

## 4 *Sugar Motherhood and the Collectivization of Love*

It took me a while to realize that Maa'Evelyn, the sixty-two-year-old lady Adwoa introduced to me as her "mother," had not given birth to Adwoa, and was not a relative. Rather, they were occasional lovers and, as Adwoa once mentioned, Maa'Evelyn, or Maa, was her "sugar mother." One day, in conversation with Maa, I heard her complain about Adwoa being "a naughty girl." She opened her explanation as to why they were currently not talking by telling me, "I took her as my baby and I'm her Mama." A little later, I was looking for accommodation in Suakrom and Adwoa offered to inquire with Maa'Evelyn if I could stay in her spare room. When I moved in with Maa and her helper, a thirteen-year-old girl, I was introduced to the neighbors as a "friend's daughter" from overseas. This was plausible since Maa had lived in Italy for two years, looking after her grandchildren. One evening after dinner, Maa went to the bathroom and called to me to bring her an additional bucket of water, which I did, not knowing she was already naked. "I'm your mother, just come," she reassured me, as I put down the bucket without looking at her. When I told one of Adwoa's friends that I felt Maa was making advances, she exclaimed, "this old woman?!" And after some reflection, she roguishly added, "then you will have to cope with it."<sup>1</sup> Soon after, Maa urged me to move out.

Maa and Adwoa became friends just after Maa was laid off from a state-owned enterprise during "redeployment." As Akosua Adomako Ampofo discusses (2007, 186), women were the first to be laid off when public corporations were sold and "rationalized" under the "Economic Recovery Program" in 1983 and the IMF's subsequent structural adjustment program. Maa took over the drinking spot of her bedridden mother, next to Adwoa's market store. I gladly accepted Maa's offer to accommodate me at a local rate in her small, government-owned

<sup>1</sup> Fieldnote taken in Suakrom, December 10, 2007.

bungalow. Her invitation to make use of her live-in helper, though, made me more uncomfortable than her flirtatiousness. Although she sent the thirteen-year-old girl to primary school, she allowed her hardly any time to rest or do homework. Often the girl looked after the drinking spot until late at night, long after Maa herself had returned home. “Mama” Evelyn’s lack of motherly affection stood in sharp contrast to her appellation, as well as the charming hand kisses and volleys of “sweethearts” she bestowed upon adult “daughters” like myself. During my brief stay in her house, I began to question to what extent respectable, postmenopausal women capitalize on the authority that goes with their age, in relation to subordinate, younger women, to whom they might be attracted. I did not speak with Maa or other women of my mother’s or grandmother’s age about erotic desire, due to my own, as much as their inhibitions. Instead, this chapter’s reflections on motherhood and on the material and emotional flows of love are informed by the stories of women in their twenties and thirties who have had considerably older or considerably younger lovers, or both.

The vertically constituted bonds between “mothers” (like Maa/Evelyn) and their adult “babies” imply a flow of goods and services that could be considered a continuation of the “mother-child” intimacies and the horizontal gift exchanges between senior and junior boarding-school girls, as discussed in Chapter 2. Cross-generational female intimacies, however, harbor the added dimension of financial support and “motherly” mentorship. The economic “sweetness” of this dimension is implied in the expression “sugar mama” that some of my younger respondents used to refer to a mature female lover. By the same token, “sugar motherhood,” as a metaphor for same-sex intimacy across a considerable age difference, can veil the abuses and violations experienced by younger women in these relationships. Paired with the stereotypical Akan notion that postmenopausal women are restrained and less sexually desiring than younger ones (Van der Geest 2006), the concealment of ambiguous or abusive dynamics works particularly well across generational configurations.

In the introductory section of this chapter, the real and imagined power of motherhood is explored through West Africa’s “motherhood paradigm” and by considering different analytical approaches to (same- and opposite-sex) age-mixed relationships. I then consider the context that drew my attention to the significance of “sugar motherhood” in Ghana: the female football world and the marketplace.

Usually, when the semi-professional footballers in Suakrom teased each other about having a “sugar mama” who “sponsored” them, they were referring to an established female trader in Suakrom’s market. This sheds light on the role of “the market woman,” a contested figure in Ghanaian history, and the ways in which this connects to popular, sexualized representations of the selfish “big woman.” In the remainder of the chapter, I examine how age difference in female same-sex intimacies is inhabited, first from the perspective of three women born in the 1980s: Adizah Cortey, Lydia Sackey, and Okaile Allotey, all based in one of the seven old quarters of Accra, each of whom in their mid- to late teens, became the lover of a considerably older woman. Their accounts speak to the inequalities and mutual dependencies involved in having a lover who could be their mother, either by age or in terms of the “sugar” provided. These stories are contrasted with the perspective of a “sugar mother” in her thirties. Dina Yiborku is a secondary-school teacher, who considers herself “the giver” in relation to girlfriends, often college students, whom she supports. She feels it emotionally and socially safer to approach (or be “given”) a younger woman rather than women of her own age group. At the same time, my analysis reveals that the overarching hierarchies implied in giving and receiving do not prevent a multitude of affective bonds between older and younger women. Rather, within relationships where sexual intimacies need to be concealed, such relational exchanges constitute intimacies that are both materially and emotionally significant.

The relational practices emerging from the narratives of the four women discussed in this chapter often involve a circular element. What I consider a collectivization of love pertains not only to the classic love triangle, but to practices of involving friends and family, and allowing them to go in-between, thus making them part of one’s love life. For instance, (genealogical) mothers and grandmothers often appear in these stories, actively discouraging or backing their daughters’ same-sex intimacies. More importantly, friends of the same generation may give or pass on a lover and have a say in making or breaking each other’s friendships and intimacies. Again, these circular practices came to my attention in the female football arena, where “team mothers” provided their “team daughters” with food, clothes, and accommodation as the need arose, but also with male and female lovers. In these tight networks, love is never a “private” matter; female friends gossip about, monitor, and arrange for each other’s intimate

attachments. While this chapter acknowledges the inequalities and abuses that can emerge under the sign of motherhood, such manipulative practices are as much part of women's same-sex sociality as are the tender ways they cater to and take care of each other's emotional and material needs.

## The Motherhood Paradigm

### *Motherhood in Southern Ghana*

In urban West Africa, globally pervasive notions of wifely, bourgeois femininity co-exist with older concepts, by which motherhood is an important avenue to become a woman and accumulate power. As Nigerian feminist Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí argues, the status of an adult woman is associated with her being a mother and not a wife, because “motherhood is defined as a relationship to progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man” (2004, 4). Ifi Amadiume points out that Eurocentric anthropologists have overlooked the structuring power of motherhood. In particular, she accuses Meyer Fortes of masculinizing his data based on an underlying “patriarchal monologic paradigm” (1997, 29, 84). On the other hand, she confronts Second Wave feminism, with its implicit framing of all women as wives, and thus social subordinates. In her own study of the dual-sex political system among the Igbo, she demonstrates how the logic of motherhood structures even patrilineal African societies (Amadiume 1997, 17–19). In the Igbo village she studied, the “matricentric” mother-child unit of a compound, headed by a communal mother, was as important as the male-focused “ancestral or family house” or compound (Amadiume 1997, 83). Interestingly, Amadiume's “motherhood paradigm” suggests a shift away from “the woman” as an analytical category to the mother-child relationship and thus moves our focus “not to a female subject, but to a social relationship” (Arnfred 2011, 208).

The bond between mother and child has been considered to be the most intimate kinship connection in many African societies. Matrilineal Akan ideals firmly place the mother-daughter unit at the heart of kinship-making. As Meyer Fortes describes, an Akan “woman grows up in daily and unbroken intimacy with her mother, learns all feminine skills from her, and above all derives her character from her” (Fortes 1975, 263). His image of a natural transfer of femininity based

on growing up with one's uterine mother is contradicted by the fact that an Akan child's aunts also qualify as mothers, as well as by high levels of residential mobility during childhood. The more children a woman has, the less likely it is that they will all grow up at her side. Rather, they may circulate through different households; staying with a great-grandmother in a hometown for a few years, becoming the helper of a wealthier or childless relative, or growing up as the protégé of a teacher, pastor, or other benefactor. In many African and black diasporic communities, the exchange of children, including pawning and fostering, is common. For instance, it has been standard practice among African-American (Stack 1974) and Afro-Surinamese working-class women (Wekker 2006) to activate and reinforce friendships and family ties by letting children grow up with mothers, sisters, or dear friends, in the hope that the children will strengthen and continue the bonds between friends and their families.

The matrilineal Akan culture, which has dominated southern Ghana for centuries, is an exemplary case of the motherhood paradigm. Though the *abusuapanyin*, the decision-making family head, is usually a big *man*, mothers and female elders are regarded as the custodians of genealogical knowledge who contain his power. While Akan ideals of the mother-daughter bond thrive on the primacy of matrilineal kinship transmission, the matrix of female transmission also matters among the largely patrilineal, but matrifocal Ga. As Claire Robertson has explored, the dominant relationship expressed in the Ga residential system in the section of Accra, where Adizah, Lydia, and Okaile reside, is that between mother and daughter. In the Ga community, multigenerational households commonly consist of female matrilateral kin. Boys are sent to their fathers and uncles by the age of twelve (1984, 57). Thus, although the Ga overwhelmingly trace descent and inheritance patrilineally, residential rights are passed on patrilineally for men and matrilineally for women (Robertson, 1984, 59).

### *Age as a Relational Category*

In comparative anthropological volumes on homosexual formations, the relationship between Adwoa and Maa'Evelyn might be categorized as age-differentiated, or age-stratified (Adam 1986; Greenberg 1988; Murray 2000). In these structural anthropological terms, "age-differentiated," "gender-differentiated," and "egalitarian" same-sex

relationships signify different models of homosexuality that correlate with different types of social organization. Thus, age- and gender-differentiation are construed as the main markers of “homosexuality” in “kinship-based” societies, whereas “modern egalitarianism” is attributed to gay and lesbian couples (Murray 2000). In Murray’s model in particular, gender (and not age) is “the major African idiom of homosexuality [. . .]. Where there are age disparities, the younger [partner] is generally cast in the feminine role” (2000, 248). While rejecting the epistemological premise that prioritizes gender over age and generalizes on Africa, this chapter critically engages with the assumed “femininity” and subordination of the younger lover. Rather than deploying age difference as a structural signifier, I am interested in age as a social relation and tool to rethink the power dynamics unfolding in all sexual relationships. Because gender and age articulate each other, this chapter cannot go without considering gender roles.

“Age-differentiation” was chiefly associated with relationships between men and boys in ancient Greece, where homosexuality amounted to a second stage of parenting (Dover 1988), and with initiation rites in Melanesia, in which slightly older bachelors “implant” their seed in the bodies of younger bachelors. Both semen-transmitting practices and the “ancient model” with its pedagogic core between an older “inspirer” and a younger “inspired” partner (Adam 1986, 21) have been theorized as masculinizing cultural institutions that ensure the reproduction of male homosocial culture and group solidarity (Herdt 1984). Parallel intergenerational female homosexual institutions were regarded to be less common, supposedly because women were married earlier than men (Adam 1986). Descriptions of female mother-daughter intimacies across smaller age gaps, however (Blacking 1978; Gay 1986), were not thoroughly theorized. Moreover, obscured by spectacular accounts of male “pederasty” and semen rites, women’s age differences appeared to be less hierarchically structured than male ones. The latter corresponds with feminist-inspired assumptions about women’s tendency toward harmonious, egalitarian social formations (Greenberg 1988). However, most of the same-sex bonds I encountered between working-class women in Ghana resisted a “non-egalitarian” classification.

Africanist work on age-mixed relationships has analyzed the complex “transactional” relationships between young women and (local)

sugar daddies (Nyamnjoh 2005; Cole 2010), or focused on the transnational ties between “beach boys” and their older white tourists in Kenya or the Gambia (Ebron 2002; Meiu 2009). Yet the real and anecdotal power of African sugar mummies, and figures such as “Mama Benz” in Francophone West Africa (Khor 2009; McKinley 2011), have rarely been examined and never regarding their same-sex involvements. Such an exploration would have to address the ways in which “big women” and not only “big men” bring together clients. The language of service and the intimate strategies through which female protégées seek, as “small girls,” to establish mutual dependencies with their “sugar mother” also needs to be taken into account.

