The film that closed out the opening day of the first-ever Queer Kampala International Film Festival (QKIFF) in 2016 was Major!, a documentary about the life of Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, a seventy-five-year-old African American transgender activist, former sex worker, and treasured community leader. The film discusses Miss Major’s activism from the Stonewall Rebellion to her role fighting for the rights of Black trans prisoners. But as the filmmakers contend, Major! is not only a biographical film. It is a documentary that “seeks to create a living, breathing history of a community’s struggle and resilience” (“Major!” 2019). Indeed, as the film ends, various members of Miss Major’s queer community face the camera squarely and defiantly declare, “I’m still here.” Or in another iteration: “I’m still fucking here.” When the credits rolled during the Kampala screening where I was present, there was a huge round of applause. There were a few audible “wows” from the audience, and several members looked back at the screen, raised a fist, and echoed the film’s call for resilience by claiming, loud enough for everyone to hear, “I’m still fucking here.”
As was the case with the Out in Africa Film Festival in post-apartheid South Africa, queer film festivals in East Africa, and particularly in Kenya and Uganda, have been sites for constructing and promoting queer visibility. In both Kenya and Uganda, where, unlike South Africa, the production of queer cinema is relatively minimal and limited to a handful of feature and documentary films, queer film festivals become both an opportunity to celebrate the success of the queer community and occasions where the frustrations of censorship become evident. I begin this chapter, which focuses on the Kenyan music video “Same Love (Remix)” and on Wanuri Kahiu’s feature Rafiki, with a discussion of QKIFF for precisely this reason: understanding films and videos in the regional contexts in which they circulate not only allows us to think about the resistance of the characters within the texts themselves but also forces us to acknowledge the way that even screening queer African stories is often itself a resistant and contested practice.

And indeed the screening of Major! at QKIFF was an inspiring finish to a day that had its ups and downs. The festival began on a Friday afternoon at a hotel slightly outside of the city center. Attendees had received information about the location via WhatsApp, a free messaging application, only the night before. The organizers had originally wanted QKIFF to be held in one of Kampala’s movie theaters. However, the theaters that they approached attempted to charge four to five times what they normally charge for hosting a film festival, making it cost prohibitive. Furthermore, the Ugandan Communication Board, which needs to give its permission for screenings in movie theaters, was charging QKIFF five dollars a minute to preview each film, and there were no guarantees that they would allow the film to be shown after they viewed it. The organizers tried contacting different embassies to see if they would host the festival as a private event. But the embassies were reluctant, for diplomatic reasons, and they said that if they were going to be involved then the police had to know in advance. When the festival’s organizer, Kamoga Hassan, approached the police, he found himself in front of the very same officer who had arrested him and several others in a traumatizing raid during a Pride celebration a few months earlier. On the third night of Pride 2016, police raided Club Venom, where the queer community had gathered for a pageant to crown Mr./Ms./Mx. Uganda Pride. The police, claiming an illegal gay wedding was taking place, locked the gates of the club, arrested over a dozen people, and for more than ninety minutes detained, beat, and humiliated those in attendance, even threatening to release photos of the Pride celebrants, which would further endanger them. The raid on Pride, coming just two years after the passage and subsequent overturning (based only on a technicality) of Uganda’s Anti-homosexuality
Act, was a harsh reminder to the queer community that the state-sponsored threats to their safety—threats that had not existed before U.S. evangelicals came to Uganda in 2009 warning against homosexual recruitment—had not disappeared.1 So when Hassan recognized these very same officers, he and the other organizers decided to find locations where they could hold the film festival underground, avoiding the police and the Ugandan Communication Board altogether. The small hotel where Major! played was one of three locations for the festival.

However, because the hotel was not a venue set up for film screening, the festival organizers had to procure and bring in their own projector and their own screen. But on the opening day when Major! was screened, the person from whom QKIFF was renting a screen was nowhere to be found. When the man did finally answer his phone, he threatened the organizers and told them he knew they did not have the proper permits for their festival and would call the police if they tried to get their deposit back. So the opening day’s films were projected on a white wall. Unfortunately, this meant that the films were quite hard to see, as the wall was scuffed and dinged and the thin curtains in the room did not block out much of the sunlight. With so much light streaming in, the wall’s blemishes were visible through each of the projected images, making evident the scars of all of the structural hurdles the organizers had to face.

Furthermore, the crowd itself was at first sparse. In addition to it being midday on a Friday, potential attendees were nervous. After the Pride raid people in the queer community were feeling especially vulnerable. But by the time Major! was shown, enough people seemed convinced that the police would not raid the festival that there was a fairly sizable crowd of about fifty. People were trickling in, gathering for drinks outside the screening room, and posing for professional photos in front of the QKIFF backdrop. Moreover, once the sun had gone down the white wall worked quite well in lieu of a screen, and the projected images covered up all of the wall’s imperfections. Audience members were messaging the two hundred members of the WhatsApp group (a group that you could join only if you were prescreened by the organizers) and praising the film in real time while it was being shown. In fact, throughout the weekend the audience grew steadily. By Sunday, when The Pearl of Africa, a Swedish-made documentary about a Ugandan trans woman, closed out the festival, several hundred people were in the audience. The closing night venue had switched to Ram Bar, a bar that hosted gay nights every Sunday and had just a few days earlier hosted a fundraiser for the trans rights organization Rainbow Mirrors. The space, in other words, felt safe, and many people were
excited to see Cleo, the subject of the film who was known to many in the community, on the big screen. In the film Cleo talks about her transition and her ability to finally show affection for her husband, Nelson, as an act of claiming and staking out space in a homophobic society. She says, “I so wanted to claim my space.” I read this line, this insistence on existing and surviving and even thriving in a hostile environment, as another iteration of “I’m still fucking here,” which proved to be an appropriate (albeit unofficial) mantra not just for Miss Major’s community but also for the qKIFF organizers and attendees.

This chapter examines two different audiovisual texts in the context of two East African film festivals, the Queer Kampala International Film Festival, which lasted only two years, and the more established Out Film Festival (OFF) Nairobi. The first piece I discuss is Art Attack’s “Same Love (Remix),” a music video that screened at qKIFF 2016 the day after Major! and that I include in a book on cinema, both because of the way it acts as a short film and because of the attention it drew from the Kenyan Film Classification Board. The second film I discuss here is Kahiu’s Rafiki, the first Kenyan film ever to be screened at Cannes. Rafiki was famously unbanned for exactly seven days in Kenya so that it could be eligible for an Academy Award, and though it was then re-banned a handful of weeks before the OFF 2018 festival, where I was in attendance, it seeped into nearly every discussion and set the tone for the three-day festival. Setting my reading of these films next to the festivals in which they both showed and did not show enables me to elaborate and complicate Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt’s (2016, 97) claim that queer film and queer film festivals “courageously turn public spaces into counterpublics.” What I want to explore here is what it means to be “still fucking here,” in light of the censorship and the constant erasure of queer African lives, and what it means to create what the directors of Major! call “a living, breathing history” of resilience that is also a testament of future lives. Ultimately, I argue that these queer East African films and film festivals demonstrate how resilience, when it is delinked from neoliberal imperatives and when it embraces rather than disavows vulnerability, tenderness, and defeat, can serve as a critical tool for political transformation.

Critical Resilience

As a number of scholars have argued, the word resilience has come to take on very specific meanings within the framework of neoliberalism. Though the term has shifted in meaning and has been used to apply to a wide range of contexts, Sarah Bracke (2016, 53) notes that its usage increases exponentially from
the 1980s onward, a period that coincides with the solidification of neoliberal governments and conceptions of the self that prize individualistic competition over social and communal networks of care. Tracing resilience as a keyword, Bracke argues that what the different applications of the word have in common is “the ability of a substance or an object to bounce back and spring into prior shape” (54). The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that resilience can also mean “adaptable, robust, hardy” (54). Thus, whether one is talking about a resilient planet, a resilient economy, or a resilient individual, resilience refers to the ability to recover, to return to an original status or form, and to absorb shock (54). Critics like Bracke claim that within the context of neoliberalism, resilience takes the form of an “ethical imperative” (64): it is not just a neutral descriptive term; it is something that one must figure out how to achieve in order to be considered a good neoliberal subject. Bracke further argues that resilience, as a narrative of self-sufficiency and mastery, dismisses forms of vulnerability and dependence as shameful and as things to overcome rather than to acknowledge and embrace (58–59).

For Mark Neocleous (2013, 5), resilience is a narrative that prepares the subject for the precarity of neoliberalism. “Neoliberal citizenship,” he writes, “is nothing but a training in resilience as the new technology of the self, a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it.” Neocleous also notes that, in IMF (International Monetary Fund) literature, resilience is often promoted as a convenient solution to poverty alleviation. Thus, resilience as an ethos of modern social life tells an individual that he or she must cope, weather the storm alone (or perhaps with a therapist or self-help book), and emerge stronger. Resilience narratives do not call into question systems that lead to vulnerability, systematic oppression, or even environmental disaster because to be resilient, to be a good neoliberal subject, a person (or economy or ecology) actually needs forms of crisis.

