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Framing homosexual identities in Cameroonian literature

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What language exists to describe the lives of women and sexual minorities who live in Cameroon? In this paper, I demonstrate how a selection of contemporary works of fiction use their narratives to create a space and language for the experiences of LGBT individuals within the cultural imaginary of Sub-Saharan Africa. Texts such as my own *Jeune fille de Bona Mbella* (2010), Max Lobe's *39 Rue de Berne* (2013) and Chimamanda Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill" describe the personal lives of both women and sexual minorities, and show how their experiences are intertwined with socio-political realities. I give close attention to the stories' different possible meanings, and place them in their socio-historical contexts in order to make an important intervention into the literary history of Cameroon: LGBT work must be included in our discussions of contemporary Cameroonian cultural production. It is part of our modernity. **Keywords:** Cameroon, collective imaginary, homosexual identities, LGBT activism.

There aren't any gays around here. The last time I saw a gay was in America. This is one of the most obscene societies in the world. Men just sleep with women, and that's all there is to it. Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*.

"Oh, what will be the end of me," she said, "whom a love possesses that no one ever heard of, a strange and monstrous love? ... Cows do not love cows, nor mares, mares; but the ram desires the sheep, and his own doe follows the stag." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

I was born in Cameroon, a country in West Africa, which was first 'discovered' by the Portuguese. The Germans took over in the late 1800s and were there until after the First World War, when the country was divided between the British and French colonial empires. In the early 1960s, Cameroon gained its independence, but the country remained more or less divided along the same Anglophone/Francophone lines until 1972, when the two parts were united into one country with two official languages, English and French.

These linguistic traces of the colonial legacy are still with us: When Cameroonians meet abroad, they ask each other, "Are you Anglophone or Francophone?" The Anglophones are the minority and to hold posts in universities or public offices, they must speak French. On the other hand, it is rare to see a Francophone who is bilingual in

French and English, which has created an ongoing tension between Anglophones and Francophones.

In addition to the differences between these two linguistic communities, Cameroon has 286 individual languages, including 278, which, as local languages, are not written (Katzner). Given this historical and social context, the question of translation is a complicated and interesting one. We must consider the relationship of French and English vocabulary to the live-experiences of individuals, who also conceptualize their worlds in their local languages. We might also consider how these different languages work within the collective imaginary of Cameroonians. For example, when stories, information, or knowledge are part of the cultural imaginary, people accept them because their coherency is based on what is unspoken but accepted collectively. In this way, with coherency located on a sense of common acceptance, people experience heterogeneity in daily life without fear or chaos.

I bring up these issues of translation and collective imaginary because I think they are of use when considering literature about LGBT individuals from Cameroon, as well as other West African countries, such as Nigeria and Senegal. These issues remind us of two important things. First: to attend to how writers create a language, and a space, within which men and women of a variety of sexualities can live and thrive. And second: although this space does not currently exist, simply using Western terms such as “homosexuality” or “gay” are nonviable, as they bring with them cultural norms and assumptions that are different from West African contexts.

Since the publication of my first novel, *Chuchote pas trop* (2001), I have been thinking and writing about lesbian identity and how concerns with social reality must be accompanied by close attention to the manners by which language works to conceal ideology. I have also explored how governmental and social discourses work both within and across national borders to silence discussions about the diverse sexualities of people of color. This attention responds to scholar V. Y. Mudimbe’s challenge to rearticulate what it means to be both African and a member of the contemporary global world. In his seminal work, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (1988), Mudimbe demonstrates how the West has accumulated knowledge about Africa in what he calls the “Colonial Library,” wherein Africa appears as an imaginary landscape, invented and constructed by the West. This “Colonial Library” is the archive of knowledge on Africa that is inevitably drawn from whenever any person speaks, writes or thinks about Africa today. It is also the central resource, Mudimbe argues, to which Africans must return and excavate ideologically in order to articulate epistemologies of Africa on their own terms.

This resonates with Foucault (Foucault and Rabinow 74) who explains:

“Truth” is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements.

“Truth” is linked in a circular relation with systems of power, which produces and sustains it, and to effects of power, which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth.

