Queer Agency in Kenya's Digital Media

Evan Mwangi

Abstract: Although scholars have noted the rising potentials for democracy in Africa as a result of increased use of digital media and mobile technologies, there seems to be a disregard or disavowal of queerness as part of that growing democratic space, as well as a related tendency to regard African culture solely in terms of mainstream writing and journalism. This article seeks to bridge this gap in the scholarship by means of a discourse analysis of comments about queer identities that can be found in the digital media (Facebook, chat rooms, blogs, YouTube comments, and online newspaper feedback) in contemporary Kenya. Following work on queer arts and "low" theory, the article explores the possibilities offered by the Internet to challenge homophobia in Kenya. While acknowledging that digital-media venues contain more homophobia than mainstream media (books, television, newspapers) in terms of intensity and quantity, the article demonstrates that they also offer a unique platform in which gay people can respond to homophobic representations of their experiences and desires.

Résumé: Bien que les chercheurs ont noté la hausse d'un potentiel démocratique en Afrique grâce à l'utilisation accrue des médias numériques et des technologies mobiles, il semble y avoir une méconnaissance ou un désaveu de la culture gay dans le cadre de cet espace démocratique croissant, ainsi qu'une tendance liée à considérer la culture africaine uniquement en termes du journalisme et des écrits grand-publique. Cet article vise à combler cette lacune au moyen d'une analyse discursive des commentaires sur les identités gay qui peuvent être lus dans les médias numériques (Facebook, forums de discussion, blogs, commentaires YouTube, et commentaires de la presse en ligne) dans le Kenya contemporain. Suite à des travaux sur les arts gay et la théorie situationniste de la production de connaissance en dehors des

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institutions, l'article explore les possibilités offertes par l'Internet pour contester l'homophobie au Kenya. Tout en reconnaissant que les sites de médias numériques contiennent plus d'homophobie que les médias traditionnels (livres, télévision, journaux) en termes d'intensité et de quantité, l'article montre qu'ils offrent également une plateforme unique où les homosexuels peuvent répondre aux représentations homophobes de leurs expériences et de leurs désirs.

Key Words: Digital media; queer; homophobia; agency; Kenyan media

Introduction

Various scholars have acknowledged the correlation between the growth of democracy globally and developments in science and technology. For instance, Zheng (2008) demonstrates how digital platforms have produced in China new sociopolitical dynamics through Internet-mediated public spaces, suggesting that digital media open up new possibilities for mutual transformations of the state and its citizens. It has also been noted that as societies adopt new information technologies, they are likely to open up democratic spaces, and vice versa. However, although scholars have noted the potentials for democracy that have resulted from dramatic changes in the use of technology in Africa (see, e.g., Simon 2002; Henderson 2008; Leslie 2002; Mudhai 2011; Obijiofor 2011; Sairosse & Mutula 2004; Tambini 1999), there seems to be a disregard or disavowal of queerness as part of the widening democratic spaces in Africa.[1] A few works do cover in some detail the representation of homosexuality in East African art and culture (Hoad 2007; Mwangi 2009), but the realm of cyberspace remains largely unexplored, especially in terms of how its users deploy homosexuality as a cultural signifier. This article, therefore, examines online expressions of culture to explore the ways in which digital platforms have opened up possibilities for challenging homophobia in Kenya. While evidence shows that the relatively lawless realm of digital social media has in fact *enabled* the spread of homophobia more than mainstream media like television and newspapers, it also demonstrates that the new media have offered a unique platform in which gay individuals in Kenya can respond to homophobic representations of their experiences and desires. Rather than simply relying on traditional media gatekeepers to counter homophobia, the lesbian and gay communities have found that they can assert their own agency through the Internet, where they can combat homophobic expressions more successfully than in the traditional media or even offline in face-to-face debates.

The analysis in this article begins with an examination of readers' online responses to a 2009 article in the Kenyan *Sunday Nation* about what came to be termed the first "gay wedding" between Kenyans. This event coincided with the run-up to the 2008 constitutional referendum and a

national debate that focused, in part, on whether the draft constitution encouraged gay rights. It then examines viewers' comments about video clips in which nominees to public offices established by the new constitution were shown proclaiming they were not gay as a requirement for their appointments. I would like to suggest that while the digital media clearly provide opportunities both for fueling and fighting homophobia, the latter case in particular demonstrates the agency of anonymous online activists, who were even more successful in arguing for their rights than the public figures appearing in person before a parliamentary committee.

Theory, Scope, Rationale, and Methodology

Many scholars have noted the monumental challenges faced by the media in Africa, including bad infrastructure and poor connectivity, especially in rural areas. Mike Jenson's observation in 2000 that the African continent "is still well behind other developing regions of the world in taking advantage of the information and communication revolution" (215) is still applicable today. But while the Internet infrastructure in Kenya is still underdeveloped in comparison to facilities in the West, half of the population of forty million people is connected to cell phones, while Internet usage has grown steadily (from 11 percent in 2007 to 24 percent in 2010) (Macharia & Mwangi 2011:10). A 2010–11 survey released by the Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK) showed that by the end of June 2011, cell-phone subscriptions stood at 25.27 million, up from the 24.9 million reported in December 2010. This represented a 1.23 percent increase in subscriptions and a 64.2 percent penetration countrywide. There were 4.2 million Internet subscriptions and 12.5 million Internet users, representing a 60.1 percent increase from the previous year, with Internet penetration in the country as a whole reaching 31.8 percent, about 98 percent of it through the mobile platform (CCK 2011). Even a cursory look at the online posts on social network sites shows that half of Facebook updates on Kenyan gay pages, such as Queer Twink Kenya, are updated "via mobile."