In a fascinating book called Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism (2015), Robin James examines the way that this neoliberal ethos of resilience is integrated into contemporary musical practices, structures, and genres. She argues that when Black musical forms get appropriated into mainstream pop—her specific focus is on electronic dance music (EDM)—they are used for messages of resilience, mimicked in the music’s soaring and dropping structures, rather than for messages of resistance. James argues that in popular music like EDM the singer is overcoming something dissonant—she refers to the “Look, I Overcame” narrative that has become the new ideal form of femininity (James 2015, 79). But she argues that this dissonance is no longer
disruptive because it gets folded into narratives about “healthy,” good subjects who have weathered their crises well rather than resisting or disturbing the system. Likewise, resilience does not call for forms of solidarity or intersectionality and, according to Bracke (2016, 63), “thwarts the skills of imagining an otherwise.” According to this line of thinking, resilience is not at all about resistance (a term with which it is sometimes conflated) but about accepting the cards one is dealt and trying to figure out how to play the best hand. Resilient subjects submit themselves to the flexibility that defines late capitalism. By contrast, resistance, at least in its oppositional or transgressive mode, would require challenging the system and questioning why the cards were dealt in that particular manner.

For the queer Kenyan intellectual Keguro Macharia, who is riffing off of Audre Lorde’s poem “A Litany of Survival,” these neoliberal forms of resilience need to be distinguished from survival. “Survival,” he writes in a blog post on the topic of tenderness,

is the imaginative act of pursuing freedom amidst devastation. Resilience says, “I can handle it—do your worst.” Survival says, “I can imagine beyond and work toward practicing freedom.” Survival is also hard work, requiring daily practice. It is exhausting work: to resist being pulled out of your body and out of your unhome, to be present as the object of political homophobia. To imagine yourself elsewhere—in another body, another place, another mind, another spirit. Somewhere less vulnerable. (Macharia 2017)

For Macharia, resilience is both passive and individualistic, whereas survival is an imaginative labor that moves toward a “freedom rooted in care” (2017). He ends his poetic post with the following couplet: “Calluses form. / Is there space for tenderness?” (2017). A statement about the effects of what it means to be the object of political homophobia is here coupled with a question about whether the callus, the skin that thickens and hardens over a wound, leaves room for the type of tender care needed for survival.

What thinkers like Bracke, James, Neocleous, and Macharia object to, and rightly so, is that in resilience discourse social and political crises become naturalized. The resilient subject is told not to worry about the crisis but to be robust and hardy. Part of their critique is that the linear temporality of resilience narratives—first defeat, then a bouncing back—precludes imagining different, nonlinear alternatives, that a fantasy of future mastery replaces the present work of caring with and about others. But what I want to suggest in this chapter is that in the counterpublics and works of art created by queer African
artists, activists, and allies, resilience is not always linear: it does not always dismiss vulnerability in the name of self-mastery but often tries to preserve it, to create space for it. The resilience in these films and in these spaces is, moreover, not one that celebrates robustness as a fundamental good; it is, rather, what I call a critical resilience, a form of resilience that works very much like the imaginative labor of survival Macharia describes, that—critically—creates space for the tenderness beneath the protective callus it needs.

I use the word critical here in two main senses. First, as with critical theory, critical resilience challenges capitalist modernity and seeks to transform society into one that is more equitable and less oppressive.4 In other words, critical resilience may champion individual endurance, but it does so in a way that also challenges neoliberal narratives by seeking to upend hierarchal organization and reimagine social life. Second, I use the term critical as in a critical, or life-threatening, condition: in medical parlance a critical condition is an “uncertain prognosis, vital signs are unstable or abnormal, there are major complications, and death may be imminent” (Suellentrop 2009). In this way, I emphasize that resilience is often critical—essential for survival—and that, at the same time, the line between being alive and not is unstable. Moreover, critical resilience is often itself in a critical condition, with imminent death being just as possible an outcome as bouncing back. In critical modes of resilience, unlike neoliberal ones, death, defeat, and injury are not simply overcome. Most importantly, though, critical resilience is not opposed to resistance but a resource for it. In other words, to look back at a camera or a screen or another human being and declare, “I am claiming my space,” or “I’m still fucking here,” is an act of both resistance and critical resilience.

It would, of course, be tempting to toss out the word resilience altogether. In fact, as Bracke argues, resilience discourse, with its cruel promises of success and rejection of interdependence, comes at a price too high to pay. But resilient is often a self-descriptive adjective used by those engaging in the type of transformative survival work that Macharia, and Lorde before him, discuss, and it is a word that queer African activists and artists are using more and more. Dope Saint Jude, an unabashedly “queer grrrl” Capetonian hip-hop artist, has an EP called Resilient. There is, in fact, an entire Ugandan-made documentary about the Ugandan transgender community called Resilience Diaries, made by the LGBT-focused filmmakers collective East African Video Artists. And at the premiere of the film, Pepe Julian Onziema—a trans man, filmmaker, and program director at SMUG (Sexual Minorities of Uganda), Uganda’s largest LGBTI rights organizations—underscored the idea’s importance to him, stating that he has a tattoo of the word resilience.
Resilience Diaries, in fact, provides a perfect illustration of what I understand to be critical resilience. Throughout the film trans women, trans men, activists, and lawyers make statements that articulate a certain ongoingness and fortitude that are various versions of statements like “I am claiming my space” and “I’m still (fucking) here.” But, at the same time and in the same breath, these subjects also articulate the sense of being in a vulnerable and critical/life-threatening situation. In each of the statements below, robustness and vulnerability coexist (italics added for emphasis):

1) In the opening monologue of the film, an unnamed trans woman states: “We are hated, hurt, and killed, not even safe on our own street. But remember: we are your children, friends, and neighbors. You don’t see us simply because you have chosen not to see us. And we are here and we will always be here.”

2) The human rights lawyer Godiva Akullo states: “Sometimes you just have to grab what it is that you want. And I think that trans people are now doing that. They are saying, we are tired of waiting. We are here and we are demanding. And as long as that spirit continues there is nothing that can hold us back. Of course there are losses that might be made along the way.”

3) The legal scholar and activist Suzan Mirembe states: “Trans and intersex people are here. We have been here for a long time. . . . We need a government that is responsive. . . . We need the police to respond to us as Ugandans, not as special citizens. We need you to go out and investigate when we tell you we have been violated. For the judiciary, we want you to listen. Not with a biased ear, not with homophobia or transphobia. We want you to actually see us as human beings and ask yourself: If any other Ugandan walked in here and said that we have been violated, what would the courts do?”

Here, the subjects insist on their ability to adapt and endure: we will always be here; we are here and we are demanding; we have been here for a long time. And, at the same time, they articulate how exposed they are: we are hated, hurt, and killed, not even safe on our own street; of course there are losses that might be made along the way; we tell you we have been violated. I take these statements together to be indicative of the hard work and the daily, exhausting practice of survival, and also of the callouses that have formed that enable one to continue on. I read these words not as ones that say, “I can handle it—do your worst,” or “Look, I Overcame,” but rather as comments on the way that “we are here and we are demanding” is completely
inseparable from “we tell you we have been violated.” For Bracke, vulnerability and resilience “operate as political opponents.” She writes, “Vulnerability here brings us to the question of social transformation, while resilience further separates us from it, even though transformation might be part of its cruel promise” (Bracke 2016, 70). But I see in recent East African cinema, and in the spaces that filmmakers and activists hold, a critical resilience in which vulnerability and the injuries that accompany it are resources for social change. And, as Judith Butler (2016, 26) writes in an essay in the same volume as Bracke’s, “Under certain conditions, continuing to exist, to move, and to breathe are forms of resistance.” What I wish to demonstrate in this chapter is the way that East African films and film festivals mobilize resilience not to submit subjects to neoliberal complacency but to participate in social transformation and to open spaces where one can continue “to exist, to move, and to breathe.”

In both Kenya and Uganda this type of critical resilience has been especially important amid what Sylvia Tamale (2013, 33) calls “state-orchestrated ‘moral panics’” that, like those mobilized in Nigeria, have been used by governments “as an effective decoy to distract attention from the more significant socio-economic and political crises afflicting society.” And though Uganda’s antihomosexuality laws have received much more international attention than Kenya’s, Macharia (2013a, 284) reminds us that, since 2005, when Kenyans began to debate the Sexual Offences Act, “Kenyans have passed a series of laws and policies that wed national belonging to heterosexuality and that pledge to protect the heteronormative family.” He adds that while these laws are not explicitly anti-queer, they do very much resemble proposed antigay legislation in Uganda by asserting that “the heterosexually reproductive family must be protected against queers” (284). I want, then, to think about how “Same Love (Remix)” and Rafiki, very much like the earlier Kenyan film Stories of Our Lives (as discussed in the introduction to Queer African Cinemas), demonstrate the different ways that existing, moving, and even breathing are crucial to a project that ruptures the suffocating present of these moral panics while also acknowledging what it means to be overwhelmed and sometimes defeated by systems of oppression. Here, then, I return to thinking about Afri-queer fugitivity as a way to maneuver within spaces of confinement (spaces where one does not always have room to breathe) and to simultaneously imagine and create new freedoms. For me, critical resilience names some of these maneuvers and articulates the hard and sometimes defeating work of African, queer survival, work that requires active and imaginative adaptability and robustness as well as the tenderness beneath the callus.
Censoring Same Love in Kenya

The 2016 music video “Same Love (Remix),” a Kenyan remake of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s famous 2012 song by the same name, illustrates the distinction between neoliberal, linear modes of resilience and the forms of critical resilience that I identify at the heart of queer East African counterpublics. In February 2016, the “Same Love (Remix)” aired twice on Kenyan television before the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) tweeted out a link to the YouTube video and declared it banned. By the time it played at the Queer Kampala International Film Festival in November of that same year, it had, thanks to KFCB’s free publicity, gained international attention and hundreds of thousands of views. Both the original Macklemore and Ryan Lewis video and the Kenyan remix video position themselves as activist pieces of art. Comparing the two, however, highlights the ways in which the Kenyan remix mobilizes narratives of resistance and critical resilience that do not always properly align with the neoliberal temporalities that are present in the original version. Like Karmen Gëï, the remake of Merrimé’s Carmen, the remake of “Same Love” rearranges the original Western work and invites a listening for more improvisational, less linear structures and ways of being.

