Edited by
Mojisola Adebayo
Lynette Goddard

BLACK BRITISH QUEER PLAYS AND PRACTITIONERS
An Anthology of Afriquia Theatre

Basin  Jacqueline Rudet
Boy with Beer  Paul Boakye
Sin Dykes  Valerie Mason-John
Bashment  Rikki Beadle-Blair
Nine Lives  Zodwa Nyoni
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We dedicate this anthology to the memory of bell hooks (1952–2021), radical Black feminist scholar and activist who compelled us to ‘challenge [the] imperialist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchy’ and taught us the value of Black love.
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Introduction and Survey of Afriquia Plays

Introduction

*Black British Queer Plays and Practitioners: An Anthology of Afriquia Theatre* celebrates the bold contribution of Black LGBTIQ+ voices to British theatre from 1985 to the present day. We are writing in an incredibly exciting time, with the uplifting presence of Black queer performers, writers and theatre makers, from main stages to fringe venues. This anthology demonstrates our rich past and points to a future where the intersectional experiences of Blackness and queerness are no longer ignored or sidelined.

Afriquia is a new word that goes some way to expressing the oneness of being both Black and queer and the inherent Africanness of queerness or, rather, quia’ness. As queer African theorist Stella Nyanzi argues, ‘Thinking beyond the loaded and westernized frame of the LGBTI acronym, queer Africa must necessarily explore and articulate local nuances of being non-heteronormative and non-gender conforming.’

There are many historic, culturally specific, words for people who enjoy same-sex relationships, or who are not constrained within a gender binary, such as *adofuro* (Yoruba), *moffie* (South Africa), *zami* (Caribbean), *kuchu* (Swahili), *choza* (Shona) and *quaniis* (Somalia). These words demonstrate that queer sexualities existed before the European colonial sphere of influence, before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, thereby countering the pervasive and problematic myth that it is somehow not Black to be queer. Afriquia is a term that includes people from across the diaspora and the continent of Africa, beyond cultural specificity. Afriquia therefore reflects the breadth of experiences and identities represented by this book and we use the term Afriquia and Black queer interchangeably throughout.

Interwoven before, between and after the eight plays in this anthology are excerpts from an intergenerational roundtable discussion between just a few of the many Black queer theatre and performance practitioners who have made work in Britain since the 1980s, along with additional materials. Britain is just one small island in the Atlantic, but due to its long history as a colonizing and enslaving nation, together with the afterlives of mass-migration and globalization, the British (or Brit-ish) artists discussed in this book have roots that stretch to Barbados, Canada, Denmark, Dominica, Ghana, Jamaica, Nigeria, Panama, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Trinidad, the USA, Zimbabwe and beyond.

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1 We use the term Black to describe being a person of African descent, from the African diaspora or the African continent, including people of mixed-heritage. LGBTIQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, plus a plethora of other terms including non-binary, androgynous, gender non-conforming, asexual, Afro-queer, Afriquia and so on. We sometimes use the term queer to summarize the collective LGBTIQ+ acronym and we acknowledge there are many more words to describe queerness, as we shall discuss. The I is placed before the Q in response to intersex activist Valentino Vecchietti’s call for intersex identity to be more visible, and because it is too easy for the I to drop off the end of the acronym and be ignored.

2 A suggested pronunciation is with a West African inflection, enjoying an open ‘a’ sound.


There is a wealth of Black queer work to enjoy beyond this book that could not all be re-published here but that we do want to highlight. Therefore, Part One of this introduction is a short essay that presents an overview of Afriquia theatre through a survey of an inspirational archive of twenty-four plays that were produced and published in Britain since 1985. We briefly sketch each of the plays in this Afriquia archive, including the eight plays in this anthology. In Part Two we discuss the eight plays more closely and draw attention to significant recurring themes.

Part One

Histories, herstories, theirstories: A survey of Afriquia theatre in Britain

Although there has been a proliferation of Black queer theatre in Britain since the 1980s, the scarcity of critical material available to date indicates how much has been overlooked. The late African theatre scholar Victor Ukaegbu attempted to sketch a brief overview but stated: ‘black queer theatre is yet to define itself through its own materials.’ This introduction shines a spotlight on a wealth of stage plays, written by Black playwrights and first produced and published in Britain, which foreground Black queer lives and relationships expressed in a variety of dramatic forms.

Although this survey focuses on published play texts, it is also important to highlight some of the ephemeral work of Black queer artists who have made significant contributions to the performance scene. Notable unpublished plays include: Crystal Clear by John-Lloyd Stevenson (Ovalhouse, 1994), Wicked Games by Paul Boakye (West Yorkshire Playhouse, 1997), Valerie Mason-John’s pantomime The Adventures of Snow Black and Rose Red (Drill Hall, 2001), Jackie Kay’s Trumpet (Drill Hall, 2001), and The Adventures of Snow Black and Rose Red (Drill Hall, 2001).

Notable exceptions include Lynette Goddard’s Staging Black Feminisms (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2007, which charted the rise of Black lesbian theatre in Britain. For further research and inspiration visit the Rukus! Federation archive at London Metropolitan Archives, founded by Topher Campbell and Ajamu X. For more writing by Black British LGBTIQ+ authors see Black and Gay in the UK: An Anthology edited by John R. Gordon and Rikki Beadle-Blair (London: Team Angelica, 2014) and Sista! An Anthology of Writing by and about Same Gender Loving Women of African/Caribbean descent with a UK Connection (2018) edited by Phyll Opoku-Gyimah, Rikki Beadle-Blair and John R. Gordon (London: Team Angelica, 2018).


This survey does not feature plays by Black LGBTIQ+ identified playwrights where Black queer experience is in the background or on the sidelines of the story, or where the characters or content is not identifiable Black. Such plays include Kofi Agyemang and Patricia Elcock’s Urban Afro Saxons (2003), Rikki Beadle-Blair’s Gutted (2014), Tristan Fynn-Aiduenu’s Sweet Like Chocolate Boy (2017) and Travis Alabanza’s Overflow (2020). White British writers’ portrayals of Black queer experience are not included either, notably: Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill (1979), This Island’s Mine by Phillip Osment (1988), Beautiful Thing by Jonathan Harvey (1993), Perseverance Drive by Robin Soans (2014), Hopelessly Devoted by Kate Tempest (2014) (now Kae Tempest). There has also been some Black queer presence on British Asian stages, such as the Black gay character Elvis in Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s Bezhti (Dishonour) (2004).

Black queer British history is incomplete without reference to the superb work of performance artist, actor and singer Le Gateau Chocolat, including *In Drag* (2013), *Black* (2014) and their queer play for children *Duck!* (2016) at various venues including Southbank Centre, Soho Theatre and Homotopia Festival. Stand-up comedians Stephen K. Amos and Gina Yashere have also done much to represent Black queer experience.\(^8\) Lastly, we note the work of Black queer spoken-word artists and poets who include Dorothea Smartt, Dean Atta, Jay Bernard and Sonority. Club Nights such as Cocoa Butter Club – established by Sadie Sinner, Brownton Abbey – created by queer Black and brown people with disabilities, as well as Duckie! have also provided an important space for Black queer people to develop and perform spoken-word poetry, drag, stand-up comedy, dance, cabaret, music and more. The House of Suarez vogue balls of Liverpool, celebrating the art of vogueing with its roots in Black/Latinx/Trans culture, hosted by Rikki Beadle-Blair (featured on the cover of this book), has been an important space for vogue culture in Britain. This list is an indication of the breadth of Black queer live performance work and a culture that is burgeoning. The work of defining Black British queer theatre and performance, and developing the discourse around this radical work, is only just beginning.

**Theatre Afriquiastory: A narrative of narratives**

We will now survey the twenty-four plays in the archive asking: what might we discover about Britain in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through reading, watching and studying these plays? What can be learnt by looking through a Black queer lens? Before embarking on a material analysis of these plays, we want to take a moment to speculate on why Black queer theatre may have emerged in mid-1980s Britain. By the 1980s, the children of Windrush Generation parents had grown up and were starting to tell our own stories of our experiences in Britain. These voices were informed and invigorated by resistance to the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, culminating in a wave of uprisings (often referred to as riots) in urban areas.

\(^8\) See *Batty Man*, a documentary written and presented by Stephen K. Amos, produced and directed by Paul Blake (Maroon Productions/Channel 4, 2003).
with high Black populations in the early 1980s, including Brixton, Handsworth, Tottenham and Toxteth, in protest against discriminatory police stop and search laws, the deaths of Black people in police custody, and racial discrimination in employment and education. Black political resistance saw the election of the first Black people to parliament in Britain in 1987, namely Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng and Bernie Grant, forming part of the Labour opposition. Black political activism was also paralleled in LGBTQ+ communities who were fighting homophobic and transphobic discrimination and in the women’s movement where the fight for gender equality continued. This Black, queer, feminist political climate may have emboldened Black authors to produce plays with queer and feminist inflections.

