



# *Afroqueerness, Heteropatriarchy, and Transnationality: Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's The Sex Lives of African Women*

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**ABSTRACT:** In her anthology, *The Sex Lives of African Women* (2021), Ghanaian writer and blogger Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah includes thirty-two stories of Black African and Afro-descendant women of different ages and sexual orientations to openly discuss queer and identity issues, family and religious dynamics, sexual freedom and pleasure, and abuses and resistance against heteropatriarchal structures. In this paper, I will first introduce Sekyiamah as a newly emerging African voice in the contemporary writing panorama and briefly examine her story collection. Second, I will discuss how gender and sex were conceived in Africa in precolonial times and how queerness and lesbianism are interpreted in the African feminist tradition. Third, I will show how Sekyiamah's anthology can be read as a transnational Afroqueer archive by discussing some of the stories included in her volume. Significantly, I will draw on Chantal Zabus's conceptualisation of "margins" (Zabus 31-32) to capture those spaces of free expression, openness, and resistance against colonial, nationalist, and heteropatriarchal power structures from which Afrosporic women express and manifest their often "dissenting" identities, exercise their agency, and fight for their fundamental human rights.

**KEYWORDS:** Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah; *The Sex Lives of African Women*; transnational archive; Afroqueerness; heteropatriarchy; sexual freedom



## NANA DARKOA SEKYIAMAH AND *THE SEX LIVES OF AFRICAN WOMEN*

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah is a Ghanaian feminist writer and blogger, born in London to Ghanaian parents but raised in Ghana. After a diploma in performance coaching and a certificate in conflict mediation, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in communications and cultural studies from the University of North London and a Master of Science degree in gender and development from the London School of Economics and Political Science (African Women's Development Fund). She delivered several speeches on feminism in Africa and outside the continent, worked as the Director of Communications manager at the *Association for Women's Rights in Development* (AWID),<sup>1</sup> and was also a member of the *Black Feminisms Forum* (BFF).<sup>2</sup> In 2010, she co-authored the book, *Creating Spaces and Amplifying Voices: The First Ten Years of the African Women's Development Fund*, with Nigerian-British feminist activist Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi and published a collection of interviews with women coming from different parts of Africa, entitled *Communications Handbook: Developing Good Practice for Women's Rights Organisations*.

Sekyiamah is well known for co-founding the blog *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women* (2009)<sup>3</sup> with Ghanaian American writer and blogger Malaka Grant. The blog was created after a conversation about sex and sexuality Sekyiamah had with other girls on a beach holiday and several meetings she organised in Accra (Ghana). After discussing her intimate experience with sex, she created a digital archive accessible anytime, which aimed to provide women with a space to speak candidly about sexual pleasure and reflect on their own sexual identities. On this virtual platform, women can share their personal stories and respond to other women's stories through comments or feedback, thereby stimulating discussions about topics often considered taboo (Sekyiamah, "Adventures" 227).

After the blog was founded, from 2015 to 2020, Sekyiamah started interviewing women living within and outside the continent (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives 2*). She then edited and collected their stories into a single volume, *The Sex Lives of African Women*, published in 2021, which she dedicated to her daughter, Asantewaa, and to "African girls and women wherever they may be" (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives*). The anthology immediately received positive reviews from critics, including Ghanaian feminist writer and publisher Margaret Busby, who describes it as "an extraordinary dynamic work" (Busby). The collection includes Sekyiamah's own story and thirty-one stories of Black African and Afro-descendant women, mainly from middle and upper classes, having different ages and sexual orientations. It addresses queer and identity issues, family and religious dynamics, sexual freedom and pleasure, abuses and resistance against heteropatriarchal structures, the interconnectedness between sexuality and cultural expectations, African spirituality, traditions and the digital dimension (e.g. social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and dating apps, such as Tinder and Muzmatch). Sekyiamah's story collection is part of a 21st-century trend

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<sup>1</sup> For further details about the association, see the official website, <https://www.awid.org/>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> The *Black Feminisms Forum* (BFF) took place on 5 and 6 September 2016, ahead of the AWID Forum in Bahia, Brazil. It connected Black and Afro-descendant feminists to celebrate their works related to self-determination and justice issues (Sekyiamah, *A Black Feminisms Forum; African Feminist Land*).

<sup>3</sup> See the blog website, <http://adventuresfrom.com>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.



of works<sup>4</sup> that openly discuss sexuality among African women—a taboo in 20th-century African feminism.

What unites the women protagonists in Sekyiamah's collection are episodes of oppression and discrimination they have experienced, often based on their sexual orientations, which have often relegated them to subordinate positions, as well as their willingness to experience their sexual freedom. Every story is narrated from a first-person perspective. The names of some women are real, whereas others are pseudonyms to protect their privacy (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 4). "Heterosexual", "cisgender", "lesbian", "bisexual", "queer", "transsexual", "transgender", "pansexual", and "polyamorous" are some of the several definitions that women use to describe themselves sexually. By focusing on their approaches to sexuality and moments of their personal and sexual experiences, their stories deal with the importance of love and care—loving oneself and others and caring about oneself and others emotionally, sexually, and intellectually.

