

Secrecy and the Poetics of Witness: Mourning Fanny Ann Eddy

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ABSTRACT

The arts of mourning, like the masquerade and the elegy in poetry, are cultural treasures and sources of memory beyond the silence of death. How then do we mourn as queer and same gender loving Africans in the face of state-sanctioned violence and homophobia, which have led to the deaths of LGBTI Africans from Sierra Leone to South Africa? As a queer African woman of faith, I am in search of a new language of mourning, a language that can also do the work of justice. The brutal murder of Fanny Ann Eddy in 2004, a fierce and outspoken lesbian activist from Sierra Leone is where I begin. I turn to witness poetry for a poetic practice, a form of truth telling that registers the moral and linguistic disruptions of small and large scale violence. Using her testimony to the United Nations, I represent Eddy as a *parrhesiaste*, a truth-teller and witness who prefers the truth of herself to falsity, even in the face of life and death. The words of her testimony about injustice are enjoined with my poetry to challenge social conventions that sustain the public secret of homosexuality as taboo. The public secret, like the term *ubuntu*, are social conventions within which homosexuality can be tolerated but without the beauty of justice. Justice can be understood in its poetic sense as the beauty of truth. A Yoruba saying, *l'iwa l'ewa* or truth is beauty is a promising antidote to the public secret. This performative credo can be supported by a messianic theology in which mourning is redemptive. Mourning as redemption is not therefore about the politics of the closet but about time; messianic time in which 'there is no Jew or Greek, no male or female, no slave or free' (Gal 3:28).

Truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret but a revelation which does justice to it.

Walter Benjamin

Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it.

Adrienne Rich

Introduction

Death is a tearing that opens into a vast silence. It is the ultimate secret, yet out of it has come the sublime arts of the masquerade and the elegy in poetry. The visual

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arts also offer responses to death, haunted as they are by the passage of time and by the passing of all life out of time. These arts of mourning, in their attempts to redress death's finality, are our cultural treasures, offering us accessories for the social rites and rituals of mourning and aiding the work of memory.¹

As a queer poet of the African present, which is also a global present, I am in search of a new language of mourning beyond the mask, the classical yet predictable language of African mourning. The violence that haunts the lives of sexual minorities from Africa and its diaspora is not historically anomalous, nor is it without precedent elsewhere. But we must acknowledge the mounting inventory of our losses each time a gay activist is murdered with the tacit consent of the state, or another law is passed garroting our rights of citizenship.² We must be able to mourn in a way adequate to these events. But our mourning must suggest more than loss, for explicit or implicit in the arts of mourning is a statement about the afterwards—what remains or what is to come. This paper begins an exploration into the poetics of mourning as the work of justice.

Silence/Secrecy

Experience stands mute before language and requires a witness to testify to it. Poetry, always willing to tell truths, obliges with its many tongues. The late lesbian poet and activist, Audre Lorde, expresses the responsiveness of poetry to experience as a quality of illumination that distills our lived experience into revelation, offering a means to move beyond silence into language, ideas and action—but only if we can muster the courage and intimacy of self-scrutiny.³

Lorde writes that the fruit of self-scrutiny is power, as the ideas from dreams and poems become precursors to new names and new forms of thought in the service of meaningful action. With a new sense of power, we lose the 'fears which

1 A fine example is Zanele Muholi's photographs of South African lesbians, both living and dead, in which she addresses multiple registers of passing in and out of time. Her photographs are part of a growing corpus of work by and about queer Africans, from the novel to film to photography, having an impact on the art scene and adding literary, visual and performative richness to Africa's cultural corpus. Please see, Zanele Muholi, *Zanele Muholi* (Madrid: Casa Africa, 2011); Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (Munich: Prestel, 2010).

2 For information on recent homophobic laws passed in the Gambia, Nigeria, and Malawi please see the following websites: "78 Countries Where Homosexuality Is Illegal", *Erasing 76 Crimes* <<http://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/>> Accessed 2, May 2016; International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association, "State-Sponsored Homophobia: A World Survey of Laws: Criminalisation, Protection and Recognition of Same-Sex Love", May 2013, 8th Edition <http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2013.pdf>. Accessed 2, May 2016.

3 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 36-37.

rule our lives and form our silences'.⁴ This claim for poetry's efficacy in the world is a contentious one among poets. W.H. Auden, in an often-quoted line from his elegy for W.B. Yeats, said 'poetry makes nothing happen'. Poetry's power, says Auden, is in its self-sufficiency as utterance, as 'a way of happening, a mouth'.⁵ It transforms human experience of tragedy into songs of lament or praise. But Lorde belongs to a different tribe of poet, those for whom poetry is more than the art of words. For these poets, poetry has and can always respond as a form of intervention—into the momentous event, the small-scaled acts of violence, and the ever-present structures of domination.⁶ This is poetry as witness. It 'defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion [and] seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and the moral universes have been disrupted by events'.⁷ Forche's work on the poetry of witness has taken state violence as one of the arbiters of the 'event' to which the poet as witness responds. This is clear from the poetry within the anthologies she has edited. Her own collections have equally addressed the "eventfulness" of state terror and of genocidal violence as explored in *The Angel of History*,⁸ which is a meditation on memory and the Jewish Holocaust. The poet works from this place of severance in the social body and the psyche, which can mutate into various registers of silence as unexplored grief if not addressed.