The question of how to deal with and determine truth is at the root of political and social conflict. This means that attempts to “explore the ‘Other’ point of view” and “to give it a chance to speak for itself” must always be distinguished from the other’s struggles.

Drawing from the insights of both Mudimbe and Foucault, I will examine two creative works, the novel by the Cameroonian Max Lobé, *39 Rue de Berne*, and a short story by the Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie, “Jumping Monkey Hill,” which was included in *The Thing Around your Neck*. Although our topic is Cameroonian literature, I am including Adichie’s work, as she takes a political stand as a writer who insists on introducing the topic of homosexuality to the Sub-Saharan Africa, and I find the insights to be gained from her text extremely important.

39 Rue de Berne and “Jumping Monkey Hill” offer alternatives to the depictions by many activists in the global north, who tend to ‘norm’ the nations of the global south as innately homophobic while simultaneously attempting to bring them into alignment with Western social and political constructions.¹ These depictions also counter contemporary popular depictions of lesbians in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the many films being produced in Nigeria,² and ask us to consider the *people* who are affected by these debates in all their complexity and beauty. Individuals suffer when homophobia is used to reify national identities and colonial roles and obscure critical socio-economic problems, but they also react to these social inequities creatively, and with beauty and grace.

I am also aware that by bringing these works, and this issue of African sexualities, into an academic context, we are doing nothing less than creating a new mode of discourse—one that melds genre aspects of Cameroonian literature (including personal narratives and an active emotional involvement with the subject matter) together with the detailed historiographical and archival approach that is foundational in academic contexts. But this work must be done, for the experiences of LGBT individuals should and must be a part of Cameroonian modernity.

Although Lobé’s work is recent, having been published in 2013, it is not the first time a Cameroonian writer has written sympathetically about a gay character. We find in Franco-Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala’s 1987 novel, *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlé* (translated as *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* by Marjolijn De Jager) that the character Ayesha’s admiration and desire for other women embodies a need for tenderness and love in a corrupt and brutal society; however, the context necessarily suggests that these yearnings are no more than a “mental escape, imperfect, sympathetic *faute de mieux*”—there being no, if you wish, truly phallogocentric alternative. Thus,

although the book brings up the topic of love between people of the same sex, Beyala ultimately turns away from validating this love. By contrast, at the heart of *39 Rue de Berne* is the same-sex love of a young Cameroonian man living in Switzerland. We must add this text to our libraries, not only because of the topic of homosexuality, but because its narrative considers two vulnerable groups: women and sexual minorities.

The story that Max Lobé tells is not a happy one. It opens with a tragedy: the life of a man in decline, living in a Douala shantytown. This is followed by other tragedies, including the story of a 16-year-old girl, Mbila, whose age was changed to 21 so that she could travel to Switzerland, with all her family's hopes placed upon her. When she arrives she realizes the price she has to pay: her documents taken, her adolescence stolen, torn from her; her body sold like common goods. All that gives light to her daily life is the presence of her son, Dipita, her only child, and her colleagues and friends, who meet in the Association for Women of Pâquis (AWP). The story ends with another tragedy; her son's arrest and his five-year prison sentence for murder. All of these tragedies are too loud, too real, too true. Yet, a close reading of the book shows that the author loves silence, the spaces in between the words and events that show the emotional effects of these difficult conditions.

Mbila and her son Dipita³ live on the 4th floor of la rue de Berne in Geneva. A strong friendship binds them, and her son is both her confidant and her associate. Mbila hides nothing from Dipita. He knows that she sells her self every night in her room, close to his own, but Dipita was born from a loving union between Mbila and her first lover, who nevertheless was the very one who forced her to walk the streets to pay for her ticket to Switzerland. For 18 years, Dipita lives peacefully amongst his mothers, sweet immigrant women who live in the same neighborhood. Dipita dreams of saving his uncle from the misery of his life in Cameroon. Uncle Démoney is a former civil servant, and an anti-government reactionary who thought he was doing the right thing in sending his daughter/sister overseas. Didn't he know the conditions in which she would be working? That she would be forced to sell her body at the age of 16 to pay for her trip? Mbila could never forgive Uncle Démoney's betrayal. And still Uncle Démoney has the gall to transfer his disappointed hopes onto his nephew, whom he had the pleasure of hosting more than once in his home during school holidays.

