



## *Introduction: Freeing Our Imaginations*

It is a peaceful evening. We are sucking oranges; six or seven footballers, spread out on the steps near the taxi rank. Opposite the street a fluctuating little crowd is catching a Nollywood flick on a small television screen, mounted at the back of a DVD-selling kiosk. In our midst: Edna, as clingy as always, snuggling up to Aisha. All of a sudden, their bantering tilts into a loud argument. My bewilderment prompts one of the senior team members to give me a roundup of Edna and Aisha's story. Edna wanted to separate from her girlfriend Naa, who also happened be her "team mother" (that is, a senior team member who was "taking care" of Edna). Naa felt that Edna was turning away from her. Not long before leaving the team to join the police force, Naa decided to "test" Edna by asking Aisha to propose to Edna and see whether she would accept. Rather illogically to me, the idea was that if Edna accepted Aisha's proposal, it would mean that she had started involving herself with other women already and had therefore distanced herself from Naa. The "test" became serious when Aisha and Edna fell in love and Aisha didn't know how to tell her friend Naa.<sup>1</sup>

I never knew what to make of the scheming and exchanging among female friends and same-sex lovers that led to jealousies, rivalries, often to broken hearts, and always to endless trails of gossip. Was Naa "testing" Edna, her lover, or Aisha, her friend? Or, given that Naa was about to leave the team, was she wittingly "passing on" her lover to her friend? The young women themselves felt that "gossiping" and lack of privacy was the source of their own and all of "Africa's" problems. "Abroad" they imagined, things were different because people do not interfere and meddle in each other's lives as much. I responded to such claims by stating that in lesbian circles in metropolitan Europe, gossip and "dyke" dramas were as prevalent as they were in Accra or Suakrom. Admittedly though, the dramas I witnessed seemed to be particularly intense if they occurred among women who

<sup>1</sup> Fieldnote based on a conversation with Aba Adama, December 7, 2007.

depended on each other to make ends meet, whereas the stereotypical white middle-class lesbian is financially independent and makes her own good money.

Indeed, the female same-sex relationships I came across in southern Ghana were never “private.” The networks of female footballers thrived not so much on stable couples, but on friendships such as the one between Naa and Aisha who probed each other’s loyalties. Such friends engaged in practices that impelled them to fight and revive or abandon their friendships, again facilitated by other friends, such as the footballer who imparted to me the story about Naa and Aisha. It was not only “team mothers” and “team daughters” who had a say in making or breaking the love relationships of their best friends; the involvement of supposedly mediating friends or cousins was integral to the informal networks I encountered. In many queer settings around the world, friends play a key role in connecting potential lovers. But the informal networks of same-sex desiring women are perhaps even more crucial in places where match-making has not been outsourced to online dating platforms and to bars and clubs as thoroughly as in metropolitan Europe. Further, working-class women in Ghana rely on close friends not only to match them with a lover, but also for providing material and spatial assistance, for instance by offering room for them to sleep together, by making housing and job arrangements, by feeding and raising each other’s children, or by taking care of each other’s aging parents.

This book is, in essence, about these friendships. It focuses on the everyday lives and intimate discursive practices of women who love women in postcolonial Ghana. It explores the agency of female friends who emphasize that they have been “doing everything together”: bathing together, washing together, cooking together, sleeping together, and eating from the same bowl. Such same-sex intimacies exist alongside and beyond sexual rights politics. They invoke a spectrum of sensual and sexual intimacies that defy the analytical boundaries drawn between kinship, friendship, and sexuality. This ethnography pushes us to perceive the vibrancy of everyday same-sex intimacies that have not been captured in the language of sexual identity. It does so by retelling stories that can only be heard if we allow ourselves to imagine more than what frames our own being. As Binyavanga Wainaina conjured in his six-part video documentary on YouTube: “we must free our imaginations” in order to “make new exciting things” and

create our own stories on the African continent (2014). In particular, Wainaina speaks out against the uninspired moral politics that frame current debates against homosexuality on the continent; he prompts middle-class Africans not to allow their “life of imagination” and innovation to be stifled by a neocolonial mentality of submissiveness and officialdom. This ethnography aims at freeing our imagination to the transformative energies and the creativity inherent to queer, as in unruly, same-sex cultures in Africa and elsewhere.

One of the main obstacles to hearing the voices of women who love women in Africa seems to be the concept of homosexuality. Certainly, the idea that same-sex desires can provides us with an inherent (homo) sexual *identity* offers an antidote to a homophobic discourse that considers same-sex desire evil, sick, or both, but never the basis for a valid identity. On the other, however, it firmly links the question of what we *do* (sexually) to the question of who we *are*. This correlation between sexual practice and social identity is not universally given, but emerged out of sexology studies in late nineteenth-century Europe (Foucault 1980). Even if our desires and intimate practices do impact on how we relate and position ourselves in the world, they do not necessarily translate into a constitutive self-identity. And what do we mean by identity in any case? Depending on context and academic discipline, identity invokes “a collective self-understanding,” it provides “the ground for social and political action,” it points “to something allegedly deep, basic, abiding and foundational” or highlights the “fluctuating and fragmented nature of the contemporary self,” to name just a few ways in which identity is put to scholarly use (Brubacker 2004, 33–35). With regard to homosexuality, identity is further complicated by its association with metropolitan lesbian and gay lifestyles, (rainbow) colors, and consumer tastes (Weeks 1977; D’Emilio 1983).<sup>2</sup> While the umbrella term “sexual identities” has served as a starting point to politicize gender diversity and same-sex desires on the African continent, its attending transnational LGBT<sup>3</sup> politics, privilege the

<sup>2</sup> From a historical perspective, Marxist scholars (Weeks, 1977; D’Emilio 1983) have traced the emergence of gay and lesbian (sub)cultures from the period of industrialization in Europe’s colonial metropolises to their solidification under consumerist capitalism in the late twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> The acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans\*) is constantly being extended to include further gendered and sexual self-identities. Though I am aware that the extension LGBTIQ has gained currency among North Atlantic organizations, I deploy the acronym LGBT when referring to a global

project of making sexuality visible over other forms of agency and identification. As such, I avoid notions of sexual identities in order to impede the conflation of various ways of experiencing desire and intimacy with one monolithically imagined sexual self-identity that can be put into plural and translated into any cultural context. Instead I revert to a broader notion of erotic subjectivity when referring to specific self-relations and erotic understandings of self. Intimacy, however, is used as a more relational term when contextualizing closeness and encounters with those to whom we bond and relate to in significant ways.

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“To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures,” queer theorist Lauren Berlant writes, while “intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared” (1998, 281). In the North Atlantic world, this narrative of something to be shared is set within a realm of desire, choice, and domesticity, to the point where intimacy is associated primarily with love and sexuality and with independent and supposedly egalitarian, “modern” relationships (Giddens 1993). Though the female friendships I chose to focus on are indeed sexually intimate and engender erotic subjectivities, they span a range of shared, intimate practices that cannot be understood adequately through concepts of sexuality. The context of postcolonial precariousness in Ghana requires that many things are shared that would be considered intimate or private in middle-class Europe. Inevitably, practices of sharing shoes, beds, or mobile phones and the exigencies of everyday survival bring into close proximity the lives of people who are neither married nor partnered. The close bonds emerging between neighbors, friends, or family members are instigated through economically and emotionally significant practices such as sharing food or bath water. I understand intimacy through the emotional rifts, the passions, and the fragilities engendering same-sex relationships that are inspired by both material and affective needs and desires.

