

# The Thinker

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**SPECIAL ISSUE ON**

## **Queer Africa: New Directions in Literature, Film, and Fashion**

**GUEST EDITORS**

Gibson Ncube, Stellenbosch University  
Andy Carolin, University of Johannesburg

# The Thinker

A PAN - AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

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## CALL FOR PAPERS

# AFRICA

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Prof Ronit Frenkel and  
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The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.



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# FOREWORD



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## Queer Africa: New Directions in Literature, Film, and Fashion

By Guest Editors, Gibson Ncube, Stellenbosch University, and  
Andy Carolin, University of Johannesburg

The last decade has seen a proliferation in cultural productions that represent and narrativise queer lived experiences in Africa. Concomitantly, there has also been a growing body of scholarly work which has attempted to intellectualise these diverse cultural productions. However, as noted by Osinubi, “[w]ithin African queer scholarship, debates on good social practices concern the uneven constitution of the field and the responsibilities of scholars towards globally dispersed African communities” (2018, p.597). One of the most pressing challenges facing queer African studies has been this uneven constitution of the field, where much of the scholarship is produced by scholars who are either not African or are not based in Africa. Most of the scholars in the field are located in the Global North and work within institutions that have the capital to shape the production and dissemination of knowledge. What this does, in many instances, is to exclude or marginalise Africa-based scholars. This exclusion and marginalisation of African scholars, as Musila (2025) explains, is materialised in the way that scholarship from Africa and by African scholars is framed as belated. According to Musila, the “charge of belatedness is often framed in the diction of lack – lack of originality, lack of theoretical rigour, out of step with contemporary debates in the field of study, redundant” (2025, p.2). The marginalisation of African scholarship coupled with the geographical and institutional imbalance, we contend, raises important questions about the production



of knowledge, representation, and the politics of visibility in a field that sets out to centre African queer lives. When we put out the call for this special issue, we were particularly interested in creating a space in which African and Africa-based scholars could enter into conversation. Our goal was to foreground voices, narratives and experiences that are often sidelined. In so doing, this special issue sought not only to contribute to the expanding field of queer African studies but also to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate the marginalisation of Africa-based scholarship.

These questions on queer lived realities in Africa have come into sharp visibility lately in different parts of the continent. As the editors of this special issue, we felt that there was something striking about this moment in the history of queer rights and advocacy in Africa, and we wanted to explore the various ways in which different contexts on the continent shape practices of narration, representation, and world-making. We were interested in how a wide gamut of practices and discourses that operate under a rubric of queer – such as resistance, resilience, identity, and desire – contribute to the forms of cultural work being produced. At the time of writing, we see different countries on the continent taking vastly different positions on queer rights, moving in often diametrically opposed directions in relation to non-heteronormative sexualities and non-binary gender identities, irrespective of whether these exist under the language of queer, nomenclatures of LGBTQ+, or some other designation. These different positionings give effect to what Gevisser (2020) calls “the pink line” which, he argues, marks the global divisions in how both political and public sentiment towards queer rights are concretising in vastly different ways. Notably in this regard, even as countries such as Namibia, Mauritius and Botswana have seen legislative and judicial reforms that better protect LGBTQ+ rights, countries such as Ghana, Uganda and Mali are seeing the intensification of institutionalised homophobia and the violent policing of cisgender normativity. Of course, there is nothing exceptional about Africa in this regard, as similarly divergent trends can be seen across the world, with the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States being a harbinger of new forms of oppression and victimisation in the West.

But while the conflicting positions on LGBTQ+ rights have generated a wide plethora of literary and cultural works that depict multiple discursive sites of contestation and celebration, we, the editors, felt that a narrow focus on African cultural production might offer us some distinctly localised

ways in which local contexts and discourses blend with (or work against) global cultural flows. What we intended for this special issue was a collation of new insights about cultural work that has been produced over the past decade that is coterminous with the increasingly fractured approach to LGBTQ+ rights on the continent.

Something that runs through all the articles in the collection is a careful attentiveness to questions of narrative form and genre itself. This marks a subtle shift away from the sometimes-disquieting inclination within cultural studies to treat literary and cultural texts as mere ‘sociological’ records of the discourses that emanate from a specific political context, a mode in which texts are separated from their specific aesthetic features. Instead, all the articles included in this special issue pay close attention to the specific narrative, cinematic, and/or broadly aesthetic features of specific texts. The special issue covers the short story form (Hall), the novel (Mbokazi and Graham; Mushwana), film (Mbokazi and Graham; Carolin), music videos (Ncube), and fashion (Mchunu and Ngedu).

Literary fiction is the focus of the first three articles included in this special issue. The special issue opens with Leila Hall’s bold and provocative reading of queer childhood in two short stories. Her comparative analysis of a South African and Kenyan short story demonstrates how fiction can respond to and rework pervasive discourses that situate sexuality in childhood within manufactured moral panics and threats of perversity and abuse. She argues that “the stories demonstrate how a ‘childlike’ way of relating to others and to the world—guided by instinct, relationality, and defiance—can act as an important counterpoint to the divisiveness and repression of socially constructed norms that include heteronormative ideals”. Hall’s analyses of the two short stories pay careful attention to focalisation as a narratological tool in order to show the analytical potential of queer childhoods.

