as enshrined in their sacred

scriptures" (398). The link between religious text interpretation to oppress homosexuality becomes prominent when considering the ethos of religion and marriage, namely, procreation and upholding cultural mores. Eno Blankson Ikpe further observes this sense of interconnectedness regarding the conflict against homosexuality and notes that:

> Existing discussions on sexuality in Nigeria are centred around respectable themes such as marriage, which is the accepted and respected space of expression of sexuality. Apart from this, human sexuality in Nigeria is problematized in relation to demography, unemployment, urban decadence, prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet sexuality has more to it than reproduction, immorality and disease. (4)

As marriage in contemporary Nigeria is considered the only respectable place to speak about sexuality, this further invalidates and renders nonnormative sexualities invisible. This erasure of nonnormative sexualities or even the normalisation of their discussion is due primarily to same-sex marriage being illegal, as instated by religious authority. Izugbara notes that "in many cases, homosexual practices, while not always explicitly discussed or identified as such in the larger public imaginary were often treated with more tolerance in pre-colonial Nigeria than during and after the colonial period" (6). As Ikpe observes:

> In most pre-colonial societies, sexuality was consigned to the realms of marriage. It was only under marital condition that sexuality was to be experienced. Outside this, it was culturally taboo to discuss sex and sexual matters. Sexuality was full of silence and discretions, for instance, between parents and children. Sexual discussions were clothed in languages, which were not explicit to the uninitiated. (6)

The significant difference between the contemporary understanding of marriage and sexuality and pre-colonial knowledge is that same-sex marriage and relationships openly existed and were culturally accepted. From pre-colonial Nigeria to contemporary Nigeria there has been a shift in the attitudes and perceptions towards homosexuality and queerness closely linked to the enhanced dominance and immersion of religious hegemony in public life. Rudolf Gaudio questions the rise of anti-queer rhetoric and legislation and attributes it to a concentration of Islamism in politics:

> What happened between 1994 and 2007 that made homosexuality, and the specific issue of same-sex weddings, the object of such intense public debate? The most obvious historical development was the rise of Islamist politics in Northern Nigeria following the sudden death in 1998 of the country's military dictator, Sani Abacha, and the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as the country's first civilian president since 1983. Like most of Nigeria's previous heads of state,

> Abacha was a Hausa-speaking Muslim, while Obasanjo was a Yoruba Christian. Less than five months after President Obasanjo's inauguration in May 1999, the Northern state of Zamfara adopted Shari'a, the Islamic legal code, and within a year and a half, 11 other Northern states, including Kano and Bauchi, had followed suit. Although a number of political leaders and commentators insisted that the adoption of [Sharia law] violated constitutional provisions against the establishment of a state religion, the Obasanjo administration did not formally challenge it. (276-277)

From the growing presence of religious sentiment in the legal code of the government, it is clear to see how homophobia is instilled and growing in communities throughout Nigeria. This rise is due to interconnectedness of the heteronormative religious hegemony. Regarding other churches or religions in Nigeria, such as Catholicism, "as it stands now, the church's position does not condemn homosexual orientation but homosexual activity. The position of the Catholic Church in Nigeria does not contradict the view of the universal Catholic teaching" (Asue 400).

The church's views on homosexuality are a direct link to the formation and preservation of homophobic laws. Nigeria is replete with anti-homosexual rhetoric and even stricter laws that seek to prohibit and outlaw any homosexual acts. Balogun and Bissell note that:

> In 2014, under the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) was passed into law. The title SSMPA1 is particularly problematic and deceptive for a number of reasons. First, even though its implication is that same-sex marriage is prohibited and illegal, it goes beyond this and extends to prohibiting and criminalising established or suspected same-sex relationships with a jail sentence of 14 years. Second, it penalises witnesses to same-sex marriages or individuals who are aware of same-sex relationships, including those who run gay clubs and organisations, with ten years' imprisonment. This law fundamentally infringes on the human rights of Nigerian citizens as guaranteed by the constitution. After the signing of the same-sex marriage prohibition by President Jonathan Goodluck, the environment of homophobia, discrimination and oppression in Nigeria was not only revived but also intensified. (116)

In terms of the laws and regulations regarding sexuality in Nigeria, Asue notes that: "Nigerian civil law objects [to] same-sex marriage and criminalizes all homosexual acts including aiding and abetting those involved such as gay rights advocacy group." Asue continues, and points out that "under the Muslim [Sharia] law in the northern parts of Nigeria, the expression of homosexual behavior could lead to death by stoning" [sic] (397).

Despite the presence of homophobia and harsh laws prohibiting nonnormative sexualities in Nigeria, queer people still exist within its borders. In their paper "Teaching About

Homosexualities to Nigerian University Students: A Report from the Field," Marc Epprecht and Sule E. Egya observe that:

> while urbanisation and globalisation have likely increased awareness and opportunities for same-sex relationships compared to the past, there is effectively one gay rights association in the country (Alliance Rights Nigeria) and one gay-friendly church (House of Rainbow Metropolitan [Community] Church). House of Rainbow MCC has a regular congregation of about 20, not a lot in a country with an estimated total population of 140–150 million. (Epprecht and Egya 368)

There is a small minority of queer people in Nigeria and, when looking at the current state of research on homosexuality and nonnormative sexualities, "virtually no research has been done on teaching about homosexuality in Africa" (Epprecht and Egya 370). If there is no research present in the various African countries, then there is no way for these nonnormative sexualities to be recognised, shared, and normalised. The lack of awareness of the history of homosexuality and queer people today in Nigeria is directly linked to the rise of violence towards queer people. As Balogun and Bissell point out, the violence in Nigeria towards queer people "is a reflection of not only repressive laws but also a homophobic society that disregards the prevailing laws and takes matters into their own hands" (128). The production of narratives which chronicle the varied experiences of queer people in Nigeria allows for a greater awareness of these existences and this histories of queer Nigerians.

The history of sexuality in Nigeria has evidence to attest to the presence of homosexuality, long before it was considered a Western import. Epprecht and Egya describe how they spoke about the "history of homosexualities in southern Africa to several undergraduate classes and to a group of faculty at a small state university in central Nigeria" (370) where they observed that "Several examples of words from African languages, however, including Hausa spoken by some of the students, demonstrated a recognition of sexual diversity and gender non-conformity among African cultures that pre-dated and contextualised the scientific or Western terminology" (371). The idea of terminology predating Western terminology is important in understanding the nuances of the stories and their historical complexities. Epprecht and Egya note that during Epprecht's lecture to the small state university, he explained:

> research about specific same-sex practices in the past brings us to re-assess commonplace views about sexuality (and African culture or identity) in the present. Primarily, he argued, the history unseats the stereotype that same-sex sexuality is an exotic or recent import to Africa. The history also indicates that

> assumptions and stereotypes around a 100% pure heterosexual ('closer to nature') African sexuality imbue much of the scientific literature on psychology, health and even HIV in Africa, and can be linked to once prevalent racist ideologies. In other words, some oppressive 'traditions' around gender and sexuality in Africa were invented over time with the help of European as well as African modernisers. (371)

Eno Blankson Ikpe also points out that "different societies in Nigeria had in the pre-colonial past developed ideas about sexuality which were culturally accepted as appropriate or inappropriate, moral or immoral, abominable or not abominable, healthy or unhealthy" (6). Continuing from Epprecht and Egya's explanation of the evidence of pre-colonial same-sex sexuality, Ikpe also observes that:

> The general claim is that this did not take place in Nigerian communities in pre-colonial times. Yet, research has shown that though not an accepted norm, it was practiced by some rare minority in some parts of the country such as in Yoruba and Hausaland and is still being practiced till date. It is believed that this practice enhances the powers of success of those engaged in it; that is, it gives those who practice it powers to triumph against all challenges and gives them long life. Nevertheless, the men engaged in it are often married; sometimes to multiple women. So in modern parlance, they are actually bisexuals. [sic] (24)

During the pre-colonial era, the presence and tolerance of homosexuality support the notion that nonnormative sexuality in Nigeria has existed for many years. Ikpe also observes "marriage between two women was prevalent in Ibibioland, Igbo land, Ishan, Edo, Urhorobo and Yorubaland but not in the present sense of lesbian marriages" (9). Therefore, as Ikpe points out, "the traditional marriage between women is now a rarity because modern Nigerian law does not recognise marriage between women" (10). The presence and the practice of same-sex marriages and activity in the history of Nigeria is what makes contemporary stories like "Iyawo" so important. When reading them through the context of a history where these kinds of relationships did, in fact, exist, the stories become more powerful and valid. The two Nigerian stories in *Queer Africa 2* serve as a call to Nigerian queer history and the acknowledgement of longing to be openly queer in your homeland. As I suggested earlier, all three of the stories I have selected for discussion, from *Queer Africa 2*, also call attention to the shift from the invisible to the visible.

Queer Intimacy and Longing in "Iyawo"

In a story entitled "Iyawo," Nigerian writer Yvonne Fly Onakeme Etaghene examines, to use Judith Butler's politicised deployment of the term, the fragile "precarity" of a queer

relationship between two Igbo women, in order to detail the complex cultural and traditional entanglements queer Nigerian women experience ("Performativity" ii). The story is replete with beautiful images of intimacy, which are juxtaposed with raw depictions of homophobia, violence, and brutality towards queer Nigerians. During a powerful moment in the story, the unnamed protagonist meditates on the complex risks involved in acknowledging and expressing her most intimate desires in such an environment: "We don't want to die for those kisses. But *those* kisses. We would die without" (38).

This short story moves between the past and present of the life of the unnamed protagonist. In the present day, she is grappling with a potential relationship with her friend, Jojo. This friendship occurs in New York City and there is a clear attraction between the two women as well as an already formed friendship, but the protagonist is apprehensive about this potential union due to past struggles she has had with intimate relationships. She has been deeply hurt by her former lover, Ronke. As she discusses the possibility of love and a new relationship, the protagonist points out to Jojo that she has lost hope in believing in pure and free love: "I gave up on loving women. I don't know when I gave up. But I definitely have" (34). Jojo, who is hopeful and adamant the protagonist can and will find love (potentially with her), tries to convince her otherwise by suggesting: "I'm not every other person who ever fucked you over." The protagonist's pessimism and loss of hope, however, is shown in her rebuttal of Jojo's pleas: "'The last one said the same shit'" (34). As the protagonist's history is uncovered, it is clear her former lover, Ronke, wanted to live openly with her and they had many plans for their future together, but it did not work out. Ronke and the protagonist could not be with each other as the former lived a life bound up in heteronormative customs and traditions – an open lesbian relationship in Nigeria was not viable for them. Throughout the story, the protagonist is shown as fighting an internal battle of past versus present and being home versus being abroad. She moves to New York City, but often returns home to the place she loves and to the people whom she cares about most.

The protagonist recounts the love she had for Ronke who has a strong association with home. It is bittersweet as she loves her country and feels the happiest when she is there, but it is also the source of much pain and hurt. Ronke and the protagonist were deeply in love, but their love was very much hidden. During an intimate moment between the two when the protagonist tells Ronke, "I love it when you call me iyawo, your wife" (36), there is a sense of deep love and admiration between them. This moment is crucial to the understanding of how important this relationship is to the protagonist – the title of 'wife' holds the meaning of an unbreakable union between her and Ronke. This moment is strikingly important because same-

sex marriage is no longer existent in Nigeria as it was in precolonial Nigeria where women had wives. This moment of declaration is, however, thwarted earlier in the story by the fact that Ronke is legally married to a man. The details are vague, which belies the seriousness the protagonist feels towards Ronke's attitude to her union with her husband: "You live here. You ain't oppressed by him as much as oppressed by how much he bores you" (36). It appears throughout this short story that the protagonist's life is a paradoxical one. She is oppressed at home, but she feels a deep connection to it. She wants to live an open life but she is only able to do this in New York City and not in Nigeria. Brenna M. Munro notes how "diasporan queer cultures can challenge national and ethnic identities imagined through the patriarchal family, both in the 'homeland' and beyond, and can forge entirely new narratives of belonging" (*South Africa* xx). But the protagonist of "Iyawo" does not wish to do this. She is caught between Nigeria and the United States and feels New York City can never be home to her, not fully. Her home country keeps on drawing her back – it is where she feels she can most authentically express herself and the love she has for the woman back home in Nigeria.

In this short story, the diaspora is presented as a place of acceptance and safety for the queer African characters – highlighting that their homeland where they feel they belong does not grant them the same feeling of recognition nor safety. The story itself points to a truth wider than the experience of the protagonist in "Iyawo" where queer Nigerians living in the diaspora are torn between home and exile, do not feel they are not living authentic queer lives at home, or are fully accepted as Nigerians abroad. The choice to live in a foreign country is complex, and amounts to choosing a place where they can merely survive. The story calls attention to the question of whether Africans living in the diaspora obtain a source of happiness from these places of safety or whether there is just an acceptance of circumstance – with no authentic happiness. In the short story, New York City is a place where the queer protagonist could be open and free, whether that be talking about dating possibilities or not hiding one's desires. For instance, there is a moment when the protagonist's relationship with Jojo is compared to a train. Jojo speaks with a familiarity of the protagonist. Their conversation is sensual and filled with sexual tension, but the protagonist seems to always be cognisant that she is not home and therefore, she is not complete in her sense of self:

> "You want to talk and build and get to know me right?" "No!" Jojo exclaimed immediately. "What?" "I already know you, that's how I know you're talkin' shit right now. I see the way you look at me." "How I look at you." We exchanged looks hotter than a summertime subway platform with no air conditioner. "Like that. Like you want me to eat your pussy." The C train

> screeched with ear-splitting loudness across the tracks like a pissed-off freight train. Like it would never stop. Like it ain't got no home training and acts a fool in public. She moved close to my ear to say, 'Tell me you don't feel this between us.' Her challenge was soft, but solid. Silence in the middle of a tornado of noise. I lowered my eyes. "Of course I feel it." It's not that I don't feel it … I just don't want to. (35)

This moment demonstrate precisely how the stories in the anthologies break taboos in African fiction in the way the editors wished. This simple display of closeness and intimacy is also proof of the freedoms and possibilities the diaspora provides. There is, however, a sacrifice the protagonist makes and that is her home.

The protagonist explains why New York City will never be enough for her. Although it offers her freedom, sex, and possibility, it does not offer her love. Nigeria is the place she loves the most, despite its lack of freedom and possibilities for a queer Nigerian woman. She misses the woman she loves and knows the fulfilment that she seeks lies within the borders of her own country: "The love I always looked for in women was in my country all along. That comforting home that I searched for in the arms and beds of women, lay on my land, waiting on my return. Home" (34). According to Boswell:

> 'Home' here is not only a geographic space or nation, but the pleasure and sustenance same-sex desire provides; a set of relations intricately bound up with place and desire. In naturalising queer love as a type of home within the national space of Nigeria, Etaghene makes a lie of the controlling and damaging ideology of homosexuality as 'un-African.' (*Queer Africa 2* 3)

This story highlights the intrinsic need for belonging for all people, especially those queer Africans living abroad away from their homes because of their queerness: "In Brooklyn again and I want the woman an ocean away from me. Longing is my best friend, is very familiar to me, has always been a way of life – missing home, missing family, missing how my name sounds when it's *pronounced correctly*" (35). As the passage suggests, the protagonist's happiness does not derive purely from sexual or physical intimacy, but from many elements that make her homeland what it is. She knows she will only be happy and fulfilled if she could both be her authentic self, with the woman she loves, in her own country but they are not able to be together as the looming reality of "government-sanctioned hatred of and violence against lesbians" (38) is prevalent when the protagonist thinks about the possibility of them being together. The protagonist reiterates the desire to have the same existential sexual freedom she has in exile in her own homeland. She yearns to be able to live authentically as herself in Nigeria, to live out in the open: "If we made this world with our bare hands instead of by the

accidental destiny of birth, our love, this love between us women, would be sanctified in public space, temples, in the market, on the dirt roads we were raised on" (35).

What makes this story so powerful is how it extends beyond the desires of one woman for her beloved, to highlight a shared desire to make queerness something that is considered normal and ordinary, part of the fabric of everyday existence in Nigeria, in Africa, in the world more broadly. The story demonstrates, however, there are many obstructions to this type of normativization of queerness in Nigeria. The main obstacle that faces queer women in Nigeria society is the entrenchment of a patriarchal hegemony in all sectors of their lives. The protagonist notes this and suggests the patriarchal standards are comical and anything that goes against the patriarchy is a source of freedom: "There are men in the other room who expect us to bear them babies, bare our bodies to them, keep the house, shut up and laugh at their jokes. We laugh when it's funny, roll our eyes when it's not, fuck our best friends in the middle of the night with *hard*, *rough tenderness* then go back to fathers, lovers, husbands, brothers" (36). This story, like so many others in the anthologies, is important because it is a story of a country that has eschewed its own precolonial traditions in criminalising queer relationships. The protagonist also articulates powerfully the desire to create a new normal in Nigeria, instead of opting for the empty freedoms of other countries where queerness may be accepted but living as an African may not, which highlights what Livermon suggests regarding how black bodies have to divorce themselves from either their race or sexuality, as explored in the introduction.

There are several ways the protagonist expresses the idea and wish for a new kind of Nigeria, namely when she recounts memories and moments spent with her former lover and states: "Part of me does want my gay fairytale to spring to life. Fuck it: all of me wants it. For Ronke and I to live in Nigeria together, make love in the heat, sweating and sweating and fucking and fucking. Holding hands in the market" (39). The protagonist in this moment wants her story to become her life. Therefore, not only is this moment important as it calls attention to the desire for representing queer characters in literature but a desire to be fully queer in real life. The idea of a "gay fairytale" is also suggestive of the longing for queer Africans to move towards a life that is attainable, worthwhile, and not hidden. The protagonist wants to know she is safe to love the person she loves in her country. Her yearning, however, is juxtaposed with the memories of her intimate moments with Ronke and the violent reality they both would face as out and open lesbians in not only Nigeria, but in South Africa and in New York City itself:

> Between our kisses I think of Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Masooa found shot to death in Soweto. Seven bullets lodged in their bodies. They were South African lesbian activits. That moment before my lips reach her neck, I think of Sakia Gunn stabbed in the heart age 15, 15 days before her 16th birthday in Newark, New Jersey. Before I get lost in her curves, I remember Rashawn Brazell, his dismembered body parts found on subway tracks in Brooklyn, New York. For being gay. (38)

This powerful moment depicts how the severity of her country's as well as the world's homophobia is embedded within the protagonist's psyche and distorts her most intimate moments – something that is recognisable to many queer people. The fact the protagonist is thinking about the implications of her natural love and how precarious the situation is highlights the courage it takes for a queer person in Africa to live an authentic life – one free of judgement and persecution.