In commenting on the growing influence of the digital media in Africa, Francis Nyamnjoh notes that these platforms, while "not free from the logic of domination and appropriation typical of neoliberalism," still "clearly offer . . . marginalised voices an opportunity for real alternatives" (2005:15). In focusing on blogs, YouTube viewers' comments, and Facebook postings, this article builds on what Judith Halberstam (2011), following Stuart Hall, calls "low" theory, "a kind of theoretical model that flies under the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and refuses to confirm hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (2011:16). In mainstream media outlets such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, ordinary people are often reduced to the position of passive consumers compared to major corporations and powerful politicians, who are regarded as the source and producers of news. The Internet, by contrast, has not just changed the way we receive and send information; as Eve Shapiro

(2004) observes, it has become a virtual space in which the nonelite can engage in social and political organizing and activism that have ramifications in the real world. I am, therefore, concerned more with marginal texts than with the more conventional expressions of culture, and while I comment on materials published in mainstream venues, such as the *Daily Nation*, I focus on the comments that readers post online or on the paper's Facebook page.

If my discussion seems to avoid an overly optimistic view of the Internet as a site of absolute liberation of the queer Kenyan, it is because I am following Halberstam's idea that "alternative ways of knowing and being . . . are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends" (2011:24). Like Darin Barney in *Prometheus Wired* (2000) and Judith Squires in "Fabulous Feminist Futures and the Lure of Cyberculture" (1996), I acknowledge that network technologies do not necessarily solve the most intractable problems faced by individuals and communities, especially those from minority groups experiencing discrimination. As Squires exhorts, we should not be carried away into a "technophoric cyberdrool" (1996: 195) that blinds us to the fact that even the cyberworld is structured by a patriarchal culture, or that we need to respond ethically to a real material world beyond postmodern computer fantasies of absolute freedom. Most of the content in Kenyan digital media touching on gay issues is homophobic, and the fact that members of the queer community mainly express themselves online using aliases signals the level of homophobia in the material world they inhabit offline. But we also need to recognize that although the diffusion of digital-media technologies exacerbates the spread of homophobia in society, it also energizes resistance and feelings of agency—that is, the confidence and conviction of like-minded individuals that they can mobilize and change their circumstances through collective action (see Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2008). This is a valuable accomplishment for marginalized groups, even if their freedom is still only tentative outside the digital domain.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the new opportunities afforded by online culture do not exclude the traditional platforms altogether. Pierre Lévy claims that whereas "cyberspace encourages mutual and community-based exchange, . . . the traditional media make use of one-way communication in which receivers are isolated from one another" (2001:186). But although he sees this difference as representing a fundamental break between the two sets of media, it should be acknowledged that traditional news organizations have tried to create a synergy between the two. Indeed, while acknowledging Lévy's position, Henry Jenkins (2008) observes in U.S. culture a cooperation between media industries, such that content flows across media platforms. The Kenyan situation, too, displays a noticeable synergy between the new and old media. Television stations post video clips on YouTube. Newspapers have online editions in which they invite readers' feedback as well as Twitter followers, and public Facebook fan pages include links to stories in the newspapers. These fan pages are

particularly important because the local news organizations are not responsible for content created and posted by readers, and comments on these pages are not as strictly vetted for libel and hate speech as the newspaper's online site. Therefore, Facebook fan pages and YouTube comments feature discussions among readers and viewers that are franker and more robust than the material found on the official sites.

The focus here is on Nation Media Group, the largest private media house in East and Central Africa whose products (which include the *Daily Nation* and *Sunday Nation* as well as a television and radio channel) have the widest circulation in Kenya. The analysis is based on Norman Fairclough's "critical discourse analysis" (1992) and its studies of the ways in which power is exercised through language. Following Michel Foucault, Fairclough observes that "the social subject that produces a statement is not an entity which exists outside of and independent of discourse" (1992:43). It is useful, in other words, to pay close attention to what might be called an individual's enunciative modalities, which help us determine the position of the subject with regard to the statement he or she is making. This is not to suggest that the media have anything like full ideological control of their users, a conclusion that would perhaps be the most pessimistic outcome of the Foucauldian point of view. Nevertheless, discourse analysis is especially helpful for analyzing how discourses reflect and produce social and institutional change—for example, the changes in social attitudes that have been produced by and are reflective of the changes in language used to discuss gay people.

In doing discourse analysis, we are faced with several methodological problems. The approach has been criticized by such scholars as H. G. Widdowson (1995, 1998) for the tendency not only to simplistically use texts to confirm prejudices rather than to objectively analyze data, but also to privilege linguistic expression at the expense of real people and their lived experiences. To overcome these shortcomings, I have been attentive to the ambivalences in some of the statements analyzed and I have also interviewed some of the writers whose statements I have discussed to incorporate their intentions in determining their meanings. In the context of Kenyan online expression, however, the practice of discourse analysis presents several methodological problems of its own. First, in a restricted media environment, online archives are unstable. Media houses have deleted some of the readers' comments referred to below mostly because of the commentators' ethnic virulence, not because of the homophobia in the comments. Curiously, there is also evidence that comments supporting homosexuality or criticizing homophobia (e.g., Facebook bloggers Hendrik DaStar Joan's and Lawson Benjamin's comments discussed below) were deleted from the *Daily Nation* Facebook fan page while homophobic ones have been retained, including those directly responding to the deleted comments.[2] One very interesting and informative site—www.mashada.com—which had long contained virulent homophobic statements and ethnic slurs, was taken offline in the run-up to Kenya's general

election in 2013, when the government finally decided to take action against the spread of ethnocentric hate speech. The site came back up after the election, but the archive of posts before it was brought down is no longer publicly available. For example, a 2005 robust discussion of gay issues proposed by a self-identified gay person seeking assistance is inaccessible today. While most of his online interlocutors were abusive, a few were sympathetic to his sexual orientation and guided him to institutional resources he could take advantage of among the burgeoning GBLTI organizations. He also fought back, terming his sexual desire his "personal business."[3]

