Queer Roots in Africa

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Since the organization Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was barred from participating in its country’s international book fair in 1995, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe has become well known for his discursive attacks on lesbians and gay men, whom he has described as being “worse than dogs and pigs” (Phillips 52). In his New Year’s 2000 address, Mugabe stated, “We cannot have a man marrying a man or a woman marrying a woman here. What an abomination, a rottenness of culture, real decadence of culture. Once you impose a foreign culture on us then you naturally evoke the devil in us” (“Zimbabwe’s Mugabe”). That there is no such thing as homosexuality in Africa is a common cliché of certain African nationalist discourses. According to this argument, any manifestation of homosexuality would be the result of a colonial imposition of foreign practices (as Mugabe suggests). The cliché might be considered partially valid if homosexuality were understood in a strictly Foucauldian sense as a modern phenomenon of industrial societies. In this case, it is true that homosexuality “as we know it today” first appeared in Western countries. The cliché is rarely understood as such, however, because such a use of the term should also argue that heterosexuality as well is a Western phenomenon and has been equally imposed on Africa.

Arguments such as Mugabe’s, therefore, fail to acknowledge how they reproduce a colonial discourse, a homophobic discourse that troped Africans as possessing a bestial sexuality, even as it claimed that Africa was not bound by the fetters of civilization (as Europe was) and had thus maintained a state of natural purity. In addition, the Foucauldian argument concerning the modern construction of homosexuality in no way means that no sexual activity previously occurred between members of the same sex. Yet homophobic postindependence rulers distort a constructionist logic in this way to consolidate their own power by claiming to represent a return to precolonial roots that would resurrect an African authenticity free of European influence. In contrast, however, it is possible to narrate alternative returns to African roots, ones that uncover
same-sex sexual practices that colonial powers attempted to eradicate and that postindependence elites have attempted to deny and, sometimes, following the lead of their colonial predecessors, even annihilate.

The effects of troping homosexuality as foreign or imposed by colonialism are not limited to the discursive level of political speeches, but translate into a very physical violence deployed against many Africans today. On 30 October 1999, while Mugabe was traveling in England for personal reasons, OutRage! a British gay activist group, performed a citizen’s arrest and demanded that the British government try him for torture. When charges were dropped against the “arresting officers,” Mugabe accused the Blair government of “using gangster gays” (Mogale) to carry out its neocolonial policies. In a letter to Blair, one of the arresting members, Peter Tatchell, claimed, “Since his inflammatory comments, homosexuals in Zimbabwe have been beaten, arrested, framed on trumped up charges, fire bombed and threatened with death.” After the incident, GALZ’s statement concerning the “citizen’s arrest,” stated that, “though GALZ had no prior knowledge of Outrage’s intention to arrest President Mugabe and did not order it, innocent black gay men [in Zimbabwe] have been targeted for revenge…. [O]ne man was threatened and falsely arrested and imprisoned; another was beaten and insulted by two plain-clothes policemen. Both were blamed for the humiliation of the President in London even though it was clear that neither of them had any knowledge of the incident” (Goddard). In his attempt to hold onto power, Mugabe has resorted to homophobic violence in a supposedly anticolonial campaign to rid Zimbabwe of all that is foreign (see Phillips, Coutinho). Likewise, his recent support of black squatters occupying white-owned farms uses an anticolonial discourse to mask antidemocratic moves (Swarns, “Mugabe’s Real Foes”). Although squatters have legitimately demanded that the white minority be forced to relinquish its control over Zimbabwe’s best farmlands, the greatest obstacle to land reform has been Mugabe himself, who has been promising it since 1980, particularly at election times. Previous redistributions were too modest, did not succeed because of a lack of follow-up support, or gave land to Mugabe’s supporters and political associates. Britain (and other donors) have subsequently used such cronyism as an
excuse to refuse compensation to white farmers for land that was stolen from blacks during British colonial rule. In addition, Mugabe seized on the climate created by the land seizures to intimidate his political opponents; in the period leading up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections, at least 26 people were killed, mostly members of the opposition (Swarms, “Political Shift”).

**Queering Afrocentricity**

Disclosing the fallacies Mugabe uses to justify such attacks, both discursive and physical, not only contests the sexual politics of oppressive postindependence regimes that have coopted an anticolonial discourse to maintain power; it also has political ramifications in the U.S. The return to African roots called for or implied in a certain U.S. black nationalist discourse also uses the assumption that there is no such thing as African homosexuality to argue that homosexuality constitutes an inauthentic identity for African Americans. As Michael S. Smith suggests, “[i]t is as if… Blackness and/or manhood is reaffirmed and strengthened by taking a stand against the faggot. Gay sexuality, it is claimed, is symptomatic of Black moral and cultural degradation…” (31). In his essay, “African Roots, American Fruits: The Queerness of Afrocentricity” (1991), he analyzes the prevalence of homophobia in three examples of Afrocentric discourse—Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968), Frances Cress Welsing’s *The Isis Papers* (1991), and Molefi Kete Asante’s *Afrocentricity* (1988)—with the project of articulating a queer alternative: “Though Afrocentricity may not be anti-white, it is anti-queer. Still that is not sufficient enough reason to reject the theory…. There is nothing about Afrocentricity… that necessitates homophobia” (31).

In that he applies his analysis of Afrocentricity to Cleaver, member of the Black Panther Party, Smith also demonstrates that a common logic unites Afrocentricity and black nationalism in their use of homophobia to police a male-centered model of black identity. In *Soul on Ice* (1968), for example, Cleaver writes:

> The black homosexual, when his twist has a racial nexus, is an extreme embodiment of this contradiction. The white man has deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white
man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on “whiteness” all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against “blackness”—upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. (103)

Cleaver focuses his homophobic critique on the gay African American writer James Baldwin, who, because of his homosexuality, serves as his model of the black man who has sold out his race to serve the interests of the white “man” (99). Homosexuality for blacks, then, becomes a form of racial suicide (102).

With a play on the literal and slang meanings of the word “fruit” (which also means “queer”), Smith’s title suggests the possibility of a queer Afrocentricity through the image of African American “fruits” growing on trees whose roots are planted in Africa. Smith’s essay, however, does not quite realize the potential of its title; while he criticizes the homophobia of straight models of Afrocentricity, he does little to propose an alternative, queer model. In “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh,” Robert F. Reid-Pharr goes a bit farther by arguing that Cleaver’s homophobia must be read in the context of the prison in which *Soul on Ice* was written, where homoeroticism would have been too close for comfort (355–60). He thereby goes a long way towards queering Cleaver—admittedly, quite a difficult task. Neither Smith nor Reid-Pharr, however, mention the counter-discourse to Cleaver’s that arose within the Black Panther Party itself. Huey Newton’s 1970 statement entitled “A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” (Teal 169–71) was a manifesto of solidarity between black, feminist, and gay activists and came out of a history of supporting the Black Panther Party on the part of the Gay Liberation Front. More importantly, however, I would argue that it is necessary to “return” to Africa itself—Afrocentricity often actually *ignores* most scholarly discourses on and from Africa—to find the queer roots of an alternative Afrocentric model of African American identity and to find roots of a non- (even anti-) homophobic African nationalism.

