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“Doing Everything Together”

Siblinghood, Lovership, Incest, Family

I'll copy her, because I like her. *Whatever she does, I like to— she's my girl proper, we sleep in the same room, we do everything together. I remember we once went somewhere, me and Korkoi. Korkoi was smoking cigarettes, smoking, smoking. So I decided to test it and see, what is inside. When I just tried it, the way I coughed! You see, when she was doing it, it looked nice, so I just wanted to do it (imitates sound of inhaling) [...] because I love her, I had to learn what she does, we had become one, siblings, one blood, (taps the crook of her arm) you see, one blood. So we had to do each and everything together, bathing together. Korkoi and me, we bath together, everything. Korkoi?! Ahh!*¹

After seven years of “doing everything together,” Adwoa Boateng and Korkoi Okudzeto were on the verge of breaking up. They had not spoken for weeks. Nonetheless, asked to talk to us about love, Adwoa dramatically conjured up their togetherness: whatever Korkoi was up for, whatever suited her, and whatever gave her pleasure, no matter how silly or ordinary, Adwoa was compelled to “see,” and “test” it herself. They were meant to share and experience all things together. Over time they *became* siblings.

“Doing everything together” is a phrase I frequently heard when a woman swooned over a female friend and alluded, with an exaggerated emphasis on doing “everything,” to their erotic intimacies. The strength of this word lies in its ambiguity. It allows “knowing women” to convey all-encompassing same-sex intimacies whether or not this intimacy has a sexual dimension. A few days after making the statement above, Adwoa introduced a childhood friend to me as her “intimate friend,” and added, as if to quote herself, that they were “doing everything together.” This soft-spoken, married woman whom she sees on a daily basis has been her loyal confidant for years. As children they used to be “wild.” Accompanied by a third friend, they would run away

¹ Interview with Adwoa Boateng at Suakrom, December 12, 2007.

from school and spend their days in the market. According to Adwoa, this intimate friend used to have female lovers “but stopped it a long time ago.” Now their market stalls are around the corner from each other, and they talk on a daily basis but are not sexually intimate. With Korkoi on the other hand, “doing everything together” does imply sexual attachment – with all its pain and pleasure. Not only did they bath together, but as Korkoi once told me, Adwoa used to spend every Wednesday night at her place. “I love Korkoi. Because if she sees me, *Korkoi asks – [...] like the kind of pleasure that I’ll give her, it will not be small. Like we wouldn’t go through all those [arduous] things.*”² Adwoa prided herself not only on copying and learning Korkoi’s ways, but also on pleasing her sexually. Adwoa’s sense that “doing everything together” made them “one blood,” points to a form of relatedness, to which the catch-all term fictive kinship does not do justice.

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If motherhood brackets intimacies between females with a notable difference in age or/and socio-economic status, sisterhood is a metaphor for the companionship of girls and women of the same age-group. This chapter explores the everyday acts of togetherness through which a same-sex “friend” *becomes* a sibling, as opposed to being *born* one. It elaborates “siblinghood” as a key framework through which closeness may be imagined, expressed, and engendered among same-sex lovers in southern Ghana. The chapter thus asks how the idiom of kinship is put to work in describing sexual and non-sexual forms of closeness: What spaces are constitutive of the lived and the idealized intimacies between “sisters”? What practices are the prerequisites of relating to each other by “blood”? And how are we to understand the relationship between love and siblinghood, if “doing everything together” is more than a euphemistic way of referring to sexual intimacies?

First, given that *onua*, the Twi term for sibling, and the gendered English term “sister” are key words for women who share the impulse of doing “each and everything together,” I attend to historical notions of siblinghood and in particular to the closeness and mutual attachment accorded to sister relations, in the literature on the Akan. Second, I focus on Adwoa Boateng’s understandings of love that resist and intersect with North Atlantic notions of romance.

² Interview with Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom, December 12, 2007.

While passion and pleasure take center-stage in Adwoa’s intimate discourse, the idea that love should eventually lead to a monogamous long-term relationship does not. Third, I examine understandings of “incest” and the circumstances under which same-sex intimacies are dubbed incestuous by the women themselves. The stories of women who inadvertently fell for a female cousin and worried about the legitimacy of their amorous feelings seem to conflict with siblinghood as a handy metaphor for closeness and sexual intimacy. In the absence of official recognition and regulations on same-sex unions, I am interested in women’s agency in deciding whether a same-sex friend is too close to home to be a lover.

Finally, I explore the family formations emerging from the “siblinghoods” of “knowing women,” whose notions of love and familiarity defy rigid distinctions between friendship and kinship. Concerned with the ways in which “siblinghood” is actualized and enacted, the chapter also reveals how intimate same-sex discourses reproduce normative Ghanaian ideas of kinship, while re-contextualizing and transgressing them.

On Siblinghood

Referring to someone as *me nua* (“my sibling” in Twi), expresses different ways of being related. First, it is used for a sibling or lineage sibling, hence a relative of the same generation. In Twi, as in many African languages, there is no single word distinguishing cousins and siblings of the same parents (although the absence of the term cousin does not imply that lineage siblings are unaware of these differences). “Cousins,” in particular, who grew up in the same compound together and refer to each other’s mothers as mothers, would only indicate uterine differences in conflicting situations in order to dissociate. Second, addressing someone as *me nua* is a way of engendering a certain closeness with a person of one’s generation and of a similar status, irrespective of one’s sex. In order to distinguish male and female siblings, the female suffix *baa* (sister: *nua baa*) or male *barima* (brother: *nua barima*) needs to be added. Third, the English terms “sister” and “brother” are popularly used when young people greet each other, summoning up a certain respect. It is also common to prefix a friend’s name with sister or brother. If it makes for a pleasant sound, these prefixes are standardized into compound names such as Sist’Akos or Bro’Yakub.

In keeping with Janet Carsten's (2004) rejection of the dichotomy between biological and social kinship – for all kinship is socially constructed – I distinguish between “genealogical” and “metaphorical” siblings. Genealogical siblings are those understood as siblings or lineage siblings (including cousins). It is not biology that connects them, but knowledge of a shared genealogy. I refer to long-term lovers or friends who speak of each other in sibling terms, but whose connections are not approved “family” relations, as metaphorical siblings. The need to distinguish between the two arises from the salience of genealogy and the fact that my respondents themselves distinguish between these different modes of being related.

The relevance of differentiating between different types of “sisterhood” is manifested in Okaile Allotey's mention of how she broke up with her girlfriend. “I sacked Rita,” she says, “the other night we slept in the same bed and she talked for hours on the phone with someone in Tema. I couldn't sleep. When the good God let it be morning, I told her that we are no more and that she is not my mother's daughter.”³ Suspecting that her lover was talking to another suitor, Okaile asserts that their closeness is not necessarily a given. She dissociated herself from her girlfriend by making plain that they do not descend from the same mother. Sisters who grew in the same womb are often compelled to share beds, but the bond between Okaile and her lover is voluntary. Okaile's speech act relies on the fact that being explicit about a sister not being a mother's daughter can be highly offensive. Although Okaile identifies as Ga, an ethno-linguistic group that emphasizes patrilineal ties, her statement points at the affective dimension of being daughters of the same house and mother. In the Ga context, closeness between uterine sisters is facilitated by duolocal, gender-segregated residence, hence sisters tend to grow up among co-residing matrilineal kinswomen. While the rhetorical device Okaile uses highlights the distinction between prescribed and voluntary forms of relatedness, it signifies that the idea of a same-sex lover being a sister does extend into the arena of (one) “mother's daughters.” It indicates that their erstwhile “sisterly” closeness in her matri-compound was enabled precisely by the blurry conceptual boundaries between friendship and siblinghood.

³ Fieldnote on a conversation with Okaile Allotey at Accra, November 30, 2007.

Intimate Hierarchies

While much anthropological attention has been given to the jural equality Akan culture accords to (opposite-sex) siblings, little has been written about sister relations. Meyer Fortes, who devoted some attention to sibling relations among the Asante – the most highly researched Akan subgroup – states that “next to the bond between mother and child none is as strong as that between siblings of the same mother. Ashanti see that it is simply the tie between mother and child translated to the level of generation equality” (1975, 273). In his volume on *Kinship and the Social Order*, he attributes an indivisible “corporate identity” to the matrilineal sibling group. “Full matrisiblings are ‘one person,’ ‘of one womb,’ a corporate unit in the narrowest sense” (1969, 175). Fortes was concerned with what British anthropology considered the conflict at the root of Akan social and political organization: the split loyalties between descent and alliance. Thus, in line with the structural-functionalist paradigm, he implicitly focused on understanding the (jural) closeness between siblings of the opposite sex in juxtaposition to the relative distance between husband and wife.⁴

In his reflections about siblinghood, Fortes does not specify whether he has in mind opposite- or same-sex siblings. The fact that he uses sister relations in particular to illustrate the equal status of siblings in general, implies that sisterly bonds are considered to be even more equal than those between brothers and sisters.⁵ Furthermore, he attributes the intimacy between siblings to the mutual identification of sisters, sweepingly declaring that “this accent on equality is not found in any other kinship relationship. It is felt to be immodest for adults of different generations to bath together; siblings of the same sex may do so. The attachment and mutual identification of sisters is notorious” (1975, 274). Although Fortes invokes sisters’ “notorious” attachment, his concern is with the intimacy of brother/sister relations. This is

⁴ In line with structural functionalism, Fortes was concerned with rules rather than lived experiences. Yet, as Van der Geest pleads, Fortes was well aware of lingering in the realm of “grammar and syntax” and less concerned with the realm of the “spoken word” (Fortes 1970, 3 cited in Van der Geest 2012, 53).

⁵ Fortes illustrates siblings’ equality by emphasizing that uterine sisters are addressed as “mothers” (*maamenom*) by each other’s children. Whereas there is a special term for a paternal aunt (*sewa*, literally: female father), the term “mother” designates not only one’s mother, but also her uterine sisters.

evinced not least at the point where he alludes to the incestuous dimension the closeness of siblings may harbor. "Complete frankness and intimacy are possible only between siblings. Great as is the horror of incest, there are no avoidances between brother and sister" (Fortes 1975, 273). While hinting at the emotional and potentially erotic closeness of brother/sister relations, he leaves unquestioned the "very close identification" he accords to "full sisters" (Fortes 1975, 264).

Compared to mother/daughter, husband/wife, and other pairings invoked among same-sex desiring women, making reference to a female lover as a sister conjures up harmonious notions of youthful, sisterly innocence. The idealized likeness of sisters is contained, however, by the hierarchical constitution of birth order. As Fortes states: "the most important difference socially recognized between siblings is that of age. An older sibling is entitled to punish and reprimand a younger and must be treated with deference" (1975, 273). As outlined in Chapter 2, the order of birth among siblings is a blueprint for the principle of seniority. Junior siblings help their seniors with household chores such as sweeping and carrying water. Growing up together, older children are the caretakers of younger children; they carry them around and give them instructions, they are expected to protect them, buy their food and later help with paying their school fees (Van der Geest 2012, 60–61).

