Introduction
Politicized Homophobia in Malawi

In *Politicizing Sex in Contemporary Africa: Homophobia in Malawi*, I analyze politicized homophobia and its material consequences on different Malawian constituencies, namely gender and sexual minorities and HIV/AIDS, human rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, and women's rights organizations. Two arguments motivate this book. First, I argue that politicized homophobia is a strategy used by African political elites interested in consolidating their moral and political authority.[1] This strategy necessitates that elites activate and politicize homophobia; the act of politicization turns homophobia from an interpersonal phenomenon into a wider set of antihomosexual discourses and practices that saturate political rhetoric. Theorizing how politicized homophobia operates as a strategy challenges Afro-pessimist[2] assumptions that homophobia is spreading unchecked like a virus throughout Africa, infecting politicians and African populations with rampant homophobia. Political elites in several African countries have used politicized homophobia to punish gender and sexual minorities while claiming to defend their country

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[1] Political elites encompass elected state officials, high-ranking state appointees, traditional leaders, religious clerics, and media. For a discussion of elite actors involved in the politics of homosexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, see Joanna Sadgrove, Robert M. Vanderbeck, Johan Andersson, Gill Valentine, and Kevin Ward, "Morality Plays and Money Matters: Towards a Situated Understanding of the Politics of Homosexuality in Uganda," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 50, no. 1 (2012): 106, 109.

[2] Afro-pessimism refers to perspectives that treat many African countries as having failed or failing states and emphasizes Africans' lack of agency and vulnerability to war, poverty, illness, and other social inequalities. Western perceptions of African governments and societies drive many Afro-pessimist assessments. John W. de Gruchy asserts, "'Afro-pessimism' provides a rationale for the West to forget the role which European powers played in the subjugation of the continent and the destruction of [African] econom[ies]." John W. de Gruchy, "Christian Witness at a Time of African Renaissance," *The Ecumenical Review*, 49, no. 4 (1997): 476.

against foreign and domestic critics.[3] Malawi constitutes an excellent country in which to study the contours and effects of politicized homophobia because it is not an exceptional case.[4] If scholars select cases in which homophobia is perceived to take a violent form, such a selection can distort explanations of politicized homophobia, as they will associate homophobia with violence. Although politicized homophobia remains an active strategy in Malawi, it has not inspired widespread antigay vigilantism that has unfolded elsewhere.[5]

Second, I contend that politicized homophobia in Malawi ensnares not only gender and sexual dissidents but also different social movements, such as HIV/AIDS, human rights, LGBT rights, and women's rights movements. As vocal critics of state corruption and financial mismanagement, these social movements became cast as dangerous opponents of President Bingu wa Mutharika's leadership. State, religious, and traditional leaders seized politicized homophobia as a strategy to besmirch activists' credibility, alleging that social movement leaders were secretly trying to legalize same-sex marriage and to upend

[3] Patrick Awondo, Peter Geschiere, and Graeme Reid, "Homophobic Africa? Toward a More Nuanced View," *African Studies Review*, 55, no. 3 (2012): 145–168; Ashley Currier, "Political Homophobia in Postcolonial Namibia," *Gender & Society*, 24, no. 1 (2010): 110–129; Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance* (New York: Zed, 2013); Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Thabo Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo)Sexuality in Africa," *Africa Today*, 58, no. 1 (2001): 56–67; Stella Nyanzi, "Rhetorical Analysis of President Jammeh's Threats to Behead Homosexuals in the Gambia," in *Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory, Citizenship*, edited by S. N. Nyeck and Marc Epprecht (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 67–87; Sylvia Tamale, "Confronting the Politics of Nonconforming Sexualities in Africa," *African Studies Review*, 56, no. 1 (2013): 31–45.
[4] Crystal Biruk, "'Aid for Gays': The Moral and the Material in 'African Homophobia' in Post-2009 Malawi," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 52, no. 3 (2014): 447–473; Tara McKay and Nicole Angotti, "Ready Rhetorics: Political Homophobia and Activist Discourses in Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda," *Qualitative Sociology*, 39, no. 4 (2016): 397–420.
[5] Ashley Currier and Joëlle M. Cruz, "The Politics of Pre-Emption: Mobilisation against LGBT Rights in Liberia," *Social Movement Studies* 2018: www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14742837.2017.1319265; Human Rights Watch, *The Issue Is Violence: Attacks on LGBT People on Kenya's Coast* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015), www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/kenya0915_4upr.pdf; Human Rights Watch, "Uganda: Anti-Homosexuality Act's Heavy Toll," May 14, 2014, www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/14/uganda-anti-homosexuality-acts-heavy-toll.

