

THE AGAINST NATURE JOURNAL

Issue #1 Summer 2020

As of summer 2020, the “restoration of natural order” is back on the agenda of many alt-right movements across the world, and “unnatural” sexual orientations and behaviors are still condemned to imprisonment, corporal punishment, and even the death penalty in over seventy countries.

The Against Nature Journal is a biannual arts and human rights magazine exploring “crime against nature” laws and their legacies, in print, in person, and online. Authors and readers from law, activism, social sciences, and the arts are brought together to foster dialogue on sexual and reproductive rights and rethink nature anew.

This inaugural issue outlines the intersections between legislation, human rights activism, and spirituality. We celebrate the magical legacy of the late writer *BINYAVANGA WAINAINA* with his first piece of fiction, accompanied by an essay on his lifework by *AMATESIRO DORE*. The issue also includes legal scholar *VIVEK DIVAN*’s commentary on a seminal verdict in the history of “crime against nature” laws from India, essays on non-normative approaches to spirituality and religion by *MARTTI NISSINEN* and *LINN MARIE TONSTAD*, poetry by *ABU NUWAS* and *CHEKWUBE DANLADI*, an inspiring text on the moral authority of “nature” by science historian *LORRAINE DASTON*, images from the colonial period in Vietnam by artist *DANH VO*, and columns on recent events in Barbados, Brazil and Abya Yala, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, and Poland.

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T.A.N.J.



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T.A.N.J.

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Future issues will intertwine six themes, each becoming the major focus of one issue: Religion, Migration, Medicine, Love, Death, Nature. If you would like to contribute or send us a letter, please write to: editors@theagainstnaturejournal.com

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Abu Nuwas

(Abū Nuwās al-Ḥasan ibn Ḥanī al-Ḥakam) is commonly regarded as one of the greatest classical Arabic poets. Living in the late eighth century, Nuwas relished wine and carnal (often same-sex) relations, both of which he refers to in his poetry.

Donnya Piggott

has been an LGBTQ advocate for almost ten years, a columnist, an award-winning social entrepreneur, and the founder of Pink Coconuts, a tech platform for LGBTQ people across the Caribbean.

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Binyavanga Wainaina

was a Kenyan author, journalist, and the 2002 winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. In 2014, *Time* magazine included him in their annual list of “100 Most Influential People” in the world.

Sexual and gender identities are varied and contextual: cultures and struggles and the degree of intersectionality change from one context to another. This is expressed in the use of a variety of acronyms and initialisms, from the most common LGBT to the more recent LGBTQI+, all intended to emphasize the diverse culture of sexuality and gender identities. Throughout this journal the editors have chosen to maintain each author's initialism of choice to reflect the diversity of positions.

I participated in the *Manufacturing of Rights* workshop in Beirut in 2014–15. It was inspiring to think and work with multidisciplinary artists and scholars and curators on our shared interests in the idea of “nature” and how it is constructed through legal, archival, discursive, aesthetic, and aural practices. The announcement of the “natural” is the simultaneous inauguration of the “unnatural” and vice versa. Filmmaker Carlos Motta and I collaborated on a screenplay for the workshop, and Council and Ashkal Alwan coproduced the film which became *Deseos /Raghabat*.

The power of declaring or assuming that something is natural (heterosexuality, a binary gender system) is amplified through association with nature (something that is just there, like a mountain or a river). This association perhaps betrays more than it reveals, as human beings are currently in the process of killing and replacing this thing we call “nature.” Meanwhile, the discursive power of the natural—whether it be deployed to describe sexualities, genders, racial capitalism, or the intersectional precarity of pandemics—continues to be amplified.

Today, writing from the home I rarely leave, the idea of an in-person workshop has the feeling of risk, unfamiliarity, and even a sense of the unnatural. Did we really hug and kiss each other goodbye every day? Did we really share cigarettes and crowd into loud rooms and hotly whisper deep thoughts so close, literally into each other’s naked faces? The pandemic has modulated the natural and the unnatural and stressed the affective registers of its binary relation. Viruses are not the only things that incubate in groups, so does creativity, debate, inspiration, desire, and fear.

I miss incubating with my comrades at *Manufacturing of Rights*, and I wonder what we might come up with, how we might feel the natural and the unnatural together, today.

Maya Mikdashi

Professor Gender Studies /Middle East Studies,
Rutgers University

It is with great anticipation that I await the first issue of *The Against Nature Journal* on the theme of religion. I was drawn to this project through my work at Human Rights Watch. The prohibition of “carnal knowledge against the order of nature” echoes down the centuries, with legal consequences to this day. Last year, for example, a Zambian couple was sentenced to fifteen years behind bars for crimes “against nature.”

When codifying English law, the seventeenth-century jurist Sir Edward Coke defined “buggery” as “a detestable, and abominable sin, amongst Christians not to be named, committed by carnal knowledge against the ordinance of the Creator, and order of nature.” In the terrain of sexual morality, what is deemed “natural” is invariably a subjective interpretation of the moral order, where “natural” is conflated with religious morality and codified in law.

In the past decade, there has been a promising overall trend toward decriminalization, as colonial-era statutes have been successfully challenged in courts or revised by lawmakers. But some countries, including Gabon and Chad, have moved in the opposite direction. Brunei even legislated the death penalty for consensual sex between men in 2019, purportedly in the name of religion.

The idea that a sexual act between consenting adults can be regarded as “unnatural” and hence a threat to family, society, and the nation is a curious one and a powerful one used to mobilize against the human rights of sexual and gender minorities. *The Against Nature Journal* arrives at a timely moment, amid remarkable progress and considerable challenges. I am proud and honored to be associated with this important intervention.

Graeme Reid

Director, LGBT Rights Program,
Human Rights Watch

Back in 2015, we worked with some of *The Against Nature Journal* team on an ambitious project tackling contra naturam legislation across the world and the impact colonization had on establishing such legislation in so many countries, especially in the Global South, which ultimately resulted in the prosecution and criminalization of LGBTQI persons in these societies. The project adopted a multidisciplinary approach, gathering jurists, social science researchers, and artists from all over the world and aimed to deconstruct contra naturam laws as another form of decolonization.

In Lebanon, such legislation is embodied in Article 534 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes any “carnal conjunction against the order of nature.” That article has been used historically to prosecute and criminalize LGBTQI persons in the country, thus exacerbating their marginalization and already vulnerable status in society. Our work in the last fifteen years has successfully deconstructed the article before national courts by adopting a strategic approach of litigation as a form of advocacy to defend persons being prosecuted on that basis, eventually affecting national jurisprudence and the contra naturam concept itself from a legal point of view.

We eagerly await *The Against Nature Journal* and expect it to generate a successful counter-discourse on the contra naturam notion within a decolonization perspective.

Nizar Saghie

Lawyer, activist, and co-founder,
Legal Agenda

Karim Nammour

Lawyer, activist, and board member,
Legal Agenda

I am excited to finally see the first issue of *The Against Nature Journal*. I'm very interested in this project because as one of the lawyers who were part of contesting Section 377 in India, I have always been conscious of the fact that challenging the "laws against nature" did not only mean getting rid of the archaic Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code but also questioning the social morality which these laws encoded. The challenge to the law had to become a challenge to societal prejudice itself. To challenge encrusted ways of thinking and acting that limit the freedom and dignity of LGBTQI persons, one needs to also work in the domain of activism and art. It is in this context that *The Against Nature Journal* has an important role to play in questioning the prejudicial moralities which stunt LGBTQI lives.

Arvind Narrain

Lawyer and Director of Research and Practice,
ARC International

Thinking through Religion

The inaugural issue of *The Against Nature Journal* delves into the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which sexual and gender minorities are considered and shaped by world religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and their denominations. The concept of “against nature” as a kind of dividing machine between what is natural and what is deviant is rooted in religious morality. The conceptual framework of our project is situated as an active response to the so-called laws against nature that still criminalize sexual and gender minorities in many parts of the world. We recognize that for various belief systems “nature” is the expression of the divine, a superior force that is separate from yet threatened by human action. It is common in most religious traditions to conform to God’s judgment of whether a body or an act is either natural or unnatural. Religion as well as spirituality more generally are also sites from which to imagine and live a different relationship to the divine.

This first issue points to the historical foundations of determining the “unnatural” within dominant belief systems. *Khanu vs Emperor* (1925) is a case in point: one of the most influential lawsuits in Indian anti-sodomy law, it redefined the scope of Section 377, and for many years became the guiding judgment for interpreting anti-sodomy laws throughout the British colonies of South Asia, East Asia, and East Africa, as lawyer and activist Vivek Divan reflects on. How anti-sodomy laws in these regions play out today is evident in the Columns section of this journal, focused on current news from such places where against nature laws still prevail (including India, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Kenya, and the Caribbean), along with debates from Europe, Latin America, and Brazil, where there are continual regressions of reproductive, sexual orientation, and gender identity rights.

While often perceived as repressive and constraining, religion and even less regulated faiths and forms of spirituality have been and continue to be the refuge in which artists, writers, poets, and activists

rethink the question of what is “natural.” A special focus of this issue is on the literary practice and activism of Kenyan, gay, HIV-positive writer Binyavanga Wainaina (or the Binj, as he was so fondly called), who passed away in May 2019. Described by the *New York Times* as a “pioneering voice in African literature,” Wainaina not only inspired a new generation of writers in Africa but his work served to critique the spread of homophobia by Pentecostalism and the politicization of homosexuality. And yet, Wainaina also embarked on a personal spiritual quest. Writer Amatesiro Dore, one of many protégés mentored by Wainaina at the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop in Nigeria, pays tribute to his lifework in these pages alongside the first piece of fiction that Wainaina ever wrote (originally published in 1996 on a now defunct literary website, but made available in print here for the first time). This early story is, somewhat surprisingly, about pagan spirituality and is accompanied by an introduction written by Achal Prabhala. Dore’s own breakthrough poem “Joy,” a beautiful, queer take on sexuality and religion, has also been republished as another companion piece.