This was also a period of artistic uprising when the creative work of historically marginalized groups flourished. Black, lesbian and gay, and feminist theatre companies in London such as Black Theatre Co-operative, Double Edge Theatre, Munirah, Talawa, Temba, Theatre of Black Women, Umoja and Gay Sweatshop emerged as part of a wave of artistic activism against discrimination and the desire for self-representation on stage. These companies and all but one of the venues that staged the plays in this survey were subsidized by funding from Arts Council England (ACE), whose diversity and inclusion agenda since the 1980s has gone hand in hand with various acts of parliament seeking to address issues of (in)equality. 9

Inclusive theatre programming has been even more important to ACE in London. Venues such as the Ovalhouse (now Brixton House) and Theatre Royal Stratford East (TRSE) are located in the increasingly multiracial London boroughs of Lambeth and Newham, where it makes sense in box-office terms to attract Black audiences. 10 Furthermore, the Black queer plays in this archive would not have been produced without the decision making of certain key white gay and lesbian artistic directors and heads of theatre programming. These include Philip Hedley and Kerry Michael (who is of Greek Cypriot heritage) (TRSE, 1979–2004 and 2004–17), Kate Crutchley (Ovalhouse, 1980–91), Nicholas Hytner (National Theatre, 2003–15), Ben Evans (Ovalhouse, 2004–10) and Dominic Cooke (Royal Court, 2007–13). For Black queer theatre to flourish we need solidarity from white LGBTQ+ as well as straight people in positions of power. 11

Our Afriquia theatre narrative of narratives begins in 1985, with Jacqueline Rudet’s realist play Basin (Royal Court Theatre). The basin of the title refers to the bowl that Rudet says some young Caribbean women are given by their mothers to wash their vagina at night in case a man may want to ‘relieve himself inside her’. 12 From the title onwards the play highlights that some Black girls and women experience sexual

10 ACE tends to use the term cultural diversity.
11 More recently, it is exciting to note that Lynette Linton, the (Black) artistic director of Bush Theatre since 2019, has programmed several Black lesbian and trans plays including Jackie Kay’s Chiaroscuro, Temi Wilkey’s The High Table and Travis Alabanza’s Overflow.
subjugation, although in the two characters Mona and Susan we discover Black women having intimacy beyond men. These women are called ‘zammies’, a Caribbean word for same-sex love and intimate friendships between Black women that has its own resonance beyond the European word ‘lesbian’. Although we witness the first of many scenarios in these plays where Christianity is used as a weapon that can damage relations between heterosexual and queer people, Basin is also hopeful in showing that it is possible for same-sex love to be accepted as an extension of Black women’s sisterhood.

Like Basin, the cast of five Black women in Jackie Kay’s Chiaroscuro (Theatre of Black Women at Soho Poly, 1986; revived at the Bush Theatre, 2019) affirms that Afriquia theatre is born from the Black women’s movement. Jackie Kay is an out-lesbian who is better known as a prolific novelist and poet, and she has also contributed two plays to this archive. In its fluid and poetic form infused with music and movement, Chiaroscuro is a political play that resonates with Black feminist theatre forms such as the choreopoems of Ntozake Shange. The title Chiaroscuro combines the Italian phrases for light (chiaro) and shade (scuro), which are evoked through an exploration of a range of Black women’s experiences from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and mixed heritages, as well as heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual. The women in this play highlight the importance of remembering and reclaiming our names, of self-defining through telling our own stories and of responding to and resisting histories of enslavement. Through the use of objects, Kay explores naming as something that is passed down, inherited and then redefined, showing gender identities as fluid and malleable. The play also explores the idea that some straight women find it difficult to accept lesbians and introduces perceptions of AIDS as ‘God’s vengeance’ on gay people. All four characters remain on stage throughout the performance, interweaving poetic monologues, dialogues and songs that emphasize both the parallels between them as Black women as well as showing their individual differences. The 2019 Bush Theatre revival reimagined the production as a contemporary spoken-word and music gig performance.

In Kay’s Twice Over (Drill Hall, 1988), the diversity of lesbian experience is extended to elders and some young people who find the idea difficult. This is the first Black play to mention the word ‘queer’, although it is used in a pejorative sense from the mouth of a teenager, Evaki, who has discovered that her recently deceased grandmother had been in a long-term relationship with another woman. As Evaki learns more about her grandmother’s past, she rethinks her own stereotypical preconceptions about lesbians and encourages her young friends to think differently too. Kay’s impetus for writing the play came after researching attitudes to lesbianism and discovering that young people overwhelmingly believed that all lesbians were young. As a Theatre-in-Education project, the play explicitly debates these stereotypical perceptions of lesbians, challenging ageist and homophobic prejudices. Twice Over

13 See Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (London: Methuen, 1974).
was commissioned by Theatre Centre (a young people’s theatre company based in London) but the play did not tour schools and was only later staged by Gay Sweatshop. Reading between the lines of playwright and director Phillip Osment’s introduction, we can speculate that the law against the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities (including schools), known as Section 28, may have influenced Theatre Centre’s decision not to stage the play in schools.16

Paul Boakye’s realistic play for two actors Boy with Beer (Man in the Moon Theatre, 1992) is the first to openly depict Black gay men in Britain. Through Karl, who is of Ghanaian heritage, and Donovan, of Jamaican heritage, Boakye explores the tensions that can arise between British African and Caribbean Black people of different class and educational backgrounds and indicates that the roots of this disparity go back to slavery. Boakye’s portrayal of Donovan alludes to the notion that some men hide their sexualities, loathe their own homosexual desires and continue relationships with heterosexual women. We hear the word ‘battyman’, which also recurs throughout the plays in this narrative of narratives, a pejorative term for men who have anal sex with other men. In Boy with Beer, the question of top (penetrative)/bottom (receptive) sexual power relations between men who will only penetrate and men who want both (versatile) is raised and this is a recurring theme in plays about Black queer men. The question of fear and power in relation to anal sex between men and how this connects to slavery speaks to the complicated nature of homophobia in the African diaspora. Lastly, Boy with Beer teaches us that there was a virus called HIV (which we now know can lead to AIDS) and that it was at this time considered taboo. Boy with Beer offers a rare illustration of love and support between Black gay partners in a time of HIV/AIDS.

Boy with Beer is one of only two Afriquia plays from the 1990s. Staging new writing in this decade may have been inhibited by a wave of anti-gay panic that arose from the Conservative Government’s homophobic Section 28 and their infamous tombstone campaign stigmatizing people living with HIV.17 As gay men and African people have reportedly been affected by HIV more than many other groups, it is no wonder that few people stood up on stage to perform stories about Black gay life. This makes Boy with Beer all the more courageous and important. The play was undoubtedly a space of support and affirmation for Black, gay and HIV+ men sitting in the audience in the Man in the Moon Theatre in 1992.18

Looking back, the scarcity of Black queer plays in the 1990s demonstrates how difficult it is to get venues to stage these works and publishing houses to print them. Indeed, it is remarkable that twenty-four plays managed to be produced and published at all during the thirty-five years that this survey covers, and especially so considering the resistance we often face as Black LGBTIQ+ people and the dangers of making ourselves visible. This is why small politically motivated spaces, such as Ovalhouse

16 Osment, Gay Sweatshop, 1xv.
17 Hateful attitudes almost received state validation through comments such as those by Manchester Chief Constable James Anderton who in 1986 described people living with AIDS as ‘swirling in a cesspit of their own making’. Also see Paul Burston’s ‘The Stigma of HIV Still Remains’ available at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/15/stigma-hiv-nhs-ban-ended-fear (accessed 30 January 2022).
18 Boy with Beer is also one of the few in this history that has been revived, in a recent production at the King’s Head Theatre in London (2017).
(now Brixton House) are so important to this history. It was also not easy for individual queer artists working in Black theatre companies to voice our experiences, especially at a time when so much of the focus in our communities was on pressing issues such as racism, criminal in/justice, unemployment and family break-down from the effects of migration. Black family life has tended to be at the forefront of Black plays, perhaps because Black heterosexual relationships are almost as contested as homosexual relationships, due to the legacies of slavery. As bell hooks says, love between men and women has been under siege since slavery where Black men and women were not allowed to marry. Homosexuality, often misperceived as a threat to family, was evidently not high on the agenda of Black theatre companies.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, coinciding with a Labour government from 1997 to 2010, there was a relative proliferation of new Afriquia work in Britain. With the emergence of social media leading to more instant interactive socio-political debate, as well as the widely embraced Black feminist theory of intersectionality, this narrative of narratives becomes more complex. Afriquia theatre starts connecting with issues such as climate change, child abuse in foster homes, D/deaf and disabled culture, globalization, Islamophobia, sectarian conflict, refugees and asylum. Gender identities and sexual practices also start to diversify on stage.

