

Horizons of Touch

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“Can I give you a peck?” Janet asks, as I am switching off the recording device. We are sitting in the dim hall of Janet’s friend, Vida. It is a hot afternoon and the blue walls of the narrow hall do not help to reduce the heat crawling in through the entrance next to me. The door needs to stay half open, even as we are talking about the intimate and the erotic – no need to perform secrecy by shutting doors. Facing me is another curtained opening that leads to a small kitchen stuffed with buckets, charcoal pots, metal tubs and piles of mortars and pestles of all sizes. A rectangle of light falls on the heavy boots that Janet removed after returning from the military campus. Janet, her yellow shirt unbuttoned, fixes me with her eyes, her compact, groomed hands resting on Vida’s armchair that is still wrapped in plastic, possibly never to be unwrapped.

She had arranged that I interview her at Sister Vida’s place. It promised more privacy than the bustling compound Janet herself lived in, where she shared rooms with her mother and brother. Sister Vida’s compound was located in an airier corner of their busy working-class neighbourhood of central Accra. She and Janet were more than friends. Not long after the two became lovers, she had decided to sponsor Janet for an unpaid internship with Ghana’s military vehicle repair services. I was eager to interview Janet that day. She was the first woman I had met in Ghana who was articulate about her same-sex desires and about ‘knowing women’ intimately – from an awareness of women’s capacity for same-sex love (Dankwa 2021, 122), to the knowledge of how to transform passionate friendships into kinship. When we met, however, I was still unsure whether I was ready to deal with a topic that I barely dared to address when talking to friends, let alone family, in Ghana. I hoped to gain clarity by listening to Janet, telling her about my research interest and getting to know more about her life – with and without women.

A few weeks earlier, when asked whether I could interview her, Janet had remarked to Josephine, my friend and research associate, that she too took her

time to “interview” the women she liked before proposing love to them. Unimpressed by my status as a doctoral candidate, she had made her own sense of my desire to know about her and her life. Had she interpreted my interest in studying female same-sex culture as a subtle way of indicating sexual interest? Later, I conjectured “that Janet chose to sexualize my intentions as a way of articulating her own interest in say, having a well-to-do ‘half-caste’ girlfriend, somewhat ‘exotic’, yet accessible – or in setting the romantic foundations for a lasting overseas connection” (Dankwa 2021, 9).

Whatever inspired Janet to agree to my interviewing her in the sticky intimacy of Vida’s hall, during our conversation something happened that felt clarifying. For almost two hours we had worked to put to words our diverging desires – starting with my desire to learn about female same-sex intimacies that were not articulated in LGBT terms and Janet’s eagerness to reconstruct how she began to desire women. In a language she had learnt at school, she explained to me, and perhaps to herself, why she chose to “do *supi*”. *Supi* is a polyvalent Ghanaian term for an intimate friend or a girlfriendship that may include erotic intimacies and has been associated with boarding school girls. Janet’s expression that she was doing *supi*, rather than being *supi*, suggests an erotic belonging to herself based on *doing* things, rather than *being* a certain type of person. While talking and listening, our desires seemed to align in a quest to understand why one would, against all odds, choose to do *supi*, and how Janet, without ever having attended boarding school, had found ways of knowing women.

I hesitated when she offered “the peck”. With my limited English, I was not sure what a peck was, but felt that Janet was suggesting a meaningful way to seal our conversation. And indeed, the peck that turned out to be a light kiss placed on my cheek did not feel like a sexual promise. The intimate gesture summed up the proximity of the interview moment. It seemed to embody the touch we had already allowed to happen through our conversation. This touch has become the basis for connecting and weathering the troubling inequalities between us for almost two decades. This (staying in) touch has not always been as gentle as the peck; sometimes it is more like the rubbing described by Keguro Macharia in *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (2019). Understood as a relation of proximity, frottage is premised not only on shared struggles or identifications (in our case, not necessarily race, gender and

sexuality, though we both identified as women, black and same-sex desiring, but by parents who hail from neighbouring villages and share a preference for gender differentiation within same-sex intimacies), but also on the constant friction and “the difficult work of working through differences” (Macharia 2019, 8).

