

I want to start an organization
to save my life.

...

I'm not concerned
about the attire of a soldier.

All I want to know
for my own protection
is are we capable
of whatever
whenever.

—ESSEX HEMPHILL, "FOR MY OWN PROTECTION"

BEGINNING IN THE 1970s, violence against women increased and went uninvestigated or unsolved in urban areas such as Boston, precipitating the organizing of the Combahee River Collective and other groups. In South Africa the focus of Black activists was, understandably, ending apartheid, but without serious consideration of gender and sexuality before the emergence of leaders such as Simon Nkoli and Bev Ditsie, who fought on several fronts—against apartheid, against heterosexism in the anti-apartheid move-

ment, and against racism within the gay and lesbian movement—toward a future liberation that no one else had articulated before. Jamaicans founded a freedom movement in 1977, claiming both gay existence since the Arawak and certain victory, with the resolution that it will require “a very long road.” Soon after, Black Brazilians reanimated their inheritance of *quilombismo* to re-narrate a Black LGBT presence and *presente*.¹ Black gay is from the future because it must be. By the early 1980s, it was already *after the end of the world*. Once the HIV/AIDS pandemic began its unrelenting assault on Black communities, Black gay and bisexual men, Black lesbians, trans folks, and allies exponentially intensified the necessary work to save their own lives. There were no specific services to which Black trans, bisexuals, gays, and lesbians could turn—in the Americas or any other place in the world—before Black trans, bisexuals, gays, and lesbians did it for themselves. Neoconservatism emerged as a global conglomerate with the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US. Crack began its assault in Miami and spread throughout the United States and the world. As Marcus (Lee) offers, “The 1980s is often theorized as a period of Black political decline and deinstitutionalization—as a tragic lack—but, this view is tenable only if the framing excludes Black transgender, lesbian, bisexual, and gay male activists.”² This is the context in which we should understand the reconstitution of Black communities and Black scholarship, here and there. US historians may continue to think of the period between the so-called Reconstruction era and World War I as the nadir of “race relations” in the United States, but if we look more closely at relations *between* Black people, we will see that the long 1980s represents a break that is likewise historically significant. As Cathy (Cohen)’s title avers, Black politics, as it was understood then, had reached “breakdown.” The boundaries of what Black folks had taken for granted, identified by Michael Dawson as “linked fate”³—the understanding that Black political ideology and behavior remain consistent across class and other difference, the interests of each partisan of the group “linked” by the effects of racism and internal cohesion—were tested, and it failed to disastrous ends that we are still working through today.⁴ Scholars have inadequately framed the question of contemporary Black politics, in large part because they have refused to account for the moment at which the frameworks of the past were ruptured and subsequently reconstituted by Black gay (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activists, artists, and organizations. Cathy’s signal work, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, empirically chronicles the consequences of this in the United States. But still, the intransigence persists, at great peril—

intellectually and materially. “You cannot go to your future, girl . . .”—Kevin Aviance has already told us this—with a poor sense of historicity. We have learned that we cannot depend upon politics that announces itself as Black, any more than politics that announces itself as queer, to liberate us. Have we not also learned that traditional disciplinary modes and attachments are also inadequate to the urgent work still ahead of us?⁵ Drawing both from social science research and her experience working within organizations, including what would become the Audre Lorde Project, Cathy has incisively challenged the “limits of the lesbian and gay political agenda based on a Civil Rights strategy where assimilation into and replication of dominant institutions are the goals.”⁶ Moreover, she has incisively argued that traditional modes of Du Boisian Black studies will have to be supplemented, and also supplanted in some ways, by new research agendas.⁷

Today the stakes are, literally, life and death for African (descended) non-heteronormative and gender-variant individuals. But also it seems clear that the project of creating an autonomous Black gay “political direction and agenda” seems to have stalled out. This is a grave matter for me and many fellow travelers. But barely a shrug registers for most folks. And we have not defined whether a transnational agenda covering all of the ways homosexual, bisexual, transgender, gender-variant, gay, non-gender-conforming, lesbian, two-spirit, same-gender-loving . . . folks identify themselves in various languages, and hold a number of ways of being and identifying as Black, is a useful goal to aspire to reach. *Alluh* this—the far-flung locales and (dis)affiliations, the shrugs, high stakes, and low investments, et cetera—leave us with huge theoretical quandaries, nettlesome political problems, and ethical conundrums. Additionally, because I have committed to tell this story, for me this constitutes a narrative challenge. Many of the scenes and many of the people who made the still-significant long-1980s fierce have already passed, of course. My preoccupation, pace Morrison, is that it seems they have also been *passed on* in too many ways. Here, again, we invoke this “middle” moment at which Black gay explicitly emerges as belonging irreducibly to its time, but exceeding this temporality. In the face of compounded vulnerabilities, yes: “against revisionism’s erasures and in pursuit of our survival.”⁸

You may think of the following conversation as a sort of ethnographic glimpse of the current moment, pushing closer to our ambition to be “fluent in each other’s histories” and conversant in each other’s freedom dreams, dear reader.⁹ Alternatively, you may choose to think of this as I did when I began this research many years ago: *whither Black LGBTQ movement?* Having already demonstrated in previous chapters that the lack of an organized,

broad-based, global Black/queer political *movement* does not constitute a lack of Black/queer *politics*, this chapter follows a few still-unfolding far-flung political dramas, strategies, and imaginaries through various peregrinations, many of which appear fruitful and all of which are fraught. Our conversation takes us to the Caribbean—Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago—where activists are shaping a new agenda with familiar politics and affect. Then, we turn to East Africa, where we meditate on Afropolitanism, pan-Africanism, and the resolve to “free our imaginations.” Engaging this juxtaposed transnational framework, as opposed to a formal “comparison” or “case study” in which the narrator’s disciplinary expertise neatly solves what folks on the ground struggle with daily, may allow us to see in ways that “incorrigible” national discourses occlude. Before addressing this contemporary work, however, we necessarily turn to another re-narration: proposing possible futures through looking back closely at the long 1980s to reconsider the politics of Black gay movement in the United States. Recall that Jacqui has warned us that “crossings are never undertaken all at once or once and for all.” This set of conversations crisscrosses danger and desires that we have visited previously.¹⁰

“For the embattled,” radical thought and practice are indispensable to the project of staying alive with a bit of integrity, even with our myriad contradictions and challenges. There is no replacement for this, and reform will never be enough for those of us who live, barely, on the diminishing piers, bottoms, and gullies of the margin’s margins. Before moving further in this meditation on our unfinished work, let me borrow the crystalline directness of the first generation of radical Black Lesbian feminist sistren whose work catalyzed the long 1980s: revolution is necessary for total liberation. And/but I hear the reminder that there is no Sierra Maestra in the urban United States. There is certainly no dense forest cover in the tony shops of Cape Town, the housing schemes of les banlieue, the archive or museum, the foundation, the press, the journal, or the university—although each can and must be transformed to foment greater humanity and higher consciousness. Toward these futures we ask ourselves: Why are we here? What sort of moment is this, now?

Another Dangerous Crossing

The evaporation of an autonomous Black gay “political direction and agenda” is multilayered, and some of the factors leading to this have become apparent only with the marvelous arithmetic of time and distance. Word on the (academic) street seems to be that the Black lesbian and gay movement and HIV/AIDS organizations of the long 1980s diminished in size, stature,

and relevance because of the failure of “identity politics,” the success of the mainstream gay rights movement, and better HIV/AIDS medications and combinations of medications that make HIV a manageable chronic disorder for people who can afford or otherwise have access to adequate medical care.¹¹ Although these factors are important, this view is incomplete. Global political-economic shifts that resulted in regentrification of urban space, the continuation of post-civil rights desegregation and concomitant disintegration of Black community spaces, and relatively easy access to communication technologies such as smartphone apps for dating and hookups (mitigating the need for gathering *at the club* and other places of communion), at the same time that heterosexual spaces became less exclusionary, have also all played important roles. Still, the fading of Black gay movement owes also to a failure of political imagination, as HIV/AIDS prevention work became its driver instead of one of the central objectives. The popular Silicon Valley metaphor of *building an airplane while in flight* begins to describe the context of wider Black gay movement and HIV/AIDS prevention and care in the long 1980s. However, hewing closer to the truth—imagine the genius necessary to build your aircraft while under rapid attack from the air and the ground. Your pilot, engineers, and navigators are dying, some after periods of painful disability and others very suddenly. Many onboard await their turn. The mission shifts. Soon, memory of how to build the craft is lost. The navigation becomes unclear: was there any point other than to become airborne?

