

## Prologue: Arrival Stories

I went to buy a bag of onions from her. After chatting for two or three minutes, she smiled at me. With a mischievous twinkle in her eyes she shook my hand and told me she liked me a lot. Two minutes later she said it again with more emphasis. I laughed and tried to change topics by asking her about her children. She mentioned a seven-year-old daughter and added that she was not married, before asking back: “And you, do you have a child?” – “No.” – “Why not?” – “Because, I’m not married, I don’t have a husband” – “I really like you, why are you not married?” – “I don’t like that.” – “Then I will marry you.” I laughed, asking back: “And who would be the husband?” – “You,” came the answer.<sup>1</sup>

The onion-seller’s name was Patricia Opoku. She was pointed out to me from afar by a friend who ran a store in the market. Rumor had it that children who peeked into Patricia Opoku’s room one afternoon saw her having sex with another woman. They were nicknamed *etwe ne etwe* (vagina and vagina). Perhaps, Patricia had heard about my research interest and assumed that I would not meet her proposal with disgust or irritation. But even if she was not aware of my inquiry, our conversation was safe: firstly, because the trope of marriage has as many socio-economic as it has romantic or sexual overtones in a Ghanaian working-class context; and secondly, because in the event that I became offended she could always revoke her statements by claiming she was joking, with an innocent “but how can woman and woman possibly get married?”

I was nowhere near to marriage, neither to a man nor a woman, when I embarked on my research on women who love women in postcolonial Ghana. Given my interest in their love lives, the women’s questions as to what I was looking for myself, if not for love, were understandable, as was the other commonly asked question regarding my heritage. To Akan Twi-speakers I often replied I was “*obɔfa, dadeefa*,” half-stone,

<sup>1</sup> Fieldnote based on a conversation with Patricia Opoku, April 19, 2008.

half-iron, an Akan metaphor for being of dual-cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> My knowledge of this old-fashioned metaphor did not go unnoticed. Whether it was smiled at or appreciated, it gave some credence to both my Ghanaian heritage and my “mixed-race” status as an “outsider within” (Abu-Lughod 1991). Drawing on the feminist insight that knowledge is always situated (Haraway 1991), our personal arrival stories and the point where we begin to develop our thoughts and research practices are inextricably linked.

I first arrived in Ghana as the baby of a Swiss mother and a Ghanaian father, who was the first to study in his family. The scholarship that brought him to Europe just after Ghana’s independence required that he return to “serve his country,” which he did with much fervor. However, by the time I was seven, Ghana’s economic and political situation had deteriorated in such a way that my parents used their remaining funds to return to Switzerland. My connection to Ghana began to take shape through Sunday afternoons spent in the living rooms of other Swiss-Ghanaian families in small-town Switzerland. Eating *Ampesi* and *Kontomire* stew, listening to old-time highlife tunes and to the grown-ups talking politics, I picked up on the bitter nostalgia among educated Africans who were frustrated with postcolonial African governments and struggling to cope with the effects of institutional racism in Europe (El-Tayeb 2015; Wa Baile et al. 2019).

As is often the case with bi-national families, the bonds between the small family in German-speaking Switzerland and the extended family in southern Ghana were framed by mutual obligations and interrupted long-distance calls. The Ghana we visited whenever we could afford to was different to the Ghana that emerged from the narratives of white Swiss friends who ventured out to discover West Africa on their own terms: as travelers, exchange students, or researchers working on the Basel Mission. I envied them for developing a rapport with Ghana that seemed to be free from complicated personal ties. Back in Switzerland, they were credited for having discovered *another* world. Meanwhile, I studied western classical music and was met with disappointment when European connoisseurs of Africa realized I was neither an “expert in foreign affairs” nor an “african

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor was imparted to me as a child. I treasured it, as a mixture of stone and metal is stronger than the stereotypical portrayal of “mixed-race” subjects as impure, torn, fragile, or disloyal. There is an old Ghanaian fabric that goes by that name.

princess”<sup>3</sup> – nor was I interested in heteronormative understandings of princesshood. Rather, the experience of being seen as “the Other” (Hall 2004) was the starting point for conducting research myself. This location shaped my search for those *Others* whose very existence seemed to lie beyond the imagination of many: African women who love women in Africa.