When Macklemore and Ryan Lewis released “Same Love” in 2012, they did so in part to support Referendum 74, which would legalize same-sex marriage in Washington State—since, at that time, the U.S. Supreme Court had not yet ruled in favor of same-sex marriage nationally. The song and music video were both hits and arguably assisted in the referendum’s passage and in shifting the national cultural tide in favor of same-sex marriage in the United States, which was legalized in 2015. And their video makes the promarriage argument much more explicitly than the song itself. It opens with a high-angle shot of a hospital light over a bed, and a baby boy is born to a white father and Black mother. The video follows the life of the boy, who turns out to be gay, as he grapples with his sexuality, finds a (white) partner, and marries him in a church wedding. As the outro plays, the video repeats the high-angle shot of the hospital light, but this time the boy, now an ailing old man, sits in a hospital bed with his husband at his side. The two lock hands as the camera zooms in on their wedding rings. The men have overcome obstacles and live a happy, hetero-chronological life together.

Throughout the music video there are also cuts to archival footage of Martin Luther King Jr. and to other key images of the Black civil rights movement. Therefore, just as the song clearly positions the teleological passage from birth to marriage to death, it also seems to position a teleological passage from the
African American civil rights movement to the contemporary gay rights movement. As Cameron Crees (2014, 79) notes, this works sonically too:

The song opens with a tonal centre of E major and instantly introduces the theme of marriage. The sound is similar to that of a rotary organ sound, which is closely associated with Gospel music and therefore, Christian marriage. It is a wave of sound as individual notes of the chord are difficult to distinguish. Piano notes ring through the opening chord like wedding bells. There is a slight layered effect as the piano notes are individual samples. The vinyl crackle effect is added to the sampled piano notes to create a more vintage sound to the pre-introduction alluding to the Golden Age of Records, which was at the same time as the Black Civil Rights movement during the mid-twentieth century. . . . The pinging metallophones and idiophones play at the close of the song too; when combined with the video, the marriage of the two gay men provides a circularity and continuity to the song, as if the message of the song is everlasting (similar to a fairy tale marriage ending of “happily ever after”).

And Crees suggests that because Macklemore and Lewis center their song on the hook in Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready,” a song Mayfield composed after the 1963 March on Washington, DC, the music itself seems to carve out an overlapping movement from Black civil rights to gay rights.

But Thomas R. Dunn (2016) argues that the references to the civil rights movement in Macklemore and Lewis’s song actually belies a neoliberal and anti-Black agenda that advances a progay marriage agenda by minimizing Black resistance and Black struggles. Dunn points out that the only images of Black resistance that are included in the video are from the 1960s, and, moreover, they are black-and-white images that contrast with the rich color images of the rest of the video, seemingly situating the struggle against racism as a thing of the past. He writes that this “deflects viewers’ attention from both the structural racism that continues to be fought today and more radical forms of black empowerment that follow the 1960s” (277). Dunn also argues that the inclusion of the multiracial main character, rather than highlighting contemporary race issues, winds up foreclosing other forms of intersectionality. And the fact that Macklemore and Lewis, two successful white hip-hop musicians, seem to focus so much on the homophobia of the largely Black hip-hop community also, according to Dunn, adds to the problematic racial politics of the song and video and highlights how homonormative marriage can foreclose radical challenges to neoliberalism and white supremacy.
I argue that Art Attack’s remix complicates the neoliberal temporality that dominates Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s song and puts forth an agenda that embraces gay marriage and provides a radical, antiprogressivist critique at the same time, allowing both to exist simultaneously as part of the ongoingness of queer African resistance. To this extent, it is interesting to look at what the remix keeps and what it dispenses of from the original. Macklemore’s voice and the lyrics he sings are completely gone, replaced by Art Attack’s colloquial rap flow that stylistically matches Macklemore’s rhythmically free-form technique but recounts an entirely different narrative. Gone, too, is the framing device around marriage. Instead of a linear story of birth, marriage, and death rapped by a white, cisgender, heterosexual rapper, Art Attack provides a story about depression, resilience, suicide, activism, marriage, love, and rejection, all (re)mixed together. Progress, in other words, is not inevitable in Art Attack’s version. Rather, time loops and interlocks, and bouncing back does not always follow the original crisis.

The Art Attack collective consists of seventeen East African artists—singers, dancers, movie producers, and socialites, many of whom identify as queer—who came together specifically to make the video, which is based on the life story of one of their members and one of the video’s producers, George Barasa. Barasa is a queer gospel singer and activist who came out on Kenyan national television in 2013, two years after being outed by a newspaper in his hometown. After being subsequently disowned by his family, Barasa moved to Nairobi, where he became depressed and attempted suicide. When he woke up at the hospital after his suicide attempt, he learned that he was HIV positive. Though the news of his status sank him deeper into depression, eventually he was able to, in his own words, “start living life again.” He enrolled in high school and founded an NGO called Out in Kenya. His career picked up when he started performing his music and modeling, and he gradually became a well-known social media activist. The “Same Love (Remix)” makes Barasa’s suicide attempt its framing device and intersperses images of a young gay man, played by the Tanzanian model Dayon Monson, facing himself in the bathroom mirror and overdosing on pills and medications, with images of gay rights protests, gay couples falling in love, homophobic newspaper articles, and clips from television shows like Empire. In this way, the video positions Barasa’s resilience and queer cultural and political gains alongside images that show the difficulty and sometimes impossibility of bouncing back.

The song begins with an intro as Art Attack’s front man, Ken Kabuga, raps over the same soft piano chords and ambient organ sounds that begin Macklemore and Lewis’s “Same Love”: “This song is dedicated to the New Slaves,
the New Blacks, the New Jews, the New Minorities for whom we need a civil rights movement, maybe a sex rights movement. Especially in Africa. Everywhere this goes out to you. I feel you.” After an opening epigraph—“To love and to be loved is to feel the sun from both sides,” a quote from the American psychotherapist and media personality David Viscott—the first images of the video are flags. First there is a rainbow flag being waved in a Pride march and then a South African flag, presumably in reference to the fact that South Africa is the only African country that has made gay marriage legal. The next images are of Kenyans going about their daily lives: one woman leaves her house in the morning; another walks down the street with her head covered and a small backpack in her arms. A man rides his bicycle; a group of teenagers play soccer. Then we see images of Ugandan tabloid newspapers like Red Pepper and Rolling Stone, which publish lists and sometimes even the addresses of what they call the country’s “top homosexuals,” juxtaposed with Pride marchers in Turkey shouting, “Don’t be silent, be heard, gays exist” (figure 4.1). The screen then cuts to black and Kabuga begins singing over the familiar arrangement that Macklemore and Ryan Lewis adapt from Mayfield.

As Monson’s character faces himself in the bathroom mirror, with bottles of medication coming in and out of focus, Kabuga raps, “This is my story yo, my

![Figure 4.1](image-url) Still from “Same Love (Remix)” (2016). A man holds a copy of the Ugandan tabloid Rolling Stone, which publishes the names and addresses of queer people.
sorry story yo, this is me, this is you, this is us, this is the World, World war, Wild war, cold war, love war. . . . Years back I fell in love with a male kid in school. He was cool, he was funny, always true, always shining. My heart told me I was right, I could go ahead and love him, I could go ahead and have him. I could go ahead and hug him.” We see images of Monson, the video’s main character, with his boyfriend, hanging out at waterfalls, goofing around, holding hands, and taking selfies, again intercut with him in front of the mirror, contemplating suicide (figure 4.2).

Though Macklemore’s voice and lyrics are absent from the song, the remix keeps the chorus by Mary Lambert who, like Barasa, is an out, queer gospel singer. And when Lambert sings the chorus—“And I can’t change / Even if I tried / Even if I wanted to / My love, my love, my love / She keeps me warm / She keeps me warm”—the video brings in another couple, Kenyan rapper Noti Flow (Natalie Florence) and her girlfriend. Like Monson and his boyfriend, the lesbian couple walks around Nairobi holding hands, sharing ice cream cones, and hanging out on a park bench in Nairobi’s National Arboretum. When the chorus ends, the story returns to Monson’s character and we see a medium shot of George Barasa himself walking toward the camera in a royal-blue studded button-down shirt (figure 4.3). The lyrics, which echo Barasa’s own experience, describe the moment when the main character comes out to his mother and is disowned. In

**Figure 4.2.** Still from “Same Love (Remix)” (2016). The depressed protagonist of the video drinks in his bathroom.
the video, images of Barasa are intercut with scenes from Fox’s show *Empire* when a young Jamal, the son of hip-hop mogul Lucious Lyon, walks to the dinner table in a pair of high heels. After Lucious throws Jamal in a trash can, bending forward to slam his son down, the video cuts to a match-on-action shot of Barasa collapsing to his knees, completing the downward motion of Jamal. But now Barasa has lost his blue button-down and is wearing a white tank top and carrying two plastic bags, which presumably carry the clothes he takes as he leaves home. And again, the video returns to Monson in the bathroom mirror, linking his depression to the lack of support from his family. But Art Attack also makes clear that the main character’s personal experience is sanctioned by the state. The video shows images of tabloids outing gay people in Kenya and Uganda, as well as images of the Protect the Family march that took place in Nairobi on July 6, 2015, to protest Obama’s visit to Kenya amid concerns (that turned out to be true) that he would ask president Uhuru Kenyatta to recognize the rights of Kenya’s gay citizens.