AIDS policy and prevention advocates, many of them Black gay men, had not adequately examined the consequences of conflating the movement paradigm with (federally and charitably funded) AIDS prevention and shifting the focus to pathology and risk—rather than on more capacious radical formulations and dreams that had been offered by Joe, Essex, Assotto, and Marsha, for example, and the Black feminist lesbians from whom they learned and drew inspiration.¹² And these visions also require refinement and contextualization. As romantic and beautiful the initial step is, for example, we can now see that “Black men loving Black men” as an “autonomous agenda” can be carried out only within the context of a wider (intellectual, artistic, and activist) movement framework—like any other revolutionary paradigm. Recalling Pat’s polite questioning of Black gay men’s politics in not advocating for universal health care and our absence in fights against cancer, I wonder, What if? And, perhaps more usefully, What else? What have we forgotten or disavowed? AIDS services organizations (ASOs) “blew up” in size and support by the height of the long 1980s, and/but this is a good description of the unintended consequences of the shift from consciousness raising and

political action to primarily HIV/AIDS prevention education and AIDS services. The nineties saw vast improvement from a few years earlier, when there were no viable treatment options. As a volunteer at AID Atlanta and Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD) in the early 1990s, I participated in “safer-sex” education and “outreach” to promote individual and group efficacy toward wellness and to decrease panic. This work is worthy and necessary. Had I arrived earlier, during the beginning of “the plague years,” I hope that I would have had the courage and the stamina to fight and work as hard as many of my epidemic-dead brothers and sisters, and the living (still here), who fought and worked to stay alive and to save the lives of others.

Still, I am convinced by the evidence that Marcus Lee has marshaled, showing that early Black gay AIDS policy and prevention advocates authored an expedient but also potentially debilitating model, in which Black men who have sex with men (MSM) form the center of an exceptionally unruly tangle of pathology and HIV/AIDS vulnerability.¹³ This is not easy. We are having this conversation toward helping to refine both how we fight *and for what*. From the late 1990s, for example, HIV testing became the holy grail—its public health intention to “identify and treat” meant to lower the collective viral load of particularly hard-hit places and reduce incidence of seroconversion. The sociocultural context of success—dramatically lowered HIV viral load of San Francisco, for example—ought to give us pause. This public health triumph is not just about new treatments, patient adherence, and the city’s enviable HIV-care infrastructure. It is also a result of the dramatic rise in cost of living and aggressive policies pushing working-class and poor Black and other people of color—whose incidence of HIV is higher and whose access to treatment is lower and less dependable—out of the city.

In her *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, Urvasi Vaid extends Cathy’s critical question—“What is this movement doing to my politics?”—likewise warning of the “mainstreaming” of the larger (read: largely white) LGBT and queer liberation movements, and advocating for the need to reach beyond what she termed “virtual equality.”¹⁴ Urvasi shows that the success of the larger LGB rights movement (“T” excluded here to reflect historical accuracy) is indicative of the appeal of “pragmatic politics: instead of doing the right thing, movements like ours do the expedient thing. . . .” The larger gay and lesbian movement made at least four strategic choices in the long 1980s that shape our current conjuncture: “degayng, desexualizing, and de-coupling AIDS-specific reforms from systemic reform and direct action. We used short-term, quick fix strategies that yielded dramatic but short-lived gains. As a consequence, we failed to tackle

the underlying problems that still exacerbate the epidemic; the problems of homophobia and heterosexism, racism, sexism, classism and the dictates of a profit-driven health care system.”¹⁵ It is not my intention to compare the larger gay and lesbian rights movement’s precipitous rightward shift to the stalling of (the) Black gay movement. Still, they are historically and ideologically related and entangled. Black HIV/AIDS activism reflects Urvashi’s insightful assertion and proves Cathy’s point about the need to distinguish progressive politics and movement praxis and to inaugurate a new (research) agenda. Crisis management must not be confused with movement agenda, political analysis, or good progressive scholarship, but the former can easily supplant each of these latter intentions. Focusing on expediency, Black gay men who led Black HIV/AIDS activism fashioned and perpetuated a notion of a particular and specific *Black homophobia* (rather than, for example, systemic racialized capitalist patriarchal heterosexism). They argued that this results in a pathological self-concept among Black men that leads to failure to comply with protective sexual behaviors during sex with men and nondisclosure of their sexual behaviors and history (and identity) with women sex partners, finding Black women to be unwitting victims of a reputedly rapacious mendacity. This is another iteration of Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” thesis, warmed over. A wide range of media promoted this idea in the long 1980s until it became our commonsense understanding of Black AIDS. Marcus’s work on how Black men who have sex with men became subjects of—and *through*—social science and policy, and what Black gay men advocated as agents of policy and knowledge production, argues that this articulation of pathology/vulnerability, and the epistemic privilege of a vanguard of Black gay men to address it, was invented by Black gay men themselves. In any case, this proved to be a winning formulation—a successful tool for raising funds toward caring for people with HIV/AIDS and preventing more infections.¹⁶

By the 1990s, a brain drain ensued from on-the-ground movement work and artistry to other areas of endeavor. Some that had not existed, or had not been accessible, before the onset of the AIDS crisis, such as middle- and upper-level administration of ASOs, HIV outreach, education and public health positions, and academe. Your author is no exception. Sometimes, in the throes of crisis, essential questions go begging: What do we stand for? What sort of world do we envision? What sort of organizations, institutions, art, and individuals do we envision inhabiting this new world beyond this moment of crisis? What should each of us do to contribute, and where/how? Instructions from the ether show us ways forward, reminding us, as members of the Combahee River Collective quipped from a protest placard, “We

cannot live without our lives.” Please reconsider, for example, Pat Parker’s questioning of the (bourgeois, or merely pragmatic?) politics of Black gay leadership evidenced by the narrow pursuit of increased funding for HIV and AIDS care within the established system and not for universal health care or socialized medicine. The former, of course, provides access to care only within existing so-called “free-market” structures of capitalism, in which some states or municipalities may offer those without financial resources life-sustaining medication if they qualify and can maintain the stamina to withstand what Dana-Ain Davis has, in the context of the (former) welfare system, called bureaucratic “ceremonies of degradation.”¹⁷ HIV/AIDS is necessarily suffused throughout our discussion of “an organization to save our lives.” It is structuring even when not explicit and even though HIV is hardly the only monster currently stalking Black folks. Colin Robinson, who provides time-space traveling context, said:

In my view, HIV has enabled or influenced much of the sexual rights work happening contemporarily. Its role has been to vastly expand public and institutional discourse about sexuality, to highlight homosexuals as a social group experiencing enhanced stigma and discrimination and to legitimate us as a target for strategic social and health programming. In the midyears of the pandemic, HIV emboldened GLBT advocates and created a sense of urgency and priority for both advocacy and sexuality, and helped strengthen sexual communities. HIV and HIV funding have helped give voice, infrastructure, access and often a framework or meaning to GLBT organizing and social activity. This has been the case in Trinidad and Tobago.

An undisputed leader in this realm in the United States during what he calls “midyears of the pandemic” and now having returned to the Caribbean, where, like much of the world, local LGBTQ organizing had focused largely on HIV among men who have sex with men and the creation of male social space, Colin notes that

HIV has also had a distorting effect on MSM and GLBT community self-concept and priorities. HIV, its dominant discourse and the resources that follow it reframe organic community organizing, the nature of leadership and the substance of programmes and advocacy. MSM, and to an extent GLBT people, are seen primarily in terms of an infectious, disabling and stigmatising disease, and the legitimacy of GLBT representation, resource allocation and the decriminalisation of GLBT desire is justified in terms of disease, and often of preventing its costs or transmission to the population

at large, instead of in terms of the humanity or worth of GLBT people, the value of sexual autonomy or the legitimacy of desire and sexual pleasure.

CAISO (Coalition Advocating Sexual Orientation Inclusion), the Trinbagonian organization he currently helps to lead and to which we will soon turn, has been routinely called on by virtue of its being a GLBT group that engages with policy and planning issues related to HIV, and he says that the group has done so with ambivalence, recognizing the importance of “transforming HIV discourse to one which centres at first stigma, discrimination and vulnerability but ultimately autonomy and self-efficacy as core facets of sexual health.” Still, it has also felt the need to push against the distorting and reductive impact of HIV on resource allocation, attention, and imagination with regard to other GLBT concerns and policy issues.

