2 Supi, *Secrecy, and the Gift of Knowing*

It is common in schools for a female or girl to call another girl her "girl friend," "dear," "girl lover" or "supi." This type of girl friend is different from the normal friendship between girls. They behave like a man and a woman. They fondle each other till they experience a special sensation. Those two friends have strong emotional attachment. They write love letters to each other and exchange gifts. They can cry when one is parting as if they are husband and wife. It is common for two girls to fight over a girl friend, a girl lover or supi in schools. Junior girls are usually taken as supi by senior girls.

(Adjabeng 1996, 41)

The advice booklet that first spelled out the term *supi* to me lay among a pile of school-books in an upper middle-class home in Accra. It belonged to a young boarding-school girl. *Teenage Sex and Love,* by well-known Christian writer and educator Joshua Adjabeng, advises young women about the dangers of life and school life in particular. While deterring readers from drugs, premarital sex, and abortion, a paragraph titled "Lesbians or 'Supi'" warns against a certain "type" of friendship that is "common" but not "normal." Though Adjabeng compares this type of intimacy to that of "a man and a woman," he is only explicit about the sexual dimension when admonishing the younger girl who, "is happy because the senior protects her. She also thinks her senior loves her so much. She realizes the devil's trick when she has become emotionally and sexually attached to the partner." Apart from the reference to the "devil's trick," Adjabeng's statement corresponds with the remarks of my own respondents, who emphasized the significance of exchanging gifts and letters as the key feature of having a *supi* during girlhood. Unlike Adjabeng and other Christian authors, my respondents did not necessarily equate *supi* with lesbianism, but rather with the close bonds between young girls, whether or not their intimacies included sexual practices.

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When exploring the shifting meanings and valences of *supi* in Ghana, it is crucial to distinguish between the term *supi* as it is discussed in public debates and *supi* as an intimate discourse. While in public debates *supi* is strongly associated with boarding school and college girls, an understanding of *supi* as a bonding practice between girls and women is by no means limited to secondary schools. To avoid conflating the public register and the intimate lived realities of my respondents – and indeed overusing the term *supi,* given that some of my respondents were unfamiliar with or disliked the term – I will deploy the phrase girlfriendship (Gaudio 2009) to refer specifically to erotic female friendships in youthful single-sex contexts. In this way, this chapter documents the gap between *supi* as a public discourse and *supi* as an intimate practice of knowing by outlining the shifting media representations of *supi* and by examining the affective and subjective meanings generated within girlfriendships themselves.

As this chapter suggests, *supi*, understood as a practice of discovering and entrenching same-sex desire through the exchange of gifts, has been integral to female bonding in a variety of colonial, postcolonial, and possibly precolonial homosocial institutions in Ghana. In the first part of the chapter, I trace public representations of *supi* through the accounts of four elderly women who attended the first Ghanaian girls' schools in the 1930s. Their recollections evoke the ways in which boarding-school crushes and intimacies were framed in mother-child terms in Victorian England (Vicinus 1984), in North America (Smith-Rosenberg 1975), and in black South Africa (Blacking 1978), respectively. Through an analysis of selected newspaper articles, video-films, market pamphlets, and religious publications in Ghana, I then assess the ways in which *supi* has been increasingly associated with lesbianism. Finally, the discourse about the "un-Africanness" of same-sex desire warrants a more detailed examination of the term's genealogy and its possible historical link to Ghana's Asafo companies.

In the second part of the chapter, I explore *supi* as an intimate discourse emerging from the life narratives of Adwoa Boateng and Ma'Abena Oppong in Suakrom. Both women formed their first girlfriendships during secondary school and both underscored that the bathhouse and other hideouts served as important spaces to express and evaluate same-sex attraction. Their emphasis on secrecy, on learning how to decipher the amorous promises of gift exchange, and on being *taught* how to "feel" for a *supi*, speaks to the intensity, the joys,

and the anxieties of first-time (same-sex) love at school and elsewhere. On the one hand, the expectation of exchanging gifts was at the heart of their girlfriendships, which calls for a critical engagement with theories of the gift. On the other hand, a manifest language of being "ushered" into desiring a female friend and "learning" how to go about erotic passion prompts the question about the extent to which first-time *supi* love amount to a kind of initiation.

This chapter argues that youthful same-sex experiences imply not only a process of learning how to exchange gifts, letters, and secrecies, but also an understanding that same-sex practice constitutes an acquired form of knowledge that thrives on its tacit circulation. This knowledge of the affective depth and intensity possible between girls shapes the erotic subjectivities of women who continue to have same-sex lovers as adults. I thus refer to those adult women who are articulate about their same-sex practices and emphasize the significance of female same-sex passion as "knowing women."

From *Supi* Girlfriendship to *Supi-Supi* Lesbianism

Since the mid-1990s, the term *supi* has been widely discussed and increasingly connected with lesbianism in popular weeklies and in Ghanaian and Nigerian video films. The sexualization and demonization of the term makes tracing its origins difficult. In order to sketch out its genealogy, I rely on oral history, notably informal conversations and taped interviews with four elderly secondary school graduates. In addition to the scarce written references to *supi*, these oral sources offer important insights into the everyday meanings ascribed to *supi* within secondary schools during colonial and postcolonial eras.

Remembering Supi *Girlfriendships*

Though I overheard the term *supi* on Accra's Makola Market among bantering female traders with little formal education, the earliest written evidence of *supi* I came across situated the term in the boarding school context (Mensah ca. 1970; Warren 1975). The first girls' secondary schools in Ghana were established in Cape Coast, some eighty miles west of Accra. As one of the first outposts of European trading activities and the center of British colonial administration in the Gold Coast between 1700 and 1877, Cape Coast has long been a hub for

school education (Osei 2009, 11). It is home to some of the oldest and most prestigious secondary schools, including Wesley Girls High School, which was started by the wife of a Wesleyan Methodist in 1835 (Graham 1976, 28). As my father E. Akurang Dankwa recalled, he frequently heard Wesleyan Methodist Girls refer to each other as *supi*, when he attended a neighboring boys secondary school in the 1950s.[1] According to Irene Bonsu, a recent "Wesley Girl," the term *supi* seems to be outdated, instead her friends spoke about having a "girling," or used the English-Twi phrase "*me tu* girl" (literally: "I dug up a girl") to brag about a new girlfriend. While Irene did not involve herself in girlfriendships, she was aware of the amorous dimension these bonds could have. She explained that *supi* girlfriends may wash each other's dishes, write love notes at the end of the day, and "tuck" each other "under" before sleeping – meaning, one tucks the mosquito net under a girlfriend's dormitory mattress, thereby building a private tent.[2]

Two of the four elderly ladies whose life histories we recorded were schooled in Cape Coast, including the queen-mother of Suakrom. Queen-mother is the Ghanaian English term for the *ɔbaapanyin*, the female elder who advises and may instruct the chief, to whom she is the symbolic mother.[3] In charge of affairs pertaining to girls and women in her locale, she also arbitrates and organizes educational and recreational gatherings for girls and women. We met the frail seventy-three-year-old lady at a Sunday dance she hosted for the women of her locality, an event she used to stage more regularly, when her health was better. In the 1940s she attended a Roman Catholic Girls School in Cape Coast and befriended one of her tutors. Asked whether she had a *supi* at secondary school, she exclaimed that she had "plenty," before specifying, "yes, I had a *supi*. She was my teacher. She liked me so much, she was caring and I also liked her."[4] The queen-mother too referenced gift exchange as a sign of friendship that transcended the classroom. "Even sometimes, when you're returning to school, you buy

[1] Personal Conversation with Edward Akurang Dankwa, February 2007.
[2] Personal Conversation with Irene Bonsu, April 2009.
[3] The queen-mother, the translation of the Twi term *ɔhemaa*, is usually not the *ɔhene's* (chief's) uterine mother, but the elder who occupies the female stool (symbolizing political office) and thus the highest position in the female Akan hierarchy.
[4] Fieldnote on a conversation with the queen-mother at Suakrom, May 23, 2008.

something from home, and you go and give it to her." Her gifts included oranges, biscuits, toffees, or tins of sardine, but she also shared provisions and money received from her uncle, a chief who was in charge of her education. Yet even in the 1940s, Senior Secondary School was not only attended by elite daughters – such as daughters of chiefs, pastors, traders, doctors or lawyers – but also by girls who were funded through a missionary house or one of the colonial trading companies for whom their fathers labored. Since boarding schools are attended by students from all strata of society, the practices of sharing and trading gifts and provisions that are integral to boarding school life could be understood as a mode of redistribution.

The eldest respondent, an eighty-three-year-old seamstress in Suakrom, fondly remembered her time at a girls' boarding school in the 1930s. As the daughter of a police officer she was sent to Krobo Girls School, run by Scottish Mission Sisters. After completing her schooling, she went through vocational training with Afro-European elite women at the Castle School in Accra and became a seamstress. Whenever I visited the retired seamstress together with my research associate Josephine, she enjoyed telling us anecdotes about the missionary sisters and boarding school life. On one of these visits she showed us a picture of herself and her best friend on confirmation day. They spent holidays together and, she added, whatever the two of them received from home, they shared. In the picture the two of them are wearing dresses made from the same material by the girlfriend's mother. Only two weeks later, when I dared to ask if she used to have a *supi*, she happily told us that it was the girl in the confirmation picture.[5]

My inquiries with respectable female elders were complicated by the fact that the word *supi* is increasingly connected to sexual practice. Initially, both the seamstress and the queen-mother seemed happy to be reminded of their *supi*. Once they realized that I knew of the term's erotic connotations today, however, they refused to go into more detail. Instead they strongly reacted against my allusions to the possibility of erotic intimacy and distanced themselves, or they reiterated normative statements about the sexualization of today's youth. During

[5] This paragraph relies on fieldnotes on conversations with Nana Yaa, December 2007.

their school years, *supi* was understood as a specifically close form of friendship between educated girls, in the then new boarding school environment. These girls comforted and protected, fought and admired each other, far away from siblings and family networks. If this closeness did lend itself to erotic feelings, they were not interpreted as inherently sexual, but considered part of a larger spectrum of girls' boarding school intimacies. The female elders we interviewed condemned the possibility of a sexual dimension to *supi*. Their reactions suggested that they were aware that schoolgirls' attachments could lend themselves to erotic or sexual play. They seemed to worry less about the bodily intimacies themselves, but about the reduction of *supi* to sexual practice.

One elderly assemblywoman whom we interviewed was outspoken about the fact that female same-sex intimacies are by no means limited to boarding school. The assemblywoman was actively involved in communal politics and in developing her neighborhood in Suakrom. She also spent a lot of time in the market with her friends, including my respondent Adwoa Boateng. The assemblywoman who was aware of and tacitly complicit in her friends' same-sex intimacies, claimed that *supi* has undergone a change in prevalence. "It was there," she asserted, remembering the time she attended secondary school in the 1960s, but "it was not as much as these days. In our time I know *supi* will be your best friend. You will sleep with her, you will do everything with her, but I don't think it comes to this stage of going to sleep with them." Today's "going to sleep," as she explained, implies that women "will get their feelings [. . .] their satisfaction through their playing," whereby one of them is "performing the rite as the man [. . .] fingering or doing the act of a man" and buying "provisions for the other woman."[6] Like Adjabeng in the opening quote, the assemblywoman made an analogy with male-female intimacy to convey that *supi* can imply sexual fulfilment as well as material support. As such, she believes *supi* bonds can cross over from youth into adult life and continue into the lives of wives and mothers.