Valerie Mason-John’s Sin Dykes (Ovalhouse, 1998) shows more open sexual experimentation between women including sado-masochism (S&M) and the club scene. Stylistically, the play is realist in form, with humour threaded throughout and explorations of archetypal queer characters: a Brixton babe, a scene dyke, an afrekeke dyke, a bull dyke, a travelled Black dyke and an SM white dyke. Mason-John explores similar debates about Black lesbian identities that were raised in Kay’s Chiaroscurro – showing how some ideas about race and gender have moved forward while others remain unresolved. In the ten-year period between Kay’s Twice Over and Sin Dykes, the word queer has shifted from being used as a term of insult to being embraced as a reclaimed identity. In Sin Dykes, two Black lesbians have a conversation where Kat says to Trudy: ‘One thing you’ve got to understand about some of these 1990s white girls is that they say it’s alright to screw a man and call yourself a dyke. It’s the phase at the moment, packing a dildo down their Calvin Klein’s, picking up cute looking gay men. It’s all the rage. They call it queer.’ Sin Dykes spells a time of free and fluid queer sex and gender experimentation and interestingly it is the only play in this survey that makes no reference to homophobia or transphobia.

The age of sex and gender experimentation continues into the twenty-first century in DeObia Oparei’s Crazyblackmuthaf**in’self (Royal Court, 2002) where sex meetings (hook-ups) are arranged online. Some gay men, such as the protagonist Femi, set up sexual encounters as a financial transaction. The sex sold by Black men, like Femi, to white men is often based on racial stereotypes reinforced by pornographic images of Black men as sexual savages, slaves and victims. The play implicitly traces these representations back to Shakespeare’s Othello in which Femi plays the lead in a stereotypical street version entitled Y’Othello. Black sexual roles are further revealed as complex in Crazyblackmuthaf**in’self through representing gender play and trans experience.

In returning to an unnamed and misunderstood sexual love between two women in a small London flat under the critical eye of an unwanted guest, Doña Daley’s 2004 realist play for three women *Blest Be the Tie* (National Theatre, 2004) parallels Rudet’s *Basin*, through the portrayal of a long and intimate interracial ‘friendship’ between two older women. As with Rudet’s play, we see that Black British experience is largely urban, informed by migration and too often financially constrained. We might speculate that prejudice and poverty sustain each other and that a consideration of economics is necessary in understanding animosity towards LGBTIQ+ people. The difference in *Blest Be the Tie* is that Caribbean women such as Martha can make themselves a financial success and that Black pensioners like Eunice who came to Britain as economic migrants can end up in very humble circumstances.

Martha does not understand the bond between her sister Florence and her white English neighbour. *Blest Be the Tie* stops short of fully depicting their friendship as a lesbian relationship and a kiss between them is represented as the kind of platonic intimacy that is shared between friends. Yet, although the LGBTIQ+ content of the play is not made explicit, it is through the everyday domesticity of romantic love between two women that homophobia is challenged. Here same-sex love and interracial love is ordinary. It is the biological bond between two women who are blood relatives that is depicted as being uncomfortable and strange.

In 2005 this narrative of narratives takes a dramatic turn with Christopher Rodriguez’s musical theatre play *High Heel Parrotfish!* at Theatre Royal Stratford East. This is the first play in the survey to fully focus on trans lives. Rodriguez explores how Black trans people and gay men in Trinidad are often victims of family and state transphobia and homophobia, which can lead to violence, violation of human rights and even murder. Yet the trans people resist the oppression that they face through drag performance, song, dance, loving each other and fighting back. This is the first play to show transphobic and homophobic hate in international contexts. It is clear through *High Heel Parrotfish!* as well as *Boy with Beer* and many other plays in this archive that connections to the diaspora are powerful and pertinent to Black Britons. Premiering in London, Rodriguez’s play, set in Trinidad, raises questions about the relevance of the issues to the LGBTIQ+ community in Britain.

The questions posed by *High Heel Parrotfish!* are answered by the very next play to be produced at Theatre Royal Stratford East, Rikki Beadle-Blair’s *Bashment* (2005), which introduces the audience to the bashment music scene where we see battles over more than just song lyrics. This realist play infused with music, exposes homophobia in the bashment scene, contempt for whiteness as associated with homosexuality and the association of Blackness with heterosexual prowess. The play expressly connects bashment music with gay bashing, and links homophobia in the Black community back to slavery. Yet the play is hopeful in exploring how homophobes can also be redeemed and make reparations.

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20 When Mojisola Adebayo ran a leadership training course in Zimbabwe and raised the issue of LGBTIQ+ equality, much of the homophobia the young people expressed was based on the idea that not only is homosexuality a white condition, but that LGBTIQ+ people are privileged by their sexuality because they have more access to white people and to Western money. This false notion has been reinforced by various homophobic diatribes from African leaders and commentators.
Beadle-Blair returns to the subject of homophobia in the Theatre-in-Education play *FIT* (Queer up North tour, 2007–10). Homophobic language was so acute in this era that the word gay became an insult synonymous with anything negative in urban youth culture and the bullying of LGBTIQ+ school pupils was endemic. Beadle-Blair directly challenges homophobia through a fashion-conscious street-style play where a group of young dancers go on a bus journey to a competition that is also a journey into their identities, desires and prejudices. *FIT* toured three times to seventy-five secondary schools, reaching over twenty thousand pupils across Britain between September 2007 and February 2010, with an accompanying post-show discussion.  

Mojisola Adebayo’s *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (Lyric Hammersmith, 2006) asks the audience to consider the connection between climate injustice today, the industrial revolution and the transatlantic slave trade, melting Antarctic ice and melting identities, through Moj, a mid-nineteenth-century enslaved African-American woman who cross-dresses as a white man to escape from slavery. The fictional Moj is inspired by the real-life Ellen Craft, who in 1848 escaped from slavery by cross-dressing as a white man. The play draws from a wide range of historical texts proving that trans experience and Black same-sex relationships during slavery are very much part of Black history. Adebayo extends into fiction where, after losing her lover, May, Moj escapes and becomes a sailor bound for Antarctica. This one-woman choreo-poem, with multi-roling and singing also integrates images from Adebayo’s own expedition to Antarctica with the queer visual artist Del LaGrace Volcano in 2005, thereby contributing Black/queer perspectives to snow-coated British Antarctic history.

In *Wig Out* (Royal Court Theatre, 2008), Tarell Alvin McCraney’s flamboyant play with a large cast, African-American New York drag-queens create alternative families or dynasties, known as houses, away from both the straight and gay mainstream. During preparation for a Cinderella vogue ball (a high-stakes competition where one house challenges another through costume and performance), and in the midst of the glitter, Nina/Wilson is trying to develop a relationship with the straight-acting Eric. The seeming fixity of the top/bottom binary is an important subject, as it was in *Boy with Beer*. *Wig Out*, however, is written in poetic form juxtaposed with realist scenes, songs and monologues where each character describes the moment where they saw a matriarch take their wig out and how this affected their sense of self in terms of gender and sexual identity. McCraney is African-American and *Wig Out* connects Britain to the African-American experience, in a look across the Atlantic that coincided with great interest in the election of Barack Obama as the 44th US President in 2008. *Muhammad Ali and Me* (Ovalhouse, 2008) was running concurrently and also references Obama, through a clip of his voice. Through the imaginary friendship between the protagonist Mojitola and her boxing hero, *Muhammad Ali and Me*, a multimedia play for three performers, parallels sexual abuse in British foster care and the racist state abuses in America in the 1970s. The semi-autobiographical story of the child Mojitola, growing up and coming out as a

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21 Both *Bashment* and *FIT* were adapted for screen by Beadle-Blair.

