Ethnography Interruptus

I first became aware of what I call the contact zone between young Atlantic African men and their European lovers when one of my white gay friends in Oakland, California—"Johnny"—sold his house, located one block from mine, at the nadir of the recent U.S. housing recession, to move to Africa to live with his married-to-a-woman boyfriend. The two had met online.

Johnny's boyfriend, whom I shall call Justice, was a jack-of-all-trades, a bodybuilder in his late thirties, and the son of a prominent local shrine priestess, a practitioner of traditional African religion. Justice spoke English but was illiterate, so he had had to hire a "typist" to chat online. My American friend, in his midforties, was a slender computer wiz, long out as a gay man—with a particular attraction to black men. In current parlance, Johnny had a fetish for black men.[1]

There was not much of a visible gay community in the country to which Johnny moved, one I shall not identify in this book. Colonial sodomy statutes continued to make male-male sex illegal and were occasionally enforced with jail time and (for

foreigners) deportation. And local nationalists and Pentecostal Christians increasingly attacked homosexuality as un-African and sinful, as a measure of everything that had gone wrong in recent years. Homosexuality had become a topic for conversation on local radio programs, in newspapers, and in national and international politics.[2] But so far that reaction had not been nearly as extreme as that in Uganda, for example.

As I thought about the sheer improbability of Johnny's coupling, the shock of the present came into focus: it was not only that capitalist media had produced time-space compression of the type analyzed by Marxists like David Harvey (1990). It was also that multiplying and differentiating underground libidinal networks, long localized, had come to the surface and were beginning to connect and interact across the globe (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999).

Neither of these linked transformations, the time-space compression created by capital nor the explosion of differentiating erotic networks, had occurred evenly across space. Because of an ocean-floor cable off the Atlantic African coast and Moore's law that the number of transistors that can be situated on a silicon slice doubles every two years (thereby making computers quickly out-of-date in the capitalist cores but still exportable as secondhand products to the peripheries), the Internet has reached neighborhoods like Justice and Johnny's (for an example, see Burrell 2012). In doing so, it has begun to link people with radically different definitions of the erotic, roles to be taken in sex, and, not least, in love—to dramatically extend and to some degree reterritorialize the "contact zone."

From one point of view, this development has increased the possibilities for love, since the range of possible partners has been so expanded (Baym 2010; Kaufmann 2012). But this very

growth has also encouraged a greater specialization of desire. In such a context, sexual fetishes have flourished. Gay Internet sites, for example, sometimes invite participants to list their fetishes—in addition to age, race, body type, and role in sex. But this specialization of desire has also been surrounded by new auras of uncertainty, for Internet "romance scams" and other so-called 419 schemes (a Nigerian phrase from the numbered section of that country's law on fraud) have also blossomed, so much so that U.S. embassies abroad regularly warn of them. After all, the Internet is disembedded from face-to-face channels of communication such as gesture and body language that can confirm (or call into question) truth and sincerity.

As we shall see, the idea of scam—like that of corruption, to which it is related—is defined from a certain (external) point of view. A condemnation from an "outside," the idea of scam can almost always be reenvisioned as an ethical, or at least acceptable, component of the core values of a contrastive "inside." This relativity will become clearer in the presentation of materials to follow.

As soon as I could, I paid a vacation visit to Johnny in his new setting, to discover a working-class urban neighborhood of perhaps four to five thousand in an Atlantic African city, a neighborhood that had started out as something of a traditional village with its own fields far from the city but that had recently been surrounded by expanding, much more expensive suburban housing—villas with high fences and gates. Because the neighborhood, with its much denser settlement, traditional architecture, and open sewers, stood out so clearly from its social surroundings, local inhabitants referred to it in English as the "ghetto."

Inside, relationships between local men and European, North American, and Australian gay men were a kind of open secret.

As many as eight or nine white gay foreigners had, in fact, built second-story rooms above their African lovers' family homes. One German man had built an entirely new three-story home on the urban land of his African lover's family. Before readers assume that these represent recent developments, I should mention Stephanie Newell's (2006) work on a British palm oil trader and writer, whom we would now call gay, in early twentieth-century Nigeria. John Stuart-Young integrated himself into the community by building a second-story room over his Nigerian lover's family house.[3] To sum up, in Johnny and Justice's new neighborhood, anyone could look out over the hillside and "see" same-sex sex—even if they were not supposed to comment publicly upon it.

