# Researching African Histories of Sexuality: In Praise of Excavating the Erotic


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# Researching African Histories of Sexuality: In Praise of Excavating the Erotic

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> There's what you think you know about sex in Africa. And then there are sensual and beautiful aspects of African sexuality and the African erotic.
> —Tiffany Kagure Mugo, "Osunality: Sex Lessons from Africa"

Researching African histories of sexuality can easily elicit feelings of rage and grief in both researchers and audiences. As a field of study, the history of African sexualities is profoundly immersed in colonial ugliness, a litany of rape and other forms of sexual violence that cannot and must not be overlooked or downplayed by historians dedicated to understanding the meaning of sex and sexualities in the past and how their effects continue to inform the present. However, an unfortunate consequence of the necessary production of horrific histories is that the "sensual and beautiful aspects" of past sexualities, to cite Mugo's playful observation, can be difficult to discern. Moreover, the wonderful facets are often rendered invisible by the domineering Western gaze that for centuries pigeonholed a singular "African sexuality" as a problem in need of explication, intervention, or, in some cases, eradication, despite ample evidence that practices across the continent were varied and sexualities irreducible to a unidimensional representation.

Western stereotypes about "African sexuality" were produced in useful tandem with the transatlantic slave trade and the intrusion and expansion of European empires beginning in the sixteenth century; thus, they have had a great deal of time to take root and fester.[1] Christian missionaries, colonial

[1] For an analysis of the historical processes by which a singular, heterosexual identity for Africans was constructed and the imperial origins of homophobia, see Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

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administrators, scholars, public health workers, and other self-imagined bringers of hope and salvation perceived Africans' sexual cultures and practices as exotic and/or morally and physically dangerous, even barbarous. Western discourse was saturated with inaccurate and racist tropes steeped in cultures of heterosexuality and ignorance about local norms, including supposedly immoral "pagan" sexuality schools for educating and regulating youth; hypersexual African men constantly lusting after white womanhood; African women victimized by polygyny and bridewealth; the "uncivilized" practice of female genital cutting; rampant promiscuity, which was largely responsible for the AIDS pandemic; and so on.[2] As Thomas Hendriks and Rachel Spronk explain, research that recycles the idea of "African sexuality" as a problem "depersonalizes sex and reduces actual people to a population of objects whose individual characteristics, personal histories, and various erotic experiences are erased."[3] Legal scholar Sylvia Tamale sums up the totalizing Western gaze thus: "Beginning with the first contact with African communities, researchers from the Global North maintained a voyeuristic, ethnopornographic obsession with what they perceived as exotic (read perverse) African sexual cultures."[4]

Criticism of racist representations of African sexualities is nothing new. Since the 1970s, scholars have in various ways resisted (often through refusal to engage) and challenged (both explicitly and implicitly) research that perpetuates harmful (neo)imperial notions about sex and sexuality in Africa.[5] In a 2009 essay assessing the historiography, Marc Epprecht

[2] A controversial example of academic research promoting the idea that there is a "distinct" type of African sexuality is John Caldwell, Pat Caldwell, and Pat Quiggin, "The Social Context of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Population and Development Review* 15, no. 2 (1989): 185–234.

[3] Thomas Hendriks and Rachel Spronk, "Introduction: Reading 'Sexualities' from 'Africa,'" in *Readings in Sexualities from Africa,* ed. Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 1–18, here 1. This recent essay is a helpful overview of current approaches to methodological, epistemological, and ethical issues in research on sexualities in Africa.

[4] Sylvia Tamale, "Researching and Theorizing Sexualities in Africa," in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, ed. Sylvia Tamale (Oxford: Pambazuka, 2011), 11–37, here 19.

