Taking It Back to the Motherland: The Untold Tales of Accra’s Returnees

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Taking It Back to the Motherland

The Untold Tales of Accra’s Returnees

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Honors Project in Anthropology
Advisor: Olga Gonzalez
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This study centers the perspectives of Afro-diasporic migrants who make their way back to the African continent, particularly to Accra, Ghana, after sojourns in the West. It aims to provide a space for these returnees, particularly returnee women, to narrate their own stories and share their realities. I argue that these diasporic returnees are united by the conception of Africa as a shared ethnic homeland. During their time abroad, they nurture and maintain connections to the homeland through first-hand and second-hand memories. Many essentialize the homeland through the images and imaginaries they hold of it. These images often inspire return. Upon return, migrants develop robust personal and professional relationships in the homeland. The return, however, is by no means a permanent relocation – it becomes one strand, albeit an important one, in their transnational lifestyles. Drawing from the diverse responses of participants’ to this question, I position the returnees in a cultural and spatial liminality, and argue that this space can be one of powerful and transformative creative tension.
*Cover Photo: Aburi Gardens, Eastern Region, Ghana
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CHAPTER ONE: AKWAABA - WELCOME

I am very much Ghanaian. My identity is very rooted here. I am able to navigate, and I find myself in places where I understand, instinctively or intuitively, what is required of me in any moment. In that sense, I am myself, through and through. I rarely second-guess the way I am around these parts, whereas in the States, I was always kind of careful. The things I like about Ghana are very much from personal, some might say selfish place. It’s simply home for me.
- Nii Tsatsu, December 12, 2014

Thirty-two-year-old Nii Tsatsu ran his hand over his forearm to swat away a fly, as he shared his motivations for choosing to return to his home country, Ghana after 12 years in the United States. Nii belongs to a growing group of African professionals who are choosing to move back to Africa and selecting the West African nation of Ghana as their site of return. These returned ‘prodigals’ are changing the cultural, economic, and political landscapes of Ghana and the African continent. Some of these women and men were born and/or raised in Europe or North America, children and grandchildren of Africans who left the continent during the so-called exoduses of the mid-1960s to late 1980s – a period of socioeconomic turmoil that resulted in the emigration of thousands of artists, intellectuals, and professionals to the West. Some left the continent alone as young adults in the 1990s and 2000s to pursue tertiary educational opportunities. Others, the descendants of African slaves brought to the Americas and the Caribbean during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, choose to return to their ancestral homeland. This project will look at this demographic, who after living in the West for many years, decide to return to Africa, specifically to the nation of Ghana. It aims to examine the images and imaginaries with which diasporans return (King et al. 2014, Pærregaard 1997, Tsuda 2009).

Anthropologist George Gmelch, defines return migration as “the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle” (1980:136). At the time Gmelch was

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1 Tape-recorded interview with Nii Tsatsu, December 12, 2014. All quotations from Nii in this thesis come from this interview.
writing, the migration discourse focused heavily on the phenomenon of brain drain, “a net loss of human capital” (Straubhaar 2000:8), particularly when discussing migration in relation to the African continent. The scholarly conversation perceived migration as a singular life event, when in fact it is not. Migrants frequently “move back to places where they lived earlier in life” (Niedomysl and Amcoff 2011:656) or to which they have ethnic or kinship connections.

In this thesis, I argue that Afro-diasporic returnees to Accra, regardless of how spatially or temporally removed from the African context, are united by an identification of the continent as their ethnic homeland. Though many of these returnees are technically first generation migrants to Ghana, their imaginative and communicative connections cause them to identify as returnees. These connections are preserved by the images and imaginaries that migrants nurture through both first-hand and second-hand memories of the homeland. While some returnees come home with mainly individualistic motivations, the majority return with a burning desire to contribute to the development of the African continent. Although returnees establish themselves in the homeland and create strong personal and professional relationships there, the return is by no means a permanent resettlement – the homeland becomes one strand, albeit an important one, in their deeply transnational lifestyles. To develop the argument, I will address the following questions: What images do migrants hold of the homeland, and how do these images inspire their acts of return? How does gender complicate the returnee experience? Are returnees able to (re)integrate into Ghanaian/African society upon return? And last but by no means least: Are they back for good? Or simply cycling through?

By connecting the dots between identity, geography, gender, and culture through the ethnographic research method, this study provides a space for African
Returnees, particularly women, an opportunity to narrate their own stories and present their own realities (Olwig 2012).

**Return Migration in the Literature**

Early literature studied migrations as mono-directional and singular events, engaged in by European and Asians moving to the Americas, with a subsequent drain of knowledge and skills from the Old World (King and Christou 2014, Tsuda 2009). This early discourse was largely situated within the fields of geography and economics to assess the spatial and financial impacts of global mobility. In 1885, the German geographer Ernst Georg Ravenstein, quite ahead of his time, published a three-part essay titled *The Laws of Migration*. In the third section, Ravenstein shared a list of ten laws according to which he believed the trends of human mobility ought to be studied. The eighth law stated that “each main migration produces a compensating counter-current” (Ravenstein 1885:199).

Ravenstein’s suggestion that migratory acts were not permanent went largely unnoticed. For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, migration studies did not address return. Scholars paid little attention to the fact that a quarter of the 16 million European migrants who migrated to North America in the early 20th century returned to their home societies (Tsuda 2009). There was a paucity of information on this topic because most studies on return migration were conducted by scholars from Western host countries. These scholars were collecting data to help governments track the number of immigrants coming into their countries, rather than keeping tabs on who was leaving (Åkesson and Eriksson Baaz 2015).
The mid-20th century saw a shift away from the notion of migration as a permanent action and towards a new systems-based conceptualization. Scholars no longer only studied recipient societies, but also the homelands of migrants, and observed incidences of migrants returning to their home countries (Skrentny et al. 2009, Tsuda 2009). In the two decades after the earliest works on return, terms were coined to describe this phenomenon of migrants ‘going home’: reflux migration, homeward migration, remigration, return flows, second-time migration, repatriation, return mobilities, and retromigration (Gmelch 1980:136).

As anthropologists began to study migration, they moved away from the primarily quantitative methods utilized by geographers and economists (Shandy 2014) and began to employ interdisciplinary approaches that incorporated both statistical and qualitative data from ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers began to study the formation and reproduction of identity groups by migrants through the deterritorialized flows of peoples, practices, knowledge, and skills, situating migration in the transnational anthropology discourse (Abu-Lughod 1991, Appadurai 1997, Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003, Said 1982, Sassen 2003). These scholars emphasized transnational lifestyles, shedding light on the cultural effects of outmigration and return on both host and origin societies. They also highlighted the impact of transnationalism on the identities and migratory trajectories of those engaging in these mobilities (Sheller and Urry 2006).

As the concept of transnationalism took root, anthropology also began to see more research focused on mobility within nations, particularly rural labor migrants returning to the countryside after working and accumulating wealth in urban areas (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Jackson 2011, Olwig 1997, Pærregaard 1997). These studies on rural-to-urban migrants focused on young unmarried males who made up
the majority of this demographic. These men were usually part of a successive
migration system, choosing to migrate to places where their kin had already settled
and found work.

Today, return migration literature employs analytic lenses that address not only
the stakeholders and geographies involved (Jeffery & Murison 2011) but also unpack
and apply concepts of belonging, and identity, memory, nostalgia, and gender (Ange
and Berliner 2015, Anyidoho and Manuh 2010, Oppong 2005, Sheller and Urry 2006,
Tsuda 2009, Norbye 2010). While the 1960s saw the birth of return migration as a
concept, the 90s and 00s saw a shift towards mixed research methodologies in
migration studies. In response to rampant civil conflict across the globe in the 90s, the
This drew the attention of governments and scholars to return migration, particularly
as it pertained to asylum seekers and refugees. They began to observe that economic
migrants were also engaging in acts of return to their homelands. This countered the
dominant discourse of brain drain by providing evidence that skilled professionals
from developing countries were going home (Jeffery & Murison 2011, Sorhaindo &
Pattullo 2012).

Development scholars, such as Savina Ammassari (2009), Brigitte Waldorf
(1995), Laura Hammond (2015), Giulia Sinatti (2015), and Maria Eriksson Baaz have
since added to this conversation by studying the intellectual and economic
contributions of skilled, middle class economic migrants to home societies upon
return. With return being factored into the development question, scholars are also
documenting the intentions of migrants and the push factors that motivate them to
leave their home countries (Carling and Vatne Pettersen 2014).

At the Intersections of Ethnicity and Gender in the Literature
Cultural and historical context is essential in the quest for more nuanced understandings of the returnee experience. The works of Martha Donkor (2005), and Nana Akua Anyidoho and Takyiwaa Manuh (2010) help to ground the return discourse in Ghanaian and African history. Their work connects red threads from colonization, through independence struggles and the immediate post-colonial period, and through subsequent decades of social and economic instability, and neoliberal economic reform. Anyidoho and Manuh (2010) look at how the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank, IMF), while crucial to the recovery of European and Japanese economies following World War II, did not have the same healing effects for African nations reeling from colonial exploitation. They provide insight into this history and its impacts on gender dynamics in modern-day Ghana. Donkor, a Ghanaian professor of History and Women’s Studies, explains how this has left African nations and citizens in a constant bid to “keep pace with other countries on the international scene” (2005:32), and connects this to the waves of outmigration from Africa to the West in the mid-late 20th century.

Karen Fog Olwig (2012) also applies a gendered analytic lens to the study of migration. Olwig looks at how during their time in recipient nations, women and men develop identities that challenge the gender norms of their homes societies, which can result in cultural, familial, and moral frictions. She examines how Caribbean female migrants upon return to the ethnic homeland carve out new, elevated spaces for themselves in their home societies. By taking ownership of their stories and crafting “narratives of return” (Olwig 2012:833) where they cast themselves as successful, powerful figures, women reshape the gender cultures of their home societies. Olwig’s research represents a portion of the literature that emphasizes diverse experiential
narratives, and provides an example of effective interpretation of gendered returnee narratives.

Tying together the work of Donkor, Anyidoho, Manuh, and Olwig, Nigerian feminist scholar and sociologist Oyeronke Oyemumi (1997) centers the Yoruba conception of gender in a manner that normalizes Afro-diasporic ideology. Oyewumi is aware of the impact European culture has had on African societies through the process of colonization and the many socio-cultural, ideological, and intellectual constructions the West has exported around the world. She warns against willful acceptance of the universality of white Euro-American perspectives and reminds us to always ask, “from whose perspective?”(1997:544).

Armed with the work of women and halfie ethnographers (Abu-Lughod 1991) like Anyidohu, Manuh, Donkor, Olwig, and Oyewyumi, this thesis moves away from the Eurocentrism that has long dominated the study of return migration, and contribute to decolonizing the literature (Behar and Gordon 1994).

Frames of Analysis

The theoretical frameworks that guide this thesis are rooted in the concepts of diaspora, transnationalism, imagined communities, and the imaginaries of the homeland. The literature it is grounded in strives to address the various factors at play in migrations: the place of origin, the host nation, migrants themselves, those who stay behind, the socio-economic situation in both home and recipient nations, and the impact on the homeland (Jeffery and Murison 2011). I also address the ways migrants construct their identities and the role of nostalgia in this. It will draw from the new mobilities framework (Sheller and Urry 2006), and the concepts of transnationalism
and diaspora (King and Christou 2014, Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003, Tsuda 2009). In framing migrants’ conception of and connection to their homelands, I will draw from Pærregaard’s (1997) images of return, Appadurai’s (1996) –scapes framework, and Said’s (1978) orientalism to reflect how migrants essentialize the ethnic homeland. In the final chapter, this will be connected to Homi Bhabha’s (1994) concept of borderline communities in a discussion on whether the returnees are back for good, or “residing” in a space of liminal transnationalism.

**The New Mobilities Framework**

This framework is the brain-child of sociologists Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) and outlines a series of interdependent mobilities that conjure within migrants a desire to return while they are in the recipient nation: corporeal, material, imaginative, virtual, and communicative. Inspired by the work of King and Christou (2014), I suggest that Sheller and Urry’s imaginative and communicative mobilities are most relevant to the study of return migration. The corporeal mobility, which is most commonly studied in migration studies, refers to physical acts of relocation. To better understand the corporeal acts of return that my participants engage in, I focus specifically on the aforementioned imaginative and communicative mobilities.

Imaginative mobilities refer to the “affective and mythological connections” (King and Christou 2014:3) that migrants maintain to the homeland while they are away; the memories, both real and invented that linger in their minds. The communicative mobility refers to relationships that tie the migrant to the home society. This includes kinship bonds, platonic or romantic relationships, religious communities, and professional opportunities (King and Christou 2014, Sheller and Urry 2006).

**Transnationalism and Diaspora**
Transnationalism is one of the most important concepts in migration studies. It provides a degree of flexibility when it comes to adapting to the changing identities of migrants, and the diverse geographies they traverse. This framework describes three main types of migrants – first generation (original migrants), second generation (those born outside the ethnic homeland), and diasporic or ethnic migrants (Bovenkerk 1974, King and Christou 2014, Tsuda 2009). Moving away from Anderson’s (1983) idea of imagined communities as tightly bound to the nation-state, the third category includes returnees whose national identity does not align with that of the country they choose to return to. However, these returnees identify with an ethnic diaspora connected to the geography, and believe that they are “returning to a ‘homeland’ to which they have emotional and historical connections” (King and Christou 2014:3). King and Christou introduce another category – the 1.5 generation. This group consists of migrants born in the ethnic homeland who move to the host country as children or young adolescents. All four categories are represented in this study.

Before going any further, it is important to establish an operational definition of transnational migration and discuss how the literature distinguishes it from international migration. It is the process “by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (King and Christou 2014:4). I refer to migrants who participate in this type of mobility as transmigrants, as their “daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state” (King and Christou 2014:5). International migration had always had elements of transnationalism. However, the transformation of labor, information, and identity through technological progress in transportation and communication has created conditions for a bottom-up
globalization (Appadurai 1996), allowing migrants to create social change from the grassroots.

The traditional migration discourse often perceived the integration or assimilation of immigrants into host societies as indicative of an imaginative break with the homeland. Scholars like Tsuda (2009) argue that the experiences of transmigrants counters this idea that migrants cut ties with the homeland in order to assimilate into the host society. Initially, transnationalism was also believed to apply exclusively to first generation migrants. Post-millennium scholarship on return migration is embracing the idea that second generation and diasporic migrants also have deep imaginative connections to both host and home societies (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003, Sheller and Urry 2006).

The transnational framework also argues that transmigrants engage in a “mixture of economic, affective, and symbolic ties usually based on principles of reciprocity and solidarity” (King and Christou 2014:5). Here we see the imaginative and communicative mobilities fleshed out. For many transmigrants communicative ties and solidarity in kinship motivates them to stay connected to the homeland, and even inspires acts of return. Imaginative mobilities manifest in the intersections of nostalgia, memory, and geography; for transmigrants to identify with both the host country and the homeland, they maintain emotional, mental, and corporeal connections with both locations.

When discussing transnationalism, it is almost inevitable that the concept of diaspora will pop up. The concept of diaspora is two thousand years old, and has experienced a revival in the last 50 years (King and Christou 2014, Tsuda 2009). Many conflate diaspora with transnationalism. Though the two overlap, they are not
synonymous. Migrants can “be diasporic without being transnational, or transnational without being diasporic” (King and Christou 2014:6).

At certain points in history, diaspora has mainly been associated with displaced populations as a result of war or natural disasters (Hirsch and Miller 2011). However, diasporas are born from a variety of historical events. In addition to refugee migrations, diasporas have also been formed by people leaving certain geographies due to political shifts, to search for both unskilled and highly skilled professional opportunities, or as slaves. These migrants, after an extended stay in one or more recipient nations, become members of the homeland’s ethnic diaspora. For some diasporans, “the homeland produces both a profound sense of ethnic consciousness and identity” (King and Christou 2014:7). This consciousness can in some diasporic communities result in a shared imaginary about the homeland that becomes reinforced as social fact through generational transmission.

Shared ethnic consciousness often results in a framing of return where diasporans seek to reverse the scattering by resettling and reintegrating into the ethnic homeland. However, aspiration does not always translate into reality. Are returnees, who once belonged to the diaspora, able integrate into the home society upon return? This question will be explored further in the following chapters.

**Who is a Returnee?**

In this study, we will be focusing on four types of returnees: *first generation or original returnees, 1.5 returnees, second generation returnees,* and *ethnic/diasporic returnees*. Dutch sociologist Frank Bovenkerk (1974) developed a typology that introduced the fourth category, *ancestral return* or ethnic/diasporic return. Bovenkerk later labeled this and second generation return as false, arguing that migrants born and bred outside the homeland could not claim returnee status.
Countering Bovenkerk’s false return theory, this study argues from an emic perspective and posits that if they have ethnic connections to a location, migrants can choose to self-identify as returnees when engaging mobilities to those places. Several of the participants in this study have roots in or connections to countries other than Ghana, such as Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Kenya. Though not historically or culturally linked to Ghana, these diaspors identify as returnees, desiring above all to return to the African continent.

**Images and Imaginaries of Return**

When migrants leave home, they engage in a process of deterritorialization, countering the notion of cultures being bound to certain geographies and temporalities (Appadurai, 1996, Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Pærregaard 1997). As they venture back to the ethnic homeland, a reversal of the detachment they experience occurs, a reterritorialization (Gupta and Ferguson 2002) – the homeland is reimagined as both a transnational and translocal “destination and a site of collective imagination” (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003:29). While away, home becomes a swirl in the minds of migrants, lived memories and dreams intermingling. From these memories, migrants develop a desire to return (Sheller and Urry 2006). Memories give rise to images that embody the link between migrant and homeland. Danish anthropologist Karsten Pærregaard (1997) argues that four images lie behind migrants’ desire to return – moral, ethnic, rational, and nostalgic.

