

## UNDERLAYERS OF CITIZENSHIP: Queer Objects, Intimate Exposures, and the Rescue Rush in Kenya

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In recent years in Kenya, some public figures have warned citizens of a new, less obvious sign of moral decay in the country: rising sales in adult diapers. In 2013, the *Star*, a national newspaper, announced that “those engaged in sodomy are said to be releasing waste uncontrollably, forcing them to use pampers whenever they walk” (Gari 2013). On August 20, at a political rally in the coastal town of Malindi, Joshua Nkanatha, a police commissioner, explained: “A survey we conducted shows that boys engaging in sexual activities with male tourists are buying pampers because they can no longer hold their stool” (*Africa Now* n.d.). Worrying about the proliferation of anal sex, Nkanatha urged people “to take up the responsibility of enlightening the youths about the health risks of engaging in the vice.” Or else, he warned, “prostitution . . . will lead to their death.” The *Star* blamed the trend on “the booming tourism of pedophiles and perverts,” including Europeans, Americans, and, of late, “our so-called business partners who come all the way from China.” With similar urgency, in May 2018, Ezekiel Mutua, the director of the Kenya Films and Classification Board, stated in a public speech that “mature men end up in diapers because they have been ‘destroyed’ by their fellow men” (Mburu 2018). Infamous for his anti-homosexual rants and for banning any media featuring same-sex intimacies, Mutua warned Kenyans: “It is high time we stopped

this Westernized and good-for-nothing practice, [lest] it will destroy . . . future generations.” Like Nkanatha, Mutua blamed foreigners for the trend: “There are foreign NGOs in Kisumu and Kakamega, which move to the villages to manipulate our poor innocent youths with ‘big money’ of up to Sh3 million [around US\$30,000] . . . to engage in this wicked act.” This, he claimed, was “a kind of neocolonialism that . . . will end up destroying the country.”

Politicians, police, priests, and journalists, among others, have used diapers as what [Rosalind C. Morris \(2008, 201\)](#) calls an “inflationary discourse,” a set of narratives that amplify the proportions of an act or affliction, rendering its cumulative effects catastrophic. Invoking a sharp rise in the prevalence of anal sex and, with it, adult diapers, Nkanatha and Mutua announced impending trouble for the nation. Foreign tourists, businessmen, and NGO workers, they warned, corrupt “innocent youths” from villages—idyllic loci of intimate purity in the Kenyan national imaginary ([Macharia 2013, 28](#)). Purchasing anal sex, these leaders said, foreigners destroy not only the bodies of individual citizens but, exponentially, whole generations, the country itself. The inflationary quality of these discourses, in turn, prompts citizens to desire rescue from dangerous global afflictions, and thus protection by their leaders.

Discourses about men who end up in diapers because they engage in anal sex are not specific to Kenya. They circulate widely among evangelical Christians and radical-right activists in countries as far apart as the United States, Romania, and South Korea.<sup>1</sup> But since 2008, as American evangelicals and local political and religious leaders exacerbated anti-homosexual campaigns in African countries, these otherwise cosmopolitan discourses also became widely deployed in places like Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.<sup>2</sup> The strong capacity of diaper discourses to evoke a simultaneous destruction of bodies and polities made them appealing as a means to govern sexuality through moral panics.

Human rights and LGBTQ+ activists in African contexts have struggled to dismantle such discourses, seeing them—in the words of the Danish Institute for Human Rights—as “unsubstantiated rumors,” “urban legends,” or “outright lies,” circulated because of “widespread popular ignorance” ([Kerrigan 2013, 50](#)). For activists, rebutting such discourses is crucial when leaders strategically employ them to prosecute homosexual men. In 2014, Ugandan refugees in Kenya said that, during arrests in Kampala, to confirm their homosexuality, “police stuck their hands down their pants to see if they were wearing diapers” ([Feder 2014](#)). In 2016, similar assumptions about incontinent homosexual bodies led police in Kenya’s Kwale County to subject two men to anal medical exams before charging them

under the penal code's anti-sodomy law. Ideas about diapers, then, play a critical role in violent imaginaries of the homosexual body. But dismissing them as mere instances of "widespread popular ignorance" means supporting ideologies of an *African* homophobia—a racist trope, as scholars have shown, commonly deployed in global LGBTQ+ liberalism (Hoad 2007; Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid 2012; Judge 2018).<sup>3</sup> To better understand how homophobic sentiment emerges and how it produces the bodies it disavows, it is important instead to take diapers seriously as an idiom of politics.

During my fieldwork in Kenya between 2010 and 2019, I encountered diapers in a variety of settings. In the town of Mtwapa, on the Indian Ocean coast, I heard rumors about adults in diapers that focused not only on homosexual men but also on women. Locals said that anal penetration destroyed women's bodies, leaving them incontinent, in need of diapers. I later encountered diapers in contexts unrelated to sexuality, in conversations about drug addicts, alcoholics, and youth involved in quick-money schemes, all said to end up ill, tragically spending the last days of their lives in diapers. I began to make sense of these disparate invocations of diapers in 2014, in the capital city of Nairobi, where I encountered a photography exhibit provocatively entitled *Diaper Mentality: Something Needs to Change*. Curated by the activist Boniface Mwangi and the art group PAWA 254, the exhibit featured scenes in which Kenyans who commit various mundane wrongdoings—jaywalking, bribing, cheating—appear without trousers or skirts and wear, instead of undergarments, adult diapers. The project's Facebook page defines "diaper mentality" as "the primitive, backward behavior we wish to outgrow as a nation." Across these contexts, I learned, diapered adults appear as products of their own everyday misdeeds and moral impediments to the nation's progress. To understand the role of diapers in anti-homosexual discourse, I soon realized, I had to explore this object's wider circulation as a symbol of moral affliction. To do so, my ethnographic archive became a bricolage of various deployments of diapers from across different sites and scales.