22 In 2016, Tarell Alvin McCraney won the Academy Award/Oscar for best adapted screenplay with *Moonlight*, a film adapted from his stage play depicting young Black gay men.
lesbian, is juxtaposed with the portrayal of Muhammad Ali, coming of age as a boxer and activist and ‘coming out’ as a Muslim. Vilification of Ali’s conversion to Islam and his refusal to fight in the Vietnam War is subtextually connected to a contemporary era of Islamophobia in Britain, against a backdrop of further controversial wars in Asia. Like Moj of the Antarctic, this play has an African physical storytelling aesthetic through the role of the Griot. Muhammad Ali and Me highlights the intersectionality of Black experience and the importance of access and inclusion by integrating D/deaf culture through Jacqui Beckford’s creatively incorporated interpretation of the whole show into British Sign Language in her role as the boxing ring referee.

Thug Ass (Soho Theatre, 2009) by Rikki Beadle-Blair is a short play first produced as part of the Mangina Monologues, directed and curated by Topher Campbell. Here, Black gay men took their cue from the feminist movement and Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues (1996) to celebrate the anus and anal sex at a time when hatred against Black gay men is exemplified in the phrase ‘battyman.’ The top and bottom binary is playfully overturned in the love affair between Thug Ass (real name Andre) and the effeminate Darnell.

In Tarell Alvin-McCrane’s Choir Boy (Royal Court Theatre, 2012), we visit an institution of control in an American all-Black elite prep school called Charles R. Drew. The plot revolves around five competitive choir boys who are heavily invested in being Drew men. A high-achieving, intelligent, well-groomed feminine gay choir boy named Pharus is bullied and beaten. Pharus, however, is talented and privileged enough to rise above his adversity and sing solo. This image of social mobility and Black class privilege in the era of Obama is one that has only rarely been represented on British stages, indicating a difference between Black experience in British and American societies. Through this drama interspersed with a cappella singing, Choir Boy examines how Black LGBTIQ+ people do at times have straight and white allies, exemplified in Pharus’s straight friend AJ.

The diasporic connections continue in Inua Ellams’s Black T-Shirt Collection (Warwick Arts Centre and Fuel tour, 2012), where we are introduced to a time of increasing tension and conflict between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria. There was also rare brotherhood, literally through the foster brothers in the play, Muhammad and Matthew. Nigeria is a potentially dangerous place to be discovered to be gay (people engaged in same-sex relationships can face up to fourteen years in prison) and so the outing of Muhammad is the catalyst for their lengthy departure on overseas business, eventually settling in China. This play for two actors explores how the marketplace between Africa and China was growing at this time and the entrepreneurial brothers prosper. It is rare in this archive that we see Black people achieving a degree of economic success. However, Ellams seems to be questioning globalization and capitalism, as further layers of oppression are exposed through the exploited Chinese workers in the brothers’ T-shirt factory.

The painful subject of the so-called corrective rape and murder of lesbians and trans men in South Africa is explored in I Stand Corrected, a theatre and dance collaboration between Mojisola Adebayo and choreographer and dancer Mamela Nyamza (Artscape,
Cape Town and Ovalhouse, London, 2012). Homophobic and transphobic violence are paralleled with the virulence of the anti-equal marriage debate in Britain in 2012, connected by a shared history of colonization. The fact that lesbians and gay men are not able to marry in a church in Britain, yet the post-apartheid South African constitution declares LGBTIQ+ people are equal citizens is critiqued by Charlie, a Black mixed-heritage British lesbian working in Cape Town. Charlie searches for her Black South African fiancée Zodwa, who has not shown up at the altar for their wedding in a Cape Town church where the audience are cast as guests. Meanwhile, Zodwa tries to understand what has happened to her ‘corrected’ body, through the medium of dance.

Nigeria connects to Zimbabwe in the diaspora through the autobiographical African storytelling performance *Zhe [noun] undefined* (Oxford Playhouse and tour, 2013), scripted by Chuck Mike (the director), Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyevu. Through the real-life story of the performers, British-born Nigerian Antonia Kemi Coker and Zimbabwean Tonderai Munyevu, we are reminded that disproportionate numbers of Black children are taken into care by social services and some experience sexual abuse and racial discrimination. Munyevu’s story highlights discrimination towards androgynous Black people in Britain, compared to being accepted in Zimbabwe: ‘Most of my friends called me Choza . . . which means a boy that is really a girl . . . It was affectionate, a name that fit, a celebration of me.’ When he comes to England and is bullied, he reflects: ‘I never noticed that I walked differently or talked differently because in Zimbabwe people loved it.’

Zhe demonstrates acceptance of sex/gender differences as being part of Zimbabwean Shona culture. This is very important at a time of the intensification of religiously justified state sanctioned homophobia and transphobia and the application laws left by British colonisers in many countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

The consequences of state homophobia are highlighted in the monodrama *Nine Lives* (West Yorkshire Playhouse and tour, 2014) by Zodwa Nyoni, an intimate look at LGBTIQ+ asylum issues. *Nine Lives* explores questions of finding a safe place to call home for the protagonist, Ishmael, who has recently arrived in Britain after fleeing from persecution in Zimbabwe where it is a criminal offence to be lesbian or gay. Through his experiences of being in ‘limbo’ while waiting for his case to go through the bureaucratic asylum processes, the play exposes the urgent and current issue of LGBTIQ+ refugees seeking asylum and the precarity of Black queer citizenship. *Nine Lives* reveals the experiences of many asylum seekers arriving in the UK who are subjected to humiliating intimate interrogations at the border and in Home Office interviews, and experience xenophobia from British people, while living in poverty when expected to survive on inadequate welfare benefits. The solo form of the play accentuates Ishmael’s loneliness and the anxieties he faces as a new arrival in Britain, where the challenges of navigating a complex and confusing system are heightened by fears of homophobic responses and loss of community if he reveals the real reasons for his asylum claim to other Africans in the support group. Asylum can be an extremely frightening and isolating situation, and love, fun and intimacy can be difficult to find when one is caught up in negotiating bureaucratic asylum processes. However, the play

is hopeful in showing how possibilities for friendship, solidarity and support exist, exemplified in Ishmael’s friendship with single mother Bex and her child. Zimbabwean mbira music overlays each of the poetic interludes, situating a connection to the ‘home’ that Ishmael has left behind and creating a nostalgic feel.

There are many characters experiencing trauma and extreme challenge in most of the plays in this survey, so Rikki Beadle-Blair’s romantic comedy *Summer in London* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, 2017) offers an alternative upbeat tone. A group of seven interracial young people flirt, play, date and give each other advice on romance at the end of a long hot summer in London, while not having a penny in their pockets and living in a park. Beadle-Blair highlights the problem of homelessness amongst LGBTIQ+ communities in London, albeit with a rainbow glow. What is radical about this play is that it makes his/her/their story by being the first play to be entirely cast with trans performers, and yet the word trans is not spoken once. Through the absence of reference to gender identity, the characters are allowed to just ‘be’, to behave as fun-loving young people looking for romantic love. *Summer in London* signals an era in Britain where trans people are taking space; trans voices are being heard more than ever before and the struggle for human rights is being strongly fought for in public life, from social media to the streets.

*Trans lives on contested British streets steps centre stage in* BURGERZ (Hackney Showroom and tour, 2018), an autobiographical ‘monodrama’ written and performed by Travis Alabanza. ‘Monodrama’ is in inverted commas because Alabanza involves the audience very directly in the action, prompted by their questions. BURGERZ is premised on a real incident where a white man threw a burger into Alabanza’s face while shouting transphobic abuse and members of the public either looked on, looked away or otherwise said or did nothing to help. The play paints a picture of a society where expressions of anti-trans views are rife, and 41 per cent of trans people report having experienced violent attacks or threats in public. However, Alabanza is radical in their approach by looking at transphobia as a problem that straight cisgender people need to address. In forging allyship, Alabanza invites a white cisgender male audience member to help them to make a burger, in an alternative cooking-show where gender identity is unpacked and audiences are asked to reflect on inactions in the face of discrimination and consider what it might mean to do something different, what it might mean to intervene, to help and protect when witnessing violence towards another person on the street.

*Temi Wilkey’s The High Table* (Bush Theatre, 2020) is a drama and romantic comedy that not only portrays a Nigerian family living in London in 2020 but a Nigerian family that still thrives in the ancestral realm. The prospect of a lesbian wedding between Tara, a British Nigerian woman, and her girlfriend Leah is on the table. Eight years after *I Stand Corrected*, the possibility of LGBTIQ+ marriage in Britain is now a reality, but her parents need to be convinced and the ancestors need to give their blessing. Will they, won’t they? is a question that runs through the play. The dangers of being openly gay in Nigeria are explored through the representation of Tara’s Uncle Teju. As we see in Nyoni’s *Nine Lives*, asylum is clearly an urgent and complicated topic in contemporary Britain, where the issue of immigration was
undoubtedly a factor in the argument for the UK’s exit from the European Union – Brexit. The damaging relationship between Christian colonial Britain and homophobic laws in Nigeria today is confronted again. The High Table is also another play that speaks to the unbroken link that so many Black Britons have to the wider diaspora and a desire for Black queer people to know our Afriquia his/her/theirstories, beyond European frames of reference.