Dipita is fascinated by his uncle, a rebel, disgusted with the government. Unafraid of the authoritarian regime, he lets everyone know it. Dipita is proud when his uncle calls him comrade, a term of esteem. And Dipita needs esteem because he lacks it, painfully. Dipita doesn't feel courageous, or strong, or handsome. He is hung up about his body, his life, the fact that he is black, and especially about his sexual orientation. Dipita loves men. And he knows that, in this respect, he has let his comrade down. He's become like the whites, because, as his uncle says, he cries and he sleeps with men.

Dipita's misfortune, however, is not that he is gay. (He would have preferred to make a big deal about it, but despite his uncle's occasional derision, both he and his mother accepted him as he is, to Dipita's great confusion.) Dipita's misfortune is his passionate, violent, irrational love for William, a young man one year older than he, whom he met in a virtual supermarket. When Dipita finds William in the bathroom of his favorite kebab shop, in a compromising position with Saarinen, his childhood friend from la rue de Berne, it is all over. He doesn't eat or speak for four days, to his mother's consternation, who tells him to work things out with William. But Dipita works things out in his own way. Carried away by his anger, blinded by betrayal, Dipita hits the repenting William again and again and again, until he dies.

You might think that was the end of the drama. But Max Lobé doesn't stop there. With her son sentenced to prison for murder, Mbila wants to take her own life. But for the women of the AWP, she wouldn't have lived to tell him, in the Champ-Dollon prison, where he serves his time, that his comrade, his Uncle Démoney, whom he had hoped so desperately to help, and whom he had so wanted to please, had been killed. Uncle Démoney had criticized the demolition of his shantytown. He had also criticized the political class, the corrupt elite, which had stamped its shame on the common people. His violent opposition to the regime found its consecration in his death.

Max Lobé tells of the tragic destiny of three protagonists searching for more, for better, for beauty. He stresses the decay of modernity by examining political and social issues that have rendered humans vulnerable. The discourse of vulnerability comes clear in the novel's language, and its focus on the difficulties of communication between wandering characters in constant search of a lost country, of love and of self. It is *mise-en scène* par excellence, an example of contemporary issues in the twenty-first century.

My novel, *Portrait d'une jeune artiste de Bona Mbella*, is concerned with vulnerability, with creating a world in which we see the vulnerable, and hear their words. But in contrast to Lobé's work, which largely takes place in Switzerland, I don't use the word "homosexual" or even "lesbian." Living in African cities and towns, these terms don't resonate in similar ways. Indeed, I am sensitive to the fact that coded language is used to talk about homosexuality—and how many women who love women simply remain *silent* as a means to avoid social scrutiny. In this way, my book challenges prevailing representations in Sub-Saharan Africa, which depict lesbian women as aberrant, isolated and diseased. I do this by focusing on love and desire—the beauty of their relationships—even when they happen against a backdrop of perversity or violence. We must nuance our understanding of homosexuality, and even more so our understanding of these women's humanity, about their internal struggle to be in societies where they are not accepted. Writing about women loving women is central to Cameroonian literature precisely because these

women lives are lesser known and less valued in traditional Cameroonian literary historiographies. Investigating these lives, closely interpreting their meanings, and placing them into multiple historical contexts, is therefore an important intervention into the new African libraries.

As I conclude my reflections, I would like to use Chimamanda Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" to underline how a literature teaches us that a new vocabulary must be developed to explore the lives of LGBT individuals in Cameroon, and, indeed, across Sub-Saharan Africa. In a climactic scene in Chimamanda Adichie's short story "Jumping Monkey Hill," about a group of African writers at a workshop and residency in South Africa, the young Nigerian author Ujunwa asks "the Senegalese," a fellow young woman, how she responded when the older workshop leader made a comment about her navel:

The Senegalese shrugged and said no matter how many dreams the old man had, she would still remain a happy lesbian and there was no need to say anything to him. "But why do we say nothing?" Ujunwa asked. She raised her voice and looked at the others. "Why do we always say nothing?" (112–3)

Adichie's story suggests many answers to this question of silence—money, power, class, Western consumption of African cultural products. All of these factors play into the choice not to say anything. But the suggestion that Adichie stresses is the concept of "Africanness," and how this concept weaves together nation, family and personal identity so tightly that one cannot deviate on an individual level from certain conceptual norms unless one is willing to renounce the relationships that tie all three together.