**Male Wives and Female Husbands**
Even if one confines oneself to a Zimbabwean context, Mugabe’s claim that same-sex sexual behavior, desires, and institutions are not indigenous to Africa is far from being borne out by ethnographic literature. Paradoxically, Mugabe chooses same-sex marriage as the target of his diatribe, a practice that traditionally exists in many African societies. In Zimbabwe itself, there is a tradition of a “heterosexual type of temporary marriage known in chiShona as mapoto” (Epprecht 213). In same-sex versions of this practice, the boy-wife was known as the ngotshana (Epprecht 213–15). Marriage between women has a long tradition in many societies from all regions of Africa; Denise O’Brien states that it occurs in “over 30 African populations” (109). It can be undertaken for a number of reasons and varies from society to society. Krige defines it as “the institution by which it is possible for a woman to give bridewealth for, and marry, a woman over whom and whose offspring she has full control, delegating to a male genitor the duties of procreation” (11). Such marriages thus imply that the “wife” will take on male lovers so as to provide children for the female husband. O’Brien distinguishes between the “surrogate female husband… who acts as a substitute for a male kinsman in order to provide heirs for his agnatic lineage” (112) and the “autonomous female husband… who is always pater to children borne by her wife or wives” (113). For example, in the first case, the daughter of a son-less father may contract a marriage to insure the continuation of the patrilineage. Some marriages of the second type are undertaken to insure a powerful or wealthy woman’s independence or her control over her or her father’s property. Barrenness may also be a factor in the second case, in addition to “a desire to improve or maintain her own status socially (by becoming a father), economically, or politically” (O’Brien 113). Political motivations become most evident when female rulers take on one or more wives. In some cases, the “husband” in a woman-woman marriage may also be married to a man. In addition to woman marriages, male-male marriages are not uncommon (Evans-Pritchard). Perhaps the most well-known example is that of men who take boy-wives in southern African mining communities (Harries; Moodie, Ndatshe, and Sibuyi; Achmat). So although Mugabe incorporates a diatribe against same-sex marriage into his attacks on lesbian
and gay Zimbabweans, perhaps nowhere on earth is there a stronger tradition of same-sex marriages than in Africa.

In the case of woman-woman marriages, however, ethnographers have gone out of their way to deny any lesbian implications, in spite of suggestions to the contrary by an earlier commentator on the institution, Melville J. Herskovits (1937). According to him, woman marriage in Dahomey “does not imply a homosexual relationship between ‘husband’ and ‘wife,’ though it is not to be doubted that occasionally homosexual women who have inherited wealth or have prospered economically establish compounds of their own and at the same time utilize the relationship in which they stand to the women whom they ‘marry’ to satisfy themselves” (338). Since Herskovits wrote these lines, he has been criticized for not substantiating his claims. Krige argued for example that “Herskovits imputed to it sexual overtones that are foreign to the institution” (11). In contrast, Carrier and Murray have questioned these criticisms of Herskovits: “A careful reading of Herskovits, however, shows that Krige, O’Brien, and Obbo exaggerate his remarks” (264; cf. Obbo 372). They point out that in his later book-length study, Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom (1938), Herskovits provided evidence of female homosexuality in other contexts: “Given the broader context of Dahomean sexual behavior, no great leap of the imagination is required to suggest, as did Herskovits, that some of the females involved in woman-woman marriage in Dahomey might also use the relationship as a means of obtaining sexual satisfaction” (Carrier and Murray 265). They also point out that “no one questions whether men and women in mandatory, arranged marriages have or desire sex with each other or, indeed, even ‘prefer’ the opposite sex in general” (266). Indeed, Krige’s association of the foreign with homosexuality reiterates the tropes of homophobic nationalism. When she writes that “woman-marriage is no aberrant, quaint custom[, n]or has it any sexual connotation for the two women concerned” (34), whereas she seems to criticize ethnographers who romanticize the institution by imposing their own Eurocentric bias, she reveals her own Western bias by writing of “the two women concerned” even though her research shows that woman-woman marriage is often polygamous.
Towards a Queer Interdisciplinarity

The debate between Herskovits and his detractors, however, is an important reminder as to why ethnography alone, though quite adequate for pointing out the fallacies of political discourses such as Mugabe’s, is not sufficient to queer Afrocentric, U.S. black nationalist, or African nationalist discourses. Indeed, pointing out the queerness of Africa is hardly new; both Christian and “scientific” discourses postulated Africans’ sexuality, perverse by European standards, as a sign of their primitiveness. It was therefore the “White Man’s burden” to civilize them and convert them to the missionary position. Ethnographers such as Herskovits, who pay special attention to “queer” African sexualities, might thus be seen as following in this tradition. Yet many critiques of this parallel to Orientalism in Western discourses on Africa silence Africans whose sexualities they consider abnormal. It is therefore important to read through the silences as far as same-sex sexual behaviors are concerned in the multiple discourses on and from Africa.

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”—about the ways Indian women have been silenced in both British and male Indian writings on sati, or widow immolation—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “Part of our ‘unlearning’ project is to articulate that ideological formation—by measuring silences, if necessary—into the object of investigation” (296). Simply attempting to speak for those who have been silenced does not necessarily eliminate the silences; as some ethnographic literature demonstrates, speaking openly about homosexual acts may create other silences regarding the colonial relation between ethnographer and informants. One way of measuring silences, I would suggest, is to stage a conversation between the various discourses on African homosexualities (both from Africa and Europe or the U.S.). Such a conversation would not combine these discourses to fill in their silences, so to speak, for they cannot be said to fit together like a puzzle in any sense. Rather, their different silences will be mismatched, thrown out of whack, so as to challenge one other. Their overlaps will produce contradictions, which present even further complications, but it is precisely into these complications, into the fissures that reading one discourse against the others can reveal, that queer African roots might be able to
wedge themselves, further disrupting official discourses on African identity such as Mugabe’s as well as homophobic versions of Afrocentricity or black nationalism.

An unlikely candidate for an alternate discourse on African homosexuality (at least as far as scholarly inquiry is concerned) is a discussion of homosexuality by an African newsgroup (afrique@univ-lyon1.fr) around the time of GALZ’s exclusion from its country’s book fair. A number of participants discussed Mugabe’s remarks, and some even used them as evidence of the dictatorial aspect of his regime. This discussion demonstrates how cultural codes and idées reçues concerning the supposed nonexistence of African homosexuality can filter into informal, semi-academic discussions. The internet provides an interesting window onto such discussions, because it facilitates “conversations” that might not otherwise occur because of geographical distance. (Indeed, though the newsgroup is centered in Lyon, discussants participated from university sites in the U.S., Canada, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and elsewhere in France.) In addition, unlike face-to-face conversations, email discussions leave “written” traces. Using a newsgroup discussion as a cultural text creates its own interpretive difficulties, such as the danger of turning participants into “native informants” and that of overestimating what such texts can tell us about homosexuality in Africa. While most of the participants (but not all) have (or at least use) African names, they are by definition limited to a certain class of Africans (living in the metropolis) with access to computers. This does not imply that their views are any more or less “authentic” (itself a problematic category) than the “typical villager” (also problematic) often assumed to be the best “native informant” by a more conventional anthropological discourse. As will become clear below, discussants held a wide variety of positions, from the denial of African homosexuality to its affirmation. (The translations of these discussions are my own; I identify each citation by author and date.)