In this article, I explore how the resonances between different deployments of diapers—many unrelated to (homo)sexuality as such—help constitute the homosexual body as a target of outrage. What makes diaper discourses so evocative in the present? What collective desires, fears, and anxieties do people express when exposing others as wearing adult diapers? And what do the cultural logics of such revelations show about the relationship between intimacy and citizenship in contexts of growing anti-homosexual violence? I make two related arguments. First, I suggest that diaper discourses are instances of what I call *intimate exposures*:

performative attempts to unmask signs of social failure hidden beneath appearances of respectability, to peel off—in speech or deed—an outer, visible stratum (e.g., clothing) of bodies and relations and bring to light their troubled underlayers. Representing social reality as consisting of materially layered phenomena, intimate exposures involving diapers constitute an important “technology of citizenship” (Lorway 2015). That is, they work to realign desires with national fantasies of intimacy and propriety. Second, tracking diapers as technologies of citizenship across different social contexts, I demonstrate how logics and sentiments associated with homophobia do not emerge simply in relation to the reified category of the homosexual. Instead, references to diapers help displace and condense desires, fears, and anxieties associated with bodies, work, reproduction, and respectability across domains of social life. Rather than think of homosexual bodies as existing prior to homophobic discourse, then, I show how the deployment of objects such as diapers proves central to their production. I approach diapers as what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls “queer objects,” marginal things whose repetitive disavowal sustains normative orientations and forecloses subversive possibilities.

The following section shows how exploring preoccupations with the hidden layers of social life can expand conceptualizations of intimate citizenship. Turning to the Kenyan coast, I then describe how sex workers and NGO workers use rumors involving adults in diapers to express anxieties over anal sex. Such rumors, I show, do not only concern sexuality but also struggles over the body’s (re)productive capacities, work, respectability, and progress. A quick detour through the exhibit *Diaper Mentality* will demonstrate how revealing hidden layers of ruptured intimate life offers an avenue to good citizenship. Returning then to anti-homosexual imaginaries, I show how intimate exposures work to produce and secure national heterosexuality. If both men and women are said to end up in diapers, the male homosexual becomes the ultimate object of displaced and condensed social anxieties—the destructive force of noncitizenship.

### UNDERLAYERS OF INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP

I use *intimate citizenship* to refer to practices and discourses that make private life the basis for political recognition (Plummer 2003). With late capitalism, Lauren Berlant (1998) argues, citizenship has revolved less around the promise of collective participation in the national public. Instead, it has become “a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in . . . the family sphere” (Berlant 1998, 5). “The dominant idea,” Berlant (1998, 4) shows, “is of a core nation whose survival depends on . . . the inti-

mate domains of the quotidian.” For many, unemployment, debt, and poverty have rendered intimate domains sites of acute anxiety and uncertainty. Thus leaders and citizens may now blame failures in the nation’s intimate lives on homosexuals, transgender people, sex workers, or various sexualized racial and ethnic Others (Partridge 2012; Mack 2016).

M. Jacqui Alexander (2005, 25–26) describes late capitalist transformations of intimate citizenship as “heteropatriarchal recolonization”: a process whereby “the state can produce a group of nonprocreative noncitizens who are objects of its surveillance and control . . . to veil the ruses of power”—to occlude leaders’ own complicity in market liberalization. In Africa as elsewhere, structural adjustment programs, the shrinking of the public sector, and the growing presence of foreign corporations and NGOs have threatened state-level national identity, making urgent “elite attempts to retain power through the molding of citizenship” (Dorman, Hammett, and Nuget 2007, 8). To legitimize state authority, leaders promise to protect citizens from the “perversions of globalization,” to rescue traditional gender roles, native (hetero)sexuality, and family values as durable foundations of national citizenship (Amar 2013; Ndjio 2016).

Assessing threats to intimate citizenship has involved what Paul Amar (2013, 17) calls “tactics of hypervisibilization”: “the spotlighting of certain identities and bodies as sources of radical insecurity and moral panic.” These tactics make citizens’ well-being contingent on the violent exclusion of others. But, in addition to hypervisibilization, it is important to also note threats that appear ambiguous, fleeting, and less easy to pin down or visualize—spectral forces of destruction yet to be revealed. Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2018, 61) argues that, with rising migration and urbanization across Africa, “the logic of ever-diminishing circles of inclusion dictates that the next foreigner or stranger is always one layer below the obvious one.” “In this bizarre nativity game of exclusionary violence,” Nyamnjoh (2018, 61) writes, “the next target is just a layer below.” To understand intimate exposures as technologies of citizenship requires attending closely to this fascination with the “layer below,” that which lies beneath the visible surfaces of everyday life and which, while not knowable quite yet, undermines efforts to build futures.

Claiming that numerous adults now wear diapers, Kenyan politicians like Nkanatha and Mutua expose afflictions otherwise hidden from public scrutiny. They warn that appearances of bodily integrity can prove deceptive and should be approached with vigilance and discreet inquisitiveness. Such intimate exposures are important in contexts in which both the citizen and its antitheses—the foreigner, the pervert, the national security threat—make for existentially unstable

entities, their presence opaque, elusive, uncertain. Incitements to intimate exposures orient subjects toward such hidden layers to produce citizens who, suspicious of the objects and persons surrounding them, must desire the state as a guarantor of their truthful value. In an ironic twist, however, citizens may often turn such tactics against their leaders, using rumors or art to expose powerful politicians as corrupt—in diapers.

What makes diaper discourses resonant is a broader context in which citizenship in Kenya is saliently debated in relation to bodily well-being, work, reproduction, and respectability. Debates about citizenship have intensified in the past four decades as the country has grown dependent on international loans and foreign investments and as migration has amplified both within and across its borders. With rapid urbanization, rampant unemployment, and a shrinking welfare state, 83 percent of Kenyans have turned to the informal sector to make a living ([Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2017](#)). In this context, competition over erratic income opportunities and decreasing access to land have exacerbated efforts to distinguish between ethnic groups, coastal and upcountry people, nationals and foreigners ([Oucho 2002](#)). An emerging imaginary of citizenship features labor migrants from Uganda and Tanzania, Chinese investors and laborers, and Euro-American tourists and humanitarians as shaping local markets in ways that, at times, disadvantage Kenyans. It also features asylum seekers from Somalia and South Sudan as escalating security threats related to Al-Shabaab terrorism and the “radicalization” of Kenyan young men ([Bachmann 2013](#)).

Fiscal inflation, a rising gap between the rich and the poor, and the private appropriation of public resources have also rendered the inclusionary promises of citizenship suspicious. [Robert W. Blunt \(2019, 7\)](#) argues that, during the presidency of Daniel Arap Moi (1978–2002) and ever since, “the power to back everything from the stability of monetary value to political promises of development . . . was . . . fundamentally up for grabs.” The fact that “the regime had resorted to counterfeiting everything from currency to title deeds” gave rise to a common perception of dissonance between the appearances and essences of persons, goods, money, and other media of value and authority. Under these circumstances, the visible itself became ambiguous. A sticker I spotted on a public minibus on the coast articulated this idea quite suggestively, stating, “The more u look, the less u c.” Discourses and practices of intimate exposure and concerns about the hidden layers of the everyday have become more common in this context.

