

Queer futures in Kenya: networks of care and the possibility of social transformation

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Abstract

This paper challenges the dominant discourse surrounding queer life in Kenya. Moving away from narratives that focus primarily on criminalisation, social stigma, and violence, it explores the alternative futures being constructed in the present. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025, across Eldoret, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Nairobi, the paper examines the ways queer people respond to structural marginalisation through networks of care, mutual support, digital connections, and community-led infrastructures of survival and protection. Utilising the Three Horizons framework, as well as scholarship on systems thinking and queer futurity, it argues that the survival strategies employed by the queer communities in Kenya are indicators of futures already taking shape; futures that reveal possibilities for belonging, safety, and social transformation.

1. Introduction: emerging queer futures

Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing (Muñoz, 2009: 1).

Much of what we know, and what is often discussed, about LGBTQ+ life in Kenya concerns criminalisation¹, violence, and struggle. International media reporting, as well as academic literature, has thus far been mainly focused on narrating queer Kenyan existence through the prism of vulnerability, exclusion, and danger. While such narratives are important, insofar as

¹ Kenya's Penal Code (2012): "Any person who... has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; or...permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for fourteen years" (Penal Code, Cap. 63 Laws of Kenya, 2012 [rev.], s. 162).

they reveal the conditions under which life is lived, they, nonetheless, produce a narrow understanding of the queer Kenyan experience, paying little attention to the many forms of queer world-making taking place in Kenya, and how communities across the country are shaping their own futures, despite circumstantial difficulties.

Across the four research² sites of my fieldwork, Eldoret, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nairobi, the queer people I encountered repeatedly described having to negotiate safety in a social environment in which visibility often carries violent consequences. Participants consistently recounted experiences of living under a system in which criminalisation, public hostility, policing, and digital harms, to name a few, have worked together to constrain the possibilities available to queer people. Scholarly work has also shown the continued influence of colonial-era legal frameworks, the role of religion in public morality, and the ways sexuality has become entangled with wider debates surrounding culture, citizenship and national identity; not just in Kenya, but also across many African contexts (Epprecht, 2008; Tamale, 2011; Kaoma, 2013; van Klinken, 2019; Wairuri, 2022).

However, alongside the accounts of struggle, another story began to emerge during the interviews. Beyond describing the conditions that limit their lives, the participants also spoke about the alternative ways in which they are responding to the structural hostilities that have come to shape their presence in an increasingly anti-LGBTQ+ Kenya. The participants spoke about community networks that mobilised during moments of crisis, activist-created infrastructures of support, and how digital spaces are utilised for connection. Rooted in ideas around collective responsibility, the participants described how safe housing projects, police sensitisation, mutual aid, and rapid response systems have become necessary tools for survival in a system that refuses to protect them, nor recognise them as full citizens. These observations form the basis of this paper, as it is less interested in how oppression and exclusion are produced, and more interested in what they produce in return.

² The data used for this paper is taken from the author's qualitative PhD study, conducted over a nine-month period in four Kenyan cities between 2024-2025.

What forms of social life emerge when communities are continuously exposed to exclusion and insecurity? What systems of care develop where formal protections are absent, ambiguous or weak? And what might such questions tell us about a possible future? In future studies terms, these questions are important precisely because social transformations seldom occur due to dramatic political breakthroughs (Sharpe et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2009), appearing instead through smaller and less visible processes in which people create and form new relationships, construct alternatives to existing institutions, and through a collective approach to organising life differently. While exploring these questions, the paper draws upon insights from systems thinking, futures studies, and scholarship on queer futurity.

Systems thinking allows us to view the mechanisms of oppression faced by queer Kenyans, such as criminalisation, religion, policing, public morality and digital violence, as being interconnected parts of a social system (Meadows, 2008; Ison and Straw, 2020). Future studies encourage us to pay attention to the possibilities that are visible in the present (Miller, 2018; Sharpe et al., 2016), while queer futurity, similarly, directs us to look at the ways in which queer communities imagine and enact futures; ones that exceed the limitations imposed by the existing arrangements (Muñoz, 2009). Thus, the argument being advanced in this paper is that, while queer exclusion remains a defining feature of the Kenyan social environment, queer Kenyans, on the other hand, are constructing infrastructures of care, safety, solidarity, and belonging that point to a more promising future. However small, localised, and fragile in some respects, these developments reveal futures already taking shape within the present; beyond simply asking whether this future exists, but what it might ultimately become.

