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Bamburi Beach: Life and
Love in a Time of Receding
Pandemic and Rising Fascism

crying and begging to be pushed so she could go on a journey.

And the Journey pushed the girl to her journey.

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Bamburi Beach: Life and Love in a Time of Receding Pandemic and Rising Fascism

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Dedicated to the life and work of Edwin Chiloba (1998-2023)

We came to Bamburi as a couple for a chance to work, relax and shelter from the COVID-19 pandemic. On the coast of the Indian Ocean north of Mombasa, we could walk along the stretches of yellow sand on the shore in the mornings, as well as along what was left of the mangroves after the erection of a seemingly endless series of enclosure walls; walls whose role had been reduced to futilely 'securing' the abandoned resorts that attested to the ruin-

ation wrought by the tourist industry. As the tide came in during the afternoons, we could swim in the clear waters of the sea before and after teaching online classes and attending Zoom meetings; classes and meetings whose role had been reduced to futilely 'securing' the abandoned hierarchies that attested to the ruination wrought by the ongoing replacement of academics by rightwing media as the preferred propagators of hegemonic discourse. There

Later in her life, the girl might become a pilot.

I want to be a pilot in the future.

was a place to cook in our room by the beach, so that we could avoid any more risk than necessary of contracting COVID in enclosed public spaces. Living as openly gay people since the 1970s, as long-term survivors of HIV since the 1980s, and as a married inter-racial couple for the past decade, we had both learned not only to survive prejudice, violence and illness, but also to thrive, despite the contingencies involved in the perilous, contradictory and serendipitous dance between living a fulfilling life and avoiding threats to our social, mental and physical well-being. It seems that life had thus prepared us to some extent for dealing with COVID.

And life had also prepared the people who lived and worked on Bamburi Beach to survive and thrive, despite contingencies much more life-threatening in many ways than the ones we had faced, in particular the ravages of successive waves of modern-era conquest, colonization and enslavement. The invaders came first from the Middle East, eventually to be replaced by colonizers from Europe, then by neo-colonizers from the IMF/World Bank/WTO, and finally by the sociopathic kleptocrats who have embezzled their way to control over the world economy. These oligarchs have now achieved coercive domination by engineering the mercenary-led terrorization and occupation of entire countries across the African continent. And they have achieved discursive domination by securing a virtual monopoly over the steady and addictive stream of hegemonic lies that spews from the devices that have managed to enslave all of us. As a result, there are a growing number of people in Kenya now living on and off of the brink of starvation, with almost all of the wealth generated by their land and labor flowing directly or indirectly to the

neo-colonial metropolises, with their farms and villages being enclosed by tourism, agribusiness, and massive landgrabs by foreign billionaires, with their access to water made increasingly precarious by climate-change induced drought, and with millions being alienated from their ancestral subsistence economy of abundance and thrust into a capitalist economy of scarcity.

Back to the illusory and addictive notions of being 'prepared' and 'secured'. Of course, one is never, and never can or should be, fully prepared or secure, because any life worth living is by definition dangerously yet blissfully out of control, replete with precarious, disruptive yet providential contingency, and riddled with frustrating, unsettling yet fortuitous unpredictability. For example, even though those who we met along the East African coast almost invariably treated us with respect as two men who had bonded with each other into a relationship that most found most appropriate to refer to as one of 'brothers', at the same time, just days after we left Kenya, LGBTQIA2S+ campaigner Edwin Chiloba was murdered and his body was left in a metal box at the side of a road along the border with neighboring Uganda, whose president has openly declared LGBTQIA2S+ people to be 'disgusting'. Uganda is also where fascist-leaning US religious organizations are flooding the country with money to wage political and social campaigns against non-cis-hetero-normative people. And even though we managed to avoid COVID while traveling to Kenya and back to the Caribbean through airports and on airplanes where we were among the few people wearing masks, at the same time, nearly all of our colleagues at home in Puerto Rico, who had just been forced by a fascist-leaning, politically appointed educational

bureaucracy to return to the classroom to teach face-to-face, ended up contracting the virus as a result, with some being hospitalized and others still suffering months later from the after-effects. All the while, the seemingly unending litany of massacres of non-cis-hetero-normative people in armed attacks on clubs and other venues in the USA has continued unabated, while 'Don't Say Gay' laws are ushering in a new era of proto-fascist censorship and repression in educational institutions in Florida and a growing number of other US states.

