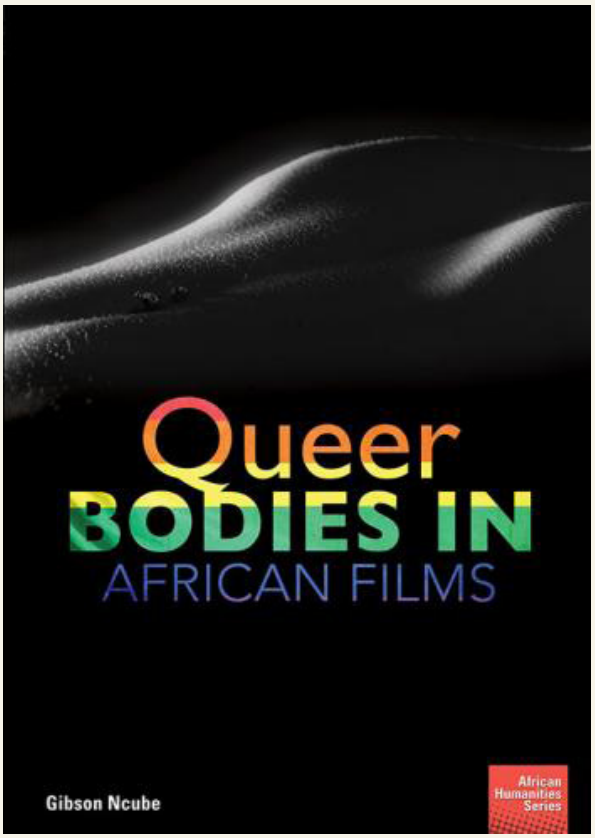

A Pan-African Exploration of Queer Embodiment in African Film: A Book Review of Gibson Ncube's *Queer Bodies in African Films* (NISC, December 2022)

By Jarred Thompson

Gibson Ncube's monograph produces a Pan-African archive of films that grapple with the specificities of queer embodiment in several regions on the African continent. *Queer Bodies in African Films* does important intra-continental theorising about what it means to be queer in Africa, or African *and* queer, in both North and sub-Saharan African contexts, with a corpus that maps filmed queer bodies in selected Maghrebian (chapter one), Egyptian (chapter two), East African (chapter three), and South African films (chapter four). Throughout, Ncube centres the filmed queer body as a site where "multiple and often intersecting discourses and narratives" (Ncube 2022, p.2) contest for legitimacy within their given cultural milieus. In this frame, the author remains attentive to "how the touching of bodies and rubbing together of physical bodies produce feelings and affection and forge (dis)connections" (2). As Ncube avers, this kind of pan-African consideration of queerness is lacking in Queer African Studies, and the monograph provides a useful entry point for scholars looking to do similar intracontinental research.

In Chapter One, "Silent and silenced bodies in Maghrebian queer films", Ncube observes a common trope of silence, secrecy and muteness surrounding filmed queer bodies in the work of filmmakers such as Nadia El Fani, Abdellah Taïa, and Nadir Moknèche. In this survey of Maghrebian film, the queer body is seen to "blur the lines between what can be said or unsaid, presented or unpresented, and what is knowable and unknowable, about Arab-Muslim sexualities" (30). Issues of language, translation and whether the films can be viewed in their original dialectal Arabic or watched via English or French translation is brought up, especially in terms of how queerness, as a globalised project with a predominant Western lexicon, is translated into local expressions. Ncube argues that existing Arabic vocabularies show how, "in North Africa, queer sexuality is viewed as that which people do and not necessarily as what or who they are" (21). This observation is important in delineating the (dis)continuities in queer expression between the global iconography of queerness and the local embodiments of it.

Yet, although Ncube accedes that the films' French subtitles are "significant in countering the lack of adequate linguistic terms in dialectal Arabic to describe queerness and queer sexual experiences positively", one does wonder whether further research on dialectal Arabic and/or references to queer writers working in Arabic dialects might have proved useful in developing a linguistic groundedness to Ncube's analyses that did not defer to the subtitles of French (23). Nevertheless, the chapter is insightful in the ways it identifies the trope of silence surrounding filmed queer bodies, noting that this mirrors the social silence queer Maghrebian subjectivities face daily. In such an environment of social silence and so-called tacit tolerance, the skin of queer bodies and its "minutest visual cues" are the means through which the filmmakers encode Maghrebian queer embodiments (43).