The paper proceeds in three stages, utilising the ‘three horizons’ model, developed by Sharpe et al. (2016), as a three-step pathway to understanding how future possibilities may be realised. Horizon 1 examines the dominant system that structures everyday queer life in Kenya. Horizon 2 explores how the queer communities respond to present conditions, turning attention to the infrastructures of care that the community has established to collectively protect and support one another. Horizon 3 considers the future trajectories of these developments, and the kinds of futures that may be visible and/or imaginable. At its core, this paper is concerned with demonstrating what the realities of the present reveal to us about the possibilities of the future.

2. Horizon 1: The current system, the limits to queer possibility in Kenya

It is important to understand that futures do not emerge independently of present conditions; they are often shaped by existing institutions that determine what appears to be possible at any given time. Scholarship on queer futurity similarly contends that futures are informed by present-day structures of exclusion which, simultaneously, contain possibilities (Muñoz, 2009). For the queer people I spoke to in Kenya, social and cultural norms, legal structures, and relations of power, to name a few, are central highlights of an oppressive system that extends beyond criminalisation. There is no singular source for this oppression, as varying forms of exclusion are reproduced through everyday interactions and political narratives that reinforce the boundaries of belonging and social legitimacy. Understood through the perspective of systems-thinking, this is a social system in which forms of exclusion often operate through interconnected elements that reinforce one another through recurring patterns and continued processes (Meadows, 2008; Ison and Straw, 2020).

Throughout my fieldwork, participants identified religious authority, poor policing, public discourse and digital infrastructures, and so on, as some of the factors that challenge queer life in Kenya. Much like the way Keeling (2019) understands interlocking forms of exclusion as shaping the horizon through which queer futures become imaginable and/or foreclosed, the Kenyan environment for queer people is described as one in which multiple institutions appear to reinforce one another. Experiences of discrimination and public hostility, for example, are understood by the participants to be part of a wider system that continues to position queerness as incompatible with Kenya's prevailing social understandings of morality, religion, culture, and citizenship. These observations are also echoed by longstanding scholarship on sexuality in Africa, which has demonstrated that anti-LGBTQ+ political sentiment often operates within broader questions that surround national identity and social order rather than same-sex intimacy alone (Epprecht, 2008; Tamale, 2011; van Klinken, 2019).

A clear demonstration of this dynamic is the salient idea that queerness is somehow external to Kenya, with participants, during interviews, recalling repeat encounters with narratives that frame diverse sexual and gender identities as culturally illegitimate, immoral, foreign, a

Western import, and ‘un-African,’ even. The vast literature on queer African studies has long challenged such claims, documenting accounts of divergent sexual and gender practices that predate the colonial projects across the continent (Epprecht, 2008; Murray and Roscoe, 1998; Tamale, 2011). Such anti-queer narratives permeate throughout Kenyan society to the extent that they circulate across many different institutions simultaneously; appearing in religious sermons, political speeches, social media discussions and everyday conversations.

For queer people in Kenya, LGBTQ+ exclusion is not limited to disagreements over rights but also includes an ongoing dispute over who belongs within the national community. Examples of these phenomena come to the surface whenever queer lives enter the public debate, as the murder of LGBTQ+ activist Edwin Chiloba in 2023 highlights (BBC, 2023; Elmi, 2026). On my visit to Eldoret, in western Kenya, where Chiloba lived and his dead body was ultimately found on the roadside, in a trunk, while “his mouth was stuffed with socks, and his face bound with denim” (BBC, 2023; Elmi, 2026), his friends and colleagues reflected on the public discourse that followed his demise. Many of them found it striking how the conversations shifted drastically away from the violent murder itself and towards wider discussions and disapprovals of sexuality and gender expressions (The Standard, 2023; Elmi, 2026).