While we and most of the African tourists at our hotel in Bamburi appeared to have come seeking rest and refuge from the pressures of work and COVID, it soon became evident that most of the non-African hotel guests had come looking for something else. There was a steady flow of young African bodies into and out of the rooms, into and out of makeshift roadside shacks, and into and out of the surrounding bushes, where they attended as best they could to their mainly European descended customers' bodily and emotional needs for contact, for connectedness, for intimacy, often in ways that upended and transgressed cis-hetero-normativity. This deeply incongruous and paradoxical cluster of simultaneously intimate and alienating, oppressive and subversive, exploitative and leveling behaviors and relationships appeared to manifest itself far beyond the local sex trade, so that particular parts of the beach at particular times of day became chronotopes for even more radical, less commercially defined and less hegemonically enclosed trans-performances.

In the very early hours, as the sun was just rising in the dawn-green Indian Ocean sky, for example, the few people walking on a particular stretch of sand and mangrove just to the

north of our hotel included a fascinating and gender-bending series of what we might call here eminences, for lack of a better term, who unassumingly yet audaciously went about their daily business of enjoying and celebrating the spectacle of the stellar center of our planet's orbit rising over the sea, while hospitably inviting the sun, the beach, and everyone else on it to celebrate and enjoy their equally stellar and show-grabbing ascent above and beyond the cis-hetero-normative miasmas that infect our daily lives. Each day these stars of the morning emerged as the stars of the night were fading away: a gender-neutral jogger in a tutu reconfigured into a sports body glove, a seductively mustached Don Juan-like figure in flowing multicolored scarves and robes, a fully bedecked, beaded and bearded Sultana, etc. But these were not movie stars or superstars whose goal was to convince us that we ourselves could never really be artists, artistes and creators, these were more like the stars in the sky, whose gentle twinkling light reminds us that we too can shine, and subtly yet unceasingly invites us to do so. In contrast to the more commercial performances that predominated later on in the day on Bamburi Beach, none of these eminences seemed to be soliciting anything, and in contrast to many similarly stunning and spectacular trans-performances in the Global North, none even seemed to be trying to make a point.

And maybe making a point, or at least the need to make a point, is partly what is at stake here. Long before we were married, both of us had been part of the anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including, but not exclusive to, the movements, for LGBTQIA2S+ 'rights' and 'empowerment'.

During those years, we had participated in, and even helped to organize, some of the very first demonstrations demanding that non-cis-hetero-normative people 'come out of the closet and into the streets,' the first Gay Pride Parades, etc. We had spent so many years 'out of the closet', that when we found ourselves in places such as Kenya, which many in the Global North would consider 'non- gay-friendly' places, we had to stand back and take a critical look at what we mean when we say 'gay' or 'friendly'. If the Global North is so 'friendly' why is Bamburi so full of lonely Northerners looking to connect with someone, and why are children's books with LGBTQIA2S+ characters being banned in schools and libraries across the USA? And why should it be assumed that the ways in which people in the Global North construct such binaries as straight vs. gay, married vs. single, husband vs. brother, and 'in' vs. 'out' of the closet are somehow 'universal' and therefore must also be those by which the people who live by Bamburi Beach interpret and articulate their world?

Do the conceptual boxes that have been discursively assembled to compartmentalize, enclose and thus domesticate human sexualities and gendered performances reflect the diverse ways in which humans have understood and celebrated our sexualities and genderings over the 300,000 years or so of our presence on this planet, or are they an artifact of the hegemonic colonization of our minds which has taken place alongside the relatively recent rise of systems of domination over the past few thousand years? While our struggles against cis-hetero-normativity, for LGBTQIA2S+ 'rights' (including gay marriage) certainly have been necessary to begin to undo that colonization in the context of the Global West, when do

we move beyond questions of rights controlled by an artificially 'sovereign' state to more fundamental questions of our very real and ancestral sovereign *powers* in relation to our sexualities and genderings; questions which many in the Global South may be in a somewhat better position to help us address? When do we move beyond the proliferation of colonizing boxes and categories represented by ever growing lists of inhospitably exclusive labels?