Both idealized sameness and hierarchical ranking figured in the female siblinghoods my respondents invoked. In one instance, Serwa Asiedu referred to her younger lover Adwoa Boateng as her "back born" sibling. Serwa liked to talk about Adwoa and did so in longing adoration and by using flowery terms. Self-conscious of her reputed infatuation, Serwa confided to my research associate and I during one of our first encounters: "Although I have grown, I like her a lot, she's my back born." Serwa, who claims to be five years older than Adwoa, but looks older, is a mother of four, works as a market trader six days a week, and takes care of her bed-ridden mother and a Deaf brother. Her affectionate reference to Adwoa as her next born sister must also be read as an attempt to deflect the impression that her love is over the top. Being a fool in love is a privilege reserved for the young. Thus, Serwa's fellow traders in the market deemed it inappropriate for her, a mature woman, to be lovestruck, and some sneered at her sexual "obsession" on the quiet. Adwoa herself railed about Serwa being smelly, disorderly, and from a family that breeds mental illness, while

capitalizing on Serwa's feelings by summoning unreasonable amounts of money from her.⁶ Nonetheless, by calling Adwoa her next born, Serwa invokes a certain closeness, as well as the legitimate authority and responsibility one holds for a "back born" family member.⁷

Addressing a younger lover as "small sister" rather than "daughter" signifies an intimacy that seeks to undermine the hierarchies implied in a generational age difference and the authority mothers hold over daughters. Between couples of a considerable age gap, referring to a lover as a sister must be read as an attempt at reducing their perceived hierarchical difference.

Ambiguous Closeness

Suppressed hostilities form the flipside to the equality that has been attributed to Asante sibling relations. As Fortes argued, underlying hostilities between maternal brothers and sisters are not collectively approved of. Instead, they are accompanied by frequent witchcraft accusations that are "felt to be an inevitable result of matrilineal descent" (1975, 275). Fortes' conclusion, that the accepted expression of these hostilities is "the belief that witchcraft acts only within lineage" (1975, 275) needs to be rethought taking into account gender.

Like Fortes, Van der Geest (2012) ascribes the bonds between sisters (and between brothers) to shared experiences during childhood, generated through separate sleeping arrangements and gender-specific domestic tasks. However, while considering the common upbringing of like-siblings a "favorable condition that fosters a close relationship between siblings of the same sex, particularly among sisters," he also observes that due to their closeness, sisters are seen to be particularly prone to fighting with each other. As one of Van der Geest's male respondents has it: "Women staying in the same house, whether they are from the same mother or not, they will quarrel and gossip" (Van der Geest 2012, 60). This statement speaks to the widespread idea that women are quarrelsome and bear grudges more than men. Such statements overlook the gendered inequalities fostering female

⁶ In fact, as events turned out during the time of our interaction, Adwoa continued to extort money from Serwa. It was only after Korkoi broke up with Adwoa that she started appreciating Serwa beyond her financial provider qualities.

⁷ The quotes in this paragraph are taken from a fieldnote taken in Suakrom, January 20, 2008.

competitiveness in the first place. In the matrilineal Akan context, where women are blessed and burdened with being in charge of their offspring, it is believed that sisters, for their children's sake, turn into fierce rivals and compete for the patronage of moneyed brothers.

The reputed risk sisterly closeness bears is nowhere more poignant than in stories about envious sisters who are said to bewitch, attack or even kill each other.⁸ Many Akan proverbs stress how closeness is “inherently ambiguous and liable to turn into animosity and envy. One of them goes, ‘It is the insect in your own cloth that bites you’ (*Aboa a ɔhyɛ wo ntoma mu, na ɔka wo*)” (cf. Van der Geest 2012, 61). Generally, witchcraft accusations are frequent among close kin and siblings in particular, and female family members are much more likely to be accused of practicing witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations often follow on the heels of jealousies over material or social benefits.

It is due to the jealousies associated with closeness that the people Van der Geest spoke to believed that “the greater distance between brothers and sisters gave in fact more room for love and life-long affection than relations between siblings of the same sex” (Van der Geest 2012, 61). Though this sounds plausible, I would argue that the life-long bonds between sisters are much less visible than those between brother and sister. Due to the everyday intimacies of women who co-reside, cook, work, and raise children together, their identification and solidarity – be it between genealogical or metaphorical sisters – is often taken for granted. Sexist beliefs about women's innate contentiousness and the subsequent risk of female closeness are underpinned by the patriarchal notion that women are to be first and foremost rivals. It also needs to be asked to what degree female closeness is feared or even envied by men such as Van der Geest's informants. These Akan men, unlike their sisters, stand at the end of their line. Since “lineage consists of all the descendants of a single known ancestress in the unbroken *female* line” (Fortes 1975, 254, my emphasis), men are doomed to become significant members of their *abusua* mainly by supporting their sisters' offspring. Within this kinship matrix, men can only reproduce socially. Whereas the capacity to give birth and raise children

⁸ This is the case in Kwei Quartey's internationally acclaimed detective story *Wife of the Gods*, set in Ghana's Volta Region, where cloaked lateral sisters kill each other over jealousies (2009).

positions their sisters at the heart of the *abusua*, brothers need to find other means to enhance their status within the matrilineal family unit.

Talking with junior men, I sometimes got the impression that they felt excluded from the real and the imagined secrets between their mothers and sisters. While belittling their “gossip,” they sensed the play and the affective bonds embedded in such talk and the circulation of gifts that enabled women to summon large networks of personal kindreds.

Expressing Love and Passion

While moral restrictions pertain to intergenerational bathhouse intimacies, it is permissible or even desirable for “sisters” in a shared domestic situation to take a bath together (Fortes 1975, 274). Fortes considered these intimacies an expression of two women’s genealogical sisterhood, hence their kinship by “blood.” But what if, as David Schneider (1984) argued, all kinship is “fictive” and “blood” only one among a range of “substances” imbued with the power to connect and engender kinship? New kinship theories have further extended this focus on “substance” and used it as an umbrella term to “trace the bodily transformation of food into blood, sexual fluids, sweat, and saliva, and to analyze how these [are] passed from person to person through eating together, living in houses, having sexual relations, and performing ritual exchanges” (Carsten 2004, 109). In view of the connectivity attributed to shared food and fluids, sharing bath water cannot simply be read as a sign of sisterly identification through pre-existing kinship ties, but as a way of actualizing siblinghood.

Could Adwoa’s passionate appraisal of “doing everything together,” sharing bath water and becoming “one blood,” be understood through the framework of “substance”? Anthropologists working on Malaysia and India in particular, use substance as means to understand kinship in more processual terms (Carsten 2004, 109). Carsten strongly advocates for understanding kinship as an active process through which “certain kinds of relationships are endowed with emotional power” (Carsten 2004, 161). Her own research in Langkawi (Malaysia) revealed that “people become complete persons – that is kin” through living and eating together over extended periods of time (236). Through sharing food and in particular rice meals cooked on the same hearth, people living in the same house come to understand each other as relatives who share the

same substance. “The core substance of kinship in local perceptions is blood, and the major contribution to blood is food. Blood is always mutable and fluid – as is kinship itself” (224). As Carsten argues, kinship in Langkawi was derived not only from acts of procreation, but also from commensality, from sharing substance and “the heat of the hearth” (1995, 236). While kinship in Ghana seems to be less malleable than in Carsten’s analysis of Langkawi, it is worth considering how substances (other than blood) are shared and imbued with meaning among same-sex lovers. Through an examination of Adwoa’s and Korkoi’s “siblinghood,” I will now explore the relationship between “*doing* everything together” and becoming “one” by blood.

Holding Breasts and Snatching Fish

With her seven-year-old daughter, Adwoa inhabits the half-deserted compound house of her deceased father. Replete with a dusty “saloon,” a couple of adjacent bedrooms grouped around a square angled courtyard, the compound has seen livelier days. An aunt occupies one section of the compound, another corner is rented out, the remaining rooms are only used when her older siblings visit. Adwoa, who is in her late thirties, keeps herself company by temporarily hosting younger friends who gladly give her a helping hand – a young gay man, for instance, who had problems with his birth family stayed with her and diligently cooked for her for weeks. A trained textile designer, Adwoa never worked in her trade. At the time of our first meeting, she was selling pad locks, chains, torches, bags, and soft drinks in the market storefront owned by a brother. Three years later, the store, which was not exactly lucrative, had been converted into a small barbershop offering “haircuts and phone batteries charging’.” With a hired barber, Adwoa was selling mobile phone credits in front of the store. All day and often until late into the evening she sat in the shade of a big yellow umbrella provided by one of Ghana’s rapidly expanding mobile companies. A good day’s work yielded a profit of the equivalent of 2.50 dollars, almost half of which she spent on shared taxis taking her to the market and back home. According to Korkoi, Adwoa chiefly relies on the support of relatives in the USA – remittances that allow her to send her daughter to a private school and uphold her father’s cultural capital as a “big man.”

Korkoi Okudzeto, an energetic trader with a marked Ewe accent, is in her thirties too, yet she is much busier than Adwoa. Unmarried and childless, she is fully committed to her mother’s smoked fish enterprise. With her older sister she takes turns traveling to the lake to buy fish, pre-smoke it onsite, and bring it back to Suakrom. Assisted by her younger sisters, the fish is processed in their compound before being sold in different towns on different weekdays, depending on their respective market day. Among her friends and customers, Korkoi is appreciated for her liveliness and her feisty wit. Her charisma and generosity make up for her loud and cheeky manner, or, as Adwoa puts it, her way of “talking harshly,” without inhibition. Among same-sex lovers, she is known to be a heart breaker, who can “kill” a woman like a *femme fatale*. When she really loves a person, she fights for her, she once told me, and I have seen her do so quite literally. Unlike Adwoa, Korkoi never talked about boyfriends or potential husbands. When people asked her when she will marry, she brushed away their questions with a joke about having some husband outside town. But Adwoa felt that Korkoi was into women too much and argued that for Korkoi’s own sake she would let her go, so that Korkoi could have children – before redirecting her attention to female lovers.

Asserting that they “had to do each and everything together,” Adwoa uses a phrase that I have also heard deployed by young opposite-sex lovers, when expressing romantic feelings. For married couples, however, a claim to special closeness can be ambivalent. Throughout southern Ghana, excessive conjugal intimacy has been regarded with suspicion. Since kinship is a lateral matter, spouses are not supposed to do and share everything together. Too much closeness may jeopardize loyalties to their respective lineages (cf. Van der Geest 2012, 64–65) and make them too similar. When female friends talk about “doing everything together,” it is not usually assumed that “everything” includes romance or sexual attachment. And even if it does, two women’s intimate familiarity are not necessarily considered a family threat. Among “knowing women,” the mention of “doing everything together,” however, does include intimacies that impact family relations and provide the basis for additional forms of relatedness.

The beginnings of Adwoa’s and Korkoi’s relationship seven years earlier do not exactly sound romantic. Passing by Adwoa’s gate on her way to the market, nonchalant Korkoi caught Adwoa’s eye. Adwoa began “monitoring” her, as she says.

I had heard that Korkoi was doing that thing. So one day, evening time, I was standing in front of our house and Korkoi was passing, and I just called her: “Korkoi, come here: Go and buy me one Guinness.” She said: “Let’s go, let’s go, I’ll buy it for you.” So we went to the [drinking] spot and started drinking beer. After that, I told her to come to my room, and I started holding her breast. And she said, (mutters) “hmm, I don’t like that-oo, I don’t like that!” And she removed her dress, and I started – started doing (giggles) that thing.⁹

In Adwoa’s prosaic rendering, their courtship took the shape of a negotiation that promptly lead to a sexual relationship. Nevertheless, her reference to Korkoi’s breasts marks their romance.