It might seem a detail in the quotation above that the Senegalese is a "happy lesbian." In the story as a whole, homosexuality at first appears to be nothing more than a subplot: a minor character, a lesbian, is derided and largely ignored. But as the story evolves, we find that the ability of the Senegalese to describe who she loves coincides with the ability of the main character, Ujunwa, to control her own narrative.

"Jumping Monkey Hill" recounts a two-week period in which writers from a host of African countries are invited to a South African resort for a writing residency and workshop. But there's something strange about this gathering. First, except for the main character, Ujunwa, all the writers are referred to by their nationality. There's the "Tanzanian," the "Kenyan," the "Ugandan," the "Senegalese" and the black and white "South Africans." In addition to Ujunwa, only the residency's organizer and facilitator, Edward, and his wife are named. Edward is somewhere between "sixty-five and ninety," who lives in London and who is the gatekeeper for a host of European money and prizes. He has the power to decide whether the writers' stories are "working" or not. He has the power to decide whether they are

“African” or not. He also, it turns out, has the power to wield his lecherous gaze and demeaning comments upon the two young women of the group, Ujunwa and the Senegalese.

This choice to identify most of the characters by country underlines the story’s comment on the relationship between national and personal identity, a relationship that is spelled out most pointedly in the scene in which the Senegalese shares her story, a fictionalized account of her partner’s death:

The Senegalese read two pages of a funeral scene, stopping often to sip some water, her accent thickening as she became more emotional, each *t* sounding more like a *z*. Afterwards, everyone turned to Edward, even the Ugandan, who seemed to have forgotten that he was workshop leader. Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren’t reflective of Africa, really. “Which Africa?” Ujunwa blurted out.

The black South African shifted on his seat. Edward chewed further at his pipe. Then he looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn’t speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. The Zimbabwean and Tanzanian and white South African began to shake their heads as Edward was speaking.

“This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?” Edward said.

The Senegalese burst out in incomprehensible French and then, a minute of fluid speech later, said, *I am Senegalese! I am Senegalese!* Edward responded in equally swift French and then said in English, with a soft smile. “I think she has had too much of that excellent Bordeaux,” and some of the participants chuckled. (108–9)

There are many interesting things happening here. There is the emotion of a woman telling her love for another woman. There is the moment of silence, in which no one knows what to say. And then there is the collective decision to turn to Edward.

Silence surrounds homosexuality in Africa. It is how we voice its presence, and it is part of the responses we hear when it is voiced. In this scene, Adichie presents us with a lesbian who is breaking the silence, and although we don’t know the details of her story, by all cues it would seem that it is love story, and a tragic one. But none of the writers in the group responds to this emotion. It is as if they cannot even conceptualize how to do it.

Yet by remaining silent, the writers grant the power of response to Edward—and he responds by disqualifying it out of hand. He does this slyly—not “as an Oxford-trained Africanist but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues.” In other words, homosexuality is un-African. One cannot be both African and gay.

This is a strong enough claim to begin with, but on a more abstract level, Edward demonstrates how his mode of argumentation precludes any conceptualization of African homosexuality. His response marks this activity as impossible. *If* one writes about Africa and homosexuality one *can only use* a discourse that is un-African. But this will *automatically fail*, because it draws from Western cultures not African ones. When the Senegalese responds to this, passionately and fluidly, “I am Senegalese! I am Senegalese!” Edward merely brushes this aside. She’s drunk on French wines, and presumably French ideas; surely she cannot think that her experiences are authentically African. (Remember Dipita and the shame he feels before his Uncle, who considers him white because he sleeps with men and cries.)

Adichie’s text powerfully suggests one of the ways that this love is silenced. Even when it is present, even when it is seen or heard, the socio-political forces that frame its consumption do not allow it to be seen for what it is: love. Rather relationships are recast in political terms that exploit fears of identity.