The anthology is divided into three different sections. The first section, entitled "Self-Discovery" (5-120), focuses on women's quest to discover their sexual selves and freedom. Their experiences are shaped by different types of journeys, such as moving from one country or continent to another, embarking on a polyamorous relationship based on consent, love, and respect, or undertaking a spiritual journey to understand better themselves and the gender assigned to them at birth. Numerous challenges, obligations, and opportunities characterise their journeys.

The second section, "Freedom" (121-205), deals with the several different ways to be "free" in life. Freedom can be read as a way to challenge social and cultural expectations and, as the author emphasises, "find [those] people [...] who love us, care for us, and hold us up when we start slipping" (121). Women resist cultural norms mainly related to compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy and choose different ways to love and be loved. Freedom is conceived by the women Sekyiamah interviewed not as a destination but as part of the journey—thus, "a state that [they] are constantly seeking to reach" (3), "[a] state of being [...] that [they] need to nurture and protect", and "a safe home that one can return to over and over again" (122).

The third section, "Healing" (207-287), is related to different types of healing, such as healing from childhood sexual abuse, abusive relationships, psychological violence, and self-inflicted violence. Healing takes on a different form for every woman—each of them chooses the strategy or approach they believe would be the most effective to combat physical and psychological harm, such as speaking out; starting therapy; journaling; practicing sex, spiritual activities, self-love, and celibacy; or abstaining from sexual intercourse (2, 207, 290). The last story in the third and final section of the anthology is Sekyiamah's story (276-287), which chronologically unveils the most significant events of her personal and sexual life, such as her Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Other works that address similar subjects are the collections *Reclaiming the L-Word: Sappho's Daughters Out in Africa* (2007), edited by Alleyn Diesel, which chronicles the stories of South African lesbian women and the urgent need to eradicate hate crime and promote a safe and inclusive society for LGBT people in the country, and *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak* (2018), edited by Azeenarh Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu, which includes the stories of resistance and resilience of Nigerian queer women. Another work that explores similar themes is *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism* (2018), edited by Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro, and Vasu Reddy. This volume examines the identity construction and the intersections of various societal influences, such as traditional values and national beliefs, through empirical and critical-analytical lenses.



“sex-negative” adolescent period, the sexual abuses she endured, her first romantic and sexual adventures with young men, her first marriage and subsequent divorce, her desire to have a family, and her daughter’s birth. Interviewing other women allowed Sekyiamah to question herself and reflect deeply on her sexuality, life choices, and “the woman [she] seek[s] to be”<sup>5</sup>. She thus describes herself as “the medium through which [the women she has interviewed] tell their stories” (Sekyiamah, “Adventures” 228).

In the sections that follow, I will first discuss how gender and sex were conceived in precolonial Africa. Second, I will focus on queerness and lesbianism and how they are perceived and interpreted in the African feminist tradition. Third, I will show how Sekyiamah’s anthology can be read as a transnational Afroqueer archive by analysing some of the stories included in her volume. In her collection, Sekyiamah provides women with the space to exercise their agency and affirm their often “dissenting” identities in societies reluctant to welcome alternative gender and sexual manifestations and that often ignore the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against women. I will draw on Chantal Zabus’s conceptualisation of “margins” (Zabus 31-32) to capture the spaces of free expression, openness, and resistance against colonial, nationalist, and heteropatriarchal power structures where African women live and act.

## GENDER AND SEX IN PRECOLONIAL AFRICA

In precolonial Africa, the notions of gender and sex had different meanings than they have today. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1970), Ifi Amadiume (1987), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997), Joseph M. Carrier and Stephen O. Murray (1998), Kathryn Kendall (1998), Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003), Epprecht (2008), and Chantal Zabus (2013) are only some of the numerous scholars who have discussed sex and gender issues in the continent in precolonial times and emphasised how the meaning of terms such as “man”, “woman”, “husband”, “wife”, and “homosexual” differed significantly from theoretical and discursive Western/Eurocentric definitions. Before the rise of Christianity in the continent, sexuality and gender roles were considered more fluid; however, despite this, African societies were still patriarchal.

Numerous scholars have shown that indigenous sex/gender systems in precolonial Africa were flexible. In her ethnographic study, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987), Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume argues that gender was perceived differently in Igbo-Nigerian society in precolonial times and “[t]he flexibility of gender construction meant that gender was separate from biological sex” (Amadiume 15). She examines the category of “male daughters”<sup>6</sup> and the custom of “female husbands”<sup>7</sup>, and despite there being no

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<sup>5</sup> This also includes a reflection on the way she wishes to describe herself sexually. For instance, to define her sexuality, she does not feel comfortable with the term “queer” but prefers instead to acknowledge her attraction to both women and men (Sekyiamah, “Adventures” 228).

<sup>6</sup> “Male daughters” were women who had “the status of a son and [were] able to inherit [their] father’s property” due to the absence of closer male members in their families (Amadiume 32).