State-sponsored violence in the form of punitive laws frames our own context of mourning as same-gender-loving Africans. What will be said after the murders, or the genocides that festered until they were no longer impossible? Milosz refers to witness poetry as 'the passionate pursuit of the real'. This is the phenomena, the happenings to which the poet as witness turns her gaze, the pulsing, beating, and the bloody stuff of the world of which she is called to testify. Men who love men are languishing in jail cells in Cameroon and have been executed in Syria, buried with shame and stigma. Where is the voice of God? Is God silent in the face of genocide and murderous hate? '*The silence of God is God*',⁸ said Elie Wiesel in the poem 'Ani Maamin'. A theology of silence is resonant with the ethos of poetry, with its attention to language and naming. But language cannot feast only on itself when all about it lies the ruins of what it has named as beautiful and good.

4 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36.

5 W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 189, Lines 36 and 41.

6 See Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1983); Carolyn Forche, *The Angel of History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); Carolyn Forche, *The Country Between Us* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1981)

7 Carolyn Forche, Ed, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 45.

8 Elie Wiesel, "Ani Maamin", quoted in *The Angel of History*, Carolyn Forche (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 5.

There is a tension within silence—or what I prefer to call the secret (*the silence of God*)—which becomes poetry: it is darkness and light, a form of concealment and revelation, the fount of our fears but also a source of liberatory power. I want to examine how poetry that issues from this silence can be a kind of truth seeking or truth telling. How can it help us navigate the tensions within secrecy when it is tied up with power and social marginalisation and violence? This is the ground on which I would like to build a poetic praxis as a queer African woman of faith—the ground of poetry as witness.

I begin with a story of secrecy and violence.

Death

On the morning of September 29, 2004, Fanny Ann Eddy, a lesbian human rights activist from Sierra Leone, was found brutally murdered in the Freetown offices of her organisation, the Sierra Leone Lesbian and Gay Association (SLLGA). The early reports of the killing were gruesome and disturbing. She had been raped and her neck broken, lending substance to the suspicion that it was a hate crime, committed because she was an out, vocal lesbian activist. It was, and seemed intended to be, a violent and punishing statement to anyone who would dare to not only be publicly visible but would dare to do the arduous work of social transformation on the basis of sexual identity.

It has been impossible to determine why Eddy was murdered. Three months after her death, the police announced the arrest of a suspect, a former employee who had been dismissed by Eddy three weeks before she was attacked. He was charged with her murder and the crime was recast—not as a hate crime, but as a private act of revenge in response to being terminated. In July of 2005, seven months later, the perpetrator, a 19-year-old Mr. Sankoh, reportedly escaped from prison. Without a trial and a proper account of the motives, Eddy's murder remains unsolved. But the irresolution is perhaps more problematic. What would it mean to have justice? Impunity, the absence of reckoning, of accountability and responsibility is more than a legal issue, and frames my privileging of the power of the witness—as poets, as liberation theologians, as artists and as cultural warriors who wield language against power.

A look at the history of violence in Sierra Leone—whether intimate or political, whether of the type that subjugates women or represses the voice of the poor or that of the politically powerful—demonstrates how all citizens do not enjoy equal justice before the law, particularly in relation to what is currently referred to as gender based violence. For example, when women and children are raped, traditional notions of justice (and they still pertain today) prescribe the levy of fines, or, even more egregiously, the marriage of the woman or child to her

perpetrator. These practices have bred a culture of tolerance and impunity. It is easy to get away with rape and even more violent crimes against women and children. Granted, Sierra Leone has passed a series of laws since 2007 to protect women and children's rights. The Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage Act, the Devolution of Estates Act, and the Child Rights Act have all been adopted to observe ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women. Yet, a cursory look at the current state of affairs in the courts or a visit to the police stations will paint a troubling picture. Victims are still subjected to the practice of negotiation and financial compensation.⁹

It raises several questions, some of which I will now address below.

Justice and Truth

Impunity points to a lacuna in the account of Eddy's murder. It is an empty space that is particularly gendered. In the same months in which Eddy was killed, there were reports of several unresolved killings of women in Freetown.¹⁰ Was Eddy murdered because of her sexuality or as a vengeful act by a disgruntled former employee? The lack of truth or accountability is a silence that is no more disturbing than the yawning abyss of death. It suggests a provocative question I do not necessarily pursue an answer to: is impunity a facet of the workings of secrecy and can the work of social justice force it to give up its secrets? The question of impunity, with its allusions to theodicy, is for another context. Rather, my main interest is in the intervention into secrecy of poetic witness or truth telling.