Once his sexuality became public knowledge, and images of his gender expression, or as the public perceived it, circulated online, the participants told me that instead of seeking justice for the tragedy that befell their friend, the public was more focused on raising questions of morality; using Chiloba’s death as an example of what happens when you live an immoral life. In other words: he had it coming. In queer futurity terms, the aftermath of Chiloba’s death is representative of the way queer lives are often positioned as threats to the moral future of the nation, making public debates about sexuality fundamentally about debates on whose futures are considered worthy and/or legitimate (Muñoz, 2009; Edelman, 2004).

In the coastal city of Mombasa, similar debates occurred when the Kenyan Supreme Court, in 2023, ruled to affirm the rights of LGBTQ+ organisations to register legally with the country’s NGO Board. Politicians and religious leaders transformed the legal matter into a public controversy concerning cultural and national moral values, with many arguing the ‘slippery slope’ theory, implying that such a ruling will ultimately lead to the legalisation of gay marriage

(VOA Africa, 2023; Ombuor, 2023; The Star, 2023). Mombasa County, part of the Muslim majority coastal region³, saw a wave of protests (VOA Africa, 2023) that inevitably turned violent. On my visit to Mombasa, participants spoke about how LGBTQ+ organisations, retailers with queer staff, housing compounds that rented to queer people, and neighbourhoods associated with LGBTQ+ residents were raided and attacked.

Queer individuals fled their homes; advocacy groups vacated offices and the LGBTQ+ community organised for safe housing against the violent protesters. In both situations, the incidents in Eldoret and Mombasa, the aftermaths of the murder and the court ruling, demonstrate how quickly queer visibility can be mobilised to express the public's anxieties about cultural morality in Kenya. Of course, religion plays a significant role within these processes, as participants consistently identify religious discourse, as well as religious institutions, as principal influences in propagating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment across the country. Research on the debates on African sexual politics reflects these findings, as notions of morality, family values, and appropriate social conduct are used to dismiss the normative existence of LGBTQ+ identities in the continent (Tamale, 2011; Kaoma, 2013; van Klinken, 2019).

Such religiosity is never seen as a private matter for the participants, but rather as an intrusive force, and often encountered in public, and in everyday discussions, shaping the political landscape, informing community attitudes, influencing family relationships, and ultimately legitimising exclusion. For queer people in Kenya, religious narratives often contribute to an environment wherein their identities, and sometimes their entire personhoods, are deemed problematic, morally deviant, alien, and therefore underserving of recognition. Exclusion, in this regard, extends beyond the present moment, and into an imagined moral future, one that restricts national citizenship based on cultural, societal and moral authenticity (Ahmed, 2006; Muñoz, 2009).

³ According to the [US State Department](#), while 85.5% of Kenyans are Christian, Muslim communities represent 11% of Kenya's population, the majority of which occupy prominent public life in the coastal and the northeast regions.

The cumulative impact of these social attitudes is also felt across state institutions and is particularly evident in the ways in which queer people interact with the police. The findings of my research demonstrate how policing is rarely confined to actual law enforcement, with participants often describing policing as being shaped by uncertainty, legal ambiguity, discretion, and suspicion. As same-sex intimacy is criminalised in Kenya, with penalties of up to 14 years of imprisonment (Penal Code, 2012), and because private sexual acts between individuals are difficult to prove, unless coerced, queer people note that police officers often target identity and visibility rather than specific criminal acts. Wairuri (2022; 2026), while researching from the perspectives of both the police and queer victims of police violence, documents the ways in which the police officers in Kenya operate through anti-LGBTQ+ stigma, purposefully targeting queer persons based on their perceived identity.

Harassment, extortion, humiliation, unlawful detainment and the denial of protection, are reported by queer individuals as harms they experience simply because they are perceived, or appear, to be queer. Several of my interviewees who experienced police violence observed that they had inadvertently attracted the attention of the officers who perpetrated the harms against them not because of anything they had done but how they looked, dressed, moved, who they were with, or how they expressed themselves in public. These encounters are significant because they extend beyond individual experience and reveal how legal ambiguity for queer Kenyans operates in practice.