One discussant writes, “Yes, there have been homosexuals in Africa since colonization. This practice is imported” (Jean-Célestin Yamegni, 7 July 1995). A respondent adds, “I don’t see what this discussion on homosexuality is doing in an African newsgroup. Homosexuality or pederasty or the gay lifestyle, whatever you choose to call it, is essentially a white problem” (Boubacar
Similar clichés of a heterosexual African purity appear in Camara Laye’s 1966 novel *Dramouss (A Dream of Africa)*, during an exchange between Fatomane (the narrator) and Liliane (a French woman) about a French man who has just made a pass at him:

“My! You’re really frightened, aren’t you… Don’t you know he’s queer? [Tu ne sais pas que cet homme est un p…?]”

And she then gave me a lengthy explanation about what that word meant.

“Oh, no!” I protested. “There’s nothing like that that goes on in my country. Out there, a man is made to live with a woman. A man is supposed to marry in order to produce children.”

“You’ll never get the hang of things here!” she said. “We all have our vices over here! You Africans are pure. You know nothing about our tricks and perversions. So much the better, too.” (64; 82 in the French)

Yet it is also in the newsgroup discussion that one can find a refutal of Fatomane’s argument. One discussant points out the political implications of the assertion that no “authentic” African homosexuality exits prior to colonization:

The debate on homosexuality reveals in certain people a stubborn attempt to hold onto a pure image of precolonial Africa and even of contemporary Africa. I’m sorry but this can quite simply only be due to a lack of anthropological and sociological knowledge of current and previous realities in Africa…. It’s useless to try to maintain at any cost a falsely pure image of a mythical Africa, which only exists in the heads of a few dreamers in our times…. Contemporary Africa is the product of numerous cultural métissages both internal and external. From this point of view, it is currently difficult to hold onto a discourse that maintains a pure image of Africa. (Barry Mamadou Cellou, 21 Aug. 1995)

He challenges the notion of an African essence that resists change and cross-cultural pollination. Such a notion of African purity would in fact merely reproduce colonial stereotypes of primitiveness. When read closely, the passage from *Dramouss* also contextualizes the nationalist
denial of the existence of “authentic” African homosexualities; while Fatomane reproduces a homophobic discourse of homosexuality as a crime against nature, Camara himself places the image of a pure Africa in the response of a French woman (representative of the former colonizer). Both characters, however, reinforce the notion that Africa is purer, closer to nature, i.e. more primitive, than Europe.

Although many African novels reproduce the politics of purity exemplified by Mugabe or Cleaver, a number of other West African novelists return to African roots in order to queer them. Their representations of African “traditions” are remarkably inclusive, and the heterogeneity they discover in precolonial origins also includes sexual diversity. In this way, literature constitutes another discourse that might help us measure the silences around homosexuality in Africa. For literary representations and their referents are often in self-consciously complex relationships with one another. This is not to say that such complexity never obtains in ethnography, but ethnography has traditionally claimed to provide an accurate representation of its referents. Reading literature against ethnography, then, can help to emphasize that ethnography, like literature, is often engaged in the writing of fictions. It is precisely in literature that the silences to which Spivak refers become laden with meaning. As we have seen, history, as it contextualizes representations of sexuality (or its denial) with respect to colonialism, is also crucial to an interdisciplinary project of reading various discourses on African homosexualities against each other. But as history is always already written and is constantly in the process of being rewritten, examples of the (mis)use of history to justify violence abound. Again, literature, self-conscious of its writtenness, also offers ways of rereading history that draw attention to the silences left in both colonial and anti-colonial versions of the same events. In spite of my stake in the discipline of literary criticism, however, I shall not propose literature as a panacea for the colonial ills of other discourses; literary criticism, as we shall also see, has its own history of fabricating silences.

Menwomen in Senegal
One of the arguments often used to disclaim an indigenous African homosexuality is that no word exists in African languages for same-sex sexual behaviors. One member of the newsgroup wrote, “I’m basing myself on, among other things, the absence of any ‘African’ term designating homosexuality. In addition, among all of my acquaintances, there isn’t a single member of my tribe who practices homosexuality. This practice is exclusively urban in Africa; it is an imported practice” (Jean-Célestin Yamegni, 7 July 1995). This argument is in blatant contradiction with all the anthropological literature. Murray and Roscoe list 77 such terms (279–82), among which, the Wolof term gor-dijuen (as they spell it), a term that also occurs in Le baobab fou (The Abandoned Baobab) by Ken Bugul (1984). When Ken, the narrator/protagonist studying in Europe, meets and moves in with a Belgian homosexual, Jean Wermer, instead of asserting the uniquely Western nature of same-sex desire, she compares Western homosexuality with a Wolof practice:

I knew there were homosexuals, we had them in my country. I myself had had a homosexual slave, inherited from long tradition. “Gor Djigen” they called him. It had always remained an abstract idea for me. But Jean Wermer had been married, had children, and he didn’t act like the Gor Djigens. (58)

In this passage, Ken returns, figuratively, to the village where she was born and grew up (and therefore to her roots) to make a cross-cultural comparison that brings out similarities as well as differences between African and European same-sex sexual behaviors. She directly contradicts the often-used argument that there is no African word for homosexuality (and therefore that homosexuality cannot be African), by inserting a Wolof term for men who, if not exactly like European homosexuals, are at least comparable in her opinion. Furthermore, whereas constructionist accounts of the uniqueness of Western homosexuality often rely on its supposed exclusiveness, in this passage it is the gor-dijuen who is exclusively homosexual and the Western homosexual who is not. Bugul thus disrupts the clichés of Western homosexuality as exceptional, which rely on a non-Western and/or premodern Other.
Several Europeans have mentioned the gor-dijuen in accounts of their travels to West Africa. In *Africa Dances: A Book about West African Negroes* (1935), for example, Geoffrey Gorer observes:

> It is said that homosexuality is recent among the Wolof, at any rate in any frequency; but it now receives, and has for some years received such extremely augument and almost publicly exhibited patronage, that pathics are a common sight. They are called in Wolof men-women, gor-digen, and do their best to deserve the epithet by their mannerisms, their dress and their make-up; some even dress their hair like women. They do not suffer in any way socially, though the Mohammedans refuse them religious burial; on the contrary they are sought after as the best conversationalists and the best dancers. This phase is usually transitory, finishing with the departure of the European who has been keeping the boy; but a certain number from taste, interest, or for economic reasons continue their practices and there is now quite a large pederastic society. If I am right in ascribing the increase in European homosexuality to a neurotic fear of life and responsibility the conditions of urban life in Africa lead to the prognosis that this society will greatly increase. (36)

Gorer leaves unquestioned the assumption that African homosexuality occurs only in contact with Europeans and that it is a recent phenomenon. In addition, he uses his discussion of African same-sex practices to pathologize European homosexuality. In contrast, however, and perhaps surprisingly, he argues that the gor-dijuen are tolerated in Senegal, perhaps more so than in the Europe of his day.

In *Pagans and Politicians* (1959), Michael Crowder makes similar observations concerning the tolerance of the gor-dijuen:

> [H]omosexuality had a much freer rein [than prostitution], being prevalent amongst Africans, Mauretanians and Europeans alike. In Place Prôtet, the main square of Dakar, young African boys, more often than not Jollofs, could be seen waiting to be picked up.
Under the Code Napoleon it is, of course, legal, and in theory presents no problem, though many people are worried by its spread in the city.

Of course, to many of these boys with no work, it is one way of making money. But amongst the Jollofs it seems to be more deeply rooted. Contact with Frenchmen in St. Louis, who often preferred black boys to black mistresses and contact with the Mauretanians may provide an explanation.

