



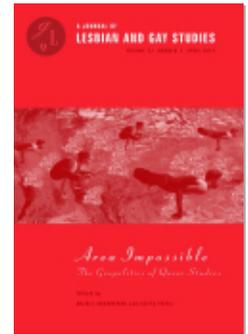
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ON BEING AREA-STUDIED

A Litany of Complaint

Keguro Macharia

I am an Africa-based queer scholar. I am an Africa-based scholar who has accepted an invitation to participate in a conversation that will live behind a paywall and, thus, will be inaccessible to many in Africa. I am an Africa-based scholar trained in the United States, struggling to unlearn the fluencies that so readily grant me access to conversations in mainstream queer studies. I am an Africa-based scholar who has chosen to publish most of my thinking on queerness and especially queer Africa on a publicly available blog as an ethical and political act that refuses academic gatekeeping as the price one must pay to be legitimized as a scholar. My blog is called “Gukira,” a Kikuyu word that, depending on how one reads it, translates as to keep silent, to cross (as in cross a road), more than, and, if one really stretches it, to awaken. *Gukira* is a wandering word, a wayward invitation to linger in and on spaces of fugitivity.¹

I am an Africa-based queer scholar trying to find the right way to enter a conversation whose premises seem much less clear after more than a year spent away from the US academy. From here, my protestation, “I am not an Africanist,” meets with puzzled looks. Stella Nyanzi, a Uganda-based medical anthropologist, asked me, “What is an Africanist?” suggesting that this geodisciplinary designation does not travel well, if at all.

Other terms are troubling.

I am a queer scholar. By which I mean to say, I am trained in and identify with a field that does not exist in my present geography. A sense of deracination overwhelms me. But I say this with trepidation, because deracination has so often been fetishized, if not celebrated, in queer studies. Consider John D’Emilio’s urban-based queers; Judith Butler’s abject; Lee Edelman’s early proclamation, “Queer theory is no one’s safe harbor for the holidays; it should offer no image of home,” now morphed into the “antisocial” thesis; Sara Ahmed’s “affect alien”;

Elizabeth Povinelli's autological subject; and Michael Cobb's "single."² Faced with so many demands to un-be and un-belong, one understands Robert Reid-Pharr's (2001: 103) comment, "You say black gay. I hear nigger fag." This dissonance between the said and the heard registers Reid-Pharr's unease with queer articulations of race: "I still have to resist the impulse to flinch when someone refers to me as a queer and to positively run for cover when someone refers to me as a black queer" (ibid.: 102–3). From Nairobi, even the deracinating power of "black queer" seems inaccessible, and I must face other illegibilities. Perhaps we might call this the geohistories of location. Or, following Katherine McKittrick (2006), the peculiar ungeographies generated by particular bodies. Here's one point of entry by the Kenyan queer scholar Neo Musangi (2014: 54):

The Akamba people of Eastern Kenya are my people. And sometimes they are not. The thing that I am they call *tala*. They do not call me *tala*; it is the thing that I always was. A thing that I became; a thing that I am becoming. *Tala* is the thing that I am. But *tala* is not even a name. It is a description. To call myself "a thing" is to choose to exist outside of myself. . . . To think of *tala* is to imagine a state of being and not being. Neither this nor that. This and that but not. I live as a description.

What if one were to refuse the instinctive recoil that says "native informant," the queer assimilation that gathers yet another term to prove that "we have always been everywhere," or the anti-identitarianism that fetishizes "description" over identity? What demands would *tala* make on the concepts and histories in which queer studies is embedded? What would queer studies have to unlearn about its geohistories to encounter *tala* on shared ground? What fluencies would queer studies have to give up to enter into conversation with *tala*? What geographies and geohistories would have to be generated and contested? Who could occupy them and how?

More.

I am an Africa-based scholar who trained in and taught about the black diaspora. For hiring committees dedicated to what Kandice Chuh (2014) critiques as "about-ness," black diaspora translates into an accumulation of racialized geographies. In some imaginations, it means I can teach the United States, the Caribbean, black Britain, and Africa. For me, the black diaspora is a s/place from which to contemplate the relationship between deracination and encounter, to focus on how black individuals from across the world interact with each other: how we imagine worlds, inhabit ungeographies, and produce fugitive temporal-

ties, not simply “other” or “alternative” or even “counter” modernities but different configurations of time altogether, located in the afterlife of slavery, occupying what Christina Sharpe (2014) might term “wake time.”³ What did it mean, for instance, when Afro-Caribbeans encountered Africans in Paris and London in the 1930s and 1940s and, subsequently, in Ghana and Senegal in postcolonial Africa? How did these encounters generate forms of being together unimagined and unimaginable within white supremacist frames that grant significance to black life only as it becomes visible to a white gaze? What forms of geography are generated by these encounters? What kinds of impossibilities? How does deracination become not only the condition under which such encounters might take place but an ongoing outcome of these encounters?

