

Hermeneutics of Life and Death, Liberation and Mourning: Response to a Roundtable about Sacred Queer Stories

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SHORT BIO

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In memory of Francis (19 April 1994 – 14 November 2022)

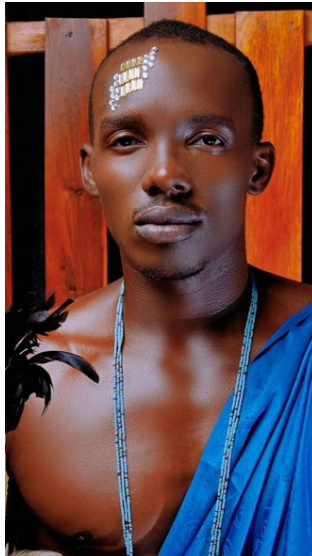


Figure 1: Francis

One morning in November 2022, we woke up to a new message in our *Sacred Queer Stories* WhatsApp group that had created at the beginning of the project. During the research that gave birth to this book, the WhatsApp group served as the team's communication and planning method. Although the project has now been completed, the group (comprising of Sebyala Brian, Hudson Fredrick, and ourselves) has remained as a medium for us to stay in touch and share in one other's lives, even if through, sometimes infrequent, messages.

The message on this Monday morning was a distressing one: the body of one of the project participants, Francis, had been found on a roadside somewhere in Kampala, Uganda where he had been beaten to death. Francis had participated in the second part of the project, when we worked with LGBTIQ refugees to examine the bible story of “Jesus and the woman caught in adultery” to explore experiences of stigma, community judgement, and the quest for affirmation and liberation. In the retelling and dramatization of this story, which can be found on YouTube entitled “Jesus and the guys caught in indecency”, Francis was one of the most enthusiastic actors, especially in the opening scenes where queer folks are dancing in a club and Francis is, quite literally, showing off his bum. A talented performer and singer, at the launch of the book, *Sacred Queer Stories*¹, in February 2022 at the Nature Network premises on the outskirts of Nairobi, Francis sang “Amazing Grace” in such a beautiful and powerful way that those present were visibly moved.

Francis’ voice will no longer be heard. His bum will never again be shown off. The talents he had will not be realized and the ambition he presented will not be fulfilled. He is no longer with us. Although the circumstances of his death remain unclear, the fact that his body was found in Kampala shortly after he had decided to return to Uganda as the asylum and resettlement process with UNHCR in Kenya did not see any progress is yet another illustration of the transience and vulnerability of the lives of members of the LGBTQI community that we worked with for this project and whose voices are presented in *Sacred Queer Stories*.

Francis’ death, and the way in which his life was subsequently remembered and mourned by the community of which he was a vital part, was a reminder for us that the work we undertook in this project is a matter of life and death; that the community facing these challenges is as fragile as it is resilient and, in the words of one of our participants, a “close-knit family”. It was also a reminder that the partnership that Nyanzi writes about in her contribution to

¹ Adriaan van Klinken, Johanna Stiebert, Brian Sebyala and Fredrick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives and the Bible* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2021).

this roundtable – the partnership between us, white, UK-based academics, and a community of LGBTIQ refugees in Kenya – is so much more than the technical and lifeless terms of “co-production” and “co-authorship” can capture. It is an ongoing relationship where we continue to share, albeit from a physical distance, in the lives of the members of the community who participated in the project, celebrating their achievements but also mourning their losses, long after the formal end-date of the project.

Figure 2: Vigil and prayer session for Francis, at Nature Network, Nairobi.

In light of Francis’ death, the methodology of our project has been both



challenged and pushed in new directions. The Bible stories we worked on in the project (Daniel in the lions’ den, and Jesus and the woman caught in adultery) reflected the experiences, struggles and hopes of our participants. Yet, with their focus on liberation and de-stigmatization, they cannot capture the full range of the life experiences that LGBTIQ refugees face. To put it poignantly and painfully, Francis did *not* survive the lions’ den of a homophobic society. Clearly, this particular biblical story, and any other, has its limitations. Where in the story Daniel is protected against the lions by an angel sent by God, Francis was brutally murdered. All we can do, in the words of one member in our WhatsApp group, is “to just pray for her to rest in peace with the angels”.

Which biblical stories could be used, if we had the opportunity, to create a space for sharing and reflecting on the ongoing pain, vulnerability, and trauma that this tragedy has revealed and reinforced, and to find comfort and encouragement? In the context of the suffering and death caused by the HIV epidemic, some African biblical scholars have proposed foregrounding biblical traditions of lament.² Similar language may be needed in the face of ongoing queer trauma in contemporary Africa. Or is it the language of “talitha cumi”, so widely employed by African women theologians who use the story of Jesus bringing a little girl back to life as a paradigm for the ongoing quest for life, healing, and resurrection in the face of death?³ How would a “talitha cum hermeneutics”⁴ look like from the perspective of a community of LGBTIQ refugees who risk being beaten to death among other major threats, such as blackmail, rape, and violent beating? The breadth of discursive genres and narrative theologies within the Bible appear to map onto the full range of the life experiences of the LGBTIQ refugees who participated in our project, which allows for what Nyanzi describes as the innovative and powerful “triangulation between life stories, bible stories and research participant interpretations of scripture”, and the ongoing expansion of what Robertson describes as the “African archive of sacred queer stories”.