Another problem is the inherent disjuncture between formal scholarly analysis and the uninhibited expression that contributors to these informal digital platforms demonstrate. Some of the language and images found online simply cannot be reproduced here, both because of their inherently unseemly nature and also, in a more formal sense, for fear of legal action or other forms of retribution from the subjects ridiculed in the images and online posts, especially in Kenya where libel laws are crafted to protect the elites. One further limitation of this study is that, as I mention at the close of this article, the discussion here tends to focus on male homosexuality, because that seems to be the central preoccupation of online commentators studied. But while lesbianism does appear to be more tolerable to the Kenyan public than male homosexuality, there is no doubt that lesbian women are subjected to intense homophobia as well. Therefore, further research is needed on the figure of the lesbian in the African cyberspace.

Finally, two caveats need to be mentioned about the use of Facebook as a source. Since Facebook has become increasingly popular over time, a flurry of recent postings on a particular subject does not necessarily mean that opinions have become more passionate or widespread than in the past. For example, we cannot use Facebook updates to precisely compare the difference between the reception of the news of Kenya's supposedly first gay "wedding" and the responses to the later "divorce," because the *Daily Nation*'s Facebook page was not as popular in 2009, when news of the "wedding" broke, as it was in 2011, when the "divorce" took place. Second, the *Facebook* "likes" function, which allows a reader to indicate some sort of vague approval of the content, is too imprecise to carry much meaning. It might indicate, for example, that the reader admires or is interested in the way a story is written, or wishes to alert friends to the post, regardless of the reader's feelings about the events presented. Indeed, news of horrible accidents, terrorist attacks, and disasters receive considerable "like" judgments, and in these cases the "like" is presumably an acknowledgment of the individual's having been affected by a post or an indication that one is mourning the losses that are described there. The absence of a "dislike" button increases the complexity of what "liking" constitutes, especially because "unliking" something means withdrawing the "like" endorsement rather than leaving a negative mark.

Is Homosexuality "Un-African"?

In Kenya, the dominant narrative about homosexuality claims that same-sex desire is a Western construct and a colonial import to Africa, and that queer practices are a reflection of European decadence. In online media discussions, expletives like 'shindwe (ashindwe; Swahili for "may he be defeated"), a word used in evangelical prayer meetings and crusades to curse the devil and wish him defeat, are frequently uttered in discussions about homosexuality. Jomo Kenyatta's early anthropological study of the Kikuyu, *Facing Mount Kenya*, argued that "the practice of homosexuality is unknown among the Gikuyu" (1938:162), and this sort of claim still has traction in the country. Many Kenyans also claim that gay rights have been foisted upon Africans through NGO work funded by permissive Euro-American liberals out to destroy the fabric of traditional African culture.

A number of other scholars have argued, in contrast, that it is not homosexuality that is "unAfrican," but rather the rigid dichotomy between what is today regarded as homosexuality and heterosexuality (see Tamale 2003; Murray 2009; Hayes 2000; Awondo, Geschiere, & Reid 2012). Kenyatta's argument, for example, does not consider that the category of "the homosexual" might not exist among the Kikuyu simply because the society saw no need to make such distinctions in the first place. Other scholars have argued that what is exogenous to African culture is not *homosexuality* but rather *homophobia*, and that the "acrimonious and raucous" nature of these debates (Mutua 2011:453), as well as the hatred of and discrimination against gay people, are fueled by imported religious beliefs. This is the position, for example, of Makau Mutua in his wide-ranging "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights: Homophobia on Trial" (2011; see also Mutua 2009). As Jon Binnie has observed, "it is homophobia that has been successfully globalized, not global gay consumer culture" (2004:77). Some African scholars insist that homosexuality is not an import from the West. For example, citing the case of Uganda, Sylvia Tamale (2003) argues that many gay and lesbian Ugandans "have never had any form of interaction (direct or indirect) with whites. Some organisations, such as the Gays and Lesbians Alliance (GALA), have members throughout rural Uganda. A good number are non-literate or semi-literate. . . [and] outside influence played no part in determining their sexuality." Further, scholars like W. N. Njambi and William O'Brien (2000) have noted the existence of woman–woman marriages in the Kikuyu community, the ethnic group to which Charles Ngengi and Daniel Gichia, the two Kenyan partners in the notorious "gay marriage," belong.

A minor problem with Tamale's and Mutua's position is that it assumes that Africans can willfully accept only those identities that are endogenous. While many Kenyan gay bloggers do accept this position—rejecting, in other words, the claim that homosexuality is an exogenous import—many may do so in part to counter any possible exclusion from the democratic space as practitioners of a foreign sexuality. In many cases, however, if the

West (and the city) seems to offer queer Kenyans a better environment in which to live their non-normative identities, queer bloggers (e.g., Tamaku at http://thegaykenyan.blogspot.com/search/label/Homophobia) are ready to embrace the so-called un-African values and technologies to secure and consolidate their identity. In a broader sense, however, it may be the case that even the logic or illogic of the arguments presented in regard to this very contentious issue are beside the point for most Kenyans. Whether justifiable or not, Kenyatta's sentiments, for example, resonate among the Kikuyus and other Kenyan communities. Kenya is still a largely homophobic country, and human rights abuses directed against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people are still prevalent. The most common terms in the country for homosexuals, *mashoga* and *wasenge*, have negative connotations. Therefore, it is not surprising that Gichia and Ngengi's marriage would cause hysteria in the nation as an imported threat from Kenya's former colonizers.

