

Queer African Cinemas



LINDSEY B. GREEN-SIMMS

Queer
African
Cinemas

BUY

A CAMERA OBSCURA BOOK

A series edited by Lynne Joyrich, Patricia White, Lalitha Gopalan, Bliss Cua Lim,
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Queer African Cinemas

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To those for whom
queer African cinema
is lifesaving

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Queer African Cinemas has been over a decade in the making. The project began, albeit in a different iteration, when I was a postdoctoral fellow in Women's Studies at Duke University in 2009–2010. There I had the opportunity to present and develop some of my thoughts on the two films that would become the basis for my first chapter. I am therefore very much indebted to formal and informal feedback and conversations with Jennifer DeVere Brody, Tina Campt, Rey Chow, Ranjana Khanna, Negar Mottahedeh, and Charles Piot, as well as Brian Goldstone, Ignacio Adriasola Muñoz, and many of the graduate students and other fellows there at the time, all of whom helped to set this book into flight. The postdoctoral fellowship at Duke also funded my first research trip to Nigeria in the summer of 2010. There, I met up with the formidable Unoma Azuah and conducted many interviews with Nollywood filmmakers, distributors, audiences, and censors that have helped me to understand the multiple complexities of gay-themed Nollywood films. I want to thank Patricia Paulina Bala, Andy Chukwu, Kabat Esosa Egbon, Dakore Egbuson-Akande, Dickson Iroegbu, Emem Isong, Afam Okereke, and Ikechukwu Onyeka for granting me interviews. After watching almost two dozen films together, Unoma and I wrote up some of our findings from this trip in an article titled “The Video Closet: Nollywood’s Gay-Themed Movies” published in *Transition*, and I am incredibly grateful for Unoma’s continued support and conversations, as well as to all of those who have engaged with that article.

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In the fall of 2019, the College of Arts and Sciences at American University funded a book incubator workshop that enabled me to bring in Naminata Diabate, Rudolf Gaudio, Z'étoile Imma, Jeanne-Marie Jackson, and Robert McRuer for an incredibly lively and fruitful discussion of the manuscript in progress. My arguments and close readings are undoubtedly stronger because of the thoughtfulness and generosity of these colleagues.

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As I was working through the revisions of *Queer African Cinemas*, I was also putting together a special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* on “The Possibilities and Intimacies of Queer African Screen Cultures” with Z’etoile Imma. I want to thank Z’etoile, as well as all of the contributing authors (Grant Andrews, A. B. Brown, Lyn Johnstone, Gibson Ncube, Kwame Edwin Otu, and Lwando Scott) and the editor, Carli Coetzee, for the opportunity to think through so many different ways that queer African screen media can create new intimacies and possibilities.

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earlier reviews of the films *Ifé*, *Under the Rainbow*, and *Rafiki* appeared on the blog *Africa Is a Country*—much thanks to Sean Jacobs, too, for making that blog such a dynamic and queer-friendly space.

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Introduction

Registering Resistance in
Queer African Cinemas

In their Nairobi apartment, Liz and Achi, two women who have lived together as a couple for three years, sit on a couch watching a news broadcast. Their expressions are deadpan. They barely blink. Liz moves her hand slightly so that it rests on Achi's upper arm. It is 2014 and the voice from the television, that of Kenyan politician Irungu Kang'ata, explains in a matter-of-fact tone that there has been a recent promotion of gay activities (or what he calls "gayism"), in Kenya and Africa as a whole, that he finds concerning (figures 1.1 and 1.2).¹ He notes that people go to hotels and have demonstrations supporting "gayism" and that there have been "situations where some writers have gone publicly saying that they are gays," referring to the coming out of the famous Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina, who published "I Am a Homosexual, Mum" online in early 2014. But what seems to anger Kang'ata the most is that the Kenyan government has failed to do anything to stop these things from happening. He calls upon the police to arrest those promoting "gayism" in Kenya and notes that if the police do not take action, the law allows for "citizens' arrest of gays." Midway through the broadcast, Achi gets up and walks into another

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FIGURES 1.1 AND 1.2. Stills from *Stories of Our Lives* (2014). Liz and Achi (top) watch Irungu Kang'ata (bottom) on the television in their living room.

room, where she begins applying lipstick. Moments later Liz, recognizing the couple's vulnerability, follows Achi and asks, "What do we do?"

This is how "Each Night I Dream," the last of five vignettes in the film compilation *Stories of Our Lives*, begins. I begin my discussion of queer African cinemas with "Each Night I Dream" because of the way that it imagines the quiet and loud, public and private, and hopeful and fearful ways of resisting and evading state-sanctioned homophobia that are at the heart of many of the queer-focused African films and videos I examine in this book. *Stories of Our Lives* was made in 2014 by members of the Nest Collective, a Nairobi-based arts collective, and directed by the Nest Collective member Jim Chuchu, whose

original music also provides the film's soundtrack. Though it has received many accolades and awards, the film was, in some ways, an accidental film. The Nest Collective had been working on a book of the same name, collecting stories from queer-identified people around the country, and decided to turn a few of the stories into short films to show to the community of people they had interviewed. They filmed sparsely in black and white using a single Canon DSLR video camera. One of these shorts was shown to a curator of the Toronto International Film Festival, who asked if the Nest Collective could make more vignettes for a feature-length film. The collective agreed, and *Stories* was slated to show in Toronto before the film was even finished. The first four vignettes reflect the stories they had collected, either as a direct dramatization of a person's stories or as a composite of several stories in order to show the many different lived experiences of queer Kenyans. (The first vignette is about two high-school girls separated by their school principal; in the second, a gay man outruns a homophobic friend; in the third, a farm worker confesses his love to his sympathetic but straight best friend; and in the fourth, a Kenyan researcher in London hires a white male prostitute for himself.) But at the last minute the collective decided that a fifth short they had filmed did not work well in the collection, and, rather than making another one from the stories they had gathered, they created "Each Night I Dream," a film that, to me, perfectly captures so many of the multiple and conflicting and intimate forms of resistance found in queer African cinemas and discussed throughout this book.²

After asking Achi what to do about the threat of the citizens' arrests advocated by Kang'ata, Liz begins to narrate "Each Night I Dream" from off-screen, explaining how she and Achi have always kept a low profile and have never expressed intimacy outside of the walls of their shared apartment. But as Liz lies awake next to a sleeping Achi, she tells the audience about her constant anxiety: "Every night I wonder what we will do when they come for us. Will we fight or will we run?" At first, she envisions fighting, and the camera cuts to Liz and her friends staring down an angry mob (figure 1.3). Then she contemplates the possibility of running and becoming a fugitive, wondering out loud what they would take with them as the camera shows them grabbing a framed photo of themselves, embracing affectionately, and leaving with little else. Liz also wonders where they would run to, noting that all the countries around them have worse conditions for LGBTQ citizens.³ And then she fantasizes about running away to an island of their own, a safe haven to which "everyone who needed to run could go." At this point, a chanted, dreamlike song (composed by Chuchu) begins to play, and the two girlfriends are shown

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FIGURE 1.3. Still from *Stories of Our Lives* (2014), showing Liz's vision of what it would be like if she and her friends were to physically fight homophobic violence.

dancing and walking in slow motion on their island as bubbles float across the screen (figure 1.4). Achi dances with a sparkler, and they both have glitter on their faces as they kiss playfully on the cheek and smile. Like several of the other vignettes in *Stories of Our Lives*, “Each Night I Dream” demonstrates the persistence of pleasure in queer lives, the “thinking, imagining, and creating [of] queer African pleasure itself” (Munro 2018, 664) even as it is under threat.

But as the island fantasy ends, Liz also considers the possibility that fleeing might not be feasible, that hiding might be a better option. She then recalls a traditional Gikūyū myth, in which it is possible to change one's sex by walking backward around a Mūgumo tree seven times.⁴ Liz imagines herself walking around the tree and coming home as a boy. When police officers come to their door, presumably to arrest them for homosexuality, Liz responds, “You think I'm a woman?” and then drops her pants to prove that she is not. The crowd gathered behind the police gasps and she shuts the door on them. The film then leaves Liz's fantasy sequence and returns to the present, back to Liz lying awake next to Achi and back to the footage of Kang'ata on television talking about how “gayism” is not African. In light of the traditional gender-bending story Liz has told about the Mūgumo tree, Kang'ata's claims—that queerness “is against our culture, against our tradition, against all the religious belief”—ring hollow, though they are no less dangerous for that.

In the final segment of the short, Liz muses on the absurdity of saying that African people are un-African, a refrain often used by homophobic politicians.



FIGURE 1.4. Still from *Stories of Our Lives* (2014), showing Liz's dream of an island where she and Achi could escape and live freely.

She looks down, examining her hands, turning them over, and asks, “If we are not African, then what are we?” She offers one possible answer: “Maybe we are aliens. Maybe we come from a place where gender and sexuality are silly ideas. Primitive ideas. Maybe we came here to find out what it’s like to be human. And maybe it’s time for us to go back home.” The camera then cuts to a shot of the stars, taking the viewer farther and farther into the universe as the soundtrack overlays multiple indistinct, staticky voices. Then a male voice takes over, narrating the last minute of the vignette as the camera continues to pan out into the universe. Though few outside the queer activist and artist community in Kenya would identify it, the voice is that of Anthony Oluoch, a prominent activist who has worked for several queer African organizations, including Pan Africa ILGA, Kaleidoscope Trust, and Gay Kenya Trust, and who was the cohost of the podcast *Kenyan Queer Questions* and, more recently, of the podcast *Padded Cell*. In his deep, resonant, and calmly confident voice, Oluoch delivers the following monologue:

There’s a law in this country that says that a man and another man are not allowed to express love. This law justifies violence, evictions, being excluded by your family, being blackmailed, being harassed by the police, losing your job, and many other things. I want to live in a place where I’m allowed to love who I want to love. I want to live in a place where my life is not constantly monitored and I have to justify how I live it. This is my country, and as a Kenyan I want to live here. I would not want to run

away. I am a homosexual and I am a proud homosexual and I have never felt ashamed of who I love. . . . All of us are different. All seven billion of us on this planet are different. But all of us need love.