Today one can even see Jollof men dressed in women’s clothes. I once met one in a small bar outside Dakar. He was obviously pathetically feminine. The Jollof must be used to this since they even have a word for them—Gor-Digen. The elders and faithful Muslims condemn men for this, but it is typical of African tolerance that they are left very much alone by the rest of the people. (68, emphasis added)

Like Gorer, Crowder treats homosexuality as a contagious disease that can only be transmitted from foreigners; rulers like Mugabe are thus far from being the first to make such arguments. Both Gorer and Crowder, in opposition to the Africans they encounter, consider the sight of cross-dressed men to be a pathetic one. One email discussant similarly argues in 1995 that there is more tolerance for homosexuality in Senegal than in the West:

In contemporary Senegal, and in contrast with what you might think, homosexuality exists and is more tolerated than in the West. Homosexuals are also transvestites. They are called “man-woman” (Goor-jiguen). There is a special, well-liked dish (because it is spicy and very succulent) that carries their name; in fact, this dish is called “Mbaxaal goor-jiguen”; it’s a special dish reserved for prestigious guests or for special events. Today, for baptisms, homosexuals are more and more invited by women to do the cooking. They also participate in ceremonies such as marriage. (Alioune Deme, 6 July 1995)

In its affectionate tone, this discussant’s representation of the gor-dijuen’s quotidian integration into Senegalese life provides an important counterpoint to the accounts of these self-styled ethnographers. Whereas the travelers were only able to see public displays of the gor-dijuen, Deme shows how they can also be integrated into a domestic economy within the home.
In “Homosexuality in Dakar: Is the Bed the Heart of a Sexual Subculture?” (1996), based on research conducted in 1990, Niels Teunis also provides an intimate account of the life of the gordjiguène (as he spells it). His more recent and supposedly more scholarly account of this role, however, is based not on research conducted inside the home, but on conversations with patrons in a Dakar bar frequented by men who consider themselves to be gor-djiguëne:

The men whom I met there referred to themselves as homosexuëles [sic], homosexuals in French (my communication language with them), and gordjiguène in Wolof, their own language.… The word is used among Senegalese homosexuals and by others, in which case it is meant as an insult. One of the members of the milieu explained to me that one can distinguish two separate groups in the community of gordjiguène. First, there are men who play the inserter role in anal intercourse. The other group comprises those who are the insertees. Wolof terms for these groups exist, but they have no French equivalent. The ones who act as inserter are called yauss…. One is either a yauss or an oubi—changing from one group to the other is not possible. Leon, the man who explained this to me, said that the latter group was composed of what he called “we the women.” This included me, too. (160)

Though Teunis is not Senegalese, his informants do not hesitate to apply a Wolof term, with the specifically Senegalese construction of sexuality that it implies, to the ethnographer, whom they did not acknowledge as such since he writes, “I did not tell them that I did research, or that I was looking for more than a leisurely time when I came” (162–63). The difference between European and Senegalese constructions of homosexual identities, therefore, does not prevent them—like Ken in Bugul’s novel—from translating the European’s sexual identity into Wolof. In fact, this translation might be read as a counter-translation; whereas usually it is the European ethnographer who translates the “native” culture into a language his European readers will understand, here the “natives” are the ones who translate the ethnographer through a Senegalese concept.
Whereas all the accounts considered above assume that the gor-djiguen is necessarily a transvestite, according to Teunis the gor-djiguen include not only the bottoms but also the tops. In other words, unlike other accounts, though the term refers to a feminized male for Teunis, it can also refer to those who are considered to play the man’s role, even though “[m]en considered as yauss did not really form a distinguishable group” (160). This is one way Teunis contradicts earlier travel accounts, but in so doing, he also contradicts himself; for later in the article, he writes: “The cultural model of the… gordjiguène distinguishes between two categories: yauss and oubi…. In practice, the oubi identify themselves as gordjiguène; yauss in general, do not…. Those who identify as gordjiguène, the oubi, come together in a bar. There they recognize each other as fellow oubi, and, contrary to the yauss, they form a social group” (166–67). In other words, the yauss both are and are not gor-djiguen. Teunis does tell the story of one yauss who identifies as gor-djiguen, but his story is complicated by the fact that though he was a yauss in practice, his “type” was “lightskinned (not white) men, with big chests and huge muscles, like Rambo” (164), who—were he ever to find such a man!—would play the role of the inserter. This example, embedded within Teunis’s account, disrupts the generalizations he makes about the mutually exclusive aspects of the two roles and the lack of ambiguity or impermeability of the boundary that separates them. Interestingly (and contra usual expectations), Teunis also discovers that oubi can have sex with each other, though it is not considered “sex” but “playing” (165–66). He does not give either the French or Wolof term for such activity, nor is he able to tell us exactly what it consists of, since he turned down his only opportunity to engage in it!

The major way in which Teunis contradicts both the travel accounts and Deme, is that the former claims that gor-djiguen are not accepted; according to Teunis, the term is one of insult. In Un chant écarlate (Scarlet Song) (1981), the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ also suggests that the gor-djiguen is less tolerated than others suggest:

In their new neighborhood the couple opposite had a son, a very queer youngster [un fils bien drôle]! This fifteen-year-old obstinately refused the company and games of
boys of his own age and sought the company and games of little girls! A funny sort of boy this was, who modeled his bearing, drawling speech and activities on those of girls!

When his father came upon him, gossiping away with the old women, or cooking up dishes in the gutter [faire mijoter les plats dans les goûters], he went wild with rage and took a whip to him. But to no avail.

It was to no avail that his mother shaved all his hair off to make him ugly. You could still mistake him for one of the little girls he played with. He rolled his eyes as he spoke. And it wasn’t only his eyes that rolled. He wantonly wiggled his hips and stuck out his bottom as he walked. As soon as he was out of his mother’s sight, he draped himself in a pagne and strutted about.

“Nothing short of a miracle will stop that youngster turning into a gôr djiguène, a pansy destined to spend his life at the feet of a courtesan, doing all her dirty work. His job would be to procure generous lovers to keep that type of pricey household going. His would be the job of settling the accounts for the meals. And sometimes it might happen that the clients would fancy him rather than his mistress…”

Yaye Khady was sincerely sorry for the mother of this specimen. (69–70; 106–7 in the French)

On one level, this passage constitutes a description of the scorn with which the gor-djiguen is sometimes viewed. Yet it must be said that, in a society in which the actions of any family member may dishonor the entire family, a parent’s reaction to a son’s becoming a gor-djiguen might be very different from that of society as a whole. On another level, this passage is an eloquent description of how, even in spite of parental violence, a boy affirms his sexual identity, which seems to develop “naturally,” far removed from any foreign influence. This gor-djiguen-in-the-making parades his identity freely, being a bit more discreet only when in the presence of his parents. Although parts of this passage recall details from other descriptions, such as the association with the art of cooking (Deme), the role of domestic servant (Bugul), and of course the common element of trans-gender identity, this boy—not (yet) a gor-djiguen—serves as the
catalyst for a lengthy ethnographic description of the gor-djiguen’s social role that includes many details not mentioned in other accounts. The speaker behind the ethnographic paragraph (enclosed within quotation marks), however, is not clearly identified. Is it Yaye Khady, the boy’s mother, or merely the prevailing, collective gossip of the neighborhood?