The problem of European frames of reference are exemplified in the affronting question which sparks Mugabe, My Dad and Me (York Theatre Royal and touring 2019–present), described by the author and performer Tonderai Munyevu as a true story. ‘Where are you from?’, an elderly white man asks the barman and resting actor Munyevu in a London pub, before proceeding to dribble a diatribe of patronizing colonial tropes about the state of Zimbabwe. This sense of entitlement and prejudice is a moment that so many Black people still endure in Britain and Munyevu’s aim is to engage the white people in the audience to reflect and change. Munyevu then reframes the performance as a bira for Zimbabwe, a traditional ritual for guidance, healing or celebration where the ancestors are called, through the music of the female mbira player who plays live. The desire for Black people in the diaspora to reconnect with traditional spiritualities is underlined once again through this play. Through gentle and often comical direct address, storytelling, jumping in time and playing several characters, an approach also employed in Munyevu, Coker and Mike’s Zhe, Munyevu seeks to understand his relationship to Zimbabwe, the country formerly known as Rhodesia, that was colonized by Britain. In a collage of scenes, Munyevu sheds light on the rise and fall of President Robert Mugabe, racism, struggles for land rights, inflation, homophobia, how these issues connect to the struggles of Munyevu’s own father and how it all informs who Munyevu is today, as a British-Zimbabwean Black gay man.

Lastly, Mojisola Adebayo’s STARS (Tamasha Theatre Company at Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), 2023) portrays an elderly Black mixed-heritage science fiction lover who has repressed her sexuality during her sixty-year marriage but now her husband is dead. Inspired by Spexit, a (fictional) post-Brexit offer for migrants to be sent into space, the protagonist, Mrs, decides to go on a cosmic quest, in search of her own orgasm. Mrs’ desire for an orgasmic odyssey is provoked by a series of encounters through which Adebayo brings those pushed to the edge of Brexit Britain – lonely and elderly Black mixed-heritage and working-class women, people on low incomes, council housing residents, migrant Muslim girl-children, survivors of gender-based violence (including FGM), lesbian travellers and intersex people – into the foreground and into the future, off the planet and into the imagination. In this Afrofuturist Afriquia play, framed by ancient African Dogon intersex mythology and astronomy and employing Adebayo’s signature storytelling style, we see the possibility of creating a consensual magical queer-feminist reality, where we are not bound by sexual boundaries or gender binaries any longer. STARS embraces the word intersex and celebrates the too often forgotten I in LGBTIQ+ perhaps signifying a time when the struggle for intersex human rights are taken more seriously in Britain. The all-important space of the club and the dance floor in the Afriquia story, mentioned and depicted in Boy with

26 Taking its cue from the disability rights slogan ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’, STARS was developed with advice and support from intersex activists Valentino Vecchietti and Del LaGrace Volcano.
Beer, Sin Dykes, Bashment, Nine Lives and The High Table, and discussed in the roundtable discussion, goes live in STARS, where a radio DJ (Mrs’ son) spins tunes live all the way through the play which eventually transforms into a club night, celebrating the power of pleasure.

These plays are varied in style and form, serving to document Black queer lives in Britain from Afriquia perspectives by providing insights into the socio-political landscape of the times in which they were written. Homophobia and/or transphobia at the intersection of race is a thread that runs through almost every play. Yet there is also hope running through these Afriquia pages, in the love stories, friendships and moments of understanding and forgiveness, enabling audiences to empathize, celebrate and increase understanding of issues affecting Black LGBTIQ+ people in Britain and the world.

Part Two

Eight plays and some recurring themes in Afriquia theatre

Choosing the plays for this anthology was difficult as there is so much excellent work in this Afriquia archive. The eight plays have been selected for a variety of reasons. We have tried to choose plays from each decade since the 1980s. We have also attempted to represent work that focuses on stories from across the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, including a balance of work by women, men and trans and/or gender non-conforming writers. Although many of the plays have connections with various locations in the diaspora, we have focused on plays set in Britain. The eight plays are deliberately chosen for the range of identities and themes as well as to showcase different styles of writing. However, some issues recur across these plays and are indeed debated throughout the plays in the Afriquia theatre archive. Paying attention to these recurring issues shows the Afriquia messages threaded throughout this body of work.

Slave to religion

All of the plays in some way reference the interconnected effects of colonialism, and particularly interpretations of the Christian religion together with enslavement, as continuing to impact on Black LGBTIQ+ lives. From the first play in this anthology, Jacqueline Rudet’s Basin, whereupon discovering that Mona and Susan are lovers, Michele shouts, ‘It’s an abomination against man and God!’, to the last play, Mojisola Adebayo’s STARS, where Mrs experiences a rather comical exorcism from ‘the demon of lesbianism’ at the hands of a white-led evangelical church, we see religion used as a justification for homophobia and transphobia. Makau Mutua has stated that in Africa, ‘much of the revulsion of homosexuality can be traced to Christianity and Islam’. Mutua points to the paradox of Christianity and Islam being used to justify homophobia and the belief that homosexuality is, as Ishmael reads on Facebook in Zodwa Nyoni’s Nine Lives, ‘A disgusting import from the colonial days’, when these two Abrahamic faiths originate in Asia and were widely disseminated by European and Arab colonizers. In a witty reference to the president of Zimbabwe, Matua writes, ‘We have to wonder how consistent Mugabe is when he uses a foreign religion (Christianity) while speaking
a foreign language (English) to claim that it is un-African to be gay.'  

These plays reveal that homophobia and transphobia are often contradictory and interconnected with Christianity and colonialism that can also be traced through slavery.

Although it is almost impossible to prove that slavery contributed directly to homophobia and transphobia, Christian colonialism did not enable Black people to experience and enjoy freedom in their sexuality or their gender identities. Slavery did not allow any room for any existence outside of a heteronormative gender binary nor did it allow Black people to retain any African traditions or religions that celebrated what we might today consider to be queerness, such as women marrying women in Igbo culture and various other examples of traditional queerness, as brilliantly argued by Tara’s ancestor Yetunde in Temi Wilkey’s The High Table. Slavery did not give people a sense of ownership over their own bodies and desires, it did not celebrate sexual pleasure for its own sake as sex was only valued for its reproductive purposes or as a tool of power for the repression of enslaved people. Slavery did not positively contribute to a feeling of love for one’s own body and others, it did not instil confidence or champion individual identity or acceptance of difference in others, it did nothing that would enable a positive experience of homosexuality and trans identity to exist happily; in fact, it did everything opposite, everything to counter Black pleasures.

Journalist Decca Aitkenhead writing in The Guardian goes so far as to say that homophobia in Black communities today is the fault of white people through slavery. Nowhere is this debate more hotly debated than in Rikki Beadle-Blair’s Bashment where Kevan asks, ‘They’re allowed to feel what they like because they’re still recovering from slavery, is that it? We’re not slave-owners. We’re not racists. But does that mean we have to be fucking punchbags just ’cause we’re liberal white queers?’ Though the play does not argue that slavery is an excuse for homophobic violence it does highlight the need for a greater understanding of the impact of slavery on Black sexualities and the potential dynamics in interracial relationships, as Valerie Mason-John also explores in Sin Dykes.

Trauma leaves scars that can be seen across the body of work in this anthology, which demonstrate that Afriquia theatre is a space not only to debate these issues but to begin the healing process. Post-colonial migration is also a site of trauma. As Ishmael, the protagonist of Nine Lives, who flees his home country of Zimbabwe due to homophobic laws left behind there by British colonizers, says, ‘Oh, it is traumatic to be an immigrant.’ Anti-homosexuality laws exist in over seventy countries, including thirty-three African countries (such as Ghana, Mauritius, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zimbabwe) and eleven islands in the Caribbean (such as Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad). In Nigeria, even knowing that someone is gay or lesbian and not reporting it leaves people vulnerable to punishment of up to ten years in prison, whereas in some countries homosexual activity is still punishable by death. Many of these legislations were put in place while these countries were under British rule and

although things have since progressed in the UK, where same-sex marriage is now a legally sanctioned right, the stringent anti-gay and lesbian laws have been maintained in many African and Caribbean Commonwealth countries. Arguably, the UK has a responsibility to provide sanctuary for LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers.