### Desiring Same-Sex Intimacies

When I started my research, there existed no self-declared lesbian group in Ghana that might have offered itself as an obvious place to start. I thus sought to find women whose female friendships included erotic intimacies. The epistemological challenge was to identify women who were intimately involved with each other without assuming either the primacy of their sexual liaison over other aspects of their friendships or a fixed boundary between sexual and non-sexual intimacy. This would have privileged and reified “sexuality,” the very category I had set out to question. While the manner in which I went about my research owed much to post-structuralist theories that have destabilized categories of identity, my approach arose from simple necessity. Given the absence of a language about “lesbianism,” and given the fact that in public discourse same-sex desire was considered taboo, it was not feasible to state upfront that I was looking for women who had sexual relationships with each other. When I did state the matter directly, I encountered a range of self-proclaimed experts on sin and sex who expressed a voyeuristic interest in the sexual aspects of “what lesbians do.” These “experts” – including hotel owners, journalists, or pastors – carried out their own covert “research” in order to produce sensationalizing sermons or media accounts featuring same-sex affairs. They were quick to declare their own heterosexuality – and invited me to do as they did. From such encounters I learned much about the mechanisms through which lesbianism is imagined – secret cults, prostitution, and promiscuity – but little about the day-to-day practices of women who love women.

Initially, I tried to follow-up on public rumors about the double sex-lives of female members of Ghana’s “jet-set” (such as university-

<sup>3</sup> This conundrum, faced by many Afropean women, is captured in the poem “african princess” by Nigerian-German writer Olumide Popoola (1999, 53).

trained professionals or frequent-flying wives among Ghana's political and business elite). Doors were continually closed in my face, however, and I eventually gave up. In the two instances where I did manage to speak to elderly elite women who were said to have had female lovers, I did not dare broach the issue of same-sex intimacy: it would have been indecorous to do so, as I was so much their junior. Similarly, economically powerful but less educated market women only lingered at the horizon of my search, namely in the accounts of unmarried young sports women who were committed to protecting the privacy of their older lovers or "sugar mothers," and who sensed that absolute discretion might be the key to the viability of their own same-sex desires in the future. As a result, I found myself in a position where I had to contend with what is perhaps a corollary of ethnographic work on sexual intimacies: that it is easier to carry out participant observation and find respondents among those who have less "prestige" to lose and whose lives are shaped by material precariousness.

Inspired by a rich body of literature that retrieves African women's voices by reading against the grain of missionary and court records (White 2000; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001), I began my research by studying boarding-school reports at the Basel Mission Archive<sup>4</sup> and scanning through customary court cases at the National Archives of Ghana, in which women accused each other over seemingly minor issues. While colonial records have been useful sources to historians exploring male same-sex transgression, female desires are much less visible. Boarding-school and mission reports do, however, hint at the significance of girlfriendships and adult women's intimate desires alongside marriage and motherhood. Some of the more far-fetched matters brought up in customary court cases reminded me of the explanations often given to outsiders when fights ensue between jealous female (ex-)lovers in the marketplace. To outsiders, unaware of the amorous passions of the fighting women, the catalysts for these explosive disputes seem petty. Often, it is the degree of intensity on display that alerts

<sup>4</sup> My interest in the Basel Mission Archive was kindled by the fact that the activities of the Basel Mission Society represent one of the most important historical links between Switzerland and Ghana. Though Switzerland did not possess formal colonies, cultural historians have interpreted the legacy of the Basel Mission as part of Switzerland's "colonialism without colonies" and its stake in the ongoing production of racialized colonial knowledge (Purtschert, Lüthi and Falk 2012, 43).

insiders and leads them to speculate about the erotic passion at stake in the conflict between the fighting women.

The more I became convinced that female same-sex passions were prevalent in Ghana, and the more trust I built up among the women I interacted with, the more I heard them bring up the term *supi* – the polyvalent term for an intimate same-sex friend or lover that became an important starting point for my research. I followed up on a mention of this term one early evening, while waiting for my youngest respondent, eighteen-year-old Khadija Coleman, who lives among a host of elderly female relatives in Accra Central.

