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## Queer Pride and Protest: A Reading of the Bodies at Uganda's First Gay Beach Pride

Stella Nyanzi

**W**earing army-style camouflage pants, I marched alongside male bodies wearing stylish stilettos, bikini bras, flashy facial makeup, and *gomesi*, or delicate miniskirts. Beside us, female bodies stomped majestically, wearing mustaches, cologne, and *kanzu*, or boxer shorts, flashing above low-cut pants. The sexy bodies of drag queens gyrated, twirled, and pulsated rhythmically to local beats. Queen Bad Black, in a lacy scarlet bra and green kaffiyeh over boxer shorts, danced barefoot on the dust path. Dancing seductively, Princess Nature Raymond, whose hairy chest was sprayed with thick paint, wore only boxer shorts and knee-high socks in rainbow colors. Sister Kelly Daniels's breasts were covered only with rainbow squares worn above a rainbow sarong. Donning men's pants under a black *kanzu* with a diagonal rainbow ribbon, Pepe, a trans man and long-time activist for LGBTIQ rights in Uganda, operated a camera.

Ahead, a truck carried an amplifier. Heavy-duty speakers blasted music. Atop the truck was beautiful Cleo, a trans woman in a huge Afro wig, dark glasses, a lime-green sash wrapped around her bosom, and snug shorts. The truck also carried Sandra, a trans man flaunting a rainbow umbrella over his dreadlocks, a rainbow flag covering his T-shirt, square shorts, knee-high socks in rainbow colors, and sneakers. Gender conformers mingled with gender benders and gender blenders. Some were draped only in rainbows. Rainbow accessories abounded. We waved our rainbow flags and a few miniature Ugandan flags too.

Our handmade posters read "Killing Gay People Solves Nothing," "African and Gay, Not a Choice," "Too Gay to Think Straight," "We Are Gay and Proud," "Say No to Hate," and "Marching for Those Who Can't!" Many wore T-shirts with "We Are Here" inscribed on the back. The front caption read "Beach Pride UG 2012." It boasted the sketched head of a

crested crane, the national emblem of Uganda. This crane's crown displayed rainbow colors. The march was the apex of Uganda's first gay pride activities, held in August 2012, which included two days of queer film screenings, an evening fashion show featuring drag, and a private trans party. To collect resources, diverse fund-raising activities were previously organized by teams of volunteers. During Pride, our Ugandan drag queens and kings did not disappoint in their bold displays of gender destabilization as we all defiantly stomped the earth in unison. The solidarity of our proud queer bodies on display in the botanical gardens that afternoon symbolized the subversion and transgression of a highly politicized heteropatriarchal social order. In that moment, the widespread illusion of a universally heteronormative Ugandan nation was shattered.

Why do I read this carnivalesque spectacle as a transgression, subversion, and shattering? When the human body is imagined within the dominant discursive productions of the Ugandan nation, it is as a beautiful black, African, heterosexual body. Essentialist configurations homogeneously posit the Ugandan citizenry as black masculine men whose sole sexual desire is for their black feminine women. The singular aim of sexual intercourse within this national imaginary is procreation leading to heterosexual progeny who contribute to development and modernization within the nation-building project. Nonheteronormative sexual orientations and gender-nonconforming identities are erased from prevalent caricatures of the Ugandan nation. Homosexuality is dismissed as a foreign imposition from an imagined decadent West, or otherwise from an exotic, erotic East, and it is depicted as sin, crime, psychosis, pathology, or a transient pubescent phase of growth (Nyanzi 2013). Similarly, gender benders and gender blenders are othered, invisibilized, or pathologized as aberrations (cf. Nagadya 2005; Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2009). Thus, the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, originally crafted in 2009, emerged as a strategy to curb the infiltration, normalization, and legitimization of non-heteronormative possibilities in the imagination of the Ugandan nation (Tamale 2009). The bill was drafted by Ugandans, but its genesis and support are intricately interwoven with a complex assemblage of local, continental, and global foreign influences, including the homophobic rhetoric of some African presidents, powerful collaborations with conservative US evangelicals, and the diffuse discourses of some bishops of the Anglican churches. From October 2009, when the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was tabled in parliament until it was passed as an act of law in February 2014, this bill galvanized widespread antigay sentiments and encouraged antigay discourse, surveillance of LGBTIQ individuals, and reporting people presumed to be homosexual in the public media as well as to the police, leading

to discrimination and violations of the human rights of same-sex-loving individuals in the country. Recent examples include the naming and shaming of individuals in public media, arrests, beatings, expulsion from rental houses, termination of employment, rejection by family, suspension from schools, and denial of access to public services.

