

*Queer African Reader*. Edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas. Dakar, Nairobi & Oxford: Pambazuka Press, 2013

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### An encounter

Against a white concrete wall, a projector reflects images of Neo playing. An act of public space claiming, mischief and sheer brilliance, he draws a large crowd of strangers, bystanders towards her, and then him and then her. These are rather ordinary movements. She only has few objects at his disposal – a Masai blanket, some beaded jewellery, a pair of pants, a t-shirt, a sweater – her own body and this small space in a town square. As she dresses and undresses, the movements of her body change only slightly and yet it is clear to the crowd that face him that something rather troubling is at hand. Through change in dress and posture the space changes, the time changes. It was not simply just that sometimes it is masculinity and her body simply and cleanly says “I am a boy,” at other times “I am a man” – it was that sometimes he is a nice rural girl, then a city girl, then a grown woman. And she really has very few objects at her disposal. Through dress and posture, Neo drags us through sex, gender, body, sexualities, pleasure, pain, ambiguity, fixity, process, becomings. We witness a rehearsal of time and space: “traditional,” “the modern,” the “rural,” “the urban.”

I encountered these images at Iranti’s somewhat recent exhibition at the University of Johannesburg. The piece was filmed in Nairobi. A crowd composed mostly of men surround Neo Musangi, bewildered by the transgression of gendered norms. The gaze of the camera turns to these men as they are invited to respond to this scene – and they comment passionately about their discomfort at not being able to fit Neo *in* to a neat category of gender, sex, or sexuality. His/her femininity and masculinity were equally “convincing.” The camera turns to one man and he asks us “Who will marry her?” (Perreira & Musangi 2013).

I return to this encounter because it draws together a range of ideas explored in the volume edited by Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas. Ekine and Abbas describe the process of compiling the collection of essays, conversation and testimony as a journey that began as a “muted discussion” (1) that became a process rooted in “queer resistance [... for] the struggle for African liberation and self-determination from the body to the collective” (3). The volume reads as multivalent resistance, full of struggling antagonisms. At the centre of this bundle of wills is an important claim and intervention for those of us invested in reading gender and sexualities in Africa, on how we attend to the political work of “queer.” A part of the project of a volume like this is about making visible the queer personal and political body, yet our interventions through various liberal projects like developmentalism, policy framing, or demands for democratic inclusions in the state often produce a limit to our reading of “queer” as it is neatly meted out to an identity politics. This presents a limit to our imagination as feminists thinking sex, gender, sexuality, time and space; for while we attend to “women” or “lesbians,” we often misrecognise the historical function of compulsory heterosexuality in meting out the contours of gendered experience.

Ekine and Abbas cite the trial of Tiwonge Chimbalanga and her partner Steven Monjeza for the crime of gross indecency as a historic moment in African queer history which prompted this volume. These discussions were muted by a context that wanted to confine the case to one concerned with “gay rights” in Africa, as we witnessed players from the global North framing their interventions through the demand for the release of “two men.” These are not simply limits of the imagination. The editors suggest the turn to “queer’ [denotes] their key political frame: neither a gender identity nor a sexual behaviour, [it is] a perspective that foregrounds sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks.” (3) They work attentively at this task, carefully selecting and placing essays, short stories, petitions, poems – utterings in place that consistently interrupt each other.

Our first interruption is poignant: a short essay written by David Kato Kisule, the Ugandan activist who was murdered on 26 January 2011. The essay is a thoughtful reflection on human rights discourse, which he inserts into the larger systems of global governance, asserting that at the core of these interventions lies a deep commitment to some vision of “a traditional

family” that reproduces the very homophobia it purports to confront (6). “Homophobia” and “the family” come to be two important themes in the volume. As a univocal frame, homophobia becomes problematic for activism and thinking (see Ndashe in the *Reader*). In her own essay, Ekine argues that there are two narratives that dominate our discussions of queer African sexualities which fall under this frame: first that queer sexualities are “un-African,” and second that Africa is a “site for obsessive homophobia.” (78) Ekine is persuasive. Applying Simidele Dosekun’s critique of essentialist notions of “authentic Africanness” (2007: 80–1), she further examines the processes of heterosexualisation in many nation-building projects. Through the use of Jacqui Alexander’s notion of “heteropatriarchal recolonisation” that directs us to “the continuity between the “white heterosexual inheritance and Black heteropatriarchy” (1997: 66, cited on pp. 81), Ekine invites us to think about the ways that through “the family” and “homophobia,” heterosexuality is re-ordered and consolidated as the only basis for citizenship. Key to this linking and de-linking of family and homophobia is the work of queer activists attending to multiple voices in/of/on Africa in confrontation and conversation with the global North. Douglas Clarke’s essay attentively pursues these questions as Clarke confronts the “double erasures” of Western queer theory itself: “it is as if Western queer theory attempts to erase both African-ness and African-centred homosexuality” (173).

