Queer Roots for the Diaspora

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In the previous chapter, I focused more on the literary and discursive implications of resisting a politics of purity through articulations of identity modeled on the mangrove than on the political implications of such a discursive strategy. Nonetheless, the political is never far removed from these questions. In the Caribbean, François Duvalier used *noirisme* to buttress his dictatorship in Haiti. In Zaïre, as it was then called, Mobutu Sese Seko used a similar return to African authenticity in the 1970s to justify attempts to homogenize Zaïrean identity and thereby maintain his totalitarian regime. After the organization Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was barred from participating in its country’s international book fair in 1995, Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe became well known for his discursive attacks on lesbians and gay men, whom he described as being “worse than dogs and pigs” (cited in Phillips, “Zimbabwe” 52). In his New Year’s 2000 address, Mugabe stated, “We cannot have a man marrying a man or a woman marrying a woman here. What an abomination, a rottenness of culture, real decadence of culture. Once you impose a foreign culture on us then you naturally evoke the devil in us” (“Zimbabwe’s Mugabe”).

That there is no such thing as homosexuality in Africa is a common cliché of certain African nationalist discourses. According to this argument, any manifestation of homosexuality would be the result of a colonial imposition of foreign practices (as Mugabe suggests). The cliché might be considered partially valid if homosexuality were understood in
a strictly Foucauldian sense as a modern phenomenon of industrial soci-
eties. In this case, it is true that homosexuality “as we know it today” first
appeared in western countries. The cliché is rarely understood as such,
however, because such a use of the term should also argue that heterosex-
uality as well is a western phenomenon and has been equally imposed on
Africa. Arguments such as Mugabe’s, therefore, fail to acknowledge how
they themselves also reproduce a fully colonial discourse, a homophobic
discourse that troped Africans as possessing a bestial sexuality, even as it
claimed that Africa was not bound by the fetters of civilization (as Europe
was) and had thus maintained a state of natural purity (see Epprecht,
_Heterosexual Africa_?). As Neville Hoad writes, “President Mugabe is obvi-
ously less worried about Western cultural imperialism when he puts on a
suit and tie in the morning, and no one accuses monogamous heterosex-
uality of being a decadent Western import (which, given the historical
polygamy of many sub-Saharan African societies, it clearly is)” (African
_Intimacies_ 73). In addition, the Foucauldian argument concerning the
modern construction of homosexuality in no way means that no sexual
activity previously occurred between members of the same sex. Yet anti-
homosexual postindependence rulers distort a constructionist logic in
this way to consolidate their own power by claiming to represent a return
to precolonial roots that would resurrect an African authenticity free of
European influence. In contrast, however, a number of African writers
narrate alternative returns to African roots, ones that uncover same-sex
sexual practices that colonial powers attempted to eradicate and postin-
dependence elites have attempted to deny and, sometimes, following the
lead of their colonial predecessors, even annihilate.

The effects of troping same-sex sexual practices as foreign or imposed
by colonialism are not limited to the discursive level of political speeches
but also translate into a very physical violence deployed against many
Africans today. On 30 October 1999, while Mugabe was traveling in
England for personal reasons, OutRage!, a British gay activist group,
performed a citizen’s arrest and demanded that the British government
try him for torture. When charges were dropped against the “arrest-
ing officers,” Mugabe accused the Blair government of “using gang-
ster gays” (Mogale) to carry out its neocolonial policies. In a letter to
Blair, one of the arresting members, Peter Tatchell, claimed, “Since his
inflammatory comments, homosexuals in Zimbabwe have been beaten,
arrested, framed on trumped up charges, fire bombed and threatened
with death.” After the incident, GALZ’s statement concerning the “citi-
zen’s arrest” stated that, “though GALZ had no prior knowledge of Out-
rage’s intention to arrest President Mugabe and did not order it, innocent black gay men [in Zimbabwe] have been targeted for revenge. . . . One man was threatened and falsely arrested and imprisoned; another was beaten and insulted by two plain-clothes policemen. Both were blamed for the humiliation of the President in London even though it was clear that neither of them had any knowledge of the incident” (Goddard).

In his attempt to hold on to power, then, Mugabe has resorted to homophobic violence in a supposedly anticolonial campaign to rid Zimbabwe of all that is foreign. Likewise, his support of black squatters occupying white-owned farms has used an anticolonial discourse to mask antidemocratic moves (Swarns, “Mugabe’s Real Foes”). Although squatters have voiced quite legitimate demands, one of the greatest obstacles to land reform has been Mugabe himself, who has been promising it since 1980, particularly at election time. Previous redistributions were too modest, did not succeed because of a lack of follow-up support, or gave land to Mugabe’s supporters and political associates. Britain (as well as other donors) has subsequently used such cronyism as an excuse to withhold compensation to white farmers for land that was stolen from blacks during British colonial rule. In addition, Mugabe seized on the climate created by the land seizures to intimidate his political opponents; in the period leading up to the June 2000 parliamentary elections, at least twenty-six people were killed, mostly members of the opposition (Swarns, “Political Shift”) in a cycle that would continue throughout the presidential elections of 2001. A similar cycle of violence accompanied the 2008 elections, when the opposition party of Morgan Tsvangirai won the general elections. Upon winning the first round of the presidential elections, Tsvangirai was forced to withdraw after the murder of at least two hundred of his party supporters. Since 2009 Mugabe has been in a power-sharing agreement with Tsvangirai as prime minister. To date, however, this agreement has not resulted in a significant loosening of Mugabe’s hold on power. The economy is still in shambles, and the racial divide in landownership persists in spite of continued invasions of white-owned farms. Yet his reign of political terror has eased somewhat, at least for now.

Male Wives and Female Husbands

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

In the case of woman-woman marriages, however, ethnographers have gone out of their way to deny any lesbian implications, in spite of suggestions to the contrary by an earlier commentator on the institution, Melville J. Herskovits (1937). According to him, woman marriage in Dahomey “does not imply a homosexual relationship between ‘husband’ and ‘wife,’ though it is not to be doubted that occasionally homo-
sexual women who have inherited wealth or have prospered economically establish compounds of their own and at the same time utilize the relationship in which they stand to the women whom they ‘marry’ to satisfy themselves” (“Note” 338). Since Herskovits wrote these lines, he has been criticized for not substantiating his claims. Krige argued, for example, that “Herskovits imputed to it sexual overtones that are foreign to the institution” (11). In contrast, Carrier and Murray have questioned these criticisms of Herskovits: “A careful reading of Herskovits, however, shows that Krige, O’Brien, and Obbo exaggerate his remarks” (264). They point out that in his later book-length study, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (1938), Herskovits provided evidence of female homosexuality in other contexts: “Given the broader context of Dahomean sexual behavior, no great leap of the imagination is required to suggest, as did Herskovits, that some of the females involved in woman-woman marriage in Dahomey might also use the relationship as a means of obtaining sexual satisfaction” (Carrier and Murray 265). They also point out that “no one questions whether men and women in mandatory, arranged marriages have or desire sex with each other or, indeed, even ‘prefer’ the opposite sex in general” (266). Indeed, Krige’s association of the foreign with homosexuality reiterates the tropes of homophobic nationalism. When she writes that “woman-marriage is no aberrant, quaint custom[, n]or has it any sexual connotation for the two women concerned” (34), whereas she seems to criticize ethnographers who romanticize the institution by imposing their own Eurocentric bias, it is actually she who reveals a western bias by writing of “the two women concerned” even though her own research shows that woman-woman marriage is often polygamous. Furthermore, Evans-Pritchard suggests that, even in polygamous marriages with male husbands, women are able to negotiate patriarchal institutions so as to create the possibility of having sexual relations among themselves.10

*Toward a Queer Interdisciplinarity*

The debate between Herskovits and his detractors, however, is an important reminder as to why ethnography alone, though quite adequate for pointing out the fallacies of political discourses such as Mugabe’s, is not sufficient to queer Afrocentric, US black nationalist, or African nationalist discourses. Indeed, pointing out the queerness of Africa is hardly new; both Christian and “scientific” discourses postulated Africans’ sexuality,
perverse by European standards, as a sign of their primitiveness. It was therefore the “white man’s burden” to civilize them and convert them to the missionary position. Ethnographers such as Herskovits, who pay special attention to “queer” African sexualities, might thus be seen as following in this tradition. Yet many critiques of this parallel to orientalism in western discourses on Africa silence Africans with nonnormative sexualities.11 African literatures nonetheless offer a great diversity of cultural representations of same-sex desires, eroticisms, and sexual acts. To engage with them, however, I suggest that one must look beyond literary studies altogether to such fields as anthropology and history.

The importance of reading African literature alongside anthropology is a major part of Christopher L. Miller’s key argument in Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa (1990): “[A] fair Western reading of African literatures demands engagement with, and even dependence on, anthropology” (4). I have engaged at length elsewhere with this argument, often by pointing out that history, particularly in the kinds of allegorical readings of African novels I tend to articulate, can be just as important as anthropology (if not more so). I have also pointed out that, especially since the 1960s, African literature has often had an antagonistic relation with anthropology, even resisting the ethnographic gaze of western readers (Queer Nations 266–77). But Miller is far from articulating an uncritical embrace of anthropological readings of African literature: “This is not intended to place anthropology in a position of dominance or let it block out other concerns, which I hope will find adequate attention here. Rather my desire is to blend disciplines together in a hybrid approach befitting the complexity of cultural questions in Africa and their translation into Western understanding” (5). In other words, Miller is far from arguing that anthropology should be the only other disciplinary discourse considered in relation to African literature, or even the most important one.