Like the expression “small boy,” “small girl” works to infantilize the subordinate subject in a patron-client relationship and invokes images of colonial domination. A “big woman’s” counterpart is her “small girl.” While local Ga and Twi terms for helpers do not mark gender, the English terms “girls” and “boys” are deployed among female traders when distinguishing their assisting younger relatives or employees by sex. As Clark writes, “using the English words not only makes the senior trader sound more sophisticated,” it also “emphasizes the subordination rather than the paternalism of the relationship by invoking colonial images” (1994, 198). The prefix “small” intensifies this subordination. Despite the erotic sweetness implied in a phrase like “sugar mama” it does not imply that every “mama” consummates the relationship with her “girl” sexually. While seeking youthful company, a big woman’s desire to mentor and support a subordinate, younger woman speaks to modes of intergenerational identification beyond sex and seduction. It does, however, provide ample grounds for unpredictable intimacies between sugar mother and their (helping) daughters – but also between the youthful daughters themselves. This came to my attention in the female football arena.

### *Female Football and Team Mothers*

With its relatively simple infrastructure, football is a popular sport in many African countries. Since the Confederation of African Football organized the first FIFA-supported African Women’s World Cup in 1991, football has also become a way for women to claim public space. Ghana has been among Africa’s strongest women’s football nations. In the late 1990s, spearheaded by what was then known as Ghana

Telecom, state-owned companies began building up semi-professional female football teams as part of their advertising strategy. While football training for girls is only gradually being institutionalized at secondary schools, these clubs attracted football-crazy young women, mostly from poor economic backgrounds, from as far afield as Guinea and Nigeria. With the privatization of Ghana Telecom, many of these teams have collapsed. Today, private companies and enthusiastic patrons, including charismatic church leaders, sponsor their own clubs. On a more sinister note, some of these patrons had been sued for trafficking female players to fictive football clubs in southern Europe.

In Ghana, as in other countries, the arena of female football is a space in which young women's masculine gender presentations and same-sex intimacies have been tacitly tolerated (Burch 2013; Crémieux 2013). In Suakrom, I witnessed training sessions in which coaches advised their protégées not to have boyfriends, since a pregnancy could put an end to their football career. In several instances I felt that coaches were well aware of their players' amorous liaisons but, as some of my respondents conveyed to me, only intervened when heartbreaks or jealousies disrupted training sessions. Proudly seeing themselves as footballers even off the pitch, my respondents cultivated masculine forms of expression, assumed male football names, wore trainers and oversized t-shirts, and bragged about having a "sponsor" or "sugar mother." Although the cliché of football lesbianism has started taking root through the media, and some national players have been tagged as "lesbian," the players I met did enjoy a certain respect for their successful masculine performance as footballers. In Suakrom, the overt criticism female footballers faced for challenging gender boundaries was relatively benign. One morning, for instance, walking back from the training grounds with a few players, I noticed that a group of male students sitting under a tree started teasing them. From afar I could not make out what exactly they said, however, they mentioned Adjoa Bayo, who was part of the Black Queens, Ghana's national women's team at the time. Overhearing her name, one of the players swiftly turned to the guys, waving her index finger in front of her crotch as if it were a penis, as she jokingly exclaimed "Adjoa Bayo? She has a penis as long as a rope!"<sup>2</sup> We all laughed. Certainly, such parodic moments, in

<sup>2</sup> Fieldnote based on conversations at Suakrom, December 5, 2007.



**Figure 3** Two women's teams being cheered at by young men from the neighborhood (2007)

which masculine-presenting women point at the incongruity between their bodies and those of “real” men testify to young women’s “contingent masculinities” (Blackwood 2010, 172).

In 2008, when I heard Suakrom’s female footballers boast of having a “sugar mummy,” the team’s players came from all over the country, as well as from Togo and Nigeria. Most stayed in a half-finished structure that served as a makeshift boarding house. Early in the mornings, and in the late afternoons, they jogged to their training sessions at a school pitch on Suakrom’s outskirts. During the day, some of them sold prepaid phone cards provided by the company running the club, and they all received a small monthly allowance on the condition that they attended all the training sessions. Still, I wondered how they survived on the meager profits of petty trading, especially if they came from neighboring countries and lacked local kinship ties and occasional job opportunities. Other than comments about “managing it,” or jokes about having “someone” who “sponsored” them, my questions regarding their livelihoods did not yield

straightforward answers. As I began joining them at training sessions, I realized that on our way back to town, some of them, still in their kick boots and jerseys, took a detour through the market. They returned from these visits with “chop money”<sup>3</sup> (to buy food), and sometimes with an invitation to join a “sugar mother’s” evening meal.

The market connections made by these footballers spanned not only age gaps, but also ethnic, national, and religious differences. Some Christian girls had Muslim “sugar mothers” and vice versa. Others made connections based on sharing the same ethno-linguistic backgrounds. An Ewe-speaking Togolese player, for instance, was provided start-up capital to begin petty trading by a slightly older fish trader of an Ewe background. Though these liaisons were not always sexually intimate, they drew on flirtatious, erotic banter. The market women seemed to enjoy the company of these well-toned footballers, many of whom hailed from bigger cities, and cherished their urban, masculine youthfulness. While relying on “sugar mummies” and some on “sugar daddies,” the players also deployed kinship terminology among themselves. The terms “team mother” and “team daughter” distinguished junior, from senior teammates, and Stone, a particularly masculine-presenting player, introduced me to the goalkeeper as her “team father” because the goalkeeper used to be lovers with her “team mother.” In another conversation, Stone claimed to have stopped visiting a certain Muslim cloth trader in the market because the teammates were constantly teasing Stone about being a “small girl” in need of a “big mama.”

### *Market Women and Mami Wata*

Throughout West Africa, the rhetoric of “sugar motherhood” points at the historical capacity of women traders to accumulate and control their resources (Ebron 2007, 182). At the onset of colonialism, rapid urbanization increased women’s commercial activity in foodstuffs and rendered their autonomy particularly visible. For Ghana, the backlash to this autonomy has been documented in the literature on female trading in post-independence Accra (Robertson 1984) and Kumasi (Clark 1994). Between 1975 and 1985, local retailers in the big market towns

<sup>3</sup> The term “chop money” can designate a husband’s monetary contribution to his wife’s cooking, and may have sexual connotations, see also Chapter 2.

suffered humiliating, physical attacks under successive Ghanaian governments. Most notably, Accra's famed Makola Market was demolished in 1979, and its traders portrayed as wicked, "human vampire bats" under the rule of Jerry J. Rawlings (Clark 2001). These attacks have been considered a reaction to the fact that market women were less affected by the economic disasters of the 1980s than male workers, including cocoa farmers and salaried workers. The latter struggled to survive the economic depression of the 1960s and the effects of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s. The mostly female traders, however, seemed to prosper. Though few actually reversed the steep general drop in the inflation-adjusted standard of living, their relative well-being earned them accusations of hoarding and violating price controls, which swiftly drew government attention.

Today, the image of the all-powerful, predatory market woman reappears in sexualized rumors about her alleged greediness. As I was told by a taxi driver in Accra, for instance, voracious market women like to seduce innocent taxi drivers by giving them precious gifts. Through this sexual relationship, the women apparently steal the drivers' sperm and turn it into "sikaduro," a Twi term literally meaning "money medicine" to make themselves rich. Ironically, market women have been legendary for supporting young men through university. The years of military rule and structural adjustment which took place during the 1980s, saw a rise in so-called "Makola scholarships," as female traders covered the university tuition of their boyfriends with money gained through trading, supposedly at Makola Market. In practice, when a woman takes the lead in expressing her feelings for a man then he may be considered as having been given a "scholarship." The term thus refers to romantic or sexual attention that has come his way easily.<sup>4</sup> At the time, Makola traders, who had often only attended a few years of school themselves, valued higher education and were instrumental in investing and arranging for young men's educational training. Tales of "Makola scholarships" betray the patriarchal anxieties about independent, "wicked women" (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001), whose capacity to follow personal sexual desires earns them the accusation of refusing their responsibilities as care givers and providers.

As discussed in Chapter 2 on *supi and secrecy*, the image of the selfish "big woman," who can afford to do whatever she pleases, has been

<sup>4</sup> Email conversation with the sociologist Kofi T. Asante, March 17, 2012.

homosexualized in Ghanaian video-films, in which well-traveled business women receive their powers through Mami Wata. This mermaid-like figure is found in ocean myths throughout West and Central Africa and is often associated with the invisible “satanic” forces of the market. Mami Wata gained popularity in the 1980s when structural adjustment programs imported fashionable commodities to Ghana without, however, enabling ordinary people to buy them (Meyer 2003). Investigating Accra’s fishing communities, the Ghanaian filmmaker, Socrates Safo, discovered stories on wealthy women’s alleged associations with Mami Wata, which he embellished to make them marketable.<sup>5</sup> His film *Women in Love* (1996) portrays a “big woman” who is “married” to Mami Wata. This marriage pact inhibited her from desiring men. Instead, she was compelled to report and detail her sexual encounters with young women to the water spirit.

Such films left a strong impression on some of my respondents, including Lydia Sackey, one of the protagonists of this chapter. Talking about the dangers of same-sex love, she said “*we see it in films*” and refers to the scene in *Women in Love* in which a monied woman washes her hands in a glass bowl filled with water, after having sexually touched her young girlfriend. As Lydia puts it, such women use their lovers’ sexual fluids “*to siphon your luck [...] they’ll use the money to take care of you, but your life won’t be good.*”<sup>6</sup> Corrupted by Mami Wata, such women are believed to become powerful at the expense of their small girls who, just like the sperm-deprived taxi drivers, remain poor. Furthermore, they rob their younger girlfriends not only of their financial luck but also of their fertility, thus denying them a respectable adult life as a mother.<sup>7</sup> Based on films about Mami Wata, seventeen-year-old Lydia was initially scared of getting involved with Ruby, the wife and mother with whom she eventually became lovers. While reflecting the patriarchal and sexist anxieties captured by filmmakers, the presence of Mami Wata in women’s personal narratives highlights the discursive power of rumors and of Nollywood and Ghallywood representations.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldnote on a conversation with Socrates Safo at Accra, May 14, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> More recently, aggressive versions of these narratives hold that the use of dildos and penetrative objects, such as deodorants or bottles, destroys women’s sexual and reproductive health, and leads to irreversible infertility.

Beyond these derogatory representations “sugar motherhood” and the desire to take care of each other, as a provider or a helper, or, as Dina Yiborku puts it, as “giver” or “receiver,” is, I suggest, an integral part of intergenerational female intimacies.

## **Sugar Motherhood and the Materiality of Love**

### *Adi Cortey, Consuming without Affordability*

Adizah Cortey is nineteen years old, and goes by the nickname of Adidas, or Adi. Like many young people in southern Ghana, she puts on a thick American accent when speaking English and uses slang expressions. In her own words, she has been “dating girls” but wants to stop “fucking around” and “that kind of shit.” Her father, who was a seaman, “kicked the bucket.” Adi has five older brothers and grew up in a matrilineal family house in Accra Central, a section of town with a reputation as a haven for immoral behavior and for the susceptibility of its youth to sex-money exchanges. Like her parents, who converted to Islam, Adi professes to go to the mosque five times daily, although this is a somewhat idealized version of her everyday life. For religious festivals, however, she diligently exchanges her masculine sports outfits for feminine attire. In her frequent normative statements about how wrong it is to have same-sex lovers, and how she will stick to her boyfriend instead, she points to the Qur’an. In the next sentence, however, she could laughingly tell me about last night’s sexual adventure with a female cousin with whom she shares her rooms.