This narrative, and many others in the anthologies, not only offer a form of representation for queer Africans, but also allows for queer Africans to know their experiences are not just their own. They enable queer Africans to feel less alone in spaces like their families, communities, and even countries that often invalidate their existence. These narratives propel those who often feel invisible to a space and environment where they are seen and accepted. The characters, as the protagonist notes, are characterised by their longing, for each other, and for their homelands, but for a sense of belonging too. Grant Andrews, drawing on the work of Brenna M. Munro, suggests that "asserting belonging in fiction was a form of 'writing back' . . . against systems which sought to oppress queer people" (3). The characters and narratives such as those in "Iyawo" are a defiant way for not only the authors to fight back against the systems of oppression, but also for queer readers to see themselves and their experiences written about and published in tangible books from which they can obtain a sense of belonging. This representation may encourage a sense of hope that they too are able to fight back against the systems that oppress them. As shown in these anthologies, there are many systems that oppress queer people. There are what I would call 'smaller systems of oppression' which are hidden in the laws and policies of various countries, the opinions of people, and the attitude of society towards queer people. One could suggest these 'smaller systems of oppression' stem from and are influenced by the much 'larger systems of oppression' such as patriarchy, religious institutions, and the heteronormative hegemony.[28] As evident in the anthologies, there are short stories that are used against these oppressive systems patriarchy in order to fight back.

[28] This idea is closely linked to the work of Berlant explored in the previous chapter.

Accepting Desire in "Àwúre Ìfẹ̀ràn"

"Àwúre Ìfẹ̀ràn," by Nigerian writer Rafeeat Aliyu, explores patriarchy and sexuality within the intersection of traditional and contemporary Yoruba culture. The short story interrogates the complexities of intertwining a modern lifestyle with Yoruba traditions. It also explores how Nigerian migrants can experience a freedom of expression outside Nigeria that is impossible at home. "Àwúre Ìfẹ̀ràn," which translates to "the love of love" is told from the perspective of the protagonist, Nouratu. The story explores her loveless relationship with her boyfriend Taofiq and her desire for something other than it. Throughout the text, it is clear she is not happy, but also that she has made no effort to changer her situation. Nourata (who also goes by Noura) has ambivalent feelings about her relationship with someone she thinks is "seeing someone else" (229).

The short story beings with Noura's friend Gigi taking her to an unknown place as Noura lost a bet and has to accept whatever Gigi says she must do. Gigi, who is aware of Noura's unhappy relationship, takes her friend to the office of a Babalawo: in Yoruba traditional society, "a Babalawo is a 'doctor', a 'pharmacist', a herbalist and the most popular diviner who the people' consult for advice, guidance and medical treatment" (Ifáyemí par. 1). Gigi takes Noura to the Babalawo to "get her love charm" (219). Noura is apprehensive, which may be from her complacency within her relationship or her inability to accept her true feelings. She notes she "had no intention of seeking any love charm" (219). Still, she later warms up to the idea. Once Noura gets to the Babalawo's place, she feels uneasy and wants to leave, but is halted by "an interesting piece of art" and "the more she looked at the mural the calmer [she] felt" (220). Noura eventually meets with the Babalawo, Fatoki, who questions her about her intentions. They engage in small talk when the art mural comes into the conversation, and Noura discovers Fatoki's daughter painted the mural. After the two become more acquainted with one another and there is a sense of comfort between them, Noura admits why she is there, stating "I am in a relationship with a man that I do not love" (222). There is a sense of trust Noura feels towards Fatoki as she is honest with her feelings from the start and yells "'I want to fall in love'." Noura is shocked by her own admission and the narrator notes "As soon as the words left her mouth she raised her hand up to her lips" (222).

Fatoki gives Noura her love charm, which consists of black soap she must wash with and a Yoruba incantation to recite for it to work. Noura leaves Fatoki's office with her love charm and incantation, but she is still somewhat sceptical about the entire process. She does, however, have nothing to lose from using the love charm – she only has the love she so

desperately seeks, to gain. Noura washes with the black soap and struggles to say the incantation as "she had always considered incantations to be deeper parts of Yoruba language that she would never need" (223). Her lack of knowledge about the traditional Yoruba language suggests her scepticism of the Yoruba cultural beliefs and her attachment or lack thereof to her traditions. Noura nevertheless completes the incantation to the best of her ability and, to see if it works, she messages Taofiq to come over. She waits patiently for him, but hours pass and he still does not arrive at her door. Eventually, there is a knock at the door and Noura answers but is shocked when she realises the person behind the door is not Taofiq. It is a stranger who makes her lose her ability to act like her usual self:

> Noura was rooted to the spot, but within her it was as if a circus had launched a grand performance. Her pulse raced and her breath quickened, her heart danced to a furious beat while her stomach performed backflips. Further down between her legs a forest fire raged and all of a sudden her legs could not support her. (*Queer Africa 2* 226)

She is taken aback by the person's beauty but Noura eventually composes herself and asks what she can do for her. The stranger at the door is Fatoki's daughter, Bewaji, who is there to return a scarf left at her father's place and which she assumes to belong to Noura. Bewaji has a significant impact on Noura who finds herself unable to concentrate, which even leads Bewaji to ask her "'Are you alright?'" (227). They eventually exchange names, the scarf, and then Bewaji leaves Noura. After their brief but emotionally charged meeting, Noura realizes that the scarf is not even hers.

Later, Noura is convinced the love charm did not work. This doubt is because the following day when Taofiq eventually arrives, she notes "there was still the same indifference; the spark just was not there" (228). Noura has an internal fight between how she has continuously been upholding a heteronormative way of living her life and going against it. She does this by being a free and independent woman as shown when she "decided to move out of her father's house" which "had been a huge uproar" (223-224) but also demonstrated by her independence and strong will. This independence is, however, undermined by the reality that she maintains a loveless and unromantic relationship as it is what is expected of her. There is a clear conflict between upholding cultural beliefs, by living a heteronormative lifestyle, and maintaining a sense of independence, for Noura. She considers taking another bath in order to try and conform to her cultural norms but dismisses the idea because her disbelief in this cultural practice. This could also suggest, however, her reluctance to improve her relationship with the love charm. She also notes "her relationship felt more like a contract than anything

else" (229), further suggesting she is forcing herself into a specific mould she does not fit into, namely, a heteronormative mould. Noura and her sister Aida later discuss the love charm and its inability to make Noura fall in love with Taofiq. Noura finally admits she is with the wrong person as "she felt relieved" (230) when the love charm did not work as she hoped it would. Aida suggests Noura go out and see if it would "work on someone else" (230). This notion is halted when the thought of Bewaji immediately dominates Noura's mind when she thinks of the possibility: "Someone else … Unheeded, Noura's mind went to Fatoki's daughter. She had thought of Bewaji often since their awkward introduction" (230).

To distract herself from the love potion events, Noura decides she should return the scarf to Fatoki, but is evident this is just a ploy to see Bewaji again and confront her inexplicable attraction. Noura returns to Fatoki's place with the scarf where she is happily greeted by Bewaji and a "warmth flooded through her as she recognized Bewaji" which suggests what she meant earlier in the story about a 'spark' (231). This is a daring move the author makes in the short story – by using a traditional love charm to precipitate a sexual attraction between two Yoruba women subverts the idea that culture only holds space for heterosexuality. Fatoki is not home, but this fact does not deter Noura as she does not mind waiting. Noura and Bewaji engage in pleasantries and become more comfortable with one another. Their conversation moves towards art, specifically Bewaji's piece of art that hypnotises Noura. Explaining her art, Bewaji shares that the painting was "supposed to symbolize patience" (233) which Noura suggests is what calmed her down before. This explanation of the artwork also relates to the overall narrative of progression maintained throughout the short story. Bewaji tells Noura she has more work to show to which Noura gladly agrees to see. They observe Bewaji's other painting of "a pile of pots tilting precariously on the far right of the painting" which "brought to [Noura's] mind the figure of a well-endowed woman" (233). When Noura asks Bewaji what the meaning of the work is, she hopes to delve deeper into the feelings, attraction, and desire she feels for her. Throughout the story, art takes on a symbolic meaning for Noura's confrontation of her sexuality. Art can be very personal, so by asking, Noura wants to own up to her desires – she is learning more about her attraction to women. By exploring Bewaji's art Noura allows herself to confront her feelings and explore her sense of Bewaji's magnetism. Their emotionally charged moment of viewing art Bewaji's together is interrupted by the doorbell and the arrival of Bewaji's friend, Ubeyi.

Bewaji and Ubeyi are too close and intimate for Noura to pass them off as just friends. She thinks they are potential lovers. "Noura [is] filled with a sudden urge to leave," (234) and makes her way out of Fatoki's place, but not before Bewaji asks her "is it OK if I have your

number?" (234). At this moment, Noura realises there is a mutual attraction and that Bewaji is lesbian. After Noura leaves, Ubeyi and Bewaji, speak and the reader discovers that Ubeyi, who also happens to be lesbian, is not with Bewaji. They are best friends: "'So is that your new catch?' Ubeyi asked, arms crossed under breasts and eyebrows raised" (234). From Ubeyi's introduction, it is clear there is a closeness between Bewaji and her. They have a long-lasting friendship and a history of intimacy:

> They had come a long way from cuddling each other on the top bunk. She had been a few months shy of her 13th birthday when Bewaji realized that what she felt for her best friend Ubeyi was more than just 'like.' But even after their shared kisses and curious explorations, Bewaji had convinced herself that it was a phase and nothing serious. (235)

It is clear Bewaji struggled with her sexuality while growing up, but once she realized she still found women attractive after school and it was not a phase, she became more open to the idea of living an authentic life. Towards the end of the story, both Bewaji and Noura are conflicted about their sexualities. Noura is at the beginning of realising her queerness. She appears to be apprehensive about the idea of her queerness but her independence has also been established. Throughout the short story, Noura's mother inspires her. Her mother resisted against patriarchal norms and traditions. Noura's decision to leave her family home is seen as a direct result of her mother's defiance: "When all attempts had failed [to dissuade Noura from leaving her father's house], her father and his relatives had gone primal, using her mother as the bad example. 'That woman was too independent.' 'That woman never submitted to her husband the way she should have and now her daughters are following her lead' (224). There is also a juxtaposition in the way Noura subscribes to the Nigerian society. She is fiercely independent, just like her mother, but she also attempts to satisfy the patriarchal requirements of finding a husband and becoming subservient to him. This subservience is all changed when she discovers there are nuances to her personhood. Bewaji, on the other hand, has a fully formed grasp on her sexuality and accepts she is lesbian, but she is conflicted about her sexuality within Nigeria. Outside of the country, she "fully accepted her sexuality" (235), but she struggles to be hopeful about living as an authentic lesbian Nigerian woman within Nigeria. This fear is, however, changed when she sees how Ubeyi, who has a wife with whom she is raising a child in Nigeria, is happy and comfortable. It is not clear how Ubeyi can have a wife and child in Nigeria. Still, this fact makes Bewaji hopeful for her future as well as leads her to think about Noura: "Bewaji would never have pictured the possibility of that future, especially in Nigeria" (235). The story ends with Bewaji accepting her sexuality and imagining "what the queer dating scene in Lagos

was like" but all she can think of is Noura (235). Noura's unconsciousness of her sexuality until it is provoked by a Yoruba love charm and the story's open-ended ending highlights, to return to the work of Berlant discussed in the previous chapter, how private sexual preferences become politicised. National and cultural borders also create personal borders by excluding queerness and confining all sexual identities to a single heteronormative national identity. The way society operates within Nigeria enforces a type of restriction on Noura and Bewaji. They both struggle to be happy and find true love. As they both come to realise, their queer love and attraction does not make them any less Nigerian.

The Faces of Homophobia in "Pub 360"

"Pub 360," by Kenyan author H. W. Mukami, deals with the varying realities of three lesbians in Kenya. Set in a not so "classy pub" (238) this short story explores an encounter between two women and their initial meeting, which is being observed by a fellow bar patron who narrates the story. She is an unnamed woman who witnesses the overt homophobia and discrimination that later transpire during the women meeting.

The two women are meeting at the bar for their first date. There is an initial discomfort that is shortly replaced with laughter and longing. The two women, Ashuri (who also goes by Ashu) and Oluchi (who also goes by Chi) meet up in Pub 360 which before "had proven safe and welcoming to a woman drinking alone" (238). This description of the bar's safety for women suggests cisgender straight men are generally not patrons at this bar, thus rendering it a place of safety for queer people. There is a clear difference between the two women. They are different in the way they dress and in their body language, which suggests a difference in how they exist in a public space. From her introduction, it is clear Ashu is confident and comfortable in her skin. Her confidence suggests she lives as authentically as public opinion and the law allows her. As the narrator recounts, "she looked comfortable" and "she looked my way and sent me a little wink" (237) when she walked into the bar. Comparatively, Chi is a lot more reserved than Ashu. Not only in their initial meeting but also throughout the story, it is clear Chi is new to those types of experiences or does not usually do things like this. As the narrator states, Chi "sighed and stared at the outdated calendar on the wall ahead of her" (238) – a subtle suggestion of a society stuck in its past. As a reader, it appears Chi's disposition is that of a woman bored and unsatisfied with her everyday day-to-day life. This normalcy, however, is changed when she meets Ashu. The narrator observes an entire shift in Chi's body language after their first encounter where "something happened; [Chi] dropped her tense

shoulder like a coat falling from its hanger, her whole back straightened and her neck turned as if by remote control to confront the intruder. She looked more relaxed, her face looked smoother, as if she removed a mask" (238). Their date is flirtatious but the stark reality of the barman's overt homophobia towards them thwarts their discovery of each other and possible happiness. This demonstrates the larger issue of how homophobia can be found everywhere, even into those generally classified as places of safety.

The barman represents patriarchal, heteronormative society, but in terms of Kenya's setting, also the hegemonic belief that queerness is a Western imperialist import. The progression of homophobia in the story aligns closely with the advancement of intimacy the two women have during their interaction, but they are vastly different in intensity. The barman reacts badly to the slightest hint of intimacy between the two women. "She took the offered hand and held it in a firm grip without shaking it, then took her left hand and covered the grip intimately" (239). This innocent and non-sexual gesture of intimacy proves enough of a disturbance to rouse a reaction out of the barman who, "muttered inaudibly under his breath and his brow creased. He look disturbed" (239). Later, as the two women become more comfortable and closer to each other, they embrace one another, further disturbing the barman. This results in an outburst:

> 'Ahem, hey!' the barman said in a voice that suggested he couldn't take it any more. As if being pulled out of an enchanting fantasy, the two women froze and turned towards the angry growl of a barman. His face was puffed in pent-up rage and disgust and his eyes hard and cold like a pair of black marbles. 'Whatever it is you pair of black whores are thinking of doing in my bar, you better think twice. You can go perform your free pornography to other clubs but not here – you are starting to make my other customers uncomfortable. You are watching too many foreign videos, you shameless copycats. This is Africa; so clear your bills and get your dirty demonic selves out of here.' (240)

The barman's homophobic outburst is not only layered with misogyny, but also with the pervasive idea of queerness as immoral, sinful, foreign, and thus as un-African. His outburst is also indicative of the often unnecessary sexualization of queer bodies. After berating the two women for innocently showing affection in a way that would not elicit the same reaction if a straight couple had behaved thus in public , he throws the two women out of the pub which leaves them shocked and embarrassed.

According to Joey Soloway in their memoir, *She Wants It: Desire, Power, and Toppling the Patriarchy* (2018), there is a term they adopt called a 'beat change' which "occurs in the moment when a character attempts a new playable action in the process of trying to get what

they want" (95).[29] The barman's outburst, which is an example of what Soloway would consider a beat change, is also a moment where the reader learns that the narrator, who witnesses the preceding events unfold, is not a patron, but the bar owner and also a lesbian. I see this as a beat change for the barman because his homophobia forces him to change from a passive viewer of the two women to an active opponent of their intimacy to satisfy his desires for heteronormativity. The barman wants the women to know they are not welcome in the bar and in Africa, too. Later, after the two women have left, the bar owner promptly fires the barman and invites Ashu and Chi back noting, "was it so wrong to feel, to be who you are?" (241). The bar owner's action of firing the barman is her beat change. She changes the outcome of the barman's wrongdoing to fulfil her desire of creating a space inside her establishment where people can operate freely without worry. Ashu and Chi apprehensively return to the bar, which is propelled by the bar owner's ability to relate to the two: "I knew what being different meant and how it felt" (241). It is also a moment for the bar owner to be brave in the face of adversity, which usually does not affect her. Previously, the bar owner's silence was due to societal opinion and potentially internalized homophobia. The act of inviting Ashu and Chi back into her bar, however, seems to derive from her need to be authentic and morally sound. As she notes, "it was time to right a wrong and I had to start somewhere" [sic] (241). Once the "cute couple of Ashuni and Oluchi" (241) reacquaint themselves with the bar and get to know the bar owner, a sense of euphoria and freedom develops between the three women: "The spell was broken. I think they sensed a need in me to connect with other ostracized women, and right there they opened their hearts to me" (243).

Although this short story ends in a positive note while also making a nod to the name of both the pub and the title by coming full circle in terms of character development, it also highlights a few noteworthy points about the realities queer Africans face within Africa. "Pub 360" illustrates the various stages of visibility queer people hold in Kenya. Ashu is proud and open, whereas Chi is reserved. The bar owner, like Chi, appears not to be honest and as authentic as she hopes to be. As the story progresses, however, we see Ashu and the bar owner take steps to improve their confidence and openness. Just as the bar owner states, "Pub 360 needed a change," (242) so too did the bar owner herself. The short story also highlights the presence of homophobia and how it can take on various forms. More so, the story shows homophobia is not always overt and deliberate but can linger in supposedly places of safety

[29] Joey Soloway, the writer, director and creator of the Amazon series *Transparent*, identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.

and internalized within a person's being. It is representative of the ideas surrounding visibility and invisibility. All three women emerge from hiding their selves to making themselves visible – indicative of how the *QA* anthology hopes these stories will help other queer Africans in their plight to change from the invisible to the visible.