Furthermore, when Miller asserts that he will “be trying to fill a gap” (5), he is referring to a lacuna in African literary studies, but we might also consider the gaps that remain even after interdisciplinary encounters in literary criticism. Likewise, in African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, Globalization (2007), Neville Hoad outlines the potential contribution of literary studies to interdisciplinary approaches to African studies: “[I]maginative fiction, as a site for investigation of questions of race, sex, and decolonization, is useful for me because it allows the horizons of the imaginable to become visible. In fiction, one can find an archive for the complex lived and felt experience of never completely determin-
ing social abstractions” (22). Hoad’s model, “in which readers may work to being othered by the text by watching their enabling abstractions and assumptions come under pressure” (22), as I suggest throughout this chapter, allows for literature to fill in gaps left in the study of African cultures in other disciplines. It elaborates on the importance that Miller already accords to close reading in both theory (in terms of his paradigm of reading) and practice (his own readings of African literary texts). Indeed, if we take Miller’s reading of Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir* as exemplary of his reading practice, it becomes clear that he just as often uses literary texts to challenge anthropological models (as well as psychoanalytic ones based on anthropology, e.g., Freud’s understanding of totemism).

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

First of all, one reason why ethnographic studies of “homosexualities” specific to African societies rarely match up neatly with literary representations is that anthropologists and novelists frequently seem to be interested in totally different phenomena. When anthropology and literature do manage to be on the same page, the former often consists of an outdated, descriptive ethnography of the sort that has come under question within anthropology’s self-critique of the past several decades. And
as part of a general trend toward challenging the ethnographic gaze of the western reader since the 1960s, African novels also frequently question any totalizing differences between western and African sexualities of the sort an older anthropology might emphasize. I, however, have come to view such mismatches as blessings in disguise, since they force us to reflect on the role of literary criticism in interdisciplinary approaches to the study of sexuality.

Second, interdisciplinary approaches to literary studies often turn literature into a mere illustration of the theories produced by other discourses; what are supposed to be the “primary” sources (i.e., literary works) are thus considered inadequate as pre-texts for theorizing in and of themselves. Paradoxically, the “secondary” texts are treated as more primary than the primary ones, which are thereby devalorized. In such approaches, literary critics often demean the object of study specific to their field and relinquish what, as Hoad suggests, is potentially their greatest contribution to the interdisciplinary encounter: the ability to read carefully and critically between the lines. I have thus come to see the gaps between various disciplinary discourses as a far more interesting object of study than what obtains when “other” disciplines are used as master discourses that might explain literary passages whose meaning is treated as elusive. Another contribution literary critics can make to interdisciplinarity is extending their skill in reading between the lines to read between the disciplines that get together in interdisciplinary approaches to sexuality. Such a reading between the disciplines also encourages a theorization of interdisciplinarity in which all disciplines called on are allowed to challenge and question one another. In this understanding of interdisciplinary analysis, the interdisciplinary influence goes both ways. History and anthropology, say, are not just consulted to elucidate literature; literature is also allowed to reflect on the disciplinary constraints of other fields.

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

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

—Mais tu as peur, ma parole ! . . . Tu ne sais pas que cet homme est un p . . . ?

   Et elle m’expliqua longuement ce que ce mot signifiait.

   —Ah ça, non ! protestai-je. Il n’y a pas de cela dans mon pays. Là-bas, un homme est fait pour vivre avec une femme. Un homme est fait pour se marier et pour avoir des enfants.

   —Tu ne nous connaîtras jamais assez, toi ! dit-elle. Nous avons des vices, ici ! Vous êtes purs, vous, les Africains. Vous ignorez les artifices et les perversions. C’est bien mieux ainsi. (82; Camara’s ellipses)

[“My! You’re really frightened, aren’t you! . . . Don’t you know he’s queer?”]
And she then gave me a lengthy explanation about what that word meant.

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

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

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

The debate on homosexuality reveals in certain people a stubborn attempt to hold onto a pure image of precolonial Africa and even of contemporary Africa. I’m sorry but this can quite simply only be due to a lack of anthropological and sociological knowledge of current and previous realities in Africa. The way some approach homosexuality reminds me of the polemic that the origin of the AIDS virus set off . . .

It’s useless to try to maintain at any cost a falsely pure image of a mythical Africa, which only exists in the heads of a few dreamers in our times.

This false image of Africa is transmitted by Africans who cannot yet tell the difference between the continent’s actual characteristics before the conquerors’ arrival and what they left us.

So before anyone begins to attack homosexuals, let’s seriously verify whether this behavior is African or imported. In fact, the anthropological literature shows that this behavior is not only present among westerners. It is present in a number of Latin American and African societies.

Contemporary Africa is the product of numerous cultural métissages both internal and external. From this point of view, it is currently difficult to hold onto a discourse that maintains a pure image of Africa.15

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

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

*Men-Women in Senegal*

One of the arguments often used to disclaim an indigenous African homosexuality is that no word exists in African languages for same-sex
sexual behaviors. One member of the newsgroup wrote, “I’m basing myself on, among other things, the absence of any ‘African’ term designating homosexuality. In addition, among all of my acquaintances, there isn’t a single member of my tribe who practices homosexuality. This practice is exclusively urban in Africa; it is an imported practice.”

This argument blatantly contradicts all the anthropological literature. Murray and Roscoe list seventy-seven such terms (279–82), including the Wolof term gor-diguen (as they spell it), which also occurs in Le baobab fou [The Abandoned Baobab] by Ken Bugul (1984). When Ken, the narrator/protagonist studying in Europe, meets and moves in with a Belgian homosexual, Jean Wermer, instead of asserting the uniquely western nature of same-sex desire, she compares western homosexuality to a Wolof practice:

Je savais que les homosexuels existaient, il y en avait dans mon pays. J’avais eu moi-même un esclave homosexual hérité de longue tradition. “Gor Djigen,” on l’appelait ainsi. Cela restait abstrait pour moi. Mais Jean Wermer avait été marié, avait des enfants, et n’avait pas les manières des Gor-Djigen. (72)

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

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

It is said that homosexuality is recent among the Wolof, at any rate in any frequency; but it now receives, and has for some years received, such extremely august and almost publicly exhibited patronage, that pathics are a common sight. They are called in Wolof men-women, gor-digen, and do their best to deserve the epithet by their mannerisms, their dress and their make-up; some even dress their hair like women. They do not suffer in any way socially, though the Mohammedans refuse them religious burial; on the contrary they are sought after as the best conversationalists and the best dancers. This phase is usually transitory, finishing with the departure of the European who has been keeping the boy; but a certain number from taste, interest, or for economic reasons continue their practices and there is now quite a large pederastic society. If I am right in ascribing the increase in European homosexuality to a neurotic fear of life and responsibility the conditions of urban life in Africa lead to the prognosis that this society will greatly increase. (36;1935 edition)

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

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

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

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

Today one can even see Jollof men dressed in women’s clothes. I once met one in a small bar outside Dakar. He was obviously pathetically feminine. The Jollof must be used to this since they even have a word for them—Gor-Digen. The elders and faithful Muslims condemn men for this, but it is typical of African tolerance that they are left very much alone by the rest of the people. (68; emphasis added)¹⁸

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

In contemporary Senegal, and in contrast with what you might think, homosexuality exists and is more tolerated than in the West. Homosexuals are also transvestites. They are called “man-woman” (Goor-jiguen). There is a special, well-liked dish (because it is spicy and very succulent) that carries their name; in fact, this dish is called “Mbaxaal goor-jiguen”; it’s a special dish reserved for prestigious guests or for special events. Today, for baptisms, homosexuals are more and more invited by women to do the cooking. They also participate in ceremonies such as marriage.¹⁹

In its affectionate tone, this discussant’s intimate representation of the gôr-djiguen’s quotidian integration into Senegalese life provides an important counterpoint to the accounts of these self-styled ethnographers. Whereas the travelers were only able to see public displays of the gôr-djiguen, Deme shows how they can also be integrated into a domestic economy within the home.

In “Homosexuality in Dakar: Is the Bed the Heart of a Sexual Subculture?” (1996), based on research conducted in 1990, Niels Teunis also provides an intimate account of the life of the gordjiguène (as he spells it). His account of this role, however, more recent and supposedly more scholarly than those of Gorer and Crowder, is based not on research conducted inside the home but on conversations with patrons in a Dakar bar frequented by men who consider themselves to be gôr-djiguen:
The men whom I met there referred to themselves as *homosexuèles* [sic], homosexuals in French (my communication language with them), and *gordjiguène* in Wolof, their own language. . . . The word is used among Senegalese homosexuals and by others, in which case it is meant as an insult. One of the members of the milieu explained to me that one can distinguish two separate groups in the community of *gordjiguène*. First, there are men who play the inserter role in anal intercourse. The other group comprises those who are the insertees. Wolof terms for these groups exist, but they have no French equivalent. The ones who act as inserter are called *yauss*. . . . The inserter men are called *oubi*, which literally means “open”. . . . One is either a *yauss* or an *oubi*—changing from one group to the other is not possible. Leon, the man who explained this to me, said that the latter group was composed of what he called “we the women.” This included me, too. (160)

Although Teunis is not Senegalese, his informants do not hesitate to apply a Wolof term, with the specifically Senegalese construction of sexuality that it implies, to the ethnographer (whom they did not acknowledge as such).20 The difference between European and Senegalese constructions of homosexual identities, therefore, does not prevent them—as Ken in Bugul’s novel—from translating a European sexual identity into Wolof. In fact, this translation might be read as a countertranslation; whereas usually it is the European ethnographer who translates the “native” culture into a language his European readers will understand, here the “natives” are the ones who translate the ethnographer through a Senegalese concept.