At the time we met, Adi was about to complete senior secondary school, but she was more committed to football training in a local club than to excelling at school or helping out in her mother’s kiosk in front of their house. Her dreams of playing football in the USA, and joining two of her former teammates who played for a college team and were therefore provided with free education, had given way to the slightly less ambitious goal of finding employment in Ghana’s national “forces.” Female secondary school graduates who are good at team sports stand a better chance of being recruited into the immigration, the military, or the police services. Besides playing football, Adi spent a lot of time roaming about with her friends. One hot Friday evening, as we were strolling through the crowded streets of Accra Central together, Adi began raving about her sexual adventures. Both her fifteen-year-old girlfriend, Yinka

Okafor, and her twenty-five-year-old ex-girlfriend, Lydia, were within earshot, when Adi told Josephine, my research associate, and myself, that she liked “sugar mothers.”

I call them rich mama because they give me money and they like my fucking! [S.D. Oh, don't use the word fuck] But I've stopped, because I have Yinka now. I've played with many, many sugar mothers, even Yinka's aunty is my former woman. Yinka's mother knows about it. And also, I separated with Lydia because of her sugar mummy; that very night I slept with one of Lydia's sugar mummy's friends.<sup>8</sup>

While talking, we walked through a lively section of the night market, where Adi kept calling out to young *kajal*-wearing<sup>9</sup> male friends who do “women's work,” such as preparing and selling light foods popular in the evening – *Indomie* noodles, hot beverages, scrambled eggs, bread topped with margarine<sup>10</sup> – and who claim to have “sugar daddies.”

Finally, Adi sat us down at a street drinking spot. All the while, Lydia feigned boredom, playing with her phone. Since the night of their separation, she took to quietly ignoring her ex-lover. Boisterous Adi, however, pointed to the other side of the road, where a few grim-looking women in their forties were sharing beers and bottles of Malta Guinness. Judging from the nets and curlers in their hair, and the fact that they sat on their own plastic chairs, it seemed that they lived close by and had come out to catch the late evening sea breeze or a glimpse of the noisy stream of passersby. “They are all in the soup,”<sup>11</sup> continued Adi, “sugar mothers are very wild. They like beating their girlfriends. When they see you with a new girl you are dead.” The story she then confided to Josephine tells of Adi's own wild part in the “soup.”

<sup>8</sup> Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on a conversation with Adi Cortey at Accra, April 17, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Kohl or Kajal is a black eyeliner that is also used by (especially Fulani and Hausa) men in the Sahel and Sahara regions.

<sup>10</sup> In recent years, the visibility of young men in Accra who prepare night foods has increased. Unlike more “traditional” foods sold by women in the evening, such as *kelewele* (hot fried plantain, sprinkled with spices), these men sell more “modern” foods. More on Ghanaian cuisine in footnote 23.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase refers to a state of being immersed in a difficult situation that involves a jumble of people. Given that groundnut soup and palm nut soup, two of Ghana's most popular dishes, are especially thick and nutritious (ideally containing a variety of meat and fish), the image captures both the richness and hustle of tight-knit informal networks.

Lydia was my woman and we went to a party together at *Locco*. I did not know she had a sugar mother so at the party and unluckily for me, Lydia's sugar mother was there with her gang. The moment she set eye on Lydia she just came over and started ordering her to come with her. All her gang were making fun of me because they realized I was Lydia's girl. In fact, Lydia didn't want to leave me but her sugar mum and friends were pushing and pulling her till she gave up. I couldn't say anything, because these women are older than me and they can easily attack me if I said jack [i.e. a word]. I was left alone, very disappointed.

Fortunately for me, a lady approached me, who introduced herself as one of the friends of Lydia's woman. She sat beside me and told me not to be worried about Lydia and to forget about how her friends were treating me. She told me I look very beautiful and asked me why am I wasting my beauty at this party. She opened her purse and showed me a lot of money in there. She asked me to leave with her and have fun. Because I was lonely, I followed her. She picked a taxi and we drove to [the place] where she lives. She is very rich and has a big apartment. We entered and she asked me to feel at home since I'm in safe hands.

Initially I tried to refuse what the woman asked me to do, but when I remembered what Lydia's sugar mummy did to me I decided to teach her a lesson by sleeping with the woman. Also, I wanted Lydia to know that she is not the only person who likes sugar mothers but I am also in the squad. I sexed the woman that night. "She really believed [enjoyed] me." I spent the night there and came home the next day. At home I learned that Lydia came searching for me during the night. I had a call from her and she asked me to see her. When I met her, she started fighting me. She accused me of sleeping with that woman. She said I am a cheap girl. Since then there is always trouble, so I stopped with her.<sup>12</sup>

I am quoting Adi's narrative, mediated by Josephine's, at some length here, because it speaks to the alluring power of "sugar motherhood" and the competitive junior-senior dynamics between girlfriends of the same age-group. In this account, Adi portrays herself as "Lydia's girl," Lydia is Adi's "woman," and Ruby is Lydia's "sugar mother." What is at stake in this triangle? Was Adi really unaware that Lydia had another lover? Was Lydia playing on making Ruby jealous by showing up at *Locco*, a bar Ruby had introduced her to?

*Locco*, a popular bar among working-class women in Accra, consists of a walled outdoor space and a small stage where local bands perform

<sup>12</sup> Fieldnote by Josephine Agbenozan based on her conversations with Adi Cortey at Accra, April 17, 2007.

neo-traditional Ga music. Unlike more cosmopolitan gay bars in Adabraka or touristy Osu in the center of Accra that attract mostly male clientele, *Locco* caters to local women, who drop in at all hours to enjoy beer and spicy goat kebabs. Neither Lydia nor Adi can afford to charter taxis or invite their girlfriends as they please. It was probably the money Lydia received from Ruby that allowed her to take Adi out. This outing was harshly interrupted when Ruby made an appearance in the midst of her “pompous” friends. Frustrated and fascinated with the imagined powers of these well to do “mamas,” Adi herself managed to capitalize on her youthfulness. Rather than being the loser in this love triangle, she proudly tells Josephine of her appeal to “sugar mothers” enabling her to effectively get one up on Lydia.

Adi’s selfhood was only momentarily unsettled when faced with Ruby, Lydia’s provider. Soon, her disappointment with Lydia gave way to the realization that she herself was attractive to older women. Adi readily tested her erotic allure and demonstrated that she too, like Lydia, was not just a “small girl,” but knew how to apply herself to the bonding networks of seasoned, same-sex desiring women. Certainly, Adi’s youthfulness, her deep, husky voice, and her well-toned, slender footballer’s body, provided her with erotic capital. Since that memorable night, Adi claims to have had several sugar mothers, alongside girlfriends of her own age group. Five years later, when I joined her at an *outdooring* – a baby’s name giving ceremony – I realized that she was not just boasting. Adi was friends with the baby’s young mother, stretched out in the middle of a stuffy room. The all-female guests, who had planted themselves on the plastic chairs against the blue painted walls, were in their forties. Upon entering the room, Adi jumped onto the lap of a woman who was wearing much make up and a tight leopard print Lycra suit, giggling and whispering to me that the lady was her “ex.” As if to give proof, she began to joke and make sexually suggestive movements on the woman’s lap. When Adi conveyed to her that she was penniless, the straight-faced “ex” started fumbling in Adi’s trouser pockets. On finding only one cedi, she promptly slipped a five cedi-bill into Adi’s back pocket (the equivalent of a day’s salary for an unskilled worker), followed by a slap on Adi’s butt. Like Adi’s feminine-presenting male friends, who sell food in the night market and juggle several “sugar daddies” at a time, Adi delights in her juvenile liberties and the extra cash she receives through her erotic conquests.

Adi's interest in sugar mummies needs to be seen in a context where young urban women, including university students, look to sugar daddies to cover tuition fees, daily living expenses, and small luxuries such as lingerie or cosmetics. In a public health framework, sugar daddy/mummy relations have been defined as sexual relations between "adolescents and older people that are associated with the practice of having these relationships in exchange for money, presents, favors and other material benefits that adolescents receive" (Kuate-Defo 2004, 21). Policy-oriented studies have asked about the conditions under which cross-generational sexual relationships can be defined as consensual, or coerced, and how they affect a population's reproductive and sexual health. They point at the difficulty of "measuring" emotional abuse and mutuality within the spectrum of the "free, transactional, exploitative, coercive or unlawful" (Kuate-Defo 2004, 14). While the actual difference in years and the younger person's age are seen as decisive factors in determining the legitimacy of such a relationship, the ways in which sexual difference or sameness factors in are not considered.

The perceived increase in non-marital sex in Africa has been attributed to the materialism and the moral corruption of greedy African youths in search of global consumer opportunities (Masquelier 2009; Cole and Thomas 2009). Indeed, the idea that consumerism is accessible through erotically motivated patronage circulates across Africa's urban centers. The anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh, for instance, attributes the pervasiveness of sugar daddy/mummy relations to an "accelerated consumerism [that] is producing consumers without affordability" (2005, 303). As he argues, young urban Africans, both male and female, are increasingly looking for well-heeled "sugar mummies" and "daddies" in order to secure their livelihoods, support friends and lovers, and shop for consumer opportunities (Nyamnjoh 2005, 296). In Dakar, the idealization of this phenomenon manifests in a rich collection of sugar daddy metaphors. A *thiof* (the name of a much prized fish) is a comfortable big man, with an "appetite for younger women, preferably pretty university students and schoolgirls of modest social and financial backgrounds," and a *disquette* (as in floppy disc) is an educated, fun-loving young girl fascinated by western consumer tastes (Nyamnjoh 2005, 296). While being strategic and opportunist in their search for autonomy and social mobility, *disquettes* are exposed to physical and health hazards within a "phallogentric and consumerist (dis)order" (Nyamnjoh 2005, 317).

Similarly, Adi's desire to boost her consumer style makes her susceptible to the cash in the hands of seemingly "rich mamas," which she spends on sports jerseys, trendy sneakers or "Calvin Klein" boxer shorts, if not on the young women she herself is attracted to. Adi's positioning as a "small girl" who competes for the attention of other girls is not captured in descriptions of young women who are exposed to the (hetero)sexual whims of "big men." Despite her vulnerability to "big women," Adi is enamored with the economic and erotic autonomy of "sugar motherhood" and delights in her own desirability. Inscribed in these intersecting desires is the prospect of occupying the position of a "sugar mother" herself one day. Further, unlike sugar daddy girls who rarely dare to inquire about their sugar daddies' marital status (Kuate-Defo 2004), Adi is fully aware of her lovers' husbands and children. She also knows that HIV/AIDS is not considered to be relevant to female same-sex relations. Generally, young women assume that their sexual health is much less at risk when sleeping with a "sugar mummy." A young Muslim woman in Suakrom even rationalized her preference for female lovers by pointing to the then widespread slogan "AIDS is real."

One way in which age-mixed relationships have been analyzed and assessed is by asking whether the liaison is a secret one or whether marriage and reproduction is envisioned by the older partner (Kuate-Defo 2004, 14). But how do we account for age differences when legal marriage prospects are missing? How can we understand the intimacies forged across a generational gap but not across a sexual difference? This matter will be explored by focusing on the life story of Lydia, who was at the heart of the love triangle between Ruby and Adi.

### *Lydia Sackey, Reciprocating Provider Love*

The age difference was not big enough for Ruby to have been Lydia's mother. Lydia was in her late teens, and Ruby, according to Lydia's estimate, "about 11 years" older.<sup>13</sup> However, the fact that Ruby's oldest daughter is only four years younger than Lydia, and Ruby is a successful business owner, suggests a considerable difference in status. This difference is reflected in Lydia's invocations of Ruby as a "big woman." Nevertheless, their relationship diverts both from the instrumentality

<sup>13</sup> Given that Ruby's oldest daughter is not much younger than Lydia, it is possible that Lydia's estimate offers a slight reduction of their actual age difference.

attributed to sexual relations between “sugar daddies” and their girls, and from the conjugal provider model.

When we first met, Lydia was upset. She had recently walked in on Ruby and a female cousin of Lydia’s. Sulky and absent-minded, she explained that this discovery had prompted her to go on a two-week drinking binge: Ruby was bossy, jealous, and controlling and Lydia felt stuck, because she depended on Ruby financially. One and half years later, when we met again, she had separated from Ruby and looked much happier. Surprisingly, she was full of praise for the practical domestic, business, and sexual skills Ruby had transmitted to her. Knowing that I was interested in the parts of her life history relevant to her erotic subjectivity, she started by telling us what led her to become interested in women, and in particular in her first adult lover, Ruby.