<sup>7</sup> “Female husbands” was a custom in which a woman married another woman and paid the bride price to acquire the rights over the labour and offspring of her partner. This allowed them to receive the social statuses of husband and wife (Amadiume 70). Scholars such as Joseph M. Carrier



lesbianism involved or sexual relationships between women, they resulted in role and status ambiguity in a Western framework (Amadiume 51). Similarly, in *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), Nigerian sociologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí points out that, before colonialism, gender did not exist in Nigerian-Yorùbá society. She highlights that “Yorùbá genderlessness [was] not to be read as androgyny or ambiguity of gender. [...] [was] genderless because human attributes [were] not gender specific” (Oyèwùmí 174). Seniority was instead the variable or “principle that determined social organization”, based “on chronological age” (13) [and i]t was “the foundation of Yorùbá social intercourse” (14). Nigerian scholar Bibi Bakare-Yusuf highly criticises Oyèwùmí’s work, questioning several of the points she analyses, including her naïve approach to the relationship between language and reality and the category of seniority, which Bakare-Yusuf believes should not be the only form of power relationship to consider. Furthermore, she adds that it is incorrect to assume that specific conceptual categories pertain exclusively to the “West” and cannot apply to an African context (Bakare-Yusuf 11). Indeed, “to deny [the] inter-cultural exchange [between Europe and Africa] and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the contribution of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history and vice-versa” (11).

Several scholars have also shown that indigenous sex/gender systems in pre-colonial Africa included sexual and erotic practices. Joseph M. Carrier and Stephen O. Murray have considered several studies made by anthropologists, such as Krige, Obbo, and Sudarkasa, who, unlike Amadiume, discuss women-to-women marriages in Africa, focusing on their lesbian connotations and describing sexual and erotic practices adopted by women (Carrier and Murray 262). Similarly, in his study, British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard foregrounds the male and female homosexual relationships in the Azande community (Sudan) in precolonial times. He emphasises that lesbianism was practised in polygamous households in the 1930s and before, and he mentions the practice of masturbation and sexual intercourse among boys-wives (Evans-Pritchard 1429) and some sexual activities practised by daughters and sisters of ruling nobles (1432). Likewise, in her studies conducted in Lesotho, American anthropologist Kathryn Kendall discusses lesbian Basotho women, arguing that their loving and egalitarian erotic friendships were not described as “sexual” as they were based on love, freedom, enjoyment, and mutual respect (Kendall 238). However, despite sexualities being “more flexible” in the continent before the advent of Christianity, African societies were still patriarchal. As American scholar Marc Ep-precht observes, “[homosexual and lesbian] relationships clearly did not detract from the traditionally high value placed on heterosexual marriage and reproduction” (Ep-precht 9), and several communities “allowed or even celebrated ‘pseudohomosexualities’ and ‘sex games’, providing they occurred within the bounds of specific rituals, sacred or secreted spaces, and designated social roles” (9). Furthermore, French scholar Chantal Zabus argues that the ways of conveying love and attraction among the members of the same sex or gender in precolonial Africa “d[id] not always

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and Stephen O. Murray argue that the custom of “female husbands” was documented in more than thirty African populations, which include nine Bantu-speaking groups in present-day southern Africa (including Botswana and South Africa), East Africa, Sudan, and West Africa (especially Nigeria) (Carrier and Murray 255).



designate homosexuality as it is understood and experienced in the Western world” (Zabus 44). For example, hormonal and surgical transitions from female to male and vice versa did not exist in precolonial times.

During colonialism, Europeans began suppressing indigenous practices and institutions and establishing new local government administrations, imposed a Western education, and forced African people to study European languages. This Eurocentric binary thinking rejected African flexibility in gender and sexual orientation and became another form of European domination (Amadiume 16). With the rise of Christianity, “flexible sexualities” were described as “deviant”, “depraved”, “excessive”, “immoral”, “bestial”, “un-Christian”, and “un-African” (McClintock; Epprecht; Magubane; Lewis), and they represented another reason to justify the civilising mission in the “dark continent”. This resulted in widespread homophobia and queerphobia in Africa and across the diaspora, as several women Sekyiamah interviewed have witnessed in her volume.

Many leaders in Africa have spoken in homophobic tones about homosexuality—they see LGBTQ rights as a key to the White supremacist movement and consider queers as scapegoats for all societal issues that deflect attention from their political mismanagement and often corruption (Tamale, “Nbonconforming Sexualities” 39). Two examples are the former presidents of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, and Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe. In particular, the latter declared moral war on homosexuality and considered it “repulsive”, “an ‘abhorrent’ Western import”, and not part of the African culture (Kendall 223, 318; Santos 314), despite the anthropological and research evidence made in several parts of the continent and accounts of black gay and lesbian people living in Africa before and during colonial times.

The last decade has seen a growing politicisation of LGBTQ rights in the continent by human rights organisations and activists, development agencies, and NGOs. Although some governments, such as Namibia, are adopting more inclusive policies (Ferragamo and Robinson), discriminatory practices, unequal treatment, and prejudice based on sexual orientation still exist in several African contexts. Often, lesbian and gay activists are “outed” by newspapers and face harassment by their governments (Youth Policy Committee). As Mattia Fumanti observes, it is therefore the “complex interplay between nation-building, citizenship, morality, and the wider politics of gender and sexuality that characterizes the everyday lives of queer Africans” (Fumanti 1).