Eddy was a vocal and fearless advocate for a marginalised group of Sierra Leoneans who were vulnerable to social and familial ostracism and to verbal attacks in the media and denunciation in places of worship. She was a fearless advocate for those living in fear and shame. But she had been warned, her former colleagues suggest, by enemies who were opposed to LGBTI organising in Sierra Leone. What, then, is the truth of her death? I want to represent Eddy as a figure of the activist as poet and explore a potential theology of redemption pertinent to justice for sexual minorities in the African present, on and off the continent.

In a study of mourning plays from the early modern period of German history, the late German philosopher Walter Benjamin began his text with a treatise on

9 The Truth and Reconciliation report compiled after Sierra Leone's ten-year war identified impunity as endemic in the political and judicial culture prior to the war and a seminal cause of the civil war. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Sierra Leone, *Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Accra: GPL Press, 2004).

10 Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Sierra Leone, E/CN.4/2005/113, 2 February, 2005, Web. <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/sessions/61/lisdocs.htm>>. Accessed February 11th, 2015.

truth in which he differentiated between truth as knowledge and truth as revelation. The former being truth that is arrived at through the pursuit of knowledge, and the latter the truth of the symbol which reveals its illumination suddenly—as a blinding flash of light. Knowledge may be said to be proper to those disciplines in which concepts are important to what is to be known and are derived from empirical research proper to the sciences. The truth of the symbol on the other hand is the terrain of unmediated ideas, where revelation is truth as beauty and as representation. In an enigmatic and poetic phrase that captures this second version of truth, Benjamin says, ‘the truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret but a revelation which does justice to it’.¹¹

This is the kind of truth that I believe poetry offers: revelatory truth, which, as Lorde writes, is both dream and representation, concrete and opaque, the language of new names and new forms of thought. It is a truth that pursues justice as the truth in and of experience. This is not truth that is useful so much as it is illuminative: it is unmediated knowledge. It makes space for the divine to reveal itself.

Yet poetry eschews a notion of revelation as the inner, transcendent essence of things. There is a heterogeneity to poetry, a recognition and celebration of the myriad and eternal possibilities of difference, of the many names that are not yet named. This is poetry’s power of redress, not only in the work of the imagination through which we can give shape to new worlds but in the ethos of the poet who stands with the world as it appears, ready to bear witness to all nature and to all experience, whether it is broken or frayed, fragmented or strange.

The heterogeneity of the poet’s encounter with the world touches on the concept of justice relevant to my exploration into the poetics of witness. The pursuit of truth happens in a web of relationality, as an ontological encounter. ‘Truth is a matter of doing justice to things as they appear in the context of their appearing’.¹² This ethical, as opposed to legal, dimension of justice makes space for the truth of things and ‘allows things to show themselves for what they are’.¹³ The truth of my queerness as an African woman does not inhere in a judgement of permissibility or not according to social or judicial ruling, but in an encounter between myself and others who in pursuing the truth of my being are compelled, convinced of my being the truth of myself. Such a phenomenological account of truth as justice can inform queer organising, particularly if local and indigenous concepts that are analogical can be brought to bear. It is what I attempt to do with the Yoruba concept of beauty, *l’iwa l’ewa*, which can be translated to mean ‘truth is beauty’.¹⁴

11 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 2009), 31.

12 Christopher P. Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38.

13 Long, *Aristotle*, 39.

14 John Henry Drewal, John Pemberton, Rowland Abiodun, and Allen Wardwell, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art in association with H.N. Abrams, 1989), 42.

Aesthetic value or beauty is the currency of the poet. She is insecure in the call for empirical accuracy as truth. Her offerings would hover on the brink of uselessness were it not for the power of the performative. She does things with words, calls the world into being against the chaos of inchoate experience. And so it is for the Yoruba. Beauty itself is performative: the dance being danced to its fullness is beauty.¹⁵ Beauty is the potential of each phenomenon fulfilling its nature—the dance dancing, the song singing, love loving in its fullness. This happens in diachronic time, in the space of worldly experience. Can this concept of truth as beauty inform our practices as co-creators, cultural workers, and political activists? Each phenomenon in nature fulfilling itself is also the work of naming, of giving new names to new things; an activity made possible by clearing a space for all that is appearing.

The truth of beauty cannot be exposed, it can only be met. The other form of truth as knowledge, in the drive to expose, may only serve to obfuscate the unknown by deceiving us with its apparent transparency. For did not the parading of a suspect and a neat story of revenge give pause to the outrage of the LGBTI community after Eddy was killed? If Eddy's murder was not a hate crime, it became possible to believe again that conditions were safe for an open and vocal movement for LGBTI equality. There is no more potent political liability than a martyr.