*My name is Lydia Sackey. I live at Accra Central.<sup>14</sup> And the type of friendship that we have at Accra Central, it’s good (.) for the environment that we’re in. Because when we were growing up, our parents were afraid that we’d bring pregnancies home. So me, for instance, my mother advised me and put fear into me, because at the age of 11 years I already had my menstruation coming.<sup>15</sup>*

As stated earlier, the fear of falling pregnant is vivid, not only among city girls. Yet in stressing her inner city “environment,” Lydia insinuates the particular roughness of Accra Central, the city’s main trading district, which has been considered a bad place to bring up children (cf. Robertson 1984, 65). In this crowded, commercial area, bustling with markets, formal and informal businesses, drinking spots and lorry stations, everything is traded, including sex. While the fear of losing respectability by “chasing men” during “hard times”<sup>16</sup> looms large among young working-class women, the anonymity and consumer opportunities of downtown Accra add to the temptation of engaging in sexual transactions with (potential) sugar daddies and thereby falling pregnant.

“So the way [my mother] talked to me, fears entered me,” Lydia continues her story. “And along the line, when I was like seventeen

<sup>14</sup> Lydia is referring to what used to be “British Accra,” the densely populated area between James Town, one of the old Ga settlements on the coast, and Makola Market.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> While all other quotes in this section are taken from conversations and interviews with Lydia, I am here quoting an interview with Ma’Abena Oppong at Suakrom, March 16, 2008.

years, *I met someone, and we became friends, and I saw that it helped me, till the time that I saw that, maybe, I'll marry.*" This someone, who prevented her from having boyfriends and seeking gifts of men, was Ruby. Lydia is not explicit about whether their involvement "helped" her because it stopped her from seeking male attention. Clearly, however, Ruby set the material foundations for a stable relationship. As Lydia continues in the present tense, Ruby took care of her: *"The one I am there with, she helps me, she's fine with me. Everything I want, she provided me with it. We are living happily."* Before considering Ruby's provider role, and the configuration of their enduring relationship, I will look at their extended period of courting. "She chased me for over six months before I accepted," Lydia remembers. As mentioned above, Lydia was wary of Ruby, due to the films and rumors about "big women" being connected to Mami Wata and using "juju" on their youthful lovers. It took months before Lydia managed to let go of her fears and started engaging with Ruby.

Initially, they met through Lydia's cousin who lived in the same compound with Ruby. At the time, Ruby was selling meals at her chop bar, an informal eatery down the road from Lydia's family house. Because Lydia avoided Ruby, and rejected her invitations to visit her, Ruby took to visiting Lydia at home. *"Because she is old enough to be my elder sister or my aunty, I can't snub her in front of my (pauses) people in the house [and she too] knows that if she comes to my house, I can't snub her, so all the time she used to come to my house till the time we became close."*<sup>17</sup> The hierarchy implied by their differences in social status worked as a cover in Ruby's courtship. As a business owner, wife, and mother, Ruby could present herself in the best light and with the noble intentions of an older sister or aunty. Lydia, however, knew that Ruby was wooing her. She showered Lydia with gifts and good advice, for instance, warning her to stay away from the "gang girls" of her rough quarter (the female equivalent of the unemployed, roaming "area boys"), until Lydia herself, alongside the people at her house, considered Ruby a helpful and "good woman,"

Lydia is the daughter of a Ga mother and a Fante (Akan) father.<sup>18</sup> Like other women of this common mixed ethnic background, she tends

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Although the Fante are an Akan people, their kinship system has been considered ambi-lineal, rather than matrilineal (Robertson 1984, 28).

to refers to herself as Fante, possibly in reaction to the bad reputation of Gas as the greed-driven landlords of Accra Central. She is also her father's beloved first-born child (her mother had children from a previous relationship). Lydia was fifteen when she moved from the suburbs to her maternal family house in Accra Central. By this time her parents had divorced and Lydia's father worked in the neighboring harbor city. Her mother, who traded plantain in Accra's Makola market, had always spent a lot of time at her family house. In her study of Ga women's history in Accra (1984), Claire Robertson shows that most women lived with their husbands early on in their marriages – previously as farmers in ancestral Ga settlements outside the city – but returned to their family houses once the children started growing. Although conjugal living in the suburbs is associated with relative wealth, women were not willing to commit themselves permanently to it. Considering the high divorce rate, conjugal living was regarded as a temporary arrangement (1984, 66). In Robertson's 1972 survey, only 1.3 percent of all women lived with their husbands. Those in Accra Central lived with their (female) relatives rather than with their spouse's relatives because of potential conflicts and their lack of authority (Robertson 1984, 65).

Lydia first started wondering about female same-sex passions as a child when she observed the women in her compound quarrel, kiss, and do “*many things* [...] *I just looked at them, I thought about it but I still didn't understand why they were doing that.*” Once at Accra Central, however, mingling with female footballers, she “heard a lot” more about “it” and retrospectively interpreted the quarrels she had witnessed as a child as lovers' fights. Thus, by the time she entered secondary school, she “knew it already.” In fact, she was hoping to attend Accra Girls Senior Secondary School in the city, but her father believed that “Accra Girls people are lesbian.” He sent her to a small-town Catholic boarding school instead, not knowing that:

They are the worstest- worst people over there! Yeah, because- so when I went there, I had many girlfriends, but we don't do anything, yeah. We only, we kiss, buy gifts and- till the time I completed. And when I- completed, that time all, I've grown wings! So, that time I met my- the woman [Ruby] I was living with for a, for about five years before we break up, yeah! (.) She teach me how to do it well, yeah.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

Though Lydia alludes to how she was taught to “do” sexual things “well” and thus gained the knowledge she would later pass on to Adi, she also acquired a range of everyday and professional skills under Ruby’s supervision.

Upon completing Senior Secondary School (SSS), Lydia “stayed at the house” – a standard phrase indicating a lack of formal or informal employment – and no one intervened when Lydia moved in with Ruby and her three daughters. “*She cooked and I washed. She doesn’t do much in the house [ . . . ] I like it that way, when I wake up in the morning, I do everything. Her children were there but I didn’t bother them. So her children liked me. Because I helped their mother. And sometimes I helped their mother to sell [food].*”<sup>20</sup> The oldest of the three children was almost Lydia’s age, and the second born attended secondary school where she had a *supi* and was hence “in it herself,” as Lydia put it.<sup>21</sup> The daughters knew that Lydia was more than a domestic helper, and even reprimanded and “insulted” their mother when she attempted to bring home other girlfriends. Toward other relatives, who were aware of Ruby’s same-sex passions and talked behind her back, Ruby used the strategy commonly deployed by “knowing women”: she ignored speculations about her same-sex life as much as possible and, if the gossip became too public, she fiercely denied any accusation.

Lydia readily helped with regular household chores but having specialized in “Food and Nutrition” at SSS, she preferred to assist Ruby with the chop bar. The preparing and selling of home-cooked food is a popular trade among women in Accra Central.<sup>22</sup> Although it is not very lucrative, a majority of women engage in it at some point in their working lives. It is particularly convenient for mothers of young children, who have to cook anyway, and whose children can help grinding vegetables for the soup, or peeling and boiling cassava for the *fufu* (Robertson 1984, 109).<sup>23</sup> Besides assisting Ruby, Lydia was also taught how to organize and time the preparation of large quantities

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> As suggested in the previous chapters, *supi* is something you are “in,” something you become part of and not something that is “in” you.

<sup>22</sup> Unlike trade in produce, fish, or imported goods, the entry requirements for food preparation, such as capital and contacts, are low and the access to cheap labor was afforded by compound organization (Robertson 1984, 106).

<sup>23</sup> *Fufu* and soup, the ideal Akan evening meal, is typically served in chop bars throughout southern Ghana. *Fufu* is made of boiled cassava and plantain, yam,

of food. Sometimes Ruby would “sit and tell me to put this here, you see, and to wait before doing that. I should add this to that and all.” The female apprenticeship system was the chief means of training girls prior to formal education and a continuation of the sexually segregated residential Ga framework within which mothers passed on basic skills to their daughters. If a mother wanted her daughter to learn a trade which she did not follow herself, or if she felt a friend or sister was better at teaching a trade, she could give the daughter to this woman to bring her up (Robertson 1984, 134). Had Lydia followed her mother, she would have become her trading assistant, traveling to “the village” to purchase plantains, transporting them to Accra, and storing and distributing them, thereby gaining bargaining skills, knowledge about how to update information on price levels, and supply and demand conditions. In this way, she might have eventually accumulated enough working capital to start trading on her own account.<sup>24</sup> But, rather than becoming a trader, Lydia chose to be her lover’s informal apprentice in a chop bar and thus follow a less prestigious trade.

Apart from Ruby’s need for helping hands, their domestic intimacy was predicated on a husband who worked outside Accra. As Clark notes, duo-local residence was preferred not only because it was believed to prevent quarrels and jealousies over the use of time and money, but also because it gave a woman more freedom to invite (female) friends and relatives to live with her (1994, 340). The location of Ruby’s chop bar, and the fact that catering for meals around noon requires an early start, makes separate living arrangements a necessity that obviates further explanation, even now that conjugal housing has become the ideal. Among working-class spouses, the need for independent incomes often outweighs romantic ideals of marital homes and shared budgets. Lydia helped in the chop bar, but she also helped to prepare meals for Ruby’s husband at his place. “She will go to her husband every Saturday night,” says Lydia, “I will come there in Sunday morning. We cook together but her husband didn’t know, me and [his] wife were something like this (pauses) and me too I don’t do something that, her husband will see me, me and [his] wife are doing this thing.”

or cocoyam, that is pounded in a mortar until it takes on a viscous texture. The preparation is labor-intensive (it takes up to three hours).

<sup>24</sup> See Gracia Clark (1994, 200) on the trajectory of becoming a trader.

The fact that Lydia assisted Ruby in serving her husband is a meaningful, and perhaps subversive act, given that many wives are reluctant “to delegate cooking to potential sexual rivals, such as housemaids, in case the sexual implications prove too strong to resist” (Clark 1994, 346). In southern Ghana, as elsewhere, cooking in marriage is a highly symbolic act. Preparing a husband’s evening meal implies sex on the female side, and the provision of so-called chop money, a husband’s main financial contribution to his wife (Clark 1994, 345). Historically, “giving chop money to a wife and cooking for a husband were the reciprocal acts at the very heart of thriving conjugal relationships” (Allman and Tashjian 2000, 66). As wives were expected to spend the night after the evening meal at their husband’s, preparing meals for an unrelated man could imply adultery. Lydia’s inclusion in the marital nexus of food preparation and consumption, speaks not only to Ruby’s and Lydia’s mutual trust. It is also an expression of their own cooking for and eating (with) each other, hence of their own intimate nexus of appetite and consumption. At the same time, although Lydia never referred to Ruby as a “sugar mother,” there was a gap in power that manifested itself not least upon their break-up.

Remembering how shattered and heart-broken Lydia was when we first met, I asked her how she “survived” their break-up. Her reply was short and simple: “my father gave me money.” It reminded me that my concern with emotional survival is not conceivable without examining their material practices and the imperative of what Mark Hunter calls “provider love” in the southern African context (2010, 16).<sup>25</sup> Fueled by the need to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the phrase “transactional sex” has been coined to highlight the centrality of material exchanges in opposite-sex intimacies that are not understood as sex work (Arnfred 2004). This materialist approach was anticipated by feminist studies on African women’s agency in the 1970s. Recently, anthropological and historical works have shifted from a transactional approach to a focus on love and emotion (Cole and Thomas 2009), while challenging the assumed primacy of romantic love in the “West”

<sup>25</sup> The question of how exactly emotional and material needs are intertwined poses itself throughout the world. In *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2005), Zelizer, for instance, challenges the assumptions that the romantic and the material occupy fundamentally different spheres of life and shows how intimate relations affect the way economic life has been organized in North America.

(Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Writing against the materialist limitations of notions of “transactional sex” and Africa’s purported “lovelessness,” Hunter notes the historical pervasiveness of marital choice and passion, prior to, and alongside, the forces of individualism that came to Africa. He introduces the term “provider love” as an emotional bond that used to be instigated by bridewealth and “became directed toward building a marital home,” always depending on men’s wage labor (2010, 37). This notion of providing love resonates in Lydia’s sense that Ruby’s provision prevented her from going after men and enabled their romantic togetherness.

The closeness between Lydia and Ruby did not go unseen. At some point, people’s “gossip” about the extent to which Lydia had involved herself in Ruby’s life prompted Lydia’s mother to call the police. Lydia’s father tried to dissuade her from doing so, but her mother ignored his interventions and asked the police to come and “warn” Lydia. Luckily Lydia was never home when the police arrived. Often, as seen in Chapter 2, it is the family of the providing partner who engages the police (by possibly bribing them). Lydia’s case is different. Neighborhood gossip inspired her mother, who was not all that bothered about her daughter’s intimacies prior to the gossip, to take action. Yet Lydia chuckles as she tells us about the police incident and ponders at her mother’s ability to “feel” that Lydia’s girlfriends had an erotic dimension. She remembers how it always puzzled her when certain female friends came looking for her and her mother would, upon their arrival, start “preaching” and taunting them: “So you too, you’re in this?” Lydia even suspects that her mother’s awareness and keen criticism derived from her own same-sex experiences. She seems to interpret her mother’s ability to discern and criticize her erotic friendships as a sign of her own “knowingness.” It is widely assumed that those who preach and blame others for their vices the loudest may not only seek to put their righteousness on display, but also to distract from their own transgressions. Her mother’s sixth sense (or her “gaydar” as North Americans might say) suggested an experience-based familiarity with same-sex passions. The fact that Lydia had become Ruby’s helper did not divert her mother’s attention from their erotic intimacy.

Lydia emphasizes the reciprocal aspects within her relationship with Ruby. Rather than seeing herself as having been treated as an insignificant “small girl,” they were partners assisting each other. Moreover, she appreciated that Ruby introduced her to a new adult world. She

acquainted her with mature women's same-sex bonding networks by taking her to bars and to her friends' private parties, to "outdoorings-like places where I never expected to be, she sent me there, because her friends are big people. And I sit among them. She was never harsh on me and she never allowed her friends to speak rough with me."<sup>26</sup> Lydia accompanied Ruby to festive occasions at which a young woman would not usually sit in the front row, among the honorary guests. Lydia had known of the passionate dimension of same-sex friendships before meeting Ruby; she had witnessed the lovers' fights of her "aunties" as a child and exchanged gifts at secondary school. Yet she strongly distinguishes her relationship with Ruby from the erotic friendships of her secondary school days.

*We don't have sex. We only kiss, buy me biscuits [...] we love each other [but] it wasn't very boisterous, that time. It was nothing, you see, that time, I only saw it as a plaything. So it was the woman who came to have a serious relationship with me. [...] We went out, ate together, bathed together, like we were living fine. And she's good in bed. She's very skillful. She doesn't hurt you. Yeah, she'll have sex with you, and you'll feel like you've really had sex! She's fine.*<sup>27</sup>

The seriousness Lydia attributed to her intimacy with Ruby lies not only in the fact that Ruby provided money, but that she was a good lover too. Lydia strongly marked off *supi* girlfriendships from her first "serious" relationship.

Before returning to the specific relational dynamics with Ruby, I will now consider Lydia's distinction between erotic play and genital sex instigated by older and more "knowing" women against the background of the sexual health workshops she attended. Inspired by an educational program taught by international gay and lesbian activists, Lydia emphasized that the wellbeing of female lovers would improve if they were provided with information about (lesbian) sexual technologies. Her request for washable vibrators, silicone dildos,<sup>28</sup> and dental

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Lydia's quest for technology and information is informed by the spaces of male peer workers doing HIV outreach work among MSM that lend themselves to conversations about sexual practice, pleasure, and identity, and to the use of dildos, if only to demonstrate the correct handling of condoms. Lydia hoped to extend the sexual health framework toward the inclusion and sophistication of female same-sex lives.

dams, stand in both for the double improvement of women's sexual health and pleasures. Another aspect of Lydia's vision of a sophisticated lesbian love life in Ghana is her conviction that women must stop engaging in love triangles and thereby reproducing negative *supi* stereotypes. If women refrained from having multiple lovers and from enacting the resulting jealousies in the streets of Accra, the quality of their relationships would improve and the popular beliefs about sinister *supi* cults and pacts with Mami Wata could be undermined. As mentioned above, Lydia herself was affected by the cinematic portrayals of "big women" involved with Mami Wata. Such beliefs were projected onto Ruby and herself, as Lydia bemusedly remembered. Apparently, Ruby was besotted with Lydia and their bond became so tight that some of Ruby's friends suspected that the two had committed to a blood friendship, claiming that Lydia had a big scar on her thigh as a result of a blood sharing practice.

Mindful of the powerful reality of widely shared "spiritual" beliefs, Lydia's rejection of blood friendship stemmed less from fears of transmitting disease, than from the notion that blood bonds do invite haunting spirits and bind souls together in ways that breed unhealthy obsessions, leading to fights and public disclosures. Once tied through blood friendship, such spirits may take hold of a couple forever, even if one lover wanted to separate, or grew to loathe the other. Lydia's investment in reducing the appeal of occult same-sex bonding practices and in showing that women's erotic intimacies can amount to a respectable form of love, beyond the gloomy spiritual entanglements and love triangles among friends and cousins, seemed to suggest a wish for a public framework recognizing and confining same-sex passions. However, Lydia did not share my rationalizing hypothesis that secrecy itself, hence the need to conceal, may be the actual problem. If same-sex unions could be lived in more openness, I offered, blood friendships might not turn into messy love-hate-affairs. My reporting that same-sex marriage is legal in some countries did not convince her either, as she seemed to associate same-sex "marriage" again with unhealthy pacts with the spiritual world. If a lover privately gave her an engagement ring that would be nice, but anything more public, she would reject.

Despite her interest in an international lesbian rights politics and in improving the love lives of same-sex desiring women in Ghana, Lydia hesitated when using the term lesbian. In fact, she never applied it to Ruby, who had conveyed to her a sense of successfully juggling

same-sex desires alongside marriage and motherhood. Rather, she reserved the term lesbian for unmarried women like Adi, her cousin, or herself. The stylish young women she bracketed as “lesbian” had less to lose than their established “mothers” who highly valued discretion and had the means to rent venues or organize women-only parties inside their compounds. This relative power allows “big women” to veil the encroachments of their “small girls.” This, however, does not figure in Lydia’s idealized rendition of her first adult love. Rather, Lydia cast the power that comes with age difference in a sisterly way.

At first Lydia did not even understand my question as to whether she ever felt “abused” by Ruby. Josephine’s translation did not yield an immediate understanding either. “*She’s asking whether you felt used. Like she used you, the woman,*” Josephine translates into Ga. “*Like she used me?* [J.A. Mhm] *Oh, no she is not like that with me, she’s good to me. She’s always good to me,* but just *that* she’s a womanizer. *She loves women.* Whoever she sees, she feels like, having her way, *you see?* But she’s good.”<sup>29</sup> While the term abuse is not commonly used in Ghanaian English, to “use” someone implies a lack of reciprocity and respect.<sup>30</sup> Because Ruby was committed and providing, Lydia resigned herself to Ruby’s womanizing, just like a wife may tacitly tolerate her husband’s extramarital affairs, as long as she felt respected. This acceptance only faltered once Ruby stopped hiding her adventures and started taking Lydia’s cousin to their room. Busy “fooling around,” Ruby did not seem to take into account that Lydia “grew wings” and started having her own (junior) lovers. As reflected in the scene at *Locco*, Adi had to contend with the fact that Lydia gave priority to her “sugar mother.” Thus, Lydia not only passed on the erotic skills she had gained through Ruby, but also implicated Adi in a triangular situation, similar to the one Lydia herself had to suffer Ruby.

While looking to a romantic ideal, Lydia rejects the idea of consolidating same-sex love through blood or “marriage” rituals (and legal marriage appears as both inconceivable and undesirable). Rather than seeing homophobia as being responsible for the possible detrimental effects of lovers locking their unions with a public or occult vow, she

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Lydia Sackey at Accra, June 26, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> The Ghanaian sex workers interviewed by A. Adomako Ampofo, for instance, evaluated their work in the light of unresponsive husbands and lovers who were “sexually (ab)using them ‘for free’” and felt that they did not want to be “used by any man again” (2007, 195).

worries that same-sex pacts in general may interfere with motherhood, reproduction, and respectability. Instead, she asserts that women who are faithful to each other are on a healthy path toward stable, peaceful relationships. This vision of partnership requires one partner to be able to provide financially. Contrary to the idea that “modern” homosexual relationships are egalitarian and do not exhibit major age differences, here difference is not considered a stumbling block, but the prerequisite to a fulfilling relationship.

### *Okaile Allotey, Working for Love*

I met Okaile Allotey on the backstreets of a touristy Accra neighborhood. Okaile was with her cousin, a young, blind man, who followed her at every turn, and with Stella Odamten, who had worked with Okaile on forming a “ladies social club” in the past.

When I explained to them that I had rented a room in Suakrom, where I was hoping to find “older women” to interview, Okaile intervened. In her mid-twenties, Okaile immediately associated my quest for “older women” with her own interest in “sugar mothers,” and claimed that there was absolutely no need to go to Suakrom. She could easily put me in touch with older women in Accra, as she had started looking for a “sugar mother” herself.

I will only go with the ones from thirty-five, forty going now and stop with the young ones. The young ones chop money.<sup>31</sup> I buy them phone credits, this that. But the old ones, you may bring food and prepare it at their house, you can fuck them and they even sponsor you. (An elderly lady in funeral attire, perhaps in her sixties, passes by.) This is just my type. These old women[’s vaginas] are tight, they haven’t had sex in a long time (all laughing).<sup>32</sup>

Five years later, when I asked Okaile how she was coping with the increased levels of hostility toward same-sex relationships in Accra, she responded that she had stopped going out with women of her own age; they were not only too demanding, but also too jealous and too impulsive, and thus unable to veil their same-sex passions.

<sup>31</sup> The verb construction “to chop” or consume “money,” hence to spend it lavishly, echoes the sexual connotations in the noun “chop money.”

<sup>32</sup> Fieldnote based on a conversation with Okaile Allotey at Accra, November 30, 2007.

Okaile is a gifted wordsmith who constantly, both intentionally and unintentionally, makes up new Ghanaian English expressions. She says of herself that she used to be a “hard call” girl, but now she likes to refer to herself as a “bachelor” and to her networks of same-sex desiring friends as “girls in the woods” – for “anything can happen in the woods.”<sup>33</sup> As a child she was called “funny” names in Ga, such as “*noo yoo* [literally:] man-girl, boy-girl.” Everything boys did, she did too, when she had to wear a dress, she changed into jeans as soon as she left the house, and, gesturing to her sizable bosom, she claimed that she was “surprised” about ending up with breasts. Okaile’s female boyhood was facilitated by a lack of care and supervision in the house of her “old lady,” her ageing grandmother. “You know this grand mum they don’t care about anything and you know, girls in our area also were also going out with men.” At the age of fourteen or fifteen, Okaile had her first sexual relationship, with Mrs. Anarfi, who was at least fifteen years older than her.