## LESBIANISM AND QUEERNESS IN THE AFRICAN FEMINIST TRADITION

The idea of lesbianism was alien or non-existent in African feminism in the 1980s and 1990s, and several African gender scholars firmly believed that women who loved other women did not exist (Mikell 4; Kolawole 15). Gwendolyn Mikell describes African feminism in the 20th century as “distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with many ‘bread, butter, culture and power’ issues” (Mikell 4), while literary scholar Dobrota Pucherová, based on her analysis of African women’s writing from this period, asserts that it was often conceived as “a Euro-American lifestyle choice” (Pucherová 169) and “an expression of a woman’s corruption, moral depravity, or even madness” (169). These beliefs have changed remarkably in the 21st century, as formerly taboo subjects have taken centre stage in African feminism.



In the past few decades, several African feminists have denied lesbianism in the continent and considered it a threat to women's procreation and traditional patriarchal gender roles. As scholars Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraïne-George argue, this may be a possible consequence of the fact that African women have often been portrayed as "bearers and reproducers of cultural traditions in countries that have been heavily gendered by postcolonial nationalist agenda and rhetorics" (Currier and Migraïne-George 11). Nigerian scholar Marie Pauline Eboh also highlights that the denial of lesbianism justifies a way to conceive African feminist ideas as opposed to Western feminist, which are related to egocentrism, moral decadence, "man-hat-ing", and rejection of motherhood (Eboh 335-336). Thus, the heteronormativity of 20th-century African gender discourse is embedded in the patriarchal cultures several feminists grew up with.

Transgender people—more than lesbians—are perhaps the most misunderstood and discriminated against either in Africa or the West. Kenyan transgender activist Audrey Mbugua points out that, in Africa specifically, transgender people are often depicted as "selfish, indecisive, overly sexually fluid and dirty, confused and dramatic people" (Mbugua 125). However, the terms "transgender" and "queer" should be used cautiously. In the West, they primarily embody the meaning of gender "misfits" and not of gender assigned at birth (Morgan and Wieringa 310); often, it is used to describe those people who decide to undergo a body transformation process involving hormonal treatment and sex reassignment surgeries. Marc Epprecht similarly argues that the term "queer" comes from a North American context of political struggle and is primarily related to a Western theoretical framework. Therefore, it cannot be easily used in an African context as it unavoidably results in homogenising interpretations (Epprecht 2008, 14-15).

In the introduction of their volume, *Queer in Africa: LGBTQI Identities, Citizenship, and Activism* (2018), scholars Zethu Matebeni, Surya Monro, and Vasu Reddy argue that "to be queer in Africa is to be in effect constrained and regulated by the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1999), 'the straight mind' (Wittig 1992), and the 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1986) that informs the hegemonic order of heterosexuality" (Matebeni et al. 1). Ugandan scholar and human rights activist Sylvia Tamale emphasises that Africans do not need new terminology precisely because African sexual morality is rooted in Western culture:

Many of the contemporary codes of sexual morality and most of the laws pertaining to sex [in] postcolonial countries are rooted in the history and tradition of the former colonising European nations. To a certain extent this means that Western theoretical perspectives define the underlying rationale and practice of the legal regimes governing sexualities in Africa. (Tamale, "Theorizing Sexualities" 25)

Nowadays, lesbian, gay, transgender, and transexual African people strive to affirm their "dissenting" identities in both African and Western contexts. Prejudice, discrimination, criminalisation, state-sponsored persecution, physical and mental abuse, imprisonment, gang rape, murder, and exile are only some of the consequences they are often exposed to (Fumanti 1). However, several scholars and activists, such as Sylvia Tamale, Stella Nyanzi, and Audrey Mbugua, have raised awareness of the urgency to deconstruct heterosexuality and to reflect on the relationship between sexuality and human rights in Africa and across the diaspora, as these are global issues and not only Africa-specific concerns.



As literary scholar Dobrota Pucherová emphasises, African feminism has experienced a significant shift in the 21st century because of globalisation, increased migration, and digitalisation, which have “given rise to internet activism through blogging, social media, and internet publishing” (Pucherová 7). Accordingly, themes such as nomadism, border crossings, deterritorialisation, displacement, unhomeliness, and otherness have become central in Anglophone African women’s writing (7). Many contemporary female authors have attempted to focus on the alternative possibilities beyond heterosexuality to discuss femininity, rejecting the fact that African womanhood only revolves around motherhood, wifehood, and self-sacrifice. Thus, in their narratives, they often show that sexual desire and sexual pleasure can be read as women characters’ willingness to exercise their agency, embracing “the demands of modernity premised on individual freedom [-] a prerequisite for democracy and human rights” (Pucherová 174-175).