Keguro Macharia’s essay emphasises Kato Kisule’s point regarding the family, which in processes of heterosexualisation is not only a framing logic for the construction of proper citizenship, but exceeds this in important affective ways. For Macharia, sexual minority rights can only be understood through sexual majority rights as “homosexuality is one of the many imaginary contents, fantasies, or significations (sometimes in the negative, sometimes not) that circulate in the production of African sovereignties and identities and in their representations by Africans and others” (273). Macharia examines the 2009 national policies on culture and heritage in Kenya which include a chapter that defines “the family” in relation to “Kenyan-ness.” For Macharia:

by claiming that the foundation of Kenyan society has *always* been ‘the family,’ this document rewrites and erases Kenya’s urban histories of prostitution, class-based histories embodied in Kenya’s very important trade unions, multi-ethnic coalitions that function outside of kin-based frameworks, disparate groups. Positing this very specific intimate

foundation, the heterosexual family, as the central form through which “Kenyan society” emerged erases the innovative, creative forms of affiliation that were so central to creating and constructing Kenya (original emphasis).

“Always” also erases the temporal markers of Kenya’s emergence as a nation (279).

Macharia invites us to think about the frame of national-time with intimate modernities that mark heterosexual marriage as an authoritative site of citizenship; when desires, arrangements and intimacies that exceed and refuse it have and continue to exist. When Macharia describes the ways that queer intimacies get “implicitly marked as a-cultural, a-modern, a-traditional, contributing nothing to history, to the present, to the future,” (280) time and space come to matter. This argument invites us to question the progressive narrative that privileges heterosexuality and heteronormativity, while simultaneously refusing to read queer erasures and visibilities as a politics tied to a telos that longs for the future. It is an important set of arguments that augments the positions brought forward by Ekine, Clarke, Kato Kisule and many others in this volume.

The *Queer African Reader* attends to the demand for a politics of visibility, representation and recognition in order to confront real and symbolic queer erasures. This demand is not to be taken for granted as self-evident. For instance, Lyn Ossome argues that “one unfortunate causality of this opening up of political spaces has been the diminishing engagement with class analysis” (33). Erasure is a good word, mirrored in Ossome’s text and many others in the collection. The breadth of genres in the collection reads as a gesture of the commitment to confront queer erasures through fiction, testimony, manifesto and autobiographical acts, like the poem written by the late Busisiwe Sigasa, *Remember Me When I am Gone*. Ossome’s critique both disrupts and sustains the commitments made in the *Reader* to the demands for recognition in a context where recognition always already, necessarily has to attend to an intersectional praxis. Portraits run through the text as a good example because they do not simply demand the inclusion of queer bodies into already existing political and analytical frames. The portrait as an object is an interesting metaphor, as it is bound to histories of representing the “properly human” and the production of visual metanarratives about

who or what is not. Yet these portraits not only attempt to re-occupy, to re-territorialise the space of the putatively human, but bear a more radical disruptive potential. I am thinking here of the portraits of “Proudly African and Transgender” produced in collaboration with the sitters by Gabrielle Le Roux. The exhibition cites silence about Transgender Africans: “When the world sees our portraits, they will know that Africa has transgender people and that there is a struggle against injustices on our continent” (54). The portrait is announced as a discourse of struggle that suggests more to me than an oppositional logic made void of its political claim or potential.

As such, a number of essays attend to visual queer activism and, more specifically, to the body of work produced by Zanele Muholi who defines this activism:

I call this method the birth of visual activism: I decided to use it to mark our resistance and existence as black lesbians and gendered persons in our country, because it is important to put a face on each and every issue” (170).

Raél Jero Salley argues that Muholi’s project does not demand integration into dominant structures, but is instead committed to “transforming the basic cultural fabric of hierarchies that allow quotidian experiences of oppression to persist and operate efficiently” (108). Photographs are not simply representations through which we can recognise ourselves; they are documents tied to regimes of truth. As such, they bear the potential to reposition these regimes of authoritative knowledge. Salley thematises Muholi’s project, suggesting the assemblage of “images, icons and indexes” to point us to the processes of signification that inhere in the production and reception of images. For Salley, if “the index refers to a process of signification in which the signifier is bound to the referent not by social convention, not by similarity, but by actual connection in the world” (111), then Muholi’s pictures may be indexical but through a repetitive emphasis on incomplete narratives of black lesbian subjects and communities they emphasise non-iconicity: “a counter-point to over-determined representations of lived experience” (113). Kylie Thomas echoes Salley in some respects, suggesting that Muholi’s work raises the question of how experience that is deemed unspeakable can enter representation: “if lesbian subjectivity is made visible through suspending the structures of recognition, what are the political implications of occupying such an ‘outlaw’ position?” (354).

