Digital Confessions: Binyavanga Wainaina's Online Coming Out and the Poetics of Queer Desire[1]

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Abstract

Recent studies on 'coming out' stories among the queer increasingly show that the internet and new forms of online and digital media play significant roles in defining gender nonconforming sexualities and identities in modern societies. This article examines the late Binyavanga Wainaina's online stories I Am a Homosexual, Mum and Alien Taste within the genre of 'coming out' narratives that are mediated, staged and performed as a ritual of 'queer politics' within local and global spaces. It examines the author's use of the confessional storytelling mode to intertextually reference his earlier memoir, One Day I Will Write About This Place to reenact a deliberate 'gay visibility' agenda while in the same instance performing new forms of queer sexuality and desires in a virtual space. The article also analyses the implications of online media participation in the process of gay self-disclosure in order to show how new media influences visibility and agency in homophobic African cultural spaces. Because of the reaction that his disclosure elicited in multiple publics, the article argues that the three texts represent a process and continuum of media formats within the milieu of storytelling, ritualized 'coming out' and a staging of queer identities and desires. Ultimately the article unravels how online self-disclosure narratives perform new forms of queer desires in virtual spaces.

Key Words: Binyavanga, Coming Out, Virtual Spaces, Queer Desires, Confessional

INTRODUCTION

In queer studies, the coming out story or declaration of one's previously closeted sexual orientation is regarded as the master narrative that crowns one's queerness. According to Esther Saxey (2001), the archetypal self-disclosure story "can be a humorous or heart-rending, fictional or autobiographical, a lengthy novel or a snappy one-page anthology piece". In recent times, the use of digital media to disclose one's sexual identity has

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become increasingly fashionable and using the media as a framework of channeling the coming out process for gays and lesbians has, not only broadened diversity of societal values and ideologies on sexuality, but also helped challenge the status quo in terms of heterosexuality. Today there is a huge archive of examples of coming out stories and confessions that are staged on radio and TV talk shows, in tabloid press, reality TV as well as online discussion forums such as blogs, social media and video streaming sites.

This article examines the online self-disclosure by a Kenyan gay author Binyavanga Wainaina. Through a story titled 'I am a homosexual, mum', which was first posted on *Chimurenga* and *Africaisacountry* online magazines; he publicly declared his homosexuality on January 19, 2014. Although the author's sexual orientation was already public knowledge among family and friends, the sensational way in which he came out of the 'closet' for the first time to the larger public using the format of an online blog story, had all the ingredients of a staged gay identity performance. The story which he labelled the 'lost chapter' of his earlier memoir *One Day I will write about this place*, was timed to appear on the eve of his forty-third birthday.

Almost immediately after his declaration, mainstream local and international media sought interviews, wrote articles and went into overdrive to get his views on a range of subjects from rights of homosexuals to the place of sexual minorities in a homophobic African setting. On various social media platforms, his disclosure provoked animated public debates on the topic of gay culture in Kenya, Africa and the world. Against a backdrop of all the media hype, this article analyzes the 'lost chapter' alongside the memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* and *Alien Taste* to illustrate how in profound ways, the author's choice of Internet as a media platform for coming clean as a public homosexual underscores long held arguments on the role of the media – and specifically online media – in highlighting the coming out stories of gender non-conforming individuals.

Theoretically, this analysis draws from Erving Goffman's tenets of identity as performance, Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity and Eve Sedgwick's views of the queer closet as a deliberate performance. The article examines ways in which Binyavanga deploys his authorial persona and uses internet as a platform of staging the everyday while at the same time foregrounding his 'coming out' narrative as an enactment of multiple queer identities and desires. Firmly anchored within critical queer scholarship on the coming out story as a genre that describes an individual's journey towards lesbian, gay or bisexual identity, this article relooks at the plot of events of *One Day…*, alongside the lost chapter *I am a homosexual…* and the

blog story *Alien Taste*. It shows how the three texts fuse into an intertextual collage of creative works that ultimately construct the grand coming out narrative through which the writer performs different versions of queerness, agency and representation of sexual minorities. Also sampled are reactions and social media responses to his coming out to argue that the author's deliberate act of sharing a personal story, well aware of the unpredictability of online citizenship, points to a media staging complete with a target audience and a clear purpose of influencing certain spectatorships. In a way, this is an interrogation on the link between actual happenings, print media and the virtual online transformation of queer intimacy in the larger African and global spaces.

MEDIA, QUEER VISIBILITY AND HOMOPHOBIA: KENYAN AND AFRICAN CONTEXTS

Issues of sexuality, gender and queer identities have been studied in African literature, arts and culture (Desai, 2001; Dunton & Adesanmi, 2005; Tamale, 2011, 2003; Reid, 2008; Green-Simms, 2016; Hoad, 2016, 2007; Macharia, 2013; Mwangi, 2014, 2009; Taiwo, 2016; Zabus, 2013, Ligaga 2009, Musila 2008, 2011). However, a small fraction of these works specifically discuss homosexuality, homophobia and queer visibility in media spaces. Dina Ligaga examines virtual expression of sexuality and the use of digital online media to foreground socio-political issues and gender stereotyping of good time girls in Kenyan popular culture (2009, 2011). Mwangi on the other hand interrogates the subject of homosexuality through the prism of the newspaper reporting of the first same-sex marriage between two Kenyan men living in the UK (Mwangi, 2014). His study analyzes the online reactions and social media responses to the reported gay marriage. Notably, he does engage in some detail with the concept of publicly declaring one's homosexuality through the media and the subsequent backlash from a homophobic audience. But Neville Hoad's review of Wainaina's 'lost chapter' squarely places it within the theoretical purview of an African sexual autobiography that imagines the future through the present. His analysis situates the 'lost chapter' within the larger plot structure of *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. He contends that the memoir complicates memory with desire, history and fiction even as it highlights a 'lost Africa' that seeks to recover its origin (Hoad, 2016). This article builds on Hoad's analysis by broadly linking the lost chapter within the larger mediatized cultural milieu and specifically the online staging of the queer in a homophobic African cultural context.

