

# Conclusion

## *Queering Queer Africa?*

Queer Africa is much more than Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. It is lazy to always start our queer African narratives with either this French philosopher or his American compatriot. Departures to Jeffrey Weeks, Denis Altman, Gilbert Herdt and Peter Aggleton still fit into western hegemony over queer studies. Sprinkling the menu with Audre Lorde, Sonia Correa or Serena Nanda is a commendable effort but not nearly enough.

—STELLA NYANZI, “QUEERING QUEER AFRICA” (2014, 65)

The contentions generated by queer politics and the desire for queer liberation in postcolonial Africa compel one to ponder what the horizon looks like for queer subjects in Africa. The recent rise in Christian heteronationalism in Ghana, evidenced by attempts among some members of Ghana’s legislature to criminalize LGBT+ identities and activities, bespeaks the treacherous landscapes that queer African activists traverse daily in the contemporary moment. Moreover, they underscore the future of queer political pursuits and the challenges and possibilities they will yield for queer subjects. Like “the color line” in the United States of America, which W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) famously described in his book *Souls of Black Folk* as “the problem of the twentieth century,” might Africa’s problem in the twenty-first century be the problem of the queer line? As I finish this book, for example, Ghana’s speaker of parliament, Alban Bagbin, is relentlessly waging a campaign that will usher in the passage of an anti-LGBT bill in Ghana. At a gathering of politicians, members of the clergy, and the Muslim fraternity, the speaker unapologetically confirmed his support for a bill that he claims will preserve Christian marriage and family values. At the event, Mr. Bagbin publicly stated that “the LGBT+ pandemic is worse than COVID-19.”<sup>1</sup> This Christian heteronationalist assemblage, as it were, calls into question the constitutional provision that mandates the separation of church and state. In this book, I have demonstrated

how the forging of this ideology needs to be situated in the larger heterocolonial project that antedated Ghana's independence. By turning to African philosophy, in particular, Akan philosophy, I have attempted to problematize the claim that homosexuality is un-African.

In a provocative essay in the radical queer African anthology edited by the South African queer scholar Zethu Matebeni entitled *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Sexual and Gender Identities* (2014), the Ugandan gender and feminist scholar Stella Nyanzi unapologetically opens with a warning on how not to study queer Africa. The injunction implicit in Nyanzi's invocation brazenly calls on queer African scholars and non-African queer scholars interested in queer African subjectivities not to always capitulate to Euro-American theoretical framings when there is a bountiful wealth of knowledge and information brimming with so much energy on the continent. This knowledge is life since the lives lived by queer Africans amount to knowledge par excellence. Hence, for Nyanzi, "to queer "Queer Africa," one must simultaneously reclaim Africa in its bold diversities and reinsert queerness" (2014, 65).

In this project, I was drawn to the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye's theory of "amphibious personhood" not because of its theoretical richness but because it provided me with a language to illuminate self-making practices of sasso, the bodies whose experiences animate this book. To understand amphibious personhood drawing on sasso lives and to understand sasso engaging with the theory of amphibious personhood exemplifies what it means to employ Africa to think "queerly" in a world interminably adumbrated by universalizing Western tendencies that bleed African/Queer bodies both experientially and intellectually.