I’m lesbian. It started when I was in JSS 1. At first I was like, likely like a man but I don’t know what is call that. When I was in JSS a French teacher, Mrs. Anarfi yeah, she introduced me to it. She likes me very much, she does everything for me. You know this French I’m not good in that. Sometimes she gave me good marks about it. One day, she [took] me to her house [...] I went and then I cooked for her, after that she asked me to eat in the same bowl with her, which I didn’t refuse. So, I eat, I ate with her. I ate, we had a nice time she bought me a drink. So after that I told her my time is up, because we- I also have another subject to [study]- so I have to go back, and she said: “oh, what kind of subject am I going to learn that is so more important than, her?” I didn’t understand. In fact, that day she was-she was on top of me.<sup>34</sup>

Asked to tell me her life history, Okaile starts head on with her erotic self – unlike other interviewees who were less direct or did not make their gendered and erotic life the starting point. Okaile considers her masculinity a sign of being “lesbian,” which she, however, did not have a name for when she was growing up. Okaile befriended the “area boys,” joined them in going to clubs with “white girls,” played football, and gambled as early as primary school. “I smoke, I drink. It’s like I don’t like men in natural. When I was tender age, I’ve been telling

<sup>33</sup> This and all the following quotes in this section are taken from the interview I recorded with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

myself I will never marry or give [birth]; so I didn't know the connection, when it started, but I'm very tender age, but I'm hard call girl at that time." Okaile identifies her preference for boys' activities and her intention never to become a wife or mother as part of a masculine disposition that she retrospectively connects to her sexual preference.

Okaile spent much of her secondary school years serving her "mistress." "Your mistress?" I pick up on her term. "Yeah, because she give me food. She buy me dress everything. I- I- I don't even pay my school fees." There was no need for the French teacher to take her time or to woo Okaile. Even if Mrs. Anarfi had sought permission from Okaile's aunties and grandmother, they might have been glad that Okaile was supported and "mothered" elsewhere, and by a teacher who could help with schoolwork and school fees. Unlike Lydia, Okaile did feel "used" in this relational configuration.

She asked me to fetch water to her place and I did that, she asked me to cook, and I did that. [Then] she will say, "oh come and eat with me" and I ate and then things started running. At that time she was on top of me, because I didn't know anything. I had the idea of that, but she was on top of me alright, she was, she was using me – (pauses) everything.<sup>35</sup>

Following the invitation to eat from her teacher's bowl, Okaile became part of an eroticized nexus of being fed and of being sexually consumed. The "idea" that her gender identification and her feelings for girls might transpire into something sexual predated her teacher's advances. The thought of having female same-sex relations was not novel or unappealing to her, but she had not envisaged being dominated and coaxed into sex by an older woman.

Okaile's story of how she was subjected to her teacher's desire needs to be seen in the historical context in which young girls have become "small girls." Schoolteachers have always been encouraged to take in a pupil. Both male and female teachers, especially those who are unmarried, childless, and stationed away from home, rely on the domestic help of a live-in pupil who, in exchange, they are supposed to mentor. According to Claire Robertson (1984), live-in helpers in Accra in the 1970s were to be raised and treated as foster children, ideally by better-off relatives and mentoring benefactors. The arrangement by which educated, elite women obtained domestic helpers was supposed to

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

benefit the helpers, because they were taught European housekeeping skills and sent to school in exchange for their help. In practice, however, child helpers were often raised by unrelated mistresses, with little accountability for the child's wellbeing (1984, 135). As I realized when living with Maa'Evelyn, the boundaries between fostering and exploitation are slippery. Though Maa'Evelyn sent her helper, who hailed from a poor rural background, to school, she worked her hard, barely acknowledged her presence, and made disparaging comments about her being stubborn and stupid. This slipperiness extends to the erotic analogies between practices of eating, feeding, and seducing, through which sexual abuses can be disguised. As Robertson revealed, the "seduction" of child helpers already appears in accounts of pawning in Accra, written in the 1930s. At the time, and until the 1950s, it was common for children who lacked a strong family network, to be given as helpers in payment for debts. This practice was inherently gendered and "girls were more likely to be given as pawns than boys, since if a girl's master seduced her, which often happened, the waiving of bride-wealth was a convenient method for her lineage to rid itself of the debt" (Robertson 1984, 134). While pawning is no longer legal, pervasive poverty and the demands of the global economy have made young women in southern Ghana even more vulnerable to "seduction," often without any marriage prospects (Adomako Ampofo 2007, 191).

Okaile appreciated her French teacher's support. They were "managing" their sexual relationship during her first two years of secondary school. Problems started when Okaile entered the final year of JSS and "became the girl, the guy himself." As Okaile says, she stopped going "for her [teacher's] money," because she needed her own "freedom." By then she had started "running people" (not to say "chasing girls"), and realized that she herself could initiate erotic bonds, without having to compromise her masculine sense of self. Mrs. Anarfi did not take it lightly. She began to attack Okaile in front of the whole class for no apparent reason – ironically, she often ridiculed her for her unusually deep, masculine voice – gave her unfairly poor marks, and verbally abused her to the point that her schoolmates realized that something was wrong. As Mrs. Anarfi began exiling her from the classroom for entire lessons, Okaile decided to avoid "embarrassment" in front of "certain girls" in her class and stopped going to French classes altogether. Surprisingly, however, Okaile ends her account by expressing thankfulness to the "mistress" who victimized her.

O.A.: I was a victim too for her [but] let me say it has helped me in one way or the other.

S.D.: How?

O.A.: How? Because she (pausing). I now go for fish myself.

S.D.: Hmm (laughing)

O.A.: I now know how to fish. She taught me how to fish [...] so that's helped me.

S.D.: Mhm, but you don't do it like her?

O.A.: No no no, it's a free will, mine it's a free will. I make sure you know [...] what I'm up to. [...] It can take me about three months, four months before touching them.<sup>36</sup>

Despite Okaile's limited agency and the victimhood she experienced, her sense of being "likely like a man" was consolidated through her involvement with the French teacher. Coaxing Okaile into having sex, Mrs. Anarfi made her aware of her own desires and of a way of acting on them sexually. She brought her, albeit roughly, into the world of "knowing" same-sex passion. Though Okaile claims that she is more cautious when approaching a girl and always verbally proposes before she becomes physical, she sees herself as following in her teacher's path, in terms of making the first move and taking the erotic lead. Certainly, at the time I met Okaile, she did not have the domestic space or the financial means to be as imposing as her teacher was. She shared a room in her grandmother's compound, and while working in occasional informal jobs she could not afford to rent hotel rooms, as is done even among conjugal couples in Accra with an acute lack of privacy.

So far, Okaile's trajectory into desiring women plays into the hands of a standardized homophobic narrative, rehearsed in popular Ghanaian discourses about how minors are brought into "homosexuality." Christian educational booklets that tackle the question of whether same-sex attraction is a matter of choice or genetics list "admiring an older teacher or mentor who is homosexual," as one of the main scenarios that "can seduce" a youngster "into homosexual behavior" (Akagbor 2007, 75). What is at stake in the seductive power and authority of a mentoring patron has not yet been contextualized outside the terms of ensnarement and moral corruption. Besides,

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

heterosexual sex with a minor is punishable by law (“defilement”), while sodomy and, by extension, all homosexual acts can be considered abominable, even if they happen between adults.

Beyond the language of condemnation, it is challenging to grasp the violence that may occur in age-mixed same-sex relationships. In order to fight, rather than fuel, the fire of homophobia, gay and lesbian activists have focused their energies on more upbeat aspects of homosexual “love.” Anthropological classification schemes of age-stratified homosexuality gloss over the vulnerabilities of younger partners to the benefit of describing “ritualized homosexualities” or theorizing classic accounts of boy-men relationships as cultural institutions. Such classifications focus on structural explanations for age-mixed same-sex practices, rather than their affective dimension or the possibility of abuse. In her rich ethnographic account *The Politics of Passion* (2006), Gloria Wekker points at the asymmetries of female relationships across generational configurations among Afro-Surinamese “mati” women in Paramaribo. Wekker’s personal account hints at the joys and complexities of being involved with a much older “mati.” She describes her sexually intimate relationship with her landlady Ms. Juliette, who could have been her grandmother. Ms. Juliette did not shy away from drawing on the authority that went with her age and forcefully enacted her jealousy when Wekker fell in love with a woman of her own age-group.

Historically, in Paramaribo, birthday parties were often thrown by an elder for a younger woman lover, in the communal yards of female-headed households. These birthday nights amounted to crucial sites for symbolically recognizing a same-sex bond, but also for enacting jealousies and heated (lovers’) fights. Melville and Frances Herskovits described the dancing, singing, drinking, and gift giving, as well as the fist fights that unfolded during these celebrations and held that the fights added “to the zest of the party” (Herskovits 1936, cited in Tinsley 2010, 56). Exploring the eroticism between women in Caribbean literature, Tinsley touches on these women’s dramatic fights, as described by Wekker and the Herskovitses. To Tinsley, the violent conflicts over a birthday girl are not always staged or playful, even if they happen in the midst of joyous celebrations. She places these “slippages from seduction to aggression” (Tinsley 2010, 56) in the context of a patriarchal colonial logic, in which market women, domestics, and washerwomen, of all age groups, had little to claim as

their own. Acting out “their hunger for at least one prized possession,” in spite of a legacy of slavery that refused their right to ownership, was a way of venting and dramatizing desire (Tinsley 2010, 57). In Ghana, the intimate maneuvering room even of powerful market women and educated teachers, is often limited and confined to female hierarchies. Taking a break from their multiple responsibilities as mothers and workers, their violent tensions are sometimes acted out within eroticized female spaces. These conflicts and rivalries need to be contextualized, but cannot be idealized away by attributing them to the oppressive colonial and neocolonial regimes in which these women are implicated.

The relationship with her French teacher prompted Okaile to test and contest the limits of her subordination, without having the means to provide. Like Adi, Okaile portrays herself as someone who draws not only on her erotic capital as a masculine female youngster, but on her attentiveness to, and her recognition of, adult women’s daily needs and duties. “People call it working for love,” she explains, continuing that, even if you don’t have money to assist your partner, you can still “help” her by doing a “small small thing.” You prepare breakfast, tidy up, do laundry on Saturdays, Okaile recites, “you cook for her, take her water, it doesn’t mean anything, or does it mean anything?” Okaile works to contest the idea of being subjugated and expresses her agency by conveying that life requires serving others at times. “It’s lively sometime right? You understand? [S.D. Mhm], that doesn’t mean she’s ruling over you, she doesn’t,” Okaile reassures herself. The relational position Okaile tailors for herself draws on the serviceability expected from clients toward their patrons, and on the language of mutual respect implied in Ghanaian notions of conjugal reciprocity and the idea that modern spouses are supposed to support and serve each other in any way possible.

My follow-up question, “but in the bed, who does the work?” further allowed Okaile to portray herself in a top role, as the worker, rather than a “small girl” helper. “Yeah, you does the work. You does the work alright [not] because she gives you money, no no no no, you didn’t propose to me I proposed to you, but I’m helping you out, you are helping me by helping yourself taking care of yourself fine [...] but at the end of the day I will be on top of you, that one here no *palaver*.”<sup>37</sup> As the wordsmith she is, Okaile tweaks her helper role, and turns the

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Okaile Allotey at Accra, May 25, 2007.

tables by equating monetary and domestic assistance. Her work concept does not determine who can lay claim to being in charge sexually. Okaile puts herself on the same level with an older partner by gendering her own position. She considers herself a worker (for love) rather than a subordinate helper. This entitles her to propose and follow up on her proposal by initiating sex. Alluding to the ideal of mutual assistance that has historically been at the heart of Ghanaian notions of conjugality, she smooths the way to construct herself as a potent “bachelor,” destined to satisfy female partners. Although she cannot “help out,” a phrase that usually implies financial support, she provides domestic services, analogous to a dutiful wife who lovingly serves her husband, while he attests to his love by paying generous “knocking fees” (the gifts of alcohol and monetary contributions a man makes to the family of his bride to be) and provides “chop money” throughout marriage.<sup>38</sup> These transactions do not make a couple less loving: quite the opposite, they are the signs of a relationship to which spouses are committed through respecting and “serving” each other; the man does not see himself as buying his wife’s sexual services, but seducing her.<sup>39</sup> Just like Janet Aidoo in Chapter 3, Okaile seems to liken herself to a modern husband who helps with domestic chores, especially when he cannot provide financially. These images of love as work, reference Ghanaian norms of conjugal (and intergenerational) reciprocity, and amount to a way of gendering and thereby balancing differences in age and status.

