

Haunted Airports and Sexual Anxieties in Nana Nyarko Boateng's "Swallowing Ice"

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Abstract

This essay argues that the airport is an international borderland where the nation attempts to position itself within the futural orientation of transit while also making gestures to cement its sovereignty. Drawing on Ghanaian writer Nana Nyarko Boateng's short story, "Swallowing Ice", which tells the story of two women French-kissing at the airport in Accra, the essay interrogates how the airport's embodiment of a kind of transit future is destabilised by the haunting of the present and past of the nation-state. Using Ayo Coly's notion of "postcolonial hauntology", I argue that non-heteronormative sexualities and the anxieties they generate form part of a historical continuum that is haunted by colonialist impositions on sexuality. Ultimately, the airport in "Swallowing Ice" functions as a stage on which same-sex desires and intimacies destabilise the nation's imaginaries of itself.

Welcome!! Akwaaba!! Ghana warmly welcomes all visitors of goodwill. Ghana does not welcome paedophiles [sic] and other sexual deviants [in red font]. Indeed [sic] Ghana imposes extremely harsh penalties on such sexually aberrant behaviour. If you are in Ghana for such activity, then for everyone's good, including your own, we suggest you go elsewhere.¹

International airports are the structural representation of a nation-state's geographical limits. Thus, to encounter the words above, as Kwame Otu did in 2012 on a sign at Kotoka International Airport (KIA) in Accra, Ghana, indicates that the nation-state into which he was entering placed a particular significance on sexual practices and identities. The sign, created by the Ghana Tourism Industry, sought to inform visitors and Ghanaians re-entering the country that "sexual deviants",

a category into which the nation-state “slots ‘homosexuals,’” were not welcome in Ghana (Otu, 2022: 2). Further, the ambiguous language of the sign, as Otu points out, is exemplified in the sentence, “Ghana does not welcome paedophiles [sic] and other sexual deviants”, written in a distinctive red colour which focalises sexual practices and identities as a primary concern of the Ghanaian nation-state (Otu, 2022: 3). The sign simultaneously communicates that the limits of Ghana’s hospitality are intertwined with sexual practices and identities, even as it transmits unclear parameters for acceptable sexual behaviour within the borders of the Ghanaian nation-state. Removed during a multi-year renovation at KIA, the sign’s institutionalisation of sexual ambiguities and anxieties haunts the airport, notwithstanding its vision of becoming the preferred aviation hub for West Africa.

Signs (such as the above) reinforce the airport as a site where the nation-state attempts to define the limits of its territory and the ideologies that underpin its national identity. They place sexual identities and practices at the core of the nation’s imaginary of itself, scripting sexuality into its ideologies. As the writer Pico Iyer puts it, the airport is the nation’s “business card and its handshake” (2000: 46). As a space that regulates human and material access into the nation, the airport establishes the real and symbolic boundaries around which the nation converges and diverges. In this way, technologies of travel and mobility bear significant implications for understanding national histories and aspirations. And in the case of KIA, the convergence of anxieties around sexual practices and desires at the airport permits a closer examination of how the airport entwines national identity with sexuality. Further, the airport as a technological space that connects the nation to the world often contradicts the nation’s ideologies and imaginaries of itself as a sovereign state. In this essay, I examine Ghanaian writer Nana Nyarko Boateng’s short story, “Swallowing Ice”, which stages a confrontation with the nation’s view of sexuality, forcing onto this nation-defining space the sexual identities and expressions that the sign above describes as “deviant”. Published in *Lusaka Punk and Other Stories: The Caine Prize for African Writing 2015*, the story highlights how these non-heteronormative sexualities and the anxieties they generate form part of a historical continuum that is haunted by colonialist impositions on sexuality. The airport in “Swallowing Ice” functions as a stage on which same-sex desires and intimacies destabilise the nation’s imaginaries of itself.