Conclusion: Making Africa More Queer

As Senayon Olaoluwa points out, the "debates around the reception of, and opposition to, homosexuality the world over have generally been about discourse of intimacy" (24). These three stories include discourses of intimacy, courage, and openness in environments where the validation of such is discouraged. Thus they show the possibility of queer African lives' ordinariness once the entanglements with religion, heteronormative hegemony, and the patriarchy are acknowledged and dismantled. As Oluwafemi Atanda Adeagbo points out, the "stories show the extent to which people go to express their sexual desires, even in the context of strict discrimination and condemnation (133). The *QA* anthology depicts how sexuality and gender identity enmesh with religion, cultural and national identity, and tradition to form a queer African identity. This struggle within the stories collected in the anthologies thoughtfully depicts the realities of many queer Africans. The anthologies also offer an impetus for, as Matebeni *et al.* suggest, a "future understanding of the ways in which living and performing queer African lives require ongoing critical responses to hetero-patriarchal regimes of authority, combined with further intersectional analysis" (13). The problems surrounding the anthologies also highlights the need for more representation in queer literature. When queer literature is afforded time, capacity, and resources to make invisible stories visible, it has potential to facilitate other forms of rich storytelling. For example, the Ugandan story "Jambula Tree" became the inspiration for the Kenyan film *Rafiki* and a queer South African novel, *A Man Who is Not a Man*, was the inspiration for the South African film, *Inxeba*, as will be explored in the next chapter.

As succinctly stated by Barbara Boswell in the introduction of *Queer Africa 2*, which can be applied to the *QA* anthology as a whole: "rendered here is an array of interpretations of what it means to be fully *human*, *queer* and *African* – three categories of identity often misconstrued as mutually exclusive" (1). The *Queer Africa* anthologies and other fiction, non-fiction, and historical facts that are considered intrinsically queer, lay the foundation for creating a space where Africa can achieve a new normal that would facilitate a more thorough and in-depth understanding of the lives of queer Africans all while acknowledging their various

histories and experiences which have altered many lives. Moreover, as Ayub Sheik points out, the stories are an "important step on the route to engaging with Africa's deeply ingrained prejudice and taboos about minority sexual rights" (170). Eliminating these ingrained ideas will reduce homophobia and create an environment where queer Africans can feel free to develop lives and livelihoods in countries where they know they belong. It will help move Africa forward into the future as a fully-realised queer-inclusive continent. It will make Africa queerer than it has ever been. The desire for more stories to be told exists – queer Africans need the space for it. The short story by design allows these types of stories to be told quickly and succinctly, allowing us to change the contemporary queer narrative template. Moreover, these short stories' ordinariness, where the focus is not strictly about coming out or the stereotypical writing of Africa, also helps create a template for how queer Africans can tell their stories – openly, honestly, and authentically in the post-colonial continent.

Chapter Three – 'Ndiyindoda! or 'I Am a Man!': Exploring the Nexus Between Queerness and Masculinity in South Africa in John Trengove's *Inxeba*

Introduction: Fractured Queer Identities

Inxeba (2017), also known as *The Wound,* is a South African film directed by John Trengove and written by Trengove, Thando Mgqolozana, and Malusi Bengu. Mgqolozana's novel, *A Man Who Is Not A Man* (2009), inspired Trengove to collaborate to write a similar narrative as a screenplay. *Inxeba* tells the story of the closeted relationship of two men, Xolani (played by the South African musician Nakhane Touré) and Vija (played by Bongile Mantsai), which occurs within the setting of the traditional Xhosa circumcision ceremony for men, referred to in IsiXhosa as *ulwaluko*.[30] The film focuses on a time when the two men, whose only connection with each other occurs during the times of the year when the ceremony takes place near their family home, face exposure from a young queer initiate, Kwanda (played by Niza Jay Ncoyini). *Inxeba* deals with the complexities surrounding black identity, masculinity, and queerness and heightens these questions by centring the film within the practices of *ulwaluko*, the ritual regarded by the *AmaXhosa* as a sacred initiation into manhood and leadership within both family and community. The word *ulwaluko* translates to circumcision, but the ceremony is more than just this physical transition. Nkateko Mabasa explains:

> *Ulwaluko*, a rite of passage for boys to become men, is a tradition that not only armours Xhosa males with a sense of duty and responsibility, but bonds together the youth, who are future fathers and elders of the community. It is to these men that authority and power over the family will be handed over. And so these lessons are considered to be revered, and only for Xhosa men who go to the mountains and brave the elements. ("*Inxeba*" par. 5-6)

Taryn Joffe notes that the film "interlinks issues of same-sex desire, cultural identity, patriarchy and generational divides into a provocative depiction of masculinity" (par. 4). It does so with a studied reliance on the emotional weight of a narrative where the identities of three characters are fractured due to the oppressive structures from which masculinities are created. As Taylor Mitchell observes, the film portrays "different understandings of masculinity through the film's

[30] Nakhane Touré, as they are credited in the film, identifies as non-binary and uses the pronouns they/them. They also use the mononym Nakhane.

three main gay characters" (par. 1). It is a jarring narrative, examining South Africa's complicated relationship with masculinity.

South Africa is a culturally diverse country, replete with variant forms of masculinity, as well as various attitudes towards masculinities, which differ from the heteronormative patriarchal models of masculinity. Furthermore, as Eusebius McKaiser notes, "heterosexuality is, sadly, normative in our society. And so the default assumption is that we are all heterosexual and that is a key part of our identity" (*A Bantu* 102). This assumption is similar throughout all the different South African cultures and has dominated our society for centuries. But these dominant models of sexuality and masculinity, however, are continuously being challenged in ways that shape the country's attitudes about what makes a man in South Africa. The vexed history of masculinity in South Africa has implications for homosexuals and queer men, as heterosexuality has always been associated with the connotations of ideal masculinity:

> The narrowing of meaning which allows "manhood" to be synonymous with "heterosexual masculinity" deliberately ignores the evidence of diverse identities. That is because these diverse identities are seen as a threat to the belief that masculinity is a given subject position whose characteristics may be taken for granted. (Mbao par. 18)

Historically, not only were homosexual and queer men considered as not man enough, but that stigma is still attached to the contemporary identity of their manhood.

The complexity of South Africa's relationship with masculinity lies within the fact that the country's constitution is one of the most progressive amongst other African countries as well as the world, but public attitudes and opinions towards nonnormative sexualities, and those who deviate from what is seen as the 'default' model of heterosexual masculinity, still remain antagonistic, are often uninformed, and laced with bigotry and prejudice. As Monica Mbaru *et al.* point out:

> Even as South Africa is about to mark the 20th anniversary of the world's first constitution to include specific wording which will protect people from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the reality on the streets for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people differs from what the legal framework would suggest. Human rights abuses on the basis of SOGI [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity] occur daily, including reported cases of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women being murdered, raped and subjected to violence. Furthermore, in the regional and international arena, South Africa has failed to demonstrate consistent and reliable leadership in human rights for LGBT persons. (178)

Thus, the question needs to be asked: why is there a disjuncture between the legal protections and the public opinions and attitudes towards queer South Africans? The ideas around masculinity, sexuality, blackness, and culture – all which intersect – need to be interrogated to answer this.

When interrogating queerness in South Africa, an intersectional lens needs to be used to highlight the disparities in how different queer people are treated. Factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status afford different levels of privilege and safety to queer people in South African society. As Ingrid Lynch and Matthew Clayton argue, "Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men in South Africa negotiate their gendered identities in predominantly heteronormative contexts that privilege a particular version of masculinity" (279). Although all queer people in South Africa live precarious lives, black queer people are more vulnerable than their counterparts of other races, who are afforded more privilege. As Xavier Livermon points out, the laws and protections, as stated in the South African constitution "have yet to bear fruit for the majority of black queer South Africans" ("Queer" 302). Therefore, this chapter has a focus on black queer men but is cognisant of all other queer South Africans. This chapter also seeks to illustrate, through various examples from the film, how dogmatic principles of heteronormativity affect queer men and how South African society works to insist on the kind of masculinities which must be maintained and adhered to by all regardless of the individualities of South African men themselves. In this chapter, I will explore these intersections, with a close reading of *Inxeba*, discussing how the film examines these very complexities. In this regard, I will also explore the controversies and debates surrounding *Inxeba* and its release – and the thinly veiled homophobia expressed regarding the reception of the film in South Africa.

One of the ways in which the filmmakers have addressed South Africa's complicated relationship with masculinity and sexuality is through what Livermon has called "cultural labor" (Livermon "Queer" 300). As discussed in my introduction, Livermon suggests that the "notion of freedom" is "engendered through particular forms of cultural labor that increase visibility and create possibilities of belonging for black queer people in black social milieus" ("Queer" 299). By drawing on their personal stories and lived experiences to express the realities faced by many queer South African men, the filmmakers quite deliberately assert a queer African identity. In addition, despite its fictitious nature, the film portrays the damaging effect anti-queer attitudes and beliefs held by the dominant heteronormative society, has on black queer South Africans.

Nkateko Mabasa observes that the precarities faced by queer people in South Africa are particularly severe in the Eastern Cape. He notes that:

> The South African Institute of Race Relations released a report in November 2017 analysing the frequency with which members of the LGBT community are met with violence. The report showed that the Eastern Cape, which has a predominantly Xhosa population, was ranked as the top province where violence against LGBT people is most prevalent. With a 15% average, it more than doubled the 7% national average. ("*Inxeba*" par. 21)

The precarious lives of queer people in the Eastern Cape, especially queer Xhosa people, are illustrated in *Inxeba.*

In South Africa, however, the disjuncture between the legal protections and social attitudes is because, in order for legal protections to work well within a country, those legal freedoms require what Livermon calls a "sociocultural construct" within the national community ("Queer" 300). That sociocultural context is missing in South Africa – this is the case for gender, sexuality, identity, and race. There are many provisions in the constitution which protect queer South Africans. As Willem van Vollenhoven and Christo Els note, however:

> Despite these post-Apartheid constitutional provisions, human rights violations against LGBT people recurrently surface in the South African media. Continual social intolerance against LGBT people hints towards a gap in the South African education system to educate ill-informed members of society against homophobia and unfair prejudice against sexual orientation. (266)

Berlant and Warner note that "the nostalgic values covenant of contemporary American politics stipulates a privatization of citizenship and sex in a number of ways" (314). I would suggest this applies to South African society too, where the acceptance of queerness is viewed, in many South African cultures, as a capitulation to an immoral society. The lack of awareness in South Africa is largely due, in many respects, to how people remain in thrall to the old ways of doing things – this pertains to racism as much as to homophobia. South Africa is replete with inequality in terms of racial wealth gaps, gender, and sexual freedoms – due to the lack of deliberate attention to South Africa's violent past.

What Makes a Man: "A boy may cry; a man conceals his pain"

Inxeba begins with the growing sounds of coming up for air from underwater. For the viewer, it is as if you are at the bottom of a lake, and you can hear all the noise from the outside world

seeping in – the crashing sounds of a waterfall increase as well as a growing siren that becomes deafening. The sound cuts off and the protagonist Xolani is shown on screen: "He's reserved, gentle, sympathetic, and, though he can't admit it publicly, gay" (Lewis par. 2). This opening scene and the introduction of Xolani sets the tone for the film. The atmosphere is claustrophobic to the viewers illustrated by the unhappy protagonist – the pain and anguish on his face are palpable. The sound of being underwater resonating throughout the film becomes metaphorical for Xolani's life experiences.

Xolani unenthusiastically works in a warehouse as a forklift operator. At the opening of the film he is shown leaving the warehouse at the end of his workweek, and making his way to the rural community where the *ulwaluko* ceremony is to take place. Xolani is a caregiver, also known as *ikhankatha*, to the initiates. A caregiver's role is to help the young initiates on this journey from boyhood to manhood. According to Richard Bullock, who spent a month observing an *ulwaluko* ceremony, the young initiates are also known as *umkwetha* while collectively known as *abakwetha* (par. 5). They will stay in huts, also known as *iboma*, for the duration of the ceremony. Bullock notes there are other roles for younger boys who are not yet old enough to be able to participate in the ritual: "While elders ensure practices are correctly adhered to, five or six younger boys will be in constant attendance to the *abakwetha*. Delighting in their role as *inqalathi*, the young boys chop wood from the nearby forest, and begin making a pile of firewood outside the entrance to the *iboma*" (par. 8). The inclusion of the younger boys (*amanqalathi*) highlights the significance of the ritual and how its importance is instilled from an early age.

Writing in the *Mail & Guardian*, Niza Jay, the queer Xhosa actor who plays Kwanda, observes that *Inxeba* "documents the complicated relationship between three Xhosa men, whose understanding and embodiment of manhood differs greatly. The film is a confrontation of what it means to be a man, specifically a Xhosa man" (par. 6). The *ulwaluko* ceremony is a crucial part of the path to Xhosa manhood expected of every Xhosa boy in each generation. As Nakhane Touré notes about their own experiences at the ceremony: "there's a huge spotlight on masculinity and what it means to be a man in the Eastern Cape. So I did everything. I went through the rites of passage of being Xhosa. I went to the mountain" (qtd. in Mabandu par. 22). Touré describes how their mother was insistent on them partaking in the *ulwaluko* ceremony and how she expressed her desire for them to participate in the ceremony to fulfil the expectations of their father. Touré states that "I remember my mother used to tell me: 'Just go, and get it over with. Satisfy your father and after that, you can do whatever you like with your life'" (qtd. in Mabandu par. 23). The desires expressed by Touré's mother shows the

importance of the ceremony to the *AmaXhosa* and how formative it is considered to be. Due to the ceremony's continued ties to heteronormativity and patriarchy, there is a clear sense of duty to uphold these practices. As will be discussed in more detail presently, there are clear similarities between Nakhane's own experiences and the familial pressures placed on the character of Kwanda in the film so that he will participate in the ceremony.

When Xolani arrives at the *ulwaluko* campsite, an elder introduces him to Khwalo, who is the father of a new initiate, Kwanda. Khwalo attended the *ulwaluko* ceremony in the Eastern Cape, and now Kwanda is expected to do the same. Khwalo invites Xolani into the privacy of his luxury car to request that Xolani be his son's caregiver. He wants Xolani to guide and look out for Kwanda during the ceremony. Caregivers typically look after a couple of initiates during the ceremony but Kwanda is Xolani's only initiate this year. The camera shot is placed in a such a way that the viewer feels as if they are sitting in the backseat of the car eavesdropping on their conversation. Khwalo explains to Xolani the reason for his particular request: "I want you to be firm with my son. The boy's too soft. If you ask me, it's his mother who spoiled him. She didn't want him to come here. She wanted him to go to the hospital" (3:21). This sincere and honest admission from a father who wants to take care of his son, whom he does not wholly understand, is the film's first indication of Kwanda's queerness. Khwalo informs Xolani that "Lately he's been bringing home these friends. Locking themselves in his room. Something's not right with these rich boys from Joburg" (03:50). Because Xolani himself is gay, he can see right through Khwalo's suggested obliviousness, or denial, of Kwanda's sexuality. To Xolani, it is clear that Kwanda is perhaps dating or experimenting with other boys, but he does not have an open and comfortable relationship with his parents to be able to let them know. Xolani stares blankly ahead as Khwalo talks, almost as if he is triggered with guilt and embarrassed by Khwalo's words – like he is the one who has been locking himself in a room with his friends.

Khwalo is originally from the area but now stays in an affluent suburb of Johannesburg with his family, which affords him this ability to request special care for his son. He pays Xolani a sizeable amount of money to ensure Kwanda's safety. As Khwalo makes his request for Xolani's protection of his son in the area where he himself was initiated, he illustrates an important intersection of urban and rural in South African life. But the film also focuses on the growing juxtaposition of urban versus rural, or modern versus traditional roles. This is portrayed throughout the film, by many characters, but mainly embodied by Khwalo's son Kwanda. Azad Essa notes, "as more and more families move to the cities, there is the inevitable clash between tradition, materialism and between rival ideas; a deepening resentment towards

city-slickers. As the rural-scapes shrink and country ideas become frail or dry, the attempt to hold on to established ideas takes root" (par. 8). The kind of physical strength of endurance required by rural life is not expected in the city, but nevertheless Khwalo wants his son to participate, just as Touré indicates that their mother did, despite their own, quite different reservations. Kwanda's social status, attitude, and privilege, which will be explored later on, can easily be read as representative of the dichotomies of this juxtaposition of urban versus rural and modern versus traditional in South Africa. His queerness, however, represents a modern portrayal of the changing masculinity in a post-colonial South Africa. As Munro notes:

> The deployment of the figure of the gay person as a symbol of South Africa's democratic modernity is, of course, a radical departure from the traditional, heteronormative familial iconography of nationhood – and it emerges from a history in which homosexuality has long been a deeply contested idea, bound up with the reimagining of race, gender, and nation in the context of settler colonialism. (*South Africa* viii)

From this early moment in the car, the film depicts how the tensions and complexities which frame masculinity or lack thereof, and the processes by which a man is made, are on display. Khwalo, who is concerned for his son, is an accurate depiction of the difficulties of contemporary Xhosa masculinity. Khwalo is aware of Kwanda's mother's reservations, and uses his wealth to pay Xolani to ensure that Kwanda is kept safe, while still hoping that the ceremony will toughen him up. Xolani accepts Khwalo's request and takes the money, while reassuring him: "Don't worry, uncle" (04:28). It is not made completely clear but it is implied in this scene that Khwalo makes a deliberate choice in his singling out Xolani to look after Kwanda – as if he is aware of Xolani's sexuality and he knows that because Xolani has been through *ulwaluko* himself that he will best be able to guide Kwanda. As explored later in this chapter, it is suggested throughout the film that Xolani's sexuality is known by members of the ceremony but is not acknowledged openly. Xolani agrees to look after Kwanda because he can relate to the boy. He understands that partaking in the ceremony is an important tenet to surviving the patriarchal hegemonies still dominant within Xhosa culture particularly as a gay man. One of the strengths of the film is in its nuances, which leaves a great deal unsaid and up to the viewer's discernment. Throughout the film, Kwanda's type of masculinity subverts the heteronormative masculinity that has been enshrined in traditional Xhosa culture before and after South Africa's colonial period because he is queer. Although Kwanda does not subscribe to conventional modes of masculinity, he is not any less of a man after the circumcision because he is gay. Although Khwalo's desire to harden Kwanda is harmful, as his son does not need to

be hardened in order to be a man, by ensuring that he participates in this cultural milestone, he, in his own way, is protecting him for the struggles he may face later in life.