_Sin Dykes_, by Valerie Mason-John, directly looks at the traumatic effect of slavery on same-sex relationships between Black and white people. Kat says to Trudy: ‘Know your history, girl, white people have persecuted so many of our people. How can you hang with someone who reminds you of slavery?’ Trudy replies: ‘That was centuries ago.’ Kat retorts: ‘It’s still happening now, look around you’, and she points to the abuses of Black people by the police and within the mental health system. Yet _Sin Dykes_ also illustrates the possibility of sexual liberation from the shackles of slavery through shackling ourselves to each other as Black women, in lesbian sex play, pleasure and power by consent. The distressing reality of slavery, however, was that most sex between white and Black people was not based on consent and this is another contributing factor in fears around sexuality in what theorist of post-traumatic slave syndrome Joy DeGruy terms ‘slavery’s children’.  

**Battyphobia and betrayal**

Rape was endemic in the slave trade. The rape of enslaved Black women is reflected in representations on screen and in literature, such as Toni Morrison’s _Beloved_ (1987). However, a fact that is seldom discussed is the anal rape of Black men over centuries of slavery. The perceived link between the fear of homosexuality and the use of anal rape as a punishment meted out by white men on Black men in the Caribbean has been discussed by perhaps unlikely figures such as Jamaican clergyman John Hardy from the New Testament Church of God. In _Boy with Beer_ by Paul Boakye, Donovan uses the term ‘slave’ to describe ‘Black guys who check for [have sex with] whites’. Rape was used to ‘tame’ Black men and Black men were used to ‘stud’ Black women. The commercial value of Black men was measured on their perceived ability to breed. For enslaved Africans, this induced a fear of being penetrated on one side and a sense of self-worth through the act of penetrating on the other. This may be why there is a hateful fixation and fear of ‘battymen’, why homosexuality is so strongly associated with white men, why hyper-masculine machismo is still so deep in African diasporic cultures and this debate comes up in various ways through the plays.  

The term ‘batty boy’ is heard in _Bashment_ and several of the plays in the archive. In _Boy with Beer_, Karl makes Donovan say ‘I’m a big battiman’ in his attempt to get Donovan to accept his own sexuality and break free of the macho power top/feminine

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31 Ibid., 76–80 and 84.
33 Boakye, _Boy with Beer_, 16.
bottom binary in which he is so invested. Karl asks Donovan, ‘What makes you think the men you fuck are any less than other men?’ The hatred of ‘batty boys’ evidenced in many of these plays is at its root a hatred for the internalized enslaved Black self. As the homophobic (and later redeemed) MC Eggy says in Bashment: ‘There ain’t one reason that n*ggas hate queers – there’s every reason . . . Cause n*ggas are queers.’ To be queer in these terms means to be abused, violated, enslaved, feminine and self-hating.

As we see in many of the plays in the archive, including Basin and The High Table, homosexuality is associated with white people and is therefore also seen by some as a betrayal of blackness. This is exemplified in Bashment during a conversation between Eggy and Venom in prison.

Eggy . . . every Black man is a brother.
Venom What about coppers? And queers?
Eggy They forfeit their Blackness.

Black queer people are perceived by some as betraying the race by engaging in homosexual acts and it is God who punishes this betrayal. In Boy with Beer we hear about having sex with white people as ‘sleeping with the enemy’, which is also a recurring conversation in Sin Dykes where Trudy struggles to go back to her white girlfriend, Gill. Trudy says to Gill, ‘I don’t trust your conditioning.’ The question of whether white people can be trusted not to betray their Black lovers is exemplified here. We see the emotional cost of betrayal by a Black lover in Nine Lives and there is also the challenge to the Black family to not betray its own queer kin, such as Uncle Teju, in The High Table. Lastly, Travis Alabanza’s BURGERZ offers a powerful challenge to audience members to actively forgo their own white, cisgender privilege and act when they witness transphobic and homophobic attacks.

Reach we reach

As we have seen, these plays do not shy away from brutal subject matter, yet many of them also recall the possibility of beautiful Black queer times, reclaiming our pre-colonial, pre-slavery African pasts and projecting into an Afrofuture. Paul Boakye reaches back to a time before Europeans stepped foot on African shores in Boy with Beer where the protagonist Karl’s poetry is heard in voiceover:

In days two thousand seasons past, our feet roamed freely through golden Ghana soil, our hearts flew up high with birds on a Ghana breeze. You loved me then.

Of my tortured enslavement from The Way you must have heard the stories told. I bear some of the scars but time has changed me none. I love you now as then. Will we meet and love again? Or is our love for ever tainted by the historic chain of events since then?

I have never lost hope completely. Don’t you despair. This Black man is still in search of his African Prince.

Karl is reaching for his potential prince, Donovan. In STARS, Adebayo uses the Dogon
creation stories of Mali and the intergalactic intersex figure of the Nommos, in particular, to frame a play that points to an Afrofuture free of sexual trauma through orgasmic space travel and collective club night pleasure for elders and young people alike. In *BURGERZ*, Travis Alabanza also recalls the God-like status that trans people had in cultures as diverse as Italy and the Philippines. Trans people are elevated and celebrated in this life-affirming play and cisgender straight people are called to address their inaction. No play is more categorical in its accusation of colonisation for the destruction of African same-sex loving traditions than *The High Table*, where ancient queer ancestors have important lessons for lesbians living on Earth today. All of the plays, in some way, name problems in Black queer experience and challenge audience members about the possible roots of homophobia and transphobia. Moreover, the plays not only reach back to an Afriquia past but also reach out to the diaspora of the present, reinforcing the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean for so many Black people in Britain.

**Named love**

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and other post-colonial theorists have shown, reclaiming language and self-naming is very important in a process of liberation and self-love for Black people and Black queer people, as can be seen in these plays. Through stating our own names, our own terms, our own identities and naming our love in our own ways we challenge homophobia, transphobia and racism simultaneously.

In *Basin*, Mona and Susan name themselves ‘zammies’ and describe their love in Caribbean terms. They appeal to their communities to understand them through the vessel symbolizing female submission: ‘If they want to know about zammies, tell them about their basin.’ In *Nine Lives*, when Ishmael meets Bex on a park bench, he calls himself Sam and constructs a new identity, pretending to be a successful business student for fear of being discovered to be a gay asylum seeker. It is only when he is authentic with Bex that they can really form an allyship and be true friends. In *STARS*, Mrs’ friend Maxi, the only self-identified intersex character in this anthology, in one of the few moments where a character comes out (in most of the other plays all of the characters are ‘out’ and coming out is not a big theme in this anthology), states their identity, claims the name intersex and plays with the name in an affirmation of the right to ‘bodily integrity’ and self-determination by playfully declaring ‘too right I am into-sex!’ The final declaration of Mrs is a revelation of her own name, but she invites the audience to just call her Nommo, after the Dogon intersex deity.

More than any other kind of naming, though, it is love that is named through all of these plays. From romantic love in *Basin*, *Boy with Beer* and *Bashment*, to sexual love in *Sin Dykes*, family love through a lesbian wedding in *The High Table*, love between friends in *Nine Lives* and self-love in *BURGERZ* and *STARS*, love is the name of each play. As bell hooks has said, love is a verb. Love is performative. It happens both in utterance and in action, exemplified in the ‘I do’ that Tara and Leah are striving to get


to in *The High Table*. Love is something that was denied to Black people through the slave trade. As hooks writes, ‘In the racist mindset the enslaved African was incapable of deep feeling and fine emotions. Since love was considered to be a finer sentiment, black folks were seen as lacking the capacity to love.’

hooks says this dehumanization has led to a ‘crisis of lovelessness’. These Afriquia plays provide new representations of loving possibilities for Black characters through profoundly political love stories that create spaces for reflection and healing. As Boakye writes in his notes accompanying *Boy with Beer*, it is ‘a sign of health’ when Black men love each other.

Audre Lorde describes homophobia as, ‘Fear of feelings of love for members of one’s own sex and therefore hatred of these feelings in others.’ Slavery produced a fear of losing love and a fear of love itself. In *Bashment* there is a gay bashing after a confession of love. It’s not so much the sex that triggers the violence, it’s love that the gang of men find so repulsive and the trigger (or perhaps excuse) is Orly’s use of the ‘N’ word. The homophobia expressed by the Black men in *Bashment* is, more than any other fear, a fear of love. If homophobia is the fear of love in men it is also the fear of being unloved in Black women. In *Basin*, Mona says to Michele, ‘Who will love us? White people? Black men? Who will love us if not other Black women?’