Transit Past and Futures

Transit technologies and their attendant infrastructure play a critical role in Afro- and African-futurist texts. Africanfuturism, for instance, appropriates local and indigenous forms of transit that range from knowledge of walking in the deserts and through forests, to the ability to fly, as well as forms of transit brought by European imperialism such as the slave ship, the public bus, the train, and the airport. Africanfuturism's appropriations localise or fundamentally change these multiple forms of transit, imbuing them with a temporal futurity that allows them to be sites where the work of speculation and invention can take place. As borderland zones, these transit sites, and particularly airports, operate through a series of binaries that sort, through spatial ordering, citizen from foreigner, insider from outsider, departures from arrivals (Fuller and Harley, 2004). Through the management of the flow of goods and people into and out of the space-time of the nation-state, the airport also shapes and reshapes perception of time. Irrespective of where it is located geographically, the airport marks an ever-approaching future and a present steadily transforming into the past. It is the site where our future arrival and our current locality converge.

The airport, however, must be considered within a genealogy of transit technology and infrastructure in Africa. The train, automobile, and later, the airplane all marked, at different points, the attainment of a seemingly futuristic technology that changed the way that people moved through space and time. In early African literature, the “cars, trains and aeroplanes without number”, as the young protagonist of Mongo Beti's 1956 novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* puts it, were imagined by colonised people as the ultimate symbol of European technological modernity (Beti, 1971: 47). The airplane and its attendant infrastructure, the airport, exemplified the transposition of the future into the present. In the early 20th century and onwards, aviation captivated the world and marked a transition into a new world order. It made it possible to see the world from an aerial vantage, instituting a perspective that trained people to perceive themselves as global citizens (Schwartz, 2014: 28). Put more succinctly, contestations over the future, or the imaginaries of the future in Africa, became indubitably tied to transit. This meant that colonial modernity, as a forebearer to global modernity, emphasised infrastructure as a fundamental signifier of civilisation (previously called the civilising mission). Africa's admission into “global modernity” was often reduced to the presence or

absence of constructed environments (such as airports, roads, and rail lines) which were seen as the primary measure of development (Iheka, 2018: 10). This has resulted in a trend where most governments in pursuit of developmental agendas invest more in structures targeted towards an elite minority, such as airports, than in other, more vital infrastructural enterprises such as hospitals.²

Beyond the vast resources directed towards transit hubs like airports, there exist particular forms of gratuitous and structural violence endemic to these transit hubs and technologies, such as interrogations, intrusive searches, and intimidation by state and private security firms. In other words, despite the persisting forms of violence that airports engender, they remain a necessary structure of mobility and global travel. Even in imaginaries of the future, where writers attempt to “reintegrate people of colour into the discussion of cyberculture, modern science, technology, and science fiction”, this “reintegration” does not cause the violence of racism or sexism experienced in these spaces to disappear (Womack, 2013: 17). In the imaginaries of writers such as Nnedi Okorafor or Nana Nyarko Boateng, the airport and other transit technologies become spaces to intervene in the structures and ideologies that enact violence on African travellers without erasing the historical forces, as well as the local and international power hierarchies, that govern these spaces.

Thus, Africanfuturism (one word), in its narrative form, contends, not only with the technologies of travel but also with the “interactions experienced or represented within those spaces” (Caprotti, 2011: 384). Africanfuturism, as defined by Nnedi Okorafor in her blog post of October 19, 2019, “Africanfuturism Defined”, foregrounds a rootedness in African geopolitical spaces, traditions, cultures, and cosmologies, but is also deeply “concerned with visions of the future,” and is fundamentally “interested in technology” (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). Yet Okorafor’s insistence on a fidelity to Africa warrants questions about the relationship between mobility and Africanfuturism. In her own works, mobility is foundational to imaginaries of the future. For instance, in her trilogy, *Binti* (2020), the protagonist must pass through an airport-like space to board a spaceship to her university, and more recognisably in the graphic novel, *LaGuardia* (2019), the airport’s delineation between citizens, foreigners, and aliens lays the foundation for the central conflict. In these worlds, the airport and its imaginative progeny are part of a technological landscape of transit and mobility, as well as its violent contradictory underbelly.