Whereas tropes of social silence might surround queer bodies in Maghrebian film, Ncube notes, in Chapter Two's "Ambivalent queer bodies in Egyptian films", how filmed queer bodies emerge as ambivalent subjectivities who shroud their non-normative desires in a combination of "what is verbally voiced and what is expressed through diverse codes and gestures" (59). Reading Marwan Hamed's *Imarat Yácubyan* [The Yacoubian Building] (2006) and Salah Abu Seif's *Hammam al-Malatili* [Malatili Bathhouse] (1973), Ncube argues that queer subjects deploy strategies of ambiguous language and gesture to signal their non-normative desire, often seeking loopholes in a sociocultural fabric which, nevertheless, still marginalises them. Such loopholes are identified in *Imarat Yácubyan*, where Hatem, a queer male character, convinces Abd, the man he is having an affair with, that their sexual relationship is "not against religious doctrines, and that although Islam is against adultery, theirs is not adultery as it will never result in a child" (51). In this context, I found that Ncube could have explored more explicitly the relation between queerness and the production of socio-cultural loopholes, especially in terms of how queer subjects exploit loopholes in socio-cultural codes so as to allow for alternative queer embodiments to inhabit a heteropatriarchal body politic. Despite this, Ncube does maintain his attention on how queer bodies so often become sites for negotiating deep anxieties about tradition, modernity, religion, class and politics across the African continent and, indeed, in the global imaginary, too.

Furthermore, while Ncube draws on the work of Brian Whittaker (2006) and other scholars to assert that "Arab-Muslim societies have been known to be tolerant of non-normative sex if conducted in private", there remains a level of violence and pathology attached to the filmed queer Egyptian bodies that seems to undercut this assertion (47). How does a cultural analyst, then, balance these competing claims? In other words, I wonder what is meant by the word 'tolerance', especially when the films illustrate how violence against queer people is inflicted on them in their private domains, where so-called 'tolerance' is said to reside and where both films reason that their protagonists' have 'become' queer through childhood trauma and abuse. Though Ncube refers to this as a form of homophobic "pop-psychology", too little time is spent on unpacking this trope in Egyptian film, considering where its roots might originate, and the trajectories that such a psychologising of queerness might take (58). This is an area of queer Egyptian filmmaking that may require further research.

Moving to considering filmed queer bodies in East African film, Ncube reflects upon "Legible queer and trans bodies" in Chapter Three, making a

distinction between queer visibility and legibility (61). Queer visibility, for Ncube, tends to be "perfunctory and superficial" (62) whereas queer legibility is when queer bodies enter the discursive space and become "legitimate and acceptable gendered and sex bodies" (63). Ncube points out that queer legibility "marks a pivotal step towards the *normalisation* of queer bodies. Once queer bodies have been *normalised*, they cease to be marginalised, invalidated and nullified" (63, my emphasis). I wondered how Ncube reconciles notions of queerness to structures of normativity. It seemed that normativity was being privileged in this chapter as something queer people wanted to be absorbed into, and I questioned what the drawbacks were for queer subjects who desire 'the normative' uncritically. In relation to this, what is the 'futurity' of queerness if its teleology is to be absorbed into the 'legitimate' and the 'legible', writ large. These were questions left unanswered.

However, the chapter makes provocative claims using Lindsey Green-Sims' registers of resistance to describe the "imperfect forms of negotiation" (2022, p.9) that filmed queer bodies in East Africa seem to take up as queer characters "become legible [...] not through bold and overt political acts, but rather through daily actions" (Ncube 2022, p.67). In Peter Murimi's *I am Samuel* (2020), the queer protagonist comes out to his rural-dwelling parents in a creative, non-verbal way that is interesting for the way it subverts the common linguistic trope of 'coming-out' to one's parents. Ncube reads this as the queer characters' forging "a physical language" (73) where the proximity of Samual and his lover to Samuel's parents produces an "affective solidarity" in which cooking, praying and playing sport are queered in everyday acts of minor subversion (74). This sense of a happy queer ending is continued in Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki* (2018), where the utopic image of female queer intimacy, vulnerability and world-making is seen as intervening in the overwhelmingly gloomy and dystopic trope of queer subjectivities who are forced to face down violence and inevitable death.