Whilst I heard young women arguing that men squeezed their girlfriends’ breasts to destroy their beauty and make them less attractive to other men, the “holding” or “massaging” of breasts among women carries several connotations. Some women may pretend to be holding or sucking the breasts of a female friend or relative as a way of indicating motherly/daughterly feelings.¹⁰ An infant may be given the breast of her mother’s best friend who does not carry milk, and allusion is made to the bond between mother and daughter when a woman fondly grabs another woman’s breasts. Since it is not uncommon among working-class women to jokingly grab each other’s breasts, touching a potential girlfriend’s breasts can be a relatively innocuous way to probe her readiness to engage erotically. Once an erotic context is established, however, holding breasts can be a gesture that acknowledges a lover’s womanly maturity and is considered a romantic gesture. At least among female footballers, who aimed at expressing their feelings in cosmopolitan terms, this practice was referred to as “romancing” or “playing romance.”

Adwoa’s mention of taking hold of Korkoi’s breasts is in line with her gendered self-making as initiator and “king” (outlined in Chapter 4) who feels entitled not only to “romance,” but also to be in control of her lovers. As much as she adores Korkoi, she blames her for being unbridled and unruly and takes issue with her economic independence: their relationship has always been fraught by negotiations over who pays for beer. Adwoa always liked to provoke and pick little fights with

⁹ Interview with Adowa Boateng at Suakrom, December 12, 2007.

¹⁰ In the context of girls’ initiation rites among the Krobo in the Eastern Region, breast massages were supposed to delay the onset of puberty. It was an act a mother performed for her daughter every morning, “when she thought that the girl was becoming sexually mature too early” (Steegstra 2004, 206).

Korkoi. In one instance she grabbed a bill out of the money jar on Korkoi's fish table to purchase phone credits and make a flirtatious phone call to her "new catch," Gladys, in front of Korkoi. As soon as Adwoa put down the phone, Korkoi started beating her, half laughing half serious, and teased her about chasing a girl of the age of Korkoi's youngest sister of nineteen years – Adwoa's prospective "catch" had just completed Senior Secondary School. While Korkoi herself does not shy away from flirting with her predominantly female customers, especially the young and educated ones, she accused Adwoa of being after "small girls," thereby suggesting that she was unable to court mature women of Korkoi's age and status.

At the time of our interview Adwoa's and Korkoi's usual benign way of teasing each other had exploded into a full-blown conflict involving friends and families. While staged provocations seemed to be an integral part of their relationship, this conflict had serious consequences. Dina Yiborku, Adwoa's best friend, was visiting from out of town and passed by Korkoi's stall to ask for some free fish for dinner. Korkoi gave her some small fishes, but the gift was accompanied by a snide remark. Dina felt insulted and called Adwoa onto the scene. Their bickering exploded. As Korkoi passionately narrates, when Adwoa grabbed the biggest fish on display, she bit into Adwoa's forearm until the white flesh under the skin started showing. In fury, Adwoa then tilted over the whole fish table and caused the loss of a week's income for Korkoi's family. Before long, Adwoa sent her friends to plead for forgiveness and spoke to Korkoi's mother about paying for the damage. But Korkoi was determined to make this incident the final straw in bringing an end to their relationship. Their increasing visibility as (fighting) lovers possibly contributed to Korkoi's determination.

Adwoa, however, worried that Korkoi would not forgive her and incited by my interview questions about love, was hoping we would put in a word and help to smooth things out again. However, her elaborations on love started by raving about Korkoi as "[her] everything" only to turn increasingly angry. Airing her discontent, Adwoa declared that Korkoi ought to be more docile instead of talking to her unrestrainedly like a "villager" – a standard term of insult. Her rant culminated in the dramatic claim that she is done with women and will stop "doing it" altogether. "*Why I don't want to do it again? It's not necessary. If you do it– sometime the girls don't respect. When you go and take them,*



Figure 4 Older friends and neighbors selling fish in Korkoi Okudzeto's vicinity at Suakrom market (2008)

they take you for a fool [...] even when it comes to bed issues."¹¹ Many women, reflecting on an impending break-up, asserted that they will henceforth stop doing "it" altogether or framed it like a bad habit they are giving up. Adwoa's claim that same-sex passions are an unnecessary nuisance is a prominent rhetorical trope in times of crisis. It implies that having a female lover is not an identity, but a practice that stops with the end of that specific "lovership" (though it must be said that by airing their frustrations and asserting that they are done, many of my respondents also went on to advertise their availability to my research associate and me). Adwoa did not stop having women lovers. The relationship with Korkoi, however, deteriorated in the aftermath of the fish incident.

Sharing Substantive Practices

Four years later, when I stayed at Adwoa's compound for a week, she was hosting Connie Ofofu, a mother in her mid-twenties. They had

¹¹ Interview with Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

known each other for two years and although Connie had a husband, she often came to stay with Adwoa for a while. As we met, Connie was preparing to return to her husband’s place.

“I will miss her,” Adwoa tells me, holding Connie’s five-month-old baby across her thighs like a log, “she has been helping me a lot.” Connie is “a good girl,” she adds, while watching her in the midst of buckets under pieces of laundry dripping from the line spanned across the compound. Connie is soaking cloths and shoes in foaming white washing powder, doing “everything” for Adwoa who has little patience for domestic chores. She already stayed with Adwoa during pregnancy. Apparently, she was jealous when Adwoa had other women at the time. Now there is not much passion. Connie complained that they hadn’t had sex during her three-week stay, but Adwoa doesn’t seem to mind. She is “tired,” and does not “feel for sex. I talk, but I don’t like it,” she tells me. Adwoa’s passion lies in holding court and spinning networks of desire and deceit, of lust and love and everything in between.¹²

While Adwoa lived, cooked, and ate together with Connie, there was no talk of love or desire at the time. Obviously, Adwoa was much less passionate about Connie than she used to be about Korkoi. Her connection to Connie looked like a partnership, or rather a sisterhood, of convenience: Connie in need of support during pregnancy and with her baby, Adwoa appreciating domestic help and company in her empty compound. Despite their sisterliness – the sharing of food and other substances on a daily basis – it is not Connie, but Korkoi, whom Adwoa referred to as a sibling of “the same blood.”

On the one hand, the closeness Adwoa attributed to Korkoi derived from their similar status. They are two women of the same age group who stand on an equal footing with one another: Adwoa’s proud sense of self, stems from being a native of Suakrom and the daughter of a foreign-trained, propertied “big man,” while Korkoi has established herself as a successful trader who cut her teeth in the market. On the other hand, Adwoa’s dramatic sense of having been connected to Korkoi through thick and thin is bound up with the seven years they have teased, loved, and challenged each other. Adwoa and Korkoi saw each other on a regular basis, but they never lived together. It seems the sustained intimate pleasures, the sharing of beds and bathwater, and

¹² Fieldnote based on conversations in Adwoa Boateng’s compound at Suakrom, January 9, 2012.

their joint outings and secret hideouts gave substance to the passion and complicity Adwoa affords their siblinghood.

The act of becoming “one blood” indicates that to Adwoa, genealogical connectedness is but one source of relatedness. In view of Carsten’s extended use of substance, one could make an argument about the symbolism of sharing bath water, blood, and sexual fluids as a mode of sharing substance. Yet, while sleeping together was an integral part of their “doing everything together,” Adwoa does not expatiate upon sexual practice as contributing to becoming “one blood.” In other women’s narratives, blood and sexual fluids were mentioned in the context of love. Dina Yiborku for instance defined love as “some form of passion” that goes beyond “the just giving of material things,” but implies the sharing of “the body,” the “sharing of blood, sharing of— whatever you have inside.”¹³ Mary Awoonor, another young woman in Accra, mentioned oral sex as a particularly intimate and powerful practice not to be engaged in light-heartedly, because it connects on a deeper level. After entrusting to me how much she loved her girlfriend and how many struggles they had overcome together, Mary passionately added that she makes love to her with her tongue. Her rhetorical question, why should she “spit out” her girlfriend’s fluids and her assertion that she “swallow[s] down everything,” hints at the symbolic power of sharing intimate waters.¹⁴

Emmanuel Akyeampong (1996) has shown that fluids play an important role in Akan rituals. However, his investigation into “white” objects and colorless substances such as water, spit, and also semen remains silent on the constitution of ovarian and vaginal fluids. Considerations about the ambivalent meanings attached to menstrual blood seem to inhibit the cultural exploration of women’s seminal fluids. This said, research on the cultural meanings of sexual substances that may engender certain forms of same-sex relatedness must be undertaken in a larger postcolonial feminist framework. Carsten herself warns that the new use of substance as analytical strategy to unsettle the dichotomy between biological and social/ “fictive” kinship tends to reify imperial dichotomies between “the West” and “the rest,” by attributing mutable understandings of blood, breastmilk, and other fluids to the “non-West” only

¹³ Interview with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, January 18, 2008.

¹⁴ Fieldnote on a conversation with Mary Awoonor at Accra, January 2, 2008.

(2004, 134): While western blood stands for biogenetic substance and is considered permanent and immutable, malleability and relationality have been attributed to culturally specific non-western ideas about substance, kinship, and personhood (Carsten 2004).

Coming back to Adwoa, it would be tempting to construe the blood she shed when Korkoi dug her teeth into her flesh as the basis for their siblinghood. Listening to Adwoa, however, the "doing," the practice of sharing, emerges as the hallmark of a lovers' "siblinghood." Rather than invigorating food or other substances shared over time, in Adwoa's narrative, *practices* of fighting, pleasing, and desiring each other over time, created a bond that is thicker than "friendship." Fights and bites that leave scars do not make this connection less sisterly. As indicated above, competition, hierarchy, and jealousy are considered the flip side to the closeness and equality afforded to genealogical sisters. Adwoa's and Korkoi's sisterly contestations do not stem from growing up together and fighting over the favors and resources of family elders and "big" brothers. Their jealousies derive from a connection that flourished precisely because they were sharing many, but not all things. This puts a critical spin on Adwoa's claim to siblinghood: Is siblinghood simply the most readily available metaphor to frame the affective closeness between long-term same-sex lovers?

Friendship, Love, and mpena twee

The fact that same-sex romance in Ghana cannot figure as the pre-stage to legal marriage, calls for an examination of the relationship between love and siblinghood. Adwoa's statements on love bring to mind an Akan Twi term, *mpena twee*, which I translate as "lovership." It derives from *mpena* (lover) and references unofficial love as opposed to the attachment between spouses. Classic, post-independent Ghanaian highlife music abounds with songs about the sweetness of lovership that refer to the bonds between pre- and extramarital lovers who are not meant to become spouses. *Yaa Amponsah*, for instance, a highlife classic first recorded in many different versions in the 1970s, sings not only of the beauty of a certain Yaa Amponsah, but enshrines the difference between *mpena twee* (lovership) and *aware* (marriage). It proposes non-marital love to a woman who is about to get married to another

man, its punch line saying “*Mpena ye dee, ye sen aware*” (lovership is sweeter than marriage). Thus, lovership is sweet precisely because it does not represent a pre-stage to marriage.

While the word *mpena* has vanished from popular songs, *ɔdo* the generic term for love has taken over. My respondents also associated *ɔdo* with the mother-child unit, with purity, affection and attachment, mutual care and commitment. In contemporary Ghanaian songs, however, *ɔdo* appears mostly in the context of romantic courtship leading to marriage. It pertains to the romance between heterosexual lovers, who seek to choose their spouses and aspire to fancy middle-class weddings. As historian Eva Illouz (1997) showed for North America, the emphasis on romantic courtship with its promise of companionate marriage and upward mobility is linked to consumer capitalism. In Akan culture, the public display of wealth used to be reserved for funerals, and marriage and marital love was not celebrated much. Now, associated with shared consumption activities, “romantic” weddings and marital ideals are displacing the notion that lovership is more desirable than marriage.