Whereas all the accounts considered above assume that the *gôr-djiguen* is necessarily transgendered, according to Teunis *gôr-djiguen* include not only the “femmes” but also the “butches.” In other words, unlike other accounts, though the term refers to a feminized male for Teunis, it can also refer to those who are considered to play the man’s role, even though “[m]en considered as *yauss* did not really form a distinguishable group” (160). This is one way Teunis contradicts earlier travel accounts, but in so doing, he also contradicts himself; for later in the article, he writes, “The cultural model of the . . . gordjiguène . . . distinguishes between two categories: *yauss* and *oubi* . . . . In practice, the *oubi* identify themselves as gordjiguène; *yauss* in general, do not. . . . Those who identify as gordjiguène, the *oubi*, come together in a bar. There they recognize each other as fellow *oubi*, and, contrary to the *yauss*, they form a social group” (166–
In other words, the *yauss* both are and are not *gôr-djiguen*. Teunis does tell the story of one *yauss* who identifies as a *gôr-djiguen*, but his story is complicated by the fact that, although he was a *yauss* in practice, his “type” was “lightskinned (not white) men, with big chests and huge muscles, like Rambo” (164), who—were he ever to find such a man!—would play the role of the inserter. This example, embedded within Teunis’s account, disrupts the generalizations he makes about the mutually exclusive aspects of the two roles and the lack of ambiguity or impermeability of the boundary that separates them. Interestingly (and contra usual expectations), Teunis also discovers that *oubi* can have sex with each other, although it is not considered “sex” but “playing” (165–66). He does not give either the French or the Wolof term for such activity, nor is he able to tell us exactly what it consists of, since he turned down his only opportunity to engage in it!

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

Dans son nouveau quartier, le couple d’en face avait un fils, un fils bien drôle ! Cet adolescent d’une quinzaine d’années refusait obstinément la compagnie et les jeux des garçons de son âge, pour rechercher la compagnie et les jeux des petites filles ! Bien drôle cet adolescent qui imitait les filles, dans leur allure, leur langage traînant et leurs occupations !

Son père, quand il le surprenait à jacasser parmi les commères, ou à faire mijoter les plats dans les goûters, entrait dans de folles colères, la cravache à la main. En vain.

En vain, sa mère le rasait-elle pour l’enlaidir. On le prendrait pour l’une des fillettes qu’il fréquentait. Il roulait les yeux en parlant. Mais il ne roulait pas que les yeux. Il roulait avec perversité ses hanches et lançait ses fesses en arrière quand il se déplaçait. Dès qu’il était hors de portée du regard de sa mère, il s’entourait d’un pagne et se dandinait.

“Sauf miracle, ce garçonnet deviendrait un ‘gôr djiguène’ destiné à passer sa vie, accroupi aux pieds d’une courtisane dont il demeurait l’homme de main. Ce serait son rôle de dénicher les amants généreux pour l’entretient coûteux de ce genre de maisonnée. Ce serait à lui
[In their new neighbourhood the couple opposite had a son, a very [odd] youngster! This fifteen-year-old obstinately refused the company and games of boys of his own age and sought the company and games of little girls! A funny sort of boy this was, who modeled his bearing, drawling speech and activities on those of girls!

When his father came upon him, gossiping away with the old women, or cooking up dishes [for afternoon snacks], he went wild with rage and took a whip to him. But to no avail.

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

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

Yaye Khady was sincerely sorry for the mother of this specimen. (69–70)]

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

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

**The Civilizing Mission and the Missionary Position**

The motif of travel is a common one when the topic of homosexuality arises in African literature. It is often upon leaving Africa that characters are first confronted with the issue of homosexuality. Yet, as we have seen in Ken’s example, this trip abroad is often balanced by a parallel return to the native land, which contradicts the initial tendency to link same-sex sexual behavior and desires with Europe or the United States. Although Ken first mentions homosexuality in conjunction with her
experience in Europe, her encounter with a Belgian homosexual leads her not to assert a European monopoly on same-sex sexual behaviors and desires but to affirm a Senegalese counterpart. Likewise, in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), when the Ghanaian protagonist Sissie encounters homosexuality in Europe (this time in the form of sexual advances made to her by a married German woman, Marija), she returns, figuratively, to her native village: “[O]ne evening the woman seizes you in her embrace, her cold fingers on your breasts, warm tears on your face, hot lips on your lips, do you go back to your village in Africa” (65). What she reveals in this memorative return to her origins is the story of a missionary to the Guinea coast who, “on one of her regular nocturnal inspections . . . found two girls in bed together” (66). On the one hand, Sissie’s response to Marija’s desire to plan a surprise going-away dinner could be said to fit into the formula of homosexual desire as *contra naturam*: “Besides, it is not sound for a woman to enjoy cooking for another woman. Not under any circumstances. It is not done. It is not possible. Special meals are for men. They are the only sex to whom the Maker gave a mouth with which to enjoy eating” (77). If one replaced the culinary vocabulary with a sexual one, the passage exactly fits the model of one homophobic argument against homosexuality, even though the absurdity of the image it conjures up—that of women without mouths!—might be said to disrupt that homophobia. On the other hand, Aidoo historicizes this response by associating it with the missionary’s characterization of two African girls in bed as “a/C-r-i-m-e/A Sin/S-o-d-o-m-y” (67).²³

After an initial discussion of homosexuality in sub-Saharan African novels, “L’homophilie dans le roman négro-africain d’expression anglaise et française” (1983), in which Daniel Vignal divides the novels he reads into homophobic and nonhomophobic camps, Chris Dunton articulated more nuanced readings of the same and other novels in “‘Wheyting Be Dat?’: The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature” (1989).²⁴ Since for a long time essays that deal with homosexuality in African literature were few and far between, both articles articulate useful readings of often neglected passages, or passages that have provoked homophobic readings on the part of many critics. Dunton, however, who provides a three-page analysis of Marija’s pass at Sissie (431–34), does not mention the novel’s representation of the repression of homosexuality by a European missionary. Although he argues that “Aidoo’s treatment of homosexuality is not unsympathetic” (432), his reading of Aidoo and other novelists allows him to conclude:
What remains conspicuous in all these works is the abstention among African writers, and even among the most searching and responsive of these, from a fully characterized and nonschematic depiction of a homosexual relationship between Africans. . . . [T]he practice of homosexuality within African society remains an area of experience that has not been granted a history by African writers, but has been greeted, rather, with a sustained outburst of silence. Whether this has been carried out within or beyond the limits of the stereotype, the identification of homosexuality with the West has helped defend that silence. An “official” history has concealed the reluctance of African writers to admit homosexuality into the bounds of a different kind of discussion. (445)

In his reading of Aidoo, which leads him to argue that her novelistic representations of African homosexualities are ahistorical, Dunton does not consider the novel’s reference to colonial history. Although he argues that the African novel’s approach to homosexuality produces silences, by failing to read the intertextual connection between history and African literary representations of homosexuality, Dunton creates silences of his own. In his discussion of Camara’s Dramouss, for example, Dunton only remarks that Fatomane “protests angrily that nothing like that could happen in his own country” (426). He fails to point out how the novel situates his comments with Liliane’s reproduction of colonial discourse. Reading Bâ, he writes, “Yet even if homosexual practice is acknowledged in these passages to have been allocated a specialized, legitimate role in traditional society, it still is stigmatized” (423). Again, he does not consider how the novel itself contextualizes this stigmatization.25

Dunton thus provides an important example of how even antihomophobic literary criticism can fail to read between the lines in order to uncover meaning within silences. In so doing, he clearly demonstrates the dangers, within literary criticism, of ignoring history. For it is not the African novel that fails to grant a history to African homosexuality but its critics. Clearly, then, it is not only that literature can help read silences in the writing of history but that history must also be studied by the literary critic (who must also be on the lookout for the ways novels participate in the writing of history) to avoid silencing historical references in the works he or she reads. In contrast to Dunton, Aidoo’s novel suggests that Sissie’s reaction to the possibility of homosexual desire is a product less of African tradition than of the imposition of Christianity that accompanied colonial conquest. Our Sister Killjoy (regardless of any intention on
the author’s part) thus historicizes the deployment of homophobia by colonial discourse and suggests that, rather than homosexuality, heterosexuality was the more significant imposition of colonialism. Aidoo thus provides the historical background that allows us to understand further Liliane’s comments in Camara’s *Dramouss*. Aidoo also draws attention to another important consideration in any discussion of African discourses on homosexuality, the influence of missionaries. Although the novel’s protagonist rejects homosexuality as un-African, the novel historicizes this rejection and suggests that Sissie, rather than defending a precolonial African purity, may actually only be repeating a discourse that she learned from European missionaries. While the African sexualities encountered by missionaries may have been diverse, their response was quite uniform. In her work in Lesotho on mummie-baby relationships (a terminology used to describe institutionalized romantic relationships between women), Judith Gay (1985) describes a similar Christian repression of homosexual or homoerotic behaviors accepted by Africans: “Although informants experienced these relationships as normal and enjoyable, and said their mothers usually permitted them if they knew, girls who had attended mission schools said that the nuns and matrons strongly disapproved and attempted to prevent them” (106).