Loving each other is for Black people part of our liberation, revolution and evolution from the past. As hooks states: ‘To give ourselves to love, to love blackness, is to restore the true meaning of freedom, hope and possibility in all our lives.’

By way of conclusion, although the plays in this anthology all deal to a greater or lesser extent with the traumatic subject matter of homophobia and transphobia, its roots in slavery and colonisation and complicated feelings of betrayal, they also all create something profoundly beautiful out of the brutal. All of the plays articulate and express different forms of Black queer love and offer speculative happy endings. In live performance, the plays offer spaces of truth telling, listening, compassion, empathy, support, solidarity and an opportunity to understand ourselves through each other; or in returning to African terms, these plays generate *ubuntu*, that Southern African philosophy with no direct translation in the English language that broadly defines humanity as: I am who I am because you are who you are or, I am me through you and

38 Ibid., 5.
39 Ibid., 16.
41 hooks, *Salvation*, xxix.
you are you through me. Whether in the basin we see ourselves reflected in *Basin*, the bed of *Boy with Beer*, the ‘Stop’ of S&M sex spoken in *Sin Dykes*, the reparative battle of *Bashment*, the camaraderie of the park bench in *Nine Lives*, the burger that refuses to be thrown in *BURGERZ*, the collective electric slide in *The High Table* and the rave, the club space that opens up in *STARS* and recurs in so many of these plays, there is an ancient and enduring ubuntu that is embraced; there is an Afriquia future of happy endings. This book is just a beginning.

**Bibliography of published plays in the Afriquia theatre archive**

The Eight Plays
Basin

Jacqueline Rudet
*Basin* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 29 October 1985, with the following cast:

**Mona**  Dona Croll  
**Susan**  Beverley Hills  
**Michele**  Susan Harper-Browne

Directed by Paulette Randall  
Designed by Vanessa Clegg
Author’s preface

_Basin_ took three years to write. It was my first attempt at putting pen to paper but the second play I finished. Between starting and finishing it I wrote _Money to Live._ _Basin_ was previously called _With Friends Like You_ and, along with some friends, I directed a production which we performed at assorted small venues.

Soon after, I became rather disillusioned with my writing, seeing its inadequacies but not knowing how to rectify them, so I went on holiday to Dominica to visit relatives I hadn’t seen in a long while. I returned to England with a love for Black women. While out there, I’d suddenly realized how strong, how loving yet how abused and unappreciated Black women are. I realized I had lost my love of Black women through the general pressures and distractions of domestic life. Through a play, I wanted to show that all Black women had much in common. This led me to much thought about the word ‘zammie’.

Zammie was a word I’d forgotten about. It was a word my mother would use to describe a very close friend, but it had connotations of being more than friend and, in a strange way, it was a rude word that only grown-ups could use, as if ‘zammie’ meant lover. In _With Friends Like You_, I was writing a play about a friendship between two women but I hadn’t been able to find a way or a word to describe that friendship.

The two zammies in _Basin_ become lovers but zammie is not lesbian in patois. The word refers more to the universality of friendship between Black women; no matter what nationality, no matter what class, all Black women have very important things in common. They’re the last in line; there’s no one below them to oppress. Whether they like it or not, every Black woman is the zammie of every other Black woman. It’s almost an obligatory thing. As one of the girls in _Basin_ says, ‘Who will love us?’

The basin symbolized the one article that all Black women possess. Mothers always teach their daughters about cleanliness. If not dressed in smart, new clothes, at least clean. An important matter of pride. As a girl grows up, it’s less a matter of pride, more a case of a woman making herself smell fresh, just in case her husband wants to relieve himself inside her.

_Jacqueline Rudet_
Characters

Mona
Susan
Michele
**Act One**

**Scene One**

*Mona’s flat. She is clearing up after the previous night’s party. She sings to herself.*

**Mona**

Honey, pepper, leaf green limes,
Pagan fruit whose names are rhymes,
Mangoes, breadfruit, ginger root,
Granadillas, bamboo shoots,
Sugar cane, cola nuts,
Citrons, hairy coconuts,
Fish, tobacco, native hats,
Gold bananas, woven mats,
Plantains, wild thyme, pallid leeks
Pigeons with their scarlet beaks,
Saffron, yams,
Baskets, ruby guava jams,
Fustles, goat skins, cinnamon, allspice,
Oh, island in the sun,
Gave to me by my father’s hand,
La, la, la, la . . .

She hears a knock at the door:

Coming!

She goes to open the door. **Susan** kisses her and comes in.

**Susan** Mona, I’ve been knocking and knocking. Were you asleep?

**Mona** Sorry, I was miles away. Back home, in fact. Thinking about all the good times. So you decided to come. Don’t you think you’re a little late?

**Susan** Looks like you had a good time here!

**Mona** Well, if you’d come, you’d have enjoyed yourself too.

**Susan** What happened?

**Mona** It was great! I mean! Pat and her new man business! The boy is so dry! He spent the whole night in the corner giving everybody cut eye! He’s a joke. I don’t know what she sees in him. I said, ‘Pat, what do you see in this boy? He must have one big wood!’ You could see Pat was shame. First, she kept making excuses that he wasn’t feeling well, then she couldn’t take it anymore, just walked out and left him! It was really funny.

Everybody enjoyed themselves. And listen to this, nah! Herbert brought this box full of whisky. I don’t know where he got it from because every minute him just a peep through the window to see if bull a come. So Michael plays this trick on him. He rushes in and says, ‘Bull outside! Someone a thief a box of whisky from the off-
licence!’ Girl, I never see Herbert move so fast! When Herbert found out, him so vexed him fit to burst!

Susan I would’ve liked to see that. Good! I can’t stand him. And how was your Michael?

Mona The boy makes me sick. The guy love woman! I’m serving drinks and the guy’s got some piss an’ tail gal in the corner a wind-up in front of me in my own fucking house! I’m fed up with the guy. All he wants me for is jook, jook, jook.

Susan I thought all you wanted was jook, jook, jook!

Mona Michael’s just taking the piss.

Susan I’ve told you that too many times.

Mona Never mind about me. Look at you! You look well miserable!

Susan tries to speak, but can’t.

Mona Come on, start at the beginning. I’ll listen, no matter how boring.

Susan Thank you!

Mona Only joking! (Pause.) Come on!

Susan Well . . . You remember when I was at drama school?

Mona Back that far!

Susan Are you interested?

Mona All ears! Come on!

Susan (pause) I was the only Black student. I felt really proud of myself. I was the only one of my friends to get somewhere and achieve something. I was being kept back and not being given the chance to prove myself, but I knew I had the talent, so I just kept on going.

Mona This isn’t what’s on your mind!

Susan I’m getting to it. (Pause.) One month, I missed my period . . .

Mona What’s this got to do with drama school?

Susan I’m jumping. Sorry. While I was at drama school, one month, I missed my period, took a test, found it was positive, but I felt so stupid, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. Anyway, I had an abortion, of course.

Pause.

Mona Are we getting to it?

Susan We’re getting there.

Mona This is all stuff to set the mood is it?

Susan I’m building up to it.
Mona  Is this why you didn’t come to the party?
Susan  I would’ve liked to have come, but I had so much on my mind.
Mona  I organized the party so everyone could cast aside the troubles in their life
and have a good time. Everyone said, ‘Where’s Susan?’ I said, ‘She’s probably down
Handsworth earning some pocket money.’
Susan  I was at home. I got to the top of your road and turned back.
Mona  There’s this really cheap psychiatrist I can recommend.
Susan  I got to the top of your road and just turned back. I couldn’t face it.
Mona  Face what?
Susan  Everyone.
Mona  Our friends?
Susan  The noise, the smoke, the chat-up lines, Michael . . .
Mona  You wouldn’t have seen him anyway! He was tucked away in that corner
getting all slippery with this little girl. I don’t even know who invited her!
Susan  That’s what I couldn’t have stood! Michael: fucking around with another
woman right under your nose!
Mona  What’s new?
Susan  I would’ve said something.
Mona  We used to go out to parties. I’d go and get some drinks, or go to the toilet,
and when I’d get back, where would he be? Pressing some girl up against a wall,
supposedly dancing! Michael’s a big slag, he always has been.
Susan  I’ve never understood this about you. You can’t tell me you love him!
Mona  You’ve never been in love, have you? Michael was my first real man. He’s
been the only man in my life since I was nineteen. A man like that becomes part of
your life. You don’t ‘go out’ with him, it’s not a ‘love affair’, he’s just there. It’s
pathetic, I know, but I can’t imagine life without him.
Susan  I can’t bear the way he treats you.
Mona  And that’s why you didn’t come to the party?
Susan  You never rang me last night. You can’t have been that bothered what had
happened to me!
Mona  So you need an invitation and then a call on the night to check you’re
coming? What’s eating you, woman?