Certain topics formerly considered taboo are therefore centre-stage in 21st-century African fiction and non-fiction. For instance, *The Sex Lives of African Women* is the outcome of thirty-two interviews—thirty-one done by Sekyiamah with women of African descent living within and outside the continent and one done with the author herself. Like several novels and short stories published by contemporary writers, Sekyiamah’s collection addresses queer issues. Before its publication in 2021, other African authors of the current generation have openly discussed these themes in their narratives, such as Unoma N. Azuah’s *Sky-High Flames* (2005), Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010) and Taiye Selasi’s debut short story “The Sex Lives of African Girls” (2011). These works and Sekyiamah’s anthology examine queerness. The body is thus conceived differently: it is not fixed but generated by a person’s lived experience; moreover, gender identity is culturally formed and related to the concept of “performativity” (Butler 195-201).<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, sexual pleasure is no longer considered deplorable or controversial. Through her story collection, Sekyiamah attempts to deconstruct the category of “woman” as it is widely conceived in heteropatriarchal contexts and simultaneously provides women with a space to describe femininity in their own way. This implies the recognition of their worth and sexual freedom, the dismantling of heteronormative sexualities, and the willingness to resist the violence imposed by gender norms, especially against those people who are gender different and do not conform to societal expectations in their gender expression.

Sekyiamah’s anthology can also be described as a transnational archive. Paul Jay argues that writing from a transnational perspective means:

[T]o put an emphasis on transit—on mobility, migration, travel, and exchange, forms of experience that create bonds between people that, while fostering a sense of national unity, also connect people and their cultural practices across, over, and through geographic and humanmade borders. (Jay 10)

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<sup>8</sup> As American post-structuralist scholar Judith Butler argues, gender is performative because it produces a series of effects—the way people speak, walk, behave etc. consolidates an impression of being a man or a woman. This can be interpreted as a “true fact” about subjects, but it is a phenomenon that is being produced and continuously reproduced, and it is crucial to the gender people present to society (Butler 201).





Rose Sackeyfio argues that several African women writers engage with the diaspora theme as “a dynamic and captivating trend” in their works (Sackeyfio, *Women Writing Diaspora* 8) that have reconfigured their directions in the global age (8). Thus, transcultural spaces can be seen as “new sites of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural encounters” (Sackeyfio, *West African Women* 2); and “[n]ew avenues of mobility emerge in an interconnected world when African subjects traverse national, religious, geographical, and linguistic borders” (3).

In her collection, Sekyiamah focuses on the personal and sexual experiences of several Afrosporic women coming from many parts of Africa who often live in the West and have different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. In describing their identities as shaped by different cultures, times, and locations, the author discusses the notions of “homosexuality”, “lesbianism”, and “queerness”, attempting to challenge essentialised, hegemonic, heteronormative, and Eurocentric representations of femininity.

## A TRANSNATIONAL AFROQUEER ARCHIVE

In her landmark work, *Out in Africa: Same-Sex Desire in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Cultures* (2013), French scholar Chantal Zabus argues that

The queer subject by definition speaks from the margins in that by virtue of his, her or his position as excluded, that subject’s desire interrogates what the mainstream discourse of heteronormativity tries to conceal. In so doing, it produces—unwittingly or consciously—sites of resistance from which alternative models of subjectivity can be generated. (Zabus 31-32)

In the analysis that follows, I will examine some of the stories of Sekyiamah’s collection, focusing on those “margins” that Zabus discusses from which Afrosporic straight, lesbian, and queer women assert and manifest their identities, exercise their agency, and fight for their fundamental human rights. Sekyiamah describes these spaces as sites of free expression, openness, and resistance against colonial, nationalist, and heteropatriarchal power structures.

As the author asserts in the prologue of her anthology, speaking openly about lesbianism, queerness, and sex in her home country, Ghana, is “a political act” (*Sex Lives* 1), and often, because of this, several activists and LGBTQ people are harassed and arrested. Sekyiamah emphasises that her work’s primary purpose is deconstructing taboos and stereotypes and debunking oversimplified notions of womanhood and sexuality widespread in patriarchal culture (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 2-3). Women’s journeys towards sexual freedom and agency are tortuous and filled with setbacks, suffering, and disappointments. Women are expected to conform to cultural expectations and conventional norms, religious and patriarchal customs, and, in several cases, they are forced to deal with the trauma following the abuses they endure:

African women grapple with the trauma of sexual abuse, and resist religious and patriarchal edicts in order to assert their sexual power and agency. They do this by questioning and resisting societal norms whilst creating new norms and narratives that allow them to be who they truly are. The journey toward sexual freedom is not a linear one, or one that is fixed and static. Freedom is a state that [they] are constantly seeking to reach. (2-3)



By including herself in the statement above, Sekyiamah highlights that it is difficult to express one's sexuality in deeply conservative societies, particularly in those regions where discrimination based on sexual orientation is a common occurrence and queer people are often exposed to a pervasive climate of fear and violence. One of the women she interviewed, Ebony, a nomadic "sexually fluid" South African artist, discusses the conditions of lesbians in South Africa. She argues that, despite her home country has a strong LGBTQI community and "the most progressive LGBTQI legislations" (58), gays, lesbians, and queer people are seen as "unAfrican and evil" (58) and, often, women are sexually abused or killed so much so that they often prefer to be infected with HIV rather than disclosing their sexual orientation (58). Like Ebony, Naisha, a thirty-four-year-old South African woman of Asian origins, heterosexual but previously bisexual, at a certain point of her life, "felt uncomfortable with [her] body and started to adopt more of a masculine façade" (75), as a strategy to protect herself from the violence that queer women are continually exposed to in South Africa.