In 2012, after Cathy and Urvashi’s fears had been borne out, Kenyon Farrow observed another “definite political move to the right by the LGBT equality movement, as well as the new alliance of national mainstream [read: white] LGBT organizations, Republican lawmakers, right-wing think tanks, and donors” that had been slowly coming together since the end of the long 1980s and emerged—or *metastasized*—during the centrist “gay-friendly” Obama administration.¹⁸ I hear Audre warning of this future/tense in 1995: “And if we lose, someday women’s blood will congeal upon a dead planet. If we win, there is no telling.”¹⁹ Who are the winners and losers today? What and who constitutes *we*? Citing the New York state same-sex marriage legislation, Kenyon argues that it was

largely won by wealthy hedge fund managers and Tea Party sympathizers, who raised money for four Republican state legislators to provide the votes to ensure its passage. . . . Many of the gay donors who raise money, even for LGBT equality organizations, are “progressives” only because of marriage, and actually do not support most of what the rest of us would call a left agenda . . . (single-payer health care system, collective bargaining, public education, an end to massive imprisonment, reproductive justice, etc.). . . . But whatever we think about the mainstream equality movement, it is almost finished with its agenda, and thank goodness. Most of the policy issues that the mainstream LGB movement has made the central focus of its agenda are already won.²⁰

This situation not only set the stage for the disastrous election of 2016 but also conditioned current lukewarm political opposition to the steady incremental rollbacks of these recent victories: their “cremation” or “evisceration,”

Melvin might say.²¹ Summarizing the work of the New Queer Agenda editorial collective, Kenyon noted the inescapable out-of-timeliness of the work of making good Black gay sense of dynamically reiterative, but also sometimes surprising and relatively rapidly shifting politics on the ground:

When we began working on this collection, we were still in the midst of the Bush era . . . there was a sense of urgency at the time about articulating the limitations of single-issue politics and the focus on legislation and policy change as the sole path towards queer liberation. But, as this collection articulates, many queer and trans radicals critique the mainstream LGBT movement not just as a difference of form, but as *an actual dispute over essence*. . . . This collection represents a collective roar to the open skies: Can't we do better than equality?²²

It is this “actual dispute over essence” that we likewise undertake here. Having achieved the “virtual equality” Urvashi warned against, some LGB organizations based in the North seemed to operate on the premise that systemic homophobia “at home” had been neutralized. It is as if these liberal advances and the abatement of AIDS deaths among urban, well-resourced, gay white men heralded their arrival to their full complement of citizenship. Mission accomplished. Therefore, we would be wise to attend to Cathy’s more recent provocation about the rightward shift and attendant “performative solidarity” of gay rights groups in the wake of a series of video evidence of Black people being murdered by police and other vigilantes. These extrajudicial executions of a mounting list of Black girls, boys, women, and men in the US, the UK, and elsewhere; and the political assassination of Rio de Janeiro legislator Marielle Franco, who was killed allegedly by former police in 2018,²³ do not seem to figure prominently in the *calendar of loss* of the wider US LGBTQ or global gay rights movements beyond “thoughts and prayers” hashtags. Cathy points out that this “performative solidarity” of LGBTQ groups (i.e., statements of support and also frequent, unfortunate, and inaccurate narration of “parallels” between race and sexual identity) belies complicity with the same neoliberal policies that support the fact that “in fact, Black lives do not matter” (to them).²⁴

Self-satisfied political insularity is not exclusive to this group, however. Nor is it exceptionally domestic. According to Black European observers and respondents, white neocolonial rescue fantasies in which Asian, Islamic, Latin American, and African (-descended) LGBTQ people are understood only as beneficiaries of the largesse of the European citizen subject who may deign to sponsor or “save” them mark interactions between racial groups. Meanwhile, Black LGBTQI activists in Cuba, the United States, the United

Kingdom, the Caribbean, Brazil, southern Africa, and eastern Africa have demonstrated that access to adequate health care, protection, and political recognition is far from a singularly “cultural” problem to be attributed to race, religion, or ethnicity.²⁵ These are political-economic issues with complex historical and spatial contexts, which are increasingly transnational. For example, the Southern Poverty Law Center showed that as gay and lesbian rights movements all over the North claimed important legislative, juridical, and cultural victories at the end of the Obama era, organized homophobic backlash and redoubled reactionary efforts intensified in the global South—financed by the erstwhile locally defeated organized foes of the US LGB movement such as fundamentalist Christian groups like Focus on the Family. Thus, the great shame of what some call “Global Gay” “Pride” is not that sisters and brothers in the global South are missing the rainbow-themed party as we parade shirtless and satisfied in the Castro, Le Marais, Soho, or Johannesburg’s exclusive Melrose Arch, but that race (class and gender) remain largely unthought in gay international/global gay sexual rights work in local and translocal contexts. Like Black and other people of color in the global North, LGBTQIA folks in the global South struggle for access to adequate health care, education, and protection from violence and other vulnerabilities. However, among the most threatening of these vulnerabilities are often supported by well-heeled US-based fundamentalist Christian groups and the widespread common sense of (white) saviorship in which they traffic. In Nairobi, when I asked a group of East African activists what they would say to an audience of would-be US allies and supporters, one person jokingly said: “White Americans! Christian Americans! Gay Americans! Come get your people!” *Can’t we do better than equality?*

In the passages that follow we ask what the most salient desires expressed by Black LGBTQ/SGL (sexual minority and/or gender-non-conforming) individuals and organizations are. How are politics of self—recognition, care, love/friendship, and erotic autonomy—enacted within these organizations and individuals? What are the most formidable obstacles to overcome? *For our own protection.*

Confronting “Homophobia” in Black/Queerpolis

Colin’s poem “Unfinished Work” confronts “homophobia” differently than you might expect. He begins this poetic manifesto with memory, invoking a dear childhood friend, Michael, “dropping curtesy to / Buller.” The speaker says, “*I remember Michael’s / thank you / neutering insult.*”²⁶ It is not direct conflict

with a heterosexist social structure or individual “homophobe” that is at issue here. Rather, the collective, reiterative work of memory, resistance, *maroonage*, and *quilombo* building is the focus and urgent matter in this poetically distilled political philosophy. Quilombos, or Maroon societies, are settlements that the formerly enslaved created for themselves in Brazil that were not only destinations for escapees but also sites from which raids and other forms of opposition and resistance to the institution of slavery and the colonial state were launched. Maroon settlements arose throughout the Americas.²⁷ In Colin’s poem the insult—“darkness of past wounds / . . . heels and / opened holes / of memory” that the speaker invokes later—is (merely) a structuring reality. What the speaker remembers and instructs is protracted, necessary work to “pervert / the language” together. Richly evoking the transnational, translanguistic space of Other Countries Black Gay Men’s Writing Collective, rather than a mere one-way, no-return diaspora, like Melvin’s poem “And These Are Just a Few,” here Colin is “recollective”—remembering relationships, battles, places, and travels between people (and dedicating it “for Zola & for Shawn; for C-FLAG; for Rohan; and for Rohan”). He is also “prospective”—rehearsing what must happen in future (tense):²⁸

And from this quilombo

I must still return . . .

. . .

Que griten

they will call me

maricón

shout *buller*

I will curtsy

. . . ²⁹

Marlon Riggs’s short film “Affirmation” (1990) also begins unexpectedly: not with a litany of “issues” or fierce righteous indignation, but with Sweet Honey in the Rock singing “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom.” Reginald Jackson unfolding a sweet story of sexual initiation. No snaps. No tears. Perched on a brownstone stoop on a sunny day while children play and cars go by, Reginald holds us in his thrall. The charming ordinariness of the story he tells—in a minor key and with a good bit of humor—is a striking complement to the drama and intensity of standard narratives of initiation and (non)belonging, and therefore a very fitting prelude to Marlon’s important short film. Reginald’s story unfolds under five titles taken from his memorable lines, beginning with “A sensitive man is *terrible*

for your nerves,” an account of meeting his first sexual partner, followed by “I didn’t know if something was going to happen.” During the “Lord, you start feeling things that you ain’t never felt before!” portion, he says: “I didn’t know you could feel these things, [much] less feel them on a regular basis. . . .” The next title, “Penetration is liberation,” more explicitly responds to common pejoratives that equate a man being penetrated with “emasculatation” (which in typical misogynist logic is read as dehumanization). Reginald continues: blushing, sometimes giggling, and other times looking over to the children playing nearby, who are presumably the reason for his coy language:

At one point . . . feeling certain things, and . . . he sort of flipped one over and one went flying over, and before you knew it, one was experiencing many things of a personal nature! Shock and pain and everything at once. Then it stopped being shock and it stopped being pain . . . and, I think this was a different type of initiation . . . it said yes . . . penetration is liberation.³⁰

The penultimate heading is, therefore “Lord, we sang praises to the Lord that day!” Reginald reports rushing to church to sing in his choir after *one was flipped over and experienced many things of a personal nature*. Eager to share his experience, he says to a choir mate who had warned him against this initiation: “It don’t hurt. . . .”