The issue showcases progressive approaches to religious thinking and practice that contribute to the ways in which we experience our own “nature,” our own sexual and gender identities. Theologians Martti Nissinen and Linn Marie Tonstad, coming from differing perspectives, provide inspirational reflections on this matter. Nissinen’s text, originally published in 1998, reviews the “unnatural” as intrinsic to ideas of creation and gender in the biblical world. Tonstad, in a text specially commissioned for this issue, questions from a queer perspective who the “we” implicated by the journal might be. These essays are accompanied by the poetry of Abu Nuwas, one of the most important poets of the Islamic world in the eighth century, and contemporary, queer writer Chekwube Danladi. They both welcome an accommodating spirituality.

Danh Vo inaugurates the artist contributions of *The Against Nature Journal*. Vo’s conceptual art practice is concerned with the histories and meanings of sacred objects across cultures. He shares two bodies of work on this issue’s theme, both of which consider

the intertwinement of religion, colonialism, sexuality, and ultimately violence. Originally documentation, these reworked testimonies of Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century and the personal records of the sexual behavior of American agents in Vietnam show Vo’s long-term commitment to finding poetic spaces and elegant forms for objects that carry contradictions and speak to power.

The closing section of the journal is dedicated to the central topic of “against nature” and the related terms of “natural order” and “nature” itself. Across all editions, this section will be dedicated to key theoretical texts, making accessible to our readers a potential resource for advocacy. This issue includes the writing of Lorraine Daston, whose far-reaching philosophical work on our guiding concept has been an inspiration since the beginning of the project. Her essay is accompanied by a world chart illustrating the geographic scope of the against nature laws.

All in all, the contributions to this inaugural issue of *The Against Nature Journal*, which can be read in order, out of order, altogether, or as individual reflections, expand our understanding of nature, religion, and social justice in important and exciting ways.

Aimar Arriola
Editor

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COLUMNS

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Pride in Jesus Church Service: Bridging the Divide in Barbados and the Caribbean

Donnya Piggott

It is no secret that religion largely fuels the rampant homophobia that exists in the world. More specifically, it fuels the homophobia that exists in the Caribbean where I live and where I tirelessly pursue with others a path toward equality and justice for all people.

It then raises the question as to why Barbados—Gays, Lesbians and All-Sexualities against Discrimination (B-GLAD), the organization which I’ve led for seven years, would host a Pride in Jesus church service during Pride Month in 2019.

Much like other LGBTQ organizations across the Caribbean region, our main adversary has always been the Christian church. They argue that homosexuality equates to a demonic spirit, as preached at rallies across the island, or is against the natural order of man, or further that it is “the erosion of the fabric of society.”

Despite some pushback from within the church itself, the resistance to such beliefs in the local LGBTQ community has created much discussion. The church is still a source of trauma for LGBTQ people—many of whom left the church quite some years ago. Feelings of rejection, self-hate, and inadequacy

stem from our early experiences with religion. So, the question remains: Why would we host such an event?

A church service with song, prayer, and worship allows believers in the Christian faith to have important conversations about equality. Barbados is touted as a Christian nation. Yet, over the years the church has only demonstrated fear, spread misinformation, and blocked the progress of the LGBTQ community. Our church service was an effort to heal and overcome that divide. This is where real progress is made, by building bridges.

Christians who believe in equality, fairness, justice, and love exist, of course: they are often the ones who send us encouraging notes to our in-boxes or quietly stop us in the street. They recognize that the LGBTQ community needs to be protected and not denounced. There are also Christian–LGBTQ people, who in existing within this intersection more often hide their own sexualities but support us from the shadows. We accept them for living their truths, too. It’s important that they are not forgotten.

As expected, the event caused quite a stir. Leading antigay religious leaders attended, quietly listened, and discussed among themselves, sometimes disagreeing with the need and relevance of such an event and interrupting with opinions. However, the service allowed all religious leaders, falling either side of the LGBTQ inclusion argument, to hear each other out and

share in common scripture, differing experiences, and various perspectives.

If we are going to embrace and celebrate diversity, we must be inclusive. As a non-Christian member of the LGBTQ community, I may not know the direct outcome of the dialogue for Christian people. But I do believe that it was a step in the right direction because real change starts with just that—dialogue.

Antigender Agendas as Colonial Reestablishments in Brazil and Abya Yala

Viviane Vergueiro

Two episodes from the Brazilian context that occurred in the last year might be useful for reflecting on antigender agendas in our regional political contexts. The first, a legislative attempt in the state of São Paulo to establish “biological sex as the only criterion for the definition of competitors’ gender” in professional sports (Assembleia Legislativa, no. 346, April 2, 2019); the other, violent remarks made by Jair Bolsonaro, (still) the country’s president, about a Rede Globo TV program on trans women and *travestis* in prison, after the cause of imprisonment of one interviewee was publicized.

By bringing these incidents together, I invite consideration on the connections between antigender agendas (as proposed by Sexuality Policy Watch) and the idea of “colonial reestablishment.” I consider this as a theoretical assemblage of bio-necropolitics and colonialities (of power, knowledge, being) that constitute socioeconomic *dispositifs* and force multipliers, which legitimize, actualize, and normalize the past, present, and future of sociocultural and geopolitical relationships. Colonial reestablishment is a present political desire for many worldwide: a “natural” order of things based on supremacist perspectives and hierarchies placed between existences. In this sense, the two episodes are illustrations of institutional exclusion and offenses, perpetrated by political representatives against trans and gender nonconforming peoples, and both evoke a space-time that amounts to at least five hundred years of white, European genocide.

The connections between these events also situate the complexity around the perspectives and rights regarding gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics in resisting against antigender agendas. As detailed in the “Rights at Risk” report by the Observatory on the Universality of Rights in 2017, it is important to realize how such agendas are promoted and funded by secular and religious stakeholders at various levels, and how they affect various groups through different strategies. As some countries implement sex/gender-based social

segregation measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems important to map the elements that drive societies' imaginaries.

These interconnections bring forth the worldwide precarization of socioeconomic rights and autonomy, particularly of marginalized groups, including LGBTI people, in the intersections of race and class. They also highlight the need to locate sociohistorical specificities in understanding the ways in which power operates within colonial ideologies, industrial revolutions, and supremacist projects.

When a bill excluding trans women from professional sports is proposed—ignoring directions from international bodies on the issue—it is not a mere act of excluding a social group from an occupation. A deeper question arises: Can trans politics allow us to better regard broader economic injustices of gendered bio-necropolitics? Could it contribute to a collective rethinking of the professional sports' hyperproductive, corrupt economies, and the gendered dispositifs they rely upon?

And when a gesture of “humanized” treatment toward trans women and travestis in prisons is instrumentalized by Bolsonaro's Mafia through insults, it is not solely about defending individual rights independently of one's crimes, but an opportunity to promote critical perspectives on judicial rights and the prison-industrial complex and its increasingly privatized, mediatized functions; a complex that must

be linked to the extreme global extractivism, militarism, and fascism which organize violence.

I share these few thoughts in the hope of situating antigender agendas within the attempts of colonial reestablishment operating today in Brazil and Abya Yala through bio-necropolitical supremacisms and extractivisms, which in relation to data invisibilities and exotisms also interrogate the political role of the sciences. To connect these dots, especially in times of pandemia, seems critical for our collective survival and well-being.

A Church Coalition's Rainbow-Inclusion Efforts in India

Pawan Dhall

Religion does not enthrall me, but its influence on queer lives does affect me. As a queer activist working since the 1990s, I have come across people who have reconciled their religion's diktats on sin, guilt, and shame with their gender or sexuality, HIV status, or occupation in sex work. There are others, though, who remain trapped in between. In search of better ways to help them, I became familiar with faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the mid-2000s in the context of the HIV epidemic.

I was highly skeptical about their approach at first, suspecting a judgmental attitude rather than respect for human diversity.

However, in 2009, I came to know about an FBO called the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), when they issued a statement in support of the High Court of Delhi's decision to read down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a British-era law that continued to criminalize queer people even after sixty-two years of Independence. NCCI, a forum of thirty-one Protestant and Orthodox churches across India, was one of the few FBOs willing to revisit their stance on non-normative genders and sexualities, and seemingly even at the cost of upsetting member churches. Given that Section 377 was a “great religious unifier,” NCCI also put themselves at risk of unshielded criticism from non-Christian organizations.

In 2016, when I attended an NCCI conference of church leaders, theologians, and queer activists at the United Theological College in Bangalore, I further learned that NCCI's ESHA program had convened workshops on human sexuality for church leaders as early as 2001, engaging queer Christians as advocates. In their centennial year of 2014, NCCI set up the National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities. They also drafted a course on human sexuality for graduate students of theology. This was rather courageous since the Supreme Court of India had just turned back the clock to

reinstate Section 377—though they eventually read it down again, and irreversibly, in 2018.

NCCI now aims to transform the Ecumenical Forum into an autonomous institute for gender, sexuality, and religious equality, and to move beyond individual programs like ESHA to make NCCI's entire organizational policy queer inclusive. NCCI's efforts are thought-provoking. Hinduism as a faith and amalgam of cultures already embodies several examples of queerness. It also claims to have no queerphobic strictures comparable to those supposedly prescribed in Judeo-Christian religions. But I fear that this openness is being appropriated by queer Hindutva proponents as an unsubstantiated claim of cultural superiority, where literary research shows that queerness has a positive space in other religions as well.

I hope that NCCI's credibility as a queer-friendly FBO grows. Simultaneously, I look for greater nuance in their work. They have published a considerable amount of literature to question the belief that the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin. Yet, some of these texts only seem to accept queer people contingent on same-sex marriage. What about single queer people?

If a kinder and more just practice of religion is possible, one that overcomes the literal adherence to scriptural divination, then a queer studies circle piloted in 2019 by Bishop's College, a Kolkata-based NCCI affiliate, comes to mind. The

circle aimed to facilitate friendship between “faculty and students of theology” and “queer persons.” Such an initiative might better address the post-decriminalization need for an anti-discrimination ethos and drive home the message that “homophobia is un-Christian.”