To many of my working-class respondents, same-sex marriage was unthinkable or undesirable. Some were bemused by the idea of marrying their female lover, others rejected the thought, and only a few women liked the idea, but equated it with living abroad and leading a radically different lifestyle altogether. Beyond the prospect of either customary or legal marriage, same-sex love quintessentially represents the principle of lovership and belongs to the realm of an unofficial, excitingly concealed passion that is both sexual and romantic. When Adwoa speaks of “the kind of pleasure that [she]’ll give” to Korkoi, which “will not be small,” sexual pleasure emerges as an important pillar supporting their long-term connectedness. “Like we wouldn’t go through all those [troubling] things.” She attributes their ability to overcome fights and weather the storms of a long-term connection to her capacity to please Korkoi erotically, thus positing pleasure at the heart of their lovership.

My respondents did not use the old-fashioned Akan term *mpena twee* or lovership. Rather, “friendship” served as the umbrella term for a variety of non-marital (same-sex) bonds, the term friend being open to interpretation. Especially in Accra, many women referred to their female lovers as “woman friends” and to same-sex passions more

generally as the "friendship thing."¹⁵ On other occasions, inquiries into whether another woman was "just a friend" did hint at the possibility of a "friend" being "more than just a friend."¹⁶ The meanings of being "more than just friends" are of course varied. As in other parts of the world, this phrase may indicate if two women have incorporated sex into their relationship, which can turn "serious" and into love or it can remain "*partial*," as Adwoa puts it. She associates friendship with erotic desire and emphasizes its distinctiveness from love. "*Friends, it's only friends, partial, it's something that will pass. But love makes a person go mad. Love – you can easily die. . . . You know, 'mepɛwo' [I desire/like you] and 'medɔwo' [I love you] is different. 'Mepɛwo, I like you very much, 'Medowo' I love you in my heart.*"¹⁷ Adwoa's correlation of friendship and desire indicates the blurriness and the openness that adheres to friendship, regarding its sexual content – since friends are potential sexual partners. Friendship can be sexual and pleasurable while remaining "*partial*." Love, on the other hand, includes an element of madness and self-loss. As expressed in classic Ghanaian highlife songs like "ɔɔɔ yɛ owu," love is [as strong and fatal as] death.

Often among my respondents it was not the term love, but rather the term friendship that was associated with sexual desire. This indicates an understanding of love that is not limited to romance or sexual exclusiveness but refers to closeness that extends from the erotic. And that is where siblinghood comes into play. While the term friend leaves open the possibility of a purely sexual liaison, someone who has become a "sibling" is more than a friend not necessarily due to sexual attraction (although that might have inspired emotional intimacy) but due to their affective intensity and commitment. Grace Tagoe, in Accra, distinguished "different kinds of love. We have sex love, and we have friendship love. And the sex love, we do love in it."¹⁸ Sex love, as I understood her, refers to relations that center on the fulfillment of sexual desires, but has the potential to develop an element of romancing and amicability. Others, like Ameley and Adwoa emphasize the

¹⁵ Interview with Ameley Norkor at Accra, April 4, 2007.

¹⁶ Similarly, among lesbians in California, the phrases "just friends" and "more than friends" have been used "to indicate whether two people had incorporated sex into their relationship" (Weston 1991, 121).

¹⁷ Interview with Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

¹⁸ Interview with Grace Tagoe at Accra, May 28, 2007.

madness and sickness that go with being passionately in love. This love exceeds mere “liking” and is driven by an intense affective condition that can turn dangerously obsessive or even life threatening. Thus indeed, in Adwoa’s discourse, *ɔdɔ* (love) seems to extend beyond sexual friendships and flows into the realm of the heart, the womb, and the blood that necessarily implies the imperative of mutual material support in order to secure each other’s survival.

Adwoa in particular brought up siblinghood (not friendship) when addressing my questions about “love.” She framed love in sibling terms by describing how she and Korkoi did things with as well as for each other.¹⁹

Holding Eggs

Adwoa’s and Korkoi’s bond consolidated not only through passionate fights and reconciliations, but also through caring for and catering to each other. “I’ll use Korkoi as a *very example*,” Adwoa says about love, “*to me*, I know I don’t have money, but I’ll live with you in a certain way, I’ll cater for you, I’ll hold you like an egg.”²⁰

Throughout southern Ghana eggs amount to valuable, symbolic gifts that have been used as pacification fees, in purification and puberty rites. As Sarpong writes, they stand for fecundity and easy labor, they are thought to have cleansing powers, their oval form makes them a symbol for female beauty and on account of their fragility they are made to signify carefulness. An egg carved on a spokesman’s staff, for instance, is meant to caution those in power to handle their authority with care and prudence without letting it fall and break (Sarpong 1991, 61–62). Reflected in the metaphor of the egg is a desire to take on chiefly material care, while lacking the means to take out a lover or purchase signifiers of “modern,” romantic love. Adwoa knows and holds up what is precious to her and deploys the egg to speak about her way of cherishing and nurturing what is dear to her without buying expensive gifts.

Of course, instrumental and material expressions of attachment are articulated by both same- and opposite-sex lovers of little means. However, when a woman loves a woman, and public, verbal

¹⁹ Interview with Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

²⁰ Interview with Adwoa Boateng in Suakrom, May 11, 2008.

attestations of love are perforce limited, the sister-like treatment takes center stage. Acts of mutual care form part of a sensual and romantic repertoire that goes unseen or remains ambiguous. When a woman takes care of a friend as if she were her baby sister, other “knowing women” may well interpret such dedication as the sign of two women’s devoted love for each other and, at times, a sign of a dangerous obsession. In the context of a triangular jealousy drama I heard about, for instance, one of the women was seen feeding her new lover by hand and was therefore suspected of using love potions to lock her new “catch” into their relationship. As with kinship intimacies, such romancing is a liability, susceptible to fierce jealousies and accusations of witchcraft.

In many ways Adwoa’s representation of love differs from experiences described as romantic in Euro-American contexts, where commodity consumption, individual self-crafting, and romance have become mutually constitutive (Illouz 1997 in Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, 18). The notion of holding a lover like an egg, rather than showering her with expensive gifts, seems to contradict the logics in which commoditization is constitutive of romantic passion. On the other hand, Adwoa’s assertions reveal that a lack of means does not prevent women from considering themselves part of an individualized modernity. Yet shared consumption activities whenever the money is available do not replace non-commoditized ways of expressing feelings of attachment such as treating a lover like a “back born” sister: washing her hands before eating from the same bowl, helping her into her clothes, emptying her pee pot in the morning, washing her panties, spoon- or finger-feeding her; such signs of love can go hand in hand with “modern” verbal expressions of love. Underpinned by a language of care, the siblinghood of female lovers who have done many things together connotes a reciprocity that is best compared to the care, comfort, and closeness associated with genealogical sisterhood. Viewed in this light, it seems more accurate for female lovers of the same generation to refer to each other as siblings, rather than deploying the loose term “friend.”

Sisterhood holds a specific kind of intimacy that differs from the gendered (“king/queen”) and age-based (“mother/daughter”) terminologies outlined in the previous chapters. While female lovers are conscious that their siblinghood stands on its own and is metaphorical, outsiders may assume that they were born as siblings. Often, lovers capitalize on this assumption in order to mask the more unapproved parts of their relationship and guard themselves against hostilities (see Chuchu 2014).

The ambiguity of making siblinghood a strategy is particularly poignant when sister-lovers find out that they are indeed genealogically related.

Incest and Similitude

Same-sex sexual acts have a higher potential to subvert or undermine the morality and stability of our human societies. Why? Consider that one of the veritable reasons to support criminalizing incest is that consanguineous coitus gives rise to “in-breeding” that produces many genetic disorders. Since same-sex intercourse would not produce children, incest should not be applicable; and we could have father and sons, mothers and daughters agitating for the right to have same-sex relationships.

(Akagbor 2007, 5–6)

In his booklet titled “Same-Sex Attraction: Choice or Genetics?” Ghanaian author Sena Akagbor asserts the proposition that same-sex desire is inherently incestuous. Because same-sex relationships cannot manifest through illegitimate offspring, he argues, they provide the basis to argue against incest rules. Similarly twisted analogies between homosexuality and the legalization of incest and polygamy have been made by European bishops and prominent members of parliament who advocated against gay marriage, for instance in Britain and Germany.²¹ What is it about the assumed biological sameness of members of the same sex that inspires fantasies of messiness and incest? And should we even speak of “the same sex” and “the opposite sex,” given the work of queer theorists like Butler in deconstructing the sex binary? These questions merit attention, since the specter of incest lingers among same-sex desiring cousins themselves.

The term cousin, let alone second- or third-degree cousin, does not figure in southern Ghanaian languages. In Ghanaian English cousin tends to be used for a more distant relative of the same generation. It can produce some distance and indicates that the cousins do not belong to the same lineage or that exact genealogical connection cannot be traced without consultation of elder relatives. It is also common to

²¹ Daniel Boffey, “Argument for gay marriage would also legalize incest and polygamy, claim bishops and MPs,” *The Observer*, June 23, 2012; Peter Rehberg, “Kramp-Karrenbauers Albtraum” www.zeit.de/kultur/2018-11/ehe-fuer-alle-homophobie-annegret-kramp-karrenbauer-cdu, *Die Zeit*, November 23, 2018.

refer to a best female friend as a cousin, even if there is no genealogical connection assumed. (I have heard university professors deploy the term cousin to refer to a close friend. Conscious of the western biologically fixed understanding of “sibling” in Europe, educated women may use the term “cousin” as a metaphor for a closeness that cannot be captured in the fluffy term “friend.”) Here, I am focusing on women who mentioned having fallen in love with a friend who did indeed qualify as a distant relative. The choice and agency involved in deciding whether or not sexual involvement amounts to incest hinges on the larger question of how sameness is constituted between women.

The place of gender within understandings of incest is at the heart of Françoise Héritier’s incest theory (2002). The French anthropologist examined the Samo and compared her findings with kinship studies on other West African societies, including the Asante, and argued that bans imposed upon certain sexual unions are ultimately not concerned with avoiding contact among “the same blood,” but with preventing the indirect transfer of intimate substance between relatives of the same sex. Given that incest was a lingering specter among some of my respondents, her argument is worth considering. Among the Asante, cross-cousin marriage, hence cousin marriage across lineages is encouraged, while sexual contact with a maternal parallel-cousin is considered *mogyadie* (literally: eating the same blood) and with a paternal parallel-cousin *atwebenefie* (literally: “a vagina that is near to the dwelling-house”) (Rattray 1929, 29).²² Further intercourse with a father’s, uncle’s, brother’s, or son’s wife, and with a wife’s mother or sister are also ruled out under *atwebenefie*, but are not considered to be as severe. The prohibitions on parallel-cousin marriage in particular, suggest that siblings of the same sex are considered to be more closely related to each other than opposite-sex siblings. For, even if two cousins belong to different lineages, once their connecting relatives are same-sex siblings, their union could be considered closer and therefore “too close to home.”