The only woman who spoke about how she continued this kind of girlfriendship in adulthood was Rose Asuku, a striking Suakrom townswoman known for her extravagance. I first noticed Rose at a Sunday afternoon women's gathering held at the queen-mother's

[6] Interview the assemblywoman at Suakrom, December 11, 2008.

house, which happens on *Akawsidae* (usually every sixth Sunday). Rose stood out for her height, for wearing a short Afro and European-style clothing. She had gone through several marriages and was known to have an alcohol problem. Above all she claimed that she used to be "rich" and respected and was now "frustrated for so many reasons." According to Rose, *supi* was done openly "in the olden days." Remembering her own first same-sex experience at the age of sixteen, she recalled how she and her friend bought gifts for each other, paid for each other's food at the school canteen, and scribbled amorous notes on small pieces of paper that they tucked under each other's desk. Not least, she emphasized the sexual aspects of their friendship and related how they first touched each other after school in an empty classroom. She maintained that people dislike *supi* matters today because they have received far too much media attention, and because nowadays young women refuse to marry men. Rose herself got married in her early twenties but continued to keep a female lover to the extent that her jealous husband took them to the police station one day. Apparently, the police officer sent them back home, with the words "if woman and woman are in relationship it is not a stealing matter."[7]

While Rose possibly invented some of the flowery stories about her youthful same-sex adventures, as well as her exploits during a two-year stay in the Netherlands, the point she makes is significant, namely that *supi* was not a topic of public discussion during her youth. She asserts that it used to be common for women to meet and mingle in homosocial spaces such as the dances, gatherings, and educational events regularly hosted by queen-mothers for the young women of their locality. Asked if she visited any lesbian clubs or meetings in the Netherlands, where she had a relationship with a fellow dishwasher from Suriname, Rose exclaimed: "Lesbian clubs, for what? I also met you at that queen-mother's party. Women meet at funerals all the time, no need for such meetings." While funerals are by no means women-only events, they offer some space for female sociality.

Funerals are family affairs, and family in southern Ghana is primarily structured by either one's paternal or maternal line of descent. For the largely matrilineal Akan, this implies that spouses do not marry into their partner's family, but remain part of their *abusua*, their mother's

[7] The quotes in this and the following paragraph are based on fieldnotes from conversations with Rose Asuku at Suakrom, April 29, 2008.

extended family. Therefore, wives may well attend funerals without their husbands. Further, funerals often take place in faraway hometowns and last for two or three days. They provide opportunities to travel and meet up with a best (girl)friend for the weekend, and to find some privacy in the folds of mourning and celebrating the deceased person's life.[8] Despite changes in funerary practices, funerals remain important sites of sociality beyond family. Especially if the deceased was rich, the festivities accompanying the burial amount to public social events, where townspeople who barely knew the deceased enjoy the food and alcohol that is distributed. Akyeampong outlined that alcohol played a central role in Akan funerals both in rituals and for drinking (1996). While the ritual use of alcohol, for example, in practices such as pouring libation, helped to transform the relations between the living and the deceased, intoxication was encouraged as "an expression of grief and solidarity among the living" (1996, 38–39). Today, it could be argued that the solidarity, the passion, and liminality that persist in the face of death create hiding places for intimacies and lend a certain "queerness" to funeral spaces that some of my respondents readily embraced to celebrate their own secret relationships.

Girls' School Intimacies in Comparison

Girlfriendships and *supi* intimacies are not limited to boarding school. Some of my respondents associated the term *supi* with their intimate experiences at (co-ed) day schools, at afterschool sports clubs, or outside any structured activity altogether. The term's particular association with boarding-school education, however, begs comparison with boarding-school intimacies in other parts of the world.

Basic school education in Ghana is free and structured into six years of primary school and three years of Junior Secondary School (JSS). Those who pass the final exams at JSS can enter into a Senior Secondary School (SSS).[9] Today, these middle schools last three years and charge

[8] As Rachel Spronk mentions, this holds true for men who desire men in Ghana. They considered funerals as well as other occasions to travel for social purposes, such as church events, as moments that could facilitate erotic same-sex encounters (2018, 893).

[9] Secondary schools have been called high schools since 2008. Because all of my respondents who attended secondary school did so before the name change, I will use the older terminology.

a small fee. An additional fee is charged for using the sought-after boarding facilities provided by most of these institutions. Introduced by missionaries, the establishment of the boarding-school system was part of the European civilizing mission to educate and discipline colonial subjects. Thus, even before the formal onset of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, boarding schools, modeled on the British system, amounted to colonial institutions that imposed racialized hierarchies, values, and a distinct set of power relations (Foucault 1975; Stoler 2002). Within these institutions, not only formal, but also informal practices were introduced through school education. Some of the common features of African, European, and North American nineteenth- and twentieth-century girls' boarding schools are the practice of gift-giving, the writing of love letters (in English), and the use of kinship terminology.

Examining the letters and diaries of students and teachers at Victorian boarding schools in England, Martha Vicinus found a system of "surrogate mothering that could often turn into a rave" (1984, 606). Through this institution, older girls were assigned to mother the newcomers. Introducing their admiring junior to the norms of the school, the senior girl "received her first taste of power" (Vicinus 1984, 606). As Vicinus argues, the hierarchies made for a "longing distance" between junior and senior girls whereby "the most common form of devotion was to make the beloved's bed or to buy her flowers or candy" (Vicinus 1984, 607). Nineteenth-century schools and families encouraged these friendships between students and even between students and tutors. These close bonds were considered essential to the girls' emotional and spiritual development as well as to the fostering of school (as opposed to family) loyalty. On the other hand, underlying fears that girls' excessive affection could undermine "family duties" (i.e., affect their marriageability) challenged the general desirability of boarding school friendships (Vicinus 1984, 603). Girls were advised to "guard against extremes" and their "raves" were considered beneficial only as long as they prompted them to shift emotional satisfaction away from familial models and toward individual discipline, independence, self-control and the sublimation, and spiritual idealization of worldly, personal desires (Vicinus 1984, 618).

Carrol Smith-Rosenberg argued that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white middle-class women in the USA inhabited a homosocial universe in which men played a marginal role. Boarding school thus

worked as a continuation of the emotionally and physically intimate female world in which girls were immersed at home. The intimacy of the mother-daughter relations at heart of this "separated female sphere" was replicated in patterns of "adoption" and "mothering" between older and younger school girls. Idealized in her school "daughter's" imagination, the nurturing "mother" gave advice and purchased such items as shoes, corset covers, bedding, or harp strings for her dependent "daughter" (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 19). They wrote tender letters to each other, rife with "confessions of loneliness and emotional dependency" (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, 26) and "routinely slept together, kissed and hugged each other" (22). Somewhat nostalgically, Smith-Rosenberg holds that such friendships continued and were acceptable throughout a woman's life.

Lesbian historiographers have been concerned with the question of when and how female boarding-school intimacies became labeled as lesbian and sexual (Vicinus 1984, 601). This concern also surfaces in feminist ethnographic accounts of women marriages and secondary-school intimacies. Judith Gay (1986) who studied "mummy-baby" relationships in Lesotho hinted at the erotic dimension of the bonds between a slightly older and more active "mummy" and her "baby." She was, however, quick to assume that these relationships terminated with the end of school years and were not understood as sexual. Henriette Gunkel (2010), on the other hand, who interviewed self-identified lesbians in contemporary South Africa found that some school girls did understand their "mummy-baby" friendships as sexual, although their intimacies were not subjected to categories of sexuality at the time.

In the 1950s, John Blacking (1978) explored the use of kinship idioms at South African Venda and Zulu schools. The "mother-child game" he focused on was played among girls at both boarding and day schools. A senior girl could choose or be chosen to mother one or several children; she protected them, settled quarrels, offered advice, and gave gifts and extra food. The girls considered this "game" helpful in adjusting to the new school environment and in avoiding loneliness: it provided "emotional stability during a period of physiological change and fleeting fancies" (Blacking 1978, 111–14). The "mother-child game" existed alongside other pairings, such as bed-mates (sharing a bunk bed) or eat-mates (sitting at the same table in the refectory), and could be combined with the "husband-wife game." Characterized

by the writing of English-language love letters and the pretense of being lovers, the "husband-wife game," however, provoked criticism or was banned by the school authorities. To the girls, as Blacking sees it, pillow talk, the exchange of romantic cards and presents, and the status accruing from being a "husband" to many "wives" were more important than the sexual play it could involve, including the use of improvised dildos (Blacking 1978, 108–10). In the boarding school world in particular, a girl could simultaneously be a child, a mother, and a husband toward different girls and integrate these positions into intricate webs of fictive kinship. Thus, a mother would consider her child's husband her son-in-law or a child would call her mother's husband father. In addition, male brothers and boyfriends could be included into these families. Since there was no distinction made between internal (female) and external (male) boyfriends, a "child" could have two fathers, once her mother married a "real boyfriend" (Blacking 1978, 111–12). These "families" reinforced the girls' allegiance to a new way of life with correspondingly new (educated) social groups in black South Africa (Blacking 1978, 102).

Similarly, mother-child practices have a structuring effect on Ghanaian boarding schools (Göpfert and Noll 2013). Thus, studying a Catholic girls' boarding school in northwestern Ghana, Andrea Noll was told that schoolmates used to choose daughters, mothers, and grandmothers among each other. A remainder of the school-sanctioned use of kinship terminology are the "mothers" of the refectory, that is, the two girls whose duty is to distribute the dishes (Göpfert and Noll 2013, 128). While Noll did not come across husband-wife games, it used to be common that older students chose a "darling" among the younger ones. The older girl shared food with her darling or they played "having a romance together"(Göpfert and Noll 2013, 128).[10] According to a Mrs. Ibrahim, a teacher and former student at the school, these darling bonds were forged much more frequently in the past. In fact, Noll's informant deplored that the "darling matter" has lost steam due to the importance placed on (male) boyfriends.

Our time, we used to hold so strong to darlings. When you come, form one, a senior would pick you as a darling. Oh, whatever (. . .) when you are sick, she would take care of you, week-ends, you visit each other in your

[10] Translation from German by Serena Dankwa, emphasis by the author Andrea Noll.

dormitories and we were so nice to each other. And our time, they were also our boyfriends, we took them as our boyfriends and we used to love each other. But this time, their darling matter is not so strong. They rather attach more importance to the boys then their fellow girls. (Göpfert and Noll 2013)

Mrs. Ibrahim's description of "darling matter" corresponds with the meanings my own elderly respondents attached to *supi*. Rather than condemning the possibility of sexual practice between darlings, Mrs. Ibrahim is critical of the perceived hetero-sexualization.