Although South Africa is considered a "rainbow nation" and became "the first country in the world to protect sexual orientation rights in its constitution" (Santos 326) and "the fifth in the world to legalise same-sex marriages" (Youth Policy Committee), it remains profoundly conservative and homophobic. Indeed, disparity exists between the protective laws provided and the lived experiences of LGBTQI people. The right not to be discriminated against based on sexual orientation, articulated in Section 9 of the Constitution and in the Promotion of Equality Act, the right to human dignity and the right to life, included in Sections 10 and 11, respectively, are non-derogable and aim to safeguard queer individuals. However, these rights have been repeatedly violated, and often, religious institutions perpetuate some of the hate crimes experienced by queer individuals or justify acts of transphobia and homophobia (Youth Policy Committee).<sup>9</sup>

Like South Africa, in Egypt, discussing one's sexual orientation openly may be hazardous. Amina, a twenty-eight-year-old lesbian woman of Sudanese descent living in Egypt, argues that lesbians should be very careful when addressing these issues, as they could risk being imprisoned (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 160). She states that because of the conservative society in which she was raised, her mother "would rather die than know that [she is] a lesbian (163)".<sup>10</sup> Egyptian scholar Atef Shahat Said highlights that the legal structure in Egypt is a "complex mixture of modern laws that guarantee human rights, and other which do not" (Said 9), and he emphasises that gays and lesbians are often sentenced according to the Egyptian Criminal Law (9).

In the patriarchal societies that Sekyiamah discusses in her anthology, women have moral and ethical obligations, and marriage and monogamy are often seen as cages. Fatou, a sixty-year-old bisexual woman from Senegal, has negotiated her

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<sup>9</sup> Despite South Africa's prevailing ambience of dread and hostility against LGBTQI people, there are several associations, such as The Gay and Lesbian Alliance of South Africa (GLASA) and the Hate Crimes Working Group, which work to fight for equal rights, treatment and opportunities for all the members of the LGBTQIA+ community and operate to implement gender sensitisation workshops (Youth Policy Committee).

<sup>10</sup> A similar version of Amina's story was published as a section, titled "A Conversation with Amina", of Sekyiamah's essay "Adventures from the Bedrooms of Queer African Women" (pp. 227-235), included in the *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies* (2020), edited by S.N. Nyeck.



sexuality whilst living in a conservative Muslim-majority society. She highlights that, in her home country, “the institution of marriage has been set up to trick women” (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 124), and, once married, they lose the benefits of being free and single, and “what they gain is nothing compared to what they lose” (124). However, Fatou does not want to comply with cultural norms and societal expectations, as she emphasises: “I am a woman who doesn’t want to behave like a woman just because that’s what convention says we must do” (129). Similarly, Naike, a thirty-five-year-old Haitian woman who describes herself as “a same-gender-loving person” (80), conceives monogamy as follows:

Monogamy is a violent word: it’s her way of trying to control me [...] In a context of wellbeing and safety monogamy can thrive, but it comes from within; it is not an imposition by others. Anything that is imposed has the potential to strike a chord of resistance. [...] I know how I love. I want to meet someone like me. I want someone who can love me to the standard that I love. I need to be able to share my truths and for my truths to be received with humour. I want to share my anger, my rage, my disappointments, my dark side, my desire to die sometimes, my desire for another woman. [...] I want to meet someone like myself, and recognise her as a familiar. (86-87)

As a spokesperson of several women in Sekyiamah’s anthology, Naike portrays monogamy as a prison and believes it should not be seen as the only type of relationship available.<sup>11</sup> It makes women feel entrapped within heteronormative sexualities and deny their rights to express their sexual agency and to love and be loved freely.

Gabriela, a forty-year-old lesbian Afro-descendent woman from Guanacaste, Costa Rica, argues that loving and being attracted by women “is not only sexual, but also political” (155). Her relationships with women “have been intellectually, emotionally and sexually more fulfilling than the relationships [she] had with men” (155). Alexis, too, a seventy-one-year-old Black queer feminist of Afro-Caribbean descent living in the United States, discusses “the Blackness that was available to [her] as a woman” very early in life (139). At twelve years old, she decided not to be like her mother: “poor”, with “[many] children” and “[many] men” (139), and after several heterosexual relationships, she fell in love with a woman. In her story, Alexis reflects on the limits of heteropatriarchal society, emphasising that “we have grown up in these cultures that devalue us as people” (135); however, she states that “irrespective of where those cultures are, it’s really important for us to uplift each other’s intellectual, creative and spiritual energies” and fight against gender inequality and discrimination against LGBTQ people (135). Her statement seems to echo the words of Nigerian feminist and writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who, in her popular TED Talk, “We Should All Be Feminists” (2009), later developed into a book-length essay, argues that “Culture does not make people. People make culture” (Adichie 46). Alexis seems to agree with Adichie’s need to raise people’s awareness about taking decisive action against gender and sexual inequality. The ideology of heteropatriarchy is deeply ingrained in our society and sadly rooted in the minds of many people. However, it must change, and the only possibility to do

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<sup>11</sup> A similar version of Naike’s story was published as a section, titled “A Conversation with Chantale”, of Sekyiamah’s essay “Adventures from the Bedrooms of Queer African Women” (pp. 227-235), included in the *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies* (2020), edited by S.N. Nyeck.



so is to work together to make this change possible for the sake of future generations.