²² According to Rattray’s list of “sins or tribal taboos,” having intercourse with a father’s brother’s child or a paternal half-sibling was considered as bad an offence as *mogyadie* (sex with “the same blood”) and was equally punishable by death (Rattray 1929, 304–12). Rattray also lists a third prohibition that is punished by death: that of unions between any member of one’s patri-clan (*ntɔɔ*), which I am not taking into consideration here (for a discussion of *ntɔɔ* see Allman and Tashjian 2000).

These are the bans that Hérítier deems to be at the heart of all incest taboos. In her grand classification, *mogaydie* amounts to “the first type” and *atwebenefie* to “the second type of incest” (that is, the prohibition of a man having intercourse with two women to whom he is not related, but who are related to each other by either blood or marriage). Hérítier rejects psychological explanations such as that which attributes prohibition to the competition it may cause if siblings share a lover or spouse. As she argues, the banning of love triangles of sexual partners, in which two parties are related, stems from the idea that through an intermediary sexual partner the fluids of two “identicals” (say mother and daughter or two sisters) would mingle. Understood as the transfer of corporal fluids, Hérítier argues that this type of incest dreads the confusion of the natural (blood) and the carnal (sex). As it “saturates our individual and collective imagination,” it is more fundamental and more universal than the “first type” (2002, 309), and it is bound to lead to a “confusion of sentiments” (Hérítier 2002, 305). Presuming that sisters are prototypically identical figures, she tags this second type “the incest of sisters,” on the basis of the imagined incest, hence the transfer of corporal substance (306). While Rattray loosely described *atwebenefie* in terms of the closeness emerging from sharing a “dwelling house,” I take issue with Hérítier’s image of the indirect sexual contact between members of the same sex as the driving force behind West African incest considerations. Such reasoning easily lends itself to essentialist explanations of (homophobic) discourse that deem homosexuality a danger for society. What seems useful, however, to my discussion is the “confusion” that may occur when two women worry about connecting on different and intersecting registers of relatedness.

“Like Sleeping with a Sister”

If indeed a notion of indirect transfer of substance between relatives of the same sex constitutes the basis of *atwebenefie*, how does this inform “sisters” who have (direct) sexual contact with each other?

Helena Asamoah, an unmarried, childless businesswoman in her early thirties, suffered disapproval over her connection to a girlfriend who turned out to be a relative. Helena was sixteen when she brought her first *supi*, a friend at a prestigious girls’ boarding school, to spend midterms with her at her parents’ house. They had been “very close”

for a while, as Helena puts it. “We eat together, you know those things,” she adds, hinting at the key indicators of same-sex intimacy.²³ One day they leafed through Helena’s family’s photo albums and realized that they had an uncle in common and were related through Helena’s father’s side. I did not find out whether they were cross-cousins or parallel-cousins. If they were parallel-cousins (i.e., related through both their fathers) this would amount to *atwebenefie*, but if they were cross-cousins and of the opposite sex, marriage might have even been encouraged in the past. I did not find out about the ethnic identification of Helena’s friend (many urban Ghanaians are of mixed parentage) and why Helena identifies so strongly through her father’s line. In spite of her keen interest in Akan rituals and customs – she chose “traditional religion” as an optional subject at secondary school – the question of whether they were cross- or parallel-cousins did not seem to matter to her. The photo album, however, a visual document making their kin connection particularly tangible, also stands for Helena’s middle-class status that requires safeguarding.

What struck me was Helena’s assertion that “a cousin, is just like sleeping with a sister.” It sounded as if the fact that they were both female, exacerbated their exact kin constellation; their shared gender making less important how exactly they were related. The emphasis on their sisterhood made me wonder to what extent she would bother with cousin taboos were she to fall in love with a male cousin. Helena firmly holds that what matters most to well-traveled, educated urbanites regarding love is their feelings for each other. “People who are enlightened a little or people who have the chance to be traveling,” she believes, contract love marriages and know that same-sex love is a “normal sexual something.” Nevertheless, Helena deems the attraction to her cousin wrong – not wrong enough though, to stop sleeping with her completely. “Even after that we used to sleep together once in a while (pauses) We do it and sometimes we all come back to our senses and we stop [...] because I can’t be sleeping with my cousin.”

Becky McCarthy, a twenty-year-old school dropout, told me that she only realized that she was related to her first big love in the wake of their painful break up. When I asked whether the fact that they were cousins bothered her, she shrugged. In hindsight, and since their

²³ The quotes here and in the next paragraph are from an interview with Helena Asamoah at Accra, May 15, 2008.

relationship had led to a broken heart, she took it as a solace that their bond seemed somehow out of place anyway. Grace Tagoe on the other hand, an unmarried mother of twins and of little economic resources, happily told me that her first and favorite “girl lover” was a distant paternal “cousin.” She could not detail their exact connection, besides, Grace is of a mixed ethnic background – her mother belongs to the Ga, who privilege patrilineal affiliation, and her father is a matrilineal Akan – which makes the question of who qualifies as a relative all the more negotiable.²⁴ She is still very fond of the cousin in question who is now married and lives in an adjunct neighborhood of Accra. “And do you know what God did? My cousin’s birthday is the date I born my children, 14th January, Sunday. [...] That’s my first girl lover. The same thing [day]. So if she is celebrating her birthday she knows that my children also – so she comes, comes and gives gifts to my children.” By staying in touch not as jealous ex-lovers but as dear friends, Grace integrated their bond into her larger networks. Their shared teenage intimacy reinforced their “siblinghood,” and so did the coincidence of birthdays. The fact that Grace, unlike Helena, treasures her bygone cousin love seems to hinge not on different degrees of genealogical closeness but, perhaps, on different degrees of sexual intimacy – Grace considered her cousin a romantic friend (only) – and certainly on differences in class and social status.

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Comparing Grace’s and Helena’s ways of recalling their cousin love, we must consider that Grace is materially much needier than Helena. Grace is jobless and depends on the caring attention of better-off married women like her cousin, and crucially relies on her ability to weave networks of personal kindreds for both economic and emotional support. Helena, on the other hand, may come to appreciate the connection to her cousin lover as an additional tie or resource within the family, but for now she is concerned primarily with her independence and upward mobility as a young businesswoman. Helena too relies on family networks, but she can afford to ponder about the legitimacy of a relationship that is at odds with the norms of respectability adhered to by middle-class families. She emphasizes her resistance toward consolidating a bond that doubly departs from social

²⁴ Interview with Grace Tagoe in Accra, April 21, 2007.

regulation and cannot lead to a recognized union. Nevertheless, she mentioned that they kept sleeping together occasionally. At the same time, Helena happily refers to another ex-lover, with whom she lived for several years, as her "sister" and proudly treats that "sister's" daughter as her own daughter. It seems the use of kinship terminology is ambiguous only when different modes of relatedness intersect: the one based on assumed blood ties, the other on hidden sexual ties.

Both Helena and Grace met their "cousins" at Junior Secondary School, in a youthful setting when they enjoyed at least some license to explore (and censor) themselves. To Hamda Ibrahim on the other hand, who fell in love with a cousin as an adult, questions of status and respectability were salient. When we first interviewed Hamda, she made no mention of her relatedness to Okaile Allotey. All she talked about during our first interview was her broken heart. Okaile was not "faithful," and was not even bothered by the fact that Hamda knew and was hurt. Longingly, Hamda related to us that Okaile was her first female partner ever and that she loved her the way she had only loved and desired men before. "I always get certain *feelings* inside me when she *kisses* me, I get *feelings* and it's like maybe, if I am *feeling* like a man *kisses* me, it's the same."²⁵ Hamda says about herself that before Okaile, she was among those women who scrutinized and condemned women doing *supi*. Through Okaile, she discovered that she deeply desired women. To illustrate her "feelings," she mentions how she sometimes feels like stroking the swaying long skirts and pieces of cloth worn by beautiful women passing by, because their beauty reminds her of her feelings for Okaile.

As Hamda remembers, one evening when she was standing in the streets with some "sisters" (the women staying in and around her family house), Okaile flirtatiously started playing with her necklace and proposed love to her. While the sisters warned her that Okaile was penniless, Hamda declared on the spot that money did not matter, because she simply liked Okaile. Falling in love she also ignored the sisters' admonitions that Okaile was notorious for "womanizing." She was even planning to rent a room for Okaile outside their neighborhood, so she could freely visit her. When Josephine and I interviewed her during the process of breaking up, she insisted that they had only

²⁵ Unless stated otherwise, the quotes from Hamda are taken from the first interview conducted with her at Accra, June 9, 2007.

kissed and did not do anything “in the room.” I assumed that they lacked privacy to sleep together, considering the crowded housing situation and the fact that Hamda’s sisters aimed at protecting her. When I spoke to Hamda again five years later, she attributed her physical “shyness” with Okaile and their reticence to consummate their relationship sexually to their kin ties. It surprised me that Hamda brought forward their relatedness after all these years, especially since it took her some effort to trace how exactly they were related; they had a great grandmother in common and were second degree, most likely, matrilineal parallel-cousins.

Hamda Ibrahima is a polyglot petty trader who has done many things to make a living, from selling home-cooked food to juggling factory jobs. She is part of a group of young Muslim women who rotate their savings and organize for social events together. Whenever she has some extra money, she buys and sells between Lagos, Accra, and northern Ghana, just as her deceased father did, a Fulani herder and trader. When she is in Accra, she sleeps in the hall of her mother’s family house in an old Ga quarter, usually sharing the couch together with one of her nieces. She herself has given birth to two sets of twins with two different men. In line with Ga custom, the three surviving sons stay in their fathers’ compounds. While she hopes to find a respectable Muslim husband, her female lover’s religious affiliation does not matter to her. Okaile Allotey is a Christian. Unlike Hamda who attended primary and Qu’ran school only until she was eight, Okaile went to Junior Secondary School. She is not formally employed, but she draws on her longstanding local connections to fetch occasional catering and decorating jobs. Of full Ga descent, Okaile stays with her matrikin in her native neighborhood. As mentioned above, she expelled a girlfriend from her bed by telling her she was not her “mother’s daughter.”

Centered around an old Ga quarter of Accra, the story of Hamda’s passionate love for Okaile calls for a word about Ga kinship organization. The Ga are indigenous to the coastal areas of Accra and constitute an inherently urban group. As explored by Marion Kilson, the Ga emphasize patrilineality, thus contrasting themselves to their matrilineal Akan neighbors (1974, 17). Moreover, the Ga kinship matrix is less lineal than that of the Akan. This is reflected in the fact that cross-cousin marriages are permitted on either side, though matrilineal cross-cousins marry more frequently (Kilson 1974, 28). Regarding residence and accession to property, the separation of sexes is at the



Figure 5 Hamda Ibrahimia at a credit association meeting of her young Muslim women’s group (2007)

heart of Ga organization, whereby men co-reside with patrilineal kinsmen, and women with matrilineal kinswomen. As Kilson suggests, as a structurally cognate descent system, Ga social organization is “more flexible and diffuse than one based on lineal principles. Within such a system, an individual probably has greater opportunity to emphasize those ties, which appear beneficial to his [or her] interest” (Kilson 1974, 20). Being of mixed Fulani and Ga parentage, Hamda could have pragmatically resorted to these relatively flexible principles. The fact that she worries about breaching a deduced incest taboo, or at least a taboo that has not been made explicit for relatives of the same sex, brings up the question of what inspires feelings of being incestuous. This, in turn, necessitates a closer look at notions of incestuousness.

