

3 “The One Who First Says ‘I Love You’”

Obaa Barima, Gender, and Erotic Subjectivity

When we first met in 2001, she stood bent over the open bonnet of a car, her white overalls heavily stained with oil. It was in the center of Accra, in the improvised car repair shop of a friend, who – like many other young Ghanaian (for the most part) men – had specialized in disassembling car wrecks and building “new” cars out of the functioning parts. Janet Aidoo, the stocky young woman who was responsible for re-spraying the cars, was flattered when I congratulated her on doing such a hard “man’s job.” When shaking hands, she scratched my palm with her right index finger – a quick, but firm gesture of erotic interest which up to that point, I had only experienced from Ghanaian men.

Six years later, in search of possible research participants, I remembered Janet Aidoo. It took several attempts to track her down. Meanwhile, she had spent two years in her rural hometown recovering from a respiratory disease caused by the inhalation of toxic car paint fumes. Back in Accra, she stayed in the densely populated neighborhood where she grew up. With her mother and younger brother she shared two rooms (a hall and chamber), the cooking and washing facilities were situated in a narrow compound and shared with a dozen other households. Periodically, Janet’s infant nieces, her elder sister, and her mother’s boyfriend joined them. But Janet was not home much and eventually her brother brought us to her friend’s place where she spent most of her time. The friend, Vida, who rented a “hall-and-chamber” in an airier compound around the corner, turned out to be more than “just a friend.”

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Figure 1 Janet Aidoo’s living quarters during rainy season in Accra (2007)

As a native Twi-speaker and a Christian, Janet belongs to Ghana’s largest and dominant group, both in terms of language and religion. In her pulsating Muslim neighborhood, however, she is part of a proud minority. More significantly, she is known as sprayer and is notorious for roaming about with young men, talking big, cracking jokes, and being quick-tempered and effusive. She is also somewhat notorious for frequenting drinking spots, having one too many, and boasting about it with her male friends – all behaviors indicating youthful masculinity. Some people recall that she was once detained by the police and friends and family pleaded for her release. Apparently, she was street fighting over a girl whose father happened to be an army officer. When the angry father turned up at her place, Janet responded to his interference by telling him “It’s not you who I love, it’s your daughter.”¹

¹ Fieldnote based on a conversation with Janet’s neighborhood friend Habiba in Accra, November 28, 2007.

Situating Gender

Masculinity without Men

The way Janet carries herself, her gait, her gestures, her demeanor, combined with the trade she proudly pursues, reminds me of the phenomenon Halberstam describes as “female masculinity.” Referring to “women who feel themselves to be more masculine than feminine” (1998, xi), this term challenges the widespread notion that masculinity in women is “a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment” (Halberstam 2002, 360). It suggests that “women” who understand themselves in masculine ways cannot be considered bad copies of cis-gendered² men but generate distinct modes of masculinity, on their own terms and in their own right. Based on the assumption that female masculinity can occasionally mark “heterosexual variation” but is mostly “the sign of sexual alterity” (Halberstam 2002, 360), Halberstam’s work focuses on self-representations of specifically butch and queer embodiments of masculinity.

Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) reads as a critical response to earlier analyses by lesbian-feminist historians who sought to retrieve the voices of “women-loving women” across time and space. They subsumed a variety of gender non-conforming female writers into a unilinear history of a (pre-feminist) lesbian sexuality, whether or not these “women” identified as such (1998, 53). “A term like female masculinity,” Halberstam suggests, is more apt for cross-cultural comparison than the figure of the lesbian, because “it allows for description rather than the absorption of the queer subject into a pre-existing category [. . .] in a variety of trans-local contexts” (Halberstam 2008, 9–12). Certainly, female masculinity reaches much further than the notion of a sexual lesbian identity with its firm historical links to the emergence of North Atlantic consumer capitalism (D’Emilio 1983). “Female masculinity” critically engages with homo-heterosexual binarism. Still, in referencing the separation of (biological) sex and (social) gender, the term “female masculinity” is perforce held in the Cartesian body/mind split.

The question of how female masculinity is negotiated relationally has been the subject of butch-femme discourse. Put simply, butch-femme theory offers a lens through which to understand gender in the context

² Cis-gender is used to describe individuals whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth.

of lesbian relationships. Butch-femme operates as a category of practice that differentiates between masculine-presenting women (butches) and their feminine lovers (femmes) who may not visibly distinguish themselves from straight women. Butch desires have variously been interpreted as a denial of the butch person's assumed womanhood. Lesbian-feminists considered this "denial" problematic for two reasons: firstly, it ran counter to a feminism that insisted that lesbians are women who embody an autonomous form of femininity (in response to scientific discourses, which tagged "lesbian" with "mannish" attributes). Secondly, butch masculinity seemed to be conflicted with the feminist critique of hegemonic heterosexual roles, (male) power, and violence. Masculine self-identifications seemed to indicate self-hatred and "an identification with the patriarchal enemy" (Schirmer 2007, 193).

Queer theorists challenged the lesbian-feminist rejection of butch-femme identities and exposed the feminist middle-class norms of respectability that cast butch-femme dynamics as an imitation of normative genders. In particular, Joan Nestle's (1992) characterization of both femmes and butches as choosing to go into exile from gender (Martin 1994, 118) echoes Judith Butler's argument that femmes and butches are implied in but not determined by a dominant heterosexual framework (Butler 1991). In their quest to understand internal female power dynamics without drawing on masculine-feminine or active-passive stereotypes, theoretical interrogations of gender within lesbian relationships have explored the affective complexities overlooked in structuralist paradigms of gender-differentiated homosexuality.

In this way, critical butch-femme theories resonate with discourses of "knowing women"³ who do not use butch-femme terminology (or any other standardized gender binary) and offer a useful theoretical starting point for examining the lived experiences of same-sex desiring women like Janet Aidoo. As Halberstam notes, "the very notion of a female masculinity has been contained and managed by its inevitable relationship to lesbianism" (2008).⁴ This inevitability is premised on what Butler (1990) critiqued as the "heterosexual matrix" – the conflation of sex, gender, and desire, implying that the sexed body determines not only a person's gender identity but also *whom* s/he desires. Within the terms of the heterosexual

³ I am referring to assertive women who are articulate in describing the intricacies of same-sex passion as "knowing women" (see Chapter 2).

⁴ I am indebted to J. Jack Halberstam for entrusting me with the English version of their introduction to *Masculinidad Femenina* (2008).

matrix, this conflation has given rise to the assumption that female masculinity indicates homosexuality. But what if the relationship between female masculinity and lesbianism was not inevitable? What if masculine-presenting women were subjected neither to “the heterosexual matrix” nor to the stereotyped image of the perverted butch lesbian? What if female masculinity was not treated as a medical and psychological condition calling for psychiatric intervention? What if, moreover, female masculinity was translated into an African context where “‘masculinity without men’ (Halberstam 1998) can be ordinary and part of accepted gender experiences” (Miescher and Lindsay 2003, 5)?

In this chapter, I explore the varying practices and implications of “masculinity without men” in southern Ghana through the lens of three, quite different, “knowing women”: Janet Aidoo, Ameley Norkor, and Adwoa Boateng. To do this, I begin by offering some further context on gender relations and forms of gender variation in West Africa and in Ghana specifically, as they relate to language, age, and kinship arrangements.

Situational Gender

African feminists have provided ample evidence that gender in Africa transcends biological sex. Nigerian anthropologists and sociologists in particular have sought to destabilize gender as a significant analytical category altogether, and argued that the primacy given to bodies and the fixity of sex in the global North does not hold for African societies (Amadiume 1987; Oyéwùmí 1997; Nzegwu 2005; Achebe 2011). If Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí argue that in “western” societies, female-bodied individuals have been framed as dependent wives, whereas in many African societies male and female need to be understood as relational and situational categories. Their radical critique of “western” feminist investments in sex/gender as a key category of difference echo Butler’s performative theory of gender (Arnfred 2011). Arguably, as African scholars, their critique of “the woman” as a universal concept was launched from a position of marginalization resembling that of queer feminists like Butler, who critiqued the heterosexual matrix underpinning the Second Wave feminist concerns with the white, middle-class woman (Arnfred 2011, 205).

Oyéwùmí insisted that, historically, sex was not a foundational category in West Africa. In *The Invention of Woman* she disqualified what

she calls body-reasoning, that is, "the assumption that biology determines social position" (1997, 17) and blames feminists for reproducing the "biological determinism" and the mind-body split inherent in Euro-American systems of knowledge. Further, feminist theories concerned with the nuclear family model, in which sex/gender functions as the primary source of hierarchy and oppression, do not apply, for example, to the Yorùbá culture of southwestern Nigeria. As she argues, the extended Yorùbá family is "non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated [. . .] The fundamental organizing principle within this family is seniority based on relative age" (Oyéwùmí 2004, 4). Foremost in her argument that social categories in Yorùbá culture are not gender-specific is the lack of a grammatical gender distinction in the Yorùbá language between male and female pronouns. Instead, age is marked linguistically as a relational category, and hinges upon a person's seniority, regarding the person's sibling position, marital status, parenthood, lineage ties, ritual authority, or vocational skills. Oyéwùmí concludes that Yorùbá power is tied up with seniority rather than with maleness. This provocative thesis represents the far end of a spectrum of Africanist interventions that deprioritize sex/gender (Bakare-Yusuf 2004; Miescher, Cole and Manuh 2007).

A classic example of West Africa's gender flexibility are its institutionalized "woman marriages," as explored in Amadiume's landmark study *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987). This work highlighted the extent to which the primacy of lineage ties and their reproduction among the Igbo outweighed a person's physical sex. For purposes of succession and inheritance, daughters could be designated "male" and wealthy women could climb the ladder by acquiring wives and becoming the legal and social "fathers" of their wives' children. Concerned with reproductive factors, most feminist Africanists (Krige 1974; Smith Oboler 1980; Tietmeyer 1985) neglected the close affective bonds emerging in these marriages. This focus on instrumental and economic factors feeds into assumptions that African family relations are "based on practical considerations alone, such as access to resources, as opposed to having a significant emotional aspect" (Njambi and O'Brien 2000, 5). Complying with the moral norms about female propriety and the heteronormative assumption about the naturalness of opposite-sex desire, feminist anthropologists criticized Melville Herskovits (1937) for even offering "homosexual tendencies" as a possible motivation for women to become "female

husbands” and overlooked or rejected the possibility of sexual intimacy (Smith Oboler 1980; Tietmeyer 1985).

The practical constraints on becoming a “female husband,” however, have received less attention than the question of their sexuality. Conditional to attaining a masculine status was self-aggrandizement and the taking of titles, which made the husband position a viable option only to a minority of female individuals. Since titles were awarded based on economic success, the incidence of women’s title-taking among the Igbo was much lower than that of the men. A wife’s duties as mother and head of the matrifocal unit of her husband’s or father’s compound made it arduous to accumulate capital and pay bride-wealth. Her cash turnover went back into the subsistence economy and household needs, which hampered her capacity to acquire titles and occupy senior roles (Amadiume 1987, 39).

Like the Yorùbá and Igbo languages, the Akan language, including Ghana’s lingua franca Twi lacks a pronominal gender distinction, but cherishes appellations that indicate a person’s seniority. As suggested by the editors of *Africa After Gender?* “seniority is a category as central to identity in Ghana and indeed throughout Africa, as gender is” (Miescher et al. 2007, 10). Indeed, among the matrilineal Akan, women, especially senior ones, have occupied important political positions, which now carry increasingly masculine connotations. Nonetheless, in our quest to correct Eurocentric misconceptions about African women’s oppression by highlighting the fluidity of gender, we must resist the temptation to idealize the power of female elderhood (and not forget that matrilineality is both a blessing and a burden). As the following analysis indicates, it is the entanglement of both the material and the affective, the economic and the erotic, that so profoundly mediates the practices of women in Ghana who identify as seniors or husbands within their same-sex relationships.