Homophobia in Africa remains pervasive and public discourse on homosexuals, especially men, is regarded with condemnatory disgust and scorn (Mwangi, 2014, 2009). Anti-gay rhetoric is firmly embedded in the

cultural fabric, publics and discursive spaces including media, political speeches, court rooms, religious pulpits among others. Across the continent, former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and Uganda's Yoweri Museveni were most vocal in labelling homosexuals 'evil', 'barbaric', and 'unAfrican' criminals (Hoad, 2011). Similarly, because of the patriarchalized and gerontocratic systems of social hierarchy and moral code, African male homosexuals bear the largest brunt of homophobic violence. In the words of Kopano Ratele, "men who love other men end up as objects of homophobic rage because such love disturbs the cornerstone of patriarchal heterosexual power in that it shows how men are not of the same mind and feeling when it comes to sexuality" (Ratele, 408). For the simple reason that homosexuality is definitionally regarded as non-reproductive and a space of detriment and death to the present and future cultural, national and racial progeny, gay men are singled out as threatening the core social power matrices that place men at the helm. Within such masculinized cultural power structures, homosexuals are seen as an accursed lost lot, that either require to be 'straightened' or at worst be ostracized from the society to discard their contaminating influence (Hoad, xii). Swahili labels like *mashoga, masenge, magai, mabasha* are freely and derogatorily used in Kenya to refer to homosexuals, often to feminize them if they are men (Amory, 1998).

Nonetheless, with the recent tighter anti-sodomy laws that criminalize homosexuality in a number of African countries, queer identities have once again been thrust at the centre of popular discourse in Africa. More writers, activists and public intellectuals have come out to openly speak against the negative profiling of homosexuals. There has also emerged a larger critical mass of published novels and short stories from across the continent that, specifically have gay characters or portray same-sex desires (Green-Simms 2016). It is within this ambit that Binyavanga's 'coming out' grand narrative is located and analyzed. As an author who won the Caine Prize for African Literature and whose satirical essay '*How To Write About Africa*' (2005) has been acclaimed globally, he is a product and beneficiary of a powerful online media format, the *Kwani* series having been sponsored by Ford Foundation. More so the act of declaring his same-sex orientation through a fictional work and using the Internet for maximum dissemination thrust him into greater limelight turning him into a continental voice of African sexual minorities.

THEORY AND SCOPE: THE CLOSET, COMING OUT RITUAL AND THE MEDIA

The theoretical underpinnings of analysis in this article are anchored in the view that homosexuality and the process of coming out as queer is a performance of identity. Scholarship on self-disclosure among gays, lesbians

and bisexuals shows that there is an increasing intersectionality between the coming out process and the use of media in the ritualization and navigation of queer identity (Hoad 2007, Mwangi, 2014). Individuals, especially those who use Internet platforms to seek new ways of formulating their own life story even as they continuously reimagine themselves, coming to terms with and reconstructing their homosexual identity, are on the rise. Even then, the terms queer and homosexuality in identity studies remain unstable, fluid and incongruous. It is therefore imperative to unpack the ways in which these concepts fit into the current analytical schema. In the words of Neville Hoad, "homosexuality is just one of the many imaginary contents, fantasies or significations (sometimes in the negative, sometimes not) that circulate in the production of African sovereignties and identities in the representation of Africans and others". Gay identities, he argues, "are a small thread in the wider tapestry of space, desire and identity" (2007: xii). Thus in the unstable world of self-signification, African queer identities have to grapple with intractable and entrenched heterosexuality.

The term homosexuality also brings into sharp focus the binaries of hetero- and homo- in which the certainties of societal coherences of identity in terms of sex, gender and desire privilege heteronormativity and homosexuality: homosexuality is thus seen as a disruptive force that resists it and troubles the gender distinctions in heterosexuality (Bricknell 2009). Overall though, debates around homosexuality in Africa in general are often a facade for wider debates on social issues such as global economic inequalities, masculinities, women's struggles, sexism, imposed gender normativity, violence, corruption, religion and immigration (Epprecht, 2008; Green-Simms, 2016; Green-Simms & Unomah, 2012). A case in point was the much-publicized conviction of Malawi's first married gay couple which showed how anti-gay sentiments in Africa have not only become a spectacle on the global stage needing Western intervention, but that homophobia has become an idiom through which multiple actors negotiate anxieties around governance, social morality and economic challenges (Crystal Biruk 2018). All the same, there is need to engage with the grammar of homosexuality in Africa, especially as used in digital platforms, to highlight and de-silence the material conditions and struggles of the marginalized in society.