Scholars have recently begun to do work that gets to the heart of the resistance to the notion of diverse African sexualities. For example in *Sexual Diversity in Africa*, articles by Kathleen O’Mara and Christophe Broqua detail the ways that people of diverse sexualities live in Ghana and Mali. Similarly, in his article from the 2013 *African Studies Association Journal*, Babacar M’Baye details the historical presence of gay and transsexual men and women in Senegal, and traces the origins of cultural intolerance to the colonial period. All of these articles stress two important points: First, gay men and women live and have lived in Africa. Second, we must understand their lives through the cultural structures in which they live. In other words, we must accept the diversity of African sexualities as authentically African. They can and must be understood as such.

But most popular discussions in Sub-Saharan Africa still refuse to allow for the possibility of same-sex love. A powerful example of this can be found in Nollywood films, as the body of popular films made in Southern Nigeria is called, which present lesbians as hyper-visible but ultimately erase their presence through a refusal to allow them to survive to a happy ending—the women are either converted, killed or cured. In these films, as one woman put it, no one is allowed to “say what is” even when everyone knows what is going on (Green-Simms and Azuah 46). No one can say that there are African women who love African women. Within the framing discourse, this is impossible.

Although we should seek to understand more clearly how same-sex love is articulated in Sub-Saharan contexts, we must also acknowledge that a refusal to see love between people of the same sex creates human suffering. It allows laws to be put into place that criminalize homosexuality. (In Cameroon, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria, homosexuality is illegal.) It also means that same-sex relationships are often denied or condemned, as official and familial discourses refuse to acknowledge them.

Just this past year, in Cameroon, a young man, Roger Jean-Claude Mbede, died from a hernia that had developed while he serving a three-year prison sentence for the crime of texting another man “I am very much in love with you.” He had been receiving treatment in a hospital until his family removed him the month before. Civil rights lawyer Alice Nkom, one of the few lawyers in Cameroon who is fighting the anti-gay laws, reported “His family said he was a curse for them and that we should let him die.” (Associated Press)

When Edward asks above, “How African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?” he is asking a rhetorical question. The answer he implies is, “It is not African.” But the story of the Senegalese, and the story of Dipita and the story of Roger Mbede have shown this to be untrue. But they also answer Ujunwa’s question: “Why do we always say nothing?” They illustrate the costs of breaking the silence. One is either stripped of one’s larger, national identity, one’s familial identity or killed, or perhaps all of the above.

Ultimately the relationship between the costs of silence and the breaking of silence is circular. Only when we can listen to the stories of African same-sex love and hear tales of love and suffering, will the human costs be mediated. Until this time the human rights of all Sub-Saharan Africans will continue to be compromised, for as Adichie so skillfully suggests, it is not only the Senegalese who suffers from Edward’s discursive framing, but Ujunwa and all the other writers. And until we cease to accept definitions of who is or is not African, the lives of gay men and women will remain in danger.

These works begin to create space within the collective imaginary of Cameroonians. These stories, and the people that inhabit them must not be translations of stories from abroad, but must be shown to belong in and to Cameroon. In this way, with coherency located on a sense of common acceptance, people experience a powerful sense of heterogeneity in daily life without fear or chaos.

Notes

1. The September 2013 issue of *African Studies Review* offers new, interesting perspectives on this debate.
2. This booming film industry—named Nollywood for its provenance in Southern Nigeria—is the second largest in the world based on “the sheer number of films it produces each year” (Green-Simms and Azuah 34). It finds its audience in Sub-Saharan Africans both on the continent and throughout its diaspora. In their recent article, Green-Simms and Azuah show that although Nollywood films depicting lesbians have increased in the past decade, they inevitably use lesbianism to depict pathology and social deviance. For example, one Nigerian director states his film was made to “call attention to the ‘social menace’ of lesbianism that is secretly infecting and destroying society” (Green-Simms and Azuah 45). This kind of rhetoric is found in cultural discourses circulating throughout the region.
3. These two names in a Bantu language, and specifically in Dúala, carry significant meanings in this novel. Mbila means “war,” or a “fighter”. This we find in the narrative of Mbila, who does not give up. She fights to survive. Dipita means hope. In fact, the novel offers a poetic aesthetic of hope for the African continent.

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