Age and Akan Matrilineality

Since Akan culture traces descent through the female line, both men and women should give absolute priority to their matrikin. Regardless of marriage, one remains part of the (extended) matrilineal family, the *abusua*, and, even if children are to be conceived in marriage, conjugality is not conditional to a woman’s social advancement. In this setting, duo-local residence is an accepted norm; a wife’s main conjugal

obligation, cooking for, and being sexually available to, her husband, does not require the establishment of a joint household. Akan matrilineality implies that a man is responsible for the upbringing of his sisters' children, rather than the children from his own marriage(s). Wives, therefore, are less at the mercy of their husband, than closely tied to (classificatory) matrilineal brothers and uncles. As Bleek argues, despite overt deference, a married Akan woman "hold[s] a considerable amount of power [which] is chiefly located in her genealogical and economic position. The former is always and the latter often independent of the husband" (1976, 144). The resulting instability of marriage is a phenomenon of "extreme lineality, whether matrilineal or patrilineal" (Bleek 1976, 91). Companionate marriage and the nuclear family model, an ideal sought after not least by urban Christian middle-class couples, has complicated this lineal logic, without, however, achieving resolution (Clark 1999, 718). As this chapter reveals, matrilineality, in particular, remains an attractive societal structure for women with little romantic interest in men.

According to Elizabeth Amoah, Akan culture invokes maleness and femaleness as basic modes of procreation applying to all beings. "An animal or plant is described as *nyin* [male] if that animal cannot produce its own kind or that plant cannot bear fruit" (1991, 131–32). This reproductive matrix configures gender ideals and shapes male and female experiences of the life cycle: youth, adult, and elderhood. These categories are flexible and refer to status above and beyond age (Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2007; Miescher 2007). Firstly, marking the period between physical maturity and marriage, youth tends to last longer for men than for women. Youth is thus a "liminal category" that grants young people certain liberties in gender expression and may allow especially boys and male students to engage in institutionalized cross-dressing practices at yearly school or campus events (Geoffrion 2012, 1; 8).

Second, though children are deemed particularly essential for a woman's happiness and personal fulfillment, both men and women become fully recognized adults through parenthood (Woodford-Berger 1997). As Clark points out, adult femininity does not assume romantic notions of motherliness, and the ability to provide for one's offspring is more integral to motherhood than breastfeeding and physical childcare (2001, 303). The ideal Akan woman pursues income-generating

activities and, committed to the working world, she strives to become a “big woman.” Just like the “big man,” a figure who has an enduring appeal in Ghana’s history, urban women can become “big,” and assert their autonomy, by accumulating and displaying wealth and large numbers of dependents (Akyeampong 2000).

The third age group is comprised of senior men and women, whose moral and social achievements are recognized by their lineage, and their larger community. As elderhood is not gender specific, women can attain elder status and take on public roles of leadership and authority. Yet, as Stephan Miescher concedes, the power of female elders and lineage heads tends to be more hidden and indirect (2005, 195). Accounts of the ambivalent positions of queen-mothers and female elders suggest that matrilineality effectively translates into male gerontocracy, transmitted through the female line (Gilbert 1993; Akyeampong and Obeng 1995; Allman and Tashjian 2000). These scholars have further shown that patriarchal tendencies were buttressed during the colonial period, when governors and missionaries privileged men as their business and political partners. Today, men access public power and accumulate wealth more directly and more overtly than women.

ɔbaa Barima

In Twi the semantic flexibility of gender is reflected in the phrase *ɔbaa barima*, composed of the terms *ɔbaa* (woman) and *ɔbarima* (man). In Clark’s translation, an *ɔbaa barima* is a “manly or brave woman.” *Barima* serves as adjective and connotes young male bravery, “but is also the most polite positive way of referring to sexual virility” (1999, 722). The Asante (Akan) market women whom Clark heard called *ɔbaa barima* in 1979 and 1994 were “those who had achieved the level of financial independence, considered essential for men, not those showing unusual physical strength, bravery, or sexual prowess. The Akan image of womanly beauty already includes more strength than in western beauty ideal, consonant with historic female responsibilities for farming, so physically strong women did not attract particular comment” (Clark 1999, 722). As a compliment for an industrious female trader, the phrase conveys the masculine ideal most often transferred from men to women: the positive capacity for economic self-aggrandizement.

The connotations of *ɔbaa barima* as I came across it in 2008 encompassed physical and even erotic overtones. Asked about its meaning, a retired secondary-school teacher first declared that an *ɔbaa barima* was a tough woman, stern and self-contained, who would not let herself be "cheated" by anyone. Then she added, not without pride, that she herself was called *ɔbaa barima* in her late teens, when she was climbing trees and playing football still. As an educated and unmarried woman she could afford to pursue leisurely activities firmly associated with male youth. Among my younger respondents the term was less common. I was, however, told that girls who look or act like boys and assertive young women who express and present themselves in ways associated with men, are teasingly called *barima*. When I asked "knowing women" in Suakrom about their associations, they pointed to tough and slightly aloof female footballers, who project a hard shell and actively pursue their same-sex interests – gender-bending women who, in Euro-American queer contexts, might be considered butch.

James Christensen's ethnography of the Fante suggests that at least during the colonial period of his research, certain women were associated with sexual alterity (1954). In his discussion of the term *sunsum* – a person's "spirit" – he mentions the qualities of a *baa banyin*, the Fante term for *ɔbaa barima*: "A man with a 'heavy' or strong sunsum is said to be aggressive, while a 'light' or weak sunsum is ascribed to the introvert. A 'light' sunsum is characteristic of a woman, while an extroverted female, or one with homosexual tendencies, thus having a 'heavy' sunsum, is referred to as a *baa banyin* (female man)" (1954, 92). Christensen's comment indicates the ways in which non-physical qualities are constitutive of not only the Fante but the larger Akan concept of personality (Gyekye 1995). However, since nothing is said about what homosexuality implies, one is left wondering whether Christensen represents his own sexualized reading of heavy- and light-spiritedness or that of his, probably male, Fante informants.

Christensen's comment suggests that gender variance (at least that of "female men") was associated with sexual practice. This contrasts with Clark's careful observation that an *ɔbaa barima*'s subservience to her husband might be reduced, but "the sexual conduct of an *ɔbaa barima* was not suspect" (1999, 722). Obviously, their different perceptions may reflect ethnic and chronological differences: Clark

worked among urban Asante women in the 1970s and 1990s; Christensen studied the coastal (Akan) Fante in the early 1950s. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, the Fante and the Ga have been stereotyped to be sexually less discreet than the Akan groups of the interior. Reflecting on Clark's considerations, I would argue that at the time of her research, even more so than today, rumors about an *ɔbaa barima*'s same-sex intimacies were not easily brought to public attention. This would be the case especially if suspicions concerned a mature woman vested with a network of friends, relatives, and dependents. Due to norms of discretion and indirection that are particularly revered among the Asante, the person uttering such rumors could be considered more dubious and indecent than the suspect herself – with the qualification, of course, that this reticence would not inhibit either unspoken suspicions or damaging gossip.

Besides historical differences in the overt and tacit meanings of *ɔbaa barima*, junior and senior notions of *ɔbaa barima* are generational. Young female urbanites and in particular footballers who appropriate cosmopolitan masculine styles are noticeable and attract comments that mark them as deviant. Among women who have exceeded their junior status by virtue of complying with the imperative of motherhood, it is economic capacity rather than physical appearance that determines whether they are considered manly in a positive sense. It is this adult version of “female masculinity” that Clark grasps when she says that a woman's “economic performance of gender appears more central and more notable” than her sexual behavior or bodily gender presentation (1999, 727). The significance of a person's socio-economic power and status informs my analysis of both the self-fashioning and the gender roles played out between female lovers.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the gendered terms through which women in southern Ghana speak of their same-sex relationships. When talking of “masculinity without men” in this context, then, I am particularly interested in the complex interrelationship between performances of masculinity, the striving to become an *ɔbaa barima*, and the language deployed to render intelligible shifting same-sex dynamics. Through a reconstruction of Janet Aidoo's life history I examine the practices constitutive of her erotic subjectivity.

Janet Aidoo, Working Masculinity

Football and Cars

"The time I was kid, I started with football. So anytime you would see me, I hold a football."⁵ Thus, Janet begins to recount her story. We are sitting in the dimmed hall of Janet's lover whom she refers to as "Sister Vida." It is a hot afternoon. Vida is working at the market; Janet has just returned from the military campus where she hopes to find work in the vehicle repair services department. Narrating her life history she draws a direct line from her favorite childhood activity – playing football – to the vocational training for which she opted: "I was twelve years of age and I decided to play the football and my mother told me if I play the football I will not give birth, so I should stop the football and go and find something better to do. So I said, I decided that I would stop the football and go and learn spraying. That's why I've become an auto sprayer." Football and cars are inextricably and consistently linked in Janet's narrative. Janet positions herself as an autonomous subject who makes decisions and sticks to them, while suggesting that she has always been attracted to spaces and activities associated with boys and men. She even claims that she could have joined the "Black Queens," Ghana's national women's team. "After I stopped playing the ball, about one year [later] I heard that all my friends went to Germany to play football. It pains me a lot, but that time, it was too late."

Janet's desire to travel the world and perhaps find greener pastures outside Ghana is only one part of her nostalgia over her abandoned football career. In the football arena, youthful displays of female masculinity flourish and same-sex intimacies are tacitly tolerated. Certainly, Janet's mother's worry that football could endanger her daughter's capacity to give birth is rooted in the notion that football is a "modern" leisure activity associated with cis-gendered men, and thereby opposed to more "traditional" girls' activities that privilege motherhood. But she may have also been aware of the erotic possibilities emerging in an all-girls environment. Upon my inquiry as to whether her mother, a savvy trader in her late forties, really believed football causes barrenness, Janet insists: "Because I'm woman, if I play the football I can't give birth, you understand? She said my, this thing,

⁵ All of Janet Aidoo's statements in this subchapter are taken from an interview with her in Accra on February 20, 2006.

my womb will turn and I can't have birth." Whether the threat of a turning uterus is her mother's or Janet's own image, the fact that this explanation is plausible speaks to a flexible understanding of the body, including the mutability of bodily organs through repeated exposure to (non-normative) social behaviors.

Janet's mother, I suspect, knew that her daughter's anatomy would not be affected by her physical activities but worried that her youthful masculinity might thrive in the football arena and eventually prevent her from becoming a respectable person, through motherhood. However, if she hoped that her daughter's masculinity would decrease without the influence of football, she was wrong. The fear of losing her reproductive powers may have compelled Janet to give up football, but it did not prevent her from pursuing a vocation that is gendered as male. She told her family that she wanted to learn auto spraying. "They said no, they would not let me, [. . .] because spraying is not a job of women, it's only men who spray so I should go and learn sewing, and I told them



Figure 2 An Under-20 semi-professional women's football team gathering before a friendly game (2008)

I can't learn sewing because I don't know how to do woman's job, only job that I can do is [a] job that men do, that one I can do it." Janet does not argue that she did not want to learn a woman's job, but that she *could* not. Similarly, her desire to be an auto sprayer does not seem to be motivated by the actual skills she would acquire but by the fact that they are associated with men. In her narrative, spraying cars seamlessly emerges as the sequel and alternative to playing football.