On the one hand, queer is not a popular word with reference to LGBTI communities in Kenya and Africa in general although it still remains a more inclusive vocabulary of critiquing hetero-normativity and capturing same-sex desire (Green-Simms, 2016). Marc Epprecht observes that queer represents that kind of anti-essentialism that is open to a whole range of human sexual diversities that underscore sexuality as a critical component in the construction of class, race, national, ethnic and other identities (2008).

Echoing this view, the queer as a theoretical tool becomes useful in African contexts because 'it not only deconstructs heteronormativity but it becomes instrumental in contesting binary notions of sexuality and challenging the idea that heterosexuality is needed to understand homosexuality' (Davies, 2014). A key strength of the term queer is how it helps raise pertinent questions, explain the multiple ways to experience and understand gender, and especially a more nuanced reading of 'sexuality as more involved and evolved than who one sleeps with' (Davies, 2014 De Laurentis 1990). Queer writing, activism and identities therefore exist beyond what mainstream media, government, medical and religious institutions choose to assign and validate. Queer as a term then, in a way, becomes more like what Sullivan refers to as 'the ways of encouraging multiple meanings and truths' (Sullivan, 2003).

But in his coinage of the term 'heteronormativity' as a countermand to queer, Michael Warner correctly anticipated that all social and sexual practices, human behaviors and associations, gender and community relations and the power structures therein are dictated by heterosexuality (1993). The use of the terms queer or homosexual as a reference to same-sex desires and sexual minorities therefore is, always somehow gesturing towards heteronormativity. Homosexuality, queer and heteronormativity are all concepts that have a huge bearing on the process of coming out of the closet for gays and lesbians. As Jagose Annamarie rightly argues "heteronormativity in conjunction with liberationist politics forces non-heterosexual identities to come out and declare or share their narratives in order to separate themselves from heterosexuality" (1996). The justification for coming out is explained on the basis that if one doesn't come out, one is assumed to be hiding, living in the closet or living a lie (Seidman, 2002; Seidman, Meeks & Traschea, 1999). The disclosure of one's non-heterosexual identity is an important experience for gender non-conforming individuals who seek to redefine themselves in more nuanced ways so that their lives can have more meaning in terms of self-expression. In the African context, societal disavowal of homosexual practices forces many gays and lesbians into what Herdt calls 'secrecy and closeted lives where they carefully manage sexual desires with fear' (1992).

Essentially, the concept of the closet emanates from heteronormativity and how, in many social contexts, it appears to grant unfettered privilege to heterosexual entitlement and normalizes all experiences and practices as heterosexual. In a world that regards the heterosexual as the normal, anything and anyone non-heterosexual is 'othered' and 'closeted'. Heterosexuality is so embedded in many aspects of African social identity such that all individuals are labeled as heterosexual unless otherwise. In

many ways, homosexuality and queerness trouble patriarchy and the hetero-reproductive social matrices hence the need for queer persons to sort of denounce this 'normalized closet' through a resounding declaration. This is the imperative of the coming out process among gays and lesbians in general.

But with changing societies and technology, queer coming out as both narrative and lived practice has quickly turned into a creative genre through which people find space to reenact the ritual of self-disclosure. Furthermore, popular culture, technology and the internet appears to facilitate the virtual 'coming out process that is personal and social, confessional and performative'. In the African context, social positioning including race, class, gender location and religion are some of the salient determinants that impact on how, why, where and when individuals share coming out narratives The ritual aspects of coming out require some kind of institutional framework to normalize the act of self-disclosure. It is for this reason that more and more individuals have lately taken to using the media to disclose their sexual identity (Boross, 2015). This is largely because of the "ritualizing power of the media and how media plays a quintessential role in transforming the socially unscripted act of coming out into a patterned, culturally meaningful performance" (Boross 2015:16). The recent proliferation of coming out stories that are being performed, narrated, staged and reflected through media platforms such as talk shows, tabloid press, reality TV as well as online discussions forums, social media and video-streaming sites echoes Boross' view that "by deploying the authority of the media in channelling the coming out process, the gay subject controls diversity of societal values and ideologies while at the same time challenging the status quo in terms of heterosexuality and the taken-for-granted normative views on minority sexualities "(Boross, 2016). The media frame provides a powerful liminal context through which coming out becomes perceived and experienced as a 'staged' rite of passage (Grimes, 2006:16, Boross, 2016) complete with actors who are queer subjects and a spectatorship or audience that participates in the coming out narrative script.

PLACE, LOSS AND ALLUSIONS TO THE QUEER CLOSET IN *ONE DAY I WILL WRITE ABOUT THIS PLACE*...

Although the memoir *One Day*…was not originally written as a queer autobiography, in retrospect one can pick out nuances and allusions to place, loss and 'closeted-ness' that foreground the eventual full disclosure of Wainaina's queer sexuality in *I Am A Homosexual, Mum*. To fully appreciate the 'lost chapter' as a coming out narrative it is important to examine the deliberate silences and gaps in the memoir that premeditate the declaration story. Indeed, it is by identifying the gaps in the plot of events in the memoir

that one can begin to fully appreciate why the author fashioned it as a 'lost chapter' that he recovers and writes in order to complete what was apparently a sexual autobiography. By deliberately framing his story as a lost piece of *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, Binyavanga not only invites his reader to reexamine the memoir as originally 'unfinished' but also instructs his reader to always read his self-disclosure narrative as the missing jigsaw piece in his memoir whose main motif is the celebration of emotional and physical people and places in his early life. Reading *I Am Homosexual…* alongside the events of the memoir it becomes evident that the newer story is in a deliberate intertextual dialogue with the earlier autobiography.

