

Contesting Homogeneity

Sasso Complexity in the Face of Neoliberal LGBT+ Politics

The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification.

—JOSÉ ESTEBAN MUÑOZ, *DISIDENTIFICATIONS* (1999, 5)

Queer visibility, then, is not only about finding acceptance for difference within black communities but also about a defiance and a subversion of blackness in ways that are potentially transformative, thus creating the very liberation promised by the constitution and giving freedom its substantive meaning.

—XAVIER LIVERMON, “QUEER(Y)ING FREEDOM” (2012, 301)

In this chapter, I discuss how queer self-making among sasso remains unstable, manifold, and complex, thus complicating binary articulations of gender and sexuality. The sasso whose accounts are discussed here are Hillary, Terry, Shelley, and Alajo. I call them by their first names because that is what they preferred. Their narratives reveal how sasso selfhood intersects with other articulations of identity, thereby confounding LGBT+ nomenclature in particular and hegemonic/dominant meanings of gender and sexuality in nation-state discourses. These interludes illuminate how LGBT+ human rights politics in Ghana and state-sanctioned homonegativity, both of which homogenize heterosexual and homosexual identification, undermine the capacious character of sasso.

Inhabiting different and contested worlds, the lives of the men featured here capture how marginalized subjects deploy complex self-fashioning techniques

to, as José Esteban Muñoz suggests, “activate their own senses of self” (1999, 5). Among the questions posed in this chapter are these: How do the stories shared by these *sasso* foreground their negotiation of the tensions between the nation-state and LGBT+ human rights organizations on the question of sexual citizenship? What kinds of worlds are created amid these seemingly stifling environments animated by the collision between homonationalism and heteronationalism? I argue that these *sasso* engage in self-fashioning processes that amplify the merits and demerits of what Muñoz famously described as “disidentifications” (1999). If disidentification “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (1999, 4), then to a degree, the men whose stories animate this chapter engage in disidentification.

It is apparent that disidentificatory self-making practices are evoked by *sasso*. Nevertheless, I am also quite aware that Muñoz’s theory of disidentification has a different import in a sociocultural context congealed by the collusion between neoliberalism and neocolonialism. For example, can *sasso* lives be understood through the theory of disidentification? Do their lives broaden the breadth of this theory or reveal its limits in the context of Ghana? Clearly, Muñoz, aware of the limits of disidentification, avers that “it is *not always* [his emphasis] an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects” (1999, 5). In that light, I outline how Hillary, Terry, Shelley, and Alajo live complex lives that evoke disidentification while simultaneously spelling out the possible deficits of that theorization in the age and context of neoliberal LGBT+ human rights politics in Ghana. These men not only vie for visibility, but also, to reiterate Livermon’s point in the second epigraph, “queer” visibility in ways that contest liberal ideas of queer visibility circulating in Western LGBT+ human rights discourses. The stories shared here also foreground the richness of ethnographic writing, which the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld describes as “both a social and poetic act” (2004, 24).

The *sasso* discussed here corporeally embody feminine qualities, yet such identification is refracted through class, religious identity, educational level, geographic location, involvement in NGOs, and degree of effeminacy. Let us take Shelley, for example, whose striking effeminacy makes him both vulnerable and appreciated depending on the time and space and with whom they are interacting. He confronts public shaming and mockery, but also celebration, adulation, and love. Despite this uncertainty, Shelley always celebrates his feminine attributes, saying, “I am proud of myself. All the features I have are natural. Whether I am man or a woman I am simply who I am.” To reduce the state of being and becoming *sasso* only to sexual identification, as is the tendency both by transnational LGBT+ activist NGOs such as Aidspace, and by the nation-state, effectively depoliticizes queer identification as a variegated constituency, as Cathy Cohen (1997) and Lisa Duggan (2003) remind us.

Sasso have variable interactions with LGBT+ human rights organizations that address health rights for men who have sex with men (MSM). For instance, Hillary comfortably and confidently identified as gay in the space of NGOs like Family Health International (FHI), Bring Us Rights and Justice (BURJ), and the Centre for Popular Education and Human Rights, Ghana (CEPHERG). In Jamestown, where he resided with his mother and sister, he identified with the term less frequently, embracing *sasso* instead. In the same vein as Hillary, Alajo both straddled and struggled with uneven geographies that LGBT+ activist NGOs and the contested category of *sasso* produced. It is worth noting, however, that Hillary, when among Terry and his peers of diasporic Ghanaian returnees, was more likely to identify as gay than *sasso*, a move reflecting how *sasso* and gay were considerably influenced by one's class position.

Comparable to women in non-Western contexts who, according to the Turkish feminist Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 275), engage in "patriarchal bargaining," these *sasso* *bargained with heteronormativity* in an amphibious manner. Patriarchal bargains, Kandiyoti argues, "exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression" (1988, 275). Kandiyoti's insightful analysis raises questions about the reducibility of patriarchy to "male dominance, which is treated at a level of abstraction that obfuscates rather than reveals the intimate inner workings of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between the genders" (1988, 275).

This interpretation of patriarchy suggests that women, often viewed as the victims of patriarchal structures and ideologies, can internalize patriarchy to oppress other women. In that regard, white women's proximity to white patriarchy, for instance, grants them access to patriarchal privileges shored up by whiteness which nonwhite women have no access to. As a result, racial and gender privileges blend to advantage white women while undermining nonwhite women. In a similar vein, women in Ghana who are ethnolinguistically Akan, the largest and most privileged ethnolinguistic group, are more likely to wield and enjoy patriarchal privileges not available to non-Akan women. Within this calculus, Akan dominance conditions Akan patriarchal dominance and vice versa.

In this chapter, however, I elaborate on how *sasso* navigate homonegativity and heteronormativity through a complicated, sometimes incomprehensible prism of bargaining. To be clear, bargaining is arguably a jujitsu tactic, which when exercised passively, actively enabled their navigation of a system that chronically disenfranchised them. The *sasso* discussed here consistently yet unpredictably treaded multiple minefields of contentment and despondence. In the process, they revealed the scrambled nature of sexual and gender identity in the postcolonial context, as well as the inconsistent composition of the postcolonial subject in a context conditioned by the uneasy alliances between neoliberal formations and

the neocolonial nation-state. Multiple contradictions are at play in their narratives, contradictions that foreground the significance of amphibious subjectivity.

INTERLUDE 1: ENTERING HILLARY'S LIFE

In summer 2011 I arrived in Ghana for the first time in four long years as a lone ethnographer. I first encountered Hillary, one of seven self-identified effeminate men to interact with me during my first short-term fieldwork, a few days after my arrival. Returning to the country of my birth, I encountered a culture at once familiar and strange. I was no longer the Kwame who had departed the shores of Ghana in 2007. The "I" of 2007 was supposedly a self-identified heterosexual with repressed homoerotic tendencies, who was initially preoccupied with doctrinal Christianity and raised by staunchly Presbyterian parents. The "I" that returned to Ghana in 2011 was a self-identified gay man unsure of what to expect after trudging through the arrival gates at the Kotoka International Airport, the main portal of arrival for travelers entering the country by air.

The shift from before to after, marked as it was by a stint of five years away from Ghana, implied that there was no guarantee that fieldwork at "home" and on a prickly subject like homosexuality was going to be an easy task. I was introduced to the *sasso* by Gina, a public health nurse, shortly after my arrival. Gina was a mature student at the University of Ghana's Department of Sociology and a senior nursing officer (SNO) at the National AIDS Control Program (NACP) Office, located on the premises of the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital, Ghana's largest and most advanced teaching hospital at the time. She facilitated my meeting with Hillary and six other self-identified effeminate men: Kissi, Crystal, Ben, Mawuli, Foster, and later Kobby. Apparently, Hillary and the other *sasso* present had participated in an HIV/AIDS outreach project as peer educators and were also recognized as ambassadors between the public health NGOs and members of the *sasso* community.