I explored how sasso worlds are entangled with larger worlds. I approached the subject as a self-identified queer Ghanaian confronting the same historic and ethnographic dilemmas and scenes that form the backdrop of sasso lives. Unlike sasso, however, I am an anthropologist based in the West, enjoying the uneven benefits of queer freedom oft undercut by anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant sentiment, and increasingly virulent homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia. Some might ask: who am I to write a book on sasso? My response would be that sasso worlds are worlds that commingle with other worlds. These worlds are scrambled by a colonial history that molded contemporary Africans into the subjects that they are today, or, in Lisa Lowe's words, "the connections, relations, and mixings among the histories of Asian, African, and indigenous peoples" (2015, 2). The increased same-sex visibility politics and homonegativity amid changing Christian and uneven neoliberal geographies of exclusion and privilege are altering the meanings and conventions of sexual citizenship in neoliberal Ghana. I make a key theoretical intervention by demonstrating how and why sasso are amphibious subjects trudging precarious terrains.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As a queer ethnographer conducting queer ethnography in a context that yields ambivalent responses to all things queer, I have rediscovered myself through my interactions with *sasso* in ways I could never have imagined. The *sasso* whose worlds entangled with mine in the process of this ethnographic journey—for example, Hillary and Kissi, all of blessed memory, and Kobby, who now resides in the United States—shaped my understanding of knowing where, when, and how to be *sasso* in this uncertain context. Having embraced me within their fold and accepted me as part of the *sasso* community, these *sasso* were, indeed, subjects who logically engaged with their worlds, nourishing me with ideas and experiences on which the ethnographic and philosophical foundations of this book are erected. I can never say enough about how much influence they have had on me not merely as interlocutors but also as teachers and theorists whose sharp and penetrative insights have allowed me to plot the various ethnographic and theoretical coordinates of this book. What I dare say here is that these *sasso* led me to discover the amphibious subject. In fact, they championed the cause that compelled me to imagine myself as an amphibious subject.

I participated in the lifeworlds of *sasso* in Jamestown, a low-income suburb of Accra, to understand how their lives questioned the tenuous politics of LGBT+ visibility. As amphibious subjects, their way of being in the world and becoming sexual citizens raised questions about the impacts of the Global North-based identitarian politics on their lives. The activities of LGBT+ human rights organizations heightened existing laws that criminalized homosexuality. Sexual minorities such as *sasso*, whose livelihoods depend on selling food, hairdressing, tailoring, working in health care, advocating for human rights, and doing HIV/AIDS outreach, were disproportionately affected by these transitions. Amid the shifts impelled by same-sex visibility politics in Africa, as well as the reactions against these shifts, *sasso* continue to adopt amphibious strategies in order to navigate the limits of the contested politics of queer self-making. As amphibious subjects, their lives also reveal that the epistemic collusion between the state and LGBT+ human rights organizations was total, yet yielded implications that were articulated differently (Massad 2007).

The contours of this book compel us to reexamine Africa, as a discursive and ontological space, and sexuality and race-making as processes that are entwined with the multiplex dimensions of Africa both as trope and as “reality.” My insistence on exploring the place of sexuality and race in neoliberal Ghana brings to bear not only the impoverished analysis of race in Africa, but also the extent to which sub-Saharan Africa, that crucible of racialization and of racial difference, remains invisible in race studies. Thus, like Jemima Pierre (2013), who deploys race-craft to capture articulations of race in postcolonial Ghana, I argue that race in Africa needs to be conceived of as linked to racial projects in the African diaspora. These

projects are scenes of power that on the surface appear benign yet have invidious consequences, what David Theo Goldberg (2008, 1) terms “racial neoliberalism.” If transnational human rights activism historically began in the guise of civilizing and Christian missionary complexes (Otu 2017), which are racial projects that cemented white supremacy, then we need a transnational/transgeopolitical and transhistorical analysis of Blackness and of the politics of rescue announced by these projects in the present context. These shifts are reminiscent of what Jacqui Alexander captures evocatively in her reminder to us that

in the linear technology of time, tradition displaces the neocolonial and modernity displaces the neoimperial as preferred terms. Since both neocolonial and neo-imperial states work, albeit asymmetrically, through colonial time and simultaneously through Christian neoliberal financial time—organized under the auspices of global capital interests and lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—our task is to move practices of neocolonialism within the ambit of modernity, and to move those of colonialism into neocolonialism, reckoning, in other words, with palimpsestic time. (2005, 215)

