

# Contesting and Curating the Queer African Archive with Sacred Queer Stories

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## SHORT BIO

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## Introduction

The limits of what constitutes an archive has expanded over the years with a move towards understanding it as a continuously contested, expanding curation of living data. As the team for the Governing Intimacies project at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa puts it, archives are “a contested terrain of intervention around which contemporary struggles for the past, and the future, are being fought”.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that in Africa there is a very real contemporary struggle for LGBTI+ freedoms and lives, impacted by compounding religious, cultural, and political forces. The various narratives, life stories, and experiences of queer Africans in scholarship, literature, and media speak to these contestations. *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible* provides an invaluable and necessary contribution to building an archive that is varied, nuanced, and capricious. The book introduces stories that have often been side-lined in studies on the intersection of religion, that of queer migrants and refugees. These narratives of movement for safety,

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<sup>1</sup> Governing Intimacies, “Intimate Archives: A Webinar Series,” accessed October 20, 2022, <https://governingintimacies.wordpress.com/2021/03/29/intimate-archives/>

boundary-crossing, and queer liminality are significant, in part because they are often so easily excluded from “official” archives. Moreover, they are significant because of the way they challenge our attempts at simplified and complete narratives of queer African lives. This exclusion reminds us how critical it is to acknowledge the curated nature of archives and continuously scrutinise the epistemologies and methodologies that go into producing it. Through my contribution to this roundtable, I propose that we ask three questions of the queer African archive and, in turn, of the work that *Sacred Queer Stories* does: who is the archive for? how do we build these archives? and why do we build it?

### Who is the archive for?

Nairobi born scholar, Keguro Macharia<sup>2</sup> points out that African archives are often focused on the production and collection of disembodied data, aimed at NGO funding or seeking state and international intervention. As a result, even when the intentions seem noble, queer African archives are often curated in ways that produce disembodied, nameless data – spectacles of marginalisation and oppression. Historically, this archive has not primarily been for the queer African people whose lives are supposed to be held within its records. Academic projects such as those that inspired *Sacred Queer Stories* are no doubt connected to the agendas of funding bodies and academic institutions. Indeed, the authors of the book, who are based in the United Kingdom, readily admit to this. However, I believe *Sacred Queer Stories* successfully manages to diminish the very real schisms between intellectual, activist, and participant that these agendas tend to create. This is in part because the contribution that *Sacred Queer Stories* makes to the archive is not disembodied, nor is it decontextualised. The plurality of experience evident between (and within) each of the twelve stories in the book speaks to pain and violence, as well as love, sex, and hope. Their life stories are contextualised meaningfully within the historical and contemporary political, religious, cultural, and social moments in Uganda, Kenya, and Africa.

*Sacred Queer Stories* is perhaps most successful in that it does not confine itself to assessing truth claims or the authenticity of the “queer”, “African”, or

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<sup>2</sup> Keguro Macharia, “Archive and Method in Queer African Studies,” *Agenda* 29, no.1 (2015): 145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2015.1010294>.

indeed “Christianity” (or religion) embedded within the life storytelling. This is counter to the so-called official archive that make claims to a completeness, often implied in traditionally western epistemologies. We see evidence of this search for completeness in the responses of border authorities, refugee agencies, priests, and even sometimes activists and other LGBTQ+ people as they question the legitimacy of the stories of queer refugees and their attempts at “seeking sanctuary”.<sup>3</sup> In comparison, *Sacred Queer Stories* embraces incompleteness, which Francis Nymanjoh argues is the normal order of things and, he suggests, offers opportunities for conviviality in Africa.<sup>4</sup> This is evident as the authors write,

this is not to say that such stories are “not true”, but that the truth of autobiographical storytelling is not necessarily located in the historical correctness, completeness, and coherence of the account but in the momentary and performative articulation and actualisation of the self through self-narration.<sup>5</sup>

This incomplete archive begins, then, to centre the lives of queer African people and offers infinite possibilities of being and becoming.<sup>6</sup> While the agendas of funding bodies, the higher education system, and, indeed, our own as academic-activists and allies cannot be wished away, we can at least hold these agendas in productive tension with those for whom the building of an archive could provide hope and opportunities for life rather than death. But if we are to do so, *how* do we build a queer African archive? As Macharia asks, “How might African archives — however those are defined — demand and produce the methods we need?”<sup>7</sup> This is the second question I also pose in this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> John Marnell, *Seeking Sanctuary: Stories of Sexuality, Faith and Migration* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Nymanjoh, “Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no.3 (2017): 253 - 270.

<sup>5</sup> Adriaan van Klinken, Johanna Stiebert, Sebyala Brian and Frederick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives & the Bible* (Rochester: James Currey, 2021), 126-127.

<sup>6</sup> Nymanjoh, “Incompleteness,” 256.

<sup>7</sup> Macharia, “Archive and Method,” 141.