“African American Freedom Day, Harlem” is the final heading, and two scenes of “Affirmation” form a climax that mirrors the opening of Colin’s “Unfinished Work.” A GMAD contingent marches along with African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change (AALUSC), Minority Taskforce against AIDS, and other sibling organizations on a beautiful parade day in Harlem, complete with floats, drill teams, marching bands, and placards of Malcolm, Martin, (Elijah) Mohammad, and Marcus (Garvey) parading in front of adoring crowds. AALUSC rhythmically chants, exhorting folks to rise and fight “From Har-lem-to-So-we-to-!” Then, a smiling young man, seemingly surprised at the boldness of the GMAD contingent, shouts: “Homos!” Assotto—dressed in a white tank top and black biking shorts, carrying an African liberation flag and backed up by the GMAD contingent—enthusiastically answers this hail, without missing a beat of his dancery stride. “Yes! Homos!” Assotto says, playfully pointing the small Black Liberation Flag at the young man in emphasis, “*cracking . . . lashing . . . free / like a whip.*”³¹

...

Llamaron maricones
oímos cimarrones y viniendo

at this quilombo we arrived³²
 from different places
 other countries
 cities, villages. plantations
 bantustans and ghettoes
 other colonies and nations
 old and new
 from strange lands
 but not strangers
 we carried tongues like oil and
 flames of Pentecost
 that linked and licked
 the darkness of past wounds
 and heels and
 opened holes
 of memory
 In passion whispered
buller batty baby
faggot maricón adodi
 magic words
 . . . ³³

Crowds continue to cheer. “The people / united / will never be defeated!” “We’re Black, We’re Gay. We won’t have it no other way.” There are also boos and hisses. Assotto is gazelle-like. Allen (dashing, as usual) chants along with other GMAD brothers: “*We’re Black-Black-Black-Black Gay-Gay-Gay-Gay. We Won’t Have It No Other Way!*” and “Hey-Hey. Ho-Ho: *Homophobia’s Got to Go!*” Some, now listening more closely to the GMAD contingent, seem confused by what they are hearing: “*Gay-Gay-Gay-Gay. . . Homophobia!*” Some continue to cheer. Others giggle or look bemused. Some boo and hiss. Marlon’s lens catches one formerly enthusiastic onlooker fold his arms in apparent exasperation. At five minutes and thirty-seven seconds into the film, the march has stopped. Another sidewalk onlooker, whom I will call “Curly hair light-skinned trade,” begins rudely yelling over the heads of giggling little girls, bemused elders, and interested, middle-aged Black women with fly 1990s eyewear. These women and girls stand, unwittingly, as a buffer between him and the GMAD contingent on the other side of the parade barricade. “Our children are out here!” Curly shouts. The parade has stopped momentarily, providing a prime opportunity for a standoff in front of the Greater

Refuge Temple on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and in the shadow of the Harlem State Office Building. Speaking, it seems, with full authority, as if he is the spokesperson for all African/Afrikan peoples everywhere for all time (ironically, even for those who would deny this brother full membership because of his physical features), Curly breaks the news that he seems at once eager and disheartened to give (there is such a strange look on his face, at once pleading and sardonic). Curly says, definitively, “You are not part of the African tradition!” In reply to GMAD’s now-louder chants in response—“Hey-Hey Ho-Ho: Homophobia’s Got to Go!”—he too escalates: “*You* got to go!” he shouts. “All of you got to go. . . . You still slaves!” he says, as the girls and women continue smiling, if not now also confounded, as they survey the gay men standing together on the streets of Harlem, USA.

Are these sisters standing at the crucial buffer zone recognizing *this type of gay*—loud and proud in many colors and styles, all at once—for the first time? GMAD members continue chanting, now focused on Curly. GMAD leaders motion for brothers to step back, avoiding or preparing for escalation. Nothing jumps off. There is no resolution to this climactic standoff, just rising action and irresolution. In the final sequence of the film, disembodied voices of GMAD members speak. A voice summarizes the fissure or boundary of Black solidarity and Black gay men’s longing, reflecting on a moment before difference meant exclusion: “There [was] a Black consciousness. A Black awareness, you know . . . and people were there with a common thread. I think that common thread is in tatters at this point. I think that there should be some higher kinship there.” Now, and then. Here, and there. Brothers talk about their dreams. They want recognition and (re)incorporation into Black publics “to nurture and be nurtured by other Black men” and “to be accepted enough to share our gifts,” among which some one cites “how to treat women.” Of course, Cheryl (Clarke), in her 1983 *Home Girls* essay “Homophobia in the Black Community: The Failure to Transform,” had already famously excoriated the lack of any demonstrable kinship on the part of “Black macho intellectuals . . . who consistently or unwittingly have absorbed the homophobia of their patriarchal slave holders . . . and the Black woman intellectual . . . afraid to relinquish heterosexual privilege.” This classic essay is a brilliant complement to her 1981 piece, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” originally published in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Cheryl had indeed called for a higher kinship: “That there is homophobia among Black people in America is largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live. . . . Yet we cannot rationalize the diseases of homophobia among Black people

as the white man's fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our core duty to transform ourselves."³⁴

Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender-non-binary folks in the long 1980s were offering everyone an opportunity to transform by rejecting homophobic poison: the "common sense" of the entire culture. This offer resonates today, for example, in the position of continental Africans who assert that it is homophobia and transphobia that are "un-African," not African homosexuals, bisexuals, and queers, or politics that support their rights, and by Caribbean activists fighting against colonial-era laws who point out that it is this set of laws, not LGBT inclusion, that is *from foreign*, against the nation, and/or anti-Black. Cheryl has already told us that we all have a duty to resist and transform ourselves and our communities, lest we find ourselves, as Curly would have it, *still slaves* to heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism. Essex's introduction to *Brother to Brother*, following up on Joe's elaboration of the contested "home" that Joe longed for and knew needed him but to which he "cannot go," echoes this longing and invitation to transform. Essex recognized the labor that this takes: to *work with* folks with whom we may stand at an impasse (I hear fam asking for a discount, or a special consideration: "can you *work with me*, sister/brother?). Staring each other down on Malcolm X Boulevard, dancing and chanting in the street on our way to freedom. Likewise complexly contradictory, lacking easy resolution, and pragmatic even in its intimate heart-rending affect, Essex writes:

We are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone. We should not continue standing in line to be admitted into spaces that don't want us there. We cannot continue to exist without clinics, political organizations, human services, and political institutions that we create to support, sustain and affirm us. . . . Our communities are waiting for us to come home. . . . They may not understand everything about us, but they will remain ignorant, misinformed, and lonely for us, and we for them, for as long as we stay away hiding in communities that really never wanted us, or the gifts we bring. . . . I am coming home. There is no place else to go that will be worth so much love and effort.³⁵

"There is no place else to go that will be worth so much love and effort. No guarantees: but this discourse is placed (*at home*), and the heart has its reasons."³⁶ Nomadic *tribal* institution building is often lonely translational homework (I am aware that the foregoing is an awkwardly stated, dense contradiction, but that does not make it any less true or important to say). This, for the intents and purposes of the Black gay habits of mind we follow here, is our Unfin-

ished Work—our *wuk* both here and there. Translating at a crossroad, which is also an intersection. Sometimes at impasse. With so much between us.

“Rights Coming!”

In 2014, while preparations for International Day against Homophobia Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) and Gay Pride celebrations began taking shape around the global North, President Yoweri Museveni of the East African nation of Uganda signed the nation’s Anti-Homosexuality Act—among other restrictions and punishments, affirming that freedom of expression “can be validly restricted in the public interest.” In neighboring Kenya, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission was filing suit against the nation’s NGO Coordination Board, which deemed their name “inappropriate.” Actions like these by African governments impelled many to ask why Africa seemed to be bucking the global gay trend toward liberal rights, and many casual observers and commentators seem to think that they know the answer, boldly proclaiming the same analyses and platitudes on social media in righteous bursts of hashtag activism, “think pieces,” and performative solidarity and expertise. The structure of the commentaries were consistent. Blame “African culture,” then respond with shaking heads, hashtags, invectives against the offending national leaders, and calls for LGBTI Africans to sexile to “freedom” in the North. This is not only wholly insufficient but also willfully misplaces perhaps sincere empathy, concern, and activist solidarity. To be clear: the issue here is not African “backwardness” or a Black and/or brown wet blanket of “cultural pathology” spoiling the fabulous trajectory of worldwide gay/queer ascension (in the global South and among people of color in the North). It is, perhaps, not yet time to cue the glitter and Cher’s “If You Believe,” dear Pride reveler (no, this one is not disco). The work of African and Caribbean activists and scholars shows that access to adequate health care, protection, and political recognition is far from a merely “cultural” issue. These are complex political-economic problems with complex local historical contexts—the connections and roots of which are global. But the successful re-branding of the (radical) Queer Liberation movement as Gay Rights finds it so insular that it has all but erased political-economic power imbalance by class, race, nation, and gender, even though LGBTQ people—especially Black and other people of color, undocumented, unhoused, and poor people—continue to suffer under this regime.