Interestingly, the only documentary in the book features the only transgender character discussed. Jonny von Wallström's *Pearl of Africa* (2016) is a "documentary [that] follows the journey of Cleopatra Kambugu, a Ugandan born transgender woman who decides to live her difference openly" (Ncube 2022, p.83). In this section, Ncube brings up the issue that "[s]ome trans Africans feel strongly that their gender is fixed and defined" (83) and that, for Cleopatra Kambugu, "her gender is not fluid. She feels that she is in the wrong body and that through the surgeries, she is moving towards a point in which there is a harmony between her body, her identity, and her gender" (83). This sense of 'moving towards' one's identity is described by Cleopatra as "adventuring" where the body is a project, a work in progress (84). By the end of the discussion, Ncube asserts that "the trans body is the embodiment par excellence of transgression in the way it rejects notions of fixed identities" (86). To this, I was curious as to how Ncube conceptually balances this notion of desiring fixity that some transgendered subjects are said to seek with the *rejection of fixity* that he claims their embodiment enacts. Similarly, Cleopatra's lover, Nelson, seems overtly silenced in this discussion; this even though it is a scene *between* Cleopatra and Nelson—where the couple test out differently-sized breast implants—that forms the erotic centre of the section. What is 'trans' about Nelson's phenomenological encounter with Cleopatra's body? In what ways does he have to 'adventure' to harmonise *his* desire with his gender identity? There was a missed opportunity here to think through queer African embodiment as it relates to Nelson's heterosexual understanding of himself and its relation to Cleopatra's transgender experience of her own corporeality.

In the chapter on South African film, intersectionality is foregrounded because of the ways colonialism and apartheid have linked race, class and gender in intimate and inextricable ways. Chapter Four's "The intersectional body in South African films" looks at two films from the apartheid period (Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* [2007] and Oliver Hermanus' *Moffie* [2019]) and two films from the post-apartheid period (*Inxeba/The Wound* [2017] directed by John Trengove, and *While You Weren't Looking* [2015] directed by Catherine Stewart). In this chapter, the analyses of the films seemed to have garnered uneven attention, as *Inxeba/The Wound* and *Moffie* get a depth of theoretical application that Sarif's and Stewart's films do not. This is especially pertinent when Ncube mentions that, in Stewart's film, there is a moment where a character observes, "'If you can queer gender, you

can queer everything: black and white, culture, nature, object and subject. And that is freedom'" (118). This remark is possibly the most interesting that Ncube references from the film and yet its resonances, especially in terms of filmic form in *While You Weren't Looking*, remain underexplored. Notwithstanding this, the chapter is a worthwhile survey of a selection of South African queer films for scholars interested in representations of intersectional queer embodiments and the politics of (post)apartheid that undergird the makings of race, class and gender as integral assemblages for theorising queer life in South Africa in its intimate, social and public dimensions.

By deftly moving across Francophone, Anglophone, Northern and Sub-Saharan regions on the African continent Ncube has certainly added to the integral work of developing an intracontinental discourse on filmed queer bodies, and the strategies filmmakers deploy to get at the phenomenological and corporeal experience of context-specific queerness. Overall, his corpus illustrates "how national and regional specificities produce particular forms of queer embodiment, subjectivity and performance" (121). While there was a distinct emphasis on queer bodies and the narrative tropes that stylise them, future research might focus more on the cinematographic (dis)continuities amongst queer films in Africa as it pertains to colour palette, sound, camera angles, editing, music, mis-en-scene and the like—formal (dis)continuities that might themselves prove useful in critically mapping the filmic techniques of queer African affective geographies on the continent. While there were moments where this was discussed in the monograph, a more formalist account of queer African film may expand into other areas of film production that shape an audience's experience of filmed queer African bodies and their intimacies.