My understanding of the “erotic” as a powerful human resource is inspired by the black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde. In her essay on the “Uses of the Erotic” (Lorde 1984) Lorde considered friendship and sexual connection vital tools in women’s assertion of their own

institutionalized framework and LGBTI when referring to African activist contexts where the extension of the I (for intersexual) has always been preferred (cf. Epprecht 2008, 24).

humanity, in surviving gendered and racialized violence, and dealing with the exclusions and subjugations imposed by the forces of global capitalism. Thus, as formulated by ethnographers working on the black Caribbean, Lorde's understanding of "the power of the erotic" (1984, 58) and her reading of the erotic through the sensual goes far beyond associations of "sex and sexuality" (Allen 2011, 96). As Jafari Allen writes, for Lorde, the erotic is not only about our sensual and sexual energy, but a transcendent and transforming force, "the deep subjective," which she recognizes as "a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence" (Allen 2011, 96, citing Lorde 1984). Knowledge of the joy we can experience compels us "not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" (Lorde 1984, 57). This capacity for and awareness of joy is vivid in the narratives I encountered in Ghana and emerges as a powerful site of knowledge production. To me, Lorde's sensitivity to the humanizing power of the erotic has been best captured in *Allah Made Us*, Rudolf Gaudio's study of male same-sex intimacies in Northern Nigeria (2009) and in Gloria Wekker's ethnography on *The Politics of Passion* (2006) among women who love women in Surinam.

This book also is set in the legacy of feminist works that explore the resilience and creativity of urban working-class women in Ghana – in particular the landmark studies *Sharing the Same Bowl* (Robertson 1984), *Onions Are My Husband* (Clark 1994) and *I Will Not Eat Stone* (Allman and Tashjian 2000), which made crucial contributions to understanding female agency in southern Ghana. They explored the shifts in gender relations, the real and imagined blessings of Akan matriliney and the legendary autonomy and flexibility of female traders throughout southern Ghana, in responding to rapidly changing and ever more aggressive global economies. My own concern with the livelihoods of working-class women seeks to extend the analytical scope of female agency in Ghana by including the affective and erotic dimension of their everyday lives. My inquiry thus responds to the African feminist call for research on sexuality that is sensitive not only to gender and power (McFadden 2003; Pereira 2003; Tamale 2011) but also, as Sylvia Tamale insists, to "pleasure, eroticism and desire," as a means to overcome "the tired polemics of violence, disease, and reproduction" clinging to the study of sexual bodies in Africa (2011, 23–31). It also responds to the call for theoretically engaged

ethnographies of female same-sex relations, pronounced since the advent of queer anthropology (Blackwood 1986; Weston 1993; Boellstorff 2007). The lacunae in inquiries on specifically female same-sex relationships speaks to the epistemological challenge of investigating sexual intimacies in general and to the double methodological challenge of exploring female and same-sex desires in Africa. Bridging these gaps requires a transdisciplinary approach that draws on anthropological, historical, and philosophical materials and engages queer, feminist, and postcolonial epistemologies.

The “postcolonial” in the book’s title refers not so much to the chronological time period since Ghana’s independence, but to an analytical perspective, which is mindful of the colonial legacy persistent in our scientific disciplines and systems of knowledge. As Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela outline, postcolonial theory needs to be understood as an “anti-disciplinary” project that seeks to excavate and destabilize the links between particular scientific discourses and (neo) colonial, disciplined ways of knowing. In so doing, this project sheds light on the material relations that work to fix “‘the Others’ in the position of ‘the Others’” (2009, 9). A postcolonial feminist approach in particular seeks to unravel the entangled, historical makings of gender in the global South and North and to dethrone the racial and gendered categories that have framed European imperialism as an inevitable global process and women of color as modernity’s constitutive Others. This approach is equally mindful of different positionalities among formerly colonized subjects and distinguishes between metropolitan Others (such as migrant scholars of color) and the subaltern who cannot make herself heard as the Other. Gayatri Spivak describes the subaltern as a person who is removed “from all lines of social mobility” and lacks the structures that would make her agency recognizable (2012, 430). In response to the popularity and what she considers the “metropolitan romanticization” of subalternity among feminist activists and scholars in the North, Spivak clarifies that “no one can say ‘I am a subaltern’” for, “subalternity is a position without identity” (Spivak 2012, 431). While cautioning postcolonial feminists not to wipe out the voices of the subaltern, by speaking *for* them, Spivak does not release us from doing “the ambivalent work of representation” (Heinemann 2019, 46) and thinking from a place of subalternity.

In this book the daunting work of writing subaltern intimacies is tackled against the backdrop of racialized, colonial representations of

African sexual bodies and encouraged by its African womanist, feminist, and queer critiques.

### “Queer” Intimacies in Millennium Africa

Wary, perhaps, of revisiting sexist and racist stereotypes about African women’s bodies, African feminists and gender activists have been slow at taking up research on sexuality and on female desires in particular (Arnfred 2004). Since the turn of the millennium, however, a major shift has happened, as exemplified by edited collections focusing on “African sexualities” (Tamale 2011; Bennett and Pereira 2013; Ekine and Abbas 2013) in response to the call for research on “subaltern sexualities” pioneered by the South African-based feminist journals *Agenda* (Gqola 2005; Potgieter 2006) and *Feminist Africa* (Mama, Pereira and Manuh 2005; Salo and Gqola 2006). Ugandan legal scholar Sylvia Tamale was the first African feminist to contextualize and explicitly write against the rapidly expanding anti-gay climate that has accompanied and spurred this shift (2003). Recently, African activists have begun to document and compile the life stories of “queer Africans” in different parts of the continent (Mwachiro 2014; Azuah 2016) and two outstanding films made in Nairobi (Chuchu 2014; Kahi 2018) speak of urban Kenya as the hub of African LGBTI activism outside South Africa. Moreover, artistic analyses of non-normative genders and sexualities (Muholi 2010; Matebeni 2014), fictional accounts (Martin and Xaba 2013), and Afropolitan online-magazines such as *Q-zine*<sup>4</sup> are bringing “queer perspectives” from African metropolises to broader audiences. These activist initiatives are using the term queer, which appears to be more open and less fraught with Euro-American connotations than the term lesbian. As a strategic term, capturing a variety of non-conforming genders and same-sex practices, queer has started cutting across activist endeavors in Africa and its diasporas.

This book addresses three major gaps persisting in the scholarship on “homosexuality” in Sub-Saharan Africa. First, most scholarly publications concerned with homosexuality in the global South have focused on men. This correlates with a larger privileging of male sexual bodies and desires and the long-standing denial of sexually meaningful female

<sup>4</sup> <https://issuu.com/q-zine>, accessed July 3, 2017.

intimacies in colonial and postcolonial sources (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999). This legacy was continued in the academic field of lesbian/gay anthropology in the 1980s, when gay anthropologists remained silent about the putative insignificance of female same-sex intimacies and only found what was recognizable to their gaze. As Blackwood put it, male scholars talked to male informants about male sexual activities and neglected the sources on female same-sex relations or assumed that the limited data did not allow for analysis (1986, 5). Moreover, female homosexuality was held to be less regulated, “less developed, less common and less visible than male homosexuality” (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, 44). This raises a more general question regarding which spaces are considered public and by whom and which ones are overlooked or considered invisible. In many places the presumed invisibility of female same-sex bonds is the result of the private/public split and a paradigm that has linked homosexuality to “spaces that are coded as masculine and public within the sources themselves” (Sinnott 2009, 226).

