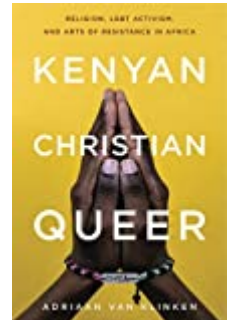


Adriaan Van Klinken. *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa.* Africana Religions Series. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019. xiv + 232 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-08380-3.



Reviewed by Graeme Reid (Human Rights Watch and Yale University)

Published on H-Africa (September, 2020)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

It Is Complicated: Being Christian and Queer in Kenya

Adriaan van Klinken has written an innovative and ambitious book that sets out to do a lot: taunt the secular orthodoxy of queer scholarship with a hint of Pentecostal fervor, complicate religious studies with a dose of queer theology, and mobilize African perspectives to provincialize queer theory. The book is as theoretically versatile as it is methodologically varied. No wonder “scavenger methodology” is van Klinken’s self-descriptor of choice, drawn from Jack Halberstam. The author describes his approach as “a somewhat eclectic array” of data and method (p. 19). This is both its strength and its weakness.

What holds these disparate elements of theory and method together? My conclusion is that it is essentially the author himself, his fieldwork experience, his perspectives, beliefs and interest in various forms of cultural production. Of course, that could be said about almost any book, but the author of *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* places particular emphasis on the power of storytelling and inserts

his own experiences as a kind of cartilage between chapters. The scaffolding of the book consists of four chapters—case studies—separated by these self-reflective interludes. But despite the discrete containment of the author’s research experiences in the interludes, his theological perspective permeates the whole book. It is a kind of magpie combination of elements that is both provocative and distracting.

In the first chapter van Klinken sets the tone by introducing themes that recur throughout the book, including his theological framing, a focus on public representations of subjective lgbt experience (van Klinken uses lowercase for the acronym throughout to signal the provisional nature of identity categories), and his treatment of literary and social text as archive. The chapter begins with a coming out narrative by Binyavanga Wainaina, written in the form of a lost chapter of a previously published memoir. Van Klinken then explores Wainaina’s oeuvres, especially his critique of ho-

mophobia and one of its driving forces—Christian dogma. He reframes Wainaina’s critique as visionary and anoints him “prophet,” notwithstanding Wainaina’s own skepticism about the title. Is “prophet,” then, an appropriate characterization? While it fits uncomfortably with Wainaina’s disavowal, it resonates with van Klinken’s overarching thesis that sites of possibility are to be found in unexpected, subaltern spaces, and that these may usefully—if optimistically—be thought of as prophetic. “I am a homosexual, mum,” is the simple truth revealed in Wainaina’s creative nonfiction. It caused a stir, amplified by a subsequent tweet in which he confirmed: “I am, for anybody confused or in doubt, a homosexual [sic]. Gay, and quite happy.”

Van Klinken sees Wainaina’s coming out as a political intervention that creates new, open-ended possibilities, a leitmotif in his book. The “lost chapter” concept employed by Wainaina echoes van Klinken’s interest in the value of personal narrative as well as silence, absence, and the archive. By restoring the missing segment of his autobiography Wainaina defies the imperative for discrete silence, conjures the figure of the homosexual in the space of its absence, and contributes to an ever-expanding archive of queer experience. Indeed, the concept of archive is reinforced by the work spawned in the wake of Wainaina’s disclosure. In a similar vein, in *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities* (2014), Zethu Matebeni expanded “queer African archives” by riffing off Wainaina’s satirical essay, “How to Write about Africa” to reflect ironically on outsider perspectives in her piece “How NOT to Write about Queer South Africa” (pp. 17, 35). Archive runs like a red thread through the book but is under-theorized and stands as almost self-evident. Further interrogation of the concept of “archive” would enable the reader to understand better the production, reception, and preservation of certain forms of knowledge, rather than

assume the artifacts of “arts of resistance” as given.

Wainaina’s coming out story was published in January 2014, in which there was an intensification of the political use of homophobia, culminating in pernicious legislation in Uganda and Nigeria. Wainaina had strong connections to both countries through family and affectional bonds. Wainaina’s story echoes the feminist adage the “personal is political,” to which van Klinken adds his interest in the “body as a site of struggle,” referencing Wainaina’s disclosure of his HIV status, some three years after coming out as gay (echoing the author’s self-disclosure in the interlude “Positive”). Wainaina’s narratives are prime examples, says van Klinken, of what Achille Mbembe calls “African

modes of self-writing” through which he is—perhaps unwittingly—catapulted into the role of spokesperson (a role for which he is subsequently criticized by some activists for not being representative, inclusive, or consistent enough) (p. 35).

The second chapter interprets a music video by Art Attack, a Nairobi-based group, featuring the song “Same Love (Remix)” (2016), which was restricted by the Kenyan Film Classification Board (KFCB), in part because it went “against the moral values of the country” (p. 61). The lyrics, imagery, reception, and statements made by the musicians combine to build an argument echoed in the opening lines of the song to the backdrop of a South African flag: “This song goes out to the new slaves, the new blacks, the new Jews, the new minorities for whom we need a civil rights movement, maybe a sex rights movement. Especially in Africa. Everywhere. This goes out to you. I feel you” (p. 68). The language of civil rights and minorities replicates a US-centric playbook as does the original song. The complication of this intertwining and cultural borrowing deserves further exploration. The in-depth theological reading of the video seems like a stretch, given that the religious references are

quite sparse, unless one approaches theology as an analytic tool.