The workings of the neocolonial, the neoliberal, and the neo-imperial become palpable when one observes the shifts wrought by the increased visibility of LGBT+ human rights politics on sasso and LGBT+ communities nestled in the neocolonial formation known as Ghana. Foregrounding sasso experiences, for example, through the globalized racial framework that Pierre (2013) calls for, as well as Alexander’s conceptualization of the techniques of racist/imperial time, allows us to also consider how queering queer Africa can be a useful theoretical intervention. A race-based framework that explores Black/African people’s relationship to desire and intimacy has been limited to the African diaspora, which is conceived as that fraught geopolitical context where racial formations persist. Would a race-based analysis of the queer liberal politics unfolding in Africa writ large and Ghana in particular allow us to see the manifold ways in which racialization functions to undercut Black/African lives? The accounts I have offered here respond to Pierre’s frustration by illuminating the coeval presence of racial projects that occur in African and its myriad diasporas. They shed light on the extent to which “white saviorism” enacted through LGBT+ human rights activism not only perpetuates whiteness as the solution to the world’s ills, but as a superior state of being. Therefore, this ethnography on sexual citizenship is simultaneously an ethnographic inquiry on race, and the extent to which neoliberal formations, by proliferating discourses and epistemes of freedom, liberation, and emancipation, engender vulnerability and marginalization.

Sasso participation in these formations is freighted by a tension deserving of analytical attention. Not merely plugged into NGOs such as BURJ, which interacts with embassies like the American and Dutch foreign missions in Ghana, sasso are embedded in global and local circuits of sexual citizenship and race-making. And with the social media boom, with interfaces such as Facebook, Instagram,

and Twitter, *sasso* more and more are becoming global in ways that minimize the vernacular label *sasso*, which is rarely deployed on these internet-mediated platforms. How are we to imagine *sasso* as new privileged subjects who are also burdened by heightening homonegativity and a neoliberal ferment that continues to create economic peril in the postcolonial nation-state? In what ways should we fathom *sasso* amphibious subjectivity as at once unsettling normative systems and consolidating them? For instance, how does their presence in Ghana emphasize the failure of heteronormativity, whereby such failure is generative? *Sasso* experiences permit us to interrogate heterosexual and homosexual citizenships as forms that limit their ontological existence in neoliberal times. Furthermore, their lives, by shedding light on the story of race-making and sexual citizenship-making in postcolonial Ghana, also reveal the extent to which these are contingent processes that are also deeply historically situated and expose the connections between the nation-state and LGBT+ human rights politics.

Hence, rather than concentrate merely on critiquing the invisibility politics tied to state-sanctioned homonegativity, we must explore how turns to visibility and liberation have violent undemocratic legacies. The Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi, responding to Western feminists' perspective that veiling is oppressive, reminds us that "veiling and nakedness are two sides of the same coin" (1997, 140). Extending El-Saadawi's reading further, it is apparent that the increased visibility of LGBT+ politics in sub-Saharan Africa nourishes unprecedented invisibility for sexual minorities. Thus, visibility, as *sasso* lives suggest, can be dangerous, especially when it is framed within the ideological architecture of freedom and liberty—projects and designs that have long been antithetical to Black and queer lives. The queer theorist of color Chandan Reddy (2011) makes this connection apparent when he suggests that Western notions and practices of freedom have always consistently required violence, foregrounding the entanglement of liberation and violence.

Ethnographic inquiries, development and public health NGO interventions, and theoretical formulations need to question the persistent racialization of all issues in Africa. In the case of this study, the idea that queer liberalism epitomizes the zenith of a country's development is a crucial assumption that needs to be unsettled. As we interrogate the evolutionary myth that queer tolerance is the new civility, we should equally be attentive to how parallel organizations founded by local activists straddle the thin and uneven geographies of neoliberal human rights environments. For example, since I completed this fieldwork, several local organizations have emerged in Ghana that attend specifically to LGBT+ human rights issues, especially in the area of public health and social justice.

Several organizations stand out. They are Priorities on Rights and Sexual Health (PORSH), established in 2015, which is run by a *sasso*, and LGBT+ Rights Ghana, which is led by one of the most outspoken self-identified gay men in Ghana, Alex Donkor, who has a strong online presence and following.<sup>2</sup> There are

also now organizations like the SOLACE Initiative, Rightify Ghana, Courageous Sisters Ghana (CSG), and Alliance for Equality and Diversity (AfED),<sup>3</sup> all of which have emerged since the completion of my ethnography. The emergence of these organizations demonstrates the urgency of LGBT+ human rights at a time when the heteronational state together with organizations such as the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV) launch aggressive anti-LGBT+ campaigns in Ghana. As I complete this book, there are efforts to enact laws that criminalize not only being LGBT+ but also engaging in LGBT+ advocacy.<sup>4</sup> In spite of the unfolding homophobic trepidations and onslaughts, these LGBT+ and their allied organizations have revolutionized their outreach by actively utilizing social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, providing them with a global audience and following. Both PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana are not only committed to sasso, but also to trans rights and the rights of intersex people.