Second, there are few empirical studies that explore the experiences, as opposed to the textual and discursive representations of contemporary Africans, who engage in same-sex relationships. Scholars analyzing historical texts and media representations of homosexuality and the political homophobia of African nationalists (Hayes 2000; Epprecht 2004; Hoad 2007) have been credited for heralding the sub-field of Queer African Studies (Macharia 2009). Increasingly, African philosophers and political scientists are broaching the subject by bringing colonial “sodomy laws” and postcolonial homophobic rhetorics to bear onto broader political analyses. Prominently Achille Mbembe theorized Africa’s “silent sexual revolution” and its adjacent politics of “phallic power” (2010). While the literature on homophobic debates and their religious and political ramifications (Chitando and van Klinken 2016; Currier 2019) is rapidly expanding, studies of the everyday practices of same-sex desiring Africans remain scarce (Awondo, Geschiere and Reid 2012, 161). Ethnographies that focus on Africans who engage in same-sex intimacies without claiming a specific sexual identity are even more rare.

Third, ever since *Defiant Desire* (Gevisser and Cameron 1994) – the first edited collection on *Gay and Lesbian lives in South Africa* – was published, research on same-sex intimacies in Africa tended to



focus on Southern Africa.<sup>5</sup> This corresponds with extensive colonial documentation of sexuality in Southern Africa, stimulated by white settler colonists and the attendant presence of imperial anthropologists (colonists were less present in British West Africa with its system of indirect rule). South Africa's contemporary position as Africa's economic powerhouse and more importantly decades of liberation struggle inspired a focus on human rights, including sexual rights.<sup>6</sup> Today, South Africa's role as Africa's only nation-state that fully embraces and protects homosexuality in its constitution and one of the first countries worldwide that granted full marital rights to same-sex couples facilitates research on gender and sexuality. Conversely, South Africa's high rates of gender-based violence and so-called corrective rapes of (masculine presenting) lesbians, which have been considered a backlash to South Africa's liberal constitution, called for academic and activist projects working on female-bodied same-sex intimacies in the Southern Africa region (Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Lorway 2008; Gunkel 2010; Matebeni 2012).

Embarking on this research project in 2006, there were no published empirical texts on same-sex intimacy in Ghana. I was thus excited to gather the few existing essays and dissertations by Ghanaian students (Yahaya 2003; Tetteh 2004) and North Atlantic exchange students (Rehnstrom 2001; Harrington 2005; Kim 2005) at the sociology department of the University of Ghana, Legon. Most importantly, Tetteh's focus on working-class women in Accra attuned me to the fact that notions of friendship, rather than sexuality provide important leads into adult women's same-sex intimacies. Tetteh noted that "ordinary ladies' friendship associations" such as mutual-help organizations offer ideal cover for same-sex lovers "to share fellowship and companionship," alongside their lives as wives and mothers (2004, 18). Cultural analyses of the derogatory depictions of "lesbians" in Nigerian and Ghanaian

<sup>5</sup> Prior to this collection, South African historians came across the same-sex "marriages" of male workers in South African gold mines. These "mine marriages" were interpreted primarily as practical, situational arrangements (Harries 1990; Moodie and Ndatshe 1994).

<sup>6</sup> This progressive legal situation is due not least to prominent black and white figures in the liberation struggle who openly identified as gay. Most famously the anti-apartheid, gay rights, and AIDS activist Simon Nkoli was said to have influenced the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela's constitution.

cinema contribute to the study of the representation of female same-sex desire in West Africa (Green-Simms and Azuah 2012; Green-Simms 2012). Above all, empirical inquiries into the strategies of pockets of gay-identifying activists in Accra (O'Mara 2007), on coastal communities of same-sex desiring men known as "Saso people" (Banks 2011; Otu 2018), and on cross-dressing university students (Geoffrion 2012) in Cape Coast attest to the increasing visibility of male gender-bending and same-sex practices and the lack of substantive work on female same-sex intimacies.

Analyses of the politicization of homosexuality in Cameroon (Gueboguo 2006; Awondo 2010; Nyeck 2013), in Ghana (Tettey 2010), and in the Gambia (Nyanzi 2013), and anthropological work on male same-sex cultures in the urban centers of francophone West Africa (Teunis 1996; Nguyen 2010; Broqua 2009) revealed how the emergence of gay activism has been framed by HIV/AIDS initiatives and how male intimacies have been associated with sex work and transactional sex. In Nigeria, pioneering anthropological work has been done on male same-sex intimacies (Gaudio 1998/2009; Pierce 2007) and recently, the gap on women's same-sex desires has been tackled in an anthology that documents the first-hand narratives of "Nigeria's queer women" (Mohammed, Nagarajan and Aliyu 2018). Besides these documentations, feminist fiction writers are freeing our imaginations with regard to non-normative genders and female desires in Nigeria and its diaspora (Okparanta 2013/2015; Etaghene 2015; Popoola 2017).<sup>7</sup> Not least, the work of the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) and the "lesbian-led" Queer African Youth Networking Centre (QAYN) document and attest to the different experiences of male and female African activists within male-dominated LGBTI initiatives (Kouassiama and Armisen 2012, 6). Still, the difficulty of integrating the study of same-sex intimacies into African feminist spaces and larger debates in African gender studies prevails. This omission necessitates a closer look at the colonial ghost haunting representations of female sexual bodies in Africa.

<sup>7</sup> In 2006, the inclusion of the short story "Jambula Tree" by the Ugandan author Monica Arac de Nyeko in *African Love Stories* (Aidoo 2006) attested to the power of fictional writing on and the recognition of female same-sex desires and its relevance by feminists across the continent.

## Colonial Ghosts and Keyholes: (De)sexualizing African Bodies

The production of knowledge about, and the regulation of, sexual, racialized bodies was at the heart of Europe's civilizing mission (Stoler 1995; McClintock 1997; Lugones 2007). Depictions of rampant primordial African men and women in need of containment and enlightenment, and the childlike, noble savage who is free of sexual "degenerations" and in need of protection from corrupting influences from the East, indicate a veritable obsession with the sexual (Hoad 2007; Epprecht 2008; Gandhi 2006). These sexualized and racialized figures justified not only the imposition and continuation of colonial power; these Others provided the background for the construction of white, "modern" masculinities and femininities (McClintock 1995; Purtschert 2006; Gunkel 2010).

The study of "primitive" sexual behaviors, such as male "sodomy" and other non-procreative sexual practices tagged as "unnatural carnal knowledge," was an integral part of British imperialism (Hoad 2007, 3–7). It was informed by the voyeuristic travelogues of European explorers and sustained by fears of insurrection (Arondekar 2009). One of the most widely acknowledged writers and travelers vested in observing, translating, and documenting sexual practices was the British officer Richard Burton. Burton (1885) devised a "sotadic zone," in which the flourishing of "homosexual" practices was facilitated by climatic conditions. Burton's "Orient" constituted the center of his pseudo-geographical latitudes of "sotadism," whereas northern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa were the only two regions on the globe he considered mostly "uncontaminated" (Karsch-Haack 1911). On the one hand, Burton's defensive rhetoric testifies to "his wishful thinking of the 'East' as a world free from the theological and moral repressions of western Christendom" and is important "in rendering the Orient into a homosexual utopia for Europe's sexual refugees"; on the other, it fueled "the energies of a moralizing chorus intent on accumulating (homo)sexual evidence for the savagery of Europe's subject races" (Gandhi 2006, 52–53).