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

*Cannibals and Queers*

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


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

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

While awaiting his execution, Pierre not only wonders whether he can describe his experience in terms of martyrdom; he also speculates about being canonized. The question of martyrdom, particularly in relation to a death sentence meted out by a polysexual leader, recalls an incident from the annals of history—that of the so-called Uganda holocaust.26 The “martyrs” in this incident were royal pages (Christian converts, beatified in 1920 and canonized in 1964) who were killed between 1885 and 1887 by the Kabaka (king) Mwanga of Buganda (a part of present-day Uganda) because their religion led them to defy his traditional power and because they supposedly refused his homosexual advances. Christian accounts of these “human sacrifices” made much use of the second explanation to demonize the Kabaka and emphasize his bestiality. (“Human sacrifices” thus play a role in colonial discourse similar to that of “cannibalism”; in fact, the two were often linked [Arens 64, 68, 70].) The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes Mwanga in terms remarkably similar to the Chef’s self-description: “The persecution occurred early in the reign of Mwanga, a *vicious, perverse* youth, after his Christian page boys refused to submit to his homosexual advances” (“Uganda, Martyr’s of” 363; emphasis added). J. F. Faupel’s *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs* (1962), which carries the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* of the Catholic Church, likewise demonizes the Kabaka in the service of hagiography, which in this case passes for history.27 What is rarely suggested, however, is that the “martyrs” were killed less because they were defending an African (and therefore natural) purity than because they were the advocates of a Christian notion of purity foreign to the traditions of the Baganda.28 Furthermore, Christianity was actively attacking and destroying traditional African social structures, and the presence of Christian missionaries in Buganda directly paved the way for the establishment of the British protectorate in 1894.

Mwanga’s “purge of Christians,” however, has not only been deployed in the production of colonial homophobia in Catholic discourse; he is also used to justify homophobic nationalism from an anticolonial perspective. To deny the existence of homosexuality in Africa, participants in the newsgroup discussion dismissed accounts of the Kabaka’s pederasty as lies invented by missionaries. The issue was raised by a non-African discussant:29 “But I remember hearing at the time about the canonization of 22 Uganda Saints martyred long ago because they refused the homosexual advances of a Kabaka. Perhaps someone could tell us
whether it is completely false.” And an African participant replied, “It’s commonplace to accuse Negroes of being sodomites. It’s pure Christian propaganda. It was one of the arguments used to justify slavery.” The first participant seemed to agree: “It’s precisely because I was suspicious of Christian propaganda that I wondered whether the account of the homosexual Kabaka was true.” Some western gay scholars, in an equally disturbing move, have used the incident as proof of a precolonial African homosexuality without questioning the colonial implications of the Christian accounts (see Dynes 206).

Although *chef* means “leader” in French, it is also the word used to describe so-called tribal chiefs. This association also links Mudimbe’s Chef with representations of precolonial African rulers in colonial discourse, which often labeled kings “chiefs” because it could not conceive of “advanced” forms of statehood in Africa prior to colonization. Therefore, in conjunction with Mudimbe’s parody of the colonial clichés of Christian discourse, the Chef might be a representation of rulers such as the Kabaka. The novel’s mention of cannibalism might make it easy to demonize the Chef, and homosexuality along with him. In spite of Pierre’s romance with a female guerrilla, however, he questions any way in which the novel might distance itself from the Chef by confessing his own homosexual tendencies: “‘Mon vieux Pierre, me suis-je dit, tu as des tendances bien prononcées pour ton propre sexe.’ La honte m’a envahi” (120) [“My good old Pierre,” I said to myself, “you have a rather pronounced tendency for your own sex.” Shame invaded me]. While he might be read as a personification of the cliché that all priests are driven to pederasty by their celibacy or that they entered the priesthood to hide their pederastic tendencies, Mudimbe suggests that both Catholic priests and revolutionary nationalists can have homosexual tendencies. *Entre les eaux* thus brings back what hagiography and homophobic nationalism have attempted to repress. Whereas the detail of Pierre’s possible martyrdom means that his imminent execution might be said to recall that of the Ugandan “martyrs,” unlike those martyrs, Pierre asserts his affinity with the revolutionary Chef and his homosexual tendencies. By reading the historical incident through Mudimbe, then, one can understand *Entre les eaux* as challenging the demonization of homosexuality through a move not unlike Bugul’s and Aidoo’s returns to queer roots in Africa. In Mudimbe, however, it is the repressed roots of an Africa constructed as queer by missionary discourse that return with such force. Reading Mudimbe through and against history, however, also reveals that one must sometimes look to historical events not represented in the literary texts under analysis to articulate interdisciplinary readings.
in a way that measures silences in the gaps between disciplinary discourses on homosexuality in Africa.

Even more recently, Uganda has continued to be a site of debate over African homosexualities. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is often cited, along with Mugabe, Kenya’s Daniel arap Moi, and Namibia’s Sam Nujoma, as one of Africa’s most vehemently homophobic leaders. Around the time of Zimbabwe’s book fair controversy, Museveni was calling for arrests of homosexuals under the country’s sodomy law. What he never admits, however, is that the law whose enforcement he has polemically called for was written not by Ugandans but by the British colonial rulers. As in Zimbabwe, Museveni’s homophobic rhetoric is not merely discursive, but has resulted in the arrests of many Ugandans (see IGLHRC). In continuing to enforce homophobic colonial laws (not to mention just leaving them on the books), Museveni demonstrates that, when it comes to homosexuality in Uganda, decolonization has yet to begin. Furthermore, like Mugabe, he masks his homophobic attacks with anticolonial rhetoric, even stating that “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights . . . had not been drawn up with the participation of African countries and therefore was ‘not universal to Africa’” (“Uganda to Arrest Gays” 22). Museveni’s implied critique of the enlightenment ideals behind human rights conventions is understandable when one considers that these very ideals were used as a justification for colonialism. The abolition of slavery among Africans, for example, was often paradoxically given as a reason for colonial invasion. Yet this critique is not the one performed by Museveni in his attacks on human rights; for his justifications of state-sponsored homophobic terror rely on the same colonial discourse he pretends to condemn. It is an irony of history, however, that, after the inauguration of homophobic discourse in Uganda by Christian missionaries, resistance to Museveni’s homophobia would first take the form of the Anglican lesbian and gay organization Integrity. On 7 July 2000, the formation of the first African chapter of Integrity in Kampala, Uganda, was announced (Integrity USA). We may also thank Mugabe for transforming GALZ from a small, mostly white organization into a larger one with a substantial black membership.

Queer Interpretations

When GALZ’s exclusion from Zimbabwe’s book fair set off Mugabe’s homophobic campaign, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, winner of the
1986 Nobel Prize in literature, publicly condemned this exclusion in the name of freedom of expression (Patron 22). Even earlier his 1965 novel *The Interpreters* included a major gay African American character—Joe Golder, a concert singer, writer, and history lecturer at the university. In his extensive reading of Soyinka in *African Intimacies*, Neville Hoad writes, “In 1965, *The Interpreters* stages a version of the ‘no homosexuality in African culture’ debate that will follow a series of pronouncements by 1990s African presidents, with much more attention to the mutually constitutive categories of race, gender, and sexuality under conditions of decolonization and postcoloniality” (21). And at the center of Soyinka’s version of this debate is the Golder character. The interpreters referred to in the novel’s title are usually considered to be the following characters: Egbo, a civil servant who has also inherited a position of traditional ruler; Biodun Sagoe, a journalist and former philosophy student; Sekoni, an engineer turned sculptor; Kola, an art teacher and painter; and Bandele, also a lecturer at the university. The novel interwines their personal stories and conversations into a complex structure of flashbacks, which often are not clearly marked. What, exactly, they are interpreting is open to interpretation however. A conventional reading might understand them to be interpreting the role of western-educated intellectuals in postindependence Nigeria. A certain kind of politicized reading might compare the eponymous interpreters with the philosophers Marx criticized for merely seeking to understand the world not change it. Regardless of how one understands the interpretation signaled by the title, however, most criticism excludes Golder from the rank of “interpreter” in spite of his importance and professional activities.

There is no shortage, in fact, of readings (both homophobic and anti-homophobic) that argue that the novel condemns Golder because of his homosexuality. Since one character, the Christian convert Noah, jumps to his death after Golder makes a pass at him, critics often blame Noah’s death on Golder’s homosexuality as opposed to the sexual interdictions imposed by Christianity. Indeed, Egbo himself has such a reaction, as Hoad describes: “In the most powerfully homophobic scene in the novel, Egbo comforts the distraught Joe Golder after the death of Noah by patting his knee. However, upon being told that Golder is ‘queer,’ he experiences strong feelings of contamination and revulsion” (43). The following passage from the novel describes this reaction on Egbo’s part:

As from vileness below human imagining Egbo snatched his hand away, his face distorted with revulsion and a sense of the degrading
contamination. He threw himself forward, away even from the back seat, staring into the sagging figure at the back as at some noxious insect, and he felt his entire body crawl in disgust. His hand which had touched Joe Golder suddenly felt foreign to his body and he got out of the car and wiped it on grass dew. Bandele and Kola stared at him, isolated from this hatred they had not known in Egbo, and the sudden angry spasms that seemed to overtake each motion of his body. (236–37)