When Mary Lambert’s chorus resumes, the video returns to the Noti Flow story line, showing her proposing to her girlfriend on a park bench (figure 4.4). The rest of the video alternates images of the two women at home cooking, watching television, and caressing each other in bed, with more overtly political messages. Here, to paraphrase Tina Campt (2017, 32), the quotidian is mobilized as the site of resistance. And at the same time, Kabuga specifically

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**Figure 4.3.** Still from “Same Love (Remix)” (2016). George Barasa (aka Joji Baro).
calls out Uganda and Nigeria for their homophobic laws, saying, “The hate is too much, all in the name of piety.” The song also contains shout-outs to famous queer Africans, namely Binyavanga Wainaina, Joji Baro (George Barasa’s stage name), Brenda Fassie (the famous bisexual South African singer who Barasa says is his role model), and Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera, a Ugandan activist who founded the queer publication *Kuchu Times* and the organization Freedom and Roam Uganda. The visual juxtaposition of these political statements with the everyday acts of Noti Flow and her girlfriend going about their daily lives is echoed in Art Attack’s lyrics: “It’s a bedroom struggle and also a street struggle.”

As the song ends, Kabuga’s rapping is layered over Lambert’s vocals. Kabuga raps, “Love is patient / Love is kind / Love is selfless / Love is faithful / Love is full of hope / Love is full of trust / Love is not proud / Love is God and God is Love,” while Lambert softly repeats the lines and melody from the chorus, “Love is patient / Love is kind.” But though the lyrics are hopeful, the image returns to Monson’s character taking his life and collapsing on the floor with his head hanging over the threshold of the bathroom door. The final shaky image, the only one shot with a handheld camera, is a suicide note he leaves: “I am tired. Tired of the pressure. Tired of the pain. Tired of the stigmatization. Tired of the insults and the attacks and the hate. Goodbye world. Mummy, I love...”
you. Wish I hadn’t been born this way. Bye.” The shakiness of the image of the note and the moments of silence that follow the end of the song speak to the often invisible, destabilizing effects of sanctioned homophobia. The resilient, happily-ever-after ending of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s original hip-hop hit is completely reworked.

Because the video and the lyrics of the remix are so different, because they are framed around a suicide rather than a marriage, Art Attack’s version foregrounds all the ways in which resilience is sometimes impossible. Robin James, in fact, argues that one of the ways to counter neoliberal narratives of resilience and overcoming is through death and melancholy. She writes,

When power demands that you live, that you resiliently make more life for yourself, and, in turn, for society/capital, death seems like the obvious way to fight back. Or, alternatively, if power banks on your death, if it abandons you to die, what happens if you don’t die in the right way, at the right time, if you don’t decay at the rate anticipated? If resilience is a biopolitical technique for investing in life, melancholy is a dysfunctional, queerly biopolitical method of investing in and intensifying “death” (i.e., hegemonically unviable practices). (James 2015, 11)

The limits of such a strategy are, in many ways, obvious. Death and melancholy are not exactly inspiring options, and although intellectually and even artistically they might have some merit, they are not necessarily the most helpful emotional states for queer activists, queer subjects, or any other vulnerable groups that are trying to claim their space and lead functional, livable lives. And, indeed, it is understandable why queer Africans, still very much entrenched in fighting for their rights and their daily survival, do not typically espouse the type of queer negativity and antirelational stance that many Western queer theorists and academics take. This is why Art Attack’s video, despite the suicide, is not about, to borrow Mari Ruti’s (2017) phrasing, “the ethics of opting out.” In the video, Noti Flow and her girlfriend get engaged, ignoring Kenya’s antihomosexuality laws, and create a happy and erotic home life together. And Barasa’s own story about finding life again after feeling that “his soul was crashed” is echoed in the video too. Even the epigraph of the video comes from David Viscott, an American psychiatrist and radio show host who was known for writing self-help books and whose last book was called Emotional Resilience. Indeed, there is much in the video and the song that encourages one to overcome and triumph even though the video acts as a documentary of hate, hurt, violation, and loss. Moreover, as Adriaan van Klinken (2019, 78) argues in his reading of the video, in the Christian and pan-African
discourses that the video adopts, death is seen not as an end but as “beginning
a new (after)life.” Van Klinken likewise warns against reading the suicide in
“Same Love (Remix)” as a queer injunction to give up on the future and in-
stead reads the video as calling attention to the problem of suicide by queer
young people “who are not recognized as fully human in the first place” (78). By detrivializing these deaths, van Klinken argues that the video opens up queer life to infinite possibilities, including divine love. Art Attack does not, therefore, champion melancholy as a way of resisting neoliberal resil-
ience, nor does it offer a model for overcoming, bouncing back, or political
progress.

What I am suggesting is that the “Same Love (Remix)” music video per-
forms the type of critical resilience I describe above, a way of stating, “I’m
still fucking here,” that acknowledges the injustices of the system and the
pain that persists even when one does bounce back. Rather than investing in
and intensifying death as James suggests, this strategy—and it is oftentimes
strategic—understands that damage and survival or brokenness and resistance
are interlocked, an argument made brilliantly and much more elaborately by Darieck Scott in his book Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination. Scott argues that, typically, Black resistance thinkers—he specifically discusses Frantz Fanon and the way that Black Power intellectuals took him up—see the past as “an obstacle to imag-
ing and building an empowered political position capable of effective libera-
tion politics” (D. Scott 2010, 4). But Scott argues that there is another strategy
to carry forward a project of resistance: to examine the deleterious effects of slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism, not just to demonstrate that they
were injurious but also to see that the injuries themselves can serve as tools or
models of political transformation (9). In a wonderful reading of Scott’s work,
Robert McRuer (2018, 100) highlights Scott’s attention to woundedness and
muscular tension in Fanon’s writing. McRuer writes, “Wounded, tense mus-
cles, in Scott’s readings of Fanon, are indicative and anticipatory, they indicate
what colonialism and war have done and they anticipate an active resistance,
by those same bodies.” Scott, in other words, focuses on the potential—the
muscle that is tensed and about to activate—that Fanon sees in his wounded
Algerian patients. And, for Scott, this active potential in brokenness or wound-
edness affords a liberating escape from linear time. Scott writes, “I find gestural
and postural possibilities, which loop (rather than align or stick on a pyramid)
the past, present, and future, an approach to time that I call interarticulated
temporality; a state of death-in-life and life-in-death characteristic of the para-
dox of a being that experiences utter defeat yet that is not fully defeated”
(2010, 26). To me, these “gestural and postural possibilities” recall the calluses that Macharia writes about because they anticipate a future that is paradoxical, that is hardened but also protective of tenderness, that contains vulnerability but does not seek to disavow it.

And, in fact, when “Same Love (Remix)” screened at the Queer Kampala International Film Festival and Barasa was there for a postscreening panel, he made a point to discuss how the suicide of the main character in the video followed rather than preceded the image of Wainaina (whose coming out signified a momentous political triumph) and the blissful love life of the lesbian couple. Gains in the movement, he noted, are sometimes followed by depression, just as depression or pain is sometimes followed by a win. I read this as the very type of “interarticularized temporality” or “state of death-in-life and life-in-death” that Scott finds hidden in the margins of Fanon’s thought. Or to put this differently, Barasa was painfully aware of the way that pain loops, and the remix—based on his life—emphasizes looping time over any narrative of defeat or overcoming.

In this way, “Same Love (Remix)” has more in common with Mayfield’s 1965 “People Get Ready” than it does with Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s version of the song. In “People Get Ready”—one of the first gospel crossover hits in the United States—the people, collectively, are taken along for an uplifting (though not soaring or triumphant) ride to and through the civil rights movement:

People get ready, there’s a train a-comin’
You don’t need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket, you just thank the Lord

As I argued above, the Macklemore and Ryan Lewis video, with its particular emphasis on the (gay) marriage plot, shows the protagonist overcoming homophobia and parallels this triumph to the way in which the Black civil rights movement supposedly overcame racism. But the melody and timbre of the song align themselves more with Mayfield’s humming diesels—more steady and repetitive than soaring and dropping—as well as with Lambert’s warm and haunting self-acceptance when she sings, “I can’t change even if I wanted to,” a chorus that is restrained and assured rather than triumphant. And though “People Get Ready” was inspired by the 1963 March on Washington, it was also written in the wake of the JFK assassination and the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four young girls. Therefore, though the train that is a-comin’ is symbolic of the social change
that has, in a sense, already left the station, Mayfield’s song channels the way that pain is always intertwined, or looped, with (divine) faith in potentiality. And as Crees writes, Mayfield’s looping is repeated in “Same Love.” But whereas the Macklemore and Lewis “Same Love” video repackages Mayfield’s restrained message into one of triumph, in Art Attack’s version, which keeps Lambert’s chorus and Mayfield’s structure, messages of hope are looped with notes (musical and handwritten) about being too tired or traumatized to move forward.

Moreover, whereas the Macklemore and Lewis version can be credited with shifting national sentiment on same-sex marriage, the legacy of “Same Love (Remix)” is itself much less unidirectional. Several members of Art Attack, including Monson and Barasa himself, have since fled Kenya and sought refugee status in Canada after being physically attacked or threatened. But at the Kampala Film Festival, Barasa also made a point that the “defeat,” or censorship, of the video itself was, in a way, not fully a defeat. Though the Kenya Film Classification Board’s decision to ban “Same Love (Remix)” prevented it from being shown on Kenyan television, it brought national and global attention to the video, enabling queer audiences in Africa and across the diaspora to see their lives and struggles reflected in popular art, perhaps for the first time. Moreover, the \textsc{kfcb} made Art Attack, whose seventeen members were all threatened with arrest, central to larger debates about online media and censorship. When the \textsc{kfcb} banned the video from television, it also tried to pressure Google to pull it down from YouTube. Ezekiel Mutua, the \textsc{ceo} of the \textsc{kfcb}, argued that because the video depicted graphic scenes of same-sex couples it could be classified as pornography and as promoting homosexuality.