The question of how gender takes shape in childhood activities and work preferences has been discussed in a growing anthropological literature on "toms" and "tombois" in Southeast Asia (Sinnott 2004; Wilson 2004; Blackwood 2010). Evelyn Blackwood's descriptions of tombois in Indonesia resonate with Janet's enactments of masculinity. Blackwood (2010) asserts that tombois in Indonesia perform a context-bound "contingent masculinity" that weaves in and out of different spaces in which different presentations of selves are permissible and desirable. By conceptualizing these masculinities as contingent, Blackwood reminds us that personhood in many places is understood as relative and contextual, rather than fixed. Thus, the masculine aspects of tombois' subjectivities are "conditioned by the material effects of particular spaces and gendered expectations" (Blackwood 2010, 160). In the day-to-day practices through which they perform a "contingent masculinity," work emerges as a "key indicator of tombois' identification with men." Although Janet is not part of a network of self-identified tomboi culture, her statements echo the words of Blackwood's Indonesian respondent Robi, a tomboi who always engaged in activities carrying male connotations. Robi states, "I feel like a man because the things I do are more like what a man does" (Blackwood 2010, 96). Similarly, Janet's self-portrayal draws on the certainty that she is destined and appointed to do work "that men do." Janet interprets her ongoing interest in activities bearing male connotations as evidence of her masculine entitlement.

This determination brings Janet into conflict with normative gender expectations and impels her to challenge her family. The authorizing "they" who opposed her desire to become a sprayer is her *abusua*. In the lives of many Akan young people, senior matrilineal relatives hold more authority than their actual father, especially if the parents do not co-habit. For her professional training, Janet needed the support of her

matrilineal uncles, who initially declined her request and wanted her to become a seamstress. But Janet passively resisted. “I sat down [for] about six months, and they thought about it and they said, ok [. . .] they will take me to learn it.” Janet stayed at home, “sat,” and refused to cooperate until they reconsidered and found her an apprenticeship. She suspects that they gave in because they realized that people would be impressed to see a woman working with cars. People would say: “Hey, I didn’t see a woman who is learning this job before.” Being a novelty, she would be in their good graces. Indeed, Janet revels in the memory of the party that was organized when she successfully completed her training. Men and women praised her and shared their astonishment about her ability to do the “spraying work.” Janet’s successful performance eventually made up for her waywardness. Her strength and sense of rightness enabled her to avoid seamstressing and do men’s work. Indonesian tombois, as Blackwood found, frame their practical enactment of masculinity as proof of their status as men, and as all the evidence needed to understand them (Blackwood 2010, 94–95). This “doing” of masculinity, against all odds, makes tombois authentic in their own eyes, and in the eyes of their girlfriends, families, and men friends.

While Janet attributes the respect of friends and family to her skillfulness and perseverance in following her vocational calling, her family’s eventual consent and investment were equally motivated by pragmatic economic considerations. Her ambitions must be read within a context in which most women struggle to make a living within the informal sector. As elsewhere, “jobs that men do” are more likely to be formal, stable, and better paid. Whereas most women who braid hair, sell petty items, or home-cooked food lack social security (Adomako Ampofo 1997, 18) Janet hopes for a salaried, formal position with the state, preferably as a soldier – and in fact she has taken the first step in that direction by taking an unpaid internship on the military campus. By strolling around in her work overalls and flaunting the military campus identity tag in her neighborhood after work, Janet not only enacts masculinity but also presents herself as an upwardly mobile citizen with a formal and supposedly paying job. The ideal of being self-sufficient and climbing the social ladder complies with the modern myth of the male breadwinner, but also references the image of the maternal provider that still holds “immense reverence and authority in Akan culture” (Clark 2001, 303).

Marrying and Mothering

Janet often looks after her sister's daughters. Like many young men and women, she engages in the collective parenting of the children in her compound, yet giving birth herself is also of paramount importance. While Janet defies normatively gendered professional expectations, she is determined to have at least one child. When asked if she can imagine "to marry a man," she affirms evasively. "You know, because of the birth. Everybody wants to have a baby." Janet's hesitant readiness to "marry" needs to be understood within a Ghanaian setting that allows her to "marry" without ever signing a contract or establishing a conjugal household. In everyday usage the term "marrying" is very broadly interpreted and used synonymously with engaging in a long-term opposite-sex relationship (Clark 1994, 343). These fluid understandings are consonant with historical Akan models of marriage in which marriage happens in stages. It may take years to complete the gradual process of formalizing a conjugal relationship, and in some cases a marriage is never completed (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 53).

Marital unions have been considered to be of less importance than family ties (Bleek 1976, 88); as an Akan proverb says: "Marriage is a bond of friends, not a bond of family."⁶ Bleek describes three types of unions between opposite-sex lovers in Kwahu, the Akan region from which Janet hails. Customary marriage is performed through a series of formal visits and *tiri aseda* (literally: head thanks) payments from the husband and his family to his wife's family. As long as the presentation of *tiri aseda* in the form of drinks and money is not fully completed, it is up to the woman's family to define the relationship and decide whether the man can claim exclusive sexual rights (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 55). Alternatively, *mpeña awadee*, literally "lover's marriage," or what Bleek refers to as "free marriage," enjoys some degree of public recognition and the couple may live and raise children together.⁷ The man is known to the woman's family or has announced marriage intentions by paying the initial "knocking fee," usually consisting of a bottle of schnapps. This type of "free marriage" has been considered "an integral part of the system of marriage" (Bleek 1976, 100, citing Tetteh 1967, 209), rather than a pre-marital stage only. Lover relationships

⁶ The Twi proverb is "*awadee ye yenko, ennye abusua.*"

⁷ Today, the informal unions sought by men who lack the income to provide for a legal marriage are termed "lover marriages" (Adomako Ampofo 1997, 182).

avoid disclosure, are secret in character, and even if they are known to everybody, they are still talked about as secret (Bleek 1976, 103).

Today, the globally pervasive ideal of companionate marriage is gaining currency throughout urban West Africa, where romantic love is seen as the epitome of progressive individualism (Masquelier 2009, 227). Still, many women remain tied to their own (lineal) family and, as Clark notes, look to marriage primarily to provide them with “children, economic support, and sexual satisfaction” within a respectable framework (1994, 338). This primacy of motherhood and material survival has also allowed women with little interest in sexual intimacy with men to retain a grasp on pragmatic forms of conjugality.

Dede Kpobi, for instance, who meets all the characteristics of a successful *ɔbaa barima*, got married to a man who migrated to the USA. A hard-working, tight-lipped jewelry trader, who travels to Togo every other week for new supplies, she is devoted to her female lovers. In light of her financial autonomy and the fact that she mothers two boys – her late sister’s children – I was surprised when she eventually got married in her early forties. But Dede waved away my question as to how she met her husband and simply remarked that she still does not like “*penises*,” and that it is therefore better for her to have a husband abroad with whom she does “not have to do it” all that often.⁸ At the time, expecting his annual visit, Dede was driving his car and taking care of the house he had started building. While yielding to the normative pressure to marry, and thereby deflecting rumors about her same-sex passions, she managed to maintain her autonomy by opting for a long-distance husband.

In Janet’s case, she eventually chose to start a relationship with the married man who would become the genitor of her child in neither a conjugal nor a particularly secret way. Her partner was not one of her age mates, but rather, as one of her neighbors and drinking mates put it, an “old soldier man.” According to the neighbor, everyone was surprised about Janet’s pregnancy, because “she makes [acts] like a man.” When I mentioned this remark to Janet, she added that some people believed she had both a penis and vagina. Her “soldier man,” however, turned out to be a medical assistant in his fifties. They met at the military hospital where he fondly treated an ankle injury she had sustained, and which the doctors had dismissed. Upon visiting Janet at

⁸ Fieldnote on an informal conversation with Dede Kpobi, January 17, 2012.

home, he also proved to be an effective herbalist. He noticed immediately that Janet's mother had been ill for years and diagnosed a spiritual affliction. The "black medicine" he prescribed, to be purchased in her hometown, led to her speedy recovery. In light of his healing skills, he soon found himself in Janet and her mother's good graces. The fact that he was married with three adult children already might have even worked in his favor as a testimony to his respectability and fertility.

Janet suggested that he was attracted to her not least because of the questions with which she drilled him during their initial hospital encounter. Certainly, her inquisitiveness indicated that she considered the romantic interest implied in his caring attention, and her interrogation regarding his background testified to her sense of tradition. As their relationship became more serious, Janet asked him to rent a room for her and he found her a room located in his own locality just outside Accra. A room of her own had long been a wish of Janet. His occasional visits did not deter her from inviting her girlfriend, a mother of three, who "understands" Janet's need of a male lover. Before long Janet became pregnant and threw away the abortion medicine with which he provided her. While he insisted that his impending retirement would not allow him to support another child, she maintained: "God will take care." Their relationship continued in line with the hospital's recommendation to have sexual intercourse during pregnancy at least once a month, which according to Janet, alleviates the need for prenatal vitamins. Her belief that the father's seed nourishes the unborn ties in with older Akan beliefs that semen helps to build up the unborn "and to 'open the womb' for an easy delivery" (Sarpong 1991, 53). Sexual activity during pregnancy is further underpinned by the belief that it strengthens the *ntɔɔ*, the spiritual aspect of paternity that is transmitted to the child at conception.⁹

Up until recently in Akan thought, while the child's physical composition and ascribed social position are received through the mother's *mogya* (blood/line), the totemic *ntɔɔ* spirit was thought to determine much of a child's temperament and moral character. Thus, in the 1930s, pregnant women were expected to engage sexually with their child's genitor in order for the child's *ntɔɔ* to develop well (Miescher

⁹ *Ntɔɔ*, as the patrilineal spirit, was much debated among anthropologists who grappled with the father's role in Akan society. For Rattray, for instance, matrilineal affiliations were "manmade" while a father's role was original, natural, and essential (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 104).

2005, 17). Allman and Tashjian refer to *ntɔrɔ* as a motivation for women in colonial Asante to be married to their children's father, as a woman's sexual activity in marriage was supposed to give her and her children spiritual and economic protection, and was central in defining rights and obligations between a father, his children, and their *abusua* (2000, 97). Effectively, the husband's "shadow" (*ntɔrɔ*) could protect a woman from unwanted sexual attention, gossip, ill health, and death, while good relations with the *abusua* of her child's father gave the child a good head start in life (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 48).

In many ways *ntɔrɔ* could be considered part of a male-orientated moral substructure of matrilineal Akan society. Today, as Clark remarks, the moral charge of fatherhood has been replenished with Christian values and paternalistic institutions that motivate women to "marry" their child's genitor. Correspondingly, urban fathers ought to live up to their traditional responsibility for a child's moral education and occupational training by paying for formal schooling and apprenticeships (Clark 1994, 336). *Ntɔrɔ* rituals are not performed anymore, yet a child's spiritual and physical health is still chiefly associated with its father's acceptance and public recognition. This is performed at a child's name-giving ceremony (*abadinto*). Mostly referred to in English as the "outdooring," it signifies the child and mother's first public appearance. At the outdooring the genitor is given the chance to acknowledge paternity by giving the child a personal name – usually the name of a close relation of his. During the outdooring he provides the mother with the necessary items of childcare and he is expected to furnish her with cloth for the occasion (Lowy 1977, 20).

The outdooring of the healthy baby girl Janet gave birth to took place in her mother's tiny hall. While the baby's first name marks the father's ethnic affiliation, her *fie din*, literally her "house name," honors Janet's mother. Mamee'Aba was born on a Thursday, just as Janet's mother. "Mamee" means mother and "Aba" is the name for a Thursday-born, though in the child's father's native Fante language. The outdooring pictures Janet shows me testify to Janet's capacity to unite seemingly conflicting areas of her life. Janet sits between her girlfriend and the child's father, her mother smiles next to him. The child's father is joined by two elderly men wearing Akan cloth in the traditional men's way;¹⁰

¹⁰ The Akan men's outfit consists of a six-yard piece of cloth, draped in a tunic-like way, with one shoulder that is not covered.

Janet herself wears a wide, embroidered *agbala* with pants underneath, all in white. Usually worn by Muslim men, this Nigerian-style robe is an attractive, unisex compromise for southern Ghanaian women who are not comfortable with the obligatory confining skirt. Then Janet brings out yet another outdoor picture. It shows the woman who tailored Janet's outfit and happened to be her lover, as Janet tells me with a witty smile. The outdoor picture brought together discreet intimate relations that matter to her: girlfriends, lovers, and family members.