For example, Kenya's 2010 Constitution (Republic of Kenya, 2010) contains robust provisions in its Bill of Rights relating to the dignity of the individual, equality, human rights, and the rights of the arrested and detained; rights to formal citizenship from which the participants feel excluded. Coupled with the criminalisation of same-sex intimacy, and the social stigma attached to all forms of queerness and diverse gender expressions, the participants describe a legal contradiction that produces uncertainty as it pertains to their relationship with state institutions. While rights as a citizen, regardless of sexual and gender identity, exist on paper via the Bill of Rights (Republic of Kenya, 2010), many feel unable to rely on them when interacting with the police, or seeking legal protection, simply because their queer identity is understood to be criminalised. Such uncertainty generates a broader sense that inclusion and exclusion are not fixed categories, but conditions that may shift depending on the circumstance,

visibility, and the attitudes of those exercising institutional power, such as individual police officers.

These exact dynamics increasingly extend into the digital sphere, wherein my research finds that queer people rely on online platforms to find community, build relationships, organise politically and access information. Despite these affordances, however, online worlds can also expose queer people to a multitude of vulnerabilities, as individuals report incidents of blackmail, sextortion, cyberbullying, forced outing, and doxxing as harms reproduced through digital visibility and interactions, linking them to wider social conditions. These are widespread concerns throughout Kenya and are corroborated by countrywide synthesis of digital violence against queer people (Bhalla, 2024; The Guardian, 2022; Karanja, 2016).

For queer people in Kenya, the threat of online exposure, or outing, carries immense power because the offline consequences remain dangerous. Social ostracisation, family rejection, potential evictions, and public violence, alongside the criminalisation of same-sex intimacy, has meant that digital communication technologies are a source of risk for many participants. Digital violence, therefore, is not thought of as entirely separate from offline realities when it comes to queer people in Kenya, rather it is embedded within the same structures that shape queer life more broadly.

The findings suggest that Horizon 1 is better understood as an interconnected system, as opposed to a collection of isolated institutions and accounts (Meadows, 2008; Ison and Straw, 2020). The many factors that impact queer life, such as criminalisation, public morality, religious authority, policing practices, media discourse, and digital infrastructures, collectively produce vulnerability, while at the same time narrowing the horizons of possibility for queer Kenyans. Questions surrounding visibility, safety, citizenship and belonging are continually being negotiated by queer people, as I discuss further below, despite the social environment remaining conditional, contested, and precarious. Even though the participants describe such exclusionary circumstances, they, nonetheless, also display efforts to work around, resist, and reimagine their everyday existence within these conditions, suggesting that alternative futures are already being constructed within the cracks of the dominant system, as this paper now turns to discuss.

3. Horizon 2: Building a queer Kenyan future in the present

While Horizon 1 describes the system that constrains queer life, it falls short of explaining how queer people navigate the environment such a system is built upon. The most striking of the findings in my research is that participants are constantly formulating strategies to circumvent the structures that seek to exclude them. Such strategies are the result of continued negative interactions with the dominant social structures, to which the participants are finding alternative ways of adapting to them, instead of rejecting them altogether, illustrating the ways in which communities reluctantly work with, and sometimes reshape system dynamics (Meadows, 2008; Ison and Straw, 2020). Rarely did the queer people speak of their strategies in the language of futurity, choosing instead to view them as survival tactics, ones that centre safety, community, friendship, and necessity.

When viewed through the lens of future studies, however, such tactics could be understood as efforts to create alternative possibilities in the present, through which alternative worlds are imagined (Muñoz, 2009). This is an attempt to organise life differently in contexts where existing institutions have failed to provide protection, recognition, and/or belonging. Futures are seldom produced through sudden institutional transformations, rather they emerge through small and provisional experiments (Muñoz, 2009; Halberstam, 2011), and gradual shifts in the ways people relate to one another, respond to shared problems, and create alternatives to existing arrangements.