Admittedly fond of Hillary, Gina noted that he "possessed leadership qualities and was also very familiar with the *sasso* community." She added further that "Hillary's ability to mobilize other *sasso* on demand for local human rights organizations and HIV/AIDS outreach agencies both in Accra and other cities in Ghana is profound." For this reason, she added, "he might be a very good person to interact with. He is also very formidable, and I am sure he will be able to offer some security and cover should you need it." As this was my initial ethnographic foray into Ghana, Gina assumed the position of gatekeeper for the purposes of the meeting with Hillary and his crew of *sasso*. I made no effort to question her nomination of Hillary, as I was confident that her decision to have him be a part of my research was sound. Sadly, toward the end of my long-term fieldwork, Hillary, after a long battle with HIV/AIDS, succumbed to the disease in June 2014, some few weeks following his thirtieth birthday. This account about him is my homage to him.

At the meeting held at the NACP office organized by Gina, Hillary projected a strong and a vociferous attitude toward all issues homophobic, sexually circumscribing, and stifling. Although it was our first encounter, Hillary vented—unreservedly—his opinions regarding Ghanaians' hypocrisy on the subject of same-sex sexuality. He unequivocally declared that "even pastors, teachers, and leading government officials secretly have homosexual lives. I know so many of these hypocrites. On Sundays, they mount the pulpit and give the impression that they are holier than thou. In fact, they are worse." Hillary's jousting made him an interesting candidate for an informal interview, and his actions at the meeting confirmed everything Gina had said about him. His socially attuned and clever political and rhetorical analyses of life amid the heightening homonegativity in his community made him an especially provocative interlocutor to consider.

These politicians say homosexuals are morally bankrupt. Yet Ghana is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. They say we, gay people, are morally corrupt, culturally corrupt, we are this, and we are that. However, they are the very people who are sending our nation down the toilet. As for me, I will never trust a politician in this government. Neither will I trust a lot of these pastors. While we need them to use money judiciously, for instance, to help provide antiretroviral drugs, nearly all the time, they spend the money on themselves. They inflate their stomachs. They are the fat cats who embezzle funds from the poor. And in doing so, they steal our lives too. How can people living with HIV continue to fight if the government embezzles the funds required to provision them with antiretroviral therapy? Kwame, I mean that these people embezzle our lives too, and because we have no money we have no power at all.

Hillary's astute sociopolitical analysis foregrounds his disdain toward the widespread public corruption in Ghana. He directed his statement unabashedly at a public health official who unwittingly uttered homophobic remarks at sasso attending the meeting. Appearing offended by the presence of sasso, the official who attended the event was shocked by how sasso confidently talked about their sexual encounters with men without fear of sanctions, while demanding that the government expand public health services to key populations. Observing this man's negative disposition, Hillary took it upon himself to take a jab at him, saying, "Even health officials who are aware that everyone in this country has a right to health also abuse and infringe on some people's rights. I wouldn't be surprised if there are some in our midst right now. In fact, I am looking at some now. What are they here for, if not to speak with us on how to secure rights for sexual minorities and other marginalized folks?"

Notably, Hillary had a profound knowledge of current affairs and public health issues and thus did not hesitate to challenge anybody whom he found suspicious or regarded as homophobic. Hillary had been to one of Ghana's constitutional review sessions in Akosombo, in the Eastern Region of Ghana, and described to me his experience at the meeting in a manner that reinforced both his knowledge of Ghana's sexual politics and his refusal to be constrained by them.¹

Kwame, I was the only sasso who decided to go. I wanted to speak for us and relate to the review committee that being gay was not wrong. It was part of being human. Not even that Marcus, who had perched himself as a leading advocate for gay rights, came. I singlehandedly went there to challenge these constitutional lawyers. I had only one lawyer, called Barrister Atuguba, there to back me up. I stood in front of the commission, can you imagine, me, with no university degree, standing before these men who at times made me feel like a nobody, because my English wasn't as good as theirs. Me, who was not able to finish university, standing before these people dropping big words, big legal language. But, I did it, because I care about myself. I want freedom. I want to be free to be me, here, in Jamestown, in Accra, and in Ghana. I went there to speak for freedom, but the so-called learned people refused to listen. I wonder why they went to school, to open their mind or to be close-minded. I am surprised, the leaders of this country. Maybe they should let the illiterates run it, I believe they might do a better job governing the country. This whole thing is a struggle. Hopefully, in the future, things will get better. But, that is something I hardly envision. We must pray for this country, Ghana.

Hillary was an advocate for sasso and gay rights in general, and this description establishes that he had been involved in a litany of human rights activities for sexual minorities in Ghana. Following my brief meeting with seven sasso, Gina asked Hillary to stay behind, proposing that he go out to lunch with me. With a smirk on his face, Hillary consented, suggesting that we have lunch at one of the posh restaurants on Oxford Street, Frankie's Restaurant in Osu, Ghana's popular expatriate center.² Our lunch date afforded me with the opportunity to request an informal interview with him. At the restaurant, Hillary provided me a basic account of his life, from his boyhood to his current position as a peer educator in HIV/AIDS and human rights organizations, charged with addressing the concerns of MSMs and sex workers in Accra. The following is an entry in my fieldwork notebook describing my initial impression of him in the restaurant:

It feels great to now be quenched by the coolness that the air-conditioned space that the restaurant affords. I am at Frankie's with Hillary. It is his choice, and I decided to follow him there. Somehow, I am wondering why he would bring me to Oxford Street, which is that part of town with a lot of obronis—white people—around. In the restaurant, Hillary clearly feels excited. He talks about the coolness of the restaurant following our rather long stride from the HIV/AIDS control program office. He begins his conversation about how he became sasso, but he stops just when the waiter comes to us with a menu. He looks at the waiter in a manner that makes me wonder whether he is merely suspicious of him or simply being flirtatious. Now, I am thinking, what should I say to him about our meeting? From where do I launch the conversation?

How to begin a conversation about homoeroticism and homosexuality in a context that completely disavows the presence and even the possibility of these erotic engagements and arrangements?³ Initiating a conversation about homosexuality, a

tabooed subject in this milieu, was a conundrum I had to overcome at the beginning of my fieldwork. Evidently, it was for Hillary, too. Despite his commitment to LGBT+ human rights activism, Hillary appeared guarded in the moment, and the fact that we were in public—a restaurant—further restrained the ease of our conversation. We conversed in hushed tones. While I struggled to disclose that I was gay, he equally contemplated whether or not to come out to me.⁴ Eventually, I revealed to Hillary that I was interested in men, and that there was a man in the restaurant I found very attractive. He laughed, saying he already knew I liked men and that my gestures and gait betrayed me from the moment he saw me. “You are sasso,” he declared laughingly. Hillary’s allusion reinforced the adjectival dimensions of sasso that I have already described. My effeminate mannerisms, according to him, were what made me his coequal. “We are all the same, Kwame. One big family,” he remarked.

As lunch unfolded, Hillary began to share the following story with me.

I am not going to declare my age to you because it is a deeply held secret. I don’t like sharing my age with strangers anyways. Maybe when we become friends, if I get to know you more, I will give you the chance to know me more. I hope you are not mad [I nodded to affirm that I wasn’t offended at all]. I have always lived with my mother and my older sister. I really care about them. I was born not in Greater Accra, but in Western Region, which is where I believe my parents met. They lived for a while until my mother moved to Jamestown. As for my father, he has never been a part of my life. In fact, I have very little relationship with him. Unlike my mother, he is not Ga; instead, he is Fante, which is why my last name is Afful. My parents divorced long ago, and then my mom left her marital home back into Jamestown, her hometown. I followed suit. But eventually, I had to move to Teshie-Nungua to live in my grandmother’s house.

Since it was my grandmother’s house, I had a lot of extended family members residing there as well. My uncles, my aunties, cousins, the list continues. I enjoyed being with my grandmother, although I dearly missed my mother too. It was she [grandmother] who took care of the financial burden that came with my education. So, I had no option but to stay with her as long as I was going to school. However, living with uncles and so many boys in the same house proved to be such a challenge for me. Unlike the males in the house, I behaved like a girl, at least, so I was told, and was very often jeered at for being Kwadwo Besia. Anyone who set their eyes on me in the neighborhood either assumed I was a girl or Kwadwo Besia, because I acted effeminately. It was tough for me wherever I went. In school, at church, with friends, people will mock me. It was so miserable and nobody came to my rescue.