Mtwapa, where I first encountered diaper rumors, amplified many of these trends. Over the past four decades, what had been a village of a few hundred res-

idents has become an urban region of 51,000. Migrants and migrant settlers from throughout Kenya have moved there to make money in and around tourism. The town's hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, strip clubs, and brothels allowed poor young Kenyans to meet wealthy visitors—African and European—for transactional sex (Kibicho 2009). Many of them hoped that, living there, they would, one day, become rich (Meiu 2017). But experiences of missed opportunity and lost fortunes also generated distrust among residents. “In Mtwapa,” a male migrant told me, “you shouldn't even trust your own brother.” Where fortunes could turn in an instance, he implied, greed and the thirst for success made the closest of kin deceitful.

Adults in diapers are examples of how such generalized suspicion comes to revolve around the less visible domains of intimacy and bodily private life. They cannot be seen or known simply by looking. Instead, like terrorists, devil worshippers, or *jini* spirits, all widely discussed in Mtwapa, they conceal their identity underneath unremarkable appearances. They are thus “innocent criminals,” to use a phrase I read on another sticker on another minibus. Hidden in the underlayers of intimate life, the afflictions that diapers conceal expand. And so, people seek to reveal their presence through rumors, art, or violence.

### **BROKEN BODIES, HIDDEN RUPTURES**

“Many men nowadays ask for ‘sex from behind’ [*ngono ya nyuma*],” said Nabaro, a woman engaged in sex work in Mtwapa. “I refuse to do it. Other women also refuse. But, when you refuse, men go with those who agree to it and you are left without customers.” She nodded, looking at me sternly, as if to assure me she was not joking. “Some women,” she said, “have to wear Pampers because they have ruined themselves. Others need surgery worth 80,000 shillings [US\$8,000].”

When Nabaro and I spoke in April 2011, she was twenty-eight. An ethnically Samburu migrant settler from northern Kenya, where I had been doing fieldwork since 2005, she had moved to Mtwapa in search of a better livelihood. We had lunch often that month to talk about my research, Samburu culture, and life on the coast. She told me she enjoyed our conversations—mostly in a mixture of Swahili and Maa (Samburu) languages—because they reminded her of her childhood. Nabaro had not returned to the north in more than ten years. For the past two years, she had been in a relationship with an elderly man from Switzerland who had rented her a luxurious apartment in town and supported her financially. In February, however, their relationship had ended, and Nabaro “returned to the bars,” as she put it, to meet men.

Because the number of tourist arrivals in Kenya declined following postelection violence in 2008, competition in sex work grew. Most nights during the following years, Mtwapa's clubs and bars hosted, by my estimates, as many as ten or more sex workers for every male patron. Fifteen female sex workers I interviewed between 2011 and 2017 said that, with heightened competition, those offering "sex from behind" stood higher chances of finding customers. They blamed the prominence of anal sex not only on customers but also on the growing presence of gay male sex workers in the town's nightlife. "[Gays] are cheating us out of customers," said Ruth, a thirty-year-old sex worker. "There are those customers who want [sex] from the behind. If you refuse them, they will just go with gays." Nabaro explained: because some customers thought "sex from behind" was "sweeter" (*tamu*) and safer than "from the front," "they don't care if they go with women or men." "This is what is destroying our market these days," she said. Ruth and Nabaro appeared to echo a national public that blamed homosexuals for moral decay. But their statements evoked more complex logics and sentiments, which will become more apparent shortly.

Nabaro was firm in her indignation with demands for anal sex: "Me, I tell customers: 'You want to destroy me? Fine. Build me a house, buy me a car, put money in my bank account, and then I will agree. At least that way I know my children will live well. Then, I can accept to wear Pampers for the rest of my life.'" What anal sex "destroys," she implied, was not the body alone. It was also one's autonomy, one's ability to act in and on the world, to build relations, and to generate value. To convey this state, Nabaro and other women used the Swahili *kuharibika*, "to be(come) spoilt," "broken," "destroyed." This verb, also referring to women who lost their virginity early or became pregnant in school, suggests that respectability, bodily integrity, and individual autonomy make for co-constitutive processes.

Bodies unable to control their flows are commonly seen as polluting (Douglas 1966; Masquelier 2005). Writing about Kenyan women with fistula, Kathomi Gatwiri (2019, 157) argues that "a leaking body is often constructed as being out of control, dirty, disgusting, and contaminable." Kenyans whom Gatwiri (2019, 128) interviewed saw fistula as the outcome of sexual transgression—promiscuity or adultery. My interlocutors did not speak of fistula as such, but, like Gatwiri's informants, they explained chronic incontinence in women as outcomes of sexual transgression. Vivian, a thirty-six-year-old sex worker, illustrated the bodily damage anal sex can cause by telling me a horrific story about a local woman whose baby had died at birth. "It came out," she said, "with a leg through her ass and the

other through her vagina,” leaving her incontinent. If moral personhood requires contained bodies, then adults in diapers are persons only in appearance, spectral embodiments devoid of interiority and reproductive capacity.

Nabaro, Ruth, and Vivian did not so much condemn women for providing anal sex as worry about the Faustian bargain the act entailed: that anal penetration generated wealth quickly only in exchange for one’s productive and reproductive bodily capacities, leaving women broken and helpless. Reflections on such bargains often entailed quite specific calculations: the enumeration of monetary gifts, surgeries worth 80,000 shillings, and more. These numbers underscored the sheer magnitude of the body’s alienation through commodification. The house, car, and bank savings that Nabaro listed as conditions for participating in such bargains were widely recognized media of middle-class success. But, she implied, they represented also the commodity value of bodily integrity. After she lost her former partner’s support, Nabaro found herself in a predicament in which such bargains could easily become appealing. She had two children: a ten-year-old daughter and an eight-year-old son. A single mother with no savings, she struggled to make a living. When I met her, she had just moved out of a luxurious, self-contained apartment into a rudimentary single-room home. She desired to regain the lifestyle she had lost, but worried that, to make money, “nowadays, one must do all sorts of dangerous things.”