Janet's daughter is barely two months old when we reconnect. Janet abides by the postpartum role to abstain from (hetero)sexual intercourse while breast-feeding and stays with her mother. When we step out for a minute, her mother gives the baby its evening bath. Leisurely strolling through the streets of her neighborhood for the first time after birth, Janet bumps into her mates who come up to her and pat her shoulders in recognition of the freshly graduated mother. As if to testify that she is on equally good terms with the baby's father (despite his having stopped renting a room for her) she gives him a quick call. As we sit down in a drinking spot, Janet summarizes the orchestration of her journey into motherhood: "I was quick, I am intelligent, you know that I'm intelligent? I have born and now I'm back" in the streets.¹¹ Janet highlights how she assessed her options strategically, in order to avoid too much "marrying." She seized the situation of having a mature, married suitor, to become a mother without having to abandon other aspects of her subjectivity, such as her identification with the young people she roams the streets with.

Her independence is facilitated by her professional training, but also by her mother who had always urged her to have a baby and is now prepared to look after the child while Janet takes up work after a brief maternity leave. After not having been with men for many years, choosing a man her mother highly approved of is indicative of Janet's devotion to family (values) and their reproduction. Her ongoing erotic autonomy is also enabled by the fact that her baby's father lives far away, beyond the reach of rumors about Janet's backstreet reputation and her drinking and smoking habits. It is to be expected that he will not bother to interfere with her personal life much, not least to stay on good terms with his primary wife, who was aware of and apparently "OK" with her husband's extramarital fatherhood. Further, based on

¹¹ Fieldnote on a conversation with Janet Aidoo at Accra, January 17, 2012.

his age, he might not read her toughness as a sign of “lesbianism,” but rather as part of the no-nonsense attitude of a prospective *ɔbaa barima* with a keen awareness of the need for discretion.

The male connotations of Janet’s work help legitimize her masculine demeanor, which appears to be an inevitable part of her vocational identity. At the same time her wit and her strategic “intelligence” paid off. Her motherhood helps deflect from her ambiguous gender and confers upon her the status of a fully fledged adult. Her ability to take on the responsibility for a child makes her “bigger” without compromising her desire to express herself in manly terms. It would be pointless to debate the extent to which her wish to be a mother was fed by an intimate longing to mother a child, and to what extent she was eager to prove her child-bearing capabilities in order to establish her respectability and enhance her upward mobility. Besides, motherhood is bound up with class and gender expectations and underpinned by social, cultural, and economic considerations in every quarter of the globe – not least in the global North, where the wish for a child is romanticized and represented as a primordial, yet wifely desire.

Liking Life

When we first met, Janet, like the majority of urban Ghanaian women, chemically straightened her medium length hair. Instead of attaching elaborate extensions, however, she wore it down or in cornrows. This practical hairstyle has been the signature of shorthaired Ghanaian schoolgirls and elderly and poor women who cannot bear or afford chemical treatment anymore. During the last two decades, cornrows have undergone a transatlantic shift in meaning. Worn by African-American hip-hop artists, they have come to represent a form of black masculinity that is fashionable among Ghanaian hiplife¹² musicians who see themselves as part of the black Atlantic world. At the same time, the simplicity of this style paired with its gendered polyvalence makes it popular among West African sportswomen, not least female footballers.

¹² Hiplife became highly popular in the 1990s when Ghanaian artists fused hip-hop with highlife, Ghana’s older popular dance music genre (Collins 1996). Using the local languages, mostly Twi and Ga, hiplife has not been able to reach an international audience.

When we last met, Janet had started dreadlocks. Previously, only the hair of *akomfofo* (diviners) and people who live on the street in Ghana, were understood to be permanently "matted." Recently, dreadlocks or locks have received some acceptance as a hairstyle, spearheaded again by a wide variety of young musicians who look over the ocean and wear them as part of their professional artist outfit. Still, dreadlocks are associated with drugs and sex work and worn with caution. Young Ghanaian women in particular tend to opt for manicured imitations of dreadlocks that can be undone, clashing with the original statement of matting or locksing¹³ as a statement against artificiality. I was surprised when Lydia Sackey, who adopts a neat feminine look, complimented my shoulder-length locks at the time. I was not the first queer woman she had met with locks and she was certainly aware that locks have been popular among black feminists and lesbians in South Africa and the USA, the two places Ghanaian sexual rights activists were looking toward. Lydia herself claimed that she will stop straightening and start locksing, but only once she has found stable employment. The image of the unkempt, loose woman seems to prevent especially unemployed, childless women, who are pursuing a feminine look, from growing locks.

Masculine gender presentations, displayed in hairstyle, clothing, and adornment, became key markers of identity within transgender and butch-femme subcultures in postwar North America. Today, as Mignon Moore's study of black lesbians in and around New York City shows, butch-femme roles have lost some of their importance in structuring sexual interactions, but continue to organize lesbian social worlds as "a visible expression of a distinctive lesbian eroticism" (2011, 89). While African-American working-class butches avoid figure-hugging clothes (Moore 2006), Janet does not shy away from tight-fitting jeans and, drawn to the social and cultural capital of motherhood, makes no attempt at disguising her ample bosom. Janet's off-work clothes are not strikingly masculine. Rather than fashioning herself in the style of a (potentially morally objectionable) male youth, she goes along with Ghanaian fashions. At weddings, outdoorings, and formal festivities, women wear a combination of *slit* and *kaba*, the national dress

¹³ Locksing refers to the gradual process of growing dreadlocks by rolling hair into tightly coiled spirals. Depending on the climate, the hair texture and the desired size of the locks, the locksing process can take several months.

consisting of a skirt and a short-sleeved blouse of the same material, plus an extra length of cloth usually worn around the midriff, mainly to make it appear fuller (Ruschak 2006). On formal occasions, most young men combine plain western trousers with a colorful Ghanaian-style cotton shirt. Janet resorts to shirt and trousers, but both in West African print or tie-dye cloth (just like the *slit* and *kaba*). This unisex two-piece outfit is gaining popularity among women who have a preference for wearing trousers. At less formal parties, such as the Easter Street festival in Janet's hometown, she evoked the image of the colonial-era bachelor by wearing a sandy suit, sturdy shoes, and a man's wristwatch, an outfit that would earn her comments about being "colo," marking an outmoded supposedly "colonial" style. Janet's style is sometimes reminiscent of the prototype of an old-fashioned gentleman working in colonial administration who, due to his bookishness was called *krakye* (literally: scribbler) or scholar. Unlike the attire of hip-hop culture, this masculinity seems to be too antiquated to be morally objectionable.

The imperative to cultivate a "life" and have "style" preoccupies many young urban Ghanaians amidst precarious living conditions. "Ope life," which means s/he likes or enjoys life, is a standard Twinglish¹⁴ expression that hails a person who emphasizes a distinct personal appearance. "Liking life" is used mostly in positive reference to the cultivation of a sophisticated urban style, and the love of going out with groups of friends and displaying one's "life." Similarly, standing for lifestyle, the term "style" goes beyond self-fashioning through dress, hairstyle, and adornment. Particularly for people with little expendable income, "style" encompasses dimensions of bodily expression that do not require the purchase of consumer goods: particular ways of walking, dancing, gesturing, telling jokes, and being verbally artistic – in short, of staging a public self. As Paula Ebron (2007) elaborates, in West African cultures, complex meanings are assigned to both bodily and verbal expressions of self. These enactments of an innovative aesthetic self are highly significant. Physical and linguistic practices are thereby produced and interpreted as intentional performances (2007, 177). In impoverished neighborhoods that are configured by restrictive living quarters, remarkable features in a person's presentation of self testify to her resourcefulness and capacity to carve out niches for a distinctly personal "life." The invented and constructed

¹⁴ Classic southern Ghanaian mix of Twi and English.

nature of someone's "style" is emphasized rather than disguised. It speaks to the ability of creating uniqueness in spite of high levels of social and moral control among neighbors. Thus, Janet's sometimes peculiar way of fashioning herself follows a cultural ideal that she reconfigures in a gender specific way.

On the street, Janet attracts both disapproving and admiring glances for her stocky posture and composure. She takes pride in her ample bosom and its association with fertility and prosperity. While a slimmer body ideal is catching on, in impoverished neighborhoods it connotes frailty, sickness, and boyishness – and hence juvenile powerlessness. Instead, Janet claims dominant adult representations of Akan womanhood. Not without pride she points out that men regard her as a desirable match. To me, however, it seemed that some of the male passers-by whom I witnessed commenting on or bemusedly complimenting her "strong structure" could read Janet's gendered and sexual alterity. Nonetheless, the way Janet carries herself and playfully, even strategically, engages with a series of contrasting styles – "modern" and "traditional," womanly and manly, "western" and Ghanaian, junior and senior – allows her to express a contingently masculine "life" without suffering overt stigmatization.

While Janet's dream of becoming a soldier indicates masculinity, it also conveys a desire to buttress her sense of being a Ghanaian national with middle-class aspirations. In postcolonial African nation states, with their relatively short national histories, women in uniforms tend to be associated with officialdom, authority, and modernity, rather than with gender transgression. The fact that women who distinguish themselves in team sports stand higher chances of being employed in the armed services is another reason why Janet regretted having given up football prematurely but felt compensated by learning a trade that allowed her to dream of a military career. While Janet's masculine sense of self is configured by her female body – and can thus be understood as a form of female masculinity that challenges hegemonic masculinities – she is also steeped in a context in which urban women have always sought autonomy and displayed their wealth conspicuously (Akyeampong 2000, 223). Although accounts of Asantewa and other powerful queen-mothers suggest that, even precolonially, "big women" had to contend with patriarchal forms of control (Akyeampong and Obeng 1995), their manliness was not considered deviant *per se*. A stable job in the civil service would equip Janet with

the tools to become an honorable, “big” woman and perhaps resist the animosities often faced by independent urban women today.

Janet’s working sense of self confirms that, from a trans-local perspective, masculinity needs to be understood as a social and cultural expression of maleness that is not tied to the male body. Yet the societal assumptions to which she is exposed differ from the stereotypes she would face in North Atlantic metropolises. Unlike in Euro-American concepts of masculinity, the enactments of her masculinity are not seen to be at odds with her desire to give birth and to tap into the power of motherhood. She is also compelled to pursue independence and accumulate wealth in the context of her relationships with men. Notably, her digressions from a gendered norm are not necessarily interpreted as signs of sexual alterity, at least not explicitly. Janet did not grow up with images of the “mannish lesbian” and her masculine demeanor has not been considered misogynist, as it could be within both hetero- and homonormative spaces in metropolitan North America (Cvetkovich 1998). Rather, her physical appearance makes people regularly believe she is older than her actual age, which enhances her status and enlarges her scope as an erotic citizen.

Doing supi

Janet’s invocations of her “style” include the ways in which she sees and does things, as well as her “tactics” in spotting, courting, and seducing women. Erotic skills are part and parcel of what she considers her unique style. My attempts to convey to her that female same-sex practice is a global phenomenon were met by her conviction that her intimate practices are beyond generalization. Instead, she described how skillful and inventive she is in gradually seducing, nurturing, and pleasuring her lovers. Referring to her relationship with an inexperienced girlfriend who had not had female lovers prior to meeting her, she tells me: “I’m a striker.” Certainly, rhetorical allusions to her unique sexual skills appear to constitute her repertoire of seduction, in this case directed toward me. Still, there is a further dimension. Although Janet was vaguely familiar with the term “lesbian” when I first interviewed her – she had heard of “lesbians” abroad and was curious to learn more about their liberties and lifestyles – she seemed

skeptical of the extent to which this signifier could grasp her own erotic subjectivity.

