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Review of Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa

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Ashley Currier, *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa* (Univ. of Minnesota Press 2012) 255 pages, ISBN 9780816678013.

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In the past few years, human rights abuses and political homophobia targeting LGBT people in Africa have garnered heightened international media coverage. This reporting has exposed efforts to pass a bill in Uganda that would make homosexual acts punishable by death, the shocking murder of leading Ugandan LGBT rights activist David Kato, the brutal rapes of black lesbians in South Africa, and the initial prison sentencing of a same-sex couple in Malawi to 14 years of hard labor,¹ among other examples of abuses against Africa's gender and sexual minorities. The international media has also highlighted Western governments' responses to African state-sanctioned homophobia such as the U.S. and U.K. governments' threats to cut aid to governments that do not embrace LGBT rights.²

While this international reporting on gay rights in Africa is welcome, its dominant narrative is often incomplete. We seldom encounter in-depth profiles of burgeoning African LGBT rights movements. What is the historical background of these social movements? What strategies do they pursue to realize African LGBT peoples' claims to full citizenship despite treacherous political waters? On what occasions do African LGBT activists make strategic decisions to retreat from public view due to safety or other concerns? How do they confront dubious yet persistent intra-societal claims that

homosexuality is inherently un-African, a Western concoction and an outside imposition?

Enter Ashley Currier's *Out in Africa: LGBT Organizing in Namibia and South Africa*, one of the first studies of its kind to grapple with these questions. Through the lens of social movement theory, Currier examines "how, when, and why" LGBT rights movements in post-apartheid South Africa and Namibia cultivate intentional public visibility or invisibility as strategies to achieve LGBT equality. Currier defines strategic public visibility as making "a particular item visible to one or more target audiences so that the audience responds in a desired manner."³ She argues that intentional invisibility allows "movement organizations temporary respite from repression, prying gazes, or unfavorable media coverage."⁴

Currier does not assume that South African and Namibian LGBT movements always desire public visibility as an organizing strategy. Instead, her ethnographic observation of four South African and Namibian LGBT organizations, interviews with dozens of individual advocates, and probe of thousands of media articles and organizational files reveal how these movements strategically pursue both visibility and invisibility at different junctures depending on political and other considerations.

Currier's study of the cultivation of visibility and invisibility in social movement organizing "centralizes activists' agency." And it is this focus on agency that makes *Out in Africa* such a refreshing read. It is always energizing to encounter studies that present Africans as actors and not simply as people forever acted upon. Too often in journalism, fiction, and non-fiction, writers and authors still portray African communities as bereft of agency. But in this well-researched, methodologically sound book, agency pours through the pages. Currier's focus on South African and Namibian LGBT activists as actors, struggling to determine their own social and political fate through strategic choices, squares with my own experience working with marginalized groups on the continent organizing for their rights. It is an important story to tell, and Currier, an assistant

¹ Josh Kron, "Resentment Towards the West Bolsters Uganda's New Anti-Gay Bill," *The New York Times* (February 28, 2012); Xan Rice, "Ugandan gay rights activist David Kato found murdered," *The Guardian* (January 27, 2011); Pumza Filani, "South Africa's lesbians fear corrective rape," *BBC News* (June 29, 2011); Barry Bearak, "Gay Couple in Malawi Get Maximum Sentence of 14 Years in Prison" *The New York Times* (May 20, 2010).

² "Resentment Towards the West Bolsters Uganda's New Anti-Gay Bill," *supra* note 1.

³ ASHLEY CURRIER, *OUT IN AFRICA: LGBT ORGANIZING IN NAMIBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA* 11 (2012).

⁴ *Id.*

professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Cincinnati, uses the visibility strategies of LGBT organizing in post-apartheid South Africa and Namibia to do just that.

In Chapter 1, Currier presents a historical overview of South African and Namibian LGBT organizing. She chronicles how Namibian political leaders' public anti-gay declarations in the 1990s had the unintended effect of igniting the young Namibian LGBT movement as it sought to cultivate public visibility in response to political homophobia. But it is Currier's historical examination of how apartheid South Africa's racial dynamics influenced LGBT organizers' strategic visibility decisions that is particularly fascinating. In the 1960s, white lesbians and gay men in apartheid South Africa "emerged from positions of invisibility" to oppose apartheid legislation that would further criminalize sexual minorities. As the anti-apartheid struggle gained force in the 1970s and 80s and the international community rooted itself in solidarity with black South Africans, white South African lesbian and gay activists confronted a "visibility dilemma." They could cultivate a public visibility that officially opposed the racist nature of the apartheid state, or they could disassociate themselves from black anti-apartheid activists' racial grievances. They chose the "apolitical visibility" of the latter, a move Currier partly attributes to racism within the white LGBT movement itself. This choice of apolitical visibility, however, eventually proved untenable under the weight of exploding anti-apartheid sentiment. By the mid-1980s, LGBT advocates "began rejecting apolitical visibility and developed inclusive visibility strategies allied with anti-apartheid organizing."⁵ By the end of the 1980s, a multi-racial South African LGBT movement worked closely with anti-apartheid political leaders to ensure that South Africa's new constitution would enshrine LGBT rights.