On January 28, 2011, Caribbean sexual orientation inclusion and sexual health organizations issued a joint statement condemning the January 27

assassination of the gay Ugandan advocate David Kato. David had been publicly “outed” in a local newspaper a few months before he was murdered. The newspaper had existed for less than two months prior to the infamous headline, which sidelined news of impending war in Sudan and social disaster following a catastrophic landslide. It read, in color, “100 Pictures of Uganda’s Top Homos Leaked.” The subheading under David Kato’s picture read “Hang Them.”³⁷ David was bludgeoned to death with a hammer, in broad daylight, at his home. He died on his way to the hospital. The statement below from Caribbean activists pledged to redouble efforts toward “liberty, privacy, dignity and joy” despite “the continuing danger that sexuality, and the human rights defenders who work in this area, face in the Caribbean and elsewhere”: “Were it not for advocacy late last year, thirteen Caribbean countries would have allowed ‘sexual orientation’ to be removed from an international statement of commitment to protect persons from unlawful killing because of who they are. . . . In places like Africa and the Caribbean, battles against slavery, colonialism, racism, apartheid, genocide, gender inequality and religious persecution ought to have taught us better lessons.”³⁸

The animating phrase, “in places like Africa and the Caribbean,” refers to the common history of transatlantic racial capitalism—that is, slavery, colonialism, racism, indentureship, genocide—which inaugurated modernity itself and began to construct blackness. The “we” is constitutive of multiple blacknesses but also the aspirational pluricultural or multicultural Caribbean framework “out of many, one” or *alluh we* (all of us) that includes and exceeds blackness. The Caribbean, especially Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, reflects a complex negotiation of difference (at least): urban/rural, regional/subregional/hemispheric, Christian/Hindu/Muslim, African/Asian/Middle Eastern descent, and racial and ethnic “mix.” Colin puts it this way:

Although Trinidad & Tobago shares a history of plantation slavery with other African American societies, in the century and a half since Emancipation we have become a multicultural country in which Afro [African descended] are enumerated as a statistical minority and the nation’s second largest ethnic group (a few percentage points behind Indo [Indian descended], the plurality ethnic group, and ahead of people of mixed descent). Thus, CAISO’s communities are not solely Black diaspora communities; our communities belong to the African, South Asian, Chinese and Middle Eastern diasporas.

According to Colin, their sociocultural visions are therefore not conceived through a prism of Black liberation alone. But to understand more holisti-

cally, we must not forget the historic tensions and postindependence political battles waged between Afro-Creole and Indo partisans, or the fact that these are live controversies today. I certainly heard this rhetoric play out on minibus rides through Laventille, a largely Black working-class area, during election season. As the solidarity statement Colin and other activists composed attests, one cannot disentangle global and historically structured antiblackness from Caribbean histories or present-day political-economic or sociocultural realities.

I have found a complex, contradictory reality in developing postcolonial nations, where the relationships of activists to the nation-state are generally built upon one of three general positions that emerge from important differences in the historical and lived experience of heterosexism and homophobia in imperial, national, and subregional contexts. Regarding the nonsovereign Caribbean, Vanessa Agard-Jones's work on the French overseas department of Martinique, for example, shows how sex education and HIV/AIDS prevention work on the island parallel Martinicans' strategic dependency on the French state, to which they belong.³⁹ In other examples, some organizations in the sovereign Caribbean, and a few individual LGBTQ asylees from Africa and the Caribbean who work as advocates but now live in the global North, appeal to northern rhetorics, strategies, and funding through discourses of the Caribbean and Africa as the "most homophobic" places in the world. However, the more widespread and growing trend—toward *sexual orientation inclusion*—is based on a shared lived experience of anticolonial struggle. "Homonationalism," Jasbir (Puar)'s formulation for the process by which the state and LGBTQ groups manufacture and promote nationalism—recruiting and (re)incorporating, for example, the most respectable eligible, white, cisgender, property-owning, or performing into state projects (like the military, or against so-called Muslim terrorists, for example)—provides a useful vocabulary to describe relatively new formations in and emerging from the United States and other settler colonial states such as Israel and Canada. Jasbir has called homonationalism "collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism" and has inveighed against attendant "pinkwashing," or the state's accommodation of a measure of gay and lesbian rights as a cover for systemic abuses of other groups.⁴⁰ But outside of the context of the French department and Dutch territories, there has been no pinkwashing, or homonationalist integration, in the Caribbean or Africa.⁴¹ And of course, homonationalism and pinkwashing assume at least the cessation of open, state-sponsored violence toward homosexuals and transpeople, which is not the case in many sites. It is based on one's ability to appear eligible to

attain not only legal status but also moral status as an appropriate citizen subject. In the Caribbean, those organizations with higher levels of intersectional commitment, working on behalf of vulnerable populations of many kinds, militate against homonationalist integration or “co-optation” by state interests. Their appeal cannot be described as “homonormative” inclusion but rather as negotiated recognition of difference. There are multiple ways to be silent, silenced, or “downpressed” that do not require a closet. Likewise, there are a number of modes of demanding recognition and representing (and making representations of) oneself that do not require rainbows, marches, tense family-dinner announcements, or the promise that “it gets better” if only one can manage to leave one’s home in the bottom of a local community to arrive into full LGBTQ personhood in increasingly inaccessible high-priced gayborhoods or gay villages of San Francisco, Paris, São Paulo, or Johannesburg, for example.

SASOD

LGBTQ activism in the Caribbean is not insular. Activists and advocates work to decriminalize “buggery,” “sodomy,” and “cross-dressing” and to push forward their vision of “inclusion.” Far from a single-minded focus on sexual rights, their politics are intersectional. Although like Black LGBTQ groups and advocates around the world, they strategically employ some of the language of international gay and lesbian rights activism, “sexuality inclusion” activism in the Caribbean eschews so-called global gay politics. The public advocacy appeals used by Guyana’s Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) and Trinidad and Tobago’s Coalition Advocating Sexual Orientation Inclusion (CAISO) consciously deploy local idioms and institutions to win support of fellow citizens and national-level politicians and administrators. These sexual-inclusion advocates prefer a negotiated strategy in which public support is cultivated through an accent on local participation and coalition building with health, education, antiviolence, and youth advocacy groups, initiating cultural dialogue, for example, about sexuality in soca and calypso music and in local and international film, and a focus on issues of democratic access, fairness, and education.

On September 6, 2013, Chief Justice Ian Chang of the High Court of Guyana delivered his judgment in the case of Gulliver (Quincy) McEwan, Angel (Seon) Clarke, Peaches (Joseph) Fraser, Isabella (Seyon) Persaud, and the Society against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD) versus Attorney General of Guyana. McEwan, Clarke, Fraser, and Persaud, transgender

women who are identified in local parlance as *dress-up girls*, were arrested, stripped, and ridiculed in police detention on an evening in 2009, after which they were fined for cross-dressing, then lectured from the bench by the chief magistrate to “give [their] lives to Jesus.” Section 153 of Guyana’s Summary Jurisdiction provision makes a criminal offense of “a man wearing female attire, and a woman wearing male attire, publicly, for any improper purpose,” and the plaintiffs argued that this was discrimination inconsistent with the 1980 Guyana Constitution. In a partial victory, the chief justice found that the police had indeed violated the human rights of the four plaintiffs—by not informing them of the reason for their arrests. But his holding provided a disappointing nonanswer to other crucial facts of the case, and no immediate remedy. Justice Chang found that “it is not criminally offensive for a person to wear the attire of the opposite sex as a matter of preference or to give expression to or to reflect his or her sexual orientation. . . .” But the court also held that because of an 1893 law, predating Guyana’s independence, “legislative rather than curial action is necessary to invalidate the provision.” The judge thereby struck down the plaintiffs’ claim altogether by punting to the legislative branch, as well as effectively invalidating the claim that the cross-dressing law amounted to discrimination on the basis of gender.