“Can we allow ourselves to be touched or do we alone do the touching?” asks Anima Adjepong who advocates for an “erotic ethnography” (2022, 397). We have learned that touch and attachment jeopardise objectivity and are to be avoided in scientific research. The erotic in particular is associated with sex and thus with the risk of harassment and abuse. Framed as a source of danger and unethical behavior between researcher and researched, the erotic remains invisible, and bodily presence is barely analysed in the process of ethnographic knowledge production. In the 1990s, lesbian feminists began to explore “the erotic equation in fieldwork” (Newton 1993) and the productivity of allowing for touch and intimate attachment in the field (Wekker 2006), though they highlighted that sex must not be the ultimate expression of the erotic.

More recently, black queer anthropologists of the Afro-Atlantic have conceptualised the erotic beyond sex and sexuality (Allen 2011; Gill 2018). They take their cues from Audre Lorde’s famous speech, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1984), where she emphasised the erotic as a self-connecting, transformative force. “[T]hat deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not need to be called marriage” (Lorde 1984, 57). To Lorde, the erotic is a powerful site of knowledge production that transpires sensual, spiritual and political energies, especially for those whose bodies and desires have been exoticised, hypersexualised and marginalised from power. It is this erotic that Adjepong summons when asking us to lean “into the erotic as a necessary modality for knowledge production” and permit “ourselves to be touched even as we touch our interlocutors, these people who let us into their lives and share some of their most intimate selves with us” (2022, 397-8). This holds particularly true when we research intimacies that could be subsumed under the LGBT+ label in its many extensions and the rainbow flag that seems to unite unconnected people, including diasporans, across the globe.

African activists have pragmatically adopted LGBT+ and other acronyms framed by international sexual rights policies, along with the backlash against them. Aware that these terminologies may not reflect everyday realities and concepts of African queers, activists deploy them to be legible and eligible for international funding. Queer African artists are at the forefront of (consciously) mispronouncing, respelling and playfully challenging these anglophone categories of identity. Queer African scholars are thus concerned not so much with LGBT's inability to include African terms, as they are with postcolonial modes of queering that ought not to be captured in labels. In *Vocabularies of the Non-Normative* (2015), zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi hint at ways in which Binyavanga Wainaina and other artists and activist-scholars neither reject nor fully embrace Euro-American designations, but playfully bend and queer them into African grammars.

In the German-speaking world, queer philosopher Antke Engel understands queer as an "art of disturbance" that is not so much about outrightly opposing hetero-norms or gender binaries, as it is about playfully interrupting them and making ambiguous forms of being imaginable. Rather than striking against normative binaries, thereby hastening into new closures, the process refrains from either multiplying or dissolving gender and sexual categories (Engel 2015, 194). Aware of the proximity of LGBT and neoliberal politics and the ways in which individual desires for sexual liberation have been usurped by late capitalist logics, Engel avers that queer strategies do not strive for unambiguousness. Instead, they reside in collective practices of negotiating care and redistribution (2015, 196–201). Despite such complex anti-capitalist articulations of collective queering, queer theory tends to be equated with North Atlantic politics and its analyses of anglophone contexts.

Thus, the ways in which queer—"in academic parlance"—seems to denote "anti-normativity" has prompted scholars of Africa to doubt the usefulness of queer theory (see Hendriks 2021, 398). Thus, Rachel Spronk and S.N. Nyeck "suggest twisting the term 'queer' by combining it with the verb 'to query': querying" (2021, 392). In African contexts with their deep entanglements between the normative and the non-normative, querying aims at accommodating "the queer affordances of everyday life" (Spronk and Nyeck 2021, 395). However, by disidentifying with queer *theories* made in the US, Africanists may overlook how lesbian-feminist and queer scholars have already

queried queer by documenting how the non-normative articulates itself through norms and vice versa – and without declaring their research participants as necessarily ‘queer’ (Gaudio 2009; Wekker 2006).

When I embarked on doctoral research, there were no publications on women who love women in West Africa. Had I believed my Ghanaian fathers in the diaspora that “homosexuals” did not exist back home, had I listened to the British anthropology professor who indicated that the topic was “weird” and had no relevance, or the Africanist historian who suggested it was simply too difficult to raise material on such a tabooed subject, I would not have found Janet. Inspired by early queer-feminist theories, it was the lived encounter and the mutual touch that opened up for me the possibility of unlearning (homo)sexuality. Once the infamous imperative to “come out of the closet” is dethroned and considered to be but one metaphor among many, some queer theories made in the US do offer routes into studying intimacies in Africa and elsewhere. Through them, I read the relational same-sex dynamics against *butch/femme* theories (Martin 1994), heard Janet’s styles echo notions of *female masculinity* (Halberstam 1998) and was reminded, through her insistence on the knowledge and “enjoyment” of “doing *supi*”, of the power that Audre Lorde – the ‘black queer theorist’ *avant la lettre* (Gill 2018) – afforded to the erotic and the “joy which we know ourselves to be capable of”, especially if our desires do not seem to matter (Lorde 1984, 57). Queer interrogations of gender and sexual categorisations and visibility politics made me appreciate Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí’s critique of the universal significance assigned to gender among white feminists (1997).

