

The Travel Journal Strikes Again: Colonial Imaginations of Sexuality in Africa

Serena, Marc *Esto no es africano!: De Cairo a Ciudad del Cabo entre amores prohibidos* [*This Is Not African!: From Cairo to Cape Town amidst Forbidden Love*]. Valencia: Editorial Xplora 2014 (470 pages)

ESTO NO ES africano! [*This is not African!*] is a heavy read. For all the wrong reasons. This book is a colonial travel journal written from the perspective of the white European gaze, and directed to a white Western audience. The colonial objectifying framing of the book shifts attention away from several otherwise unique stories of people with a non-normative sexual and gender identity that put their very lives at risk in the different African countries where they live.

The book is comprised of a collection of fifteen stories written in the first person with inserted quotes from the interviewees, and each story focuses on one African country to where the author travelled for this project. Stories are varied and range from, for example, a gay albino in Kenya, an intergender girl in Uganda, and a queer imam in South Africa.

I commend the author for taking up the vital issue of sexuality in Africa. This is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly, as much is at stake for millions of people and their efforts to be protected and hu-

manised in their societies. The only good feature of the book is the raw individual stories, the words of the interviewees, which complexify an otherwise rather simplistic narrative on identity presented by the author. Despite various problematic assumptions and unsustainable remarks, the best chapters are those where the author focuses on narrating the personal stories of individuals and lets them take the lead and speak for themselves. This is the case with "Soledad" ("Solitude"), the chapter about Said and his struggle for survival and human dignity in Morocco where he sells his body as sole means of subsistence, and in Spain where he tried to migrate to, only to experience the most tormented hours of his life. This is a very well written narrative that brings out vividly the drama of living as Said and it makes you cringe just by reading about his dreadful experiences with police violence, ostracism, and despair.

Despite its unfortunate title, another well-achieved chapter is "Un imam con purpurina" ("An Imam with Glitter"), where we hear mostly the voice of queer imam Muhsin Henricks from South Africa. Muhsin Henricks is not the gay diva the title might suggest, but rather a serious, calm, and extremely well-educated person who exposes an informed religious interpretation of Islamic sources that makes the combination queer and Muslim viable. I will focus my critique on the highly problematic and inconsequent features of this book that might discredit it as a serious work on sexuality in Africa, namely the colonial gaze and related to this, the outsider LGBTQ terminology and agendas that are, unreflected, transported to the African context.

Who is writing, what is the purpose of the book and who is its audience? The answers to these questions open problems unresolved in the book. Marc Serena claims not to be writing a novel, but true stories. He displays little or no consequent self-reflection on his position as a white European male and how his gaze is the one framing these stories. He spends page after page with useless touristic information (good restaurants, tourist entertainment, ATM's), rambling and whining about his discomfort during travels and creating a stereotypical image of Africa and Africans as primitive, corrupt, chaotic, disorganised, underdeveloped, easily manipulated due to lack of education and simultaneously

extremely manipulative, unsophisticated, liars and cheaters always trying to rip off the poor privileged white boy from the colonisers' country. Serena spends too much time starting chapters with negative descriptions of the cities, except when they display colonial aesthetics, architecture, and urban planning (Tunis) or the proper multiculti mix of tradition and innovation à la Western (Cape Town), then they are cool, elegant, beautiful, proper.

There are serious ethical issues in this book. In most cases, there is no information on how Serena found his interviewees, nor on who decided which names to give them. Given that certain individuals live in rather small communities, identifying them certainly could be easy and one can only imagine what consequences this might have for them. In several interviews of extremely sensitive cases, like that of intergender Gloria from Uganda (chapter "But are you a girl or a boy?"), Serena leads an interrogation style of interview, pushing them to tell intimate and painful details. There is no word on his part on why he has the privilege to come, meet these people, hear their personal stories, steal and share their knowledge for free in whichever way he sees fit for a white audience, nor what happens to their mental health during and after the interviews where traumas are revived without professional assistance. Instead, at the end of interviewing Gloria, he pities himself, the heavy story made him sick (Serena 2014, 342). He cries wolf when someone asks him for money to be interviewed and it seems that this is the only ethical dilemma he sees in his project (399).

