Book Review

H. "Herukhuti" Sharif Williams, ed. *Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé: A Legacy of Afrocentric, Decolonial, In-the-Life Theology and Bisexual Intersexional Philosophical Thought and Practice*. London: Routledge Publishing, 2024. 213 pp. $180.00 (ISBN: 9781032424330).

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H. "Herukhuti" Sharif Williams' edited collection, *Dr. Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé: A Legacy of Afrocentric, Decolonial, In-the-Life Theology and Bisexual Intersexional Philosophical Thought and Practice* challenges the reader to imagine that decolonization is an ongoing, multifaceted, and inclusive project. The collection shows how decolonization of the erotic and religious based binaries has implications for philosophical thought, and the nature of life for everyone. Williams' moving introduction, "The Bridge and the Water," imparts Farajajé's wisdom that "we need to heal and get free. Healing is inseparable from the decolonial project" (p. 9). In memoriam, or *gedenkschrift*, of Farajajé (1952 – 2016), the collection centers his life as

Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies, Volume 3, Number 2, Spring 2025

both a thinker and a force for change in ways of thinking about spirituality. From the 1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, Farajajé's AIDS activism and erotic interventions into Black theology demonstrate his radical approach to the study of sexuality.

This volume includes contributions from academic faculty H. "Herukhuti" Sharif Williams, Kenneth Hamilton, Loraine Hutchins, and Taya Mâ Shere and practitioners Steven G. Fullwood, M'kali-Hashiki, Yael Schonzeit, Eric A. Thomas, and Sol Yael Weiss. Williams also includes Farajajé's foundational writings within the volume, and, therefore, the collection elucidates the spiritual and historical value of all sentient beings, including those currently labelled Black and queer.

Farajajé's legacy is a spiritual genealogy, which places "intersexional" spiritual life and living at the center. His work grapples with how the West has demonized and misrepresented Black lives and spiritual traditions. The contributors are, therefore, keen to incorporate the concept of intersectionality; it is an important lens through which one can explain the erroneous association of queerness with immorality, and evil with Black religions. Contributors also demonstrate that the rejection of these fear-based positions requires an intersectional, decolonizing spirit and commitment to the destruction of colonial values.

The first reading, Farajajé's "Breaking the Silence: Toward an -in-the-Life Theology," works through the effects of colonial language that attempts to define humanity. Farajajé claims that the concept of evil was part of a "rhetorical process" (p. 24). He notes that within the colonial condition, same-sex identified people were physically and ideologically attacked by European Christian violence (p. 16). Farajajé relies on Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," as a source from which to explain Black theology's silence and dishonesty about the roots of so-called "traditional" values. He asks, "whose traditional values are they?" (p. 17). He concludes that the scriptures used to demonize homosexuality, and non-Christian religions, are based on translated Hebrew texts, and are often misinterpreted and misquoted by religious leaders. Furthermore, Farajajé explains, "the term homosexual does not exist in any of the original languages of the Bible" (p. 26). Moreover, the story of Sodom in "Genesis 19:1-10, is not about same-sex activity but, rather, about inhospitality" (p. 26). This patriarchal narrative, which

rendered Lot's daughters and the women of Sodom insignificant, is a lesson about extending hospitality to strangers, and not same-sex behavior.

In contrast to many African traditional belief systems, Christianity is a narrative rooted in patriarchy, authoritarianism, and the despiritualization of the body. Queer folks have used inclusive language, such as "in-the-Life," for generations, to describe queer behavior. Farajajé uses the characteristics of West African religion to decolonize Western categories of gender, the body, and spirituality. He notes, "[i]n African religious traditions such as vodun (Afro-Haitian religion) or those based in Yoruba tradition, there is a theology of gender that is very different from what mot [sic] people in the Black Church are accustomed. For example, in the Yoruba religion there are manifestations of the divine (orisha) that are bi-gendered" (pp. 22-23). Unfortunately, the denial of these truths has affected real lives. During the AIDS epidemic, Black gay/bisexual men avoided safer sex practices and information because of the stigma, and false narratives, that they were evil, which was propagated by inhospitable, Christian rhetoric. The truth is that these narratives are not our roots; these ideas are not our true self-definitions.

The third entry in the collection—Farajajé's "Creating Change (1995) Keynote Speech"—continues his legacy of healing, in part, through decolonizing language. The speech calls upon a Black and queer spiritual genealogy through Sojourner Truth. Identifying Truth as "both mystic and activist," he claims her as "the very incarnation of both/and thinking" (p. 49). Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman" speech was a wise corrective that gender is a social and colonial construct. She is Farajajé's hero, "because instead of trying to adapt herself to the societally accepted definition of woman of her time, she challenged both the definition and the standards that had created it" (p. 43). In that spirit, Farajajé proposes an embrace of "[q]ueers in intersection where being queer means acknowledging that race, class, genders, sexuality, spirituality are not monolithic, distinct categories" and "where we can hold many images and creative tension at once" (pp. 43-44). "Queers in intersections" is a destabilizing identity, which moves within the tradition of Sojourner Truth. Therefore, a healing decolonial project includes a reevaluation of bi-gender within an Afrocentric context. For example, the bi-gendered nature of some orishas is a corrective for generations of colonial religious disinformation about the erotic.

The seventh entry in the collection, Farajajé's "Fictions of Purity," emphasizes the need for a corrective, by explaining how bisexual men are demonized through false notions of a purity. But this idea of purity is unreal. This point challenges us to examine whether "simplistic" labels of good and evil and classifications of either/or in our thinking are actually, simple. What if we moved away from these classifications and ideas, and concerned ourselves with intricacies of people's lives? It is neither helpful, nor truthful, to use false, socially constructed notions, to interpret an entire groups' lived experiences.

The fact that he put his thoughts into practice is made evident by the writings of the other contributors who were touched by Farajajé, and who continue his legacy. In "The Closest Thing to God in a Body," Taya Mâ Shere refers to Farajajé as "Baba," and claims that he was "our fullest expression of embodied divinity" (p. 160). In "Sex Toys on the Altar," Loraine Hutchins remembers Farajajé's joke that because sex is sacred, they should consider putting their sex toys on their altars (p. 56). She also remembers him as her spirit guide (p. 53). The collection also includes Farajajé's 2012 Starr King School Symposium opening sermon which advises, "[t]his is about authentically living in and living *into* the differences. Finding the unity in the differences and not demonizing that which we have been taught to fear. Difference is not bad" (p. 147). Farajajé's philosophical thought proposes that "we understand that our religious education has to be multi-issue/ multifocal/ multilayered because we are multi-issue people" (p. 184); we must remember this point. M'kali-Hashiki remembers how Farajajé often called on the land, ancestors, and deities, which live within our souls (p. 38). Even further, Hashiki claims, "[h]is spirit has been present with me for so long and I didn't even recognize it" (p. 39). It is, therefore, high time that we all recognize Farajajé's place in Africana Studies, as well as Gender and Sexuality Studies, and his linkages to Audre Lorde, Sojourner Truth, Black theology, West African religion, and AIDS activism.

Towards the end of his physical life, Farajajé continued to speak about life and living. One year before he transitioned to the ancestral realm, in his, "Remembering Our Wholeness: Starr King School for the Ministry 2015 Symposium Opening Remarks," Farajajé asks, "[b]ut why do we say Black Lives Matter? I think it's really simple—because no one ever says they matter, no one ever acts as if they actually matter" (p. 155). By moving from the epistemological violence of silence towards the

truth of queer lives, we can learn that our thoughts are connected to our everyday practices. Journal readers should purchase and read this book to gain insight into the spiritual depths and breadth of his thought and practice.