When L. R. Early suggests that “Noah is a tragic sacrifice to the fundamental cannibalism of society (represented by Joe Golder)” (172), thereby implying that Golder himself is a cannibal, he not only reproduces Egbo’s reaction but also fully reproduces colonial clichés of the sexually perverse cannibal, the same clichés Mudimbe parodies in the character of the Chef. We might also state that blaming Golder for Noah’s suicide reproduces the very homophobic assumptions—instilled by western Christianity—that propel this character to his death. But such readings of this scene fail to take into account the fact that, in the above passage from *The Interpreters*, for the one character who offers a homophobic interpretation, Soyinka offers two who counter it. Furthermore, in a move that will be repeated in the novel (as we will see below), Egbo performs his reading from behind, “throwing himself forward,” in the direction of Golder’s backside in a way that perhaps suggests that his revulsion is an abjection that attempts to expel what is in fact partially internal, partially a part of himself. Indeed, it is his own hand, the one that touched Golder, that becomes foreign to him. It is little wonder, then, that several critics have argued that Golder is Egbo’s double (Houbein 98; Morrison, K. 756). Since in traditional society Egbo would have been a hereditary ruler, the novel also links Golder (through the “couple” he forms with Egbo) with traditional political structures, as I explain below. In other words, in spite of attempts on the part of many critics to attribute Golder’s homosexuality to his alienation from Africanness due to both his métissage and the fact that, sexually, he represents a Euro-American contamination of African purity, the novel actually connects Golder’s sexual marginality to the most traditional aspect of Nigerian culture, religious practices that predate the advent of both Islam and Christianity. Indeed, it is around the question of how to interpret Golder’s Afrocentricity, I would argue, that his character becomes central to a reading of *The Interpreters* as an allegory of reading or interpretation in which heteronormative versions of Afrocentricity are deconstructed and queered.
Nonetheless, as Gaurav Desai writes in “Out in Africa” (1997), “Gold-er remains to this day in the criticism of this text, the homosexual—and therefore—the accused” (142). In his assessment of criticism on the novel, he adds:

Herein, then, lies Joe Golder’s tragedy—attempting to escape both the homophobia within the African American community at home and the insistent hypersexuality ascribed to the black man by the larger predominantly white American society, Joe finds that in Africa, too, he is no more than a sexual body. Yet, if the possibility of this reading is left open by the narrative, it is one that few critics have pursued. Instead, the critics replay the textual tragedy in their own criticism. (142)

According to Desai, then, most critics fail to understand Golder as the embodiment of the intersectionality of racial and sexual identities. Implied in Desai’s commentary is a suggestion that in spite of the anti-colonial positioning of most Soyinka scholarship, critics often tend to deploy colonial stereotypes about black sexuality, though projected onto (a supposedly white) homosexuality.

Furthermore, critics often argue that, since Golder is only “one-fourth black,” he is ashamed of not being more purely African; for them his inability to become one with his African roots (because he is ashamed of not being more purely African) is a sign of his inauthenticity (Ojo-Ade 748; Jeyifo 176). As Desai also writes, “Joe . . . has consistently been read . . . as Soyinka’s emblem of everything that is wrong with a Western-based, romanticized Afrocentricity” (141). Interestingly, such a reading of Golder preexists criticism of the novel, since Soyinka himself already provides a parody of it in the pronouncements of another interpreter, Sagoe, who most openly mocks Golder’s Afrocentricity: “Look, the truth is that I get rather sick of self-love. Even nationalism is a kind of self-love but that can be defended. It is this cult of black beauty which sickens me. Are albinos supposed to go and drown themselves, for instance” (195–96). Sagoe has even accused Golder of being “mentally white,” to which the latter responds:

“Black is something I like to be, that I have every right to be. There is no reason at all why I shouldn’t have been born jet black.”
“You would have died of over-masturbation, I am sure.”
“You enjoy being vulgar?” (195)
Soyinka has long been a critic of Négritude; his famous sentence, “A tiger does not go around proclaiming its tigritude,” amply demonstrates that he does not hesitate to resort to mockery to get his point across. (Négritude is, after all, an Afrocentric movement.) Neither can one deny that Soyinka often directs a similar criticism against Golder, such is the multiplicity of positions he stages on this question, as on others.

It would, however, be simplistic to take all of this mockery at face value. For there is no one the novel mocks more than Sagoe, who on occasion even seems to border on mental instability. The novel is even harsher on him than Bandele and Kola are on Egbo. Sagoe spends much of the novel trying to convert his pidgin-speaking messenger Mathias to his personal philosophy, which he calls Voidancy, “the philosophy of shit” (71). He is also quite a misogynist, arguing on occasion that women who behave in certain ways should be beaten (67) or raped (105). (By denying Dehinwe, an important female character, the status of interpreter in much the same way that they treat Golder, many critics may be said to share this misogyny.) Few critics, however, would argue that the novel espouses Sagoe’s misogyny or his “voidante” philosophy, yet when it comes to his homophobia, for many critics, Sagoe suddenly becomes the novel’s (and Soyinka’s) mouthpiece. Why not, in contrast, understand the novel as suggesting that, by association, Sagoe’s misogyny and his homophobia are likewise “philosophies of shit”? Furthermore, when critics take up Sagoe’s opinion of Golder, they fail to mention that Sagoe acquired his philosophy as a student in the United States and that older characters refer to him as “that boy from America” (94). Sagoe is thus hardly in any position to defend African purity of any kind. In fact, one might argue that the greatest American influence on Sagoe was the formation of his homophobia.

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

[I]t is precisely in addressing [Golder’s] simultaneous negotiations of racial and sexual identities that Soyinka presents Golder as a profoundly sympathetic character. Golder is an individual who has had to claim actively at least two identities that continually threaten to escape him—he is at once a light-skinned black man capable of “passing” as a white man and a homosexual capable of passing as straight. His choice not to pass—his choice to reaffirm at once two identities not only at odds with the hegemonic order of things but also, more importantly, at odds with one another—is a choice that must sober even the most unsympathetic of readers. Furthermore, Joe’s decision to study African history and his move to Nigeria, despite its potentially romanticizing implications, is presented by Soyinka as his continual attempt to negotiate the different demands placed upon his identities. (142–43)

In an approach to Golder that is profoundly different from the ones taken by many readers of Soyinka’s novel, Desai puts a more positive spin on the way Golder’s racial and sexual identities work in nexus with each other, their intersectionality in other words.

Hoad’s reading of Soyinka’s novel, however, takes issue with the notion that an antihomophobic criticism, especially an anticolonial one, would need to defend Golder against his detractors, both the novel’s characters and its literary critics. In fact, he is the only antihomophobic reader who offers a somewhat critical view of Golder’s behavior; for this reason, I consider his analysis of this character in greater depth.37 He describes Golder as “a very complicated kind of Pan-Africanist sex tourist” (43) and adds, contra Desai, “I do not think the essentially predatory Golder is a figure available for heroic sublimation” (44). Although Hoad qualifies his assessment, like Dunton, with an acknowledgment of how Soyinka complicates the cliché of homosexuality as a white man’s disease—“What is remarkable about The Interpreters’ understanding of Golder’s homosexuality is its refusal of psychogenetic narratives of homosexuality, which must be described rather than explained” (42)—he nonetheless reads him as a symptom of the complications that arise when western constructions of sexuality are imbricated in the flows and exchanges that make up global-
ization. Whereas I will be reading Golder as a personification of queer roots (in the form of a queering of the Afrocentrism he espouses), I view Hoad’s reading as a possible corrective to my own potentially celebratory one. (For, as I pointed out above, none of Soyinka’s characters escapes mockery and/or criticism.) And, although our readings of the character of Golder and the relation between him and Sagoe constitute the area where Hoad and I diverge the most, both our readings serve the broader concerns of our individual studies, Hoad’s focus being on globalization, mine on queering African roots as a discursive strategy. That Golder is available for such diverse and seemingly mutually exclusive interpretations, in fact, might have as much to do with the polysemic nature of Soyinka’s novel as an allegory for precisely the kind of interpretative strategies I have been developing in this chapter as with the “rightness” or “wrongness” of any given reading. As a matter of fact, in the context of his own interpretative narrative, I can find no fault with Hoad’s reading; it is not, however, the reading I perform here.

Regarding the relation between Golder and Sagoe, the latter begins to learn of the former’s homosexuality in the discussion that begins in the passage quoted above during which Sagoe mocks Golder’s Americanness and American notions of racial belonging. At one point in this conversation, Golder asks whether Sagoe is afraid of him:

“Do you think . . . are you afraid I might molest you? Is that it? Do you think I am a homo?”

“Good God, no.” The suggestion startled Sagoe and he did not even think before he rejected it. “You have some rather effeminate mannerisms, but that is all.”

“Come come, be quite frank now.” (199)

As Hoad writes of this passage, Golder actually misreads Sagoe’s statement: “Golder begins by imputing homosexual panic where none has been expressed by Sagoe” (40). Nonetheless, egged on by Golder, Sagoe goes on to deny the existence of a vaguely expressed “perversion” in his own society: “Listen you, it is true I have spent some time in places where every possible perversion is practised, but I do not on that account jump to hasty conclusions. I happen to be born into a comparatively healthy society . . .” (199; Soyinka’s ellipsis). In response, Golder not only points out the homosexual practices of certain traditional rulers but also gets Sagoe to reveal that, in spite of his mockery of Afrocentrism, he shares the claim it stakes to the purity of African roots:
“Don’t give me that? Comparatively healthy society my foot. Do you think I know nothing of your Emirs and their little boys? You forget history is my subject. And what about those exclusive coteries in Lagos?”