Locals did not only share such rumors with me. When I visited sex workers at the offices of a local NGO, where many worked as peer educators, I often heard them tell such stories to each other. Sensationalist rumors about women in Pampers shocked their audiences. The very mention of diapers scandalized them. Though Pampers-branded baby diapers available in Kenyan supermarkets were expensive, cheaper versions—generically called “pampers”—were common. By the 1990s, single-use baby diapers had become so widespread that poor mothers saw them—along with milk and soap—as essential to caring for their infants. Rumors about women in diapers redeployed this familiar mundane object to highlight the fragility of motherly care today: mothers who, trying desperately to feed their children, ended up in Pampers became themselves like their babies—helpless and dependent. Expressing anxieties over shifting contexts of livelihood, these rumors also allowed women to negotiate the limits of their participation in the sex economy. To understand why these rumors resonated so strongly with everyday struggles, the next section shows how, according to NGO workers, anal sex undermines “progress.”

## RUPTURED PROGRESS, REVELATORY RESCUE

Public health workers in Mtwapa spoke of how “sex from behind” was an expanding “fashion.” “For quite a while now, there has been too much anal sex here,” said Amos, a man in his early twenties. He and I sat with five other young men and women on the veranda of their office in February 2017. Operating under the patronage of a regional NGO, with funds from the United Nations for Population Activity, since 2013 their community-based organization (CBO) has offered sex education through workshops, theater, and social media. “You will find that a girl is doing that,” Amos said, “and, at the end of the day, she is wearing Pampers. For what reason? She got destroyed there in the back, at the seam [*mshono*]. She is no longer able to persevere [*kuvumilia*]. She lets out water all the time.” I asked Amos how he knew that anal sex was on the rise. “We learn about these things from our peers in the community,” he said. Other public health workers echoed Amos’s claims. “If you hang out with youths, you will know that [anal sex] has become widespread,” said Fred, a forty-year-old working for another NGO. To emphasize this growth, Fred and Amos used Swahili verbs like *kuenea*, “to spread out” or “expand,” and *kuzidi*, “to become overabundant.”

Claiming novelty and expansion for the practice of anal sex occluded its longer history in sex economies and occult imaginaries along the Swahili coast (Shepherd 1987; Thompson 2017). Rather, what was new was the production of knowledge about the practice. Beginning in 2004, public health workers have published statistics showing that anal sex is a prevalent avenue for HIV transmission throughout Kenya. Both “men who have sex with men” (MSM) and heterosexual couples, these statistics reveal, engage in it (e.g., Schwandt et al. 2006; Mannava et al. 2013, 4). A significant number of men, they also show, moved between these two categories, expanding possibilities of infection. A public health poster announces that “HIV doesn’t care if you have sex with men or women” (see Figure 1). Depicting two men and one woman in an intimate grasp, the poster warns: “Anal sex without a condom is the highest risk sex for HIV transmission.” Amplifying anxieties over heterosexual reproduction, these public health findings and the iconography of HIV prevention have informed a humanitarian rush to rescue “key populations,” including sex workers and MSM (Moyer and Igonya 2018, 1013), since 2009.

Amos and Fred participated regularly in training sessions that circulated these findings. But, to better convey the magnitude of risk associated with anal sex to their “beneficiaries,” they also shared local rumors about incontinence and diapered adults. To emphasize anal sex as the “highest-risk sex,” Amos would tell the following story:

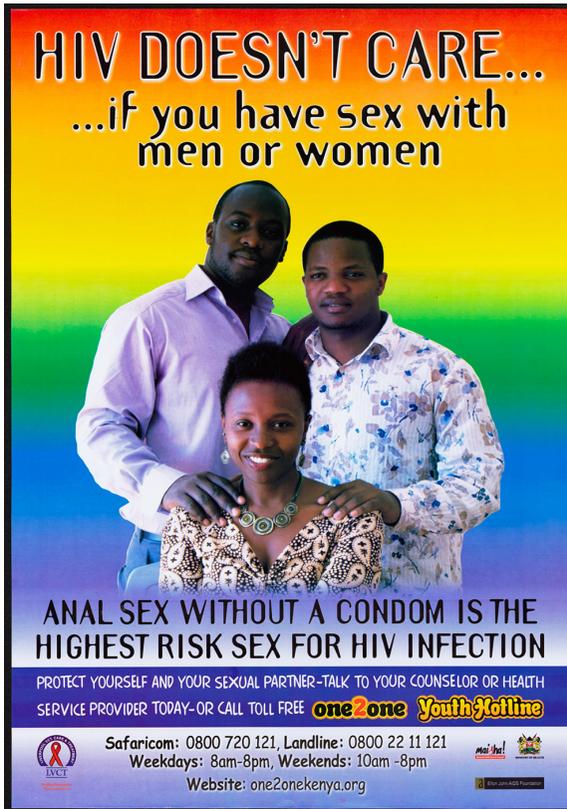


Figure 1. HIV-prevention poster, Kenya, late 2000s. Image by Liverpool Care and Treatment.

There was a sheik here in Mtwapa. And his daughter was having sex from behind because Muslims protect their virginity. This girl had a *charli* [boy-friend], and she was having anal sex. . . . So, that child, she got complications and was brought to the hospital. The doctor told the father that this girl has a sexually transmitted disease, that she was getting laid there, in the back, until she got wounded. So, the father set her down and she told him: “I was having sex from behind because, if I have sex from the front, I might not get a husband and it won’t be good.”

Amos performed an act of intimate exposure: he revealed to his audience how anal sex, driven by the young woman’s naiveté, eroded the body from beneath appearances of normality. A medium for respectable marital and filial relations, the body may appear intact (virgin). But its appearance is deceptive, its deceptiveness difficult to spot. Such revelations, in turn, cautioned people that the relations through which they built futures were fragile, easily to rupture.