At a media briefing Mutua stated, “Kenya must not allow its people to become the Sodom and Gomorrah of the current age through psychological drive from such content. We have written to Google to remove the video from their platforms. We expect they will do it within one week from now to avoid further violation of the law” (quoted in Murumba 2016). Though Google refused to take down the video, they did add a content warning that appears only in Kenya. Kenyan viewers, or at least those with a Kenyan \textsc{isp}, must click “continue” before they watch a video that has “been identified as potentially inappropriate.” In response to the \textsc{kfcb}’s attempt to regulate YouTube, which also led to the board’s intensification of internet censorship, Art Attack added their own, sarcastic content warning that appears below the video on the YouTube page for viewers everywhere. It reads, “warning: This video contains imagery and a message that may be unnecessarily offensive to some.” Art Attack’s use of the word \textit{unnecessarily} underscores the point of the video, which is to make homosexuality seem everyday and ordinary and to make homophobia seem cruel
and inhumane. And, to a certain extent, Mutua’s crusade against the video helped to spread the message, since about 175,000 people clicked the YouTube video in the three-week period after it was banned (“Google Refuses” 2016). It also brought the video to the attention of Kamoga Hassan and the other organizers of the Queer Kampala Film Festival, who brought Barasa to Uganda to screen his censored but readily available video to an underground film festival and to an audience who, even after experiencing the traumatic raid on their Pride celebration just months earlier, risked their safety to attend the festival and to insist on “still being here.”

Unfortunately, though 2016 QKIFF was a huge success, especially considering the suppression of the 2016 Ugandan Pride, the following year QKIFF was not so fortunate and, in a sense, the complicated fallout from the “Same Love (Remix)” video seems to have been repeated for the festival at which it premiered. For the 2017 festival, the QKIFF organizers had found a new space, a hip, mixed-use warehouse space called Design Studio. Learning their lesson from the previous year, they built their own screen and spent hours covering all the holes in the warehouse roof where light might shine through and dilute the viewing experience. I was again in attendance at the opening night, which was a festive atmosphere with a huge crowd, food, soft drinks, and live music. But the next afternoon Hassan received a tip that the police were coming. He had just enough time to pack up his equipment and to erase evidence of any queer film festival. The organizers went into temporary hiding and were devastated, suspecting that someone from the community had informed on them. They canceled the rest of the festival and showed a few of the films weeks later at a private residence. Hassan has said that he will regroup and think about how to hold future festivals, but in the immediate aftermath of the 2017 festival he was, like the main character of “Same Love (Remix),” too tired and traumatized to move forward. Indeed, he was in a very critical condition.

“How Do We Save Our Joy?”

Unlike the Queer Kampala International Film Festival, run by independent filmmakers on a shoestring budget, the Out Film Festival (OFF) Nairobi has enjoyed institutional support and has been largely ignored by the Kenyan government even as it grows bigger and bigger each year. It began in 2011, with Johannes Hossfeld of the Goethe Institute and the queer writer and journalist Kevin Mwachirio as the organizers. The Goethe Institute has provided the screening venue since then and, because it is a private cultural center (not run by the German government, though it does receive German state funding), it
enjoys relative autonomy. The festival has received financial support over the years from a range of African and international NGOs and has been able to make screenings free to the public. They also do HIV screenings, throw parties, and, beginning in 2015, organize the panel discussions that have become, according to some, the heart of the festival. Moreover, the organizers of OFF have found a legal way to obviate the Kenyan Film Classification Board: the festival is set up as a private film club for members age eighteen and older. Since the event is private rather than public, the government does not need to prescreen movies, and in order not to draw much attention to themselves the organizers keep the advertising of the festival to a minimum, circulating posters mostly in queer-friendly spaces. However, the festival may still not screen banned or illegal films, which means that it has been unable to screen Kenya’s two queer feature films, *Stories of Our Lives* and *Rafiki*.

At the November 2018 Out Film Festival Nairobi, the absence of *Rafiki* was particularly palpable. When it was announced in April 2018 that the film would be screening at Cannes, Mutua initially praised and congratulated the director Wanuri Kahiu on public radio. But a few days later he did an about-face, banning the film that, in an April 27 tweet, he said went against “the law, culture, and the moral values of Kenyan people” and announced that anyone in possession of the film would be breaking the law. Kahiu herself was furious about the ban. She had followed proper procedures, learning from some of the mistakes made by the *Stories of Our Lives* crew who did not get proper permits. She submitted the script for preapproval to the KFCB (though Mutua claims that the script was altered and not properly resubmitted) and had police on set during the filming as required by law. She believed that the film should be viewed by mature audiences and had been hoping for and expecting an 18-and-over rating. When Mutua banned the film outright, Kahiu decided to sue the government both as a matter of principle and so that her film could be eligible for the Academy Awards, which requires entries to have screened in their home country for at least seven consecutive days. On September 21, 2018, Justice Wilfrida Okwany lifted the ban on *Rafiki* for exactly seven days, stating, “One of the reasons for artistic creativity is to stir the society’s conscience even on very vexing topics such as homosexuality” (Bearak 2018). Though the queer community objected to being called a “vexing” topic, there was much jubilation around the announcement. Theaters in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu began to screen the film and kept needing to add more and more screenings to meet demand. By the end of the week, it had become the second-highest grossing Kenyan film of all time, and distributors say that the rush and excitement at the cinema had only been felt before at the *Black Panther* release earlier that
same year ("Rafiki Tops" 2018). Though audiences at some screenings of the film, especially those screenings later in the week that were not filled with a primarily queer audience, snickered at some of the more intimate moments, most queer people writing, tweeting, or talking about the film felt that it was a revolutionary moment. As Holly-Nambi says in her review of the film on the AfroQueer podcast, “When the film ended, a large part of the audience stayed until the very last credit rolled. Some people were immobile because they were so moved, some because they wanted to see all the Kenyan names that were behind the production of this film, and some people, like me, sat still because they just didn’t want this moment to be over. It really felt like a moment in history. The first time a queer Kenyan film has been shown in Kenyan cinemas” ("Rafiki Uncensored" 2018). Unfortunately, when the seven days were over, on September 30, the film was rebanned.

The 2018 Out Film Festival Nairobi was held on November 7, just five and a half weeks after the seven days of Rafiki ended. But the energy and momentum of the film were still demonstrable and, in a move that was deliberately meant to provoke and taunt Mutua and the KFCB, an image of a Rafiki ticket stub was used for the festival’s promotional poster (figure 4.5). The curators of the 2018 festival, Jackie Karuti and Muthoni Ngige, addressed this decision in the opening paragraph of the festival’s program. They wrote,

On behalf of the Out Film Festival Nairobi, we would like to congratulate the cast and crew behind the film Rafiki; the first Kenyan feature film to compete at the prestigious Cannes film festival. . . . We had all the plans to screen and cheer Rafiki at off this year but unfortunately we cannot. Fortunately for us we were all recently treated to numerous screenings thanks to the timeless efforts of people who ensured the temporary lifting of its ban for seven days. When the kickass team at the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) bought out the entire theater one afternoon and invited us to go watch for free one of us saved their ticket as future testament to a momentous ruling and gathering. We hereby present it to you as our Off 2018 poster.

The ticket on the festival poster therefore occupies a fascinatingly looped temporality. It is at once an archival reminder that this momentous event did occur; an indication of the present state of the ban, which substitutes the ticket stub for a promotional photo of the film that surely would have been on the poster if Rafiki were showing; and, as Karuti and Ngige write, a “future testament.”

What they mean by a future testament becomes clear in the third paragraph of the program, when they discuss the film that they have chosen for the
opening night, Deepa Mehta’s 1996 romantic lesbian drama *Fire*. When *Fire* was screened in India, cinemas in Bombay, Delhi, and Calcutta were attacked and vandalized, and the film was pulled from theaters. But Mehta, other activists, and members of the film community petitioned the government not only to rerelease the film but also to ensure moviegoers’ security. Eventually, *Fire* was rereleased with no incidents of violence. By putting *Fire*, which Karuti and Ngige call “a film ahead of its time,” in the coveted opening slot at OFF 2018, which otherwise would have gone to *Rafiki*, the curators intimate that *Rafiki* too will again have its day. But *Fire* was chosen not only because its backstory overlaps with *Rafiki*’s but also because the Indian Supreme Court, just a few weeks before *Rafiki*’s temporary unbanning, decriminalized homosexuality and declared, “History owes an apology to the members of the community
for a delay in ensuring their rights” (Safi 2018). India’s ruling was especially important for Kenyans who, at the time of off, were less than one hundred days away from a ruling on their own decriminalization case, though the original decision date, which had been scheduled for February 2019, was pushed back to May 24, 2019, when a three-judge panel ultimately ruled against decriminalization. But at the time of off 2018 there was much hope attached to what was referred to on social media as #Repeal162, as Section 162 of the penal code makes consensual sex deemed to be against the order of nature a criminal offense. And, in fact, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (nglhrc), the organization that bought out the screening of Rafiki on the day that the “future testament” ticket was acquired, was also the main plaintiff in the case. Because Kenya’s and India’s penal codes are both products of British colonial rule—the British imported into Kenya elements of the 1860 Indian Penal Code that outlawed homosexuality—the win in India held particular significance for nglhrc’s case. It became harder for gay-rights opponents to claim that decriminalization was a Western phenomenon in the wake of the India ruling. The nglhrc-sponsored Rafiki ticket on the festival poster is therefore a future testament not only in that it would, at a later date, remind queer Kenyans of the historical nature of the Rafiki screenings but also in the sense that it anticipates a future freedom that Fire and India embody. If, as Darieck Scott argues, past injuries can serve as models of political transformation, then the Rafiki ticket stub, which marks the absence of the film itself, is a way of understanding defeat as political potential.