Boateng's short story, "Swallowing Ice", in its realist interpretation of the possible chain of events that might be set in motion in the wake of two Ghanaian women French-kissing at the airport, might not on the surface meet the criteria for the narratives that fall within futurist genres. Yet, it is, nonetheless, a story that is invested in the geopolitical space of the continent and envisions a future that is conditioned by the past and present of an African nation. I interpret Jane Bryce's description of African speculative fiction and futurism as "textually multi-valent" works that address the "social real" through "the fantastical, the grotesque, and the other-worldly" as applicable to Boateng's story (Bryce, 2019: 9). The story experiments with layered narrative perspectives to interrogate same-sex practices and desire as entwined with the airport as a technological transit centre. This, in part, justifies my reading of the story through a futurist lens. Additionally, the story seeks to imagine a parallel world where the debates about same-sex intimacies are not focalised around unnamed and unknown others, but on the lives of Ghanaians living in Ghana and abroad.

"Swallowing Ice" takes advantage of the temporal convergences at the airport to interrogate the ongoing debates around same-sex desire and sexuality in Ghana. For those well-versed in Ghanaian political history, KIA is a rather auspicious setting because it played a crucial role in the reimagining of the modern Ghanaian nation-state after its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was ousted from power. While the airport had held significance for Nkrumah's vision of modernisation and nation-building for independent Ghana³, after the 1966 coup d'état that removed him from power, it became the death place of one of the military leaders responsible for that coup d'état, Lieutenant General Emmanuel Kwasi Kotoka. Kotoka was killed at the forecourt of the airport (now the domestic Terminals One and Two) in a subsequent, failed coup attempt, and the airport was subsequently renamed Kotoka International Airport. That this stage where the drama of decolonisation and its afterlives unfolded is also, in 2015, imagined to be the ground zero of another struggle for how the nation defines itself, this time in opposition to same-sex sexualities, invokes what Ayo Coly describes as "postcolonial hauntology" (Coly, 2019). Drawing from Derrida's (2006) concept of hauntology and what Coly refers to as "Fanon's amendment", Coly argues that Fanonian hauntology points to the repeated and inescapable presence of colonial epistemologies in postcolonial subjectivities (Coly, 2019: 14). Depicting the ways postcolonial discourse and

literature have been unable to overcome the overdetermining of the African female body with aberrant sexual excess, Coly frames the discursive remains of colonial epistemologies, which underscore discursive practices around the African female body and sexuality, as a haunting. For example, Coly argues that one such haunting is an “angst about the female body” that sustains the “tentative engagements of African women with the sexual female body” (Coly, 2019: 3). What emerges in “Swallowing Ice” is a future haunted by both a deep and forgotten past where sexuality was not defined by colonial epistemologies, and a recent past where the ongoing trauma of colonialism is mixed with a religious zeal that seeks to define the future of the nation through the complex terrain of sexuality.

Haunted Airports and Imaginaries of Sexual (Un)Freedom

Boateng’s “Swallowing Ice” depicts the airport as a site haunted by the nation’s multiple histories and imaginaries. It is both a microcosm of the nation where its curated identity and aspirations are on display, and a palimpsest where the older vestiges of British colonialism are entangled with postcolonial aspirations of global significance through a tourism-driven neoliberal economy. Brema, the protagonist of “Swallowing Ice”, works as a journalist who invents the news. This speculative act allows Brema to explore other possible timelines in which the nation-state’s stance on sexuality and sexual expression is interrogated at the airport. The airport is an apt setting for inventing this future as it remains an important site for the struggle over the identity of the nation. In other words, the airport is the site where the nation’s struggle over its global future is visible in the discursive framing of the nation’s image. In “Swallowing Ice”, the future of the nation brushes up against its present and past, creating a kind of palimpsestic memory, where the traces of the past surface in the present to haunt the future.

In the unfolding drama that pitches the two women against the mob and the state, Boateng’s short story complicates the nation-state and its self-fashioning at the airport by bringing to the fore questions of sexuality and sexual practices that are seemingly unimaginable (Boateng, 2015: 159-60). The airport’s shiny façade, through which the nation stakes its self-image and ideologies (however problematic and ambiguous), forms the backdrop upon which the spectrum of sexuality that exists within the nation can be put on display. Brema’s invented story, or story within a story, is about two women, Miss Serwaa Boadu and Miss

Jane Owusu, who are attacked by a mob at the arrivals hall at KIA for French kissing. The story – written under the pseudonym Vivian Quack and entitled “Gayism at KIA—Two Arrested!” – reports on an incident at KIA where two women were attacked by a mob. By staging this display of same-sex intimacy in the public sphere of the airport, Boateng unshrouds and forces into the public space the seemingly hidden, non-heteronormative sexualities that the nation seeks to define as “aberrant”.