In addition, although violence against gay people is not as common as in the neighboring Uganda, Kenyan politicians are as hawkish as Uganda's in their stigmatization of homosexuality. Homosexuality is illegal in Kenya, with convictions for homosexual activities or attempted homosexual acts carrying penalties of five to fourteen years' imprisonment, and politicians frequently present their opponents as homosexuals in smear campaigns.[4] Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Moi, and Raila Odinga have all spoken or written against homosexuality, with the latter two being notorious for attacking it in comical performances at the podium in which they enacted offensive stereotypes of gay behavior in a way that validates the argument that African politicians enjoy participating in the grotesque and the vulgar in the performance of their duties. The Kenyan penal code, however, is difficult to implement regarding secretive homosexuality. And one of the gains of the new media is the ability to write publicly about issues of minority sexual desire in a virtual, digital world, without the fear of retribution that one might face in an actual face-to-face meeting. As Pramod Nayar (2010) observes, "the anonymity of identities in cyberspace enables queer people to find a space where . . . [they] can communicate and form a community without fear of 'discovery.' The Internet allows personal preferences to circulate without revealing the physical address or identity of the advertiser" (133).

But even when one does not want to hide one's identity, cyberspace may be the only place where one can express queer-themed content. Discrimination is also common in the media, where fair and balanced reporting on LGBTI issues is hard to find. A number of gay organizations, such as the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya, use their Web sites and online publications to promote recognition and acceptance of gay interests and to defend the rights of LGBTI communities and their members. In 2011, Internews, an NGO devoted to training local citizen-journalists (https://internews.org), helped the LGBTI community set up a Web site (www.internewskenya.org) where gay people can tell their stories.[5] Here, for example, Kate Kamunde, a Nairobi-based lesbian artist and musician,

first performed, "This is Me and My Little Life," a daring song about the pain of discrimination that she could not perform elsewhere. The Web site later could not be accessed, but Kamunde's song and other videos have been posted to YouTube (under Kate Kamunde.mov).[6]

Nkt! The Scandalous Gay "Marriage" of Charles Ngengi to Daniel Gichia

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed notes that in the heteronormative cultures we live in, "queers can be affectively alien for placing their hopes for happiness in the 'wrong' objects" (2010:15). In Kenya, gay happiness, however private, is mourned as a collective national death. News touching on gay issues are usually greeted with the expression "nkt!," an unpronounceable Short Message Service (SMS) expression coined by Kenyan teenagers that soon found its way into social media platforms to express unspeakable disgust, frustration, exasperation, and anger.

Nowhere is this moral panic seen more clearly than in the Internet responses to the news about the legal same-sex partnership that was formed in Britain between two Kenyan men, Charles Ngengi (age 40) and Daniel Gichia (age 39) in London on October 17, 2009, under the British Civil Partnership Act (2005). Framing the partnership as the first gay marriage between Kenyans, Kenya's national media gave the event maximum coverage, not to celebrate the "wedding," but to showcase it as a scandalous and immoral event. By contrast, when Ngengi and Gichia broke up two years later, the news was greeted with celebration. One Facebook user, Peter Pmg, declared in a post entered on October 5, 2011, at 3:31 p.m. that the update and responses to it were "*motomoto . . . lol*" (too lively/fiery . . . laughing out loud) (www.facebook.com/DailyNation).

It was odd in the first place that the Nation Media Group had given such prominent coverage to a nuptial event that did not involve a national political figure. Founded in 1969 by the Aga Khan as a nationalist anticolonial alternative to the British media, the Nation Media Group's products are characterized by a staid, nonsensationalist coverage of events, especially in its print editions. But since the expansion of the digital media in the twenty-first century, the group has begun to incorporate tabloid-like sensationalist stories to attract young readers, although these stories are usually tucked away in magazine pullouts and are rarely featured as the lead stories in the main-run newspaper. Occasionally the papers carry a celebratory picture of a colorful wedding on the front page, but the most prominent parts of the newspaper are still reserved for high-level national political news. Even international news stories rarely make the first page.

But not so with Ngengi and Gichia's "marriage" abroad. The *Sunday Nation* and its sister newspaper, the *Daily Nation,* which are the highest circulating newspapers in East and Central Africa, deviated from their own norm to focus on the sensational story. The "wedding," which was first covered by the *Sunday Nation* (2009) and published with the headline

"Two Kenyan Men Wed in London," was treated as both a spectacle and a national shame. It was covered not by the paper's regular British correspondents in London, who usually handle sensitive diplomatic and political topics, but rather by two Kenyan freelance writers: Gitau wa Njenga in London, who usually writes for the more sensational Kenyan daily *The Standard*, and Gakiha Weru in Nairobi, whose feature stories in the *Nation* and *The Standard* usually have macabre entertainment value but are rarely published as front-page news.

The story, in fact, seemed to be so much of a valued scoop that, for the first time in its online publishing, the *Nation* engraved its logo on the accompanying pictures, probably to emphasize its copyright ownership of images that were to be circulated by other media outlets (see figure 1). As the editors probably expected, the story was a hit. Charles Obbo (2009), a columnist with the *Daily Nation*, noted that "After the *Sunday Nation* broke the story of the gay wedding of Kenyans Daniel Chege Gichia and Charles Ngengi in London, hardly any other subject could get attention on call-ins into FM stations, the Kenyan blogosphere, and in Nairobi pub conversations" www.nation.co.ke/oped/blogs/-/445642/676622/-/ikwbx7/-/index. html). In the newspapers, Ngengi and Gichia were described as a "gay couple" and "long-time" lovers in picture captions and bold headlines to attract attention. Journalists mischievously added the feminine moniker "Wacera" to Gichia's name and usually described him as the "bride" in

Figure 1. Commitment Ceremony of Charles Ngengi and Daniel Gichia.