This historical reflection resonates, particularly in light of recent developments since the book's publication involving racial tensions and visibility strategies in South African LGBT organizing. In October 2012, black lesbian activists disrupted the Johannesburg Gay Pride Parade, which was organized by white LGBT organizers, in order to

⁵ *Id* at 35.

protest sexual violence against black lesbians and gender-non-conforming people. In response to this politicized display of public visibility, white march organizers physically and verbally attacked the black lesbian protesters.⁶ The white organizers had intended the gay pride march to reflect an apolitical visibility, which clashed with the strategic decision by black lesbian activists to use their protest action to embrace political visibility. The horrifying clashes at the gay pride march are proof that Currier's astute analysis of race and visibility dilemmas in apartheid South Africa's LGBT movement continue to be relevant in post-apartheid South Africa.

In Chapter 2, Currier explores how anti-lesbian violence resulted in two lesbian organizations in South Africa and Namibia revealing different orientations to visibility. In South Africa, vicious sexual attacks against black lesbians caused the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) to develop "an orientation towards decreased visibility, resulting in a default position of invisibility that FEW used to protect constituents and the organization."⁷ In contrast, in Namibia, where lesbians faced heightened homophobic political rhetoric but did not fear being singled out for physical injury, the organization Sister Namibia developed "a strategic orientation to visibility." However, Currier later and rightly notes that despite their initial orientations, as time moved on neither organization operated exclusively within the realm of either strategic visibility or invisibility.

In Chapter 3, Currier examines how and why South African and Namibian LGBT organizers missed political opportunities for visibility, particularly regarding law reform efforts. She explores South African LGBT organizations' failure to immediately engage in public visibility strategies following the South African Constitutional Court's ruling in favor of marriage equality and investigates Namibian activists' delayed public law reform efforts. The most interesting part of the chapter, however, is when Currier interrogates the assumptions underlying these very questions regarding seemingly missed political opportunities

⁶ Gillian Schutte, "Johannesburg's Gay Pride Parade, Not Much to Be Proud Of," *The South African Civil Society Information Service* (October 8, 2012).

⁷ CURRIER at 53.

at visibility. She encourages social movement scholars to understand that “[a]ctivists may not perceive an opportunity in the same way that social movements scholars do,” and “[b]y presuming LGBT movements should have plans to launch a law reform campaign, scholars may knowingly or unknowingly impose a Northern LGBT organizing paradigm on the global South.”⁸ Currier’s interrogation of the assumptions animating the chapter’s central questions was welcome. I have witnessed African LGBT activists weigh the pros and cons of pursuing public visibility centered on law reform efforts. Factors including lack of judicial or legislative receptivity and risks of political backlash may cause some LGBT organizers in the global South to not view law reform efforts as politically opportune exercises in visibility.

In Chapter 4, perhaps the book’s most interesting chapter, Currier explores how LGBT activists in South Africa and Namibia cultivate their visibility strategies to dispel the “homosexuality-is-un-African” narrative that tends to pervade mainstream discourse in many African societies. According to this thinking, homosexuality is a Western import that does not exist in African culture, and therefore, the authentic existence of African gender and sexual minorities is impossible. Currier argues that this homophobic discourse creates “controlling visibilities” for African LGBT advocates. In response to these controlling visibilities, activists fight to be seen as authentically LGBT, South African or Namibian, and African all at the same time. This is a challenging undertaking when activists use historically Western sexuality and gender identity terms in their advocacy, accept funding from Northern donors, and develop international partnerships, leaving them susceptible to homophobic accusations that they are puppets of a Western agenda. (Interestingly, these same denunciations are not applied to African anti-sodomy laws, which are largely remnants of European colonialism or to anti-homosexuality activism in Africa that is funded by fundamentalist overseas religious groups.)

Although the visibility strategies of Northern partners of African LGBT organizers is beyond the scope of this book, it is a natural extension of

Currier’s reflection on the challenges internationally-funded African LGBT activists face in dispelling homosexuality-is-un-African narratives. It is important for Northern organizations to be sensitive to this visibility struggle because it will help inform their own visibility strategies when partnering with African LGBT organizations. There are some advocacy opportunities in which the public visibility of Northern partners in campaigns regarding African LGBT rights can be very helpful (for instance, in focusing international attention on neglected instances of LGBT rights abuses on the continent). There are other situations in which heightened public visibility of the Northern partner might very well be unhelpful, and in those instances international organizations must work behind the scenes and cultivate strategic invisibility so that African communities authentically view African activists as the face and fire behind LGBT organizing efforts.

This book will be useful to social movement scholars and to LGBT organizers in the global South and their allies. But beyond those audiences, this is also a worthwhile book for anyone who is interested in social movements and how and why they make strategic choices to “be seen” from the margins of society.

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⁸ *Id* at 119.