I note, for instance, that the work now circulating as queer African studies in the United States is indifferent to many of the conceptual frames in African studies. Reading through this emerging body of work, it is difficult to imagine that African philosophers, including John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, and Nkiru Nzegwu, have ever written anything that conceptualizes personhood, individuality, or community. African intellectual contexts disregarded, queer African studies becomes simply another trick in the queer backroom.⁴ In fact, the work of thinking through queer Africa will be mostly illegible to US and European ears trained by and embedded in LGBTI studies. Or, as is happening too often, queer African voices and experiences will be absorbed as “data” or “evidence,” not as modes of theory or as challenges to the conceptual assumptions that drive queer studies.⁵ Even now, an army of well-meaning European and US researchers descend on Africa with notebooks and digital recorders to capture the belated entry of Africans into queer modernity.

In a gesture of profound rudeness, I now ignore e-mails and requests for meetings from US and European researchers who travel to Africa to search for queers.

In recent years, I have returned to Barbara Christian’s “Race for Theory” (1987). There, Christian critiques the whiteness and aesthetics of theory, the languages and bodies assumed to be capable of theorizing, the racialization (and tokenism) of theory. She insists that “people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western forms of abstract logic” (Christian 1987: 52). “Form” lies at the heart of race-making distinction, for the being envisioned and theorized in much Western thinking, the being Sylvia Wynter (2003) terms “Man,” emerges from and occupies a genealogy of thinking and practice of living that is simply unavailable to black people. Hortense Spillers (1987) teaches me that the genealogy of blackness in modernity—a genealogy that creates and

sustains slavery and colonialism—produces a different relationship to those philosophical figures supposed to describe one's being in the world: the individual, the subject, the person, the human. The thing-making labor of colonial modernity demands rubrics other than those of inclusion/exclusion, inside/out, subject/object, majority/minority.

And nothing is quite as futile as trying to occupy or reclaim a negating space.

My thinking emerges from and tries to inhabit the s/place between an ungeography called Africa and a deracination called the black diaspora. From this s/place, archives become tricky. I could pursue and reproduce my negation by attempting to use the archives of colonial modernity. But I am tired of describing all the ways racism unmade black people. Too, I am radically uninterested in the colonial-era archives now brandished with much excitement by those who insist that colonialism brought homophobia, not homosexuality, to Africa. Instead, I am interested in how different black people across multiple geohistories have co-imagined each other and attempted to create a shareable world. This means the sites and scenes and objects I examine—the disparate pieces that make up my archives—are often uninteresting to mainstream queer studies. When I examine, say, how wearing trousers was an important moment in Gikuyu colonial modernity when gender and sexuality shifted in radical ways, or how shifting practices of labor and punishment in pre- and postemancipation Jamaica remade notions of gender and sexuality, I see the yawns lining up in mainstream queer studies. Where are “the queers”? Sometimes, the question is, “where are the white people we can care about?” and at other times, “where are the Europeans and US inhabitants we can care about?” Or, where are the US thinkers we can care about?

I am interested in tracking the dissonant intimacies that emerge as black figures encounter each other: the uses of what Audre Lorde (1986: 61) terms “heterocetera” to create shared ground, the frictions created by geohistorical origin, the uses and failures of blackness to create shared ground, the uses of what Tavia Nyong'o (2014: 76) terms “critical fabulation” to imagine conversations that might occur. Location matters.

When I was still institutional in the United States, before I resigned, it mattered more that my thinking demonstrate I knew how to speak, to conversate, if you will, with mainstream queer studies. Now, I am much more interested in thinking with people for whom blackness is not an afterthought. It means that much of my thinking will remain illegible and uninteresting to mainstream queer studies, as I insist on populating it with names like Neo Musangi, Stella Nyanzi, Zethu Matebeni, Nkiru Nzegwu, Kwasi Wiredu, and Wambui Mwangi. As I stage conversa-

tions that skirt the United States, learning from Kamala Kempadoo and Rinaldo Walcott, refusing, in the process, the notion of an “area studies” model that centers the United States as the place to which information flows.