Today's boarding-school relationships are structured not least by the dormitory "*partner*" setup (Göpfert and Noll 2013, 125). A first-year and a third-year student or two second-year students are considered partners if they share a bunk bed and "boxroom," the lockable boxes where they can store personal items (Göpfert and Noll 2013, 124). It is standard practice that the junior *partner* is in charge of everyday chores such as fetching water for the two of them or washing the senior's school wear. Although in some cases the juniors are bullied by their seniors, this hierarchical form of partnering is generally sanctioned by the school: it gives the senior student more time to prepare for her final exams, whereas she introduces her junior to the formal and informal rules of the school (Göpfert and Noll 2013, 126–27). Such pairings and kinship practices extend from school education into other spheres of young women's lives.

This came to my attention when doing research within Suakrom's semi-professional female football team (see Chapter 4), where senior "team mothers" distinguished themselves from their junior "team daughters." What mattered was not necessarily age difference (most players were in their early twenties), but the "mother's" senior status in the team and her ability to take under her wing a chosen "team daughter." These mutually supportive bonds can be casually extended into larger families. In one instance a player playfully referred to her "team mother's" female lover as her "team father."

When I asked Ma'Abena Oppong, a secondary school graduate and former football player, about boarding-school mothering, she strongly distinguished between being "the child" of a school mother and being someone's "girl" or darling: "*The* normal one, *that's what it is*, school mother, *someone who'll* serve *you* [. . .] *maybe that* friendship *thing isn't there*." Serving implies that the "mother" chooses where she sleeps on the bunk bed, usually below, and that the "child" has to fetch water

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every morning. "But as *her* girl *she wouldn't let her fetch water for her. You have to* serve your school mother, *that is* different from (*pauses*)." While differentiating the senior-junior dynamics of bed-mates from an amorous girlfriendship, Ma'Abena's comment does suggest that "the normal" way of school mothering can develop into a *supi* relationship. *"You see, when it gets to a point and the two of you develop that mind and* contact *that way, then it's the* idea *of the two of you. That's what they call supi. 'This is my supi, this is my* girl.'"[11] Interestingly, despite interviewing many women about their understandings of *supi*, school mothering was not mentioned. It seems that especially those women who continued having same-sex lovers after school did not represent their intimacy through these hierarchical, school-sanctioned practices framed in kinship terms.

To Ma'Abena, *supi* implies the deeper connection developed in spite of the structuring power of school-induced senior-junior hierarchies. Her idealizing distinction between school mothering and *supi* as a loving relationship parallels the distinctions Blacking's respondents made between "husband-wife" and "mother-child" bonds. As one of his respondents mentioned, when her "mother" became so friendly to her "that she was more of a friend than a 'mother'," she decided to refer to her as "husband," in order "to escape being proposed to by other girls" (1978, 110). Ethnographic and historical accounts of school girls' bonding practices speak of similarities in the ways in which senior-junior intimacies are formalized through kinship terminology and enacted through the exchange of gifts and letters. The concepts of family, the extra-mural homosocial institutions informing intimate friendship and kinship practices, and the larger histories they are shaped by differ considerably, however. In order to understand the particular formations of female friendships and same-sex desires in southern Ghana, we need to take a closer look at the shifting representations of *supi* and the term's gradual sexualization.

Supi-Supi*: Sexualizing and Nominalizing*

"In the secondary boarding school where hundreds of students live together, a female student may share the same bed with a girl friend; this female friend is called *supi* but the term does not have the sexual

[11] Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, April 25, 2008.

connotations which lesbianism has in the West" (Warren 1975, 31). Dennis Warren, one of the few anthropologists commenting on *supi* in the 1970s, disassociated the term from sexual practice. Contrary to Warren's assumption, two Christian guide booklets published at the time did bracket *supi* practice as sexual (Konadu and Mensah ca. 1970; Mensah ca. 1970). In a section titled "'Supis' and Homosexuality," Reverend Ronald Mensah holds that "homosexual feelings" based on childhood or teenage experiences are common (Mensah ca. 1970, 26). He moderately advises young women with "homosexual tendencies" to avoid "college 'supi' girls," but also Christian "bigots" who will "piously condemn your sin" and brand you as hopelessly "queer," but thereby only drive you into "deeper insecurity and, ultimately, into the arms of the gay community which offers security and acceptance" (Mensah ca. 1970, 30–31). Mensah encourages young women with a "homosexual problem" to seek pastoral help without, however, worrying too much about it (26). Interestingly, Mensah, who seems to be well versed in international gay and lesbian vocabulary at a time when there were no hints of queer activism in Ghana, deploys neither the term lesbianism nor the term identity. Instead he strongly argues that "the practice of homosexuality" is not worse than any other sinful *practice* such as "lying, stealing, committing adultery or bearing false witness against a neighbor" – all of which can be dealt with (27).

This sexual connotation of *supi* came up in an interview with Mrs. Dokua Hewlett, who was a dormitory prefect at the boarding school she attended in the 1960s in the Western Region. Mrs. Hewlett distinguished the "normal way" *supi* friends related to each other – as best friends – from the sexual type of friendship that was prevalent in her dormitory. In fact, as a prefect she struggled to prevent "innocent small girls" from being seduced by their senior *supi*; "they can act as lesbian," she said, "which is dangerous [...] excuse me, they will be fingering each other."[12] One measure taken to prevent such "acts" from happening was the prohibition of covering mosquito nets with cloth to provide hide-outs for secret intimacies. Hewlett clearly considers *supi* intimacies both sexual and immoral. It is unclear, however, whether she attached the label "lesbian" to these "acts" at the time or only retrospectively following the invention of "supi-supi lesbianism."

[12] Interview with Dokua Hewlett at Accra, January 21, 2008.

A decisive shift from *supi* as an endearing word for a close friend to the derogatory phrase "supi-supi lesbianism" occurred in the 1990s. This shift is reflected in a column in a popular weekly that sets out the tension between "ordinary" and "lesbian" intimacies and considers the former a necessary part of a girl's development. In this article "Apostle" Kwamena Ahinful discusses the comments of radio callers who disagreed over the question of whether *supi* intimacies should be banned.[13] He reports that some callers described "lesbianism" as "the outcome of those *supi-supi* practices seen on the campuses of especially female teacher-training colleges and secondary schools," while others wondered if it is "possible to distinguish between student lesbians and ordinary best girl friends." The crux of the radio show and of Ahinful's commentary was the news about a "wealthy woman" who was "able to snatch away a poor man's dear wife, and is living with her comfortably in her house as 'husband' and wife." Ahinful attributes this woman's appeal to the financial capacity that allowed her to accommodate her female lover, thereby taking on the role of a husband. The comparison to a conjugal relationship echoes this chapter's opening quotation, as well as comments by women I met who likened *supi* relations to husband-wife bonds, which implied both a sexual and an economic dimension. In Ahinful's column, "'Supi-Supi' Lesbianism" is marshalled as the Ghanaian version of or an erotic pre-stage to (full-blown) adult lesbianism.

Whereas in intimate discourse the single word "*supi*" is deployed an endearing term that expresses the mutual adoration and closeness of two female friends, its reduplication as "*supi-supi*" in public discourse turns it into a generic label for a suspicious social phenomenon. In southern Ghanaian languages, including Ghanaian English, words can be intensified and turned into quasi-plurals through their reduplication (Osam, Marfo and Agyekum 2013, 45). "*Supi-supi*" works as a catchphrase that nominalizes and fixes *supi* on a meta-level and equates it with notions of the sexual and the immoral. Thus "*supi-supi*" allows for the generalization of a variety of female same-sex passions and their being subsumed under the label lesbianism. By combining and correlating *supi-supi* with "lesbianism" – a term fiercely associated with sexual decadence and the immoral "West" – young

[13] Kwamena Ahinful, "No 'Supi-Supi' Lesbianism," *The Mirror* (Ghana edition) January 17, 1998.

women's elusive intimacies were suddenly marked as (homo)sexual and classified as deviant.

In the mid-1990s, this deviance was enacted when the video-film industries of Nigeria and Ghana (known as Nollywood and Ghallywood or Ghanawood, respectively) began to tap into the commercial potential of female same-sex desire. Just like the films of Nollywood, Ghallywood is designed to stimulate the audience "by sensationally depicting religious, social and moral transgressions that contribute to everyday instability and uncertainty in the postcolony" (Green-Simms 2012, 28). Films such as *Supi: The Real Woman to Woman* (1996)[14] promise to show true stories about educated women in sexual cults, both in and outside the boarding-school context. *Women in Love* (1996) and *Jezebel* (2007) are the most well-known Ghanaian melodramas that feature "*supi* lesbians." These films play on the audience's voyeuristic desire to see something that remains hidden from society, and on the alleged involvement of wealthy business women with Mami Wata (Green-Simms 2012).

The trans-African mermaid-like water spirit known as Mami Wata can take on different genders and identities and may bestow the men and women whom she "marries" with riches, while also rendering them sexually insatiable (Meyer 2003).[15] Lindsey Green-Simms revealed how the hypersexual figure of the Ghallywood lesbian is charged with privileging "individual accumulation above familial, communal, and national bonds" and marked as a threat to biological and social reproduction (2008, 5). It would be difficult to establish the extent to which images of greed-driven "supi lesbians" who rob their youthful lovers of their fertility circulated prior to these film productions and to what extent they were triggered by them. According to filmmaker Socrates Safo, *supi-supi* stories involving Mami Wata are most common among Accra's fishing communities, although this rendition in itself echoes mainland Akan stereotypes about Ga and coastal Akan people being inclined to greed-driven and unrestrained behaviors, including same-sex practices.

Another arena in which the term *supi* has made appearances is the pamphlet or market literature, Ghana's most popular informal genre of fiction. The authors of these handy short novels – which are produced

[14] Directed and produced by Ghanaian film maker Ashiagbar Akwetey-Kanyi.
[15] This aspect of Mami Wata will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4.

in small numbers and sold on markets, at roadside stalls and through the windows of *trotro* mini-buses – are quick to respond to topics of the day (de Bruijn 2008). Romantic relationships are a dominant theme, with love often associated with commodity accumulation and imagined "as a force to overcome adversity and radically alter lives" (de Bruijn 2008, 5–9). This promise features prominently in *Love in the Girl's Dormitory: 'Supi' Palava* (Mensah ca. 2005) a story about two university-trained female professionals, who fall in love with each other at a prestigious secondary school. The story is both cautionary and titillating. Though the protagonists' obsession with each other ultimately destroys their lives, they are portrayed as highly successful and autonomous women engaged in a meaningful and loving relationship. Furthermore, the moral of the short story – "lesbianism is a moral canker. Stamp it out!" – is undermined by the scanned internet images adorning the pamphlet, which show female hip-hop stars seductively smiling at each other. Indeed, Beyoncé and Kelly Clarkson sexily pose on the pamphlet's front cover, creating a "homoerotic allure" (de Bruijn 2008). Thus, the images of US superstars that serve as models of self-fashioning to many young Ghanaians are deployed to represent the story's supposedly morally objectionable lesbian protagonists.