The Trial of Kenya's LGBT Community in the Court of Public Opinion

Kari Mugo

As April dovetailed into May 2020, amidst an unprecedented moment in the world, the High Court in Kenya was making its ruling in a petition brought by filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu against the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB), the agency responsible for the national regulation of films and broadcast content. In the petition, Kahiu was challenging the KFCB's decision to ban her film *Rafiki* from viewership and distribution within the country. *Rafiki*, which means “friend” in Kiswahili, tells the coming-of-age story of a romance between two women in Nairobi's housing estates. Banned in April 2018 for, as the board put it, “its homosexual theme and clear intent to promote lesbianism in Kenya contrary to the law,” the movie went on to premiere at Cannes, making history as Kenya's first feature at the festival.

Back in Kenya, the film was greeted with far less celebration. Kenya is one of dozens of countries in Africa that still has jurisdiction to criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity. With hundreds of annual reported violations and instances of discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, the courts have emerged as a new battleground for activists and opponents in the push for human rights for LGBT people. While Kahiu's case sought to establish her constitutional right to the freedom of expression, we know that censorship of LGBT stories is one way in which discourse can be stymied, limiting the public's understanding of the challenges that the community faces, prejudicing myths and stereotypes instead. The ruling in April against Kahiu, in favor of upholding the ban, therefore came as a disappointment.

Following the judgment, the director of KFCB, an overzealous moral policeman, who once called for two male lions appearing to have sex in the Maasai Mara to receive counseling, had this to say on Twitter: “We stood for family values and what we believe to be in the best interest of Kenya. Family is the basic unit of society.”

In a country where a reported 80 percent of its 47+ million-strong population identifies as Christian, “family values” has become a dog whistle for conservatism, which in Kenya includes a rejection of homosexuality, fierce admonition of abortion as a woman's right, and opposition to divorce and single

parenthood. But Kahiu's case is not the first time that Christian values have been conflated with national ones, or for that matter the public's interest.

Barely a year ago, in another courtroom in the constitutional division of the High Court of Kenya, activists attempting to decriminalize same-sex conduct received another ruling laden with similar appeals. In that ruling, the court had argued that repealing Sections 162 and 165 of the Penal Code, which make same-sex conduct punishable with up to fourteen years imprisonment, would not only go against national values but threaten the basic unity of the family. Repealing these laws, the judges said, would sanction the coupling and cohabitation of same-sex individuals, posing a challenge to the constitutional definition of marriage as between members of the opposite sex. It was not enough that activists in petitions and oral submissions had argued that this case was not about the right to marry.

Both cases are under appeal and highlight the challenges in seeking redress through the courts, particularly when faced with a fervent religious block that feels mandated by the strength of its numbers to push for a religious state, where a secular one also stands.

LGBTQI of the Lebanese Revolution Don't Need Permission

Dayna Ash

The October Revolution (still ongoing) in Lebanon erupted due to cedars burning, the drop in currency value, and an exorbitant taxation placed on a failing infrastructure enabled by forty-five years of corruption.

The Lebanese Republic is governed by the Free Patriotic Movement, which is currently led by Gebran Bassil, an ex-minister and the son-in-law of the president. They propagate divisive racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs to control, demonize, and segregate the public with conservative and religious rhetoric, as indicated recently by Charbel Khalil, the director of programs at OTV, a TV channel owned and operated by the party: “Your homosexual deviance, your demons, your Mashrou' Leila WILL NOT PASS. You're dragging this country to destruction.”

The LGBTQI community did not infiltrate the revolution, but neither are we on its outskirts; LGBTQI is part of what makes up society in Lebanon, ranging from capitalists to communists, from the lower class to the upper, from young women to old men, and all the in-betweens. LGBTQI are Muslim, Christian, Druze, and atheists.

While Khalil and the sectarian leaders deliberate over whether to permit LGBTQI participation in society, we live and flourish in mundane and sublime moments. We work in creative agencies, write television shows, direct films, and style your colleagues and favorite artists. We are dropping our children off at school, driving cabs, wrapping sandwiches, and working as bank tellers. The LGBTQI community is marching with mothers and fathers, with migrant workers and with refugees against classism, racism, elitism, sexism, and sectarianism, while defending the front lines with bodies and voices. LGBTQI distribute food, carry the wounded to first-aid tents, throw stones when enraged. Thousands stood shoulder to shoulder as fists penetrated the air dense with tear gas. “The Queers Built Beirut” is still etched into the concrete walls that separated the protesters from the Grand Serail.

The heart of the protests in the capital city was at the Ring, where the major highways converge. The Ring is also where the graffiti “Yas Queer” and “down with the regime” are seen side by side because they are one and the same. The highway that had once divided the country during the civil war has now been reclaimed by its free citizens: among the many revolutionaries that closed the Ring were the lesbians, trans*, gays, queers, and nonbinary activists of Lebanon. And as the public squares filled with dialogue that the system had once worked so hard to isolate, protesters listened to one another when asked to refrain

from using “gay” as a derogatory remark and “womanhood” as a weakness.

Revolution breeds clarity, and with it comes solidarity. Those that are oppressed can no longer be maligned when the same oppressor holds an iron fist over all our houses: the only time we are all considered equal is when we are subjugated to injustice and oppression. The queers are not the “unnatural” force that strangled the country but the “natural” revolution to free it from its shackles. We did not infiltrate society. We are not deductible nor an alternative. We will not fade into the background or be sedated. The revolution is not queer; the queers are a revolution.

Of Islamic Laws and the Colonial Past: The Conundrums Faced by the Malaysian LGBTQ Community

Niza

In September 2018, Malaysia made news for caning two women for attempting *musahaqah* (lesbian sex). The women were charged under Section 30 of the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment 2001, read in conjunction with Section 59 (1) of the same enactment. They were fined US\$800 each and caned

six times in front of around 150 people in the court of the conservative state of Terengganu.

The caning was intended to humiliate. LGBT activist and friend Thilaga Sulathireh, from the group Justice for Sisters, said she wept witnessing the event. As someone who identifies as lesbian, I was shocked by the court decision, along with my fellow community of queer women. Our community stays away from provoking the authorities, meeting only here and there in secret. Many scholars state that lesbians have not posed much of a threat historically, in comparison to homosexual men.

Malaysia has two legal systems: one secular, inherited from British colonialism, and the other is a Syariah system which governs Muslims in matters such as marriage, divorce, and alimony. Both systems discriminate against LGBT people.

Malaysia’s preoccupation with our community is not new. In 2008, the National Fatwa Council issued a religious edict against *pengkids* (a degrading term for women who dress like men and who may or may not have sexual desires for other women). Gay men have been sent to prison. Transgender women are routinely murdered. And online harassment of Malaysian LGBT people persists.

Malaysia is considered a “moderate Muslim nation” by many, but it has seen a rise of Islamic fundamentalism since the 1970s. Most Muslims believe that the community of Prophet Lot was condemned by God for practicing

homosexuality, as described in the Qur’an. Sodomy is today outlawed under Section 377 of the Malaysian Penal Code, which was first introduced by British colonial rulers. The most famous use of this law was in 1998 when Malaysia’s then prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, sacked his deputy Anwar Ibrahim on allegations of sodomy in an attempt to destroy his career.

Yet, despite popular misconceptions, Southeast Asia, the Malay Archipelago included, has a rich history of gender and sexual diversity. Researcher Sarah Ngu asserts that Malay rulers as far back as the fifteenth century appointed *sida-sida* in their palaces. These androgynous courtiers had sex with both genders, and their role was to protect the women of the court.

Regarding the recent caning, local feminist group Sisters in Islam released a statement: “Qur’anic teachings emphasize repentance, forgiveness, and personal transformation. God is forgiving and merciful.” While it may not be approving of homosexuality itself, their statement is radical. Such progressive voices are rare in Malaysia because many Muslims believe that human rights, liberalism, and pluralism go against Islam. It may take years, generations even, for Malaysian LGBT people to get their rights, but there is a glimmer of hope. I for one hope that as Malaysian society progresses, so do the rights for our marginalized community.

Love in the Time of Corona

Naoufal Bouzid

I'm not a naive, optimistic person, and I've always been proud of being rational and stoic, especially when looking at the present and what the future might hold. However, I cannot deny my feelings of loneliness during the enforced solitude in this time of Covid-19. I have also witnessed the beauty of my country, both in the solidarity of the people and the relative coherence of the government—though, realistically, this will probably only last no more than a couple of months.

A few days after the lockdown, on April 13, the Moroccan, transgender, Instagram-influencer Naoufal Moussa (aka SofiaTalouni) encouraged the use of location-based dating apps, usually used by gay men and often, to “out” others within the community. Many people took up their proposition and created fake profiles, then they started taking screenshots and pictures of other users and posting them on Facebook. As a result, between fifty and one hundred people were outed against their will, which caused a huge wave of hate against the LGBTQ+ community on social media.

I am talking about a community that has never learned to communicate in public or to support each other, nor the skills to fight back; there is no history of shared struggle. However, in this case the LGBTQ+ community started

listing the attackers and mapping the victims, coordinating support for those who found themselves in need of assistance or a shelter. I was personally surprised to see such solidarity inside the LGBTQ+ community in Morocco. For the first time in history, this episode managed to unite all the colors of the rainbow in my country, with LGBTQ+ people reaching out to the world with their little phones, from the corners of their little houses, among families who were completely unaware of the tragedy affecting the gay community.

What Sofia did must be taken as a general lesson. It comes as a result of political decisions made over recent generations, resulting in poor education and a strong iron-fisted government, which without the will to recognize its responsibility in creating a community of cultural and sexual acceptance stops anyone courageously standing against it.

As human rights activists and engaged citizens, we don't want anything more than basic common sense and rights to an environment which will allow us to grow, so to help our country grow. I'm not a fan of victimization speeches, but I wish to see LGBTQ+ groups being able to officially register as organizations, and to no longer have to work in the shadows for fear of being caught. Being deprived of the freedom of organization, and thus of assembly, is what makes the situation here a lot worse.