In the queer Kenyan context, the findings reveal that Horizon 2 is already visible in the present. Throughout my fieldwork, not only did I witness these dynamics, but participants also relayed to me practices that point towards these kinds of alternative futures. For example, community networks emerge where formal protections are absent; new forms of kinship develop where traditional sources of support become unreliable; digital spaces create opportunities that are difficult to find and sustain offline; activists build relationships with state institutions and create protective infrastructures that expand what is possible for queer people living under conditions of criminalisation.

Perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon can be seen in the forms of care that the queer Kenyans, both as individuals and as a community, provide for one another during moments of crisis. Throughout my fieldwork, queer people often recounted experiences of violence as being endured collectively rather than as individuals. For example, whenever participants were ever attacked, displaced, threatened, outed, or otherwise harmed, support systems often appeared around them. These kinds of practices reflect forms of queer worldmaking wherein alternative modes of care and support are produced as a response to an extremely exclusionary environment (Muñoz, 2009).

Friends would often provide emergency accommodation, activists would mobilise resources, LGBTQ+ organisations would coordinate responses, and fellow community members would step in and share information, offer financial support and practical assistance. Such interventions are developed in reaction to immediate circumstances, revealing a broader ethic of collective responsibility operating within these queer communities. The aftermath of Edwin Chiloba's murder, as previously discussed in this paper, provides a powerful example of these scenarios. As the case generated intense public attention, accompanied by a national backlash that placed queer people in Eldoret under heightened scrutiny, participants spoke about the ways in which the community mobilised a response: Chiloba's friends, colleagues, and fellow queer activists supported each other through the funeral process, managed media engagement, attended court hearings, and provided practical and emotional support during an exceptionally difficult period. What stood out most in my conversations with the queer community in Eldoret was that their response to the crisis extended beyond grief, as it focused more on the wellbeing of the wider community and collective responsibility in the face of national scrutiny.

Such practices challenge the tendency to view community care solely as a response to exclusion. Certainly, these networks of care emerge because people need support, but they also reveal alternative ways of imagining social relations. Care, in this regard, is not organised primarily through the state or a formal welfare structure, but rather by embedded networks of friendship, activism, mutual aid, and community solidarity. For queer Kenyans, 'care' functions as a key component of their survival strategies while, at the same time, it also functions as a way of constructing forms of belonging that extend beyond traditional institutions. Such arrangements could, perhaps, be categorised as what Weston (1991)

describes as ‘chosen families,’ and what queer future scholarship refers to as the creation of an alternative social world, one that is primarily organised through acts of care, reciprocity and belonging (Weston, 1991; Muñoz, 2009).

Alternative safety infrastructures also emerge from the data, as queer people rely less and less on formal institutional protections. As previously demonstrated elsewhere in this paper, participants view interactions with the police as unpredictable and potentially harmful. Likewise, digital spaces are equally deemed to be somewhat dangerous due to the prevalence of blackmail, harassment and doxxing, with limited recourse from either the state or digital platforms themselves. As a response, queer communities have developed their own set of mechanisms for combating digital harms, which include the creation of WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and informal community networks that work as rapid-response systems. The participants describe using these channels/networks to share information about potential threats, unsafe locations, blackmail schemes, and/or highlight known blackmailers and hostile individuals, while also circulating up-to-date security concerns to the wider queer community.

These networks allow queer persons to avoid perilous situations by facilitating immediate responses when community members may be experiencing harm. Some participants, particularly those whose queer identity is outwardly visible, greatly emphasised how these systems had become essential tools for navigating everyday queer life in Kenya. Safe housing also represents another important dimension to these infrastructures, particularly during periods of heightened hostility, such as the anti-LGBTQ+ protests in Mombasa, where community networks organised protective systems, mobilised accommodation, and pooled support for individuals who faced immediate threats.

These initiatives are often small in scale, and often resource constrained. Nonetheless, they function as practical alternative solutions to the unwillingness of formal state institutions in protecting LGBTQ+ Kenyans. These arrangements move beyond individual strategies of survival, as they involve the whole community in the collective attempt to create systems that may reduce vulnerabilities. Such safety infrastructures, as described by the participants in this study, are, therefore, experiments in forms of security that are organised through solidarity,

trust, and mutual responsibility, constituting a prefigurative collective life that anticipates a safer future (Keeling, 2019; Muñoz, 2009).

