

Preface

Martina Kopf

This special issue on sexuality and power in African literature aims to focus on social dimensions of sexuality as well as of writing and imagining sexuality and the erotic. Not only do power relations matter in any sexual and erotic encounter, power is also exerted and constructed through the control of speaking about and speaking sexuality: Who is allowed to speak what in which context?

Literature and literature studies offer various approaches to reflect on (the discourse of) sexuality as a site of power struggles and conflicting interests. The following theses, which we suggested to our contributors as point of departure, present some of them:

- 1) Fiction creates a space where forms of social definition, of the exploitation and repression of sexuality can be explored and analyzed as well as a space to experiment with self-defined concepts of sexuality and erotic desire.
- 2) Sexuality is a complex and sensitive subject characterized by the interaction, respectively competition of "intimate", "private", "public" and "political" interests and desires. "Intimate", "private", "public" and "political" are not universal categories, their boundaries are culturally and socially defined.
- 3) Writing the sexual/the erotic derives its dynamics from conflicting decisions about what can be said, what should be said, what wants to be said and what remains unsaid. The frame of what can be possibly said and how, depends on social, political and cultural contexts and power relations. To engage in a public discourse on sexuality as well as to create and protect intimate spaces does have a political dimension. Both, addressing sexuality in public discourse and claiming the right for intimacy can be strategies of self-assertion and resistance.

4) Exploring the categories of “sexuality” and “power” in the context of African literature needs to take into consideration the dimension of colonialism and racism as well as precolonial traditions and gender concepts.

The first essay leads the reader right into the middle of the vibrant and multifaceted performance of gender drama in the Nigerian video film industry. If women’s literature has managed to crack the crust of silence over the issue of sex, as Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju argues, Nollywood “has shattered it to reverberating echoes” (6). In a large number of films, sexuality is related to the negotiation of domestic, social and political power. Using the power scheme of the social psychologists John R.P. French Jr. and Bertram Raven and its application in gender theory, the author shows how the representation of female agency draws on women’s deployment of sexuality as a strategy of influence, respectively as a source of “referent power.” Oloruntoba-Oju’s essay does not only present a revealing analysis: by his strikingly vivid and playful language he seems to reflect also on the linguistical level the vivacity of this rising popular cultural production he has set out to explore – and in which he also engages as creative writer and scriptwriter.

Felicity Palmer’s reading of Yvonne Vera’s novel *Without a Name* draws on Drucilla Cornell’s concept of the “desiring subject” as medium and agent of a “non-prescriptive feminist ethics of desire, dignity and autonomy” (29). Like few other writers Vera mastered the writing of the erotic as a source of empowerment, agency and creation alongside with the narrative exploration of the trauma of sexual violence. As Palmer argues, through this very positioning of her female protagonists as “desiring subjects” in the face and despite of extreme violence, Vera strives for the idea of a political autonomy that replaces “overdetermined concepts of freedom within colonialist and nationalist frameworks” (27). Unlike the ideal of sovereign subjectivity which is central to these concepts of freedom, an autonomy based upon the notion of the desiring subject would not have to deny intersubjective reliance upon others; a denial, which proves to be especially limiting to women. In her analysis of the novel and her introduction of concepts and discourses, Palmer opens up a wide range of meaning which

matches both, the complexity of Vera's writing and the relationship of sexuality and power.

Bettina Weiss discusses another novel which is quite outspoken in regard of sexuality as a site of power struggles and its role in the social construction of gender. *Toasted Penis and Cheese* by the South African writer Dianne Case is a rebellious text in terms of deconstructing and subverting gender stereotypes, which has not yet gained much attention in African literature studies. Weiss' close reading focusses on the writer's strategy to write the body and to "bring [it] into play as a narrative paradigm, as a site of pain, anxiety, conflict, subversion, recreation, and emancipation." (47)

Bettina Weiss is committed to young and unconventional voices in African literature not only as a scholar, but also as publisher and translator. She started her own publishing company *kalliope paperbacks* with the publication of *The End of Unheard Narratives*, a collection of essays that reflect on "tabooed" issues such as alternative sexualities, HIV/Aids, homoerotic desire and their representation in contemporary literatures of the southern African region. Thanks to her initiative, Dianne Case's novel is now also available in German.

Renaud Lagabrielle's contribution deals with Maghrebinian literature. His analysis of the autobiographical fiction of the francophone Tunisian writer Eyet-Chékib Djaziri follows the protagonist's/narrator's (discursive) assertion of a subject position in a social context where male homosexual practices are prosecuted by law and violently repressed by moral norms and tradition. Lagabrielle elaborates on the close connection of the devaluation of both homosexual desire and femaleness with the construction of an oppressive idea of maleness. Yet he does not stop at this diagnosis of power exerted and constructed through repression. Through an original argumentative turn he defines the very (narrative) insistence in homosexual pleasure as a source of power. With reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's claim of the "transformational energy" of the "queer childhood" (75) Lagabrielle argues that the protagonist's/narrator's pleasure in transgression and his resistance to the verdicts and violence of a dominant heterosexual order form a powerful basis for the construction of a subject "free in his choices and desires" (75).

The subject of Julian Tapprich's essay is the stagnation of desire and the textual performance of this stagnation. His juxtaposition of *Elle sera de jaspe et du corail* by the Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking and Samuel Beckett's classic *En attendant Godot* is also an exercise in transgressing disciplinary boundaries; one of the rare examples in comparative literature where the possibility to work simultaneously with an African and a European text is taken for granted. As Tapprich argues, both writers use similar techniques to stage a universe in their texts, which excludes the sheer possibility of imagining, experiencing or expressing desire: a "mauvaise éternité", where perception and imagination are so curtailed that everything seems like an eternal repetition. The author then shows how, within a context that is so determined by the absence of desire, the writers perform the textual play with this absence as a (re)creative moment. By working with the analytical tools and premises developed in the abundant research on Beckett, Tapprich makes an interesting contribution to the critical study of Werewere Liking, one of the most original voices of contemporary African literature.

We hope our readers will find as much pleasure in reading the essays and critical reviews in this volume as we did and will be inspired to further reflect on the writing of sexuality and power and its personal, social and political implications.