During the research process, however, my questions regarding Janet’s erotic life became blurry. Increasingly, preoccupied with southern Ghanaian concepts of personhood, property, mothering, and trading that pertained to self-understandings not restricted to women who love women, I worried about circling too far away from my original object of inquiry and ending up elsewhere. Margot Weiss considers the push and pull of inquiring supposedly “queer” intimacies and the longings for an *elsewhere* as constitutive of a new queer anthropology that seeks to overcome its colonial history of categorising sexuality (2022). “[Q]ueer indexes that desire to reach beyond theoretical or conceptual closure to an *elsewhere*, the frustration when one’s desires are thwarted and then the return and reopening of new horizons” (2022, 2). In this

understanding, queer anthropology takes shape as a “political-intellectual desire” that lingers between a focus on same-sex or gender-transgressive realities and queer as a much broader horizon. By allowing for disturbances and bearing with the frustration of our object of study slipping away, this horizon queries and perhaps transforms normative processes of knowledge production.

To me, this horizon of touch first opened while I was reading Patricia McFadden, Charmaine Pereira and Sylvia Tamale’s contributions to the issue on “Changing Cultures” in *Feminist Africa* (2003). They insisted that we focus on feeling and on pleasure beyond marriage and reproduction, but also beyond ‘western’ concepts of sexuality (McFadden 2003, Pereira 2003, Tamale 2003). My investment in queering was inspired not so much by the aspirational vagueness queer holds, but more importantly by the ways in which queer has been appropriated by African gender activists (Ekiné and Abbas 2013; Sika and Okech 2019). Here, too, frustrations are being expressed – frustrations not necessarily with queer’s slipperiness, but with generalisations about African homophobia that do not account for the extractivism and necropolitics endangering queer as much as other African lives. In *On Being Area Studied* (2016), Macharia points at the coloniality in the growing field of Queer African Studies. His “complaint” addresses US-centred African Studies that are absorbing queer African voices as “data” or “evidence” while remaining indifferent to African conceptual frames (Macharia 2016, 185).

Against the background of nationalist Ghanaian anti-LGBT+ politics, it is not farfetched to consider Janet’s cherishing of her erotic self-connection, secrecies and knowledge around female friendship and same-sex passion, as a way of tacitly queering the laws and moralities once introduced under colonial rule. But is the insistence that colonialism brought homophobia to Africa enough to decolonise queer anthropology? Is it enough to assert that (African) languages that use non-gendered pronouns are quintessentially queer? Both queer-feminist and decolonial approaches aim at transforming modes of knowledge production towards making them accountable to the lives we study – the lives we inevitably touch and that touch us. This process goes far beyond authorising indigenous terms as the new queer.

Researcher and researched study and desire each other's knowledge, my encounters with Janet and other knowing women taught me. And more than that, we touch and are touched by each other with or without sexual desires involved. Understanding touch through the transformative energies the erotic harbours implies that "we attend to the political and spiritual alongside sensuality" (Gill 2018, 9). That which moves between the bodies of researchers and researched, including the erotic, is political in as much as it is framed by the workings of power. Moments of intimacy and proximities nurtured by prolonged touch go with friction and frottage (Macharia 2019). If touch is to stretch our scholarly horizons, we need to interrogate more than our situatedness as (feminist) scholars who desire new modes of knowledge production. Queering as an afro-feminist practice implies that we allow for touch and work through the frottage – the simultaneity of difference and identification – in all its materiality.

Notes

- ¹ An extended earlier version of this text is published under the title "Queering" in *Basel Anthropology Papers 2025*.
- ² LGBT has been ridiculed and attacked by conservative politicians across the world. In Ghana, where the acronym has been mediated as an expression of western deviance and neocolonialism, nationalists conjure the specter of 'LGBTTTTIQQAAP+++'. Animated by American 'pro-family' evangelists, the moralising runs: What will be the next letter in this never-ending alphabet of perversion and aberrations? (Adomako 2002, 83).
- ³ Medical policy terms such as MSM (men having sex with men) have made it into everyday parlance and the same may happen with UN abbreviations such as SOGI (Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities).

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