Workers like Amos used intimate exposures to impart knowledge about sexual risks for the greater good of *maendeleo*, “progress” or “development.” Since independence, *maendeleo* has referred broadly to national progress through modernization. With the neoliberal overinvestment in the self-reliant individual, the word later also came to designate *personal* growth, wealth, and well-being initiated, among other things, through private, domestic efforts (Smith 2008). Within this framework, anal sex undermined both private and national progress. “If people see someone else do something in a Western way,” Fred explained, “curiosity is making them want to try, so they can also become ‘modern’ [*wa siku hizi*].” Youths, he said, watched porn on their smart phones and emulated its “foreign styles.” They called those who did not know of anal sex, for example, *washamba*, “peasants” (i.e., backward). Thus, anal sex expanded by deceptively promising youths modernity and progress and delivering instead dependence and helplessness. “What is spoiling us here in Kenya,” Fred said, “[is that] we are poured upon [*tumemwagiwa*], all at once, information that is otherwise to be swallowed [i.e., discerned] slowly. So, I take it all at once and start using it, thinking I will become Westernized. But [as a young person], I am not mature enough to handle it all at a go.” For both Amos and Fred, maturity and moral discernment enabled genuine progress, while the rush to emulate foreigners—a temporal acceleration toward progress—ultimately undermined it.

For NGO workers, then, bodies in diapers signaled failed progress. To commence the pursuit of progress, Kenyans had to rescue bodily autonomy by cultivating moral discernment and respectable sexuality. To move forward in time and acquire autonomy, the nation and its citizens had to foreclose the expansion of anal sex in space. Rumors about diapers and incontinence were meant to shock audiences into pursuing collective well-being. But here is an interesting twist in my story: diaper discourses did not only pertain to sexuality. They were also commentaries on illegitimate moneymaking practices that required careful concealment.

### WORK, CONCEALMENT, AND RESPECTABILITY

What makes revelatory discourses about adults in diapers meaningful is partly a context in which people feel that, in order to make a living, they must engage in morally problematic “work” (*kazi*). As Nabaro suggested above, in Mtwapa, a strong sense prevails that the present is a time of exceptional deeds and tough bargains. “These are hard times,” I often heard people say, “you do what you need to do to eat.” The moneymaking strategies people found troublesome included, besides sex work, theft, drugs trafficking, and sorcery. Rumors circulated of various

get-rich-fast schemes and their dire consequences. Such rumors typically involved protagonists from poor backgrounds who, using questionable means, became rich quickly, only to lose their wealth, turn HIV-positive, “go mad,” and die. Many spent their final days in diapers. Such stories allowed people to negotiate what kinds of work, otherwise “immoral,” were nevertheless becoming permissible, given the difficult economic circumstances. In these rumors, diapers did not always relate to sexuality, but expressed anxieties about how the redefinition of legitimate work affected people’s bodies and ability to progress and build futures.

At a government meeting on drug trafficking in Nairobi in 2008, a woman said:

In June 2006, I buried a childhood hero of mine. He had spent twenty-five years suffering of drug abuse. He went in and out of Mathari Mental Hospital. By the time he was dying, he was [in] diapers. As a mother of a small child, I know how happy a parent feels when their child stops using diapers. When you have a forty-year-old child who is addicted to drug[s] and is using diapers, it means that we, as a society, have failed our children. . . . It is us adults who allow drug traffickers to pass our porous borders. We give minimal sentences to drug traffickers and thus increase the proliferation of drugs in our country.<sup>4</sup>

This statement depicts unregulated *economic* flows moving freely through the nation’s “porous borders” as finding expression in uncontrollable *bodily* flows that render citizens similarly pervious. According to this logic, without national security and border regulation, citizens cannot grow out of infantile dependence, becoming instead “forty-year-old children.” Problematic moneymaking practices thus put adults in diapers, making them regress to infantile dependence. “Forty-year-old children” reflect their society’s failure to progress. Here, bodies constitute central means through which shifting political economic trends play out more generally. Exploring preoccupations with the “underneath of things” in Sierra Leone, [Mariane C. Ferme \(2001, 8\)](#) argues that “the individual’s body [is] the site for locating hidden, potent forces of the underworld, as well as for contesting and reorganizing the socio-political order.”

If illegitimate work ruptured bodies, diaper discourses also implied that much energy was invested in hiding those ruptures, along with the means of livelihood that caused them. Diapers could conceal incontinent bodies to preserve their respectability only if, at the same time, they were themselves concealed by

outer clothing. The resulting image of layered concealments resonated strongly with people's everyday attempts to veil how they made money. Nabaro, for example, told her children and neighbors that she worked night shifts as a waitress in a restaurant. To avoid rumors of her sex work reaching her parents in the north, she also frequented bars located far from where Samburu migrants typically socialized. At night, when she walked from home to the bars, she covered her short skirts with long, traditional *kanga* fabrics that she later removed. "I make myself a bit more respectable," she once told me laughing, "so that mamas in my neighborhood won't talk too much." Seeking to acquire money through sex work while maintaining respectability, Nabaro had to cover—quite literally, at times—different aspects of her life. Like others, she engaged in a "politics of pretense," to use Julie Soleil Archambault's (2017, 43, 94) term, "juggl[ing] visibility and invisibility," "embellishing reality . . . through concealment." The careful management of the body in space and time, its strategic covering and uncovering, reflects how the preservation of respectability, over the long run, presupposed the concealment of one's more immediate means of livelihood. It also reflects how an imaginary of social life as layered proved important in this context.

In rumors that reveal the hidden layers of others' lives, people expressed and reflected on their shared anxieties. In May 2017, Vivian told me and two friends of hers how delighted she had been to discover recently that her neighbor, a woman who "pretends" (*anajifanya*) to be a respectable "mother of the community" (*mama wa mtaa*), was herself "just a prostitute" (*malaya tu*). As we all laughed, entertained by Vivian's theatrical narration, I remembered that she, too, had recently been outed as a "prostitute" on national television. A Nairobi crew filming a reportage on Mtwapa's nightlife had promised to blur Vivian's face in the interview she offered. They didn't. And, after the segment aired, her parents and kin upcountry called her to say that she was no longer welcome home. I do not mean to suggest that Vivian's laughter at exposing her neighbor constituted a form of Schadenfreude or abreaction. But, taken together, these experiences show how, in intimate exposures, anxieties, aspirations, and amusement are ambiguously intertwined. Rumors exposing others also expressed unease with a shared predicament in which people must work illicitly to build respectability amid suspicious appearances and uncertain attachments. Yet these rumors were more than expressions of fear and desire. They also represented, as I have suggested, technologies of citizenship. To show this, I take a brief detour in the following section, away from my ethnographic data, through the Nairobi exhibit *Diaper Mentality*.