Pærregaard’s images might be positioned as part of the intellectual lineage of Edward Said (1978) and his concept of *orientalism*. Said describes orientalism as a way of imagining traditionally ‘other’ geographies and cultures as bizarre, antithetical counterparts to the West. According to Said, this “ontological and epistemological distinction” has become a modus operandi within the Western academy upon which “elaborate theories, […] social descriptions, and political accounts” of the so-called
Orient are crafted (Said 1978:2). He explains that the oriental no longer refers only to European imaginings of the other, but has become a “body of theory and practice […] for many generations” (Said 1978:6) and many peoples. I will use this concept to unpack returnees’ essentialisms of the homeland.

Toa-Kwapong

Arjun Appadurai (1996) contributes to the conversation on images through his -scapes framework, which includes ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, ideoscapes, and mediascapes. Through this framework, Appadurai provides a potential response to the question ‘where is migration headed?’ Taking into account the impact of migration and other forms of global interaction on ethnic groups and their cultures, he posits that groups will “no longer [be] tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous” (Appadurai 1996:48). As we live increasingly transnational realities, ethnography will have to take into account the deterritorialization of culture and how this “affects the loyalties of groups” (Appadurai 1996:49).

Drawing from Anderson’s idea of imagined communities, Appadurai discusses the impact of imagination on the production of culture through “dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories” (1996:53) and how this can shape and inform ethnography. He brings this into the present by examining the impact of media and technology on cultural development by allowing communities to be imagined across space and time. Due to the sheer force and magnitude of an increasingly rapid globalization, “persons, images, and ideas” are more deterritorialized than ever. If anthropologists wish to remain relevant in an ever transnational global landscape, he argues, we must “find new ways to represent the links between imagination and social life” (Appadurai 1996:55).

Accra as a Global City
“Places are constructed by people doing things and are in this sense never ‘finished’ but are constantly being performed.”

Cities are vital, almost anthropomorphic bodies in a globalizing world. Urban areas have throughout human history been sites of great scientific, industrial, financial, and intellectual innovation, holding the lion’s share of societies’ resources (Sassen 1991). The cementing of urban areas as hubs of innovation and resources has resulted in a new type of city, “the global city” (Sassen 1991:4).

Global cities are “strategic sites […] with high level of internationalization in their economy and in their broader social structure” (Sassen 1994:154). Most studies on global cities highlight cosmopolitan urban spaces in the Global North. This focus on well-known industrialised cities reflects the conception that cities in the Global South are not cosmopolitan (Dupont 2014). I would like to challenge this notion; emerging and developing cities can be as cosmopolitan and globally-connected as those in the West. While Ghana’s capital city may not be regarded by the international community and the academy as a global urban space, Accra is a “city in transition” (Dupont 2014: 4). It has long been a cosmopolitan site – interacting with, being influenced by, and influencing the rest of the world. I do not wish to conform to the idea of a hierarchy with Western cities as ideals to be emulated by developing ones. As a postcolonial African city, Accra has its own distinct challenges and experiences, and will have a trajectory that aligns with this reality. This thesis aims to position Accra as a cosmopolitan center, and give the reader a sense of the city’s unique energy and rhythm. This is a dynamic, growing urban space, where local and global impulses intermingle, and to which returnees are drawn by the opportunities it provides them (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003).
Crafting the Ethnography

The research for this study was carried out in two parts. The initial field study took place over a six-month period from July to December 2014. The data collected was built upon during a two-week follow-up field study in Accra in June 2015. A total of fifteen interviews were carried out, all of which were recorded using a digital recorder. I interviewed ten female and five male returnees, ranging from 25 to 50 years in age. Some had spent five years and others most of their lives in the West. Others were Ghanaian-born and bred, having ventured abroad for school or work. These migrants were connected by the perception of Africa as a common ethnic homeland, and Ghana as their chosen site of return (Bovenkerk 1974, King et al 2014, Tsuda 2009). Collecting narratives from individuals with temporally and spatially distinct migratory experiences provided valuable insight into diverse perspectives on return.

I used a convenient snowball sampling method to reach out to individuals in Accra that I identified to be returnees. In the process I found that participants mainly belonged to the middle-class and were tertiary-level educated, some with advanced degrees. They belonged to a variety of professional disciplines – from university professors, to oil company employees, and creatives. As I engaged with them, I began to understand what Laura Nader describes as the importance of studying the “middle and upper ends” of society (1972:1). Nader touches on the tendency within anthropology to study marginal communities. As a result, there is “abundant literature on the poor, the ethnic groups, the disadvantaged”, with little fieldwork on the middle class and upper middle-class communities. Nader emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and thinking about power and class differentials in relationships between dominant and subordinate groups and how this affects the “kind of theories that we are weaving” (1972:6) as anthropologists. I hope that this middle class-
focused ethnography will find itself within the larger aim of anthropology to better understand “whole cultures in a cross-cultural context” (Nader 1972:9).

I located and contacted participants through a variety of social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the returnee network Ahaspora, and also through referrals. Once a participant agreed to take part in the study, they were given two copies of a consent form, one to return to me and one for their personal records. Some also provided consent via e-mail. I then conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with returnees to learn more about their backgrounds and experiences. Interviews ranged from thirty to ninety minutes in length and were later transcribed. To protect the anonymity of my informants, I used pseudonyms in the transcripts and this document.

In addition to interviews, I engaged in participant observation, observing and engaging with my participants as they went about their daily activities, to get a sense of an average day in the life of a returnee in Accra. For example, if a participant was a teacher, I took part in their lessons as a student. In this process, I worked to achieve a balance between immersing myself in the culture, and being able to step back and engage intellectually with the information gleaned from my observations (Bernard 2011). I also tried very hard not to disrupt the daily lives of my participants, though my presence as a researcher likely impacted the spaces I entered and inhabited, and the people with whom I interacted. While observing and engaging with my participants, I took meticulous field notes to complement the information accessed through interviews.

My dear friend Rhoda, a true ‘Accra girl’ as she calls herself, helped me navigate the bustling metropolis that is Accra, as we dashed daily from one interview to another. She taught me how to stay firm when haggling with taxi drivers, where to
catch a *tro tro*, repurposed mini vans used as public transportation in Ghana, where to find the best plantain chips, and helped me overcome my fear of crossing Accra’s streets. She remained engaged, uplifting, and supportive throughout the process, even when we got stuck in rainstorms, waited endlessly for participants operating on “Ghana-man”\(^2\) time, and often did not finish interviews until 9 or 10 pm at night. Rhoda’s deep insider understanding of Ghanaian culture was complemented by the fact she was about to move to the US for college, placing her in the interesting position of someone who might one day be a returnee. Her presence during interviews and the insights she contributed impacted this process significantly.

Another important point Nader (1972) brings up is the assumption within the field that anthropology students will always conduct their field study in a rural, non-Western context. While it is important to introduce students to the experience of culture shock and the “detachment” it can give rise to, this also implies that anthropology students are American or European, white and do not come from or have connections to the cultures they study. I must state upfront that I have some vested interest in this study. I find myself in this study not only as a researcher but also as a “native in the situation” (Nader 1972:23) I studied, and will be featuring intermittently as a participant. While it is impossible to conduct research from a place of complete neutrality, it is important to acknowledge one’s positionality and be conscious of one’s biases. As a child of Ghanaian migrants, the narrative of African return is of great interest and personal significance to me.

Both the fieldwork and writing processes required a significant degree of self-awareness and interiority from me as a researcher. I initially planned to write in a Malinowskian manner (1922), as an objective and discerning observer working to

\(^2\) Refers to the generally relaxed attitude to time in Ghana
note distinctions between the ideal and actual behaviors of my participants and making educated inferences about Accra’s returnee community. However, as I began my interviews, I found myself relating repeatedly and intensely to the experiences of my participants. I could not deny that I was a child of the African diaspora, born and raised in Norway to a Ghanaian father and British-Ghanaian mother, and living in a state of constant migratory and cultural liminality (Turner 1969). My parents’ imaginaries about Ghana were planted firmly in my subconscious, along with my own memories from three years spent living there as a child. In my mind, it was a pure and beautiful place, the one place in the world where I would always belong; where people looked and thought like my family and me.

Upon my return to Macalester, I began to think deeply about how my positionality would impact this study. I needed to acknowledge the subjectivity that I carried into the field, corporeal and emotional. As I prepared to return to Ghana for my second round of fieldwork, my advisor, Olga Gonzalez, introduced me to autoethnography. Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al. 2011:1). Olga encouraged me to lean into my subjectivity by stepping into my position as a member of the returnee community. She advised that I keep a journal to be able to reflect later on my experiences of re-entry and re-adaptation to the Ghanaian context.

Through the intersections of my participants’ and my own experiences, I identified the core concepts of this study – nostalgia, home, belonging, desire, gender, alienation, disillusionment, diaspora, and transnationalism. By writing deliberately from my positionality as a diasporic Ghanaian young woman, from within a culture to which I belong, I hope to contribute to the process of decolonizing “the power
relations inherent in the representation of the other” (Behar and Gordon 1994:4) and address the increasing need for “flexibility and eclecticism” (Nader 1972:23) as we move toward what Appadurai calls “cosmopolitan ethnography” (1996:52).

**PROSPECTUS**

Chapter Two of this thesis looks at how migrants construct their identities in relation to the ethnic homeland. It links these identity-formation processes to the images migrants hold of the homeland and unpacks the ways in which these images can produce essentialism, where migrants idealize and romanticize the homeland. The third part of this chapter examines the role of chance in acts of return and explores how for some returnees, coming home is the result of serendipity.

Chapter Three deals with gendered expectations of return, and how this impacts the experiences of transmigrants. It also addresses the implications of gender norms in Accra’s professional spaces, where the lines between work and lust can at times become blurred. The final section looks at how returnees adapt to the cultural nuances and expectations of finding a partner in Accra.

Chapter Four discusses the infrastructural, socio-political, and cultural disillusionment that can come with the returnee experience, particularly with regard to conditions in Accra. The next section looks at how returnees manage the “authenticity dilemma”, where their African identity is questioned. It explores strategies returnees use to (re)integrate into the Ghanaian society, and incidences in which they accept otherness.

Pulling together the themes discussed in the previous chapters, the conclusion examines the following questions: Are Accra’s returnee in Ghana for good? Or is Ghana simply one strand in their multi-sited lifestyles? Drawing from the diverse responses of participants’ to this question, I position the returnees in a cultural and
spatial liminality, and argue that this space can be one of powerful and transformative creative tension.

CHAPTER TWO: IN PURSUIT OF AN AFRICAN DREAM

French philosopher Simone Weil once said that “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (Hirsch and Miller 2011:2). People have been mobile, picking up their lives and settling in new geographies, for centuries. However, the nature of migration has significantly changed over the last five decades (Castles and Miller 2009). In his studies on exile, Edward Said (2002) suggests that we are currently living in the “age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration” (Hirsch and Miller 2011: 3). The twentieth century was littered with conflicts and instability at global, national, and local levels. World War II left
Europe, North America, and East Asia reeling socially, financially, and politically (Remmenick 2009).

Countries of the global south, many of which were European colonies at the time, after fighting to preserve the freedoms of imperial powers wondered if they too should not taste the sweetness of self-determination. In the fifteen years following 1945, a wave of independence washed over African and Asian territories that had formerly belonged to the British and French empires. As these nations began to do the challenging work of nation-building and unfurling themselves from the grip of European domination, they became subject to the subtle dynamics of neo-imperialism (Cooper 2002). These were embodied by coup d’état backed by US and former colonial governments, corrupt puppet leaders, global markets that left them stuck as natural resource producers, ethnic tensions, civil unrest, and structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in exchange for meagre financial support that did little to improve conditions for these nations and their citizens (Donkor 2005, Anyidoho and Manuh 2010).

Due to the socio-political instability of this time, many African citizens were forced to leave their homelands as social, economic, political migrants. Some saw greater opportunities for educational and professional development in the West and left to pursue these opportunities. Some were struggling to provide for their families on home soil and perceived the West as a place where they could establish a firm financial foundation for themselves and their kin (Donkor 2005). Others were fleeing from civil unrest produced by ethnic tensions, dictatorial leadership, or both. With diverse motivations for leaving the motherland, African migrants flocked to Europe and North between the 1960s and the 1990s.
People of African descent have been present in Europe and the United States for centuries before this (Gourdine 2003). However, the intensification of African mobility during this time resulted in the proliferation of an already-present diaspora. For some, the move was meant to be permanent. For others, the goal was to return home and settle. Whether or not migrants intended to return, many found comfort in maintaining a connection to their countries and keeping cultural customs as salient parts of their identities (King and Christou 2014). Memory and nostalgia became core features of migrant and diasporic experiences, a way to satiate their “longing for connection” (Binaisa 2014: 78).

Migrants work to keep the homeland alive, not only within their own consciousness but to transmit an understanding of and affection for it to their progeny. Hirsch and Miller refer to these acts of generational sharing between children and parents of language, food, dance, folklore from the homeland as “post-memory” (2011:4), and argue that they are essential to the shaping of cultural identity. This chapter looks at the intersections of nostalgia, memory, belonging, and essentialism, and examines how these impact migrants’ relationships to the homeland and their return mobilities. It will also explore the role of serendipity in return migration and unpack how ‘happy chance’ can in some cases be the catalyst for migrants to return to the homeland, permanently.

**Constructing African and Afro-diasporic Identity**

My conversation with Helene Schulz begins with bursts of laughter as she helps me test the recorder to make sure of our conversation is audible over the palmwine guitar music blaring from the speakers and the din of blue and yellow taxi cars whizzing past us. We are sitting at Starbites Café, a hot spot in Accra’s East Legon neighborhood, frequented by returnees and upwardly mobile locals alike. Helene has just wrapped up a day of filming the web series An African City, an Accra
version of HBO’s Sex and the City. An African City aims to chronicle the experiences of female returnees and provide an alternative depiction of life on the continent. Helene plays a character named Makena, a half Kenyan, half Swiss lawyer and divorcee, who returns to Accra from London jobless.

Helene has been in Ghana for three years. She is tall and slender, dressed in a copper-coloured ribbed crop top, and flowy black high-waisted palazzo trousers that sway elegantly in the wind. As we begin to chat, Helene tells me that she was born in Geneva, Switzerland to a Ghanaian mother and a Swiss father. Her father was an expat whose job took him and his family across the globe. When I ask the Swiss-Ghanaian actress whether she had fun growing up in these different countries, her face lights up: “I did!” She talks about being asked if she is “complex or lost” with regards to cultural identity, and recoils at the thought of being a third culture kid cliché. For Helene and her older brother, their identities were always clear; they were never culturally confused. Their parents made sure they were firmly rooted in their Ghanaian and Swiss national identities. “I know my roots. I know where I’m from. I lived in countries that were not my own, but I respected them,” she stresses.

For Helene, and many other 1.5 and second generation migrants, their parents’ employment of memory and nostalgia to ground them culturally and emotionally in the homeland, is what draws them to return (King and Christou 2011, Rudie 2011). Though Helene grew up across the globe, her mother, who was born in Accra with roots in the diamond-rich region of Akimoda, was adamant that vacations be spent in Ghana. When they were living in other countries, she reproduced Ghana in her children’s lives by making Ghanaian cuisine a mainstay in the home, speaking fondly

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3 Tape-recorded interview with Helene Schulz, June 17, 2015. All quotations from Helene in this thesis come from this interview.
of the country, and sharing memories from her childhood growing up there. This planted a seed of longing in Helene and her brother for Ghana.

Olivia Angé and David Berliner suggest that there are two fundamental postures of nostalgia, exo-nostalgia and endo-nostalgia. Endo-nostalgia refers to “longing for the past one has lived personally”, while exo-nostalgia encompasses vicarious longing for a past “not personally experienced” (2015:21). Helene’s mother wanted her children to have a strong connection to her country. By narrating her childhood memories to them, and making sure they experienced blissful Accra summers, she fostered in them a sense of nostalgia for and belonging to Ghana.

Not unlike Helene, it was a sense of nostalgia and communicative connections that prompted British-Ghanaian Kojo Gramson to return. Kojo was born in London, England to Ghanaian parents who were educational migrants in the 1970s. His parents split up when he was seven years old, and his father returned to Ghana. Three years later, his father sent for him, and he lived in Ghana for seven years, completing his secondary school education there. He moved back to England at 17 and lived in London until he returned to Ghana in 2005. As we sit chatting in his office at Mfia University, where he is a lecturer, Kojo shares how he conceptualizes his identity, “I’ve thought about this quite a bit. First and foremost I’m African. Then Ghanaian. Somewhere further down the line, I’m British. I would also say that I am an Akan because I make it a point to interact with that part of who I am”. Though he leans toward his African identity, Kojo is not in denial of the ways in which his British upbringing has influenced him and might make him “different from many of [his] Ghanaian brethren”.

\[\text{4Tape-recorded interview with Kojo Gramson, November 21, 2014. All quotations from Kojo in this thesis come from this interview.}\]
Despite a strong English lilt and cultural sensibilities that make him stand out, Kojo feels that he belongs fully to Ghana. The first step in this identity-formation process was the time he spent in Ghana as a child and adolescent, when he learned the Fanti dialect of Twi and Pidgin, two of Ghana’s linguae francae. However, it was not until the early 2000s, just after completing his master’s degree that Kojo began to seriously consider moving back to Ghana. In the aftermath of 9/11, the job markets had shrunk significantly. Kojo’s father began to beckon him home, assuring him that in Ghana, he would flourish. The elder Gramson’s professional life had turned around upon return to Ghana. He introduced computing to the Bank of Ghana and became an IMF representative within months. He told Kojo: “Unless you leave the UK, nothing will change. Come to Ghana; everything will happen.”

It was not only professional opportunities and his father’s coaxing that called Kojo home. In his late 20s at the time, he had begun to think about starting a family. At this time, right-wing parties were experiencing a surge in popularity in England. Stabbings and shootings had also become almost daily occurrences in London’s low-income black communities. Black Britain was fractured along cultural lines, with tensions high between Britons of Caribbean descent and those from continental Africa. The tipping point for Kojo was the brutal murder of a ten-year-old Nigerian boy, Damilola Taylor by British-Jamaican brothers Danny and Ricky Preddie. He tells me, “His death really shocked me. Increasingly I thought ‘I cannot imagine myself raising children in the UK, who will think of themselves first and foremost as British,’ because their parents would be based there.”