The Witness

But is martyrdom an acceptable name for a death? The name of martyr should be an uneasy name for the living to hear. I cannot and do not make a case for Eddy as a martyr to the cause of LGBTI equality. The Greek word for martyr, *martis*, means witness; in dying, the martyr bears witness to the faith or cause for which he or she is persecuted.¹⁶ This meaning of witness contains a moral ambiguity at its core. As Agamben notes, the notion of martyrdom suggests irrationality or meaninglessness, for it is a death perpetrated by those who cannot understand the cause or the faith of those executed. There is a dissonance or fissure in the encounter with the martyr that abjures meaningful exchange. The language of the martyr does not resonate, is not part of the lexicon, nor can it be sustained by the system of signification. In fact, there is a refusal to broaden the lexicon, to make space for 'new names and new forms of thought'. It is a social space in which poetry does not survive. It is this refusal that makes possible the condemnation of those who die for their cause.

¹⁵ Drewal et al., *Yoruba*, 42.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1999), 26.

Yet I hesitate. I do not wish to ascribe martyrdom to Eddy or others who have fallen to hate crimes against sexual minorities because there is a danger in the romanticisation of martyrdom—the glorification of death. Eddy’s example and the substance of her testimony is rather a tenacious claim to life: to the right to be alive in her lesbian body despite the threat of death.

Many African sexual minorities live in countries in which they can be killed, arbitrarily, by mobs with or without trial or charge simply for their name: ‘queer’ or ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’. They have been judged by legal codes or by social cultural codes with the force of law. They live under the cloud of condemnation. But we cannot look to the law to establish the truth, nor can it guarantee justice. In the case of Eddy’s murder, the arrest of the perpetrator confirmed that the law had been broken and his punishment would have seen him prosecuted according to the law. But as ‘law is solely directed towards judgement, independent of justice and truth’,¹⁷ the rendering of judgement without a recognition of Eddy’s fundamental right to be fully who she is, to live without fear as an African lesbian with the full rights of citizenship, would reiterate the prohibition of murder but not ensure justice. For justice belongs properly to ethical life. In regards to the nature of law as judgement, but not justice, we need only point to the judgement of sexual minorities in the seventy-eight countries in the world in which homosexuality remains a crime.

Despite the ambiguity around Eddy’s death, the reactions to her murder by the international community and African activists were those of profound grief and outrage. She had a significant impact on all who knew her. Her fearlessness and clarity of purpose was a beacon in a bleak landscape for LGBTI advocacy. To honour her, IRN-Africa (International Resource Network) established The Fanny Ann Eddy Poetry Award in her name. Another notable commentary on her international impact was an academic paper on her vocal activism as *parrhesia* or fearless speech.¹⁸ ‘Fearless speech’ was her character and the character of her witness. As Foucault says: ‘*Parrhesia*, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger. But the *parrhesiastes* primarily chooses a specific relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the “game” of life or death.’¹⁹ The version of truth Foucault refers to here is not evidentiary truth, or what I referred to earlier as knowledge or empirical truth, nor is it the poetic form of truth, but rather truth as belief or opinion. The truth-teller risks their life for their beliefs because

17 Agamben, *Remnants*, 26.

18 See for example, S.J. Murray, “The Body of Free Speech: Risk and the Rhetorical Practice of Parrhesia”, *Subject Matters: A Journal of Communications and the Self*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2006), 59-72, Web. <http://modernrhetoric.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/free_speech.pdf>. Accessed 17 April 2015.

19 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 16.

they are the ultimate authority on their experience of the truth. But in order to be so convinced, I would add, this truth-teller must have passed through the truth, or the truth must have passed through them. To have come through 'the game of life and death' experience of truth telling is to be a survivor who is able to be a witness with their body and speech.²⁰ It is not to court death, which is a perverse notion, but to insist on life, even in the face of its loss. Up until her death, Eddy was a testament of courage and a witness for other same-gender-loving Africans in numerous contexts. I will highlight her last international appearance when she testified before the 60th Session of the UNHCR (United Nations Commission on Human Rights) in Geneva in April, 2004. Her testimony was not solely that of an advocate or third party, but of one who, up to that moment, had survived the dangers of which she spoke.

Testimony

*My name is Fanny Ann Eddy.
I want to tell you about the dangers we face.
Many African leaders
do not want to acknowledge we exist.
But we do exist in constant fear
of the police,
that our families will disown us,
of violence from our neighbors.
Our leaders use culture, tradition, religion
Those weapons of spectacle
to deny our existence. denial is disastrous.*

*A young gay man was arrested for being dressed
as a woman detained
for being dressed*

*I bring to you a plea.
Speak.
Your silence is a craft
It creates vulnerable*

bodies, made to be broken
for the spectacle
of culture, tradition, religion

20 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 17.

for the spilling of blood ripened for spectacular sacrifice
break the silence. Say
*we exist.*²¹

In this direct transposition of Eddy's address into lines that I have formatted and arranged for emphasis, I have tried to highlight in her speech the enforced silence, the non-recognition, the experience of effacement and violence from which she spoke as a witness. Though Eddy was addressing the Commission, she was not supposed to exist as an African. 'African leaders do not acknowledge that we exist', she said. As an unimaginable person, an impossibility, her testimony at the UN was already marked by a silence. She spoke out of that silence. In standing before the UN delegates her language was already suffused with the illumination of poetry as witness, 'as a way of happening', not as song, surely, but as an intervention into political and social violence. Then, as now, she speaks from the vast silence beyond death as a witness for those who mourn her and who must continue the work she began and continues to do from the grave through the testimony of her courage. What remains of that testimony is her tongue, her primal tongue that says 'I am'.