Justice Chang’s ruling seems to misapprehend distinctions between gender and sexuality. It is not necessarily sexual orientation but gender identity or performance that is at issue here. Moreover, the court held that “cross-dressing in a public place is an offence only if it is done for an improper purpose.” Gulliver McEwan, one of the plaintiffs and the director of Guyana Trans United (GTU), noted that “the Chief Justice was relatively clear that once you are expressing your gender identity, it’s not criminal for a man to wear female attire.” But Gulliver gets to the crux of the matter here: “The law really stifles us, because what could be an *improper purpose*? The trans community is very worried, and still fearful of arrests, in light of this decision.”⁴² The court also ruled that SASOD, the local LGBTQI organization, had no standing as a colitigant. SASODomites, the clever name by which members and supporters of Guyana’s SASOD are called, have chosen film festivals, coalition work with HIV/AIDS and antiviolence organizations, and blogging as important strategies, along with their leadership in this court battle coordinated by legal scholars at the University of the West Indies, to overturn cross-dressing bans that effectively outlaw dress-up girls and transgender individuals. The cross-dressing ban case became a regional cause célèbre and has inspired the locally produced film and SASOD project “My

10.1 Logo of Trinidad and Tobago's Coalition Advocating for Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO), featuring carnival motif, voter's red-dyed finger, and the islands embedded in the palm.



Wardrobe, My Right.”⁴³ On November 13, 2018, the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ)—the regional high court newly established in 2001 to replace the Commonwealth’s Judicial Committee of the Privy Council for an increasing number of Caribbean nations, and Guyana’s final court of appeal—delivered its decision. McEwan and company prevailed against the attorney general of Guyana. The court ordered that Section 153(1)(xlvii) be struck.⁴⁴ But the project coordinator at Guyana Trans United, Alessandra Hereman, has said that despite this watershed victory against the ban on “cross-dressing” in Guyana, “stigma and discrimination persists and can lead to violence.”⁴⁵

CAISO is an acronym naming the organization’s work (Coalition Advocating Sexual Orientation Inclusion) and honoring the importance and unifying appeal of the local Trinbagonian music form, calypso (locally “kaiso”). The organization’s logo (see figure 10.1), prominently showing the index finger of one who has voted and with the twin islands indelibly imprinted on the palm, visually communicates CAISO’s local focus and commitment.

SASOD’s regional “sibling” organization, Trinidad and Tobago’s CAISO, stood in solidarity with SASOD and the plaintiffs, as did a number of regional

organizations. Trinidad and Tobago has no cross-dressing ban but does have a colonial-era antisodomy (antibuggery) law, and CAISO had already successfully advocated for assurance of nonprosecution under this antibuggery statute but not for its abolition. Explaining this long-game strategy of engagement, Colin says that “my organisation is trying to build an LGBTI movement here that is strategic and imaginative. Although sodomy laws, even when unenforced, continue to fuel stigma and sanction discrimination, repealing them doesn’t repeal the Bible or Qur’an.”⁴⁶ When I asked why CAISO had sought assurance of nonprosecution of buggery laws rather than outright decriminalization, Colin told me that whereas he strongly supports the efforts of SASOD and the plaintiffs, it would be unwise and unimaginative to focus solely on litigation as a means of advancing sexual autonomy in the Caribbean. More work is necessary. Certainly, both SASOD and CAISO understand that juridical remedies alone are not sufficient to solve issues of sociocultural inclusion and protection. Several years after this conversation, the on-the-ground evidence seems clear: the recent CCJ ruling has not solved the issue of discrimination against gender-non-conforming and trans individuals in Guyana. Of course, South Africa’s progressive constitution, which guarantees more protections than most others in the world, has not prevented the murders of Black lesbians any more than hate crime legislation in the US has in the US, as killing and assault of Black and Latinx trans women rise. Colin said that

we have been talking in T&T a lot about “citizenship” in CAISO’s work. We’ve also begun to talk about developing a culture of minority rights (though not in those words), e.g. in the context of the election we have begun advocating for protection of political opinion and affiliation from discrimination. But, like Guyana, we have this vital need to accommodate ethnic and religious difference for the society to work at all which we can draw on, but that other territories may not.

In a moment of renewed recognition of the deep antiblackness of the United States, these words (“need to accommodate ethnic and religious difference for the society to work”) are chillingly resonant and chastening. In our original virtual conversation for *Black/Queer/Diaspora*, Colin said:

CAISO’S founders originally came together on Emancipation Day 2007, to meet with Kennty Mitchell, a gay, primary-school-educated taxi driver whose successful lawsuit for police harassment elicited widespread public sympathy and visible news coverage, in which he said he wanted to

speak out for gay rights for people who could not do so for themselves. The Mitchell case evidenced for GLBT people, media and national empathy with victims of discrimination, and substantiated the possibility of successful redress for discrimination for ordinary citizens. Efforts were made then, which fizzled, to form a novel cross-gender, cross-class advocacy organisation. CAISO itself formed on June 27, 2009, in response to a Cabinet announcement two days earlier that the proposed final version of a national Gender Policy [that had been the subject of noisy advocacy by evangelical Christians five years earlier over its inclusion of a handful of forward-thinking references to sexual orientation and termination of pregnancy] would expressly avoid dealing with sexual orientation.

Focused on interregional collaboration in the Caribbean and on the region's relationship with the rest of the world, Colin holds that "it's time for a strategic regional conversation where we enter as equals and talk about common interests and disagreements and the question of strategic political collaboration. My sense of past efforts is that they've been driven by power differences or by funding relationships that have had to balance political interests with others like HIV." Interviewed by a national newspaper, *TNT Times*, another of CAISO's leaders, Sharon Mottley, reflected on the founding of the organization:

The minister's comments that there was no room for us in the gender policy sparked something . . . has shown us that unless we get up and say that we are here and that we want to be afforded the same rights and respect as anybody else it won't happen. . . . And so, I think this is an exciting time to be gay and lesbian in Trinidad and Tobago because we have young voices, we have powerful voices, we have a diversity of voices coming to the front and we're not stopping. We are ready to move.⁴⁷

The interviewer asked Sharon and Colin, "On the spectrum of gay men being tortured and killed with impunity in Iraq, and Iceland appointing a lesbian prime minister and GLBT being allowed to marry in other parts of Europe, where do you think Trinidad and Tobago falls in terms of acceptance of homosexuality?" This framework of the interviewer—seemingly overdetermined by comparisons that unhelpfully collapse disparate cultural and geopolitical contexts—is not unusual. Many media outlets continue to plot LGBTQ rights on a stable bipolar trajectory, with ethnically more homogeneous and wealthier European societies with secure social welfare nets on one side and an unlikely triad of Iraq (standing in for the entire Islamic world), "Africa" (as if it

were a country—and of course except South Africa), and Jamaica (imagined as the whole of the Caribbean) on the scandalous other.⁴⁸ Sharon says:

GLBT citizens from other countries in the region . . . look very favourably on us. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have openly gay parties. We have our gay Mecca, our centre. This does not happen in other Caribbean islands. [People from] other Caribbean islands come to Trinidad and they're always in awe. And then at Carnival time you can have men dress up almost like women, leading [*mas* band] Island People's frontline section going down the road. That does not happen in other Caribbean countries. We have a long way to go, but to be able to sit here and comfortably say that I'm a lesbian woman, have this interview, I think that puts us ahead of a lot of other countries.⁴⁹

Sharon is correct. The democratic traditions of Trinidad and Tobago make it a beacon for the rest of the region. Of course, it is not only the country's democratic traditions and Carnival but also its stable economy and functional state infrastructure supported by exploitation of the nation's oil and natural gas resources that make possible what often amounts to begrudging relative "live and let live" posture on the twin islands, compared to neighbors (if not always the popular chatter or legal statute). But Colin offers a more strategically usable response to the implicit hierarchical rhetoric underlying the reporter's question: "I'm always resistant to that whole quantification thing. I agree with everything that Sharon said, but I would also say that things are good enough here that there's hope for organizing, and I feel confident that we have the organising power to hold government accountable. But things are bad enough that people are still losing their lives and their ability to be free, and that always makes the work necessary."⁵⁰ At the end of the interview, he summarizes—recalling and rhyming with Marlon's films "Affirmation" and "Anthem," in which his poetic intervention "Unfinished Work" is central:

It's about the affirmation. It's about community rituals. The same reason people go to mosques or to church. It can be really powerful, especially when you organise to do things that you can't do by yourself—that's the power of community: the power of people coming together to accomplish things—even if they don't like each other, to recognise that there are things we can accomplish by working together that we can't alone and that when we actually get those successes and we celebrate it's sweet. I've had some of those experiences already in CAISO. That's what makes the work worthwhile.⁵¹