Kojo’s thoughts about the “trajectory of family” deepened his desire to return. However, the longing had been present since his first stay in Ghana: “The seed was planted the first time they brought me back, and I learned the language and all that. It
was very intentional on my parents’ part”. Faced with the harsh realities of life in London, Kojo yearned for what Hirsch and Miller refer to as the “simplicity of home” (2011:14). He recalled feeling that his British identity as something fragile, that could and might be taken away from him at any time, what Kim calls the “authenticity dilemma” (2009:305). In contrast, he felt deeply confident in identity as a Ghanaian and had no problem defending his right to belong there:

I like the fact that no one can ever challenge my nationhood here. Whereas in the UK, the British National Party or anyone can get up and say ‘go home!’, You see? I won’t get that here. Even with my very brofoized\(^5\) accent, I’m Ghanaian. And if anyone flips it on me, I will throw the language back at them.

For both Kojo and Helene, it was through of a combination of getting to know and love Ghana through the exo-nostalgic memories of their parents and their endo-nostalgic recollections that they formed a connection to their country. They became Ghanaians living in the African diaspora, and eventually engaged in acts of return. For them and other migrants whose formative years are spent outside the ethnic homeland, there can be what Binaisa (2014) and Van Liempt (2014) describe as an enhanced sense of connection to a cultural identity deeply rooted in the locality of the African continent or its global diaspora. For some first generation or original migrants, it is upon moving to the West that they begin to consider what it means to be an African and for blackness to be a central feature of their identity. While at home, they were simply another individual. They had identity labels such as son, daughter, top student or athlete, or a member of one or more ethnic groups, but had rarely considered what it meant to be African or black. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) touches on this in her lauded Ted Talk ‘The Danger of A Single Story’:

I must say that before I went to the US, I didn’t consciously identify as African. But in the US whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways, I think of myself now as an African.

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\(^5\) A local term for speaking an indigenous Ghanaian language or English with a Western accent
For many African migrants, consciousness around their cultural identity occurs in a manner similar to that described by Adichie. Outside the ethnic homeland, they become ambassadors of their respective countries and of Africa. For some, this grows into a Pan-African consciousness as they begin to align themselves with the general black diaspora. The geography of Africa lies at the center of this awakening and becomes “the raw material for the creative production of identity” (Collins 2010:82).

Entrepreneur Nii Tsatsu had this experience of learning about his place as a member of the African diaspora while abroad. Nii, who had been back in Ghana for three years at the time of our conversation, was born in Houston, Texas while his mother was studying there. His father was based in Ghana at the time. When I ask Nii if he identifies as an American, he scoffs and answers swiftly. “Oh no, no, no!” He only spent a few months in the US with his mother before his father brought him to Ghana, so she could focus on school. Nii returned to the US at 18 to attend a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest in 1999.

Though he was born in the United States, he considers himself a Ghanaian and describes himself as a first generation migrant. He did not grow up or spend much time in the US as a child and early adolescent, and had little cultural context for the experiences he would have as a college student. A significant aspect of his experience was learning to perceive himself as a member of the diaspora and fostering meaningful relationships with people from other parts of Africa and from the Caribbean. He also encountered and had to learn to navigate American race relations and the complexity of existing in the US as a person of color:

I remember when I was living in the States, I was cool with this guy. He was from Virginia. Joel was his name. We used to joke, and got along really well. And then one day, he made this joke which I thought was just so inappropriate. It was along of the lines of race. And it kind of just changed my entire relationship with him.
Treading the murky waters of American racial dynamics challenged and exhausted Nii. The emotions these interactions stirred up only intensified his yearning to be back at home and close to his family, where he felt at ease. Moving back to Ghana was always in Nii’s plans. Staying connected with family and friends, and being up to date with the happenings at home were at the core of his Ghanaian identity. While he had formed deep relationships with African and Caribbean friends in the US, he found himself less and less connected with his loved ones at home, and thus less connected to his Ghanaian identity. Brief and sterile phone calls to his family became emblematic of this disconnect:

Phone calls and how brief they were; that was a major stressor for me. I would call my dad, and we would probably speak for 20 minutes at most before he would say something about not wanting to incur too many costs, or that he didn’t want to take up too much of my time. Essentially when you are away, there is a lot that transpires that you are not privy to. You always get somewhat of a summary. You never really get the full scope of things. So you miss quite a bit.

When a job opportunity in New York fell through, Nii took it as a sign. He had never intended to make the US his home; he had come for school and work experience. His stay had already been longer than he had bargained for. He would always have the friendships he had developed in college, graduate school, and as a journalist. However, Ghana was and would always be home. He was excited to return to his favorite place, to be in a context where he understood social cues, where he could be close to his family, and be himself fully.

Lottie Komeh met moving to the US with great reluctance. She was born in Freetown to a Sierra Leonean father and a Sierra Leonean-Nigerian mother. While her father worked in the United States, Lottie’s mother’s job as a diplomat took her from one African nation to the next, and grew in what Coe (2013) calls a scattered family. Growing up in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Ethiopia, Lottie gained a sense of pride in her identity as an African. When she visited the US for the first time at age ten, her
father suggested that she move there to live with him. Lottie was not interested: “I really did not like the US at all. I had a horrible time. It just felt very restrictive, and not wide and free like home. So I was not eager to stay”.  

Lottie returned to Addis Ababa, where she and her mother were living at the time, elated to be back on African soil. Though many of her African peers had internalized the idea the West was superior to Africa – what Nnam (2007) would call the colonial mentality – Lottie was happiest on the continent. Growing up in what she described as a “well-rounded, middle-class African family”, the West was something she knew would inevitably be part of her life, and was therefore not something to be coveted. She recalled: “Just having known for a long time that going overseas was a family’s tradition. It was a foregone conclusion: At some point we’d all go to the US. So we weren’t obsessed with it”.

When Lottie turned thirteen, her parents made an executive decision; it was time for her to join her father in New York and complete her middle school and high school there, before heading to college. During these, Lottie clung to her Sierra Leonean and African identities. She took every opportunity to introduce ‘her Africa’ to friends and classmates:

I was always very, “yes I’m from Sierra Leone. Yes, it’s in Africa. Yes, I’m from Africa”. In high school, everyone who met me knew where I was from. I tried to educate people about the continent and how things really were. So everybody that interacted with me knew that. In geography class every time I would open my mouth, it would be like: “In Sierra Leone …, in Africa...” So as soon it was my turn to answer, as soon as I would open my mouth, everybody would be like: “In Ethiopia, in Africa!” They just mocked me! [laughs] I was always very proud of where I was from.

While Lottie left Addis at thirteen, Gabriel Addy left Ghana’s shores a mature man of 34 in 2000. Gabriel headed to the US in pursuit of a master’s degree. He left behind in Accra a wife and daughter who was but a toddler, and had no intentions of

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6 Tape-recorded interview with Lottie Komeh, June 10, 2015. All quotations from Lottie in this thesis come from this interview.
staying in the US. Intensely proud of his Ghanaian nationality and his Ga ethnicity, he wanted to acquire skills to contribute to the improvement of Ghana. He entered the US on a tourist visa. Upon gaining university admission into a development studies program, he changed to an F1 student visa.

While working on his degree, Gabriel began a job search, hoping to make some money to send back to his wife, daughter, and extended family in Ghana. It was during this time that Gabriel became acquainted with the struggles of being an immigrant and man of color in the US. Despite being student in an advanced degree program, he struggled to find work. He took a minimum wage job, where many of his colleagues were young, poor African-American men. Gabriel recalls this challenging time:

You don’t have access to any upscale opportunities. You’re not going to get hired. You are likely to have colleagues who did not even finish high school as work mates. It’s one of the things I really didn’t like about the US. And the fact that you have most of the black guys, and I’m not talking about the girls, you find most of them out of employment.7

Gabriel felt helpless as he observed the struggles of black American colleagues within a system he came to believe had little interest in helping them improve their lives. He also experienced for the first time being the target of xenophobia and racism at the hands of white co-workers, who believed that he was occupying a job that could have been awarded to a US citizen. These experiences frustrated Gabriel and deepened his desire to return home. Having been back in Ghana for over six years, he shared his hopes for the solution of America’s systemic inequalities, particularly as they impact people of color:

You can feel the hatred of you as an immigrant by Caucasians, even though they have no reason to hate you, and they don’t have the power to hate you. But they do not hide their disdain for you being an immigrant or for being black, or for being colored so to say. It wasn’t the reason I left. I knew I was going to leave,

7 Tape-recorded interview with Gabriel Addy, June 16, 2015. All quotations from Gabriel in this thesis come from this interview.
regardless of the way I was treated in the States. Once I was done with the objectives that took me there, I was going to leave anyway. But I think these are things we should be able to articulate, and get the institutions that are responsible to begin to address.

Helene, Kojo, Nii, Lottie, and Gabriel are not alone in constructing their identities against the backdrop of the homeland. This is a common feature of the migrant experience; managing the “complex dynamics of belonging and the politics of diaspora” (Hirsch and Miller 2011:6). In their time away, migrants navigate the reality of existing in a state of spatial, cultural, and to some extent ideological liminality (Kim 2009). With the blood of certain cultures and places running through their veins, while physically inhabiting geographies to which they do not ethnically belong, migrants occupy a space that Rouse refers to as the “gap between two worlds” (1991:157). Characterized by global interaction, “criss-crossed economies, intersecting systems of meaning, and fragmented identities” (Rouse 1991:157), molding and clinging to their identity becomes a way to stay grounded.

Upon return to the ethnic homeland, many returnees find that their identities are far more complex than they had realized while living in the host country (Bhabha 1994). As they come to terms with their hybrid identities (Abu-Lughod 1991), the yearning to belong manifests as the “co-existence of a desire for roots and an embrace of diasporic identity” (Hirsch and Miller 2011:2). They mold the homeland with ideas, meanings, and emotions, acknowledging that they and the spaces they occupy are “never ‘finished’, but are constantly being performed” (Collins 2010:82). They begin to see themselves not only as products but also as creators of identity and place.

Growing up in suburban Pennsylvania with Ghanaian parents, Rachel Danquah-Aryee learned at a young age that there was a difference between *African* and *African-American*. She learned early on that being African was advantageous in the US context, and took pride in being “the African girl.” Black Americans were
associated with negative aspects of US history, such as slavery. Worse yet she was learning in the classroom and through media that black Americans let the bleak experiences of their ancestor hold them back and define their future. Since returning, Rachel has gained a new understanding of what it means to be a black American:

As I get older, I realize that as an African kid, an African black kid growing up in America – Africans, Caribbean people, people who know where they are from, would tend to distance ourselves from the black narrative, which is not right. And it’s not until things like Ferguson or Baltimore, when we realize that the police see us and they see as one thing, you know? They don’t say “Well you’re from Ghana, and you’re from Nigeria, and you’re the black, black American.” To them, we’re all black.¹⁸

Rachel explained that it took moving to Ghana for her to grasp and identify with the concept of diaspora, and to perceive herself as part of the African diaspora. In Ghana, her identity as an American has come to the fore, something she has begun to embrace. Rachel was packing up to return temporarily to the United States for graduate school. She shared some ideas of how she planned to embrace her diasporic and black American identities during this sojourn in the States:

I’m actually going to pledge Delta when I get back. Delta is a black sorority. Because it’s a part of who I am that I grew up in America. Yes, I’m Ghanaian, but I was born there, grew up there, was educated there. I don’t always believe in everything America does. But I am also aware that if I hadn’t been raised there, I wouldn’t be who I am today. I think there is a struggle in being an actual African-American, not just a politically African-American or black American, that we’re still kind of coming to terms with. For many people of recent continental African descent, we haven’t decided if this is something we are willing or ready to deal with.

Rachel’s increasing understanding of diasporic identity is evident in the composition of her friend circle in Accra. She explained that her core group of girlfriends includes a Jamaican woman, a few African-Americans, and a Zimbabwean woman. All perceive Africa as an ancestral home to which they have returned, and are excited at the prospect of creating lives for themselves in Ghana and contributing to

¹⁸ Tape-recorded interview with Rachel Danquah-Aryee, June 17, 2015. All quotations from Rachel in this thesis come from this interview.
its growth. Rachel wishes that fellow Africans would embrace the diaspora more wholeheartedly and that members of diaspora would embrace Africa. She gushed about the continent: “Africa is beautiful. I wish that we would all realize that irrespective of us being Ghanaian, Nigerian, American, Caribbean, or whatever; we have been given a continent that has everything on it. Everything!”

For many returnees, the construction of identity manifests in holding on to the label of “returnees” even after years of moving back home. They create a community with fellow returnees, and find comfort in shared experiences, both in the host and home countries. Others choose to fully re-immerse themselves in Ghanaian society, and distance themselves from the returnee community, as a means to integrate better with the local culture. While being African remains a source of immense pride, some returnees maintain connections to the cultural identities they possessed in the West. I will interrogate this further in chapter four.

**When Migrants Essentialize ‘Home.’**

*I am often asked if I plan to go back to Ghana. I go to Accra every year, but I can’t go back to Ghana. [...] We can never go back to a place and find it as we left it.*

- Taiye Selasi, “Don’t Ask Me Where I’m From, Ask Where I’m Local” (2014)

The quote above is from a viral Ted Talk by UK-born, US-reared and educated, and Italy-based author of Ghanaian-Nigerian descent, Taiye Selasi. As Selasi posits, returnees do not come back to the same place they have stored in the myths of their memories. Just like people and identities, places are not static (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003). For many migrants, the homeland is always contrasted with the West, which carries the negative connotations of hectic day-to-day life, materialism, separation from family, and racial discrimination (Pærregaard 1997, Tsuda 2009). The homeland, on the other hand, is cast in their imagination as a “place of romance,
exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1978:1).

In 1997, my mother, my sister and I flew from Norway to Accra, where we said a tearful goodbye. My sister and I were going to live there with our grandmother for a few years while our mother moved to London to get her master’s, and our father worked as a teacher in Norway. We epitomized Coe’s (2013) scattered family; separated but working hard to stay connected “over time and space” (Shandy 2014).

Though the separation from our parents was painful, I thoroughly enjoyed my years in Ghana. Upon my return to the grey Norwegian countryside in November 2000, I longed for the Accra I had perceived through rose-coloured lenses of childhood. My daydreams generally took the form of me gazing out the window of my uncle’s car, Accra’s bright and colourful cityscape whizzing by. It was a highly sanitized version that recalled and romanticized only that which was beautiful. I remembered the sweet scent of roasted plantain seasoned with ground ginger and habanero peppers, mingling with the crackle of the coal fire, and exciting the senses. I remembered the melodic calls of street hawkers and commuters clad in vibrantly-coloured wax cloth. I remembered the cool green palm trees and warm fuchsia rhododendrons bushes that swayed gently in my grandmother’s garden. When I returned to Ghana in the summer of 2014 to volunteer before studying abroad at a local university, I looked forward to returning to a land of jolly treat vendors, whose pink Fan Ice yogurt cooled my throat on hot days, and whose delicious meat pies stalled hunger. The Ghana I saw with my 20 year old eyes was quite different from what I remembered.

Pærregaard suggests that as anthropologists “we often share experiences and positions with the peoples we study, which sometimes makes our perspectives
Indeed, as I began to have conversations with returnees in Accra, I learned my experience was not unique, but rather a common side-effect of extended sojourns outside the African context, in which endo-nostalgic experiences give rise to a kind of essentialism. Several of my informants recalled a homeland in which kind strangers offered directions when you were lost. Many had left Ghana as children, and much like myself romanticized the frequent power cuts, which led to nights spent sleeping on the rooftops of family homes to escape the heat, followed by laughter-filled races with siblings and cousins to blow out as many candles as possible when the lights finally came back on.

For migrants with memories of the homeland, whether from long-term stays or visits, nostalgia is often a significant imaginative factor in their return. This was discussed in passing in the previous section, and here we delve deeper into the concept, the role it plays in essentializing the homeland, and in acts of return. Anne-Katrine Brun Norbye (2010) describes nostalgia as “a deep longing for a lost wholeness. It can be a longing for a happy childhood, for the home, for another time, for […] completeness” (Norbye 2010:160). When we look at the etymology of the word, it is derived from two Greek words. The first is nostos – returning home, and the second is algos – pain and longing. One translation that I found particularly fitting for the purposes of the paper was this early one: “the pain a sick person feels in yearning for their homeland, together with the fear that they may never return” (Norbye 2010:139). It taps into a desire for both a place and time, from the past.

For a person to experience this kind of longing for home, memory plays an important role. A migrant’s memories are emotionally-laden “marks of their past histories” that they carry in their minds, hearts, and bodies (Rudie 2010:127). The possession of memories can be described as universal, “but the character of the
memories will take different shapes for each person, and particularly of each
generation” (Rudie 2010:126). Through essentializing the “old country” (Hirsch and
Miller 2011:112) the descendant diaspora (1.5 and second generation migrants) forms
a relationship to it and nurtures a desire to return. This group comes of age in the host
country, but have been in their childhood and adolescent years transported home,
again and again, through music, stories, culture, language, and their parents. Hirsch
and Miller refer to this as a “spiritual familiarity” (2011:112). As the years go by, this
familiarity is reborn within them as nostalgia, of longing for the homeland.

Afia Annan’s imaginary of Ghana was deeply nostalgic. She was aba fresh,
Ghanaian vernacular for a recent returnee, and had only been in Ghana for nine
months at the time of our conversation. Afia was born in Connecticut to Ghanaian
parents in 1988. When her parents divorced in the early 1990s, Akua was shuttled
back and forth, living with her father in the United States during the school year and
with her mother in Accra during vacations. While the US signified the busyness and
bustle of everyday life, Accra was the site of carefree summers. She loved the
freshness and spontaneity of Ghana, which in her mind was juxtaposed with an
America that felt restrictive and where she often felt that she did not truly belong. She
told me, “I loved the way people were open to ideas and new people, new adventures,
and trying things.” Afia remembered Ghana through the imaginary of a “liberatory
nostalgia” (Blunt and Dowling 2006:213), as a place of freedom.