Reprinted with permission of the photographer, Gitau wa Njenga. First printed online at www.nation.co.ke/-/1148/674072/-/14xfoajz/-/index.html.

order to call even more attention to the situation. The media hounded the couple's parents in rural Kenya and reported on the shame they were experiencing at the abominable things their sons were doing abroad. The parents were harassed and insulted by their neighbors, and one of them was reported to be so traumatized that he was unable to speak (Karanja 2009).

Readers responded to these stories with less subtle homophobia than the editors displayed. The *Nation*'s online readers posted a record number of comments (232), and although some of them criticized the homophobia expressed by fellow readers, the majority commented on the Ngengi–Gichia partnership with words such as "shame," "nugus" (monkeys), "mafala" (fools), "abomination," "cursed people," "un-African," perverts," and "disgusting." Some commentators asked Ngengi and Gichia never to return to Kenya, while others asked the government to strip the "couple" of their Kenyan citizenship. Some just responded with "sijui niseme " (no words), or quoted lyrics from the national anthem in Kiswahili without saying anything further. Some advised the media against calling the couple "Kenyan men," suggesting that they simply be referred to as "men," with no mention of their nationality. Others objected that it was not the couple's national identity that was relevant, but rather their ethnic identity. "Don't say two Kenyan men" commented a reader; "say two kikuyu men to pinpoint where the rot is coming from. You are soiling the name of a whole nation for selfish (or should I say enterprising) drive" (www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/673614/-/uo10l1/-/index.html). (It is probably relevant that the Web moniker of this commentator was "Ogweny," a Luo name, and that the Luos have been seen as the political nemesis of the Kikuyus since shortly after independence in the 1960s.) "These men come from a tribe called Kikuyu from Kenya. . . . Most people from this tribe can do anything to get money even if it means sleeping with their mothers . . . so I'm not surprised," wrote another reader named Elias Wekesa (a Luhya name) (www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/673614/-/uo10l1/-/index.html). This comment set off a flurry of responses to the ethnic slur, with Kikuyu readers responding in kind with demeaning comments about members of the Luhya "tribe," such as their propensity for holding only lowly menial jobs as watchmen. Thus the original homophobic content escalated into even wider chauvinism and intolerance. The *Daily Nation* seems to have later deleted all the comments.

If some Kenyan readers were sympathetic to the couple, their response, for the most part, was tepid, tending not to counter the homophobia, but mostly to challenge the conclusion that Ngengi and Gichia were in fact homosexual. Their comments recall Fanon's argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* about *Makoumè* (Caribbean men who dressed like women but whom Fanon believed to "lead a normal sex life") (2008 [1963]:29). Ngengi and Gichia were, according to many online sympathizers, just striving to earn a living in a morally decrepit Europe or trying to get asylum in Europe. The sympathizers saw Ngengi and Gichia as Fanon viewed the black homosexual in Europe, as a person whose sexual identity was merely "expedient."

But even as the Internet mostly fueled homophobia, digital platforms were useful for those who wished to condemn it, especially in ways that the mainstream media could not. When the *Nation* broke the story of the marriage, Charles Obbo (2009) did write a column titled "Chege and Ngengi: The Accidental Gay Rights Trailblazers" in which he noted that the society had to confront the reality of homosexuality. While one of the three readers' comments to his op-ed was homophobic, the other two supported gay rights in words that were even more affirmative than the written article.

> Trailblazers!? Understatement, the Kenyan gay community is rejoicing n gaping [and clapping] from the big hole now on Kenya's ailing gay closet! Kenya has had a formal gay education crash-course. The cat is so out of the bag! We are a minority group has been deprived of BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS and exposed to international HATE-CRIMES! Period! We need basic rights. ie expression, assembly, health services, security etc. (www. nation.co.ke/blogs/-/445642/676622/-/view/asBlogPost/-/50ro7z/-/index.html)

Another example is Patrick Gathara's cartoon (see figure 2), portraying the power-sharing relationship between President Mwai Kibaki and his homophobic political rival, Raila Odinga, as similar to Ngengi and Gichia's marriage, suggesting that there are many collusions and partnerships in society

Figure 2. Cartoon by Patrick Gathara
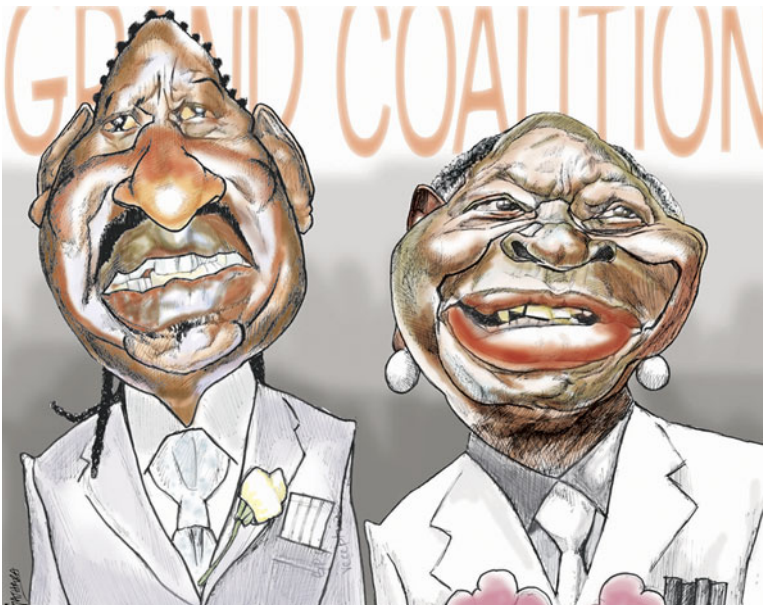
Reprinted by permission of Patrick Gathara.