This skepticism correlated with certain representations circulating in Ghana, which appear to deploy a stereotypically lesbian visual language. These consist of sleazy girl-on-girl fiction geared toward straight men and sensational reports of the supposed bisexuality of skinny white celebrities who do not match Janet's image of womanhood. Janet, like many Ghanaians, deems lighter skinned black women more attractive than darker ones, but finds white women, at best, exotic.¹⁵ More significantly, her unease with being subsumed under a global category for female same-sex sexuality, regardless of its name, echoes Judith Butler's unease with such categories. "If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy?" (1991, 17), she asks. Rather, the invocation of a signifier like "lesbian" obscures the specificity and indeterminable lines between "sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality" (Butler 1991, 25). Janet's insistence that her "tactics" and skills are beyond categorization resonates with Butler's assertion that "sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which to some degree can never appear" (Butler 1991). The search for a specificity to homosexual identities obscures how they are implicated in heterosexuality without, however, being determined or derived from it.

"I don't joke in the bed. I play my work very well, I play my role very well," Janet tells me during our interview. Later she chips in over a beer, "because I am good at doing men's work, I am also strong at doing my work in bed." The analogy between occupational work and work in bed is not uncommon. Elderly wives in rural areas may refer to conjugal sex as a physically "tiresome work" after a day's work of farming (Van der Geest 2006, 227). Janet, however, intimates her sexual competence as a working subject by comparing herself to a potent young man, who ought to perform, and take on, an ostensibly active role. On an everyday level, this role implies the ability to wake up

¹⁵ My respondents' associations with white women ranged from images of skinny, scruffy backpackers to (neo-)colonial wives, who represent an affluent lady version of femininity but are also considered too frail and unfit for same-sex passion. As a female footballer in Suakrom told Josephine, white women's "soft" skin would get bruised too easily, be it in sexual acts or in palpable lovers' fights.

in the middle of the night and initiate sex – before going back to sleep. This is a necessity in an environment where bedrooms are shared, and one needs to be sure that one's room mates are fast asleep or can at least pretend to be sleeping. Janet prides herself on being particularly good at setting her inner clock and waking up when the time is ripe for the work of love. The pleasure she takes in raving about her amorous escapades, and representing her lovers as conquests, constitutes an erotic and emotional style that can be likened to what is understood as butchness in Anglo-American lesbian (sub)cultures and theories.

The term “lesbian” as such, with its Euro-American associations, did not bother Janet. In our initial interview, she equated lesbian with *supi*, when I asked about the meaning of *supi*. “In Ghana here, that is the name. We know, we call it lesbian, but in-, we, we, the Gas [rather], they call it *supi*. ‘Hey, this one is my *supi* oh’.” Janet, who did not attend boarding school herself introduces the term *supi* when she recalls her initial erotic experiences at her sister's boarding school. The day she visited her sister, wearing a Chicago Bulls t-shirt, white shorts, and shiny sneakers, as she fondly remembers, she immediately attracted the attention of the girl who “opened [her] eyes.” This girl said “she wants to be *supi*, and that time I don't know what is *supi*. I went to the girl, the girl do me fine. She would serve me, she would give me everything; she would say that I should sleep with her in the school. We would sleep there, after that then I enjoyed and I started to make some.” Janet aligns her teenage experience with the “work in bed” she is strong at today. Without me asking, she further substantiates why she started and continued to engage in female sexual intimacies. “Because I like the *supi* very well, because I enjoy in it. From the time, I'm small then, I started to do this thing. I take a boyfriend but I did not get enjoyment in it than how I enjoy the (pauses), so I think I choose the –.” Janet portrays her same-sex activity as a conscious and ongoing choice but stops when it comes to naming what exactly she chooses – a blank space that reflects how unusual it is to name same-sex desire on a meta-level and to be explicit once the context is established.

Notably, Janet does not compare the boyfriend of her late teens to a specific girlfriend, but instead generalizes on doing *supi* on its own terms. “I think the *supi* is something great. If you are doing *supi* with someone [. . .] you can love the person very well.” While she does not invoke *supi* as an identity, her oscillating between *supi* as practice

(something she does), and as preference (something she chooses), complicates the "acts-to-identity trajectory" cast by queer historians (Kunzel 2002, 266). Regina Kunzel uses this phrase to critique the teleological, and implicitly evolutionary, trajectory that has been charted in the wake of Foucault (Halperin 1998). Whereas in modern regimes, "sexual object choice bears a privileged relationship to identity and selfhood," historians have suggested that "premodern" same-sex practices were "not constitutively linked to a notion of identity" (Kunzel 2002, 256). As noted earlier, even in the absence of converging psychiatric, psychoanalytical, and sociological ideas about "the homosexual," individuals integrate and conceptualize their practices and desires on their own subjective terms. Halperin holds that the alleged chasm between (premodern) sexual practices and (modern) sexual identities is partly the result of a narrow concept of identity. With Roger Brubaker, I would rather argue that the popularity of the term "identity" makes it a "category of practice" that is too multivalent and diffuse to serve as a useful category of social analysis (2004, 33). With regard to sexual identity, its firm link with gay and lesbian politics thwarts any trans-historical and trans-cultural analysis that seeks to account for a variety of erotic self-understandings.

Janet struggles for words when comparing the pleasure of doing *supi* to the boredom of having a boyfriend. Her emphasis on "enjoyment" suggests a belonging to herself that echoes Audre Lorde's vision of the "erotic as power" (1984). To Lorde, searching to feel and live "in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of," is a powerful site of knowledge production and political attentiveness. Her extended vision of the erotic and the sensual as a powerful resource has inspired queer ethnographies of the black Caribbean that seek to understand identifications that arise from the erotic, but are more inclusive, and not burdened by the concept of a universal (homosexual) identity. For Lorde, as Jafari Allen writes, the erotic is a transforming force, a "lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence" (Lorde 1984, 57), and a site of knowledge production alternative to regimes of the state (Allen 2011, 96). By drafting an "erotic subjectivity," Allen seeks to grasp Lorde's holistic understanding of a subjective agency, in which the erotic is at the heart of "an embodied human resource composed of our personal histories and (sexual, social) desires" (Allen 2012, 231).

My interest in this framing of an erotic subjectivity is less about the distinction between practice and identity – a distinction that undoubtedly serves its purpose in light of globalizing concepts of homosexuality and certain gay and lesbian lifestyles – and more about the potential of subjective desires to blur the analytical gap between gender and sexuality. Anthropological writings that posit a gender-stratification (in which one partner takes on the gender of the opposite sex), as precursor to an egalitarian, “modern” mode of homosexuality, drew on the juxtaposition of sexual versus cross-gender identifications. The contingency of gendered and sexual categorizations struck me in conversations among sexual rights activists in Accra. In their efforts to build up a female wing of the envisioned LGBTI movement in 2006, they casually referred to “the masculine ones” as “lesbians” (and not butches) and to “the feminine ones” as “bisexuals” (and not femmes). This distinction was not based on the women’s stated or unstated sexual preferences, but on their gender propensities. This collapse of sexuality and gender presentation highlights not only how unstable these categories are, and how easily they take on new meanings as they travel, but suggests that gendered and sexual roles and desires, and their representations, are indeed unpredictable and intertwined.¹⁶

The chronology of discovering the enjoyment and power of same-sex eroticism prior to sexual encounters with men is common in the narratives of self-confident “knowing women” like Janet. Not all women view their adult same-sex love life as a direct continuation of their teenage girlfriendships. Desire, pleasure, and autonomy are highlighted specifically by those who recognize same-sex passions as an integral part of their coming of age. These are not necessarily the most masculine looking women, but rather it is the self-assertive and seemingly most sexually experienced ones who make claims about their erotic knowledge and seniority in doing *supi*. While knowledge about sexual styles and practices was often enacted through a masculinist language of gender binaries, age and sexual experience figured as crucial tropes in claiming erotic seniority.

Relational Manhood and Erotic Age

My initial impression that women who claim cross-gender identifications tend to portray themselves as the ones who touch their lovers, and

¹⁶ This is by no means to suggest that cross-gender identification indicates same-sex desire, but rather that our gendered desires do have a bearing on our social, sensual, and erotic sense of self.

refuse to be touched themselves, was soon to be revised. Even Lydia Sackey, one of my most feminine presenting respondents mentioned above, compared herself to a man, when portraying herself in terms of her sexual experience. When Josephine, my research associate inquired about her sexual role, she asserted "if I'm harder than her, I'll do it to her and I am the man." Lydia exemplifies the significance of being "harder" and more experienced by bringing in her ex-lover Adizah, or Adi, Cortey, a masculine-styled footballer, as an example.

Adi always thinks she is good at playing the role of a man but I realized that she can't do anything. The day I had sex with her I was rather doing it to her. She is just rushing [showing off]. I taught her how to do it and now she thinks she is the champion, so she goes about sleeping around. [. . .] She didn't know anything so I didn't want her to do it to me. And I'm also older.¹⁷

While Adi recites her amorous escapades, Lydia calmly maintains that she guided Adi's growth and introduced her to sexual intimacy. With Adi, younger and inexperienced, Lydia positions herself as the doer, the one who digitally stimulates her partner, without allowing the reversal of such touch. She stresses that genital touch needs to be done artfully and hygienically, which requires attention and expertise that she did not credit Adi with. Besides the unpredictable relation between claimed and effective practices, butch-femme theorists destabilized the assumed correlations of masculine/feminine gender presentations with touching and being touched (Hollibaugh 1983; Nestle 1987).

Nevertheless, Janet's and Adi's sexual expressions of self seem to be fundamentally different from Lydia's. While Janet hails herself as a masculine striker who works in bed and "brushes" her women, Lydia construes herself as "the man," only when invited to talk about sex. She positions herself as expert in the context of complaining about Adi's inexperience, which stands in sharp contrast to Adi's masculine swagger. Lydia resorts to the image of "the man" when portraying herself as the one who knows how to take the lead and teach her partner how to touch. Janet, however, is invested in an erotic and emotional style that is bound to initiate touch, and to resist being touched.

¹⁷ Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a conversation with Lydia Sackey at Accra, April 17, 2007.

In butch-femme lesbian discourse Janet would be considered untouchable or a “stone butch.” Questions over the emotional and sexual intimacies of touching and being touched have been the subject of butch-femme theorizing, in which the butch takes “erotic responsibility” (Nestle 1987). As Bidy Martin summarizes, both butchness and femmeness are first and foremost “different ways of enacting feelings of power, competence, and strength, as well as vulnerability and pain.” Even if such feelings are enacted through deep-seated gender stylizations, they amount to expressions of “more fundamental aspects of self and relationship [. . .] irreducible to the grasp or reach of gender differences” (1994, 118). On the heels of the butch-femme theories of the 1980s, Butler destabilized the patriarchal logic that links masculinity with activity, and femininity with passivity, by illustrating the inversions played out in butch-femme dynamics.

A butch can present herself as capable, forceful, and all-providing, and a stone butch may well seek to constitute her lover as the exclusive site of erotic attention and pleasure. And yet, this “providing” butch who seems at first to replicate a certain husband-like role, can find herself caught in a logic of inversion whereby that “providingness” turns to a self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation [. . .] On the other hand the femme [. . .] who “orchestrates” sexual exchange, may well eroticize a certain dependency only to learn that the very power to orchestrate that dependency exposes her own incontrovertible power. (Butler 1991, 25)

Likewise, Ann Cvetkovich asserts that the butch, in her eagerness to tend to another person’s desires, could just as easily be considered feminine as masculine. The femme, on the other hand, who is “at greater ease with sexual expression or loss of control,” provides ways of being open without being passive or stigmatized, and throws into question “the presumption that to be touched is to be feminized or that feminization is to be resisted” (2003, 68–70). Cvetkovich and other femme-identifying scholars have emphasized that the femme’s responsiveness needs to be framed as a (physical) activity, through which the meanings of vulnerability and receptivity are rewritten, rather than reproduced (Cvetkovich 2003, 81). The fact that Lydia’s soft-spoken responsiveness did not stop her from touching, and claiming to be the teacher, endorses butch-femme rewritings of feminine desire, that seek to liberate femmeness from Euro-American ideas about feminine passivity.

