

BOOK REVIEW

Lindsey B. Green-Simms, *Queer African Cinemas*. Duke University Press, 2022, 250 pp.

Scholarly books on marginalized groups are as important for the new knowledge they produce as for the human stories they tell. Both elements should be at the core of a good book, and Lindsey B. Green-Simms's *Queer African Cinemas* symbolizes these qualities. The book gives us new names that make us rethink the way we view queer African lives. A phrase “registers of resistance” (24) speaks to the act of gathering, collecting, telling, and storing stories.¹ Another phrase —“Afri-queer fugitivity” (26)—points us to the emotion of fleeing; of seeking refuge from a familiar place that has turned its back on a person, to a site that is unknown. Fleeing, *Queer African Cinemas* shows us, is an act of courage and an act of vulnerability—and both can be read as acts of resistance.

Queer African Cinemas focuses mainly on cinematic production south of the Sahara; it opens with human stories on the way in which queer activists in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya are responding to the rise of rabid homophobia across political spheres in the twenty-first century. The foregrounding of the introductory chapter on the seminar Kenyan documentary “Stories of Our Lives” belies the way in which queer Africa has sought to create different means of resistance against suppression and oppression, through various media that include films, the internet, and books.

While queer African literature has had queer-identified Africans at its vanguard, queer African cinema dwells largely in total invisibility in most African countries, and on the margin in even the most liberal countries, due to political censorship, and because the majority of films that deal with queerness tends to be made by producers pandering to the current political atmosphere, with queerness often depicted as a symbol of societal decay and a dent on morality.

In this book, Green-Simms takes on the two sides of the queer spectrum—the rather homophobic cinematic productions and the homo-friendly films. These two sides are not merely two opposing views, but are enmeshed in complex body politics, in which people are trying to navigate the intricate balance between telling the real stories of queer Africa, and incurring the wrath of the political class, and the easily stirred viewing public. For example, in the discussion of the Nollywood film “Emotional Crack,” Green-Simms shows how heterosexual film

¹ Keguro Macharia with Sokari Ekiné, *Digital Queer Africa*, unshed paper presented at Digital Africas Symposium, Amherst College, October 2017.

producers who want to be sympathetic to queer Africa resort to familiar tropes of stereotypes in order to circumvent official and public censorship. Whereas queer producers not only grounded their cinematography in love and care in the way the fictional characters in these films are portrayed, they also often foregrounded the quotidian life in their productions.

In her analyses and narrations, Green-Simms brings to bear her long and strong relationship with some of the important figures in African cinema. With almost two decades of studying and befriending different personalities in African film industry, Green Simms shows a robust understanding of local, continental, and international politics and how these three political segments intersect with one another, and how they, in turn, impact queer Africa and discourses of African sexuality and gender. How does an ethnographer negotiate friendship and objectivity? Green-Simms manages to do this well by being attuned to human feelings as expressed by fictional characters and by sticking to the facts of lived experience. In this context, it is highly commendable that Green-Simms takes on the problems of labeling and naming: words such as *queer* are labels that speak to class and space. They also mark an identity that emanated from a Western discourse on homophobia. The struggle with, and the recognition of the ambivalence that surrounds such labels, shows the sensitivity of the author to her own privilege as an American scholar and to the cultural differences and the politics that permeate knowledge production across academia.

Up to chapter 3, the people and the characters that one encounters in the book are mainly middle-class Africans, queer people who seem to enjoy the agencies and privileges that their class position, education, and mobility afford them. Often in African literary studies, fictional portrayals as well as literary analyses are foregrounded in the lived experience of middle-class queer Africans; in chapter 3, in the discussion about John Trengove's Oscar-nominated film *Inxeba* (2017), we get an acknowledgment of this shortcoming.

Queer African Cinemas is crucial to anyone interested in the contingency of the present, one in which the past—the project of colonial modernity—has totally shaped today's attitude toward sexual identity. Green-Simms did not treat the people she met and the characters she analyzed as mere cultural objects; they are people and characters with feelings and thoughts, who are allowed to speak for themselves. *Queer African Cinemas* treats queer Africans with love and care, without condescending to them. This is what happens when a scholar puts the human at the core of a study.

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