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

Although Dunton’s five-and-a-half-page discussion of Soyinka (439–44) does not mention this reference to history (and recall that he is the one who argues that the African novel denies homosexuality a history), it is through an assertion of his knowledge of African history that Golder reveals the fallacies of nationalist denials of African homosexualities. Indeed, at one point Golder says to Sagoe, “I am writing my second book, a historical novel set in Africa” (190). Golder thus carries out a move similar to Aidoo’s in *Our Sister Killjoy*, which, unlike Sissie in her response to Marija, gives a history to matters of sexuality in Africa. We might even take his lead to reread seemingly simplistic representations, such as the one by Camara in *Dramouss* with which I began this chapter, to point out that after the protagonist asserts the absence of homosexuality in Africa it is the Frenchwoman who voices the colonial cliché of Africa’s sexual purity. In so doing, she might be read as the representative of colonial power who embodies precisely the history that Aidoo and Soyinka recall. Like Aidoo’s Sissie at first, one interpreter of Soyinka’s novel (Dunton), like at least one interpreter in it (Sagoe), ignores this connection between the novel and a colonial history of sexual normalization.

Nonetheless, in his reading of this passage, Hoad does not find Sagoe’s statement to be homophobic, at least not in any simplistic way (42). And, as Hoad wisely points out, Golder’s examples may be far from asserting an “authentically” African same-sex desire or sexual practices: “The reference to ‘Emirs and their little boys’ further engages two colonial-era stereotypes. One depicts Islam as a religion of sexual license and a corrupting influence on Africans. In the other, the reference to little boys marks the infantilizing of, and concomitant denial of masculinity to, African men in colonial racist ideology” (41). The same holds true for the second example of same-sex desire that Golder offers: “Both the milieu that Golder mentions in his argument with Sagoe—‘the Emirs and their little boys’ and ‘those exclusive coteries in Lagos’—reveal different strategies of ‘homosexual’ othering for our Bohemian protagonists: the Emirs with the taint of Islam and the
North, the little boys bearing the infantilizing and emasculating charge of racism, and the exclusive coteries as class enemies of sorts” (41). Whereas I would agree with this assertion, I am more interested here in the binary opposition Sagoe asserts between “perversion” (presumably western) and a “comparatively healthy society” (which must be African or Nigerian or Yoruba).

Indeed, in spite of Golder’s qualifications as a historian, it is actually anthropology more than history that provides the interdisciplinary intertext for a thick reading of this passage. In fact, it is possible to understand *The Interpreters* itself as a model of interdisciplinarity in that each of the interpreters interprets from a different discipline, the very kind of queer interdisciplinarity I pointed to at the beginning of this chapter, a model of interdisciplinarity that involves much more than using history or anthropology to clarify or elucidate literary texts and, instead, brings various discourses into confrontation to read them not only for their contradictions but also for their silences, including those of the literary text. For, as in previous novels examined in this chapter, the ethnographic literature does not match up with these allusions on Golder’s part in any simple way. Regarding “those exclusive coteries in Lagos,” I have found only two references to anything similar in either the historical or the anthropological literature, the first of which is in a personal communication by sociolinguist Rudolf P. Gaudio to Stephen O. Murray and/or Will Roscoe:

I met at least two Yoruba self-identified “gay” men in Kano, neither of whom had ever lived abroad, who told me about the many other “gays” they knew in such cities as Ilorin, Ibadan, and, of course, Lagos where there is a “Gentleman’s Alliance” with pan-Southern membership. My Kano Yoruba contacts told me that GA members have private parties at each other’s homes, and that there is a division of Yoruba gay male social circles into “kings” and “queens.” . . . When I asked one of these Yoruba “queens” whether there was any Yoruba equivalent to the Hausa *ya’dan daudu*, he said that no, Yoruba queens had more “respect” than the *ya’dan daudu*, insofar as Yoruba queens keep their outrageous, feminine behaviors a secret from other people. (qtd. in Murray and Roscoe 101)

Of course it might be a stretch to equate the GA Gaudio describes with the “exclusive coteries” Golder mentions; over thirty years separate their mention. According to Daniel Vangroenweghe, the GA was founded in
1989 (223), which does not exclude the possibility of earlier precursors. But if such a connection could be established, Gaudio’s account here offers an alternative to Hoad’s class-based associations. Reading Golder’s reference to the “exclusive” nature of the Lagos coteries as referring not to a socioeconomic elite but to a closed organization in which terms of royalty are used as coded references to gendered distinctions between men who have sex with men would lessen the likelihood of an association between homosexuality and so-called bourgeois decadence or the “class enemies” mentioned by Hoad.

In relation to Golder’s other example, the “Emirs and their little boys,” the novel is presumably referring to Hausa and Muslim northern Nigeria. Here again, the novel seems to draw attention to the very problematic nature Hoad highlights by offering examples that do not match up with the anthropological literature on Nigerian “homosexualities.” Most such literature focuses on the Hausa figure of the dan daudu, to whom Gaudio compares the queens of the Lagos GA in the passage cited above. In “Masculine Power and Gender Ambiguity in Urban Hausa Society,” for example, Gerald W. Kleis and Salisu A. Abdullahi define this figure as follows:

The yan daudu (sing. ‘dan daudu) form a strikingly distinctive social category of males associated with female prostitution in the Hausa-speaking areas of northern Nigeria and Niger Republic. The most conspicuous aspect of the ‘dan daudu’s status is his rejection of conventional masculine identity and adoption of feminine dress, speech, and mannerisms.\(^{39}\) This behavior seems especially incongruous in Hausa society, which insists on a strict separation of the male and female domains. However, on further analysis it is evident that the sharp definition and segregation of gender roles are crucial in explaining the daudu phenomenon. Viewed in this light it becomes clear that, while the daudu is deviant, his deviance illuminates and actually reinforces the boundary between the male and female worlds, while contributing to the maintenance of patriarchal authority. \(^{40}\)

Regarding the ‘dan daudu’s sexuality, Kleis and Abdullahi add, “Many yan daudu are assumed also to be homosexuals, although this does not seem to be the major feature of their social status, which hinges more on their self-identification as females” \(^{44}\).\(^{41}\) As we can see from this anthropological account, therefore, the phenomenon bears some resemblance to that of the Senegalese gôr-djiguen discussed above.

In addition to being associated with female prostitution, the yan dau-
du are often associated with another specifically Hausa cultural practice, the bori cult of spirit possession. In *Horses, Musicians, and Gods: The Hausa Cult of Possession-Trance*, for example, Fremont E. Besmer describes the role of 'yan daudu in relation to the Hausa bori cult: “They appear at public bori performances where they dance in an effeminate manner. ‘Yan daudu do not fall into trance at these events and confine their participation to the giving of small gifts of money to cult-adepts who do enter possession-trance, especially when the spirit, Dan Galadima, is present” (18). What characterizes bori cult practices, however, is their distance from orthodox Islam; they are usually considered to be remnants of pre-Islamic socioreligious practices often in conflict with more orthodox manifestations of Islam in Hausaland. So, while Hoad may be absolutely right on the mark regarding Golder’s association of “the Emirs with the taint of Islam and the North” (41), measuring the silences that emerge when the novel is read in conjunction with the anthropological literature highlights specifically Nigerian same-sex practices, not ones introduced from the outside. Furthermore, perhaps Golder’s examples (as read by Hoad) are related to his problematic embodiment of an Afrocentrism that the novel clearly criticizes.

Nonetheless, I would suggest, the novel hints simultaneously at queer possibilities for Golder’s Afrocentrism and black nationalism and at a queer roots narrative exemplified by this particular return to African origins on his part. This model, in fact, is actually rather diasporic, for in addition to Golder’s profession as a history lecturer and concert singer, he is an avid reader (i.e., an interpreter), and in spite of his desire to reconnect with his African roots, he displays a particular fondness not for African literature but for a specific African American writer: James Baldwin. In fact, Baldwin becomes a focal point in one of Sagoe’s most homophobic exchanges with Golder. In the following passage, Golder discusses a Baldwin novel with Sagoe, to whom he has offered a ride:

Golder: “It’s Another Country, the latest Baldwin. Have you read it?”
Sagoe: “I spell it Another Cuntry, C-U-N-T.”
Golder: “You don’t like it?”
Sagoe: “It reminded me somehow of another title, Eric, or Little by Little! Said with an anal gasp, if you get my meaning.”
“You enjoy being vulgar,” [Golder] said again.
Sagoe: “And you? Why is this lying on the car seat? So when you give lifts to students you can find an easy opening for exploring?”
Golder: “You are trying to hurt me?” (200)
Although Sagoe expresses views shared by many critics, this passage is rarely quoted, perhaps because it would be difficult even for many homophobes to sympathize with Sagoe here (given his vivid imagining of anal sex!) and even harder to argue that Sagoe expresses the view of the entire novel, let alone Soyinka himself. When Femi Ojo-Ade writes, “A homosexual, Golder has a field day making passes at students and colleagues” (748), he echoes Sagoe’s position. Like Sagoe, Ojo-Ade also does not care how often Joe has been robbed or blackmailed as a result of his attempts at intimacy. One might even say that Ojo-Ade has been tricked by Soyinka into playing the role of one of the more ridiculous “interpreters,” more specifically Sagoe.