When he is done talking, the screen goes black, and as the credits roll, the dreamlike chanting music from the island returns. This final monologue of the film imagines a journey not just to outer space but also to a Kenya where queer people would not in fact want to run away, a Kenya that activists like Oluoch and artists like the Nest Collective are trying to create, so that queer Kenyans can stay and live on and love whom they please without shame. It is, given the realist documentary news footage that opens the vignette, a decidedly defiant and even abstract way to conclude an anthology of films highlighting multiple stories about the challenges of queer love and intimacy in Kenya. But what this ending demonstrates is that, although Liz dreams of all the worst-case scenarios, queer African cinema can also register dreams for different possible presents and futures, presents and futures that are often even in conversation with more traditional and fluid understandings of gender and sexuality. Here, then, I follow Elena Loizidou who, expanding our ideas of what might be considered political resistance, writes that “we can think of the dream (its experience and a recounting) as an extension of the political actions of demonstration and protests, tracking the *flight* to freedom” (2016, 125). In this way, the final shots of the stars and constellations show that *Stories of Our Lives*, despite its documentary foundations, should be understood not in terms of a singular or concrete visibility project but as a film that illuminates planetary dreams in which there is “a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present” (Muñoz 2009, 49). Or, as Z’étoile Imma and I write of queer African screen media more broadly, the vignettes as a whole “offer us a new visual language, one that speaks in terms less invested in explicit narratives of resistance and domination, but instead enacts visions of interaction, touch, and longing which anticipate African queerness as possibility and belonging” (Green-Simms and Imma 2021, 5).

But just as it is important to highlight *Stories of Our Lives*’ investment in love, pleasure, and imaginative possibilities, it is no less essential to underscore how the film records and tracks the increased fear, anxiety, and vulnerability many queer Africans were experiencing both in Kenya and across the continent at this particular historical moment, as public outings, violent attacks, and calls to further criminalize homosexuality were proliferating in many African countries in the first decades of the twenty-first century. For instance, in 2014 when Kang’ata was delivering his hateful message on television in Kenya and actively

trying to strengthen the country's antihomosexuality laws (which he was not successful in doing), Nigeria's draconian Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), first introduced in 2006, had just been signed, emboldening many Nigerian citizens to lure and attack queer people. Only a month after Nigeria's law was signed, so too was Uganda's Anti-homosexuality Act (AHA). Like Nigeria's SSMPA, the AHA was many years in the making and likewise based on British colonial law. And though Uganda's law would be overturned later that year because it passed without the necessary quorum, the antigay violence it unleashed and encouraged persisted. Likewise, Ayo Coly (2019, 44) notes that in Francophone Senegal, political leaders also "engaged in a performance of virile postcolonial African nationhood" that aimed to show the world that they too could resist emasculation by embracing antigay rhetoric. Indeed, the increase in antigay rhetoric in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, even when not accompanied by calls to further criminalize homosexuality, affected many queer Africans across the continent.

What I want to emphasize, then, is that *Stories of Our Lives*, like many of the films discussed in this book, registers the upsurge in homophobia that swept up many African countries in the first decades of the twenty-first century and, at the same time, attempts to find alternatives to the violent heteronormativity that continually threatens hopes of queer belonging and life-building. But what is important for the purposes of this book is that the films discussed here do so by indexing multiple and sometimes conflicting or even opaque or muted forms of resistance and refusal—forms that include loving, touching, fighting, running away, staying put, staying quiet, taking refuge in customary practices, and dreaming of otherworldly possibilities—that are often practiced from a position of vulnerability. What I argue in this book is that queer African cinemas articulate forms of resistance that cannot be understood through narrow understandings of resistance as visible or audible strategic opposition to the status quo. Here, I follow Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (2016, 6), who argue in their introduction to *Vulnerability in Resistance* that resistance needs to be understood outside of the context of "masculinist models of autonomy," that it needs to be understood as drawing from vulnerability and not mutually opposed to it, and that it must be tracked across its different and conflicting registers.

Moreover, as I suggest throughout *Queer African Cinemas*, if one is to understand all the complexities of resistance in queer African cinema, one needs to look both at and beyond the text and to the politics of production, consumption, and distribution. For instance, *Stories of Our Lives* was banned in Kenya in large part because of its hopeful ending. According to Chuchu and fellow Nest

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Collective member and cowriter Njoki Ngumi, the Kenyan Film Classification Board thought that the end of the film was too positive, too progay, and told the Nest Collective that if they wanted the film to be shown in the country they needed to either drop the final vignette or change it. The Nest Collective, however, stood their ground, and the film was censored in Kenya. George Gachara, who was listed as the producer, was arrested for filming without a license. The charges against him were eventually dropped, but if the Nest Collective violated the ban and showed the film in Kenya or uploaded it to the internet, the government said they would pursue charges.⁵ In this case, the Nest Collective not only made a resistant film but at the same time faced a growing resistance to queerness and queer expression in Kenya. They kept the ending they wanted but also chose to comply with the law and not risk the safety of their members by screening or uploading the film, even though this meant that the film is nearly impossible for Kenyans to see unless they are able to access it internationally or obtain a smuggled copy.⁶ These complex decisions and maneuvers by the Classification Board and the Nest Collective—each practicing and pushing back against the other's practices of resistance—show that resistance does not follow any neat or discernible path, that it is never as simple as simply showcasing forms of agential resistance or celebrating transgression against power.

Though I begin my discussion here with *Stories of Our Lives*, a film made by a director who identifies as queer about the lived experiences of queer Kenyans, it is important to note that while the Nest Collective's film anthology embodies so many of the different forms of resistance that I see in queer African cinemas more broadly, it is not necessarily typical of the films discussed. The films and videos I examine throughout *Queer African Cinemas* come from a range of African countries, all with their own cinematic traditions, aesthetic practices, political histories, and sets of censorship regulations that determine not only the types of queer stories that are told but also how the films circulate locally, regionally, and globally. Moreover, what I am calling queer African cinemas in this book are not only films made by queer filmmakers or their allies. In fact, many popular films that portray queer characters, especially those emerging from West African video film traditions like Nollywood, are structured as cautionary tales intended to warn audiences against the dangers or threats of homosexuality. It has indeed been a challenge to put the types of films that queer Africans have largely found to be homophobic, films that often resist projects that make queer African lives habitable, next to life-affirming films like *Stories of Our Lives*. But it is precisely this juxtaposition that has helped me to understand how all queer African films, regardless of why they were

made or who made them, invite an understanding of resistance as a messy process that entails both opposing and consenting to forms of power, that involves fearing for the worst but dreaming of the best, and that sometimes demands slow or imperfect forms of negotiation. In this way, the films discussed in this book do not pit a “noble, heroic subaltern” against a “corrupted, malicious state,” to borrow the phrasing of Ebenezer Obadare and Wendy Willems (2014, 9) in their introduction to the collection *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century*. Rather, each film I discuss here—and I examine a range of audiovisual output across the continent that includes avant-garde films, realist dramas, popular melodramas, occult films, and a music video—reveals how the types of resistance in queer African cinemas are always multilayered, always determined by a complex entanglement of racial, gendered, and sexual identities and national politics as well as by conventions of genre and format and modes of circulation. But it is my contention that paying attention to these multidirectional vectors of resistance makes palpable the way that the precarities and vulnerabilities of queer African life exist alongside modes of survival, practices of care, and aspirational imaginaries.

Queer and African and Cinemas

I situate this project within the emerging and burgeoning field of queer African studies. Though there is still some debate about the applicability of the term *queer* to same-sex practices and desires in Africa, it has been the case that, at least for the past decade, the word *queer* has been widely used by those on the continent as a mode of thinking through and about diverse, nonconforming African sexualities and of challenging heteronormative assumptions. As Zethu Matebeni, a leading South African sociologist, curator, and filmmaker, and Jabu Pereira, director of the Johannesburg-based LGBTI+ media advocacy organization Iranti, write in their preface to *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities*, the use of *queer* is “understood as an inquiry into the present, as a critical space that pushes the boundaries of what is embraced as normative” (2014, 7). But Matebeni and Pereira also understand that the term *queer*, like the acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) that it often stands in for, has the potential to conflate very different types of people and to reinforce invisibilities within the broader queer community. They also make clear that *queer* should be applied not just to twenty-first-century identities and that gender nonconformity in different forms has existed on the African continent for centuries, despite false claims that it is un-African. Thus, Matebeni and Pereira use the space-making and

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boundary-pushing term *queer* to acknowledge many forms and local categories of nonheteronormative sexual identities while emphasizing that it is far from perfect and that it has much work still to do. The Ugandan intellectual and activist Stella Nyanzi articulates some of this work when she argues that queer inquiry in Africa must take on a “two-pronged approach, namely queer-ing African Studies on the one hand, and Africanising Queer Studies on the other hand” (2015a, 127). Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi (2016, xiv) writes in his introduction to the first queer-focused special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (RAL) in 2016 that the question now is “less about the applicability of queer and more about the already-existing applications of queer in Africanist research.”

This, of course, does not mean that *queer* is a universally accepted term. As Serena Dankwa argues in *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana*, her study of intimate friendships between working-class women in Ghana, many people who engage in same-sex practices in Africa are uncomfortable with or unfamiliar with the language of sexual identity (e.g., *queer*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *lesbian*) that is more common in larger cities and activist or “Afropolitan” circles. Although she judiciously avoids using the term *queer* to describe people who would not use it to describe themselves (preferring instead to underscore the multiple and sometimes ambiguous ways same-sex-desiring women “know” each other), Dankwa, like the thinkers above, also recognizes the strategic usefulness of *queer* in literary and activist spaces across the African continent. While not ideal, part of the appeal of the term *queer* is that it can be more flexible as well as more inclusive of indigenous same-sex practices that fall outside of “gay” identities and that it can, despite its association with Euro-American spaces and identities, provide theoretical tools that unsettle rigid, Western understandings of sexual identities (Dankwa 2021, 24, 37). My own position follows the scholars above: despite its imperfections, the term *queer* is useful in naming both a range of nonheteronormative sexualities and the critical possibilities and openings they afford.