I don't think I demand too much as a citizen of this country

when I say I need to have the right to protect my privacy, far from the judgment of the law and away from the culture of scriptural interpretation. We are not seeking the impossible when we ask for a fundamental cultural revolution that eases the way to political and social change. Until then, I'm happy to see that the new LGBTQ+ generation has found an alternative underground solution to organizing themselves around the love they have for one another, not waiting nor caring about having the permission to fight for a better colored life.

A Trojan Horse for Warsaw's Castle

Elie Jones

After thirty years of field-bending contemporary art programming, Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) in Warsaw lost its most recent director, Małgorzata Ludwisiak, to the newly appointed Piotr Bernatowicz: a decision made by the minister of culture without an open competition, as is usually the case for public positions. That Bernatowicz is renowned for curating dubious exhibitions featuring misogynist and homophobic content and that his vision for CCA will focus on artists whose work champions conservative, patriotic, and pro-family values is a response to the last few years of activities at CCA, which

have only established the institution as a safe space for minority communities in Warsaw.

Over eighteen months alone, the resident queer and feminist collective Kem filled the castle—itsself a reconstruction, once a palace—with as much nourishment as many art institutions only hope to provide after years of concerted effort. Focusing on expanded choreographic practices, Kem have managed to create an artistic infrastructure that exists alongside institutions and with their financial support. This position of being both inside and outside has allowed the collective to realize projects such as their temporary queer summer *Dragana Bar* in 2018 at CCA, which they removed a window from the castle's facade to build, replacing it with a set of metal doors and a stairway that facilitated autonomous activity during opening times that extended well beyond the castle's usual public hours.

To see the hundreds of people pour in and out of this parasitic architecture over the summer of *Dragana* was to bear witness to a resistance to the country's control over the behavior, aesthetics, and gender-fucking presentation of unruly bodies. For Poland's governing party Law and Justice (PiS), the very fact of being LGBT+ goes against the idea (by the Catholic church's moral standing) of a valuable and (re)productive member of Polish society. In asserting a space for self-affirmation, as much as dissent, Kem helped fracture the

homogeneity that is at the core of PiS's project of a unified (singular and same) Poland.

Equally jostling with the new director's vision was the recent retrospective *The Power of Secrets* (November 15, 2019–March 29, 2020) by Warsaw-based queer artist Karol Radziszewski, who founded Queer Archives Institute and *DIK Fagazine*: two world-making projects that render visible the lives and stories of queer persons in Eastern Europe. When it was known that Bernatowicz would be taking over the institution, curator Michał Grzegorzek and others established a new clause in the artist's contract, stating that any attempt to censor or close the exhibition prior to its planned duration would result in legally binding financial compensation to the artist.

This preemptive effort is but one example of the local and international art community's myriad attempts to stop the appointment of Bernatowicz, or at least, failing that, to challenge his tenure. But the castle's fort will only hold for so long. Some of CCA's key staff have already taken up positions elsewhere. Those that remain fight micro battles daily, such as the censorship of the recent "Anti-fascism for the Unconvinced" program. Kem too have recently forged alliances with Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique), a Pan-European online magazine and activist group who, much like the Trojans, sought substantial funding from the City of Warsaw. Kem are

currently developing an experimental queer and feminist education program—the first of its kind in Poland—as part of this initiative, which will be open and free to all as of 2021. Though the castle may have fallen, it seems that this will not be the last chance to rebuild it again.

AROUND

A HISTORICAL VERDICT

Documentation and analysis that places current against nature laws in historical context. Legal scholars guide us through the most influential cases of anti-sodomy law.

1924 SCC ONLINE SIND JC 49 : AIR 1925 SIND 286
KHANU V. EMPEROR
IN THE COURT OF JUDICIAL COMMISSIONER, SIND

(Before Kincaid, J.C. and Kennedy, A.J.C.)

Khanu . . . Appellant;
Versus
Emperor . . . Opposite Party.

Criminal Appeal No. 15 of 1924
Decided on April 28, 1924

JUDGMENT

1. The principal point in this case is whether the accused (who is clearly guilty of having committed the sin of Gomorrah *coitus per os*) with a certain little child, the innocent accomplice of his abomination, has thereby committed an offence under S. 377, Indian Penal Code, 1860.

2. S. 377 punishes certain persons who have carnal intercourse against the order of nature with *inter alia* human beings. Is the act here committed one of carnal intercourse? If so, it is clearly against the order of nature, because the natural object of carnal intercourse is that there should be the possibility of conception of human beings, which in the case of *coitus per os* is impossible. Intercourse may be defined as mutual frequent action by members of independent organisation. Commercial intercourse provides for the merchants of the state *A* who wish to come to and trade in the state *B*, not intending permanently to settle there but with *animus redcandi* to *A*, and similarly for the merchants of the state *B*. Such is the *magnus* intercourse which regulated the trade of Britain and Flanders in the middle ages. Social intercourse provides the rules under which members of one family may resort to the premises occupied by another family, not intending to reside in such premises occupied by another family, not intending to reside in such premises but merely to visit them for laudable purposes, reciprocity being, of the essence of the bargain. By a metaphor the word intercourse, like the word commerce, is applied to the relations of the sexes. Here also there is the temporary visitation of one organism by a member of the other organisation, for certain clearly defined and limited objects. The primary object of the visiting organisation

DOCUMENT

is to obtain euphoria by means of a detent of the nerves consequent on the sexual crisis. But there is no intercourse unless the visiting member is enveloped at least partially by the visited organism, for intercourse connotes reciprocity. Looking at the question in this way, it would seem that sin of Gomorrah is no less carnal intercourse than the sin of Sodom. The sin of Lesbos or Reboim is clearly not such intercourse, and I doubt if mutual cheirourgia would be such. Not very much can be gathered from a consideration of English authorities, which are all affected by the fact that the offence of unnatural vice was originally one of the three offences dealt with by the ecclesiastical tribunals and that the Civil Courts, when called on to deal with those offences, showed their usual tendency to look with much jealousy on the criminal legislation of the church. The cognate offences of heresy and usury are now not dealt with by the Criminal Courts at all, and the third is held only to have been committed when the offender is proved to have committed the sin of Sodom. And it was this vice in particular which was rendered punishable by the early Christian state, for it was par excellence the vice of the Hellene and the Saracen. By making this vice particularly punishable, therefore, the State not only protected good moral but struck at its enemies. It is this vice, therefore, which attracted severest censures of State and Church, but in mediaeval times all emission other than in *vas legitimum* was considered unchristian because such emission was supposed ultimately to cause conception of demons.

3. It will be seen how little help can be extracted from Christian sources in deciding this question. But why is it that most modern States, now freed from the influence of superstition, still make the sin of Sodom punishable. Partly I suppose of the desire of princes to encourage legitimate marriage. Partly because there is an idea, (perhaps erroneous) that the public tolerated practice of that vice creates a tendency in the citizens of the State, where it is practiced, to adopt an unmanly and morbid method of life and thinking, so that a person saturated with those ideas is less useful a member of society. Partly because of the danger that men put in authority over other men may use their power for the gratification of their lusts. But principally I suppose because of the danger to young persons, lest they be indoctrinated into sexual matters prematurely. But surely all these ill consequences would equally follow in a city where the sin of Gomorrah was tolerated.

4. It is to be remembered that the Penal Code does not, except in S. 377, render abnormal sexual vice punishable at all. In England indecent assaults are punishable very severely. It is possible that under the Penal Code, some cases might be met by prosecuting the offender for simple assault, but that is a compoundable offence and in any case the patient could in no way be punished. Is it to be supposed that the Legislature intended that a Tigellinus should carry on his nefarious profession perhaps vitiating and depraving hundreds of children with perfect immunity?

5. I doubt not, therefore, that *coitus per os* is punishable under S. 377, Indian Penal Code, 1860.

6. But we must not allow our disgust at the perpetrators of such acts to blind us to the fact that this vice is less pernicious than the sin of Sodom. It has not been surrounded by the halo of art, eloquence, and poetry. It cannot be practised on persons who are unwilling. It is not common and can never be so. It cannot produce the physical changes which the other vice produces. It is, therefore, rightly punishable but the punishment need not be so extremely severe as in the other case.

7. Neither the actual penetration *per annus* or in a legal sense attempt at such penetration is proved in the present case.

8. As for the question of kidnapping, the learned Judge has not addressed himself to that question with his usual thoroughness. It is arguable that a child playing in the street and induced to accompany a man for a few minutes is not kidnapped; it would be otherwise no doubt if there were a diversion, *e.g.*, if the child had been intercepted while going to school or sent on some errand. But on the other hand, the child next was locked up, and thus wholly put under the dominion of the accused. Thus it would seem there was a kidnapping. I would, therefore, dismiss the appeal against the convictions under Ss. 367 and 377 and against the sentence under S. 367. But I would reduce the sentence under S. 377 to one of 5 years' rigorous imprisonment. The sentences to be concurrent.

9. *Appeal dismissed.*

Grappling with the “Unnatural”: A Dubious Judicial History

Vivek Divan

UNENLIGHTENED PREJUDICE

One of the first significant interpretations of the British law that was imposed in India in 1860, and several British colonies thereafter — the odious Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code — was provided by Justices Kincaid and Kennedy in Sindh (now Pakistan) in the 1924 judgment of *Khanu v. Emperor*.