On one hand, one can argue that the story compares with the memoir by way of offering it new meanings while in the same breath radically destabilizes earlier meanings that readers had about the author's coming of age narrative. In many ways the author's framing of the 'lost chapter' as a typical gay coming out story demands a rereading of the earlier memoir in order to identify the seemingly quotidian but glaring queer instances and silences that instantiate and foreground the author's self-disclosure much later. Borrowing from the idea that coming out as a gay or lesbian is a lifelong process, my argument is that *One Day…*contains many narrative plot gaps and silences that inevitably point to a symbolic gay closet, that is explicitly unraveled eventually in the lost chapter and the blog story *Alien Taste*. Ultimately, the online foisting of his self-disclosure narrative as a 'lost and found' chapter is an attempt to rework his memoir into a sexual autobiography by staging his own queerness more brazenly through the internet.

Some critics of Binyavanga's memoir have pointed out to its being a coming of age story in the mold of James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (Tim Adams, 2014: *The Observer*). Kangsen Wakai sees it as a story "of perseverance, visible and invisible borders; a story of self-discovery, friendships and looming in the backdrop a fleeting sense of place" (Wakai, 14). The title of the memoir is drawn from chapter twenty-two of the book where the narrator recounts the events of December 1995 when the author's extended family of three generations assemble at Kisoro in the Western part of Uganda to celebrate Christmas. At this family gathering he mulls, "one day I will write about this place". The motif of place is clearly at the center of events in the memoir both in terms of character depiction and chronology of events. Place is equally evident in the child narrator's voice as the story begins with the author's description of a typical middle class family in the Kenyan town of Nakuru where the narrator/author with his siblings – brother Jimmy and younger sister Ciru – are enjoying a game of soccer. His growing up amid disappointments, changing aspirations, disjointed experiences and familial upheavals saddled with romantic love is also celebrated with all manner of

people and connections. As the title suggests, place in his story refers to many geographical sites. At different instances in the story it is Nakuru, Kenya, {his town birth} Kisoro, Uganda, {his mother's country} or Transkei, South Africa, {where he went to university and later became a writer}. Even more, place in the story also gestures towards the many versions of Africa, a pet theme that is well articulated in his famous 2005 satirical essay *How to Write about Africa*. Stylistically, the narrative navigates many creative places in terms of plot, language and the deft complication of temporality, memory and sexual desires of the narrator and the reader. Like many autobiographies, the idea and place of truth is also central to its storyline and yet one cannot help but notice how the author blends the moral and deeper emotional truth of fiction with the factual truth of memoirs (insert reference on truth in autobiography).

Right from the start, the author narrates his childhood and family roots in the late 1970s and 1980s; growing up in the household of a Kikuyu father who is a managing director of Kenya Pyrethrum Board and a Ugandan mother who runs a salon. These formative childhood years are juxtaposed with Kenya's early post-independence times from the first presidency of Jomo Kenyatta up to Mwai Kibaki's 2007 post-election crisis that nearly plunged the country into a civil war. Using the haphazard child narration voice Wainaina recalls his growing up in multinational, multicultural and multi-ethnic places and times. For instance, he innocently but vividly describes that historical moment when the death of President Jomo Kenyatta captured the nation's attention:

> We are afraid to be inside the house. Shapeless accordion forces have attacked the universe. Kenyatta, the father of Kenya, is dead. Mum is always tired, always talking to our new sister. Last month the pope died and this month the new pope died, the smiling pope…. Kenyatta is the father of our nation. I wonder whether Kenya was named after Kenyatta or Kenyatta after Kenya. Television people say Keenya. We say Ken-ya. Kenya is 15 years old. It is even older than Jimmy. Kenya is not Uganda.

In the excerpt, the author through a mishmash of different events literally tumbles through his story comparing related and unrelated, local and international issues while foregrounding the growth of the story's protagonist as a mirror of the growth of the nation. In his narrative journey he plods through memory and a kaleidoscope of events to reveal his most intimate experiences of growing up and offers an interesting historical and political trajectory of independent Kenya struggling to grapple with its own failures, successes and challenges of nationhood.

Besides being a story that occurs in many places and multiple 'everywheres' in Africa, the memoir is also an allegory of the hurtling Kenyan nation whose

progress is punctuated by a series of queer nuances, allusions and silences. In hindsight the queer subtleties can be read as deliberate pointers to the author's homosexuality which is later fully disclosed in the lost chapter. Through ellipses and half glimpses, the author creates the self-image of a hypersensitive gay young man who thrives in heterosexual diversity but still recognizes his queer desires in small and sometimes innocuous ways. The subtle references and allusions to queerness, it appears, were his first steps in trying to come out of the gay closet. A good example from the story is when the author mentions in the story how he was always different, not just within his family, but also outside:

> I am coming back into my arms and legs and the goal mouth, ready to explain the thousand suns to Jimmy and Ciru. I am excited. They will believe me this time. It won't seem stupid when I speak it, like it often does, and then they look at me rolling their eyes and telling me that my marbles are lost. That I can say that again. (13)