This includes the litany of letters in the mega-category LGBTQIA2S+, which remains within the restrictive and hegemonic bounds of colonizing Western metaphysics, in spite of the very inclusive and hospitable impulses that have moved us over the years from 'Gay' to 'Lesbian and Gay' to 'Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual' to 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans' (LGBT) to 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual, Plus' (LGBTQIA+) to 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and 2 Spirited, Plus' (LGBTQIA2S+) to 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, 2 Spirited, Asexual and Ally, Plus' (LGBTQQIP2SAA+)? Maybe the 'Plus' at the end of this growing list should best be read not as an afterthought or the little bits and pieces that are left over. Perhaps this Plus represents the 95% of human sexualities and gendered performances that no hegemonic conceptual boxes could ever enclose, that Western science and Western ways of understanding the world do not give themselves permission to see, much less to come to terms with or to celebrate.

And then we come to the refreshingly unconvoluted, deceptively simple, 'awesomely material' and bountifully generous term 'brothers' that our Kenyan hosts so hospitably, yet so unreflectingly and unproblematically bestowed on us, like a blessing and a gift. There

On Thursday, the Journey herself was taken by surprise.

She had met a Date that lost control of herself.

is ample evidence of all kinds of non-cis-hetero sexualities and gendered performances in every human society at every period of human history. The most meaningful, fulfilling, and enduring aspects of our particular type of non-cis-hetero normative bonding have resonated from the deep past to become part and parcel of the linguistic, cultural and ethnic repertoires that have come together along the Indian Ocean coasts of Africa, Asia and Oceania over tens of thousands of years, if not longer. Before the extremely recent consolidation of cis-hetero-normativity and the institutions to enforce it, such as the nuclear family, the enclosure of affective and erotic bonding within the bounds of legal and/or religiously formalized heterosexual marriage, etc., all of which has taken place over no more than the last few hundred years in the Global West and over the span of mere decades in Kenya and most of the rest of the Global South, people everywhere enjoyed the kind of bonding that we have enjoyed as a 'gay married couple'. They probably have done so, however, as what they might have understood to be something like 'brother and brother,' rather than as 'husband and husband'. In fact, in most places and times, eroticism, affection and bonding into deep relationships were just as likely, or often more likely, to take place between people sexed as male and male or female and female, then between people sexed as male and female. Moreover, in most places and times, more formalized relationships that might have been the closest equivalent to what has generally come to be known as 'marriage' today have often been seen as a means to 'prepare' for and 'secure' procreation, rather than as a particularly appropriate venue, let alone the preferred venue, for erotic, affectionate, long-term bonding.

So, when our colleagues from the Global South express discomfort with the idea of 'gay marriage' this should be seen more as an opportunity for opening up conversations about how such erotic, affectionate non-cis-hetero-normative bonding happened and was talked about before and after the encroachment of rabidly patriarchal fundamentalist Abrahamic religions and associated hegemonic institutions such as schools, the media, the nuclear family, marriage, etc., rather than yet another opportunity to 'make a homohegemonic point', whereby, as Caribbean activists and scholars Krystal Nandini Ghisyawan and Carla K. Moore point out, "white, queer liberalism serves a neocolonizing function by instructing Global South and Third World countries on the right way to be queer" (Ghisyawan & Moore, 2020, p. 20).

Reference

- Ghisyawan, Krystal Nandini & Carla K. Moore. 2020. Tales from the field: Myths and methodologies for researching same sex-desiring people in the Caribbean. In Moji Anderson & Erin C. MacLeod (eds.), *Beyond Homophobia: Centring LGBTQ Experiences in the Anglophone Caribbean*, pp. 5-24. University of the West Indies Press.

near the Congo Mosque

on the Congo River,

usually called the Mwachema River.

The Name had not survived.