Colin's strategy—and that which he and his colleagues in CAISO and CariFLAGS (Caribbean Forum for Liberation and Acceptance of Genders and Sexualities) follow—is to “build the values needed to sustain our embrace of sexual rights and the dignity of same sex sexuality.”⁵² Their focus is to build government capacity on gender and sexual orientation issues and to address vulnerabilities of sexual minority status, such as homelessness, school bullying, and stigma, which prove formidable barriers to access to health care and justice. I was able to experience this up close during a visit to Trinidad and Tobago in 2010. At the height of election season I canvassed Port of Spain neighborhoods and attended rallies with CAISONians. The huge numbers of Trinbagonians out on the streets, in bars, and at campaign rallies of both major coalition parties met us with good-natured engagement. Months before, CAISONians participated in a demonstration against a white US American “ex-gay” minister: Phillip Lee of “His Way Out Ministries.” Lee had been invited to Trinidad and Tobago by a group of clergy to lecture at a youth sexual health seminar. The religious crowd and some advocates for youth and education policy reform, new to the coalition, were dubious about “gay rights,” but CAISONians won support with their open engagement and commitment to shared values with the youth and education advocates. The T-shirts that CAISONians wore eloquently spelled out the tenor of the movement. As clever as a wry calypso, the shirt read: “The Homosexual Agenda: 1. Buy Crix [a popular local cracker brand] 2. Spend Time with Family 3. Work for Equality.” This lighthearted T-shirt with an incisive and sophisticated political message typifies this stream of work underway in nations of the Caribbean, in which advocates for *sexual orientation inclusion* build local alliances and depend primarily on their localness, national belonging, and regional cooperation. They highlight the fact that restrictive gender and sex laws are vestiges of the colonial past that mirror the present neocolonial vision of US-based religious fundamentalist groups, which fund and propagandize homo hatred. At the same time, in *Decolonising Sexual Citizenship*, in which he lays out conditions for engagement by would-be Commonwealth allies, Colin asserts that seeking redress in that body would erroneously pose the buggery laws as a “British colonial problem” requiring a British solution. Rather than engage in what he calls “polarizing national debates over still misunderstood and misrepresented sexualities” that can easily foreclose other gains and opportunities to deepen “shared values of non-discrimination . . . and fairness,” CAISO has focused on local coalition building and advocacy for local and subregional solutions, supported by “international solidarity, South–South dialogue and North–South listening.”⁵³

In terms of differences in strategy and relative reliance on the global North, Colin admits that

in the past, regional voices in critique of local strategies (mine has been one) haven't been pitched too sensitively or been heard as generous. But strategic decisions made locally in Jamaica have regional impacts, since Jamaica still has a disproportionate impact on regional popular culture. . . . Sometimes the way to make change in Jamaica may be through levers elsewhere; and there are places to do so within the region without the baggage of Global North engagements. . . . How are we collaborating in shifting the terms of engagement on sexual diversity and citizenship in the region as a whole?⁵⁴

Though often challenging, South–South dialogue has been ongoing, through various organs such as CariFLAGS, but the international solidarity and North–South listening pieces—burdened with perhaps deeper mistrust and power asymmetries—are much less developed.⁵⁵ Colin's *Decolonising Sexual Citizenship* points to a number of northern LGBT rights strategies commonly in practice, which he argues are ineffective—or, more generously, cannot support long-lasting broad-based support. This includes “public scolding” of politicians, use of HIV as a convenient entry point to transform sexual health policies, and what he calls “silken suit” fund-raising. He writes, “If Global North advocates wish to be part of the movement to end ‘sexual apartheid’ they must resist temptation to take the reins. They must engage in genuine North–South dialogue and international solidarity. They need to get behind Global South initiatives and push in the direction carved out by Southern activists.”⁵⁶ Colin has spoken forcefully against those who he says

feel license to speak like abolitionists on behalf of the GLBT interests of the [Caribbean] region . . . distort[ing] organizing strategies . . . at the expense of nurturing local political alliances, of building ownership of GLBT issues by other sexual rights stakeholders, of developing strategic power domestically, of building a local base to which leadership is accountable, of developing appeals and legitimacy in the currency of domestic and traditional values and frameworks, or simply of being politically innovative in response to local conditions.⁵⁷

Speaking in the broader context of “global gay” politics during our roundtable, he said that

the most dangerous impact of the “spread” of Western GLBT politics . . . is not that certain understandings and assumptions about how GLBT

politics is practiced in the North are being exported to us. The larger danger instead is that ideas about how GLBT politics should be practiced in the Global South, quite differently from in the North . . . are being conceived in, and spread from, the North. . . . Because of the assumptions that civil and political rights frameworks are weak, enlightened governance is not yet achieved, and GLBT communities are relatively powerless in Global South states, there is the expectation that GLBT liberation politics will rely on external advocates and look for moral authority to international covenants and arbitrating bodies rather than engaging in domestic political work.

“I Am Not an Afropolitan; I Just Dress Like One!”

Binyavanga Wainaina’s *One Day I Will Write about This Place* was published to critical acclaim in 2011, years before releasing what he called his “lost chapter” of the memoir, “I Am a Homosexual, Mum,” in January of 2014. With this, the founding editor of the influential literary journal *Kwani?* joined local LGBTIQI activists and advocates in Kenya and throughout the continent who had been actively working to ensure the safety and inclusion of LGBTIQI people in Africa. Binyavanga’s “lost chapter” added sexuality as another facet of itinerancy and displacement to his crucial work, provoking readers past diaspora, pan-Africanism, and Afropolitanism to something that looks to me like what we signal with “Black/Queerpolis.” In the memoir “this place” refers not only to his native Kenya but also to all of Africa, given his long residence in South Africa, extended visits in Nigeria, and references to places all over the continent (and throughout the world). Still, before the addition of the lost chapter, *One Day I Will Write about This Place* was silent about homosexuality, including Binyavanga’s own. In a tender and poignant turn of Black/queer time, although the lost chapter is addressed to his mother, he wrote and published the essay years after she and his father had already passed to the ether. The “lost chapter” imagines a conversation that never was. It begins:

11 July, 2000.

This is not the right version of events.

Hey mum. I was putting my head on her shoulder, that last afternoon before she died. She was lying on her hospital bed. Kenyatta. Intensive Care. Critical Care. There. Because this time I will not be away in South Africa, fucking things up in that chaotic way of mine. I will arrive on time, and be there when she dies.

. . .

“I have never thrown my heart at you mum. You have never asked me to.”

Only my mind says. This. Not my mouth. But surely the jerk of my breath and heart, there next to hers, has been registered? Is she letting me in?

Nobody, nobody, ever in my life has heard this. Never, mum. I did not trust you, mum. And. I. Pulled air hard and balled it down into my navel, and let it out slow and firm, clean and without bumps out of my mouth, loud and clear over a shoulder, into her ear.

“I am a homosexual, mum.”⁵⁸

Binyavanga had held his public silence until the confluence of the concurrent rise of the “Kill the Gays” bill in neighboring Uganda, similar legislation and increased media attention to violence in Nigeria, and the death of Carlota, one of the author’s close friends, compelled him to speak. One of the most important contemporary African cultural figures, he stepped into this politically fraught moment with humor and seemingly very few fucks to give—knowing that this could have potentially cost him dearly. In a Facebook post commemorating the release of “I Am a Homosexual, Mum” two years later, and commenting on the intentional publication politics of local African outlets, Binyavanga’s friend, scholar/activist Neo Musangi, wrote:

Today, in 2014, “I Am a Homosexual, Mum . . .” was published by the almighty Chimurenga and later taken up by *Africasacountry.com*, of course before the Americans got to see it. That essay, like the six-part video series [“We Must Free Our Imaginations”], shifted and re-shaped many conversations, not only around sexuality, but also around religion, Black consciousness and stupidity, on this continent. So, today I want to thank you sweetheart and to thank your beautiful mum and the smiley Baba for you. I am grateful to the Universe for your continued healing and strength.⁵⁹

Later, Neo posted a photo of Binyavanga by photographer Msingi Sasis, titling it “Photographing the Photograph.” Here he returns the gaze of the viewer twice. This exuberant portrait of Binyavanga frames him against a brilliant cerulean blue wall, with huge blue flowers in what looks like a floor-sized vase to the left of the tufted green wing chair in which he is seated—wearing a flowered wax-print jacket—while also appearing in another pose, leaning on the chair, above his own shoulder. A yellow sunflower appears as one sun above the vase as light streams through a window on the other side of the tableaux. Tagging Binyavanga, who was convalescing after one

of a number of strokes, Neo wrote, cheekily: “Original photo credit: Msingi Sasis/ Model: Binyavanga Wainaina/ Dressed by: All of West Africa via Dutch Capitalists/ Make-up: The Universe.”⁶⁰ Earlier that year, acknowledging his Twitter and Instagram feeds replete with check-ins from Nairobi to Dakar just before the celebrated Dakar Biennale, from Johannesburg to London (to New Haven—where we were fortunate to host him at Yale!), and featuring gorgeous West African (and, yes also Dutch⁶¹) wax prints, custom shoes, and art from Senegal during his extended stay there, Binyavanga the trickster quipped with characteristic cleverness and self-deprecation: “I am not an Afropolitan; I just dress like one!” recalling his much-discussed plenary lecture titled “I Am a Pan-Africanist, Not an Afropolitan.”⁶²