This spy-like gaze, coupled with nostalgia about "uncontaminated," non-western sexualities, is reproduced in the writings of early twentieth-century anthropologists who waded through the small print of colonial and precolonial travelogues and missionary

reports (Karsch-Haack 1911; Westermarck 1908) in order to map out homosexual practices across the globe. While the bulk of these documents focus on men, the German entomologist and armchair anthropologist Ferdinand Karsch-Haack was attentive to what he considered “lesbian love” in Africa. Steeped in the racist sexologist paradigms of the early twentieth century (and in particular of his colleague Magnus Hirschfeld), Karsch-Haack’s weighty compendium *Das gleichgeschlechtliche Leben der Naturvölker* (1911) features an entire chapter on tribadism (female genital rubbing). Karsch-Haack compiled and re-interpreted the vivid descriptions of explorers who examined “macroclitorides” and “hypertrophic” labia minoras. Interested in the nature-culture question, these (pre-) colonial adventurers inquired into whether “monstrous” labias and clitorides were “racial peculiarities”<sup>8</sup> or resulted from “tribadism” and other “excessive” cultural practices (such as the elongation of the labia or the use of dildos in initiation rites). Karsch-Haack was critical of the heteronormative, masculine voices of the travelogues and mission reports he relied on.

Writing against notions of the unfeeling “mannish woman” as a “degenerated creature,” Karsch-Haack’s compendium can easily be considered an expression of his personal interest in rehabilitating “homosexuality.” Nevertheless, such accounts also reiterate what Tamale labels the “voyeuristic, ethnopornographic obsession with what [European scholars] perceived as exotic (read perverse) African sexual cultures” (2011, 19). Tamale suggests that “ethnopornographic” depictions of African women as unfeminine, hyperfertile, insatiable, backward, or barbaric reflect the imperial anxieties of their authors. But they reflect more than that. The racialized images of African women’s bodies and practices constituted the “periphery” of metropolitan sexual regimes, which, in turn, served to normalize constructions of white bourgeois femininity (cf. Purtschert 2019). This “ethnopornographic” gaze has been reproduced in policy-oriented social science and media reports on reproductive health and fertility control in Africa, and not least in the discourses on sexual health and the HIV/AIDS crisis (see Caldwell et al. 1989). The AIDS paradigm has contributed to a profound re-medicalization of African bodies since the mid-1980s (Tamale 2011, 15) and to a revival of colonial

<sup>8</sup> The author’s translation of “Rasseneigentümlichkeiten” (Karsch-Haack 1911).

constructions of black sexuality as promiscuous and inherently Other (Spronk 2006, 10).

The colonial ghosts haunting representations of female desires prominently surface in the conflicting interpretations of African “women marriages.”<sup>9</sup> Discussions over the motives for and the meanings of these institutionalized marriages between two females evince a divide between (straight) African feminists and (white) queer feminists, which leaves little room for queer African perspectives. “Women marriages” have been reported in about forty, mostly patrilineal African societies, and explained on the grounds of hereditary considerations or reproductive exigencies (Tietmeyer 1985). For the Nuer for instance, Edward Evans-Pritchard mentioned how a barren, wealthy woman could become a “woman-husband” and marry one or several wives “in exactly the same way as a man marries a woman” (1951, 108–9). In these marriages, often forged by female diviners, the “woman husband” paid bride-wealth and chose a genitor for her wife, whose offspring would belong to her (the “husband’s”), lineage.

Interestingly, accounts written prior to the advent of gay and lesbian studies in the 1970s were more likely to imagine or allude to the possibility of eroticism within these marriages (Wieringa 2005). Melville Herskovits, for instance, formulates that “it is not to be doubted that occasionally homosexual women [in Dahomey] who have inherited wealth [...] utilize the relationship in which they stand to the women whom they ‘marry’ to satisfy themselves” (1937, 338). Decades later, Herskovits’ assumption was dismissed by feminist anthropologists, whose concern was with the gender regimes, the lineage, and the class structures framing female marriages. In fact, they left unexplored possible erotic aspects of some women’s marriages (Krige 1974; Smith Oboler 1980). Without considering intimate connection as additional or primary incentive for a woman to marry a woman, they were quick to assume the non-sexual nature of these bonds and invested in rendering female spouses “heterosexual.”<sup>10</sup> More recent

<sup>9</sup> These marriages have variously been referred to as “woman-marriage,” “woman-to-woman marriage,” or “gynaegamic.” For the purposes of this discussion, I refer to the phenomenon as “women marriages” (cf. Wieringa 2005, 299).

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, ethnographer Judith Gay who did account for the erotic dimension of bonding friendships between girls in Lesotho (1986) assumed that adult women who pursue sexual interests have either opposite- or same-sex relations, and not both, thereby imposing the Euro-American “homo/hetero binarism.”

research highlights the aspects of mutual care and emotional intimacy that were mentioned by elderly Gikuyu women involved in such marriages (Njambi and O'Brien 2000). Second-Wave feminists, however, perhaps wary of imposing what was perceived as an utterly modern configuration of (non-procreative) sexuality and/or aware of the colonizing keyhole gaze (the legacy of gathering information by peeping into bedrooms), tagged concerns with kinship and reproduction rather than intimate companionship as the sole purpose of marriage in Africa.

Audre Lorde was the first feminist to take up Herskovits' allusion to homosexuality. In an essay that tackles the racism and heterosexism shaping competition among black women in the USA, Lorde mentions women marriages. "Some marriages of this kind are arranged to provide heirs for women of means who wish to remain 'free,' and some are lesbian relationships" (2007, 34). She frames women's autonomous economic and erotic alliances in West Africa as part of a lost diasporic past in which women of African descent "enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power" (Lorde 2007, 50). Lorde's note provoked a strong reaction from Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume, an expert on Igbo women marriages. In the foreword to *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), Amadiume attacks "western" feminists for usurping the meanings of an African institution (1987, 7) and angrily rejects the possibility of sexual intimacy in women marriages. Indeed, she deems Lorde's analogy, "shocking and offensive" (Amadiume 1987). Ironically, Amadiume's attack is directed toward a queer feminist of African descent, who herself grappled with the primacy of white feminist interpretations of "lesbianism." Was Amadiume really unable to imagine the possibility of emotionally and sexually meaningful intimacies between female spouses? While her anger is understandable in the face of the ongoing commodification and cultural appropriation of African bodies and practices, Amadiume's refusal to imagine more reflects her seemingly uncritical adherence to a binary framework of homo- versus heterosexuality.

Today, lesbian feminist scholars are careful not to hasten the sexual labeling of female husbands and their wives. Still, the statement that "most African women in same-sex relations live their lives" in "silence" and "marginalization" (Morgan and Wieringa 2005, 19) has its pitfalls. The multi-authored life story project *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* (2005) seeks to break this "silence" by giving evidence to the historicity of "female homosexuality" in

Southern Africa. Contesting the absence of explicit historical references to female homosexual practices, the editors deplore that previous researchers did not “give very detailed descriptions of what the girls actually did when they were in bed” (Morgan and Wieringa 2005, 297). While such statements rightly point at the failure of androcentric researchers to recognize the possibility of fulfilling sexual intimacies between women (Blackwood 1986; Carrier and Murray 1998), the question of what exactly happened in bed echoes legacies of peeping into “native” bedrooms. The risk of reducing intimate lives to sexual categories looms large in the quest to uncover and inscribe homosexuality into Africa’s history. The keyhole gaze and other colonial technologies that characterized the search for homosexual evidence resonate with the scholarly and activist desires to validate same-sex practices through history.