Unlike Bâ’s gor-djiguen and those described by everyone except Teunis, who claims that all of his informants led closeted lives, Teunis, at least as long as he was in Senegal, was in the closet as a homosexual and as an ethnographer (160). Even though he describes the openness with which “many streetboys” operate on Dakar’s main street (160)—and here he echoes Crowder—he also describes blackmail (163) and the tendency of police to target the bar for ID checks (162). Is there not a contradiction between the obviousness implied in the term man-woman, and the invisibility Teunis attributes to them? How accurate can we consider his observations to be when his own closetedness (as he understood it) prevented him from asking heterosexual informants about their own feelings towards gor-djiguen? Though one might be tempted to suspect travel accounts to be more prejudiced by the clichés of colonial discourse (why, because written by amateurs?), Teunis’s account demonstrates that even the gay ethnographer can project idées reçues onto his “homosexual” informants and that anti-homophobic ethnography can produce its own closets.

**The Civilizing Mission and the Missionary Position**

The motif of travel is a common one when the topic of homosexuality arises in African literature. It is often upon leaving Africa that characters are first confronted with the issue of homosexuality. Yet, as we have seen with Ken’s example, this trip abroad is often balanced by a parallel return to the native land, which contradicts the tendency of some pan-Africanist and U.S. Afrocentric discourses to link same-sex sexual behavior and desires with Europe or the U.S. Though Ken first mentions homosexuality in conjunction with her experience in Europe, her encounter with a Belgian homosexual leads her not to assert a European monopoly on same-sex sexual behaviors and desires, but to affirm a Senegalese counterpart. Likewise, in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), when the Ghanaian protagonist Sissie encounters
homosexuality in Europe (this time in the form of sexual advances made to her by a married German woman, Marija), she returns, figuratively, to her native village: “[O]ne evening the woman seizes you in her embrace, her cold fingers on your breasts, warm tears on your face, hot lips on your lips, do you go back to your village in Africa…” (65). What she reveals in this memorative return to her origins is the story of a missionary to the Guinea coast who, “on one of her regular nocturnal inspections, …found two girls in bed together” (66). On the one hand, Sissie’s response to Marija’s desire to plan a surprise going-away dinner could be said to fit into the formula of homosexual desire as contra naturam: “Besides, it is not sound for a woman to enjoy cooking for another woman. Not under any circumstances. It is not done. It is not possible. Special meals are for men. They are the only sex to whom the Maker gave a mouth with which to enjoy eating” (77). If one replaces the culinary vocabulary with a sexual one, the passage exactly fits the model of one homophobic argument against homosexuality, even though the absurdity of the image it conjures up—that of women without mouths—might be said to disrupt that homophobia. On the other, Aidoo historicizes this response by associating it with the missionary’s characterization of two African girls in bed as “a / C-r-i-m-e / A Sin / S-o-d-o-m-y” (67).

After an initial discussion of homosexuality in sub-Saharan African novels, “L’homophilie dans le roman négro-africain d’expression anglaise et française” (1983), in which Daniel Vignal divides the novels he reads into homophobic and non-homophobic camps, Chris Dunton articulated more nuanced readings of the same and other novels in “‘Wheyting Be Dat?’: The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature” (1989). Since essays that deal with homosexuality in African literature are few and far between, both articles articulate useful readings of often neglected passages, or passages that have provoked homophobic readings on the part of many critics. Dunton, however, who provides a three-page analysis of Marija’s pass at Sissie (431–34), does not mention the novel’s representation of the repression of homosexuality by a European missionary. Although he argues that “Aidoo’s treatment of homosexuality is not unsympathetic” (432), his reading of Aidoo and other novelists allows him to conclude:
What remains conspicuous in all these works is the abstention among African writers, and even among the most searching and responsive of these, from a fully characterized and nonschematic depiction of a homosexual relationship between Africans. The practice of homosexuality within African society remains an area of experience that has not been granted a history by African writers, but has been greeted, rather, with a sustained outburst of silence. Whether this has been carried out within or beyond the limits of the stereotype, the identification of homosexuality with the West has helped defend that silence. An “official” history has concealed the reluctance of African writers to admit homosexuality into the bounds of a different kind of discussion. (445)

In his reading of Aidoo, which leads him to argue that novelistic representations of African homosexualities are ahistorical, Dunton does not consider the novel’s reference to colonial history. Though he argues that the African novel’s approach to homosexuality produces silences, by failing to read the intertextual connection between history and African literary representations of homosexuality, Dunton creates silences of his own. In his discussion of Camara’s Dramouss, for example, Dunton only remarks that Fatomane “protests angrily that nothing like that could happen in his own country” (426). He fails to point out how the novel situates his comments with Liliane’s reproduction of colonial discourse. Reading Bâ, he writes, “Yet even if homosexual practice is acknowledged in these passages to have been allocated a specialized, legitimate role in traditional society, it still is stigmatized…” (423). Again, he does not consider how the novel itself contextualizes this stigmatization.

Dunton thus provides an important example of how even anti-homophobic literary criticism can fail to read between the lines in order to uncover meaning within silences. In so doing, he clearly demonstrates the dangers, within literary criticism, of ignoring history. For it is not the African novel that fails to grant a history to African homosexuality, but its critics. Clearly, then, it is not only that literature can help read silences in the writing of history, but history must also be studied by the literary critic (who must also be on the lookout for the ways novels participate in the writing of history) to avoid silencing historical references in the works s/he reads. In
contrast with Dunton, Aidoo’s novel suggests that Sissie’s reaction to the possibility of homosexual desire is a product less of African tradition than of the imposition of Christianity that accompanied colonial conquest. Our Sister Killjoy thus historicizes the deployment of homophobia by colonial discourse and suggests that, rather than homosexuality, heterosexuality was the more significant imposition of colonialism. Aidoo thus provides the historical background that allows us to understand Liliane’s comments in Camara’s Dramous as well as Cleaver’s in Soul on Ice. Aidoo also draws attention to another important consideration in any discussion of African discourses on homosexuality, the influence of missionaries. Though the novel’s protagonist rejects homosexuality as un-African, the novel historicizes this homophobia and suggests that, rather than defending a precolonial African purity, Sissie is actually repeating a discourse that she learned from European missionaries.

Whereas Aidoo situates clichés concerning a so-called absence of African homosexuality within a colonial history, V.Y. Mudimbe’s Entre les eaux: Dieu, un prêtre, la révolution (1973) (Between the Waters: God, a Priest, and Revolution), confronts the aftermath of colonial homophobia in postindependence Africa in very subtle ways. In spite of the Congolese origins of the novel’s author, its setting is an unnamed African country in which the government is being challenged by armed resistance. Because of its fictional setting, the novel (as is common in postindependence novels) defies a “straight”-forward association with ethnography; it also resists comparison with would-be historical references in any simple way. I would argue, however, that history can be crucial in understanding the novel’s representation of homosexuality through a reading that might tease out the novel’s sexual politics by bringing to the fore the ironic and paradoxical ways in which the novel deploys sexuality and perverts Christian missionary discourse.