Section 377 reads as follows:

*377. Unnatural offences. —
Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse
against the order of nature with any man,
woman or animal, shall be punished with
imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment
of either description for a term which may
extend to ten years, and shall also be liable
to fine.*

*Explanation —
Penetration is sufficient to constitute the
carnal intercourse necessary to the offence
described in this section.*

What is clear and does not require judicial interpretation is that a kind of sex (“carnal intercourse”) was punishable even if it was consensual (“voluntarily”) between adults (“whoever” with “man, woman . . .”). But the question of what was “unnatural” as per the title of the section and what was “against the order of nature” was up for interpretation. Its meaning vexed many a judge for over a century. In the report of 2008 “This Alien Legacy: The Origins of ‘Sodomy’ Laws in British Colonialism,” Human Rights Watch covers much of this judicial contemplation.¹

What judges of yore felt about “the order of nature” and “unnaturalness” in regard to sexual intercourse became particularly important in the public domain when a concerted effort challenging the constitutional validity of Section 377 took place in India from 2001 onward. An entire

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community of queer individuals, activists, and their allies from the sexuality, HIV, and other movements made this challenge successful. The Delhi High Court struck down the law as it pertained to consensual sex between adults in 2009.² A travesty of justice was to follow a few years later, however. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India countenanced an appeal (made in large part by religious hard-liners of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian persuasions) of the earlier decision: gay sex was recriminalized and Section 377 was back in play. Fortunately, after realizing that a mockery had been made of the constitutional rights of queer people, the Supreme Court reversed its decision in 2018. Today “unnatural” sex is legal in India as it pertains to consenting adults.

But what is this sex that is “against the order of nature”? The Khanu decision is where one begins to see the judiciary grappling with this term in earnest.³ Although court rulings are hard to fathom for nonlawyers at the best of times, the Khanu judgment is hard reading for a lawyer too. For a lawyer who is agnostic/atheist it is even more challenging.

Although no more than two pages in length, the judgment held forth on the “order of nature” in a most protracted manner, replete with Judeo-Christian references that revealed the colonial domination and morality that India was oppressed by as well as understandings of sexuality that were ignorant at best. Khanu was a case involving the sexual abuse of a minor. Yet, this fact (that the case involved a person incapable of giving consent in law) appears to have played no role in making the court indignant. What the court was engrossed with was whether the act of the accused (oral sex) amounted to “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” The court held that it did. As the “natural object of carnal intercourse is that there should be the possibility of conception of human beings,” oral sex was “unnatural.”⁴

With what was evidently great abhorrence and appears to have been abject discomfort in dealing with issues of sexual intercourse and sexuality, the judges traversed the meaning of “intercourse,” using the metaphor of commerce and trade to describe it. And, in describing sexual intercourse they elucidated on the notion of “penetration” in Section 377:

a temporary visitation by one organism by a member of the other organization, for certain clearly defined and limited objects. The

primary object of the visiting organism is to obtain euphoria by means of a detente of the nerves consequent on the sexual crisis. But there is no intercourse unless the visiting member is enveloped at least partially by the visited organism, for intercourse connotes reciprocity.

Looking at the question this way it would seem that the sin of Gomorrah is no less carnal than the sin of Sodom. The sin of Lesbos or Reboim is clearly not such intercourse, and I doubt if mutual cheirourgia [masturbation] would be such.⁵

As Human Rights Watch points out, Section 377 was an imposition of British Christian values, having nothing to do with Indian society and its mores. The colonizers saw Indians as degenerate, to be reined in.⁶ Indeed, this legal provision became “a colonial attempt to set standards of behavior, both to reform the colonized and to protect the colonizers against moral lapses,”⁷ and a model to be emulated in other British colonies, particularly in Asia and Africa.⁸

The Khanu judgment revealed a lot more, laced as it was with Christian preeminence and overt racism: the “unnatural . . . vice in particular . . . was rendered punishable by the Christian state, for it was par excellence the vice of the Hellene and the Saracen [Greeks and Arabs].”⁹ Inexplicable personal predilections revealed themselves in the assessment that oral sex—even when it involved a minor—was less malevolent than anal sex: “It cannot be practiced on persons who are unwilling. It is not common and can never be so. It cannot produce the physical changes which the other vice produces. It is, therefore, rightly punishable, but the punishment need not be so extremely severe.”¹⁰

Judicial ignorance was revealed in Khanu through the observation that the “sin of Sodom” (anal sex) is still punished in “modern States” due to “danger to young persons, lest they be indoctrinated into sexual matters prematurely,”¹¹ thus reinforcing the false link between homosexual sex and child sexual abuse. Of course, the language of Section 377 allowed for the lumping together of these acts, along with bestiality, while consent between adults was of no consequence.

While the courts pre-independence reflected the foreign morality demonstrated in Khanu, tragically judges in free India were all too happy to ape the colonizers. A series of judgments after Independence in 1947 followed in the same vein. Based on the belief that non-procreative sex was “unnatural,” these rulings reiterated that Section 377 covered acts of oral sex¹² and included acts that imitated penetration (thrusting the penis between thighs¹³ or mutual masturbation¹⁴). As has been rightly observed, “judges tried to bring an ever wider range of sexual acts within the laws’ punitive reach: descending while doing it, into almost-comical obsessions with orifice and organ, desire and detail.”¹⁵

DISINGENUOUS CONFLATION

Until recently, the devious imagery of child sexual abuse and homosexuality was irresponsibly bandied about by parties before the court and the judges hearing the cases that challenged the validity of Section 377. When the Indian government filed its affidavit in 2003 it evoked just these falsehoods, stating that delinquent behavior would be unleashed on society if the law were removed. During proceedings in court its lawyers constantly reiterated this falsehood. This was particularly irksome given that the petitioners and the queer community that litigated the case had been conscious that Section 377 was the only law in India then which could be deployed in cases of child sexual abuse. They thereby asked that the section be retained for such situations, but be interpreted (“read down”) henceforth to exclude consensual sex between adults.

The drumbeat of lies, however, appeared to have worked. One of the Supreme Court judges who recriminalized gay sex in 2013 later stated that the material on child pornography which was placed before the court weighed heavily on his mind.¹⁶ Presumably, the judge was giving this as an excuse for his perverse verdict. Yet, if one reads that judgment and its flimsy reasoning, nowhere will such a justification be found.¹⁷

CODA—THE VAGARIES OF JUSTICE

The 2013 judgment took the queer community back to the dark ages of colonized India. Moreover, it was sketchy in its analysis

and understanding of many legal principles, including that of judicial review and even the workings of democracy. A reading of the judgment reveals very little about the substance of Section 377. And all the evidence placed before the court on how this law oppressed queer lives was entirely ignored. What the decision also disguises rather well is the palpable discomfort that the judges exhibited while hearing the case.

That unease with matters of sex and sexuality is partly revealed in the transcript of the entire proceedings.¹⁸ But it was best experienced by being present in the courtroom, where one could witness the many sidelong glances and grimaces that the judges made at each other, and the frequent fidgeting in their seats when such matters were raised. Their lowbrow comments and flippant humor about sexual intercourse were attempts to lighten the courtroom atmosphere and alleviate their embarrassment. For example, that homosexuality may or may not be normal: “we can’t say, only persons with experience can say so.”¹⁹ Or absurd extensions of logic that obfuscated the issues at hand: “Would breastfeeding come within the meaning of carnal intercourse?”²⁰

On repeated questioning by the judges for the meaning of “carnal intercourse” and “against the order of nature,” the lawyers appearing on behalf of queer people constantly and painstakingly explained the phrases. Yet, the court was dissatisfied. It countered claims made by these lawyers, stating that Section 377 did not criminalize a sexual orientation but only sexual acts, and that these acts could also be between heterosexuals. Failing to recognize how the law disproportionately impacted queer lives, irrespective of the meaning of these phrases, the court sought to put into question whether Section 377 in any way affected queer people in their constitutional claims to life, liberty, privacy, and equality. Queerphobia manifested in the courtroom over those several days of argumentation in 2013, ultimately leading to the revival of Section 377 in its full force.

Fortunately, this ruling was overturned in 2018 and queer people were finally decriminalized. Luck—which should not be the basis of justice—had a significant role to play, as it did in 2009 when the law was first read down, and in 2013 when it was upheld. The luck was in having the right judges (in 2009 and 2018) and the wrong ones (in 2013) hear the case. In both instances when the law was read down, the judges who heard the case knew or had met and engaged with queer people. The justices of 2013 had in fact met queer people

through their affidavits submitted to court.²¹ But they refused to engage with and understand what was squarely placed before them; not once did they refer to these testimonies in their lengthy judgment, which was a dereliction of duty and cowardice at play. At one point during the hearings, the judges even asked the lawyer arguing the case whether he knew anyone who was gay.²² Many of us queers present were stupefied and some of us were left in a quandary—would it be appropriate to Bollywoodize this moment in the hallowed portals of the Supreme Court and stand up to be counted in a context where such swagger is looked down with disdain?²³

That moment was one among many during those hearings, which reflected a court and an establishment that was out of touch with social realities. One way in which the 2018 ruling has dealt with this disconnect is to ask the Indian government to take “all measures to ensure that this judgment is given wide publicity through the public media” and initiate programs to remove the stigma associated with queer people.²⁴ The government has done no such thing. If it ever did, a greater number of people would more fully understand the true subjectivity of nature.

NOTES

- [1] Human Rights Watch, “This Alien Legacy: The Origins of ‘Sodomy’ Laws in British Colonialism” (December 2008), accessed April 14, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lgbt1208_webwcover.pdf.
- [2] Naz Foundation v. Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (2009), Delhi High Court, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/100472805>.
- [3] Prior to this, courts considered the phrase to mean “anal sex”: “the act must be in that part where sodomy is usually committed.” Government v. Bapoji Bhatt (1884), Mysore Law Reports, vol. 7.
- [4] Khanu v. Emperor (1925), High Court of Sindh, 286, para. 2.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Human Rights Watch, “This Alien Legacy,” 1, 10.
- [7] Ibid., 5.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Khanu v. Emperor, para. 2.
- [10] Khanu v. Emperor, para. 6.
- [11] Khanu v. Emperor, para. 3.
- [12] Lohana Vasantlal Devchand v. State (1968), A.I.R., Gujarat, 252.
- [13] State of Kerala v. K. Govindan (1969), Cr. L.J., 818.
- [14] Brother John Antony v. State (1992), Cr. L.J., 124.
- [15] Human Rights Watch, “This Alien Legacy,” 11.
- [16] Apurva Vishwanath, “Child Porn Weighed on My Mind, Says Supreme Court Judge Who Upheld Section 377 in 2013,” *The Print*, September 18, 2018, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/governance/child-porn-weighed-on-my-mind-says-supreme-court-judge-who-upheld-section-377-in-2013/119898>.
- [17] Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation (2013), Supreme Court of India, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/58730926>.
- [18] “Notes of Proceedings in Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation” (2012), Supreme Court of India, accessed April 14, 2020, http://orinam.net/377/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SC_Transcripts_Hearings.pdf.
- [19] Ibid., 15.
- [20] Ibid., 104.
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THE MAGIC OF

A guiding force within the LGBTQI+ community in Africa. The life and work of Binyavanga Wainaina inspires reflections on what it means to believe, write, and think through sexuality and spirituality.