I have focused on debates about women marriages in some detail, as they illustrate both the problem of the colonial gaze, when drawing on Other cultures in order to make arguments about sexual categories and their attendant Euro-American studies and disciplines, and the heterosexist ghosts haunting African feminists bound to write against the ongoing colonial appropriations of black women’s bodies. Bearing this in mind, the next section considers some of the few existing anthropological references to same-sex friendships and desires in colonial Ghana. It begins by looking at anecdotal references to Akan women’s “extra-large beds” and outlines the need for intersectional and queer-feminist analyses. I then turn to the historical practice of “friendship marriage” in southern Ghana and the conceptual potential of friendship as opposed to and alongside sexuality.

### **Extra-Large Beds and the Subalternity of Female Desires**

(L)esbian affairs were virtually universal among unmarried Akan women of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), sometimes continuing after marriage. Whenever possible, the women purchased extralarge [sic] beds to accommodate group sex sessions involving perhaps half-a-dozen women.

(Greenberg 1988, 66)

This quote, taken from the US sociologist David Greenberg’s (1998) work, exemplifies some of the anecdotal references, sweeping generalizations, and unaddressed methodological problems that inhere in the

literature on sexual behavior in Africa (Pinechon 2000; Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2011). Not unlike the sexologists of the early twentieth century, social scientists such as Greenberg (1988) (see also Murray 2000) waded through colonial notes and footnotes in order to produce comparative maps of homosexuality, without critically assessing their source materials (cf. Dynes 1992). Greenberg's assertions about the universality of "lesbian" practices among the Akan derive from his personal conversations with Eva Meyerowitz, who carried out fieldwork in the 1940s. While Greenberg's claim has been considered empirically weak (Murray 2000, 359), it also evokes assumptions about racialized difference and about Africans' purported sexual "Otherness." Before considering his, albeit interesting interpretation of African women's same-sex "friendships," I will briefly contextualize the comparative mappings of gay anthropologists at the time.

A crucial starting point to the cross-cultural study of homosexuality was Foucault's distinction between sexual practice and sexual identity. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault sketched out that sexuality is not a natural given but rather a historical construct implicated in hegemonic forms of power (1980, 103). He argued that sexuality as an intrinsic trait and "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" as essentially distinct types of persons were generated as European medical doctors and psychiatrists promoted the idea that sexual acts were indicative of an individual's biological or psychic truth. The religious and scientific obsession with sex was part of a gradual shift from a "deployment of alliance," a system focusing on the regulation of marriage and kinship ties, to the "deployment of sexuality" in which the knowledge about one's own body and its sensations took center stage (1980, 108). Equipped with technologies of the self, bodies became subjects by internalizing and reproducing the sexual categories on offer, and by fashioning sexual self-identities.<sup>11</sup>

Greenberg's work can be understood as part of a wider search for cross-historical and cross-cultural "evidence" that was inspired by the gay liberation movement of the 1970s and the subsequent emergence of gay/lesbian anthropology. Invested in establishing homosexuality as

<sup>11</sup> Ann Laura Stoler discussed Foucault's underlying Eurocentrism and lack of theorizing on the racialized figures constituted outside of metropolitan sexual regimes (2002, 320). Her critique is informative in looking at how the intimacy of the colonial encounter (i.e., within sexual relationships between colonizing men and colonized women) impacted metropolitan notions of race and sexuality as well.



a cultural formation, this anthropological subfield illustrated that same-sex desires could not be considered psychological aberrations but formed the basis for relational models tied to a society's age, gender, and kinship structures. A typology of age-defined, gender-defined and egalitarian forms of "institutionalized homosexualities" was developed and correlated with different types of societies in grand "ethnographic" mappings (Weston 1993; Drucker 1996). A "gender-defined" type of homosexuality, in which "certain people took on social roles and characteristics of a different gender" was ascribed to Sub-Saharan Africa and an "egalitarian" model of homosexuality clustered in Euro-American societies (Drucker 1996, 76–77). While I am highly critical of such cartographies, their focus on relational constellations drew my attention to the language of kinship and friendship deployed by same-sex desiring women in Ghana, as well as the context-specific connections (and disconnections) between language, practice, and subjectivity.

Returning to the abovementioned intimacies between Akan women, Greenberg held that "egalitarian," homoerotic friendships developed mostly among children and adolescents, but also considered the sexual bonds between African women to be egalitarian (1988, 66–71). Murray (2000), another "ethnographer," however, disclaimed Greenberg's assertions about African women's "egalitarian" intimacies and distinguished them from "modern egalitarian" lesbian relationships. Certainly, same-sex relationships between Africans who seemed to be equals posed a conceptual challenge to the notion of progression from "pre-capitalist" age-defined and (slightly more "complex") gender-defined homosexualities toward an ideal-typical modern egalitarian homosexuality (cf. Murray 1998, 274). Aside from the boundary-drawing reductionism of such mappings, notions of female egalitarianism have a feminist, but nevertheless problematic, dimension. Greenberg suggested that "lesbian relationships are not repressed in kinship-structured societies, and do not entail gender transformation; they tend more often to be egalitarian, possibly because women are not socialized to compete for status with other women, or to dominate" (1988, 73). Arguably, the feminist-inspired idea that women's intimacies are less competitive than men's is informed by a Euro-American context, in which women, as wives, have been framed as social subordinates. Yet, such heteropatriarchal ideas about the sameness of female same-sex friends are not unique to the global North.

Rudolf Gaudio discussed similar perceptions in northern Nigeria among *'yan daudu*. This Hausa term pertains to men “who are said to talk and act ‘like women’” and to enact “passive” sexual roles with normatively gendered men (2009, 3). The close friendship between two *'yan daudu* is understood as “girlfriendship” (*lkawance*). It denotes the affectionate and platonic bonds between girls, and it is also used by adult women. When *'yan daudu* refer to a close male friend as their “girlfriend,” this is reflective not only of the feminine self-understandings of *'yan daudu*, but of normative ideas about female friendship. While such “girlfriendships” may in practice include sexual intimacies, these feminine intimacies are generally glossed as non-hierarchical and non-sexual.<sup>12</sup> Thus (same-gender) intimacies between two feminine men are belittled or disparagingly equated with “lesbianism” (Gaudio 2009, 73). As Gaudio concludes, through “this patriarchal equation of sex and power, sex between equals is cast as something ‘feminine’ and is therefore seen as mere play, less real and less consequential than sex between people of different social status” (1998, 128). While the disregard of relationships that lack a binary power division is reflective of norms that associate sexuality with asymmetry, dominance, and inequality (Pierce 2007), the real and the imagined sameness and subordination of feminine subjects and the assumption that “girlfriendships” are per se playful and egalitarian are constitutive of the discursive gap of certain (female) same-sex intimacies.