more deleterious or offensive than a gay union. The cartoon was rejected by the mainstream media houses, most likely for a number of reasons aside from the brutal political criticism. In distinction from the mushrooming gutter press, the mainstream newspapers pride themselves on being heteronormative "family newspapers." It is also useful to remember, as Mbembe (2001) argues perhaps hyperbolically, that the African nation is usually seen as a family unit, with the head of state as the most virile man:

> The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system. (2001:110)

In this context, the depiction of Kibaki as a woman wearing earrings is the height of sacrilege; the cartoon could not be published in a "family newspaper" like the *Daily Nation*. Were it not for the Internet, therefore, the cartoon, like many others involving powerful politicians, would have died a natural death. In this case, the cartoon was published on the cartoonist's blog with a detailed commentary on why Kenyans should be accommodative of gay rights, with variations of the cartoon posted (with the title of "Farcebook") on his personal Facebook page as well, commenting on then Prime Minister Raila Odinga's call for the arrest of gay people (www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150131918033032&set=pb.806883031.-2207520000.1402867222.&type=3&theater). Without the Internet, it would never have circulated beyond the editorial board that rejected it.

The Celebration of a Queer Divorce with Facebook "Likes"

If gay happiness is mourned publically and in the press as a sign or harbinger of social decay, queer breakups are celebrated. A freelance reporter, Joseph Ngugi, brought the news that Ngengi and Gichia were divorcing, and on October 5, 2011, the *Daily Nation*'s stories about the impending divorce from its print and electronic editions were posted twice on its Facebook page.[7] Although, as I have indicated above, Facebook "likes" are not reliable indicators of the feelings of Facebook users, the "likes" attached to the *Daily Nation's* updates were clearly celebratory. Compared to the only three people who "liked" the story about the happy wedding when *Nation* posted it on its fan page on October 18, 2009, there was a dramatic rise in the number of people who "liked" the news about Gichia and Ngengi's divorce, amounting to a 3,433 percent increase. Several fans did suggest that the *Daily Nation* had wasted its time on a story that, even in this negative context, might promote gay identities in the country. Others expressed the suspicion, also found in blogs, that some media executives at the Nation Media Group might be gay. But most of the "likes" seemed to be celebrating the break-up.

The queer community, for the most part, did not respond to the *Daily Nation's* Facebook update. However, Facebook bloggers identifying themselves as Hendrik DaStar Joan and Lawson Benjamin did engage in a robust back and forth with other bloggers. Lawson Benjamin's comments, which received nine "thumbs-up" hits, criticized Christians for their homophobia and other historical "atrocities" and announced that homosexuality "is here to stay, always was and will remain so until the sun ceases to shine." It ended with the provocative comment that "psychoanalytic theory holds that homophobia—the fear, anxiety, anger, discomfort and aversion that some ostensibly heterosexual people hold for gay individuals—is the result of repressed homosexual urges that the person is either unaware of or denies." (www.facebook.com/dailynation).[8] The nine "likes" to the post were bolstered in their authority by the institutions to which the commentators were affiliated, including the University of Nairobi, Harvard, and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

Fairclough draws our attention to the importance of verbal modes of resistance through discourse (1992: 56). For him, readers do not just accept what dominant speakers say. They subvert dominant discourses as a way of initiating and registering social change in the material world. Looked at from Fairclough's perspective, this means that *Nation* readers sometimes read media products against the grain and occasionally reject the positions taken by the dominant groups in a conversation, including the editors' point of view. The second most "liked" Facebook comment in the post about the gay "wedding" (seven hits) was Ruth Muya's condemnation of negative comments about the Ngengi–Gichia union that focused on the ethnicity of the partners. Like Lawson Benjamin's comment, it received approval from individuals affiliated with powerful institutions such as the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) and the University of Nairobi. Her comment linked homophobic hatred to the post-election violence (PEV) that rocked Kenya in 2007–8 in which more than a thousand people were killed within weeks and thousands were left homeless: "Trust kenyans to find a way to put a tribal or religious twist to any issue. When will we learn . . . after another Pev-like situation!" (www.facebook.com/dailynation; posted October 5 at 4:40 p.m.). Unfortunately, the comment did not attack homophobia per se, and homophobic comments that were posted in response to her statement also attracted numerous "like" responses, especially from bloggers who identified themselves with church-sponsored institutions.

"I Am NOT Gay": The Case of Willy Mutunga and Constitutional Rights of the Queer

In 2011 Willy Mutunga and Nancy Barasa became Kenya's Chief Justice and Deputy Chief Justice, respectively, of the Supreme Court of Kenya, in the face of spirited opposition on the part of conservatives who thought that they were too liberal to hold such positions in a truly Christian African

nation. But without any substantial argument to cling to, anti-Mutunga forces branded the two nominees as gay. The kind of evidence to support this charge was that Mutunga had filed for divorce and wears an ear stud. In addition, allegedly writing under the pseudonym of Cabral Pinto for the *Saturday Nation*, Mutunga had been ardent in his defense of gay rights (Pinto 2010), and Barasa was a divorced woman who, moreover, was writing a Ph.D. thesis on the subject of homosexuality.[9] During televised confirmation interviews before a parliamentary panel in June 2011, Mutunga and Barasa were required to affirm that they were not gay. A headline in the online edition of the *Daily Standard* proclaimed: "Mutunga: I Am Not Gay" (www.standardmedia.co.ke), and a video of the hearing posted online by the Nation TV was titled "Straight Talk: Mutunga Declares He Is NOT Gay" (NTV 2011a; see www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNj69TZnI6c). The media seemed to pay more attention to Mutunga than Barasa, although both were accused of queerness.[10]