Musings on "stone butchness as emotional style" (Cvetkovich 1998) resonate with the styles of Janet, and other Ghanaian women who claim to be on top of their lovers. Through their readiness to feel, and respond to, their lover's desires, these "tops" expose a desire that implies its own dependencies and vulnerabilities. The desire to pleasure marks and puts them in a precarious position vis-à-vis a feminine lover, especially if the latter is more heavily resourced, or if she happens to be less drawn to engaging in same-sex intimacies. The ambiguity of such butchness is framed, but not determined, by its adaptations of behavior conventionally gendered as masculine. This notion of butchness as first and foremost an emotional style, needs to be kept in mind when considering the language through which my respondents asserted their relational manhood. The fact that in Ghana this position is not premised on visible insignia of masculinity also evokes Oyèwùmí's critique of the powers attributed to the visual in the West, where sight is privileged "over other senses for the conception of reality and knowledge" (1997, 15).

When sketching out the implications of "butch" and "femme" in Europe to "knowing women" in Ghana, I was told there is no word to make such a distinction, but, as Ma'Abena put it, "we know the difference." The informal terms women conjured up to conceptualize difference within same-sex relationships varied. I was offered explanations that framed "the man" in ways that could be interpreted as consisting of certain (butch) traits, such as "the one who commands," or "the one who takes responsibility." But most women who engaged with my attempt to understand the power dynamics between same-sex lovers, told me "it depends," before adding that "the man is the one who proposes," or as Janet put it, "the one who first says: 'I love you.'"

Before returning to Janet, I will focus on another respondent, Ameley Norkor, who considered herself "the man" in relation to her female lovers. My interest in grappling with the power dynamics between same-sex lovers and understanding how these were framed in gendered terms was met by explanations that foregrounded the economic dimension of claiming manhood. Finally, I will focus on how Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom coins her own terms when elaborating on female same-sex dynamics. She distinguishes between "the king" and "the queen" and clearly relates these positionalities to erotic roles (and not to their visibility). As such, this discussion further illustrates how

the socio-economic dimensions of being “the man” intersect with assertions about erotic age and agency, while undermining the visualness often attributed to gender differentiations within same-sex relationships.

Ameley Norkor, the Man Struggling to Provide

At the time we first met, Ameley was a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two known for being outspoken but warm-hearted and generous, and, for having what she terms “women friends.” After attending primary school for three or four years she started selling petty items. Today she works in a field chiefly occupied by women: she walks the streets with a basket full of nail polish and gives women manicures and pedicures. Her living quarters, in an impoverished neighborhood of Accra, consist of a stuffy room that she inhabits with her amiable and hard-working husband and their two sons. As the room is getting too small for the four of them, Ameley prefers sleeping in the airy, but noisy compound that is shared with compound neighbors and domestic animals. Despite her impaired sight, caused by an eye disease she suffered as a child, Ameley is energetic and assertive.

Although Ameley wears dresses and does not distinguish herself from other working-class women of her age, she clearly positions herself as “the man” when it comes to women. She is also very clear about the fact that women are her primary erotic passion. The fantasy of sleeping with a female lover enables her to be sexual with her husband. “*When I do it with him – at times when he does it, you have to give yourself over; and when you give yourself over, you don’t give him your whole mind, you see? You have to go – you have to remember somebody [female] you do that with, and then you’ll discharge and get up, and he’ll finish. Yes!*”¹⁸ Not only does Ameley fantasize about female lovers in order to be able to perform sexually for her husband, she also “trained” her husband to have intercourse only occasionally.

Regardless of her marriage and her capacity to satisfy her husband, Ameley is known for her same-sex passions. At the time of our first interview however, pregnant with her third and last child, she conveyed to me that she did not have any present lover. Based on what she experienced during her previous pregnancy, when her long-term

¹⁸ Interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, June 2, 2008.

girlfriend was jealous, bewitched her, and thereby prolonged the pregnancy by three months, Ameley holds that having a girlfriend while pregnant can harm the unborn. In the course of our interview, however, she claims that she stopped seeing women altogether, for yet another reason.

If you're a man and you have a girlfriend, you have to spend for the woman. If the woman also has some money, then you'll be helping each other. But all the people I was meeting were poor, so the burden always falls on you the man. Once you don't get money to cater for them, you need to stop. Because I don't want anybody to say that 'I'm going out with you and you don't give me money'.¹⁹

According to this logic, initiating a sexual friendship requires the capacity to offer something to the prospective lover. The ability to invite her out helps to arouse her interest – especially if that friend is not in the know. Ameley, however, is not alluding to the early stage of an erotic connection, as she knows how to seduce inexperienced junior women through her care and charisma, as opposed to monetary spending. She is, rather, concerned with the later stage of love. Being on the “man side,” as she also formulates it, requires a certain level of socio-economic power that allows Ameley to take care of her lovers’ needs and lay claim to an ostensibly dominant role. Her capacity to assume a provider role ought, by these means, to prevent her lovers from dating other, more gainful female “men.” As Ameley explains, in the worst-case scenario, not providing sufficiently for her lovers could result in them presenting her with money they had received from an “outside” suitor.

Ameley’s statements need to be read against a background of persistent poverty where the question of survival is crucial in all relationships, whether or not they are erotically charged. Framed by the obligation and desire to cater to one’s close relations, all serious bonds – be they between relatives, friends, or lovers – involve the exchange of monetary and material gifts. Friends are expected to house each other if the need occurs and share food and personal items such as clothes, shoes, phones, and beds. Between lovers, material “transactions” assume additional meanings. More than once I was told that at least one person in a relationship must be able to ensure the couple’s survival. The vital necessity and the casualness of material

¹⁹ Interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, April 4, 2007.

exchanges do not deflect from the dependencies that emerge from these “transactions.” The resulting power dynamics are read as signs of a couple’s passion and commitment to their relationship.

There is yet another factor that plays out between same-sex lovers, which enhances Ameley’s seniority in spite of her relative lack of financial sufficiency. As stated above, seniority is relative to someone’s maturity and experience in a certain field. Between female lovers, seniority relates not only to a woman’s (social) age but also to her sexual age and insight. Like many articulate and assertive women, Ameley posits that her same-sex “knowingness” dates back to her girlhood. Her seductive powers, her knowledge of the intricacies of same-sex passion, and her capacity to conceal this knowledge from outsiders (while “transmitting” it to a junior lover) are constitutive of Ameley’s seniority. While she dates back her first “serious” adult same-sex experiences to her age of physical maturation around sixteen, she remembers kissing and playing with girls from the age of seven. Again, she ascribes the fact that girls liked coming over to her house to her generosity and her capacity to bestow them with little gifts. “*I was getting money from my mother. [. . .] She had enough for me, such that when you’re my friend and you don’t have money and you come to me [. . .] I was able to provide. Even as a child, you knew that you needed to give the person something. So they used to come to me more than I went to them.*”²⁰ Ameley reflects upon this provider role not only through a gendered language but also by deploying language that references her social age. I ask her: “How do you mean you are the man in the relationship?” She replies: “*In everything there should to be a head.*” Referring to the dramatic relationship with the jealous lover who bewitched her, I argue that her girlfriend might have been the head. But Ameley interrupts me somewhat theatrically: “*She won’t dare! She can’t be given that right? If she does that outside, then fine, but not on my side.*” I insist: “How do you mean ‘the head’? What does it mean?” Ameley replies: “*As we are sitting here, there should by all means be an elder, there should be an elder amongst us.*”

In explaining roles to me, Ameley resorts to age and asserts that every social situation – whether an intimate one involving a relationship of lovers or an interview situation involving a small group of women sitting around a table like the one in which we found ourselves –

²⁰ Interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, April 4, 2007.

needs its senior head or elder. Vested with symbolic power, elderhood is both a privilege and a duty. Being the leading elder implies the capacity to take charge of others' wellbeing, to give smart guidance and take wise decisions under challenging economic circumstances. Ameley's boastful comment that her ex-girlfriend could have only taken on such a power position vis-à-vis another lover “outside” their relationship, indicates how relational and situational this position is. It speaks to the possibility of having multiple lovers and being the senior within one relationship, the junior in another. As Ameley concedes, she has been the junior in relation to women older and more well off, while simultaneously engaging with lovers who were socially younger and less resourceful. The older Ameley grows, both socially and in years, the more she is eligible to claim the senior role with which she identifies, a role, however, that is always subject to negotiation.

The way in which seniority and claims to being “the man” tie in with erotic subjectivity emerge in Ameley Norkor's life hi/story. What she elaborates in her speech underpins how self-evident it is for “knowing women” to refer to relational as opposed to visible embodiments of masculinity. While her spoken statements emphasize the socio-economic dimensions of her relations with lovers, her performances of being in charge of them hint at an affective dimension that is harder to put in words. This is evinced in an omission she made in our first interview, when she asserted that she stopped having “women friends” due to her monetary shortcomings. But a year later, in our second interview, she amended this claim. In fact, she had started seeing a “lady friend” at the time of our initial interview, her pastor's wife. And, since this friend was working at the hospital, Ameley even allowed her to give “chop money”²¹ to her children to buy school lunches. Still, Ameley maintains that she would never ask her new lover for money for herself – this would undermine her sense of “being on the man's side.”

Janet Aidoo, the Man Saying “I Love You”

Janet highlights the economic dynamics between female lovers and portrays herself as committed to the provider ideal implied in

²¹ As mentioned earlier, the phrase “chop money” (chop being a word for eating or consuming in West African Pidgin English) colloquially designates the spending money regularly given to a dependent to cover everyday expenses.

initiating a relationship. “The man is the one who first says ‘I love you’,” she tells me, the one who verbally enacts her attraction first. The consequences of such a declaration became clear when she introduced Josephine and myself to a mature friend of hers whom she adored, a married mother of five who runs a small hair salon. Janet was single and childless at the time and we asked her why she does not propose to the woman. She explained:

Hey, do you want me to be in trouble? [J.A. What kind of trouble?] You see, if I go first to tell her I love her, then I will be the man and I will have to take care of her. I have to give her money and me too I don't have the money. So I was waiting for her to tell me she loves me, but she was not saying it. [. . .] At the end nobody told anybody anything and we are now close friends.²²

Janet's statement testifies to the insight shared by “knowing women” according to which declarations of love carry certain dangers. The one who engages courtship must be able to handle the expectations triggered by her advances. Janet understandably shies away from tapping into the ambiguous power of the spoken word. If she were to hastily disclose her erotic interest and make the first move, she would be taking on a role she could not live up to, *vis-à-vis* a woman who is more resourced than herself. As a “man” without money, who is young, effusive, and not always discreet enough, it would be difficult to secure herself a respectable position. The fact that they managed to settle in friendship, however, suggests a mutual awareness of the performativity of their roles.

Since Janet cannot afford to be “the man,” she needs a woman who allows for her assertive personality without making monetary demands. This was the case in her relationship with Sister Vida, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Even though Janet cannot learn “jobs that women do,” she happily fulfilled a junior role in respect to Vida, who was more established and over ten years older. Since Vida was busy all day, running her stall, Janet performed domestic chores usually assigned to wives and children. She took it upon herself to get up at dawn, sweep their room and compound, prepare the bucket of water for Vida's “shower,” and iron her dress; in the evening she would make sure dinner was ready upon Vida's return; and on Sunday she would

²² Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a conversation with Janet Aidoo at Accra, April 20, 2007.

wash clothes – even Vida’s panties, an unmistakable sign of devoted love, as Janet emphasized. Vida, on the other hand, made it possible for Janet to undergo an unpaid internship on the military campus by meeting the costs of her food and transportation. Based on their mutual assistance, which corresponds with the Akan understanding of marital love – an understanding that thrives on a couple’s reciprocal support rather than on pure romance and verbal expressions of love (see Chapter 4) – Janet considers the relationship to Vida a “true love,” even long after it had deteriorated.