The resort to an idealized notion of working for love, as opposed to working for material gains, looms large when young women like Adi or Okaile portray themselves in relation to an older, comfortable “lady.” Both Adi’s boastful “sugar mother” rhetoric, and Okaile’s sexualized emphasis on the attractiveness of postmenopausal women, is spurred by what could be considered “emotional butchness” (Cvetkovich 2003). This does not preclude that Okaile, according to her ex-girlfriend Hamda, sought provider love not only with female, but also with male lovers. Perhaps Okaile’s dependence on the “sugar” of better-off men and

<sup>38</sup> The historical connotations of “chop money” are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. See also footnotes 3 and 31.

<sup>39</sup> This of course does not take into account the unequal stakes regarding procreation that undermine conjugal reciprocity. Okaile’s assertion of the equivalence of monetary and domestic exchanges and her ideal that this does not prescribe sexual roles is undermined by many a woman’s desire for having children- a desire that can amount to her primary motive for marital sex, which husbands may take advantage of.

older women is counterbalanced when she seduces “girls” herself. Yet even feminine Lydia who “grew wings” hinted at how she upset Ruby by looking for girl lovers of her own age group. In these stories, a pattern emerges whereby the younger partner seeks to distance or emancipate herself from a nurturing or overbearing “sugar mother” by striking up erotic adventures on her own terms.

Often, heart-broken young women try to console themselves or win back a philandering “sugar mother’s” heart, by testing their own erotic powers. The emerging dramas are triangular not only because of the number of lovers involved, but also because of the number of friends involved as matchmakers and go-betweens. The final part of this chapter looks more closely at the roles female friends and relatives play in each other’s love lives. On the one hand, the interference of these brokering third parties could be considered manipulative; on the other, by monitoring dyadic affective intensities, they also keep in check the abuses that may occur within couples.

## Gifts and Givers

### *Dina Yiborku and “the Natural Law of Compensation”*

The frustration about younger lovers spreading their wings and eventually moving on is part and parcel of being in the “sugar mother” position. This dawned on me through conversations with Dina Yiborku, a thirty-seven-year-old “sugar mother” (although she does not apply this term to herself). Dina is a sports teacher, smart and energetic, and an expert handywoman, who masters the art of keeping separate the different domains of her life, and making different spaces available to different sets of relationships.

Dina splits her weekends between the man she recently married, a policeman in Accra, and the house where she grew up in Suakrom, where she still has her own room. Often, she picks up her girlfriend Monica Ankrah to join her in Suakrom when she checks on her ageing mother and her many nieces and nephews. Monica is in her early twenties and attends a technical college on the coast. The weekdays Dina spends mostly at her workplace, a secondary-school campus an hour away from Suakrom. Occasionally, she invites her twenty-one-year-old “outside” female lover, Becky, to keep her company in the room she rents on campus. In “small girl” fashion, Becky, who is of

little means, does Dina's laundry. Besides being mobile, autonomous, and rather reserved about the details of her personal life, Dina's ability to create spatial divides between different friends and relatives emerges as a prerequisite to becoming a respected "big woman" with multiple girlfriends.

Dina was the only one of my primary respondents who went through tertiary education. When we first met, she was enrolled at a technical university, studying toward a degree in physical education. She was also the only one who owned a car and who, industrious as she is, hired it out as a taxi whenever she did not need it herself. Prior to becoming a sports teacher, Dina was well on her way to becoming a sister in an order of Christian nuns. After six years at the convent, she undid her vows and followed her call to independence. She found that life had more in store for her than the routine and uniformity of the convent. Despite this, she is full of praise for what convent life taught her, and how it broadened her cosmopolitan horizon; she picked up some Greek and Tagalog, from Filipino Sisters, and she calls up meditation techniques and lessons in psychology and philosophy that she chiefly applies to her own life. Above all, she learned how to "deal with many things inside you and control emotions, like your anger and loneliness." Her mobility and her professional and educational aspirations reflect her declared aim to be "the boss of [her]self" and "the giver" in her relationships.<sup>40</sup>

Reflecting upon her first intimate same-sex friendship at age twelve, Dina considered herself a "receiver." Her "giver" was a table tennis player about seven years older than her. They were in the same training group and Dina "fell in love with her," but as she emphasizes: "We didn't have any relationship like sex, no, but what I meant [by calling her the giver] was I remember sometimes I cook and I sent it to [her] place and we ate but he – she didn't bring it to me, bringing of food or something, no but I remember I cook for us to be eating [S.D. OK.] I remember that one."<sup>41</sup> It is the intimacy of serving and sharing meals that Dina remembers as the sign of first being involved in a specific type of intimacy and in a dynamic of giving and receiving. She was the one receiving money and instructions and bringing the meals to her friend's place. The term *supi* was in use at the time, Dina recalls upon my inquiry, but avoiding its connotations with lesbian sex today, she

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, January 17, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, January 18, 2008.

does not refer to the non-sexual table tennis friend as a *supi* – only later, did she experience sexual intimacies under the mosquito net tents in the bunk beds of a private boarding school.

Remembering her first committed relationship with a classmate at teacher training college, Dina positions herself as the giver. Eighteen at the time, she was one year older than her girlfriend when they were “living like husband and wife. We had sex, we shared things together, we sat down with each other and that was when I felt I loved the person really.”<sup>42</sup> The next day, as I tried to follow up on Dina’s mention of having lived “like husband and wife,” she corrected herself by saying “I didn’t say we were husband and wife [. . .] what I meant was we were together, we were doing things- everything together.” After three years of “doing everything together” the relationship ended with the classmate’s marriage. This experience was “bitter” and formative to Dina’s erotic subjectivity. If she had just been “doing things for doing sake,” for fun, their separation would have been less painful. But Dina struggled “to let go.” She holds that most young, unmarried women treat same-sex attraction as a passing thing and are correspondingly careless. This ties in with the public attitude toward female same-sex passions as a transient, adolescent experience, or, as Dina put it “a game, when you get somewhere you just forget about it.” Dina sees this attitude reflected in the love affairs of the female football friends of hers. They boast about sleeping around with several women and “do it because it’s a fashion among them.” This superficiality she believes, makes it easier for them to eventually say, “fine, the person will move on and I will also move on to another, so that’s what went on in my mind then.” Dina, however, considers herself “that type who likes to pick one and keep the person till whatever time, you see, so in case you have somebody you develop that kind of love for the person, and you have to let go the person, it is not easy.” Dina paints a picture in which her desire to love a woman is deeper, and her commitment to this desire stronger, than that of most young women who do not give much significance to their teenage same-sex experience.

As noted, Dina hesitates with the image of husband and wife. Rather, she construes herself as the “giver” in relation to a “receiving” partner who exhibits “feminine qualities.” The gendered roles of “giver” and “receiver” become apparent when Dina invokes the sexual advantage

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, January 17, 2008.

of “receiving from the lesbian.” Physically, she argues, female lovers have more stamina at giving sexual pleasure than men. Dina conjures up the limitations and contingency of male phallic desire, or in her own words, the fact that after releasing “sperms, the penis relaxes,” whether or not “the woman” has had an orgasm. A woman’s sexual “tool or [...] the hand she is using” to please another woman, never tires – unless “the heart is weak and she cannot go again.” Dina casts herself in a position where she invests labor into ensuring her partner’s sexual satisfaction. Rather than portraying herself as the receiver of her lover’s trust and devotion, she negotiates and confirms her own (ostensibly self-less) desire to please and provide. While working-class butches in the global North have been represented as dependent on the softness and healing comfort provided by their emotionally more expressive femme partners, Dina was not the only “knowing woman” I interviewed who considered herself a “giver” both in sexual and emotional terms.

Rather than attributing the instability of same-sex couples to the social pressures of getting “somewhere” in life by following the imperative to marriage and parenthood, Dina pragmatically concludes that women’s casual attitude prompts her to be strategic in her choice of lovers. On the one hand, she deems it advantageous to propose love to younger women who are less educated, and less asserting, than herself. On the other hand, resigned to the fact that younger women would always leave her at some point, she opts for multiple lovers as a preventative measure to avoid loneliness and reduce the pain of eventual heartbreaks. These considerations echo Wekker’s account of Afro-Surinamese women in their late thirties and forties who spoil their girl lovers with gifts. These women consider it an advantage to initiate a young woman, who they can “mold and train,” thereby introducing her to the mutual sexual and material obligations of the “mati work” (Wekker 2006, 186). While expecting absolute fidelity from “the girl,” the older woman may not keep to such standards herself (Wekker 2006). At the same time “it is taken for granted that as an older woman one does not become too attached to a younger partner, since there is always the chance that she will begin a relationship with a peer” (Wekker 2006, 187). Dina herself had to learn the lesson of not becoming too emotionally attached to a younger girlfriend.

Dina met Gladys Agyeman, her “second girlfriend,” at the secondary school at which she was teaching temporarily. While coaching Gladys

during the school games, she realized that the girl was in the process of breaking up with a female lover. “Well, she was my student, but I knew she was doing it and when I saw her, I liked her that was all, so I proposed to her and she accepted.” A few weeks after the interview, Dina corrected that it was in fact not straightforward and that she herself had reported Gladys’ other female lover to the police so Gladys could move out and become Dina’s girl. Dina made it her responsibility to support Gladys and pay her school fees. She paid them to Gladys’ mother, rather than to Gladys or to the school directly. Her generosity gave her access to Gladys’ home and ensured Gladys’ mother’s approval of their friendship. “When I go there the mother calls me and says ‘hey, your sister is here, your friend is here’ that is all sometimes she says.” By putting kinship terminology into Gladys’ mother’s mouth, Dina’s comment suggests that the mother was aware that their bond was more intimate than that of mere friends and that she might have tacitly agreed with the less platonic aspects of their sisterly closeness. Unlike Lydia’s mother, Gladys’ mother never went to the police to report her daughter’s “friendship.” On the contrary, she was the one who begged Dina to come back and to continue paying Gladys’ school fees after their breakup.

Dina and Gladys broke up over similar circumstances to those of Ruby and Lydia. Gladys began to explore her erotic powers by indulging in her own adventures. She left Dina for a peer, a fellow footballer, to whom Dina had once introduced her. Perhaps it was mostly a tease, an act of provoking the all-powerful Dina, who does not shy away from flirting with other women herself. Dina, however, was deeply upset and took sleeping pills for a while to calm herself down. Eventually, Gladys and the footballer broke up and Gladys asked Dina to reconsider her. Though Dina refused, they remained friends, and every now and then still spent a night together. This ongoing closeness disrupted Dina’s (non-sexual) friendship with Stone, another footballer, who was Dina’s confidante during the crisis with Gladys. Stone “didn’t like that I went back to Gladys. But you have to take care of the people you have been with. You shouldn’t hate them. If you don’t do good, it will come back to you.” In touch with the “radical humanist” principles her late father had followed and conveyed to her, Dina invokes what she refers to as the “natural law of compensation” that compels her to remain loyal. On a more pragmatic level, however, as a teacher, it is vital to make sure one is not blackmailed by a former student lover, especially if it

was a same-sex lover. Dina and Gladys' story involves multiple actors. Besides Stone, who knew all the parties involved, including the footballer with whom Gladys had an affair, there is Gladys' mother. Despite Stone's advice, Dina continued to contribute to Gladys' school fees. She did not pay as diligently as she used to, but enough to appease Gladys' mother in view of her previous complicity.

Dina's attraction to younger women and her claim to protect herself from the inevitable heartbreaks by entertaining "outside" lovers,<sup>43</sup> clashes with her dream of a monogamous companion of her own economic and educational standing. It needs to be remembered that this dream was articulated toward me, the interviewer, representing the economic independence and the feasibility of a "modern egalitarian" ideal of homosexual monogamy. In Ghana, it would be hard to find a lasting companion of her status who would commit to her, Dina believed. Instead, she hoped to find a sincere, younger woman whom she could mold and economically empower, in such a way that they could one day "share [their] money together," and "share everything together." Thus framed, "sugar motherhood" intersects both with a gendered provider ideal and the claim of "doing everything together" in the sibling-like fashion explored in Chapter 5.