Patriarchal society is often silent in the face of the violence perpetrated against women. Several women Sekyiamah interviewed have been victims of sexual assaults and harassment from an early age and experienced trauma afterwards. For instance, Mariam Gebre, a twenty-six-year-old heterosexual Ethiopian woman, was sexually violated at five years old. Sharing her experience of abuse with other women who endured comparable episodes of mistreatment helped her recover from her traumatic past (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 220). Similarly, Estelle, a twenty-eight-year-old Black-British cis pansexual woman of mixed African and Arab origins living in the United Kingdom, describes her feelings of invisibility and voicelessness following several experiences of harassment and the subsequent trauma she endured. The hardship she faced impacted her sexual life but simultaneously led her to find her true *self*, as she confesses: "I try to remind myself of how much I have to gain by working through the pain. I have to remind myself that I am finally claiming myself for me" (114).

American scholar Cathy Caruth highlights that surviving a traumatic event is even more painful than the trauma itself because "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*" (Caruth 9; italics in the original). After being sexually assaulted, Tafadzwa, a thirty-two-year-old bisexual woman from Zimbabwe, decided to assert her sexuality through polyamory to cope with her post-traumatic stress disorder (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 265-270). Conversely, Salma—a thirty-one-year-old cis heterosexual Muslim woman, born in Egypt to an Irish mother and an Egyptian father and living in London—acknowledges that, because of the sexual abuse she endured, she became "a shadow" of herself (212) and "a product" of her own silence (215), and started therapy to alleviate her distress. Similarly, Waris, a thirty-nine-year-old woman born in Somalia and currently residing in London, experienced trauma when she was a child after undergoing female genital mutilation, which she described as "a serious sexual assault against women and children" (193). After a few toxic relationships that impacted her mental health, she resorted to MDMA therapy<sup>12</sup> to regain the self-confidence she had lost (197).

Therefore, the experiences of Mariam Gebre, Estelle, Tafadzwa, Salma, and Waris can be described as what Caruth conceives as "the stor[ies] of a wound that cries out" after an "overwhelming event" (Caruth 4), which "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time [of its occurrence by the subject], but only belatedly in its repeated possession" (4).

In discussing the concept of "intersectionality", American scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that several axes of identity constitute the multiple, intersected, and simultaneous forms of discrimination to which women are exposed but also capture women's efforts to cope with these injustices they are subject at once (Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection; Mapping the Margins*). In her

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<sup>12</sup> MDMA therapy treats severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It includes psychotherapy sessions and specific dose administrations of MDMA—a psychoactive drug that acts as a stimulant and releases chemicals in an individual's brain, giving energising effects and stimulating certain emotions such as empathy and awareness. MDMA therapy prompts an individual to access traumatic memories (e.g. serious accidents, sexual abuses, injuries, war) and work through them efficiently and with less anxiety (Sreenivas).



volume, Sekyiamah analyses gender, sexuality, race, disability, HIV status, and illness as the components of identity that cause women's discrimination within society. For instance, the combination of racism and sexism impacted Maureen's life in France. Raised in France but born in the Ivory Coast, Maureen is a twenty-nine-year-old heterosexual woman who soon realises that society demeans Black people, as she emphasises: "the imperialist strategy has been assimilation. We're told to be as white as possible which means we end up hating ourselves" (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 237). Queer parties are the spaces where she feels safe (240) and can cope with her constant anxiety and depression:

As a dark-skinned Black girl growing up in France, you're never chosen. Nobody sends you a letter saying you're not desirable. You can just see that the girls who have boyfriends are not like you. They don't even look like you when they're Black. They are the girls with good hair, or they are white or Arabs. (234)

Similarly, in her story, Yami, a thirty-year-old queer, pansexual Canadian woman of Malawian descent, describes the dynamics of cross-cultural relationships and the challenges she faces in the strict Catholic, racist, and sex-negative environment in which she lives in Canada (200). She plans to have only Black children through in vitro fertilisation—a political choice that she explains as follows: "We live in a world that continues to erase Black people, and so the process of birth is a radical act against state sanction, the prison industrial complex and violence against Black bodies" (204).

Conversely, Elizabeth, a forty-four-year-old heterosexual woman of Nigerian and Scottish descent, lives with a disability that has impacted her personal and sexual life, and she is often discriminated against when she attempts to meet new people in person and online (63-71). Philester and Tsitsi, instead, must cope with their HIV status and illness that constantly marginalise them within society. Philester is a thirty-two-year-old bisexual Kenyan woman, sex worker, and single mother of three children who chronicles her experience of physical and psychological abuse due to her HIV diagnosis and profession. This has encouraged her to struggle for sex workers' rights and later become the coordinator of the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA) (93-94). Conversely, Tsitsi is a heterosexual Zimbabwean woman who is initially unable to accept her HIV infection. She later begins to write a booklet of poems and stories to dedicate to people suffering from her disease. She confesses that writing healed her: "It enabled me to go within myself, and to tap into all the pent-up anger I had felt since my diagnosis. [...] All the words, hurt and feelings came out in black and white..." (272). In this regard, Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera points out that often a woman prefers writing to speaking because "[t]he written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief" (Vera 3). Writing, like speaking, is often perceived by women as a shelter and a free space, where they often voice their deepest feelings and sometimes their longing to escape.