the government. In addition, elites used politicized homophobia to divide social movements, fomenting discord among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Politicized homophobia constrained social movement campaigns and strategies, undermining solidarity partnerships between NGOs. In other words, politicized homophobia turned activists against one another. Portraying politicized homophobia as a phenomenon that only affects gender and sexual dissidents underestimates how government leaders, political parties, and other elites politicize sexualities to control postcolonial African politics.

To trace the rise and effects of politicized homophobia in Malawi, I draw on fifty-one interviews that I conducted in the summer of 2012 with HIV/AIDS, human rights, LGBT rights, and women's rights activists in Malawi about how politicized homophobia affected their organizing. Activist interviews highlighted how politicized homophobia interrupted social movement campaigns and sowed conflict among activist organizations.[6] I returned to Malawi in 2014 to interview eighty lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people about how politicized, social, and religious homophobias affect their lives, if at all.[7] These interviews allowed me to track the reach of politicized homophobia. I also gathered 1,921 articles from Malawian

[6] I developed a list of possible activists to interview from my review of Malawian newspaper coverage. I initially approached activists affiliated with the Centre for the Development of People (CEDEP) and Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) for interviews in 2012; these activists put me in contact with leaders of human rights, HIV/AIDS, and women's rights NGOs in Blantyre, Lilongwe, and Zomba. CEDEP staff also referred me to LGBT activists and volunteers who were willing to speak with me about their perceptions of how politicized homophobia influenced their organizing. I conducted all interviews in English.

[7] With assistance from CEDEP staff and volunteers, two Malawian research assistants and I interviewed eighty LGB people in Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Mzuzu, and Nkhata Bay. CEDEP staff and volunteers helped circulate information among local LGB constituents about my interest in conducting interviews with interested LGBT people. I conducted interviews in English, and research assistants interviewed research participants in Chichewa and English. I provided food and nonalcoholic drinks for research participants, roundtrip fare for their trips on public transportation, and mobile telephone airtime vouchers to thank them for their time participating in interviews. Multiple efforts to recruit transgender-identified research participants were unsuccessful. My position as a white, US middle-class, cisgender bisexual woman researcher may have discouraged potential research participants from responding to interview invitations; in addition, they may have been uncomfortable with the prospect of being interviewed by cisgender Malawians.

newspapers from 1995 to the present that mention homosexuality and homophobia.[8] I analyze newspaper articles to identify how, when, and why homosexuality entered political discourse in Malawi and to classify and analyze different meanings that became associated with homosexuality.

Next, I describe gender and sexual diversity politics in postcolonial Malawi before explaining my approach to the politicization of homosexuality. Then, I theorize politicized homophobia as a strategy that political elites use. In justifying my preference for "politicized homophobia," I review different arguments for using "homophobia" as a concept. I also distinguish politicized homophobia from social homophobia before defining reactive, proactive, and preemptive politicized homophobias. After distinguishing my approach to politicized homophobia from the sex-panic framework, I introduce readers to what I call the "architecture of politicized homophobia," different tropes that combine to make it a malleable discourse and practice. At the end of the chapter, I present an overview of the book's chapters.

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[8] My data collection goes back to 1995 for two reasons. Malawi transitioned away from a dictatorship to a democracy in 1994. John McCracken, *A History of Malawi, 1859–1966* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2012). I anticipated that it would take some time for civil society actors to exploit the political opening that democratization represented before they addressed same-sex sexualities. Because Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe began making antigay threats in 1995, I did not expect to find evidence of politicized homophobia in Malawi before this year. See Margrete Aarmo, "How Homosexuality Became 'Un-African': The Case of Zimbabwe," in *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures*, edited by Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 255–280.