My reading of Rafiki also underscores this imbrication of defeat and political potential and demonstrates the way the film is infused with an anticipatory hope that is deeply intertwined with a vulnerability and broken past it never tries to disavow or overcome. Rafiki is based on Monica Arac de Nyeko’s Caine Prize–winning short story “Jambula Tree.” Kahiu was drawn to the story because she was looking for hopeful African love stories, stories that would showcase the joy, frivolity, and tenderness of young Africans falling in love with each other. “Jambula Tree” is a love story about two Ugandan girls, Anyango and Sanyu, who are from the same Kampala housing estate. However, the girls are separated after they are caught, by the neighborhood gossip Mama Atim, in an intimate moment under a purple jambula tree and Sanyu is sent off to London. The story begins when Anyango hears of Sanyu’s return: “I heard of your return home from Mama Atim our next door neighbour. You remember her, don’t you? We used to talk about her on our way to school, hand in hand, jumping, skipping, or playing run-and-catch-me” (Arac de Nyeko 2013, 91). Anyango then recounts the girls’ extended courtship in the Kampala housing estate where
many of the economically struggling characters are trapped in loveless relationships and where soldiers in green uniforms have become the new order. In the story, Anyango anticipates Sanyu’s return, telling Sanyu where to find her and what to expect to see in the neighborhood that has not changed much at all. Though the reader never knows what becomes of the two lovers (the entire story is narrated the day before Sanyu’s arrival), the ending is, almost literally, ripe with possibility. Anyango describes the picture of the purple jambula tree she has hanging in her room and says: “Sanyu, you rise like the sun and stand tall like the jambula tree in front of Mama Atim’s house” (105). Anyango is therefore anticipating a moment that may very well be joyous but that will nevertheless be unable to erase past pain. The ending, to borrow Darieck Scott’s verbiage, is full of “gestural and postural possibilities” that speak both to defeat (i.e., the neighborhood that has not changed, the jambula tree where they were caught) and to the fact that Sanyu’s return indicates a future that “is not fully defeated,” that might “rise like the sun.”

The film Rafiki follows both the basic plot and the “gestural and postural possibilities” of “Jambula Tree”: two girls, here Kena and Ziki, fall in love and are discovered by Mama Atim, with Ziki subsequently sent off to London. However, Kahiu makes a number of changes and additions to the story. First, the film is called Rafiki, which means “friend” in Swahili. During the shooting of the film, Kahiu and the crew did not want to draw attention to the fact they were making a lesbian love story. Though the script was in fact approved by the Kenya Film Classification Board before filming began, and police were on set as was required by law, they still wanted an inconspicuous title that would not be linked to the short story. They settled on Rafiki, which, as Kahiu has stated in several public appearances and interviews, is how queer Kenyans need to introduce their partners in a society in which it is not yet safe to name their love directly. The title, then, has a double meaning: it both names the special friendship between Kena and Ziki and names the fact that the real nature of their relationship needs to be hidden.

The second major change that Kahiu made to “Jambula Tree,” which begins with the return of Sanyu and then tells the backstory, is to make the structure of Rafiki linear. Kahiu’s film begins with the girls meeting and then falling in love, and it ends with the return of Ziki. But because, unlike in the original short story, the return is not known in advance, Kahiu finds other ways of keeping the hopeful yet hesitant expectation alive through a vibrant soundtrack, beautiful costuming, lighting, and color palettes. Kahiu also takes the very Ugandan short story, full of references to specific Kampala neighborhoods and Ugandan foods, and makes it a very Kenyan film. The soundtrack is performed almost
entirely by Kenyan women under the age of thirty-five, and the setting and speech patterns are very Kenyan, with the characters often using Sheng, Nairobiian slang that combines Swahili and English with a mixture of words from other local languages like Kikuyu and Luo. There are also, as Holly-Namibi points out in her review, recognizable Kenyan fashion labels like Chili Mango and Africa Suave and art by the famous Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu. These inclusions are important not only because the film showcases Kenya’s thriving creative community but also because it implicitly makes the argument that the queer love story is indeed a Kenyan one and resists any claims that it is un-African.

*Rafiki* is Kahiu’s fourth film and with it she seems to have cemented her status as one of Kenya’s most notable filmmakers. As Robin Steedman (2018) remarks, Nairobi-based female filmmakers like Kahiu, along with Judy Kibinge, Anne Mungai, Hawa Essuman, and Ng’endo Mukii, have become some of the most successful and acclaimed filmmakers in Kenya’s small but growing film industry. Therefore, despite the fact that the Kenya Film Commission has focused on selling Kenya as a destination for non-Kenyan filmmakers rather than developing its own industry, filmmakers like Kahiu and her cohort have made use of Nairobi’s vibrant creative scene and media market to deliver films that are putting twenty-first-century Kenyan cinema into a global spotlight (Steedman 2018, 316). Though Kahiu has worked in several different genres, her contribution to this creative scene has slowly transformed into what she calls Afro–Bubble Gum art, “fun, fierce, and frivolous” art that counters the images of poverty, sickness, and destitution that are so often associated with Africa. To her, then, the idea of being frivolous and full of joy is indeed political, and *Rafiki*’s mise-en-scène reflects this politics.

The film begins with off-screen ambient sounds of Nairobi’s cityscape, as the screen lists funders, the film’s title and director, and the obligatory acknowledgment of “Jambula Tree.” After a few seconds, Muthoni Drummer Queen’s pulsing hip-hop song “Susie Nomo” begins to play. But the first image is not an establishing shot of Nairobi or Slopes, the middle-class neighborhood where the film takes place. Rather it is a tightly framed shot of eighteen of the windows of a two-tone pink apartment building, and it announces not the characters themselves but the main (bubblegum-influenced) color scheme of the film. The camera then cuts to three other images, all from different angles, of the same pink building before continuing with the opening credits. Throughout the opening montage, as “Susie Nomo” continues to play, whimsical drawings of the film’s cast and crew are interspersed with images of the neighborhood’s residents. We see Kena in one of her signature coral-colored V-neck T-shirts skateboarding down the street, kids playing soccer, girls hula-hooping, a man
shaving, and friends playing checkers. And there are also many quick cuts to close-ups of the objects that make up daily life: knives being sharpened, peppers being chopped, bananas for sale, a sewing machine at work. Like “Same Love (Remix),” Rafiki begins by announcing that its story is very much a part of Nairobian everyday life. In this sense, Rafiki registers Nairobi as a city that, as Eddie Ombagi (2018, 106) argues, “is structured to allow queer, queering and queered flows by its queer users.” Critics have compared Rafiki to early Spike Lee films like Do the Right Thing, but the fast-paced introduction recalls films like City of God and Slumdog Millionaire that capture the beauty and intensity of city life in the global South, and the whimsical depiction of a youthful African neighborhood has much in common with Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Cameroonian film Quartier Mozart. But the “fun, fierce, and frivolous” color palette of the film is in a class of its own. Kahiu takes the purple of Arac de Nyeko’s jambula tree and the green accents in the original short story and blends them into a palette dominated by shades of pink, pink-orange, and red, accented not only by rich greens but also by bright blues and yellows.

The first half of the film is a joy-filled girl-meets-girl love story. Kena—who hangs out with a group of guys, including Blacksta, the boda boda (motorcycle) driver, who thinks she would make a good wife—sees pink-haired Ziki across the street with her friends. They exchange coy smiles but no words (figure 4.6). Since they move in different circles and there is no script for how they would approach each other, they communicate initially through tentative body language. As Neo Musangi (2014, 50) writes of their own gender-bending performance art in the streets of Nairobi:

There is a language to be found in a visible silence. To stand in the streets and draw attention to oneself is a possible—but not the only—language. It is one among many. It is to tell one’s story without uttering a word. It is also to own one’s pain and to immerse oneself into the matrix of danger. It is to put oneself “out there” as it were. It is to reclaim one’s place in both time and space.

And, likewise, Kena and Ziki, visibly silent, put themselves “out there,” searching for a new language to express their desire within a matrix of danger, to reclaim a time and space that might be otherwise.

For the first part of the film Kahiu keeps the two girls cautiously circling around each other. The audience can only anticipate what the future will hold, what types of love, pleasure, violence, or fantasy their hesitations might lead to. Kena and her friends play soccer or congregate around Mama Atim’s restaurant and are served by her daughter Nduta, who is sleeping with Blacksta.
Kena is also somewhat preoccupied by the news she has heard from the gos-sipy Mama Atim that her father, who left her mother and remarried, is now expecting a son. Ziki’s life is comparably carefree. She comes from a wealthier family, and she is often seen dancing with her friends and wearing vibrant new outfits. Kahiu also thickens the plot by making Kena and Ziki the daughters of two rival politicians, and when Ziki’s friends tear down campaign posters of Kena’s dad, Kena chases Ziki and her crew. When she catches up and gets close to Ziki for the first time, she is at a loss for words and the two hold each other’s glances for a moment before Ziki runs off. A few scenes later, Ziki approaches Kena to apologize for her friends’ behavior, and Kena asks her if she would like to get a soda. But soon, the malicious chatter of Mama Atim and the dirty glares from Nduta encourage them to abandon the soda. They become fugitive and artfully escape to a nearby rooftop away from the constraints, gazes, and noises that threaten to make their love impossible.