Kwame, life growing up in my grandmother’s house was truly depressing. But I managed to get by eventually, following an incident that will leave a bitter mark on my memory and in my life. One of my uncles began molesting me sexually when I moved into my grandmother’s house. At night, he would sneak onto my mat and then have sex with me. This went on for a long time to a point where I wanted to run away, to go someplace very far away. I was afraid to tell anybody because he

threatened that if I did I would die. And, in addition, I was afraid to disclose the act to anybody given how shameful it was. Imagine your own uncle having you from behind, Kwame? How can you tell someone of something as embarrassing and shameful as that? That was the difficulty I encountered. Upon completing junior secondary school, I decided to move out of my grandmother's house to live with my mother in Jamestown. Because, not only did my uncle have sex with me, some older boys in my school, who were bullies, began having sex with me too. It was frustrating, but these incidents describe my initial experience as *sasso*. They threw me into a world where I knew it was impossible to act on my feelings for men. Of course, I didn't like what my uncle and the boys did, but in a way, they also showed me that there was nothing wrong with me, because it was they who fucked me, and enjoyed the process in no small way.

The way Hillary authors his life story allows us to see how his being in the world is irreducible to his *sasso* identification, but also extends to include other forms of identities, spaces, and formations traversed by him. Negotiating multiple scenes of self-making as a queer subject, Hillary ultimately strategically disidentified with those familial and educational structures that were all too frequently violent spaces that reminded him of his difficult upbringing. These structures were created to instill in heteronormative subjects an unquestioned acceptance of heterosexuality; however, for Hillary, they were ultimately founts of violence. His story indexes how queer subjects experience a heteronormative socialization process that leaves behind traumatic scars.

Schooling Passions? Family, School, and Church

It is evident that the family, school, and church are contested sites of effeminacy and the virtues of proper masculinity, as Hillary's narrative reveals. In effect, he was a living palimpsest, not one "self," but rather a multilayered subject, with a scrambled self. Relocating from his mother's house to reside with his paternal grandmother in another suburb of Accra following the dissolution of his parents' marriage, Hillary suffered repeated sexual abuse and violence at the hands of his uncle and other family members, and then, much later, from schoolmates in high school. The narrative, then, combines experiences about the personal and the collective, as he traverses both familial and educational milieus. To understand Hillary's subjectivity as *sasso* is to fathom his history as shaped by physical, emotional, and psychical violence and the dissolution of familial relations.

Lamenting his parents' divorce, he declared that "they never considered the effects of the dissolution of their marriage both on me and my sister." Moreover, he speculated all too frequently that had they remained together, his lifelong passion for education would not have been ruptured. And in addition to that, he occasionally regretted being effeminate. It was the very reason why he had to face expulsion from school. Reflecting on the rupture of his education he says:

I have always pondered the fact that had my parents stayed together in their marriage, I would probably have ended up just like you. I am sure your parents are still

married. I could not even finish senior secondary school because of a relationship I had with a senior. I was caught once with him in his dormitory and was reported to the housemaster that I had been having sex with other students. Therefore, when we were caught the housemaster decided to use me as scapegoat, and the senior was seen as the victim. Can you imagine, Kwame? [He shakes his head in disbelief.] The world is such an unfair place to be. I guess he was let go because, unlike me it was quite difficult to prove that he was homosexual. He wasn't effeminate, you know? I, on the other hand, was very effeminate, exuding auntie quality in school.

I would hear people muttering under their breath whenever they walked past me. Life was difficult. Following our exposure, I was expelled from the school. My hopes were dashed. I couldn't tell my mother and sister the cause of my expulsion. How to tell them that I was engaging in homosexual acts? How to convey such an act, Kwame, and in what language? Now the senior who forced me into having this relationship is somewhere married with a wife and children, and possibly cheating on his wife by sleeping with men. I have always argued that once you do a sasso, you never stop, because it is in you, it lives with you, and it will follow you into your grave.

My life now relies on doing peer educator jobs and workshops for these NGOs. Although I do the groundwork with a lot of my friends, we get little to nothing. And these days life is increasingly becoming difficult. At least I can say that I have acquired some qualification following my active involvement in the workings of these NGOs. My life therefore is better, but I wish I had more job security, and had better education like you. Had I taken my education seriously, I would have ended with a university degree that would have catapulted me into success.

Expressing utter regret for his dismissal from high school, he states: "Had I carefully and secretly guarded my relationship with my boyfriend in high school, I would have graduated with a senior secondary school certificate and then continued to the university." Although Hillary submitted to the language of shame and self-blame in narrating his story, he nonetheless never claimed to be fully remorseful. Indeed, he felt that he had productively lived his life in spite of the circumstances that had derailed his ambitions. Moreover, he frequently acknowledged that his life was better than others—especially his sasso friends. Affording me an ethnographic journey into his life, his account revealed the rather complex nature of heterosexual regimes in neoliberal political economic landscapes. His story reveals how educational institutions, like the secondary school he attended, were active sites for politicizing heteronationalism and for "schooling" heterosexual passions, to use Veronique Benei's illustrative terminology.⁵ In the context of the boarding school, homosexuality was sanctioned as an affront to citizen-making.

The details of Hillary's story, particularly his precarious financial situation, which meant that I occasionally remitted him some money to take him through the day or helped pay for his medications, solidified our connection. Our developing relationship provided an opportunity to interact with the other actors and institutions in his life, including close relatives, coworkers, consorts, other sasso, politicians, renowned human rights activists, clergy, choristers, and the various

organizations in the orbit of his life. While offering a tragic narrative, his story exposes the alliances between family and education as institutions that attempted—albeit unsuccessfully—to mold his passions in order to consolidate heteronormativity. Additionally, they uncover how these institutions provoke queer possibilities and entanglements in ways that on the surface may appear impossible.

Don't Do unto Others What You Don't Want Others to Do unto You

In Hillary's opinion, being sasso or engaging in same-sex eroticism did not interfere with his relationship to religion. The church played an integral role in his life:

I am an ardent chorister, which means that I love my church. I was born and raised Anglican, and I have been in that church for almost my entire life. As a chorister, I have to always make it a point to attend choir practice. My reverend knows me very well and is even aware that I am sasso. Although we have not broached the topic, we don't let it interfere with the services I give to my church, and what I derive from the church too. However, my overt effeminate mannerisms draw attention to me as sasso. For example, one member of our church, a woman, went around spreading bad stories about me. Sometimes, she would tell people that I was dangerous, and that I was a homosexual. I did not know what I had done to merit her badmouthing me all the time. But one day, the least expected happened to her, as she had to come face to face with what she feared most. Her oldest son caught her youngest son having sex with another boy in the community. And this was during Easter, can you imagine? Now, when I heard her story, I thought about how the world we live in is surely a strange place. And then I immediately thought about that verse in the Bible, which says that if you would not feed a snake or stone to your child, why would you feed it to someone else's.

Payback, payback, it is sweet, but also not very sweet. We have to love each other. As for me, I learned a lot from that woman's experience. When she saw me again, she tried to be nice to me. I however knew in my head that she did not empathize with me. Do unto others what you want others to do unto you.

The interspersed Christian allusions in Hillary's narratives with local proverbs and idioms represents an attempt to make himself legible and to be viewed as "normal" in a setting that limits his desire to be sasso. Here, he attempts to make comprehensible the consequences of a church member's castigation of him as a homosexual, applying the biblical proverb that "you reap what you sow." Rather than draw on doctrinal Christianity to discipline his homoerotic disposition, he recycled aspects of a religion that disciplines homosexuals by declaring that "I am what I am because that is how God created me." In making this inference, he was referring to the Christian God.

Hillary's resort to Christian discourse illumines the paradox undergirding his homoerotic desire. In the larger Ghanaian Christian universe, his justification might be construed as blasphemous, yet his invocation reconciles his conflicting identities as sasso, Christian, Ghanaian, and, ultimately, queer. In this rendering,

too, it doesn't matter whether Christianity has left a homonegative legacy; what matters is how Hillary recycles aspects of this religion to his advantage. In that respect, although he is well aware of the limitations of Christianity on his being, he finds recourse in it nonetheless. Hillary's narrative reminds us of the complex tapestry of contradictions that work together to make his self-identification as *sasso* possible.

