

Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher, eds. *Africa After Gender?* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007.

By Henriette Gunkel, University of Fort Hare, South Africa

1 In *Africa After Gender?*, the editors Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh, and Stephan F. Miescher present a range of articles rooted in different disciplinary approaches — ranging from the social sciences to literary theory and history — which demonstrate the broad range of African gender scholarship. This anthology adds to a number of recent publications within African gender studies which counteract the Western hegemony of gender research by pointing to the specificity of experiences of colonialism and racism, the differences in political and economic environments, the interpretations of feminist theory as well as the importance of questions around positionality, standpoint and intersectionality — amongst others (1). In the introduction, “When Was Gender?”, the editors approach the question of what the meaning of gender in an African context can be by pointing to the temporal location within gender discourse:

Our book’s title, “Africa After Gender?” poses a provocative question, one that is deliberately ambiguous. It suggests a temporal flow of ideas (a ‘before’ and ‘after’), a possible teleology of progress (progressing through stages of development), or even the eclipse and demise of a discourse on gender in Africa that, as many know, has barely begun to take root. (3)

2 By arguing that the concept of gender only recently entered “Africa and African studies” the book explores the specificity of thinking gender in “Africa” with the aims to “make a productive intervention in the dynamics of North-South relations” (3) and to put forward the argument that the study of gender in the African context requires a transdisciplinary approach.

3 The book is divided into five thematic sections with four chapters each. In the first section, “Volatile Genders and New African Women”, Sylvia Tamale’s personal account of the responses her support for gay rights triggered underlines the editor’s argument that African gender identities today are volatile in the sense of “precarious and explosive” (5). Tamale’s analysis of homophobia in contemporary Uganda shows once again how sexuality is used as a tool to constitute the gender regime, unfortunately with the support of women’s rights organizations. Gay Seidman’s article on the history and the impact of the South African Gender Commission in “post-apartheid” South Africa forces us to rethink the question of how feminist politics can be successfully incorporated into governmental institutions. She highlights the internal dynamics in the struggle for equal rights, especially in regard to

questions of class and race. Lynn Thomas's essay explores the "New African Woman" in the shape of the pregnant schoolgirl in colonial Kenya, arguing that the question of procreation is more than a matter of anatomy and the body. Thomas points to the intimate relationship between gender discourse and gendered reproduction which needs to be understood as a combination between colonialism and pre-colonial notions about the dangers of reproduction in order to ensure "proper generational relations and secure material wealth" (57). Nwando Achebe and Bridget Teboh, themselves understood by the editors as "New African Women", explore the politics of doing research as African women on African women — in this case in Nigeria and Cameroon. Their article points to African women's role in the production of knowledge, arguing for an interdisciplinary methodology.

4 The second section, "Activism and Public Space", explores the relationship between African gender theory and activism, emphasizing the different histories of gender activism in various African countries. The first two articles examine women's engagement with activism and the public sphere in relation to popular culture. Susan Andrade explores the relationship between African gender activism and its representation within African fiction. She draws particular attention to fiction's engagement with nationalism within the project of decolonization. Adrienne MacLain's article refers to popular theatrical performance in Nigeria as primary material. She explores gender and gendered conflicts on the public stage of Yoruba popular theater in Nigeria which traditionally reproduces a patriarchal discourse. She demonstrates how gender becomes a vehicle for larger economic and social anxieties. Similarly to Achebe and Teboh, Takyiwaa Manuh points to the necessity of generating knowledge by African scholars and activists in Africa. She refers to the provocative question "Do African Women Scholars Have Theory?" (142) in order to highlight not only the fact that African theory is widely ignored by Western scholars but also to question what theory African scholars and activists consider useful. Hussaina Abdullah examines the driving forces behind the emergence of women's organization in Nigeria. She argues that Nigerian gender activism since the 1990s is highly influenced by the UN's agenda for women and a global feminist movement, which also raises questions about the impact of international funding policies on local politics.