Silence shades into secrecy in spaces where same-gender-loving Africans do not officially exist. We know that after Eddy's death, LGBTI work in Sierra Leone continues, but it is clear that the conditions are fraught with equivocation. Activists now work quietly and with great caution, careful not to make demands of the government that would jeopardise their safety. Yet there are faint glimmers of hope in a larger sea of resistance from the human rights community working in Sierra Leone. In the midst of the debate and passage of the Anti-same-gender-loving Nigerian bill, the president of Sierra Leone again equivocated, not calling for the repeal of the law, but urging consultation and conversation. Sierra Leone has an anomalous legal situation in that sex between women is not considered illegal, nor is it culturally taboo. It is considered a childhood practice and women are expected to grow out of the practice and marry.

On the other hand, activists who work on the frontlines are wise in their caution. Several African activists have been murdered since Eddy's death: David Kato in Uganda and Eric Ohena Lembembe in Cameroon. Lesbians have especially been targeted in South Africa. We remember Eudy Semelane, raped and brutally killed in Soweto, who is one name among many others.

21 For a transcript of the full testimony please see: Fanny Ann Eddy, "Testimony by Fanny Ann Eddy at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, October 4, 2004", <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2004/10/05/sierra-leone-lesbian-rights-activist-brutally-murdered>>. 10 January 2015.

The Public Secret

I want to suggest that what makes impunity possible is a facet of social life that the anthropologist Michael Taussig has referred to as the 'public secret'. Taussig, whose work engages with the violence of the state and the sacred in modernity, defines the public secret as 'knowing what not to know'. It is, he says, a form of 'socially active knowledge; the shared secrets [that are] the basis of our social institutions, the workplace, the market, the family, and the state'.²² The public secret is one of the structures of knowledge that sustains social life.²³

As a facet of social life, the public secret is not so much the content of knowledge as the play between what is said and not said, what appears normative but retains pliability at the level of speech or representation. It is the fiction by which the normative and what threatens it are held in balance.

This, I would claim, is the social context of homosexuality in most communities and societies in which it remains a cultural taboo. It is when, for example, as in some African communities, married men and women conduct clandestine affairs with same-sex partners who know each other, yet present a public front of homophobia for political expediency.

The face of homosexuality as secrecy is also what an older generation of sexual minorities in the US can attest to: the guarded glances between men and women who had to speak a silent dialect in public where recognition and misrecognition was fraught with danger. Homophobia, especially as it is sustained by denial and evasion, is about speech as elision.

As Taussig writes, the public secret is 'that which is generally known but cannot be articulated'.²⁴ It is what cannot be said because in exposure what is defaced is not the content of the secret so much as the taboo against speaking. It is a risk that the *parrhesiastes* takes. The *parrhesiastes* breaks the taboo, not of desire, which is held like an eddy, a floating boat in movement, alive yet ambiguous in the dark. The taboo is the act of speaking, of making real what must remain hidden.

This tacit prohibition on speech that lies at the heart of social life and its institutions maintains a wide range of relationships between the powerful and the powerless, and also within the family and other social contexts. Each citizen must actively submit to this dynamic in everyday relations since attempts to opt out may court various levels of danger, from softer forms of sanction like ostracism or coercive interventions like medical therapies and religious exorcisms to outright violence. Knowing what not to know, and not saying what not to say protect social taboos from defacement. It is a public performance. And this very public and very

22 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.

23 Taussig, *Defacement*, 4.

24 Taussig, *Defacement*, 5.

social performance is undergirded by what has been theorised as the sacred, which is social life itself and what ensures its perpetuity through ritual and belief. Secrecy is an important trope for recent treatments of the politics and rhetorics of sexuality in Africa.²⁵ While these approaches have focused on the historical, cultural and health implications of secrecy and sexuality, I want to suggest that the poetics of secrecy and its strategies of concealment and revelation can offer a locus for queer Africans to challenge the optics and rhetorics of power and patriarchy. For as much as public secrecy can offer a cover of safety for taboo practices, as we will see below in Epprecht's reference to *ubuntu*, it is also the face of impunity. It sustains an opacity within which the powerless—women, the poor, children, sexual minorities—are disposable. This calls for a different structure of secrecy and truth, one in which the hiddenness of things does not subsist on the backs of the marginalised or stand for a lack of transparency by which the efforts made towards social change disappear into the unreflective pool of a putative tradition.