Cannibals and Queers

Entre les eaux tells the story of Pierre, who resigns from his position as a Catholic priest to join a revolutionary militia. Because of what it reveals to his superiors, Pierre’s letter of resignation is considered to be an act of treason by his comrades, who subsequently condemn
him to death. Finally, after government forces attack their unit, thereby dismantling it and killing many of its members, the execution is not carried out. Before the letter is discovered, however, in conversation with the “Chef” (leader of the unit), the latter reveals to Pierre that he is a pederast:

I am a man of vice. Yes, vice. I adore hemp, strong drink, fat women. Yes, fat ones; they are as tender as plump, ripe, very juicy fruit. They bleed gold. Beautiful boys as well, of course. I am, as you say in your learned language… Yes, thanks, that’s it, polyvalent. A passion I carry within. I should have been a wild animal. Do you see? Pierre, I am a fundamentally immoral being. In fact, a month ago, I ate human flesh. (55)

Here, resistance to a neocolonial regime is embodied by a pervert. The Chef seems to fit perfectly Catholic descriptions of perversion as bestial ("J’aurais dû être une fauve"), descriptions that also link sexual deviance with political aberration. The comparison between pederasty and cannibalism found in the above passage would not be unusual in colonial Christian propaganda. In early modern colonial discourse, cannibals (more a figure of the Christian imagination than a historical reality) epitomized all that was un-Christian and, therefore, uncivilized. As W. Arens points out in his demystification of cannibalism, The Man-Eating Myth, the Spanish often claimed that the Aztecs “practiced both cannibalism and sodomy” (77). He also mentions “titillating descriptions of often-combined cannibalistic and sexual acts” (99). In his introduction to Cannibalism and the Colonial World, Peter Hulme as well describes a tendency to represent cannibalism (particularly in non-anthropological discourses) “as an orgy of limb-tearing violence, possibly accompanied by excesses of other sorts, from infanticide to sodomy” (Barker et al. 24).

While awaiting his execution, Pierre not only wonders whether he can describe his experience in terms of martyrdom; he also speculates about being canonized. The question of martyrdom, particularly in relation to a death sentence meted out by a homosexual leader, recalls an incident from the annals of history—that of the so-called Uganda holocaust. The “martyrs” in this incident were royal pages (Christian converts, beatified in 1920 and canonized in 1964) who were killed between 1885 and ’87 by the Kabaka (king) Mwanga of Buganda (a part of present-
day Uganda) because their religion led them to defy his power and because they supposedly refused his homosexual advances. Christian accounts of these “human sacrifices” made much use of the second explanation to demonize the Kabaka and emphasize his bestiality. (“Human sacrifices” thus play a similar role in colonial discourse as “cannibalism”; in fact, the two were often linked [cf. Arens 64, 68, 70].) The New Catholic Encyclopedia describes Mwanga in terms remarkably similar to the Chef’s self-description: “The persecution occurred early in the reign of Mwanga, a vicious, perverse youth, after his Christian page boys refused to submit to his homosexual advances” (“Uganda, Martyr’s of” 363, emphasis added). J. F. Faupel’s African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs (1962), which carries the nihil obstat and imprimatur of the Catholic Church, likewise demonizes the Kabaka in the service of hagiography, which in this case passes for history. What is rarely suggested, however, is that the “martyrs” were killed less because they were defending an African (and therefore natural) purity than because they were the advocates of a Christian notion of purity foreign to the religious practices and political structures of the Baganda. Furthermore, Christianity was actively attacking and destroying traditional African social structures, and the presence of Christian missionaries in Buganda directly paved the way for the establishment of the British protectorate in 1894.

Mwanga’s “purge of Christians,” however, has not only been deployed in the production of colonial homophobia in Catholic discourse; he is also used to justify homophobic nationalism from an anti-Christian perspective. To deny the existence of homosexuality in Africa, participants in the newsgroup discussion dismissed accounts of the Kabaka’s pederasty as lies invented by missionaries. The issue was raised by a non-African discussant: “But I remember hearing at the time about the canonization of 22 Uganda Saints martyred long ago because they refused the homosexual advances of a Kabaka. Perhaps someone could tell us whether it is completely false” (Godfrey A. Whyte, 11 July 1995). An African participant replied, “It’s commonplace to accuse Negroes of being sodomites. It’s pure Christian propaganda. It was one of the arguments used to justify slavery” (Jean-Célestin Yamegni, 12 July 1995). The first participant seemed to agree: “It’s precisely because I was suspicious of Christian propaganda that
I wondered whether the account of the homosexual Kabaka was true” (Godfrey A. Whyte, 12 July 1995). Some Western gay scholars, in an equally disturbing move, have used the incident as proof of a precolonial African homosexuality without questioning the colonial implications of the Christian accounts (e.g. Dynes 206).

Although “Chef” means leader in French, it is also the word for so-called tribal chiefs. This association also links Mudimbe’s Chef with representations of precolonial African rulers in colonial discourse, which often labeled kings “chiefs” because it could not conceive of “advanced” forms of statehood in Africa prior to colonization. Therefore, in conjunction with Mudimbe’s parody of the colonial clichés of Christian discourse, the Chef might be a representation of rulers such as the Kabaka. The novel’s mention of cannibalism might make it easy to demonize the Chef, and homosexuality along with him. Pierre, however, questions such a demonization; in spite of his romance with a female guerrilla, he confesses his own homosexual tendencies: “‘My good old Pierre,’ I said to myself, ‘you have a rather pronounced tendency for your own sex.’ Shame invaded me” (119). While he might be read as a personification of the cliché that all priests are driven to pederasty by their celibacy or that they entered the priesthood to hide their pederastic tendencies, Mudimbe suggests that both Catholic priests and revolutionary nationalists can have homosexual tendencies. Entre les eaux thus brings back what hagiography and homophobic nationalism have attempted to repress. Whereas the detail of Pierre’s possible martyrdom means that his imminent execution might be said to recall that of the Uganda “martyrs,” unlike the Ugandan martyrs, Pierre asserts his affinity with the revolutionary Chef and his homosexual tendencies. By reading the historical incident through Mudimbe, then, one can understand Entre les eaux as challenging the demonization of homosexuality through a move not unlike Bugul’s and Aidoo’s returns to queer African roots. In Mudimbe, however, it is the repressed roots of an Africa constructed as queer by missionary discourse that return with such force.

Even today, Uganda continues to be a site of debate over African homosexualities. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is often cited, along with Mugabe, Kenya’s Daniel arap Moi, and
Namibia’s Sam Nujoma, as one of Africa’s most vehemently homophobic leaders. Museveni has recently called for arrests of homosexuals under the country’s sodomy law. The law whose enforcement he has demanded, however, was written not by Ugandans, but by British colonial rulers. Furthermore, as in Zimbabwe, Museveni’s homophobic rhetoric is not merely discursive, but has resulted in the arrests of many Ugandans (IGLHRC). In continuing to enforce homophobic colonial laws (not to mention just leaving them on the books), Museveni demonstrates that, when it comes to homosexuality in Uganda, decolonization has yet to begin. Like Mugabe, he also masks his homophobic attacks with anticolonial rhetoric, even stating that “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights… [was not] drawn up with the participation of African countries and therefore was ‘not universal to Africa’” (“Uganda to Arrest Gays” 22). Museveni’s implied critique of the enlightenment ideals behind human rights conventions is understandable when one considers that these very ideals were used as a justification for colonialism. The abolition of slavery among Africans, for example, was often paradoxically given as a reason for colonial invasion. Yet this critique is not the one performed by Museveni, because his justifications of state-sponsored homophobic terror rely on the same colonial discourse he pretends to condemn. It is an irony of history, however, that, after the inauguration of homophobic discourse in Uganda by Christian missionaries, resistance to Museveni’s homophobia would first take the form of the Anglican lesbian and gay organization, Integrity. On 7 July 2000, the formation of the first African chapter of Integrity in Kampala, Uganda, was announced (Integrity USA). Mugabe might also be given credit for turning GALZ from a small, mostly white organization to a larger one with a substantial black membership (cf. Coutinho 62, Phillips 52–53).