Digital spaces are also highlighted in the findings as providing opportunities for creating new forms of community. For many participants, these spaces are where they first encountered people like themselves; other fellow queers. Digital worlds, therefore, extend beyond being mere methods of communication, as they become spaces in which a queer future is socially visible (Keeling, 2019). Social media platforms, WhatsApp networks, and other digital spaces are frequently foregrounded as entry points into the wider Kenyan queer community. Albury and Bryon (2016) argue that while online platforms are potentially risky for queer people, they, nonetheless, also create “a sense of safety” and “intimacy” (2016: 1), demonstrating the dichotomous nature of digital spaces.

Likewise, and despite the inherent dangers attached, the participants recount using these platforms to learn about their sexuality and/or gender identity, engage with activist organisations, find friends, develop relationships, romantic or otherwise, and seek sexual partners. This is particularly pronounced for individuals who live and/or came of age in non-urban contexts where visibility is immensely risky, and for whom digital spaces provide opportunities for connections that are difficult to achieve elsewhere. Several participants spoke of periods in their lives when they believed themselves to be isolated, only to discover, through social media, that wider communities of queer people existed in Kenya, with whom they could connect.

For some, the connections were about forming friendships, for others it led to a pathway of activism, support networks and long-term romantic relationships. These accounts reveal that not only have digital technologies facilitated communication and connection for queer people in Kenya, but they have also enabled the formation of communities that might otherwise have remained inaccessible. More importantly, when considered alongside the broader question of futurity, communities are not only support networks, but they are also spaces in which people imagine alternative possibilities. The new forms of belonging that continue to arise from these networks will no doubt lead to the development of social worlds that challenge the hostile environment produced by Horizon 1.

Not all responses to oppression and exclusion, however, involve a complete withdrawal from formal institutions, as the queer community also describes carrying out efforts to directly engage with them. This is particularly evident in the findings and in the way LGBTQ+ activist groups and advocacy organisations are approaching sensitisation programmes with the police; working alongside law enforcement officials to train officers on the issues impacting queer people and their experiences of negative policing. Activists work from a top-down approach within law enforcement, fostering relations with county chiefs to conduct workshops, and create opportunities for dialogue, and understanding; often in humanising language aimed at officers who might otherwise be prejudiced.

Most of the activists I spoke to are realistic about the limits of this endeavour, however, rarely viewing sensitisation as a complete solution to police violence and/or institutional discrimination. Nevertheless, activists tell me that the initiatives have produced some tangible improvements over time; claiming that there has been proven success in some specific contexts. These sensitisation programmes reveal how the queer community is enacting social change, refusing to wait for institutions to transform themselves, and attempting to reshape them from within. Through a positive and amiable approach, and through incremental steps, the participants say that they believe that even highly resistant systems could be influenced over time.

Seen through the lens of future studies, such initiatives and attitudes represent another example of Horizon 2 in action. While the limited success of these programmes may not reflect a fundamentally transformed system, they do, however, create openings within existing institutions and expand the range of possible futures available to those operating within them. Such developments also reveal that futures rarely ever arrive fully formed, but that they might emerge through small practices that initially appear marginal but gradually reshape how people organise social life. These practices are more than mechanisms for survival; they are also signals for change, demonstrating a future that is already being constructed (Muñoz, 2009), however unevenly, in the present.

4. Horizon 3: From survival to transformation: what are the developing futures in queer Kenya?

Throughout the urban areas I travelled to in Kenya, such as Eldoret, Mombasa, Kisumu, and Nairobi, queer people often spoke about long-range visions of social transformation, but only as secondary to immediate concerns. Finding safe housing, avoiding police harassment, supporting victims of violence, navigating threats, and ensuring that community members could access basic services were issues that were far more prioritised than actions and ideas that attempt to reshape society altogether. A key insight of future studies is that transformative change begins through practical responses to present-day problems, with the aim of gradually reshaping lives and conditions, and imagining possibilities (Miller, 2018; Sharpe et al., 2016; Muñoz, 2009).