The unusual difference from his siblings made them to constantly tease him for being a weird daydreamer who had 'lost his marbles'. Similarly, the feeling of being an observer, 'always standing and watching people acting boldly to the call of words', dressing up sometimes in his Mum's clothes and his own admission, 'something is wrong with me', are just some of the initial signals to his queerness (15). His awkward walk and dreamy world of language and the books he furiously read always made more sense than reality. Growing up, he confesses 'it was scary' but comforting to be in the company of adult males like Jonas the Pokot guard and Cleophas their farm hand. At age 13 when he is circumcised he doesn't feel as manly. Rather its hollow and he would prefer to be immersed in his own world reading his mother's collection of Mills & Boon thriller novels and masturbating. In high school he once acted the role of a female prostitute in a school play and had a surreptitious attraction to the head boy. And although he loved the music of pop groups ABBA and Bee Gees, he admired pop star Michael Jackson more because of his weird shiny clothes, moonwalker dance style and queer masculinity. Much later at university in South Africa he has a fetish and love for the music of controversial lesbian musician Brenda Fassie.

In more familial ways, the author reckons his name Binyavanga – literally meaning 'mixing up things' in his mother's *Rufumbira* language – betrays his somewhat ambivalent, confusing and mixed up sexual identity (219). The same sexual ambivalence plays out when one time, he watches his own Dad mend a car with his friends effortlessly in that manly way that is clearly disconnected from his own world:

> There are things men are supposed to know, and I do not know those things, but I want to belong and the members need to know about crankshafts and

> points and frogs and holy manly grails and puppy dog tails. Secular things to hang onto (14).

Clearly, the writer acknowledges and is unapologetic about not feeling masculine enough or even getting attracted to the things that heterosexual men like his father fancy. He is quietly troubled by his inability to exist in his father's world but surprisingly as a kid he had fantasies about his own father. In a Counter-Oedipal fashion, he signals his peculiar desires early on when he confesses about the strong near taboo sexual attraction towards his father; "My father is like warm bread: he smells good and radiates good biology, and my enzymes growl and glow around him". Though he is still young and innocent, this honest expression of untethered but seemingly unrecognizable feelings for his father in what he calls a 'biological' way constitutes the first signals of his different and non-normative desires.

According to Steedman the broad definition of queer also includes the appreciation of not just non-heterosexuality but also the acknowledgement of all those 'whose stories often silent or silenced, is incongruous with existing corpus of narratives and all those who tell new stories that challenge existing assumptions of familial structures and desires' (24). The numerous ellipses and glimpses of queer desires in the memoir are a precursor to the ultimate declaration later that he is indeed a homosexual. While these queer desires are merely alluded to and never materialize, they nonetheless present a gap in the plot of events which Kangsen Wakai rightly observes thus:

> Although Wainaina is mostly honest, outside his relationships with family members, there are hardly any glimpses into the writer's friendships and heartbreaks. Voids like this in the memoir keep the reader wanting and seeking answers to questions Wainaina doesn't answer (Wakai 14).

In a way, the gap in the memoir's story can be read as a deliberate queer closet deployed by the author to withhold information. The unexplored friendships and heartbreaks be they queer or heterosexual, represents the closeted, suppressed and self-censured core of the author that he merely alludes to without venturing to expose to his readers. These unexplored everyday friendships and heartbreaks that Wakai is most likely alluding to are, most certainly, the queer silences, nuances and innuendos that are lost within the many places and experiences described in the memoir which are eventually found and freely expressed in the 'lost chapter'. This is in line with Eve Kofosky Sedgwick's views where she argues that:

> Closeted-ness itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence. Although the actual words of coming out of the gay closet are usually more specific, . . . the 'sheer mentioning' of what might have already been obvious between two friends who know about each other's sexual

> orientation represents the simplest form of coming out . . . silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech in relations around the closet (67).

Indeed, it makes sense to presuppose that the silences around queerness in *One Day*…are in fact tacit performances of queer identity that precede the actual self-disclosure story in the 'lost chapter'. In many ways, Wainaina's memoir is not just creative staging of place, loss and closeted-ness but a performance of suppressed queer desires that ultimately explode and come to the fore later in *I am a homosexual*…In both his memoir and lost chapter, one can discern a deliberate sense of tentativeness, fluidity, uncertainty and incompleteness in terms of time and spatial imaginings of the two storylines. From their titles – memoir and lost chapter – what stands out is the motif of 'lost-ness', and a sense of grappling with the jerky, the incomplete and the unfulfilled, which in retrospect, not only signals the yet to be named queerness of the author but also appears to unravel in time, place and at a personal level his fascination with all manner of social diversity. More significantly, in my view, the memoir foregrounds, alludes to and gestures towards the queer nuances and sensibilities way before the author eventually comes out of the closet through his lost chapter.

I AM A HOMOSEXUAL, MUM: STAGING 'COMING OUT' RITUAL ON VIRTUAL SPACE

Questions abound on why Binyavanga did not include the lost chapter in the memoir from the outset and why it took so long to write it. The answers to such questions certainly sheds light on the concept of the gay identity closet and visibility of sexual minorities in Kenya and Africa in general. All the same, these are questions that he aptly confronts in his declaration story *I am a homosexual* . . . Like most typical online blog stories, the 'lost chapter' begins in a conversational tone and confessional style in the mold of an entry into a personal diary with all the features of privacy and honesty. The words 'Hey mum' signals the use of the first person narrative style, which further creates a sense of intimate and face-to-face dialogue when he continues to address the mother thus: "I have never thrown my heart at you mum. You have never asked me to" (1). In a sense, the reader feels like an intruder in an intimate conversation between a mother and son as the story transitions from the allusion, secrecy, invisibility and shame that was witnessed in the memoir, to the unraveling of the closet, celebration of visibility and pride in the history of gay identity and queer representation.