Sagoe’s literary reference is to a 1858 novel written by Frederic W. Farrar, a preacher, headmaster, and theological writer. It tells the tale of Eric Williams, a well-born and -raised boy sent to board at school while his parents are in the employ of the British colonial system in India. Under the bad influence of some of his schoolmates the virtuous young man spirals into a moral decline, which leads to delinquency (consisting of cheating and bullying, as well as such supposedly equally horrendous acts as cursing, smoking, and drinking!) and, ultimately, his death. The homosocial setting of the all-boys school, however, lends much to possible queer readings of the novel. From the prelapsarian Eric’s being the “loving friend” (32) of the virtuous Russell to the kiss Eric gives Russell on the latter’s deathbed (120–21) to the system of “taking up” (which consists of older boys taking younger ones under their wings and often leads the younger boys “to sink into the effeminate condition which usually grows on the young delectables who have the misfortune to be ‘taken up’” [58]), the novel is ripe with innuendo even as it condemns the very delinquency that invites a campy interpretation: “May every schoolboy who reads this page be warned by the waving of their wasted hands, from that burning marle of passion, where they found nothing but shame and ruin, polluted affections, and an early grave” (69). That the African Sagoe reads the title of this Anglican morality tale (a title that most immediately refers to the gradual nature of Eric’s moral decline) as referring to a penis slowly penetrating a man’s tight anus suggests that, in spite of his professed homophobia, he displays his own talents for queer interpretation. In so doing, he suggests that it is not just the case that Britain imposed Christianity on Nigeria but also that Africans are quite capable of queering that cultural import. In Sagoe’s queer reading of Farrar, therefore, Soyinka not only reflects on the long history of collaboration between Christian missionaries and colonialism around the matter of
sexuality along the same lines we saw with Aidoo and Mudimbe, but he also queers it.

**Queering Afrocentricity**

In an essay published in the New York queer weekly *Outweek* in the early 1990s, “African Roots, American Fruits: The Queerness of Afrocentricity,” Michael S. Smith analyzes the prevalence of homophobia in three examples of Afrocentric discourse—Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968), Molefi Kete Asante’s *Afrocentricity* (1988), and Frances Cress Welsing’s *The Isis (Yssis) Papers* (1991)—with the project of articulating a queer alternative: “Though Afrocentricity may not be anti-white, it is anti-queer. Still that is not sufficient enough reason to reject the theory. . . . There is nothing about Afrocentricity . . . that necessitates homophobia” (31). In that he applies his analysis of Afrocentricity to Cleaver, a member of the Black Panther Party, Smith also suggests that a common logic unites Afrocentricity and black nationalism in their use of homophobia to police a male-centered model of black identity: “It is as if . . . Blackness and/or manhood is reaffirmed and strengthened by taking a stand against the faggot. Gay sexuality, it is claimed, is symptomatic of Black moral and cultural degradation” (31). As a result, homosexuality constitutes an inauthentic mode of being for African Americans, being cut off from one’s roots.

With a play on the literal and slang meanings of the word *fruit* (of which the latter means “queer”), Smith’s title suggests the possibility of a queer Afrocentricity through the image of African American “fruits” growing on trees whose roots are planted in Africa. Smith’s essay, however, does not quite realize the potential of its title; while he criticizes the homophobia of straight models of Afrocentricity, he does little to propose an alternative, queer model. Nor does he mention the counter-discourse to Cleaver’s that arose within the Black Panther Party itself. Huey Newton’s 1970 statement entitled “A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” (reprinted in Teal 169–71) was a manifesto of solidarity among black, feminist, and gay activists and came out of a history of supporting the Black Panther Party on the part of the Gay Liberation Front.

I would argue, however, that the queer model suggested in Smith’s title might even be said to have preexisted the earliest homophobic text
he considers, Cleaver’s, which was published three years after The Interpreters. For, in relation to Soyinka’s allusions to Another Country and other texts by Baldwin, one may tease out an intertext that includes precisely the kind of discourse Cleaver exemplifies. There is, in fact, much for Golder to identify with in Baldwin’s authorial persona: like Golder, Baldwin was gay, and his blackness has similarly been questioned by some Black nationalists; and, like Baldwin, Golder resists being labeled as homosexual or gay (Field 458). Of these, none more bitterly attacked Baldwin than Cleaver, who singled out Another Country in Soul on Ice to make many of the same comments about Baldwin that some Soyinka critics have made about Golder. According to Cleaver, the black homosexual is the epitome of an Uncle Tom:

He becomes a white man in a black body. A self-willed, automated slave, he becomes the white man’s most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks.

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

Furthermore, for Cleaver, Baldwin becomes a very model of the black man who has sold out his race to serve the interests of the white “man” (99); homosexuality, then, becomes a form of racial suicide (102). If, as described in the previous chapter, the Créolistes accuse Europeanized men of bending over for the French, Cleaver accuses Baldwin of bending over for white men by mere dint of being a homosexual, which becomes the ultimate sign of his racial self-hatred. Cleaver calls Baldwin’s African American character Rufus Scott in Another Country “a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man’s pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual fuck him in the ass . . . [and] was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to a white man” (107). Sagoe, it should be noted, is far from the Cleaver we see in this passage. First of all, he distances himself from black nationalism à la Cleaver. Second, he rejects Golder’s desire for an authentic blackness. Sagoe nonetheless shares Cleaver’s abjection of anal sex between men. Yet the novel,
as I asserted above, is far from embracing Sagoe’s views on this matter in any unambiguous way. Although *The Interpreters* was published three years prior to *Soul on Ice*, in other words, and in spite of Sagoe’s sarcastic indictments of Afrocentricity, Soyinka mocks the very reading of Baldwin and his work that Cleaver would later articulate and foreshadows debates about the Africanness or blackness of homosexuality that continue to this day. In short, although Cleaver’s version of Afrocentricity was predicated on turning James Baldwin into a scapegoat, the gay African American writer plays a major role in Golder’s queerer version of Afrocentricity.

Furthermore, *Another Country* is not the only reference to Baldwin in Soyinka’s novel. While Golder is preparing to pose in the nude for Kola’s painting of the Yoruba pantheon, the painter remembers their first meeting:

> Joe Golder, ugly on a stool, confessing, “Do you remember that first time I asked you for drinks? That afternoon when…”
>
> How could he forget? Entering the flat, he was astonished to see Joe lying on the sofa, naked with a scant towel on the small of his back and pretending to read *Giovanni’s Room*.
>
> “It is so terribly hot, isn’t it? What time is it? I was just going to have a bath.” (217; Soyinka’s ellipsis)

Kola, here, actually picks up on something quite subtle in Golder’s use of Baldwin as a coded pick-up technique. And in spite of what some critics have described as predatory or lewd, Golder’s literary references actually seem intended only for those in the know. Receiving visitors in the nude notwithstanding, the lewdness, if lewdness there is, lies less in Golder’s messages or actions than in the interpretations of them that, it must also be repeated, are articulated by a minority of the eponymous interpreters even when Golder and Dehinwe are excluded from this group.

In the above allusion to *Giovanni’s Room*, Soyinka also makes subtle references to the kinds of interpretations hinted at in his own novel’s title. Baldwin’s protagonist, David, a penniless American in Paris who is waiting for money and his fiancée to arrive, rooms and has an affair with the eponymous ne’er-do-well, whom he later abandons. Unable to recover from this abandonment, Giovanni kills his former boss and lover Guillaume after the latter refuses to give him his job back even after tricking with him. The account of this outcome, however, is not presented as an eyewitness one in the novel. “I could hear the conversation” (225), the narrator David comments, which suggests that he conjures
up this conversation between murderer and victim. When David states that Giovanni “is actually facing Guillaume, not conjuring him up in his mind” (226), he contrasts his own “interpretation” of Giovanni’s actions with the supposed realness of the actual conversation (again, as imagined by the narrator). The narrator then imagines that Guillaume conceals his “real” reasons for not rehiring Giovanni: “Beneath whatever reasons Guillaume invents the real one lies hidden and they both, dimly, in their different fashions, see it” (228). Thus, in the narrator’s reading of his past relation with Giovanni (one that also haunts him in the present), there are multiple levels of interpretation that are imagined as being layered vertically, not between the lines but “beneath” them in a kind of “bottom” reading, or reading from the bottom, of exactly the sort that Sagoe performs in his imagining of anal penetration, articulated with the gasp of a bottom, one that also recalls, though from the opposite sexual positioning, Egbo’s reading Golder from behind.

Baldwin’s narrator conjures up Giovanni’s death in a similar way when, after imagining his beheading, he sees his ghost in the mirror (245). The mirror, in which one usually sees oneself, returns an image of the self as haunted. This haunting troubles David, and as his fiancée Hella attempts to resolve issues resulting from this haunting she discovers his secret, his homosexual love for Giovanni. But before this realization, she offers to abandon some of her feminist objections to the gendered hierarchy he wishes to impose in defining their relationship. “I’ll throw away the books” (237), she states, thereby characterizing reading as antithetical to the heterosexual gender norms that would define their marriage. By coming out of the closet that such a relationship would require, David provides a model for a different kind of reading from the one implied by Hella’s rejection of books, a kind of reading I would characterize as queer. And it is precisely such a reading that Soyinka stages in the relation between his interpreters, for Soyinka reveals himself to be a much better reader of Baldwin than Sagoe and perhaps even Golder; it goes without saying that he is a much better reader of Baldwin than Cleaver.

