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Polo B. Moji, *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. viii + 172 pp. Notes and works cited by chapter, index. \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0367637514; \$47.65 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1003120544.

Review by Kristen Stern, University of Massachusetts Lowell.

Polo B. Moji's recent monograph, *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives*, is a thorough study of contemporary literary, documentary, and political texts by Black French women whose work complicates oversimplified and spectacularized representations of race and gender, and how they relate to urban spaces in the French imaginary. Moji takes the emblematic figure of the *flâneur* in French letters and demonstrates how urban walking as a specifically Black *flâneuse* is both a common figure that runs through a broad and varied corpus in contemporary francophone cultural texts, and a crucial method for thinking more expansively about the everyday realities of Blackness in Parisian spaces.

The long shadow of 2005—the uprisings that started after two teenaged boys of color died after being pursued by police into an electrical substation in Clichy-sous-Bois—extends its reach to Moji's book, which takes these events as its point of departure. For Moji, 2005 was a moment of spectacularization of the *banlieue* in media, through a lens of violence, poverty, deprivation, and necessary state intervention to establish and maintain order, all caused by an unassimilated otherness of the residents (mostly of color) of those neighborhoods adjacent to central Paris. Moji starts her study with Guianese politician Christiane Taubira who also identifies 2005 as a clarifying moment for her: “Je suis devenue noire à Paris. C'était en 2005” (p. 1).<sup>[1]</sup> Taubira's political and personal memoirs open and close this book, otherwise focused on literary texts and films as its primary sources, making clear the author's position that these identities and spaces of containment have clear political consequences (both in terms of electoral politics and politics of the everyday). This explicitly political framing with the moment of 2005 and Taubira's reflections on it bring to the fore what is a central concern of the creators in Moji's corpus: the political/popular discourse that makes immovable distinctions between the *banlieue* and intramuros Paris that scholars and politicians alike often make much of. Through her detailed close readings and viewings, Moji pushes back against this vision of a clearly demarcated line between the two spaces and emphasizes rather what is productive in thinking about the connections and movements between different spaces that happen to fall on either side of the *périphérique*. Moji asks a central question: “How do AfroFrench negotiations of place develop a lexicon for a critical engagement with a diasporic blackness that is European?” (p. 8). She proposes “walking as method” to investigate this question, in order to get past the spectacular or exceptional and into the everyday (p. 15). Her work reimagines Benjamin's *flâneur*, who is emblematic of the gaze of

the alienated man. Moji “...argue[s] that the material-discursive framing of black *flânerie*, as both relationality and embodied movements in French spaces, renders visible the processes of placemaking and respatialisation embedded in daily lives of black women. ...[T]he theoretical intervention of this study is to read *flânerie* as both the site of an ethnographic gaze and a movement of relation that is rendered visible by a ‘poetics of relationality’ (Glissant 1990)” (p. 8). Rather than reinforcing the logics of containment often heard in popular and political discourse regarding Paris’s outer suburbs, Moji’s study emphasizes the “possibility of spatial liberty” (p. 7).

*Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives* focuses on some well-studied authors (Miano, Diome) but also intentionally brings some lesser-studied Black women creators into the conversation: Pascal Obolo and Mame-Fatou Niang (film); Lénora Miano, Bessora, Fatou Diome, and Lauren Ekué (literature); Rama Yade-Zimet and Christine Taubira (political memoir). Moji’s intention is to push back against “strangely depoliticised readings of works produced by black women” (pp. 8-9). While I agree that these creators are deserving of more, and more robust, critical attention to the richness and innovation of their works, it does strike me as odd to understand these authors’ works as being “depoliticized.” It is precisely writers of color broadly, and African or Afrodescendant writers particularly, who are often faced with the mandate to be politically engaged in the critical reception of their works.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is titled “The long shadow of Marianne” and focuses on how Black, and specifically Black female, citizenship is conceptualized within the theoretically race-blind French Republic. The first chapter, “I wonder as I wander: AfroFrench visuality and walking as method,” focuses on visual media, specifically the documentaries *Mariannes Noires* by Mame-Fatou Niang and Kaytie Nielsen, *La femme invisible* by Pascale Obolo, and the 2015 webseries *Flâner* by Cecile Emeke. Through close viewing of these resources, Moji emphasizes walking as a method to theorize the paradox of social invisibility and political hypervisibility of Black women in France. She argues that walking makes clear the link between particular spaces and the strangeness (otherness) of individuals and groups. Moji specifically tackles the “otherness” of the *banlieue* which is automatically applied to blackness in France: the *banlieue* is imagined as a space of containment, and also a space that was conceived as being for people who were intended to be in the country on a temporary basis. This logic of *banlieue* visibility still applies when a Black woman walks intra-muros Paris, Moji argues, because her body evokes that specific place (for the White viewer, one supposes). The examples of women interviewed on the street in both *Mariannes Noires* and *Flâner* resist the spectacle of blackness and of the *banlieue* because they show these women living ordinary lives and doing their daily, everyday tasks: “...[Emeke’s] depiction of ordinary Black French people delinks blackness from the imaginary of the *banlieue*” (p. 27). These films evoke the sensorial experience of walking through the city as these characters through the gaze of the camera, raising questions of place and belonging in a multiracial contemporary Paris. Moji in this chapter draws attention to these works that have not been adequately studied as primary sources in French/francophone studies, and the emphasis on *flânerie* places them accurately—and provocatively, putting into question assumptions about race and gender in the figure of the *flâneur*—within a longer tradition in French letters. Moji’s analysis asserts a more accurate way of conceptualizing who gets to take up public space and who gets to make meaning out of these everyday strolls.

In the next two chapters, “The map is not the territory: Francophonie and the errant writer” (chapter two) and “Black or French: Voicing the borders of black France” (chapter three), the author focuses on literary texts. Here, Moji offers new ways of reading the prose of Fatou Diome

and Léonora Miano, two contemporary authors who are the subject of many current studies and present on many graduate and undergraduate syllabi. Moji pays close attention to the connections between both the fiction and the nonfiction essays of both authors, expertly identifying the bridges between these works. Both genres are parts of each writer's overall aesthetic projects and cannot be compartmentalized, especially in today's highly mediated literary sphere. Alain Mabanckou is brought up as a kind of counterpoint to some of these questions regarding how migrant characters navigate the city; the author misses an opportunity here for a stronger critical engagement with masculinity considering the monograph's explicit engagement with gender representation. Moji here dips her toe into discussions of autofiction in the case of Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* and *Marianne porte plainte!* and Miano's *Écrits pour la parole* and *Afropean soul et autres nouvelles*. In this section the author addresses a real *angle mort*, in my opinion, in literary studies, which as a whole does not adequately engage with the multiple modes that writers communicate in and that are available to readers and critics of contemporary literary fiction.

Diome and Miano are both often categorized as immigrant writers, thus inextricably linked with the same wander aesthetic as the *flâneur*. Moji, rather, emphasizes a relational mode of thinking about these texts, aligning with theories of Glissant: "...by delinking herself from the geographically circumscribed 'I' of an immigrant writer—who is forever frozen in the moment of arrival—and claiming a relational 'I' that is (re)born in the moment, the errant writer, and narratives of errantly [sic] make it possible to imagine relational modes of belonging to French identity" (p. 57). This relational way of thinking about belonging brings her to theorize a "...form of citizenship...that is waylaid by the obstacle of 'othering.' This notion of *waylaid* citizenship allows us to read the distinction between "*français de souche*" [*of original French stock*] and "*français d'origine*" [*French of other origin*] in nationalist discourse as a lexicon which creates a hierarchy of belonging *within* the nation" (author's emphases, p. 61). This mode of thinking about citizenship can be productive for escaping the sometimes oversimplified pigeonholing of authors of African origins/descent in French/francophone studies and proposes a more nuanced way of thinking about these figures in Diome's and Miano's fiction—who at times fuse or overlap with their own social identities—who are indefinitely part of the urban French social body, but whose *belonging* there is always contingent, fragile.

