Research Africa Reviews, Vol. 6, No. 2, August 2022
These reviews may be found on the RA Reviews website at:
https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/ volume-6-issue-2-august-2022/

Taboom Media (editor), *Hopes and Dreams that Sound Like Yours: Stories of Queer Activism in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Publisher: MaThoko's Books, South Africa, 2021. 98 pages. ISBN# 9780620935340.

Reviewed by: Brenna M. Munro, University of Miami.

This book is an open-access collection of twenty finely honed short essays by activists, along with a range of beautiful illustrations commissioned to accompany the essays. The book was published by South Africa's Taboom Media in collaboration with the GALA Queer Archive through their MaThoko Books imprint. Although North Africa is absent, this is a geographically diverse anthology, including writers from countries such as Mozambique, Mauritius, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda, as well as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. *Hopes and Dreams* would be a lively addition to undergraduate classes on gender and sexuality and is a rich resource for scholars working in queer African studies. While the multinational anthology format tends to flatten the complexity of each distinct context, the collection nonetheless offers a nuanced picture of LGBTQ activism on the continent in the pandemic era.

The essays focus on why and how the writers became activists, thus documenting a staggeringly wide range of forms of injustice and persecution. Timiebi Ebitibituwa describes the impact of the 2014 Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act as "a devastating blow that gave Nigerian society free rein to discriminate against queer people. I watched in horror as antiqueer attacks and homophobic violence rose" (38), while Kashindi Shabani Gady says:

> There are no specific laws against being LGBTI in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but there's plenty of hatred . . .We face arbitrary arrest for illegitimate offences, rejection from our families and society, discrimination in employment and education, inadequate healthcare, so-called "corrective" rape, and other forms of violence. The persecution is relentless. (55)

DK Dlamini from Eswatini focuses, as several of the writers do, on Christianity: "The shame, the embarrassment, the conversion therapies, the deliverance ceremonies, the exorcisms — I knew it didn't need to be like this" (80-81). Many of the essays access an eloquent rage, and real courage is documented throughout, from Gady, who returned from Ireland to a worsening situation in the DRC determined to make change, to Eppy Mutetwa, a straight Zimbabwean activist whose association with queer people has brought threats: "These men wanted to scare me into

abandoning my queer friends. Weathering their disgusting assaults together only strengthened our bond" (76).

Some of the essays, meanwhile, tell more unexpected stories, such as Dhoza Ahmed's compelling reconsideration of her identity and embodiment while losing access to hormones and enduring depression during covid lockdown: "As I lost some of my gender-affirming body features, I gained an appreciation for how diverse and wide the trans spectrum truly is. . . .Sitting alone at home, watching my body change against my will, I learned the power of self-worth and self-love. No matter how I look, I am a trans woman, and I am worthy of love" (14-15).

The question of where African queer activism comes from is deeply politically freighted. As Matthew Thomann and Ashley Currier examine in a recent essay on the West African context[1], same-sex sexualities are associated with money, and imagined to be both tied to local elites and "rooted in corruption and white foreigners' influence. These discursive associations become more complex and often volatile when countries in the global North offer ideological and financial support to sexual and gender minority organizations on the continent" (200).

This volume itself was funded by the Arcus Foundation (US/UK), the National Endowment for Democracy (US), and the Sigrid Rausing Trust (UK), and the material importance of working for NGOs in the lives of these activists is clear. The role of transnational networks in these narratives, however, is complex. Many of these activists have moved between different African countries to find safety or work themselves, and have sharp regional political awareness, and a commitment to helping queer refugees. Many are involved in building pan-African queer and sex worker organizing structures, structures that may eventually shift perceptions about the provenance of sexual and gender rights activism.

The collection also emphasizes the local genesis of activist desires and projects. Some writers were positively inspired by their own families, such as Pamina Sebastião, whose queer organizing in Angola alongside her sister came from a family culture of social justice as much as her own sexual orientation, and Bulelani Mzila, who credits his queer feminist values to his working class South African mother, whose own mother "died when she was sixteen, forcing her to drop out of school to work and raise her siblings. She spent her entire life providing. To me, she was the epitome of gender-nonconforming — she was my mom and my dad. As her gender-nonconforming child, I wanted to make her proud" (26).

