

## Reviews of books: queer politics

*This book review section consists of three sets of debates about three books. Each debate includes three reviews followed by a response from the author.*

Serena Owusua Dankwa, *Knowing Women: same-sex intimacy, gender, and identity in postcolonial Ghana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £75 – 978 1 108 49590 5; Open Access at <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863575>>). 2021, 318 pp.

A same-sex-oriented book that focuses on women in Ghana, a country where same-sex relations are culturally and religiously frowned upon, and written by a Swiss-Ghanaian woman, is undoubtedly a ground-breaking project. *Knowing Women* opens a new chapter in sexuality debates in Ghana – and, by extension, in sub-Saharan Africa. The release of the book at a time when the discourse and public outcry on LBTQIA+ in Ghana are at their peak (early 2021) makes it even more relevant. The book fills a big gap, because books on sexuality in Africa have mainly focused on Southern and East Africa with little attention given to West Africa. Many such works have focused on male same-sex relations or gayism and have neglected women.

Situated within anthropological literature and informed by ethnographic research approaches and life histories, the book teases out the sexuality of women who prefer to engage in intimate relationships with their fellow women in postcolonial Ghana. The author contextualizes the phenomenon of homosexuality and identity politics through an in-depth review of African feminist and gender literature. Structured in five chapters, the author shares the lived experiences of women involved in same-sex relations and how they cope with everyday stigma associated with the practice of lesbianism. I found the sections on pp. 54–78 very insightful in our appreciation of the complexities involved in juxtaposing religious values with traditional orientations towards sexuality issues in West Africa. The book identifies charismatic sexualization, the media, group and public spaces, globalization, the law and labelling as some of the key factors that trigger positive or negative orientation towards same-sex persons and their practices in Ghana.

A remarkable feature of the book is the tactical and sensitive strategies employed by the author, specifically by drawing on the concept of ‘indirection and discretion’ in accessing and gaining the confidence of respondents in her study. Dankwa describes some of the challenges of research: ‘Given the absence of a language about “lesbianism,” and given the fact that in public discourse same-sex desire was considered taboo, it was not feasible to state upfront that I was looking for women who had sexual relationships with each other. When I did state the matter directly, I encountered a range of self-proclaimed experts on sin and sex’ (p. 3). While this approach worked well with the working-class women she studied, it was still challenging for her to gain access to more ‘powerful women’ from other social classes. This draws attention to power relations and her positionality as an outsider. I wonder if an insider or ‘local Ghanaian researcher’ who may not belong to the same-sex subculture could successfully carry out similar research without challenges.

The author demonstrated great creativity in the techniques through which she generated data among the participants in this sensitive study. Also notable is the author’s use of the term ‘postcolonial Ghana’ as an analytical tool rather than a stage or period in Ghana’s development. Dankwa’s *Knowing Women*

further draws attention to the role of labelling in same-sex relations. While many of her working-class participants engaged in same-sex relations, they hesitated about being identified as lesbians. Some therefore were involved in heterosexual practices to cover up their same-sex relations, while others enacted 'joking relations' to distance themselves from such relationships. This resonates with the challenge of labelling that has framed most same-sex relations in many parts of Africa. It confirms Murray and Roscoe's work in *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands: studies in African homosexuality*,<sup>1</sup> where they argued that such practices existed among Lesotho women but that they never labelled it in the same way as in the West. What is Dankwa's position on the labelling of same-sex relations in Ghana? And how does the author reconcile 'supi' as used among Asafo groups in the coastal areas of Ghana with *supi* in reference to same-sex relations among women in Ghana?

The findings from Dankwa's exploratory ethnographic work, which uncovers challenging experiences encountered by lesbians in Ghana, have the potential to influence Ghanaians with regard to redefining the labelling of lesbians and appreciating the sexualities of other minority groups. The first chapter of the book, for example, reveals some indirectness in the Ghanaian language, religion, politics and laws relating to the subject of homosexuality. Policy engagement with Dankwa's conceptualization of the terminologies of sexuality in this book could provide precise definitions for hazy legal terms in the Criminal Code. This would also help clarify matters relating to criminality within the context of social justice and a person's sexuality as a social construct.

Overall, I found this book very timely and relevant to sexuality research design techniques and policy formulation. It contributes immensely to global discourses on sexual identities. *Knowing Women* is a must-read for scholars of African sexuality, social scientists, researchers, cultural studies scholars, sexuality and gender policy formulators and implementers and all those who have a stake in advancing and protecting the identities of African women.

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This book adds to a small but increasing scholarship on same-sex intimacy and desire in Africa. Serena Owusua Dankwa's ethnography brings alive the everyday lives and intimate discursive practices of *supi* – defined by the author as working-class women who love women in postcolonial Ghana. Dankwa does an excellent job of showing how the lives and the narratives of erotic subjectivities thrive.

Dankwa promises a (decolonial) interruption of the hegemonic ways in which 'queer' others' experiences are perceived in juxtaposition to the 'modern' homosexuals, and she delivers on this. Even though Dankwa keeps reminding us that *supi* don't self-identify as – nor make much reference to – lesbian or the 'modern' homosexual, there is a constant dance between erotic subjectivities of *supi* and the globalized Western identity of lesbians that travels through all the chapters. For instance, even though *supi* female masculinity is framed as relational, there is referencing of Western notions of butch/femme. Eurocentric framings of the modern homosexual seep through each chapter, appearing as a point of reference. Indeed, decolonial feminism usefully offers us 'a lens to understand the

<sup>1</sup>S. O. Murray and W. Roscoe (1998) *Boy-Wives and Female-Husbands: studies in African homosexuality*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press.