Contextualising the Wound: The Birth of Manhood

The struggles Kwanda may face later in life, from which his father is trying to shield him, derive from the expectations in which all the men in the film are embedded: namely patriarchal hegemonic masculinity. The expectations of heteronormative patriarchal Xhosa culture are what link the struggles that the three main characters face in the films, albeit for their different reasons. These interconnected struggles faced by Xolani, Vija, and Kwanda are also what give the film's title its duality. Therefore, a contextualisation of the wounding in the film is pertinent to understanding the nuances and the metaphorical resonance of its title. Firstly, *The Wound*, which is the English translation of *Inxeba* is symbolic of the physical wounding that the initiates undergo during the ceremony, the pain of the actual circumcision, as well as continued pain, thirst, and hunger. Secondly, it symbolises the psychic wounding of the three queer men in the film due to restrictions on their authentic lives in the face of the expectations of heteronormative masculinity. Thirdly, there is a spiritual and transcendental element to the circumcision wound from which masculinity emerges – the wound as the actual and symbolic impetus to manhood. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (1994), Nelson Mandela states, "as a Xhosa, I count my years as a man from the date of my circumcision," signalling the wound's cultural significance as the origin of manhood and its continued relevance (59). Lastly, in the context of the film's narrative, the wound symbolises masculinity itself and how the complexities involved in sustaining forms of patriarchal hegemonic masculinity may be harmful to men. There is an idea that boys need to be wounded to become men – that the ceremony is in place to break down boys to build them up as men. The psychic growth that the boys experience, however, intertwines with intergenerational ideas of what a man should be, resulting in the disturbing reality of how toxic masculinity has encouraged boys and men to act. As Gibson Ncube notes, "the clichéd adage 'boys will be boys' has, over the ages, normalised unbecoming behaviours. It has also socialised young men into thinking that being a man could entail getting away with reckless behaviour, even the use of violence and aggression to assert power" ("South African" par. 1). Ncube's remarks further highlight the nuance of the film. On the one hand, *Inxeba* deals with the complexities around masculinity and what it means to be a man in Xhosa culture, but on the other hand, it shows how this is further complicated when experienced through a queer lens.

The symbolism of the title is prevalent in the intersecting narratives of Xolani, Kwanda, and Vija whom all arrive at the ceremony, inflicted with their psychic wounds. According to the website, *South African History Online*:

> Homosexuality in the film is explored as both a repressed and oppressed experience in the setting of traditional Xhosa cultural tradition. It is hidden and anyone suspected of deviating from heterosexuality is immediately scorned and excluded, due to traditional beliefs purporting homosexuality as taboo and wrong. Although this is highly criticised and resisted in the film, through the character of Kwanda, the pain and fear of having same-sex desire is expressed through the struggles of the characters of Xolani and Vija. (par. 7)

All three queer characters are complex and are shaped by the patriarchal hegemonies present in Xhosa culture, but, as mentioned above, they all approach cultural traditions differently.

Kwanda lives a privileged life in Johannesburg, which allows him more freedom than his counterparts Xolani and Vija. His father's wealth and his upper-class lifestyle provide him with a certain mindset, which he brings to the Eastern Cape. Kwanda is rebellious and has an air of arrogance regarding this cultural tradition. He attends the *ulwaluko* ceremony, however, to please his father, despite his desires not to participate. Kwanda's duty to please his father mirrors Nakhane Touré's real-life experiences. Although Kwanda is defiant in how he critiques the ceremony, he is also, at some level, unaware of what he has lost as a result of his urban detachment from the land and the roots of his Xhosa culture. The filmmakers' decision to portray the importance of the *ulwaluko* ceremony to the lives of two other queer men, despite the struggles and lived complexities of their relationship, highlights the fact that just because Kwanda is queer, does not mean that he cannot participate in his culture. The ways in which Kwanda resists and critiques the cultural ceremony will be explored later in this chapter.

Xolani and Vija on the other hand struggle to resist patriarchal hegemonic masculinity because they are both closeted. Not only are they closeted but neither of them are afforded the privileges of wealth and social status that Kwanda has. For Xolani and Vija, due to their working class positioning in South African society, there is a far greater risk in being an openly gay man. This issue will be explored in further detail later in this section. They both use the *ulwaluko* ceremony as a conduit for their authentic expression. Outside of the ceremony, however, Xolani's life is awash with isolation, inauthenticity, and unrequited love. Vija, who has a wife and children, also struggles with the reconciliation of his sexual orientation and masculinity but he is more comfortable with his lot, due to the fact that he is successful by patriarchal hegemonic standards, standards he is reluctant to relinquish. Vija is a complex character. While it might be argued that he is bisexual, the closeted nature of his desire for

Xolani suggests instead the compromise he has made with social norms. He wants Xolani but he wishes to be seen as a man. Ironically, his marriage and children, as well as his class, prevents him from having the opportunity of being openly gay. Vija thus attempts to keep his relationship with Xolani at a transactional level in the sense that he does not fully express his emotions – which is safer for him. Therefore, he has made a deal with himself that his brief reconnections with Xolani in the mountains are enough. For Xolani, as is shown in his frustration with Vija's curtailed emotional reactions, these brief encounters are not enough to satisfy his hunger for a life that would allow him more regular contact with his lifelong friend and lover. Although their participation in the regular *ulwaluko* ceremony brings Xolani and Vija a version of happiness and presents them with the opportunity to continue their affair, there is no hope for either of the men to heal from their wounds. Both Xolani and Vija have chosen to guide and support the young initiates on their journeys into manhood, where for each initiate their lives start to change from the moment they are circumcised but, as the film repeatedly suggests, life for these two caregivers cannot change no matter how much they desire it.

In the film, the depiction of the circumcision is quick – with the arrival of the surgeon and him actually circumcising the boys lasting no more than two minutes of screen time. Before the surgeon performs the circumcision, the elders order the boys to line up and drop their protective blankets used to cover their naked bodies. The initiates are washed and cleansed with buckets of water "to protect them from bad spirits" (05:00). After being washed, the caregivers gather their initiates and take them to their huts. Sitting outside the huts, the boys wait for the surgeon to come and perform the circumcision. The elders tell the boys to sit and look away as the surgeon spreads their legs and circumcises them. The short scene which depicts the momentous occasion is disorientating as the camera hastily follows the surgeon as he himself rushes from one boy to the next. The circumcision is swift and the boys are forced to endure the pain of which will be a testament to them becoming men. The camera only focuses on their faces as the surgeon performs the circumcision – which maintains a sense of privacy to the film. Nelson Mandela recounts his own experiences of the *ulwaluko* ceremony. He points out that "flinching or crying out was a sign of weakness and stigmatized one's manhood. I was determined not to disgrace myself, the group, or my guardian. Circumcision is a trial of bravery and stoicism; no anesthetic is used; a man must suffer in silence [sic]" (61). He continues that "a boy may cry; a man conceals his pain," which highlights the pressure placed on these young boys not only to perform a sense of masculinity developed in a matter of weeks but also to endure overwhelming physical pain in order to prove their masculinity

(62). Mandela's words can also be read as a critique of masculinity itself and how men are not allowed to show any pain or emotion as it is considered to be weak. Once the circumcision is complete, the surgeon shouts at them to repeat, "Ndiyindoda!" which translates to "I am a man!" (05:43). After the surgeon has circumcised them, most of the initiates confidently repeat the phrase. Kwanda, who is last to be circumcised, is not only apprehensive about spreading his legs but after his circumcision when he is told to repeat the phrase, he lacks the confidence that the other initiates show. The surgeon is unhappy with Kwanda's quiet proclamation and orders him to repeat the phrase. Kwanda, who is in pain due to circumcision, repeats the phrase more confidently, showing his strong will and ability not to back down, which will be further explored later in this chapter. After they profess their manhood, the head elder inspects each circumcision and informs the initiates that they are now men. There is a moment which highlights the power dynamics at play during the ceremony when the surgeon declares: "You're a man, my boy" to the first initiate who gets circumcised (06:15). While one might assume that this is just the colloquial use of 'my boy,' the remark highlights that these young men are still at the beginning stage of this significant ritual. The circumcision is only the first physical aspect of the experience that makes them men – they need to further heal and thus endure the psychic transition from boyhood to manhood.

After the circumcision, Kwanda has an empty look on his face suggesting a deliberate choice by the filmmakers to show his continued detachment from this centrally important cultural milestone. In the scene following the circumcision, Kwanda is joined by Xolani in his hut as he starts the healing process. Xolani paints Kwanda's face with a white clay mixture which "is supposed to keep [the initiates] warm and protect their skin from the sun" (Bullock par. 17). Alternatively, some suggest it is to "ward off witches attacks, during their journey" [sic] ("Ulwaluko; An Ancient" par. 9). Xolani helps Kwanda dress his wound, but as he does so, Kwanda squirms in pain. Xolani does not take well to Kwanda's inability to be stoic in the face of pain – he sees it as a weakness. Xolani informs Kwanda that: "You were assigned to me. I'm Xolani Radebe. Your family knows me. Our fathers were close," which depicts the ceremony's intergenerational continuity (07:42). As discussed earlier, it is difficult to know what exactly Khwalo knows about Kwanda's sexuality. Because Khwalo knows Xolani's father, he perhaps has a sense of similarity between the two sons. Before he continues with his explanation of what is to come in the following days, perhaps to comfort and reassure Kwanda with the promise of his continued care and presence, Xolani states that "a lot of city boys don't come to the mountain anymore. Cowards. Don't know what it means to be a man" (08:02). There is irony in Xolani's words, as it is clear that he struggles to apply to himself the manhood

that has been prescribed to him. Xolani relates to Kwanda and, as seen later in the film, this proves to be a source of internal conflict for Xolani. Kwanda continues to feel the pain as Xolani is dressing the wound and his discomfort becomes increasingly audible, which further irritates Xolani. He threatens to stop helping Kwanda and to leave him to do it himself. When Xolani finishes, he explains to Kwanda while showing him the bloodied gauze used to dress the wound that "this is the first witness to your manhood" (08:34). Xolani goes on to explain the various rules of the ceremony and how the initiates are sworn to secrecy: "You'll stay in this hut for eight days. No drinking water. No sleeping. All questions come to me. When you go home, you don't speak of what happened here" (09:26). The dressing of the wound and the informing of the rules are put in place not only to guide the initiates but also to establish another form of power dynamics – this time between the initiates and their caregivers. The rule regarding the secrecy of what happens during *ulwaluko* is juxtaposed with Xolani and Vija's affair throughout the film. Although Xolani is the one who enforces the law of confidentiality on to Kwanda, he cannot speak of his affair to anyone other than Vija, who enforces the rule of secrecy onto Xolani out of protection for them both.

Maintaining the Secrets: Homosexuality and Traditions

The film progresses with beautiful shots of the Eastern Cape landscape full of colour and light. The vast openness is frequently juxtaposed against the small, dark, and claustrophobic confines of the hut, symbolic of both the ideas of masculinity forced on Kwanda and the constrictive nature of the secret that Xolani and Vija harbour. There are many scenes throughout the film which attend to the realities and complexities of what it means to be gay in a situation where homosexuality is seen as an abomination. Vija would lose everything if he were to leave his family to be with Xolani. During Xolani and Vija's first encounter in the film, the viewer is not let into the details of their secret relationship, and made to believe that Xolani and Vija are friendly acquaintances who know each other from their own *ulwaluko* ceremony. Vija refers to Xolani by the nickname, "X," highlighting a sense of history with each other. Their first encounter is brief but, when Vija leaves, the viewer discovers that Xolani is deeply in love with him, by witnessing the yearning, painful look that falls across Xolani's face, as if his psychic wound has been reopened. It is clear that Xolani is unable to live as an openly, authentic gay man in his life beyond the ceremony because he loves Vija and has a deeply emotional attachment to him. As Emmanuel Tjiya points out, Xolani is "a man so paralyzed by fear and held hostage by unrequited love that it feels like he forgot how to breathe" (par. 5). Both men

remain closeted which is where their struggles lie but ironically it is also what saves them. According to Gibson Ncube: "The space of the mountain can be viewed as an extended metaphor of the closet in that every year it affords Xolani and Vija a place and fleeting moment in which they can pursue their relationship" ("Film" 73). They are unhappy that they cannot express themselves authentically in their day-to-day life but hold on to the happiness that derives from meeting up once or twice a year at the ceremony.

Vija's campsite is placed near the river, which in the film is a deliberate stylistic choice, as it suggests and sustains to idea of the water's suffocating presence. In another scene, the physical connection that the two men have is depicted when Vija notices Xolani at his campsite. Vija quickly informs his initiates to stay at the campsite and look after themselves as he leaves with Xolani. The pair make their way through the woods to an abandoned house on a hillside without speaking a word to each other. As they walk inside, the two remain silent while they have sex on the floor of one of the empty rooms. The entire sex scene last no more than one minute and the camera shot is not centred on the two men on the floor but rather captures the bodies of the men in a doorway where their faces are not visible. The sex is rough, unemotional and formulaic, but after their sexual encounter, both are in happy spirits – even sharing a laugh. The unspoken understanding of how they would go to the abandoned house to have sex illustrates that this routine is familiar to both of them and that they have done this many times before.

After they have sex, they speak to each other on a more personal level. Vija asks, "How are you, X?" to which Xolani replies with a generic, "You know. Not too bad," but when Vija proceeds to ask more than just pleasantries Xolani looks confused (15:02). Xolani's confusion suggests that Vija may be showing more interest than usual, in contrast to what Xolani expects. Xolani is stuck in limbo, and reiterates this covertly to Vija: "Nothing's changed, Vija" (15:21). Vija knows and feels what Xolani feels deep down but because their current arrangement is all that they can have he states: "It's good to see you, my friend" to which a somewhat defeated Xolani responds, "Me too" (15:26). They are both able to acknowledge and recognise that their situation is unfortunate but it is also the only way they can find to be together.

The conversation shifts to talking about the initiates where Vija notes that Xolani has been entrusted with Kwanda. He states, "They trust you with the softies. Better you than me, boy. I'd just make them cry," (15:52) signalling Xolani's caring nature once again. This acknowledgement from Vija of how Xolani is perceived to be soft, gentle, and patient is comforting to Xolani and leaves him, once again, staring longingly at his lover. There is an interesting shot of Vija's face during this moment in the film that is from Xolani's point of

view. It is a close, intimate shot that depicts the intensity of Xolani's feelings towards Vija. Vija's entire face consumes the screen, which is symbolic of how he consumes Xolani's mind.[31] This moment, however, is interrupted by Vija announcing that his wife, Boni, has given birth to their third child. This news of Vija continuing his family's legacy dissipates any hopefulness Xolani has and reminds him of his isolated reality. Xolani tries to hide his anger and frustration at this news from Vija. After a brief moment of processing this news, he says reluctantly: "I'm happy for you" (16:30). Xolani proceeds to ask Vija if he is excited for the new child. Vija retorts: "I should be working extra hard. I shouldn't even be here this time" (16:38). Xolani, who is completely wrapped up in his feelings for Vija, offers to help him out with money. Vija, however, rejects his offer indicating the patriarchal belief that men provide for their family through their hard work. Vija asks Xolani about his job but, with an apathetic response, Xolani says that everything is "still the same" (16:57). There is, however, a glimmer of hope for Xolani when he mentions that he might be promoted soon which would have him move to Queenstown in the Eastern Cape where he will be closer to Vija, and they could "hang out like the old days" (17:18).

Vija does not say anything about Xolani's potential move but looks visibly annoyed. The possibility of being closer to each other does not spark excitement for Vija in the way that it does for Xolani, as Vija knows that life outside their time in the mountain during the ceremony is complicated by his life with a family. Tracey Lee McCormick details the complexities of coming out in her paper, "Queering Discourses of Coming Out in South Africa," and observes that "Coming out is presented as the primary way in which to activate a stable identity, to bring about change and to end the misery of denial" (136). Although coming out of the closet is often seen as liberating in a white liberal society, it is not the same for other societies due to the "homophobic link between colonialism and post-colonialism in which homosexuality is aligned with the taboo" (McCormick 137). Furthermore, McCormick expands on the idea of the closet, through an African lens, using Ruth Morgan and Saskia Wieringa's *Tommy Boy* (2005) as a departure. McCormick notes that:

> Morgan and Wieringa make it clear that western approaches to identity are problematic in the African context. They state that '[o]ne of the major concerns [they] have is the tendency to essentialise and universalise human experiences

[31] This shot is reminiscent of Barry Jenkins's work in *Moonlight* (2016) where closeup shots are frequently used. They add another dimension to the narrative and according to Jacob T. Swinney "the close-ups seem to transcend the narrative of the films. Time seems to stand still as we gaze into the eyes of the characters. They are intimate and profound as they become pure cinema" (par. 2).

> by assuming the relevance of 'western' categories to the lives of people elsewhere.' (137)

Therefore, as much as Xolani hopes that their affair can be more than what it is, Vija knows that his family life, and the attitudes of their communities in South African society outside of the secrecy offered by the mountain retreat do not permit it and it would be dangerous for them to come out. Xolani's hopes for the two men to be in a relationship outside of their bi-annual reconnection disrupts Vija's sense of reality. They use the *ulwaluko* ceremony as a cover and an opportunity for a sexual relationship but when Xolani seeks more than Vija is accustomed to giving, he threatens Vija's livelihood. In Vija's eyes, if their affair should ever be uncovered, he would be emasculated, both in his personhood, and his community. The film's placement of a queer narrative within the confines of a traditional *AmaXhosa* space, not only disrupts the heteronormativity of the traditional narrative, but also offers a reinterpretation of the vulnerability in how masculinities are made.