5 The third section, "Gender Enactments, Gendered Perceptions", moves to the conception of gender as performance. By focusing on women's critical agency in particular the articles remind us that there is more to gender performance than sexualities and sex. In her work on West African documentary film Paulla Ebron points to her understanding of gender performance as discord and drama that is used both to normalize and denormalize other social

categories. Ebron understands social status itself as performance and by doing so questions the binary understanding of power relations that equates power with masculinity. Similarly, Eileen Boris also historicizes gender by pointing to the alternative meanings and ways of doing gender in the African context. By raising the question “What can Africa do for gender?” Boris argues that African scholarship not only challenges the relationship between biological and social but also forces us to rethink the privileging of gender over other social categories while arguing that gender as an expression of power cannot be separated from historical struggles such as colonization and liberation. Eileen Julien and Nana Wilson-Tagoe both address discourses of gender within the postcolonial project in African fiction. While Julien makes a comparison between Wole Soyinka’s and Mariama Ba’s writing in relation to women’s agency identifying literature as a gendered practice, Wilson-Tagoe, critiques the nationalist agenda within African literary studies by looking at the works of Ama Ata Aidoo and Yvonne Vera. Both authors challenge the existing gender regime within anti-colonial struggles by identifying the concept of culture as a social and historical construction and by including larger issues of social, cultural, and economic relations within national culture.

6 In the fourth section, “Masculinity, Misogyny, and Seniority”, the emphasis moves from gender as a discussion of issues predominantly affecting women to a discussion of masculinity and manhood. Perhaps the strongest section of the volume, the chapters take into account other categories that inform gendered identities such as seniority. Lisa Lindsay historicizes the notion of masculinity in colonial Nigeria by exploring the emergence of the male breadwinner as a gender ideal among railway men. She highlights the historical specificity of gender ideals and demonstrates how Nigerian men and women were active agents in the construction of gender norms within the colonial project. Stephan Miescher also points to multiple and often conflicting notions of masculinity during colonialism by exploring continuities around ideas of elderhood and subjectivity within a Ghanaian mission church. By arguing that the social position within society is not gender specific Miescher concludes that seniority is as central to the category of identity as gender is. In her research on West African popular theater Catherine Cole deconstructs images of misogyny and gender-based violence which are supported by the audiences. She reads this support as an indication of how cultural anxieties are negotiated through gender. Similar to Ebron’s argument she identifies gender as an aspect of personhood which is linked with other identities, forcing her to rethink the meaning of gender as a Western concept within African knowledge systems. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi also picks up the issue of misogyny and violence against women and points to the distinction between the theoretical concepts of gender and actual lived

experiences of women. She draws attention to the ubiquity of domestic violence at all levels of socioeconomic spectrum in much of Africa.

7 A criticism that can be leveled at the book is that the categorization of the articles into the different sections sometimes strikes one as a bit arbitrary. Furthermore, some of the articles do not directly focus on the key question(s) of the book project and/or are lacking a dialogue with each other. This could be due to the fact that this anthology is a selection of (revised) conference papers presented at the conference entitled ‘Africa After Gender? An Exploration of New Epistemologies for African Studies’, hosted by the Interdisciplinary Humanities Centre’s African Studies Research Focus Group at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2001 — convened by two of the editors, Cole and Miescher.

8 This anthology is, however, an important contribution to African gender research. Some issues raised in the book have been central to African scholarship for some time now. They have been addressed in the conceptualization of African feminisms/womanisms from the 1980s onwards (for comprehensive overviews see for example Susann Arndt, *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literature*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002). In fact, the editors initiate the key questions of the book around a discussion that emerged at the first international conference on Women in Africa and the African Diaspora (WAAD) in Nigeria in 1992 when the specificity of African feminism(s) and gender activism became apparent. Some of the issues are fought for today as strongly as back then, especially in relation to and in dissociation from global feminist theory and global gender activism. This anthology makes this continuous struggle visible.