BINYAVANGA WAINAINA

How to Binj

Amatesiro Dore

STORY

I

We're at the Coast of Sierra Leone. The weather is like steam rising from a boiling kettle. Pores are open, and sweat is welcome. Unlike cooler places where sweat has the flavor of something fermented, here, it is the sheen of every limb. Sweat is only a perfume when fresh, free-flowing. It is the only air-conditioner that works.

Cold things, iced things are silly here. They just give you the false illusion that you are chilled, before heat overwhelms you with a vengeance.

Pots stir in the midday heat. The kitchen is in the courtyard, kids are playing. Somebody is grinding chili. I have often wondered why chilis get hotter the hotter a place is. To get you to sweat, I guess.

From the Congo River to Nigeria, palates embrace musk and any other flavors that mimic the most sensual smells of the body. Yams. If potatoes ever were in heat, this is what they would taste like.

—Binyavanga Wainaina, “Prawn Palaver” (ca. 2001)

The Binj was a cook, and his favorite ingredients were words that produced imagery. His father, Job Muigai Wainaina, was the founding managing director of a Kenyan government parastatal; his mother, Rosemary Kankindi, was a hairdresser, mother of four, with Ugandan and Rwandan bloodlines, and a periodic Pentecostal. The upper-middle-class family lived as one of the most illustrious families in Nakuru. The Binj's father abstained from looting public funds, chaired the local golf club, and managed a private farming enterprise to sponsor the cosmopolitan education of his children.

The Binj was loved. He was blessed with a doting mother and a compassionate father, who was easily manipulated by his children. That love became the seed that blossomed into the charitable lifestyle of the Binj. He performed the life of a savior, serving as an unsolicited literary agent of African writers; he was the number one referee for grants, scholarships, and residencies long before he was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in 2014. It was boring old love for Africa and Africans that drove his life and career. From cradle to grave.

The Binj was a failure who tried to make success out of everything and for everyone in Africa, starting with food. He looked inward and commenced the process of exhibiting African excellence at the heart of Africa, South Africa. His contemporary Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie immigrated to America for tertiary education, like other upper-middle-class kids, while the Binj went to the best place within the continent. The Binj cooked after failing in school and tried to run an African catering business (while he wrote on the side, gathering hundreds of recipes and publishing outstanding food criticism). He failed beautifully. The business never made a profit. But he was serially published in two prestigious magazines in South Africa (*Weekend Argus* and the *Sunday Times*), and went on to win the Caine Prize for African Writing in the same year that Chimamanda was short-listed.

The Binj was the second male African writer of his generation to explode from the continent after Helon Habila, another struggling writer who made it big after winning the Caine Prize. Then he performed another act of magic: he set up the magazine *Kwani?* and published Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, whose story subsequently won the 2003 Caine Prize. He loved to be local, African, so he did not understand the Afropolitanism of Taiye Selasi and lashed out against her 2005 essay about African identity in the diaspora. He would later recant and apologize. But I doubt if he ever regretted rejecting the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leader honor. The Binj preferred to sponsor emerging African talents with food and intoxication.

After food, he profiled soccer, and Western NGO behavior on the continent. "How to Write About Africa," the Binj's classic essay, was originally a letter to the editor of *Granta* magazine, castigating their 1994 issue on Africa. He developed the rhythms of his first book, *One Day I Will Write about This Place*, during his years of curating

African cuisine across the continent. While profiling food, he also profiled talents via exquisite emails and his reliable word-of-mouth. Careers have been made on his recommendations, as a thousand tributes testify online. In a series of YouTube videos *We Must Free Our Imaginations*, you will find his motivations and why he insisted on original people and abilities, no photocopies.

The Binj was loveable. He would assemble and fund a feast of talented creatives whenever he entered any territory. He was a sugar daddy with a conscience. Having spent his twenties as an African food connoisseur and instigator of enjoyment, the rising homophobia and general conservatism spreading across the continent by Christian Pentecostals motivated his tirades against religious oppressors. He believed that New-Age Pentecostalism corrupted the faith of friends and loved ones. The personal fueled his public utterances.

Unlike his mother, he did not hear the Pentecostal God and did not regard African men of God. His god was a sci-fi, African ancestor consulting with spirits and technology. He believed that the proclamations of a Pentecostal pastor had convinced his mother not to vote in a multiparty system election; the pastor supported a one-party state government, despite evidence of wanton corruption and economic hardship in Kenya. He also believed that the reign of Pentecostal Christianity robbed Africans of original creative thinking and development. The church ascribed governmental failures and personal inadequacies to demons and so-called demonic activities. It was, for him, the very enemy of the people because it blocked their imagination. Some Pentecostal pastors in Kenya further believed they could "eradicate homosexuality" with government policies. The Binj compared their homophobia to the Salem witch trials. In an episode of *We Must Free Our Imaginations*, he says, "give me the book about demonology and how demonology is important for building roads, schools, and imagination . . . give me data . . . give me data that homosexuality is such a problem that is spreading virally."

The Pentecostals made living in Africa difficult for the Binj. He railed against them. This was why he addressed his deceased mother and her generation of Pentecostal Kenyans in his coming-out essay, "I am a Homosexual, Mum."

II

There are times that even Graham believes the story he has peddled for so many years, about how he came to be gay. That he had always known; that he used to dress up in his mother; that he had been riveted by the biceps of Mohammed Ali, the anger of those black panthers on television; that he had played the kerfuffle game in public school; that the old gay friends of his mother, who had hosted him when she was in rehab, or consulting her guru in Lucknow, had made it easy to see possibilities in this world. These things are all true, but only small accessories to the main event.

But the main event, as seen by him now, is also untruthful: it was not as clear a sexual selection as he prefers to imagine, and he knows this enough not to share this story—it could well be that he was always gay, and that he would have come to it in one way or another, despite his self-protests to the contrary. But the unambiguous epiphany that the first gay fuck gave him marked not his sexuality, but his approach to life itself, it was his Woodstock, his civil rights movement. And inside himself, he remains unconvinced of his visceral homosexuality, believes that he has willfully created himself.

—Binyavanga Wainaina, “Alien Taste” (2016)

Very few times was homosexuality the main event in the Binj’s writing. In the story “Alien Taste,” he compared the naturalness of queer sex to drinking beer. In his TEDGlobal 2007 talk, he said, “the most consumed stories in Africa were from the Bible.” He began to rewrite Africa by challenging the dominant homophobic narrative with his imagination. At the time of his Lannan Foundation conversation with Chimamanda in 2011, he had not published any queer literature, neither had he come out, so it was fascinating to watch him discuss her *The Shivering*, a Pentecostal queer story. During the dialogue, she said, “by the time we knew he was gay, we already liked him.” The Binj winced and complained about the dearth of queer literature from the continent. Then he continued to hide himself until many years later.

Pentecostalism also robbed the Binj of his mother. She believed in miraculous healing and stopped taking the necessary medication for her diabetes. It led to her death before he could come out to her. After he did come out, he was invited as a guest of honor to his prestigious Kenyan high school, but on his arrival the ceremony was canceled on the counsel of an influential bishop of the church—the church first attacked the Binj before he attacked the homophobia and intolerance of the church. In a statement reported by *The Nairobi*, he said: “Oh! There is a lot of money in gay business . . . but if I wanted real money, I would start a church. First, I would make noise against the church, then I would wait for six months and go to the biggest church in Africa and ‘confess’ . . . Then I would marry a beautiful musician and be featured in all the cool press in Africa: ‘Meet Mr. Binyavanga and Mrs. Binyavanga, ex-homosexual and his model girlfriend sitting on a yacht . . . that is the life.’”

The Binj did not perform friendship, rather he was a friend indeed. He befriended ordinary Africans doing extraordinary things across the continent, from chauffeurs to cooks in Tanzania and Ghana, to street artists and merchants in Nairobi and Accra. Regular folks had his intercontinental phone number; everyone had direct access via his email, and he sent money for the mothers of his friends. Their pain was thereby accessible to him, and the injuries inflicted by the church on his friends stayed acute in his memory. When a church in Kenya excommunicated the mother of a late queer friend and the local community turned on the family of his deceased compatriot, he spoke back against the church. He castigated the public list of queer people authored by church-sponsored homophobes and denounced the state-endorsed discrimination against LGBTQI communities in Kenya.

When he authored his coming-out piece addressed to his late mother (and other aggrieved mothers in Kenya), he came out for a generation and interrogated the most homophobic powers in Africa: the church and the state. It was a verbal hammer to chip away at their influence. He also wanted to turn the eyes of the church away from the bedroom activities of his friends—why was the church so concerned with the sexual activities of his friends anyway? The Binj also named names and mentioned the individual homophobic bodies and personalities behind the murder, assault, and harassment of queer folks. The Binj spoke out at

every opportunity and instance, challenging the homophobic churches in Kenya into a test of holiness, righteousness, and patriotism.