## How do we build an archive?

Queer African archives demands, as we have discussed, the inclusion of nuanced, embodied stories and the recognition of incomplete, messy, lived realities. Yet, a queer African archive, cannot simply be about storytelling. As Sarojini Nadar<sup>8</sup> points out, “when presence [in this case LGBTQI+ stories in research] becomes a replacement for perspective [critical theory], then potentially radical spaces ... can simply become what bell hooks calls commodity and spectacle – embracing and promoting a descriptive rather than an analytical approach”. How then do we produce, curate, construct, and share stories without reducing them to commodity and spectacle? There may well be a wide range of answers to that question, but I argue, as Macharia also suggests, that part of the answer lies with the methods and methodologies that are needed and developed.

Macharia writes: “Methods are generated from paying close attention to what exists in and is formed as an archive”.<sup>9</sup> In *Sacred Queer Stories*, Christianity and, indeed, the Bible as a sacred text are central in the stories of the Ugandan LGBTI+ people. The Bible functions as an omnipresent reference point, liberally leant on in Africa to produce moral discourses about queer people and queer sexuality. As Nadar points out, “Its sacredness lies in its authority to be ‘God’s word’,<sup>10</sup> which sets norms and rules for how people ought to live their lives – and defines what is sacred and ‘right sex’”.<sup>11</sup> The Bible, thus, becomes a central text to be appropriated in a postcolonial sense to produce a cultural archive that is not so much focused on recovering an accurate history of something lost but, rather, aims at re-presenting, reconstructing, and reimagining this sacred text for queer lives.

*Sacred Queer Stories*, therefore, is not spectacle because it does not simply present us with autobiographies and life stories. Rather, it provides inter-reading of queer life stories with biblical stories (by the storytellers themselves). This, as the authors acknowledge, is strongly informed by the

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<sup>8</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “‘Stories are Data with Soul’ – Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology,” *Agenda* 28, no.1 (2014): 19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2014.871838>

<sup>9</sup> Macharia, “Archive and Method,” 144.

<sup>10</sup> van Klinken, Stiebert, Brian and Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Queering sacred sexual scripts for transforming African societies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 83.

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method. Largely considered to be developed as a method of research<sup>12</sup> by South African biblical scholar, Gerald West, and furthered by various liberation and feminist scholars since, Nadar describes its goal as “[bringing] the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into dialogue, for the purpose of transformation”.<sup>13</sup> It is a method firmly rooted in a community-centred liberationist project that aims to read the Bible with the community.

*Sacred Queer Stories*, thus, also models a method of building an archive with community. The project team creates a community of critical readers and thinkers by initiating conversation with (rather than conversion through) sacred texts. The seemingly simple act of adding the names of Mother Nature (Sebyala Brian) and Frederick Hudson can be seen as more co-productive and participatory than much scholarly work that theorises an approach *ad nauseum*, often one that is neither empathetic nor conscientious in its praxis. In these ways, this contribution to the archive of queer life stories does not render them a spectacle. Rather, the book is presented in a way that enables the reader to engage productively with these stories through theory and, simultaneously, centre the stories and storytellers as significant in shaping new theory.

Using a CBS-like method also holds great transformative potential empirically, methodologically, and politically. This brings me to my final question: so what? Why do we build the archive?

### **Why do we build an archive?**

This question of “so what?” is an important one to ask of a method and contribution. I draw inspiration from Macharia again to ask, “what do telling these stories have to do with changing the future, with preventing murders that have already happened and violence that continue to be experienced?”.<sup>14</sup> It is a question, I believe, that the authors of *Sacred Queer Stories* ask as well, not only in relation to telling the stories and building the

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<sup>12</sup> Although its roots can be traced much earlier to community engagements in Latin America.

<sup>13</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “Beyond the ‘Ordinary Reader’ and the ‘Invisible Intellectual’: Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy,” *OTE* 22, no.2 (2009): 387.

<sup>14</sup> Macharia, “Archive and Method,” 140.

archive, but also in relation to engaging the Bible through these readings and to determine the transformative potential of this exercise.

The CBS method, which *Sacred Queer Stories* is inspired by, has been critiqued by black liberation and feminist scholars, such as Tinyiko Maluleke<sup>15</sup> and Sarojini Nadar,<sup>16</sup> precisely for its transformative limitations. This is partly because it so heavily relies on “reading the bible with” so-called “ordinary readers”.<sup>17</sup> While these acts of “reading with” seems to prevent the production of a spectacle of queer stories as I discussed before, CBS practitioners have often been caught up in the search for completeness and authenticity, this time of indigenous or community knowledge, that it leaves little if any space for an interventionist method of conscientisation. The problem, as Nadar points out, is that CBS has been reliant on a binary framing of two actors – a trained academic and an ordinary reader.<sup>18</sup> That which constitutes “ordinary” has often gone unnamed but has almost always meant marginalised communities, such as women who experience gender-based violence, the homeless, gang members, prisoners, and, indeed, queer individuals. In comparison, the trained scholar has often referred to the white, privileged, often male academic, very much removed from those ordinary communities. Nadar suggests that is often due to the trained scholars’ keen awareness of their positionality as privileged outsiders that the emphasis has been so solely fixed on reading *with* the community. As such, there have been few possibilities for trained scholars to challenge community readings or offer participants new interpretations of biblical text. Nadar goes on to argue that academics should not alone be transformed in their reading of biblical text. She rightly points out that the tools of biblical hermeneutics can be used to transform community understandings of sacred texts, as the community knowledge, which is so celebrated through CBS, is not always unproblematic and life-giving.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, “The Bible Among African Christians: A Missiological Perspective,” in *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multicultural Global Context*, ed. Teresa Okure (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), 87–112.