But what exactly constitutes queer African cinema? While the African literary scene has seen several queer-identified African authors—such as Binyavanga Wainaina, Jude Dibia, Unoma Azuah, Kevin Mwachiro, Frieda Ekotto, Frankie Edozein, Akwaeke Emezi, and Romeo Oriogun—making public statements, going on book tours, or publishing work that explicitly challenges homophobia, the same cannot be said of the African film scene. Feature films about queer African characters tend not to be made by people who publicly identify as part of the queer African community. Many, in fact, are not made by Afri-

cans at all, and some are made by African filmmakers who make films to depict homosexuality as a threat to the social order. Unlike queer African writing, queer African films often run into problems with national censorship boards that determine what can and cannot be said or shown. In their wonderfully ambitious and carefully argued book *Queer Cinema in the World*, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt address this challenge with regard to queer cinema throughout the world. Citing the limitations of narrow definitions that reduce queer cinema to productions by or explicitly for queer people, the authors prefer a model that is more capacious and that is free from Western cultural presumptions about what a gay director or gay audience might look like. Schoonover and Galt (2016, 14) argue for an approach that does not “determine in advance what kinds of films, modes of production, and reception might qualify as queer or do queer work in the world,” and they set out to answer an equally capacious question: Given that queer world cinema is such an open-ended category, “where in the world is queer cinema?” Their response takes them to queer film festivals in New York and India and Botswana, and to video stores, BitTorrent sites, underground DVD markets in Iran and Egypt, and, of course, to sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Such an itinerary allows them to leave open the definition of cinema, claiming that it is “a space that is never quite resolved or decided” (3), and to sidestep the tangled debates about how one defines world cinema. Rather, they opt for a discussion of a queer cinema that “enables different ways of being in the world” and “creates different worlds” (5), and they focus on “cinema’s unique role in sustaining and making evident queer counterpublics” (2).

Because the categories of “queer” and “cinema” can encompass so many different forms, I follow Schoonover and Galt in keeping the definition of the terms as capacious as possible. Additionally, one must always keep in mind that “the invention of Africa” by colonialists, as V. Y. Mudimbe puts it, means that “Africa” as an epistemological object of knowledge is also always a bit unresolved. This means that I am working with several terms—*queer*, *Africa*, and *cinema*—that are all multiply and sometimes arbitrarily determined and boundless. However, because one of the goals of this book is to think particularly and regionally about queer African cinema and the politics of place, I argue that in order to understand the world of queer African cinema, one must pay attention not only to the porousness of categories but also to the various material and political challenges faced by African audiences and African filmmakers in a global world. In other words, while Schoonover and Galt (2016, 30) privilege films that partake in “worlding,” a term that is necessarily diffuse, a more specific set of questions arises when trying to define queer African

cinema, especially considering the paucity of publicly queer-identified filmmakers and the role of state censorship boards in trying to limit or prohibit films with queer African content. My aim, then, is to attend to the unique complexities and challenges of filmmaking, exhibition, and distribution in Africa, complexities that sometimes make it difficult to fit queer African cinema neatly into broader projects of “worlding” and creating queer world cinema counterpublics.

In order to understand the particularities and specifics of queer African cinema, I would like to begin by outlining three main categories into which it can be grouped: 1) international art films; 2) popular melodramas made for local audiences; and 3) documentaries by and about queer African communities. International art films, or those feature films that primarily circulate at global film festivals, are oftentimes the most visible and well-known queer African films to both local and global audiences. Though there were a few Senegalese films in the 1970s that had minor queer characters, as well as a few relatively obscure anti-apartheid films with queer content made by white South Africans in the 1980s, it is Mohamed Camara's *Dakan* (1997) that is most often considered the first global African feature film about homosexuality. *Dakan* is a Guinean film about two teenage boys, Sory and Manga, who fall in love, are separated by their parents, and then reunite. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival as part of the Director's Fortnight and went on to tour at primarily international gay film festivals. In 1998 it won the Los Angeles Outfest award for “Outstanding International Narrative Feature” and then opened in French cinemas the following year. Though the film screened at the French-Guinean cultural center in Guinea as well as at the 1999 FESPACO (Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou)—Africa's most famous film festival, which occurs every other year in Burkina Faso—almost all of its accolades were received abroad, where international Black audiences had a much more positive reaction to the film than audiences based on the continent. Four years after *Dakan* was released, *Karmen Gei* (2001), a Senegalese version of Bizet's opera *Carmen* in which Karmen's lovers are both male and female (see chapter 1), was selected at major film festivals such as Cannes, the Toronto International Film Festival, Sundance, and the New York African Film Festival. It also screened for about six weeks in Dakar but was eventually banned after the theater was stormed by two to three hundred people wielding machetes who threatened to burn the theater down. Though the protest was technically over the use of a Mouride (Sufi Muslim) holy song during the scene in which Karmen's female lover is buried in a Catholic cemetery—and not over the first-ever depiction of African lesbian

sex on screen—*Karmen Gei*, like *Dakan*, was primarily viewed by Western rather than African audiences.

Between 2001 and 2014 the only queer African-made films to receive major international attention were South African films. These films included John Greyson's *Proteus* (2003), a historical drama about a love affair between two male prisoners on Robben Island in the early eighteenth century; Shamim Sarif's historical drama *The World Unseen* (2007), about two South African women of Indian heritage who fall in love in Cape Town in the 1950s; and Oliver Hermanus's *Skoonheid* (2011), about a closeted Afrikaner man who attempts to rape his friend's son, a film which I discuss at length in chapter 3. These films toured internationally but were also screened throughout South Africa, where both homosexuality and same-sex marriage are legal and where cinema has played an important role in post-apartheid queer activism.

Then, in 2014, *Stories of Our Lives* became the first East African queer film to screen at international film festivals. It won multiple awards, but its censorship in Kenya, its country of origin, foreshadowed the fate of many queer African films that followed in the years after. In 2018 the South African film *Inxeba*, titled *The Wound* in translation (see chapter 3), and Kenyan Wanuri Kahiu's film *Rafiki* (see chapter 4) were, likewise, blocked in their own countries while simultaneously racking up international awards. After protests at early screenings of *Inxeba* in South Africa, the film was given an 18-and-over rating and pulled from theaters, though the filmmakers were eventually able to overturn the rating and return the film to the theaters. Kahiu also challenged her government in court, but *Rafiki* was permitted to screen in Kenya for only seven days, the exact length of time a film must screen in its country of origin to be eligible for an Oscar, before it was banned again. And while many queer African films do screen in South Africa, which with the release of three more queer art films in 2018–19—*Kanarie*, *The Harvesters*, and *Moffie*—is seeing a noticeable growth in queer filmmaking, outside of South Africa it is often difficult to see a queer African film screening in an African theater unless it is exhibited at a local festival, in which case the film is screened only one or two times total. Furthermore, while a few of these films, like *Inxeba*, can occasionally become available on Netflix, which is an increasingly popular way to stream movies across the continent, many are available only on Amazon Prime, to which the vast majority of Africans do not have access. And many, like *Stories of Our Lives*, *Karmen Gei*, and *Dakan*, are not available on any streaming services. (*Karmen Gei* and *Dakan* are, however, available on Kanopy, a streaming service accessible through university libraries.) In fact, while attending a queer film festival in Nairobi I met an actor from *Stories of Our Lives* who had not

himself seen the film as a finished product. Illegal downloading is, of course, sometimes a possibility, and pirated copies do occasionally pop up on YouTube for limited periods of time. (As of early 2020, there has also been an increase in queer African films available to rent on YouTube.) Nevertheless, for most of the twenty-first century, the African films that typically screened at film festivals across the world, the ones that would be most readily identifiable as queer African cinema and accessible to viewers in the West, have often been difficult to find for viewers based on the continent.⁷ This means that the queer African films that are most explicitly designed to counter the dehumanization of queer Africans are often unable to create counterpublics in their countries of origin.

However, the situation is quite different for the second category of films mentioned above. While African filmmakers and audiences in the twentieth century often complained about the difficulty of circulating and distributing celluloid feature films on the African continent (in this sense, queer films faced many of the same challenges of African film in general), the advent and increasing popularity of video films in Anglophone Africa shifted much of the discussion. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nigerian and Ghanaian filmmakers began to change the model for the production, distribution, and circulation of African film. While African celluloid films, primarily from Francophone countries, were often funded by a combination of national and foreign governments and, even when not about taboo topics, were more readily circulated to international audiences, Nigerians and Ghanaians were making what would be called Nollywood (or in the case of Ghana, Ghallywood/Ghanawood) films that were self-financed movies explicitly for local audiences. The stories were embedded in popular culture and based on local rumors or moral expectations and often centered around family melodramas. Using inexpensive video technologies (first VHS, then VCD and DVD), these West African filmmakers created an industry and model of filmmaking that was hugely popular across the continent. In Nigeria, and, to a much lesser extent, Ghana, filmmakers aiming to make melodramatic stories with wide, local appeal have capitalized on the salacious topic of homosexuality.⁸ But in these films—with the exception of the handful of Nigerian films produced by human rights organizations such as The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERS) or The Equality Hub—homosexuality is always condemned, blamed on occult spirits, overly strict parents, unfaithful spouses, or greedy individuals who enter homosexual cults as a way of acquiring wealth. And, as a result, homosexual characters are always either punished with death or imprisonment—or saved by Jesus. By and large, for most of this century (though this is beginning to change) the African depictions of same-sex desire that are the most easily available across Africa (i.e., that do not require

a subscription to Amazon, Netflix, or Kanopy and that might screen for free on television, YouTube, or be available for purchase in market stalls) are those that pathologize homosexuality and that will be approved by censors who work for governments that condemn it.

The third category of film I consider here—documentary films by or about those in the African LGBTQ community—have, again, historically been those that are more likely to circulate internationally than locally. On the global stage, this category was initially dominated by Western-made films whose primary goal has been to offer global audiences a glimpse of queer African life. Laurent Bocahut and Philip Brooks's *Woubi Cheri* (1998), about the Ivoirian queer and trans communities; Katherine Fairfax Wright and Malika Zouhali-Worrall's *Call Me Kuchu* (2012), about slain Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato; Shaun Kadlec and Deb Tullman's *Born This Way* (2013), about the underground queer community in Cameroon; and Jonny von Wallström's *The Pearl of Africa* (2016), which follows a Ugandan trans woman as she undergoes surgery and relocates to Kenya, are some of the most well-known documentaries. Many of these documentaries, all of the ones just listed, have screened at international film festivals and have been available to stream on Amazon or Netflix. Unoma Azuah (2018, 11) argues that these Western-made documentaries have played an important role in highlighting the courageous battles being fought by African activists, and that "the issue of who shoots the movies may not be as significant as whose story is being told." But it is difficult to tell the impact that these films have on what Azuah calls the "re-education" of homophobic publics when, in many cases, the documentaries do not screen in the countries where they are filmed. This seems to be especially true in Uganda, which has drawn a considerable amount of media and documentary attention. For instance, several activists I spoke to in Uganda seemed frustrated that the film *Call Me Kuchu*, which won over a dozen awards globally, was not screened to the Ugandan queer community at large or to their allies. And, to make matters worse, Uganda had, the year before *Call Me Kuchu*'s release, been the subject of a BBC documentary called *The World's Worst Place to Be Gay* (2011), a film that Kwame Edwin Otu scathingly describes as a homophobic safari in which "queer people are perceived as *endangered species* in dire need of rescue" (Otu 2017, 127, emphasis in original). There are, of course, exceptions: *The Pearl of Africa*, for instance, screened to a large crowd at the inaugural 2016 Queer Kampala International Film Festival and was well received by the audience, including many of those in the trans community. Though there is much to say about these Western-produced documentaries and though one might include them in the category of queer African cinema, I wish to bracket this subset of

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films for the purposes of this study in order to focus on the type of audiovisual material being produced on the continent itself.