Two persons have been arrested for allegedly committing lesbian acts at Kotoka International Airport.... The alleged incident occurred on the evening of 17 May 2013, a few minutes after Miss Boadu’s plane landed at KIA from the US. As soon as Miss Boadu got to the arrival hall, Miss Owusu ran and went to embrace her, after which they were seen French kissing, much to the shock and disgust of the crowd, who had gathered at the arrival hall (Boateng, 2015:159-160).

The so-called “lesbian acts” as a shorthand for non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality and sexual desire in the airport removes the secrecy that renders “hidden and unspoken” the sexual practices that the sign with which this essay begins seeks to disavow (Mwangi, 2009: 189; Otu, 2020: 222; Dankwa, 2021: 4-6). Same-sex intimacy at the airport, especially at the arrivals hall where a microcosm of the nation watches, amounts to acting out in public something that is supposed to exist only in the dark, hidden realm of secrets. As the state has a “monopoly on the legitimate use” of violence, the crowd’s threat of violence, suggested by the visible presentation of “shock and disgust,” positions them as the deputised representatives of the nation-state and its ideologies which are in direct opposition to the display of same-sex desires and intimacies (Weber, 2015: 136).

As the sole international airport in Ghana, KIA has long been the site where the nation attempts to define its position on sexuality. It is a place where the nation concentrates the display of its sovereignty, even as it negotiates the limits of such sovereignty within a global world system. When imagined as an oppositional space where the airport’s technological futurity encounters the seemingly regressive struggle over sexual expression, understanding the airport within longer historical processes complicates this binary. The key actors – the two women, the mob, and the legal system – each distort the binary between the progressive airport space

and the regressive homophobic characterisation of everyday people in countries like Ghana. While the legal system is baffled by the legal ramification of two women kissing, the crowd is certain that this intimate act is a violation of a sort and attempts to enact its form of justice. Whereas the 1992 Constitution of Ghana ambiguously criminalises “unnatural carnal knowledge”, which is often interpreted as non-heterosexual sexual acts, the crowd, comprised of citizens, workers, and onlookers, suffers no such ambiguity in its response to such displays of non-heteronormative sexualities. In this tense zone where the postcolonial travelling class is placed on display for the labouring class, the infiltration of neoliberal capital and its attendant ideologies are concentrated and contested. It is in considering the irreconcilable gap between a tentative legal system and an assertive crowd that “Swallowing Ice” re-narrativises the conflicting legal ramifications of the kiss:

Lawyers contacted are torn about whether or not the accused persons can be properly charged and convicted for unnatural carnal knowledge. While some criminal lawyers opined that lesbianism was unnatural, contrary to Ghana’s customary and criminal laws as well as its Constitution, others were of the view that the criminal code did not specifically prohibit lesbian acts (Boateng, 2015: 160).

In the absence of state-defined legislation, either in the customary or criminal code, the crowd’s “shock and disgust” supplements the justice system. Affective reactions such as the crowd’s, entwined with the gaps in the constitution of Ghana has, in 2021, led to a draft bill submitted to Ghana’s parliament called, “Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021”, which criminalises LGBTQI+ individuals as well as any person or group who sympathises with them. It proposes up to a ten-year prison sentence for LGBTQI+ people, and any groups or individuals who advocate for their rights, sympathise, or offer social or medical support.⁴ The far-reaching scope of the law also targets academics, activists, or anyone in Ghana who creates or posts content across social media platforms in support of LGBTQI+ issues. Though this law is still in its infancy and must go through several other stages before it becomes law, it represents an attempt by some lawmakers and institutions to legally codify into law what the crowd in “Swallowing Ice” merely threatens. Similar laws in Uganda, Nigeria, and other African states have sought to impose what Sylvia Tamale has called a

“compulsory heterosexuality” that is “secured by penal laws” which criminalise same-sex intimacies as “sex against the order of nature” (Tamale, 2009: 58; Nyanzi, 2013). These laws, like those enacted in Uganda and proposed in Ghana, seek simultaneously to clarify ambiguous legal language inherited from colonialism and enact punitive legislation against same-sex sexual practices and intimacies. Despite the long history of same-sex intimate relations across the African continent, they continue to be framed as “un-African” or an imposition by Euro-American nation-states – a kind of sexual neocolonial project (Tamale, 2009: 58; Wahab, 2016; Okanlawon, 2018).