## INTIMATE EXPOSURES, QUEER OBJECTS, AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP

Diaper discourses, I have shown, help people express and negotiate aspirations and anxieties related to bodies, work, respectability, and progress even in circumstances unrelated to sex. This means that public revelations of diapered adults reflect a cultural logic independent of—though, at times, overlapping with—discourses of sexuality. *Diaper Mentality*, the photography exhibit curated by Mwangi and PAWA 254, illustrates how this cultural logic forms a technology of citizenship, a way to produce subjects within national frames of moral propriety.



Figure 2. Image from the Nairobi exhibit *Diaper Mentality*. Image by PAWA 254.

Organized for the fiftieth anniversary of Kenya's independence from British colonial rule, *Diaper Mentality* showcased images of a wide range of troublesome behaviors. In all pictures, let us recall, those doing bad things appear in adult diapers. In one image, a group of people jaywalk on Nairobi's busy Kenyatta Avenue. In another, three youths sit behind the driver on a motorcycle cab, stretching its carrying capacity beyond the limit (see Figure 2). A painted inscription on the wall behind them reads *Uhuru*—Independence—suggesting satirically how some Kenyans misunderstand liberation from colonialism as liberty to misbehave. Also featured are unreasonable or offensive acts: a group of drivers wash their trucks in a lake, polluting the water; waiters in a restaurant serve light-skinned foreigners

smilingly, ignoring fellow black Kenyans; and a group of coastal men drink beer, chew khat, and play board games, while their wives undertake the hard—traditionally male—work of climbing palm trees to harvest coconuts. Yet other pictures portray corrupt or abusive deeds: police demanding bribes from drivers or destroying informal alcohol joints; and men harassing a woman on the street for dressing “scantly.” All images capture evocative public affects Kenyans will likely recognize, including innocent smiles, angry demeanors, or panicked gazes.

The use of diapers is metaphoric. Not actual ruptures caused by sexual penetration or illness render bodies incontinent, but immorality broadly construed. Although a significant number of photographs focus on sexuality, they nevertheless dissociate bodily incontinence from actual sexual penetration. In a particularly evocative picture, three female high school pupils, all pregnant, point their index fingers at the male teacher who impregnated them. Another male teacher who has already sired a baby with a schoolgirl, stands nearby, looking indifferent (see [Figure 3](#)). The phenomenon of teachers impregnating schoolgirls has seen widespread debate in recent decades. In this image, the accused appears on his knees, holding up a biology book, against the background of a blackboard with terms related to sexual reproduction. The image thus ridicules supposedly pedagogical circumstances that lead to such pregnancies and exposes male teachers as failed persons. Notably, the teachers wear diapers not because they have been penetrated, but



**Figure 3.** Image from the Nairobi exhibit *Diaper Mentality*. Image by PAWA 254.

because their irresponsible deeds have rendered them, senior men, subservient to their immoral desires. This logic subverts the causal relation between sexual penetration and diapers, rendering the latter a more generic symptom of ethical failure.

*Diaper Mentality* is an attempt to rescue norms of propriety, which the artist-activists think should have defined Kenyan national identity since independence. The exhibit draws on popular understandings of diapers as tools of infantilization to announce the nation's ruptured progress. Political activists worldwide have used diapers in this way to satirize leaders. Consider, for example, Baby Trump in recent U.S. and U.K. protests, or the "red diapers" referring to the communists of the 1960s U.S. scares (in which, homosexuals themselves were sometimes associated with the communist threat). Echoing colonial and developmental temporalities that have long infantilized non-Western racial Others (Fabian 1983), Mwangi and his team use diapers to underscore the urgency of moral rescue and to shame fellow citizens into good behavior. They condemn certain private practices to restore ideals of propriety, gender, and family that should define progress.

More important for my argument, the exhibit uses bodily incontinence to depict broken citizens and expose hidden layers of intimate life. Such uses of diapers have been common in the national public in recent decades. They started when, in 1985, in a public hygiene campaign on the island of Lamu, local politicians called on the island's residents to put diapers on the donkeys they used for transport. Kenyan artists, including the famous cartoonist GADO, found the idea so ludicrous that, in their art, they put corrupt politicians in diapers instead. While *Diaper Mentality* also features President Uhuru Kenyatta, Nairobi Senator Mike Sonko, and other politicians, the exhibit builds on this genealogy to focus primarily on ordinary citizens. The journalist Oyunga Papa explains that the main focus of the exhibit is "the ordinary *mwananchi* [citizen] behaving badly." "Diaper mentality," he suggests, is another name for what has "evidently become an accepted culture of individualism in Kenya." Inspired by Mwangi, he claims, "whenever I spot bad behavior in public places, I think of Lamu donkeys and mutter under my breath: 'Stop being an ass and be a responsible citizen or we will dress you in diapers.'"

*Diaper Mentality* seeks to reform Kenyans. An op-ed described it as "a campaign on . . . general ethics in the country" (Mzalendo 2015). This approach continues Mwangi's previous work, a photography exhibit depicting the gruesome carnage of the 2008 postelection violence, which traveled across the country to educate citizens about the perils of interethnic hate (Githuku 2016, 438–46). Similarly, *Diaper Mentality* means to shock with its revelatory gesture: it invites citizens to contemplate broken layers of their everyday. This gesture recognizes and

redeploys the otherwise common tactic of intimate exposure to foreclose bad behavior and produce good citizens. It thus works as a technology of citizenship that confronts subjects with the tremendous impact of their actions for the nation's progress and pushes them to work on themselves.

This use of diapers as a technology of citizenship can help us better understand its deployment in rumors in Mtwapa. Like Mwangi's art, NGO workers and sex workers uncover ruptured strata of bodies and social life, performatively exposing the magnitude of their sheer damage. Revealing how anal sex undermines bodies and society, they seek to restore national reproductive heterosexuality as a foundation of citizenship. They thus perform what [Inderpal Grewal \(2017, 10\)](#) calls "exceptional citizenship," a mode of empowerment prompting subjects "to rescue, to save, to become humanitarians." "Naturalized as entrepreneurial and aspirational but also fearful and insecure," [Grewal \(2017, 4\)](#) argues, such citizens "believe they can do more than the state and save . . . the world." We can interpret intimate exposures as technologies of citizenship because they aim to produce citizens who, doing the work of the state, surveil underlayers of social life and expose their ruptures to secure collective well-being. Their ability to shock fuels their inflationary quality: Anal sex emerges as an excess, an expanding affliction that makes the act of exposure a performance of exceptional citizenship.