Summers in Ghana epitomized not only freedom but also luxury for Helene
Schulz. After blissful vacations, it was almost painful to return to her everyday lives
and responsibilities. Between chuckles, Helene leaned in as though sharing a secret:

“I always loved coming back on holidays, because I always had a lot of fun.
Maybe a little too much actually! ‘Cause it’s so free over here. I think about

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9 Tape-recorded interview with Afia Annan, June 6, 2015 . All quotations from Afia in this thesis come
from this interview.
bringing up children here, and it scares me a little bit. Children can do anything, there are not a lot of boundaries, you know? You have all these privileges, like drivers and maids.”

Kehinde Elemide also dreamt of the freedom and fluidity of African life while living in California, and later Massachusetts. Kehinde was born to Nigerian parents, who were educational migrants, in Boston. When she was three months old, her father’s work took the family to Kenya. She grew up in the suburbs of Nairobi. At the age of eighteen, she moved California to study at Stanford University. “Probably within the first few months of living in the US, or maybe the first year, I realized that it was not a place I could see myself in the long run,”, she told me. After college, Kehinde worked in consulting for three years. In the rat race of corporate America, she had little time for pause or reflection.

The year she left for America, Kehinde’s parents left Nairobi and moved to Accra. She spent every summer in Accra during her college years and began to fall in love with the city. It was the Ghanaian way of life, which she has had a profoundly positive effect on her mental health and self-esteem, that convinced her to move there:

Things just move at a slower pace here. For me, that’s refreshing because it allows me to catch myself sometimes when I’m slipping into that mode of trying to get stuff done really quickly all the time. Like I spent three hours at the clinic yesterday. But I had conversations and reflected on something I have been trying to write. It just reflects that people here value communicating with each other. I like the slower pace of things, and I like that there’s time to connect with people in meaningful ways. It forces you to think, “why am I so eager to get stuff done all the time? Is there other stuff that I’m missing by trying to go so fast?”

Kehinde spoke of her return beginning as a mental and emotional move, before the actual physical relocation. It is not uncommon for migrants to engage in what Sheller and Urry (2006) call virtual return, while still in the host country. In addition to staying connected with family and engaging in touristic mobilities, they also carve

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10 Tape-recorded interview with Kehinde Elemide, June 6, 2015. All quotations from Kehinde in this thesis come from this interview.
spaces for themselves and create images of the homeland using technology (Appadurai 1996, Blunt and Dowling 2006). This is what Appadurai refers to as technoscapes, pointing to the movement of information “at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (1996:34).

The information and images transmitted across technoscapes are “mediascapes and ideoscapes” (Appadurai 1996:35). While migrants are still living in the host society, these techno-, ideo-, and mediascapes are central to both identity-formation and their images of home. One particularly important technoscape and resource for returnees is the Ahaspora Young Professionals Network. Ahaspora was founded by a returnee named Christabel Dadzie in 2011. The network’s name combines the Twi word ‘aha’, which means ‘here’, and the second half of ‘diaspora.’ It symbolizes the network’s aim to act as a bridge between Africans on the continent, and the diaspora. Members are united by the common ideoscope that Ghana is a site of “immense potential, talent, and opportunity” (Ahaspora 2015). As indicated by the organization’s motto, “home to make a difference”, Ahasporans want to use their “skills, knowledge, resources” to give back to a country and a continent from which they feel they have gained a lot. It was through this network that several of the participants in this study found jobs and began to network, before physically relocating to Accra.

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Most returnees share a penchant for essentializing the homeland. They create flowery descriptions of “its people, customs, [and] destiny” (Said 1978:3). While in the host country, they become root-seekers (Hirsh and Miller 2011:13), molding their identities through various images of the homeland. These images are the products of the essentialisms they craft.
Pærregaard (1997) groups these images into four categories: moral, ethnic, rational, and nostalgic. He posits that those who are summoned home by a moral image are “concerned with the future salvation of their native home” (1997:48). Based on his ethnographic research in a village in Peru called Tapay, Pærregaard demonstrates how moral returnees return to evangelize for the Protestant Church. In the Ghanaian context, the moral return exists, but its angle and aim is different. In Accra, moral returnees are driven by the notion that it is their ethical responsibility to contribute to the betterment of Ghanaian society.

Araba Mensah, a first generation migrant who spent twelve years in the United States, is a moral returnee. I was a student of Araba’s for a semester while studying in Ghana at Mfiase University, Africa’s first liberal arts college. The course I took with her was called Leadership as Service. Throughout the course, she emphasized the need for leaders who understand Africa’s development project as one of service and sacrifice, not self-aggrandizement. When Araba left Ghana in 1996 at twenty to attend Florida State University in Tallahassee, she already had in heart and mind, the desire to come back and serve the country. “I entered with the exit in sight. I felt the US didn’t need me. They have the manpower. But then when I look at Ghana, I see the need for people like myself. It just made sense,” she says.11 Typical of a moral returnee, Araba strives to “set a good example of discipline, hard work, responsibility, initiative” (Pærregaard 1997:48). In addition to being a full-time professor in the Business Administration department at Mfiase, she also runs a recruitment agency, Alias Limited, is an active member of her church, and spearheads anti-corruption initiatives in Accra.

11 Tape-recorded interview with Araba Forson, October 15, 2014. All quotations from Araba in this thesis come from this interview.
Moral returnees adopt different approaches in their quest to convert locals to their belief-system and create social change, for example actively confronting those in power as a way to dismantle existing systems. Araba achieves this through her anti-corruption activism. She was one of the brains behind the 2014 Occupy Flagstaff House demonstrations in Ghana, which highlighted the ineptitude of Ghana’s leadership. This was not without consequences. A few weeks after our interview, Araba was absent from class. The Mfiase campus was abuzz with queries and rumors. This was unusual behavior for Araba, a stickler for precision and punctuality. Later that day, a friend and I learned Araba was in her office and decided to stop by. She told us her home had been broken into that night while she was asleep. While her cash and credits cards were left behind, all her technological devices were gone. She believed government henchmen had been sent to find incriminating evidence on her.

For migrants who return with an ethnic image, the primary goal is to establish themselves as influential political, economic, social figures. In Tapay, Pærregaard observed ethnic returnees as “increasingly taking over [its] political and religious institutions” (1997:49). They imagined their rural home as a beautiful and well-endowed, but underdeveloped place. They believed it is their right and obligation “to participate and intervene” (Pærregaard 1997:48) in the development of the community.

Similar to Tapay, returnees who come to Accra with the ethnic image demonstrate allegiance and attempt to integrate by contributing to socio-economic development. This can be done through commerce, politics, art, or education. In addition to his job as a lecturer at Mfiase University, Kojo Gramson is known for his dedication to fostering an alternative arts scene in Accra. Kojo is part of the team behind the globally-lauded Zongo Art Festival, which for the past five years has been
a much-anticipated summer event set against the backdrop of Accra’s low income, coastal Jamestown neighborhood. As Kojo speaks about his passion for the arts, I get the sense that his return is both and ethnic and moral:

I like how fresh everything is here. You have a chance to do new things since the market isn’t saturated. And I’m not just talking about business; I’m also talking about culture. I’m very interested in popular culture, and I feel like you can start new movements here. There’s a lot of evangelism to be done, not in a religious way, but with regards to art and culture. I’m currently focusing on counter-culture and underground music.

Then there are the nostalgic returnees, who in their time away “create an illusion of a place unspoiled by moral decadence, industrial pollution, Western greed, economic interests; an island where history stands still” (Pærregaard 1997:46). For many African migrants, the homeland is the foundation from which their moral compasses are formed. Many parents choose to frame the West as a place of sexual immorality, capitalism, and rabid individualism, during their children’s formative years. The homeland, on the other hand, is positioned as “morally superior to the home they now inhabit” (Blunt and Dowling 2006:218). Its geography represents an act of temporal transportation; it takes them back to the simpler times. Those who hold this imaginary tend to have left the homeland at a young age and remember it, as I did, through a child’s carefree eyes.

The more rationally-minded among these migrants often return with a different sensibility. To them, the homeland represents an “economic and social problem” (Pærregaard 1997:47) that can be remedied through increased connection to modern economic and technological advances. They perceive this as an opportunity and look at the ways to use the spatial, natural, human, and cultural capital of the homeland to “improve the living standard of fellow” (Pærregaard 1997:47) Africans. What distinguishes them from some of their more altruistically-motivated counterparts is that their return is largely motivated by a fervent desire to accumulate personal
wealth. The homeland is considered an optimal place to achieve these goals. Among my participants, Lottie Komeh embodied this most remarkably. Lottie is a freelance marketing consultant, a designer, a television personality, and magazine editor. And she is determined to break into other sectors as well:

Recently I’ve been interested in real estate development. The next five years will be ‘how do I get into the real estate industry here in Ghana and start developing?’ I also have land in Sierra Leone that I want to develop. While it’s good to be a consultant, the only consistent multigenerational source of wealth is property. By the time I’m 45, I want to own enough property to live off the revenue my properties bring in. And there’s no reason why in the next 10-15 years that shouldn’t be the case.

As Pærregaard suggests, to understand returnees’ homeland images as “static or exclusive” (1997:50) is to underestimate the complexity and fluidity of these migratory experiences. Many returnees hold more than one imaginary at a time. Once physical relocation has occurred, images of return are subject to change as returnees adjust. Keeping in mind the fluidity and flexibility of return images can help minimize the risk of confining participants, both spatially and ideologically (Appadurai 1988).

While Lottie’s image of return came across as primarily rational, as I got to know her better, it became apparent that she also held a moral image. She shared, “I always planned and prepared, not for the American dream, but for a kind of African or global dream. That’s what for me was the ideal, not living in America with a white picket fence.” Lottie looked down and rubbed her belly, her lips forming into the most affectionate smile. She was six months pregnant and dreamt that her unborn son would grow up with the same love for the continent that she had. Deeply optimistic about the continent’s future, she wants to use her business acumen to acquire wealth, with which she hopes to do some “social good.”

Regardless of which images migrants carry and cultivate, these images are important catalysts, tipping them toward acts of return. These images, together with
essentialisms of the homeland, serve the purpose of keeping the homeland alive in the consciousness of individual migrants and larger communities. In chapter four, we will discuss how this romanticizing can result in disillusionment upon arrival in the home country.

Choosing Chance: Serendipitous Return

*And at the time, it would never have occurred to me, not even remotely, to consider returning to my native home.*  

Helene Schultz never dreamed that she would end up living in Ghana. When Helene was born, her family was living in Nigeria, and she spent her early years of life there. When her father was transferred to India, the family moved there. After this, they spent a couple of years in his home country, Switzerland and then moved to Syria. From Syria, they went to Thailand, where Helene finished high school. She then moved to Australia for university. Helene, who had always dreamt of being an actress, began to pursue drama seriously during this time. When she completed her bachelor’s degree, she moved to Paris to study theater at a conservatory. “And now, I’m in Ghan-aaaa!” she sang gleefully, brimming with joy at living in her mother’s country.

For some returnees, going home is an unexpected, but pleasant plot twist. While some make a firm and intentional choice to go home, other returnees find that their returns are the fruits of serendipity or happy chance. The term ‘serendipity’ is attributed to the English art historian and politician Horace Walpole (1754). It is widely held that Walpole coined term while translating the fairytale *Three Princes of Serendip*, the Perso-Arabic name for modern-day Sri Lanka. The fairytale follows three princely travelers with a penchant for “making fortunate discoveries accidentally” (Smawley 1965:177). Forgotten for almost two centuries after Walpole
coined it, the concept reemerged in the social sciences in the mid-20th century and has since become a “sweetheart” within many of its branches (Shaw 2004). This section will be focused on what I refer to as serendipitous return, relying on Walpole’s definition of serendipity as “discoveries made by accidents and sagacity” (Shaw 2004:8).

It was a one-time acting gig that brought Helene to Accra. She was a self-described starving actress in Paris, struggling to find work and subsisting mainly on baguettes and cigarettes. Though deeply proud of her Ghanaian heritage, she had never thought of Accra as a place with viable or desirable prospects for someone in her profession. “If you had asked me five years ago if I would move to Ghana, I would have been like ‘Hell no! For what?’ ”. The Ghanaian film industry that once produced great films like Kwaw Ansah’s classics, Love Brewed in an African Pot (1980) and Heritage Africa (1989), has sadly degraded in quality in the last two decades. Helene imitated a scene from a typical modern mass-produced Ghanaian film to explain her initial hesitance to participate in the industry. She hunched her back, placed a hand on her hip, adopted a Ghanaian-English inflection, and emulated the demeanor of a local grandmother calling out to a fictive grandchild: “Ei Abena! Come! Come!” leaving me, my tour guide Rhoda, and those at neighboring tables at East Legon’s Starbites Café in fits of laughter.

Her theatrical prowess spilled into the conversation countless times, with comedic timing well-suited to stand-up, and enough confidence to self-deprecate without self-destructing. Helene intended to return to Paris after finishing her Accra gig. To her surprise, Helene found fertile ground for growth within Ghana’s film industry. She began to toy with the idea of sticking around a little longer to explore the role she might play in this development. Three years later, she is still in Accra,
acting up a storm. As we sipped tangy fruit smoothies, she gushed about the potential of the local film industry and her dreams for it: “Working in the industry here has become far more personal and significant than I expected it to. That’s why I decided to stay. And things are going really well, actually, work-wise.”

For first generation Ghanaian returnee Akua Sekyibea Djan, her return was accidental in the most literal sense. In June 2009, Akua was laid-off from the architectural firm where she had been working for six years. She had two small children; a boy aged seven and a four-year-old little girl. Her husband, a man she had been with since college, had just left her. Her life was in shambles. “My story is not your typical “I-want-to-go home-and-now-I’m-here” story. It started with my mother having a mastectomy all by herself. She had a biopsy, and it had come back positive for cancer. She didn’t tell anybody what she was going through […]”.12

Akua pauses mid-sentence as her phone rings. She apologizes, explaining that it is her father and that she has to take the call. As a returnee, she has become her parents’ primary caretaker. Her mother was of particular importance to her return. In the midst of a trying time in her own life, Akua did not know that her mother, who had flown to the United States to take care of Akua’s kids and provide emotional support, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Akua learned about her mother’s illness by chance on November 29, 2009. Her mother was turning sixty-two, and she called to sing her the birthday song. When she couldn’t reach her, she called her younger brother, Kofi, who was living with their mother in Accra:

And he goes, ‘Oh, I just got a call that she’s just come out of surgery.’ And I’m thinking ‘Well, damn! You live with her. How come you’re getting a call that she’s coming out of surgery? You didn’t know?’ And he’s like “No, I didn’t”. And I ask him, “How is that? You live with the woman. You should know what’s going with here. And what surgery?” He says, “I have no idea. Let me call you back. I need to find out myself.”

12 Tape-recorded interview with Akua Sekyibea Djan, June 13, 2015. All quotations from Akua in this thesis come from this interview.
Frustrated by this conversation, she called her father. Though her parents had been divorced for over 15 years at the time, they had remained close friends. Her father told her, against her mother’s wishes, that she had been diagnosed with a malignant tumor in her left breast and was having it removed that day. Akua was wracked with guilt. Her mother had spent that summer in the US supporting her, all the while experiencing an immense tribulation of her own. She felt ashamed for not noticing that her mother was unwell. She was also angry that her mother had kept this information from her. “She could have told me what was going on. We could have figured it out together,” she told me. A week later Akua was on a flight to Accra. Six years later she is still living in Accra and has established herself as one of the city’s most sought-after architects.

Akua also said that her financial situation in the US impacted her choice to stay in Ghana. She is not alone in this. The vast majority of returnees move in pursuit of better “employment opportunities and [in some cases] higher wages” (Song 2009:287) when they engage in acts of return. Though Akua thought her job was secure and that she had proved herself over a six-year tenure, she became a victim of the 2007–2009 economic recession that forced companies, particularly those in the housing industry, to lay off thousands of employees. “It was after six rounds of layoffs that it finally hit me,” she explained. She and her kids moved out of their four-bedroom home, rented it out, and moved into a more affordable two-bedroom apartment.

Before she left for Ghana, Akua moved her stuff into the basement of her home in Atlanta, thinking this would be at most, a three to four-month trip. While she was away, her sub-letters were also laid off from their jobs and unable to keep up with the mortgage payments. Her home was foreclosed, all her possessions with it: “I think
I’ve lost everything, including my wedding album and the kids’ baby pictures”. Now a homeless, unemployed single mother, there was little that kept Akua tethered to America. Though she had not intended to stay in Ghana, she began to think that there was a reason why she found herself there at that particular moment. “I figured I was in Ghana; I might as well make it work.”

And then there was Rachel. She stared off into the distance as she reminisced about her days on Wall Street, “I was making more money than my parents had ever seen at twenty four. It was crazy.” Rachel, a biology major at Princeton University, landed a job at a hedge fund right out of college. What prompted Rachel to leave the hustle and bustle of New York for the vibrant and dusty streets of Accra? She sighed deeply before answering, as though to exhale the negative memories: “Long hours, shady people. It just wasn’t my cup of tea. But everybody was like, ‘Wow, you work at this prestigious company!’ ” Her job, though grueling, paid extremely well. She was able to afford a decent apartment in Manhattan and pay her bill, with enough left over for loan payments. But Rachel was hungry for adventure, for a life beyond sixteen to twenty hour work days with little time to enjoy the fruits of her labor. Occasionally Ghana, her parents’ homeland, would pop into her mind. “I had always wanted to go to Ghana, in the summers, at Christmas.” But for years, school, opportunities to explore other regions, and at that particular moment, her job, had always gotten in the way. Ghana kept being pushed back.