And, indeed, many queer Africans have been documenting their own stories, engaging in what the renowned South African photographer and visual artist Zanele Muholi calls “visual activism,” a method of activism Muholi (2013, 170) uses to mark the “resistance and existence” of Black lesbians. Since the end of apartheid, many South Africans have produced films about their experience during and after the struggle. Zackie Achmat and Jack Lewis’s *Apostles of Civilised Vice* (1999), which documented white, Black, and colored South African queer histories, and Beverley Ditsie’s film about her friendship with the famous gay anti-apartheid activist Simon Nkoli, *Simon and I* (2001), were some of the first, but many have followed.⁹ Ditsie continues to make documentaries about Black lesbian life and activism—her more recent films include *The Commission: From Silence to Resistance* (2017) and *Lesbians Free Everyone: The Beijing Retrospective* (2020)—as do filmmakers such as Zethu Matebeni and Busi Kheswa, who made *Breaking Out of the Box* (2011). And Muholi directed *Enraged by a Picture* (2005) and *Difficult Love* (2010), both of which document their pathbreaking photography and have screened around the globe as well as at festivals in Africa. More recently, the South African nonprofit organization STEPS produced a beautiful coming-out documentary about a young trans man from the Kingdom of Lesotho called *I Am Sheriff* (2017) that screened at Batho Ba Lorato, Botswana’s queer film festival, as well as at the Zanzibar International Film Festival. And, likewise, the organization Iranti continues to make short documentaries about queer life in South Africa and released a film about the decriminalization of homosexuality in Botswana called *There Is Power in the Collar* (2020).

In Nigeria, TIERS made the documentary *Veil of Silence* (2013) on the eve of the signing of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, and though several years went by before another queer Nigerian documentary was made, activist Pamela Adie launched *Under the Rainbow* in 2019, a visual memoir about her life as a lesbian in Nigeria, through her organization The Equality Hub. (And after finding documentary filmmaking so fulfilling, Adie went on the following year to produce a short fiction film titled *Ifé* about a lesbian couple on a three-day date in Lagos.)¹⁰ Also in 2020, Harry Itie, founder of the Lagos-based LGBT+ media platform The Rustin Times, released *Defiance*, a documentary that highlights the voices of young queer creatives and advocates in Nigeria. Additionally, in Uganda, queer activists have been especially keen to represent their own stories. *And Still We Rise* (2015), about the impacts and forms of resistance that have emerged in the wake of Uganda’s Anti-homosexuality Act, was

codirected by Richard Lusimbo, a researcher and documentation manager for Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), and the Canadian professor Nancy Nicol; Pepe Julian Onziema, program director of SMUG, made the documentary *See Me As* (with Tim McCarthy and Deus Kiriisa) that features interviews with allies and members of the queer community and that was made specifically for the community itself; and East African Visual Artists made *Resilience Diaries* (see chapter 4), about Uganda's trans community, and several other films documenting queer Ugandans' lived experiences, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, that are made with local rather than international audiences in mind. In Kenya, the queer digital media organization None on Record has produced short video documentaries that are posted on their website and has also moved into podcast production with their award-winning podcast *Afro-Queer*.¹¹ And Peter Murimi's documentary, *I Am Samuel*, which follows the life of a queer Kenyan man over the course of five years, premiered at several major film festivals in 2020. Likewise, filmmaker Aiwan Obinyan released the short documentary *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2020), about the first LGBTI church in Kenya which was featured in executive producer Adriaan Van Klinken's book of the same name. The list of African-made queer documentaries (even if they are sometimes coproductions) continues to expand at such a rate that it is no longer the case that the West is the sole, or even prime, producer of queer African documentary content.

Until the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, these three categories existed with relatively little crossover. But, slowly, the categories are beginning to blend into one another. For instance, in Nigeria, TIERS, a human rights organization, has begun to produce fictional Nollywood films (see chapter 2) that appeal to local audiences but have a more global reach, thereby straddling the first two categories of cinema. In 2019 TIERS collaborated with producer Funmi Iyanda to make *Walking with Shadows*, an adaptation of Jude Dibia's novel of the same name, which became the first Nigerian queer film to premiere internationally when it screened at the British Film Institute Film Festival. The work of TIERS and other queer media organizations producing dramatic content in Africa also indicates that visual activism is no longer to be associated with the documentary mode alone. Even a film like *Rafiki*, an independent art film that Kahiú intended to be a simple story about young love in Kenya, is now also, because of the censorship imbroglio which caused Kahiú to sue the government, tied to the work that activists are doing to create a more open Kenya. At a screening of *Rafiki* in Washington, DC, Kahiú told the audience that what has surprised her most about the trajectory that her film has taken was that it has thrown her into the role of an activist rather than just

a filmmaker. And even before *Rafiki*, the music video for “Same Love (Remix)” by the Kenyan collective Art Attack (see chapter 4) became linked to larger censorship debates. When the video was posted on YouTube and the Kenyan Film Classification Board attempted to force Google to remove it, George Barasa of Art Attack, on whose life the video was based, became a key opponent of the Board and its subsequent attempts to censor the internet in Kenya. What seems to be happening now is that just as activists are producing art films, art directors are making films that are more explicitly linked to activist efforts.

Likewise, African activists are increasingly working to create spaces where queer audiences can come together to watch both African films from across the continent and global queer films. For many years the Out in Africa South African Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, which ran from 1994 to 2014, was the only queer film festival on the continent, and though the lion’s share of their films were non-African, they were increasingly able to screen and fund African films (see chapter 3).¹² In 2011 they were joined by the Durban Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and the same year an organization called Gay Kenya Trust, in conjunction with the Swiss embassy and Kenya’s Goethe Institute, began to host the Out Film Festival (OFF) in Nairobi, the first queer African film festival outside of South Africa. In 2013, Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO) began organizing the Batho Ba Lorato (People of Love) Film Festival in Gaborone, a festival that began in the living room of the activist Caine Youngman and that now takes place at a mainstream movie theater in a busy Gaborone mall. In 2016, the queer Ugandan filmmaker Kamoga Hassan, who made his own docudrama called *Outed* (2015), inaugurated the Queer Kampala International Film Festival (QKIFF), a festival that unfortunately was raided by the police in 2017 and has not yet resumed. And in 2017, Zimbabwean activists organized The Rainbow 263 Film Festival, a two-day event that was part of a weeklong “Queer University” program that taught filmmaking to interested people in the queer community. Film festivals also often include panel presentations on an array of topics and have (as I discuss in chapters 3 and 4) been spaces where films provide the occasion for activism, education, queer sociality, and affective community engagement. Likewise, they often provide opportunities for Africans to see queer films that are difficult to access or that are banned in nearby countries.

Throughout *Queer African Cinemas*, my focus is largely on the films in the first two categories discussed above: internationally circulating art films, including those made by NGOs, and popular, more locally bound melodramas—though I do often bring African-made documentaries into the discussion and do readily acknowledge the porosity of these categories. My primary goal,

however, is to emphasize the meaning-making and experimental possibilities of fictional works and to highlight how the creative and imagined stories that are told by and about queer African citizens register the multiple and sometimes contradictory contestations of queer resistance in a global world. I also suggest that discussions of what constitutes queer African cinema cannot be severed from discussions of the spaces in which these films may or may not circulate. I am not claiming that a film must be seen by a queer African audience to be considered queer African cinema, but I am claiming that in order to understand the messy forms of resistance I outline in this book, one cannot think about these films existing in a void without audiences. I therefore concentrate specifically on films made on the African continent, and it is important to note that I not only leave out Western-made films, I have also set aside films that are about queer Africans living in the West as these films do not have to contend with state censorship or concern themselves with local audiences in the same way as those that circulate on the continent do. Diaspora films—films like *Rag Tag* (2006), *Sex, Okra and Salted Butter* (2008), *Unspoken* (2013), or *Reluctantly Queer* (2016)—while certainly not unaffected by events on the continent, do, I argue, navigate different geopolitical realities. This book is therefore a sustained examination of queer fictional films and videos that have come out of the continent during the first two decades of the twenty-first century and that reflect and participate in the unprecedented homophobia that exists concurrently with an unprecedented resistance to it. Of course, the films I examine in this book are not at all monolithic, and neither, for that matter, are the countries from which they come. In fact, I have deliberately chosen to highlight the plurality of African cinemas in my title and to attend to the similarities and differences of different nations and regions in each of the four chapters of the book. I am therefore not trying to prescribe any forms of resistance; nor am I attempting to fit the films I discuss into any particular model of oppositional cinema or political liberation. Rather, I want to call attention to the ways that queer African films, whether intentionally or not, animate layered and sometimes contradictory, sometimes mundane modes of resistance, as well as to how these films, in turn, mobilize the affective formations and emotional lives that reside inside these layers.