Opening with the subtitle lines "This is not the correct version of events" the narrator dramatizes an imagined dialogue with his sick mother which never really took place but which is supposedly a fictionalized performance of his memory and what he wished should have happened. In an imaginative

bygone space of a typical Oedipal mother-son drama, Binyavanga in a mixture of casual, jerky language and disjointed story telling style that employs shorter sentences for easy online reading, goes back and forth in time, shifting from the past to the present reimagining and reconstructing what should have been the last conversation with his mother before she died of diabetes related complications at Kenyatta Hospital:

> 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 (2).

The language used throughout the story sounds more like spoken rather than the written word but clearly the story's plot is about the author's guilty conscience and attempts to emotionally reconcile his past broken relationship with the mother. The statement, 'not the correct version of events' at the beginning signals what Marion Carlson calls the "use of a dramatic technique of patterned behavior where the author is obviously pretending to be what he was not" (Carlson, 12). This consciously brings to attention the fact that his story is a performance of what never really took place and as readers we should take it for what it is. His supposed pleadings with his mother on her death bed are therefore a mere performance of a wish that never materialized. Eventually when he says… "Only my mind says this . . . not my mouth" and later utters the words 'I am a homosexual, mum', we certainly know that the disclosure of his homosexual identity was the more central purpose of his performative address to the mother. Although he begins by mourning the death of his mother, the moment of grief is appropriated to let loose his deepest and most suppressed core that is his homosexuality.

But at the same time, the author juxtaposes the real and the dramatic, fiction and the truth when the second section of his story begins thus: 'This is the right version of events'. In the section that reads like a recapitulation of the final moments before his mother's passing on, the author through agency openly acknowledges his inability earlier on to see his mother for over five years because of shame and visa problems in South Africa. The mother-son drama is again reenacted as a platform on which he opens himself up about his homosexuality. Instructively, it is after recounting the events leading to his mother's death on the morning of 11 July 2000 and subsequent mourning period that he switches into confession mode. Oscillating between the present and past tense of events the author grieves both his parents' demise but seizes the moment to declare his homosexuality. In vivid details he recalls how at age five his father then muscly, ruggedly dressed in overalls and smelling diesel excited him, lifting and swinging him in the air. This childhood encounter left him gloriously excited but also fearful and ashamed. He

describes a similar queer experience at age seven when a male golfer at Nakuru Golf Club shakes his hand and triggers sexual sensations of overwhelming confusion that makes him cry and leaves him shaken. Although he denies these initial body feelings the telltale signs that he is a homosexual are already all clear.

Chronologically, the story begins when the author is aged twenty-nine when the mother dies. At age thirty-four he has his first paid-for gay sex at Earl Court, London but it is not until age thirty-nine that he can unambiguously say he is gay. On his forty-third birthday when he announces that he is gay he still reflects back to age forty-one when his dad died. At some point the story's plot goes back to age five when he first suspected he was gay and then randomly switches to age seven when he first felt emotionally distressed by indescribable strange sensations that he initially felt weren't sexual. The fluidity of age, time and place in the story is emblematic of the earlier confusion that he had initially felt as he grappled with the idea of coming out. The hesitancy and lack of a stable time in what reads like a chapter in his larger sexual autobiography, lends credence to the fact that coming out is not a mere moment but a complex process that unfolds in faltering steps. However, claims of having known his queer identity at a tender age hearkens back to the inexplicable awkwardness that he mentions in his autobiography. Put side by side, the memoir and lost chapter are in an intertextual dialogue to perform Binyavanga's masculinity and queerness within the frame of identity self-performance. While in the memoir queerness is alluded to through glimpses and ellipses, in the lost chapter it is named and performed through the revelation of specific details including his first experience of queerness as a toddler to his first gay sexual encounter.

In multiple ways, Wainaina's ubiquitous online presence plays a significant influence on queer visibility largely because of his appropriation of the internet space as a media framework through which he performs his personhood for the gaze of others. 'I am a homosexual, mum', is framed as an online coming out story that the author uses to perform a ritual of passage from assumed heterosexuality to homosexuality and queerness. In the words of Dai Davies, a self-disclosure story in queer politics is like a rite of passage for lesbians, gays and bisexuals because it is through coming out that their lives take on new trajectories which determine the formation of their sexuality and help attain a sense of acceptability within queer communities. Comparing the coming out process to a couple's declarative at a Christian marriage ceremony; Davies argues that it is during the coming out process that individuals put their identity into practice (Davies 2014). The simple statement 'I am a lesbian/gay/bisexual' therefore is a powerful performative phrase, much like the statement 'I now pronounce you man and wife' during

a traditional heterosexual Christian marriage which creates the bond of marriage between the bride and groom. The ritual-like declaration of same-sex identity that is comparable to the heterosexual marriage, in Davies' view, marks a leap in identity for the gay individual who is soon after expected to redefine a new trajectory of being and becoming queer. Indeed, coming out, as Herdt observes, is a way of entering into different types of relationships with other people, a signpost that directs the intended and potential construction of meaning in social interaction (Herdt, 1993; Davies, 2014).