Khadija's aunties illegally tap electricity and run a hidden "drinking spot"<sup>5</sup> that attracts women who work at the nearby night market; women who like to smoke and drink cheap local liquor, and are considered "rough" or "indecent" by normative Ghanaian standards. One of the regulars, a tall tomato seller dressed in red funeral clothes, kept teasing and joking with us. As she finally whooshed out of the compound, agitated and squiffy, another woman mumbled after her: "this one oh: *supi*." Unsure if I had heard right, I inquired: "What is *supi*?" – "You said you don't know *supi*?" she asked in disbelief. "I can show you, I can teach you. I can take you to this room and show you," she said, pointing to the poky chamber where Khadija's mother was taking a nap. One of Khadija's aunties intervened, "She doesn't like what you are telling her." I laughed, shook my head, and lied that I had "someone" back home already, which made her continue: "So I can just talk to you and advise you [about it]."<sup>6</sup>

It was safe to casually follow up on the term *supi* in the tipsy atmosphere among Khadija's "aunties." A few weeks later in the same compound, however, I found myself hitting a wall as I took to interviewing the eldest woman among them, Khadija's ninety-year-old great grandmother. I was genuinely interested in the life history of the frail, elderly lady with the big glasses who sat in the open door of her room all day, quietly following the lively conversations and dealings going on in her narrow compound. From previous visits I knew that she was aware of both the sex work and the same-sex passions flourishing inside and around their drinking spot compound. Thus, after she had told her life story, I tried to find a way into the topic of same-sex love,

<sup>5</sup> Drinking spot, sometimes abbreviated to spot, designates a local liquor store and street bar.

<sup>6</sup> Fieldnote based on conversations in Khadija Coleman's compound at Accra, December 1, 2007.

by picking up on one of her favorite subjects: her deceased son, whom she, like everyone else, considered a *kodjo besia*, a feminine man.<sup>7</sup>

He worked as a hairdresser in Nigeria and apparently he had a child there. But Nana Mansa did not seem to believe it herself. Instead she fondly remembers the midwives' self-fulfilling joke at his birth: For half an hour they made her believe she had given birth to a girl.

I could not resist asking the suggestive question as to whether there were "women like her son, women who liked women." Her face froze and she firmly shut down any further conversation: "If you want to enter that subject, you will not find an answer."<sup>8</sup>

Among my primary respondents, it was established by the time they allowed me to record their life history that I studied cultures of same-sex intimacy. But with elderly women I did not feel entitled to touch on this directly. Nevertheless, spurred by the desire to elicit some kind of information on the topic, I attempted to cajole Nana Mansa into talking about it and thus hastened the closure of our conversation. This raises a set of ethical questions. Since I could not establish my project and search participants by advertising through official channels, the process of locating respondents was bound up with long conversations in which I would convey my own queerness. The only way to appropriately broach my research subject therefore was through indirection. My approach was thus informed by the indirect ways in which sexuality in Ghana has been dealt with historically, by the current anti-gay discourse, and not least by the strategies of my key respondents, who would often deter me from making plain my research interest.

Participant observation, the much-debated method at the heart of anthropology, is especially necessary when exploring practices that are considered non-normative or taboo. This holds true not only for the study of same-sex intimacy, but for any practices that fall outside normative ideals and require explorative research. Anthropologists of West Africa have pleaded for radical forms of participating, which acknowledge that there is no observation without participation, and which seek "social closeness" and "emotional involvement" (Spittler 2001; Van der Geest 1998). But what does radical participation mean with regard to exploring erotic friendship and same-sex intimacy? Where are the boundaries

<sup>7</sup> "Kodjo besia" is a term used for a boy or a man who has traits or interests that are associated with women (such as cooking). See also Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Fieldnote based on a conversation with Nana Mansa at Accra, January 7, 2008.

between social and emotional closeness, feelings of affection, and sexual attraction? How far should and can emotional involvement go? And beyond this particular subject, how much spontaneous lying and evasion about one's own intimate life is permissible in the field, when we expect or hope that our informants will be truthful?