Secrecy and the African Sacred

The concept of the public secret echoes that of *ubuntu*, a term currently playing a promising role in African discourses of sexuality and social justice. Epprecht's highly readable and helpful text *Sexuality and Social Justice* suggests using a new framework for the struggle for sexual equality in Africa. But I would like to query the promise he suggests it offers. The major faith traditions in Africa, he argues, whether African traditional religion, Christianity or Islam can offer some resources in a reframing of the struggle as a quest for erotic justice. He delineates practices that helped to protect sexual minorities in traditional settings, practices that functioned as 'strategic silences' or 'don't ask, don't tell' approaches to non-heterosexual sexualities. These strategic silences are variations of what Epprecht calls the philosophy of *ubuntu*—the principle of social wellbeing within which non-conformist behaviour, whether sexual or psychic, can become 'a manifestation of the will of the community across the lines of the living and the dead [with] sophisticated ways to ensure that everyone understood this, not least of all, strategic silence'.²⁶

Ubuntu as an African theory of social life can also be read into in Durkheim's theory of the sacred according to which religion and the realm of the sacred are

25 Graeme Reid & Liz Walker (2005) "Sex and secrecy: A focus on African sexualities", *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, 7:3, 185-94. The 4th conference of the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society was held in Johannesburg, 22-25 June, 2003 under the title *Sex and Secrecy*. Some of the papers from that conference are collected in Volume 7, issue 3 of the journal *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. See also Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking homophobia and Forging Resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

26 Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, 77.

‘social affairs and the product of collective thought’, the first and final aim of which is social cohesion or social solidarity.²⁷ In Durkheim’s schema, social cohesion is primary and social difference secondary. The social sacred, in its emphasis on social cohesion, echoes Epprecht’s use of the concept of *ubuntu* and my own use of the term ‘the public secret’. *Ubuntu*, as a theory of the African sacred in Epprecht’s sense, equates individual and social well being by subsuming the non-normative into functional social institutions that can withstand difference from the avowed norm, either through absorption or through silence.

It is notable that *ubuntu* was first articulated as a conceptual resource for Africa’s modernity and development in the early post-colonial period of African self-definition, as a social philosophy relevant for a communitarian political economy and popularised by Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, as ‘I am because we are’. It continues to inspire various social justice movements and was seminal to the declaration produced at the KwaZulu-Natal African Scholars’ Consultation on Human Sexuality and Religion where it was rendered as ‘Because you are, therefore I am’ which I read as an inversion of the earlier form of the phrase in its repositioning of the relationship between the individual and the social sacred. Here, the wellbeing of the individual within the social becomes primary to the survival of the social as social.

If *ubuntu* provides us with an African reason that has social and philosophical resonance for inscribing sexual minorities in Africa’s history, we still come up short. The public secret maintains a certain social equilibrium through the strategic silences and rhetorics of power—knowing what not to know, or not saying what not to say. However, we are still left with the question of truth and justice. *Ubuntu* and the safety of the public secret keep us in an atavistic limbo, caught between the politics of secrecy and the ethics of truth in a global context in which gay marriage is legal and queer characters are protagonists in films and theatre and can run for political office. In the midst of these metropolitan triumphs and celebrations, our murdered activists—Eddy, Kato, Lemembe, others we did not hear of—who lost their lives in the practice of truth-telling, of *parrhesia*, were resisting a tradition of secrecy and silence, one no longer sustainable in their effort to live the truth they knew to be the truth. How do we then mourn the deaths of these *parrhesiastes*?

In Search of a Language of Mourning

The arts of mourning we avail ourselves to must be sensitive to the ethic of justice. An unjust death is doubly so without the work of redress. While the primary arts of mourning available to me are the elegy in written poetry and the masquerade

27 Emile Durkheim, *On Morality and Society, Selected Writings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 125.

within the performance traditions of West Africa, I am sensitive to the social costs of secrecy in the use of an art form or tradition. A poetic practice of social justice would begin here, with a critique of the social structures of secrecy that take root in us, as our religious beliefs, our social identities, our sacred duties to family and country. In this space of the imbrication of epistemology and ontology, that is, how the truths we know as truths and by which we live define who, and what we say we are, our identities and identifications, can be submitted to the light of self-scrutiny—both as a society and as individuals.

This was the task I set myself to consider in the poem ‘for Iris’ (below). It is a rewriting of the *egungun*²⁸ masquerade as a performance of loss. The memory of the dead (as mask) ensures the survival of the ties that bind the whole community: the living, the unborn and the dead. The masquerade is a time of gathering, of dance, of music and interaction with the dead who return in the figure of the masked dancer. When the masquerade proceeds down the streets of the city of Freetown, the cosmology of the mask is dramatised as the permeability of this world by the spirits of the ancestors who saturate nature and our everyday encounters with their presence. They return through the mask to reassure us that they remain, undoing the severance of death. Senegalese poet Birago Diop’s classic poem, ‘Breaths’ is a classic representation of this trope:

Listen more often to things rather than beings.
Hear the fire’s voice,
Hear the voice of water.
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees,
It is our forefathers breathing.

The dead are not gone forever.
They are in the paling shadows,
And in the darkening shadows.
The dead are not beneath the ground,
They are in the rustling tree,
In the murmuring wood,
In the flowing water,
In the still water,
In the lonely place, in the crowd:
The dead are not dead.²⁹

28 The *egungun* mask is the mask of the dead. It is a Yoruba-derived cult brought to Freetown by the repatriated slaves resettled in Freetown by the British in the nineteenth century, during the height of the slave trade.