This gap is at its widest when imperialist and local patriarchal structures reinforce each other in rendering invisible the agency of the seemingly powerless. Such subtle patriarchal entanglements have been theorized by postcolonial feminists and most pointedly by Gayatri Spivak who characterized the colonial debate around the practice of widow burning a case of white men, seeking to save “brown women from brown men” (1988). In the colonial narrative these widows were framed as passive victims who needed to be rescued from native men. Indian elite on the other hand emphasized widows’ heroic choice of voluntarily following their husbands into death. In either case the women’s own voices remain

<sup>12</sup> The fact that intimacy between friends who occupy the same gender role ought to be framed as non-sexual points to the threat that same-gender homoeroticism poses to the established order of men’s (seemingly) non-erotic patriarchal bonding (Sedgwick 1990).

inaudible.<sup>13</sup> Such silences and erasures persist in notions of (African) women's harmonious girlfriendships or their inconsequential sexual liberties in extra-large beds.

The theoretical and empirical lacuna on female same-sex cultures in Africa owes much to the complexities of these women's intersectional subject positions. As Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989; 2015) reveals, it is the most privileged among the marginalized whose realities are considered in research and social policies: black men are framed as the targets of racism, white women as targets of sexism, and white gay men as targets of homophobia. The multi-faceted subjectivities and concerns of those affected by multiple oppressions and exclusions, such as women who are black, queer, and working-class, fall through the (analytical) cracks or are considered to be too "particular" to make for overarching claims or analyses. These discursive erasures are even more pronounced regarding my respondents in Ghana, who do not necessarily identify as black, queer, or working-class or not in the way in which these categories have been understood in North Atlantic settings. Accordingly, their knowledge and realities have been barely captured in either queer or postcolonial studies.

### **Queer-Feminism and the Oceanic Fluidities of Same-Sex Intimacy**

This book is inspired, in part, by an epistemological question that has been posed most searchingly by queer-feminist theorists: to what extent is sexuality, as an analytical category, the appropriate lens through which to conceptualize female same-sex desires and intimacies in post-colonial Ghana?

At the outset, queer theory has been understood as a range of critical perspectives on heteronormativity, "those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary" (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 149). The difference between lesbian/gay studies and queer studies is comparable to the difference between women's studies and gender studies: while gender studies shifted attention from female

<sup>13</sup> As Rahul Rao argues, imperialist "rescue narratives" are still at work "in the contemporary eagerness of white gays to save brown gays from brown homophobes" (2010, 182).

bodies and identities to a focus on the construction and the relations between all genders, queer studies shifted attention from the practices and concerns of (queer) groups and individuals to the scrutiny of the processes that render these practices non-normative in the first place (Boellstorff 2007). Given that not all strands of queer theorizing are invested in a feminist critique of gender hierarchies, the phrase queer-feminism highlights the ongoing need to engage with gender and power relations, while looking at sexual and other categories of difference (Nay 2017). Though the term queer is increasingly used as a convenient shortcut for LGBT identities and the ever-expanding extensions of this acronym<sup>14</sup> or as a label that seeks to remain elastic, I am interested in queer as a theoretical approach established by lesbian feminist thinkers, who unsettled the complacency of lesbian/gay studies (Halperin 2003, 340) and in practices of queering that allow for the uprooting of entrenched notions of (sexual) politics and activist agency.

In the 1990s queer “was a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse” (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005, 1). Extending from a critical focus on sexual and gendered normativities, queer theory became a powerful tool to interrogate the social processes and logics of power that produce and recognize but also normalize and sustain identity and “its multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion” (Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz 2005). This broad critique led to a destabilization of the metropolitan emphasis on “coming out,” hence on the liberating effects of sexual (self-)disclosure and public recognition with its tendency to flatten out or displace a range of unbridled and troubling, but potentially productive “queer” feelings (Love 2007). At the same time, the analytical opposition between sexual identity and practice began to blur through geographical and anthropological scholars of “queer globalization,” who looked at the ways in which concepts of (gay) sexuality travel and work to reconfigure specific same-sex cultures through their transnational circulation (Altman 1997; 2001; Jackson 2000; Binnie 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Besides LGBTI, the acronym that attuned toward the inclusion of intersexual identities, the initials Q for queer or questioning, or A for asexual or allied have been added and in some contexts rounded up by a Plus (LGBTIQA+).

An important critique of the narrative of sexual modernity and the unequal power relations shaping processes of queer globalization has been made by postcolonial cultural theorists (Massad 2002; Puar 2007). Joseph Massad (2007) in particular is concerned with the role of what he polemically calls the “Gay International”: gay tourists, activists, and anthropologists who are spreading an Orientalist discourse of sexuality. He argues that the attention given to sexual acts and to the homosexual/heterosexual binarism supersedes specific, precolonial epistemes of same-sex desire. The activism of transnational LGBT organizations thus prompts local populations to interpret previously unmapped intimacies as sexual and as deviant in the first place. Whereas postcolonial critiques focus on textual representations rather than the lived experiences of queer subjects in the postcolony, queer studies have focused on processes of coming-out and on the metaphorical “closet” (the secret bars and bedrooms in which queers have been hiding) in metropolitan settings in the global North. This focus, as in Eve Sedgwick’s seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), is barely compatible with the contexts of my respondents in Ghana, to whom private closets and bedrooms are not a given. As Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley puts it, “too many northern studies of same-sex sexuality [...] stay out of springs or swamps and close to bedrooms” (2010, 25). Conversely, Tinsley makes the materiality of the ocean waters the point of departure in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic” (2008), invoking the unruly (queer) bonds forged in the sex-segregated holds of slave ships:

You see, the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic. What Paul Gilroy never told us is how queer relationships were forged on merchant and pirate ships, where Europeans and Africans slept with fellow – and I mean same-sex – sailors. And, more powerfully and silently, how queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean archipelago. (Tinsley 2008, 191–92)

Tinsley’s “queer imaginings of the Middle Passage” are inspired by the etymology of the Creole term *mati*, the word Afro-Surinamese women use for a female friend or lover: “figuratively *mi mati* is ‘my girl,’ but literally it means mate as in shipmate – she who survived the Middle Passage with me” (Tinsley 2008, 192). Closets have little bearing on the lives of working-class women in Ghana either: many of the women who became my respondents shared bedrooms, clothing, and other

“private” items tucked away in large “Ghana-must-go” bags and boxes – ready to make a move, or hoping to travel across the ocean one day.

### Cultures of Relatedness and the Revolutionary Potential of Friendship

The lacuna on female same-sex relations in West Africa is not only a result of male-dominated or one-dimensional identity politics, but a discursive emphasis on sexuality as a domain seemingly separate from friendship.