  To map the contours of politicized homophobia in Malawi, I gathered 1,921 articles from Malawian print and online newspapers published between 1995 and 2016 that mention gender variance, sexual diversity, and/or politicized homophobia. I collected articles from print newspapers on fieldwork trips to Malawi in 2012 and 2014, from Malawian online newspapers, from Malawian print newspapers' online repositories, and from Malawian newspapers on microfilm at my university's library and during two trips to the United States Library of Congress in Washington, DC, in 2012 and 2015. I gathered articles from four major Malawian news publications: the *Daily Times*, a daily print publication; the *Malawi News*, a weekly print publication; the *Nation*, a daily print publication; and the *Nyasa Times*, a daily, online publication. I developed a coding template so that I could identify tropes of politicized homophobia, which included assertions that homosexuality was un-African, concerns about sexual minorities recruiting heterosexual youth into same-sex sex acts, and worries that same-sex sexualities would lead to ethnic extinction.

The Malawian Context

Malawi has a "long precolonial history" of same-sex sexual practices.[9] However, British colonialism and President Hastings Kamuzu Banda's "brutal dictatorship"[10] installed heteronormativity, a system that rewards heterosexuality and gender conformity and punishes nonheterosexualities and gender nonconformity, as a cultural and political priority.[11] Whereas the transition away from colonial rule constituted an opportunity for state leaders to revise laws governing gender and sexual norms, this did not happen in Malawi.[12] Instead of enjoying the "rights and freedoms previously denied" to them under colonialism, Malawians suffered under thirty years of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda's authoritarian rule "remembered as much for widespread human rights violations as for strictly enforcing its 'four cornerstones,' namely unity, loyalty, obedience, and discipline."[13] In addition to quashing political dissent, Banda legislated morality to homogenize social norms, particularly those governing gender and sexuality. Under Banda's leadership, the government adopted antisodomy laws from British colonialists. His government also introduced the "Decency in Dress Act" in 1971, which proscribed women from donning trousers, miniskirts, or "skirts with slits"; the legislation tried to guarantee gender conformity and "control eroticized behavior and displays, especially those of women."[14] In this repressive environment, most gender and sexual dissidents "went underground" to avoid state-sponsored harassment and violence.[15]

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[9] Msibi, "The Lies We Have Been Told," 67. See also, Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*, 2nd edn (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 114–115, 121–123.

[10] Undule Mwakasungula, "The LGBT Situation in Malawi: An Activist Perspective," in *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, edited by Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites (London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 2013), 359. http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/4824/9/13Mwakasungula_LGBTMalawi Activist.pdf.

[11] Rahul Rao, "The Locations of Homophobia," *London Review of International Law*, 2, no. 2 (2014): 169–199.

[12] Mwakasungula, "The LGBT Situation in Malawi."   [13] Ibid., 359.

[14] Lisa Gilman, *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 66.

[15] Mwakasungula, "The LGBT Situation in Malawi," 360.

In the early 1990s, foreign donor representatives began voicing concern about repression and human rights violations perpetrated by Banda's government. When donors withheld development aid to protest human rights abuses, Banda held national elections in 1994, which he lost; these elections inaugurated the transition away from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy in Malawi.[16] Multiparty democracy under President Bakili Muluzi ushered in many changes. Under Muluzi's leadership, lawmakers redrafted the constitution in 1994 and negotiated new diplomatic ties with different countries, yet allegations of corruption and abuse of power marred his ten years in office.[17] After an unsuccessful attempt to amend the constitution to allow Muluzi to run for a third term as president, Mutharika was elected as president in 2004.

Malawian politicians began denouncing homosexuality in 2005 when human rights activists advocated for decriminalizing same-sex sex, which political, religious, and traditional leaders rejected. Politicized homophobia became a staple of political discourses after the 2010 prosecution of Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza for violating the antisodomy law.[18] This case elicited outrage from Western diplomats, donors, and activists and motivated political elites' reactive politicized homophobia. As activists demanded that he fight politicians' corruption, improve the economy, and respect all human rights, in his second term as president, Mutharika turned to politicized homophobia deliberately and proactively to bolster his claim to authority. In a speech broadcast on radio in 2011 that echoed Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's antigay comments from 1995,[19] Mutharika alleged that

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[16] Danielle Resnick, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The Limits of Foreign Aid on Malawi's Democratic Consolidation," in *Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid*, edited by Danielle Resnick and Nicholas van de Walle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110–138.

[17] Diana Cammack and Tim Kelsall, "Neo-Patrimonialism, Institutions, and Economic Growth: The Case of Malawi, 1964–2009," *IDS Bulletin*, 42, no. 2 (2011): 88–96.