Rachel was born in Pennsylvania to political migrants who left Ghana in the 1970s and 1980s respectively to escape the unrest that resulted from the military coups emblematic of this time in the nation’s history. Her father moved to the United States in 1970, her mother eleven years later after finishing her bachelor’s degree at the University of Cape Coast and a year of national service. Her mother’s family left
Ghana in the late 1970s with the five youngest of their seven children. She provided context on the times, “After the coup in ’79, it wasn’t that hard for families to get visas. Basically, it was like, ‘Oh, you’re from a conflict country? Somebody’s already over there? Okay, everybody gets in’.” We all chuckled as she conjured up the memory of this unusually liberal juncture in America’s immigration policy history. For her mother’s family, this was only meant to be temporary relocation. They planned to move back to Ghana once political situation eased up. For her father, things were a bit different: “My dad had been gone for a long time by the time my mom’s family got here. His dad had died, and he didn’t really have any family left. He wanted to explore new things.”

In April 2007, Rachel received an email informing her that a friend from Princeton had fallen to his death while rock climbing. She told me, “He plummeted down, I think about 30 feet, and hit the concrete. His brain swelled up, and he was dead in a week. He was 26. And I thought to myself: ‘What kind of life is this? I hate my life. I hate what I’m doing. The way I’m always on my Blackberry, and I don’t look up when I am walking, I could get hit by a city bus or a taxi.’” A few days later she made the decision to hand in her company phone, credit card, laptop, and turn in her letter of resignation. In July, she quit her job in New York and moved home to Pennsylvania. By September, she was in Accra.

While Rachel made a spontaneous choice to return, her parents’ departure from Ghana was not voluntary. They experienced the violence and disorder of military coups that marked the country’s political scene from the late 1960s to the early 1980s (Donkor 2005). Like many Ghanaians during, this time, they left in search of greener pastures. Though proud of their heritage, they also held a degree of disdain for their home country, which Said (2002) describes as typical of migrants forced out by
political circumstances. Rachel believed that this was reflected in the way they painted Ghana throughout her childhood:

For us growing up, Ghana was a punishment. It was like “hey, if you don’t eat that food, you’re going to the village!” I would always say “No, I don’t want to go the village!” And my parent’s would be like “Well then, eat the broccoli or you’re going to the village”. And it’s a shame that it was like that. But I look at history – my parents left at a tumultuous time in Ghana’s history. And so it was almost as if they felt they had no choice but to be expelled. And so by them feeling that were expelled, they distanced themselves and us for a while.

With this image of Ghana in their home, Rachel’ parents were quite baffled when she told them she was moving there. “You’re moving to Ghana? Why? We’re here!” But the death of her school mate had shaken Rachel. She needed to do some soul-searching, and she felt Ghana might be the right place to do that. She laughed, recalling her mother’s reaction to this: “She said, ‘We’re not white people. We don’t do this. We don’t explore ourselves.’ ” Rachel persuaded her parents by framing Ghana as a cost-effective global experience. She would stay for a year of national service and then return to the US for medical school. Almost eight years later, Rachel has created a life herself in Ghana. She has become a bridge between her family still living in the diaspora and Ghana, and is helping her parents repair their relationship with the country:

My mom is coming in five weeks. She’s probably been here three or four times since I’ve moved here. My sister comes here a lot. My dad and brother are coming for the first time in a long time for Christmas. I’m happy that my accidental living here and then turning it into my life has also gotten them to come back too, even if just temporarily.

Thirty nine year old Jacob Acheampong’s return was more the product of sagacity than accident. Jacob was born and raised in Kumasi, Ghana’s second-largest city. After completing a bachelor’s degree in English and Linguistics, and a master’s degree in Archives Administration at University of Ghana, Legon, Jacob moved to the US in 2002. He pursued a second master’s degree at Central Michigan University, and
then went on to complete his doctoral degree in anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana. As a practicing anthropologist, Jacob bases his work on Ghana and Africa, with an emphasis on the intersections of popular culture and politics. While field work allowed him to visit home often, he had no intentions of returning.

Jacob’s reasons for leaving Ghana were purely economic. He left the country at a time when the financial situation was dire, and work was hard to come by. It was a moment in which, in Jacob’s own words, “if you were able to ‘escape’ it made sense to stay where things were better for you.”13 While doing fieldwork for his dissertation, Jacob realized Ghana was changing, and for the better. “I began to think that maybe with my education I might be able to lead a certain lifestyle in Ghana,” he told me.

When he was scouted to work at Mfiaze University, the continent’s first liberal arts college based in the rolling green hills of Ghana’s Eastern Region, he took it as a sign that it was time to give home a chance.

Jacob returned to Ghana in 2010. Working in the Arts and Science department at Mfiaze as an anthropology professor, he earns a fourth of what he would make in the US. Living in Ghana has not made him a rich man. However, Jacob feels far more content than he did in America: “I’m definitely not living an extravagant lifestyle here. However, if I compare the life I’d be leading in the US to the life I’m leading and enjoying here, my experience here has been far more meaningful.”

Helene, Akua, Rachel, and Jacob returned to Ghana at a promising moment in the nation’s economic history. In 2007, the nation discovered new oil reserves off its southern coast believed to hold up to three billion barrels of sweet crude (Watts 2004). A wave of euphoria swept over the nation, with both its government and civil society hopeful that this discovery would result in tremendous economic and social growth.

13 Tape-recorded interview with Jacob Acheampong, September 1, 2014. All quotations from Jacob in this thesis come from this interview.
The national atmosphere was thick with optimism. The positive impacts of this spilled into the housing, arts, and academic industries, as Ghana became the go-to West African business partner for many Western and East Asian companies.

Some scholars argue that professional and financial considerations are among the strongest factors that pull returnees home (Ravenstein 1885, Tsuda 2009). For both Helene and Akua, it was a lack of professional opportunities in Paris and Atlanta respectively that pushed them to embrace life in Accra. Both were accustomed to middle-class lifestyles. However, as an unemployed actress in Paris or black mother on welfare in Atlanta, their social statuses would be reduced. Moving to Ghana allowed both to continue to work within their chosen fields, escape the macroeconomic pressures of life in the West, and “maintain their middle-class lifestyles” (Tsuda 2009:31).

Rachel and Jacob, on the other hand, both moved to Accra aware that it would result in a considerable pay cut. Their decisions to settle in Ghana were buttressed, not by economic considerations, but rather the hope for an enhanced quality of life. Neither had planned for a permanent relocation. It took time for Rachel to accept Ghana as her home. Though she had planned to leave after a year, a chance meeting in Accra with a friend from Princeton changed everything. The friend’s father was about to set up an Accra branch of his London-based company and asked if Rachel would oversee the project. She decided to trust fate once again and accepted the offer, thinking she would stay for two years at most. She spoke about taking ownership of this chance event:

Because my move here started out accidental, I sort of had to come to the realization that I was here for the long haul. By year three, I had to wake and choose to be here. This was my life. It took me about three or four years to realize that I lived here. It’s not just that my stuff lives here, and I travel a lot. Or that this is my office, but this is my home. Once I made that distinction, my attitude changed about how I would proceed and live my life here.
It may have been chance that brought these returnees to Ghana, but they have taken the seeds of serendipity and actively cultivated the conditions they were provided into lives they enjoy living, and jobs in which they thrive. Each returnee has in their own way, transformed temporary or accidental mobilities into long-term acts of return. Reflecting on my conversations with these serendipitous returnees, I cannot help but wonder: Why have their homecomings been so happy and successful? How does class factor into this? In another paper, it would be interesting to examine the conditions that contribute to these outcomes.

Irrespective of whether a return is the product of chance or not, returnees share the experience of constructing their identities in relation to the homeland, host society, and the liminal spaces they occupy between these (Bhabha 1994, Pærregaard 1997, Tsuda 2009, Turner 1969). Though they are currently in the homeland, their lifestyles are highly transnational in nature. They challenge us as anthropologists to think more flexibly about the connections between identity and place, and to study those “who inhabit the borderlands and account for difference within a locality” (Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003: 28). The final chapter will discuss the permanence of these mobilities, planned and serendipitous alike.
CHAPTER THREE: GENDERED FRICTIONS

In the past two decades, the study of migration has begun to acknowledge that mobility is gendered and that women engage in acts of migration independently of their connections to male migrants (Christou 2003, Olwig 2012). Christou suggests that men’s migratory experiences tend to be individualistic in nature, more focused on professional opportunities and building nest eggs. Women migrants, on the other hand, often perceive migrations as a communal practice, whether it relates to kinship bonds, friendship ties, or romantic relationships. Regardless of their gender, outmigration and return result in a reimagining of gender identities as migrants shift between the cultural dynamics of translocal and transnational contexts of the host society to the homeland (Christou 2003). How do returnees manage moving from the gender expectations and dynamics of the West to those in Ghana, and the frictions these transitions gives rise to?

Among Ghana’s many ethnic groups, there are some that are matrilineal in tradition, perhaps most notably the Akan, which is comprised of sub-groups Ashanti, Fanti, Akyem, Akuapem, Brong, and Kwahu (Oppong et al. 2005). Particularly among the Akyem of Ghana’s Eastern Region, bride-price is non-existent. In wedding
procedures, the groom’s elder sister leads the congregation that visits the bride-to-be’s family to ask for her hand. If the proposal is accepted, it is made abundantly clear to the groom’s family that this is not a transaction, the bride cannot be purchased; she remains both an individual and a member of her family. Akan women were traditionally not housewives, as was common in 19th and 20th century Europe and North America. Their children belonged to them, and they had their own wealth. While some of this tradition lingers to this day, Ghanaian gender norms have changed quite a bit over time. Although the matrilineal Akan make up 60 per cent of Ghana’s population, gender attitudes today are more representative of the patriarchal tradition of ethnic groups like the Ga.

I would argue that this can be linked to Ranger’s discussion on “false models of colonial codified African ‘tradition’ ” (1997:451). Ranger introduces the idea of invented traditions, which he argues play a major role in the construction of modern African power structures. These traditions were not simply imposed on Africans by colonists. Some Africans, particularly men, desired new social structures and were willing to play along: “Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong to” (Ranger 1997:457).

This collusion of local male leaders and colonists during the late 19th century pushed the Gold Coast further toward a male-dominated social model that normalized patriarchal perceptions of women’s position in society. Particularly men who had returned from studies in Europe or North America and local monarchs, practiced this “progressive traditionalism” (Ranger 1997:457). If the white man’s burden was to civilize the “savage” black and brown peoples of the world, then the burden of the educated African man was to “pick out what is best from (European culture)” (Ranger 1997:457) and adjust it to the local context.
With the mingling of traditional customs and colonial values in the contemporary African context, migrants have to deal with a motley of gender norms upon return. This chapter explores how the returnee experience is shaped by local and transnational perspectives on gender relations, and the frictions borne from this. I will unpack how gender affects expectations of success upon return, how it plays into the professional context, and finally discuss its impact on romantic trysts.

**Gendered Expectations of a Successful Return**

“It’s easier for women to move back, that’s for one. You’ll find that for every one guy that has moved back, there are two or three women”, Lottie Komeh laughed, craning her neck to look at me from the front passenger seat of her car. Her assistant, Penelope, is in the driving seat as we make our way from Fabrex Factory in Accra’s Spintex suburb, back to the city centre. She has just finished a meeting about developing a new campaign for the Ghanaian fabric manufacturer after her wildly successful Lupita Nyong’o inspired campaign that astutely capitalised on the global fascination with the Kenyan Oscar-winner. In between directing Penelope to more efficient routes and critiquing Accra’s rowdy drivers, Lottie points to billboards she has crafted with the small staff of her freelance communications company – Komeh and Co., which she runs out of her home in the returnee-heavy neighborhood, Labone.

Every fibre of Lottie’s being drips with confidence: the unwavering steadiness of her voice, the easy eloquence with which she delivers each sentence, her strong posture, and sure-footed, feminine stride. She looked rather like a goddess in her fushia-colored paisley maxi dress. My tour guide Rhoda, who accompanied me for the interview, leaned over and whispered – “She is amazing! I want to be like her when I grow up.” During the car ride, we learned, our wide-eyed admiration growing deeper, that Lottie does marketing for Halipo, a juice brand that is a mainstay in most Ghanaian households. In addition to running Komeh & Co., Lottie is also the editor of
Pro African Woman, a magazine printed by a woman-owned Liberian-British publisher in Birmingham, England. Pro African Woman is currently distributed in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and England. She also runs a current affairs blog called People of Salone, through which she delivers news updates and hard-hitting critiques of the Sierra Leonean government.

Like many returnee women, Lottie came to Accra without a job. She had ideas of the work she was interested in doing, but no concrete leads. She explained that this is not an option for men who move back to the continent. They are expected to have accumulated enough wealth to attract a mate (if they are not already married), be able to support a wife and kids they left behind, or the family they are relocating to Ghana with.

Kehinde Elemide echoed Lottie’s point, “If you’re a guy, and you’re moving back, you really need to sort out your money situation. ‘Cause once you come back, and it finishes you don’t have the same safety nets, you know? You’re the one taking girls on dates; they’re not taking you on dates.” As we chatted in the sweltering heat of her office on a particularly scorching afternoon, sweat trickling down our temples and air conditioner whirring in the background, she explained the pressure on men to return in a manner that projects an image of success. They must have at least one solid job offer under their belts before they can even consider packing up a container and shipping their belongings to Accra.

Due to the serendipitous nature of his return, Jacob Acheampong did not have time to plan for his move. After a stint of fieldwork, he and his American wife decided to embrace life in Ghana and see where the journey would take them. Unfortunately, this meant that Jacob started his life as a returnee in Accra with no savings. As we sat cross-legged on a white-washed stone bench at Mfiase University’s
outdoor teaching space, Jacob opened up about his financial situation, tugging at the hem of his sky-blue oxford shirt. Money has been a point of insecurity for Jacob, who was well-aware of the expectations Ghanaian society had of him as a male returnee. In particular, not having a car for his commute to Mfiase University, a 30-minute drive or hour long tro tro ride from his home in Accra, has been a daily challenge for him. During his first year back, he sensed judgment from colleagues, friends, and family for not having prepared more carefully for his return. To buffer against these judgments Jacob has worked hard to distance himself from the returnee label:

> When I came back to Ghana, I tried as hard a possible not to appear foreign. I consciously did that because I did not have the funds to sustain that lifestyle. The financial constraints of the time meant that I was taking drop-in\(^{14}\) and tro tro\(^{15}\) all the time. I didn’t want people to associate me with money. Because in Ghana, the longer you’ve lived outside, the more money you should have. And I did not want people to say, “look at this guy! He went to abrokyiri\(^{16}\) for ten years, and he can’t afford this and that”. And people will say it whether you like it or not. So I try to live a life that until I tell you I’ve lived outside, you wouldn’t know it.

Kojo Gramson also felt this pressure when he moved from London to Accra. Having been unemployed for some time and working low-paying temp jobs when he could find them, Kojo returned with meager savings. What he had was not enough to afford rent in Accra, where leasing a mid-range flat can cost upwards of 10,000 US dollars a month. To save money, Kojo decided to move in with his father and stepmother. He often found himself defending this decision to friends in London:

> I did what a lot of people do when they return – I moved in with my parents. People on the continent live with their parents a lot longer than people in the West do. In the West, around 18, you move out. That’s the norm. In Accra even if you wanted to do that, the economics don’t allow for that. So I’ve lived with my family until quite recently. My friends from the UK would hear and judge me. I’d say, “You come to Ghana and let’s talk.” The rent situation here is ridiculous. We’re talking two-year advances! It’s crazy.

\(^{14}\) Ghanaian vernacular for a shared taxi  
\(^{15}\) Repurposed mini vans used as public transportation in Ghana  
\(^{16}\) Twi word for ‘abroad’
The image of a successful return is not the only reason male returnees work so hard to have certain pieces in place before moving home. During their years outside the African continent, they have often grown accustomed to a certain degree of independence, a lifestyle they may not be able to live out in their parents’ homes. Women returnees also become used to a certain freedoms while abroad. However, upon returning, most women choose to move in with family or friends. This requires reintegration into Ghanaian social hierarchy, in which older people have an upper hand. For many women returnees, this means relinquishing freedoms of self-determination and mobility they have become used to. Akosua Nnamdi, born to a Ghanaian mother and Nigerian father in Boston, chuckled in reminiscence of her disbelief at being given a curfew while living with her aunt during her first year in Accra:

When I moved here, I lived with my aunt, and the curfews were ridiculously early. Each day when I was about to head out, she would say, ‘I think it’s going get dark by 5 pm. Please be back by then’. And I think that’s normal, especially for people who haven’t had as much Western influence; single women are expected to be home early. Men, on the other hand, are pretty much free to do as they like and stay out till whenever, even if they aren’t married.17

Despite this trade-off in independence, almost all of my participants believed that women make up the larger part of Accra’s returnee community. In my search for participants, I initially wanted to find equal numbers of men and women participants. While identifying female returnees was relatively easy, I saw my sample reflect the gendered nature of return as I had to dig deeper to find male participants. Afia Annan shared her thoughts on how gendered ideas of success upon return contribute to this:

Because Ghana is society, if you’re single woman, you’re expected to move in with your family when come back. With guys, it’s more flexible. People may not bat an eye if they moved home. But if they have their own place, it’s seen as even better. For women, you’re not expected to have the means for that. If

17 Tape-recorded interview with Akosua Nnamdi, June 19, 2015. All quotations from Akosua in this thesis come from this interview.
you’re a guy in your thirties, there is the idea that you’ve amassed a certain amount of wealth and have come to seek a wife. People expect both genders to be educated and have money. But for men, being a provider and being able to support a family, are important.

Afia thinks these expectaitons make it harder for men to return. However, she suggests that Ghanaian society has a tenous relationship with returnees in general. With many Ghanaians aspiring to leave the country and seek opportunities for advancement in the West, it can be difficult for locals to comprehend returnees’ desire to live on the continent. When a returnee comes back, regardless of their gender, locals perceive it as an act of concession; they have failed to make something of themselves in the West and have returned with their tails between their legs. Afia found this rather puzzling:

There is a stigma around coming back. Because so many people are trying to go abroad, when you come back it means you somehow failed. You didn’t make it there. People always say, “Why did you come back? You’re not telling the truth!” There’s no story. Ghana is my home! I always wanted to come back. They wouldn’t want to leave if wasn’t for the opportunities out there. I see those opportunities here. To me, Ghana is a great place to be. But I think for men, it makes it even harder to come back, because of the whole male ego thing.