While precolonial homosocial spaces in southern Ghana allowed for the strengthening of friendships between men and between women,<sup>15</sup> the little-known institution of “friendship marriage” was designed to formalize adult same-sex friendships. *Agonwɔle agyale* or “friendship marriage” has been documented for the Nzema, a small Akan subgroup on Ghana’s west coast (Signorini 1971). Italo Signorini described how same-sex friends could officialize and strengthen their connection, while simultaneously being married to an opposite-sex partner. However, he refrained from answering his implicit question as to whether these friendships included sexual intimacies. According to later ethnographers of the Nzema, “friendship marriage” had become obsolete by the mid-1980s, yet *agonwɔleyele kpale* or “good’ friendship” – another type of lifelong ritualized bond, that usually united two persons of the same sex – was still found (Grotanelli 1988). Distinctions between ritualized friendships and marriage raise the epistemological question of classification as to whether such formalized same-sex bonds should be listed as friendship or as marriage, and whether marriage is always indicated by the use of the terms husband and wife. Grotanelli concluded that friendship bonds were usually formed between two men, and “more rarely between two women, in which preliminaries partly similar to those of real marriage are performed, partners cohabit for short periods, exchange presents, and share the same bed or mat” (1988, 210). Although today’s gift exchanges between girlfriends in Ghana are not ritualized through a script that formally involves the couple’s families, Grotanelli’s

<sup>15</sup> “Youngmen’s” associations and girls’ puberty and initiation rites (Sarpong 1991; Steegstra 2004) in particular speak to the significance of homosociality in both patri- and matrilineal precolonial Ghanaian contexts.

description resonates with the relationships I observed: Age gaps are highlighted and performed through the exchange of money, gifts and services, and spatial intimacies; the sharing of rooms and mats is significant marker for passionate bonds involving erotic intimacies.

To my knowledge “friendship marriage” has been found only among the Nzema. However, despite its marginality in the Akan historiography, it speaks to my own inquiry: the fact that women in different parts of West Africa could officially take on a husband’s role highlights the primacy of social networks and kinship ties and the non-static conceptualization of gender (Amadiume 1987; Oyéwùmí 1997; Nzegwu 2005). This transferability of gender roles applies to southern Ghana, where a person’s gendered status is not necessarily determined by a person’s sex (Akyeampong and Obeng 1995). Historically, social status depended on a person’s social age, which thrives on a range of qualities such as physical age, charisma, lineage affiliation, reproductive capacities, entrepreneurial success, and religious authority – the sexual body being but one aspect of personhood. The linguistic absence of gender in personal pronouns in southern Ghanaian languages suggests a grammar of gender that differs from the linguistic binaries of most European languages. In the Akan language – Ghana’s lingua franca – this absence is accompanied by a vocabulary used to designate feminine males and masculine females, explored in Chapter 3. The notion that gender is situational and denotes a relational position that configures the scope of Ghanaian personhood today is therefore a critical strand of my analysis. This is useful, for instance, in conceptualizing how powerful, post-menopausal women take on male-connoted elder roles, while adolescent girls have the liberty to perform certain youthful masculinities, for instance in the female football arena.

Generally, Ghanaian attitudes toward gendered and sexual desires have been relaxed (Appiah 2008, 20), underpinned by the high value placed on fertility and reproduction. As reflected in the annual reports of the Basel Mission’s first girls’ boarding schools, pre-marital pregnancies were only problematic for the duration of a girl’s pregnancy. Female missionaries observed that a “fallen girl” resumed respect by successfully giving birth and becoming a mother (Sill 2007; Dankwa 2009). Alongside this pro-natalist culture, sexual activity has been regarded as an integral part of life, and the lack of sexual satisfaction in marriage a reason for divorce. As I witnessed in several informal conversations, sexual relationships are considered vital for both men’s

and women's physical and mental health; adults who do not engage sexually are regarded with suspicion. During puberty, masturbation has been tacitly expected and approved of as a route toward approaching sexual maturity, especially among girls (Bleek 1976, 51, quoting McHardy 1968). In the same vein, children's "mock marriages" and "love games" used to be encouraged and were only restricted by taboos regarding pre-nubile pregnancies (Sarpong 1991). These ideas about sexual activity being healthy were challenged (but not replaced) by somatophobic moral norms introduced by pietistic missionaries from Scotland, Basel, and Bremen and underpinned by the Victorian British laws imposed on the Gold Coast in the colonial period.

Certainly, scholarly interest in practices of same-sex "friendship marriage" echoes lesbian and gay efforts to formalize same-sex relationships through the institution of marriage. In the global North, marriage has become a powerful means to recognize and solidify same-sex intimacies as more than just "friendships." The fact that my respondents of different backgrounds often referred to their lovers as siblings, mothers, or daughters alerted me to consider kinship theories. Recent studies of kinship have moved away from their structural-functionalist foundations to look at the social impact of technologies of assisted reproduction and practices of adoption (Strathern 1992; Franklin and McKinnon 2001), and forms of gay and lesbian kinship (Weston 1991; Moore 2011). These studies aim at dissolving the artificial boundaries not only between biological and social kinship, but also between reproductive and non-reproductive sexual relations and affiliations. They shift focus from an examination of "homosexual institutions" in relation to society, to an examination of how categories of kinship are produced through non-procreative relational ties and networks. So far, however, the study of queer kinship has tended to focus on the global North. By being attentive to the personal meanings women attach to their same-sex intimacies in Ghana, this book rethinks the study of kinship in two critical ways: it deals with queer notions of family-making that call into question the naturalness of the nuclear, heteronormative family, and combines this with an understanding of kinship as an active mode of relating that considers the everyday practices and "processes by which certain kinds of relationships are endowed with emotional power" (Carsten 2004, 161). In *Cultures of Relatedness* (2000) Janet Carsten introduces "relatedness," as an umbrella to compare a variety of ways of being related that challenge rigid, functionalist understandings of kinship in the South.



The epistemological challenge of conceptualizing erotic intimacies, without assuming the centrality of sexual acts, has been broached by queer postcolonial scholars who took their cues from Foucault (1989). In a brief interview he demystifies “the revolutionary potential of homosexual sex” and advocates for “friendship as a way of life” (Gandhi 2006, 42). Foucault holds that ultimately homosexuality “disturbs people” and defies the dominant social order not as a way of having sex but as a way of inventing friendship and reimagining sociality (1989, 310). He considers same-sex friendship a mode of life that “can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized” and “run counter to the ideology of the sexual liberation movements” (Foucault 1989, 310–11). Several queer scholars engage this notion of friendship by emphasizing the subversive potential of non-normative, non-formalized bonds in forging alternative methods of alliance (Eng et al. 2005; Allen 2011) and undermining the (sexual) binaries that informed colonial epistemologies (Gandhi 2006). In *Affective Communities* Gandhi investigates the intersections of different traditions of resistance that short-circuit “the tedious generativity of power under modernity,” that is “the power of power to reproduce” itself (Gandhi 2006, 41). Focusing on the intimate and the provisional within resistance – on elusive, homo(a)sexual friendships across differences and “inchoate” coalitions – rather than on the effectively organized revolutionary movements, Gandhi holds that anti-imperialism resides in its provisionality and in making “an unexpected ‘gesture’ of friendship toward all those on the other side of the fence” (Gandhi 2006, 189).

Against this background, friendship emerges as a useful entry for conceptualizing female intimacies that may span a variety of elusive attachments, for instance, when lesbian-feminist historians unearthed the passionate, effusive letters written by female “friends” in nineteenth-century Britain and North America. These letters, exchanged between well-to-do boarding school girls, wives, and widows (Smith-Rosenberg 1975; Faderman 1981; Vicinus 1984), but also between African-American working-class women (Hansen 1995), reveal the prevalence and intensity of “special” female friendships, but were mostly beyond the reach of sexual evidence.<sup>16</sup> Interpreting these

<sup>16</sup> However, in “No Kisses Is Like Youres,” Karen Hansen examines the letters of two nineteenth-century African-American women that do include explicit references to eroticism (1995).

infatuations as loving, “romantic friendships,” Faderman has been critiqued for assuming the feminine and asexual nature of these bonds and thus covering up the possibility of female sexual aggression and masculinity (Halberstam 1998, 55–65). Although one might concede that female friendships have been romanticized, this focus opened up new perspectives on female intimacies that have been beyond the ostensibly sexual. For, as Biddy Martin holds, queer theory must attend not only to sensationalized, (gender) transgressive practices and sexual subcultures, but to the unspectacular, quiet fascinations and attachments “that do not necessarily reproduce, reflect, or line up neatly with political ideologies or oppositional movements” (1996, 14).