Vida claims that they eventually separated because one night, when Vida had a male “friend” visiting, Janet insulted her in front of all the neighbors. After asking Janet to serve beer and then leave her alone with the nocturnal visitor, Janet exclaimed that Vida was only interested in having sex with him. In hindsight, Janet believes it was her incapacity to contribute financially to their household that made Vida pick this quarrel. Janet was perfectly willing to accept Vida’s “friend” as the genitor of the child Vida was after, if only she had consulted Janet first. If informed, she would have helped Vida look for a man; indeed, she had done so for a previous female lover. Janet’s comment speaks to her desire to be in charge of her lover and to orchestrate and perform emotional control, even if she cannot provide money or children.

Janet’s readiness to take on a “wifely” domestic role highlights the structuring effect of age and the high levels of flexibility that poverty requires. Both Janet and Ameley consider their stifling economic situation – rather than their sexed bodies – as a hindrance to the manliness they invoke. Their identification with the role of the initiator and the concomitant obligation to attend to their own and their lovers’ need put them in a vulnerable position, which is only partially veneered by the relational masculinity to which they lay claim. Their considerations resonate with the frustrations of non-salaried young men in West Africa who struggle to compete with older and wealthier men by engaging in the language of romantic love. What they lack in economic stability they attempt to make up for through the mastery of the “modern” language of emotional intimacy (Masquelier 2009, 219). This primacy of socio-economic status prompts Ameley and Janet to employ a variety of flirtatious strategies in order to smooth over the gap between ideal and precarious reality. They both draw on their verbal versatility when proposing love.

Adowa Boateng, the Hustler King and Queen

There are different strategies of coping with the imbalance between an ideal of monetary autonomy and the precarious reality of everyday life. Adwoa Boateng, the thirty-six-year-old mother in Suakrom, who had her first *supi* experiences as a child, is less bothered about living up to the ideal of a provider. Still, she asserts that she has always been the king in her same-sex relationships. “I don’t like [to be] that queen. Me, since I start this thing I don’t want anyone to cheap me [take advantage of me]. [. . .] I want to be a big, big, big man.” One day however, Adwoa surprises me by happily telling me that she met an onion seller who wants her to be her queen. At first, I was not sure if she was mixing up her own king-queen terminology. But Adwoa insists: “I want to be her queen.” As I ask: “Why should *she* be the king?” I am told: “Because she has money.”²³

Adwoa is the daughter of a foreign trained contractor, whom she fondly remembers as a “rich man” and patron of many. Even though Adwoa was the sixth and last child her father had with her mother, he was an important figure in her life, at the time when she started doing *supi*. Adwoa’s description of him as a quintessential “big man” is complete with the mention that he had many children and was a “womanizer” with “a lot of money, so he had a lot of women.”²⁴ Adwoa’s mother came to Suakrom to attend a catering school. She returned to her native Fante region after getting divorced from Adwoa’s father. As the lastborn of her parents’ children, Adwoa happily remembers the time her father was still alive. He “pampered” her and gave her “everything [she] wanted in this world.” Regardless of her matrilineal background, Adwoa is closer to her father’s *abusua* (family) with whom she stayed for some time during her teenage pregnancy. Today, Adwoa is in charge of the deserted family compound he built and of a market storefront she inherited, and strongly identifies with her father and his properties.

Adwoa had her first child at the age of fifteen. After completing Senior Secondary School, she attended a vocational school for cloth design. Although she never worked as a designer, her fashion-consciousness is reflected in a careful presentation of self and her frustrations about being “fat,” as she says. Her hair is short with a neat, little parting and she

²³ Fieldnote taken in Suakrom, March 31, 2008.

²⁴ Until stated otherwise the quotes from Adowa Boateng are taken from an interview conducted with her in Suakrom, December 12, 2007.

dresses smartly, by combining "western" unisex attire with African materials and designs that feature Akan symbols of power. Constantly short of money, not least due to sending her daughter to a semi-private primary school, she relies on the remittances sent by her siblings who live abroad or in bigger Ghanaian cities. As I ask her how she "manages," considering that her store was never exactly busy, Adwoa tells me that she is "very bold" and a "hustler woman."

I have heard other junior women in Suakrom who struggle to make a living proudly referring to themselves as hustlers. These women are entrepreneurial, flexible, and witty as they juggle different networks and work to build up social and economic capital. They run errands for better-off friends and relatives; they act as loyal and serviceable couriers; they pick informal jobs; if necessary, they reduce their age by a few years or augment the number of children on a health insurance card; they know when it is permissible to embezzle some money and when it is time to look for a new patron – and so on. In popular usage the notion of hustle has "a dual morality, defining both life's possibilities and its constraints, legal aspiration and illicit value accumulation" (Shiple 2013, 223). Hustling, as a mode of survival, has become both a necessity and a lifestyle among young Ghanaian urbanites. As Jesse Shipley (2013) observes in his book *Living the Hiplife*, the need to hustle is celebrated and lamented in the lyrics of popular and mostly male hiplife musicians.

When Adwoa is short on money, she says of herself that she can be "a little wicked," and tricks her lovers and friends, including myself. Indeed, in many ways Adwoa reminded me of the trickster figure *Kwaku Ananse*,²⁵ the witty spider in Akan folk tale that gets off scot-free more often than not. With her wide-eyed charm and portly joviality Adwoa often made up for being a trickster and a hustler. At the same time, by playing friends and lovers against each other, she consolidated her position as someone who cannot be overlooked. As a native townswoman, Adwoa has the cultural capital to cover up for her failed business endeavors. Some market people take her to be a "big woman," despite critical comments about her gender-ambiguous appearance or rumors about her non-normative sexual conduct. Being a "big man's" daughter helps her to claim a social status that less established "hustlers" cannot. As a mode of

²⁵ Kwaku Ananse oscillates between man and animal. Although he is a trickster, who sometimes fails and sometimes wins and is usually forgiven, he is a hero, hailed for his wittiness (Yankah 1983).

getting by with pride, Adwoa's hustling corresponds to the organization of her erotic life and her gendered selfhood.

Adwoa deploys her linguistic skills not only to seduce women. She delights in her word creations and verbal artistry and conjures up her own same-sex discourse through which she identifies herself and others. This intimate discourse revolves around the figures of "the king" and "the queen." In some instances, the king is constructed as the one holding economic power, at other times he is marked by an erotic and emotional style, and often Adwoa refers to all these elements in their intertwinement. I do not know how she first came to use these terms, although I have heard self-identified gay friends of hers – flamboyant young men oriented toward the capital city, who dream of living a metropolitan gay lifestyle – refer to themselves as queens and their male lovers as kings. The appeal of these terms may also hint at the royal Asante background to which Adwoa lays claim. Though the Asante have no queen, the chief (*ɔhene*) or king (*ɔmanhene*) is backed by a so-called queen-mother (*ɔhema*) who is in charge of the female population. A spin on this division of roles is the children's game *ahenahene* ("kings"). In this game children paired and elected a king, a queen-mother, as well as their elders, who presided over what used to be the "commonest 'love' game" in colonial Asante (Sarpong 1991, 41). According to Sarpong, girls became "wives" and cooked with the little amounts of money that their "husbands" passed on to them. The mock spouses had "reciprocal obligations and duties in everything except the marital act. When a 'wife' or 'husband' offends a partner, a complaint is lodged with the 'elders' who restore amicable relations." Approved by their parents, mock marriages could last for days (Sarpong 1991).

In 2008, Adwoa often referred to friends and lovers by categorizing them as queens or kings. The following instances help elucidate the implications of these terms. When Adwoa introduces me to Dede Kpobi, the newly married *ɔbaa barima* mentioned above, she whispers to me: "This woman is a lesbian. She is the king of kings. She is more a king than myself."²⁶ Adwoa highly respects Dede, who has several female lovers and goes to great pains to court the ladies in which she is interested. Here, Adwoa connects kingliness with erotic power and the readiness to pursue female lovers no matter what. She does so by interlacing the lesbian category (with which she knows I am familiar),

²⁶ Fieldnote taken in Suakrom, November 21, 2007.

with her own image of the king. In another instance, Adwoa emphasizes the socio-economic dimension of the rhetorical figure of the king. Adwoa, the king without cash, also considers her best friend Dina Yiborku, whose grandness she admires, "more of a king" than herself. This made sense to me once I had witnessed how Dina passed on money to Adwoa to go and purchase fish, which Dina's sisters later worked into a soup for all of us. As an educated, enterprising teacher and businesswomen, Dina is more mobile than Adwoa, both spatially and socially, and has the means to position herself as patron.

But Adwoa herself was not always sure who to consider king and queen. On one of my last evenings in Suakrom in 2008 I invited her out together with Ma'Abena and Esther, Ma'Abena's girlfriend. Adwoa knew the two of them only loosely. As always, Ma'Abena was wearing a black baseball cap, jeans, and a printed T-shirt. Esther on the other hand, who had come straight from Accra, was made up in a feminine style, with a long weave-on (unbraided hair extensions), a blouse with little mirrors on it, and tight white trousers. Not having seen each other in a while, Ma'Abena and Esther were lovingly huddling together and catching up with each other *sotto voce*. When Esther got up to make a phone call, Adwoa asked: "Who is the queen and who is king with the two of you? Are you the queen?" Ma'Abena replied: "Hey, just because Esther is drinking, that is why she seems hard?" Adwoa did not respond.²⁷ Surely, she was aware that Esther, a mother of two with a job in Accra and a husband abroad, is economically stronger than Ma'Abena. At least, Esther had already bought a beer for herself, while the others were waiting for me to pay.

Another aspect of the making of kings and queens is age. One evening, when passing by Adwoa's place in the company of Stone Addai, a footballer in her early twenties, Adwoa started teasing Stone by telling us: "*Look at his/her*²⁸ *face, the face of a child. She is a queen not a king.*" Stone, who moves and dresses much like a male youth, did not react to Adwoa's provocation. The appeal of the king-queen imagery occurred to me when Stone herself, half a year later, employed it. Asked why she wears one earring only, she tells me "kings wear one, and queens wear two earrings" and

²⁷ Fieldnotes in this paragraph were taken in Suakrom, May 25, 2008.

²⁸ I am using the slash because in the Twi language, all personal pronouns are gender-neutral. Thus, Adwoa did not refer to Stone as either he or she.

ignores my follow-up comment whether in that case, practically all women in Ghana qualify as queens. She too had been spending much time with gay-identifying young men who wear earrings and who pay reverence to Stone's masculinity, by calling Stone by the male version of their day name, Kwabena instead of Abena.

The erotic aspect of Adwoa's king-queen rhetoric is evinced in a phone conversation Adwoa had with my research associate Josephine. In this conversation Adwoa, not for the first time, flirtatiously tells Josephine that she is "interested" in her. Josephine cleverly evades her advance by arguing:

J.A.: But Sister Adwoa, you just told me you've got a young girl, how are you going to manage the two of us?

A.B.: Oh, in fact the small girl I love her, but I made a mistake by allowing her to go free when she spent a night at my place. Now she might think I am good-for-nothing-king.²⁹

Indicating that she did not manage to seduce the "small girl," Adwoa's reply speaks to the sexual implications of king-dom. Whether or not Adwoa literally used the term "good-for-nothing-king," in her conversation with Josephine, being the king is construed in terms of catching a girl and initiating sex. Adwoa craves to be desired and prefers that to having to impose herself. Part of her fascination with Sandra, the "small girl" in question, is the fact that Sandra is a footballer and sportswoman, just like Adwoa used to be. And just like her, Adwoa smirks, Sandra is really "a king, but does not want to admit it." If Sandra revealed her desire to have a queen at her side herself, she would lose her entitlement to ask for money and "lorry fare."³⁰ Negotiations over who is the king and therefore the one supposed to provide points at the emotional charge and the (economic) luxury of openly committing to one's intimate desires. For, although money is decisive in structuring gendered subject positions, money is not everything. The very power of being moneyed makes kings susceptible to being manipulated by their queens.

