

BOOK REVIEW

Babacar M'Baye and Besi Brillian Muhonja, eds. *Gender and Sexuality in Senegalese Societies: Critical Perspectives and Methods*. London: Lexington Books, 2019. 326 pages. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$100.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781793601124.

Many edited volumes claim to fill an existing gap in the scholarly record, however small or obscure such a gap may be. They claim value and significance in the act of pointing our attention where it has heretofore failed to land. Babacar M'Baye and Besi Brillian Muhonja's new collection of essays, *Gender and Sexuality in Senegalese Societies: Critical Perspectives and Methods*, addresses not only an understudied aspect of Senegalese social life, but also one that has been largely silenced and discredited as a field of study, namely the existence of alternative, fluid, and non-normative sexualities. This book is an example of how this kind of gap-filling can be not simply a worthwhile intellectual project, but also an important political act.

The book features nine content chapters sandwiched between a short introduction by M'Baye and a brief conclusion by Muhonja. In his introduction, M'Baye laments the reluctance of Senegalese scholars to address homosexuality within the context of the country's heated political climate of violent and state-sponsored homophobia. This volume asserts the value and academic merit of research on alternative sexualities in Senegal and serves as an invitation to expand the field of sexuality studies in Senegal and across the African continent. The introduction announces the intention of addressing the full complexity of gender and sexuality in contemporary Senegal through a more thorough understanding of its history, literature, and culture. Indeed, the volume was clearly compiled with the goal of interdisciplinarity, with chapters from scholars of comparative literature, anthropology, sociology, and political science. This broad range is both a strength and a weakness of the book. Readers from a variety of different fields will find something useful or relevant to their interests; however, only a few of the essays speak to one another, and the chapters vary quite widely in their format, levels of sophistication, and depth of analysis. Several chapters feel like a distinct misfit with the overall tone of the volume, and indeed, are barely mentioned in the introduction and

conclusion. The book is strongest in its chapters that focus on queerness, whether in a direct discussion of homosexuality or in cases of a more ambiguous gender non-conformity, and these essays are what make it such an important publication.

Ayo Coly's sharp and incisive essay, "The Invention of the Homosexual: The Politics of Homophobia in Senegal," opens the book and gives much-needed context to the contemporary Senegalese culture of social and legal hostility toward homosexuality. Coly ably demonstrates how perceptions of non-heteronormative sexualities have recently changed and been mobilized in concert with domestic political aims and in response to global politics. Beth Packer profiles female *footballeuses* who challenge norms of womanly deportment, dress, and domesticity, all while framing the antagonism they receive for their transgressions as a test of their religious faith as Mourides. These women carve out a distinctly Senegalese and Sufi performance of gender non-conformity that itself defies both cultural and religious positions of patriarchal and homophobic dogma. Juliana Friend writes a cogent, absorbing chapter on men who have sex with men (MSMs) who work for public health projects to spread safe sex information online, which will be of interest to scholars of public health as well as of Senegal.

The final chapter of the book is an interview with a noted Senegalese scholar/activist, Cheikh Ibrahima Niang, who has committed his life's work to scholarship of and advocacy for marginalized Senegalese and has paid a steep personal and professional price for this work. The interview, conducted by Ellen Foley, is a riveting read; it chronicles Niang's personal biography and his trajectory as an activist, researcher, and eventually university professor. Niang's narrative provides an accounting of intellectual history on the continent and of the obstacles to pursuing research in a changing political climate, along with a captivating life story of a remarkable man. It is a fitting concluding chapter to the volume and a compelling model of how to expose a wider audience to the significance and context of African intellectuals' work while also preserving the important oral histories of scholarship on the continent.

In sum, this collection boasts many valuable offerings for researchers interested in sexuality in Africa and in Senegalese culture and politics more specifically. Its biggest contribution however, is simply its existence. It is an important artifact for African Studies and gender/sexuality studies, the opening of a much-needed discussion and an opportunity to formalize and validate the importance and critical value of queer studies in Africa for scholars on the continent and off.

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