As I learned about the gender dynamics of return through these conversations, one question came to mind: Why would these women trade independence for the strict rules and regulations of living with family? Kehinde explained that this ‘sacrifice’ is justified by a desire to feel safe. Living in a family home means there are constantly people around, and a watchman at the gate. She elaborated on the link between safety and her choice to move in with her parents:

I think in the diaspora, it’s easier to feel comfortable doing your own thing. Here, it’s either socially unacceptable or legitimately more challenging live by yourself as a woman. And I say here more generally as African countries, not just Ghana. So that is a factor that drives many women to think about living at home or with other people, whereas in the US, they might have lived alone.

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In spite of the pressures associated with return, returnees are finding ways to balance social expectations with their own aspirations. For many of Accra’s returnees, this means doing work they find fulfilling and that contributes to the betterment of Ghana and Africa. For many this includes building enough financial and social capital to support a family. In the next sections, I will look at how gender impacts returnees’ professional and romantic pursuits.

**Gender Dynamics in the Workplace**

Upon moving home, returnees must learn to navigate the gender dynamics of urban Ghanaian workplaces. Some never truly adapted to the way gender relations in the Western environments they lived in, where various waves of women’s empowerment movements in Europe and North America have put in place social checks on male behavior to make sure that women can have a greater sense of agency and comfort in workplaces. These checks often left Nii Tsatsu feeling uncertain as to how he should comport himself while living in the US. “I would say that I was way more careful in the US with how I deal with women or speak to them. Because sometimes I think people take things too seriously over there. It does not take a lot for somebody to feel slighted or accuse you of something.” When I asked Nii to elaborate, he added “I’ll give you an example: if you are working with a woman and you compliment them on a nice outfit, in Ghana you could just say “ene de, wo a ye fe o!”. 18 It’s so normal; the women don’t even react. But in America, you say that to somebody, and inadvertently they might say ‘Oh, why is that your focus? Why are you saying that to me?’ ”

While in graduate school in Chicago and later working as a journalist in Washington D.C., one of Nii’s greatest fears was to offend a female colleague and

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18 Twi for “You look beautiful today!”
find himself embroiled in a sexual harassment lawsuit. He found the US too selfconscious when it comes to this topic, too concerned with labels and with rights. He explained, “And maybe somebody, a feminist, would say I feel this way because I think I can get away with more stuff here. But the truth is, and maybe I am talking too much here, but before I went to the US, the word ‘feminism’ – I can’t say it meant much to me.”

Nii scowls as his lips form the word ‘feminism’. His tone is thick with mockery at the mention of a concept he argues is not needed in the Ghanaian context. Nii believes that handling the issue of gender is a far simpler affair, not only in Ghana but on the African continent as a whole. “In general, I feel like men and women alike are more comfortable dealing with women here.” He thinks the Western world complicates gender conversations by constructing and using terminology like ‘feminism’ and ‘sexual harassment’. Ghanaian women, he argues, are able to embody the core tenets of feminism without this label. “My mother was an example of somebody who was a feminist without screaming at the top of her lungs, ‘Hey, I am a feminist!’ ”, he tells me. Nii’s mother ran the household and kept tabs on the lives of everyone in her family, while excelling in her profession outside the home. He adds, “It’s hard for me to think of her as anything less than my father’s equal.”

Nii expresses a common sentiment in Ghanaian society, among men and women alike, that women can be in dominant positions but within certain social constraints. In We Were Feminists in Africa First, Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo and Zimbabwean journalist Adewale Maja-Pearce (1990) explain the reasons behind this notion. Aidoo explains that historically, West African women, and particularly Ghanaian women, have enjoyed a greater deal of independence and agency than many of their African counterparts. At some points in history, it would not be an
exaggeration to argue that Ghanaian women were “luckier than most women in the world” (Adewale and Aidoo 1990:17). However from within Ghanaian society, Aidoo argues that Ghanaian women are as oppressed as their female peers anywhere else in the world. And this oppression only intensified in the wake of the colonial experience.

Aidoo is not suggesting that sexism was introduced to Ghana by the British. However, like Ranger, she argues that modern Ghanaian gender dynamics are deeply impacted by traditions invented during the colonial project: “it definitely seems that the kind of systematic exclusion was born out of a total misunderstanding of how our societies operated […] they didn’t come to understand us and definitely had very negative effects on contemporary African women” (1990:17). The colonizer, observing the world through a myopic lens, transposed his cultural norms onto the African context. Dealings around land, labour, and other resources were carried out almost exclusively between men. Opportunities to study in the West were largely awarded to men, who returned to occupy positions of power and influence, both during the colonial era and following independence. Local women had been entrepreneurs and tradespeople for centuries, and occupied important positions in religious and political hierarchies as priestesses, medicine women, traditional psychologists, and monarchs. The conquest of the continent created opportunities for local men to assert dominance over women. African women, as a result, found themselves “colonised by the coloniser, and then by our own men” (Aidoo and Adewale 1990:17).

Nii rejected the idea that Ghanaian men assert, subconsciously or consciously, any dominance over their countrywomen, in the workplace or otherwise. Jacob Acheampong echoed this sentiment. He shared his perspective on the impact of gender on the returnee experience, “I don’t think me being male and returning has
gotten me any advantages.” As I went to ask the next question, it seemed his anthropological critical thinking lens kicked in, and he added laughing: “Unless I’m in that false consciousness as a male, where I can’t see my own privilege.” Jacob grew up in a female-dominated Ashanti home and was sure that if he were benefitting from male privilege, he would have noticed.

During my conversations with Jacob and Nii, I smiled, nodded, and swallowed the blazing rants that wanted to crawl up my throat, and lecture them on the importance of feminism and womanism to general social progress on the continent. However, I held back because I wanted them to feel comfortable expressing their honest views. Though both meant no ill with their perspectives, one wonders whether they can truly discern, from the vantage point of male identity within a patriarchal society, if they are being unduly favoured or not, and if the women around them feel as liberated and empowered as they imagine. In some cases, Ghanaian women, deeply steeped in their culture, do not seem to observe the gender disparities that impact their personal and professional lives. Lottie Komeh provided some insight into the reasons why many middle-class African women comfortably reside within the confines of patriarchy:

The interesting thing about power; is when you’re in and part of it, you don’t even know that there’s something wrong. And for a lot of women on the continent, they’re not even aware that they live in patriarchal societies. And they themselves are proponents of patriarchy and defenders of it too.

Aidoo and Adewale discuss whether African men have deliberately positioned themselves as mediators between African women and white men, knowing the benefits this could yield. Not seeking to vilify Ghanaian men, Aidoo argues though that is the outcome, it was not a premeditated action. Rather, African men simply took “the line of least resistance” (1990:18) in a difficult situation. However, from observing and researching Ghanaian society and popular culture, I would argue that
produced what I refer to as a “double-damning” of Ghanaian women – the result of both misogynistic tendencies of traditional gender dynamics and those introduced by the colonisers. In the oft-idealized traditional Akan context, a woman could occupy a number of prominent posts in society, but her own body became a tool used against her. During menstruation, women were considered unclean and forbidden from working or engaging with friends and family (Adewale and Aidoo 1990).

The conceptions mentioned above continue to impact the way women move in local professional spaces. In the last five centuries since Portuguese explorers first set foot on the shores of what today is Ghana, they have been used to justify male dominance in leadership positions across the African continent. Though both past and present paint an image of a Ghana in which women do not hold most of the social agency, the merging of Western and local misogynistic ideals has resulted in a distrust of Ghanaian women that gives birth to such popular maxims as ‘Fear Woman and Live Long’ (Sutherland-Addy 2005:255), immortalized in song by Fanti highlife legend, A.B. Crentsil.

Esi Sutherland-Addy interrogates this distrust, its roots in Ghanaian tradition, both original and invented, as well as the proverbs, folk songs, and tales crafted, passed down and repurposed (as done by Crentsil) to perpetuate the idea of an intrinsically negative “female social persona” (2005:259). It is interesting to note that a number of these quotes address women’s vocation, outlining the spaces women can access without causing harm or alarm. An example is, “The woman sells garden eggs and not gunpowder”, which defines produce as commodity suitable for a woman to sell, while the more profitable gunpowder can only be commoditized and profited from by men. Another adage, “When a tall woman carries palm nuts, a hornbill eats
them,” warns that if a woman steps out of place, professionally, her livelihood (symbolized by the palm nuts) will be destroyed.

Lottie Komeh started her magazine, ProWoman Africa, to counter this view that certain professional spaces are off limits to women. As a returnee, she has found that men are comfortable when women aspire to excellence within traditionally feminine professions, such as catering, fashion, and the beauty industry. And though Lottie genuinely believes women can thrive and excel in these areas, she also thinks there are significant financial opportunities in other sectors and wants to help open these spaces up to African women, so they too can access big profits. As we drove to an upscale Japanese restaurant, she explained: “When I got here I kept asking ‘where is the real money?’ And when you look at it, where there is real money, women aren’t there. For me, wealth and independence are the biggest factors for women to fight patriarchy”. Lottie uses her magazine to publish stories about African women who are breaking socio-economic barriers and venturing into areas like technology, petroleum engineering, and the global business sector.

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As Nii spoke of relaxed workplace atmospheres, I recalled conversations with female returnees about situations where the line between personal and professional had become blurry. Professional returnee women, working to obtain government contracts or secure meetings with important political or public figures, may find that their gender grants them access to certain spaces. This is because, as Aidoo outlined, most of these positions are occupied by men, many of whom use their social standing to pursue romantic or sexual relationships. Afia Annan spoke of an incident in which a male client began to flirt with her:

I once had this hour long conversation with a client about his wife and his children. I think they lived abroad or something. Then by the end of the
conversation, he was like ‘What do you like to do in the city, in Accra, for fun?’ And I was like ‘Oh you know, just hang out.’ Then he said, ‘They’ve just opened up a new mall in Weija. Have you been there?’ ‘No, I haven’t been to that mall yet.’ And he’s like ‘Anytime you wanna go shopping, let me know, I’ll take you.’ We just talked about his family’ for however long, and now he wants to take me shopping for clothes and buy me all this stuff?

This man wanted to be Afia’s sugar daddy, local vernacular for middle aged married men who initiate relationships with young women, referred to as sugar babies. Sugar daddies provide young women with gifts or money, often in exchange for a sexual and/or romantic relationship. For many young women in Ghana, this becomes a means to an end; a way to get ahead in a system that is otherwise not stacked in their favour. Sanyu A. Mojola, who studies these relationships in Kenya, refers to them as “transactional sex relationships” (2014:8). She describes them as emblematic of the “entwinement of intimacy and money” (2014:32). This phenomenon is not unique to Ghana or Kenya, but represents “gendered dynamics in many parts of the world where marketing and promotion of consumption of goods work to make modernity and romance synonymous with consumption” (Mojola 2014: 31-32). For many young women in Ghana, transactional sex relationships become a means to an end; a way to get ahead in a system that otherwise is not stacked in their favor.

Though some women engage in these relationships to reclaim agency in a system built to disadvantage them, the patriarchal system makes it such that women are damned whether or not they participate in transactional relationships. While in Ghana, I frequently overheard or engaged in conversations about this cultural phenomenon. It was interesting to observe that the bulk of the responsibility for these relationships is placed on the shoulders of women. Women who engage in these relationships have often been labeled as shallow, ruthless, and immoral (Oppong et al.
2005). An example is the classic Amakye Dede song “Mmaa Pe Sokoo”, in which the first verse reads:

Women love the luxurious life  
It is the luxurious life that women love  
The women of today, if you have no money they do not love you  
Women love the luxurious life  
It is the luxurious life that women love.

Why do these women risk defamation for gifts and money? One reason is the popular perception that women are defined by the men to whom they are attached. Of both Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean society, Lottie Komeh says, “They’re always trying to find a place for you. Are you somebody’s daughter? Are you somebody’s wife or girlfriend? Society is much more comfortable when they know where and to whom you ‘belong’. ” Sutherland-Addy connects this to the “Fear Woman” mentality and situates it deep in Ghanaian tradition through proverbs, highlighting two strong examples of women being defined by their connection to men: “If a woman buys a gun, it must lean against the wall of man’s room” and “the beauty of a woman is attributed to her husband” (2005: 259). As a woman living alone in Accra (her father and her boyfriend are both still based in the US), Lottie has often felt like an outlier for not wanting to be appraised based on male connections. In most Ghanaian homes, a woman only leaves her parents’ home when she gets married. In the past, some women were happy to live at home until their 30s and even their 40s. Today, women are getting hungry for independence at an earlier age. However, the mindset remains that a man is needed to do this.

Lottie believes this is one reason many local women enter and stay in unhealthy relationships. She has made it her mission to educate Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean women, through her magazine and her lifestyle, that one can achieve social and economic independence by striving for professional success. During our conversation, my eyes were drawn to her phone case, embossed in colorful letters “A
Man Is Not A Financial Plan”. She explained that this was an initiative she had going in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, disseminating t-shirts and phone cases embellished with this mantra. She wants to counter the notion that “the boy’s role is to give, and the girl’s to collect”.

After chatting with Lottie, I pondered whether Western feminist frameworks can be appropriated and applied to the Ghanaian and African contexts? Aidoo (1990) suggests that the progress of the continent is contingent on the inclusion of women in decision-making processes across the board; in educational institutions, the formal political arena, the business sector, and in traditional politics. In her conversation with Adewale she stated, “I don’t see how you can be an African nationalist and not be a feminist, whether you are a man or woman (1990:18).” Lottie Komeh identifies as a feminist and believes that there is a need for a mental revolution, in Ghana and across the continent, around gender. She thinks middle-class women, including those in the returnee community, can use their positionality to improve the situation for fellow women who have not been privileged with as much agency. She elaborated, “I think when you’re in the middle, you take for granted what life is really like for the majority of women on the continent. ‘Cause money buys you out of certain gendered experiences. But being a woman on this continent, it’s something else altogether. It’s so real.”

“Love is Hard to Find in this Town”

I wish that someone had sat me down and told me how differently male-female dynamics and relationships operate here as opposed to the West. I came in the presumption that the ground rules would pretty much be the same. I have since learned that they are very much not.

− Kojo Gramson (November 21, 2014)

This was 37-year-old male Ghanaian-British returnee Kojo Gramson’s answer to the question “What is one piece of advice you wish someone had given you before
Toa-Kwapong

your return to Ghana?” Most returnees find navigating matters of the heart to be quite different in Accra than in the Western cultures they inhabited before returning. Jacob Acheampong spoke about Accra’s dating scene: “If I had not been married when I returned to Ghana I would have stayed single. Finding a partner in Accra is a full-time job.” Jacob moved back with his wife, a white woman from Nebraska who he met while completing his doctoral studies in anthropology in Illinois. They had not experienced any significant challenges being a married couple in Accra, with the exception of some initial financial struggles and trying to avoid the *obroni price*, where vendors charge foreign people higher prices under the assumption that they are wealthy. He shared some strategies they used to get by: “When we came we didn’t have money. Literally we didn’t have anything. So I would ask her to hide, hail a cab, and like “Ei massa, ahe?” [Hey buddy, how much?] When they’d give the local price, then I’d call her. This would really piss people off.”

Aside from the financial struggles, it is not surprising that Jacob’s transition to life in Accra as a married man has been smooth. The stakes are higher for men when it comes to expectations of professional achievement upon return. However, their female counterparts have the shorter end of the stick when it comes to navigating romance in Accra. Though African societies may not expect returnee women to have their professional lives in perfect order, there is the expectation that these women are married, engaged, coupled up, or in the very least thinking seriously about nuptials and having children. Afia Annan discussed this double standard during our conversation:

I think the experience is definitely different in terms of gender. I came to Ghana without a job. I mean I had a few good leads, but I didn’t have an apartment or a permanent offer. So I had a lot of in-person meetings and interviews. And in 100% of those conversations, the fact that I was single came up each time, regardless of whether I was having an informal chat with a
family friend or having an interview at a multinational company. People were very interested in that.

Most female returnees are in their mid-twenties to their early thirties, which in many modern middle-class African contexts is considered an ideal age bracket for a woman to settle down and start a family. But for many returnee women, this is not the only priority in their lives. They have gotten their degrees, worked for some years in Europe or North America, and now they have come to Ghana to build their empires. Many also want to get married and have kids, but first, they want to establish themselves as entrepreneurs and/or experts in their fields of work. However, as Afia Annan explained, in the Ghanaian context, a woman’s education and profession are often “perceived as resume-builder in the search for marriage, for being a trophy wife.” For the “fairer sex”, marriage is the socially prescribed end-goal.

“My grandma got married at 19. For her marriage is the ultimate thing,” said Mawumefa Quartey as we sat in her office in Accra’s Dzorwulu neighborhood, where she works remotely for the Coalition for African Progress (CAP). The 25-year-old returned to Ghana a single woman, one year after completing her undergraduate degree at Mount Holyoke. Mawumefa, who was about to move to Mauritius to be part of the founding staff at CAP’s first university campus at the time of our conversation, appeared content with her life. She had a job she loved that allowed her to travel across the African continent. She was in back in Accra, her favorite place in the world, with family and friends she had missed terribly during her sojourn in the US. Yet her marital status, or lack thereof, was discussed far more often than her academic and professional achievements. For her grandmother and the older women at her church, this was a major cause of concern.

19 Tape-recorded interview with Mawumefa Quartey, June 8, 2014. All quotations from Mawumefa in this thesis come from this interview.
Every day Mawumefa returned from work, her grandmother, who lived with the family would ask her if she brought a husband home with her. “I don’t know where I’m supposed to find a husband at work,” she laughed. Her co-worker Kwame, the only other CAP employee in the office that day, was seated on the opposite side of the room with a headset on. He laughed at his colleague’s grandmother’s statement.