The Binj was a great writer, who happened to be gay. He wrote queer literature as a response to homophobia. He fought for his friends against state actors and known enemies of their lives. He was loyal to a fault because he also adopted the personal enemies of his friends, irrespective of whether his friends were wrong or not. He would have spoken out against Islam if it were part of the Pentecostal forces tormenting the health and freedom of his friends. After he came out, the Binj befriended the queer with his works and imaginations. He was not a conventional human rights activist. He had no regard for donor funds and despised the activities of Western NGOs focused on solving African problems. At the end of his life, he began to build the coalition of Upright People to stand against injustice and discrimination on the continent. He was not against a structural approach. He was simply against neocolonial Western approaches that propagate the image of a benevolent West with sinister motives. He was simple in his takedowns and tirades against homophobic Pentecostal churches in Kenya. He was not against Pentecostalism. He was against homophobia and homophobic Pentecostals who used their power to torment his friends.

III

Hey mum. I was putting my head on her shoulder, that last afternoon before she died. She was lying on her hospital bed. Kenyatta. Intensive Care. Critical Care. There. Because this time I will not be away in South Africa, fucking things up in that chaotic way of mine. I will arrive on time, and be there when she dies. My heart arrives on time.

I am holding my dying mother's hand. I am lifting her hand. Her hand will be swollen with diabetes. Her organs are failing. Hey mum. Ooooh. My mind sighs. My heart! I am whispering in her ear. She is awake, listening, soft calm loving, with my head right inside in her breathspace. She is so big—my mother, in this world, near the next world, each breath slow, but steady, as it should be. Inhale. She can carry

everything. I will whisper, louder, in my minds-breath. To hers. She will listen, even if she doesn't hear. Can she?

—Binyavanga Wainaina, “I am a Homosexual, Mum” (2014)

The Binj never came out to his parents. He imagined coming out to his mum in the piece above. “Sometimes I feel like your parents are hostage to you much more than you are hostage to them, and so, the fear of, sort of, wounding them, for me, I think, was a big thing. But then, this is the opportunity to test their hearts the way I didn't give myself the opportunity to test their hearts,” the Binj said to *NPR* on the publication of his essay “I am a Homosexual, Mum.” In the essay, he takes us on his metamorphosis from shy to outspoken advocate of sexual rights and identities. He addressed parents, the basic unit of society, because he needed them to fight homophobia and homophobic institutions. He wanted Pentecostal parents to speak up like Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, an African hero of faith from his mother's country, who preached against the homophobic gospel of his contemporaries and the church in Uganda.

The Binj wanted to create a world of “upright people,” which he defined as “people who love Africa.” He embraced upright people, irrespective of race, nationality, creed, or sexuality. He wanted an Africa where all people were welcome. He wanted a safe passage across the continent. He was committed to African unity, and he extended an invitation to the Nigerian president who signed the anti-queer bill into law. The possibilities of his own death broadened his empathy to forgive across the homophobic divide. His Upright movement required the cooperation and participation of all lovers of Africa. As the effects of multiple strokes and speech impediment slowed his body, his mind expanded into using previously unconsidered mechanisms to eradicate hate from the continent.

The Binj struggled to finish his love letter to Nigeria and the continent at large. It remained a work in progress at the time of his death. It was his dying work and labor of love for the continent. He wanted to interview the political youth of the next generation. He wanted to hear their voice and document their thoughts about his Upright movement. He was against “NGO funded youth.” He wanted

to work with “political young people who live and survive the way the other citizens of their countries do.” On his intended tour across Africa, he wanted to live with upright people. In a YouTube video statement published on his Facebook page, he said, “it could be the person I am to stay with is a homophobe. That is OK because he signed up as an upright person. In Soweto, or in Kano, or in Juba, he is responsible for our security because upright people do not allow their guests to stay where it is not safe.” He could rely on the humanity of homophobes because he recalled how upright Africans across the continent rallied to raise US\$30,000 to cater for his medical bills; contributors from various demographics attended fundraising drives in Lagos and Nairobi. The Binj could rally the people.

The Binj asked for donations to fund the Upright movement from ordinary Africans on the Internet. He utilized social media to rally his flock, but his failing health discouraged many supporters. He grew religious and began to explore traditional African faith healers. He patronized a *sangoma*, “a person who helps people to get in touch with their ancestors,” who encouraged him to return to Kenya. In his home country, weakened by multiple sicknesses, he tried to build his coalition of Upright Africans. He ignored the homophobic Pentecostals and came to believe that the failure to recognize his ancestors was responsible for his strokes. He became quite spiritual during his last days and believed the practice of nondiscriminatory African spirituality was a pathway to a continent free of homophobia.

In the words of Adriaan van Klinken from his book *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa*, the Binj was “a queer among the prophets.” The Binj was self-appointed to lead, as in the Book of Jeremiah 1:10, “over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” Like Christ, the Binj intended to tear down the church and rebuild it without homophobia. If you dismiss his faith as the epitome of a sick body, the Binj authored a short story “Binguni!” as early as 1996 about a protagonist in an African afterlife, featuring ancestors from an Internet realm. In the story, the protagonist went to a liberal paradise, and the Binj sought the same at the end of his life.

At the time of his death, the Binj was scheduled to publish two books: *How to Write about Africa* and *It*

Is Only a Matter of Acceleration Now. According to *The Bookseller*, the first book stems from a satirical piece he wrote for *Granta* magazine in 2005, and the second book is “based on travels and interviews across Africa, aspiring to change readers’ perceptions of Africa in the way V. S. Naipaul’s *A Million Mutinies Now* did with India.” Multiple strokes made the respectively 2017 and 2019 publication dates unfeasible. His death in Nairobi at 10 pm on May 21, 2019, ended his journey, but his works will always inspire a generation.

A Queer We?

Linn Marie Tonstad

ESSAY

In human life, no one gets what they deserve. Life ends in death. In that regard, we're all in the same boat, together in our separation.

All having is loss. Yet, to move as a mortal body that knows it will die is to have life itself, and life abundant.

No one gets what they deserve, but everyone deserves better than what they get. No one gets what they deserve: the damage I have done to others, or connived at, is never quite brought home to my doorstep. To get what I deserve would destroy me if it were calculated according to guilt, fault, and debt. To get what we deserve would destroy the possibility of us, for we cannot survive that calculus. But to get more than we deserve might set us free: from desert, from the logic of merit, but also free for relations beyond calculation, for a justice outside the law of responsibility, consequence, and blame.

We work against unjust deaths, but where do we go to rage against death itself? A world without death is not something we can work for (for the denial of death is the denial of life), but nonetheless we long for more than this, for ourselves and for each other.

Even if a good death is the only ultimate bodily mercy, there are mercies that aren't ultimate: local mercies, moments of respite, an unexpected smile or fuck, a kindness. In a state of emergency, when do we get to ask what life is worth living, and what, beyond mere survival, we are living for? As Audre Lorde said, some of us were never meant to survive (from the poem "A Litany for Survival," 1978). And mere survival is not enough: we want more. When survival is all some of us are offered, and others of us not even that, it is time to demand more, much more—pressed down and running over.

In a time when life together means bodily life apart, a queer "we" must demand much more than this. To preserve the possibility

of “we,” we have had to distance ourselves from each other in the ways that matter most. But life apart is for the sake of life together; without life together, life apart is not life. Life apart shows us its impossibility, for life apart is unsustainable. The life to come must reflect what we are learning. Our need for each other remains, regardless of our desire, and our desire is for each other. Who will we become?

To be a queer “we” means not knowing who we are nor who we might become. We have thrown ourselves willingly, riskily, desperately into the space of possibility. We have discovered our desire, trusted it, and been overmastered by it.

A queer “we” should be a threat to civilization as we know it, or as we knew it. Since the formation of a “we” always inaugurates a “they,” a queer “we” must be formed aslant. A queer “we” cannot come from sameness, inclusion, or recognition. A queer “we” takes shape against the systems that produce sameness, inclusion, and recognition as their only possible ideals.

So, who is for us, and who is against us? Queer, the identity, can always form a “we” by distinction and distance: “We are not like those queers over there. We are not a threat. We are good citizens who simply want to love our families, for love is love.” But queer, the political position, cannot form a “we” in the same way. As a political position, a queer “we” forms around those who have had the choice made for them: the unassimilable. Queer, as a political position, stands with those who don’t have the choice to conform or to belong, and not with those whose nonconformity can be turned on or off at will. As a political position, queer is not a romantic ideal of individual dissent but a finding oneself alongside others who never had the option to walk through the door of inclusion, respectability, and power.

To speak is to risk—to speak for “us” even more so—but all risks are not the same. Insurance companies are in the business of

quantifying risk; a queer “we” is not. It is difficult to hold these insights together, but to opt for one over the other is an unsurvivable concession to the demands of transparency, legibility, the calculable. A queer “we” refuses the demands of respectability and productivity, even though some queers want these same ideals. Therefore, a queer “we” is not inclusive; a queer “we” knows that enmity and antagonism are real.

A queer “we” reflects an ethics in which antagonism is never overcome, even as we learn that we are already in relations that destroy us and remake us. A queer “we” knows that life together includes death and loss, that the body that lives is the body that dies. And because death is the necessary end, a queer “we” fights and grieves and works for the life of the body that is so much more than survival, so much more than living, and going on.

Instead of reproducing what already is, a queer “we” finds another option. As queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid puts it, “Queers are searching for God’s nipples and soft lips and trying to bite them in oblique ways in order to achieve some oblique transcendence in their lives” (*The Queer God*, 2003, 49). And so, we become a queer “we,” a “we” of strangers and the estranged.

The Past and Present of Against Nature Laws

Living in a society based on a secular legal system with a religious imprint, we are subject to the concept and figure of “nature.” It is used to criminalize individuals for nonreproductive sexual orientations, gender identities, and ways of being. This affects primarily LGBTQI+ communities, but it extends beyond them too. The legal language to support such criminalization often stems from colonial legal codes: the Napoleonic Penal Code, for example, and various other British texts. Defined in some Penal Codes as an “act against nature” (Article 534, Lebanon, 1943), “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” (Section 377, India, 1860, repealed in 2018), or “carnal knowledge against the order of Nature” (Article 162, Kenya, 1930), these laws often found no cultural base when first introduced to former European colonies. Using arbitrary concepts to divide what is “natural” from what is “unnatural,” politicians, judges, and religious figures have ascribed an indisputable authority to nature (and still do), and such divisions are enforced with the full coercive power of the state. Over the past couple of years we have witnessed important legal changes however, especially in India and Botswana, which undermine this concept of nature; these are moments of hope, but more importantly they are occasions to discuss further developments.