I think of diapers as "queer objects," things that one must repudiate, relegate to the margins, to acquire heteropatriarchal respectability ([Ahmed 2006, 90–91](#); [Davidson and Rooney 2018](#)). Often deemed vulgar, repulsive, or shameful, such objects are "straightening devices," media that, in demanding disavowal, orient subjects away from subversive intimacies, toward normative ones ([Ahmed 2006, 66](#)): *If you don't want to end up in diapers*, so the argument goes, *don't engage in x behavior*. What makes such objects "queer" is not that they subvert heteropatriarchal intimacies. Rather, they prove central to producing them. Even so, within normative frameworks, such objects disturb and offend. Interlocutors often regarded me skeptically, for example, when hearing I was writing an essay on diapers, and colleagues have suggested more than once that I look at more "dignified" things. Hence, the queerness of this object rests both with its marginality and with my analytical choice to focus on it; for, as [Ahmed \(2006, 166\)](#) argues, "bringing an object that is often in the background to the foreground . . . can have a queer effect." In this case, diapers help me decenter the homosexual as a hegemonic target of outrage while also demonstrating their centrality to producing such targets.

## HOMOPHOBIA, DIAPERS, AND DISPLACEMENTS

Having traced diaper discourses across different domains of social life and shown how they help normalize intimate exposures as technologies of citizenship, I now return to their role in homophobic imaginaries. At the beginning of this article, I showed how political leaders invoke diapers to highlight the threat of homosexuality to national integrity. In this sense, how diapers circulate in rumors about anal sex and illegitimate moneymaking or in activist art is also, if indirectly, constitutive of the homosexual body as an object of outrage, violence, and exclusion.

Political homophobia, the strategic use of anti-homosexual rhetoric by political leaders, elites, and their supporters, has intensified in Kenya since 2008. Some leaders have long employed homophobic rhetoric; but following the contested presidential election of 2007 and the interethnic violence that ensued, they have more consistently singled out homosexuals to unify the divided national public around a common national threat. In the following years, as Kenyans debated the draft of a new constitution, leaders sought to consolidate national identification and state authority by promising Kenyans protection from the “perversions of globalization.” A member of parliament, Aden Duale, for example, claimed that, in Kenya, “gayism is as serious a problem as terrorism.” Since the early 2000s, leaders across the world have employed homophobia extensively as a strategy of power (Bosia and Weiss 2013). This global context as well as similar developments in Uganda—where President Museveni supported a bill condemning homosexuals, in some instances, to death (Boyd 2013)—made political homophobia a resonant strategy in Kenya as well.

Nkanatha, Mutua, and other leaders’ references to diapers may seem trivial in this context. I suggest they are not. Such references catalyze disparate affects and meanings associated elsewhere, as we have seen, with struggles over bodies, work, respectability, and a progressive futurity. Diapers thus enable a process of displacement and condensation through which different *elsewheres*—other scenes of social life in which people invest diapers with aspirations and anxieties—become constitutive of the homosexual body. The homosexual body not only takes on these displaced affects but, in so doing, also becomes the externalized object-cause of national intimate trouble more generally, and thus a ready target of repudiation.

Men who identify interchangeably as gay, *msenge*, *kuchu*, or—using public health parlance—MSM rebuked diaper discourses. In June 2017, I spoke to Kent, a twenty-four-year-old from Mtwapa, who had come of age during a time of amplified political homophobia in the country. “I think I was in fifth grade” (eleven

years old), he recalled, “when I thought about whether to continue or to stop [being gay] and the repercussions.” He explained:

It was about how people perceived you. They’d say that in the future you will be walking in Pampers. Those rumors. So, those myths, to me, were scary. I remember . . . my mom had been told I could be gay. So, that was the first time my mom told me about sexuality: “If you practice this, you will be in Pampers. You will not be able to hold your stool. Blah, blah, blah.” So, I started believing that until I was older and joined high school. I told myself I have to stop this. But time was passing, and I was still practicing [anal sex], and I saw no difference, no nothing.

Diaper discourses, though false, Kent suggested, shape gay men’s subjectivities as they grow up. Linking anal penetration to incontinence, such rumors inculcated fear.

Diaper discourses also informed violent homophobic imaginaries. Kent recalled how, in 2010, while in high school, teachers and classmates caught him having sex with a roommate. They took them both into the school yard and beat them. Kent remembered receiving the harsher beating because he had been the receptive partner—“bottom” or “queen.” As punishment, the headmaster expelled Kent, only giving his partner—the “top” or “king”—extra cleaning chores. “I think they perceive *gayism* to be in the bottom,” Kent said. “So, if you are topping, you are a man who has been forced or socially corrupted. . . . I was told I am the one who is influencing socially the rest of the boys.” On another occasion, a few years later, neighbors caught Kent having sex in his home. They dragged both men out into the street and beat them. Once more, Kent received the worse beating. “Then again, the blame was on me being the bottom. They said, ‘He is the one who went to boarding school and then brought us the habits [*tabia*] from there to the neighborhood.’”

In discourses about *gayism*—a term to which I return shortly—diapers conceal deeper anxieties over anal erotic pleasure. Receptive anal sex, queer theorists argue, has long threatened to dissolve the modern, rational, male subject of liberal discourse, to blur interiority and exteriority, leak gender distinctions, and diffuse sources of agency (Bersani 2009; Guss 2010). In Kenya, rather than appear passive, men’s anal receptiveness was often imagined as assertive, active, and agentive. Critiquing phallogocentric understandings of agency, Nkiru Nzegwu (2011) shows how the idiom of the “devouring vagina,” common in African imaginaries, captures the

dangerously agentic power of feminine sexuality, its ability to engulf the penis, to make it disappear. One can expand this argument to what people perceive as a “devouring anus” that undermines worlds, enticing “normal” men to turn them into bottoms. Diaper discourses disavow anal erotic pleasure as unbearable, unthinkable. “When people say you end up in Pampers,” Kent said, “they don’t count the pleasure part of it . . . only the traumatizing part.” According to this logic, if heterosexual anal sex is simply the outcome of poor moral judgment, men’s desire for and pleasure in receptive penetration signal a quest to devour society, to turn men into *mashoga* or “fags,” and reproductive sexuality and national progress into selfish self-gratification.