Queer Interpretations

When GALZ’s exclusion from Zimbabwe’s book fair set off Mugabe’s homophobic campaign, Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature, publicly condemned this exclusion in the name of freedom of expression (Patron 22). Even earlier, his 1965 novel *The Interpreters* included a major gay, African American character—Joe Golder, a
concert singer and history lecturer at the university. The interpreters referred to in the novel’s title are usually considered to be the following characters: Egbo, a civil servant who has also inherited a position of traditional ruler; Biodun Sagoe, a journalist and former philosophy student; Sekoni, an engineer turned sculptor; Kola, an art teacher and painter; and Bandele, also a lecturer at the university. The novel intertwines their personal stories and conversations into a complex structure of flashbacks. In spite of Golder’s importance in the novel, however, most criticism excludes him from the ranks of the “interpreters” (e.g. Maugham-Brown 55–56, Early 170). Furthermore, he often serves as an excuse for literary critics to voice their homophobia (e.g. Ojo-Ade 748). Since one character, the Christian convert Noah, jumps to his death after Golder makes a pass at him, critics often blame Noah’s death on Golder’s homosexuality as opposed to the sexual interdictions imposed by Christianity (e.g. Abodunrin 162, Early 169–70).

L. R. Early even suggests that Golder is a cannibal: “Various critics have observed the theme of human sacrifice in Soyinka’s work. In *The Interpreters* Noah is a tragic sacrifice to the fundamental cannibalism of society (represented by Joe Golder)...” (172). In this example, literary criticism, in spite of its self-proclaimed anticolonial stance, fully reproduces colonial clichés of the sexually perverse cannibal, the same clichés Mudimbe parodies in the character of the Chef. Regarding Golder, critics often argue that, since he is only one-fourth black, he is ashamed of not being more purely African; for them, his homosexuality represents another aspect of his inauthenticity in much the same way as homosexuality is seen as symptomatic of racial self-hatred in Cleaver’s writing. As Gaurav Desai summarizes in “Out in Africa,” “Golder remains to this day in the criticism of this text, the homosexual—and therefore—the accused” (123). A number of critics, however, have resisted this tendency, and some even accept him as an interpreter (e.g. Owusu 187).

One of the most frequently quoted scenes describes Kola’s painting of the Yoruba pantheon, for which Golder poses as the god Erinle, defined in the novel’s glossary merely as “an animal spirit” (259). (Most critics have focused on the following request by Golder regarding this painting: “For God’s sake, blacken me. Make me the blackest black blackness in your pantheon”
Though Erinle is not the most frequently discussed Yoruba orisha, or divinity, it seems that Erinle’s gender identity is far from clear. In his work on Yoruba religious practices in the nineteenth century, Peter McKenzie includes an entire section on changes of gender among the orisha (190–96), including that of Erinle: “Another ‘god of stream,’ Eyinle or Erinle was worshipped as a male orisha at Lagos and as a goddess at Otta” (29). Soyinka’s novel as well discusses precisely this kind of gender variability: “[Golder] had said once, You should paint me as one of those Indian gods, hermaphrodite. Kola laughed and said, You’d be surprised, we have a few Gods like that. In one area they are male, in another female” (215). Reflecting on this passage from the novel, Kinkead-Weeks writes:

Golder is a man apparently caught in hopeless opposition, but to measure him against Erinle is to reinforce the sense of what he could be, transformed in the crucible of clashing forces from within. For Erinle is bisexual and contradictory…. For Soyinka, it is intrinsic to the Yoruba sense of deity that there is a vital connection between opposites; there is, for example, healing in violence and violence in healing. To fix on one aspect of the exclusion of the opposite is to distort the nature, and inhibit the potential, of the god-like power that is in man, and can transform him. To be both fully is to explode contraries into power and progression; to tap the divine forces in the universe, and to become more godlike. (232)

It is little wonder, then, that several critics have argued that Golder is Egbo’s double (Houbein 98, Morrison 756). In spite of attempts on the part of many critics to attribute Golder’s homosexuality to his alienation from Africanness due to both his métissage and to the fact that, sexually, he represents an American contamination of African purity, the novel actually connects Golder’s sexual marginality to the most “traditional” aspect of Nigerian culture, religious practices that predate the advent of both Islam and Christianity. Since in precolonial society, Egbo would have been a hereditary ruler, the novel also links Golder (through the “couple” he forms with Egbo) with precolonial political structures.
In fact, Golder is the character who points out the homosexual practices of certain precolonial rulers. In a discussion between Golder and Sagoe, who is disgusted by the mere thought of homosexuality, the latter denies the existence of homosexuality in Africa:

“…Listen you, it is true I have spent some time in places where every possible perversion is practised, but I do not on that account jump to hasty conclusions. I happen to be born into a comparatively healthy society…”

[Golder] jumped on him. “Don’t give me that? Comparatively healthy society my foot. Do you think I know nothing of your Emirs and their little boys? You forget history is my subject. And what about those exclusive coteries in Lagos?”

Sagoe gestured defeat. “You seem better informed than I am. But if you don’t mind I’ll persist in my delusion. (199)

Although Dunton’s five-and-a-half-page discussion of Soyinka (439–44) does not mention this reference to history, it is through history that Golder reveals the fallacies of nationalist denials of African homosexualities. Golder’s homosexuality is therefore connected to not only religious African roots, but to historical ones as well. Furthermore, even Sagoe admits that any notion of African sexual purity is a delusion, i.e. a fiction.

As Desai writes, “Joe… has consistently been read in the critical literature as Soyinka’s emblem of everything that is wrong with a Western-based, romanticized Afrocentricity” (122). In spite of Sagoe’s deployment of the nationalist clichés regarding homosexuality, he is the first to mock Golder’s Afrocentricity: “Look, the truth is that I get rather sick of self-love. Even nationalism is a kind of self-love but that can be defended. It is this cult of black beauty which sickens me. Are albinos supposed to go and drown themselves, for instance” (195–96). Sagoe goes on to accuse him of being “mentally white,” to which Golder responds:

“It sounds Rousseau but I have a right to feel the way I do. Black is something I like to be, that I have every right to be. There is no reason at all why I shouldn’t have been born jet black.”