29 Birago Diop, ‘Breaths.’ <http://www.quaker.org/poplar/messages/20150301_Forefathers.pdf>. Accessed 2, May 2016.

My on poem, 'for Iris' does not celebrate the rebirth of the dead but mourns the loss of the mask itself.

For Iris

if you had known beauty
 as a return of the dead in rich satin
 bright silks / brocaded quilts on a frame
 a pageant of the unborn
 who leave the fourth state of the in-between
 to return as a wisp of / air / as a guttural cry
 saying *listen in your sleep for the song of respite*
 if without hesitation you had approached
 the third stage in the open lot where / beauty
 as the one you lost
 arrives / in trilby hats stacked / in twos & threes
 shawls on broad shoulders
 to pacify / the woman written in the fear of your dark
 then out of a gravid daybreak you might
 come to meet me in the clearing
 on a Monday after Easter / fierce
 as the heat of a knife after creation.
 You might come in the terrible wonder
 of an invisible / face covered in strips
 of Malaysian cloth / quills of a porcupine
 the sting of a poultice under the mask
 but you did not know what it was to dance
 to carry the house of the dead like a tortoise shell on your back
 down the roads of Romarong
 such beauty was lost to you and so to me
 here in the blue green grass where I learned
 of your death and kept silent wake
 for twenty years / entered the muted watch of the guard &
 waited for a lucent wall
 to mourn.

The loss mourned here is both a persistent presence of the dead for whom the mourner keeps watch and an absence of the mask that is meant to console as the beautiful dead. Yet it also suggests that the poem's materiality can replace the mask, but without the secrecy it demands—mourning becomes the practice of writing grief into language. But there is no consolation for the mourner.

In my first encounter with poetry as a vocation, I had sought an organic poetic practice in the mythological traditions of the Krio of Sierra Leone and their contemporary interpretations in the masquerade in Freetown. I was inspired by Wole Soyinka who developed a modernist poetic inflected with high European modernist literature and Yoruba mythology and performance. But I do not have a comparable indigenous tradition. What might be called traditional in the cultural history of my city Freetown is already hybrid, without the deep pockets of an oral and ritual past. It is English and African, commercial and sacred, suffused with allegory and Christian identification.

But what I lost in the depth of a tradition I found in the poetics of the montage—whether in my sexual identity, my geographical provenance or my ancestral lineage. The mask proved to be a source of attraction and alienation. It came to be merely an idiom of secrecy, a language without transformative power.

In ‘for Iris’, I insist that the mask is lost to those of us who want to reverse what it attenuates as a patriarchal object—male domination and secrecy that excludes women and non-conforming genders. To know its myths, I would be required to join a sacred/secret society in whose sacred grove the mask is constructed. But these sacred cults are a means for men who become members to acquire social capital and a male-dominated reserve of secret knowledge.

Sacred/secret societies function like social clubs, especially in Freetown, though they were once akin to governments of small acephalous communities. In many rural areas of Sierra Leone, initiation societies remain very powerful and are in fact the de facto government in small villages. The masks of these associations represent ancestral claims to land and lineage, embodying powerful symbolic representations of moral and philosophical knowledge.

One of the most powerful functions of the masks of initiation societies is the mediation of the social construction of gender. Boys and girls become men and women in the sacred bush, watched over by the spirit of the mask. The ritual is a re-inscription of sex as gender through the physical transformation of cutting and moral education. These initiation ceremonies are not practiced in my community or by my ethnic group, yet they are powerful forces which inform the national body politic, assigning value to hetero-normative notions of adulthood and citizenship. Though they comprise our classical tradition and embody the history and norms of excellence, they must be open to critical thought and philosophical scrutiny. The implications for non-conforming and non-heterosexual identities becoming more normalised appear daunting in the face of this tradition. Yet it is clear from the small communities of LGBTI and queer youth in the city that the means and ways of reinforcing gender roles and identities are not altogether impervious to what exceeds cultural prescription.

The Poetics of Elegiac Redemption

What are the possibilities for praxis given our present losses as same-gender-loving people of Africa and its diaspora? How do we face the death of activists in Uganda and Cameroon and of the continued corrective rape and murder of lesbians in South Africa, killed because they dared to walk the streets emboldened by love or constitutional citizenship? We can begin with the names of the still-warm bodies of the dead:

Maleshwane Emely Radebe, South Africa
 Eudy Simelane, South Africa
 Roger Jean-Claude Mbede, Cameroon
 Eric Ohena Lemembe, Cameroon
 David Kato, Uganda
 Unnamed Victim, Kenya
 Fanny Anne Eddy, Sierra Leone

