

REVIEW OF *AFRICAN GENDER STUDIES*, ED., OYÈRÓNKÉ OYĒWÙMÍ, NEW YORK, N.Y: PALGRAVE, 2005 AND *READINGS IN GENDER IN AFRICA*, ED. ANDREA CORNWALL, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2005.

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These two recent collections foreground the emergence of gender studies as an ever-growing area within the wide field that is African Studies. While both volumes provide important contextual and historical information on the central theoretical debates in African gender studies, the two volumes seem to posit different approaches to remedy the intellectual and political discourses that have “dangerously superimposed monolithic versions of gender relations onto African relations” (Cornwall 7).

In her essay included in *African Gender Studies*, Obioma Nnaemeka eloquently reminds us “theoretical frames also border and exclude. Our concern should be less with what is framed in and more with what is framed out, with what is silenced. In feminist scholarship as we charge ourselves to listen to silences, particularly in women’s writing, we must, with equal enthusiasm, listen to the silences imposed by theory” (Nnaemeka 53).

Consistently most of the twenty-two essays included in *African Gender Studies* strive to not only listen to but also interrogate the silences and assumptions that have been shaped by Eurocentric examinations of gender in Africa. Interdisciplinary and broad in scope, these essays, written by renowned scholars such as Filomena Chioma Steady, Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Abena Busia, Nkiru Nzegwu and Ifi Amadiume and many others, speak as collective corrective to the overwhelming marginalization of African-centered responses to African gender queries.

As the editor to this impressive and important volume, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí continues to address the problematic of universalizing gender paradigms. She includes as the first chapter her essay “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects” excerpted from her manuscript *The Invention of Women: Making*

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*African Sense of Western Gender Discourses.* While Oyèwùmí's critique has sparked much dialogue since its original publication in 1997, many scholars and students of gender will find the inclusion of this chapter serves as a strong introduction to the study of gender in Africa. And it offers an indispensable and innovative perspective, one that needs be further grappled with even ten years later. Indeed, Oyèwùmí's deconstruction of Western gender discourse, which she defines as a body-centered "bio-logic", articulates a fascinating examination of gender categories such as "man" and "woman." When fixed unto African bodies by colonialists, imperialists, some early anthropologists and Western feminists, these categories reduce and obscure complex relations and flexible identities under the hegemonic gaze of Western norms. Oyèwùmí effectively argues that by forcing diverse African gender tropes to fit the binary mold of the West, hierarchical relations between woman and man are overdetermined, while African woman's power in their communities (as well as African men's disempowerment under colonialism) is displaced.

Overarchingly, *African Gender Studies* serves as a theoretically focused text in which reconceptualizing gender is a central aim. Divided into seven sections, that cover a wide-breath of issues, this critical anthology demands that its reader think differently about mainstream gender epistemologies. Thus the text offers students of gender new ways to approach their research and new questions to consider. Nnaemeka's chapter asks us, for example, to re-examine how discursive practices shape pedagogical approaches to African texts and lived experiences within the context of the Western classroom. Furthermore, she proposes we ceaselessly ask questions "to unearth the prejudices and assumptions in the materials we use" (58). In a chapter titled "An Investigative Framework for Gender Research in Africa in the New Millennium," Filomina Chioma Steady demonstrates that there is a need for "African-focused methodologies" (Steady 320) to respond to epistemologies born of colonial conquest. Accordingly, she carefully offers a model on how to formulate a de-colonized/ing scholarship. And if in a direct advancement of Steady's postulations, in the final section, "Critical Conversations", Nkiru Nzegwu's discussion of Kwame Anthony Appiah's epilogue in his seminal text *In My Father's House* is a challenge to the ways in which African scholars stubbornly uphold Eurocentric representations of African kinship dynamics even as Western frameworks fail to accommodate African realities. As Nzegwu writes "readers of *In My Father's House* need to gain a deeper appreciation for the subtle myriad ways in which neocolonialism and neoimperialism currently thrive in Africa to supplant its traditions with 'euphonic' ones. It is through Africa's own leaders, statesmen and children who

mostly loudly profess to work for Africa's interest that the continent's subjugation occurs" (Nzegwu 377). Oyewùmí's inclusion of Nzegwu's essay, alongside newer critical analysis, in this volume will no doubt offer readers an opportunity to develop anti-imperial perspectives on gender that subvert repetitive structures of epistemological domination. *African Gender Studies* is a collection that engages a practical and theoretical activism that is so often subverted and underdeveloped in mainstream discourse on Africa.

Andrea Cornwall's *Readings in Gender in Africa* fosters a different response due in part to its aim "to serve as a general introduction to the field" (Cornwall 1). While the text responds to the need to serve as a primary guide for gender studies in Africa, the anthropological focus of the volume undermines its interdisciplinary objectives. One third of the scholars included are situated in anthropology departments. While it could be argued that all disciplines of the Western academy share an intrinsic Eurocentricism, as Steady contends in *African Gender Studies*, anthropology has assisted in the colonialism envisioning of African peoples and thus helped to "justify colonial expansion and domination" (Steady 314). Recognizably many anthropologists have sought to exorcise the racist gaze from their disciplinary agenda; ethnographic text is still haunted by this imperial imagining of the continent. So while Cornwall's introduction to the collection is extremely well written and provides an excellent historical summary of the main thematic struggles and concerns of the field for students of African gender studies, the body of the volume centers an anthropological viewpoint with mixed results. Nonetheless, articles such as Obioma Nnaemeka's "Mapping African Feminisms" provides insight into this issue as Nnaemeka charges "academic colonialism" i.e. "the work of academics that have used the study of less privileged women for economic and professional advancement" (Fester, Nnaemeka's 38) must be exposed. Interestingly, Nnaemeka is the only scholar whose work is included in both volumes, even as other well-known scholars and activists of African gender politics are quoted repeatedly, their full length articles are curiously absent.

However, there are several stand out pieces included in the volume including for example, Felicia Ekejiuba's important discussion of "Women-Centered Hearth-holds in Rural West Africa" and Rudolf Gaudio's "Male Lesbians and Other Queer Notions in Hausa." These two essays work to de-center normative notions of the nuclear family and heterosexism that is often implicit in body work that is African gender studies. Additionally LaRay Denzer's "Gender and Decolonization: A Study of Three Women in West African Public Life" seeks to address what Peter Zeleza argues, in his article included in *African Gender Studies*, is a consistent bias in historiography that generates an invisibility of African

women as political agents (Zeleza 208).

Despite these resourceful contributions, the design of *Readings in Gender in Africa* makes these interesting discussions frustrating to access. Set in a terribly small font and a double column per page layout, consistent with the rest of the Readings Series, the book managed to be challenging in form if not always in content.

Although, these two texts in juxtaposition may not inspire a balanced rejoinder from this reader, read collaboratively they would offer a seminar course a wonderful body of literature to spark discussion and to propel further research. Still, the advanced (and perhaps more politicized) scholar of African studies, and activists alike, will reach for Oyewùm's finely edited *African Gender Studies* to reenergize and revive crucial discussions on gender in Africa that ultimately have as their goal the decolonization of gender discourse and gender-focused activism on the ground.