Unmasking Traditions: A Generational Divide

As the film progresses, Kwanda's detachment from and defiance against the cultural traditions in which he has been forced to partake becomes more visible. Although he finds comfort in Xolani's presence and help throughout the ceremony, Kwanda becomes impatient with the process. Kwanda's learns that he and Xolani are similar when Xolani reveals what he experienced during his own *ulwaluko* ceremony: "You're lucky. It was bad for me … I was kept separate, like you. But I didn't have a caregiver. And the other initiates wouldn't help me. I taught myself how to do the dressing" (18:52). Xolani shows Kwanda a scar on his upper arm and explains: "A rabid dog got into my hut. It was just me and the dog in the hut. And with all the pain I was in …" (19:19). It is explained later by Vija that Xolani killed the dog but in this moment Kwanda realises that Xolani was also alone and ostracised because of his difference from the other initiates – Xolani, however, did not have any of the class privileges Kwanda has. Kwanda is perplexed as to why Xolani would return to the ceremony, given that he did not have a good experience: "So what bring you back here? What do you get from servicing initiates?" unaware of Xolani and Vija's affair (19:38). Xolani tells Kwanda "It's not me. Your parents asked for my help" (19:43). To get to know his caregiver better, Kwanda asks Xolani if he misses his friends and his girlfriend. When Xolani does not answer Kwanda's question, the dawning recognition on Kwanda's face suggests that this is the moment when Kwanda first registers Xolani's homosexuality (20:10). As they sit silently together in Kwanda's hut, this

affinity between the two men makes Kwanda realise that he is not alone. Just as Xolani feels alone in his life because he cannot live authentically with the man who has shaped his idea of intimacy and sex, so too does Kwanda feel alone in this hypermasculine space where he feels that the masculinity on display is performative, outdated, and unnecessary.

As the days progress, there are various elements and steps involved in completing the ritual. Khwalo arrives at the campsite to check on Kwanda, but also to partake as a father in the ritual. The elders and the other men all stand outside the initiate's hut and call for Kwanda to come out. Before he comes out of the hut, he has to say shout something so that everyone outside can hear. The head elder shouts "We can't hear you" to which Kwanda shouts back the Xhosa word "Ngqash!" (21:34). According the website *Word Reference*, the word "*Ngqash*" is used only by Xhosa initiates at the ceremony and the words "have no English translation nor are they ever used outside that space. They are never known or used by anyone who [has] never undergone initiation. They are both exclamation words that [assert] rejection." It has also been suggested that word "rejects all things boyhood [or] non-Xhosa" (localmaximum no. 4). After Kwanda comes out of his hut, Khwalo thanks all of the men for his help: "Oh my brothers. I'm so happy. I'm so happy. Thank you, gentlemen" (21:51) as the other initiates watch Khwalo praise his son, further highlighting the class differences as their fathers are not there. Following this joyous moment of Khwalo's satisfaction with his son's journey so far, the festivities and the celebration begin. At first, a goat is slaughtered, and then the men dance around a fire and engage in ritualistic displays of traditional fighting. During these fighting displays, other men are dancing and singing traditional chants and songs. It sounds beautiful and full of fervour and joy. The men are fuelled not only by alcohol but with the excitement attendant on this passage to manhood for the new initiates. There is also a sense of nostalgia in the older men as the prideful displays of enthusiasm show how important this moment is and should be in a young Xhosa man's life.

There is, however, also a moment of vulnerability when Vija and Xolani are celebrating together. They are intoxicated and therefore let their guards down. They openly embrace each other with Xolani gripping Vija around the waist. Xolani is visibly frustrated as Vija breaks away from his grip. He is overcome with his longing for intimacy with Vija but is also snapped back into reality when he realises where he is. As the ceremony progresses into the night, the elders and caregivers sit around a fire and continue to drink alcohol as they talk. A visibly drunk Vija recounts his memory of his and Xolani's initiation during which Xolani bravely killed a rabid dog that was attacking him. Vija proudly talks up Xolani's masculinity which leaves Xolani hurt as they are forced to hide their authentic feelings. Vija tells Xolani in front

of the other men at the fire: "X. You're the man. We go way back. We'll always be friends and that will never change, understand?" (24:50). In a way, Vija's public assertion is the only way he can express his admiration for Xolani under the mask of brotherhood, despite how the label of friendship undercuts their true connection. Although their flawed, dysfunctional, and painful relationship has been going on for decades, it is kept safe not only because of the danger of exposure but by the guaranteed secrecy of the ritual itself.

At another section of the campsite, the initiates sit around their own fire and talk about their future sexual conquests. Kwanda does not participate in this conversation with the other initiates as the ritualistic space does not permit conversations about homosexual sex. Kwanda is interrogated about his city life by two *amanqalathi.* Kwanda reinforces his detachment to ritual by ignoring the *amanqalathi* and leaving the group of initiates. He makes his way to the group of older men ignoring the clear power structures and segregation of the different men. Vija notices Kwanda at the elders' campsite and interrogates him after he defiantly sits down next to one of the older men at the fire. Vija, bothered by Kwanda's presence, seeks to find out why he is ignoring the rules of the traditional space. A visibly irritated Kwanda seeks clarification from Vija: "I was wondering, caregiver, what happens next? Aren't we done yet? (26:19). These remarks trigger an audible negative reaction out of many men around the campfire. A wary Xolani looks on as Vija asks Kwanda to explain further to which he retorts: "I mean, we have to sit here for two more weeks watching our dicks heal?" (26:30) Vija, visibly annoyed by Kwanda's disrespectful remarks, launches a tirade against him questioning Kwanda's wishes in rushing of the ceremony. Vija gets up in front of everyone sitting around the fire and walks over to Kwanda to confront him. A nervous Xolani asks Vija to leave him alone and tries to order Kwanda to go away as he is aware of Vija's penchant for violence. Vija asks Kwanda to give him the stick that he is to carry around with him during the entire ritual. He reluctantly offers Vija his stick but does not let go of it – which comes across as a direct challenge to Vija. A scuffle ensues and, Vija who overpowers Kwanda in a headlock forces him to leave the area. Gibson Ncube notes the use of violence during the film, and how it forms part of the foundation of manhood made there: "*Inxeba* shows that the construction of masculinity involves the use of violence and aggression to assert one's manliness" (par. 15). By challenging Vija, Kwanda is directly challenging his masculinity. Other men voice their disagreement with Kwanda's attitude while someone remarks, "He needs a beating!" as Xolani looks on (27:56). This scene, which focuses our attention on Xolani watching as these words are uttered, serves as a deft, stylistic foreshadowing of what is to come later on in the film. After Kwanda is ejected from the elders' area, the head elder continues the lessons to the young

initiates as he tells a historical tale about the ceremony. During this storytelling, Kwanda sits in his father's Mercedes SUV and begins to listen to loud music on the car radio, which serves a physical depiction of his elevated class. During his moment of scorn, Kwanda notices Xolani walk off with Vija following closely behind him – which further raises his suspicions about Xolani, but also makes him suspicious of Vija.

In the next scene, it is the following day, and Xolani is talking to Kwanda who is washing in the river when they both spot Vija. Kwanda, intrigued by what he saw the night before, begins to ask more about Vija and his friendship with Xolani. Xolani warns Kwanda to stay away from him to which Kwanda asserts, "I'm not scared of him" (30:28). Later that evening, Xolani and Vija make their way through the hills for another sexual encounter. Xolani tries to kiss Vija, but he does not let him and instead restrains his head and forces Xolani to perform oral sex on him. Vija's physical aggression with Xolani in this scene could be read as a form of punishment for trying to kiss him, an act Vija continues to resist – as a kiss is very intimate and would force Vija to confront his feelings.

Throughout the film, Kwanda is often teased by the other initiates for being gay. As Gibson Ncube notes: "In several scenes in the film, the initiates engage in stick fights. They also look down on one initiate, Kwanda, whom they call "*is'tabane*", a derogatory isiXhosa word for homosexual" ("South Africa" par. 15). Despite the negative attention Kwanda receives from his fellow initiates, he ignores it and is silent and observant of his surroundings and the people around him. He repeatedly takes specific and careful consideration of the relationship between Xolani and Vija. His observation and growing recognition of the interactions occurring between the two men culminates in a moment of confirmation in the hut with Xolani. As Xolani sleeps, Kwanda moves his hands over Xolani in a way that is not directly touching him but is nevertheless an effort to get as close as possible. Xolani wakes up confused and concerned about Kwanda's actions. Kwanda reassures Xolani that "it's OK," suggesting he is okay with Xolani dropping the mask of secrecy (35:44). Once he realises that Kwanda knows of his queerness, Xolani grabs hold of Kwanda's hand and pushes him back. He says nothing but leaves a surprised Kwanda in the hut. Overcome with the shock that Kwanda knows about his homosexuality, Xolani leaves the young man alone at the campsite as he makes his way to a van where other men from the camp are on their way to fetch supplies.

As is shown in his expectations that Xolani will return his advances, Kwanda continues throughout the film to be both defiant and proud. There is a striking scene in which Kwanda stares at himself after he puts his nose ring in – openly declaring that he no longer wishes to hide the type of self-expression his culture deems taboo. Despite his bravery, the other initiates

continue to tease and berate him. Although they outnumber him and steal his shoes, which, as will be discussed in more detail later, are symbolic of the class differences between Kwanda and the other initiates, Kwanda does not back down. He fights to get his shoes back, and when he does, he separates himself from the other initiates. Later, when Xolani is on his way back to the campsite, he notices that Kwanda is at Vija's campsite. Shocked by this discovery, especially after knowing what Kwanda knows, he joins them. He looks worried and concerned that Kwanda may have revealed what he suspects. Xolani orders Kwanda to come with him, but the young initiate refuses and once again challenges his authority. He does, however, relent finally and join Xolani. In a critical scene of the film, as they make their way back to their campsite, Xolani asks Kwanda about his defiance. Kwanda immediately confronts Xolani head-on about his relationship with Vija: "What do you see in him? Do you think he cares about you? Do you think he thinks about you? I can see what you are, but you can't admit it. You want me to be a man and stand up for myself, but you can't do it yourself" (39:23). Xolani is taken aback, unable to handle the confrontation from Kwanda, and begins to walk away. A relentless Kwanda follows him and asks, "Aren't you tired? Pretending to be something you're not" (39:44). This harsh interrogation further antagonises Xolani. He instructs Kwanda to leave him alone, but not before Kwanda says: "Don't worry, your secret is safe with me" (39:53). This moment serves as confirmation that someone other than the two men involved knows about the affair. Despite his insight into their relationship, it also helps to illustrate how Kwanda remains unaware of the realities that Xolani and Vija face. Although he comes from the city of Johannesburg to rural Eastern Cape where a particular version of masculinity is required and where he knows that he does not fit in, his privilege offers him more safety. Thus he is not afraid to challenge the preconceived notions of masculinity that inform the elders, the caretakers, and the initiates. He does this by highlighting the hypocrisy of Vija and Xolani's relationship and the patriarchal beliefs that their homosexuality emasculates them. He does, however, also afford Xolani a sense of protection in his promise to keep the relationship secret. To him it seems apparent that Vija is only using Xolani so he confronts this issue in the hopes that it will help Xolani to stand up for himself. Following his confrontation with Kwanda, Xolani makes his way back to Vija's campsite. When Vija notices him, Xolani apologises for his initiate's behaviour. Throughout the film, whenever Xolani is around Vija, he reverts to the days when they were boys, and he loses all sense of confidence.

Xolani, despite Vija's initial dismissal of the idea, also gives him money to help towards his financial burdens placed on him by his family because it is all that he can do for him. Vija reluctantly takes the money only after Xolani takes his hand and puts it in his hold. Surrounded

by the sounds of the water, serving as a reminder of the notion of suffocation, the two stare at each other until Vija admits to Xolani, with a crack in his voice: “You’re a good man. Thank you” (43:18). Vija clearly feels guilty about how he treats Xolani and as Xolani leaves the campsite, Vija calls after him, asking that the two go for a drink.

The Confrontation of Gay Xhosa Love

In a crucial scene of the film, Xolani slowly reaches his breaking point as he confronts Vija about their relationship. The two men are shown walking alone together in the vast open fields. Electricity pylons tower over them while they talk, drink, laugh, make jokes and recollect memories from their shared past. Their joking evolves into a serious conversation when Vija asks Xolani: “The kid’s a faggot isn’t he?” (44:40). At this moment, Vija’s internalised homophobia exposes itself. He does not see the irony in his use of disparaging language to describe Kwanda as being gay, which often happens in closeted situations. His failure to reconcile that Kwanda can go through the ceremony and still be his authentic self, not only antagonises him but causes much internal conflict. Because of his earlier confrontation with Kwanda, Xolani starts to doubt his situation with Vija. When answering Vija’s question, Xolani takes his time and replies, “So?” to which Vija replies, “I wouldn’t get too attached if I were you. Get out while you can” (42:50). Vija’s remarks suggest that he thinks Xolani is attracted to Kwanda, but also imply his own attitude towards the pain, internal conflict, and anguish that comes with this sort of attachment.

But Vija’s actions suggest the exact opposite of his words as he thanks Xolani once again for the money, puts his arm around Xolani’s shoulder and tells him that he is a good friend. He states sincerely: “You never change. Thank you” (43:44). What ensues after Vija’s remarks is a pivotal but rare moment of unguarded togetherness and tender physical closeness. Xolani leans in to kiss Vija who, this time, does not back away and returns the kiss with passionate intimacy. Xolani pulls away and confesses his feelings to Vija in an attempt to get Vija to face things head on: “You know why I don’t change? Why do you think I’m here? Fuck Queenstown. I was always the clever one at school. I could have left. Instead, I work. I live alone. Eat alone. But I always come back here. Why do you think that is? I come back for you. To help you” (44:30). After Xolani’s confession, Vija sighs audibly and pulls away as he cannot do as Xolani wishes and be together. He then tries to return Xolani’s money and the two begin to argue. Xolani asks: “Why are you doing this?” and with a cracked voice Vija responds, “I can’t do this!” Xolani pushes Vija even more, asking “Why?” multiple times before he finally

asks him, “What are you afraid of?” while ignoring the very dire repercussions of Vija coming out (45:40 – 45:48). Xolani is forcing Vija to confront his deepest secret that has been wrapped in self-loathing and overt masculinity – masked by his heteronormative life outside his connection with Xolani during their brief encounters in the mountains.

The two are no longer arguing about the money, but about how Vija cannot commit to more for Xolani. In a stylistic choice designed to show the parallel struggles of the two characters, Xolani belligerently continues to ask Vija what he is afraid of, echoing Kwanda’s words as he notes furiously: “We do this every year. The same thing. *Aren’t you tired?* When will you stop hiding?” (46:04 *my emphasis)*. The decision of the filmmakers to have Xolani repeat Kwanda’s question, as it was earlier posed to him, is important here to demonstrate the young man’s role as a catalyst who pushes Xolani to address what has been unspoken between him and Vija for decades. Vija is scared of confronting his love for Xolani because it means that he could lose everything. Vija is conditioned to perform his masculinity through expressions of violence and assertiveness – throughout the ceremony and in life. Therefore, Vija ignores Xolani’s questions and the pair begin to scuffle. Vija overpowers Xolani, leaving the latter angry and frustrated. To hurt Vija in the only way he knows how, as Vija leaves, Xolani tells him: “You should know I’m not coming back. We won’t see each other next year. Run, coward” (46:27). The moment after Vija walks away is one of real poignancy for both men. The confrontation of their love has shaken Vija while emboldening Xolani who begins to take heed to what Kwanda has been saying to him – he deserves more than Vija has been giving him and he can be braver than he is. He has destroyed Vija’s comfort for the sake of pursuing his own happiness more actively. Xolani’s confrontation is brash and Vija’s treatment towards Xolani is manipulative, however, these are the choices available to them. This is not their doing but rather a direct result of societal expectations.

If the Shoe Fits: Depictions of Classism in *Inxeba*

At the *ulwaluko* ceremony, Kwanda is often outcast from his fellow initiates – sometimes due to his own choices. There are several scenes in the film that depict a disjuncture between Kwanda and his fellow initiates due to his class and his sexuality. In the scene that follows Xolani and Vija’s confrontation, the initiates must say their thanks to the elders for what they have taught them during the ritual. They connect their newfound manhood to themselves by reciting their names with their clan and family names. There are resounding cries of the goal to revive family houses, to continue legacies, and to lead communities. When it is Kwanda’s

turn to speak, he refuses and says, with a despondent look on his face, that he does not want to speak. Niza Jay observes: "although Xhosa culture rightfully creates a space for abiding male bodies to flourish, endowing them with the tools to occupy their designated place as men in the culture, defiant bodies such as mine are expected to forego self-definition to satisfy cultural expectations of manhood" (par. 14). As Niza Jay points out, an authentic queer body will not satisfy Xhosa cultural expectations – which is something Kwanda realises the longer he participates in the ritual. Kwanda feels like he does not belong and he knows that he will not please the elders with an answer that differs from the other initiates, resulting in his silence. Xolani comes to his defence and states: "He's not ready yet, elder. He's still learning" (48:56). Kwanda's silence does not sit well with the rest of the men. One of the other caregivers, Babalo, retorts "That's nonsense, you hear me? This boy will stand up and speak like all the other initiates" (49:00). Xolani defends Kwanda by reminding the other men that "He's my initiate and he'll speak when he's ready" (49:13). One of the elders, however, begins to berate Kwanda and his upbringing: "What were we thinking? The father fucks off to the city, as if he was banished from here. Deserting his home and traditions. As a result, this is what we're faced with today. It's staring us in the face" (49:19). There is a moment where the camera focuses on the pair sitting alone on a log by the fire, separated from the rest of the group, as Babalo rebukes Xolani's defence of Kwanda: "Caregiver, don't forget where you come from" (49:41). In this scene, the filmmakers once again, illustrate the parallels between Kwanda and Xolani – and their shared isolation in the *AmaXhosa* culture.