At first, it seemed that Mawumefa’s sense of humor and thick skin must be the secret ingredients with which she weathered the incessant comments about her relationship status. As our conversation went on, it becomes apparent that she worked hard to stay connected to the continent during her time away. In Massachusetts, most of her friends were Ghanaian or from other African countries, several of whom she had gone to school with at the SOS Herman Gmeiner School in Tema, Ghana. Her romantic interactions also kept her rooted in the African context – she dated exclusively Ghanaian or African men in the US. She wanted to settle in Ghana, marry an African man and have children who felt as strong a connection to their homeland as she did. With this in mind, she purposefully kept her time abroad as short as she could so as not to lose touch, visiting at least once a year.

This was also the case for professor, social activist, and entrepreneur, Araba Forson. During her twelve-year sojourn in the United States, she worked hard to stay up to date with the evolving norms of her country. Before moving back to Ghana in 2007, she tried to visit at least once a year. When she finally moved home, she did not feel socially or culturally removed. Friends in the States and her family in Ghana tried hard to dissuade her from moving back. However, staying in the US was never part of her plan. She was concerned that if she stayed any longer, that she might end up in a romantic relationship that would bind her to the US and distract her from realizing her dream to settle in Ghana. She explained:
Because I have a brother in the US [...] I have so many people who they settle down, then they have one kid. Then they have another. Then the kids are in school, and they don’t want to destabilize them, so they say “let’s wait till they’re in college.” And then 50 years later, you’re still there. I figured this is time. I’m single, no children. This is the time to move. If I don’t move now, I’ll get trapped.”

Araba came back to Ghana with the thought that a couple of years in, she would meet someone, get married, and start a family. Yet at age 37, six years into her return, Araba was still unmarried and childless. When I asked her what she wanted her life to look like in 10 years, she said that a husband and children are something she desires quite deeply. I was a student of Araba’s for the semester I spent at Mfiasse University. Over the course of the semester, I came to admire her deeply. I was not alone. She was a revered figure on campus and a well-known social and political figure in Accra’s middle-class circles. Araba is smart, attractive, educated, motivated, and loves her country. In her leadership lecture, my mind would often wander, pondering why no gentleman had snapped up this gem of a woman.

Over the course of the fieldwork process, I came to learn that Araba’s situation was quite common. It seems the majority of returnee women in Accra are single, while most of their male counterparts are either dating, engaged, or married. Lottie Komeh, who at the time of our interview was in a long-distance relationship and expecting her first child, offered an explanation for this trend: “I feel like the continent is not ready for single, independent, self-assured women who don’t ‘know their place’.” When I applied Lottie’s explanation to Araba and many of the other single women I spoke to, the puzzle pieces began to fall in place. Araba and other female returnees are often outspoken, educated, and confident, which rubs some men and even some women, the wrong way.

I witnessed this first-hand one morning during Araba’s leadership class. Araba, exceptionally punctual and particular about order, watched with her arms crossed as
my classmates stood outside the door, chatting and laughing well into the class hour. Only six of seventy students trickled in and took our seats. She opened the door and informed the crowd outside the door that they would not be allowed to come in, a penalty for their tardiness. This was mainly a shock-tactic – to let them know that they had been disrespectful and prevent this scenario from occurring again. A few minutes later, she let the rest of the class in. A hush fell over the room as my peers took their seats, digesting what had just happened. A young Nigerian man, Bole, took a seat to my right, his shoulders tense and his lips pursed. Once settled in his seat, he leaned over to me and whispered, his tone dripping with sarcasm “Is she on her period or something?” The young man sitting to my left, Kofi joined in, “She must be angry because she doesn’t have a husband.” They high-fived each other over my head, elated to have brought Araba down a peg or two.

There has long been the perception that Ghana is a “man’s land and you only survive if you know how to live in it as a woman” (Gourdine 2003:78). And to live in it as a woman is to exist within the frames constructed by the patriarchy. It is not uncommon to hear middle class Ghanaian men describe Ghanaian women as ‘West African tigers’. This is at times offered as an explanation for why they marry non-black women and women from other parts of the African continent. It appears that Akan women in particular rarely comport themselves in a manner that is satisfactory to local men. These women are perceived as too rowdy and too outspoken. This perception has come to be extended to returnee women, who are doubly-damned in this regard. They are determined to live on African soil “amongst their kin” (Gourdine 2003:77). They are also unwilling to compromise their standards, be they professional or romantic, firm in the belief that “living as a woman is having what you
want” (Gourdine 2003:78). They want it all; career, marriage, liberation, and life on continent, and they believe it can be theirs.

Afia Annan recalls going to dinner with a group of returnee women who had been in Accra for quite some time, not long after she had arrived. She had been on a couple of bad dates at the time and was not feeling very hopeful about the pool of men available to her in Accra. The returnee veterans did little to assuage her concerns. If anything they fanned the flames. Being more seasoned on the Accra dating scene, they provided Afia with a list of do’s and don’t’s: “First of all they were like you can’t just date everyone who asks you out. Even if it’s just for coffee or something. It sends the message that you are desperate and people will talk about it.”

In Accra, agreeing to a single date implies some degree of commitment. Therefore going on a date requires careful thought so as not to put across the wrong message. Afia had been in Ghana for nine months and was still accustomed to the flightiness and superficiality of the American dating scene, which today is defined by applications like Tinder and the zeal to sample the options available without placing too much significance on each encounter. In Ghana, a woman who dates different men is thought to have low self-esteem and be of low value. In Afia’s words, it “taints your reputation or credibility as a ‘good woman’”.

According to Afia’s returnee veteran mentors, once a potential dating target had been identified there is still work to be done. It is imperative to do extensive background research on the fellow before agreeing to go on a first date with him. She outlined the ‘rules’: “You have to ask a friend of a friend who he’s dated before, what happened in those relationships, what type of person he is, what his family is like, what they do.” After completing this exhaustive background check and making sure your suitor is worthy of you, you can now entertain the idea of a first date. Afia
explained that there are also important criteria for the first date that must be observed to ensure that your suitor understands your quality as a woman, and your expectations for the relationship: “He can’t take you just anywhere ‘cause then that means he doesn’t respect you, and then it’s all downhill from there. You have to establish that you’re a girl of a certain calibre. So he has to take you someplace really nice the first time. Regardless of what type of job he has or his income.”

Out of courtesy, Afia listened to these women. She still believes that their advice is indicative of the frames within which courtship takes place in Accra. However, about two months into her move, she broke one of these cardinal rules and agreed to go on a date with a local man on the spot, without doing the customary research or stating any expectations. And so far she has no regrets: “We’ve been together seven months, and it’s been going great. I met a great guy by doing things my own way.” Afia knows she has been lucky to find love in Accra as a female returnee with such ease and so quickly. She has heard far too many horror stories about dating in Accra to not be aware of this.

I listened to her speak, astonished by her ability to trust so whole-heartedly the intentions of local men. I had met the romantic scene in Accra with a great deal of skepticism and aloofness, trying to figure if it was me as a person men were interested in, or if my foreign accent and passport were luring them in. Ghanaian-American Akosua Nnamdi laughed as she expressed similar cynicism about dating in Accra: “Unfortunately, I’ve always looked at ‘local’ men with a side eye. I’m always wondering, is there a genuine interest? Or are you just looking for a quick green card?” There is no false modesty with Akosua, who refreshingly admits that she received ample male attention in England as well, where she lived for ten years before moving to Ghana. Though she is no stranger to being an object of the male gaze, she
describes the attention in Accra as excessive. Here, Akosua gets the sense that her American passport and accent, and her British schooling are her most alluring traits. When men approach her, she often wonders if there is a hidden agenda. She shared some thoughts she imagines local suitors have when they approach her: “If I can get her interested in me, she’s foreigner, she can automatically get me places that I can’t go right now.”

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Just like any other type of mobility, return migration is gendered. As a result of their transnational lifestyles, Accra’s returnees find themselves in the position of balancing Western and local gender norms. They must manage ideals of successful return, with women expected to forfeit parts of their autonomy and men burdened with the expectation to step into the role of provider and the financial obligations of this role. While men tend to fare better in the professional context, women returnees find themselves embroiled in male-dominated work spaces, where outdated gender dynamics give rise to social situations like the growing sugar-daddy phenomenon. While the lines between the personal and professional can be blurry, this does not deter single returnees from trying find both success and love in Accra. They develop strategies, both individual and collective, to facilitate these processes. In Chapter Five, I will discuss whether these dynamics affect returnees’ decisions to settle in Ghana or on the continent.
CHAPTER FOUR: ALIENATION, (RE)INTEGRATION, OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

Once they are back home, returnees are faced with the challenge of (re)integration. Ghanaian society and her ‘locals’ places on them the onus of proving, in a variety of situations, that they can not only survive but thrive in an African city. Nadia J. Kim refers to this as the “authenticity dilemma” (209:305). When in the West, African migrants rarely feel a sense of belonging. Despite being born in these host countries and/or spending several years residing in them, many find themselves “racially marginalized as foreigners” there (Kim 2009: 305). As discussed in Chapter Two, many construct their imaginaries of belonging around the ethnic homeland. In this scenario, the homeland is cast as a cultural and ethnic haven where “they racially belong” (Kim 2009:305).
In the West, Afro-diasporic migrants’ physical appearances carry the label of ‘African’ regardless of whether their behaviors or cultural sensibilities are in fact ‘typically African.’ It is with this mentality, that their African identity is intrinsic, that many migrants return to their ethnic homeland (Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009). Upon return they learn that Africanness is conceptualized differently on the continent than in the diaspora. To be authentically African one must embody both racial and cultural characteristics of this identity (Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009, Kim 2009). While the return is often meant to signify a move away from the cultural uncertainty of growing up and/or living in the West, returnees can end up reliving their “struggles with race/ethnicity, nationality, and culture” (Kim 2009:306) in the ethnic homeland, often becoming other there as well. The distinction is that, for the most part, their otherness is not based on phenotypic dissimilarity, but rather a cultural difference (Song 2009).

As we discussed in Chapter Two, many create or are given (by their parents) a mythical version of the homeland, around which they develop a dominant image of life there, often viewed through a comparative lens against life in the host country. Living outside the ethnic homeland, many migrants combat a sense of rootlessness, developing an obsession with it. Upon return, their essentialized image is held up against the reality of life on the continent (Hirsch and Miller 2011).

This chapter will focus on the challenges returnees face with reintegrating into Ghanaian and African society. Though they perceive themselves as homecomers, many returnees find their claims to belonging challenged by local Ghanaians who perceive them as newcomers (Ní Laoire 2009). While addressing the trials of “not quite belonging” (Ní Laoire 2009:40) and how returnees manage this, it will also address socio-economic and political disillusionment, and how returnees deal with
infrastructural challenges and try to find their place in the home society’s development project (Hammond 2015, Sinatti 2015).

‘Some Things Will Never Change’: The Stage of Disillusionment

“Remembrance of things past is not necessarily remembrance of things as they were.”

− Marcel Proust, In Search of Lost Time (1913-1927)

I arrived in Accra to a gray and gloomy skyline on the evening of June 5, 2015, just two days after the city center had been devastated by severe flooding and an explosion at a gas station. The streets were filled with murky puddles, multicolored garbage, and potholes so deep one might have thought Accra’s mechanics dug them to keep themselves in business. As I descended from the plane and felt the hot and familiar scents of Ghana’s capital wash over me, I was not filled with joy or a sense of comfort that often accompanies a homecoming. My heart was heavy. I was not happy to be here. The heat felt like an assault, as did the heavy, musky air on which it traveled.

Unlike on my last trip in 2014, this time I made it through security quickly, no one stopping me to ask for a bribe along the way. I felt a strong sense of relief when I saw my uncle with whom I would be staying. His face was kind and warm, and he greeted me with a comment about my bearing a striking resemblance to my father. My face formed into a smile. As we drove out of the airport parking lot, I heard a familiar melody from the radio. It was “Changes” by late American rap artist Tupac Shakur. This song had been the soundtrack to my Ghana in the years I lived there as a child. As I saw Ghana through older eyes and a more mature mind, aware of the socio-economic realities that my country faced, Tupac’s lyrics rang in my ears: “That’s just the way it is. Some things will never change”.
While African migrants have been returning to the continent for quite some time, return migration to Ghana spiked in 2007 when, as mentioned, the nation found oil off its coast. This discovery made Ghana the face of the Africa Rising discourse, with the prediction that the nation’s already impressive growth rate would increase further over the next decade, potentially propelling it out of the Third World and into the Second. It became an attractive site for European, North American, and East Asian expatriates, as multinational companies like Google set up their West African branches in Accra. Ghanaians and other Africans also perceived this as their cue to come home, set up businesses, and play their part in this phase of nation-building. Unfortunately, Ghana’s oil wealth did not result in the kind of growth envisioned. Politicians became significantly wealthier, large amounts of oil were being exported, but Ghanaian citizens saw few benefits from this resource.

My last visit to Ghana before my 2014 study abroad experience was in 2008, a year after the new oil reserves had been found. I was astounded at the progress I saw. Roads that had been bumpy, terracotta-colored dirt paths on my family’s previous visit in 2003 had been immaculately paved. Accra’s streets were cleaner than they had been in some time. Public restrooms were plentiful and in good condition. As a 14-year-old beginning to observe the world through the eyes of a young adult, I also noticed for the first time, the deep class and gender inequalities in Ghanaian society. There was still a lot of work to be done to improve the living conditions of poor Ghanaians (who made up the larger part of the population), and to ensure freedom and protection to women across social strata (Anyidoho and Manuh 2010). However, there was an awareness of this and the changes I observed seemed to be moving Ghana in a positive direction. This was the image I returned to Ghana with in 2014, one of great
optimism. My heart was heavy with sadness and disappointment at the Ghana I met that summer, and again in June 2015.

On a somber stormy Accra night, Afia Annan spoke about the reality check she has experienced about “real life” in Ghana. Afia had started to confront the reality that she had returned to Ghana at a particularly challenging economic juncture. The government had not been able to translate oil revenues into socio-economic progress for the larger population. Power-cuts had become part and parcel of daily life in Accra. Sometimes the lights would go off for 12 hours, and then be on for 24, dubbed *dumsor* or “lights on, lights off” by Ghanaians. Dumsor would generally happen in the morning, when people needed electricity to heat water for their baths and iron their clothes. In a culture that places great emphasis on hygiene and presentation, careful planning and creativity have become essential parts of everyday life.

When Afia was growing up in the United States, her parents made sure she visited Ghana at least once every two years. While Afia is grateful for the links she was able to establish with her homeland through these temporary mobilities, she feels they may have given her a “false impression” of life in Ghana. Upon arrival in Ghana, she found a gap between her nostalgic image, and what Norbye refers to as “real-life space” (2010:145). She reflected on this:

> When you’re here on vacation, it’s a short period. You don’t really get to experience the full 360. You see your friends, and it’s all, “I haven’t seen you in forever! It’s great to see you!” But like once you’re here, it’s like real life. People have stuff to do. It’s been a challenge, creating another network of friends, re-establishing relationships and what not.

Due to a “false impression” of Ghana, borne from essentializing the country while abroad, Afia experienced a major culture shock upon returning. For many returnees, the rosy imaginaries of the continent that they create and nurture, from their own memories and/or those of their parents, are remarkably different from ‘normal’ Ghanaian life. The socio-economic challenges that on holiday seem at best endearing
and at worst inconvenient become daily scourges that must be managed in order to get by.

After nine years in the United States, first-generation migrant Gabriel Addy has found the socioeconomic disorder of Ghana difficult to deal with. While the US had its challenges, Gabriel enjoyed living in a society where proper institutions, however, flawed, existed and for the most part worked as they should. Where measures were put in place to check those in positions of power, and the protests of civil society could make a difference. Though Gabriel does not like to draw comparisons between life in the US and Ghana, since returning he has often felt hopeless and helpless as a citizen:

There is not a single day you step out from the house you don’t have something to complain about in this country, whether driving on the road or walking by the roadside. It takes a lot of sacrifice for a Ghanaian who has lived in an advanced environment where discipline works, institutions work, to come and live here [his emphasis]. I can find my way around things. But it is not the best of places to be if you have something to compare with.

Though Gabriel was frustrated, he was not surprised. Having lived in Ghana for 34 years before moving to the US, he had some context for what life might be like. These experiences were completely new to Ruth Adjaye, whose return in 2011 marked her first visit to Ghana since she left at age four. Ruth came to Ghana to challenge herself. She wanted to get to know the country she was born in and from which her blood flowed. Having spent most of her life in Western Europe, particularly France and England, Ruth had to quickly learn how things work in Ghana. In the process, she has dealt with her share of frustrations, particularly with what she describes as the absence of balance in Ghanaian society:

I had huge culture shock when I moved here. I was not well-prepared at all when I came. There’s not a lot of balance here. Either we have very low self-esteem about ourselves and our country, or we think we know it all. That’s
why I think there is so much poverty, so much corruption; because we do not think highly enough of ourselves.  

In her comment Ruth alludes to a sense of inferiority among Ghanaians. Akosua Nnamdi, who lived in the United Kingdom prior to returning to Ghana, reiterated a similar concern a few days later. Akosua believes that this inferiority complex is present not only among Ghanaians, but is common across the African diaspora. Over time, this complex has shaped the way Afro-diasporic people view themselves and their place in the global context. The term ‘the colonial mentality’ was coined to describe the belief among other formerly colonized peoples that their culture, customs, languages, and even their bodies are “diabolic, evil, backward, primitive and uncivil” (Nnam 2007:vii). Like the Igbo philosopher and scholar Nkuzi Nnam (2007), Akosua believes that many of the social ills plaguing African societies today stem from this mind set. She aired her frustrations:

> I really hate the colonial mentality – this idea that everything that’s white is better, including if you’ve been educated with white people or abroad. It’s just better. I really hate that. What I wish the larger continent would understand better is that Africa runs the world. Quite literally, we have just about all the natural resources needed on our land. I don’t really understand why our leaders so freely give them out, with little consideration for the impact on their people, just to make sure that people who don’t care about you, are okay. I think Ghana gave out most of their petrol and their natural gas. I think they only get around 10% of the revenue. Why would you do that? That doesn’t even make any sense.