Incestuous Doublings

One aspect of Hamda's story that brings us back to Héritier's "incest of sisters" is Okaile's boyfriend. Apparently, he flirtatiously proposed love to Hamda too and was angered by her refusal. Hamda never informed Okaile about this incident. Situations where a wealthy man goes after two female friends are not so unusual and can be a major source of conflict. On the other hand, Rose Asuku, an elderly respondent in Suakrom, related to me that she remembers how her mother supported her father's decision to take her best friend as his second wife. While sharing a husband, the women remained close friends. Rose further suggested that some women might in fact encourage their husbands to marry their *supi*. However, for Hamda, a poorer and unmarried woman, this kind of ménage à trois was not an option.

If Hamda and Okaile were indeed genealogical relatives, sharing a male sexual partner amounts to an "incest of sisters." Héritier locates this secondary type of incest in a collective imagination that abhors the indirect contact of bodily fluids between "identicals," especially female relatives, who are supposedly of "the same substance, the same form, the same sex, the same flesh." This state is bound to bring about the characteristic "confusion of sentiments" reflected through the encounter of blood ties and sexual fluids (2002, 306–7). Could it be argued that Hamda's sense of committing incest was not necessarily stirred by her family connection to Okaile but by the confusion that Okaile's boyfriend could have brought to them? Perhaps the risk of becoming entangled in a love triangle through a potential husband may have alerted Hamda to the ambiguity of their closeness and to their "sameness" both in terms of gender and kinship ties.

Strictly speaking, according to their largely patrilineal backgrounds, Okaile and Hamda belong to different lineages and ethno-linguistic groups: Okaile is Ga, Hamda qualifies as Fulani. Yet, while Hamda does maintain her Fulani contacts throughout West Africa, Ga is her first language, she spends a lot of time among her mother's Ga relatives, and she seems to identify as Ga at least when she in Accra. At the time they were lovers, Hamda did not seem to consider their kin connection. Even if she was not fully aware of it then, the geographic closeness of their relations was obvious, with her maternal grandmother staying

next to Okaile’s compound.²⁶ As I see it, their connectedness through a web of friends and loosely defined “sisters” mattered more than the exact kinship constellation. In order to grasp Hamda’s concern, her subject position, and her erotic subjectivity need to be explored.

Whereas Adwoa and other articulate “knowing women” trace their same-sex awareness to erotic childhood experiences, Hamda fell in love as an adult and consistently portrayed herself as unknowing regarding the possibilities of sexual intimacy between women. She dubs the relationship with Okaile, who “opened her eyes,” a one-time experience rather than the beginning of a learning process that would make her a knowing (and teaching) woman in her own right. This self-understanding as someone who is not “knowing,” intersects with her self-portrayal as an innocent single woman who lacks formal education and as a neglected lastborn child. Hamda’s social position is bound up with her difficult start in life: Her mother died after birth and her father was old when she was born. He gave her to her “[maternal] auntie’s first born,” a woman who had little interest in her. “I don’t eat, sometimes I don’t wear panties, sometimes, I don’t wear shoes, not even sometimes, no slippers at all, even at home I don’t wear slippers.” At the age of eight Hamda started following luckier daughters to their homes. She learned how to sneak into the hearts and households of her best friends’ mothers, making herself their child helper. Even today, she is highly attentive to other people’s needs and readily assists her friends’ families. “When I come to your house, I don’t make myself like I am older than you, I will behave like I’m a child you understand me? If I’m staying with you and your mother is there, I will wash for her, sweep and do many things and others. People might think I am taking your mother away from you.” Hamda attributes her ongoing success in making personal kindreds to her overall serviceability and submissiveness. The capacity to closely connect with both men and women and access their families allowed her to gradually overcome the precarious position associated with being an orphaned, youngest child. Hamda’s quest for respectability, her hope to contract a suitable husband and extend her networks, conflicted with her soft spot for

²⁶ The one case when a young “knowing woman” in Accra mentioned her sexual involvement with an elderly relative (her mother’s cousin), their relatedness did not come up as an issue at all; the “aunty” lived in a far-away rural hometown.

a dauntless cousin who might jeopardize her efforts to become upwardly mobile.

*

As Lévi-Strauss argues, incest rules are not originally informed by genetic rules or the fear of inbreeding, but by men's drive to enlarge their networks and transcend a descent-based "mechanical solidarity" (1969, 484). He considers incest taboos a way of ensuring that wider alliances are forged, and communication and exchange happens across different groups. Certainly, Hamda's sense of being related with Okaile stems from their overlapping social (and sexual) networks. Perhaps their relationship might have flourished had she found Okaile a room outside their local setting. Five years after their breakup, when Hamda first mentions Okaile as a "cousin," she was doing relatively well and self-assertively claimed that Okaile wanted her back now. Apparently, Okaile was jobless and involved with "ten women" in order to get by. Their relatedness served as a handy reason to explain why she did not engage sexually in the first place. Indeed, considering the intertwining of their daily lives, Hamda's outright infatuation courted the danger of their relationship becoming too public. At least to their sisters, Hamda and Okaile were considered more than just friends; the tacit acceptance of their erotic bond could have tilted into shameful *supi* gossip. Nevertheless, Hamda does not represent her decision to stop their intimate involvement as a result of the public outcries against "lesbianism." She refrains from portraying herself as the victim of homophobia or other hostilities. Rather, she portrays their sexual reticence as a choice consciously made in order to avoid the trouble of simultaneously engaging and mixing different modes of relatedness.

Is Hérítier right, when arguing that there is something inherently troubling about the duplication of being connected? Her theory about the "incest of sisters" relies on what she considered the "incontestable and irreducible character of sexual difference" (2002, 316). Derived from a structuralist investment in sexual difference, which she deems "necessary for biological as well as social reproduction" (Hérítier 2002, 315), the social dynamics that produce sameness and difference (and thus prescribe which sexual unions are legitimate or not) do not seem to matter. Insofar as Hérítier's theory validates the presumed "sameness" of members of the same sex, it uncannily aligns with circular homophobic arguments – like the one brought forth by

Akagbor in the quote opening this subchapter – according to which same-sex desires are inherently messy, unproductive, and undeterminable because their legitimacy cannot be traced through biological offspring. Yet given the considerable genetic, physical, reproductive, and hormonal differences between persons considered to be of the same sex, the term sameness in itself needs to be interrogated. Boellstorff uses the term of "similitude" instead (2005, 26), thereby challenging homophobic constructions of sexual "sameness" as an utterly non-reproductive mode of being in the world.

In none of the above cousin loverships were the exact genealogical connections spelled out. The mere fact that there was some genealogical connection to be traced was sufficient to put a question mark over the relationship and to avoid sibling terminology. It seems that unwritten incest rules are more useful indicators on what could make a relationship wrong than the discourse in Ghana and elsewhere that considers same-sex desire an "ancient taboo"²⁷ altogether. If Hamda had not found out about their common great-grandmother, would she have referred to Okaile as a (metaphorical) sibling? Incest considerations between female lovers point to the mostly unspoken but significant distinction women themselves make between genealogical and metaphorical forms of being related. By insisting on this distinction, they resist such folk fantasies and theories that tag as incestuous the (direct or indirect) transfer of sexual fluids between female bodies, whether or not they are genealogical related. The fact that the sisterhood of lovers remains in the realm of metaphor, however, does not reduce its relevance, for all kinship can be, and is, extended metaphorically. The realness of this metaphor manifests itself when same-sex lovers raise children together and share their networks of personal kindreds.

Contingent Families

Next to "love" in all its shapes and permutations, permanence and endurance are among the defining features of Kath Weston's understanding of "gay kinship." In *Families We Choose*, the pioneering anthropological study on gays and lesbians in California's Bay Area, Weston explored

²⁷ See, for example, Kwamena Ahinful, "No 'Supi-Supi' Lesbianism," *The Mirror* (Ghana edition), January 17, 1998.

the “ideological opposition between biological families and families we choose” (1991, 118). The “chosen families” she portrayed included lovers, ex-lovers, and friends, who refer to each other as aunts and uncles, but overwhelmingly placed themselves in the relationship of siblings (Weston 1991, 117).

In Euro-American contexts, the practice of referring to a lover in sibling terms has undergone several shifts. For a long time, siblinghood was one of the few cultural categories that rendered strong feelings toward a “friend” of the same sex intelligible. As Weston states, the alliance between “the language of friendship and the language of kinship” served as a means to veil the erotic bonds between queer “friends” (119). This use of sisterhood and brotherhood was only eclipsed when the gay and lesbian rights movement pushed for political visibility, solidarity, and community, when “coming out as a lesbian or gay man entailed learning to discriminate between feelings of erotic and non-erotic love, drawing meaningful contrasts between sexual attraction and friendship” (119–20). Thus, the terms brother and sister began to designate exclusively non-sexual relationships within a growing identity-based, “quasi-ethnic gay community.”²⁸ The shift back, from contrast to continuum between friends and lovers, occurred in the 1980s and laid the basis for a family-centered discourse. With the creation of “chosen families,” erotic and non-erotic understandings of siblinghood realigned. These families took many different forms, encompassing different households, lovers and children, ex-lovers, and friends, whereby gay and straight friends were grouped together with lovers, and children “within a single cultural domain” (136). With the increased recognition of lesbian and gay identities and politics, kinship terms were re-appropriated and adapted into a family ideology that highlighted love, choice, and creativity as the organizing principles of gay kinship (41).

The extent to which struggles for the legal recognition of gay marriage thrive on a desire to be “normal” and lead to the assimilation of nuclear, “homonormative” families is much debated (Mesquita 2011; Nay 2017). As queer theorists have argued, the quest for legal rights and the increased visibility of middle-class families consisting of two

²⁸ Stephen O. Murray coined this phrase in his article “The Institutional Elaboration of a Quasi-Ethnic Community” (1979) where he compared urban ethnic to urban gay communities (Weston 1991, 230).

lesbian or gay parents and their children, undermine the search for *extended* forms of family and communal understandings of queer kinship (Epstein 2005; Moore 2011; Mesquita and Nay 2013). When same-sex desiring working-class women in Ghana parent children and weave personal networks that span several households and generations, they tend to do so without assimilating or asserting themselves against a nuclear family ideal. While sharing rooms or compound houses, living in close proximity and attuning their everyday lives to each other, they cannot seek state recognition. Rather, their arrangements are as precarious and contingent as their overall lives are; they put into question sexual identity and same-sex marriage as the corner stones of queer family formation – all the more reason, therefore, that these “arrangements” deserve consideration from a (queer) family perspective.

Sharing Rooms, Sharing Husbands

Though the nuclear family is gaining popularity throughout urban West Africa, the extended family model is still widely available and often the only choice under circumstances of persistent poverty. Coordinating their lives, women who love women inscribe themselves into each other’s birth families and friendship networks. Thus, their material realities translate into forms of relatedness, which contrast with the self-identified, politicized notions of “chosen family” (Weston 1991). In these accounts, shared housing arrangements and the joint care of children take on an important role in consolidating a sisterly complicity or even partnership without, however, implying the absence of male partners. Female lovers share rooms not only with their children but often also with the husband of one or the other. In Teley Kwao and Felicia Clotey’s case, Felicia’s husband was an integral and certainly inevitable part of their “family.”