The Asafo Legacy

Only late into my research did I find out that the term *supi* existed in certain homosocial institutions prior to the colonial boarding-school setting. "Supi" is the title referring to one of the senior officers or captains, of a male Asafo group. The so-called Asafo companies developed as military bands of young Akan men that defended their towns and villages against enemies and incursions (the word comes from "sa" meaning war and "fo" meaning people). A particularly complex version of Asafo organizing emerged among the Fante, the second largest subgroup of the Akan, in and around Cape Coast. Today, Asafo is regarded as a traditional Fante institution and known for its elaborate visual art, such as colorful flag banners and other European inspired regalia.[16] Asafo companies, which organized communal labor and masquerades

[16] Asafo companies played an important role in the Fante-Asante wars of the nineteenth century and in Cape Coast's cultural and political life. While defending their villages, they developed rivalries with other Asafo companies that were acted out during ceremonial occasions (cf. Yarrow 2011).

and played a role in chieftaincy, have remained a "powerful expression of a religious, social and political identity" (Sackey 1998, 86). Although, there is room for older men and women, Asafo is primarily a field of activity for young men (Datta and Porter 1971, 280). Generally, Asafo companies operate through the principle of patrilineal succession. Under certain circumstances, however, young men affiliate with the company of their matrilineage. The mode of succession to higher offices, such as the office of Supi in particular, was often determined matrilineally (Datta and Porter 1971, 281). Further, the office of the Supi was associated with motherly qualities.

While it is widely assumed that Supi derives from "superior" (cf. Cape Coast Metropolitan Assembly 2006), an older ethnographic report points to other directions. In the early 1930s, De Graft Johnson noted: "Supi: as the name implies, is like the big water-pot, who, figuratively speaking, acts as reservoir for all the waters" (1932, 312). The Supi captain acts as the custodian of the group's money and ammunition and provides its members with strength. "He is their *ɔbaatan*," literally their nursing mother (De Graft Johnson 1932). This association with fluid nurture and pot-like motherliness resonates with the argument of religious scholar Brigid Sackey (1998). She holds that Supi does not derive from "superintendent," but from "supe," an iron sword implanted into a pot-like tortoise shell. This magical pot is placed on top of a sacred monument, in which the Asafo stored their insignia and is supposed to detect and neutralize evil medicine (1998, 75).

There is no discussion in this literature about a possible link between Supi as it refers to the Asafo world and the term *supi* as it is used among schoolgirls. Such a link surfaces in a remark made in an online panel discussion on feminist understandings of family. Catherine McKinley suggested that Ghanaian "lesbians are called Supi. And Supi means the place where your spirit resides. Literally, it refers to a stool. Everybody, when born, is given a stool and that's the place where your spirit sits. Your stool is your Supi; it's the thing you're closest to" (Baumgardner and Richards 2004). This comment is based on her personal interactions with elderly market women in Accra (McKinley 2011). Although most people are given a small bathing stool at birth (a stool to sit on while taking their bath), the suggested connection between Akan stools and *supi* is interesting, if only for the fact that some Asafo companies do have their own blackened, ancestral "stools." Blackened with blood and eggs, these stools are furnished with ancestral power and used in

rituals that have played an important role in Akan chieftaincy matters (Sarpong 1971; Akyeampong 1996).[17]

Given that *supi* is associated with "superior," it is curious that the term applies to both the senior and the junior girl in an intimate, same-sex bond. It raises the question of whether *supi* professes a hierarchical structure by which it does not abide: *Supi* indexes an intimate bond that reflects as well as transcends the junior-senior hierarchies by which they are framed. The script of one person being the mentoring senior is undermined by the fact that the two girls tend to be close in age and that *supi* attraction is by definition mutual: each girl is the other girl's *supi,* and it is not always clear who is the leading and who is the following partner. In this sense, the term seems to offer its own structure of Akan-inflected power. Since Cape Coast is home to both the first girl's boarding school in Ghana and to the most influential Asafo companies, one wonders whether different notions of *supi* moved between the boarding school and the Asafo environment. Descriptions of the Supi's function as an Asafo leader and a nurturing mother figure (De Graft Johnson 1932, 312) certainly resonate with the senior-junior roles played out within girlfriendships.[18]

Adwoa Boateng: The Imperative of Gifts and Secrecy

Among the majority of my Akan respondents, *supi* was associated with first time same-sex experiences. My interest in the question of whether they understood these youthful "crushes" as romantic and/or sexual was met with personal stories in which *supi* intimacy appeared as the outcome of a learning process. This process developed through different stages of becoming aware of one's sexual feelings and being taught how to negotiate intimate desire. In the accounts of Adwoa Boateng and of Ma'Abena Oppong in particular, the school environment frames this gradual learning process in significant ways. Ma'Abena's narrative of how she was ushered into "feeling" same-sex passion by a senior boarding-school friend reads likes an initiation and is fraught with feelings of excitement and profound confusion. At the heart of

[17] In an informal conversation, an elderly Fante lady indicated that *supi* has similar stool-related meanings in Efutu, another version of the Akan language spoken among small fishing communities between Accra and Cape Coast.

[18] The fact that "*supi*," pronounced as "supe," has appeared in Nollywood boarding-school dramas poses another conundrum.

Adwoa's narrative is the process of figuring out how to read the erotic promises of giving, receiving, and reciprocating gifts. Equally central is the realization that the play and passion growing out of these exchanges need to be disguised and handled in secrecy.

"Exchanging of Gifts"

"At first, *in* school, *we used to say that this is this girl's 'supi', she can give her a gift.*" When receiving her first parcel, Adwoa Boateng was in her last primary school year, about twelve years old. The gift was accompanied by a letter saying: "I love you, I want to take you as my *supi.*"[19] Upon receiving these words, Adwoa asked a friend what *supi* meant. The friend's reply that *supi* is "just a friend" was reassuring enough for Adwoa to "agree" and start befriending the school mate, still unsure of what she was actually agreeing to. She accepted a little parcel filled with sweets, "chocolates," and "different kinds of toffee." Victorian boarding-school girls gave sweets to each other too. Vicinus interpreted such "presents" as secret signs of devotion, characteristic of the romantic forms of distant desire fostered in nineteenth-century England (1984). In Adowa's context, gift exchanges are more than hidden acts of homage. Adwoa mentions provisions, sandals, clothes, and other "heavy gifts" that changed owners – gifts that were given in full daylight and begged for counter-gifts: "*I was there when she brought a* parcel*, and put it on my desk,* (hits a surface repeatedly) [. . .] *she placed it on my desk, and asked me to also bring mine.*"

Adwoa's wording and her emphasis on the "exchanging of gifts" is reminiscent of Marcel Mauss's essay (2002 [1925]) on "the gift." Mauss delineated the act of giving, receiving, and reciprocating a gift as a threefold obligation that dominates all social relations, including intimate relationships. His gift theory relies on the distinction between gifts and presents; unlike presents, which are deemed to be a personalized donation free of intentions (and which, once received, are not supposed to change owners), "gifts" require counter-gifts and engender a hierarchical relationship between giver and receiver (Znoj 1995). As a "big man's" daughter, Adwoa had ample occasion to witness the importance of handing out and reciprocating gifts. She

[19] Unless stated otherwise, the quotes in this subchapter are all taken from an interview with Adwoa Boateng at Suakrom, December 11, 2007.

fondly remembered her father as a well-educated and savvy patron with a compound full of children and chiefly responsibilities in both Suakrom and his rural hometown. Upon receiving her first "heavy gift," she consulted him as to how to reciprocate. "*She bought* [drinking] glasses *and other things and gave them to me as a gift. So I came to show them to my father, and my father said oh, I should also buy a mirror for her, a looking glass, so that any time she looks at her face, she'll remember me and say, 'Jewel*[20] *gave it to me.'*" Adwoa showed him the parcel, without telling him about the "long, long love stories" in its attendant letter. Adwoa's father suggested that a mirror would be an adequate response to the generous gift she had received, because it would always remind her friend of its giver through looking at her own face.

During our conversation, Adwoa kept stressing how, initially, she had no idea about "that deep thing" *supi* could imply. She (and her father) thought "it was just ordinary friendship," without imagining the erotic possibilities of *same-sex intimacy*. Embedded in Adwoa's "looking glass" considerations, however, was a sense that not only glasses and letters changed owners, but that gifts carried layered meanings and expectations. Since Adwoa herself uses the looking glass as an example of how she started to grasp the significance of gift exchanges, it needs to be seen against the Akan background in which gifts are often believed to be "vehicles for the unwitting or deliberate transmission of evil to the recipient" (Sarpong 1991, 63). Its defining feature being self-reflection, a looking glass reflects the need to decipher a gift's underlying intention, while mirroring the giver's pure intentions.[21] Her father's suggestion to respond with a mirror seems to be emblematic of the significance of reciprocation. Importantly, however, the process of figuring out what the exchanges were all about did not happen

[20] Here Adwoa does not use her Twi day name but her cherished English name that I anonymized. Though most friends know both her English and her Twi names, and use them depending on the context, I heard her called by her day name "Adwoa" more frequently. In the context of receiving an English-language love letter, she uses her English name, hinting at the formality and romantic modernity of this exchange (cf. Mutongi 2009).

[21] Mauss identified the idea that something of the giver's spirit is sedimented in the gift, by appropriating the Maori term "hau," a concept that gives every gift "a kind of individuality" (2002, 15). Endowed with its original owner's essence, the gift exerts a magical hold over its recipient, as long as it is not reciprocated.

between giver and receiver alone but was fueled by her intimate conversations with a third party.

It was not the mirror girl who introduced Adwoa to the erotics of gift exchange. "It was later that someone showed me," Adwoa says. This someone was Mavis Marfo, an "age mate" from her neighborhood. Adwoa was about fourteen then, and Mavis was fifteen. "*She's a very good friend of mine. As for her, true, she understood, you see. So the gift that my friend gave to me, she said, 'Hey, Adwoa, this and this and that.'*" Mavis understood and introduced Adwoa to the erotic implications that gifts and romantic letters could harbor, by explaining to her that girlfriends could physically touch and please each other. Being attentive to Akan etiquette – according to which reproductive organs should not be named without prior excuses (Sarpong 1991, 68) – Adwoa reiterates Mavis's explanations: "*She was saying that when a lady sleeps with a lady, she be touching,* excuse me, *your* breasts *and things like that. But she didn't show me that* (pauses) you can use your finger to do something, but – yes, she didn't teach me that." Though Adwoa considers the mirror girl her first *supi*, it was her "mate" Mavis who instructed her. Initially, this introduction was of an explanatory, platonic nature and did not include sexual touch. The teaching process soon became more physical, however, as Adwoa concedes in a second interview a few months later.

Not only was Adwoa's narration circular, but circulation seems to be at the heart of the formation of *supi* knowledge. Faced by my research associate's jokes and insinuations that her colorful sexual life must have begun early, Adwoa emphasized that she herself was oblivious to the erotic possibilities or expectations gifts could raise when she began trading them. "When she gave me the *gift*, then I [. . .] entered before I saw. As I was going through, then I started understanding it." This process of coming to understand is not constituted in Mauss's economy of gifts and counter-gifts (Znoj 1995, 38–39). While Mauss focused on the ways in which gifts transform into personal loyalties and enhance a "big man's" status, the significance Adwoa attaches to the act of "exchanging" points at a wider dimension of gift circulation. The actual gifts exchanged seemed to matter less than the knowledge gained in the process of interpreting these exchanges that transcend the dyadic reciprocation. Moreover, as Marilyn Strathern's research on "the gender of the gift" in Melanesia suggests, "knowledge is like a gift"; it is both an external resource and an internal part of the person (1988,

108). Thus, in Melanesia, people are not construed as individual owners who negotiate their collective lives through gift exchanges, but as "dependent upon others for knowledge about themselves" (Strathern 1988, 132). This knowledge is constituted through "the impact that interaction with others has on the inner person" (Strathern 1988, 109). Similarly, Adwoa's "understanding" alludes to an emotional response and a knowledge gained through personal experience. By talking and interacting within growing circles of female friends, she "entered" a sensory way of knowing.