They died because their very presence challenged prevailing orthodoxies about sexuality and religious/cultural fundamentalisms. But the redemptive potential in their death is in the politics that inform our mourning, whether that death is the social death of criminalisation and scapegoating or of mob violence and religious homophobia. This is not to romanticise death or search for easy consolation, but also not to descend into depression or fear. It is to see the work of mourning as the call to resist the lure of melancholy or *acedia*, that ‘indolence of the heart which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image’.³⁰ This will be our poetics, the creation of images that acknowledge the indivisibility of the deaths of sexual minorities and victims of political or religious violence, from Senegal to South Africa. Like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, who sees all the ‘wreckage’ of history as one single catastrophe and would like to ‘make whole what has been smashed’,³¹ our politics of mourning will ‘dive into the wreck’³² with our wings propelled into the future by the winds of change and visions of full liberation.³³

Redemption

It is a vision informed by a messianic theology that draws on the concept of messianic time as an age of liberation from political disenfranchisement, from the evisceration of economic poverty and the oppressive powers of cultural and

30 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 256.

31 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

32 Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”, reprinted in Strand, *The Making of a Poem*, 276.

33 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

religious taboos. Messianic redemption is both a vision of the kingdom of God that is already here within all of creation (Luke 17:21), and the age of divine justice that only comes when the messiah returns. It is the time of full liberation, of social and political equality.

Messianic theology promises an interruption into history's false narratives of progress, which are 'documents of barbarity' built on global capitalism's reach. In African capitals and churches, global capitalism takes the form of the free gospel of prosperity theology imported by the religious right from the United States over the past fifty years and which has overwhelmed the progressive and tolerant Christian theological traditions in African churches. Prosperity theologies have colonised not only the churches but also public spaces that are dominated by advertisements and images of conservative preachers who peddle redemption as prosperity and demonology as sociology. In this context, queer Africans are demonised and, as Eddy lamented, ostracised and condemned.

Public discourses framed by the demonisation of same-gender-loving Africans depend on the public secret, on the silences that undergird cultures of impunity. Our queer politics of mourning as I envision it will foster public life and public spaces in which secrecy is not a repressive imperative of social life, but a facet of the Great Mystery, of God, in which we all move and have our being. The Great Mystery is the vast silence from which the created world and the word of creation appeared (Genesis 1). It suggests an ecological ethos attuned to nature and the sacredness of all creation. Every being, including homosexuals and transsexuals, heterosexuals and bisexuals are created equally in the image of God. And it is this fundamental nature which all beings share and to which we are reconciled in the Christian call to social justice and mercy.³⁴

If in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, male or female (Gal. 3:28), difference then is at once a mark of otherness and the negation, not of difference, but of the binaries imposed by culture and language. The messiah calls for the overcoming of social alienation and contentious wrangling for domination based on difference—whether between races and sexualities or *homo sapiens* and the natural world of which they are a part. The Judeo-Christian tradition recognises this state of reconciliation of humans to nature and to God as the state of redemption or the kingdom of heaven and it is at once already here and yet to come (Matthew 5:3).

Redemption therefore is this-worldly and performative. Those who are outside the normative binaries of sexuality in which difference is contentious and threatening are already redeemed from a fallen world where cultural and religious taboos—the contents of the social sacred—have been raised up as natural to usurp

34 There is an urgent need to incorporate the natural and behavioural sciences in the work of LGBTI advocacy in the African context. Our discourses must be interdisciplinary, aware of the educational impoverishment perpetuated by conservative readings of scripture exported by the religious right.

the divine beauty of all creation. The messiah redeems all from these cultural forms that have become petrified with rigidity.

Public Space and the Performative

When the poet gives voice to experience they name the world with language and affirm the heterogeneity that is nature. They become a co-creator in the building of the kingdom of heaven. And this is the work of all the creative arts where the voices of those who are maligned and the bodies of the those consigned to invisibility through social or cultural death speak through photography and storytelling and dance as public discourse in civic space. The concept of *l'iwa l'ewa*—truth as beauty—affirms the justice that inheres the affirming of difference as performance and visibility. Secrecy may mean the Great Mystery out of which we speak or write or create images, but it cannot be the superstructure of our social identities. The gay or lesbian or transgender individual's truth must be liberated into the contours of public life.

Adrienne Rich's exhortation to create an art that resists the fragmentation of hate and oppression can resist the easy compulsion to end our mourning prematurely. The contexts in which we have legal recognition are the same ones in which we can still be disappeared—with brutality and hate. So like the angel of history, we keep our faces turned towards the dead, attuned to the powerful forces of death and destruction, powers that would deal violence to maintain the status quo. *We will say the names of the dead, tell their stories in the public square, testify as survivors and stand with those who have been condemned to social death. We will acknowledge that the secrecy that protects us can someday be the face of the impunity that murders us. And we will find the language that does not merely seek to expose the secret but to do justice with the truth.*

If you ask them anything they go on telling you the same thing forever./ Not what happened, but what may happen./ Death understood as death./ *The world in its worlding.*/ Our hope put into questions./ Figures dead and alive/ whispering not the truth but a need for truth when one word is many things.³⁵

35 Carolyn Forché, "The Notebook of Uprising", XXVII, in *The Angel of History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 51, lines 1-7.