The notion of *gayism* common in Kenya (and anglophone Africa more generally) is distinct from—if also coexistent with—liberal understandings of sexual orientation as immutable identity. It is akin to evangelical renderings of homosexuals as unable to reproduce and so needing to “recruit,” a logic that Euro-American right-wing conservatives have long employed (Angelides 2019, 86). Gayism, like any *-ism*, is a trend, a current that proliferates through conversion, which explains, for example, why homosexuality is often associated with Freemasonry in West Africa (Geschiere 2017). It posits men who desire receptive penetration as feeding off the bodies of others. In Mtwapa, interlocutors, including some gay men, told me that a man becomes gay by first being “ruined” (*kuharibiwa*) by another man (see also Amory 1998, 82), a logic that political leaders also employed when warning against foreigners who seduced Kenyans with money. Once ruined, a man spreads the vice to quench his thirst for nonreproductive, anti-social pleasures, becoming the ultimate embodiment of not only intimate noncitizenship but something like *anti-citizenship*. Thus understood, gayism expands one layer below what can be seen, afflicting, like a contagion, ever larger numbers of people. Pandemic anal sex and gayism are constructed as two only partially overlapping yet co-constitutive afflictions. And diapers enable this co-constitutive process as a point of resonance that alerts people to the rapid deterioration of their society from underneath.

Accordingly, leaders, police, and urban crowds also deployed violence as a form of intimate exposure to identify, reveal, and rectify the hidden layers of social life through which gayism secretly expands. They drew on such popular perceptions of intimacy to expose homosexuals, “uncover” their “underground networks.” Similarly, citizens could drag homosexual men—as they had done to Kent—into public spaces to reveal otherwise invisible, troubled strata in the town’s intimate life. Crowds thus performed their own version of intimate exposure and good citizenship. As Tom Boellstorff (2004, 480) argues for Indonesia, so too in Kenya,

leaders' homophobic rhetoric made "violence not only thinkable but sensible as an emotional 'gut reaction' to . . . an assault on the nation's manhood." Diapers, if anything, lend strength to such violence. Discursive conduits for the displacement and condensation of social anxieties, they help disambiguate the homosexual for exposure and exclusion.

## CONCLUSION

What makes diaper discourses so evocative in the present is their ability to resonate with how people perceived political economic and social transformations. These discourses rehearse cultural logics that some Kenyans have already employed to make sense of how shifting definitions of licit work affected their bodies and respectability. Social anxieties over these matters have found new expression in diaper discourses. Neither merely the product of the political class nor simply a folk concept, these discourses bring leaders and the citizenry into a relationship of conviviality—a shared experience of a common predicament, a "community of affliction" (Turner 1968). This conviviality finds expression through a long-standing "aesthetics of vulgarity," as Achille Mbembe (2001, 104) calls it, discourses involving bodily orifices, genitalia, or feces and that maintain citizens and the state in the same discursive realm. Deployments of diapers in everyday rumor, political art, or leaders' rhetoric reflect a newly amplified concern with concealing, revealing, and suturing broken intimate underlayers as a condition of citizenship.

As technologies of citizenship, intimate exposures, including diaper discourses, promise exceptional citizenship to those who reveal ruptured underlayers of social life and help reform them. Like Nyamnjoh (2018), I use *layers* as a descriptor for what my ethnographic material suggests as an implicit, emic topography of citizenship. In Kenya, as elsewhere, citizenship is experienced today, in part, as intimate, in that people understand their private lives as both symptomatic of and consequential for national progress. This implicit topography animates a wide array of practices, including strategic concealments and performative exposures, through which people imagine and negotiate attachments to each other and the polity.

As queer objects, diapers also take us beyond the readily recognizable targets of state exclusion. To understand shifting forms of intimate citizenship, I argue, anthropologists must also explore threats to the nation and its private lives that are less concrete, more fleeting, and ambivalent. Diapered bodies constitute such indeterminate threats, easy to miss if our analysis focuses only on the globalized repertoire of sexualized identities readily marked for exclusion. Understanding the

homosexual, for example, as a normative target of exclusionary violence requires that scholars explore how the signifiers producing this body in particular contexts—diapers, among others—carry traces of other “troublesome” bodies (e.g., sex workers, alcoholics, drug addicts). As key conduits for the displacement of anxieties and aspirations across social terrains, such signifiers lend strength to homophobic repudiations.

A methodological focus on queer objects has important conceptual implications for intimate citizenship. First, as I said, it suggests that the semiotics and sentiments of homophobia are not always constituted in relation to a body readily recognizable as homosexual, emerging instead across vast domains of social life. Second, queer objects illustrate pervasive technologies of citizenship that work through everyday conviviality, and not merely through the manipulative efforts of political leaders or elites. Third, this approach suggests that sexuality is never a distinct, fixed domain, but, if anything, an upper, outer layer of citizenship discourses. Just one layer below—to pursue metaphors related to diapers—things look messier: the sexual subject, the citizen, and its myriad threats are all unstable, ambiguous, shifting, always emerging anew in different forms. Diapers’ queerness, then, rests with this object’s ability to trouble normative social types, even as its deployment enables their reproduction.

### ABSTRACT

*In Kenya in recent years, diapers have played a central role in anti-homosexual discourses, suggesting that anal sex results in chronic bodily incontinence. But rumors about adults in diapers do not pertain only to homosexuality. They also describe bodily ruptures resulting from sex work, illicit moneymaking practices, and “immorality,” more generally. This article explores how the resonances between different deployments of diapers help constitute the homosexual body as a target of outrage, violence, and exclusion. I argue that rumors about adults in diapers identify and expose national threats in the hidden layers of intimate life to produce good citizenship. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work, I approach diapers as “queer objects,” because they offer an alternative entry point into discussions of intimate citizenship: they bracket the reified category of the homosexual and demonstrate how sentiments associated with homophobia emerge in a wider set of struggles with bodies, work, respectability, and progress. [sexuality, homophobia, objects, intimacy, citizenship, Kenya]*

### NOTES

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1. Personal communications with LGBTQ+ activists from these countries.
2. For Cameroon, see Peter Geschiere (2017, 11); for Ghana, see Nathanael Homewood (2020, 114–17); for Nigeria, see Benedict Hart (2014); for Uganda, see J. Lester Feder (2014).
3. In African contexts, anti-homosexual sentiment and violence have emerged not only through political leaders' incitements but also through transnational religious networks, popular reactions to neocolonialism, and changing forms of consumerism and gender (Msibi 2011; M'Baye 2013; Ndjio 2016).
4. *Kenya National Assembly Official Record*, November 12, 2008, 3407.

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