From this perspective, many of the support and survival-oriented practices carried out by queer Kenyans, as previously discussed in earlier sections of this paper, are indicative of alternate futures fledging from present conditions, a response to the dominant system; exceeding the limitations imposed by the current structure, while remaining rooted within it (Muñoz, 2009). Such developments are not necessarily replacing Horizon 1, but they do, however, reveal a potential system that may sit alongside it and, at times, may challenge it. Moreover, viewed through the system-thinking prism, structural change becomes visible, and perhaps imaginable, precisely when transformations begin to emerge from alternative relationships and practices (Meadows, 2008; Ison and Straw, 2020).

The previous section provided a glimmer of what this potential system might look like in action, as it paints the possibility of a future in which infrastructures are organised through community rather than through state institutions. A recurring theme across much of the research data is the participants' inability to place trust in the hands of the state, nor its formal systems of protection, such as the police. Routine policing is frequently described as actively harmful, as the mere act of reporting a crime, for visibly queer persons, carries the risk of humiliation, extortion, brutality, and/or further victimisation. As a result of this lived experience of violent policing, the queer community has developed alternative mechanisms of

protection in the face of institutional absence, including varying modes of emergency support systems and community-response networks.

Many participants note that these systems are not designed as temporary substitutes, instead they are well-trusted and well-established components of queer Kenyan life which have proven themselves to be dependable and successful in times of great need. These findings suggest that a possible trajectory for a queer Kenyan future relies on the continued strengthening of these community-based safety infrastructures that, in the face of continued criminalisation, eliminate the need for state protection. These infrastructures are a clear example of queer worldmaking, whereby communities construct alternative mechanisms of protection outside the dominant social and legal arrangements (Muñoz, 2009; Keeling, 2019).

This new system rebalances the production of security, turning safety into something that is generated collectively rather than something that is delivered from above. This is already visible in the ways the participants have reported to responding to crises, how information travels through activist networks, how individuals seek assistance from community organisations, and how the most vulnerable members of the queer community are often protected through collective action. These measures bypass formal institutions, rule-based governance and state apparatus whose interventions have thus far been detrimental to the security and welfare of queer Kenyans.

Redressing concerns surrounding belonging are also central to this new system, with the collective co-creation of social relationships being a salient feature in the data. Participants relay forming alternative structures that defy conventional understandings of family, community, and citizenship, describing friendship groups, activist networks, digital communication, and support systems that function as significant sources of identity and belonging; ones that provide forms of care and support that are unavailable elsewhere. Scholars of queer kinship have long argued that LGBTQ+ people often actively construct and continue to build upon alternative ways of belonging, ones that not only challenge but also question the normative and traditional assumptions regarding family and social bonding (Weston, 1991; Ahmed, 2006).

Horizon 1 demonstrated an environment of exclusion that positions queer people as deviant outsiders of Kenyan society, one in which they are foreign to preconceived cultural ideas and norms around family, religion, morality, and national identity. However, the result of such exclusions is neither complete isolation nor further retreat from society, although that does occur to an extent. Instead, it has generated a queer community that challenges dominant assumptions about how belonging should be organised. Digital communities are a perfect example of how these relationships are forged, and identities are strengthened, as scholars of queer digitality have pointed out that digital communication tools “can help people experience a sense of togetherness...and enable feelings of belonging” (Eickers, 2024: 2).

Prior sections of this paper have noted the ways in which online spaces are used to glean information, explore one’s sexuality and gender identity, and find like-minded queer Kenyans, particularly in contexts where there are limits to offline connections. These experiences demonstrate a future in which belonging becomes increasingly networked, flexible, and community-based, rather than being solely dependent on traditional forms; paving the way for new kinds of relational forms and collective connections to emerge (Keeling, 2019; Muñoz, 2009). That is not to say that traditional forms would disappear completely, but that it points to a broader expansion of the ways belonging may be experienced and/or enacted in the future.