The significant theoretical interventions and innovative textual analysis of these two key writers of our time in these two chapters would be more impactful by situating them more clearly within longer conversations in the field. The reader is left wondering how Miano and Diome distinguish themselves from others, particularly those working in the very French tradition of autofiction. Moji also coins the term "literary activism" (p. 61) to describe the fusion of the political messages found in both Miano's and Diome's written literary work and their public speech acts.[2] It is unclear what distinguishes the author's definition of literary activism from *littérature engagée*, particularly when there has been scholarship addressing this question in contemporary francophone African letters in the last decade or so.[3] Expanded work on these two questions would generate rich and productive theorizing about the state of the field.

"Blackness intra muros" is the second section, which includes chapters that continue Moji's focus on literary fiction. Chapter four, "Naming *into* place: Afropeanism as a poetics of relation," extends the author's engagement with Glissant and on Miano's fiction, specifically the novel *Blues pour Elise*. Similar to the two previous chapters, both Miano's fiction and non-fiction writing are a part of the author's corpus here. Notably her 2020 essay *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et*

*post-raciste*. *Blues pour Elise* picks up the theme of making blackness everyday, specifically blackness intra-muros. This chapter demonstrates how works like Miano's resist clear demarcation lines between intra-muros and *banlieue* Paris for racial belonging. Glissant's archipelagos are at work in Île-de-France as well: "The multicultural pockets of the city are therefore represented as being both spaces of containment, which limit the presence of racialized and ethnicised groups to certain streets or 'quartiers', but they also act as an archipelago of spaces in which black does not equate to 'otherness'" (pp. 97-98). In Miano's novel—as in contemporary reality—blackness is everyday, blackness is a part of French life, and French identity as well.

The focus shifts to Bessora's novel *53cm* in chapter five, "Zara in the metro: Geographic variability and the ethnographic gaze." The protagonist Zara, who resembles Bessora with both African and European parentage and a Swiss passport, struggles to be legible in the French immigration system where she is a university student. Moji identifies this system as a heterotopia, a space that appears open and simple but is actually a place of concealed exclusion. The administrative system that Zara must navigate for herself and her daughter to have legal status pretends to be clear and logical but is in fact obscure and determined to exclude those who do not easily fit within racist categories of belonging. As Moji says, *53cm* "reframes the question of 'which bodies belong where' as a question of 'who decides which bodies belong where'" through the absurd twists and turns of Zara's quest to obtain the legal paperwork for her student status in France (p. 117). Like Miano and Diome, Bessora's blog is in dialogue with her published novels; the "errant writer" motif from the blog's subtitle is central to her fiction writing and is productive for rethinking blackness in French cultural production and political discourse. Bessora's blog is a curated, performed version of the self that can be read as her pushing back against ways in which she is marginalized or othered in mainstream literary spaces. Moji sees Bessora's "geographically variable" subtitle of Bessora's blog as aligned with her own multiracial identity, with multiple national identities across Europe and the African continent, and with the Afropean identity that Miano theorizes. Many studies of this novel have noted Bessora's reversal of the colonial, anthropological gaze, but Moji goes further to "argue that the novel's dissection of French society goes beyond a simple inversion of the colonial gaze, because it questions the association between modern scientific reason and the colonial production of knowledge about the 'Other'" (p. 117). Zara, with her creator Bessora, is the errant figure, mobile and "geographically variable" through the streets and tunnels of Paris, both inside and outside the *périphérique*, despite the logics of containment of the state; this mobility, argues the author, demonstrates that the subaltern has more awareness and knowledge of space, borders, and boundaries precisely "because their *being* depends on it" (p. 129).