“You would have died of over-masturbation, I am sure.”
“You enjoy being vulgar?” (195)

Soyinka has long been a critic of négritude; his famous sentence, “A tiger does not go around proclaiming its tigritude,” amply demonstrates that he does not hesitate to resort to mockery to get his point across. (Négritude is, after all, an Afrocentric movement.) Neither can one deny that Soyinka often directs a similar criticism against Golder. Yet, it would be simplistic to confuse this mockery with homophobia. For there is no one the novel mocks more than Sagoe, who on occasion even seems to border on mental instability. He spends much of the novel trying to convert his pidgin-speaking messenger Mathias to his personal philosophy, which he calls Voidancy, “the philosophy of shit” (71). He is also quite a misogynist, arguing on one occasion that women who behave in certain ways should be beaten (67), and on another, that women who engage in certain behaviors deserve to be raped (105). (By denying Dehinwe, an important female character, the status of interpreter in much the same way as they treat Golder, many critics may be said to share this misogyny.) Few critics, however, would argue that the novel espouses Sagoe’s misogyny or his “voidante” philosophy, yet when it comes to his homophobia, for many critics, Sagoe suddenly becomes the novel’s (and Soyinka’s) mouthpiece. Why not, in contrast, understand the novel as suggesting that, by association, Sagoe’s misogyny as well as his homophobia are likewise “philosophies of shit”? Furthermore, when critics take up Sagoe’s opinion of Golder, they fail to mention that Sagoe picked up his philosophy as a student in the U.S., and that older characters refer to him as “that boy from America” (94). Sagoe is thus hardly in any position to defend an African purity of any kind. In fact, one might argue that the greatest American influence on Sagoe was the formation of this homophobia.

Though Dunton, like many homophobic critics, argues that “…Golder is not one of the interpreters” (442), he integrates Golder into an overall understanding of the novel: “Soyinka’s characterization of Golder can hardly be said to be sympathetic. Yet there is a concern with Golder’s social psychology that finally does distinguish his characterization from the stereotype and that suggests that his role bears a complex relationship to the novel’s thematic development” (440). He also suggests that there might be a connection between Golder’s racial and sexual
identities: “[W]hile Soyinka is hardly concerned with projecting a metaphorical identification of the stigmatization of homosexuality with that of blackness, he does establish such an identification as integral to Joe Golder’s psychological make-up. He shows how Golder advertises his blackness as a means of displacing the alienation he suffers because of his homosexuality” (440). Desai interestingly takes the totally opposite stance regarding how likably Soyinka portrays Golder:

[I]t is precisely in addressing [Golder’s] simultaneous negotiations of racial and sexual identities that Soyinka presents Golder as a profoundly sympathetic character. Golder is an individual who has had to claim actively at least two identities which continually threaten to escape him—he is at once a light-skinned black man capable of “passing” as a white man and a homosexual capable of passing as straight. His choice not to pass—his choice to reaffirm at once two identities not only at odds with the hegemonic order of things but also, more importantly, at odds with one another—is a choice that must sober even the most unsympathetic of readers. Furthermore, Joe’s decision to study African history and his move to Nigeria, despite its potentially romanticizing implications, is presented by Soyinka as his continual attempt to negotiate the different demands placed upon his identities. (123–24)

In an approach to Afrocentricity that is profoundly different from the ones represented by many homophobic readers of Soyinka’s novel, Desai puts a more positive spin on the way Golder’s racial and sexual identities work connection to each other. Golder, in other words, who has come to Africa to find his roots, also asserts their queer aspect.

Similarly, although Cleaver’s version of Afrocentricity was predicated on turning James Baldwin into a scapegoat, the gay African American writer plays a major role in Golder’s queerer version of Afrocentricity. In the following passage from the The Interpreters, Golder discusses a Baldwin novel with Sagoe:

“It’s Another Country, the latest Baldwin. Have you read it?”

“I spell it Another Cuntry, C-U-N-T.”
“You don’t like it?”

“It reminded me somehow of another title, Eric, or Little by Little! Said with an anal
gasp, if you get my meaning.”

“You enjoy being vulgar,” he said again.

“And you? Why is this lying on the car seat? So when you give lifts to students you
can find an easy opening for exploring?”

“You are trying to hurt me?” (200)

In spite of his sarcastic indictments of Afrocentricity, Sagoe’s opinion of Baldwin curiously
foreshadows Cleaver by about three years. In 1965, Soyinka foresaw the conflict between
Afrocentricity and homosexuality that would preoccupy cultural commentators until this very
day. Though Sagoe expresses a view shared by many critics, this passage is rarely quoted,
perhaps because it would be difficult even for many homophobes to sympathize with Sagoe here
(given his vivid imagining of anal sex), even harder to argue that Sagoe expresses the view of the
entire novel, let alone Soyinka himself. When Femi Ojo-Ade writes, “A homosexual, Golder has
a field day making passes at students and colleagues…” (748), he echoes Sagoe’s position. Like
Sagoe, Ojo-Ade does not care how often Joe has been robbed or blackmailed as a result of his
attempts at intimacy. One might even say that Ojo-Ade has been tricked by Soyinka into playing
the role of one of the “interpreters.” Given the history of homophobic criticism of the novel and
the curious fact that certain interpreters of the novel echo certain interpreters in the novel, one
might also say that Soyinka’s novel constitutes an allegory of literary criticism in that it has
somehow managed to get its critics to illustrate what it criticizes. Soyinka’s novel still manages
to mock its own readers 35 years after it first appeared; literary critics who fail to recognize the
model of literary criticism The Interpreters proposes, end up embodying the kind of interpretation
it makes fun of.

Baldwin appears in another passage in the novel when Kola and Golder first meet. Golder at
first tries to seduce him (as he tries to seduce Sagoe during their first meeting): “Entering the flat
he was astonished to see Joe lying on the sofa, naked, with a scant towel on the small of his back
and pretending to read *Giovanni’s Room*” (217). Though Kola is not interested in a sexual encounter, when Golder takes off the towel, Kola finds him beautiful. In spite of the fact that Golder’s racial self-hatred prevents him from being able to recognize his own beauty, a beauty that requires the rejection of a politics of purity in order to be seen, it is only upon “returning” to Africa that this beauty can be appreciated in the eyes of an African artist. Kola does not have to paint him blacker than he sees him to create this beauty, but rather his aesthetics relies on an appreciation of diversity that is also sexual. Although Sagoe characterizes Afrocentricity as a form of masturbation (which is, when one thinks of it, a rather queer way to describe Afrocentricity), Golder is the character who points out to Sagoe that he is more nationalistic than he lets on: “You Africans are so damned nationalist” (194). Golder thus represents a version of Afrocentricity that questions nationalism, an anti-nationalist nationalism, a rather queer nationalism since, as the slogan goes, “the Queer Nation has no borders.” It is perhaps an irony of history that it took a straight African writer to create a queer model of American Afrocentricity, a model that queer Americans have yet to surpass. As it has been the task of this essay to demonstrate, such a queer Afrocentricity requires an interdisciplinary quest for queer African roots, whether the “fruits” of these roots are African or American. The *Interpreters* likewise proposes a model of interdisciplinarity in that each of the interpreters interprets from a different discipline.

The notion that one might return, figuratively or literally, to a pure Africa free of colonial influence constitutes one possibility of returning to African roots. Many of the examples examined here suggest that narratives of return to African origins may just as easily contest such essential notions of purity. As many representations of same-sex desires and behaviors in African literature point out, there are multiple origins of African identity and multiple ways of rooting it; Africa before, in spite of, and after colonization is a heterogeneous continent, and its heterogeneity is also sexual. In spite of wanting to be purer in his Africanness, upon returning to his African roots, Joe Golder asserts that they are actually quite queer. In this sense, his return to origins parallels those of Ken in Bugul’s *Le baobab fou* and Sissie in Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*. 
He reiterates a trope of nationalist discourse (the desire to return to a precolonial Africa), but what he finds there contests the purity that this very same nationalism attempts to enforce. To a certain extent, then, he demonstrates how African roots are always already queer.

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