"It Has Become a Spirit"

One afternoon, Adwoa and Mavis were in Mavis's room when a cousin walked in on them. "[Mavis] was lying on me and we were both naked." The female cousin who happened to work with the police as a "CID"[22] took it upon herself to interrogate them and take them to the town's police station. Adwoa remembers how they defended themselves. *"It was even I who spoke. I said that when she came to meet us lying there, we had gone to take a bath, and were in our pants when we fell asleep, and that when she saw us, she said we were doing something. And we said that we hadn't done anything, we hadn't done anything. They* forced [*pressured*] *us and later* released *us*."[23] Adwoa capitalized on the fact that in many a small, dim sleeping chamber, the bed does serve as a fitting space for dressing after bathing, which is nothing unusual for two girls of the same age. As Fortes remarked with regard to the Akan context, "it is felt to be immodest for adults of different generations to bath together; siblings of the same sex may do so. The attachment and mutual identification of sisters is notorious" (Fortes 1975, 274). Whereas moral restrictions pertain to intergenerational bathhouse intimacies, it is permissible or even desirable for sisters, including cousins and female friends of the same age group, to share bath- and bedrooms. At the police station, Adwoa, who is a good storyteller, managed to evoke that sisterly dimension, thereby concealing the sexual feelings that may have been explored in a shared moment of afternoon privacy.

[22] CID means Criminal Investigation Department and is part of the police department. Calling someone a CID is a casual way of calling someone a police detective.

[23] Interview with Adwoa Boateng at Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

Back from the police, Adwoa hid in her room, skipped classes, and avoided her family until her father confronted her. "*My father got annoyed for about* four days *and then he came to me in my room and spoke to me, and told me that if that is the case, then it is* spiritual *and other things;* it is not good, so I should stop it." After providing for Adwoa's gifts and thus supporting the consolidation of her girlfriendships, the father disliked what was reported to him. When I asked Adwoa how exactly her father told her that what she was doing was bad and "spiritual," she resorted to a standard phrase that is thrown at Ghanaian girls who love girls: Have you seen "woman and woman sleeping [together] before?" In such questions, same-sex desire is rhetorically attributed to the non-natural world. Generally, spirits are understood as possessive forces, which haunt their victims and get hold of their personal lives and identities. As mentioned above, in film and other popular representations same-sex desire is often associated with the voracious appetites of female water spirits and thus relegated to the occult, "spiritual" realm. Invisible to the human eye and thus to society and the social world at large, this realm seems to engender intense, unhealthy attachments.

Having to bear the anger of her beloved father and resisting the police both constituted key moments in the formation of Adwoa's erotic subjectivity. In Suakrom, most people have been to the local police station – if not as accused or accuser, then as onlooker. A lively place, where petty crimes and contestations are arbitrated, officers take on the roles of mediators: they calm people down, delay a case, or support the party by which they have been bribed. Though many issues are solved at the police station, it must have been unusual in the mid-1980s for the intimacies of two naked girls in their room to have been reported.[24] Without an ambitious cousin, keen on furthering her detective career with the police, the matter of two girls lazing on a bed would not have been worthy of investigation by either police officers or radio journalists. Adwoa asserts that these things are different today: "*If it had happened* by now*, we'd have also come on the* FM [radio]*, don't you see?*" Adwoa's comment hints at the increased media attention (and the resulting sanctions) that schoolgirls garner if "caught" in sexual acts at boarding houses today. This heightened attention, as seen

[24] For the legal framework concerning homosexuality in Ghana, see Chapter 1.

in Chapter 1, results not least from the proliferation of competitive private radio stations.

The significance of the radio in making *supi* a sensationalized topic of public interest and part of the non-natural, "spiritual" world was evinced in many informal conversations. Like Adwoa, Comfort Otu, a fruit seller in Suakrom, refers to the "spiritual" and its mediatization as key to the condemnation of same-sex bonds. I had heard that Comfort had or used to have a same-sex lover. When I asked her whether she had a current girlfriend, she replied: "*You mean supi? No, I don't do that, it's not good. It's a spirit.*" Like other respondents who had experienced homophobic exclusions and a difficult breakup from a female lover, Comfort claims not to "do that" anymore. She also holds that having a supi "*doesn't do you good because people talk about it. You hear it on the FM stations and everywhere.*" In Comfort's pragmatic formulation, same-sex intimacy has a negative effect, due to the gossip and media attention it triggers. Notably, in her rendition, *supi* only becomes a malign spirit when it is exposed to the public and mediatized. In response, I related how things are different in Europe and that in some places, women could marry each other officially. She answered: "*I've heard about that. It's better to do it there than here. Here it has become a spirit because people talk about it, although it is something concerning your own innermost parts [only].*"[25] As I understood her, the innermost parts is where your feelings and desires reside. These parts of your inner self should not be subjected to public debate about the natural and the non-natural.

"The Real Love"

While the police episode did not terminate Adwoa's connection to Mavis, it suspended the introduction and learning process for at least a year because soon after Adwoa fell pregnant.[26] "*[My father] said he won't give me food to eat,* chop money. *It was through that that I got*

[25] Fieldnote based on a conversation with Comfort Otu and Josephine Agbenozan at Suakrom, May 2, 2008.

[26] Retrospectively, she attributes her relationship with the father of her firstborn to this event – although it was not clear whether it happened before or after she fell pregnant. This incident speaks to her appreciation for adult lovers who are discreet and know how to conceal their same-sex relationships, rather than creating suspicions by fighting in public.

my boyfriend, *called Alex. He's the father of my eldest child. He used to* tip *me. I didn't take him as a* boyfriend. *But he took me as a friend. Once in a while, he gave me* tip off, *some little money,* chop money." Adwoa pragmatically constructs her teenage pregnancy as a direct outcome of her father's punishment. It was not his admonishments that she should stay away from *supi*, which drove her into the arms of Alex, her loyal friend and admirer, but rather the father's withholding of "chop money" – the spending money which she would have needed to cover daily expenses, school lunches, and transport. At that time, Adwoa was a "sports girl," the best table tennis player in her region. She had known Alex for a while through after-school sports activities, but hardly noticed him. This changed when he stood up for her in class one day. They became best friends and Adwoa gladly accepted the monetary gifts he offered. The mirror girl and other girlfriends ridiculed Adwoa once her pregnancy showed. "They laughed at me that I had done the *wrong thing. So,* they even gave me herbal medicine, *traditional medicine to, (pausing) to drink, to abort it.*" But Adwoa did not abort. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy at the age of fifteen. In order to keep the pregnancy under wraps, she was sent to her father's hometown in the mountains. After weaning, she returned to Suakrom, leaving her son in the hands of a "senior sister" – possibly meaning a paternal cousin. Meanwhile, Adwoa's family threatened Alex's family with "knives" and "sticks" and pressed them to pay compensation, until Alex migrated to Germany. Adwoa and Alex's son has since completed school. He is staying with Adwoa's mother in Accra and occasionally receives money that Alex sends from abroad.

Interestingly, Adwoa mentioned Alex and her pregnancy when I asked her about the general "difference between friendship and love." Adwoa used Alex as an example of how friendship can effectively grow into something else, something passionate and sexual. The nostalgia about her impeded "love" for Alex certainly bears upon her failed marriage with the genitor of her second child and her ongoing search for a presentable, providing husband. While wistfully remembering Alex, Adwoa flirts with the idea that giving birth at a young age gave her greater liberty in continuing to pursue girlfriendships. As Adwoa coyly reasons, today, after having given birth to a second child with a man who refused to marry her, it "will be fair for [her]" to avoid men. "*And I started going near the* lesbian. *That's how come. Yeah, this is my story.*" Adwoa reconstructs her story along the lines of

her current focus on female lovers. Similarly, many of my younger respondents reasoned that their fear of teenage pregnancies and of losing respectability by being seen with boyfriends drew them to women. As one feisty, young mother who claimed that her husband lived in the USA asserted, it was better to satisfy her economic and erotic "needs" with girlfriends than by having boyfriends.

Adwoa's pregnancy only briefly interrupted her school career and her same-sex activities. In fact, it was in her father's rural hometown that she completed Junior Secondary School and kissed her first girl. Trying to make sense of Adwoa's multiple "first" times, I asked about her "first kiss," assuming that it must have been the mirror girl or Mavis, the neighbor, with whom she was taken to the police station.[27] Yet, without hesitation Adwoa calls up a fellow sports girl – "the runner" – whom she met at JSS. The fact that "the runner" died a few years later adds to her fond memory.[28] Clicking her fingers in excitement, she exclaims: "that girl, I can see her before my inner eye, eh, Chale![29] I miss her. May she rest in peace!" When I inquire what she liked about her, she raves about "the runner's" responsiveness: "I attract her during the bath time. So I started to kiss her [. . .] She's a sexy girl, you know, sexy girl. Very good girl. She understands everything. [S.D.: Like what?] *Vagina and vagina*," Adwoa jokes and joins my research associate in an outburst of laughter. "*You see,* through *the mountain girl* [the runner]*, that is how I came to see* the love, the real love." Beyond the inquisitive gaze of policing cousins and concerned fathers, and aware of (opposite-sex) genital intimacies, Adwoa realized that girlfriendships can be taken to another level of romance and sexuality. From this "first kiss" in the bathhouse, she moved on to her first "big love," a schoolmate at SSS who even came to stay with her in her father's house for some time.

Adwoa's reconstruction of her youthful erotic experiences offer a number of insights. Her discovery of *supi* pleasures was soon

[27] Adwoa replied in English to my question about her "first kiss" – a Euro-American motif charged with symbolizing the beginnings of a romantic relationship.

[28] Adwoa only mentioned in passing that someone had bewitched her friend and put *aduro* (herbal medicine) into one of her running shoes, which caused her foot to swell up and eventually led to her death.

[29] Chale or Charlie is an exclamatory appellation that has become a Ghanaian trademark, known throughout Anglophone Africa. I have been told that it was once a generic term for the colonial British man.

followed by the realization that certain gifts need to be wrapped particularly well and handled with the utmost discretion. If caught, however, denial presents itself as the sole option. Like most girls and women, Adwoa went by the unspoken rule that the sexual dimension of *supi* practice must be disavowed. Increasingly, secondary school authorities expose girls who are caught kissing; they are ridiculed by their mates and in some cases suspended or expelled. Adwoa, however, made her first same-sex experiences beyond the confines of a boarding school and at a time when *supi* was less of a public concern. She realized that it was in her power to "revert" the sexual encounter with a girl by testifying to her knowledge of what is considered morally right or wrong. Second, while her naked intimacies with another girl was punished only when someone walked in on them, the consequences of having sex with a boy were far-reaching even if they happened behind closed doors. When Adwoa's "friendship" with Alex became manifest in her pregnancy, she was sent to a rural town and her entire family became involved in safeguarding the family's good name. Had this happened a hundred years ago, her punishment could have been much more severe. Akan girls who conceived before going through puberty rites (*bragoro*) were ostracized. According to Peter Sarpong, they were made to undergo a series of purification rituals and were sent to the forest away from their community for forty days (1991, 47–55). However, as was the case with Adwoa, the stigmatization ended once a girl had successfully given birth.