<sup>16</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’ A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement Between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 399–351.

<sup>17</sup> Nadar, “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’,” 342.

<sup>18</sup> Nadar, “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’,” 347.

<sup>19</sup> Nadar, “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’,” 349–350.

At a glance, *Sacred Queer Stories* seems to also contribute to this power imbalance, something that the UK based academic authors are keenly aware of. Their awareness of their positionality means they opted to remove themselves from much of the exercise of “reading with” and, instead, acted as participant observers. I felt slightly ambivalent in reading this in the text. On one hand, I applauded their commitment to centring the knowledge and experiences of those participating in creating these new interpretations of the Bible – this queer African archive. On the other hand, and while I did not encounter any interpretations of scripture that might be considered life-denying in *Sacred Queer Stories* (although, admittedly, I am no biblical scholar myself), I wondered what did or might have happened in instances where life-denying and potentially threatening interpretations did come to light? Is there space here for trained biblical scholars and theologians to offer the community new resources and tools through which to read the Bible and, in turn, make sense of their stories? Is there space in *Sacred Queer Stories*, and more broadly in the production of queer African archives, for Nadar’s interventionist conscientising paradigm?<sup>20</sup> Or is this a space reserved only for “organic intellectuals”, that is trained individuals from the community? If our answer is the latter, then perhaps our attempts in building a queer African archive must not only centre the facilitating of telling stories, or even the production of theory from these stories, but equally on training and facilitating environments that allow for the emergence of these organic intellectuals.

Does my ambivalence, then, suggest that *Sacred Queer Stories* has nothing transformative to offer in this context? I argue that there are a few differences in the original application of CBS and the project described in the book that allows it to be thoroughly transformative and queer. *Sacred Queer Stories* is not, in fact, as reliant on the binary between the ordinary reader and trained intellectual as CBS is. Nadar’s critique that communities need to be conscientised by scholars so as to become more aware of their oppression as implicated in particular interpretations of scripture, does not seem applicable to the Ugandan LGBTQI+ people featured in the book. Siya Khumalo aptly proposes, through the title of his book, “You have to be gay to know God”.<sup>21</sup> In the instance of *Sacred Queer Stories*, this could be

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<sup>20</sup> Nadar, “Hermeneutics of Transformation?,” 341.

<sup>21</sup> Siya Khumalo, *You Have to be Gay to Know God* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2018).

transposed to read, “you have to be gay to know the Bible”. Admittedly, the biblical understandings and interpretations are not based on accurate historical contextual readings, but that is not to say they are not critical. In fact those featured in the book are uniquely aware of the cultural power of the Bible and how it has infiltrated various discourses against them. They have been, in this instance, trained by their experiences and the discourses around them to reinterpret and reimagine the Bible in ways that even biblical scholars may not be able to. This is where the transformative potential of this exercise in (inter)textuality lies: in the ability to use the Bible to “talk back” to power and produce counter-narratives and stories of resistance.<sup>22</sup> The potential held within these queer and questioning lenses is significant and should be seen as transformative.

## **Conclusion**

Within the politically loaded context that debates about gender and sexual diversity takes place in various parts of Africa, it is imperative that we remain critical and reflective of the purpose and methods driving contributions made to an expanding queer African archive. *Sacred Queer Stories*, and projects like it, that centre the stories and lives of Ugandan and more broadly African LGBTQI+ people are an enormously meaningful endeavour. It acknowledges and joins together the research project and the participants’ needs in thoughtful and meaningful ways. Central to the project are the lived realities of people who tell their stories and the potential to create transformative understandings and interpretations of oppressive and harmful discourses and beliefs. The book also reminds us that the archive should be embraced as always incomplete, varied, and changing. Yet, if we seek to expand it, we must be conscious of our curation and what it means for those whose lived realities are affected by the stories we tell and how we tell them.

## **Acknowledgment**

This work was supported by the Religion and Education focus area of the SARCHI Chair in Religion and Social Justice, National Research Foundation of South Africa under Grant number 118854.

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<sup>22</sup> van Klinken, Stiebert, Brian and Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories*, 133.



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