I recognize the irony of making such a claim for a conversation in *GLQ*. Perhaps my task here is to be a complaining native.

Since returning to Nairobi, I ask how being here can be made more possible. It is a here that extends across borders, a here that tugs between ungeography and deracination, an insistent here too often full of displacement. So I form my sentences carefully, learning, from Barbara Christian, how to find the forms I need to survive.

As I return to this writing, Nairobi is in the grip of what used to be called the long rains, which run from March to May. Or, at least, they used to. Now, as February turned into March, and March approached April, phone calls would start with the same question: “Is it raining there?” It has become difficult to know when to plant and what to plant. Food prices have become erratic. Tomatoes are smaller. As are onions. When it rains, electricity becomes erratic. Traffic gets worse. Flying termites fill the air—birds and geckos eat well. The tap water, supplied by the city, shifts in color from clear to mud brown. And when it clears again, it is still difficult to use.

Perhaps it is the rains. As I kept trying to respond to wonderful comments about how to imagine and reimagine area studies, about what a decolonizing university or academic practice might look like, about the kinds of knowledge practices and archives that might remove queer studies from its imperial perch, I kept getting stuck on the story of the scorpion and the frog. You know how it goes: a scorpion begs a frog for a ride across a body of water. Though at first reluctant, the frog eventually agrees. At some point during the trip, the scorpion stings the frog. That is its nature. We know the conversation the frog and scorpion have before they enter the water, and we know the conversation the two have as the frog is dying, but what do they say to each other as the frog begins its journey across the water?

The opening lines of Audre Lorde’s “There Are No Honest Poems about Dead Women” have been nagging:

What do we want from each other
after we have told our stories

I think the scorpion always has an answer to this question. I think the scorpion always knows what it wants. To cross the body of water, to meet another frog, to cross the body of water again, and to meet yet another frog. Perhaps the frog always

knows it is going to die. And, to the extent that it can, it chooses where it will die. In the water. As it is swimming. Perhaps the story of the frog and the scorpion is less about the scorpion's nature and more about how the frog chooses to die. What does the frog want? More precisely, how should the frog choose how to die?

Increasingly, I admire a certain African genius for waywardness. As practiced by Stella Nyanzi, waywardness accumulates odd stories, little moments, folksy wisdom, and seemingly disconnected anecdotes. Some stories feel juvenile—and those looking for profound insights in them will be disappointed by their simplicity. And also revel in their sophistication. Others will nod sagely and with well-practiced condescension praise the simplicity of African philosophy found in odd stories. Waywardness revels not in the secrets found as it strays here and there—it is not a scavenger hunt. Nor is waywardness necessarily interested in forging new paths that others can follow. Often, it is a stubborn refusal to come to the point. And I find myself asking what kind of refusal the frog might stage.

I am not really sure I have anything to say about area studies—about the maps of the world it created, about the maps of the world it still uses, about how it assembles knowledge, about the academy's complicity in it, about the role of native informants, about the possibilities of antinomian practices, about decolonization (a term whose current use in online communities makes little sense to me), about earnest US-based scholars who promise not to replicate imperial strategies as they travel around the world to discover, if they dare, that they hold US passports, and this means something they cannot escape. I could think about what that means for those who travel with good intentions, but I do not really see the point.

How will the frog choose to die?

A final wayward moment: primary school history taught me how to think about Africans. There were two kinds of Africans: those who collaborated and those who resisted. Later, I would encounter the native informant, a role that I could not not perform, and Gayatri Spivak offered me the language of complicity. Others entered the frame: the sly native, the trickster native, the desiring native, the sage native, the agential native, the undeveloped native, the homosexual native, the queer native, the deracinated native. Increasingly, I have been interested in the indifferent native. This native haunts colonial archives and, if you check, recent NGO reports. This native fails to speak in the correct way. Chooses not to answer questions. Rarely shows up. Shows up when not expected. Offers banal observations—perhaps about flying termites. Perhaps the indifferent native understands that the scorpion does not really care about conversation. Perhaps the indifferent native never has to say no. Perhaps the indifferent native simply wanders off.

Notes

1. Thanks to Cervenak 2014, “wandering” has become a newly available term to think with.
2. Many of these works are now vernaculars and need not be cited. I would draw attention to Edelman 1995.
3. I learn “s/place” from Philip 1994.
4. I address some of this in Macharia 2015.
5. I owe this formulation of how nonwhite figures appear as “evidence” or “footnote” to Soto 2005.

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