Finally, in chapter six, "Re-imagining AfroParisianism: Blackness encoded; spatiality decoded," Moji turns her attention to the début novel of Lauren Ekué, *Icone Urbaine* (2005). This novel explicitly engages with hip-hop aesthetics, feminism, and a global understanding of blackness and consuming global Black cultures. Ekué's use of hip-hop to interpret spaces in the city is, for Moji, a "poetics of AfroParisianism" through its critical understanding of identity (p. 134). Language in general and *verlan* specifically "remix[es]...linguistic codes to simultaneously represent the particularities of blackness in France in relation to a globally mediated popular image of *Blackness*" (p. 134, emphasis and capitalization changes original). Like Miano, Ekué's novel eschews reducing the Black, French, female experience as one of "shared pain and victimization," quoting bell hooks, but rather shows the everyday life and joys of these characters, thus challenging the "racialized urban geography" of Paris by allowing these characters to thrive intra-muros (p. 140). Spaces can have multiple layers, codes, or belongings. Black-coded spaces

intra-muros are legitimate, connected to other Black spaces (in the Paris region and beyond, to Dakar, to Harlem...), and are mapped. Moji theorizes these spaces as “archipelagos of black space,” inherently connected to diasporic thinking and aesthetics like hip hop, while still situated in disparate “islands” within the larger urban space (p. 151).

As the title of the second section makes clear, the book almost exclusively emphasizes Black women protagonists in Paris. The literal and cultural centrality of the French capital is not in question; but the strongest points the author makes in the book are when she is explicitly analyzing an AfroParisian aesthetic or politic. Her rearticulation of intra-muros/*banlieue* Paris de-emphasizes the separation between those two spaces, in favor of mapping the connections between them, as the fictional protagonists and subjects of the documentaries in her corpus experience them. Moji’s conclusion underscores the porosity and interconnectedness of these spaces that are in a way built to seem impervious. Despite the logics of containment perpetuated by the postcolonial state, Moji makes clear that through both political discourse and cultural production, Black French women demonstrate that this containment is not as steadfast as simplified political rhetorics may make it seem. This book “expands the terrain on black *flânerie* beyond the territoriality of national spaces and cityscapes. Thinking of AfroFrench blackness in *relation to* an entangled and transcultural, network of affiliations subverts the linear or circular logic of movement between France and its former (francophone) colonies” (p. 160). Moji reads “a new ‘spatial turn’” in this literature in the “ambition to create openings...and this ‘place’ for the banality and relationality of blackness...” (p. 160). *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives* is a significant contribution to contemporary francophone literature and film, opening new ways of theorizing and practicing understandings of urban space in France. Moji’s work challenges scholars of literature and film to explore what new paths of inquiry open up when we resist spatial boundaries that contain, and follow the actual movements and the authors and protagonists we wish to study.

Lastly, I must address the poor copyediting in this monograph. There are frequent, obvious, typographical and other errors (sentence fragments, discrepancies between the French and English translations of quoted texts, errors in titles of texts referenced, etc.). These errors are at times so serious that they are not simply a nuisance to the reader, but they get in the way of clear communication of the author’s argument. It is unfortunate that the publisher does not invest more in supporting their authors in this way to ensure high quality representation of their ideas and scholarly work.

## NOTES

[1] Christiane Taubira, *Mes météores: combats politiques au long cours: mémoires* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), p. 17.

[2] The term “literary activism” has been proposed in the context of African literatures by Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallace with a different meaning than used here, pertaining to entrepreneurial (though not profit-seeking) activity by and for stakeholders in African literatures based on the continent. See Krishnan, Madhu, and Kate Wallis. “Podcasting as Activism and/or Entrepreneurship: Cooperative Networks, Publics and African Literary Production.” *Postcolonial Text* 15/3 & 4 (2020). <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/2483/2427>



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[3] Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

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