

*Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender, and Identity in Postcolonial Ghana*, by Serena Owusua Dankwa, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, viii–320pp. USD 99.99, ISBN–10: 1108495907, ISBN–13: 978–1108495905

In February 2021, an organization called LGBT+ Rights, Ghana opened a community center in Accra, Ghana’s capital. Although several other advocacy groups have existed in Ghana since at least 2006, the community center was the first of its kind to name itself explicitly as a space to support Ghanaians who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT). The plus (+) in the group’s name gestures towards the other letters in the acronym, typically queer, intersex, and asexual to make LGBTQIA. Within less than a month of its opening, the Center caught the attention of homophobic entities including the so-called National Coalition for Proper Sexual Rights and Family Values. In short order, Accra police raided the Center leading to its closure and mainstream Ghanaian media reports celebrated the shutdown of “trumu–trumu offices.” Trumu is the Akan word for anus and the doubling of the term refers to anal sex between men. Since February 2021, Ghanaians who identify as LGBT+ or who engage in same-sex intimacies have faced heightened assault from government and religious entities about their belonging in the body politic. The media’s emphasis on anal sex in describing the police violence that led to the Center’s closure demonstrates the imagined queer subject and his activities – a cisgender man who engages in anal sex with other men.

Serena Dankwa’s book, *Knowing Women*, is a first of its kind – a rich ethnographic examination of working-class southern Ghanaian women’s same-sex intimacies. The book pivots away from state violence and the overfocus on anal sex between men, to offer a different approach to making sense of same-sex intimacies in Ghana. Focusing specifically on women, Dankwa challenges the dominant narrative about the imagined queer subject and questions the utility of claiming LGBT+ as a unique sexual identity for navigating the Ghanaian postcolonial landscape. By providing a deep dive into her interlocutors’ stories, their life histories, economic struggles, aspirations, and most importantly, friendships and kinship ties, Dankwa paints an expansive picture of the intimate relationships that Ga and Akan women have with one another. These stories provide a more complete picture than what could be attained from a study of lesbian or bisexual women because they broaden the scope of who these women are beyond a fixed identity label. Indeed, this expansiveness is a key theoretical contribution of the book.

Dankwa effectively argues that attention to doing, rather than being, provides a more adequate way of making sense of the “sensual and sexual intimacies that defy the analytical boundaries drawn between kinship, friendship, and sexuality” (p. 19). In other words, by refusing the language of identity, we are better able to understand the various modalities through which women experience intimacy amongst themselves. While sexual intimacy is certainly an aspect of “knowing women,” Dankwa shows us how friendship and fictive kinship equally animate women’s relationships with one another. Dankwa’s attention to knowing and doing offers an alternative to the neoliberal landscape that fixes same-sex intimacies as a unique identity category. Instead, the expansive frame of analysis allows us to see these women as elders, workers, and mothers amongst other relationships they build. The rich ethnography also gives readers a chance to learn about the women’s aspirations, desires, responses to religious impositions, and creative strategies for navigating the economic vagaries of life in Southern Ghana.

Another important theoretical contribution is the book’s gender analysis. Building on the gender scholarship of African feminists such as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Ifi Amadiume, and Signe Arnfred, Dankwa explores gender as situational by showing how women embody masculinities in socially acceptable and sometimes, even respected ways. Through a skillful weaving of Akan notions about *ɔbaa barima* or masculine women, economic self-sufficiency, age, matrilineality, and motherhood, Dankwa shows how Western binary ideas about gender do not pertain to the southern Ghanaian landscape. Instead, there is a flexibility that makes room for women’s erotic intimacies. Nor does this gender flexibility bar knowing women from being sexually involved with cisgender men. Instead, various other social relations and norms shape the enactment of masculinity and by extension, femininity. Furthermore, this flexible gender system offers room for masculine women to embody maternity. As Dankwa writes, “many an *ɔbaa barima* goes to considerable lengths to conceive children and is less bothered by marrying” (p. 169). That motherhood and masculinity are not irreconcilable demonstrates the materiality of a flexible gender system. This analytical contribution encourages greater engagement with African gender scholarship.

*Knowing Women* effectively debunks two persistent claims about African intimacies. The first is that African relationships are characterized by radical pragmatism that discounts the importance of emotions such as love and affection. By emphasizing the importance of friendship, which she put into conversation with historical ritualization of lifelong bonds that both men and women entered, Dankwa shows the importance of love in same-gender intimacies. Her careful attention to the love, desire, and affection between women demonstrates how women’s intimacies, like all other relationships, consider material and affective needs as

equally important to the flourishing of relationships. The presentation on how “knowing women” engaged in sexual relationships with one another whilst helping their lovers with housing, childcare, education, and even marital problems, demonstrate the deep intimacy of these relationships and refuses existing one-dimensional portrayal of African sexualities as purely practical. Indeed, this ethnographic accounting also challenges representations of African sexualities as either devoid of eroticism or primitive (read: hypersexual). Instead, Dankwa shows us loving, erotic, and mutually beneficial relationships between women. We also see how family members including husbands and mothers are complicit in sustaining these relationships.

The second persistent claim that *Knowing Women* debunks is the so-called “un-Africanness” of same-sex eroticism. While an obviously bizarre claim that certain expressions of human sexuality are alien to Africans, religious fundamentalists and certain African governments maintain this fallacy. Dankwa challenges this claim by providing a historical perspective on *supi*, a term which transitioned from a relatively innocuous description of girls’ friendships to being associated with lesbian sexuality. This historical overview includes stories from older Ghanaian women who engaged in *supi* relationships during their high school years from the 1930s onwards. These women’s narratives illustrate the breadth of such relationships, including its erotic and sexual dimensions. The role of Christianity in overemphasizing the sexual dimension of *supi* relationships is instructive because it reveals how a colonial religious imposition shapes the landscape of what practices are considered African. In brief, the rich history of women’s intimacies that Dankwa provides challenges readers to embrace the reality of sex and eroticism between African women and the ways that religion, rather than culture as is often argued, sought to suppress this reality.

*Knowing Women* straddles a serious academic style while inviting lay readers into engaging with some of its key contributions. The stories that Dankwa shares are illuminating for readers interested in kinship practices, African genders, and intimacies. Readers will also be exposed to ideas about challenging increasingly static notions of gender and sexual identity. For scholars, Dankwa offers important theoretical and methodological arguments that expand how we engage with ideas about kinship, intimacy, identity, and studying the postcolonial landscape. Finally, queer activists and organizers will also find this book beneficial for thinking about ways to engage women and others who refuse to be interpellated by the language of LGBTQIA, whilst “doing it” all the same.

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