Unlike BURJ, PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana staff are a mix of sasso and self-identified LGBT+s with allies that work with them. They have solid networks with health officials in designated hospitals who provide services for sasso if need be. These health officials, unlike those in other hospitals, do not draw on Christian tropes to refuse service to sasso or embarrass them. The emergence of PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana are therefore effective examples of how sasso are beginning to enter the world of LGBT+ human rights organizing and politics on their own terms. Representing a generation of young Ghanaian queer women, men, nonbinary, and trans folk who are advocating for their visibility and rights, thus undermining the violence of a homophobia rooted in heteronationalism and concomitant Christianity, these organizations have made outstanding progress. Not only have they attracted international attention, but are also run by members who boldly claim LGBT+ identification or regard themselves as allies.

While their appearance on this stage is tricky, I contend that their approach to LGBT+ human rights from below has had transformative potential, especially as they are familiar with and knowledgeable about the complexity of the worlds in which sasso are nested. PORSH has attracted young Ghanaians by actively reaching out to them and providing them with critical human rights language to start a movement. If mainstream LGBT+ human rights projects, as I have revealed in this book, form part of race-liberal orders, then as Melamed indicates, their universalizing overtures are sometimes resisted and overcome by “subjects, epistemes, and cultural formations” that they have produced (2011, 47). PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana are undoubtedly a logical response to the increased visibility of LGBT+ human rights projects, ambivalently refusing to be assimilated, formalized, or obstructed by those LGBT+ human rights projects that are ancillaries of race-liberal orders. To be clear, these are organizations that determine their own representation, involving sasso and members of the LGBT+ community in Ghana.

I hope that this book has opened, or will open, a vista through which to explore the consequences on *sasso* of the unimagined entanglements between LGBT+ human rights politics and state and religion-sanctioned homophobia in neoliberal Ghana. Indeed, here are communities that are not merely amphibious, but constantly embroiled in projects that at once validate and invalidate their humanity and existence in a neoliberal world. These formations equally enforce modes of governance and power that punctuate queer self-making in neoliberal margins. In these peripheral zones, radical worlds, such as those that convene around amphibious subjectivity, are always constituted and decomposed.

Moreover, the communities *sasso* reside in are also places of world-, self-, and freedom-making that are dense and tense scenes of queer self-fashioning. They are domains where queering queer Africa, to once again return to Stella Nyanzi's provocative remark, occurs. One might ask about some of the ways that organizations like PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana, SOLACE Initiative, Rightify Ghana, Courageous Sisters Ghana, unlike BURJ or AIDSPAN, are engaging in projects that "queer" queer Africa. I am of the view that by their very existence in a state of uncertainty overseen by a heteronationalist government navigating the collusion between neoliberalism and neocolonialism, these organizations, despite their unique and familiar shortcomings, forge livable spaces where queer Ghanaians both converge and commiserate.

For example, they capitalize on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and especially WhatsApp to apprise themselves of the happenings occurring in and outside of the community, what affects members of the queer community, and what both PORSH and LGBT+ Rights Ghana can do to create and sustain a safer space for all involved, including nonqueer members. Some if not most members of the *sasso* community are now involved in these activities, making one wonder whether LGBT+ categories will subsume *sasso* in the future or not. Does queering queer Africa as a project, practice, experience, and epistemology also entail retaining these vernacular formations of queerness such as the ones *sasso* embody and live? Will *sasso* be here ten years from the publication of this book? Are *sasso*, by entering the categories LGBT+, changing how the desires, intimacies, and identities attached to those categories are imagined, felt, embodied, thought, and performed? In sum, how are they engaging either overtly or covertly in queering queer Africa?