Many of these writers are, like Mzila, from backgrounds that cannot be described as "elite." There is also a recurring motif in these stories of queer people in domestic spaces of refuge, alone or in a small collective of trusted friends,

---

[1] Currier and Thomann, "Sex and Money in West Africa: The 'Money' Problem in West African Sexual Diversity Politics," *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies*, ed. S.N. Nyeck, Routledge: New York, 2020: 200-212.

discussing and dreaming up ideas that then take material public shape. David Ochara, for example, begins his story of how he was involved in creating an LGBT-affirming church this way: "The year is 2013. A group of young Kenyans sits clustered in a basement apartment in Nairobi. We're playing games, catching up, hanging out. We're sharing our hopes and dreams" (21). As Sebastião describes the origins of her work:

> What's now called Arquivo de Identidade Angolano (AIA) started around an old table in my family's living room in 2016…we created LGBTIQ video testimonies, translated queer rights resources into Portuguese, and documented our journey in a blog. . . .AIA built No Cubico in 2017 as an LGBTQI safe space for cultural and educational activities. . . .No Cubico quickly evolved into a shelter, some nights hosting 10 or more people. (30-31)

Nigerian Mike Daemon shares the following: "Eventually, in this isolation, I somehow found my voice. . . . I recorded the first episode of NoStringsNG from a mattress on my mother's floor. The sound quality wasn't great, but I didn't care. I only cared about telling my story" (51). That home-made podcast has "grown into Nigeria's premier LGBT+ media advocacy organization" (53), whose latest initiative is:

> Qtalk, a social and counselling mobile app that connects LGBT+ Nigerians to volunteer doctors and therapists who provide free psychosocial and legal support. The app also serves as a platform for queer people to share their struggles and form meaningful friendships (53).

Daemon describes the practical and psychological help provided to a trans woman, who was evicted, and a gay boy being bullied at school through QTalk (53). While the collection indicates the importance of pop culture and media as both a source of knowledge about sexual and gender diversity and a means of circulating homophobia—particularly on radio and TV—the digital sphere comes across as a central tool for many activists.

As these examples indicate, the "single story" of oppression in Africa is balanced in this collection with an array of imaginative responses, from the "Ghana Gay Blackmail List," which "lets LGBT+ people report and expose people who con or extort us" (42), to successful lobbying for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Mozambique, to condemning and documenting US anti-gay groups' events, to the Rock of Hope Eswatini, which works, often successfully, to "change pastors' mindsets" (81). Mutual aid, community-building, media advocacy and "artivism" are as important here as law, governance, and health.

The writers consistently use the globalized language of identity to describe themselves—what one writer even calls "the right terminology" (79)—with African-language terms referenced only as a source of stigma; "A "stabane," they called me,

an anti-queer slur that stabbed through my heart" (25). This leaves little room for other ways of being which draw on specific African cultural forms, such as "supi," the mode of female relation Serena Dankwa analyzes in her important ethnography, *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana* (2021); Dankwa argues that a knowing discretion, rather than "visibility" is central to this formation.

In *Amphibious Subjects: Sasso and the Contested Politics of Queer Self-Making in Neoliberal Ghana* (2022), Kwame Edwin Otu examines how gender non-conforming men in Ghana who call themselves "sasso" move "amphibiously" between social worlds with very different rules about sexuality and gender, including the world of LGBTQ activism, and how the vernacular concept of sasso troubles the clear distinctions on which LGBT identities rely. In fact, Otu refers to this kind of activism as "homocolonial," and argues that "human rights groups come with their own homogenizing tendencies and agendas. . . that reduce sasso subjectivity to their sexual orientation . . . they rehearse colonial and Christian projects that displaced arguably fluid precolonial gender formations" (7-8). Sociologist Anima Adjepong, meanwhile, emphasizes the crucial role of Ghanaian LGBTQ activism against the escalation of political homophobia as a site of important dissent in a society that otherwise struggles to stand up against corrupt neoliberal governance.[2]

This debate is a crucial context for *Hopes and Dreams*. Perhaps paradoxically, then, *Hopes and Dreams* might be most useful to readers in the global North. In his landmark 2009 report on US right-wing Christian funding and fomenting of homophobia in Africa (https://politicalresearch.org/2009/12/01/globalizing-the-culture-wars-u-s-conservatives-african-churches-homophobia/), Kapya Kaoma argues that the heterocolonial turn to Africa by the Christian right was the result of significant losses in their "culture wars" at home. Today, however, queer people in the US, particularly trans people, face a newly volatile legal, political, and cultural landscape: we are in need of the inspiration and ideas this collection offers.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2022 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and

[2] See her blog post of June 24, 2021, "Protecting Us from Government Overreach-The Gift of Queer and Trans* Ghanaian Activists" (https://animaadjepong.com/blog/2021/6/24/protecting-us-from-government-overreach-the-gift-of-queer-and-trans-ghanaian-activists)

published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990.