As Desai suggests, the song Golder sings in concert, “I Sometimes Feel Like a Motherless Child,” might also be read as an allusion to Baldwin’s mention of the same song in an essay entitled “Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown,” included in Notes of a Native Son (Desai 143; Baldwin 89), which, like the title essay of that collection, is obviously a reference to Richard Wright’s Native Son, the very novel Cleaver defends against Baldwin in Soul on Ice. Yet in defending Wright’s character, Big-
Ger Thomas, it is actually Cleaver who bends Baldwin over for Wright: “O.K., Sugar, but isn’t it true that Rufus Scott, the weak, craven-hearted ghost of Another Country, bears the same relation to Bigger Thomas of Native Son, the black rebel of the ghetto and a man, as you yourself bore to the fallen giant, Richard Wright, a rebel and a man?” (106). He bends Baldwin’s character over for Wright’s and therefore one writer for the other. Although the “Sugar” is presumably ironic or sarcastic, what prevents us from reading it against the grain as affectionate? And if we compare Cleaver’s reading to Egbo’s and Sagoe’s, whose would it resemble more? Is it a “bottom” reading like Sagoe’s (as I have read him through David of Giovanni’s Room) or is it a reading from behind (a “top” reading”) like Egbo’s?

Interestingly, I am not the first to “mess (around) with” Cleaver in this way; in a reading of him in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1990) that has often been cited in queer black studies, Michele Wallace writes:

If one is to take Cleaver at his word, the black homosexual is counter-revolutionary (1) because he’s being fucked and (2) because he’s being fucked by a white man. By so doing he reduces himself to the status of our black grandmothers who, as everyone knows, were fucked by white men all the time.

However, it would follow that if a black man were doing the fucking and the one being fucked were a white man, the black male homosexual would be just as good a revolutionary as a black heterosexual male, if not a better one. Black Macho would have to lead to this conclusion. If whom you fuck indicates your power, then obviously the greatest power would be gained by fucking a white man first, a black man second, a white woman third and a black woman not at all. The important rule is that nobody fucks you.

Finally, if homosexuals are put down, even though they’re males, because they get fucked, where does that leave women in terms of revolution? (68)

Wallace later adds, “And when the black man went as far as the adoration of his own genitals could carry him, his revolution stopped. A big Afro, a rifle, and a penis in good working order were not enough to lick the white man’s world after all” (69). Although she positions Cleaver as the top in any intercourse he might have with Baldwin (social or sexual), this last passage suggests not only that Cleaver is not quite up to the task of
such a top reading but also that he likes to rim (with Baldwin being first in line to receive such a pleasure).

In “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh,” Robert F. Reid-Pharr goes a bit further by arguing that Cleaver’s homophobia must be read in the context of the prison in which *Soul on Ice* was written, where homoeroticism would have been too close for comfort (104–12). He thereby not only contributes to the queering of Cleaver that Wallace began—admittedly, quite a difficult task—but also suggests that Cleaver’s greater fear is that of becoming a bottom. In fact, if we read Baldwin’s Giovanni as a queering of Wright’s Bigger Thomas (and therefore of Cleaver’s defense of both Wright and his character), is it not more appropriate to see Baldwin as bending Cleaver over in what, according to Wallace, would be one of the most revolutionary nationalist acts of black masculinity? Indeed, in *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*, Magdalena J. Zaborowska seconds the suggestions of both Wallace and Reid-Pharr:

> A misogynist, self-acknowledged rapist, and bombastically anxious heterosexist whose sexual ambivalences have been probed by many critics, Cleaver “lusted” after Baldwin’s books in *Soul on Ice*, on the one hand, and reduced him to his “little jive ass,” a despised fag’s body, on the other. Amiri Baraka, who struggled with his own sexual identification, and undoubtedly many of Cleaver’s Black Power peers similarly defined their aggressively heterosexist, homophobic, and inevitably misogynistic masculinity against Baldwin’s much more complex configurations of gender, race, sexuality, class, and power. (199)

The difference between Zaborowska’s reading and those of her predecessors, however, is that here Cleaver is the one who is “probed,” that is, bent over in the encounter with Baldwin.

To return to Golder, when read through the intertextual web I have just woven, which includes African American writers as diverse as Baldwin, Cleaver, and Wright, *The Interpreters* roots its representations of homosexuality in Africa. Golder, in other words, who has come to Africa to find his roots, also asserts their queer aspect. Indeed, his wish to become blacker is actually granted by Kola, who includes him in his painting of the Yoruba pantheon, for which Golder poses as the god Erinle, defined in the novel’s glossary merely as “an animal spirit” (259). Although Erinle is not the most frequently discussed Yoruba orisha, or divinity, it seems that Erinle’s gender identity is far from clear. In his work on Yoruba religious practices in the nineteenth century, Peter McKenzie includes an entire
section on changes of gender among the orisha (490–96), including that of Erinle: “Another ‘god of stream,’ Eyinle or Erinle was worshipped as a male orisha at Lagos and as a goddess at Otta” (29). Soyinka’s novel as well discusses precisely this kind of gender variability: “[Golder] had said once, You should paint me as one of those Indian gods, hermaphrodite. Kola laughed and said, You’d be surprised, we have a few Gods like that. In one area they are male, in another female” (215).44 Reflecting on this passage from the novel, Kinkead-Weeks writes:

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

In The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (1997), Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that gender as we know it in the West did not exist in precolonial Yoruba societies:

[T]he fundamental category “woman”—which is foundational in Western gender discourses—simply did not exist in Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West. There was no such preexisting group characterized by shared interests, desires, or social position. The cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world. (ix)

She offers as supporting evidence the facts that “Yoruba kinship terms did not denote gender, and other nonfamilial social categories were not gender-specific either” (13), that “most Yoruba names are gender-free” (43), and that “[u]nlike European languages, Yoruba does not ‘do gender,’ it ‘does seniority’ instead. . . . Seniority, unlike gender, is only comprehensible as part of relationships. Thus it is neither rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized” (42). Indeed, “Seniority as the foundation
of Yoruba social intercourse is relational and dynamic; unlike gender, it is not focused on the body” (14). Seniority was patricentric in this patriloc-cal society; that is, wives begin to accrue seniority upon joining their husband’s household, whereas paternal relatives begin to accrue seniority at birth. For example, a husband’s younger sister would have the status of “husband” in relation to his wives and the latter that of “wives” in relation to his younger sister, even when they were older than his sister (unless they were married to him before she was born). In such a context, therefore, does it even make sense to discuss the gender of gods or, for that matter, that of female “husbands”? Oyewumi’s work should thus also lead us to cast debates considered earlier in this chapter about homosexual relations between female husbands and their wives in an entirely different light; whereas most western observers focus on the female couple in “woman-woman” marriages (an expression that would only make sense in a context in which gender exists), any “woman” can have the status of husband in an extended family joined by additional “women.”

Kola’s “reading” of Golder, then, his painting of him into the Yoruba pantheon, or Kola’s reading of Golder’s relation to the African diaspora and its roots in precolonial religious beliefs, associates him with a pre-gender society that would seem as queer to many westerners as it does to Golder. This is also the reading that reconciles him to his blackness, which he has found defective throughout the novel. Right after the passage quoted above in which Kola remembers meeting Golder for the first time while the latter was wearing only a towel and pretending to read *Giovanni’s Room*, Golder at first tries to seduce him (as he tries to seduce Sagoe during their first meeting). In spite of the fact that the novel describes Golder as “ugly on a stool” (217), and although Kola is not interested in a sexual encounter, when Golder takes off the towel, Kola finds him beautiful: “He had a hard-sprung body, truly beautiful. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘my body is fully negro; it is simply an act of perverseness that I turn out mostly white.’ And then he leapt up suddenly ran round to look at the first brush strokes” (217). As Kola begins to paint the orisha Golder is posing for, the latter requests, “For God’s sake, blacken me. Make me the blackest black blackness in your pantheon” (217).

In spite of the fact that Golder’s racial self-hatred prevents him from being able to recognize his own beauty, a beauty that requires the rejection of a politics of purity in order to be seen, it is only upon “returning” to Africa that this beauty can be appreciated in the eyes of an African artist. The fact that Kola paints him blacker than he sees him is not what creates this beauty; instead, his aesthetics relies on an appreciation of
diversity that is also sexual. In spite of wanting to be purer in his Africanness, upon returning to his African roots, Golder asserts that they are actually quite queer by pointing to the local existence of same-sex desires. In this sense, his return to origins parallels those of Ken in Bugul’s *Le baobab fou* and Sissie in Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*. Although Sagoe characterizes Afrocentricity as a form of masturbation (which is, when one thinks about it, a rather queer way to describe Afrocentricity), Golder is the character who points out to Sagoe that he is more nationalistic than he lets on: “You Africans are so damned nationalistic” (194). Golder thus represents a version of Afrocentricity that questions nationalism, an antinationalist nationalism, a rather queer nationalism since, as the slogan goes, “the Queer Nation has no borders.” He reiterates a trope of nationalist discourse (the desire to return to a precolonial Africa), but what he finds there contests the sexual purity that this very same nationalism attempts to enforce.

It is perhaps an irony of history that it took a straight African writer to create a queer model of American Afrocentricity, a model that queer Americans have yet to surpass. As it has been the task of this chapter to demonstrate, such a queer Afrocentricity requires an interdisciplinary quest for queer African roots, whether the “fruits” of these roots are African or American. Given the history of homophobic criticism of Soyinka’s novel (and even, in some cases, antihomophobic criticism that denies a history to same-sex desire in Africa), as well as the curious fact that certain interpreters of the novel echo certain interpreters in the novel, one might also say that Soyinka’s novel constitutes an allegory of literary criticism in that it has somehow managed to get its critics to illustrate what it criticizes. Soyinka’s novel still manages to mock its own readers over forty-five years after its first publication; literary critics who fail to recognize the model of literary criticism *The Interpreters* proposes end up embodying the kind of interpretation it makes fun of. Soyinka thus has much to teach western queer studies, for through him one might say that the roots of the African diaspora are indeed always already queer.