Registers of Resistance

Because this project is interested in the different national or regional queer cinematic practices across the African continent, it is important to note that my concerns are not necessarily the same as those of scholars examining

cultural production in the global North. Indeed, queer studies scholars, who have by and large been located in and focused on the global North, have often aimed their criticism at mainstream LGBTQ movements that frame their goals in terms of assimilation, marriage equality, and a liberal progressive agenda. As Rahul Rao (2020, 2) remarks in his wonderful study of queer temporality in postcolonial Uganda and India, “Salutary as its critiques have been, we need to consider the extent to which queer theory’s determination to stand askew to the progressive march of time has been shaped by its geopolitical provenance in the contemporary United States.” Thinking through Jasbir Puar’s work on what happens when liberal rights are granted to queer people, Rao notes that the question Puar asks—i.e., “What happens when ‘we’ get what ‘we’ want?”—is very different from the questions asked when the focus is on queerness in the postcolonial global South. Rao argues that a different set of questions emerges when attention is turned to ongoing queer postcolonial struggles that are often marked by feelings and temporalities of dissatisfaction rather than to “a critique of the progressive triumphalist temporalities of queer liberalism” (10). And it is within these ongoing struggles—struggles that, as Rao reminds, are often marked by temporal tensions and frictions rather than discernible forward, backward, or sideways temporalities (27)—that I wish to situate the plural and very much ongoing forms of resistance at work in queer African cinemas.

One of the aims of this project, as mentioned above, is to articulate an expansive understanding of the concept of resistance that encompasses multiple and sometimes conflicting forms that include but also extend well beyond overt political acts. This capacious understanding of resistance reflects the way I see the term being deployed by queer artists and activists on the continent and also, I argue, foregrounds localized forms of creativity and life-building. In the Nigerian anthology and social media campaign #HowIResist, for instance, queer Nigerians articulate forms of resistance that include writing, flourishing, finding self-acceptance, letting go of heteronormative ideals, waking up and living, detaching, and persevering. Likewise, in the introduction to *Meanwhile . . . Graphic Short Stories about Everyday Queer Life in Southern and East Africa*, an anthology of comics written by a group of queer African youth called the Quintu Collab, two members, listed simply as Talia and Alex, argue that queer African stories of resistance should be situated in the heterogeneous “imperfect present.” The Quintu Collab uses the title *Meanwhile* to indicate how in their lives—just as in comic books, where the caption *meanwhile* is often used—events are often concurrent rather than strictly linear. Resistance, for

these writers, might mean resistance to Western narratives of queerness, but Talia and Alex also insist on seeing “resistance as a more mundane, indeterminate and ongoing endeavor” (Qintu Collab 2019, n.p.). They write, “Across the continent churches and politicians are crowing about queerness being an import, legislators are deliberating over decriminalizing same-sex sex, and across the world the continent is portrayed as hostile and homophobic; *meanwhile* every day, all over the continent, there are a myriad [of] queer moments—the look, the gesture, the smile, the touch, the first date, the break-up convo, the text, the selfie” (my italics). In other words, the forms of resistance practiced by queer African storytellers and everyday citizens are not always positioned as agential forms of mastery or political action: they do not always easily fit neatly into a progressive political agenda (or even a more radical critique of that agenda), and sometimes they might not be immediately discernible as narratives of subversion. As the Qintu Collab implies, resistant practices might hover in a moment of indeterminacy, existing in a *meanwhile* and in an ongoing present that contains multiple and sometimes contradictory ways of resisting oppression or rejection.

In their collection *Vulnerability in Resistance* Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay suggest that one way to decenter a resistance that is often conceived of as autonomous, and often masculinist or paternalistic, is by privileging rather than dismissing vulnerability. In their introduction, they ask, “What in our analytical and political frameworks would change if vulnerability were imagined as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance? What follows when we conceive of resistance as drawing from vulnerability . . . , or part of the very meaning or action of resistance? What implications does this perspective have for thinking about the subject of political agency?” (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016, 1). I find these questions to be key to broadening understandings of resistance, and I add the following: What happens when intimacy, pleasure, small gestures of unruliness, practices of survival and fleeing, or even of negotiation, are imagined as conditions or resources for resistance? What happens when we see resistance not as the opposite of subordination and complacency but as something that is entangled with it? What happens when we take seriously the Qintu Collab’s framing of resistance as something that might be routine or vague, as something that hovers in the spaces of the *meanwhile*? My position is that when we disengage resistance from its progressive teleology and its binary relations (to subordination, to domination, to vulnerability, etc.) we can better attend to all of the imperfect forms of adaptation, life-building, and belonging that more indeterminate forms of resistance make

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possible and that exist alongside the necessary work of overt and strategic political organizing.¹³

What I propose in this book is a way of reading queer African cinemas for different and sometimes conflicting *registers of resistance*, and I take this phrase to mean several things at once. At the most basic level, this book, like all forms of queer African cinema more broadly, can be seen to register queer African existence at a moment when it is sometimes denied or seen as un-African. But I also use the phrase to describe the practice of registering, as in taking inventory or recording, the different types of resistance that exist within the texts and subtexts of different films and different modes of African cinema. As in my reading of “Each Night I Dream,” in which I identified different forms of resisting homophobia—forms that include love, pleasure, violence, fantasy, and fugitivity—here I attend to the indexical function of cinema. In other words, I offer this book up as a register of different films and the plural practices of resistance they make palpable as works of art, even when those forms of resistance might be contradictory or imagined or incomplete.

But I also understand the word *register* to indicate the different vocal or sonic ranges, or registers, that in Saidiya Hartman’s (1997, 13–14) words, “occur below the threshold of formal equality and rights” but that nevertheless “gesture toward an unrealized freedom.” In her book *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt (2017, 9) advocates a way of “attuning our senses to other affective frequencies” that “quiet” forms of art, like vernacular photography in her case, register. Though cinema is certainly not quiet—at least not the films discussed here—and though the sonic ranges are expressed through very audible frequencies, I want to make the case that lower frequencies, or registers, and inaudible expressions of interiority are also part of resistant practices and present in many queer African films.¹⁴ For instance, silence becomes one of the many modes of speaking back and speaking out in the film *Vibrancy of Silence: A Discussion with My Sisters* (2018), in which the queer Cameroonian director Marthe Djilo Kamga and the queer Cameroonian producer Frieda Ekotto team up to discuss the complexities of being a Cameroonian woman artist. In the producer’s statement, Ekotto states that the film is intended to create a visual archive of African women’s creative work, of their goals, their achievements, their hopes, their dreams, and their struggles. But at the same time that they contend that creating an archive is a way of marking that which is “sayable,” the filmmakers also insist on recognizing the “vibrancy of silence,” the ability of silence also to vibrate or reverberate or resonate, and to take part in communicating these desires, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. In the section of the film where Ekotto, who also published the first African Francophone lesbian

novel, talks about her own work, she says, “I think I was born a rebel. . . . I no longer am, I’m more settled in my way of thinking because I’ve understood that it’s not by screaming that we’re going to change anything. You just have to operate differently.” For Ekotto, these quieter modes of operating differently, these ways of reflecting, thinking, and being at a lower frequency, are just as important as the public utterances, the screaming, that defy a long history of invisibility. And indeed, as Nyanzi (2015b, 190) argues, silence can often act as a powerful “collective language of some queer communities particularly in the Global South” where louder forms of protest might not be possible or advisable given safety concerns. What Ekotto and her film express are not only this collective language of silence, but also how that silence becomes a quiet mode of transformation and potential. Part of what I do in this book, then, is to listen—often literally, as cinema provides the occasion for this—for these below-the-threshold forms of resistance, forms of resistance that vibrate more subtly, sometimes through music, sometimes through inaudible gestures that communicate inner desires and fears, sometimes through intimate gestures or touches, and sometimes through modes of being that might not even register as clear or celebratory resistance.

Moreover, just as resistance can operate at different frequencies, so too can it register different meanings. While resistance is often assumed to be transgressive or in opposition to power, it can often mean the exact opposite. In *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity*, Shalini Puri provides a useful parsing of the contradictory meanings of resistance, reminding us that resistance does not simply mean an opposition to or the undoing of the status quo. Puri (2004, 108) points out that *resistance* has another meaning as well, one relating to its “psychoanalytic connotation,” in which the patient, often unconsciously, refuses to allow thoughts that might be disruptive to his or her conscious mind. In other words, in psychoanalysis, resistance is used to preserve rather than to dismantle the status quo—the mind resists that which it finds to be unacceptable or damaging (108). And, indeed, this allows us to see how *resistance* can be used colloquially to describe situations when dominant institutions or people in power resist that which they find to be disruptive. The ambiguity and ambivalence inherent in the term *resistance* lead Puri to favor the term *opposition* and to focus on the often complex and labor-intensive process of transforming more diffuse forms of resistance into intentional opposition.¹⁵ But it is precisely this ambiguity that I find productive, not for the sake of ambiguity or ambivalence as intrinsically superior to concrete action, but because resistance as an everyday practice is often ambiguous for queer citizens or allies who might find simple acts of loving

or dreaming to be resistant or who might, at times, uphold the very norms they at other times resist. But registering both of these conflicting definitions of resistance together, as confusing as it might seem to say that resistance can mean both opposition to the status quo and opposition to changing it, helps to forestall any romanticized or unencumbered understandings of resistance. In fact, characters in many of the films I discuss in this book occasionally perform both types of resistance simultaneously, as they might express homophobic or misogynist or racist sentiments at the same time that they contest structures of oppression.

Moreover, because of the multiple ways resistance is performed in many queer African films, different audiences might have very different perceptions of the type of resistance they are watching. And this brings me to the final way I use the term *registers of resistance*: to indicate the way that the resistance might mentally register, or make sense, to a particular audience member. One person, for instance, might see a film portraying the struggles of a queer character as resisting the official line that homosexuality is un-African. Another person might see the struggles of that same character, especially if the character faces social or legal repercussions for being queer, as resisting a gay rights agenda that seeks to normalize homosexuality. Indeed, in my discussion of Nollywood film, I discuss how there is often much public debate about whether a film is homophobic because a queer character is arrested or killed off or whether the film promotes homosexuality because it shows that queer character finding pleasure or even love. But even in art films intended to critique homophobia or to validate queer love, performances of resistance might register differently for different audience members. For instance, when I interviewed Chuchu about *Stories of Our Lives*, he mentioned that, at a screening of the film for friends and family in Kenya before the film was banned, the mother of one of the actresses pointed to the fact that because the lesbian character her daughter portrayed was suspended from school, the film beautifully portrayed the negative consequences of being gay. To this audience member, the film resisted the normalization of queer love, which was not, of course, the takeaway the Nest Collective had intended. What I am suggesting here, then, is that in order to attend to the complex social landscapes that the queer characters and queer subjects must navigate, it is important to acknowledge not only the dual meanings of resistance present in queer African cinemas but also the different ways resistance might register to different audiences.