Teley Kwao, shy and skinny, with a strikingly deep voice and masculine self-styling, is a working-class woman struggling to make ends meet. Although her mother was a teacher, she only attended two years of primary school and only speaks Ga, the main language spoken in her Accra neighborhood. As the youngest of nine children, she received little attention and spent most of her days playing football. While her sisters and neighbors pester her for being childless and wearing boyish clothes, she does not mind being mistaken for a feminine man. In fact,

every now and then she puts on a fake diamond earring as she had observed flamboyant gay men doing. Her main resource is a large family network that she can fall back on. She used to hire out bicycles until they went out of fashion, then she took to selling phone cards, but none of her small-scale business endeavors were fruitful. At the time we met, she was out of work and living on the meagre monthly allowance a senior brother gave her. It was hard to find a good time to interview her; several times she had gotten drunk and was asleep when we visited.

Over a number of years, Felicia had been Teley's "best friend." Like Teley, Felicia is the lastborn of many children and only slightly more resourced than Teley, but she is married and has a child. Teley liked to spend her days at Felicia's little store, tending to Felicia's baby boy and selling petty items such as mats and children's slippers together with Felicia's ten-year-old niece. She was not paid, but occasionally she would ask Felicia to buy something for her – a fancy t-shirt she had seen in town, for example – and Felicia would buy it for her. At night Teley shared the hall with the baby, at Felicia and her husband's doorstep. Asked whether it does not pain her, when she hears them having sex, Teley replies, at first it did, but now "*I am with them*" and "*when he leaves, it's left with the two of us.*"²⁹ Indeed, there is a lot of time for the two of them, since Felicia's husband works at a drinking spot; he leaves the house early and returns around midnight.

Kinship terminology played a significant role when Teley first spoke to Felicia at a funeral in the neighborhood. She pretended she already knew Felicia and told her one of her brothers was looking for her. "*I told her, 'I want to speak to you for a little while. My brother is standing in the corner, he wants to speak with you.'*[...] *When we got there, she asked where he was. Then I started complaining, 'Ah, this brother of mine! I've gone searching everywhere for him, but I can't find him!' So we had to wait a little to pass time. So we started conversing.*" Teley used her family as a pretext to approach Felicia and the ruse worked. They ended up going for a drink together and with the help of a mediating "knowing" friend, Teley managed to have a quiet moment where she finally disclosed herself to Felicia, by telling her that she herself was the "brother" who took an interest. Felicia seemed to be in the know already and they became lovers.

²⁹ This and the following quotes in this section are taken from an interview with Teley Kwao at Accra, February 26, 2007.

Five years later, Teley worried about Felicia's pending marriage and expected Felicia to break up. "*When she got wedded, I really felt it, because it was like my friendship was going to be – It was like she was going to leave me.*" Aware of her own powerlessness, Teley was convinced that Felicia would eventually prefer her husband and freeze her out. But the break did not happen. Teley was even present during their wedding night, when she slept at Felicia's new place, in the same room with Felicia, her female relatives, and the husband. Soon Teley realized that still,

*the love was there. [J.A. Love is strong!] And she came and kissed me once and told me not to worry. [J.A. Oh!] And she gave me 20,000 cedis and told me not to worry. She could see that the heart was boiling! [J.A. The heart was breaking! She was breaking her heart.] So she apologized to me. And even the following morning – we were all still there, and the room, like this, I could lie here and- when day broke- as for the man, after waking up, he went to work. [. . .] She used to say "When he leaves, aren't the two of us left alone?" Then I bluff; you know me already! I had to pretend that I didn't like the whole idea. But we're on very good terms.*³⁰

After the newlyweds had spent a few days by themselves, Felicia "pretended" to be harsh toward Teley, capitalizing on her newly found status as a married woman. Teley on her part mimed the angry one and warned Felicia "*that 'Hey, I don't allow people to give me any heart disease [i.e. annoy me immensely]'*." But Felicia managed to save Teley's face and ensured that her proud selfhood was not hurt, despite her lack of power. Teley became Felicia's permanent guest. Luckily, she got on well with Felicia's husband who, as Teley puts it, did not "*bother about certain things.*" Rather, if Teley did not show up at their place for a few days, and the husband saw her in the streets, he would ask when she would be "coming back home." If she passed by his drinking spot, he would give her a tot and so did his assistant. Teley waved away my suggestion that the husband himself might have a lover at his workplace. Certainly, that the husband sensed how important Teley was for his wife and did not torpedo their relationship.

This is not the only case of female lovers sharing rooms with a husband, taking turns with household chores and co-parenting. With Teley and Felicia, however, this arrangement worked for quite a while, whereas other similar arrangements often deteriorated over

³⁰ Interview with Teley Kwao at Accra, February 26, 2007.

jealousies or financial problems. Perhaps this triangle worked particularly well because Teley's situation was precarious enough not to be threatening to the husband. On the other hand, precisely the fact that Teley relied on Felicia's slight income makes it surprising that the husband did not "bother" with Teley. (Even though separate property is culturally entrenched, "modern" husbands who cohabit with their wives may try to exert some control over their wives' income.) It seems their difference in gender identification – with Teley presenting herself as a brother in certain moments – coupled with Teley's material dependency, facilitated this triangle. In a similar constellation, a breakup between two female lovers occurred after the envious live-in lover tried to oppose her girlfriend's desire to beget another child from the husband. Teley, however, reluctant to sleep with men herself, treated Felicia's son as her own.

What puts an interesting spin on their arrangement is the fact that Felicia's son does not look like Felicia's husband at all. At the funeral party of Felicia's father, the rumor about a mutual friend of Teley and Felicia's, a gay activist, being the boy's real genitor, became plausible. Pa Koo, the activist arrived with an entourage of friends, and, as is suitable for a "big man," with two coolers filled with beer and soft drinks; apparently Felicia had asked him to bring drinks. Without objecting to my remark that he and the little boy looked alike, he jokingly told us he wanted to see Felicia's husband and "date him." Clearly, he enjoyed the idea of undermining a (supposedly straight) husband's territory. While Felicia's husband remained the mysterious absentee and never made an appearance at the funeral, the atmosphere turned exuberant later in the evening. Surrounded by a host of young men and women, dancing to pounding Ghanaian hiplife and American R&B tracks, the gay activist exclaimed that "homosexuals are in the house, it's written everywhere, and I can see it from the [dignitaries'] faces that they know. But I don't mind. It's a youth culture now."³¹ At some point, Pa Koo tried to whisper into Teley's ear and dance with her flirtatiously. But Teley, who is otherwise full of admiration for him, did not look comfortable and neither did Pa Koo's boyfriend.

There are many question marks to this event: Was Felicia's husband infertile? Was Pa Koo thrilled by the idea of having female "wives" and invested in his own "queer family"? Did Teley and Felicia plan to have

³¹ Quotes in this paragraph are from fieldnotes taken in Accra, March 10, 2008.

children by the same man? Like many childless women of her age, Teley was scorned for engaging other people’s children to run small errands for her. During the weeks leading up to the funeral, she mentioned several times that she wanted and needed to have a baby, perhaps hoping that a child would reduce the criticism she received for her masculine gender presentation. The fantasy of sharing a donor does not seem farfetched, considering that female-bodied queers in Europe and elsewhere often try to conceive by the same donor, for both practical and (normative) romantic reasons. Yet, we need to be cautious about correlating ideas about reproductive practices across continents. Considering the chronic poverty and the animosities faced by childless, gender transgressing women like Teley in Ghana, the desire to have children by the same “big man,” must not necessarily be about forging an additional, “biological” connection to their female lover, but could also be the result of searching for a powerful fathering patron for their children.

I was not close enough with Teley and Felicia to inquire either about their reproductive dreams and fantasies or their parenting ideals. All I sensed was that they were close confidants, sharing many secrets and taking care of Felicia’s little son together. To date, Teley does not have a child. When I last saw her, she was recovering from a major car accident. Unable to afford the necessary surgical treatment at the time, her right arm was disabled. She stayed with her aunt and sisters and only visited Felicia occasionally and, as she claimed, only because she wanted to see the boy. Felicia, on the other hand, had started running her own drinking spot and had “so many friends,” which pained Teley. There may be various reasons for their distance. One of them, considering Teley’s bad health and her inability to work, is conceivably that Teley was too proud to be a burden on Felicia.

If we define “family” as an intergenerational constellation, with one or more adults raising children and caring for each other on a daily basis, then Teley and Felicia’s setting could be considered a queer form of family. Their interdependence grew from their togetherness and affective attachment. Yet, unlike Weston’s informants, this family arrangement is situational and has strong pragmatic aspects that are based neither on sexual identity nor on a claim to permanence, but rather framed by material precariousness. But does the fact that their relatedness cannot be intended to be permanent and that it appears less “chosen” than that of lesbian-headed families in California, make them any less family?

Sharing “One Mind”

While Weston was inspired by middle-class lesbians and gays of the 1990s who claimed love, choice, and permanence as the pillars of their families, Carol Stack’s take on kinship speaks to the exigencies of poverty and marginalization faced by black urban poor in North America.

In her landmark ethnography *All Our Kin* (1974), Stack describes the intense material and emotional flows within a black working-class neighborhood in the USA, where even in newly formed friendships, individuals begin to rely upon one another quickly. In this context precariousness does not allow for nuclear families but calls for the constant exchange and the renewal of living arrangements in which friends and neighbors take care of each other’s children and elders across different households. Similarly among my respondents, the degree to which “kindreds” rely on each other blurs the distinctions between genealogical and metaphorical kin. Stack coins the term “personal kindreds,” which are networks comprised of all those “who are socially recognized as having reciprocal responsibilities” (1974, 55). These “kindreds” may include those kin who “exhibit the interactive patterns of friends” and those friends who live up to one another’s expectations and are thus identified as kin (Stack 1974, 53). “For example, if two women of the same age are helping one another, they call their friend ‘just a sister,’ or say that ‘they are going for sisters.’ Anyone in the community with whom a person has good social dealings can be classified as some kind of kin” (58). Kinship thus amounts to a way of activating jural rights and obligations and mobilizing support. Amidst “fluctuating economic needs, changing life styles, and vacillating personal relationships,” the capacity to expand the networks into which one is born, by contracting and creating “personal kindreds” (94), is key to survival in the community Stack described. Similarly in Ghana, the bond with a same-sex lover can be strengthened through her gradual incorporation into personal networks that include affines and genealogical kin.

While questions over exchange were at the heart of Ma’Abena’s adventurous introduction to doing *supi* described in Chapter 2, her adult relationship with Esther Gyamerah is construed along more pragmatic lines.

Even if she doesn’t have enough, and I also don’t have, we still feel good, because we’ve been together for long, we’re now like siblings, so we have one mind now. When we’re together, and I don’t have enough, I tell her what is

happening, and she does the same thing when she doesn't have enough. Even if it's Gari³² that we're going to eat, we don't have a problem. We don't allow people to know what we're going through.³³

Unlike Adwoa, Ma'Abena does not engage the metaphor of blood. Her speech mode is calm and not heated with passion. By likening her relationship with Esther to the bond between siblings who are of "one mind," siblinghood emerges as a vehicle for the construction of endurance and continuity. This connectedness was built on practices of sharing, rather than exchanging (material and immaterial) things.

Though Ma'Abena stresses how they came to think the same thoughts and are able to communicate with a look and how they managed to overcome hardship together, her life history suggests that the fifteen years which she counts as years of being together had not been steady. During this period of time there were years when Esther and Ma'Abena were distant or went entirely separate ways. For instance, during the period of Esther's pregnancy and postpartum, Ma'Abena had another girlfriend for at least one or two years. At the time of our interview, Esther and Ma'Abena's passion had given way to what Ma'Abena likens to siblinghood. The everyday practices through which their familiarity, fraught with breaks and reconciliation, is enacted, provides the foundation for actualizing their siblinghood.