INTERLUDE 2: NAVIGATING TERRY'S WORLD

I was introduced to Terry, an affluent *sasso* whose life often intersected with the lives of other *sasso* in Jamestown and beyond, by Hillary. Known to be able to fix problems for *sasso* who lacked the resources to navigate the problems that beset their lives, Terry had both *sasso* and nonsasso friends. Terry was ethnically Ga, and his posture in the *sasso* community made him seem omnipresent, attracting gay men not only in Jamestown but also in the upscale suburbs of Accra. In effect, Terry's reputation afforded him access to multiple settings in ways that other *sasso* did not have. Unlike Hillary, Terry did not interface much with LGBT+ human rights organizational efforts. Hence, he was less likely to be present at meetings sponsored by organizations such as BURJ. In fact, he was more invested in organizing gatherings such as parties that mostly brought *sasso* together.

Middle-aged, Terry wore a shiny dark skin and generally exuded confidence. He always wore a smile. "My large smile is my signature," he once uttered loudly. Terry owned a provisions and accessories shop that was regularly patronized by *sasso* in the community, as well as people in Jamestown. Called Terry's, the shop functioned as a transit point for the different strokes of *sasso* from Jamestown. It also, on occasion, served as a bar for Terry's wealthy friends, most of whom were clandestinely gentor. There, *sasso* converged to engage in wide-ranging sociopolitical and economic conversations about matters that deeply affected their lives. It was the kind of spot where one could receive a loan, buy an item on credit, grab a drink, or find and enjoy much-desired company. A makeshift plywood structure covered in brown oil paint, Terry's obviously offered the *sasso* who visited some sense of community and family. Through their association with a man believed to have access to considerable wealth in the community, the *sasso* who gathered there felt validated and protected. It was ultimately home for many, buffering them from intermittent homophobic onslaughts. As Terry put it,

Life is definitely not easy for these young *sasso*. I know some *sasso* who have been rejected by their families. Where do you expect them to go? In a country where effeminate men are called homosexuals, and beaten as a result, it is hard to let them go out into the world, homeless and helpless, when there is nobody out there to help them. I have come across a lot of young *sasso* who have attempted suicide. I actually know someone who took his life last year. He was a very brilliant young man. In fact, you remind me of him, which is why I have taken a strong interest in your work.

It is by a Ghanaian who also identifies with the community. It will be good for the *sasso* community and for Ghanaians in general. Since I opened this shop, I have had young men come up to me asking for a place to stay. Now I think I am the mother and the father of all these abandoned kids, abandoned because they are gay. Some of them need good and quality education to become successful in these times. But, unfortunately, they are not being taken care of, basically because their families have accused them of engaging in homosexual sex. What kind of stupidity is this? People need to change from their ways. When these young men come to me seeking solace, I offer them whatever assistance I feel I am capable of affording, and I move on. I know that is the good thing to do. The two young men in my shop were thrown out of their homes for fear of being gay. Now they are under my care. They are brilliant and industrious. Just imagine the kind of resourceful people families in Ghana are losing because they are seen as different because they are gay. And even worse is the fact that they are sometimes told that they are possessed by demons. What nonsense! Without these men in my shop, I wonder how successful it would have been, Kwame. I simply wonder!

While providing support to his *sasso* patrons, Terry's shop was a low-grade structure by design. The gutter, like most open trenches in downtown Accra and other urban centers in Ghana, showed traces of silt and *spirogyra*. The façade of the shop had a rusty awning which provided shade on sunny days and prevented rain from entering the store on rainy days. Two wooden pillars, firmly thrust into the concrete floor, supported the porch. On this verandah, Terry and his two shopping assistants, Abdullah and Nana, always rested on a raffia mat. His shop assistants also doubled as his "children," as Terry adopted them following ostracism by their families. According to Abdullah, Terry presented them with the opportunity to refashion and build their lives. "He saved my wretched life," says Abdullah, "when I was down on my luck." *Sasso* often filled the shop to capacity, sometimes in the company of their consorts. Between intermittent power outages, Terry would blast loud music, heightening excitement at the shop. The space was constantly abuzz with entertainment, with *sasso* coming and going as they pleased. Indeed, it served as a liminal space where *sasso* revived their relationships with each other.

When Class, Race, and Queer Capitals Converge

Besides managing his provisions shop and bar in downscale Jamestown, Terry lived in one of Accra's upscale suburbs, called Roman Ridge. His residence, unlike his store, was a hotspot that saw a mix of *sasso* and wealthy gay men. They often gathered there to have semiprivate homosexual soirees and get-togethers. The *sasso* at these events were of a certain status. To be invited, as I was reminded once by Terry, the *sasso* had to be of a certain stature; respectable, with a certain level of education, and prim and proper. At such events, Terry would treat his friends to sumptuous meals and drinks. On these occasions, too, he would mock me by speaking in a diluted American accent. Not responding in an American accent, I retorted that I resisted speaking like an American. He laughed at my rejoinder.

Terry spoke fluent English. Having lived in England for a while, relocating to Ghana in the early 2000s to take care of his mother, who lived in another suburb, he was betrothed to an older Englishman called Edward. Terry visited the United Kingdom a dozen times a year to fulfill his matrimonial duties to his husband. When he finally decided to move back to Ghana, he established what was arguably one of Ghana's first gay bars—Terry's. I interpreted Terry's disclosure of some of the most intimate aspects of his life as deriving from the symbolic esteem and status derived from his association to whiteness through marriage.

Like Terry, the other men I met at his soirees highlighted their triumphs in Ghana and abroad in a fashion reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's description of "the forms of capital," by which he means that "capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (1986, 241).

Terry's life distinguished him from most sasso. He obtained his diploma from one of Ghana's technical universities, proceeding to the United Kingdom in search of a better life and to also escape what he once described to me as "the tragedy of being a man interested in having homoerotic encounters with men in Ghana." He provided me with a brief account of how he had always wanted to leave Ghana for a place where he could be himself without feeling alienated.

I always knew I was sasso. My siblings always laughed at me. I only have sisters, so it was not surprising that I behaved like a girl. As I became a teenager, I was preparing to go to senior secondary school. Aware of my feminine attributes, I was quite afraid that seniors in the school would bully me. For many people in Ghana, boys who act like girls will grow out of it. I don't think I did. The only option I had was managing my girlishness. My parents wanted me to go to boarding school. I was forced to go there because they shared the view that I was going to be toughened up. When I arrived in school, I was quite afraid. So, I had to act tough to avoid getting bullied by other students. I began exercising my body by visiting the gym regularly. I still do this even today. If people see me, they think I am just like any other man because of my looks. However, while I have the musculature of a man, I believe that I have the heart and the feelings of a woman beneath the ruggedness that defines my body. It is this softness in me that Edward finds attractive. He always says that when he first saw me, he knew I was very calm and soft from within. These attributes, he claims, were what drove him to approach me. We first met in a gay bar in London. I had never been to a gay bar at the time and was quite terrified by the idea. However, I decided to go, disguising myself so as not to be seen by Ghanaians who lived nearby. Once I entered the bar and heard the music I saw many men on the dancing floor briskly dancing to music. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I convinced myself that night

that if men can fall in love with men, then there is nothing wrong with my feelings for men. In Ghana, we're socialized into believing that having homosexual feelings is wrong. Meeting Edward, I was convinced that was untrue. I discovered my true self.

Terry's marriage to Edward, which occurred in the late nineties, gave him access to British citizenship. In Terry's narrative, he sees England as a space of queer freedom, whereas Ghana is figured as a site of queer abjection, a position made quite clear in the 2011 BBC documentary entitled *The World's Worst Place to be Gay?* Often representing England as a liberal domain, Terry, much like LGBT+ human rights organizations that are based in the West or sponsor LGBT+ human rights organizing in Ghana, elevated England as a citadel of queer tolerance, a mecca every homosexual in Ghana should experience at least once in their lifetime. No longer solely Ghanaian, he had the opportunity to visit England with much ease. Moreover, his dual citizenship status marked him from the other sasso as the outsider within, one who had access to the privileges of a Westerner.