Achille Mbembe’s rendering of “Afropolitanism” is not a “perfect fit” with Black/queerpolis, to be sure. Here we follow Black/queer artists, activists, and people every day to offer a dynamic, textured, enduring feeling of common union among African (descended) peoples that is not only and not merely a condition of biopower, history, global political economy, or common vulnerabilities. Here we see this unfold as transnationalism and globalization played in a minor key. And pragmatic politics also driven by desire. A libidinal drive to (re)construct family and new futures with what Binyavanga might call “our own new sci-fi things.” However, the point is not to pull off a seamless and elegant suture to Achille’s brand of Afropolitanism but rather to make the “failure” (thanks, Jack!) or “irresolution” (thanks, Matt!) or intersection or *agencement* more generative and more interesting: to see new horizons and to explore the pleasures and potential efficacy of it all.⁶³ Here I offer an enticement to read reparatively and also, again, for resonance across blacknesses. After all, rocking with the polyphonic rhythms of Black/queerpolis (of course, I hear Wumi now⁶⁴), Achille’s poetic, hybrid, transcontinental definition turns on the following:

Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognize one’s face in the face of [one’s Black/queer other] . . . and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seems to be opposites—it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that defines the term “Afropolitanism.”⁶⁵

Calling for “broad-mindedness” and arguing against a “nativistic reflex” in the face of Africa’s “worlds of movement,” Achille has averred that “the

cultural history of the continent can hardly be understood outside the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement.”⁶⁶ This goes equally for the entire Black world. And not only for Black subjects already authorized in scholarly and popular literatures and film, such as global petro-billionaires, high-flying heads of state, internet scammers, Nollywood producers, Oprah and her high-achieving girls. For example, think about transcontinental networks that include Black gay South African flight attendants whose multiple cultural competencies and cosmopolitan Black consciousness, grounded in the local experience of post-apartheid South Africa, show that this notion of broad-mindedness does not come only from well-to-do professionals, artists, or intellectual elites. These men and women constitute another current of contemporary “worlds in motion.” Think too of those fleeing war and certain rape, famine, and/or ethnic, sexual, or religious persecution over land and on the high seas. Remember flickers of African disco ball luminescence: flashes at the bottom of the ocean.

Binyavanga turns us ruthlessly toward a continental view of our current conjuncture. Likewise addressing the familial and local, and deeply resonant with US Black gay writing from the long 1980s, Binyavanga’s video essay “We Must Free Our Imaginations” lays out an analysis of current issues and a future vision for the continent of Africa. Binyavanga seeks a “muscular secular space” that will bring (back) the “oxygen” of democratic discourse and governance—like others in Kenya and throughout the continent, in the Caribbean, and increasingly in the United States and other places where reactionary political projects (often in the guise of religious fundamentalism) drive public discourse and policy. His vision is focused on the expansion and liberation of Africans’ imagination and capacity for innovation. LGBTQ rights and recognition, like many other issues, are inevitably a part of achieving this. Focused on eradicating “shit from a thousand years ago hate” kept in place and reinvigorated by “middle classes that have been trained not to imagine,” “We Must Free Our Imaginations” starts abruptly, with a stark white background and simple black tilting that reads: “One: Bring Me the Obedient Children.” Binyavanga begins:

I want to live a life of a free imagination. I want to work with people around this continent, to make new exciting things. To make sci-fi things and to make stories and to make pictures. I want this generation of young parents to have their kids see Africans writing their own stories, printing their own stories. That simple act; I think that is the most political act one can have. I want to see a continent where every kind of person’s imagination doesn’t

have to look for being authorized. Me, I'm an African, and I'm a Pan-Africanist. I want to see this continent change.⁶⁷

This resonates with Sharon's affirmation—"We are here"—speaking and working on the other side of the reflective, faceted Atlantic (or is it a disco ball, as Wura claims?). Binyavanga repeats the same phrase in his video—"We are here"—adding with a conspiratorial giggle, "So you just deal."⁶⁸ Regarding Caribbean activists invoking the disco-ball-like array of "places like Africa and the Caribbean . . . battles against slavery, colonialism, racism, apartheid, genocide, gender inequality and religious persecution . . .,"⁶⁹ Binyavanga seems to agree with this cognate analysis of borrowed sameness of (British) colonial remnants of sodomy laws. As he says,

When you take that set of laws. . . . The word *sodomy* is the most Victorian word ever. . . . Me, I'm just saying. What is the word for "sodomite" in [African] languages? That word *sodomite* came because the most anal people in the world, the Victorians, came and said *these Africans have many queer behaviors. They just married 12 people; and then tomorrow they're going to worship. . . . Then, they are just dancing endlessly. And I'm sure, in the middle of the night, they are performing sodomy!* The only countries in the world where there are antisodomy laws are countries that were colonized by the Victorians. Nigeria, Kenya, India—same place. Where people inherited that . . . idea. So now, mysteriously (homophobes say) "*It was never African.*" And I'm like, no! They put that law because they were expecting that you were. Whether you are or not.⁷⁰

Binyavanga asserts that before colonialism there were no laws against same-sex sexual behavior or gender expression in Africa. Likewise, before the recent missionary reincursion of so-called evangelical Christians to the global South, homophobia in East Africa did not include the vile homicidal rhetorics of the likes of American preacher Scott Lively, from the United States, who incited and paid Ugandans to fight against what the demagogue called a "genocidal" and "pedophilic" gay movement. A new colonial or missionary zeal is sweeping the continent, in which foreigners have effectively spread a new "gospel" among preachers and politicians willing to be their mouthpieces. Antihomosexual hatred is good for business. And religious expressions of homophobia that are redeployed by opportunist politicians are convenient. During election season this can be used as a means to "unite" Christian and Muslim fundamentalists, and others who would otherwise

be divided along religious or ethnic/tribal lines, under the banner of homo hatred and transphobia. The film *God Loves Uganda* tracks the genealogy of the “Kill the Gays” bill and the partnership between Ugandan LGBT activists and advocates and the Center for Constitutional Rights, in the United States, which filed a historic federal lawsuit in the United States against Lively on behalf of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG).⁷¹ The “straw queer” is an opportune figure to blame for any number of unrelated economic conditions and social ills. As neoconservative regimes disguised as populism rise in the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, the Philippines, and elsewhere, with similar maneuvers of disinformation and targeting of minority populations, this tactic also seems good for electoral popularity among those tired of watching their domestic affairs be dictated from London, Washington, or Brussels. Worldwide, homo hate and transphobia are apparently easily disguised as local “tradition.” Organizations such as East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (UHAI-EASHRI), Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK), and Kenya’s National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) have developed keen contextual analyses of their issues. Rather than external solutions, they should be able to count on our willingness to acknowledge their leadership on their issues and our support in expanding their analysis and work. I’m just saying—*Sasa nina-chojaribu kusema ni*—Binyavanga asks, “How many lives will be destroyed?” Although the “we” in “We Must Free Our Imaginations” is clearly read as *Africans*, and “this place” in *One Day I Will Write about This Place* is Africa, it is *Black/queer-political* in its broad-mindedness. In a pivotal moment in the video essay’s first chapter, Binyavanga summarizes: “I believe Africa is rising. I am an African and I am here to stay. . . . But you see, the thing is that we’re just here. Me, I’m not going away. I’m here. So you deal.”⁷² I hear this contradictory, difficult transnational *wuk* harmonizing with Essex and with GMAD: “There is no place else to go that will be worth so much love and effort,” “Yes, Homo!” and “Black! Black! Black! Black! Gay! Gay! Gay! Gay! We Won’t Have It No Other Way!”

Having heard it at Tracks, New York, back in the day, preserved and reedited in Marlon’s film, and at a mall bookstore in Port of Spain, Colin’s poetic refrain plays on in my head. The interpellation of difference as abjection offered in the slur also sounds like a recognition of the fact that something else is needed here. That we must bring something else to move us all far beyond our colonized grammars, and come as Maroon. Freewoman. Free. Marooned among “bristren”—brothers and sisters, cis, trans, and otherwise, who are

working to be psychically free from “shit from a thousand years ago hate.” It ain’t always pretty here. We and it are yet unfinished. Colin invites/commands us *when they shout faggot*, “pervert the language.” We hear Cimarrón:

...

rewrite history

redecline the past

and conjugate a future

reinvent etymology

grow new roots

...⁷³