Coming in the wake of the news stories about Gichia and Ngengi's partnership in London, the referendum on Kenya's draft constitution that established the offices for which Mutunga and Barasa were nominated was to some extent a referendum on homosexuality. The "No" side of the campaign argued that the draft should be rejected because it supported gay rights. The "Yes" campaign insisted that the draft constitution did not include any clauses that specifically mentioned homosexuality. Otiende Amolo, a member of the Committee of Experts on Constitutional Review that drafted the document, went on record that in spite of appeals by British MPs, gay rights would not be included. Amolo told the media on October 18, 2009, a day after the Gichia–Ngengi ceremony, that "on several occasions some British MPs have approached us on the gay matter. They wanted us to include homosexual and lesbians' rights in the draft. But we told them in their faces that such a thing cannot happen because if we did so a majority of Kenyans will reject the draft during the forthcoming referendum" (quoted in Ringa 2009).

The real challenge faced by Mutunga and Barasa, therefore, was their liberal stand on sexual identity issues. I would like to propose that Mutunga's failure to argue against such homophobic questioning in the parliamentary hearing—especially since he was such a highly qualified nominee and in other forums had been a vocal defender of gay rights, albeit with a pseudonym—was hardly an advancement of gay rights. Mutunga remained composed and dignified when asked about his sexuality, but he did not comment on the ugliness of such questioning. Nevertheless, the posting of the parliamentary hearing online did provide an opportunity for others to object. The majority of the thirty-eight comments were homophobic and chauvinistic. But one viewer remarked,

> Dr Mutunga does not have to indicate his sexual orientation at all to anyone. But he chose to do so as a gentleman who believes in public scrutiny. I believe that in future Kenya will have a gay president and that will

not be an issue at all. It is time that we opened up our minds and stopped dwelling on petty issues. Mutunga has never dined with killers and thieves, like most MPs who are vetting. (www.standardmedia.co.ke/InsidePage. php?incl=comments&id=2000036730&cid=4)

According to another viewer's post,

Is there anything wrong with being gay? Does being gay exclude one from being Chief Justice? They should have included this in the job requirements. To the church leaders, don't they preach that all human beings are children of God. Are gays not humans? If one is following their religious beliefs, which I believe, are formulated by religious teachings, then, they should not have a problem with gays. Questions asked should be job related, not personal. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNj69TZnI6c)

According to a third viewer, "Actually when it comes to a job application a good answer to such a nosy, stupid question would have been "My sexual orientation is None of your business" (www.youtube.com/watch?v= bNj69TZnI6c; accessed Dec. 10, 2012). And a fourth YouTube subscriber commented,

It must be hard being a [Chief Justice] of a people with village mentality. So what if he is gay? Maybe he should have asked [the female MP] a question too . . . . have you had an abortion? Does not matter either!! *Nchi ya watu wadogo kweli lakini* [Indeed, we are a small-minded nation, but] we welcome the democratic space. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNj69TZnI6c; translation mine)[11]

If we go by Fairclough's (1992:101–5) Bakhtinian observation that statements are supposed to recall others like them in an intertextual chain, the comment about *kitu kidogo* (a popular Kenyan euphemism for "a bribe") links homophobia not only to narrow-mindedness but also to impunity and corruption. Further, while acknowledging the persistence of homophobia in Kenya, the comments' critique of homophobia as a national attitude epitomizes some hope that the weakness will be addressed more openly in the future, the way corruption has been discussed even if it has not been brought to an end.

Trapped in the Virtual Closet? In Lieu of a Conclusion

Before the www.mashada.com site was taken down in 2013, a preliminary diachronic study of postings (2005–8) showed that over time more comments condemning homophobia were being posted. It is unfortunate that we could not examine or document this trend because, although the site is back on, the archive of older posts is no longer publicly available. This article also has not done justice to representations of lesbian desire. Research should be done on this topic because lesbians, while perhaps more acceptable than

gay men to the public generally, may even be more reviled by homophobic men than gay men are. In many ways, however, the online expressions of both homophobia and antihomophobia in regard to gay women may demonstrate patterns that are similar to those regarding gay men. For example, when in November 2010 the Kenyan hip-hop artist Avril (Judith Nyambura Mwangi) released a song criticizing men who make sexual advances toward her without even considering that she might be a lesbian, a music blogger immediately posted scandalous nude pictures of what he claimed to be Avril and another woman having sex. Other blogs picked up the pictures and circulated them around the Web. But while the intention was obviously to intensify homophobia, at least some of the 156 comments that were posted in response condemned the blogger and defended Avril. Said one commentator, "This is 21 century en [the] chicks r rep 2 da fullest [.] go guls!" (This is 21st century, and the chicks are representing themselves to the fullest. Go girls!) (http://lyrics.ghafla.co.ke/kenyan-music-news/avril-nude-pics).

This article has argued that there is agency to be obtained from contributing to these "low" forms of cultural expression. Peter Levine (2004) points out that online discussions are in many ways less responsible and deliberative than the face-to-face discussions that Habermas (1989) envisions as constituting the ideal public sphere, and to some extent this does seem borne out by the situation in Kenya. Even in the most controversial threads, contributors rarely change their original positions. However, it does seem that a posting will often inspire contributions from those who agree with a position, and online forums have become a useful platform for the campaign against homophobia.