Terry's narrative bespeaks his multiple "transformations" in the service of heteronormativity. First, because he perceived that he possessed feminine attributes, Terry regulated his effeminacy while in Ghana. Second, his marriage to Edward encouraged him to embrace his effeminacy unapologetically in England, reinforcing my observation that he imagined England as a site of freedom. The fluidity and tensions between selves in his narrative clearly complicate his location in the community of sasso, his family, and the class of clandestine gay men. Unmistakably, his narrative expands how his desire for queer self-making remained unstrapped from the pressures of heteronormativity. Not only was he now able to easily travel between Ghana and Britain, but also between Jamestown, that low-income suburb, and his swish estate in Roman Ridge.

Sasso Contestations, Gay Confrontations

When Terry returned to Ghana from London to open his bar, he wanted it to serve as a space for gay men in and around Accra, expatriate workers, and Ghanaians returning from overseas. His experience in the UK informed his desire to create a space that served men who wanted to share their lives with other men. "For me, a bar that catered to gay men was also a place where people who were not free to come out and be themselves could get some luck. It was in a gay bar in the UK that I found myself." Although the space was intended to serve as a bar open to the public, Terry wanted to create a space where gay men in Ghana could converge without facing umbrage from the public. In his narrative, coming out and being gay was what essentially defined one's sexual identity, and having a space in which to express such identity was crucial. In Ghana, that was difficult. Terry named the bar after himself, "Terry's." When it opened, it attracted a large clientele, including sasso, gay men, and nonsasso. The majority of the bar's patrons were Ghanaian returnees and expatriate workers in Ghana. The bar was located in Adabraka, an area popularly known to be a hotspot for swanky businesses and hotels, and the

opening of the bar brought together what Terry described as unlikely patrons. Terry recounts how there were occasional squabbles among his mixed clientele.

When I opened the bar, it was my hope that all the gay men I knew could finally get together. It was going to serve as a place where they could be comfortable about their identities. Of course, *sasso* are not necessarily gay. It appears that to be gay here implies having wealth and obtaining some level education. As you know, very few *sasso* know who gays are or even understand what it means to be gay. My goal was to let this space permit *sasso* to learn from these men. I have always had *sasso* as friends, and I have always regarded myself as one of them. But in the bar, I had to occasionally distance myself from that identity. This does not imply that I ignored my friends who were *sasso*; rather, I was more comfortable with calling myself gay, so as to make those patrons who self-identified as gay feel comfortable. Clearly, Terry's was a space for all men who had sex with men, and it was open to the general public too. But I was more comfortable with the idea that gay men and *sasso* alike could come there to enjoy themselves. I have always been appreciative of my *sasso* friends. Without them, I couldn't have opened the bar. They are truly resourceful. On occasion, they can present problems. For instance, my wealthy guests often fought with *sasso*, calling them out on their nuisance. They thought they were tarnishing the image of the bar, given how loud they were, and most especially, their open display of effeminacy. I was OK with that, but I could only take that so far. The bar had to close down because there was a fight among *sasso*. When the fight broke out, there were straight clients at the bar. Being witnesses to the fight, they reported me to the authorities without hesitation. The case they built against me revolved around the fact that Terry's catered to gay men in Ghana, and that since it was illegal to be gay in the country, the bar had to be shut down. Moreover, my neighbors always complained about the blasts from the music. They said I was disturbing what used to be a serene environment. I am certain that was not the problem. In fact, they too had been given the information that my bar had a large gay clientele. A few years after I opened Terry's I had to shut it down because of these complaints. I used some of the profits derived from that business to set up my provisions store in Jamestown. My hope is to open a bar again. I shall. I believe in myself.

The role of politics around sexual identification is prominent in Terry's telling anecdote. Here, it is clear that class differences were at the heart of the conflicts that arose at the bar. For example, middle- and upper-class gay men reminded *sasso*, who were viewed as belonging to the lower class, and considerably less educated, to respect the boundaries between them. Confronted by this dilemma, Terry distanced himself from *sasso* when surrounded by his coterie of wealthy gay friends, most of whom had lived abroad. *Sasso* who patronized the bar also agreed that the gay men they engaged with were no different from them because they had sex with men. Besides, they detested the idea that the former often emphasized their class status to distinguish themselves from *sasso*. With different selves colliding, all of whom were queer but scrambled by amphibious, class, and effeminate subjectivities, the space amplified the differences among *sasso*, as well as their fractious

relationship with self-identified gay men. Terry's shifting allegiances between gay men and sasso mirror the tensions that emerged between these constituencies, and the fact that there were heterosexual patrons made this space convoluted.

Terry conveniently gravitated toward sasso while in Jamestown and distanced himself from them in the swanky suburb where his bar was located. Here, Terry faced a dilemma. He worked to manage his class status in a manner that did not declassify sasso, whose class status was lower than the gay men in the bar and were regarded as being too loud and lacking courtesy. It is clear that class difference emerged as a source of tensions in the community, and Terry became a source of both envy and emulation for several sasso. Evidently Terry's class, his proximity to whiteness via his marriage to Edward, and his ability to act manly when and how he pleased not only elevated him but also protected him from the encumbrances of homonegativity and economic precarity.

INTERLUDE 3: INTERACTING WITH SHELLEY, AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXCURSUS

Shelley's story invites us to witness the multiple ways in which he navigated being an overly feminine sasso amidst increased homonegativity in Ghana and also how he bargained with heteronormativity. Shelley ethnically identified as Akan yet lived in Jamestown for much of his adult life. For him, life in Ghana was a complex experience that entailed not only having to deal with being marginalized because of one's gendered or sexual identification, but also having to deal with a sociopolitical economy that made life miserable for sasso and the poor. He was in his early forties at the time of our encounter.

I stood on the edge of the dusty field, watching as the older boys played football. Wild imaginations about having sex with them ran amok in my head. The weather had the usual sunny and humid tinge, and the boys' bodies were drenched in sweat as they briskly played. I staged myself at my usual location, the periphery of the field, to get a better view of them. I was in the company of my girl playmates, who accompanied me to the field every other football day. They, too, enjoyed consuming their sculpted appearances, and the streams of sweat that rained down their torsos. The smell of dirt and sweat diffused ineluctably in the dusky air of the sunset-lit field. I basked in the moment. The boys' sweaty bodies enhanced their physique, exposing the veins in their arms and the contours of their abdomens. Although they never lifted weights, they did possess the bodies of "macho men" [weightlifters]. In fact, you know who they reminded me of: Captain Planet [laughs]. I loved football days.

On such days, I would dash home to quickly finish my household chores in advance to ensure that I had ample time to spectate [pauses, looks at me]. You know what I mean? And it was certainly the delight I absorbed by watching their penises prance back and forth that made the experience one to crave. The end game usually climaxed with the boys mobilizing around me and fondling my body. It was truly the climax [bobs head]. Some slapped my bum, caressed my breasts, and played with

my phallus, but only when the coaches weren't looking. On several occasions, they would demand that I follow them to secret hideouts in the bushes bordering the field, and there, I fellated them. This was like a normal routine. However, they would usually divulge information about our sexual encounters to others, and in doing so, cast me as the perpetrator, because I allegedly lured them to "play" with me.

I was often teased and subjected to name-calling, and always had to deal with the uncontrollable spread of stories about my sexual acts with them. I must admit, however, that I was never ashamed. In fact, I continued to give them fellatio without remorse because I enjoyed it too. These circumstances led to my first anal sex. I was about fifteen years old and it was with a football captain. He approached me one afternoon after a game. A very handsome dark, tall, and well-built boy, every girl admired him, and I did too. I think he is a Northerner. He asked me to follow him into the bushes, and while there, he played with me again and again. It was painful, but I enjoyed it, every bit, in fact. We did it again and again thereafter. He told the other boys about our sexual encounters, and they, too, would begin to solicit sex from me time and again. Some accompanied their solicitations with money and gifts, and this is how I got into sasso.