Kwanda is defiant but unsure of what he believes in. He knows, however, that it is not the teachings of the ritual. Kwanda agrees to participate in the ceremony to please his father but, as time passes, he learns that pleasing his father will not make him truly happy. His goals change, and when viewing his actions through a cultural lens, he is often behaves in ways that are immature, disrespectful, and entitled. Through a queer lens, however, Kwanda is progressive, authentic, and courageous given the ties that culture and tradition have to heteronormative patriarchal hegemony. Kwanda's defiance and progressiveness are born from a reaction to the ceremony and culture, namely his inability to be himself in a space that requires him to conform and follow the mould that has been in place for millennia. On the one hand, he is not made welcome by any of the other initiates nor by the practices of the initiation ceremony because of his sexuality. On the other hand, throughout the film there is much that highlights Kwanda's elevated class, namely his electronic music, shoes, and nose ring – all of which also separate him from the other initiates. He fails to realise that his classism and

snobbish attitude towards the teachings of the rituals are what are divisive. This will be further explored later in this section.

Kwanda can be brash, provocative, individualistic – he favours that above the community-driven life of the rural *AmaXhosa*. His individualism, however, highlights the need for the inclusion and recognition of nonnormative sexualities by traditional cultures, as afforded to every South African, as stated in the constitution. When queer men (and women) hide their authentic selves during cultural practices, further divisions are sewn into the fabric of a country and a national culture with an already fractured history. Although the viewer may interpret the earlier statement from the elder as highlighting the apparent dichotomy between modern and traditional, I think that it calls attention to the inability for this cultural ritual to adapt and change with contemporary modes of inclusion and acceptance.

The tension within the group of initiates derives from the entanglements of sexuality and class in this traditional space, as exemplified by Kwanda. Because he lives an affluent life in the urban city, Kwanda is distant from his cultural roots and maintains a classist attitude towards other initiates. The filmmakers choose to represent Kwanda's resistance to the Xhosa culture and elevated class through specific symbolism, namely his shoes. In an earlier scene, as the initiates are walking in the forest, they tease Kwanda about his insistence on wearing shoes as they are all barefoot and are clearly used to walking like this. One of the initiates, Zuko, informs Kwanda: "You know you're not supposed to wear them here?" as a way to alienate him (32:48). Zuko further separates Kwanda when he says that "I can tell he thinks he's white" (32:57). Therefore, the shoes serve as a metaphor for Kwanda's elevated class and his disconnection from the *AmaXhosa* culture – his feet never touch the ground and therefore he is not connected to the land. The initiates also link his city living to whiteness when they ask him invasive questions about white girls from Johannesburg. This questioning provokes Zuko to further embarrass Kwanda when he states, "Why are you asking him? What would he know about girls?" to infer to the others what they all suspect about Kwanda's sexuality and to highlight how he does not belong there (33:12).

Another crucial moment that depicts the differences between Kwanda and the other initiates occurs as they are showing each other their circumcisions. A few initiates invite Kwanda to show them his circumcision. At first, he is reluctant to show the other initiates his penis. As a queer person, such same-sex experiences of nakedness and exposure, viewed as spaces of safety for cis-heterosexual men, are charged with risk, as well as with shame and desire. Kwanda joins the group but before he can compare his circumcision, Zuko, one of the initiates, makes an exaggerated point of excluding Kwanda from this unsexualised display

when he declares, “Fuck that! He’s not looking at mine. He sleeps with men. That’s why he wants to see our dicks. Just because your father has money” (51:27). His statement is not only homophobic, but it also calls attention to how heteronormative culture and society overtly sexualise queer bodies. To defend himself and his father’s reputation from the other initiate, Kwanda lambastes the initiate’s father: “So he’s one of those [men] who disappears for weeks and fucks around on your mom with a different woman in every town. And when he comes home at the end of the month he wants respect because he’s the man, right?” (51:52). Kwanda’s defensive retort is a further critique of the ideas of masculinity which surround the initiates and the ceremony and which he exposes as hypocritical. His harsh rebuke is his only protection from their homophobic verbal violence with its constant threat of physical violence. So Kwanda too is pushed towards hypermasculinity in order to protect himself. This highlights the requirement of being able to demonstrate a capacity for violence as a way of protecting yourself as a man – shown in Vija, the other men, and finally in Xolani, as will be explored later. The initiate then tries to launch an attack at Kwanda and continues to assault him verbally with homophobic expletives: “I’ll show you what we do to faggots where I come from” (52:10) while the other initiates stop him before anything can happen. This scene confirms Kwanda’s feelings of being othered by the demonstrating the other initiates unnecessarily sexualising his body. This sexualisation of a non-sexual act is an affront to Kwanda as it feeds into the stereotypes about gay men being hyper-sexualised, unable to contain their sexual urges around other men. Kwanda is yet again ostracised in the ceremonial space for trying to be his authentic self.

From afar, Vija notices this confrontation between the initiates and as Kwanda leaves the group, he calls him over to talk. Vija explains to Kwanda that: “You shouldn’t let them get to you. They’re jealous. They want the life you have” (52:46) as he calls attention to the class differences between Kwanda and the other initiates. Kwanda responds “I don’t have time for them” illustrating his entitlement and arrogance. The poverty of all the other men is visually apparent throughout the film. Kwanda has no humility or reason in the face of such poverty. He does not find value in a different mode of life to his own as he looks down on these men. Kwanda is aware that his wealth gives him power. The Eastern Cape *AmaXhosa* community is not his and so he does not care how he behaves here and his actions have no consequences for him. Vija realises that he is unable to reason with Kwanda and asserts: “So you are here to fuck up our ways” (53:08). Kwanda, who has proven that he can stand up to Vija (and his authority), asks for clarification. Vija confronts and calls out Kwanda’s criticism and resistance to the ceremony: “I can see your tricks. You pretend not to give a damn. But you won’t be satisfied

until you've disrupted our ways. Isn't that right?" (53:21). Kwanda, clearly aggravated by being called out by Vija, informs him that, under Xolani's orders, he cannot speak to Vija. When asked why, Kwanda then wields the only power that he knows could hurt Vija, his sexuality, insinuating what he knows about the two men: "Maybe it's because he wants me all for himself" (53:52). It clearly shakes Vija as he leaves the young initiate.

Catalytic Change: Confrontations of Queerness in *Inxeba*

Throughout the film, as pointed out by Vija, Kwanda is presented as an uncomfortable force of disruption and change. Kwanda's ability to read between the lines affects both Xolani and Vija as "he challenges them and their conceptions of masculinity, becoming a threat both to the lovers and to himself" (Joffe par. 2). He does not always do this intentionally. Sometimes his mere existence upends the traditional modes and values. There is a shift in Xolani and Vija's relationship towards the end of the film which demonstrates how Kwanda's presence in this ritual space has catalysed a change in their interactions and had an effect on both Vija and Xolani – both of them now question their shared reality. Xolani is starting to realise that he may deserve better whereas Vija finally realises that he should admit his feelings toward Xolani and behave better or he will lose him. Despite the tensions and vexed emotions caused by their secretive and problematic relationship, Vija and Xolani remain drawn to each other. There are moments in their brief interactions where they can be themselves as they can with no one else.

After Kwanda confronts Vija with his knowledge, the next scene shows Xolani returning from another supply trip to find an empty campsite. The *amanqalathi* inform him that the initiates have gone up to the mountain with Vija – leaving him to panic and chase after them. To the viewers, it is not clear what he is worried about – that Kwanda could expose his affair with Vija, or that Kwanda is alone without his protection. When Xolani and the other caregiver, Babalo, catch up to Vija and the initiates, they discover that the young men have gone to look for the waterfall. It can be inferred that Vija's actions are a sort of power play in response to his confrontation with Kwanda earlier. Xolani is angry at Vija, and so is Babalo, with the latter asking "Why would you just take them without telling us?" (55:38). In an effort not to show his anger in front of the initiates, Xolani agrees and leads the group to the waterfall. While walking to the waterfall Babalo asks Vija about Xolani:

> Babalo: Did you hear? X won't be coming back to the mountain next year.
> Vija: Nonsense. He'll be back
> Babalo: Maybe he's ready to take a wife, raise some kids of his own.

> Vija: With who? That little girl from the church?
> (56:20).

The camera is focused on Xolani's face during this entire conversation and shows how Vija's effort to hide their love affair by teasing Xolani about the girl from the church is hurtful to Xolani.

Before they all make it to the waterfall, they come across a white farmer who is working on a fence. The initiates and caregivers react with trepidation – highlighting the seclusion of the ceremony as well as the power dynamics between the Xhosa men and the white farmer. Throughout the film, race is not the focus of the narrative, granting the Xhosa men with agency but this scene suggests the fraught relationship between Xhosa culture and white farming culture. Xolani and the rest of the men become less assertive and confident when they encounter the farmer, indicating an imbalance of power, specifically in a space designed for them. This speaks to how important the film is, as it is not led by a narrative about race, suffering, nor a monolithic view of Africa.[32] While Babalo thinks that they should not cross the fence where the farmer is working, Xolani disagrees. He walks up to the farmer to explain that they wish to cross to see the waterfall, but as he is talking to the farmer, Vija proves to be reckless and coerces the initiates into stealing a goat from the farmer's van. Initially, this scene seemed like an add-on to propel the narrative in the subsequent scene to follow. Interestingly, however, in his autobiography, Nelson Mandela speaks about his experience with his *ulwaluko* ceremony and how he and the other boys during his ceremony stole a pig: "A custom of circumcision school is that one must perform a daring exploit before the ceremony. In days of old, this might have involved a cattle raid or even a battle, but in our time the deeds were more mischievous than martial" (63). The panic of fleeing from the farmer with the stolen goat ensues before Xolani realises what is happening. When they get to the forest Vija, in an attempt to undermine and embarrass Kwanda, instructs him to slaughter the goat. Kwanda reluctantly takes the knife that Vija offers him and mounts the goat. During the chaos of this theft, Xolani catches up to Vija and the initiates. He challenges Vija, and the two begin to fight. During this scuffle, despite his best efforts, Xolani is once again overpowered. The tensions rise and culminate in a scene where Kwanda, covered in blood, successfully slaughters the goat and proves his masculinity to the rest of the group. Interestingly, when Vija subdues Xolani in their tussle, he holds his head to the ground and at the same moment the camera cuts to Kwanda

[32] See Taiye Selasi, "Stop Pigeonholing African Writers" where she highlights "the west's tradition of essentialising African subjects" and explains how Africa is often viewed as a singular entity, as explored in the previous chapter (par. 3).

cutting the goat's throat – which can be viewed as another deliberate linking of Kwanda and Xolani by the filmmakers. From the scene where the initiates compare their circumcisions to this moment where he slaughters the goat, Kwanda's acceptance of his own kind of masculinity is entirely on display and Gibson Ncube points out that it "contrasts the hard manly expression of masculinity that is expected by heteropatriarchal strictures. This emergent masculinity presents itself as not inferior to the culturally idealised masculinity. It presents itself as complete and valid in its own right" ("South" par. 12). In addition, Kwanda is not interested in praise nor confirmation from Vija and his initiates and therefore leaves the rest of the group – showing that he has accepted that he is different. He is not waiting for the others to accept him. Kwanda is not afraid of Vija nor his threats, and even though he proves that he can perform the type of masculinity valued by men like Vija, he does not subscribe to that type of masculinity.

The Wounds of Xhosa Masculinity

Later that evening, the day's events have changed perceptions for everyone. Vija stumbles drunkenly through the woods alone while Kwanda dances around the fire with the rest of the initiates at the campsite while they all drink. Xolani, on the other hand, is asleep alone in the abandoned house that he and Vija often use for sex. The following day Xolani is confronted by Kwanda, who has a concerned look, which Xolani notices and asks: "Why the long face? You're going home tomorrow. Isn't that what you wanted? (1:01:54). Kwanda acknowledges that Xolani did not sleep in the hut the night before. Kwanda finds comfort in Xolani, so it is no surprise that he cares for him – especially after Xolani's public altercation with Vija. Xolani deflects Kwanda's concerns and expresses to Kwanda that he should be in high spirits. There is, however, also a hint of jealousy in his remarks: "You should be pleased. You're going back to your life. You're a man now" (1:02:12). Kwanda proves once again to be unrelenting in his concern for Xolani's happiness. To get through to Xolani and help in the only way he knows how he continues to ask questions and try to reason with him:

> Yes, I'm a man. I'm not taking anyone's shit anymore. Not my dad's. Not anybody's. You like this place? Seeing the same people? Doing the same things? Don't you want to leave, Xolani? See new things? They all see you, but won't let you be – I know what your problem is. You're afraid of what you want. (1:02:31)

When Xolani continues to ignore his pleas, Kwanda lashes out and calls him a "stupid faggot" (1:03:15). This slur used against Xolani garners his attention, and he confronts Kwanda. He

interrogates why Kwanda wants him to leave and assumes that the young man wants him to join him in Johannesburg and pursue something more. Xolani highlights the disparities between the two men and how they are from different social classes. Kwanda, who was raised in Johannesburg can live more comfortably there whereas Xolani, who has lived in Eastern Cape and would be an outsider in Johannesburg, knows that he would not fit in. In one of the most important moments of dialogue in the film, Xolani notes: "The mountain is all there is for me. And it's not enough," calling attention to their class differences and the choices they have in their respective lives (1:03:47).

Xolani angrily leaves Kwanda and makes his way out of the woods, but as he is going, he is approached by two initiates who confront him about his relationship with Kwanda. They infer that they know that he is gay and that he has had sex with Kwanda. They let him know that the relationship they suspect is wrong: "We mean no disrespect but we've been hearing stories … You and that city boy. Caregiver, we've been watching you … This is not the first day we've seen you. We've been watching you. What kind of man does what you do? (1:04:15-1:04:52). Xolani does not appreciate their attitudes and disrespect and begins to question them while they in turn become aggressive and invasive with their questioning. Before the situation gets any more out of control, Vija arrives and reprimands the young initiates. While Xolani stands and watches, Vija then begins to beat up one of the young men. As his violence against the initiate intensifies, the familiar sound of the siren from the beginning of the film grows louder and louder, until one of the other caregivers steps in and stop him. The caregiver rebukes Vija actions, asserting: "A man doesn't behave like this!" (1:05:28). Vija becomes overwhelmed by the entire situation and in this moment he exposes himself – his fear, his feelings for Xolani, his need to protect him, are all on display in his aggression towards the initiate who has confronted Xolani with his queerness. Vija fears himself. He tries to fight himself, his emotions and his situation in the only way he knows how – through violence. His vulnerability has been expressed through violence as his fear of being perceived as weak leads him to extremes of which other men in his community disapprove, strongly. Vija also struggles with the idea of identity – all of the conflicting moments leading up to this moment result in him not knowing who he is. This crucial scene highlights the strength of the film's ability to represent all kinds of Xhosa masculinity.

Vija is confused by his actions and therefore makes his way to the waterfall with Xolani following after him. Although water often symbolises how Xolani is suffocating and drowning throughout the film, in this pivotal scene, water is used as a symbol of cleanliness and rebirth. At the base of the waterfall, Vija walks into the water. Xolani follows him and immediately

embraces him. This is a key moment in the film where Vija finally confronts his emotions. At first, he fights Xolani's embrace but eventually succumbs to it – as the two men cry while they hold each other. The overwhelming white noise of the waterfall behind the two men embracing is symbolic of their overwhelming feelings. In the next scene, Xolani and Vija move to the woods to have sex, but this time it is far more intimate and sensual compared to any of the other times depicted in the film so far. They fall asleep in the woods, naked, in each other's arms – dropping their guards once again. Their vulnerability is exacerbated when Kwanda comes across the two men asleep together naked. They begin to panic and put on their clothes after the young initiate awakens them. He stares at the two disapprovingly – which is not to suggest that he disagrees with their relationship entirely, but that his disappointment and disapproval lies with their hypocrisy. Kwanda fails to recognise or understand what being gay is like for a slightly older generation of men and here he demonstrates his lack of compassion or solidarity. He addresses Vija in order to provoke him: "Excuse me, brother. Does your wife know the shit you get up to on the mountain?" (1:08:25). Once again, Vija's vulnerability results in him responding in violence. Consumed by his anger towards Kwanda, Vija chases after him to stop him from exposing the affair and outing him as a gay Xhosa man. In his efforts to continue protecting Kwanda, Xolani tries to prevent Vija from going after him but gets hit in their struggle. As he runs through the woods, Kwanda trips and is injured, but manages to evade Vija and the violence aimed at him if Vija was to catch him. Xolani eventually catches up to Vija who has given up on his search for Kwanda – shown by him sitting with his head hung low, full of shame. Xolani can see how Vija is broken and exposed by the discovery of their secret. Stumbling through the dark, Kwanda tries to make his way back to the campsite, but due to his injury and his inability to find his way, he spends his last night of the initiation ceremony hidden in the bush.

The next scene opens the following morning, where the elders are gathered at the campsite to congratulate the young men on completing their initiation ceremony. As they inspect the initiates' circumcisions, one of the senior men notes: "This is how a man is meant to be" (1:11:14). Another elder questions where Kwanda is. The other caregivers inform him that he is missing and that Xolani and Vija are looking for him. The shot of Kwanda standing over Xolani and Vija asleep is echoed in the following scene where Xolani eventually finds Kwanda the next morning and stares at him as he wakes up. Xolani instructs Kwanda to put his clothes on and tells him that he will guide him to a nearby highway to protect him from Vija. As they make their way to the highway, the elders back at the campsite leave the initiates with parting words: "Young boys, you have crossed the first of many rivers of manhood. You

must be patient and persevere, my sons. The deepest river is the one you cross when you leave this place. As men you should be proud. Grow a family. Build a kraal and let it not be hollow!" (1:13:13). To complete the last part of the ritual, the initiates and caregivers set the huts alight and leave them to burn as they all leave for home. The words from the elder ring out loudly while the initiates burn down their huts. As they are chanting and singing, the scene cuts to Xolani and Kwanda are far away near the top of the mountain. Kwanda is struggling as he makes his way to the highway with Xolani close behind him. There is a defining moment of foreshadowing as one of the elders below them asserts: "Open your ears. Open your eyes. Reject the foreign ways of the city. And beware the temptations of the white devil that attacks the womb of the black woman" (1:13:50). Xolani rises and stares intensely at a hobbling Kwanda, and it is clear that he is no longer looking out for Kwanda, but for himself and Vija.

