

**Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives.**

Polo B. Moji.

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Polo B. Moji's *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives* analyzes the tension between Black French people's notion of belonging and their presence in French public space. Moji offers a "strolling method" (8) using diverse visual and written materials to show how Black people in certain French public spaces are "out of place" and the ways in which their representations of Blackness are perceived as disruptive. Moji utilizes the gaze of the black flâneuse (strolling woman) to investigate how "race and gender intersect in the (re)mapping and/or repurposing of urban spaces." As a Black French activist, I only encountered frequent use of the term 'AfroFrench' after entering academia and engaging with English-language scholarship. Indeed, Black political organizations, collectives, and cultural projects more commonly use the categories of Afro, Afro-descendant, Noir (Black), or dual citizenship (i.e. Senegalese-French, Guadeloupean). In her book, Moji chooses to adopt the non-hyphenated style "AfroFrench" to emphasize the way in which AfroFrench identities are "inherently relational, multiple and mobile" (8). It is interesting to note that Afrofeminist activists in France also use a non-hyphenated term to emphasize that they are not an offshoot of feminism, but rather a movement of their own (Nsafou).

Moji argues that the narrative of colour-blindness produces the invisibility of Black French women's identities. It is from those margins of invisibility that they mobilize to negotiate place, space, and movement—constantly negotiating with the persistent idea of Blackness as foreign/strange. To address the notions of belonging, space, and Blackness in France, Moji makes use of documentaries, biographies, and novels by Black French politicians, authors, artists, and academics, some of whom are analysed individually,

while others are understood in conversation with Léonora Miano and Rama Yade-Zimmet's writings.

Moji's book is divided into two sections across three chapters, which she organizes around material that she draws from to construct her argument. The first part of the book revolves around the tension between being Black and French and the notion of belonging. Moji highlights the persistence of the "geographic collusion" (43) that the presence of Black bodies creates and how it disrupts the "fixation of French homogeneity" (45). The second part focuses on urban space (and more specifically Paris) as the prime example of Blackness being deemed out of place, in comparison to the banlieue.

Another facet of French national ideology is the political distinction between Black and French. For her third chapter, Moji uses the title "Black or French," highlighting the "language of nativeness in France" (62). Moji provides evidence that, despite the ideology of colour-blindness, there exists a political distinction between white French and the 'others' who do not belong to the national French identity.

The tension between the Republican ideology of colour-blindness and the material and ideological realities of the production of racialized 'others' is a central question in race scholarship in France, but Moji succeeds in offering a new perspective on the diversity of Black French narratives with her strolling method. *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives* is a compelling addition to emerging contemporary Black French studies and geographies due to Moji's thoughtful dialogue with Africana scholarship, from Paul Gilroy to Édouard Glissant and Saidiya Hartman.

Despite its numerous achievements, Moji's book could have provided readers with a more nuanced understanding of the importance of class in the production of Black French identities, in connection with the space of the banlieue. Indeed, it would be useful to understand the core differences between Rama Yade, Léonora Miano, Alain Mabanckou and Fatou Diome on one hand, and Maboula Soumahoro (her book is not cited but her quotes from interventions are) or Mame-Fatou Niang on the other. The first group represents an updated version of French exceptionalism since these figures have roots in the petite bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie of former French colonies and gained French citizenship as adults. Their success and recognition are used in national narratives as proof that France is a place that rewards talent. However, Maboula Soumahoro or Mame-Fatou Niang, for example, come from proletarian

family backgrounds in the banlieue, and their social mobility is tied to the history of the transformation of racial justice mobilizing in France in the past 20 years (Larcher; Niang; Kouvidila). This dimension is crucial as it produces tension between the two groups. Miano, Mabanckou, Diome's "literary activism" must be contextualized and offset by the many critiques that Black French people from the banlieue make vis-à-vis their bodies of work. This form of literary engagement should also be understood in relation to the persistent issue of classism from the African and Caribbean intelligentsia/elite toward Black French people from predominantly working-class immigrant backgrounds.

Incorporating the work of Elijah Anderson, a key scholar in the sociology of racialized specialization and spatializing of race, could have helped to strengthen the analysis of how the 'iconic ghetto' (Anderson)—the stereotypical imagination around Blackness—provides analytical tools to understand the narratives voiced by individuals appearing in the documentary materials: the eagerness to prove that they are "not Fatou" (26) and the choice to label people "who do not fit the trope of unemployed or unemployable black youth" as "ordinary people." This frame is based on a problematic trope regarding the non-ordinary condition of those who are unemployed or unemployable while failing to question the persistence of systemic racism that creates this condition. The intersection of class with gender and race is unfortunately and additionally left out of the analysis when in response to certain representations of Black girls (loud), the counterargument involves showcasing middle-class and petit-bourgeois Black women, furthering the erasure of the most marginalized people. Black women and Afrofeminist activists and thinkers from France (Gay, Mwasi, Noël, Soumahoro) emphasize how the response to racist representations of Black girls and women in mainstream media should not revolve around respectability politics but rather reveal how those loud Black girls in public spaces carry disruptive and rebellious intentions, and in this way deploy Black girlhood fugitivity.

The book is proof of the necessary ongoing transatlantic and afro-diasporic conversations around blackness in the hexagonal French context.

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