My excessive sexual encounters began to have its payoff, however, when I developed severe anal fissures. I was quite bedridden for a while and did not want anybody to know about my condition. I bled whenever I attempted to walk and the blood soiled my pants. I considered getting pampers and sanitary pads per the suggestion of my friends to help minimize the incontinence. But that did not stop me from bleeding. Traumatized by my condition, I was afraid to go to the doctor. Furthermore, I feared disclosing my condition to my mother. You know, they tell us that getting fucked in the ass is a bad thing, so it is also difficult to complain when you find yourself wanting. I developed symptoms like anal warts and some other related sexually transmitted infections. As I remember it, those days and nights were terrible, and I could hardly sleep. I was distressed and traumatized, cursing myself for not considering the possibility of having sex infrequently.

My condition worsened over time, and I had to finally reveal to my mother this unpleasant thing in my behind. She was petrified and could not help but admonish me. She said that it was God's retribution for the evil things I had been doing, and for backsliding as a Christian. She was very upset with me; however, she saw my condition as an opportunity to preach the gospel. Imagine groaning with pain, and being bombarded with verses from the Bible, Kwame? It is nothing to savor. In her numerous teachings to me she would say that only a change in my habits would let God heal me. And for this reason, she said God had given her a remedy. The remedy was that I sit on a bucket of hot water twice every day for two weeks, once at dawn and once before going to bed for the sore behind me to heal completely. The steam from the hot water was the antidote. In two weeks, I was completely healed and then went back to the guys again for sex. Since this incident, hot water has been my friend [we both laughed at his last statement].

Shelley shares this story with me at his *kelewele* (spicy caramelized fried ripe plantain) joint one evening in the organized anarchy of Jamestown. Seated behind his food vending table, which was pitched right next to one of the thoroughfares in the

neighborhood of Swalaba, *okada* riders buzzed around, injecting smoke that had both Shelley and me coughing incessantly.⁶ Amid the cacophony and unperturbed by the crowds that surrounded us, I recorded his story, which he shared while his friends and the consumers of kelewele interrupted us intermittently during the course of our conversations.

Shelley waxed nostalgic about how beautiful he had been, and how the failing economic conditions in Ghana made life weary for him. "Life," he would often say, "is hard in Ghana these days. But I will overcome. I keep on praying." In spite of the dire economic circumstances in which he lived, he still managed to retain a degree of optimism. In our first encounter, I misrecognized his gender by assuming that he was a woman. On the spectrum of sasso identification, Shelley was an "auntie," given his overt effeminate presentation and his profession as a food vendor. His feminine embodiment mirrored the women in Jamestown, most of whom bleached their skin and were also industrious. I was not alone in mistaking him for a woman: on several occasions, others, inside and outside the community, did the same. Overall, Shelley's stories reflected his nostalgia for a past in which he was a desirable sasso. Compared to other sasso in the community, his appearance gave him a youthful demeanor and disposition.⁷

Shelley's light and shiny skin, doctored flawlessly with brighteners, complemented the crown of his iridescent dark, curly hair. On occasion, he would apply a large dose of curl activator to give some oomph to his already coiled hair, on which he invested large blocks of time, equal to the time he spent on grooming his body in general. Shelley often applied bleaching creams to his skin. The extensive use of these creams had left his hands, neck, and arms sinewy, exposing green varicose veins.⁸ Standing at six-foot-two, his well-preened, slender figure made Shelley hypervisible in the community.

When he visited the market to purchase the food items for his business, he often towered above the market women. His skillful bargaining power—touted as genuinely exceptional and too good for a man—earned him the admiration of the market women. In fact, for his dramatic flair at bargaining, the market women often gave him their produce at a reduced price.⁹ Shelley luxuriated in the fact that his bargaining skills and economic talents also earned him the envy of his fellow sasso. He would often say: "I am blessed. I possess a God-given trait, which gives me plenty in these harsh economic times." Laughing boisterously, he asked playfully, "Am I not blessed, Kwame. Am I not?"¹⁰

Shelley subscribed to Christian beliefs." He often used the phrases "a church benchwarmer" and only an "occasional churchgoer" to capture his affiliation with Christianity. Unlike Hillary, Shelley was not involved in HIV/AIDS organizations because he was convinced he did not possess the wherewithal to educate others, nor did he have the educational capital to venture out and be involved in such projects. He uttered this line to me: "I am not like you, the degree holders. I have

very little education, which is why I sell kelewele here. If I had some education, I would have joined my brother, who currently lives in the United States. I, however, think that this will not be possible, given his awareness that I am sasso. He doesn't even talk to me now."

Shelley cared surprisingly little about his overt effeminacy, perhaps because he was relatively older. At the time of our interview, he had just turned forty-five years old and emphasized that he was not the "coequal" of sasso precisely because he was older, despite the fact that his effeminacy placed him among the other sasso. Here, Shelley participates in reinforcing his position as an older sasso by virtue of his age. Yet, his age blended with his effeminate self-identification, which like the self-presentation of Hillary and Terry, placed him squarely in the ambivalent space created by being a man without masculinity or exuding femininity without being a woman.¹¹

On occasion, Shelley reflected on the fact that effeminacy deprived him of privileges of masculinity such as being a husband and a father. The market women with whom he interacted were subdued by their knowledge that he lacked "manliness," which, they believed, kept him from the rungs of potential marriage and fatherhood. In fact, these attributes made Shelley one with them and the market women one with him. In a culture where fathering children and marriage are considered as the ultimate crown of masculinity, to possess a quality that, as popular belief had it, prevented one from having an active phallus left an indelible mark on their personhood.¹² In Jamestown, it was a public secret that Shelley had sex with men, which many deduced from his feminine attributes. As can be extrapolated from the stories of the other sasso in this chapter, Shelley embodied and expressed competing masculinities and femininities. In this milieu, his "masculinity" could be described as "effeminate masculinity."¹³

Are You a Man or a Woman? Gender Misrecognition in Action

It was a rainy day and Shelley had to go to Salaga market, the open-air market in Jamestown, to buy cooking oil for his kelewele business that evening. With puddles everywhere in the unpaved market, Shelley's struts, his impeccable sashaying and negotiation of every mound of mud with utmost care, revealed how adroitly he maneuvered the muddy waters of the market. Arguably, such navigation was analogous to how sasso traversed the precarious conditions created by transnational LGBT+ activism and the heightened homonegativity faced by them.

Shelley moved to Jamestown when his mother asked him to pack his bags and vacate his natal home in Tema, the harbor city located east of Accra, following rumors that he was a homosexual. Jamestown became his home; when I met him, he had been residing there for more than a decade.¹⁴ There he could comfortably be himself, as he once reminded me. "Here I wear my embroidered white elbow length shirt, and my skintight knee-length jeans without flinching. I also don't

have to worry about indignant looks.” For Shelley, to express effeminate identity was to adorn his body in beautiful clothes. That act, he emphasized, offered him the latitude to show off his curves, especially the protrusion of his buttocks.

In Jamestown, unlike other parts of Accra, Shelley had the freedom to overtly express his effeminacy. There, he could also claim and embody a sociophysical appearance that challenged hegemonic gendered categories. Beyond the confines of Jamestown, however, Shelley, like other sasso, was confronted by questions like “Are you a man or a woman?”

Not very long ago, I was out on one of my usual errands in the city. I ran into a very attractive young man somewhere in Accra who expressed an interest in me. He was a butcher in Accra but resided in Kasoa. Following a brief conversation, he invited me out to a nearby drinking bar. I remember enjoying every second we spent together in the bar. This guy caressed my arms and then fondled my thighs with his large palms, which seemed to have been toughened up by years of wielding the butcher’s knife. After a few drinks at the bar, we left to go have a meal in a chop bar. In fact, he enjoyed hanging out with me. I assumed that he knew I was a man who resembled a woman. When the night fell, he asked that I come with him to spend the night at his house. This was a proposal to which I happily consented, because I, too, liked him a lot. He quickly hailed a Kasoa-bound taxi. We arrived at his house around 1 a.m., which was nested in a wooded neighborhood that had poor dirt roads with no lights. I was terrified. I remember pondering what to do at this time of the day should something bad happen.