In Binyavanga's case the powerful words, 'I am a homosexual, mum', which are also the title of his story is a poignant statement that loudly announces the author's official crossover from the 'assumed heterosexuality' in the realm of his audience to 'affirmed homosexuality' which is the true self. As a renowned public figure his opening up about his sexuality was a way of entering into a different type of relationship with his many audiences by reconciling his private and public lives in order to give way for more authentic expression of his personhood. More so, his decision to go public through a blog story that suddenly went viral was a clear signal that the author was not only aware of the sensationalizing and ritualizing power of internet in shaping queer sexuality, but he was also ostensibly using it to push a political narrative that is peculiarly African. For instance, on 21 January 2014, the author followed up his 'coming out' story with the release of a six-part YouTube video documentary, *We Must Free Our Imaginations* in which he elaborated on the inspiration behind his self-disclosure and underlined the view that rampant manifestation of socio-political homophobia in Africa is largely because of what he calls 'the bankruptcy of a certain kind of imagination'. The video attracted strong responses and online discussions mainly because it was uploaded online a few days after the 'lost chapter'. A year later on January 15, 2015, Binyavanga again appeared in an online TEDex Euston talk titled 'Conversations with Baba'. This time cross-dressed in women's clothes and shoes he dramatically verbalizes a spoken word performance where he is candidly owning up his homosexuality to his own father the same way he did with his Mum.

Although the Ted Talk and YouTube videos are not the main focus of this article they are still part of the larger multimedia format that Binyavanga deploys to perform his queer masculinity. Reactions to his coming out, including comments in online newspaper articles and discussions and platforms like Twitter and Facebook, point to and acknowledge the fact that his actions were well-calculated and scripted to generate a discourse that defies and destabilizes heteronormative power structures on sexuality in the Kenyan and African contexts. Below is a sample of immediate reactions on Facebook and Twitter pages after his coming out.

A.R: You are a brave man, and an inspiration! January 21, 2014 at 7:01pm

A.W: Proud of you for standing up and being counted. I hope your voice as an LGBT African will allow for more progressiveness and less discrimination. I stand with you as a straight ally. January 21, 2014 at 7:33pm

E.G: Being as it may u still remain my fav n best author in tha +254 n tha east african community as a whole.nuf respect 4 puttin it in black n white. January 21, 2014 at 8:25pm

MMW: bogus, we were wasting our time reading your work thinking that you got the brains to distinguish between right and wrong. when you can't know the difference between the natural and Un-natural. January 21, 2014 at 8:48pm.

J.F: Ur a brave guy. U stand out 4the LGBTI community in africa. Kudos 4puting it in black ad white. January 22, 2014 at 7:21am.

P.S: I applaud your bravery and the necessity for speaking out when the tone of homophobia is reaching ever more strident levels. January 22, 2014 at 10:35 am

P.K: An embarrassment!!! January 22, 2014 at 10:39 am

P.P.A: wat do u gain?y do it n its againt the wil of GOD. January 22, 2014 at 11:08am

K.M: Now u r da wife or the hubby. January 22, 2014 at 11:18am.

Clearly from the varied responses by online internet viewers and virtual communities with regard to Binyavanga's decision to declare his sexuality, there were those who applauded and those who condemned him. In the examples above for instance, while P.K is uncompromisingly homophobic and thinks Wainaina is 'an embarrassment' to the male fraternity, J.F congratulates him for being 'brave and standing out for the LGBTI community in Africa'. Facebook user K.M is more crude and cynical when he asks, "Now u r da wife or the hubby?" (Now are you the wife or the husband?). In all these comments it is evident that the online audience are either questioning or validating his queer desires and masculinity in different ways.

CUT LOOSE, LOSS OF INNOCENCE AND THE RECOVERED *ALIEN TASTE*

As a follow up to his self-declaration, Binyavanga went further in June 2016 to publish another blog story titled *Alien Taste* in which he uses fiction to describe his first gay sex experience. Like the 'lost chapter' this blog story is part of his seemingly elaborate online performance of queerness that continues to attract online and offline audiences largely because of ongoing debates on homosexuality in Africa in response to the recent passing of draconian and stringent anti-gay laws in Uganda and Nigeria. *Alien Taste* is the story of a fictionalized young man named Graham who revisits his

journey of finally identifying that he was gay and the ultimate moments when he affirmed his gayness. First published on the popular Brittle paper literary blog on the 17th June 2016, the story exposes in detail the main character's first gay sex experience when on buffet car, he met the black muscly Fred, a handy man who worked on renovating buildings and mending asbestos roofs in the suburbs of London. Unlike the lost chapter that used the 'I' narrator, *Alien Taste* uses the controlled third person narrative point of view to describe Graham's 'emotional ambivalence and confusion about his sexuality before the ultimate 'loss of virginity' moment of first gay sex with Fred.