[5] Important examples include Charles van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (London: Pluto Press, 1976); Janet M. Bujra, "Production, Property, Prostitution: 'Sexual Politics' in Atu," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 17, no. 65 (1977): 13–39; Tade Aina, "The Myth of African Promiscuity," in *Blaming Others: Prejudice, Race and Worldwide AIDS*, ed. Renee Sabatier (London: Panos, 1990), 76–79; Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion, and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Beth Maina Ahlberg, "Is There a Distinct African Sexuality? A Critical Response to Caldwell," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 64, no. 2 (1994): 220–42; Marc Epprecht, "The 'Unsaying' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 631–51; Signe Arnfred, "Rethinking Sexualities in Africa: An Introduction," in *Rethinking Sexualities in Africa*, ed. Signe Arnfred (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Tryckeri, 2004), 7–29.

lamented the paucity of contextualized, antiracist research and declared, in a passage that continues to resonate, that much more historical research on sexualities must be done in order to illuminate "hidden struggles, tensions, and interconnections" that affected a host of social processes in Africa and the diaspora, such as, inter alia, class formation and the construction of ethnic and gender identities, and to further enrich global sexuality studies.[6] He also highlighted various obstacles, past and present, to the creation of historical research that broadens our understanding and counters Western biases, including overdetermination of theorizations of sexuality produced in the Global North, ongoing colonizing effects of pathologizing constructions of Africanness, underappreciation of African historical scholarship, and underrepresentation of sub-Saharan Africa in northern academic journals, including in this one.[7] Regarding the politics of publishing, local professional constraints and the difficulty of navigating foreign (northern) academic journals mean works by Africa-based historians often are not published or widely available outside the continent, such as, for example, the 2005 edition of *Feminist Africa*, which is about sexual cultures and a key intervention in the literature edited by Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, and Takyiwaa Munah.[8] Fortunately, as a result of digitization projects and moves to online publication, journals published on the continent, such as *Feminist Africa*, *JENDA*, and *Agenda*, are increasingly available electronically. However, they have a low profile in the Global North, and as a result many northern scholars continue to be unaware of or resistant to citing research these journals publish.[9]

Undeterred by these and other obstacles, historians and other scholars in recent years have steadily undermined long-standing, offensive assumptions and diversified the range of topics investigated, often in ways that cross disciplinary boundaries. The last decade in particular has seen the literature expand considerably, a sign of the recent rapprochement between African studies and sexuality studies.[10] Both drawing on and intentionally distancing themselves from a theoretical toolkit located in the Global North, historians are tackling, with sensitivity and creativity, the challenge of writing diverse

[6] Marc Epprecht, "Sexuality, Africa, History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (2009): 1258–72, here 1260–61. See also Corrie Decker, "Sexuality in Colonial Africa: Current Trends and New Directions," in *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, ed. Chelsea Schields and Dagmar Herzog (New York: Routledge, 2021), 42–54.

[7] He noted that "in nearly two decades, the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* published but three articles and two book reviews on Africa south of the Sahara" (Epprecht, "Sexuality," 1259). Since 2010 the journal has published an additional four research articles and three book reviews.

[8] Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, and Takyiwaa Munah, "Editorial: Sexual Cultures," *Feminist Africa* 5 (2005): 1–8. See also Jane Bennett and Sylvia Tamale, *Research on Gender and Sexualities in Africa* (Dakar: Codesria, 2017).

[9] *Feminist Africa*, "Feminist Africa Archive," accessed August 5, 2022, https://feministafrica.net/feminist-africa-archive/.

[10] Hendriks and Spronk, "Introduction," 3.

histories of sexuality. Their works include detailed studies of fresh themes such as consent, erotic practice, and love.[11] Scholars are also using new and innovative methodologies to chart much-needed histories of same-sex-desiring, transgender, and genderqueer people.[12] Nonsexual forms of intimacy and sites of arousal linked to the individual body, especially in relation to spiritual practices, are also receiving attention.[13] Feminist and queer historians in particular have led the way in rejecting the pathologizing and medicalizing of Africans' sexualities by paving new avenues of research on female pleasure and same-sex experiences and identities, research agendas that to a significant extent reflect the emergence across the continent of vibrant social movements combatting gender-based violence and homophobic laws and social attitudes.[14] Yet despite these exciting developments in scholarship, the Western reductive discourse stubbornly persists, evident in "sticky stereotypes" that continue to populate popular and scholarly forms of cultural production, with dehumanizing results.[15] It is a frustrating truism that scholars who write histories of African sexuality must first dismantle stereotypes and show how they emanate from racial imaginings in the West before they can proceed to the construction of alternate histories—the