Growing up in the same neighborhood, Esther and Ma'Abena knew each other from childhood, but only befriended each other in their early twenties after having attended different boarding schools. Ma'Abena was then playing for Suakrom's newly established semi-professional women's football team. But neither the allowance she received for attending training semi-daily, nor the accounting she did for her mother's market store, was lucrative. Esther, on the other hand, found a white-collar job. She started inviting Ma'Abena over when she lived in a "self-contained" (an unattached single room), built by Esther's husband. *"She said she was married, but her husband had traveled, so she was alone at home, and that I should be passing by to visit. [...] When I went to visit her, she made me feel good. She welcomed me and asked what work I was doing. So I told her my life*

³² Gari is a staple food among poor people along the West African coast. Made of ground cassava that is fermented and dried, gari can be stored for years. It is easily prepared by mixing it with cold water.

³³ Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

history. *So she told me to come to her more often. And she tried getting a job for me.*"³⁴ Although Esther and Ma'Abena are of the same age group, Esther is years ahead of Ma'Abena in terms of social status. Formally employed, with a room of her own, and a husband abroad, she is much better placed than Ma'Abena.

Ma'Abena used to stay in her father's compound. Upon his death, Ma'Abena's mother returned to her *abusua* and, the following year, Ma'Abena and her older sister had to leave too. Before long, Ma'Abena moved in with Esther and stayed "*for about two-and-half years.*" During that time Esther urged her to stop playing football. "*She kept complaining that why do I keep going [to training] and falling sick.*"³⁵ Certainly, the reputed rowdiness of female footballers and their attractiveness to older women might have added to Esther's concern over Ma'Abena's bad health at the time. She asked Ma'Abena to run small errands for her and promised to reward her with the same small amount of money she could make on the football pitch. At first Ma'Abena tried to do both: She slipped away from training to run errands for Esther on her way home. Only during a prolonged bout of malaria, confined to bed, did she give in to Esther. "*I decided to stop, because it was money that I needed, and she was prepared to give me that.*" In spite of this patron-client dynamic, Ma'Abena does not refer to Esther as her senior, let alone her "sugar mother." Instead, she portrays their relationship as a give and take between equals who have been through thick and thin, doing everything together.

Sharing Kids and Kindreds

Esther and Ma'Abena's "siblinghood" implied that they would not allow their neighbors to notice when they had "problems." If they fought, they did not change their routine of carrying each other's buckets to the bath, "wash and hang" together, or eat from the same bowl. Even if they were not talking for days they tried to prevent others from noticing that they were not on good terms, for a lovers' fight is a sign that two women are more than "just friends" and may be read even by outsiders.

³⁴ Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

³⁵ Interview with Ma'Abena Oppong at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

Once Ma'Abena was offered room in her father's house again, she returned. Soon after returning, Esther joined her for half a year. This time Esther "*had a little problem. So I told her that she should let us all come, because, it's like, you've helped me,*"³⁶ Ma'Abena says. Esther had many problems. Above all, her husband found out that she had misused his money to pay off a large sum that she embezzled at her company. Consequently, she had to leave the place he had built for her. Through all this, Ma'Abena was her loyal helper and confidant. Although Ma'Abena has never met Esther's husband in person, she became their mediator. He even sent Ma'Abena a mobile phone, so he could call her and check on his house-building affairs; he seemed to trust her more than his wife. Having a brother in Italy, Ma'Abena knew how to communicate long-distance, and, having many male (football) friends, she had learned how to work with men.

Ma'Abena herself is not legally married, but she refers to a family friend whom she used to work with at the market, as her "husband." He is the proud father of her ten-year-old son Will. Two years after Ma'Abena gave birth, Esther had a son and named him Will too. While other women name their children after past and present friends and lovers, their connection is evinced by a newly chosen name. Today the namesakes are close friends, a closeness enabled by the fact that Ma'Abena arranged for a room for Esther in a maternal cousin's compound, and their sons can visit any time. When Ma'Abena's son asks his father for a present, he would ask for two additional ones, to give to his friend Will and his little brother. The desire or duty to pass things on is constitutive of all alliance- and kinship-making. Ma'Abena and Esther's unofficial "alliance" resulted from many years of actively connecting their kids, kin, and kindreds.

Ma'Abena emphasizes her closeness with Esther by invoking the things they shared and experienced together, their vicinity and complicity. Meanwhile, they are not as passionately drawn to each other as they used to be. During our interviews with Ma'Abena, Esther was in Accra where she spends most of the week, looking for a new job and staying with a boyfriend. Every other weekend they catch up and spend much time with each other, to the point where Esther's mother would phone Ma'Abena, if she could not reach her daughter. But Ma'Abena is explicit about them having surpassed the stages of lovers' infatuation,

³⁶ Interview with Ma'Abena Opong at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

when she reflects on the fact that they are not compelled to constantly be in each other's company anymore.

*At first, it was like, we were always together, it was good. But now, the pressure [urge to see each other] is not like at first. If I see her, it's good, if not, no problem. I feel like, I can go anywhere that I want to go. At first, even if I had to go somewhere, we had to do it together. Do you understand what I'm saying? Because I knew that there was something behind me. But it's not like that anymore. I can go wherever I want [...] without knowing her whereabouts; I don't have any problems.*³⁷

While the heat of passion and the jealous drive to be together at all times faded over the years, Ma'Abena counts all the fifteen years they have been in each other's lives as years of their togetherness. It was during these years that they shared substance and became "like siblings": they washed, bathed, slept, and ate together on a daily basis, shared their headaches, provided each other with room in their family compounds, cheated on each other, named their firstborns after each other, and were known as best friends by their husbands, mothers, sons, and friends. Along the way, Ma'Abena and Esther began to share their networks of personal kindreds and, just like many opposite-sex couples, they developed a sibling-like bond which to some extent undermined their erotic passion.³⁸

In Ma'Abena's discourse, siblinghood emerges as a model for companionship and mutuality that is becoming post-sexual. Yet even Adwoa's passionate claim to siblinghood is fueled by a dramatic sense of losing Korkoi as a lover, which makes their non-sexual shared substance, their closeness "by blood," all the more compelling. Whether or not their relationships are tacitly perceived as erotic relationships by outsiders, having shared not only bath water but also bodily fluids, matters to their claims of having become "one blood" or being of "one mind" respectively. Yet, in Ma'Abena's account, amorous passion has lost its urgency and given way to a connectedness that hinges on a complicity forged through dealing with each other's husbands and having children. It seems that it is

³⁷ Interview with Ma'Abena Oppon at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

³⁸ Comparable assumptions are made in the Euro-American myth of "lesbian bed death," which holds that female homosexual couples, much more than heterosexual or male homosexual couples, are prone to asexual long-term relationships.

precisely the bread-and-butter intimacies and the loosening of the passionate grip, combined with the longevity of their friendship, that are the prerogatives of their relatedness.

Articulations of choice and permanence are not the markers of shifting same-sex family formations that span different households, include husbands or boyfriends, and are as contingent as the lives of the women who form them. While invoking each other as siblings, my respondents did not claim to raise queer families. Using the term family to describe the closeness of women who house or arrange rooms for each other, name their children after each other (or after a bygone cousin love), and take care of each other’s elders, is thus a conscious effort on my part to evaluate the “arrangements” I encountered as more than “arrangements.” By examining “lineages” and “domestic groups” rather than “families,” anthropologists of kinship in West Africa reinforced ideas about the nuclear Euro-American model as the “real” family associated with safety and domestic comfort. Multi-generational, extended forms of living and belonging together have been in turn defined against this unspoken nuclear family norm. By considering the networks I found siblinghoods and families, I emphasize the affective element and the critical agency of women who attune their everyday lives to each other and share responsibilities, even if they cannot or choose not to co-reside permanently.

Conclusion: Actualizing Siblinghood

Female “friends” who refer to each other as *nuanom* (siblings) or sisters make nuanced distinctions between different forms of relatedness. To outsiders, they capitalize on the blurred and often unspoken boundaries between genealogical and metaphorical kinship and between best friends and lovers. Deploying siblinghood can be a way of avoiding the ambiguous term “friend,” since a “friend,” assumed to be a non-relative, is a potential lover. Among same-sex desiring women, claims to siblinghood allude to a mode of closeness and connection that exceeds “friendship.” Such claims tend to connote the equality and harmony attributed to uterine sisters rather than the internal hierarchies and underlying hostilities that also prevail among siblings. Siblinghood may index a companionship that has ceased to be sexually passionate. Having weathered the storms of passionate love, material hardships, and the exchange of gifts, these

bonds transcend the vagaries and vagueness associated with friendship and sexual attraction.

Carsten's concept of relatedness has been extended here to crystallize narratives of *becoming* siblings, which are inspired by shared substances: food eaten from one bowl, shared cigarettes, or bath water. Perhaps the sharing of bodily and sexual fluids is also implied in the raised eyebrows and the elongated "everything" common to the parlance of my respondents. Intimate notions of relating or becoming related do hold sensual and erotic meanings among "knowing women." Nonetheless, given that these women do not dwell on the materiality of the "substances" shared, but rather on the act of sharing, I prefer their phrase "doing everything together." Rather than focusing on substances, shared practices are marked as grounds on which female same-sex "siblinghoods" thrive in postcolonial Ghana. This emphasis on practice transpires in the phrase "doing everything together" – mothers and daughters do not do "everything together," neither do brothers and sisters or husbands and wives. Without claiming family status, some women creatively seek out arrangements that allow them to share their everyday lives. Bound to engage with each other's boyfriends and genealogical kin, the disputes and the mutual assistance characterizing these "arrangements" are not restricted by a focus on one partner. Transcending the logic of the couple and the "chosen family" (Weston 1991), which tends to be small and economically independent, working-class women who love women in Ghana connect each other's networks of personal kindreds in significant ways.

The fact that the women themselves distinguish between metaphor and genealogy is nowhere more compelling than in the anxieties about inadvertently falling for a female cousin. Taking a closer look, however, the key question is not how exactly they are related and whether or not their unions would indeed be outlawed. Concern over what feels or might be considered incestuous hinges more on the degree to which two women's networks overlap, how entwined their everyday lives are, and how tangible and known their intimacy is to their immediate community. Conversely, anxieties over the lawlessness of same-sex unions are articulated not only among women who worry about being of the same sex *and* of the same family, but are also expressed by women who deplore the messy triangulation of love within their tight-knit same-sex bonding networks. Fears of inadvertently committing incest reflect the absence of public rules and rituals to formalize

and regulate same-sex bonds. Public recognition would allow same-sex partners to frame their intimacies in terms of (marriage) alliance rather than (uterine) descent. This is not to say that the specter of incest would be banished if same-sex marriage was an option. Researching the question of what exactly engenders feelings of incest through the lens of relatedness – rather than structural notions of kinship – may reveal the existence of sibling-like feelings among long-term opposite-sex couples as well.

The fact that legal same-sex marriage is not available nor necessarily desired makes siblinghood the most likely and readily available metaphor through which to grasp the intimate attachments of female same-sex companions. In these relationships, *exchanging* gifts, the key feature of youthful *supi*, gives way to intense forms of *sharing*. Thus, among adult women, sharing and “doing everything together,” amounts to the symbolic expression of lovers’ siblinghood in its many fabrics.