Away from the noise of the city and against a pinkish-purple sky that perfectly matches Ziki’s hair and lipstick, the two girls lay down a colorful blanket and begin their first conversation (figure 4.7). Kena tells Ziki that she is waiting for her test scores and wants to be a nurse. Ziki says she should be a doctor or a surgeon and then reveals that before university she wants to travel the world and go to places where they have never seen an African. She says, “I want to just show up there and be like, ‘Yo, I’m here. And I’m a Kenyan. From Africa.’” Kena replies, “But you’re not the typical Kenyan girl they’d be looking for.” Ziki agrees and says that she does not want to be like her parents,
staying at home doing typical Kenyan things like laundry, making babies, making *chapos* (Kenyan chapatis). As the sun shines in her face and makes her glow, Ziki holds up her pinky, painted with neon pink nail polish, and says to Kena, “Let’s make a pact that we will never be like any of them down there. Instead we’re going to be . . .” Kena fills in her sentence: “Something real.” Ziki repeats “something real” as the two lock fingers, imagining a world that would look and feel different from the one they currently inhabit and feel trapped by, practicing resistance and a refusal to inhabit norms in the small gesture of interlocking fingers. But the pact the two girls make, the “something real” they imagine, has yet to take a concrete form: here, at this moment, as the girls gaze down at their city, they are just beginning to envision how to construct a life that breaks boxes, evades rules, and flees the constraints of heteronormativity. When she returns home, Kena’s mother immediately notices something unusual about Kena but attributes Kena’s new happiness to Blacksta. Ironically, Kena’s mother encourages her to spend more time with Ziki, saying that people like the Okemis will lift her up, whereas everyone else, including Blacksta, is like a weight that will keep her stuck.

And Kena does indeed start spending more time with Ziki. When Ziki tries to join a soccer game Kena is playing with her friends, a downpour suddenly begins and Kena leads Ziki to an abandoned *matatu* (minibus used for collective transport in Kenya) that appears to be drenched in pink light. Though it seems that the two will finally kiss, Kena leaves abruptly, overcome with shyness. Soon afterward, however, the two go on an extended date throughout

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**Figure 4.7.** Still from *Rafiki* (2018). Kena (left) and Ziki (right) on the rooftop where they have fled to escape the world below.
Nairobi. As the beautiful acoustic love ballad “Ignited” by Mumbi Kasumba plays, they go paddleboating, dance at a nightclub, paint each other with neon paint, and finally kiss. Then, a few scenes later, when Kena finds out that she has received high enough marks on her exams to go to medical school, she and Ziki return to the abandoned matatu, celebrate with candles and cupcakes, and then finally spend the night together (figure 4.8).\textsuperscript{14} Though the homophobia of the broader culture has been introduced through a pastor preaching in a church scene and a gay man who keeps getting harassed in the neighborhood, Kena and Ziki are able to live momentarily in a bubble of their own. Their scenes together are always quiet, filled with long silences or soft music that seems to contrast with the bustling noise of the rest of the city and that creates a space for them to be and find themselves, to experience emotional connections and tenderness. But eventually their quiet bubble is pierced with violence. Ziki’s friends become jealous of the time she spends with Kena, and Mama Atim and her daughter Nduta, who resents the attention Kena receives from Blacksta, all take notice of the girls’ closeness. When Ziki’s friends confront Kena and call her a lesbian—the first and only time the word is used in the film—a fight ensues. Ziki pulls Kena away and tends to her wounds, but when Kena’s mother walks in on them kissing and tells Kena to leave, they flee together, again seeking out a space away from the constraints of the suffocating present.

They escape once more to the abandoned matatu, but what before seemed like a secret hideout full of light and warmth now becomes a place where they are stuck. The minibus, which is now dark and cramped, cannot move or take

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Still from \textit{Rafiki} (2018). Kena and Ziki share an intimate moment in the abandoned minibus near the fields where Kena plays soccer.}
\end{figure}
them anywhere, so they begin to plan for the future. Ziki says that they can get their own place together once Kena becomes a doctor, but just as they smile and kiss, Mama Atim and Nduta burst in. Mama Atim looks at them in disgust. “Two politicians’ daughters stuck together like dogs,” she remarks before calling over a crowd of men that has been lying in wait. But even Mama Atim and Nduta look slightly astonished at the level of violence they have unleashed. Kena and Ziki are attacked and beaten, and they wind up blood-spattered and bruised on a bright green bench in the police station (figure 4.9). (There they are subject to the same probing questions about their gender roles as the two main characters in “Ask Me Nicely,” the first vignette in Stories of Our Lives.) Ziki’s parents are furious with her, but Kena’s father becomes one of the film’s unexpected heroes. He covers Kena in his coat and embraces her and complains to the police that the attackers should be arrested, not the girls.

After the beating, Kena’s mother takes her to a pastor who tries to pray for her salvation. But Kena remains stoic during the ritual and the next morning goes to visit Ziki. There, she learns that Ziki’s parents have taken more drastic measures than her own: they are sending her to London. There are many close-ups of the girls’ bruised faces, but they barely look at each other. Their wounds are too overwhelming. Ziki keeps her back to Kena as she tells Kena that she wants to be sent away, that she wants her “normal life back.” Calluses have formed. The girls have been exposed and feel exposed, and the secret future they had been planning suddenly feels like it is in the past. In the wake of the exposure, Ziki tries to toughen her damaged exterior. She tells Kena that they were being naive and asks, “What did you expect was going to happen

![Figure 4.9](image.png) Still from Rafiki (2018). Kena and Ziki are seated in the police station after being beaten by a mob of angry men.
either way? Are you planning to marry me? Are we going to have this beautiful family?” And Kena responds, “Yes,” but Ziki tells her to leave and then, as her mother holds her, begs not to be sent away. This is where Ezekial Mutua and the KFCB would have liked the film to end, with the space that the girls created for themselves cut off and with heteronormativity restored. Mutua, in fact, just after the Cannes announcement, insisted that if the film were to be permitted in Kenya, it had to have an ending that did not convey hope. He told Kahiu that if she could end on a shot of the girls looking remorseful then he could give the film a rating and allow it to screen in the country. It was not the kissing or the intimacy or the love, then, that bothered him—it was the fact that all of this could go unpunished (Kahiu 2019). Much like the Nigerian censors, the Kenyan censors believe that at issue is not the depiction of homosexuality but depicting it without sufficient condemnation. But Kahiu refused to change the ending, so that this scene of vulnerability, the penultimate in the film, becomes one that is, like “Jambula Tree,” full of anticipation and potential precisely because there is indeed something next, something beyond. In this way, Rafiki shows how “vulnerability, reconceived as bodily exposure, is part of the very meaning and practice of resistance” (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016, 8).

In the film’s epilogue, Kena, who is now a doctor or medical student at a local hospital, encounters Mama Atim as a patient there. Mama Atim refuses to be treated by Kena but informs her that Ziki Okemi is back in Slopes. Kena silently heads to her locker and examines a postcard that says only “I miss you” with a z doodled underneath. (Readers of “Jambula Tree” will recognize this as containing the same message as the one postcard that Sanyu sends to Anyango from London.) Slowly and quietly, Kena heads home, glances over at Ziki’s building, and then heads to a hill nearby. Moments later we hear Ziki’s voice from off-screen call out Kena’s name and see her hand—with bright orange nail polish—rest on Kena’s shoulder. Though the film ends here, without a direct resolution and without showing their faces together, the lyrics to Njoki Karu’s breathy song “Stay” certainly imply that what Ziki might be saying is “I’m here.” As Karu croons, “Lay with me, we can put the stars to bed, watching me ’til the morning sun rises” (a reference, perhaps, to the rising sun in “Jambula Tree”), and the credits roll, it is hard not to see this film as imagining a new future for them. And I argue that one can see in this ending, especially with its attention to Ziki’s hand and fingers, the fulfillment of the pinky promise the two girls made on the roof, that they will be real, that they will craft an otherwise, perhaps even marry and have a beautiful family—not a family that needs to be protected against queers but “a family that disrupts the neat gender
binary that anchors the nation” (Macharia 2013a, 286). And yet the withholding of Ziki’s face, and of the life they build after the reunion, indicates that this ending, as Ombagi (2019, 272) argues about Stories of Our Lives, exists not despite but because of the “various tensions and frictions that create a landscape of queer liveability” in Nairobi. Rather than seeing the ending as a triumph or an overcoming, I see it as an opening in which vulnerability, tenderness, and defeat are resources for resistant, queer life-building.