[11] Some of the recent works that speak to the trends listed include the following. For consent, Elizabeth Thornberry, *Colonizing Consent: Rape and Governance in South Africa's Eastern Cape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Corrie Decker, "A Feminist Methodology of Age-Grading and History in Africa," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 2 (2020): 418–26; Nafisa Essop Sheik, "Cultures of Sex, Laws of Difference: Age of Consent Law and the Forging of a Fraternal Contract on the Margins of the Nineteenth-Century British Empire," *Law and History Review* 38, no. 1 (2020): 201–18. On love, see Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, eds., *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Mark Hunter, *Love in the Time of AIDS: Inequality, Gender, and Rights in South Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[12] Bianca Camminga and Zethu Matebeni, eds., *Beyond the Mountain: Queer Life in Africa's Gay Capital* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2020); Louise Vincent and Bianca Camminga, "Putting the 'T' into South African Human Rights: Transsexuality in the Post-apartheid Order," *Sexualities* 12 (2009): 678–700; Pepe Hendricks, ed., *Hijāb: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* (Cape Town: Inner Circle, 2009); Elsje Bonthuys and Natasha Erlank, "Modes of (in) Tolerance: South African Muslims and Same-Sex Relationships," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 14, no. 3 (2011): 269–82; Corrie Decker, "Love and Sex in Islamic Africa: Introduction," *Africa Today* 61, no. 4 (2015): 1–10.

[13] "Mining the Logs: Celibacy in Africa | H-Net 25th Anniversary Crossroads | H-Net," accessed September 15, 2021, https://networks.h-net.org/node/1134508/links/2952662/mining-logs-celibacy-africa.

[14] On erotic desire and female sexuality, see Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall, and Kate Hawkins, "Thinking with Pleasure: Danger, Sexuality and Agency," in *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*, ed. Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall, and Kate Hawkins (New York: Zed Books, 2013), 28–41; Signe Arnfred, "Female Sexuality as Capacity and Power? Reconceptualizing Sexualities in Africa," *African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 149–70. An early, still-powerful work on same-sex desire is Zackie Achmat, "'Apostles of Civilized Vice': 'Immoral Practices' and 'Unnatural Vice' in South African Prisons and Compounds, 1890–1920," *Social Dynamics* 19, no. 2 (1993): 92–110.

[15] Hendriks and Spronk, "Introduction," 1.

required ritual we performed above, albeit in extremely compressed form, in the opening paragraphs of this reflection.

To us, one of the most exciting and inspiring directions in research to have emerged in recent years is the sharpening focus on the erotic and sexual pleasure to the point of requiring much greater emphasis. It is striking how seldom the word "joy" appears in relation to sex and bodies in the corpus of African history. In a prescient speech about the power of the erotic in a very different context in 1978, Audre Lorde proclaimed that an "important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy."[16] Feminist researchers determined to uncover the "erotic connection" in Africa are now rediscovering and prioritizing embodied erotic intimacies over discourse, specifically pleasure over pain. As an example, Nkiru Nzegwu writes about a Nigerian sexual paradigm she calls "osunality" that emphasizes the importance of pleasure for all sexual partners, a theory of sex derived from African history and (Yoruba) culture that avoids Western essentializing tendencies and gendered ideological assumptions.[17] An approach to studying African sexualities that foregrounds the pleasure principle is vitally important because, in addition to joy, it brings to light numerous other new, intersecting topics of research, namely, romance, love, intimacy, and emotions. In this way, historians dedicated to excavating the erotic in African history are helping to turn the discursive tide carrying racially stereotyped assumptions and "knowledge" about a timeless nonmodern African (hetero)sexuality existing on a continent itself imagined in ludicrously simplistic, othered terms.

Our current research projects brought home to both of us the power of the erotic in African history. Our works illuminate ways that desire challenged prevailing conservative norms and traditions and spurred resistance to repressive, unjust social orders. Erlank's work shows that, contrary to assumptions that Black South Africans were incapable of romantic love, a view embedded in the precolonial and colonial historiographies, sexual yearning and ardor characterized people's love lives. New ideas about family and love and the acquisition of literacy brought passions that flared in the early twentieth century into genres the historian can apprehend, revealing young men and women who fell passionately in love to the extent that they flouted traditional parental stipulations about whom they should marry. Love letters written in the 1920s and 1930s between mission-educated men and women attest to the intensity of their desire: one letter contained admonitions to moisturize lips that would otherwise be too blistered from kissing; another lover signed his letter, "An abundance of love and 320

[16] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 41. Lorde delivered her speech at the Fourth Berkshire Conference of the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College.