Her public exposure and her father's disapproval constitute the driving elements in Adwoa's narrative. Both the hushing up of her erotic girlfriendships and her pregnancy are key moments of her story. Not only did her father's reaction impart to her that *supi* practices are considered spiritually wrong and need to be concealed, she also learned that *supi* accusations can be defused quite effectively by pointing at the legitimacy of homosocial intimacies, such as sharing a bath, with a female age-mate.

Ma'Abena Oppong: Learning How to Feel

Whereas Adwoa does not go into detail about the unease that can accompany the process of identifying and learning how to express same-sex attraction, Ma'Abena Oppong's life story addresses emotional challenges directly. In Ma'Abena's recollection, her discovery

of same-sex attraction takes the shape of a slow dance in which two girls evaluate each other's responsiveness. Although Ma'Abena avoids the term *supi*, her narrative captures the affective challenges of being called into *supi* intimacies by a more experienced girl she refers to as her "senior."

"*The* first *day, it was* difficult *for me,* because [. . .] *she was* leading *me by so many years,*"[30] Ma'Abena remembers her beginnings with Efua Aikins. They met at a prestigious co-ed Senior Secondary School that draws students from a large area. Ma'Abena had just completed her first year, Efua was about to enter her final year. It started when they had "free exeat"[31] and Efua asked Ma'Abena to accompany her to celebrate the graduation of the final year students. Ma'Abena was the only one of her class invited. "*We went to sit on the park and she brought drinks, foreign drink! And I told her that I don't drink, it's only Coke that I drink*." But Efua brought a glass and mixed Ma'Abena's Coke with alcohol, in fact not with local brew, but with classy imported drink. Efua was in a jolly mood that evening, she was smoking "jot"[32] and cajoled Ma'Abena into drinking with her. Obliged to accept, Ma'Abena drank and even ate the boiled eggs Efua fed her after soaking them in alcohol.[33]

After an exuberant night of "outing," as it is called in Ghanaian English, Ma'Abena became unwell and vomited. Early the next morning Efua woke her up and urged her to drink a little more. "*She said that if I didn't drink, I get sick. So when I drank it,* within five minutes, *I vomited again and slept*. But after that, *I even think she sent me to the* hospital, *the way I was reacting*," none of which Ma'Abena remembers. As she was throwing up, Efua took her to the bathhouse to wash her. "*She went to bath me. Even that, I didn't know it. She was the one who told me of it the following day that when I vomited yesterday, she went to bathe me [. . .] So that made me* feel *shy. You know, [she,] as a* senior, *I've vomited and she's gone to bathe me. But she asked me not to fear, 'Why, am I not a woman?'*" Ma'Abena was shy about bathing

[30] Unless noted otherwise, this and all other quotations in this subchapter are taken from an interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, April 25, 2008.

[31] An old-fashioned term for school permission to go out and leave campus.

[32] A casual Ghanaian name for cigarettes, thereby stylized into something more secretive and bombastic than the mere tobacco of which they consist.

[33] I have observed mostly men at funerals soaking boiled eggs in alcohol before eating them.

with a schoolmate whom she looked up to and ought to respect. After having been pushed to her limits, Efua worked to let her know how selflessly and devotedly she took care of her. With her rhetorical question, she positions herself as a fellow "woman" – as opposed to a man, with whom such intimacy would not be permissible. While Ma'Abena self-consciously shies away from her "senior," Efua styles herself as a caring, complicit sister, thereby creating the atmosphere of a twosome. However, as Ma'Abena emphasizes, the night they went out was by no means the start of their sexual relationship. "She didn't do me anything; from the *party,* we went to sleep at one of her friend's house, so there were a lot of us in the room." Often allusions to having stayed together with a friend in "the room" serve as an index for sexual activities, whereas bathing with a friend indicates the beginning of sensual and erotic attraction. This demands a closer look at the spatial contours of the bathhouse, before further exploring Ma'Abena's and Efua's interactions.

Queering the Bathhouse

While sleeping rooms are scarce, the bathhouse is accessible to many and affords a certain degree of privacy in crowded residential compounds. Attached to an assemblage of rented one-bedroom quarters, the bathhouse is much less a house, than an unroofed, walled structure with a drain. Ideally it is located next to a water tub where the bucket can be filled. It also serves as a urinal, and as the place for brushing teeth and washing underpants. To block the view of passers-by, it is built in the shape of a labyrinth. In Central Accra such bathing facilities are often shared with at least a dozen other tenants, plus visiting friends or relatives who all cook and wash in the compound facing their rooms.[34] Yet, even in crowded compounds, it is not permissible to enter the bathhouse unannounced. When someone approaches, a slight clearing of the bather's throat suffices to prevent unwanted intrusion. While bathing intimacies are frowned upon if they occur between a man and woman, including husband and wife, there is nothing unusual about joining a female friend or sister in the bathhouse. Especially in the

[34] Only one of my primary respondents in Suakrom, whose father sent home money from Germany every month, lived in a large more or less unfinished house and had her own bathroom attached to her room.

mornings and evenings, when it is pressing and compound members queue to get to the bath, it is nothing unusual for two girls or women to bath together. Tucked away from people's eyes, bathing thus allows for sensual moments and acts of kindness: carrying the friend's bucket; heating up her water to make the bath more pleasant; soaping her back. Young girls in particular can take a long time in the bath without raising any suspicions about engaging in erotic activities. In my interviews, the bath emerged as a significant space not only for schoolgirls discovering same-sex eroticism, but for adult women who share their rooms with children, mothers, or husbands.

Wherever possible, adult women take their bath twice a day. It is often the only time they have to themselves and it may be shared with an equally busy friend. I asked Ameley Norkor, a working-class wife and mother in Accra with very little space to herself, how she "spots" potential lovers, or in the words of my research associate Josephine, how she "knows" if a woman "does it" or not. First, she confirmed in her native Ga that, indeed "*there are those who when you start the friendship, they don't do it.*"

Do you understand? She doesn't know how to do it. The way that you build the relationship – for instance, when I get a friend – if we become friends and you don't do that, I can keep you for one week or two weeks; *by* the third week, *I'll usher you into it. I won't tell you anything. We like each other and do everything together. You'll bath and dress in my room, I won't touch you, but by the third week, if you take your bath and you're in my room, it will be difficult for you to get out of my room.*[35]

In Ameley's rendition of how she draws a "friend" into an intimate, sexual relationship, doing "everything together" implies taking a bath, changing together, and engaging in sisterly activities. To Ameley, whose school experience is limited to two years of primary school and who remembers making her first erotic girlfriendships as a child sleeping in her mother's compound, "*this* friendship *thing*" as she calls it is learned by doing. And if you have not done it before, you can be initiated into it. It would be both detrimental and redundant to explain the amorous and sexual protocols to a potential partner. Approaching a "friend" who has not been involved with women

[35] Interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, April 4, 2007.

before is instead a matter of gradually establishing an erotically charged, confined space.

The bias of my question to Ameley about how she "spots" potential lovers lies in its assumption that women who "do it" are recognizable and somehow distinct from those who do not. To Ameley, however, it is not a question of identifying a woman's sexual inclination or releasing a "personal truth" in a Foucauldian sense. She accounts for the fact that a friend who she finds attractive might be unaware of the possibility of same-sex love on a sexual level, by trying to capture her attention and stimulate her curiosity. She is thus concerned with the question of how to spark her erotic interest, the implication being that any woman can be responsive to same-sex passions if she is initiated in appropriately. Ameley attributes her seductive power to her unobtrusive persistence, to the steady way in which she invites and shows care toward a female friend over weeks. Her notion of initiating in relies on the personal capacity to trigger the interest of a woman who "doesn't know how to do it." The goal is to transmit the joy of becoming knowledgeable and of knowing another woman erotically. Obviously, the ways in which women charm each other are as varied as their personalities. Yet the patterns emerging within narratives of seduction have similarities: an erotic context is established through repetitive acts within familiar and familial spaces, such as the bathhouse, that lend themselves to same-sex erotic intimacies.

Both in Ameley's strategy of seducing an unexperienced female friend and in Ma'Abena's narrative of being seduced, timing is a crucial element in engendering and eroticizing bathing intimacies. The queering of spaces by defamiliarizing and marking them as meaningful and erotic takes time. Ma'Abena portrays the process of understanding the erotic dimension of her own physical shyness as a step-by-step introduction orchestrated by her "senior." This introduction took place across different bathhouses. During term break Efua took Ma'Abena to her mother's house for "three days" and continued to instigate situations that made Ma'Abena feel shy:

I think the third time – *it was the same, we were also on* midterms. *She woke up and asked us to go and bathe, and I said no, she should take the lead, and that I'd bathe after her. But she said in that case, I should rather go to bathe first. Do you see how she made me think? So when I was in the bathroom, she came to join me.* But *I couldn't even bathe well, like, if I see this senior I was*

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standing with her in a bathhouse bathing together, like – *it's not easy! There's nothing easy about it. It was* through *that thing that – (Josephine: So that day, did she touch you?)* That day, *she didn't do anything to me.* It *did* take time, it *did* take time.[36]

In line with a general trend in Ghana to call up numbers and time designations in English while speaking Twi, Ma'Abena produces a chronology that structures the time it took to develop and identify her own and her "senior's" feelings: the "third time" at the bath during the "three days" at the house of Efua's mother. Ma'Abena's narrative is structured using time references. These time markers may be understood as a narrative device resulting from my interest in her life "hi/story" (Rosenthal 1993), for history requires a temporal dramaturgy. However, this time line also demonstrates that the bathhouse and other spaces can be "queered" and become erotically charged spaces, through repetitions and the re-signification of everyday practices (Halberstam 2005). In hindsight, Ma'Abena conceives of Efua's efforts as part of a carefully staged script, which introduces her into an alluring world of same-sex intimacy. Efua did not "touch" her but allowed Ma'Abena to grasp how Efua gradually "made [her] think." Efua took the lead and introduced her to the erotic potential of sharing intimate space.

"*Nnye* easy" (it's not easy), a "Twinglish"[37] phrase that Ma'Abena uses often, implies an emotionally or physically challenging situation which may be uncomfortable and exciting at once. Ma'Abena's unease seems to derive from the fact that she saw herself taken on a journey, without knowing where she was heading. The graduated quality of this process does not mitigate the uneasiness with which it may unfold, and the difficulty experienced in understanding and speaking about it. Before considering the affective dimension of first-time same-sex love, the way in which seniority is enacted (by Efua) deserves some attention.