Inspired by the paradigms of “feminist anthropology,” questions about the power dynamics and “the relationship between the writer (and readers) and the people being written about” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 5) are at the heart of this inquiry. I am particularly drawn to Lila Abu-Lughod's critique of Clifford and Marcus's approach to “writing culture” (Abu-Lughod 1991; Clifford and Marcus 1986). As a feminist of mixed Palestinian and US-American parentage or, as she says, a “halfie,” Abu-Lughod is wary of the ways in which participant observation risks flattening out internal cultural differences. Even if (as in Clifford and Marcus's approach) culture is written with an emphasis on the poetic, and even if the subjectivity of the author is exposed, “writing culture” engages in a professionalized generalization about Others. Abu-Lughod advocates writing “ethnographies of the particular,” by finding “ways of writing about lives so as to constitute them as less other” (1991, 149). This approach resonates with my own “halfie” position as the daughter of a Swiss working-class nurse and a Ghanaian medical doctor, straddling “split loyalties” and the inherent dilemma of observing while participating. The experience of being “othered” in both African and European contexts had made me wary of the grand identitarian schemes of feminist or lesbian solidarities that assume a joint identity or engage participatory research methods that may lead to the downplaying of differences (Ahmed 2000). An ethnography of the particular that seeks to document lived experiences through the process of generating life hi/stories has the potential to (re)articulate differences, without othering them.

Being “particular” necessitates a close look at the epistemological and methodological premises upon which data is collected and transformed into analysis (Weiss 2011). Often, the daunting task of unearthing stigmatized or hidden sexual cultures seems to obviate a critical analysis of the process of data collection and interpretation. Therefore, research on same-sex desiring subjects has been particularly susceptible to treating “data as ‘raw’ data, with no attention to the ways data are used, derived, or produced” (Weiss 2011, 650). By spelling out my methodological tools and analytical practices, I seek to write against the veiling of

the process of knowledge production and, perhaps, to decolonize or at least interrupt the hegemonic ways in which “queer” Others have been called into being in juxtaposition to “modern” homosexuals. In this book, one attempt at making more transparent the process of generating data is reflected in the different typefaces used when quoting my respondents. Since they usually code-switched, all the words that were originally uttered in Twi or Ga and have been translated are put in italics, while terms that were originally uttered in Ghanaian English remain non-italicized. Though it may irritate the flow of reading, this unevenness is a reminder of the processes of translation that are inherent to knowledge production and scientific research.

### **The Ethics and Erotics of Being Indirect**

Locating same-sex desiring working-class women in Ghana required the “unlearning” of my pre-conceived notions of sexuality as a social identity and the developing of an indirect language of allusion. To begin with, the process of locating respondents was difficult and lengthy. It took shape through a series of (constitutive) misunderstandings that taught me to be discreet and indirect, as this early interaction, recorded in my fieldnotes, reveals:

Yesterday we took Janet and her brother to an upscale bar that was rumored to cater to gay audiences – a place Janet did not know. While Josephine [my research associate] engaged her brother in a conversation, I paired up with Janet and told her I was interested in the lives of women who had a very close female friend. Janet’s English was rusty, and so was my Twi, but her flirtatious response to my clumsy explanations indicated that she understood that I was interested in women whose same-sex friendships included erotic intimacies – and so did her unconcealed scanning of the female couple that arrived at the bar only just before we left. As we walked out, she swiftly took Josephine aside and spoke to her in a low voice, to Josephine’s great amusement. As she later told me, Janet claimed she had perfectly understood what I was after, but that I had been beating around the bush rather than fully expressing my sexual interest. Whereas I felt I had asked her to talk to me about female same-sex bonds and networks, she believed I was interested in practicing sexual intimacy with her. Three weeks later, prior to interviewing her, she told me that she too “studied” and “interviewed” the girls she had an interest in, before proposing to them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Fieldnote based on conversations with Janet Aidoo at Accra, January 30, 2006.