His secular bias is also a mark of his Western gaze in the sense that he makes numerous decontextualised observations of the presence of religion in the public sphere that he refers to as sign of high religiosity, giving the impression to the uninitiated reader that religious markers suddenly make the African spaces inherently conservative and anti-gay by definition. This is made even clearer when the good guys are defined in his text as the secular middle class people living in elegant French residences in Tunis (52). Particularly, this is the case when a quote inserted completely randomly borders islamophobia. This quote is attributed to Tariq ibn Ziyad, an Amazigh general that in Serena's words "started the

Muslim invasion of the Iberian Peninsula,” and it is given after we are told that Said from Morocco was migrating to Spain in search of a better life (101). The quote is random, ambivalent, and controversial with serious implications in today’s political climate, where present migration from the south Mediterranean to the north Mediterranean is portrayed as a “muslim invasion”; a propaganda media and politicians in Europe use and abuse on a daily basis. Equating muslim migrants with muslim invaders and conquerors shows how little sensibility and knowledge the author has of the issues at stake and of the impact of the narrative he creates with his book, always throwing irrelevant personal comments that frame the stories on sexuality in Africa and shift attention from them for the sake of a poor first-person travel journal writing style.

There is an unreflective transfer of Western LGBTQ questions, ideas, issues, agendas, and symbols as a point of departure for analysis of the African context. This starts with the concepts of homosexuality, gay, lesbian, transgender, *travesti*, bisexual, and intergender. Not only are contemporary African laws against homosexuality a colonial inheritance but so is the very concept of homosexuality itself, along with binary gender identities, binary gender roles; indeed, the idea of sexuality as a realm of its own, the Eurocentric tradition that body and spirit are separate and that the spirit should control the body. The concept of homosexuality is colonial, even though the realities of same-sex relations are not. Are these terms valid in Africa? Are they imported? Who uses them, the interviewees, the media, the politicians, the author? Sometimes they appear in the voices of the interviewees, but often it is unclear whether the author imposed those labels on them.

The international and Western dominated LGBTQ movement too often exports terms, realities, and conditions globally, creating a neocolonial conflict in societies still at odds with their colonial past. Having indigenous terminology and world-views would be more beneficial to the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ people in Africa, who are caught between political games. Naforé in Mauritania, for instance, says “gays” for men and “women who love women,” not lesbians (128). There is no explanation of what *travesties* mean in the context of Cabo Verde and

whether this is what society calls them or what they call themselves. The author forces Western conceptualisations of sexual and gender identity upon the interviewees to explain their identity: "They are trans, but they have never heard this word on the island, so, sometimes, they identify as gay, even though they live as heterosexual girls." (183) It is not the author's task to define these individuals on his terms, but to understand the terms and conditions in which they define themselves. This shows how problematic it can be, as Serena does, to not distinguish between sexual and gender identity, gender and sexual roles. For a lay public, as his audience might be, and when dealing with diverse types of identities that intersect sexuality, gender, class, and nationality, a reflection on the complex relation between gender/sexual identity and gender/sexual roles is vital.

Serena also takes Western LGBTQ agendas for granted while narrating his stories. He follows the idea that romantic love should be the true bond in a relationship and other types of family constellations are defined as insincere, convenient escape routes (338, 411). Coming out and gay marriage appear as some type of goals non-normative Africans should strive for. The idea that sexual identity should be the primary identity of the interviewees clouds their commitment and location in a culture where community and family building are extremely important. Family constellations where LGBTQ Africans enter into straight marriages and have children, and then have lovers on the side are merely introduced as a way to survive and not also as a desire to build a family. Again, gender roles and sexual identity are not static. The prominence of the rainbow flag and the pride parade, or absence of, in many of the places Serena visited should not be seen as a mere lack of visibility but African activist agendas on sexuality have other priorities like community awareness, health, and legal protection.

Import of Western notions of normative femininity and masculinity into African contexts is done in this book and is dangerous since it classifies gay men as effeminate and lesbian women as masculine. This strategy of homonationalist transnational interventions in the African LGBTQ struggles results in common behaviours becoming sources

of suspicion in communities that inspired by both extremely anti-gay churches (many sponsored by big US churches) and politicians who want to mark a position of independence regarding the neocolonial impositions of Western nations, have become obsessed with tracking LGBTQ people, behaviours such as men holding hands and kissing as it is customary in the Arabic culture (to the author's surprise) or dress codes not necessarily conforming to Western gender norms.

There is nothing original in a book like *Esto no es africano!* written as a travel journal on Africa. Western travellers have been doing this for centuries, intertwining their experiences with some ethnographic work. I expected the visions and perspectives of actual Africans. These have unfortunately been clouded by Serena's constant tourist whining and racist remarks about Africa and Africans.

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