The beautiful chants of the men making their way home can be heard across the mountain where Kwanda is still attempting to comprehend his altercation with Vija. He begins to more broadly question homophobia in Africa as he says to Xolani:

> This is South Africa, not Uganda or Zimbabwe. We're not lead by Mugabe. Like Africa doesn't know gay love? I'm sure Shaka and his warriors all wanted each other. Probably Jesus and his disciples were the same. How can love destroy a nation? What's the purpose of a dick anyway? Sure, it's nice. But is it really such an important instrument? … People think they are so smart. Men follow their dicks around like it's the most important thing. A stupid little tip. It's completely irrelevant. (1:14:45 – 1:15:41)

Kwanda's words highlight the questions that need to be asked about South Africa, African homophobia, and the centrality of the penis to ideas of identity – what Jacques Derrida calls phallogocentrism.[33] Kwanda's acknowledgement that homosexuality in Africa has existed for all time also echoes the sentiments that homosexuality is not destructive, but instead, that homophobia is. Because Kwanda is young, naïve, privileged, wealthy and urban, however, he sees his version of homosexuality in African culture as straightforward and comfortable. Due to his immaturity he is given to black and white thinking without compassion or generosity for the relationship between Xolani and Vija – he does not understand the complexities of why their secret consumes, controls, and could destroy them. Kwanda continues to air his issues with Vija, other men and masculinity while Xolani proceeds to guide him further up the mountain. A defeated Vija eventually meets up with the returning initiates and when Babalo

[33] According to M.H Abrams, phallogocentrism is where discourse "is centred and organized throughout by implicit recourse to the phallus (used in a symbolic sense) both as its supposed 'logos,' or ground, and as its prime signifier and power source" (128).

asks him if he is all right, to which he does not answer. Vija's silence is born out of fear and the risk of exposure, but when he spots Khwalo who is waiting for Kwanda, he joins the other men in their singing. Vija is relieved and feels secure in his secret not being exposed as Kwanda is not there. Up on top of the mountain, Xolani turns to Kwanda and affirms his belief that Vija is a good man. Kwanda retorts: "He's a little boy posing as a big Xhosa man. Like all the rest of them. You need to free yourself from this bullshit" (1:17:11).

Throughout the film, it is clear that Xolani cares deeply for Vija despite his obvious flaws – he relentlessly defends Vija's bad behaviour, hypocrisy, and inability to be real. When Xolani points out that "He's got a wife and family. You don't think about those things," Kwanda does not feel empathy for Vija. He goes so far as to say that he should be exposed: "I don't give a shit! Someone should expose him. As a liar and hypocrite," once again demonstrating his inability to understand the precarity of this exposure for the two men (1:17:22 – 1:17:26). Kwanda, on the other hand, continues desperately to try help Xolani reconcile with his happiness, stating that he deserves better in life: "You think he loves you? You think you're the only guy he fucks? Fuck! I'm so angry! Aren't you fucking angry? Doesn't he make you mad?" (1:17:33). Xolani does not answer Kwanda's questions, but the questions linger in his mind as the anger grows on his face. Kwanda walks in one direction, but Xolani stops him and observes that there is another way down. Kwanda is confused by this as he can see the highway from the top of the mountain. With one more effort to ensure Kwanda's silence, Xolani pleads with him, reiterating the rules he laid out at the beginning of the ritual, but this time there are more dire implications if he speaks out: "You can't speak of what happened on the mountain" (1:18:10). Kwanda looks at Xolani with a dumbfounded look on his face and walks away – signalling that he has no desire to keep the secret anymore. Filled with anger and frustration, Kwanda can no longer guarantee his silence when he leaves and continues on their original path as Xolani follows him. They find themselves even higher up on the mountain with the flowing river below.

During their last moments together, it is evident that Xolani grapples with the reality of Kwanda revealing his secrets versus his responsibility to protect the young initiate. He is, however, overcome with shame, fear, and the risk of exposure. It is clear that, from the moment Xolani witnessed Vija hang his head in shame, Xolani would put the man he loves first. Kwanda peers over the edge of the mountain and utters: "You said there was a path," when Xolani, who is plagued by the risk of exposure and therefore him losing the closest thing he has to a relationship, strikes Kwanda on the head with a stone (1:18:30). For Xolani there is no path – the conflicting versions of South African masculinity do not offer him a future. Xolani

watches as Kwanda falls to his death into the river below. It is a frightening moment, but by hitting Kwanda on the head with a stone and inflicting a literal wound, Xolani enlarges his unhealed psychic wound. The shame that comes from being gay within a culture that emphasises performing cis-heterosexual masculinity and adhering to cultural norms, both of which do not accommodate homosexuality, drives Xolani to commit this unspeakable act and follow this path he has reluctantly chosen.

As Xolani makes his way into town on foot, the familiar ringing from the opening scene grows increasingly louder. Xolani has a numb look on his face, and this scene of his returning home is intercut with shots of people at the closing of the ceremony, dancing while waiting to greet the returning initiates. The camera moves in such a way as to mimic someone underwater. It is as jarring as it is disorientating. As the shot begins to realign its orientation, it focuses on a young boy who stares directly into the camera, displaying his innocence. The image of the boy is juxtaposed with a shot of Xolani on the back of a truck as he heads into the city – signalling the birth and death of innocence. Philile Ntuli observes that Xolani "leaves the mountain the same as he had arrived: wounded, secretive, and dangerously violent" (par. 9). He has a solemn look on his face as he makes his way back to his life where paradoxically nothing has changed. Although Xolani is the one who murders Kwanda, as Ntuli points out, the young initiate is 'killed,' in the metaphorical sense of killing his authenticity, spirit, and individuality, in many other ways:

> For his insistence at freedom, they all kill the effeminate and unapologetic gay initiate. His fellows kill him with bitter looks and sharp dehumanising tongues; his father does it with traditionalist patriarchy; the elders with their defence of sameness; Vija, Xolani's secret lover, with the hands of lust, and Xolani, the bravest, with a rock and silence. (par. 11)

Xolani's murdering of Kwanda highlights the pervasive nature of how the "fear of deviance from normative masculinities [and the exposure of this deviance] drives this violence" even in men who are a gay (Msibi 53). Xolani's actions speak to attitudes felt in South Africa where, unfortunately, there are too many examples of violence committed against queer people even in this age of progressive change.[34]

Inxeba shows that the nexus between queerness and masculinity in South Africa is replete with a masculinity that is, at its most visible state, extraordinarily fragile and interchangeable with violence. Although the dismantling of masculinity's link to violence

[34] See "Hate Crimes Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People in South Africa, 2016"

against queer people is filled with conflict and nuance, representations of queer masculinities in the characters of Kwanda, Xolani, and Vija seek to disrupt both the discourse and the stereotypes surrounding queer people in Africa. The violence depicted in the film is a direct form of "cultural labor" where lived experiences of black queer Xhosa men are made visible (Livermon "Queer" 300). This "cultural labor" upends the history of Western films where the violence has a long history of being a way of punishing or policing gay characters for being gay (Livermon "Queer" 300).[35] The film is an important case study in the ways in which masculinity wounds different men – as seen by the depiction of the three main characters, and also by the reception of the film, which illustrates the homophobic socio-cultural environment in South Africa, as will be explored in the next section.

Wounded Debates: The Reception of *Inxeba* in South Africa

This section will extend on Livermon's ideas and show how his thinking around black queerness is demonstrated by the film's reception in South Africa. Critically, *Inxeba*, which is "the most awarded film in South African history," (Politically Aweh 00:03) has been a juggernaut for South African cinema due to its reception abroad – "it has garnered 19 awards at 44 festivals across the globe" ("*Inxeba*" Mabasa par. 14). Furthermore, *Inxeba* has been critically well-received in South Africa. It "walked away with six awards" out of the eight nominations it received, including the Best Feature Film in 2018, at the South African Film and Television Awards (Kumona par. 1). The film almost made its way to the Hollywood awards stage as "it was also short-listed for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film category" (Mabasa "*Inxeba*" par. 14). Despite its reception from critics, however, the film has also been met with an outcry by people locally in South Africa. Not only are there dissatisfied people online, but there was an outcry from the public as, "cinemas across the Eastern Cape were forced to cancel screenings of the film and offer refunds to patrons who had bought tickets, as a result of protests, intimidation of employees and patrons, as well as damage to property" (Mabasa "*Inxeba*" par. 1).

The uproar surrounding the film is a direct reaction to the film's content. Due to the secretive nature of the ceremony, the filmmakers have been accused of revealing secrets that no one but the *AmaXhosa* initiates, and the men who take part, should know. Furthermore,

[35] See Haley Hulan's "Bury Your Gays: History, Usage and Context" as discussed in the previous chapter. Also see Jess Magnan "Bury Your Gays: How a 1930s Hollywood Production Code is Killing Your Favorite LGBTQ Characters Today."

because the film is written and directed by a white man, the film has been considered to be damaging to African culture by catering to a Western white gaze through its storytelling. In addition, many of the film's detractors have suggested that the film is disrespectful to the Xhosa culture – that it exploits a sacred ritual under the guise of artistic expression. All these arguments will be explored in this section. When analysing the furore surrounding the film, it is clear that the debate about *Inxeba* serves as a microcosm of the more extensive debate around legitimacy of queerness in South Africa.

The history of the release of *Inxeba* is complicated. It was initially classified by the Film and Publication Board (FPB) with a 16 LS rating.[36] The Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) and the South African National Traditional Healers Association, however, felt that the rating was not restrictive enough. Therefore CONTRALESA appealed this rating because, in their view, *Inxeba* "infringes on their right to the protection of [the Xhosa] culture, enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa" (Mabasa "*Inxeba*" par. 10). The outcry also derives from a nationalistic sense of the need to protect one's culture, as demonstrated when CONTRALESA provincial secretary, Nkosi Mkhanyiseli Dudumyo, called for a boycott of the film, asserting: "All people who are proud of their culture and are patriots must join us in protecting our custom against intentional exploitation and commercialisation" (Dudumyo qtd. in Feni and Ntshobane par. 5). As will be explored in this section, however, the exaggerated outcry is guided primarily by homophobia. According to CONTRALESA's Gauteng Chairman, Prince Manene Tabane, Xhosa men "are being embarrassed. He mentions that "the things that are being shown there is not what is happening in the mountain. It is disgusting and disrespectful of our cultural practices" (Tabane qtd. in Mabasa "*Inxeba*" par. 11). The FPB listened to these outcries and changed the rating. As Zelda Venter notes: "The [FPB] said it reclassified the film from a 16 age restriction to X18 following numerous complaints by cultural organisations, which among others, objected to the homosexuality depicted in the film, the violence and the vulgar language used" ("*Inxeba*" par. 13). Their appeal was successful, and the film's rating was altered – reclassified "to an X18 SNLVP rating, which meant it was classified as pornography" (Venter "Judge" par. 7). The film's reclassification as pornography meant that it was only suitable for adults and licensed, adults-only businesses could distribute the film. This reclassification raised many questions. As Eusebius McKaiser declared: *Inxeba* "cannot be pornography because it does not aim to

[36] This rating means that the film is not suitable for persons under the age of 16 and that the film contains scenes of strong language and scenes involving sex, sexual conduct or sexually-related activity. See the *Film and Publication Board* website at https://www.fpb.org.za/ratings/ for further explanation of film ratings.

arouse. The bits of nudity and implied sexual activity in three scenes do not last, collectively, for more than a few minutes in a film that is of regular feature length" ("Rating" par. 21- 22). He went on to argue that "the appeals tribunal did this only because the implied anal sex scene offended their homophobic sensibilities (even in the absence of explicit sex)" ("Rating" par. 26). The film's reclassification, as McKaiser points out, "stems from a wicked belief that homosexuality per se is pornographic. That is a view the appeals tribunal members can hold privately. It cannot in law be the basis of the X18 classification" ("Rating" par. 28). Therefore, the film producers turned to the courts in an attempt to "set aside the X-rated classification" (Venter "Judge" par. 10). Despite the infringement on the filmmakers' freedom of expression, they also argued that "the classification as hardcore pornography meant that the film could only be viewed at 'adult premises' and no longer at mainstream cinemas," which is detrimental to the film's success – given its critical acclaim (Venter "Judge" par. 13).

The filmmakers' court case to review the X18 rating of the film was met with much debate too, including discussions about freedom of expression and the infringement of the cultural rights of the Xhosa people. The review case was brought before Judge Joseph Raulinga who observed that "the right to freedom of expression had an effect on the rights of the Xhosa traditional group," noting that "the film included language which was degrading to Xhosa women and it exposed women to societal violence such as rape" (Raulinga qtd. in Venter "Judge" par. 20). Judge Raulinga also expressed that the film "contains harmful scenes which could cause tensions within the Xhosa community and even within the broader African community" (Raulinga qtd. in Venter "Judge" par. 21). According to Zelda Venter, however, he "concluded that the appeal tribunal did not have the jurisdiction to reclassify the film and therefore he granted the review" ("Judge" par. 22). John Trengove, who, with his fellow filmmakers and producers, was at the helm of trying to rectify the unfair reclassification, notes that "constitutionally speaking, this ruling by the FPB tribunal is completely out of line and there's really zero foundation for it. It's just a bureaucratic process, and I think we will get the decision overturned" (Trengove qtd. in Joffe par. 18). In time, the rating was changed but to 18 LVS – which allowed it to be screened in cinemas again, but, like *Rafiki*, this rating still negatively impacts the film. The controversy not only centred around the content of the film but the conflict that arose outside of its release. As Nkateko Mabasa notes, the producers also "filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission over the threats of intimidation and violence met by the cast and cinema employees" ("*Inxeba*" par. 3). The threats to the actors and creators of the film derived from the perceived threats to Xhosa masculinity and traditions.

From the moment its trailer was released, *Inxeba* has been met with controversy and debate. Nkateko Mabasa highlights that "there was always going to be controversy surrounding the movie given that when the trailer was released in 2017, it received widespread criticism over it 'allegedly' revealing the secret and sacred traditions of the Xhosa initiation ceremony" ("*Inxeba*" par. 4). Many people from the Xhosa culture have taken issue with the film's content and its portrayal of the sacred *ulwaluko* ceremony– calling for its banning. This controversy stems from the belief that the film reveals secrets of the ceremony. As Amanda Khoza notes, "secrecy is sacrosanct and deeply entrenched," within the ritual, and it is immensely personal to the male initiates (par. 24). *Ulwaluko* is "a practice that has always been masked in secrecy and is intended to prepare young men for manhood" (Kgomosotho par. 1). This secrecy enables women and non-initiates to be deliberately as well as carefully excluded from this ceremony that holds so much importance. On the one hand, there is the validity in the notion that the secrecy should be maintained to avoid any exploitation or corruption of the cultural sanctity of the ceremony. On the other hand, however, the narrative of the film highlights the need for freedom of sexuality in traditional cultures. The debate that greeted the film demonstrated how expressing sexual freedom in South Africa is often taboo, especially if this entails gay sexuality. As Nonhlanhla Dlamini notes: "discussions around matters of sex and sexuality evoke anxiety in Southern Africa and Africa as a whole because of secrecy and silence on sexual matters" (2). John Trengove, who insists that there was no cultural malice nor disrespect intended in making the film, argues:

> This is not an exposé but rather a film that is set in this space where young boys are taught to be men. How are we teaching our boys to be men? What is this idea of masculinity? And who are these two characters who are forced to hide such a crucial part of their identity while they're imparting this knowledge? (qtd. in Joffe par. 14)

According to Gibson Ncube, "what Trengove depicts of *ulwaluko* cannot be described as intrusive because what the film screens is what is generally known even by those who have not taken part in the initiation rites" ("Film" 64). Furthermore, Trengove also observes that "the backlash to *The Wound* seems to be proportionally much bigger than it was to [Nelson] Mandela's autobiography" which, as many have pointed out, also discusses and explains many parts of the *ulwaluko* ritual. Trengove observes: "You could kind of look at that and speculate that perhaps there is a homophobic subtext to the outrage" (qtd. in Politically Aweh 2:13 – 2:44). In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela mentions many details surrounding the ritual itself as well as his own experiences:

> In Xhosa tradition, [becoming a man] is achieved through one means only: circumcision. In my tradition, an uncircumcised male cannot be heir to his father's wealth, cannot marry or officiate in tribal rituals. An uncircumcised Xhosa man is a contradiction in terms, for he is not considered a man at all, but a boy. For the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society. It is not just a surgical procedure, but a lengthy and elaborate ritual in preparation for manhood. (59)

Beyond the public access to Nelson Mandela's musings on the subject of *ulwaluko*, the film contradicts the idea that it is disrespectful to the cultural practices by its tasteful depiction of the actual circumcision ritual, as pointed out by Masego Panyane: "When the *ingcibi* (traditional surgeon) makes the cut, the film presents a raised, side view of *umkhwetha* (the initiate). There's a scene where Xolani, the *ikhankatha* (the caregiver), is dressing Kwanda's wound. We only see their faces and are left to imagine what happens below" (par. 10-11).