I found this scene fascinating. At the time, I knew of nothing like it in the African literature.[4] I began to prepare for a year of fieldwork. Back home, I completed the bureaucratic processes necessary for a preliminary project to interview five African men looking for or with foreign white lovers and, if I could find them, five foreigners with or looking for African lovers. I carried out these interviews in August and September 2012.

Strikingly, African men typically represented their European relationships with respect to commodities.[5] If many white gay men came to Africa propelled by the fetishism of race, African men seemed to meet them with what Marx called the fetishism of commodities. One young man was proud to show me, on his cell phone, a picture of himself and his Australian lover, seated on a couch holding hands, in an otherwise unfurnished room, surrounded by unpacked boxes full of household items. His lover had bought them a newly built house in a suburb farther out, but with his lover back in Australia, in the job that paid for all these commodities, and with social life in the new development

so limited, the African man often returned to his original neighborhood—where I happened to meet him in a bar.

Photographic images assumed an outsize role for African men. One young man in his early twenties with a German lover in his forties insisted on taking me to his home to show me albums of pictures from a trip to Germany. There was one in which he was decked out in full gear, such as one might see in a gay leather bar in Berlin or San Francisco. Another African man in his late forties had legally partnered with his German lover, an owner of a gay bar in Hamburg, where they both lived and worked for most of the year.[6] The man with the German husband happened to be visiting his wife and grown children in the ghetto while I was there. He kept an automobile in Africa and, as more than one of his neighbors pointed out to me, he had returned to Africa on a German passport. The car and the passport were more than objects. They were icons of success.

Many of the relationships between Africans and foreigners (though not the last one mentioned) had begun in Internet cafés, of which there were many in the ghetto. One or two (before being closed by the police shortly before I arrived) were entirely devoted to young African men educating themselves about Western gay customs, all the way from the difference between tops and bottoms to sadomasochism and master/slave relationships. The principal primer used was gay male pornography, typically viewed while young men also trawled multiple gay Internet dating sites, looking to chat with foreigners. What did Western gay men want? African young men made themselves experts on that question.[7]

Given the local unemployment rate for young men, it was not as if those hours in Internet cafés could necessarily have been spent more productively elsewhere. That time—late into

the night, when more foreigners were signed on and when café rates went down—was sometimes devoted to outright scams. After hours of chatting with a lonely older gay man, it was not unusual for the African partner to ask for airfare to visit abroad. I interviewed one older gay man in Oregon who had sent more than $2,000 for this purpose. When the young man disappeared, the man in Oregon felt humiliated because he had known about such schemes, and he still had allowed himself to be used. Two thousand dollars was, of course, a considerable amount in the ghetto and only reinforced the notion that computers could dramatically change lives.

Digital connection, however, produced more than 419 schemes. As we have seen, real relationships and certainly a fair amount of reportedly enthusiastic same-sex sex, in all kinds of combinations and permutations, also took place. Rather than Africans traveling abroad, it was more common for foreign gay men to come to Africa for a visit.[8] Their new African friend usually acted as a tour guide, with the two visiting the usual tourist sites, staying in the same hotels, sleeping in the same bed. Such tours usually covered several countries and nearly always included the rain forest, "the jungle," and, on the Atlantic coast, slave castles, those holding pens that had sent more than twelve million African slaves to the New World. African American tourists experienced the castles as sites for mourning and for reconnecting to their cultural roots (Holsey 2008). Some gay white tourists, I shall suggest, had surprisingly different associations.

Given the link between computers and huge but mysterious rewards, both the Internet and same-sex sex were associated with the occult. Both were transgressions, according to Christians, used to access illicit wealth. It was widely believed, for

example, that young men in the neighborhood used charms and spells, provided either by local Koranic scholars *(mallams)* or traditional African shrine priests, to attract foreigners through computers. And it was precisely such evil—pacts with the devil, according to Pentecostal Christians—that were continually denounced in the large and loudspeaker-enhanced churches that ringed the ghetto (denunciations that probably also produced desire).