²⁹ Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a phone conversation with Adwoa Boateng, September 27, 2007. The following block quotes are also taken from the phone conversation she had with Josephine.

³⁰ It is customary to reimburse a guest of a lower economic standing with the money they spent on transportation. Previously, traveling was often done on so-called "mami lorries," hence the phrase "lorry fare." A more contemporary term to refer to the expectations of being reimbursed for boarding and transportation costs is the phrase "T'n'T" (tea and transport).

Interested in the relationship between physical enactments and embodiments of masculinity, Josephine strategically inquires as to who was the "the man" in Adwoa's relationship with Maa'Evelyn, a "big woman" in her early sixties.

J.A.: But Maa'Evelyn looks like a king, because to me she has some hairs around her mouth and under her chin.

A.B.: Oh, but still I am the king. I said, I have never been the queen and I will never be. But I think if I can be a queen, then maybe I have been with you for so many years and I then decide to give you that chance, to be a king, but all the same I will be in control.³¹

Adwoa's dramatic assertion that she will always be "the king," amounts to a performance of never being out of control. Her vision of being the master of her lovers and, perhaps more importantly, herself, stands in contrast with the little control she has in her day-to-day economic life. Adwoa's concession that she may *allow* a long-term lover to make her a queen resonates with Cvetkovich's assertion that the exchange of power in sexuality can be much "more important than the actual physical acts." To Cvetkovich the complex intersubjective dynamics of giving and receiving go beyond the question of which body parts are involved in such acts (2003, 64). This is evinced in a comment by Adwoa's friend Dina Yiborku. An inquisitive black lesbian friend of mine, who was visiting from abroad, asked Dina about sexual role divisions. In responding to my friend, Dina who otherwise tended to refer to herself as "the giver," and to her younger girlfriend as "the receiver" took up Adwoa's king-queen terminology. She explained that there are kings and queens "and those who do both," before conceding that she too has "received" in sexual relationships with women, because "sometimes it doesn't matter."³² While Dina's concession has to be seen in the context of her flirtatious conversations with my visitor, it also speaks to the interdependence of corporal and psychic acts.

Following Cvetkovich's suggestion that the willingness to risk losing control is the chief feature of a femme sexuality, and the desire to be in control the signature of butchness, I did catch myself thinking of Adwoa in butch terms. Unlike the popular metropolitan assumption that butches desire female-bodied lovers only, Adwoa desires male

³¹ Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a phone conversation with Adwoa Boateng, September 27, 2007.

³² Fieldnote taken in Suakrom, December 31, 2008.

lovers too. While distinguishing between (female) lovers who are older and wealthier or younger and needier than herself, she insists that she likes men and women in the same way. As I ask if there is a difference between loving a man and loving a woman, and if so, which one she prefers, she unwaveringly replies: “*I like both of them* because it’s the same. [. . .] *I don’t like this one and dislike the other one. The way I love the woman is the same way I love the man.*”³³ While Adwoa’s assertion needs to be understood against normative ideas by which women cannot find fulfillment with each other, her reply is more than a claim that same-sex and opposite-sex love are equally valid.³⁴ Ever since Adwoa’s brief marriage to the genitor of her second born, she is in search of a suitable husband. Even if this search comes across as less passionate than her interest in women and in twisting and tweaking her king-queen rhetoric for this purpose, opposite-sex desire seems to be an integral part of her erotic subjectivity as well.

Let us return to the phone conversation in which Josephine critically enquires about the implications of Adwoa’s “king.” She reminds Adwoa that Maa’Evelyn used to be her “sugar mother,” and the one who gave her money. Although money does help in claiming to be a “king,” Adwoa’s response indicates that kingliness is primarily an emotional style and strategy.

J.A.: But you are the king, so you have to give her money?

A.B.: Yes, I am the king, but I don’t believe in the system of kings always giving money to queens. This is the mentality of many women in this town [. . .] They always think the kings are the ones who have to give money. But as for me Adwoa I will only give, if I have but I also find a way of taking money from them [the queens] without them realising it. I like hand go, hand come.³⁵

Replying to Josephine’s clever questions, Adwoa emphasizes that being “the king” is not simply about monetary riches. Indeed, when Adwoa, the hustler, is in a trickster mood, she knows how to take without

³³ Interview with Adwoa Boateng at Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

³⁴ While readily invoking an abundance of amorous feelings and intimacies in relation to women, Adwoa’s desire for men remains vague and is also motivated by the status she hopes to cement through a marriage to a respectable townsman. The emphatic descriptions of her love life explored in Chapter 5 pertain to same-sex passion.

³⁵ Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a phone conversation with Adwoa Boateng, September 27, 2007.

giving. When she does come by some cash, preferably "pounds and dollars," she considers herself "soft-handed" and almost insanely "generous." She once illustrated this by relating an episode, where she instantly spent some seventy dollars received from the USA on Gifty. In her nostalgia and identification, with the young sportswoman, Adwoa bought her a mobile phone, only to find out later that Gifty handed on the prestigious gift to a girlfriend of her own age group. In a moment of self-reflection Adwoa ironically concludes that, in fact, she herself was doing to Maa'Evelyn what Gifty is doing to her: extracting money by capitalizing on unequal levels of attraction. Material motives are pardonable; they are an avenue for the "king" to eventually trigger intimate feelings and desires.

In Adwoa's universe, being tricked seems to be the price a committed king needs to pay in return for the power he claims. At the end of the day, however, things should balance out somehow: "It has to be give and take, hand go, hand come." Deploying a Ghanaian Pidgin English phrase, Adwoa conjures up an image of reciprocity that places her kingdom in a perfectly valid situation within the larger flows of erotic and material gifts. Just as gifts ought to be in constant circulation in order to regenerate and remain valuable, Adwoa's king-queen terminology circulates and takes on different meanings depending on who uses and will continue to use it.

Conclusion: Gendered Relationality

This chapter grapples with queer understandings of butchness and "masculinity without men" in relation to the erotic subjectivities of my respondents in Ghana. It has shown that the antagonism between sex and gender – specifically between the female body and masculine gender presentations – which so potently constitutes notions of female masculinity in the Euro-American context, loses some of its conceptual power in the Ghanaian context. A number of Nigerian feminists claim that in West Africa gender was of a secondary social importance prior to patriarchal missionary and colonial interventions (Amadiume 1987; Oyéwùmí 1997; Nzegwu 2005; Achebe 2011). The question is whether their argument that age and seniority used to be the main principle organizing social life can be held, given that a person's age-based status hinges on their (re)productive capacities. A term like *ɔbaa barima* does not dissolve gender boundaries. It does, however, indicate that

masculinity is not understood as being intrinsically tied to certain bodies; gender appears as derived from but not predicated on sex. More importantly, as Ebron argued, the social construction of gender is highlighted, and subjects are constituted through performative acts in a variety of gerontocratic West African settings (2007).

Through their verbal and physical creativity, “knowing women” in Ghana appropriate a range of powerful metaphors when styling themselves as devout “men” or responsible “kings.” While these terms resonate with butch and trans-masculine expressions of self, they are deeply intertwined with West African understandings of seniority. Discussing the contingency of female masculinity in Indonesia, Blackwood emphasizes how tombois enact versions of womanliness in order to respect and maintain family ties and in line with their fondness of immersing themselves in large social gatherings (2010,158). Likewise in Ghana, women like Janet take up seemingly contradictory manly and womanly subject positions, while cultivating (a) “life” that takes pleasure in being part of outdoorings, funerals, and other festive occasions that gather friends and family. Their sociability and their delight in the relationality of their subjectivity extend into a desire to have children. Thus, while tombois in Blackwood’s Indonesian context consider marriage the most troubling challenge to their masculinity (Blackwood 2010, 154), many an *ɔbaa barima* goes to considerable lengths to conceive children and is less bothered by “marrying.” As I see it, the masculinity of “knowing women” is not only contingent but highly relational.

Although my research did not look for ethnic and regional differences regarding marriage, variations between the situation of Ameley, who belongs to the patrilineal Ga,³⁶ and Adwoa and Janet, the Akan women, do seem to be shaped by patri- versus matrilineal family models to some extent. While Adwoa and Janet both stayed with their (matrilineal) *abusua* and never established conjugal households, Ameley shared rooms with her Ga husband. His threat to take away their children and bring them to his relatives does thrive on patrilineal understandings of kinship affiliation; it contributed to Ameley’s staying with him when she was in the situation of having to choose between him and her jealous female lover. When I last met Ameley she had just

³⁶ Chapter 4 focuses in more detail on the largely patrilineal kinship arrangements of the Ga.

moved out of the room she used to share with her husband and children. She left not so much because the husband had started spending money on his new girlfriend, but because he started bringing her to their compound without making any effort to disguise his extramarital relationship. Only a few weeks later he died. Supported by matrilineal sisters and "women friends," Ameley withstood the ensuing rumors that connected her separation to his sudden death.

In the intimate discourse of "knowing women," manliness emerges as an elastic metaphor for patronage, elderhood, and erotic seniority. Though these roles ostensibly apply to a person's socio-economic and symbolic power, they must not correlate with visible enactments of masculinity. The style of Adwoa, the king without cash, appears to be much more masculine than Ameley's own. Concealed by a grand *ɔbaa barima* attitude on the other hand, Adwoa relatively comfortably receives money from her lovers and can afford to buy clothes that signal metropolitan masculinity. What Ameley, who wears simple dresses and engages in activities that have feminine connotations, calls the "man's side" does not refer to a particular bodily styling but to her ideal of assuming a provider role, both erotically and economically. As she conveys, passionate same-sex bonds are configured by constant negotiations over leadership that are not mediated or obfuscated through superficial understandings of power. Relationships emerge not only as sites of mutual care and support but also as particularly dense transfer points of power that do not fit neatly into popular notions of butch-femme relations. Unlike Ameley, who shies away from relying on her "women friends," Adwoa does ask for money, making it part of her smooth "hustler" style, while enumerating what she will bestow on her benefactors, once she does have money.

Visible differences between butch and femme styles in the global North are often seen as structuring community and lesbian relationships, which resonates with Oyéwùmí's critique of the privileging of the visual and the physical in "western" gender perceptions (1997, 2). Role division among women in southern Ghana are indeed not considered to be visual. The primacy of relational power is reliant on a person's social and erotic age and configures and curtails the significance of gender stylizations. Butchness as an emotional style, however, which cannot be cast in terms of masculinity and is irreducible to the "reach of gender differences," does resonate with the practices of women like Janet, Adwoa, and Ameley. Is it their readiness to articulate and act upon

their desires that makes them “men” in relation to their lovers? Or, is it their endurance and pride in pursuing same-sex desires? Regardless of their physical appearances, an understanding of butchness as an emotional style could be applied to Ameley’s and Janet’s provider ideal and their passion to be in charge of their lovers’ needs and desires. Cvetkovich advocates for a notion of butchness that is not bound up or circumscribed by certain visible insignia of female masculinity. Instead she suggests that “the relation between butchness and hypervisible styles of masculinity must remain unpredictable” (1998, 169). Not only were the styles and practices I came across shifting and unpredictable, but the very concept of masculinity, visible or not, loses some of its potency when there is a certain awareness of the performativity of gender (Ebron 2007) and difference is conceptualized through varying figures of power. Relationality rather than visibility determines the agency of the *ɔbaa barima* who seeks to be the first to say, “I love you.”