The story unpacks the protagonist's childhood telltale signs of queerness that included among other things the love for beer, dressing up in his mother's clothes, being riveted by the biceps of Muhammad Ali and the fraternity with his mother's old gay friends who he acknowledges 'made it easy to see the possibilities in this world' (4). In the world of Graham, these subtle signals were minor pieces in the puzzle of his gay journey. The defining moment for him was "the unambiguous epiphany that the first gay fuck gave him…which marked not his sexuality, but his approach to life itself, it was his Woodstock, his civil rights movement". This 'loss of innocence' moment when 'a large lubricated finger prized him open' and 'cut him loose for the first time' is described as a juncture of unshackling, a liberating stage of his gay journey that he likens to the 'civil rights movement' epoch. Interestingly, Graham compares his first gay sex experience with his earlier heterosexual encounter when he slept with Diana, an American friend of his mother's sculptor. Aside from being unconvincing, confusing and repellent the whole episode 'smelt and felt wrong' and the protagonist likens it to an 'alien taste'.

Although the story is framed as a fictional account, one can still draw parallels between the character of Graham in the story and the author's voice in the memoir and the 'lost chapter's' plot. Graham's childhood account of dressing up in his mother's clothes', his attraction to the biceps of legendary boxer Muhammad Ali and his love for black panthers on television are direct references to Binyavanga's similar confessions in his memoir especially where he used to dress in his mother's clothes, adored Michael Jackson, loved his father too much and was more comfortable in male company. In the same vein, Graham's description of his falling in love with Fred somewhere in the suburbs of London directly speaks to Binyavanga's 'lost chapter' confession where he admits that:

> It will take me five years after my mother's death to find a man who will give me a massage and some brief, paid-for-love. In Earl's Court, London. And I will be freed, and tell my best friend, who will surprise me by understanding, without understanding. I will tell him what I did, but not tell him I am gay.

> I cannot say the word gay until I am thirty-nine, four years after that brief massage encounter (3).

Although 'Alien Taste' was published as an online story on Brittle Paper two years' after the 'lost chapter', it is interesting to note how it structurally dovetails into Binyavanga's larger coming out story. It is no coincidence that the fictional setting of Suffolk, London in 'Alien Taste', appears similar to the real Earl Court's, London in the 'lost chapter'. Both the 'lost chapter,' 'I am a homosexual, mum' and 'Alien Taste' form the larger online corpus of coming out stories that began in the author's memoir. The plot of events at the beginning of the memoir together with his opening up about his homosexuality in the 'lost chapter' and 'Alien Taste', point to a typical gay coming out story. Central to all the three narratives is the author who is progressively depicted as an adolescent from a middle-class home who can't connect with his siblings, parents or classmates. Like an archetypal grand gay coming of age story, the three texts point to different stages of the protagonist's childhood, early sexual encounters, relationship with family and ultimate acknowledgement of sexual identity.

In the two online blog stories, the writer appears to deploy both truth and fiction to progressively unveil and stage in piecemeal several aspects of his queer identity. In the 'lost chapter' for instance, he performs his gayness in a confessional self-reflexive manner that articulates the existence of a queer lifestyle despite the heteronormative social constraints that keep silencing it. When he utters the words 'I am a homosexual' twice in the story, it is a deliberate identity performance that underscores the agency to break out of certain African heteronormative limitations that profile gayness as a source of shame. In similar fashion when the narrator in 'Alien Taste' describes Graham's rare exhilaration, "as a large lubricated finger prized him open…and he was cut loose for the first time", the author is once again candidly celebrating gay desires. By naming homosexuality and openly appreciating gay sexual pleasures, Binyavanga is in a way staging queer visibility and helping it claim its rightful place as an alternative sexuality in our social realm. This echoes what Evan Mwangi calls 'a strategy of protest confession but also a way of writing back to the literatures that erase homosexual desire or veil it in subtexts' (Mwangi, 2009). On the one hand, Binyavanga's self-disclosure story at a time when homophobia was rampant on the African continent, signals a strong message in gay politics and representation of sexual minorities. On the other, 'Alien Taste' as a bolder coming out vignette uses fiction to vividly and proudly describe and normalize the feelings, expressions and pleasures of gay sex. Together the two blog stories comprise of the different versions of breaking free from the

gay closet in order to lend credence to the view that heteronormativity is best challenged by transgressive staging and visibility of alternative sexualities.

CONCLUSION

From a media perspective, Wainaina's *'I Am A Homosexual'*... and *'Alien Taste'* as online blog stories have had considerable impact on queer visibility by virtue of the online platforms on which they are circulated. Indeed because of his internet presence Wainina certainly wears many hats as an author, activist and public intellectual whose essays, works of fiction and ideas are widely circulated through printed books, journals, blogs, social media, online discussions and videos. More specifically, in a kind of queer way, he has used the internet to present himself in ways that are at 'odds with the normal, the legitimate and the dominant' (Halperin, 1995). As Musila rightly argues, the author is part of a youthful, energetic and culturally subversive 'Reddykyulass Generation' that uses "innovative display and appropriation of media platforms including broadcast media and cyberspace as strategic spaces for engagement and knowledge production". Their use of various media and popular cultural genres such as theatre, television, cyberspace, satire, comedy, fiction and essays completely challenged and changed traditional configurations of knowledge production and cultural interventions (Musila, 2008:11). Since winning the 2002 Caine Prize for literature he used many online platforms to contribute to public, political and intellectual cultures in Africa and globally. The interesting ways in which he continues to challenge the older conservative attitudes in Kenyan and African public life is perhaps best demonstrated in how his online essays, blog stories and works of fiction always go viral and attract lots of online attention. The variety and range of online and offline audiences that he has been able to reach with his extraordinary ideas has certainly turned him into an important figure in African public knowledge production and the shaping of contemporary cultural trends in the continent.

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