In response to the heightening societal animosity, the rash of public outings, and attacks on same-sex-loving individuals and support organizations, members of local LGBTIQ subcultures galvanized a politicized countermovement alongside their allies and partners. From the existing LGBTIQ support communities and queer social spaces (Tamale 2007; Nyanzi 2013) emerged a radical arm devoted to political protest within the public sphere at local, regional, and international levels. The budding LGBTIQ movement in Uganda crafted and successfully implemented a range of protests, including public media campaigns, strategic correspondence with and lobbying of significant publics, public cultural productions, peaceful demonstrations, civic participation efforts designed to heighten visibility, local commemorations of international LGBTI functions, the formation of coalitions with mainstream civil society organizations, litigation, occasional militant demonstrations of solidarity with individuals, and networking and partnerships with regional, bilateral, and multinational stakeholders. Uganda's first gay pride events fell under the rubric of these ongoing protests. Overt and covert, short term and long term, inclusive and private, engineered and sporadic, labor intensive and capital intensive, local and border crossing, these protests had diverse effects. In some cases, state agencies mounted strategies of resistance aimed at deterring local LGBTIQ people from publicly protesting.

At the end of our Beach Pride March, we descended toward the great Lake Victoria. Food and drinks, prepared overnight primarily by effeminate gay men under the direction of Ssenga Keith, refueled our bodies. Some marchers proceeded to swim. Frank Mugisha, the director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, ascended a platform built on the shoreline and saluted us. Maurice Tomlinson, the Jamaican LGBTI rights advocate and winner of the David Kato Vision and Voice Award, who was the parade's chief marcher, addressed us. Thereafter, Kasha Jacqueline, the radical visionary at the helm of organizing Beach Pride, started speaking. Suddenly, a pickup truck full of armed uniformed policemen advanced upon us from the surrounding vegetation. They surrounded us, cutting off possible escape routes. Armed and stone silent, they stood guard and awaited further instruction. Tension mounted.

"Happy birthday, Kasha!" individuals began shouting, following our prearranged security measure. We sang "Happy Birthday" to an infuriated

Kasha, who spoke about rights of assembly and asked what crime existed when a Ugandan held a birthday party.

Plainclothes police officers arrived. They summarily ordered us to disperse. We demanded to know why. They alleged that they had received public complaints about a same-sex wedding at the Botanical Gardens. We denied knowledge of this. A few of us volunteered to go to the police station and give a statement provided the rest of the marchers were allowed to travel back to their respective homes. Because I was among the oldest-looking marchers, I embraced the role of Kasha's aunt who had organized the supposed birthday party. Together with the chief marcher, a South African photographer, and four local LGBTIQ activists, we mounted the police patrol truck. At the police station, we learned that three of our marchers had been arrested. All three were dancers with the group Talented Ugandan Kuchus; they were arrested from their car just after dressing in brilliant white feathery drag costumes. A British lesbian photographer was also arrested for daring to take pictures of the police.

Inside the police station, human rights activists loudly protested against the police raid. We refused intimidation by the state. After some negotiations by comrades on the outside, we were all released. We still had bright spray-in color in our hair, glitter on our faces, and rainbow symbols on our bodies. Out T-shirts still read "We Are Here!" Queer folk—homosexuals, same-sex lovers, gender benders, gender blenders, LGBTIQ allies, and prohomosexuality advocates—continue to live in a Uganda that harbors the Anti-Homosexuality Act, with its legal, cultural, political, and human rights implications. More queer contestations, lobbying of stakeholders, and multipronged strategies are needed for the ultimate protection and pride of nonheteronormative individuals living in Uganda.

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## **Sex(t)ing Revolution, Femen-izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics**

**Karina Eileraas**

Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-mem-bering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.

—Homi K. Bhabha (1987, 123)

For politics to take place, the body must appear. . . . Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed among us.

—Judith Butler (2011)

**O**ur bodies inhabit the borderlands of the natural and the constructed, the marvelous and the mundane. Neither biological givens nor passive sites of inscription, they represent stunning political interventions, living canvases, and endlessly fascinating achievements in time and space (see Grosz 1994; Foucault 1995; Weiss 1999). When bodies hit the streets en masse to oppose the status quo, their power can appear either infinitesimal or so spectacular as to arrest onlookers in their tracks. By suspending audiences between past and future, demonstrating bodies become emblems of what is and what might be: "laboratories for alternative futures" (Rose 1999, 279).

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