A knock on the door. Mona opens the door. Michele walks in.
Mona  Ah, now we come to the interesting part of the story!
Michele  What story? Hi, Sue, where were you?
Mona  Now we come to the *very* interesting part of the story!

Michele helps Mona clean up.

Michele  What story?

Mona  Michele finds herself in the unenviable position of being in the same room as four of her ex-boyfriends.

Susan  Michele, you’re good!

Michele  Where were you?

Susan  I didn’t feel like it.

Michele  You missed one party!

Mona  What does Michele do?

Susan  Dunno.

Mona  She ignores all her ex-boyfriends and takes up with someone man!

Susan  Michele, you’re good!

Michele  They’re ex-boyfriends. Ex. You know, in the past.

Susan  So, who’s the new one?

Michele  A guy called Steven. I don’t know where he came from. Heaven, I’m sure!

Mona  Of course, Michele’s looking so good, all of her man dem a eye-up her backside. So Michele’s getting it on with number five while numbers one to four try their best all night long to get a dance.

Susan  Michele, you’re a star!

Mona  Could it be charisma?

Michele  Leave it out!

Mona  Could it be the perfume she uses?

Susan  What perfume do you use?

Michele  Who’ll make the tea?

Mona  She’s just a regular girl really. See? She drinks tea like the rest of us.

Susan  Want a cup, Mona?

Mona  No thanks.

Susan goes into the kitchen.

Michele  Mona?

Mona  Yes.

Michele  Have you still got that nice red dress?
Mona  You want to borrow it?
Michele  Could I?
Mona  Whatever you want.
Michele  And do you still have those nice red shoes?
Mona  Take them too.
Michele  Thanks, Mona. I’m going out tonight but all my stuff needs mending or dry cleaning.
Mona  Aren’t you tired?
Michele  Yeah, but I feel like going out (Beat.) Mona, you did see that Steven boy, didn’t you? Don’t you think he’s nice?
Mona  He bores me.
Michele  I could really check f’him!

Susan enters and puts two cups of tea on the table.
Mona  You’re always talking about man and going out.
Michele  What should I talk about?
Mona  I tell you, you love man. Man fever, you have. It’ll be a real problem in time to come.
Michele  How could it?
Mona  You rely too much on men. You think all a man thinks about is you? He’s got lots of things on his mind; other women for a start!
Michele  What can I do? I seem to get on better with guys. Girls really irritate me; they look at me and see where they can fault me.

Have you ever been to a party where women are just looking you up and down, checking you out to see which parts of them are more expensive than you. I’ve never been able to get into girls and what they talk about. All these girls at my school, all they ever talked about was marriage, kids and having big houses. I never wanted that. I always dreamt of having a little place of my own and doing what I wanted.

Susan  Your wish came true.
Michele  I’m working on it.
Susan  Sounds like you’re overdoing it!
Michele  We all like being complimented, don’t we? Where else am I going to get praise? If you stick with a guy too long, the compliments dry up, so do the presents, so does the passion. That’s why I keep checking new men. When you first get a guy, he takes real good care of you; takes you out, buys you things, tells you how good you look, and the loving is sweet! I like that.
Susan  You can’t live on that.

Michele  I live on it. Believe me, I live on it.

Mona  Like I said, you rely too much on men. You’ve never been alone for two minutes. You don’t even know who you are and what you’re capable of.

Michele  Don’t give me a hard time. All I came here to do was borrow the dress and some shoes.

Mona  The way you bring my things back sometimes, I might as well throw them away!

Michele  That’s not true. I’ll have the dress back, washed and ironed, by tomorrow night.

Mona . . . I’m going out with Marcus tonight . . . and I’ve got to have money. Could you lend us a fiver?

Mona  You think I print money?

Michele  As soon as I get my cheque I’ll pay you back.

Mona  By Friday. No later.

Michele  Mona . . . (Long pause.) . . . you know that whisky?

Mona  Yes.

Michele  What did you do with it? Have you got any left?

Mona  Yes, lots, take a bottle.

Michele  You’re an angel. (To Susan.) So, where were you? Having a little party of your own, were you?

Susan  I just didn’t feel like it.

Michele (to Mona)  If you can’t find the red dress, I’ll take the black one.

Mona (wearily)  Take whatever you want, Michele.

Michele  Have you got Steve’s number?

Mona (looking in her bag for her address book)  What, are you going to go from Marcus to Steve tonight? Michele your poom-poom must be well hot! (She finds her address book and shows Michele the number.) You want Michael too? Michael’s probably got some for you if you want it!

Michele (copying the number on a piece of paper)  Thanks. No, I’m not going to Steve tonight. Tomorrow.

Mona  Go on, have another pickney! That’s what you want, innit? You can’t breed pickney like dog!

Michele  Everyone’s allowed one mistake. I’m all equipped now, anyway, so it won’t happen again. (Beat.) He’s so nice though! How can I resist?
Mona: There are so many pretty boys, Michele.

Michele: I like pretty boys. Girl, I could eat him!

Mona (to Michele): Have you got any weed?

Susan (to Mona): You smoke too much weed.

Michele: No, she doesn’t.

Susan: I wasn’t talking to you!

Michele: There’s nothing wrong with a smoke every now and then.

Susan: I don’t like people who smoke a lot of weed. Everything’s too cool with them. They haven’t got a job, that’s cool. They haven’t paid the rent, that’s cool. They just got pregnant, that’s cool. Everyt’ing cool!

Mona: Have you?

Michele: Not with me.

Mona: I’ve got some, but just enough for one. I don’t like not having any. Sometimes, you just fancy a spliff.

Susan looks at her disapprovingly. Mona shrugs her shoulders.

Mona: I don’t know why you two bicker at each other.

Susan: We don’t bicker.

Michele: No, you just dig at me.

Susan: I dig at you only when I have a reason. It just so happens that I find your manners a little lacking these days.

Michele: What have manners got to do with it?

Mona: Are you sure all this doesn’t date back to Roland?

Susan: That was years back! I got over that years ago!

Mona: Are you sure?

Susan: Roland and I fell out, we split up, Michele was his next woman. I was glad to get rid of him.

Mona: That’s not what you said at the time.

Susan: I was caught up in the heat of the moment.

Mona: You accused Michele of one set of crimes!

Susan: Mona, stop shit-stirring! I wasn’t going to fall out with a friend over a man, a good friend at that.

Mona: So what is it between you two?

Michele: It’s nothing.
Susan  It’s not nothing, Michele. I don’t like to see you abuse Mona.

Michele  Times are bad for me right now. I’m supporting myself. What I need to find is a rich man.

Susan  You won’t find a rich man. You don’t move in those circles.

Michele  I feel bad but I just haven’t got any money. I’m feeding my baby rubbish. Things’ll get better. I’ll pay Mona back.

Susan  Things will get better?

Michele  (irritated; to Mona) Can I just take those things and go?

Mona  Go look in the bedroom, you’ll find them.

Michele  And where’s the whisky?

Mona  (pointing) Over there in the corner.

Michele  Mona . . . (Long pause.) . . . I know what Susan was just saying . . . but I haven’t got any food in the flat. My dole comes on Friday. Is there anything left over from the party?

Mona  There’s a tin of cheese biscuits on top of the fridge. I didn’t even open them.

Michele  Are you sure that’s all right?

Mona  You just sit there. I’ll get it all together for you.

She goes into the kitchen, then the bedroom, collecting things for Michele in some plastic bags. Uncomfortable silence between Susan and Michele.

Susan  It’s getting a bit bad these days, isn’t it?

Michele  What?

Susan  The way people treat each other.

Michele  shrugs her shoulders, not understanding.

Susan  The world is run by those who get the breaks. Some people are born into the breaks, others just strike lucky. Those who get the breaks – there’s not many of them – they rule our lives; we; the mass; the majority. There’s no such thing as an oppressed minority, most of us are part of the oppressed majority. What do we do, we minions, what do we do? We squabble amongst ourselves. They find that very funny.

Michele  Who?

Susan  Those in power; those who get the breaks. They laugh at us. As long as we run around in circles, they’ll be all right.

Michele, not really understanding, looks blankly at Susan, not sure what to say.

Susan  I’m talking about us, Michele. We help you. You’re meant to help us at some stage of the day.

Michele  I’m having it bad right now.