It is clear that the Kenyan society and its media teem with homophobia. Most of the Facebook postings, YouTube comments, and blog entries discussed above are homophobic. It is also true that the old media, with their gatekeeping policies against indecency, would not publish the kind of crude homophobic comments that are seen in the digital media. But even if the digital media energize the production and diffusion of homophobia, they also give agency to subaltern queer voices that cannot otherwise be heard. The big question is: should the queer community in Kenya content itself with virtual self-representation? The failure of some candidates who were popular with the online fans to win even party nominations during the Kenyan 2013 election suggested that those who post comments online do not cast votes in the real world, as "it is evident that Martha Karua and Peter Kenneth's strong showing on social media was not good enough to match the total votes garnered in the real elections" (Gathigi 2013; http://internewskenya.org/blog/?p=143). In the Nairobi gubernatorial nominations, the urbane Jimnah Mbaru lost to a rustic stone-throwing politician, Ferdinand Waititu, despite the former's considerably stronger showing in the blogosphere, leading to the conclusion that in most cases Facebook "likes" do not translate into real votes because bloggers are elites who do not participate in the real-life politics. Clearly, then, although much of the

attraction of the Internet is the anonymous or fictional self-fashioning that it enables, members of the queer community and its supporters must also strategize on how they can improve their economic, political, and social circumstances in the real material world.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Except in cases where the subjects under study use a different term to name themselves, I use the word "queer" not in its foundational derogatory and homophobic sense, but as a more inclusive term that designates non-normative sexual practices and beliefs. The people and practices I call queer do not necessarily identify themselves using the term, but following Teresa de Lauretis (1991), I use "queer" to recognize the splintering differences within gay and lesbian communities, even if these may not be fully articulated in the subjects I study. De Lauretis (1994) has recanted her earlier view of "queer" as more politically radical than the alternative terms, but I don't use "queer" here as more politically powerful than its alternatives, but as a term more inclusive of all sexual categories that are non-normative, including bisexuality, or in agreement with what Marjorie Garber, in a different context, envisions as a perspective that "opens the door not only to a fuller acceptance of homosexuality but also the inclusion of bisexuals, transgenderists, and others who do not neatly fit into older preconceptions of social 'nomality'" (2005:56).

2. Web addresses are listed in the text, but with the proviso that these may no longer be active addresses.

3. The thread read: "I'm really surprised that there is no information on gays in Kenya *na hata kama iko, ni kidogo sana* [and even if there is, it is very scanty]. . . . Am I the only gay *jamaa* [dude] who realises this or the info ain't for *msoto* [economically underprivileged] guys?" (http://www.mashada.com/forums/ general-discussion-life-opinions-advice/28054-gay-kenya.html). Other currently inaccessible threads include "can a homo be a christian?" (http://www.mashada. com/forums/general-discussion-life-opinions-advice/92286-can-homo-christian. html), posted in 2008, in which some debaters accept that gay people can be

Christian, one even wondering if the question is relevant "in this day and age." Started by a blogger identifying himself as "fiery preacher," the thread is homophobic on the surface, but there is a sense that it could be a sarcastic mimicry of the Christian right, as we would not expect a preacher to describe himself or herself as "fiery" without a sense of irony. It indicates a shift from the more intense homophobia of 2005 to a more tolerant community, in the sense that debaters castigate each other for using offensive expressions. One called Musema Kweli Kabisa (Swahili for "one who tells the truth as it is") likens the use of the word "fag" with the use of the N-word.

4. In the 2013 presidential debate, one of the deputy presidential candidates, William Ruto (who won the election), compared homosexual people to dogs. None of the candidates stood for gay rights. For a recent discussion of the Ugandan situation, see Kristen Cheney's (2012) examination of the sentiments following the introduction of the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009.

5. A nonprofit organization that seeks to promote community media, Internews has worked in Kenya on human rights issues mainly focusing on HIV and AIDS. In this project, it worked with the gay and lesbian community to enable this minority group to connect and make their voices heard (http://www.internewskenya.org/article.php?id=200#sthash.pUe8KCCd.dpuf).

6. The song is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5EP36-qfvc; see also arguments by the group (including Kamunde) that one can be gay and Christian at once, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK5Hj-2GOvc.

7. www.facebook.com/DailyNation/posts/289285234416975; www.facebook.com/DailyNation/posts/203711426366229.

8. The blogger seems to be quoting from a 1996 press release, "New Study Links Homophobia with Homosexual Arousal" (http://www.philosophy-religion.org/handouts/homophobia.htm) or other sites that use the quotation.

9. See Pinto (2010). Although the identity "Cabral Pinto" as Willy Mutunga might seem to be an allegation promoted by his detractors in the blogosphere, the respected National Council for Law Reporting also identifies Mutunga as the author of the "Cabral Pinto" articles (http://kenyalaw.org/kl/index.php?id=3321). The pen-name seems to have been coined from the names of assassinated political radicals: Amilcar Cabral (1924–73), the Guinea-Bissauan political thinker, and Pio Gama Pinto (1927–65), a Kenyan journalist, politician, and freedom fighter of Indian origin.

10. Barasa was later removed from office because of alleged bad conduct that had nothing to do with her academic work. Class-inflected problems sealed her fate after she was accused of pinching a female security guard at a high-end shopping mall for not recognizing her as a senior government official who did not deserve to be taken through routine security checks that involved frisking.

11. The Kiswahili expression "nchi ya watu wadogo" (country of small-minded people) comes from a song by a Kenyan artist Eric Wainaina, in which he criticizes his countrymen for propagating the culture of "kitu kidogo" (something small, or a small token, a popular euphemism for a bribe); see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr7_OI7QmVk.