This future is also characterised by the push for gradual institutional change, as previously mentioned in this paper. Despite the persistence of queerphobia and social stigma that permeate across Kenyan institutions, particularly in government and policing, as well as religious organisations, and the wider society, the queer Kenyan community makes efforts to engage with some of them. The police sensitisation initiatives mentioned in prior sections of this paper are perhaps a clear sign of how this engagement could work in the long-term. Instead of abandoning interactions with law enforcement, due to prior negative experiences, activist groups and LGBTQ+ advocacy organisations interact with law enforcement, seeking to build relationships with officers and create opportunities for dialogue to gradually influence police practices and ultimately reduce harms for the wider queer community.

These efforts are significant because of the assumptions that underpin them: the belief that systems can, over time, be changed from within, even if that change is not immediate but slow,

and perhaps uneven. Such an orientation towards gradual transformation echoes queer futurity's concerns with identifying openings for change within existing structures rather than wait for revolutionary change (Muñoz, 2009). The programmes have limitations; they may work in some cities and not in others, some officers may be 'friendly,' while others are hostile. Participants do, however, point to specific contexts where dramatic changes have occurred over a ten-year period, like in Mombasa County where, despite the presence of a dogmatically religious police force, they say relations between the police and queer people have improved significantly due to sensitivity training programmes. By actively intervening in state institutions the queer community is creating opportunities for a future in which formal systems are more responsive, and more accountable to queer lives, however imperfect.

In futures studies, such possibilities, as described here in Horizon 3, are not predictions, nor are they a representation of a utopian vision of what should happen, instead they are what may be conceivable through developments already taking place (Muñoz, 2009; Sharpe et al., 2016). The research data does not direct me to a single queer future in Kenya, yet common themes emerge while people describe aspirations. Queer people in Kenya long for safety, dignity, recognition, and belonging; imagining futures in which they are less fearful of the world around them, where infrastructures are stronger, violence is less prevalent, and queer life is less constrained by socio-legal structures.

These aspirations remain difficult to realise while many of the barriers discussed in Horizon 1 continue to shape everyday life. Yet the queer community persists in its co-creation of alternatives that circumvent the harmful realities of daily queer life in Kenya. The alternatives, such as the community care networks, and informal welfare systems, and so on, do not yet necessarily constitute a transformed future, however, they allow queer Kenyans the ability to imagine certain futures easier. This is why Horizon 2 is important: it reminds us that the future is not in some inaccessible location somewhere beyond comprehension, nor beyond the present, rather it is already visible in the structures people create and the possibilities they insist on building, despite the inherited conditions. For queer communities in Kenya, life remains uncertain, partial, often contested, but they are steadfast in their belief and potential for a better life.

5. Conclusion: beyond survival

This paper began with the observation that much of what we know about Kenyan queer life has often been relayed through stories of violence and struggle. Criminalisation, police abuse, digital harms, extortion, family rejection, public hostility, and everyday uncertainty have come to symbolise the lives of many of the participants in this study. Horizon 1 demonstrated how these experiences stem from socio-legal structures that limit the possibilities available to LGBTQ+ people across the many regions and cities explored. These findings, however, do not entirely tell the story, often leaving out the kinds of alternative systems being developed by queer communities; ones rooted in survival, and the forging of new paths for existing within a hostile environment structured by exclusion.

Moreover, this is an example of a community actively building different ways of organising social life, representing efforts to create conditions in which queer lives can thrive, despite the constraints imposed upon them. More importantly, the participants are aware of the fragility of these practices, as Horizon 1 is still powerful: societal oppression still exists, criminalisation and public hostility, for example, remain in place. Perhaps viewed through a more positive lens, the participants' accounts demonstrate that hope is not necessarily something people only possess, but that it is also something people do.

Much in the way Muñoz (2006; 2009) describes the concept of “hope” as an “emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence” (2006: 10), the participants convey a great deal of collective optimism in their endeavour to pursue a safer and less challenging society for themselves. There is no certainty for queer Kenyans that legal reform, in the way of decriminalisation or formal protection, or social acceptance, will arrive soon, or that it even looms in the distance. Yet they are focused on fixing the present and finding ways to navigate a harmful system. Beyond survival and ‘hope,’ however, they are actively, persistently, and deliberately, constructing an environment in which different futures are imaginable.

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