[18] Some news reports spelled Chimbalanga's first name as "Tionge." I opt for the spelling that appeared in most news accounts. For a discussion of activists' debates about how to spell Chimbalanga's first name, see Ryan R. Thoreson, *Transnational LGBT Activism: Working for Sexual Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 169–170.

[19] Aarmo, "How Homosexuality Became 'Un-African'"; Matthew Engelke, "'We Wondered What Human Rights He Was Talking About': Human Rights, Homosexuality, and the Zimbabwe International Book Fair," *Critique of Anthropology*, 19, no. 3 (1999): 289–314.

lesbians and gay men were "worse than dogs ... You'll never see dogs marry each other ... These people want us to behave worse than dogs. I cannot allow it."[20] Mutharika warned sexual minorities that publicizing their gender and sexual dissidence would provoke punishment. His comment also revealed the insecurity attached to politically and culturally sanctioned heteronormativity. His statement that sexual minorities "want us to behave worse than dogs" suggested that heterosexuals may not be so certain about their sexual orientation. Intimating that sexual minorities entice heterosexuals into same-sex sex, Mutharika promoted the notion that sexual dissidents corrupt heterosexuals culturally, morally, and sexually.

The strategic value of politicized homophobia to Malawian political elites is apparent in Mutharika's 2011 speech to a gathering of chiefs who opposed decriminalizing same-sex sex. Mutharika justified his expulsion of Fergus Cochrane-Dyet, the British high commissioner to Malawi, claiming that foreign diplomats and donors were trying to blackmail him into decriminalizing same-sex sex. In a display of defiance, Mutharika refused to "bow down to get the aid," which he claimed would have required him to decriminalize same-sex sex.[21] Politicized homophobia persisted after Mutharika's sudden death in April 2012. Within weeks of becoming president, Joyce Banda endorsed decriminalizing same-sex sex, but she and her administration withdrew their support for decriminalization when political opponents and religious leaders criticized the announcement, which I discuss in Chapter 4. Banda lost the 2014 presidential election to Peter Mutharika, Bingu wa Mutharika's brother. In 2016, in a meeting with Randy Berry, the United States special envoy for the human rights of LGBTI persons, Peter Mutharika's administration affirmed the government's antihomosexuality position.[22] Thus, political elites remain invested in politicized homophobia.

[20] Judith Moyo, "Malawi Leader Says Homosexuals 'Worse than Dogs,'" May 16, 2011, www.southernafricalitigationcentre.org/2011/05/16/malawi-malawi-leader-says-homosexuals-worse-than-dogs/.

[21] Agnes Mizere and Temwani Mgunda, "Don't Bring Foreign Cultures to MW: Bingu," *Daily Times*, May 11, 2011.

[22] Jacob Nankhonya, "Government Says Won't Change Policy on Gays," *Nation*, January 21, 2016, http://mwnation.com/government-says-wont-change-policy-on-gays/.

The Politicization of Sexuality

I treat the "politicization of sexuality" as a constellation of social, cultural, and political processes that police sexual practices, identities, and communities.[23] The politicization of sexuality involves media, political elites, and social movements inaugurating or intervening in debates about sexual communities, identities, and practices, demarcating boundaries between socially (and legally) acceptable and forbidden sexual practices, generating knowledge about little-understood sexual practices, and recommending collective action to promote, sequester, or repress certain sexual communities, identities, and practices. The politicization of sexuality often begins as a discursive process that generates legal, material, and policy consequences.[24] Although politicization can generate positive outcomes, such as introducing individuals to welcoming, supportive sexual minority communities, negative effects tend to outnumber the positive consequences of politicization.[25] Such negative outcomes include the stigmatization, persecution, and criminalization of sexual dissidence.[26] Historical research on the politicization of sexuality shows how state actors viewed the policing of sexual behavior as a means to instill moral and social values in citizens, thereby stabilizing state institutions and cementing their grip on power.[27]

Politicization often begins with groups subjecting an issue to public debate and "making previously unpolitical matters political."[28] At a minimum, politicization involves political elites transforming an issue into a social problem. Social problems theory tends to view the identification of a social problem as resulting from collective

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[23] Deborah Posel, "Sex, Death, and the Fate of the Nation: Reflections on the Politicization of Sexuality in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute*, 75, no. 2 (2005): 129; Anne Marie Smith, *New Rights Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[24] Michel Foucault charts how discourses produce sexual subjects. See his *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