The second article in the special issue is by Ntokozo Mbokazi and Lucy Graham. They offer a (re)reading

of *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Inxeba (The Wound)*, a novel and a film, respectively, that have a pre-eminent status within the South African queer literary and filmic canon. Key to their analysis is the relationship between space and Africanness within the narrative trajectory of the *Bildungs*. They argue, in this regard, that “as narratives of development and initiation, these two texts meditate on the possibilities of queer Black bodies being integrated into communities in post-apartheid South Africa”.

Wisani Mushwana’s fine contribution to the special issue focuses on Chinelo Okparanta’s novel *Under the Udala Trees*. The article explores the relationship between particular renderings of fundamentalist Christianity and the discursive reproduction of heteronormativity and patriarchy. Mushwana argues that the novel is “a creative output aware of the shame inherent in Christianity’s conceptual resources and ways in which it is wielded to stifle the expressions of queer subjectivities”. Mushwana’s analysis is closely tied to the tension between imposed shame and queer resistance. The article also signals a wider conceptualisation of trauma that recognises the practices of inclusion and exclusion that are fomented through religious fundamentalism.

The focus of the special issue moves to film in Andy Carolin’s contribution on melodrama in South African queer films. He argues that close attention to the specific aesthetic features of melodrama as a narrative genre might open up new ways of thinking about the cultural politics surrounding queer representation. His article focuses on *Kanarie*, a film that has received considerable scholarly attention, and *Runs in the Family*, a film that has been wholly neglected by literary scholars, as he explores the tensions between a radical queer futurity and a more conservatively framed assimilationism.

Gibson Ncube’s article focuses on three music videos by South African multimodal performer Nakhane. The article is theoretically astute, and blends work by Steven Connor, Carli Coetzee and Keguro Macharia to argue that “skin [is] an expressive screen [that] serves as a canvas on which queer affect and touch are negotiated and performed”. The article draws our attention to the ways in which touch can function symbolically as a way through which queer bodies can resist the

dehumanisation and desexualisation that so often accompany heteronormativity.

Next, Khaya Mchunu and Isaiah Negedu’s insightful study zeroes in on the queer implications of a specific Nigerian fashion brand, The Lagos Space Programme. They innovatively draw on social media site Instragram as a site of articulation. Through an analysis of specific imagery, films, design statements and interviews with its creative director, Mchunu and Negedu powerfully show how a specific fashion brand that employs distinctly Lagosian and Yoruba cultural and aesthetic elements and cultural references can demonstrate how “maleness and masculinity are not antithetical to queerness” within Africa.

The special issue includes Jarred Thompson’s insightful review of Gibson Ncube’s monograph *Queer Bodies in African Films*.

Some of the articles offer fresh and provocative angles on texts and films that have previously been extensively analysed. These include texts like *Under the Udala Trees*, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, and the film *Inxeba (The Wound)*. While these works have received substantial scholarly attention, the contributors to this special issue revisit them with novel views that enrich and complicate existing interpretations. What this does is demonstrate that even widely discussed texts can yield newfound insights when approached through innovative frameworks or when read alongside underexplored cultural phenomena. As such, the special issue not only deepens engagement with these canonical texts but also challenges the field to broaden its thematic and methodological horizons.

When we first made the call for papers for this special issue, we were interested in articles that would shine light on the rich and dynamic cultural production that explores and subverts conventional narratives and adds to the continuing conversation about queer representation and visibility by highlighting the various ways queer identities are portrayed across the continent. It was our hope that the call for papers would attract studies that would showcase the various ways that queer voices from different parts of the African continent are redefining and reshaping the cultural landscape by considering how queerness intersects with and is expressed in fiction, film, music, fashion and many other

artistic expressions. The articles that we ended up receiving focused on countries that continue to dominate studies on African queerness: South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. It might certainly be argued that these articles, read as a corpus, unwittingly reproduce the geographic and linguistic divisions that have characterised queer African studies and African studies more broadly. Such division, as argued by Ncube (2022), has had the effect of reproducing colonial demarcations of African spaces and cultures. Scholars focusing on Anglophone, Arabophone, Francophone, or Lusophone Africa often work in isolation from each other, with little or no dialogue or collaboration across linguistic boundaries. Such fragmentation limits, in many ways, the development of what van Klinken (2020) terms a truly “pan-African queer” studies framework. The special issue is largely Anglophone in its scope and focuses on a region of the continent contentiously named “sub-Saharan” Africa. While it is perhaps not uncommon for

literary and cultural work from some countries to be over-represented in analytical accounts of Anglophone African queer literature and film, we were struck by the ongoing absence of articles that might focus on cultural work being produced elsewhere on the continent.

Despite the special issue's scope, it makes important interventions that push the boundaries of Queer African studies. Importantly, it engages with issues such as fashion, melodrama, and music videos which are cultural forms that rarely figure in the field of queer African studies. These areas of scholarship expand the horizons of queer African studies beyond its conventional textual and activist focus and open up new possibilities for making sense of the intersections of queerness with popular culture and everyday life.

It is our hope that future edited collections are heedful to cultural works from a far wider range of countries and regions on the African continent.

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