As this episode shows, the potential for misunderstanding in ethnographic observation has surprising and paradoxical implications. Janet Aidoo, whom I had met years before through my long-standing friend Josephine Enyonam Agbenozan, was not used to being asked to speak *about* same-sex intimacy and certainly not to someone she had barely met. Unimpressed by my being a doctoral research student, she made her own sense of my desire for knowledge. Hence, any attempt at explaining my interest in intimate same-sex cultures could easily be interpreted as a subdued way of indicating sexual interest, inasmuch as the desire, on the one hand, to speak about intimacy and, on the other, to speak intimately cannot be detached from each other (Cameron and Kulick, 2003). One might also argue that Janet chose to sexualize my intentions as a way of articulating her own interest in say, having a well-to-do “half-caste” girlfriend, somewhat “exotic,” yet accessible – or in setting the romantic foundations for a lasting overseas connection. While I never expected that I would have much control over how my intentions in the field were interpreted, this encounter alerted me to the fact that researcher and researched do “study” each other on an intimate level and thereby create erotically charged situations.

These ambiguities speak not only to the complexities of researching sexualities or any other topic that is shrouded in secrecy, but to the broader question of the place of the erotic in the field. The posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s personal *Diary* (1967), in which he detailed how he “lusted” after missionary and Trobriand women, begs for a thorough examination of the question: What does it mean for ethnographic research if is not possible without moments of affection and/or desire? What if the person you are about to interview asks you to rub some lotion on her back? What does it mean if the urge arises to embrace and comfort a respondent who is heartbroken? Whether or not one decides to yield to such impulses, they shape our research in significant ways (Newton 1993; Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996). Kulick in particular argued that desire can be epistemologically productive, since erotic relationships, whether or not consummated sexually, represent “one especially poignant means through which anthropologists become aware of themselves as positioned, partial, knowing selves” (1995, 18). This must, however, include a critical awareness of the “racist and colonialist conditions which make possible the unidirectional discourse about the sexuality of the people we study” (Kulick 1995, 4).

Making clear my research interest without reproducing preconceived notions of sexual identity or misleading respondents as to the fact that I would write about the topic of intimacy and about whatever our interactions and conversations included, was a challenge. Besides, I had to learn how to deal with the queerness – hence the “deviance” attributed to my project – and the rejections and ambiguities it implied. Once women realized that I was aware of the erotic dimension of their friendships, they either distanced themselves or began to sound out romantic prospects, which they did more or less aggressively. Feeling vulnerable and exposed, my dismissal of blatant sexual advances was born out of personal fears and a fraught respect for cross-cultural intimacies, rather than out of clear-cut moral or strategic considerations. Once attuned to the indirect ways in which the women themselves jokingly foreclosed or deflected unwanted attention, while keeping male and female suitors in their favor, I became more confident in flirtatiously negotiating “the erotics of fieldwork” (Newton 1993, 5).

Whether this mutual observation – this feeling out of each other’s motives – is pleasurable or frightening, the desire for knowledge reflects the fieldworker’s dependence on their respondents. This dependence, however, is overwritten when reversed in writing by ethnographers who appear as the “knowing strangers” (Ahmed 2000) who authorize their own interpretation of the Other’s desires, thereby veiling their own, ethnographic desire. Cultural critic Sara Ahmed has taken the question of “who knows” and who translates strangers and strangeness into a field of knowledge, as the starting point from which to scrutinize the ways in which (white Australian) feminist ethnographers have presented their native “informants” as friends and co-authors. By simply framing them as co-authors we conceal “that the ones who are known have not authorized the forms of writing and knowledge produced by ethnographers, but have been authorized by it” (Ahmed 2000, 55). Ahmed demonstrates that the fraught solidarities in the field hinge on our troubled desire to hear (and speak for) the subaltern, while the condition of the subaltern is constituted by the impossibility of being heard on her own terms (Spivak 1988).

When I asked Josephine Enyonam Agbenozan to translate<sup>10</sup> and assist me in this project, we were already close and had spent time

<sup>10</sup> With a few exceptions my respondents’ mother tongue was either Ga or Twi – two quite different languages. Although I labored to learn Twi years before