Upon arriving, he took me to his bedroom and asked me to undress so he could admire my body. As I undressed he came to the realization that I was a man. He began to yell and call me names. Not far from where he stood on his side of the bed hung a big machete. He drew my attention to the machete, prompting me to wonder what he might do with it. Grabbing the machete, he brandished it at me. With my eyes completely welled up and bloodshot, I was overpowered by my emotions. I pleaded with him to release me, convincing him that I had thought that he knew I was a man and that I was never going to let this happen again.

Following my plea, he dropped the machete and offered me money to quietly leave his house. I dressed and slowly left his room. I dashed out, running quickly to a nearby road, where I waited a while to catch a taxi back to Jamestown. While running, I looked behind me to make sure no one followed, as I feared he might have changed his mind and come after me with the machete to butcher me to death.

Kwame, this experience not only terrified me, but also stayed with me. Eventually I had to regulate my movements in and outside of Jamestown in particular and Accra in general very carefully. And anytime I went outside of Jamestown, I had to manage my looks, appearance, and voice, even. I had to put on clothes that did not encourage people to ask the question: Are you a man or woman? Sometimes you’ve got to be careful, especially as you will not know what is coming to you.

Shelley’s narrative articulates the embodied interenactment of masculinity and femininity that confused his consort. In the different domains he traversed, his presentation of self and interactions with others determined how he was interpreted.

In fact, his “I,” so to speak, remained an ambiguous domain that inevitably threatened and blurred both gender and class binaries. In Shelley’s case, effeminacy is not merely a performance but a way of life and of being and becoming. For instance, it is quite difficult to know whether his consorts misrecognized his gender, or if Shelley, too, misinterpreted their intentions.

How is one to read the misrecognitions and misinterpretations figured here? Must they be read as just another effect of the disenchantment with or perhaps the failure of gendered and sexed categories in this context? These microincidents represent the everyday experiences that sasso like Shelley and Hillary faced. And for the most part they are not investigated by the LGBT+ human rights organizations that purport to rescue sasso from the homophobic claws of the nation-state and civil society. I suggest that these incidents invite us to probe beyond facades of the supposedly homogenous categories established by heteronationalist and homonationalist politics in order to plumb the fissures and contradictions that they mask.

Another scene of gender misrecognition is relayed by Shelley. This time, however, the misrecognition occurs not in Jamestown but at the place of his birth. Hence, misrecognition was not unilateral but bilateral on occasion, as the following anecdote encapsulates.

A few years ago, when I still lived in the house of my extended family in Tema, a man approached me and asked if I had a boyfriend. I told him that I did not have one. He asked to be my friend and then I decided to exchange telephone numbers. Beginning our friendship over the phone, it later became sexual, and we began to have phone sex. On one occasion he said he had fallen for me and was intoxicated by my beauty. He even called me Eve, because I was his forbidden fruit. He convinced me to have sex with him one evening. We arranged to meet at Nick Hotel in Tema Community Seven one night. The man, an exporter of local produce, was very rich and could afford to pay for us to go to this four-star hotel.

Before this encounter, which he deemed special, he would always buy me gifts ranging from clothes to jewelry. I think he really loved me and had good intentions for me. And I loved him too. I did not know if he knew I was a man, although I assumed that he did. At the hotel, he reserved the king’s suite for us, and was ready to christen our relationship with a sexual encounter. I, too, was looking forward to the moment. I could tell that he was very well endowed and couldn’t wait to enjoy him just as much as he did me. Together in the suite with him, he treated me to drinks that he had ordered from the bar. This was accompanied with assorted foods from the restaurant, too. Kwame, I really enjoyed being with him until the unexpected happened. So, he began to kiss me and then fondle my breasts. Just when he began to unzip my tight pants, the “thing” sprang out. He jumped out of the bed in shock, grabbed his belt, and locked the door.

Kwame, he lashed the hell out of me that night with his belt in a way that I have never experienced. I was jumping around the room looking for a way to escape, but the door was locked. He told me he was going to phone the police to tell them what had happened. I also quite remember him saying that he was going to call a radio station to come and capture the event. As he moved to pick the phone and call the

police, I quickly grabbed the keys, which had been left on the bed, unlocked the door, and fled from the room. I can't believe this happened to me. And sometimes I laugh whenever I reflect on the incident.

These anecdotes detail Shelley's constant confrontation with misrecognition. For example, in retelling these stories, Shelley recalled how people read the physicality of his body, such as his curvaceous and bosomy appearance in a milieu that confines gender performances to the masculine and the feminine. Shelley's embodiment and navigation of effeminacy complicate the idioms of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Furthermore, his sasso identity, as well as that of others, tells us more about how sexual subjectivities and forms of self-making occur among sasso themselves, and in ways that are far from parallel and even. Shelley's misrecognition bespeaks the failings of dichotomized gender, showing how it confuses the very subjects who enforce the rules and grammar of gender based on the physical and performative presentation of an individual. The homophobic reaction from the man in the hotel room can be read as representing a moment in which the deregulation of gender invites quick retribution. Arguably, homophobia is an instance of heteronormative retribution at gender misrecognition; hence heteronormativity's failure to comprehend nonheteronormativity puzzlingly enables homophobia and queer possibility.

INTERLUDE 4: TRAVERSING ALAJO'S UNIVERSE

I was introduced to Alajo by Hillary. When we met, he had just turned twenty-five. Alajo was truly animated and unlike any sasso I had encountered. An only child, he lived with his mother in one of Accra's coastal suburbs, Nungua, which is east of Jamestown. Mixing ambitions with loss and disappointment, Alajo unmasked his difficulties reconciling his identity as sasso with being an only child, and his unwavering ambition to become a journalist. Like Terry, Alajo was quite well educated, possessing the ability to debate any subject with alacrity. He was biethnic, being of Akan and Ga extraction.

Alajo occasionally distanced himself from his sasso comrades, seeking their company at his convenience, especially during weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. He often commuted to Jamestown to visit Terry at his shop. Our first meeting was in 2011, in the twin city of Sekondi-Takoradi, located on Ghana's west coast. Alajo was participating in a health-care outreach project that was under way and being monitored by the West Africa Program to Combat Aids and STI (WAPCAS). The project was part of WAPCAS's campaign to offer flexible services to MSM in the metropolitan area of Sekondi-Takoradi. In sasso circles, these acronyms are widespread, which bespeaks their interaction, encounter, and perhaps involvement with both local and transnational NGOs that address issues related to HIV transmission.

Fair in complexion, Alajo was slender, standing about five-eleven. He exuded conventionally feminine attributes while engaging in performative masculinity in spaces and on occasions where any expression of femininity could potentially raise eyebrows and frowns. He regarded himself as being less effeminate than Hillary and Shelley. Among the *sasso* in Jamestown, he was touted as a beautiful man. Like Shelley's, Alajo's beauty sometimes drew positive attention. On other occasions, he was jeered at for being Kwadwo Besia, a term he sought to avoid. In our conversations, Alajo would hint that his gait betrayed his effeminacy. One day, as we walked through one of Accra's suburbs, a group of men started calling him Kwadwo Besia, referring to me as his homosexual partner. Fearing for our lives, Alajo asked that we catch a taxi to escape the unknown. Alajo's gait highlighted the contours of his hips and buttocks in a manner that was beyond his control. "I can't control the way I walk, or the way my ass looks," he would often say to me in a polite and soft-spoken manner.

During our encounter, he told stories about his ambition to become one of Ghana's greatest journalists. Having attended one of the elite senior secondary schools in Ghana in the Central Region, from which he graduated with honors, Alajo secured admission at the Ghana Institute of Journalism, where he pursued a bachelor's degree. Following his graduation, however, he found the job market to be challenging. "There were virtually no jobs, and if there were, employers only sought out applicants who had obtained a university degree," he told me. He expressed frustration with the absence of jobs in his field.

I had always seen myself going to the school of journalism. Following my graduation from Adisadel [historically an Anglican private school for boys in Cape Coast], I quickly hopped on that bandwagon that was going in the direction of Ghana Institute of Journalism. You know, growing up around my mother I loved to read. Although my mother has very some minimal education, she always encouraged me to take my studies seriously. She did this by buying me books. Dickens, Brontë, Shakespeare, Achebe, Wa Thiong'o, Soyinka. I have read them all. My mother was very supportive of my education. As someone with little to no education, I was quite amazed at her ability to invest in my education. Growing up reading the writings of these people, I managed to secure a place in Adisadel.