Enacting Seniority

There are many questions engulfing Ma'Abena's first significant night with Efua. Why did Efua make her drink more when Ma'Abena was already sick? Was Efua drunk herself, or did she intentionally contrive

[36] Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong, at Suakrom, April 25, 2008.
[37] The Ghanaian mix of Twi and English.

a compromising situation, so she could act as Ma'Abena's savior? If she intended to introduce her not only to boarding-school party life and wanted to capitalize on her seniority in order to orchestrate a sort of initiation, her strategy worked. Ma'Abena's needs during her sickness, and the closeness and embarrassment caused by sharing "foreign drink" and bath water, were at the heart of her ambiguous admiration of her attentive "senior."

Close relationships between senior and junior boarding-school girls echo the ranking of siblings. As Fortes (1975) noted, the most significant, socially recognized difference between Akan siblings, including twins, is that of birth order. An older sibling must be treated with deference, and is entitled to punish and reprimand a younger sibling while taking care of him or her (Fortes 1975, 273). The very notion that siblings belong to the same age group makes small differences in age significant. Ultimately, however, seniority is less about biological age than social age, which refers to a person's adeptness and experience relative to other members of that age group.[38] The principle of seniority operates in any given context; it determines who takes the lead in both a domestic or dormitory setting. While the age of classmates at Senior Secondary School can be uneven, with children entering school at different ages, senior-junior hierarchies are fairly institutionalized. Within the boarding houses, comprised of students of all years, third-year students are expected to acquaint the first-years with the daily routines on campus. They are encouraged to rear and discipline their juniors (Göpfert and Noll 2013). This school-sanctioned educational dimension of senior-junior bonds is reflected in how Efua orchestrated their sharing of food and provisions.

As established above, an important feature of approaching a potential girlfriend is the exchange of gifts. Ma'Abena described how her "senior" made her realize that gift exchanges follow a certain script of mutuality and discretion. "*If my* senior *comes, she'll say I'm the only one to buy the food for her.* So all the time *we get to* campus*, I ask her to give me the money in advance, so that at* break time*, by the time she comes from her* classroom*, I'd have bought her food. Sometimes she asks me to buy and that she'd pay me when she comes, but she doesn't pay, you see?*" Efua professed her trust in

[38] Social age connotes economic, cultural, social capacities, and prestige and corresponds to what Pierre Bourdieu termed symbolic capital (1985).

Ma'Abena by asking her to buy her food, which she would then share with her. Eating together from the same bowl is considered a sign of great intimacy. If a man and a woman dunk their hands in the same bowl of soup, they are suspected of being lovers – "di," the Twi verb that means "to eat" or to "to consume" has multiple meanings, including "to have sex." If two women eat from one bowl, only insiders may suspect them of being lovers. Ma'Abena performs her service and does not complain if Efua "forgets" to return borrowed money, but she comes to understand this reciprocity as an integral part of their intimacy. It seems that, to Ma'Abena, not asking questions was not only a matter of deferring to, or accommodating, her lover-to-be, but a way of testifying to her understanding that there was more at stake in their exchange than material value. Ending her explanations by asking me, "you see?", Ma'Abena indicates that she assesses these practices as part of the process through which Efua introduced her into a specific kind of intimacy that thrives on emotional reciprocity while engendering mysteries.

Studying the bonds between "play mothers" and their "play children" in South African schools, Blacking suspected that these "games" were a continuation of "traditional 'puberty'" schools among the Venda, in which every novice was given a "mother" (1978, 101). He found similarities in the patterns of gift giving and the dominance of the senior partner, and the use of kinship terms was symbolic of a new status in both the school and the "traditional" setting. Eventually, however, he concluded that similar social situations may give rise to similar institutions, but that there was "no evidence of cultural continuity" (1978, 101–2). Although the puberty rites that used to be practiced in southern Ghana are less elaborate than the Venda practices, it is worth considering girls' nubility, such as Asante *bragoro*, or *dipo* puberty rites in southeastern Ghana (Steegstra 2004) as homosocial contexts in which female hierarchies and intimacies are instantiated. Since both Ma'Abena and Efua are of Akan background, I will focus on *bragoro*.

Bragoro nubility rites were practiced regularly until the mid-nineteenth century (Sarpong 1991). While girls went through *bragoro* individually upon menarche, their age mates were closely involved in the weeklong process. Officiated by an elderly woman, the day of the ceremony mirrored the enstoolment of a queen-mother, the ritual that initiates a female elder into the role of queen-mother. The girl was

treated as chief-elect, she was required to fast, her head was shaved, and her friends were allowed to make fun of her (Sarpong 1991, 21–37). Besides a stool, an egg was an important symbol at different stages of the ceremony. It was supposed to absorb any evils contained in the gifts with which the initiand was showered (Sarpong 1991, 22). Later, hand-fed by the officiating woman, the initiand was required to taste small samples of food and to swallow a whole boiled egg, because biting it would jeopardize her fertility. Generally, *bragoro* features a complex use of symbolic foods and fluids. "Libations of alcohol informed the ancestors of this august event and secured blessing. The initiate was ritually bathed in a river to cleanse her of misfortune and she was served [a dish] made of sheep blood, arguably, to make her fertile" (Akyeampong 1996, 35). After being bathed by the officiating woman, the cleansed girl was dressed and beautified with beads reserved for adult women, before selecting the girls with whom she wanted to eat from the same plate. Far from suggesting that Efua was imagining herself as an officiating elder, Ma'Abena's emphasis on how Efua bathed and fed eggs to her gives their initial encounter a ceremonial character.

Sarpong interpreted *bragoro* practices as a preparation for a girl's life as wife and mother, conveying standards of morality and giving her a foretaste of the rights and responsibilities of motherhood. He focused on the "neophyte's" change of status and thus on her vertical relations to the adult women who admitted her into their company, "who have carried her, called her 'mother' and referred to her as 'queen-mother'" (Sarpong 1991, 76). He is less concerned with the horizontal ties engendered between the initiand and her girlfriends who joined her during a "six-day-confinement" that followed the ceremony. They bathed and spoiled their "six-day queen-mother," while she distributed food to her "maid-servants," gave them symbolic protection, and held mock courts if they misbehaved (Sarpong 1991, 39), all of which Sarpong interprets as an exercise for "motherliness." However, as he writes, "it cannot be without significance that the girls spend their nights with her when they could easily and perhaps more conveniently retired to the their homes to sleep and return to the neophyte's house in the mornings" (Sarpong 1991, 82).

Given that sharing beds and baths can be signifiers of girlfriendships, Sarpong's reading lends itself to some queering. *Bragoro* is erotically charged. Adult women beat the armpit *donno*, an hour-glass drum

which is one of the few instruments women were allowed to play, despite menstrual taboos that prevented them from touching other types of drums. They sang sexually explicit songs and encouraged the initiand to take to the dance floor amidst her friends. Boys paid uninvited evening visits and played dance games and mock marriages, before eventually retreating to their homes and leaving the girls to continue playing on their own. As a "six-day queen-mother," the initiand is called into the role of a senior, who gets both teased, and served, by her "maids," of whom she is in charge. These junior-senior dynamics resonate with today's practices among girls at boarding schools, where ample opportunity to tease and test each other, and to taste the power and liabilities of seniority, are provided. On a less tangible level, ritual secrecies reverberate in the aesthetics of youthful same-sex bonding. I often felt that young women tried to mystify same-sex attractions toward a junior by orchestrating peculiar circumstances and suggested that something extraordinary was happening that was beyond their physical control, by conjuring up moments of ritual significance (such ritual skills as pouring libations are taught as optional secondary school courses in traditional religious practice).

Stories of being ridiculed and confused by a *supi*, before winning her confidence, are common in the boarding-school context. Senior girls delegate arduous tasks to their juniors, incite them to go against the house rules, make them suffer small punishments, and play on their naivety in order to, sometimes, mercifully catch them when they break down. Upon entering Senior Secondary School, newcomers are subjected to fierce "bullying" games, which are to some degree sanctioned by the school authorities. This "liminal transitional phase" is concluded by a student entertainment night during which the status of the first year-students is officially confirmed (Göpfert and Noll 2013, 134). As I was told by same-sex desiring adult women, secondary school pranks, such as hiding or borrowing a junior's clothes without ever returning them, or cutting off her eyebrows at night, could amount to ambiguous markers of attraction.

At schools that seek to curb the perceived tides of *supi* infatuation, erotic intimacies have been restricted by prohibitive rules such as "no four legs on one bed."[39] At Ma'Abena's school, however, it was not

[39] Apparently, this phrase was more than an unspoken rule at the Catholic girls' school in Cape Coast, I was told by a university student who graduated from that school.

hard to keep up the façade of "normal friendship." Ma'Abena herself suspects that her dormitory's "headmistress" looked away, because she "*has done some before. As for her, when she sees a girl is standing with a boy on campus or something, the way she'll treat you!* But *if two girls are sitting there,* midnight, *chatting, she won't do anything.*" Notwithstanding the liberties Ma'Abena and Efua enjoyed under a headmistress who seemed to be more worried about unwanted pregnancies than about girls' nocturnal intimacies, it took time and extramural space to act upon their attraction.

Teaching and Studying Feeling

It was during a holiday at Efua's mother's that Efua sat Ma'Abena down and disclosed some secrets to her. She explained why a "lady" at school had been treating Ma'Abena so "badly."

She said she was coming to tell me why the lady *hates me. So when she told me, I became sad, and she told me but that this issue should only be known between the two of us, and that if she [Efua] gets to know that I've told a* third person, *she'd be very disturbed, because, she told me, if she didn't like me she wouldn't have disclosed what she is doing with her friend, and so if I also feel that I like her, I shouldn't disgrace her, and that I should* try *to do – And I told her that I've not done some before. And she said that nothing will happen to me. So she* confused *me for a long time, until she and I did it.*[40]

Efua proposed a sexual relationship by disclosing what she has been doing with another "lady" who spurned Ma'Abena and competed for Efua's graces. This conversation happened away from the bustle and the intrinsic lack of privacy at school. While boarding school has been described as a quintessential space for adolescent "playground sexualities" (Janssen 2002), it was not the dormitory, but a room in a mother's house which eventually set the scene for sexual disclosure and intimacy in this case.

Ma'Abena used English-language adjectives to describe how she felt upon realizing that Efua had another "lady" with whom she shared a secret. But Ma'Abena's reaction to this disclosure and the webs of passion and jealousy in which she found herself, cannot be fully captured in language. "*She used to teach me, she made me* feel- *like, sometimes you enter into something and don't know what to- I don't know*

[40] Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong, at Suakrom, April 25, 2008.

how to put it." Whereas expressing emotions in Twi often requires verb constructions that refer to a person's physical or spiritual body (Gyekye 1995, 95), Ma'Abena captures her ambiguous emotions, by resorting to the English shortcut "feel."[41] Though Ma'Abena could not articulate how exactly Efua taught her to "feel," she knew that she was entering into a world of emotions that were new to her. Ma'Abena grapples with the inconceivability of what she sensed, before it could be packaged and channeled into emotional expression; she describes, in a sense, an affect rather than a clear-cut feeling.