Of course, the risk here is that if resistance is seen as both for and against the status quo, as both public and private, loud and quiet, it loses any meaning at all. But the claim I am making is that depicting queerness or even queerness

in general is not inherently oppositional and that resistance is not only about triumphantly overcoming something or about gathering in public or even about coming out. Indeed, it is quite possible, as I will explore in the chapters that follow, to be both resistant (in the transgressive sense of the word) and complicit with the status quo at the same time.¹⁶ If all of this means that resistance as a keyword becomes murky and less explicitly attached to counterhegemonic practices, then that is because the films that I discuss throughout this book, films that come from very different traditions and are made by filmmakers with very different agendas, reflect the many contradictory registers of resistance, registers that complicate any simple binary between subversive and oppressive. But the point of *Queer African Cinemas* is not to celebrate murkiness. Rather, what I try to do is to understand how one can both acknowledge it as the reality of the present and also not allow it to become an obstacle to imagining new freedoms and possibilities.

Throughout this book I examine films by and about queer African citizens that, like “Each Night I Dream,” simultaneously document the pain inflicted on queer persons and invite a listening for and thinking through what Ashon Crawley (2017, 23), building on work in Black studies, calls “otherwise possibilities.” But if I am to pay serious attention to the emotional labors and complex ethics of resistance and to the fact that resistance might also be a conservative gesture, it must be understood that the opening up of possibilities is also often accompanied by resistance to the otherwise. Crawley writes, “Otherwise is a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoingness of possibility, of things existing other than what is known, what is grasped” (24). Understanding resistance as something that can create as well as block this operation of ongoing possibility allows me to leave behind the question of whether something is a good or bad representation of queer Africans or whether a portrayal is resistant or homophobic. It is not that I am uninterested in these discussions—in fact, I believe very strongly that it is politically and socially necessary to have hopeful and positive representations of queer life no matter where one is located. But for the purposes of this book I am less interested in a project that decides what is positive or negative or what should or should not be labeled resistant and more interested in understanding what types of frameworks and narratives become available when one imagines vulnerability, or pleasure and intimacy, or quieter modes of operating differently, or negotiating as practices of and resources for resistance. In other words, rather than pitting progressive, transgressive resistance against oppressive homophobia, I am interested in exploring all of the various registers in between.

Afri-queer Fugitivity

One of the ways to categorize the registers of resistance that rest in the middle range between heroic agency and denial of gay existence and rights is through what I call Afri-queer fugitivity, a fugitivity that can be seen in the different forms of fleeing, escape, and past/future reimaginings in “Each Night I Dream” as well as in many of the other films discussed in this book. Fugitivity is a concept used primarily by a broad range of scholars who theorize African American practices of escape and evasion as they flee from and imagine alternatives to the different types of enslavement and captivity that mark Black life in the United States. In her book on the sounds of Black, queer eccentricity, Francesca Royster (2012, 12) describes the fugitive as “the artistic impulse to escape the constraints of the objectification and social death of slavery—but also to never fully escape its embodied lessons.” James Edward Ford III (2015, 110) writes that “one can define fugitivity as a critical category for examining the *artful escape of objectification*,” and he emphasizes that fugitivity and the “act of fleeing” foster “alternative spaces, ethics, and structures of feeling in the name of being otherwise” (Ford 2014, n.p.). But as Matthew Omelsky writes, thinking through Fred Moten’s highly influential work on fugitivity, Black fugitivity is not only an American experience or ethos: “If Moten identifies the conditions that engender Black fugitive life as a ‘global phenomenon,’ then indeed fugitivity names that desire to flee the confines not just of the nineteenth-century southern plantation or the contemporary American carceral state, but of colonial and postcolonial regimes that have suppressed Black life globally” (Omelsky 2020, 56). Omelsky therefore urges consideration of the specificities of African fugitivities. In *Queer African Cinemas*, I point specifically to an Afri-queer fugitivity, an African and queer fugitivity that inhabits a certain slipperiness, that dreams of lives unencumbered by state-sanctioned homophobia, that breaks or evades rules, and that flees from constraints by mobilizing past, present, and future imaginaries. I have chosen the prefix *Afri-* rather than *Afro-* because—much like the writer Nnedi Okorafor (2019), who rejects the application of the term *Afrofuturism* to her African-focused work—I find that the prefix *Afro-* often, though certainly not always, signals associations with African American rather than African life when circulating in a North American context. While Okorafor replaces *Afrofuturism* with *Africanfuturism*, I have chosen the shortened *Afri-queer* both for ease and because, when said out loud, its sonic resonance with the word *Africa* implies a queering of Africa.¹⁷

I understand Afri-queer fugitivity to be at work across a range of queer African writing, advocacy work, and creative expression. I recognize an Afri-queer

fugitivity, for instance, in Binyavanga Wainaina's *We Must Free Our Imaginations*, a six-part video documentary he released on YouTube three days after he published "I Am a Homosexual, Mum," which he referred to as the lost chapter to his memoir. In his video, Wainaina, whose writing and activism have inspired much queer artistic expression across the continent, urges Africans to escape a neocolonial mentality, to shed submissiveness, and to reclaim African traditions that will help to reimagine new futures. Likewise, I see Afri-queer fugitivity in the African LGBTI Manifesto, drafted in Nairobi in 2010 and published anonymously by activists from across the continent, that opens by stating, "As Africans, we all have infinite potential. We stand for an African revolution which encompasses the demand for a re-imagination of our lives outside neo-colonial categories of identity and power" ("African LGBTI Manifesto/Declaration" 2013, 52). The manifesto calls for the celebration of complex sexual identities and ties "erotic justice" to economic, environmental, and racial justice, demanding "total liberation" and noting the "endless possibilities" that exist (52). In this way, Afri-queer fugitivity articulates a form of queerness that, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz (2009, 96), whose work on queer futurity influences my thinking throughout this book, is "about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough." In this sense, and at its most basic level, Afri-queer fugitivity is about resisting the limitations of the present by searching for something that can surpass it.

But I also want to emphasize that Afri-queer fugitivity marks the way that constraints of the past and present continue to hold sway even as one escapes them. This can be seen quite poignantly in Zethu Matebeni's (2011) documentary *Breaking Out of the Box* (codirected by Busi Kheswa). The film begins with a poem by the late Buhle Msibi juxtaposed with Zanele Muholi's photographs of Black lesbian couples (see figures 1.5–1.7):

Today I break this box I have lived in for being black
 I break this box that said to me I can't
 Today I break this box I have been left in for being a woman

 Today I break this box that I have been forced to live in for being
 homosexual
 This box that said I am un-African
 This box that said I am abnormal.¹⁸



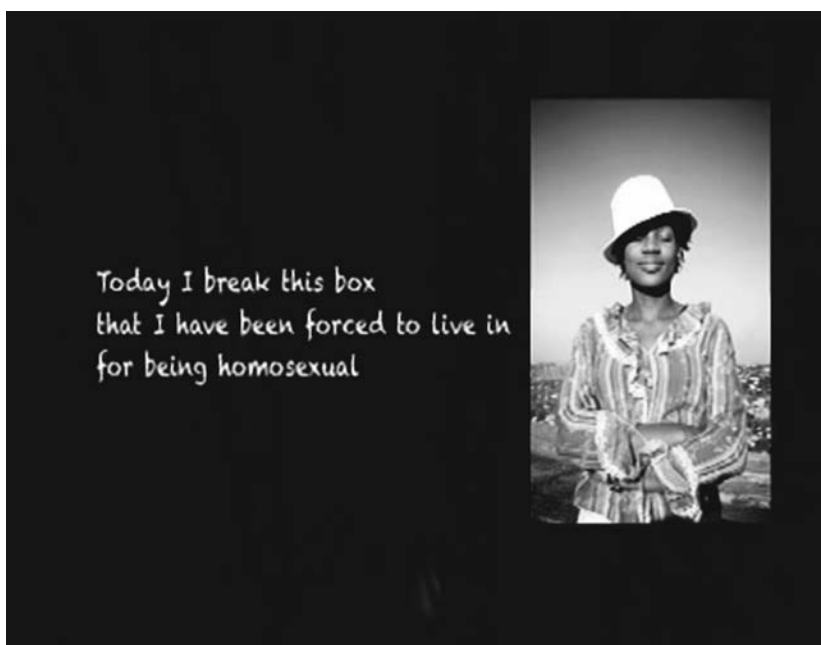
Today I break this box
I have lived in for being black



I break this box
I have been left in
for being a woman

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FIGURES 1.5–1.7. Stills from *Breaking Out of the Box* (2011), juxtaposing Buhle Msibi's poetry with Zanele Muholi's photographs of Black South African lesbians in the opening images of the documentary.

The film then focuses on six Black South African lesbians. They discuss the sexual fluidity that has always existed within African cultures, the difficulty of being gay during the anti-apartheid struggle, and the way in which the invisibility and vulnerability they felt during apartheid mirror how they feel as lesbians today. But they also discuss how they are now artists, athletes, organizers, and role models in their communities. In this way, the women describe their ability to break free from many of the constraints they face while also, as Royster says, never leaving behind their embodied lessons. As the film ends, the last lines of Msibi's poem appear on screen: "I break all the boxes / And free as a bird I fly to the great blue sky above." The film speaks to the forms of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia that objectify and contain, but also to the histories of defiance—the breaking of boxes—and the imaginations of freedom of Afri-queer people. *Breaking Out of the Box* therefore illustrates perfectly an Afri-queer fugitivity that suggests an otherwise to despair and submissiveness while still marking the violence and pain that sometimes permeate queer African stories.

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Though Afri-queer fugitivity is a leitmotif in many of the films I discuss in this book, I want to be clear that not all films with queer African subjects contain scenes of Afri-queer fugitivity. Some do. Some do not. And those that do might, at the same time, circulate in some publics as warnings against expressions of queerness, or might wind up being complicit with other forms of oppression or structural violence, including homophobia. Moreover, sometimes moments of escape or flight are blocked for various reasons. Sometimes flight becomes physically or emotionally impossible. Sometimes, as Nyanzi (2014, 38) writes of an otherwise joyful 2014 Ugandan Pride event at Lake Victoria, one is surrounded by armed policemen who cut off all possible escape routes. Sometimes, as is the case with the vignette “Run” from *Stories of Our Lives*, a character who runs and becomes a fugitive in order to escape homophobic violence decides to stop running, to stay put. Therefore, while Afri-queer fugitivity is a useful lens through which to view the multiple yearnings for escape and the practices of refusal of many queer characters in the films under discussion, I want to underscore that it is not the only one and that it is complicated by the often contradictory registers of resistance addressed above.