Both Nyanzi and Robertson are very generous in their discussion of *Sacred Queer Stories* and its attempt to facilitate a dialogue, or “inter-reading”, between biblical stories and the life stories of Ugandan LGBTIQ refugees based in Kenya. We are grateful for their assessment that, by and large, the book achieves and delivers on the intentions of the project. That is, the intention for us, as UK-based academics who are allies of the community in question, to produce knowledge together through a participatory and creative process of story-telling and re-telling. A process in which the Bible

² Madipoane Masenya, “Dangling between Death and Hope: An HIV and AIDS Gender-sensitive Re-reading of Psalm 6,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 2 (2016): 1-8; Gerald O. West, “Between Text and Trauma: Reading Job with People Living with HIV,” in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 209-230.

³ Nyambura Njoroge and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *Talitha Cumi! Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

⁴ Musa W. Dube, “Talitha Cumi! Some African Women’s Ways of Reading the Bible,” in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. A.F. Botha and P.R. Andinach (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 133-146.

is appropriated and reclaimed as a text that recognizes and affirms the life-experiences of community members and gives voice to their quest for dignity and liberation. Even more important to us is the way in which the community itself has experienced this process and benefited from its result. The contributions of our collaborators and co-authors, Sebyala Raymond Brian and Fredrick Hudson, to this roundtable are testimony of their investment in the project and its outcomes as well as of their trust in us, which we do not take for granted considering the risk of power imbalances in projects such as this alluded to by both Nyanzi and Robertson.

Reflecting on their own involvement, Raymond writes that “the process wasn’t always easy but at least we made it through with the grace of God, and we made it happen!” Perhaps it was this awareness that inspired Francis to perform “Amazing Grace” at the launch of *Sacred Queer Stories*. Organized by and hosted at the Nature Network in February 2022, this launch was an occasion for the community to receive and celebrate the tangible outcome of the project in which they had participated. Community members were visibly excited to see the hard copy of the book that includes their stories in front of them and presented to them and celebrated it as a recognition of their work and an affirmation of their lives. “A book with our stories – this is a-ma-zing!”, one of them shouted, with others responding by saying “amen” and “praise God”. Perhaps here also lies an answer to Robertson’s most critical question about the transformative potential of the methodology of the contextual, creative, and dialogical Bible study deployed in the project. As Hudson succinctly puts it in his contribution to this roundtable, “the Bible became really relatable”. From a potential or actual “text of terror”⁵, this sacred Scripture was engaged as “a friendly text”.⁶ It illustrates what we conceptualize as the “hermeneutics of trust” (rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion) with which participants approached the Bible.⁷

⁵ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁶ Robert E. Goss and Mona West, “Introduction,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 5.

⁷ Alice Yafeh-Deigh, “Rethinking Paul’s Sexual Ethics within the Context of HIV and AIDS: A Postcolonial Afro-Feminist-Womanist Perspective,” in *Navigating African Biblical Hermeneutics: Trends and Themes from our Pots and Our Calabashes*, ed. Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) and Kenneth N. Ngwa (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2018), 20-39.

The Bible becoming relatable does not, at first sight, bring about any major social change. Yet, on a small-scale, grassroots level, perhaps it does. As Robertson acknowledges, the transformative potential of the *Sacred Queer Stories* project is in its “ability to use the Bible to ‘talk back’ to power and to produce counter-narratives and stories of resistance”. Both she and Nyanzi mention the risky and “potentially dangerous” aspects of this strategy citing the ambivalent messages that can be, and are, derived from the Bible in relation to questions of sexual and gender diversity. Yet they also acknowledge the transformative potential that was explored and made productive through this project.

The Ugandan LGBTIQ refugees who participated in our project narrated experiences of trauma and pain caused by religious leaders and communities, in particular noting situations where the Bible had been used to deny them their dignity and right to exist. Nevertheless, they demonstrated an overall attitude of trust towards the Bible, distinguishing the sacred text from the religious authorities that seek to manipulate it and use it for their own end. This appeared to be enabled by their fundamental trust – or faith – in the God of the Bible, which allowed them to identify with and reclaim the affirming and liberatory elements of the biblical text and reject as irrelevant other elements that were at odds with their faith in a God who created them the way they are. By identifying themselves in the text of the Bible, they were able to speak back prophetically to the social, political, and religious actors invested in promoting queer-phobia and anti-queer violence and envisage an alternative future. The drama plays produced as part of the project express this prophetic critique and reflect a creative African queer religious utopian imagination.⁸ Imagine the social chance that could occur, if only religious leaders, politicians, and other spokespersons of the anti-queer brigade would watch these plays, read the life stories collected in *Sacred Queer Stories*, and allow themselves to be touched and transformed by them!

⁸ See The Nature Network, “Daniel in the homophobic lions’ den,” YouTube, 24 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0j9xq6xX8c&t=11s>; The Nature Network, “Jesus and the guys charged with indecency,” YouTube, 19 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f-1JD9tQew&t=50s>.

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