[17] Nkiru Nzegwu, "'Osunality' (or African Eroticism)," in Tamale, *African Sexualities*, 253–70.

kisses."[18] Klausen's research highlights the power of the erotic as a politically radicalizing and unifying force via her study of the criminalization of interracial sex in white supremacist apartheid-era South Africa (1948–94). During apartheid at least ten thousand couples were arrested for contravening legislation prohibiting extramarital sexual contact between white and Black South Africans; the overwhelming majority of these couples were white men and Black women. Starting in the 1960s a small but growing number of white men explicitly rejected apartheid's racial hierarchy in the name of love, some declaring their passionate feelings for Black lovers and partners during their prosecutions in magistrates' courts. There were white men who even went so far as to apply, sometimes successfully, for race reclassification from white to Coloured (the official term for mixed-race individuals) in order to be with the women they loved without fear of state repression.[19]

Both our projects spotlight the depth of affection and sexual desire that cross-cut intimate heterosexual relations and illuminate their political effects in modern South Africa. Moreover, by foregrounding the erotic, our work contributes to an overdue historical antidote to the tired dominant trope of rapacious heterosexual masculinity on the continent. Our findings strongly accord with the view advanced by anthropologist Rachel Spronk, who has long lamented "the negligence of the embodied experience of sexuality" in African studies and asserted that a "differentiated conceptual framework is urgently needed," a framework that emphasizes the interlinkages of sex, pleasure, emotion, and affection.[20]

A notable feature of recent work focusing on the erotic is the use of generative methodologies that challenge conventional disciplinary norms, including the weaving of poetry, art, and fiction into reconstructions of erotic intimacies.[21] Both of us, for instance, use novels as sources. Romantic and other fiction can spur in historians' minds the acts of imagination necessary for recapturing the emotional space that love occupied in people's lives and the social consequences of love affairs gone wrong. In the absence of detailed sources, especially in relation to precolonial African history, novels such as Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* provide an extrapolated texture to dry social histories.[22] As Hilary Mantel has so movingly recounted, "The task of historical fiction is to take the past out of the archive and relocate it

[18] Natasha Erlank, *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender and Tradition in Early Twentieth Century South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022).

[19] Susanne M. Klausen, "'Do You Call Yourself a White Man?': Nationalism, Criminalization of Interracial Sex, and the Policing of White Male (Hetero)sexuality in South Africa during Apartheid," *American Historical Review* 127, no. 1 (2022): 159–93. Klausen's forthcoming monograph on the Immorality Act elaborates on these points.

[20] Rachel Spronk, *Ambiguous Pleasures: Sexuality and Middle-Class Self-Perceptions in Nairobi* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 3.

[21] Zethu Matabeni, *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities* (Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2014).

[22] Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (New York: Vintage, 2017).

in a body."[23] When used in conjunction with more conventional historical sources, well-written and researched fictionalized accounts of past sexual encounters provide the embodiment missing from the historical record.

It is not possible in a short piece such as this to discuss all the creative and carefully applied approaches that historians, along with other scholars and nonacademic cultural producers, are currently taking to wash off the domineering imprint of the colonial past on histories of African sexuality.[24] Nevertheless, in the context of a reassertion of conservative, morally rigid Christianities, the resurgence of homophobic and transexclusionary discourses, and the whittling away of gendered and reproductive rights on parts of the continent, the importance of their scholarship cannot be overstated. Historical research shedding light on the power of the erotic and embodied sexual pleasure is a vital resource in the ongoing decolonization and diversification of scholarship on African sexualities.

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Natasha Erlank is a professor in the Department of History at the University of Johannesburg and an adjunct research professor in the Department of History at Carleton University, Ottawa. Her research interests lie principally in the history of gender, marriage, and sexuality within the broader context of colonialism and Christianity in Southern Africa. Her new work examines the history of reproductive health in Africa between the 1940s and the 1990s by taking a comparative look at birth control policies and practices in the newly independent African states after the 1960s.

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[23] Hilary Mantel, "Can These Bones Live?," *Medium* (blog), July 12, 2017, https://medium.com/@bbcradiofour/can-these-bones-live-b015dc8397c6.

[24] For instance, the historical elements in Danai Mupotsa, "The Promise of Happiness: Desire, Attachment and Freedom in Post/Apartheid South Africa," *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 183–98.