Two months prior to our interview, Dina had started her relationship with Monica, with whom she was trying to do exactly that: initiating and empowering her so they could pool resources one day. Monica, an attractive sportswoman, was in her late teens at the time and about to complete secondary school. Spending term break at Dina's family house in Suakrom, she appeared to be the quintessential social junior, quiet and subdued. As Dina confirmed, "she will not sit down for me to sweep the room, automatically, because she is younger. The Ghanaian set up, when the older one and the younger one are there, it's the younger one [who] does all the work, most of the work."<sup>44</sup> When Dina, her friend Adwoa Boateng, my research associate Josephine, and myself were having lunch at Dina's compound, Monica did not eat but served us. Adwoa kept playfully commanding

<sup>43</sup> With these less important lovers, Dina takes on a nurturing role too, albeit not as extensively. This attitude is much like that of the migrant workers in South Africa, who see themselves obliged to provide for different girlfriends to different degrees, thereby receiving home comforts in different places and keeping circulation flowing (Hunter 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, January 18, 2008.

her to bring us something, soft drinks, water, or soap to wash our hands. “Monica is just shy and likes to hide in the room,”<sup>45</sup> Dina explained to me, while spoon-feeding her five-year-old nephew. Later that afternoon, as we walk to town to buy a pair of boxer shorts for the beloved nephew, Dina tells me that she is Monica’s “first person,” the one who took her virginity, and feels obliged to take good care of her. Monica was in fact “given” to her by a friend who went abroad. As we talk, Monica walks ten steps behind us.

Four years later, I was surprised that Dina and Monica were still together and quite happily so. Dina had just married, but was reluctant to talk about her husband. “He just needs to be presentable,” she tells me as I ask her criteria in choosing a husband, “presentable, a good character and someone who loves me how I am.” Having met at university, where Dina engaged in same-sex intimacies, she told him that she used to have female lovers but had stopped. Yet, she confesses, “I can’t stop it, ever. Otherwise I will die. Because that is who I am.”<sup>46</sup> This conversation took place in her car, as she drove us back from the school campus to Suakrom. Dina’s braided extensions were bundled into a ponytail, she was wearing flashy sunglasses, tight white trousers and red moccasins matching her bright red T-shirt that reads, “I’m into having sex, I ain’t into making love.” This print had caused some commotion at the teacher’s meeting we stopped by. While her female colleagues reprimanded her, one of the guys exclaimed “kəkɔɔ yɛ dɛ” (red plantain or redness is sweet, which Dina interpreted to me as: “the red inside of the vagina is delicious”) and another man supported her by saying, “she is married now, so she is allowed to do it.” Both Dina and Monica dress in less masculine fashions than they used to. As Dina’s “outside” lover Becky relates to me, Dina does so because she is married; she also asks her lovers to dress more girly, so as to avoid people talking about them. While Dina, Mrs. Anarfi, and other women who seek out younger lovers, recognize a “small girl’s” inclination for same-sex desire by her masculine presentation of self, they ask them to tone down that gendered expression of self, in order to be less visible to an urban public that increasingly reads gender transgressions in clothing style as a sign of “lesbianism.”

<sup>45</sup> Fieldnotes taken in Suakrom, December 30, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Informal conversation with Dina Yiborku at Suakrom, Fieldnote January 12, 2012.

Dina is paying for Monica to attend a technical university like she herself did and Monica is still the dutiful junior, though she jealously monitors Dina by constantly calling her phone. Dina believes Monica is good for her because she tries to “educate” her and holds her accountable to her own ideals of monogamy. Clearly, they had ample time to study each other, know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and have become attached to each other. Monica, who tells Dina to be faithful and mind the way she flirtatiously touches other women in Monica’s company, has become much more than a subdued “small girl.” Although they still cannot pool economical resources, Dina feels that their relationship may survive Monica’s pending marriage. Perhaps Dina has managed to disbelieve her own prophecies that younger women will eventually leave her for someone else.

I did not probe Dina about the friend that gave Monica to her, and what the process of “giving” looked like. Several women had told me of a third party who had given, entrusted, or arranged for a lover for them, when they felt lonely or simply needed “someone” to keep them company in a deserted family compound, and the language of “giving” was used frequently by the “knowing women” I interacted with: Lydia was introduced or perhaps “given” to Ruby by her cousin (who eventually became Ruby’s lover too, and ushered in Lydia’s break-up). Lydia involved herself with Adi and Adi in turn, made Lydia jealous by finding her own potent “sugar mother.” I was often irritated by the staged gossip, lies, and triangular arguments of my respondents. In search of stories of twosome togetherness, I was perplexed by the multitude of other voices that had to be included or filtered out and by the fact that it was almost impossible to locate and interview long-term couples with a straightforward love story to tell. Only after having convinced myself that these relationships were indeed sexually and emotionally significant did I begin to acknowledge the collective forms of self-expression emerging from the social practices of “giving,” “stealing,” “testing,” or claiming back friends or lovers, as in the introductory vignette.

These practices that are framed as gift exchanges are more than just a by-product of overlapping love triangles. Perhaps, triangles through which passions and intimacies are being passed on (like gifts), liberate us from the dyadic logic of gift exchange, as sketched out by Marcel Mauss (2002 [1925]). As Heinzpeter Znoj argues in his critique of Mauss, gifts are not only given, received, and reciprocated, but also

passed on and thus converted into a broader interconnectedness (1995, 46). Inasmuch as the attempts of directing a friend's desires limit and contain twosome intimacies and thereby terminate some and reinvigorate other friend- and loverships, they play a constitutive role in spawning same-sex bonding networks and making love a mode of sociality. Indeed, the close ties woven among women who know of each other's intimate bonds emerge as a social fabric in which love is much more than a twosome. The practice of involving additional "daughters," "mothers," and friends in relational negotiations, seems to provide the basis for queer forms of relatedness.

### **Conclusion: Collectivizing Love**

Though most of my respondents made their first erotic experiences with a girl of their own age group, they considered their relationship with a senior and sexually more experienced female lover their first "serious" same-sex bond. A mature woman's capacity to mentor and provide for a younger woman, while knowing how to conceal their passion in public, makes her an attractive match for a less experienced woman. For Lydia, the age gap only became poignant when love ended and she had to contend with her socio-economic inferiority. And the end of a love relation does not necessarily mean that a "mother" stops supporting her "daughter" financially. To that extent, responsible "sugar motherhood" can indeed be considered a sort of motherhood that (as in Dina's and Gladys' case) may even be encouraged by the genealogical mother of the younger partner.

In West Africa, where the mother-child unit is understood to be at the heart of even patrilineal societies, motherhood is a powerful image. At the same time, the paradigm of motherhood has its limits. On the one hand, there is the normative pressure for women to give birth and become respectable mothers. Although Dina and other childless "knowing women," took care of their siblings' children and were gladly mistaken for their mothers, they felt that it would be advantageous, if they gave birth themselves. On the other hand, derogatory depictions of Mami Wata or the hoarding market woman as a selfish and greedy (rather than a caring and hardworking) mother undermine the power of motherhood and speak to the salience of patriarchal notions of submissive wifeness. This puts "big women" in a more vulnerable position than "big men." While both big men and women

are expected to take care of their dependents, “big men” have much more leeway in spending their money on personal status markers and pleasures. In this regard the positions of sugar mummies and sugar daddies are fundamentally different. Moreover, in recent years young women have the power to denounce a “sugar mother” as a “lesbian,” if their relationship ends on a bitter note.

In public health studies (male) homosexual bonds tend to be portrayed as particularly “transactional” and the younger person’s motive as purely material (Broqua 2009, 65). It has also been argued that the bigger the age difference, the higher the risk of coercion and abuse (Kuate-Defo 2004). Though neither Okaile’s nor Lydia’s same-sex bonds figure in this literature, this equation does apply to their intimacies to some degree – Okaile felt “used” by her teacher and “mistress” who was twenty years older than her, while Lydia is full of praise for her “woman,” who could have been a senior sister. Still, this equation does not factor in gender or sexual “sameness.” On the one hand, it could be argued that Okaile’s sense of being sexually “the same” and sharing an erotic subjectivity might have prevented her from exposing or reporting her abusive teacher. On the other hand, even though the lack of a public framework to formalize same-sex bonds can be oppressive, the unexpected queer affinities arising across intergenerational intimacies are as real as the masking and unhealthy effects of secrecy. Even if age-mixed intimacies are indexical of mother-daughter, patron-client, or teacher-pupil hierarchies, they also subvert these configurations through secrecy, and through a sense of erotic similitude and intergenerational solidarity.

The materiality of love within these relationships defies celebrations of the postmodern individualism of love manifest in Anthony Giddens’ notion of “confluent love.” The British sociologist argued that today’s “confluent love presumes equality in emotional give and take” and seeks egalitarian (sexual) fulfillment (1993, 61–64). While the contingency and fragmentation Giddens diagnoses pertain to love under precarious postcolonial conditions, Hunter notes that egalitarianism is predicated on autonomous bodies that can enter and leave relationships as they please (2010, 198). Especially where bodies cannot defend themselves from undesirable communal expectations, love is care and resides in practical and committed acts of support (Hunter 2010, 16). “Provider love” is useful in accounting for the ways in which love is evoked among female same-sex lovers in Ghana. Given that especially

intergenerational same-sex relationships (both male and female) have been branded as the antithesis of love, it is important to point out the acts of care, kindness, and assistance characterizing these bonds.

My findings refute structural mappings of homosexuality that assume that gender is the main vector of difference in African same-sex relationships, while age difference is insignificant. In contrast to Murray's comments about the femininity of the younger person in an African same-sex relationship (2000, 248), the self-understandings of the younger women I met were not exactly feminine: rather the opposite. While their financial dependency, and their "wifely" roles vis-à-vis an older woman, put them in a subordinate position (which Murray might have read as feminine), their assertive erotic and gender styles carried strong masculine connotations. In a more complex way, gender alongside age did play a role. While "sugar mummies" were invoked in a bantering manner, I felt that such banter served as a way of reducing the younger person's socio-economic powerlessness. Often, the bantering chat about "sugar mothers" among female footballers seemed to counter-balance the "mother's" authority. Moreover, some younger women contested their alleged subjugation by declaring themselves as sexually dominant or by claiming to be doing the work of love in a mutually dependent partnership. Making such claims they drew on Ghanaian notions of reciprocity, rather than on egalitarianism. The attendant squabbles and power dynamics were read as signs of passion and deemed constitutive of a sincere same-sex love relationship.

I started this chapter by reflecting on how elderly women like Maa'Evelyn flirt with adult women who could be their daughters and by asking what goes unseen in the exchanges between "big women" and their "small girls." I ended by highlighting the love triangles and jealousies that unfold among these networks. Whilst these dramas could simply be attributed to the youthfulness of the protagonists, they are more than that. The same-sex relationships I encountered were framed by intense negotiations that constantly involved (non-sexual) friends and even genealogical family members as advisors, mediators, or go-betweens. Practices such as "giving" a lover to a friend, or a friend to a (former) lover, are predicated on the senior-junior dynamics instantiated within tight-knit social networks. Through this "gift economy," senior friends and "sugar mothers" may keep in check others' amorous togetherness, while at the same time engendering new interconnections. The resulting fights and

tensions are certainly considered problematic by cosmopolitan women, who are looking for a committed, monogamous partner, while in the meantime having back-up lovers themselves. The fights and competitions over friends and their resources can be violent, painful, and destructive. But fights, both playful and dramatic, can also be a way of staging intimacy, and, to borrow Herskovits' words, they can add to "the zest" of life and the cohesion of same-sex bonding networks (Herskovits 1936, cited in Tinsley 2010, 56). In postcolonial Ghana, through circulating material and erotic gifts among working-class women, passionate desires are grappled with and made "public" to those "who know." Thus, the passing on of materially relevant friendships and intimacies could be understood as a mode of weaving queer family networks – networks through which the materiality of love is being collectivized.