[25] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

[26] Roger N. Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[27] Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[28] Michael Zürn, "The Politicization of World Politics and Its Effects: Eight Propositions," *European Political Science Review*, 6, no. 1 (2014): 50.

consensus that a form of social "deviance" constitutes a social problem. Premised on social constructionism, social problems theory affirms that social problems only exist if members of that society believe that these problems are troubling.[29] In other words, an issue only blossoms into a "problem" in need of immediate containment, correction, or eradication if society legitimates it as such.[30] Whereas any collective can become involved in labeling an issue as a social problem, I emphasize political elites as actors who politicize sexuality. When social and political groups believe that sexual communities, identities, and practices are on the verge of overwhelming social and political structures, these beliefs can agglomerate into the perception that states and societies must contain social problems at any cost, even if these social problems do not really exist.[31] In other words, the collective construction of same-sex sexualities as a social problem politicizes them.

Politicization is an ongoing process that goes beyond initial pronouncements of a social problem. Other groups besides political elites can become involved in politicization. Past research attributes the politicization of sexuality to the actions of sexual rights movements, such as feminist, LGBT, reproductive justice, and sex workers' rights movements.[32] Such movements advance new or revised understandings of social concepts, such as bodily integrity, reproductive justice, and sexual identities. These movements also seek legal and social reform that will permit people to explore and act on sexual desires without fearing ostracism, job loss, or arrest. In this sense, sexual rights movements help politicize sexuality from the ground up. As politicization becomes more punitive, social movements associated with despised sexualities may become targets for vilification and isolation. When potentially negative consequences for defending reviled sexualities become too great, social movement leaders may distance

[29] Herbert Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," *Social Problems*, 18, no. 3 (1971): 298–306.
[30] Blumer, "Social Problems," 302–303.
[31] Peter Meylakhs, "Drugs and Symbolic Pollution: The Work of Cultural Logic in the Russian Press," *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2009): 378.
[32] Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Mark Blasius, *Gay and Lesbian Politics: Sexuality and the Emergence of a New Ethic* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 15; Chi Adanna Mgbako, *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

their organizations from these sexualities. Conversely, social and state repression of sexual minority communities can harden the resolve of movement leaders willing to challenge repressive action when defending their communities. Politicization centers media, social, and political attention on an issue or social group; this attention can metamorphose into unavoidable hypervisibility and susceptibility to surveillance.

Defining Politicized Homophobia

Politicized homophobia is one type of politicized sexuality. As a concept, politicized homophobia has value for scholars who document organized opposition to gender and sexual diversity and LGBT organizing, the scapegoating of sexual dissidents, mounting legislation curtailing same-sex relationships and visible gender transgression, and state-sponsored violence against gender and sexual dissidents.[33] Nevertheless, ongoing debates raise questions about the utility of the term "homophobia."[34] In this section, I theorize politicized homophobia as a concept and as a strategy available to political elites.

Homophobia. For some scholars, homophobia's origin as a term describing a pathological fear and hatred of homosexuals and same-sex sexualities makes it unsuitable for understanding social and political disdain for sexual diversity.[35] In their view, homophobia refers

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[33] Tom Boellstorff, "The Emergence of Political Homophobia in Indonesia: Masculinity and National Belonging," *Ethnos*, 69, no. 4 (2004): 465–486; Rudolf Pell Gaudio, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009); Agnieska Graff, "Looking at Pictures of Gay Men: Political Uses of Homophobia in Contemporary Poland," *Public Culture*, 22, no. 3 (2010): 583–603; Kapya J. Kaoma, "The Marriage of Convenience: The US Christian Right, African Christianity, and Postcolonial Politics of Sexual Identity," in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, edited by Meredith L. Weiss and Michael J. Bosia (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 75–102.

[34] Karl Bryant and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, "Introduction to Retheorizing Homophobias," *Sexualities* 11, no. 4 (2008): 387–396; David A. B. Murray, ed. *Homophobias: Lust and Loathing across Time and Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

[35] For discussions of the limitations and merits of homophobia as a concept, see Barry D. Adam, "Theorizing Homophobia," *Sexualities*, 1, no. 4 (1998): 387–404; Bryant and Vidal Ortiz, "Introduction to Retheorizing Homophobias"; Gregory M. Herek, "Beyond 'Homophobia': Thinking about Sexual Prejudice," *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 1, no. 2 (2004): 6–24;