The emotional states that Ma'Abena does name in remembering Efua's proposal – disgrace, sadness, confusion – reflect how unsettling first-time love, and non-normative love in particular, can be. In *Feeling Backward* (2007), queer theorist Heather Love argues that the unwieldy affects through which North Atlantic queers recognize and act on their desires have been written out of lesbian and gay history. Concerned with public rights and recognition, "well-heeled gays and lesbians" have tended to emphasize the liberating effects of coming out of the closet and obscured "the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence" (2007, 10). In order to overcome the "backwardness" of feelings, such as shame and melancholia, that inhabit the shadows of queer (as in unruly) encounters, "modern" homosexual politics flatten out the repertoire of feeling (Love 2007, 8). Love is concerned with the loss that accompanies these "demands of queer history" and the sexual politics of liberation compelling us to "transmute shame into pride, secrecy into visibility, social exclusion into outsider glamour" (Love 2007, 28).[42] Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2010) advocates for the transgressive pleasures, hence the joy and mischief that could lie in deviating from the politics of normalizing homosexuality as happy and respectable (cf. Mesquita and Nay 2013).[43]

[41] For instance, *m'ani agye* ("I am happy") literally means "my eyes have received," and *m'ani abre* ("I am upset") literally means "my eyes have turned red."

[42] In North Atlantic metropoles this tendency has been countered by ever new, queer assemblages that take issue with the logics of liberal gay assimilation and opt for anti-consumerist "gay shame" rather than "gay pride" marches.

[43] Heather Love (2007) argues that the domestication of negative feelings has been integral to the project of casting a positive gay and lesbian past and present – a present inhabited by homosexuals who matured from being what psychoanalysis has considered the infantile, perverse, sterile, immature, and melancholic "queers" and grew into "out and proud" citizens equipped with the technologies to manage their gender and sexuality.

In the Ghanaian context, where historical norms of discretion clash with contemporary representations of *supi* as a haunting "spirit," queerness is not contained by happy visibility politics. Ma'Abena's "sadness," and the menace lurking in Efua's demand for absolute discretion, or else she would be "very disturbed," betray any straightforward narrative of gay (as in happy) self-narration. The process of acknowledging an erotic attraction that could bring "disgrace" is uneven and unpredictable and speaks of both the joys and the pains of subverting an assumed norm. Its secrecy cannot be attributed or reduced solely to a lack of positive notions of homosexuality on offer or to the results of "internalized homophobia." It is rather integral to the push and pull of desire through which these young women come to "understand" first-time same-sex desire. The inconceivability of first-time *(supi)* love is reflected by Ma'Abena's difficulty in grasping her feelings. Through the confusion and uncertainty of what her "senior" expected from her, Ma'Abena came to understand erotic intimacies as an expression of unspeakable feelings. Not only did she learn how to interpret certain affective conditions, she also became aware of the importance of waiting before articulating sexual feelings.

After completing secondary school, Ma'Abena forged a same-sex bond herself, in the single-sex environment of a semi-professional female football team. She befriended a teammate who had moved to Suakrom in order to further her football career. Talking of their trajectory of becoming involved with each other, Ma'Abena highlights how challenging it was to find the right setting and the right words to instantiate the erotic dimension of their friendship. They carefully observed and "studied" each other long before acting upon their mutual attraction.

I slept, in the same room with her six months *before I did anything with her. I ate together with her, we bathed together, we returned from [football]* training, *we came home and all.* But *it took time* before *I did anything with her. For her, she was – the* first day *that I did it with her, I asked her whether all along, she loved me. And she said she had been* studying *me. That same thought was in my head, that I was* studying *her. That's why I said that different people have their different thoughts. If peoples' minds were like coconut or pineapple, it could be opened to see what was in there,* because *it takes time.*[44]

[44] Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, April 25, 2008.

In a context where same-sex desire is not usually discussed and categorized on a meta-level, there are fewer shortcuts to express same-sex attraction and propose love. Young women who are cautious and inexperienced in reading each other's minds and feelings express the need to "study" each other first. During this period of studying, an eroticized context arises from the sensuality and the careful attention given to everyday practices. This intimate "study" is by no means a standardized process of "coming out," for what is in people's "minds" cannot be neatly categorized and only manifests over time.

Ma'Abena's boarding school experience taught her to evaluate a friend's responsiveness, before articulating and exploring her desires. The process of grasping and acting out her feelings is not framed in terms of finding a sexual label or orientation to apply to them. Ma'Abena does not even use the term *supi* to talk about her girlfriendships. Her path toward learning how to "feel" is inscribed in the temporal and spatial framework in which senior-junior bonds can go beyond comforting or guiding each other and turn themselves into "something else." In her study of black lesbians in New York, Mignon Moore (2011) notes that women who grew up in the Caribbean considered the beginnings of same-sex attraction as the continuation of a best friendship that became "something else" over time. She concludes that in "many areas around the world" where same-sex desire is not legally sanctioned, intimate friends are compelled to take their time, keep their intentions veiled, and follow a vague and "more obscure and longer path" toward acting on and naming their feelings (2011, 39). Through the lens of queer affect theorists, however, Moore's argument could be reversed to argue that in some parts of the world a standardized language of sexual rights and identity may in fact serve to obscure the affective turmoil of (first) same-sex love and conceal the length and the particularity of the path toward a personal queer self-understanding.

Unlike Ma'Abena, Adwoa portrays herself as knowledgeable and in control of things, ever since her explorations brought her to the police station. Such taken-for-grantedness emerges particularly in the stories of women who account for having had their first bathing or sleeping experiences with a female neighborhood friend or cousin prior to the social world of secondary school. The challenge of having a *supi* in a dormitory with dozens of girls stacked in bunk beds lies in carving out spaces of intimacy and trading secrets in an environment that is fraught

with the vagaries of group dynamics among junior and senior students. Knowing how to veil heartbreaks, jealousies, and intrigues from headmistresses and policing prefects is vital to having a *supi*. This informal knowledge, and the capacity to establish meaningful spaces in which to foster twosome intimacies, while steeped in larger webs of social relations, is at the root of the bonding networks of those who continue to pursue same-sex desires as adults.

Conclusion: Knowing Women

In this chapter, I examined the figure of the (cinematic) *supi* lesbian and the Asafo Supi captain, and explored stories of having a *supi* at school. What connects these different discourses on *supi* are the notions of seniority, knowledge, and secrecy. In Nollywood and Ghallywood, the *supi* lesbian appears as the misguided, corrupted, and domineering "senior" who ensnares her junior lovers and introduces them to evil same-sex cults. The Asafo Supi is represented as a mothering and nurturing leader figure and the custodian of the secret objects of a young men's society. At girls' schools, *supi* amounts to an old-fashioned word for a close friend who is much more caring than a "school mother" or a bunk bed "partner," yet somehow superior. While we can only speculate about the etymology of *supi*, its associations with Mami Wata gesture toward Tinsley's imaginative archive of a black queer Atlantic (2008).

Sensing the intimate nexus of sharing food and drink and compelled to reciprocate, inexperienced girls may find the process of becoming someone's girlfriend or *supi* deeply unsettling. The mothering "seniors" who make erotic allusions and engineer intimidating situations may capitalize on the legitimacy of the school setting and, importantly, senior dominance. Gift theories are useful in thinking through the ways in which knowledge itself emerges as a gift that circulates, rather than being reciprocated in a vacuum between two girls alone. Following Strathern, we depend upon others for knowledge about ourselves (1988, 132). Both material gifts and the gift of knowing about the eroticism of same-sex intimacy are relational and do not take place in a dyadic. Thus, *supi* practice is a socializing process, which extends beyond learning how to reciprocate gifts. Since every secondary schoolgirl may become a senior herself, the passing on of "the gift" is an integral part of *practicing supi*.

Secondary school girlfriendships are forged across regional, ethnic, and social groups. These school connections have considerable cultural support. They are encouraged by school authorities and by parents who allow their daughters to invite poorer girls to come and spend the holidays at their place. The language of kinship lends itself to girls' informal practices at boarding houses and in other close-knit homosocial environments, such as female football clubs. In these environments, far from home, senior-junior dynamics structure complex webs of friendships and the reproduction of kinship. The personal ways in which kinship is inhabited, however, and the meanings specific girls may attach to terms like mother and child, vary. At schools the formal language of kinship may either refer "to the status of a relationship, which might be formal and not particularly affectionate," or to the quality of a relationship (Blacking 1978, 113). Such terms as "school mother" or "team daughter" do not reveal what they mean to a specific girl and whether they can develop into "something else." Though Ma'Abena draws a line between the hierarchical "mother-child" constellation and the mutual *supi* attraction, her own reference to her girlfriend as her "senior," reveals that the boundaries between different sets of pairing are not as clear-cut – they are certainly difficult to distinguish for outsiders, parents, and school authorities. To girls themselves the boundaries become blurry with the development of erotic feelings. Learning how to veil the sexual dimension of their attachments is vital, especially to those girls whose same-sex desires do not terminate with graduation.

Interestingly, love letter-writing emerges as a common feature of the boarding-school girlfriendships described in different parts of the British postcolony. As Jennifer Cole and Lynn Thomas showed, the promotion of a "modern" economy of love was at the heart of the civilizing mission, as it aimed to replace flexible marriage arrangements with monogamous conjugality and nuclear family households (2009). This emphasis on companionate marriage as a modernizing force went along with the "idealization of verbal over instrumental expressions of attachment" (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, 5) and a new language of courtship featured in love letters not least in Anglophone Africa (Mutongi 2009). In southern Africa, love letter writing emerged as the epitome of a new type of "romantic love," while remaining closely tied to older, non-written forms of expressing love (Hunter 2010). As this chapter shows, the practice of exchanging love letters could go along with conjuring older aesthetics of secrecy and initiation.

Though this chapter focused on what *supi* implies in the school context, the term is also associated with and used among older market women with little school education. Especially in Accra where negative media representations have circulated at least since the 1990s, trendy young women dislike the word *supi*. To them it sounds "too local" or like a "dirty word." They prefer to use English terms such as "my girl" or "my dear" in referring to a same-sex lover. But mostly, my respondents referred to women who sexually involve themselves with other women, as those "who do it," or those who "know (how to do) it." Rather than verbally marking an explicit distinction between sexual and non-sexual female friendships, same-sex passions are invoked through a language of allusion that is consonant with Akan norms of indirection.

Despite the widespread association of *supi* with boarding school and hence with a legacy of the British colonial education system, *supi* is not regarded as a foreign import. Rather, prior to the term's correlation with lesbianism, it might have been understood as a desirable form of intimate friendship, the assumption, however, being that it could not be of public significance. Given its association with higher education and, more importantly, the fact that women themselves uphold the reciprocity of same-sex practice as something they were "taught" at secondary school, "knowing" offers itself as a trope to describe *supi* practices. On many levels, same-sex passion is hailed as an embodied form of knowledge – yet not as a Foucauldian "ars erotica," but rather as an awareness of the possibility that a woman can passionately love, and awaken the desire for this love in another woman. The knowledge about how to conceive and eroticize same-sex intimacy, while at the same time veiling it, is acquired through practice. Despite its elusive character, this practice is constitutive of the informal networks of self-assertive women, whom I refer to as "knowing women." Many of the women I met who used to have a same-sex lover were not ready to talk and reflect on these intimacies. The women whom I consider "knowing women," however, are women like Ma'Abena or Adwoa, who are articulate about the power of the erotic. "Knowing women" emphasize the meaningfulness of female friendships and desires and the knowledge embedded in a tacit same-sex culture.