My intention is to place Afri-queer fugitivity into a larger constellation of practices of resistance and refusal that, like queerness itself, sometimes fails to properly align with expectations, or fails to be directly legible. But I also find Afri-queer fugitivity to be a productive way to think about the particular forms of temporality expressed in many of the films, forms that, as I have been suggesting, might not fit into linear narratives of rights or progress. As Tavia Nyong'o (2018, 10) writes in his profound study of the polytemporality of Black, queer world-making, “The kind of fugitive time that allows for access to something beyond and for the emergence of the virtual is not just ordinary, everyday time.” Fugitive time, in other words, allows for models of temporality that are not about overcoming and moving forward but about unpredictability, anticipation, and imagining an elsewhere, an otherwise past or future. As the queer Kenyan blogger and intellectual Keguro Macharia (2013b) writes, “Fugitivity is seeing around corners, stockpiling in crevices, knowing the un-rules, being unruly, because the rules are never enough, and not even close. . . . Fugitivity is time-distorting, multiplying and erasing, making legion and invisible.” Afri-queer fugitivity therefore provides a valuable way to think about queer African cinemas as a whole, despite the very different politics that exist in the body of work I discuss: the films I examine do not fit into any familiar historically or politically progressive (or regressive) sequence; they do not spell out what queer protest looks like or what it will lead to; and they do

not dwell strictly in the homophobia of the present. Rather, collectively, these films gesture both to lives negated and to lives in the process of being remade and reenvisioned.

Lineup

This book consists of four chapters, each of which reads practices of resisting homophobia alongside practices, like censorship or the pathologizing or killing off of queer characters, that reproduce homophobia or that resist an otherwise. Each chapter, then, reaches out to different sites to understand the multiple complexities and registers of resistance. In chapter 1, “Making Waves: Queer Eccentricity and West African Wayward Women,” I look at two West African films that are emblematic of the first two categories of films discussed above: Joseph Gai Ramaka’s *Karmen Gei* (2001) and the four-part Ghanaian video film *Jezebel* (2007–8) by Socrate Safo, two films in which the titular queer female character is linked to the African water spirit commonly known as Mami Wata. Using Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) concept of waywardness, I discuss how, despite the very different positions the two filmmakers seem to take on the acceptability of queerness, both films simultaneously create openings for, and highlight the limits of, women’s sexual agency and willful errantry. I also articulate how Mami Wata provides a blueprint for indigenous forms of queerness and decolonized forms of knowing that are improvisational—that allow for an Afri-queer fugitivity—and that suggest ways to “make waves,” to disrupt the status quo with an uncontainable waywardness. This chapter therefore suggests how queer African cinema in its different modes can be both an “ongoing exploration of what might be” and an enactment of “the entanglement of escape and confinement” (Hartman 2019, 228).

While chapter 1 highlights formal readings, chapter 2, “Touching Nollywood: From Negation to Negotiation in Queer Nigerian Cinema,” takes a more national and historical approach, tracing representations of queerness in Nigerian video films over the past two decades. Despite the fact that Nollywood provides the largest archive of gay-themed popular culture on the continent, with dozens of films depicting same-sex relationships, very little has been written about these films in the very rapidly expanding field of Nollywood studies. The Nollywood industry, because of its impressive growth and adaptability and wide, pan-African appeal, is often lauded for its ability to speak to African moral values. But when Nollywood films take on the topic of homosexuality, these values tend to be aligned with a morality that sees homosexuality as a

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threat to the family and the nation, providing a conundrum for scholars like me who want to take African popular culture seriously on its own terms and not force it into Western paradigms and value systems. This chapter, following Nyanzi's proposal for queering African studies, is therefore an effort to queer Nollywood studies and to model a way of reading queer-themed Nollywood films that does not discount their complexities and cultural context but, at the same time, holds them accountable for participating in a public discourse that was supportive of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) of 2014. The first half of the chapter looks at the body of Nollywood films leading up to the SSMPA, arguing that even though these films contradict state discourses denying the existence of homosexuality in Nigeria, they also move and touch audiences by figuring the homosexual as an object of fear. In the second half of the chapter, however, I turn my attention to the TIERS-produced films mentioned above and discuss how queer activists have strategically utilized Nollywood aesthetics and conventions to touch audience's emotions in a way that challenges the morality of homophobia itself. Here, I argue that TIERS practices what Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) refers to as "nego-feminism," a strategy that makes use of negotiation and give-and-take and is grounded in African values and morals.

Chapter 3, "Cutting Masculinities: Post-apartheid South African Cinema," also takes a national approach but focuses on three films in particular: Oliver Hermanus's *Skoonheid*, John Trengove's *Inxeba*, and Christiaan Olwagen's *Kanarie*, all of which, like the vast majority of South African queer feature films, center on queer male desire. Unlike Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria, where homosexual acts are illegal, South Africa has the continent's most progressive laws on same-sex relations and even legalized same-sex marriage as early as 2006. But despite these laws, homophobia still persists—as do the colonial and patriarchal structures that created it. Each of the three films that I examine highlights the complex and ongoing entanglement between homophobia, race, masculinity, and class in South Africa. Here, I return to the concept of *the cut*, a term I use in chapter 1 to discuss forms of escape and rupture. However, in this chapter I use the term more broadly to think not only about moments of breaking away or cutting away in the cinematic sense, but also to think about that which is left out or cut out, that which is cut short, that which cuts through, and that which is literally cut or wounded. What I argue is that reading these three films for the multiple forms of cutting they perform calls attention to the ways in which globally circulating queer male South African feature films simultaneously break away from and are contained by hegemonic racial and gendered structures.

My final chapter, “Holding Space, Saving Joy: Queer Love and Critical Resilience in East Africa,” turns to two Kenyan works—Art Attack’s “Same Love (Remix)” music video and the feature film *Rafiki*—but examines them alongside queer art and activism in neighboring Uganda and in the context of queer film festivals in Nairobi and Kampala. Unlike chapters 2 and 3, which highlight the trajectory of queer cinema in Nigeria and South Africa, respectively, the goal here is not so much to produce a history of queer Kenyan cinema, a history that would include a very small handful of films, but rather to think through the complexities of queer African counterpublics that exist in countries like Kenya, where queer art is censored, and countries like Uganda, where queer gatherings and safe spaces have been violated by police. What I articulate here is a way of thinking about queer film and queer film festivals as enacting what I call a “critical resilience,” a resilience that does not just repeat and reproduce neoliberal mantras of overcoming and enduring, but that embraces modes of survival and imaginative acts that are nonlinear and nondismissive of vulnerability, tenderness, and defeat. I use the phrase *critical resilience* to indicate modes of resistance and survival that intersect with the complexities of inner life and that often exist, as Hartman suggests, as everyday practices that exist below the threshold of overt opposition. Here, I think alongside thinkers like Macharia, who emphasizes the hard work and daily practice that it takes to resist the psychological devastation of homophobia, and Darieck Scott, who discusses how the wounds of colonialism and racial and sexual oppression can serve as tools or models of political transformation. This chapter is therefore just as much about tracing current queer cinematic practices as it is about mapping their aspirations and the critical potential they anticipate. Like all the chapters in this book, “Holding Space, Saving Joy” contains present participles in its title. I use this part of speech, these verbs expressing continuousness, to highlight the ongoingness of feelings and actions that queer African cinemas capture and to point toward the entanglement of pasts, presents, and futures that my reading practices bring to the fore.

The range of countries discussed here—Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and, to a lesser extent, Uganda—is admittedly limited and skewed toward Anglophone countries (with the obvious exception of Senegal) as well as toward those countries with more robust economies and film industries.¹⁹ But, by and large, these are the countries that have produced queer feature films and videos in the twenty-first century, at least at the time of my writing. (I do also return to the 1997 Guinean film *Dakan* in a short coda concluding the book.) The concentration on these countries in particular does not, of course, mean that queer creative life and media production do not exist elsewhere in

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Africa, or that there have not been queer or queer-themed films that are under the radar or impossible for me to access. But my particular focus is indicative of the way that cinema, which requires a certain amount of capital, equipment, and technical know-how—not to mention distribution networks—is more concentrated and visible in certain African countries, especially in Nigeria and South Africa, by far the continent's two largest producers of media content. I have tried, then, to address many of what I would call the major queer feature films and videos that have been made on the continent, while also acknowledging that there are many films and audiovisual materials—YouTube videos, web series, short films, documentaries, diaspora films, and so on—that also make up queer African screen media.

Throughout this book, I employ methodologies from several different disciplines in order to highlight, as Lindiwe Dovey (2015, 3) suggests, that “the value and meaning of films are contingent on their contexts of distribution, exhibition, and reception.” I have interviewed many of the filmmakers discussed in this book, especially those who have not been widely interviewed by media outlets, and I have tried to include their perspectives, anecdotes, and aspirations. I have also met with and interviewed activists, queer film festival organizers, censors, and queer audiences based in the countries discussed and have attended queer film festivals in Nairobi, Kampala, and Gaborone. But, at the end of the day, this is not an ethnographic project. My focus is on the films themselves, on their formal structures, on the meanings and ambivalences they produce as fictional texts, and on the ways they circulate and resonate and register different meanings for different people.

It is also important to acknowledge that I write from a particular vantage point. I am trained as a film and literary theorist and postcolonialist. I have the privilege of a tenured position at an American university (one named, in fact, “American University”). My position has provided me access to books, articles, and films that are often not available on the African continent. It has also provided me with funding to attend conferences and to travel internationally; it has provided me with a mobility that has essentially made this book and its multiple sites of inquiry possible. But my subject position and geographic location also limit me: I am an outsider looking in, a non-African and non-Black scholar who does not live or work in Africa and who has not made films or worked as an activist. This is why what I offer here is not intended to be prescriptive, nor is it intended to be definitive or encyclopedic. What I provide are a set of readings and a model of reading that I think can be useful to scholars, activists, and filmmakers—or to anyone, for that matter—interested in thinking about queer cinematic practices, ethics of resistance, and the different

challenges, strategies, and queer cinematic histories across the African continent. Though I have been studying and thinking about African cinema for almost two decades, I have tried to approach this project, and will continue to do so, with a sense of humility, with a readiness to listen and to acknowledge my mistakes and flaws. I am incredibly grateful to the people who have met with me, talked to me, hosted me, answered my questions, and engaged in conversations and exchanges of ideas. I see *Queer African Cinemas* as a necessarily incomplete and imperfect continuation of this dialogue that, I hope, will open up more questions than it answers.