Ultimately, challenging the colonial origins of the contra naturam laws is important work to do, and yet this work still remains insufficient; we bear responsibility for the continuing exercise of these laws and their related imaginaries. From north to south, the laws against nature have become a horizon for the politics of many conservative movements, who look for more control and uniformization of people’s gender, sexuality, and privacy. This is also affecting countries that were once considered to be progressive, but are now witnessing a rise of anti-gender ideologies, the justification of verbal and physical discrimination toward trans individuals, worsening environments for LGBTQI+ organizations, divergent legal statuses and reproductive rights for LGBTQI+ families, as well as the threat to abortion rights for women.

ENDNOTE

To monitor current state jurisdictions, charts, maps, and rankings are produced by international NGOs, like the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). Beyond criminalization their research also takes into account instances of expression, freedom of association, protection (constitutional, individual, professional), and the recognition of marriage, partnership, and adoption. This map, inverted and visually translated, is offered here as a tool to visualize the work that still needs to be done.

Discrimination is not only enforced by the state, and while international advocacy is more necessary than ever, human dignity and equality enacted on a personal level must become part of rethinking the social and legal imaginary, to which *The Against Nature Journal* hopes to contribute.

Grégory Castéra and Giulia Tognon
Editors

MAP

The data presented in this map is based on “State-Sponsored Homophobia,” an International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) report by Lucas Ramón Mendos, December 2019. Courtesy of ILGA World. Map drawn by Stepan Lipatov.



INITIATIVES

A selection of organizations doing progressive work at the intersection between religion, spirituality, and social justice.

CALEM

Marseille, France

is an organization founded by Imam Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, the founder of the first European inclusive mosque in Paris. CALEM offers advice and training to a variety of organizations on topics such as migration, women’s rights, and progressive Islamic theology.

calem.eu

House for All Sinners and Saints

Denver, Colorado

is a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America started by pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. It describes itself as “a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice oriented, queer inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient-future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination.”

houseforall.org

Reformation Project

Dallas, Texas

is a Bible-based, Christian organization founded by Matthew Vines. It works to promote inclusion of LGBTQ people by reforming church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity.

reformationproject.org

The Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice

New York City

was founded in the spring of 2009 under the leadership of artist AA Bronson and Kathryn Reklis. The Institute’s mission is to explore the relationship between art and religion through the lens of social justice.

artreligionandsocialjustice.org

House of Rainbow

Lagos, Nigeria

fosters relationships among Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME), LGBTQ+ individuals, people of faith, and allies in order to create a safer and more inclusive community. Reverend Jide Macaully is the founding Pastor of House of Rainbow.

houseofrainbow.org

Union Theological Seminary

New York City

is an independent, ecumenical seminary with a commitment to interreligious engagement. Progressive theology has long taken shape at Union, where faith and scholarship meet to reimagine the work of justice.

utsnyc.edu

ADVERTISEMENT

MA in Transnational Queer Feminist Politics at SOAS

London —
from October 2020

The SOAS Centre for Gender Studies launches a new postgraduate program. It aims to refocus issues prioritised in Western Gender Studies and the study of sexuality on the complex specificities of Asia, Africa, and the Near and Middle East.

soas.ac.uk/genderstudies

RAUPE- NIMMERSATISM by SAVVY Contemporary

Berlin —
September to November 2020

Raupenimmersattism. The Affluent Society As Consumed Society Or The Myth Of Endless Production and Consumption. A research, exhibition, discourse and performance project.

WITH Lhola Amira, ArTree Nepal (Hit Man Gurung), Yasmin Bassir, Mansour Ciss, Phil Collins, Sarah Entwistle, Samira Hodaei, Fallon Mayaniya, Daniela Medina Poch / Juan Pablo García Sossa, Jean David Nkot, Krishan Rajapakshe, Nasan Tur and more.

savy-contemporary.com

Grupo Mexa in residence at Casa do Povo

Sao Paolo —
collaborating since 2016

GRUPO MEXA, is a group formed by people in vulnerable situations and members of the LGBTQI community. It uses artistic tactics to defend and promote encounters with diverse portions of the population in situations of social vulnerability.

casadopovo.org.br

On Riots, Grief and Parties at MACBA Study Centre

Barcelona —
until November 2020

How do dissident bodies survive in the city of Barcelona? How do desires and emotions fit into their displacements? How does the colonial regime continue to operate in these bodies and what wounds does it continue to open?

macba.cat

Desperate Living C-19 by Studio Voltaire

London —
June to October 2020

An LGBTQ+ artist-led program in response to COVID-19, providing support for artists as well as opportunities for people to engage with arts and culture in direct response to their experiences.

studiovoltaire.org

Tom of Finland Foundation and The Community

Paris —
2021

A group exhibition from the Tom of Finland Foundation's collection and a series of programming co-curated by The Community in Paris. The Tom of Finland Foundation in Los Angeles has been building and preserving the world's largest collection of gay and erotic art, consisting of thousands of works, since 1984.

thecommunity.io
tomoffinland.org

Contemporary And (C&) + C& América Latina (C&AL)

is an art magazine for the reflection on and linking together of ideas and discourse on contemporary visual art from Africa and the global diaspora. C&AL focuses on the important connections between Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.

contemporaryand.com
amlatina.contemporaryand.com

nominal bliss

online publication

nominal bliss is part of an ongoing series of free online publications that aims to develop new research networks around contemporary artists of non-binary and trans experience. The series is designed by Studio Vanessa Ban and edited by Wong Bing Hao.

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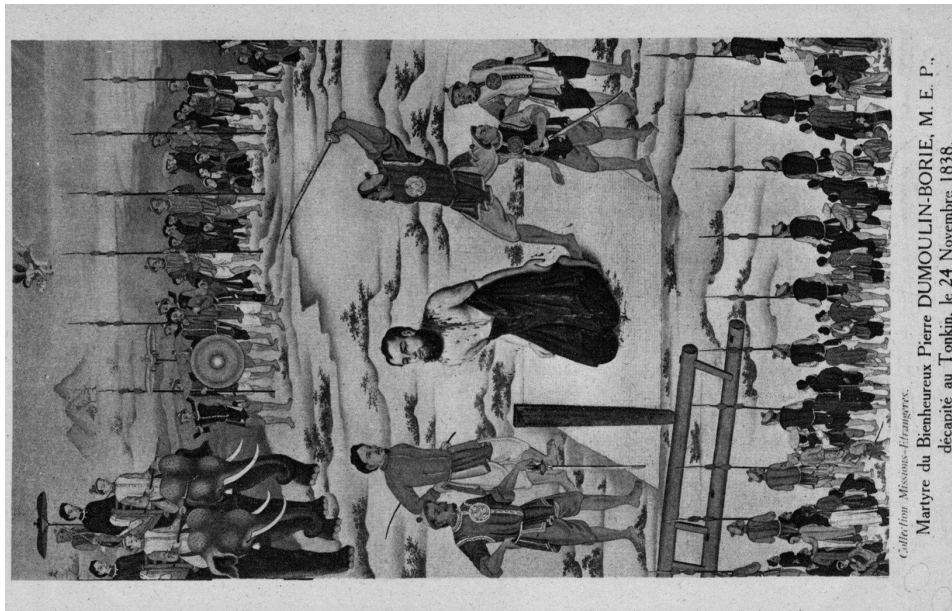
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Iki Yos Piña Narváez & Jota Mombaça at Villa Vassilieff

Paris —
September to November 2020

As a duo, the artists will develop a research-based project focused on the delirium of El Dorado, rooted in the colonial thirst for extraction and on the inconsistencies of these white regimes.

villavassilieff.net



Danh Vo
Good Life
 2007
 b/w photographs

Photographs taken in Vietnam, 1964–73, by Dr. Joseph M. Carrier, an American who worked in South Vietnam during the war years, first as a counterinsurgency specialist with the RAND Corporation and later on field research into the effects of Agent Orange. Although taken at the height of the conflict, there is little in these photographs to indicate the brutal ongoing fight beyond a series of bombings visible on the horizon of a scene of bathing youths. Instead they focus largely on young Vietnamese men, sometimes engaged in casual displays of affection such as holding hands in public or napping together. These interactions were accepted in Vietnamese culture as platonic expressions of masculinity, but Carrier's photographs are charged by a distinctly erotic gaze. For Vo, whose family left all their possessions behind when they fled Vietnam, including family photos, the appropriation of Carrier's images addresses a void in his own history. He has spoken of them as a mediated self-portrait wherein he identifies with both the photographer and the subjects.

Danh Vo
Société des missions-étrangères – Les Martyrs
 2009
 postcards

Vo discovered these vintage postcards in the archives of the Missions étrangères de Paris, a Catholic organization that has been dedicated to missionary work abroad since the mid seventeenth century. They reproduce historical paintings depicting the violent martyrdom of French missionaries in Asia. Painted by Vietnamese converts to Christianity, such works portray local populations as ruthless savages in need of salvation and were used as recruitment tools for young priests. While a number illustrate their subjects using a flat, frontal style, others introduce techniques of compositional perspective associated with a Western tradition.

Danh Vo

is an artist born in Vietnam. Vo's projects emerge via objects and images that have accrued meaning in the world, whether through their former ownership, their proximity to specific events, or their currency as universal icons. Power, history, eroticism, personal biography, imperial dissolution and globalist expansion are all in play. The Vo family escaped Vietnam to Denmark in 1979, and the artist's work embodies the shifting and precarious nature of contemporary life. Vo imagines a world for the artist unbound by obligations to state institutions, social norms and grand humanist projects.

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