Here, then, I see the film not only as anticipatory, as holding open a future moment, but also as aspirational in the sense that Christina Sharpe describes in In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. Sharpe, thinking about aspiration as both ambition and inhalation, writes, “Aspiration is the word that I arrived at for keeping and putting breath in the Black Body,” for imagining and transforming space through an ethics of care and an ethics of seeing (Sharpe 2016, 131). Sharpe’s work examines the precarity of Black life in the United States in the wake of slavery and the centuries of violence in which the Black body has been subjected to “physical, social, and figurative death” in countless ways (17). But wake work, or living in the wake, is for Sharpe a way of accounting not only for that death but also for “the largeness that is Black life” (17). She describes being in the wake as recognizing “the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force” (16). Like Darieck Scott, then, she finds it necessary to name and articulate injury and woundedness as a means of anticipating a resistance to it. She writes, “In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery” (18). Aspiration, then, is how she describes the rupturing of the suffocating present with other possible futures. Aspiration is about breathing and existing and creating and allowing the lungs to fill with air. But it is also a way of remembering pain. Aspiration, in this sense, is connected to the cut and to fugitivity and the artful way one deviates from something to which one nevertheless remains bound. But for Sharpe aspiration is also connected to the concept of the hold and to the many different meanings of hold that she mobilizes throughout her book. Primarily, for Sharpe, this refers to the suffocating hold of the slave ship and all the iterations of captivity that affect and negate Black lives (and that, as I have been suggesting throughout this book, are not limited to Black lives in the diaspora). But there is also the hold, as in being held, as in the grip humans and bodies have on one another in a network of care when one beholds another, when people are beholden to each other, obliged to be concerned about the other’s
well-being (Sharpe 2016, 73, 99, 100). Aspiration, then, inhales from within the hold and also reaches for new ways of holding life and love.

I also understand the hold and holding to be forms of critical resilience that hold time and space for vulnerability, that say in the same breath: “we are here and we are demanding” and “we tell you we have been violated.” Holding, as in a holding pattern or as in holding one’s ground, has, in fact, a very different temporality than “I Overcame,” but it is, I argue, no less resilient and in many ways even more resistant, more critical. And it is, I argue, these forms and modes of holding and of critical resilience that made Rafiki feel so revolutionary to the queer people who watched it in Kenyan theaters during the seven unbanned days. Here’s what Stacy Kirui, a Kenyan student and storyteller who went to see the film each of the seven days it was banned, wrote of her experience:

There, in that big cinema, women who ached the way I did held me, and I held them, as we experienced a story familiar to all of us. In the cinema, I was held by other Black queer women who resonated with the realities of loving other Black women under duress. We passed pocket tissues around and rested our heads on each other’s shoulders. We squeezed each other’s hands. We were vulnerable. We grieved mothers like Ziki’s whose complexity we knew all too well. Mothers who held us while we were consumed by the pain of loving too differently while they simultaneously begged us to love a little less differently. Mothers like Kena’s who could not fathom us, who left us to be our fathers’ children because we loved too unfamiliarly. Mothers like Mama Atim who harmed us in ways they would never wish for their own children to be harmed. We also grieved fathers like Kena’s who held their children and loved them back to safety.

There, in the cinema, the noise quieted. For a moment we were neither the elephant in the room nor the spectacle. We watched these two queer women come of age together and some of us came of age with them. In Rafiki we saw ourselves, our lives, our joys, our struggles, our triumphs. We were real. (Kirui 2018)

The act of beholding those queer lives coming of age, of holding one another in the visible silence of the theater, of being held in one’s seat after the credits roll was, to many, breathtaking, transformative, critically needed. Indeed, speaking about the film on a panel at Off 2018, Holly-Nambi says, “Seeing people seeing themselves on screen during Rafiki felt otherworldly, like going to church. It felt life-saving. Films should be put in the hands of people whose
lives need to be saved.” In that sense, the coming of age enacted by Kena and Ziki, who own their pain, who reclaim their time and space, who find the language to write their own stories, was to many queer Kenyan viewers something to aspire to, something to hold on to.

Of course, aspiration, like resilience, is a keyword that has come to take on a very specific meaning in our neoliberal moment. As McRuer (2018, 176) writes, “Aspiration has basically been . . . codified as an individualist, libertarian concept oriented around personal achievement and merit,” and he warns that it often forecloses meaningful class analysis. Here, then, one might note that parts of Kena’s and Ziki’s hopes and aspirations are indeed hitched to class mobility. Kena’s high test scores and her potential career as a doctor signal to Ziki that the couple can move in together and sustain themselves economically without needing the approval of their parents. But though a doctor’s salary would indeed make things easier for them, I also read their rooftop promise “to be real”—a phrase repeated by Kirui, who found a type of realness while watching the film—as one that resists heteronormative, heteropatriarchal aspirations based on personal achievement and merit. Ziki very much does not want to be a typical Kenyan girl, and though the aspirations she and Kena express might depend on economic independence and stability, I do also see them as gesturing toward, as Frieda Ekotto says in *Vibrancy of Silence*, ways of simply operating differently, ways that are inspirational to all types of queer Africans, and especially to queer youth who may have never seen queer African love and happiness modeled for them or held out as a real possibility.

But in order to more fully understand the spaces queer films like *Rafiki* hold open, I would like to return once more to the 2018 Out Film Festival Nairobi from which *Rafiki* was withheld. On the third night of the festival there was a panel called Pride and Protest in Uganda that focused largely on the queer movement in Uganda in the wake of the fateful Pride 2016 raid. The performance poet Gloria Kiconco moderated the session and described how many Ugandans had dropped out of the movement or hibernated after the raid because they were so traumatized. But she also noted that new parties and spaces were popping up because, as fellow panelist Godiva Akullo (also featured in *Resilience Diaries*) articulated, queer people are “resilient.” When Kiconco asked the panelists to comment specifically on what types of queer organizing and socializing were occurring in Kampala, the queer artist and organizer of feminist utopias Mildred Apenyo took the mic. “How do we save our joy?” she asked Kiconco and the audience. She continued, “That is how I am interpreting this question. I am absolutely militant about making my safety joyful, but I know that wouldn’t have helped when we were holding each other
on the ground [at Pride 2016]. But the moment they let us go, we kept organizing [our events]. . . . And me, I am flourishing.” Even though Apenyo was talking about the need for militancy and organization, she was also articulating a way of mobilizing and resisting from a position of vulnerability and defeat, from the hold. Vulnerability, in other words, “is part of the very meaning and practice of resistance” (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016, 8), but so are joy and frivolity. *How do we save our joy? When we were holding each other on the ground. In the cinema, I was held by other Black queer women. I’m still here.* All of these statements articulate the interarticulatedness of care, flourishing, and trauma.

The Pride and Protest panel that night, and in fact all of the panels at the Nairobi festival, had very little to do with the films being screened at the festival. And festival organizers Karuti and Ngige made it clear that this was intentional, that the panels were about a radicalness and openness and defiance that were not only connected to the films being shown. The festival to them was just as much about watching films collectively as it was, in Karuti’s words, about “*holding space to congregate.*” Of course, sometimes one holds space and that space is violated (as in the case of Ugandan Pride 2016 and QKIFF 2017), or that space is censored by those attempting to resist queer rights, queer bodies, and queer existence. But at other times holding space can mean creating resistance by saving joy, savoring joy, and carving it out within spaces of defeat. Here’s what Kahiu herself says about joy in relation to the violence depicted in *Rafiki*:

> We have to be really very clear that we are joyful, radiant people. And the way I think of joy is not like happiness. Happiness is sometimes fleeting, but I think joy is almost a bowl that contains all of our experiences. And some of those experiences are hard but that does not mean that we are any less joyful. . . . And [in the film] that moment of hardship is within the context of love, and within the context of a joyful space, and within the context of radiance. (Kahiu 2019)

The violence, she says, “needed to be *held*” but she did not want it to be the emphasis of the film (2019). Kahiu holds this violence within her bowl of joy, within her space of rebelliousness and radiance.

And this was also precisely the type of joyful, defiant space that *off* 2018—taking its cue in part from the mood created by the seven days of *Rafiki*—created and fiercely held open. The previous year, the theme of *off* Nairobi had been “A Quiet Revolution,” and Kahiu had been there for a filmmakers’ panel talking about a film that, in 2017, no one had yet seen, that had not yet been selected for Cannes or been banned or temporarily unbanned. Quietness
held open a space for being “out there,” as Musangi says. But the theme of off 2018 was “We Do Not Have the Luxury of Shame,” a phrase that comes from a line in the first episode of the television series Pose about the 1980s–1990s underground ball scene in New York City, where queer and trans people of color joined houses, created chosen families, and competed against each other in dancing, fashion, and vogueing categories. The line is spoken by Blanca, a new housemother, who is taking her previously homeless “son,” Damien, to audition for dance school despite the fact that a lack of self-worth caused Damien to hold back, to miss the deadline. Shame, or at least shame alone, Blanca intimates, does not create space for other possible futures, for aspiration, for critical, life-saving resilience. What Blanca asks of Damien, which is what the 2018 off organizers seemed to be asking of the attendees, is to harness vulnerability for its potential to transform.17 “We Do Not Have the Luxury of Shame” was therefore a theme that, in the wake of Rafiki and in anticipation of #Repeal162, redacted the “quiet” in “a quiet revolution,” while also paying respect to the quiet hold of Rafiki and a film like Fire.18 It led to frank discussions about queer sex, and to Apenyo’s descriptions of punching a man who threatened her safety at a queer party, and to Jim Chuchu’s declaration that queer African films should not have to be downloaded illegally and watched alone on laptops because queerness is not explosive to those who live it every day. And it led to an after-party where Samantha Mugatsia, the actress who played Kena, drummed with her band Yellow Light Machine (which was how she was originally discovered by Kahiu, who thought she had the exact look of Kena) and where the Ugandan DJ Rachael Ray Kungu, East Africa’s first female DJ, who was repeatedly outing in tabloids like Red Pepper, played tunes until four in the morning because space was being held and no one wanted it to end. The organizers and attendees of off created a moment in which joy was indeed saved, in which calluses were exposed, in which a community of people experiencing both the defeat of Rafiki’s censorship and also the exuberance of its existence and the hopeful anticipation of decriminalization were able to say proudly and defiantly, “I’m still fucking here.”