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INTRODUCTION. REGISTERING RESISTANCE

- 1 “Gayism” is a neologism that began circulating in some Anglophone African countries in the early 2000s. It is used in this context almost exclusively as a derogatory term in public discussions.
- 2 These production history details come from Jim Chuchu and Njoki Ngumi, interview with the author, December 5, 2017, Nairobi, Kenya.
- 3 I use the acronym LGBTQ throughout this book to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities. However, when an organization or person uses a different iteration of the acronym, I use the acronym that they have chosen.
- 4 The myth recounts the story of Wacici, a herd boy who was beaten by his father because he failed to look after his father’s cattle. After learning of a girl who walked around the Mũgumo and became a man, Wacici does the same and happily becomes a girl who no longer has to tend the cattle (Karangi 2008).
- 5 Chuchu and Ngumi, interview with the author, December 5, 2017, Nairobi, Kenya.
- 6 On their website, the Nest Collective (2015) discusses the censorship of the film and provides the following information: “On 30th September 2014, we applied for a classification of *Stories of Our Lives* from the Kenya Film Classification Board in line with legislation regarding the public screening of films in Kenya. On 3rd October, we received communication that the Kenya Film Classification Board has restricted the distribution and exhibition of *Stories of Our Lives* to the public in line with section 16(c) of the Film and Stage Plays Act. This, because the film ‘has obscenity, explicit scenes of sexual activities and it promotes homosexuality which is contrary to our national norms and values.’ This means that there will be no further screenings, sale and/or distribution of *Stories of Our Lives* in Kenya.” The Nest Collective then states their intention of complying with the ban but also adds an aspirational comment, saying, “We hope Kenyans will get to see this film one day, because we made it for Kenyans.”
- 7 The release of *Rafiki* in early 2020 on the South Africa–based satellite service DStv, which broadcasts throughout the continent, might signal a future in which queer

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African films, not just queer South African films, are more available. Unfortunately, though, the announcement that *Rafiki* would be available on DStv in January 2020 did stipulate that it would not be available in Kenya because of the ban.

- 8 In “Showing the Unshowable: The Negotiation of Homosexuality through Video Films in Tanzania,” Claudia Böhme also discusses two Swahili-language films that, she argues, borrow much from gay-themed Nollywood but that are unique in the Tanzanian context in that they represent the only locally made films on the topic. She writes, “The first visual representation of homosexual practices in Tanzanian film appeared in *Popobawa*, by Haji Dilunga in 2009, which treated the myth of an evil spirit called Popobawa (Batwing) that originated in Zanzibar in the 1960s. Popobawa is a batlike creature, said to appear at night and anally penetrate his victims” (Böhme 2015, 68). The second film she discusses is *Shoga Yangu*, which was censored in Tanzania in 2011. She describes *Shoga Yangu* as “a stereotypically negative representation of homosexuality as a bad, family-destroying behavior, the consequences of greed (*tamaa*), and the desire for quick money, as well as the use of the occult” (74).
- 9 It should be noted that I use the term *colored* here (as well as in chapter 3) in its specific South African context. As Livermon points out, “During apartheid, there were four designated racial categories: white/European, Coloured, Indian/Asian, and black/African. Blackness took on a political dimension during the fight against apartheid. This political blackness, perhaps akin to the US terminology ‘people of color,’ developed out of the black consciousness movement and encompassed Coloured and Indian identities” (Livermon 2012, 317n9). However, like Livermon, I use the term *Black*, as most use it in South Africa, to refer to Black/African and not to Indian and Colored South Africans.
- 10 For more on Adie’s films, see my two film reviews “Nigeria’s First Lesbian Documentary” (Green-Simms 2019) and “A Rare Cinematic Portrait of Queer Women’s Intimacy in Nigeria” (Green-Simms 2020), both on the blog *Africa Is a Country*.
- 11 For a discussion of the None on Record video series “Seeking Asylum,” see A. B. Brown’s (2021) article “Lawful Performance and the Representational Politics of Queer African Refugees in Documentary Film.”
- 12 In its final year, in fact, rather than holding a festival, Out in Africa decided to put its funding into the production of the film *While You Weren’t Looking* (dir. Catherine Stewart, 2015), which toured nationally and internationally.
- 13 I therefore situate this project within feminist discussions that seek to dismantle the binary framework that posits an agential and autonomous resistance against subordination. Postcolonial feminists like Lila Abu-Lughod, for instance, challenge the tendency, including her own, to romanticize resistance, arguing instead for understandings of resistance that attend to its complexity. Saba Mahmood (2005) pushes Abu-Lughod’s claims one step further, asking whether it is even possible to identify universal acts of resistance and arguing that the category of resistance imposes a “teleology of progressive politics . . . that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms” (9). Mahmood suggests that we should

not be reducing forms of “being and action” to categories of resistance. But many feminist thinkers still see the usefulness and power of resistance and have argued instead for a rethinking of resistance outside of liberal categories and progressivist politics by expanding our understanding of what might constitute resistance, and it is precisely this orientation that I advocate in this book.

- 14 Here I am also thinking of Kevin Quashie’s important work on quiet, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. Quashie urges that instead of focusing only on the “political meaningfulness” of Black culture, attention also be paid to the interiority of Black subjects and in particular to capacities for quiet, where quiet acts as “a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears” (2012, 6). Quietness, vulnerability, and interiority are all, to Quashie, ways of moving beyond the “all encompassing reach” of resistance to search for what else exists (5). Though I am certainly influenced by Quashie’s work, my own position is that rather than understanding quiet as something beyond resistance, we can understand quiet moments, or practices of stillness, or grace, or surrender, as resources for resistance and as part of what it can mean to be resistant in certain circumstances.
- 15 Building on the work of James Scott, who sees resistance as a “dress rehearsal,” Puri (2004, 111) argues that resistance is best understood as a prelude to concrete political opposition rather than something superior to it, and she emphasizes that one can avoid the pitfalls of a teleological presumption by focusing on the labor necessary to transform resistance into opposition.
- 16 As Bobby Benedicto (2014, 17) argues, in queer studies a general emphasis on resistance often erases the way that complicity operates, especially when one considers the fact that gay subjects on the margins of the global order might also, simultaneously, hold class privilege, and that “local agency . . . can be mobilized to reproduce the center in the margins.” Others, too, have made the case that queerness is not inherently oppositional. Jasbir Puar’s (2007) work on homonationalism, for instance, sheds light on the ways in which queerness can be used in the service of xenophobia. And in her article “African Queer, African Digital: Reflections on Zanele Muholi’s *Films4peace* and Other Works,” Naminata Diabate (2018) discusses the ways that an artist like Muholi creates work that can be co-opted and put to the service of neoliberal capitalism.
- 17 The Nigerian psychologist Augustine Nwoye has a useful discussion of the distinction between the *Afri*- prefix and the *Afro*- prefix in his article “An Africentric Theory of Human Personhood.” Nwoye, thinking in particular about the term *Afro-American*, writes that, given the American “association of the root term, ‘Afro,’ in making reference to the identifiable Americans of African descent,” he prefers “the term Africentric, for making reference to the psycho-cultural frame of reference of the continental African peoples” (Nwoye 2017, 43).
- 18 Msibi was a lesbian HIV/AIDS activist, writer, and mother who passed away from AIDS in 2005 at the age of 26.
- 19 It should be noted, too, that the films examined here do not include the several queer films made in North Africa. As Taiwo Osinubi (2018) points out, “North

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African countries have been overlooked within African studies because of linguistic, cultural, historical, and political differences from sub-Saharan Africa” (603). Though my study repeats this exclusion, it is also the case that it is precisely because of these linguistic, cultural, historical, and political differences that North Africa is beyond my field of expertise and that most studies of African cinema focus either on North Africa or on what is commonly, though often arbitrarily, referred to as sub-Saharan Africa. A study of queer African cinema that gives North Africa its proper due would also require a much more nuanced parsing of what Gibson Ncube (2018) describes as North Africa’s and “the Maghreb’s own conflicted relationship with its African-ness” than I am able to give (624). It would also need to address the well-established field of queer Maghrebian studies, as well as the complex and regionally specific ways that queerness has been historically accepted and practiced in North Africa. However, Ncube’s own discussion of queer North African cinema in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, “Skin and Silence in Selected Maghrebian Queer Films” (2021), begins this work in important ways.

CHAPTER 1. MAKING WAVES

- 1 After independence, former French and British colonies took very different tracks when it came to the development of cinema. In an effort to form binding ties with its ex-colonies, the French Ministry of Cooperation actively funded films in Francophone West Africa and in 1963 formed the Bureau of Cinema to facilitate technological and financial support. This support, along with the cultural influence of the French New Wave filmmakers, led to a robust art film culture, and many filmmakers from Francophone colonies traveled to study filmmaking in France or Russia and toured their films at international film festivals. The Anglophone postcolonies, devoid of such support, produced fewer films at first and did not develop their own industries until the 1990s, when video technology became available and entrepreneurs began making films geared toward local audiences.
- 2 In order to make the Carmen story more specifically Senegalese, Ramaka spells the name *Karmen*, which is more in line with Wolof names and spelling (Dovey 2009, 248), and gives his Karmen the last name *Geï*. As a few critics have noted, Karmen’s last name—pronounced the same as the word *gay*—could be a pun, but Ramaka (who also bears the name) states a different reason. He says, “I thought of the rhythm of the *sabar* [drums] called ‘Ndèye Guèye.’ The person who gave her name to this particular rhythm was a beautiful and exceptional dancer. She was a Carmen. So the title of my film is *Karmen Geï*” (quoted in Powrie 2004, 286).
- 3 The film features songs by Yandé Coudu Sène, a famous griot who, playing herself in the film, sings the story of both Ndèye Guèye and, at the end of the film, Karmen Geï. And the film also features songs by Massigi (El Hadj N’diaye), including a controversial holy song sung during Angelique’s funeral procession, and by Karmen herself, who sings with a strained and sometimes shaky voice. Moreover, the rhythm of the *sabar* drums—often led by the famous Doudou N’Diaye Rose, head of Dakar’s National Ballet—heard throughout the film is joined with a jazz score composed