The film was also touted as an inadequate representation, with morally corrupt depictions of Xhosa culture. As Zelda Venter observes, many of the film's opposers have echoed Judge Raulinga's earlier statements, explaining that "the film disrespects women, [as] it is riddled with vulgarities and incites rape and violence" ("Judge" Venter par. 6). The FPB said that "complaints were largely based on the perceived cultural insensitivity and distortion of the Xhosa circumcision tradition . . . and strong language in the film" (Dayile par. 7). As Tshego Lepule notes, "Traditional leaders have called for the movie *Inxeba*: *The Wound* to be banned and for film-makers to issue a public apology for portraying their traditions as 'barbaric'" (par. 1). Another of the film's detractors includes the *Man and Boy Foundation* executive director Nkululeko Nxesi who said that "traditional initiation schools are sacred spaces – not a space for sexual activity, regardless of whether it is homosexual sex or not" (Nxesi qtd. in Collison par. 10). Batana Vundla, who was one of the producers of the film, debunked the idea of cultural insensitivity and reinforced the idea that the outcry derives from homophobia:

> But this thing of 'protecting of culture' is really just a ruse to cover up homophobia. They will say these things don't happen in initiation schools, but we've worked with Xhosa men who have been to the bush and they have guided us. Over the five years it took to make this film, we had hundreds of conversations with men. We didn't imagine these things. We know these things happen. We made a point to honour the sacredness of initiation, its relevance and its importance. We approached it with the reverence and sanctity it deserves. This was not something that was done to insult anybody. But it is our right as artists to depict different modes of blackness and masculinity in society today. This is not a send-up of anyone's culture. (qtd. in Collison par. 22-23)

As Batana Vundla points out, much of the response to the film is homophobic – even more so because the fervent negative response includes people who have not yet even seen the film. This misinformed reaction speaks to the larger attitudes towards queerness in South Africa. As Eusebius McKaiser observes:

> The widespread sense of entitlement to hate *Inxeba* without having seen the film stems from the general acceptance of homophobia and conservative cultural tropes in society. Someone tells you there is a film in which the central characters have same-sex desire and same-sex sex and that is enough to give licence to public disapproval even without watching the film. ("Rating" par. 12)

The homophobic attitudes and beliefs depicted in the film, and which it strives to confront are, therefore, clearly mirrored in the public outcry at the film's release. For instance, after attending a screening of the film at Rhodes University in September 2018, I witnessed first-hand the backlash against the film's content. Responses to the film focused around questions about whether the decision to set the film's depiction of homosexual relationship within one of the most sacred Xhosa rituals was appropriate. In the press and on social media, *Inxeba* has also attracted a backlash, because the director decided to combine the breaking of taboos around homosexuality and circumcision in Xhosa culture. As Wamuwi Mbao points out:

> In the days that followed, I watched as conversations around the film played out in public spaces and on social media. It was a chorus of mostly heterosexual black men who filled various social media corners with the song of their hurt. They performed their dismay, and they made clear their disbelief that such a film was being put out into the world and that nobody was doing anything to stop it. In the tenor of their anger, it was easy to discern fear – the fear that one of the foundational sites of black male subjectivity was being symbolically castrated through its proximity to homosexuality. Their reaction reflected their deep discomfort with the notion that something so intrinsically a part of their specific cultural economy could be treated as a narrative – that is something which they do not have singular ownership over. (par. 6-8)

This backlash demonstrates precisely the need for such narratives to be told in these settings, as the film illustrates a simple but powerful fact: that queer identities and queer intimacy exist and have always existed within Xhosa culture and thus within traditional rituals such as *ulwaluko*. The heteronormative confines of tradition and culture, however, mar the visibility of queer Xhosa people. Nakhane Touré highlights the hypocrisy surrounding responses to the film when they note that the men in the Xhosa community ignore so many other issues:

> People have jumped to conclusions about a film they haven't even seen. I speak as a Xhosa man who has been to initiation, and who is proud to have done so, when I say that no secrets are revealed. What is being revealed instead, is a violent homophobia. Those issuing threats are nowhere to be seen when Xhosa initiates are sexually assaulted during initiation. Where are you *madoda* (men) when babies are raped in our communities? Where is your anger when women are raped and murdered? The answer is nowhere. Instead, you choose to attack an important and insightful film that I do not for a single moment regret being part of. (Nakhane qtd. in Zeeman par. 8-9)

Therefore, it seems that the outcry over the film highlights the belief that heteronormativity is under threat by queer people. Furthermore, due to the history of imperialism, as bell hooks argues, "most black men are clinging to outmoded survival strategies, of which patriarchal thinking is one, because they fear that if they give up what little 'power' they may have in the existing system they will have nothing" (*We Real Cool* 130). As Nkateko Mabasa asks:

> Could this movie be seen as a perceived threat to the conservative cultural values that have guaranteed privilege to a certain group that is now feeling powerless? Is there a balance between protecting cultural practices that may seem oppressive to some and the freedom of speech that may infringe on the other's rights? ("Inxeba" par. 25)

According to Percy Mabandu, Touré confronted their uncle Langa Mavuso, who, at the time, was a tribal chief in Alice, about the presence of homosexuality at *ulwaluko* ceremonies. Touré explains that they informed their uncle that "'there are men having sex with other men' and he didn't even try to get away from it. He said: 'Yes, but we don't talk about it'" (par. 27-28). Touré's real-life testament to the presence of homosexuality at the initiation ceremonies signifies the important link between the film's portrayal and South African realities – it is based on lived experiences. Therefore, the accusations of cultural insensitivity are linked to the idea of breaking taboos particularly the secrecy of homosexuality. Epprecht explains that "talking publicly about sex was taboo" and that highlighting this taboo was an "important part of the cultural protection against sexual scandal." Furthermore, Epprecht notes that "polite people turned their eyes away and, if possible, shut their ears and eyes against suspicious behaviour. What this meant was that sexual acts that were forbidden or shameful in theory could take place in practice as long as they remained a secret" (*Unspoken* 31). The claim that queerness is non-existent in Xhosa culture is damaging to both queer Xhosa people and the culture itself. According to Zohra Dawood, who is the Director at the Centre for Unity in Diversity in South Africa:

> [t]he film is important in contemporary South Africa and touches on issues that are of a highly sensitive nature, including that of male circumcision and the secrecy around this practice. In essence, however, it is about homosexuality. That sections of the population are deeply uncomfortable with issues of sexuality and the reality of gay and lesbian men and women who live with and amongst us is of course true. Multiple instances of homophobic acts and 'lesbian killings' have sadly dogged South Africa, and shifting our gaze away is not an adequate response. The question to ask is whether the discomfort experienced by many of the film's content, trumps vital constitutional protections - not only to artistic expression but vitally also by the right of gay and lesbian men and women to choose their sexual orientation and live free of harm and violence. (par. 5)

As Dawood points out the film has a focus on masculinities and homosexual relationships that take place at the ceremony – which, under the laws provided by the constitution, is legal. The depiction of a gay relationship and sex in this cultural setting, as seen by the reactions to the film, are, however, not culturally accepted. The disapproval, however, does not mean that queer Xhosa men do not exist – it only adds to the heteronormative patriarchal belief that queerness does not exist in Xhosa culture. Unless one is homophobic, a queer narrative about Xhosa culture is not disrespectful to Xhosa culture because queerness has always been a part of it, as it exists in all cultures.

Another of the prominent issues that have faced the film is the notion of cultural imperialism' and the white gaze in African storytelling due to the fact that the film is written and directed by a white man who has no lived experiences of the ceremony. Taylor Mitchell notes that there is concern about the depiction of the Xhosa culture and the ritual, highlighting that "the preservation of Black history and culture is integral – after Apartheid sought to degrade, destroy, and replace it – both in the past and today" (par. 5). Trengove, however, is aware of the complexities, both historically and culturally, surrounding his right to tell the story of *Inxeba* set in this traditional space. He notes that "we have a very painful history of racial imbalance and race discrimination and so this idea of representation and who gets to tell stories is obviously something that is highly contentious and highly politicised" (Trengove qtd. in Joffe par. 11).

While many people have called for the film's banning, others attached to the film have shown support for *Inxeba* due to their personal stakes in the film. As explained by Trengove in an interview with Taryn Joffe, Trengove himself, his co-producers Batana Vundla and Elias Ribeiro are "all queer filmmakers and we identify as such" (Trengove qtd. in Joffe par. 20). Furthermore, according to Masego Panyane, Trengove explained that "the extras were not actors, but men who had had first-hand experience of the ritual itself and would, during scenes,

speak out if they felt that these were not being true to what occurs on the mountain" (par. 7). Trengove also explains the sense of urgency around why he decided to make the film:

> Going in I had huge reservations. I have always been critical of the idea of white filmmakers telling black narratives, so when this prospect was presented to me my first reaction was that it was almost inconceivable that I should be the one to make this film. At the same moment we felt that there was this dire need to have some authentic representation of black, queer communities in the South African film camp. When we were about to start shooting there was a spate of very disturbing films that had been made in South Africa with really horrendous stereotyping of queer people, so simultaneous to there not really being the right kind of support for filmmakers to make the kind of film that we thought was important, there was also this sense of things being quite urgent, and something needing to happen. On the urging of our co-producer Batana Vundla, who is himself a gay, Xhosa man, I embarked on this process and waded into this terrain. (Trengove qtd. in Joffe par. 6-7)

Much of the scrutiny surrounding the film stems from detractors whose "objection resides primarily in the fact that the film has been directed by a white man, John Trengove. They believe that the film cannot be accurate because it is the work of a person alien to the culture" (Mbao par. 12). This belief, however, robs any of the queer black contributors of any agency or volition in drawing on their own experiences during the making of the film.

Trengove notes that *ulwaluko* is "a vast and very nuanced practice, and there remains a lot to be said about the ritual that is not my place to talk about. Things that need to be said from within the culture. Hopefully, *The Wound* could spark some of that" (Trengove qtd. in Dercksen par. 9). Trengove highlights why he got involved with the film, stating that "maybe a gay Xhosa kid will watch it one day and go: 'Actually, that wasn't my experience at all' and be inspired to write his own story" (Trengove qtd. in Thangevelo par. 16-17). Noting that there were flaws in the depiction of the ritual itself, Xabiso Vili notes that to look at the film as an exposé "takes away from its actual value. Instead, it explores a relationship between two gay men in a hyper-masculine context" (par. 8). Vili goes on to note that "initiation school becomes a microcosm for a greater societal norm of toxic masculinity" (par. 9). *Inxeba* makes clear that its focus is on exploring the narratives of toxic masculinities in Xhosa cultures with input from Xhosa people. But Vili also raises the issues of the film's catering to a Western audience: "Considering the initial screenings of *Inxeba* were mostly abroad (Sundance Film Festival, World Cinema Amsterdam, Philadelphia Film Festival), it becomes a film that caters to a white gaze, utilizing Xhosa stories as its tool. This is a form of 'cultural imperialism'. Our culture has been taken, sold to Europe before returning to us" (par. 5). Vili is not wrong in asserting the fact that the story, which initially premiered at international film circuits, uses Xhosa stories

to propel its narrative. There is, however, no doubt that the film would not receive the warm welcome, acclaim, or success if it were to be screened in South Africa solely. The reception *Inxeba* received has proven that the film would not be the success it is today had it not expanded beyond South African viewership.

Despite his good intentions and the success of making a black queer-centred film, Phlile Ntuli highlights an instance where John Trengove was guilty of mispronouncing the film's title. To the foreign viewer who might engage with the media reaction of the film, this appears to be just an instance of a language barrier. This error, however, holds weight and historical implications:

> First, because it pokes the wounds that continue to fester in the many black tongues that have rolled over backwards for decades to pronounce English words "correctly". For the director of a film centred on a sacred African ritual, it is disrespectful. Second, and consequently, that the film can easily be summarised as a successfully constructive critique of the multiple brands of homophobia vested in one of the few surviving preserves of African customary practices does not and should not ignore the sacredness of the entire experiment. Yet it does. (Ntuli par. 2-3)

The debate encompassing the film's release explored in these sections highlights the complexities of LGBTQ+ rights in South Africa when intersected with cultural norms. Taylor Mitchell observes that:

> The difficulty of navigating allegations of cultural insensitivity, whilst promoting and protecting LGBTQ rights, complicates the future of queer advocacy in South Africa: how does one protect cultural communities while advocating inclusivity and the acceptance of new, queer members? The answer is not legal protection of LGBTQ people, in specific, or freedom of speech at large – for South Africa's constitution protects both. The difficulties in implementing such policies lie in the power structures of South Africa's government, as well as other institutions such as the country's film board. (Mitchell par. 6)

In their PhD thesis, "The Rupture in the Rainbow: An Exploration of Joburg Pride's Fragmentation, 1990 to 2013" Nyx McLean analyses the disparities between race and class present in the Johannesburg Pride events. McLean observes how the commercialisation of the pride parade in Johannesburg and its predominantly white occupants are reflective of the neo-apartheid state of South Africa in terms of opportunity, recognition, and self-expression for black queer South Africans and the inequalities whiteness enshrines in South Africa society. McLean explains that:

> The use of the term neo-apartheid seeks to suggest that despite the ending of apartheid, economic power and wealth have not been fairly redistributed. This suggests that while apartheid, as a legislative system, may be over 'it still manifests itself in practice,' and continues to generate white economic power through neoliberal policies and politics. (131)

Whiteness and its privilege is often detrimental to the vexed issue of ensuring the freedoms of black queer South Africans within not despite of their cultures.

The scrutiny around the film revealing secrets or being told by the wrong person invalidates any "cultural labor" performed by the black queer contributors and highlights how the film is a microcosm of the larger debate around queerness in South Africa (Livermon "Queer" 300). Therefore, the furore around John Trengove's role and the way his involvement is seen as the destruction and whitewashing of the *ulwaluko* ceremony is no more than an attempt to hide homophobic attitudes. As Mbao points out, "The protests against *Inxeba* are a pathological symptom of an ingrained ideological fallacy: they assume that Xhosa society is an organic whole, united in expression and identity" (par. 17). The "cultural labor" performed by the various black queer contributors of the film and the misconception around the exposure of the ceremony's secrets, which have been widely available and documented, attests to the errors of the controversies surrounding *Inxeba* (Livermon "Queer" 300).

As seen throughout the debates discussed in this section, the social structures and cultural institutions have power over how much controversial art is released in South Africa – despite the presence of laws and protections. *Inxeba* challenges these institutions to discern whether or not they follow the law of the constitution or whether they follow their comfort. *Inxeba* solidifies the existence of queer Xhosa individuals – despite how fractured the identities of the characters may be.

Conclusion: Healing Masculinities

Inxeba is a critique of South Africa's homophobic society – as seen by the film's content and the reactions it has received. Xabiso Vili observes that:

> *Inxeba* has served as a mirror to many aspects of South African society. It cannot be discounted that many homosexual people share experiences with characters in the story. It can also not be discounted that many of the responses to the film were eerily similar to the homophobia and hyper-masculine behaviour exhibited on our screens. (par. 13)

The film puts a young gay man at the centre of cultural conflicts. It shows the harmful realities that many men have face when going up against ideas of masculinity embedded in a patriarchal culture. As Gibson Ncube observes:

> Men, the film demonstrates, are expected to be emotionally distant and self-determining. To have successfully transitioned from boyhood to manhood, a young man is expected to perform specific scripts of masculinity deemed to be desirable. The film shows that *ulwaluko* is, among other factors, a breeding ground of violent masculinities, homophobia and misogyny. Fearing that he will be outed as gay, Xolani – the character played by Nakhane – takes violent action against Kwanda in the climactic scene. This highlights how gay masculinities also perform the scripts of violence that are not different from those enacted by straight men. ("South African" par. 16)

As seen by the struggles of Kwanda, Xolani and Vija, *Inxeba* highlights both the complexities faced by, and the various subject positions taken up in response to, homosexual men in South Africa. Kwanda is defiant in his resistance to his family's culture, customs and masculine ideals. Vija has settled for a closeted life where he passes as a straight man. Xolani would rather kill the young initiate than risk the exposure of himself and his lover in a society where it is difficult, if not impossible, to live as their authentic, true selves. *Inxeba* is an honest depiction of a South African society rife with internal conflict, where men are shown as deeply afraid of disappointing a set of traditions and cultural codes. According to Niza Jay, the film "represents another moment of vital confrontation for South Africa. The film confronts the prevailing depictions of the black body, the erasure of dissenting voices and, most importantly, the limitations of our film industry's narrative exploits" (par. 16). Although replete with violence and homophobia, *Inxeba*, through its confrontation of South African masculinity, aims to heal the very conceptions that seek to destroy it. The strength of the film is that it acts as a question: How do we get out of this impasse? It seeks to heal the wounds of South Africa's complex history by confronting the threads of lived experience which make up the film and how the discussion and increased visibility queer black South African lives can slowly help with progress.

Conclusion – The New Normal for Queer Africa

This thesis has examined representations of queer African lives on film and in literature, produced by Africans for Africans, as a means to interrogate the role played by the interconnected histories of colonialism, religion, and the policing of queer intimacy, specifically in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Through this thesis, I have drawn on the work of various scholars, such as Epprecht, Berlant, Mbembe, and Ncube as a means to foreground the importance of interrogating the complexities of queerness in Africa and the entanglement of queer identities and histories located both within and outside the continent. As Achille Mbembe points out "Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature'," and therefore, what I have hoped to show in this thesis is how important films like *Rafiki* and *Inxeba* and literary formations such as the *Queer Africa* anthologies are to the representation and full realisation of queer African identities. The chapters on my chosen texts have attempted to demonstrate how countries, like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, as well as the continent of Africa more broadly, are rich with stories and lived experiences that need to be told in order for the world to grasp the complex human nature of queer Africans. An implicit claim of all three texts, *Rafiki*, *Inxeba*, and the *Queer Africa* anthologies, is that queerness and queer people has always existed in Africa and will continue to exist, despite pushback and oppression.

Regarding the two films explored, Gibson Ncube succinctly explains their impact and importance for not only the queer viewer but the non-queer viewer too:

> for viewers who identify as gay, watching the film offers a space of recognition and belonging. For these viewers, the process of viewing the film becomes an empowering experience in which kinship and community are forged and coalesced. The screen represents a space of contact and dialogue where ideas of what it means to be black and queer are performatively discussed and rethought. For a viewer who identifies as queer, watching a film such as *Inxeba/The Wound* becomes a process of facing the diverse contradictions, emotions and corporeal pleasures and pains that accompany the negotiation of non-normative sexual identities. In this sense, the act of watching a queer film can be considered a discursive activity in which meaning-making cannot be dissociated from community-making and space-making. It is through the process of watching a film that there is a leap from the imagined to the liveable and legitimate. ("Film" 68)

Ncube's words ring true about not only the two films explored in this thesis but about the literary representations explored through the anthologies. All three chapters have aimed to show how important and vital representation is in the creation of a new normal and of the desire

for queer Africans to tell their own stories. Through this "cultural labor" of making one's self visible, one's life becomes worthwhile (Livermon "Queer" 300). Furthermore, queer representation in film, television, literature, arts and in the world as a whole, not only benefits queer Africans who have a complicated history of oppression but benefits those who do not yet understand or have adequate knowledge about queer African lives. Because queer people in Africa have a longstanding reality of invisibility, representation not only makes queer people more visible, and therefore legitimised, but can also save lives, change opinions, and transform laws. Through this thesis, I have striven to demonstrate in detail how truly beautiful and queer Africa really is.

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