It was not, of course, only foreign men that were sought. Foreign women were also the object of African attention. One slightly built man in his late forties in the neighborhood confided in me: "You know, this search for a white man is not working out for me. Can you help me find a white woman?" As one young man explained, it was more difficult to attract women on the Internet. Immediate and direct appeals to sex rarely worked (as they did with men). It took more time to reassure, to entice, to romance. Such was more likely to produce results in face-to-face interactions with female tourists to West Africa.

The search for a foreign partner, whether male or female, took place in a setting in which traditional marriage between African men and African women was coming under considerable pressure. Given the unemployment produced by structural adjustment programs, uneducated urban men found it difficult to command the economic resources to support wives and children. Some men in the previous generation had been lucky enough to procure low-paying but secure government jobs. Their sons had been thrown back entirely into the hustle of the informal sector—the very concept of which was invented by Keith Hart (1973, 74) to describe a West African slum: "Nima is notorious for its lack of respectability, for the dominance of a criminal element, and for the provision of those goods and

services usually associated with any major city's 'red-light district.' In this environment, the availability of certain illegitimate means (particularly of a casual, rather than a professional kind) is scarcely less than infinite; moreover these activities, while recognized as illegal, and therefore somewhat risky, meet with little of the opprobrium found elsewhere in the city."

Johnny and Justice's neighborhood had some of the same qualities. The 2010s had become even more economically challenging than the 1960s described by Hart.[9] Given that change, a number of men in their late forties in Johnny's neighborhood had never married (and therefore probably never would). They were the local epitome of social failure. They were teased in my presence, and without descendants, they would, for example, never be given showy funerals—the rite that defined, finally, a good life.

It was in this context that male-male relationships with foreigners had begun to subsidize traditional marriage. With increased resources flowing to the African man and his family, the pressures to marry a local woman became irresistible. Even if a foreign gay partner objected, it was not too difficult to conceal a young wife's presence, since, unlike Johnny, most visited for, at most, only a few months out of the year.

After I had returned home from what seemed a remarkably successful three weeks of study, Johnny visited California the following Christmas. I was taken aback to learn that his boyfriend's mother, the shrine priestess, had instructed Johnny that the gods were unhappy with the questions I was asking. Given his commitments to his new family, Johnny said he could not be seen with me again in the neighborhood.

At first, I interpreted the mother's concern as one of protecting local young men—an issue with which I was intensely

concerned. But more reflection raised the possibility that the mother wanted to bring me into her orbit and to repair the relationship between the gods and myself (as she had done many times with Johnny).

In any case, I realized that the gods might have a more clear-sighted view of the risks involved in this research than the encouraging young men whom I had just interviewed. The latter were remarkably open and candid about the most intimate details of their own and their neighbors' lives. But how much did this forthrightness spring from the hope—no matter how much I explained about academic research and writing a book—that what had brought me to Africa was an attempt to find a lover? So many other white gay men had preceded me that strangers in the street openly flirted with me (a man in his late sixties). They winked and rubbed the palm of my hand with a bent finger when we shook hands.

I thought about what additional ethnographic work would entail. The more I learned, the more local my focus would become, and therefore the more difficult it would be to disguise location. And, of course, there was the local reaction against "homosexuality." I did not want to precipitate a sex panic that would endanger the men who helped me.

I finally decided that what fascinated me was not so much the deepening of ethnographic detail. It was the construction of a theoretical approach that would make sense of such a provocative case—as well as all others I could envision. To my knowledge, no such system existed. In a short period of time, I had collected remarkable materials—so unusual for Africa that I probably would not have believed them without gathering them myself. And Johnny remained a crucial interlocutor, first from

afar and then again in California when he temporarily moved back in 2016. After consulting Johnny, I decided I could keep the promises of anonymity to those who had helped me by locating them, only inexactly, in "Atlantic Africa," that narrow strip of the coast from present-day Senegal to Angola that had been in interaction with Europe for over five centuries.

The more I investigated the history of Atlantic Africa, the more I came to realize that it provided, in fact, the keys to my theoretical conundrum. Eventually, I went from Atlantic Africa back to Europe and the United States to question the very notion of sexuality. At its most ambitious, this essay aims to explode Western notions in order to reconstruct the erotic commitments, the fetishes, of social actors across the *longue durée*.