Yet what Boateng’s story ultimately shows is that the African female body continues to be the site where these legal battles over sexuality occur. By rehearsing the ongoing debates about same-sex intimacy through the mob’s violent reaction, Boateng’s story also reveals African female bodies to be the “host” to ongoing postcolonial anxieties of female sexuality that are founded in “colonial statements” (Coly, 2019: 17). Suppose we think about the mob’s actions as mimicking and repurposing imbibed perspectives and practices that have been assumed to be indigenous to Africa. In that case, their reaction ceases to be solely legible as a violent reaction to the public display of same-sex intimacy. Rather, the mob’s reaction becomes haunted by the entrenchment of colonial epistemologies of sexual desire nurtured through Christian civilizing missions from Europe (the dominant religion in modern-day Ghana is Christianity). These beliefs are in turn imagined as the moral foundations of the Ghanaian nation-state. Opposition to same-sex intimacy can thus be read as part of a colonial heritage whose remains cannot be articulated as such. In opposing and punishing these women, the nameless and faceless crowd, it seems, is enacting a protest against something larger and older than the two women French-kissing. The two women, unluckily, become a synecdoche of global forces, which the mob is increasingly powerless against, even though these forces have long had a stronghold in the nation.

Brema’s imaginative news story transforms the airport into a staging ground that demonstrates the speculative potential of invention to unsettle deep-seated anxieties around African (and Black) women’s sexuality. As a space that regulates human and material access into the nation, the airport constitutes the real and symbolic boundaries that converge in the nation-state. Through characters who are Ghanaian, Boateng highlights that these non-heteronormative sexualities

are part of the fabric of the nation's past and present and will surely be part of the nation's future. Many religious organisations, particularly the Christian Council of Ghana, remain unequivocal about their posture towards same-sex identities and practices, citing the Bible and so-called "African traditions" as the source of their contestation. While elite Ghanaians can afford to live relatively secure lives regardless of their sexual proclivities, those subjected to the strict enforcement of such laws by popular state proxy, as Boateng's story shows, are everywhere waiting to mete out the justice that the state cannot or has not yet defined for itself.

However, the airport's initiation of a global perspective does not negate the hold of the nation-state on identity and forms of belonging. As exemplified in Boateng's short story, the airport allows for conflicts over global citizenship, national belonging, and sexual identities and practices to be made visible. "Swallowing Ice" imagines the airport as a space where the struggle over non-heteronormative sexuality is choreographed and acted out, and in so doing, offers a brief glimpse into another future where sexual expression is unrestricted by the heteronormative imaginary of the Ghanaian nation-state. In this way, Boateng's short story makes visible the tension between the futurity of the airport and the seemingly regressive understanding of sexuality and sexual expression in Ghana. "Swallowing Ice" shows how sexuality is marked by an impassable internal contradiction whose legacy is falsely attributed to a past that precedes colonialism when it is actually rooted in the persisting remains of colonial epistemology.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Kwame Otu for permission to cite from his forthcoming monograph on queer self-making in contemporary Ghana where he provides a nuanced analysis of what this sign signifies about the limits of same-sex intimacies in Ghana.
2. See Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel's (2018) collection, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, for a more detailed analysis of the intersection between infrastructure and uneven and unequal distribution of resources in the so-called Global South.
3. In addition to the renovation of the airport, Nkrumah also supported other aviation-centred projects including the Afienea Gliding School which was founded by former Nazi pilot Hanna Reitsch (Allman, 2013: 108).
4. The "Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill, 2021," if passed in its current form, would also criminalise intersex people and recommends "gender realignment" surgery for such individuals. The law's far-reaching attempts to criminalise sexual practices and identities has been described as "draconian". A copy of the bill can be read here: <https://citinewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/LGBT-BILL.pdf>

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