There, I did general arts, and my electives were literature, Christian religious studies, and government. I enjoyed these courses very much, passing with flying colors. After my stint in Adisadel, I gained admission into GIJ, where I worked with some of Ghana's prominent journalists. I had a great cohort that supported each other. In fact, my time at GIJ was great. For me journalism was one of the ways by which I could tell the story about those whose lives remain under the carpet of our deteriorating economy, politics, and culture. I thought of journalism as one of the most effective and efficient ways to expose the inconsistencies in our country. Coming from a poor family, I was inspired and motivated to see Ghana become a much better place for all.

My mother had very little education, and my father abandoned her just when I was born. These experiences really informed my decision to pursue journalism. Also, another reason for the pursuit of that discipline was my own location as someone who grew up knowing that he was interested in having sex with men. Although my homosexual feelings were never considered as I embarked on getting a degree, I had seen and heard in the news how homosexuals in this country were being treated. I often objected to how journalists represented homosexuals in the media. For me, journalism presented an opportunity for as to ask questions, dig deeper into the things we do. Ask ourselves why we do the things we do, with some level of circumspection and introspection. That is how I envisioned it. So, when I graduated and realized that I was not going to get a job, it frustrated me. Most of the jobs expressed an interest in someone with a bachelor's degree. At the time, GIJ only offered diplomas in journalism. Can you imagine, Kwame? I felt so lowballed.

Alajo often shuddered at the idea that he couldn't get a job in journalism despite his laurels from the Ghana Institute of Journalism and the secondary school he attended. Moreover, he felt that the system in Ghana did not work well for him, largely because it was against sassa like him and, for this reason, undermined their prospects for growth. As he reminded me once: "Kwame, the system here only operates on the basis of who one knows. Here nepotism and cronyism remain the rule. I am the first in my family to get this far by way of education. Most of the people I know are not that influential. I am hoping to find someone who will offer to give me a job on a merit basis rather than just because they know me or are familiar with me outside of my expertise."

Amidst uncertainty, however, Alajo landed a job with human rights and public health NGOs, one of which was WAPCAS. As part of his work in these NGOs, he traveled the length and breadth of Ghana, counseling MSM, female sex workers (FSW), and persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV).

When I met Alajo, he was part of a research team that was conducting "The Men's Study." At the time, Sekondi-Takoradi was undergoing an oil boom. The economic turnaround attracted a large number of foreign workers who mostly worked on the oil rigs in the Gulf of Guinea. The discovery of oil off the western shores of the country drastically transformed the sexual demography of the city, suddenly making it one of the areas in Ghana to witness an upsurge in HIV cases. The Men's Study was being conducted to examine the sexual behaviors among men amid the transitions that were happening. Alajo collected data for WAPCAS, asking MSM about their sexual behaviors.

We arranged to meet at the Akroma Plaza Hotel. I arrived at the hotel earlier than anticipated, following a seven-hour trip from Accra. As I waited for Alajo, I became quite concerned about our safety there. The past few months had witnessed growing claims that homosexuals were invading Sekondi-Takoradi.¹⁵ Media stories maintained that a group of gay men had begun throwing parties there, and that the government needed to intervene immediately. Responding to media reports about the increasing presence of homosexuals in the city, the then

minister of the Western Region Paul Evans Aidoo issued a statement that asked law enforcers to “smoke out” homosexuals in Ghana.¹⁶ An idiomatic expression, “to smoke” out literally translated as hunting for rodents such as rats, grasscutters, ground hogs, and reptiles using smoke to fumigate the holes they dig. These creatures were regarded as destructive and invasive to crops such as cassava, yam, cocoyam, and other root tubers. The smoke forced these animals to come out of burrows and tunnels.

The minister’s statement, while legitimizing attacks against men perceived to be homosexuals, received little to no attention in the country. The minister imagined homosexuals as invasive individuals scourging Ghana’s purity, for which they needed to be “smoked out” at all costs. Our meeting was, therefore, discreet, to say the least. The danger was likely somewhat less for the queer ethnographer based in the West than the *sasso* living in conditions governed by homonegativity; but it was not safe for either of us.

*Strange Bedfellows: Heteroerotic Entanglements
with Homoerotic Pleasure*

Alajo arrived at the restaurant just in time for dinner. He was decked in a pink polo shirt that was tucked into well-ironed denim pants; he looked splendid for our meeting. Asked why he was so well preened, he rejoined: “Well since I am coming to a four-star hotel, the onus is on me to appear in a fashion befitting of the location, Kwame. You know in Ghana, the guards will ask you to leave if you come in rags, tattered clothes, looking all disheveled.” Alajo was truly articulate, possessing the ability to be lucidly expressive.

Our conversation at dinner ranged from his sexual experiences with men to the uncertainties accompanying being *sasso*. A story he told me left an indelible mark. It was about how a woman in Jamestown proposed that he have sex with her husband.

I was walking on the streets of Jamestown one hot afternoon, to this place called Clubhouse, you’ve been there, right? On my way, a woman, who stood at the entrance of a compound house,¹⁷ hissed at me, gesturing me to come. She had an Adinkra cloth with a Gye Nyame symbol print wrapped around her bosom.¹⁸ As I approached her, she asked me to follow her into her compound. I wondered what was going on, asking myself if the woman was normal. But, I just thought that she was a woman, and that should anything happen at all, I could overpower her. She offered me a bench once I entered the courtyard and a cup of water. She immediately entered her room, returning with a bottle of Coca-Cola to quench my thirst.

Relaxing on the bench together with her, she told me that I was a very handsome, and, in fact, very beautiful man. I delightedly responded to her praise, saying that I knew that. As you know, I get these statements thrown at me all the time by both men and women. In this case, I did not know what the woman’s intentions were. I assumed that she liked me, and that she wanted me to become her boyfriend. But I also held the belief that she was aware I was *sasso*, since I had a lot of friends in this

part of Jamestown, and I hung out with them at Clubhouse almost every night and every other Saturday.

As our conversation grew, the woman finally revealed the reason for her impromptu invitation. She wanted me to become her husband's boyfriend and lover. She did say that she would give me some money if I chose to sleep with him, and also if I established a relationship with him. This request came as a surprise. I knew for a fact that in Jamestown anything could happen, but something like this was all too rare. She asked me if I was interested, and said that she could give me some time to think about it. To this question, I responded in the negative.

In fact, I made up the lie that I had a very jealous boyfriend who would not take kindly to her request. At the time I had been out of school for a couple of years and was ready to return to pursue journalism, too. So, I saw no reason to have any homoerotic relationship, or being embroiled in this love triangle that this woman so desperately suggested. I just couldn't believe that she tried to pay me to sleep with her husband.

Heteroeroticism uneasily intertwined with homoeroticism in this incident. In fact, homoeroticism, as I understood it, was preferred because it preserved the sanctity of heterosexual relationships. By proposing that Alajo become her husband's boyfriend, the woman hoped to sustain her heterosexual bond with her husband. In a milieu where homosexual relationships are forbidden, Alajo did not threaten her heterosexual marriage. Homoerotic dalliances were therefore preferred. If the husband had been in a heteroerotic relationship, the likelihood of him asking for a divorce would have been higher. Arguably, homoeroticism consolidated heterosexual marriage.

The entanglement of homosexuality with heterosexuality here needs magnifying, since these nuances are often obscured by the largely abstract critiques of African homophobia that lose sight of the cultural nuances of sexual and gendered relationships. These critiques are often articulated by Western-based organizations and Western-produced documentaries like *The World's Worst Place to Be Gay?* (Alcock 2011) and even more radical ones like *Call Me Kuchu* (Zouhali-Worrall and Fairfax Wright 2012), both of which imagine in distinct ways how the queer African subject is constantly assailed by homophobic regimes. Similarly, heterosexuality's furtive yet complex entwinement with homoerotic networks, as Alajo's story illuminates, clearly questions the Ghanaian government's normalization of heteromonogamy and the assertion that Ghanaians qua Africans naturally have heterosexual dispositions.