The placing of Awino Okech's essay at the beginning of the reader speaks to an important desire to foreground a number of threads that run through it. Okech is concerned with the space and place of queer organising in mainstream African feminist spaces and what she recognises as struggle within sites of intellectual and political activism and solidarity. Feminist spaces in particular, as such sites of struggle, intended to be sites of safety, instead conjure isolation amongst sisters. So, Okech asks whether:

the conceptual and ideological tools that feminism offers have been used in ways that are neither homogenising nor essentialising within movement building processes [...] how ready they are to respond to a growing queer movement [?] (11)

The deployment of "gender" as a depoliticised tool fails for Okech, as it orients our efforts towards a politics of inclusion rather than radical transformation. The broader implications for movement building and solidarities come to be framed by "'acceptable' forms of political, social and economic engagement [...] regulated by powerful institutions and individuals [and...] limited by the rules of participation" (13). As a result, it is difficult to define or substantiate the collective", no less the notion of "collective consciousness." For Okech, the divisions of space around which feminist mobilisations occupy matter, specifically in relation to the ways that notions of friendship, sisterhood and solidarity are deployed.

Okech examines the feminist engagement of friendship as both enabling of a challenge to hetero-patriarchy but possibly limiting to the erotics of female same-sex intimacy, arguing that by consequence "same-sex relationships among women are situated as part of a heteronormative continuum [...posing] the erasure of sexuality as part of women's friendships [on one hand and] lesbian sexualities on the other" (21). Positioning sisterhood alongside or perhaps against solidarity, which has been positioned as strategically more powerful and perhaps more practical, Okech argues that in its present usage in African feminist mobilisation, it rests on unconditioned foundations "creating a pre-discursive subject" (ibid.) of and among women, in homorelational friendships confined to a heteronormative framework. While feminist spaces offer a reprieve from heterorelational structures, same-sex relationships remain limited to the "'private' and not the 'public' domain through a 'don't ask don't tell' approach" (23) that limits "the potential for effective solidarity between an emerging queer movement and mainstream autonomous feminist spaces." (26).

Okech's challenge is crucial, demanding a solidarity less premised on building bridges across movements; it is a demand for the destabilising of heteronormativity. The volume pushes this agenda persuasively and draws me back to the encounter with Musangi's embodied rehearsal of a radical queer black African feminist praxis. The political standpoints of "woman" and "lesbian" are productive sites for thinking and acting, but require a more demanding engagement with the processes of subjectivation that make us legible to each other, the state or the market, yet are the very preconditions of our erasure. There is a valuable intellectual and political tension here. Bernadette Muthien asks:

So how should we define lesbian? Many people I associate with define lesbian as the equivalent of gay homosexual, i.e. the opposite of heterosexual. While the construct queer embraces those who are non-heteronormative and includes the inbetween fluids, the construct lesbian does not necessarily include me, because I define myself as beyond binaries, as inbetween and fluid, dynamic and variable. Perhaps some may call me bisexual, but this then too subscribes to a notion of polarity – that I am both poles – when in fact I shift and change positions, not on a static linear continuum, but on an endlessly spiralling ellipse that, not ironically, is ovoid, symbolic of female reproductive power. Is lesbian defined as orientation, or as preference? Are we victims of biology, or active agents with choice? (13)

For Muthien it is the imperative of a racist, capitalist heteropatriarchy that intends to keep us in the boxes of binaried sexuality. I read the collective challenge of the *Queer African Reader* as this and more, demanding that we interrogate our assumptions about the nation, its temporalities and our sustained commitment to a heteronormalising feminist praxis.

Producing an edited volume-as-reader is an arduous task, particularly when the intention is to work through "Africa." The possibilities for silencing and omission are plenty. Osome's critique concerning the politics of recognition echoes such a concern, as in recent years we have seen queer activism most articulated through practices of vision and representation via the use of the portrait-as-method, which bears the possibility of silencing other interlocutors and methods. But I think this criticism would be too final. Other sites of representation are explored in the volume and, read together, offer a persuasive visual, aural and oral set of demands. The demand for recognition

matters in a set of contexts where real and symbolic queer bodies face continued precarities from global bodies, the state, the family and individuals. As such, while offering a critique of thinking queer in/and/of Africa within the logics of developmentalism that want to limit queer to identitarian politics, it is still clear and necessary that this demand for recognition includes the logics of the state, the market, the family, the religious bodies, the development industry and so on that continue to set the conditions for who is “properly human:” who can live, who can die.

In a short discussion on the book, a friend asked what role a volume like this can play in Africa, if the discussion is still framed by liberal, developmental, rights discourses. What is the value of the book to on-going legal interventions on non-heterosexual beings in Africa? The editors are quite intentional in addressing such demands but, of course, this matters little if those of us who write, think and teach in feminist spaces fail to attend to queer politics. Are our teaching practices queering the approach to gender, sex, sexualities, space, time, the nation and the family; or do we simply follow an integrationist pattern of adding-on queer-as-identity, while we continue to frame woman-as-somehow-stable-subject, until we attend to lesbian-also-as-stable-subject or transgender-as-stable-subject?

## References

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