In her anthology, Sekyiamah also addresses the topic of transsexuality and attempts to negotiate new paradigms to discuss 21st-century Afroqueer subjects. For instance, Solange is a forty-six-year-old trans woman and sex worker from Rwanda living in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. In her story, she emphasises that despite the several forms of discrimination she is exposed to, her transitioning is not only related



to the exploration of her changing body (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 186), but it is also a means to take “a step towards the different people [she] love[s]” (184). Simultaneously, her profession allows her to connect with many women and men from around the world and experience several aspects of her sexuality (186-187). Solange’s willingness to express and manifest her identity in non-heteronormative ways can be read as a subversive practice of contestation and resistance against heteronormativity and gender oppression in an Afro-diasporic context (Zabus 32).

Michel Foucault highlights that, in Western societies, sex is understood as a highly rigid social framework, and sexuality should not be conceived as a drive but “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 103). In her anthology’s prologue, Sekyiamah emphasises that her work “build[s] our collective consciousness around the politics of pleasure [...especially] in a world where women too often lack access to truly comprehensive sexuality education” (Sekyiamah, *Sex Lives* 1) and are subject to different dynamics of power. For instance, Nura, a forty-two-year-old Kenyan woman, who moved from Kenya to Senegal to live with a man she had met before, confesses that she has always been “immersed in a very heteronormative space” (7) and forced to comply with rigid gender norms. However, she describes Islam as a “place of curiosity, and not oppression” (8) that “speaks” to the social and environmental justice issues she cares about (8) and that allows her to embrace her sexuality (10). On the contrary, Helen Banda, a Zambian thirty-nine-year-old cisgender and pansexual woman and mother of children who lives in the United States, practices swinging with her husband, which consists of engaging sexually with the partners of other couples. However, Helen keeps her lifestyle secret because she knows that her sexual habits are not welcomed among African women (27). Conversely, Miss Deviant, a fifty-two-year-old Black lesbian woman living in the United Kingdom, exercises her sexual agency by working in the sex industry and being part of the bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) community (141-149). Miss Deviant’s and Helen Banda’s stories, in particular, break sexual taboos and celebrate sexual freedom and sex positivity.

In Sekyiamah’s rich and varied collection, several stories discuss women’s needs to find their true selves after being sexually abused and experiencing trauma afterwards. Some stories are related to freedom, polyamory, and sexual pleasure in conservative societies; others foreground women’s willingness to find a queer community that shares their struggles and seeks to challenge negative views about non-heterosexual affiliations and transgender people. All these stories centre around women’s process of self-discovery and moral and psychological development in their journeys across different cities, countries, and continents.

## CONCLUSION

Sekyiamah’s anthology can be read as a transnational Afroqueer archive. The female protagonists of her collection are characterised by a hybrid-transnational-Afrosporic status: they have African origins but often live in the West, or they were born and raised in an African country and then moved to another. They describe their lives as complex, multicultural, hybrid realities beset by their own gender, ethnic, and class issues and often influenced by Western values. As Rose Sackeyfio highlights, diaspora writing examines “the treatment of women, their status as diaspora



subjects, racial identity, and hybridity to provide a holistic portrait that will re-(position) African women's agency in social interactions across national boundaries" (Sackeyfio, *Women Writing Diaspora* 8). As such, "African identities are unfixed and fluid through exposure to social, economic, and political influences and hybrid cultural spaces of dislocation" (Sackeyfio, *West African Women* 3). Dobrota Pucherová similarly argues that:

Transnational positionality provides African women with an outside perspective that enables them to visualize alternative identities as opportunities for liberation from heteropatriarchal systems and to challenge and deconstruct the assumptions of their own postcolonial cultures. (Pucherová 174)

Paul Jay also adds that cultures are "hybrid and syncretic" (Jay 10), and "identities and cultural practices within nations are always forming and reforming across the differences we associate with race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and nation" (10). Sekyiamah negotiates women's positions in postcolonial transnational settings and celebrates individualism as essential to recognise their fundamental human rights. The themes and the topics that the author explores subvert conventional motifs and codes of writing stressing the relationship between gender, the body, and sexuality. Women's bodies are described as sites of agency, sexual freedom and pleasure that challenge the oppressive constraints of heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and neocolonialism and connect women's life experiences across Africa and its diaspora.

To conclude, Sekyiamah's transnational Afroqueer archive emerges as a testament to women's resistance, freedom, and sexuality. By describing different identity imaginaries and contexts of ethnic, sexual, and political oppression and discrimination, the anthology aims to defy hegemonic, Eurocentric, and heteronormative depictions of African femininity and challenge conventional representations and expressions of sexuality. In such a way, Sekyiamah raises readers' awareness about the potential for advocating for change not only through everyday struggles, feminist demonstrations, and social media but also through non-fiction writing.

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