Utopian ideas of friendship and of coalition-building “across the fence” do not tell us how to do empirical research. Yet in refusing prescribed categories of difference, they point to the political potential of “inchoate” affiliations, of alternative ways of knowing, and, perhaps, of “freeing our imaginations.” I therefore mobilize friendship as a conceptual tool to grasp the intense affective and corporal same-sex intimacies that do not speak their name but may nevertheless yield a basis for “a way of life” in Ghana or elsewhere.

## The Book

The question of how to refer to the women whose life narratives I am studying is a challenging issue throughout this book. I avoid nouns such as *supi* or lesbian. *Supi* could be considered a specifically Ghanaian or even West African term. Nonetheless, it is important to resist using it generically. The transformation of *supi* into an overarching category would divest it of the shifting and contingent ways it has been used by the women I spoke to. Fixed and appropriated by academics, emic terms may turn meaningless for the people who coined them in the first place. Often I am referring to my primary respondents as “women who desire women,” indicating that same-sex desire must not always imply a lived love relationship. This phrase reflects the fact that most of these women preferred to use verb constructions over nouns to describe themselves. Increasingly, however, I settled for “same-sex desiring women.” The noun persisting in this phrase has been rejected not only by queer feminists who exposed “woman” as a heteropatriarchal construction (Butler 1990), but also by some African feminists who consider “woman” (as a category) an essentializing “western” invention

(Oyéwùmí 1997). Given that my primary respondents, even those who transgressed gender boundaries, conceived of themselves as being of the “same sex” as their female lovers, and positioned themselves as women, I cannot do away with this noun. As Tinsley (2010) pointed out, for black working-class women in America, the claim to womanhood has been a powerful one in the face of colonial violence and chattel slavery that denied them a gender identity. In Ghana, where the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in contemporary affairs is a less immediate one (despite the sizable numbers of freed Africans who returned to the shores of West Africa in the nineteenth century), womanhood is considered an achieved status. Claims to womanhood amount to a way of asserting humanness in the face of multiple post- and neocolonial subjugations. Therefore, the noun “woman” and its cognates are retained in the discourse that follows.

Chapter 1, “Tacit Erotic Intimacies and the Culture of Indirection,” demonstrates how the neoliberal political and religious landscape has called sexuality into discourse. This is done by focusing on a key debate on homosexuality in Ghana, the debate over an “international homo-conference” that was supposedly planned by Ghanaian gay activists and subsequently banned by the government. The global media coverage accounted neither for the fierce national media rivalries that conjured up the public outcry against said “homoconference” nor for the “pro-gay” voices that made themselves heard in the ensuing “homo-conference” controversy. The chapter further looks at the role and activities of Ghana’s first gay activist. In so doing, it lays out the basis for understanding how the women I interacted with resisted, re-signified, or performed the international language of LGBT activism and human rights. Their reluctance to name and out themselves, a practice deemed essential to empowering homosexual subjects transnationally, and their subsequent “voicelessness” call for a close investigation of the language spoken within the informal networks of female friends and lovers.

Chapter 2, “*Supi*, Secrecy, and the Gift of Knowing,” explores the genealogy of the polyvalent term *supi*. It distinguishes between the shifting public representations of *supi* and what I consider *supi* as a practice and an intimate same-sex discourse. Focusing on the recollections of two adult Akan women in particular, I examine the exchange of gifts and erotic intimacies, and the homosocial spaces and hierarchies by which *supi* practices are informed. In the narratives

of these women, *supi* is framed as a learning experience and an introduction to the ways in which same-sex desire can be negotiated and celebrated in disguise. Invoked as a form of knowledge about how to conceive of female same-sex passion, while at the same time veiling it, *supi* amounts to a learning process. Despite the tacit and elusive character of the knowledge at stake, it is constitutive of the bonding networks of those respondents whom I consider “knowing women.”

Chapter 3, “The One Who First Says ‘I Love You’: *Obaa Barima*, Gender, and Erotic Subjectivity,” focuses on the gendered language through which my respondents framed their same-sex relationships. It centers on a close reading of the life history and the everyday practices of Janet Aidoo. This young auto sprayer views herself as “the man” vis-à-vis her female lovers and claims to be the one who proposes love and initiates sex. In contrast to western notions of gender expression, her masculinity is not threatened by her quest to find a husband and have a child and thereby assert herself as an adult woman of her matrilineage. Rather it is her precarious economic reality that curtails her masculine ideals of being able to entertain and provide for a female lover. The “styles” and strategies Janet and two slightly older respondents deployed to make up for this deficiency require a careful look at the situationality of gender in West Africa, and at the Akan figure of the *obaa barima*, or “manly woman.” Often such claims to being “the king” or “the man” hinged on the question of who was older or erotically more experienced within a specific relationship. Thus intertwined with age and seniority, gender emerges as an inherently relational category.

Chapter 4, “Sugar Motherhood and the Collectivization of Love,” examines motherhood as a metaphor for intimate relationships forged across considerable differences in social and economic status. It takes up from the mother-daughter terminology deployed by senior and junior female football players who consider each other “team mothers” and “team daughters” or praise themselves for having an established market woman as their “sugar mama.” This requires a closer look at the world of female football, at the figure of the market woman, and at the materiality of love in Ghana. The chapter also touches on dynamics of exploitation and inequality within relationships that include an older “giver” and a younger “receiver” and examines how “team mothers” and “team daughters” may exchange not only material gifts, but also their girlfriends. Through practices such as providing

each other with potential lovers, friendships are probed and “tested.” These practices limit the togetherness of twosomes, while containing and binding them into a circular logic of female sociality. This paves the way for a focus on the reciprocities of everyday love and for an extended understanding of same-sex passion as a socializing process.

Chapter 5, “‘Doing Everything Together’: Siblinghood, Lovership, Incest, Family” attends to the ways in which intimate ties between women of the same age group are often framed in sibling terms. Drawing on the idealized closeness and harmony afforded to uterine sisters in Akan culture, a lover may be invoked as a sister in order to front a non-sexual connection. In an insider discourse, however, claims to being siblings “of the same blood” index forms of enduring attachment that have gone through passionate sexual and non-sexual stages. While some women emphasize romance and the “sharing of the body,” everyday practices such as bathing, washing, and eating together over extended periods of time emerge as the crucial markers of sibling intimacies. Conversely, this chapter explores the incest considerations of those women who fell in love with a genealogical cousin – who is indeed considered a sibling according to Ghanaian kinship principles. Female same-sex lovers in Ghana who raise children together and name them after each other, who take care of each other’s elders, and build joint networks that include husbands and genealogical kin, do not claim queer family status. Neither queer kinship theorists who tend to focus on the global North nor Africanist anthropologists dealing with “lineages” and “domestic groups” have considered these “arrangements” to be family. The chapter therefore contends that the practices of female lovers who appeal to each other as “siblings” are usefully examined from a (queer) family perspective.