Van Klinken anticipates and pushes back against the expectation that queer is synonymous with transgressing norms. Through a contextual reading of the video, and in particular the social and political significance of the Nairobi Arboretum, he argues that vanilla, in context, has the potential to be the new queer vanguard. The setting of the video—in the shadow of the presidential residence and a site of religious observance—symbolically reclaims space and is filmed without official permission, one of the technical reasons cited by the KFCB for restricting the distribution of the video.

The author nods approvingly at the depiction in the video of egalitarian same-sex relations as a rejection of heteronormativity, effectively rendering relations based on a dyad of power differentials top/bottom, butch/femme (which he suggests are economically determined) as a form of false consciousness. But downplaying difference could equally be read as an aspiration toward modernity and a rejection of relationship patterns that may well be subjectively experienced by the participants in unexpected ways. This remains unexamined in the text and speaks to a broader limitation in his analysis; the images and lyrics are taken as given and not treated as cultural artifacts worthy of analysis in and of themselves. More attention to the elements of the video as bricolage would give further insight into the global circulation of some ideas over others and the Kenyan appropriation of specifically US styles and identity-based consciousness.

The throwaway line about “gay vague”—the mainstream incorporation of gay sartorial register into everyday style—could be further developed as a way of highlighting ideas about urbanity, masculinity, modernity, and the complicated relationship with class and cosmopolitan style, which makes certain forms of queer expression palatable, even fashionable, to a certain social milieu

(p. 71). While Audrey Mbugua, founder of Transgender Education and Advocacy (TEA), has earned a name for herself as provocateur and a thorn in the side of the LGBT movement, her support of the KFCB and rejection of trans-inclusivity is an interesting counter-narrative, if strategically misguided, that resists the global hegemony of LGBT, exposing these as unstable and contested categories. As a voice in the wilderness, might she be considered a prophet, of sorts?

The third chapter is about a collection of 250 life stories, curated by The Nest, an arts collective based in Nairobi, with the intention of providing a counter-narrative to populist rhetoric that homosexuality is “un-African.” Some of the stories were published in an anthology, *Stories of Our Lives* (2015) edited by the NEST Collective, and five of these were dramatized in a film by the same name, banned by the KFCB. The author engages the stories as unmediated texts, authentic personal narratives, that can be treated as an archive of alternative knowledge, located in time and space. The stories are set in Nairobi, Mombasa, and small towns in Kenya, but van Klinken makes the point that they also speak to Kenya in Africa and are located within a global queer imaginary. The author treats the recurring themes as evidence, taken at face value. I was left wanting to know more about the archival project, in order to better understand the production of particular narratives. This again speaks to the limitations of a theological reading of text, in which the author appears to take the material almost for granted, rather than focusing more explicitly on how stories both reflect and produce subjectivities. It seems interesting to me to focus on how certain themes and narratives are reproduced, how those echo a political reality for a specific class of people in Kenya, and how that resonates with global discourses around LGBT rights. The stories themselves are bricolage, imagined interiorities that draw on multiple competing discourses. The stories tell interesting meta-narratives about the construction of identities, drawing

on a wide range of resources, fast tracked by instant global communication.

The fourth, and last, chapter is the most methodologically grounded, not only for my anthropological bias. It is about a queer affirming church, and his research includes some participant observation, supplemented by ongoing exchanges in a WhatsApp group. The links to the US are very direct, notwithstanding the obvious reluctance of The Fellowship Global to be seen as the initiator and sustainer for what clearly is a Kenyan project. It is Joseph Tolton of the US-based Fellowship of Affirming Ministries who confers authority on the leaders of the Kenyan church community. It seems to me that the very reason for the need to assert the localness of the church, in the face of its strong US connections, is interesting in and of itself and would have been a point of tension to interrogate, rather than explain. In this sense, it does seem that van Klinken takes on the mantle of “research as advocacy,” the subject of his closing interlude in which he grapples with the discomfort and veracity of that role (p. 187).

Van Klinken’s willingness to innovate through his embrace of “scavenger methodology” and his close attention to sites of possibility, to prophetic vision, have produced a creative hybrid, a bricolage, that will stimulate further engagement between disparate fields, especially between queer studies and religious studies (p. 19). The book also provides new perspectives in the burgeoning field of queer African studies. Van Klinken is alert to the discordant notes, personal stories at odds with social norms, acts of defiance small and large, which he sees as signs of potential for change. In this way, slivers of subjective experience or events like small, barely noticed church services emerge as good omens. And that is the hopeful, optimistic message of his book—van Klinken’s version of “cruising utopia” (p. 138). His use of theology as an interpretive tool reads, at times, like an uncomfortable overlay. But, simultaneously, it is radically disruptive of religious orthodoxies. His turn to fem-

inist (and a smaller body of queer) theology, which reinterprets “fruitfulness,” outside the narrow confines of reproduction, and the body as a site of connection and pleasure, stands out (p. 135). The provocation to queer studies to be less secure in a secular space and pay more attention to religion and faith is powerful and overdue. His frank appraisal of his fieldwork experiences and the ways these shape his work make for refreshing interludes. His approach to religion and queer studies is fruitful academically and—no matter how reluctant he is to accept the “researcher as advocate” mantle—also useful in providing necessary counter-narratives to the homosexuality is “un-Christian” and “un-African” argument, which has been central to the rhetoric of political homophobia on the continent since the mid-1990s. By blurring boundaries, this book makes a valuable contribution to many fields.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Graeme Reid. Review of Van Klinken, Adriaan. *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. September, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55344>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.