Akosua, while fluffing her cotton candy-textured afro, delivered with the eloquence and vigor of an attorney the argument that acknowledging this colonial mentality, and actively working to dismantle it might help Africa realize its potential to be a powerful and influential global player.

Kojo Gramson, who also lived in England prior to returning to Ghana, expressed similar disdain for “what Nkrumah called the colonial mentality”. Like Afia

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20 Tape-recorded interview with Ruth Adjaye, June 15, 2015. All quotations from Ruth in this thesis come from this interview.
and Akosua, he held a romantic image of Ghanaian society prior to returning. He shared Akosua’s frustrations with the lack of proper resource management and what he perceived as a departure from traditional values of achieving well-being and progress through communalism (Jackson 2011), and toward what he described as “individualistic capitalism”. He hypothesized: “I think as result of certain experiences we are now unhinged from our moral bearings and are on this rampant, rabid, militant, aggressive capitalism, which is a cancer at the heart of everything”. Akosua had also observed this shift and the increasing presence in Ghanaian society of a “dog-eat-dog mentality” that she thinks stems from a decline in quality of living over the last three years. As life has gotten more challenging, Ghanaians, particularly those suffering most acutely from the harsh realities of poverty, have become thicker-skinned and tougher-mannered in response.

As we sat at her kitchen table, munching on crispy and savory spring rolls prepared by her housekeeper, Rachel Danquah-Aryee pointed out that returnees, first as members of the diaspora and later as continental African citizens, are not exempt from the colonial mentality. It is, in fact, often beneficial to them. Many first generation migrants are sent to the West by their families to study, with the understanding that a Western degree is superior to what they would receive on the continent. For 1.5 and second generation migrants, their dual identities as Western and African can increase their status as they, in certain spaces, are perceived and treated like honorary obronis, the Twi word for “white people”. In the West, African or black had been their primary identity. Upon arriving on the continent, they became the American, British, or French friend or co-worker, their African identity usurped by this.
Due to the belief that European and North American cultures are superior, local Ghanaians often try to emulate Anglophone accents; a cultural phenomenon mockingly referred to as LAFA, a locally acquired foreign accent. Many returnees, particularly 1.5 and second generations often have either an American or English lilt when speaking English, as opposed to a Ghanaian accent. These Western Anglophone accents are referred to as “slangs”. Through their accents, demeanors, and sensibilities, returnees become by their association with the West, socially-elevated in Ghanaian society. Akosua explained:

Returnee privilege is a thing. I notice this especially with my accent. As soon as I speak, it’s completely different. Regardless of what I have to say, people want to listen. People think that if you’re coming from abroad, you’re automatically better-educated. I think if you were like a high school dropout from the US, it would be so easy to get ahead here, simply using the accent.

Rachel had also observed the presence of returnee privilege at play in professional spaces. She came to Ghana to complete national service and then return to the US for medical school. A chance meeting with a college friend resulted in her being hired to set up the Accra branch of InnovateAfrica, a US company that aimed to bring power to 60 per cent of Ghanaians by 2020. Rachel anticipated many challenges and joys with her new job. What she did not bargain for was learning to navigate the privileges that accompany her status as a professional returnee in Accra. As we sat snacking on spring rolls below the steady whir of a ceiling fan, Rachel spoke of observing differences in how she and her local Ghanaian secretary were treated:

Being a returnee, it’s a blessing that has to be managed very carefully. It is easy to be complacent because once people hear this accent and see where you’ve been, you’re suddenly an expert. But you’re not. You’re still growing, and you still need to be challenged. Still, it’s night and day when my secretary, who is a local, calls people. They can be so rude to her. She’s like, “Madam, call dem! Call dem! Use the American slangs” [mimics Ghanaian accent]. And when I do, all of sudden, things are open to me. It’s like, “Oh, we are so sorry for inconveniencing you!”
In a bid to manage her privilege and use it in a constructive manner, Akosua Nnamdi wants to play an active role in improving Ghana. A trained journalist and digital marketer, she long planned to follow the expected path and pursue jobs with big Western media outlets like CNN and BBC. After living in Ghana for the past two years and bearing constant witness to social, economic, and political disorder, she is looking for work in the non-profit sector and hopes to engage in “the types of jobs where I can help to alleviate the unfairness.”

Rachel also hopes the increased presence of returnees can contribute to the socioeconomic fortification of Ghana. She has been equally disillusioned by returnees who in their efforts to help, she argues become self-righteous and hypocritical. She spoke of petty-mindedness within the community, particularly regarding entrepreneurial ventures. Returnees are often driven to set up a business of their own, one that is equal parts philanthropic and profitable. Unfortunately, many end up hoarding their ideas, fearful that someone else might turn it into a reality before they have the chance to. She talked about the Ahaspora network, of which she is a member and through which she had learned about my study. Though Ahaspora and its members are well-intentioned, Rachel worries that the network reinforces an unproductive savior mentality and egoism, among returnees:

I really like the concept: aha – we’re here, but we’re also in the diaspora. But then our logo is ‘here to matter’. Here to matter to who? Are we here to make a difference? Honestly, I think most are here to matter to themselves, not to others”. I just wish people would be upfront about what they’re about [laughs], you know? It’s fine. Some people are self-serving. There’s nothing wrong with that. I’m trying not to judge them.

Araba Forson returned to Ghana with a desire to make a difference. She is what Pærregaard (1997) calls a moral returnee, primarily motivated by a desire to see her country improve and striving to find a place for herself within its ongoing development project. On the last day of the Fall 2014 semester at Mfiase University,
Araba stands in front of her Leadership As Service class, clad in an immaculately-tailored mauve and lilac batik print dress, her head clean-shaven, and a pair of chandelier earrings dangling above her shoulders. An almost mischievous smile on her face, she posed to our class of almost 80 students from all over the African continent, three important take-away questions: “What do you want your legacy to be? What can you do in your own small way to improve your society? What do you envision for the continent?” These are questions that returnees, regardless of the images that draw them home, give great thought to. Araba talked about her quest for balance between realism and idealism, regarding her hopes for Ghana:

Ideally, I want to see serious reform, where the public sector’s efficiency matches that of the private sector. And of course, my hope is that I contribute to that particular change. Realistically, oh, it’s an uphill struggle! And it will take a while, but I hope to see mindsets change. It is slowly happening. People are a lot more conscious than they have been in the past. That gives me hope. I could give you the utopian ‘I want to see everything get better’ [laughs]. But, if I am to prioritize the areas where I really want to see change: public sector reform, education, and industry.

Araba believes striking a balance between aspiration and reality has sheltered her from the sense of disillusionment many returnees struggle with. Rachel Danquah-Aryee agrees that returnees need from this kind realism. Returning to the continent is not for the faint of heart. In the absence of humility, a fighting spirit, and hope that thing can change, she has seen many fellow returnees give up:

Life here is a struggle. You can get eaten up here so fast. I was looking at pictures from my friend’s bachelorette party. She got married in 2012, and more than half of the girls in the picture are gone. They’ve gone back to America. They’ve gone back to London, or wherever they came from. Accra is hard. It’s very hard here. And if you don’t have the tools or try to find the tools need to survive, you’ll end up back where you came from because you’ll just want to ease our life.

As my Accra tour guide, Rhoda and I stood outside the brown gate of Rachel’s home early at 8:55 am on a Wednesday morning, we were met by the jarring sound of metal striking stone. I pushed the gate open to find a petite woman with a curly afro
pulled away from her face by a navy blue hairband, standing in the front yard encircled by a group of men, all significantly taller than her. Though they all towered over her in stature, Rachel was clearly in charge. “No, you have to finish it today! I won’t be here next week. It has to be done today. “Oh shit! Dubie right? I completely forgot. Can we reschedule?” She threw a quick glance in our direction, a pen in her right hand signing off on one document, while she ran her left index finger over another, skimming its content. She asked if it could be possible for us to reschedule for later that night, around 6 pm. We agreed to return that evening. Then she summoned her watchman to open the tall brown gate, and hopped into a large, black Land Rover that made her look even tinier, all while issuing orders to the men on what she expected to see when she got home that evening.

Later that day, Rachel explained that the key to beating disillusionment was keeping managing your expectations of what the return will look like. She greeted us warmly and provided an explanation for the hubbub we had encountered that morning: her home in Accra’s Labone neighborhood had been badly hit by the floods that had devastated the city a week prior. The flimsy wall between her and her neighbor’s compounds had begun to tilt toward the house. Rachel was trying to have it rebuilt and had been struggling for the last week to get her neighbor to sign off on the construction. As she poured herself a glass of her favorite wine, a South African red called the Chocolate Block, she expounded on how she has beaten disenchantment upon return:

If you have these super high expectations, you’re gonna feel angry all the time. You’re just gonna be angry at everything. You have to take everything – the small wins, be appreciative of them. And then when the big wins happen, you’re really appreciative of them too. Fight what for what you believe in, you know? If you know that what you’re asking for is right, you might not always win, but at least, you go down fighting. Swingin’, you know?
For many returnees, the act of returning to Ghana, whether or not they had lived there for an extended period prior to their sojourn in the West, or if they were living in Ghana for the first time, shifted their perception from a fairy tale to quite simply, “real life”. Real life is often unable to live up to the rosy images of home that many returnees hold. I entered my study abroad experience with moral and ethnic images of Ghana. I wanted to return to a place that belonged to a different time and thus no longer existed, except in my heart and my mind. Over my six-month stay in Ghana, it was not only my personal encounters with infrastructural deficits that challenged me. I was frustrated that things had degraded so drastically since my last visit. Perhaps the dominant imagery of my country and my continent as dark and dreary, and my people as helpless, was not completely false, I wondered. Though I was disillusioned, the frustration also nurtured in me a desire to contribute to making positive change in Ghana. This brought up yet another query: what could I do to diminish, let alone demolish, the grand and daunting issues that face my country? As I spoke with returnees and locals alike, who despite tribulations aplenty, refused to give up and were constantly looking for new ways to make life in Ghana what they hoped and dreamed it could be, I could not help but be inspired. It brought to mind an interlude in Tupac’s ‘Changes’, my Ghana soundtrack, where the rapper recites a call to action to the African-American community:

We gotta make a change  
It’s time for us as a people to start making some changes  
Let’s change the way we eat, let’s change the way we live  
And let’s change the way we treat each other  
You see the old way wasn’t working so it’s on us to do  
What we gotta to do survive

As I trekked around Accra, from one returnee interview to the next, each offering endless inspiration through the determination of these individuals and their
local peers to improve Ghana and Africa, I could not help but feel hopeful that one
day, things just might change for the better.

**Becoming ‘Local’ or Remaining A Stranger**

“I didn’t go back there so that the home folks could make admiration over me that I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet. I knew they were not going to pay either of those items too much mind [...] I’d still be just Zora to the neighbors.”


Ruth Adjaye was born in Ghana. When she was four years old, her family packed up and moved to Milan, before finally settling in Paris where Ruth grew up. As a teenager, she left Paris for London where she completed her college education. Here she learned to speak English, and spent a few years as a young professional. In 2011, Ruth decided to return to Ghana. With most of her nuclear and extended family living in the diaspora, Ruth made the bold move of returning with no connections and no safety nets:

I always wanted to come back here. It was kind of personal challenge to myself. I never knew Ghana. I met Ghana when I was a kid, a baby. So I felt very distant from, very ignorant about my own country. And I had always had this dream to know the truth about my country, about Ghana. So I followed that dream.

While living in Italy, France, and later England, Ruth had little interaction with other Africans beyond her family unit. Coming to Ghana was the first time she found herself surrounded by people who phenotypically resembled her. Ruth arrived aware that her cultural sensibilities, her demeanor, and her accent were all very European. She described herself between self-deprecatory giggles as a “culturally half-caste”, Ghanaian vernacular for mixed race. Years of separation from her Ghanaian side made her particularly excited to soak up Ghanaian culture and learn more about her ancestral heritage. While she expected to be an outsider to some degree, she did not expect to be perceived altogether as a foreigner. She explained that this often happens as she goes about daily errands:
When I go to the marketplace, and they hear the accent, they try to play me. But what they don’t realize is that I am still a Ghanaian. I speak my language. It can be really difficult at times because I am in my own country, but my countrymen don’t see me as Ghanaian. People have taken me for an Ivorian, a Nigerian, but never a Ghanaian. This happens every day.

Ruth’s accent, laced with French inflections, is particularly confusing for local Ghanaians trying to place her, culturally and nationally. The majority of Accra’s returnees come back from the Anglophone West; the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. It is not uncommon to hear to an upper middle-class English accent or a southern Californian lilt in a Ghanaian marketplace. It is less common to hear a French or Italian accent, though both France and Italy have sizeable African and Ghanaian migrant populations. It would be interesting in another study to interrogate the question of why fewer Afro-diasporans from non-Anglophone nations are returning. Being a member of the small subgroup of Francophone Ghanaian returnees in Accra, Ruth is learning to accept that being viewed as a foreigner “comes with the territory.”

Afia Annan assumed that her milk chocolate brown skin and typically Akan name would allow her to seamlessly blend in upon return. She had spent three years living in Ghana as a teenager. Her mother lived in Accra and wanted to Afia to attend middle school there. During this time Afia learned Pidgin and sharpened her skills in Fanti, a dialect of Twi. She acquired a solid circle of local Ghanaian friends that she was excited to reconnect with. Growing up in the US as a first generation immigrant with an ethnic name she had never felt fully at home, and was used to being questioned about her identity. She returned having given little thought to possibility that she might have to prove herself as a Ghanaian:

It’s funny; I go out here, and its’s the same as the US. They ask over and over, “Where are you from?” And then ask me to speak Twi to prove my Ghanaian-ness. So I tell them “My name is Afia Annan. I don’t even have an English name”. And then they’re like, “Well, that’s not your real name.” I often find myself in situations where I’m asked to prove my “street cred.” I guess in their
eyes; I seem too different. It’s weird to think that this is what you view as home, but people here still see you to an extent as an outsider.

Afia experienced what Ni Laoire refers to as the “conditionality of belonging” (2009:42). Rachel Danquah-Aryee had a similar sense that her Ghanaian identity had to be demonstrated for and approved by locals. Despite being strongly connected to her Fanti culture and customs growing up in Pennsylvania, Rachel has often felt out of the loop and culturally inept as a returnee. She told me, “There are things that go over my head, certain nuances, the little things, maybe in the language that I don’t always pick up. And so while you want to be, you know, “I’m Ghanaian, I’m here” or whatever, there is still that small sense of other, that you’re not 100 per cent.” Rachel is often taken for Liberian or African-American, but like Ruth and Afia, is rarely perceived as Ghanaian by locals. In an attempt to counter these perceptions, Rachel has in her own words “rebelled against being a returnee.” In her seven years living in Ghana, she has at times distanced herself from the returnee community, and made a concerted effort to establish and nurture relationships with local Ghanaians, who have spent their whole lives in the country. One relationship, in particular, had a powerful impact on Rachel’s transition into Accra life. During her national service years, she started seeing a local man, who had completed the vocational Higher National Diploma, as opposed to a bachelor’s degree. In terms of class and social status, they were not “equally-yoked”. However, Rachel dove into the relationship and says it marked her settling into life in Accra, and owning her identity as a Ghanaian. She smiles coyly as she recalls this important relationship:

I think through dating him I was exposed to regular Ghanaian life. It was really cool. There was this chop bar\(^{21}\) we used to go and watch games at. He taught me how to live here, you know? He taught how to […] survive. With my little broken Fanti and Twi, that’s always intermingled because sometimes it all

\(^{21}\) Traditional restaurants that serve local Ghanaian dishes, cater to low income and middle class communities
sounds the same, I can fight for myself. I can survive here, and I’ll always be grateful to him for that.

According to Rachel, she has become something of an “Accra expert” among her friends, local and returnee alike. People often reach out to her when they are looking for resources, certain that she will know where to find it or who to ask. Still, she wishes her parents had sent to her Ghana for some time, like Afia’s parents did. Rachel appears to have adopted a highly romantic image of secondary and high school in Ghana, through the exo-nostalgic memories of her cousins who completed these phases of schooling in the Ghanaian system. Though she has worked hard to understand and engage with the flow of life in Accra, she often has the sense that she “missed out on something important.”

While returnees are at times regarded as honorary white people, they must also contend with reality that many locals Ghanaians will treat them with a sterner and more critical hand than they would white foreigners, due to the conception that their time spent in the West, education, and exposure have produced in them a tendency toward “sporadic arrogance” (Kim 2009:320). This manifests particularly in professional contexts when a local Ghanaian finds themselves in a position of power over a returnee. Gabriel Addy found himself faced with this when he returned after nine years in the United States. During his time in the States, Gabriel learned to embrace confrontation and became comfortable with asserting himself in the workplace. Upon returning to Ghana, he had to learn to temper his newfound outspokenness, which has in some situations been perceived as arrogant and discourteous behavior. When Gabriel was _aba fresh_, it made it difficult for him to find work:

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22 Local vernacular for newly arrived returnee
In our environment [Ghana], these qualities are looked on as disrespectful. If Ghanaians see you as a respectful person, it means you don’t assert yourself. You see wrong, and you keep your mouth shut. On the other side [abroad], that doesn’t hold water. If it’s not right, you just say it like it is! Here when you try that, it’s considered an affront. For that reason, when you are interviewed by someone who has not had the kind of exposure you have had, you come off as snobbish. You come off as disrespectful, and a threat to status quo. And it makes it difficult to actually get a job.

Gabriel’s experience is also due to the fact that many employers, particularly international companies based in Ghana, tend to favor returnees in the hiring process. Since the business dealings of multinationals tend to be globally-minded and their workplaces rather cosmopolitan, returnees although they are newcomers, end up in these position with well-paid salaries due to the belief that “their work orientations differ from those of natives” (Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009:134). Having returned with ethnic and moral images, Gabriel wanted to work for a locally-owned and locally-run company. He knew his life could be easier if he took a job with a foreign-owned company. However, until he starts a business of his own, he believed working for a local company is a way to contribute to Ghana’s growth. He was prepared to humble himself in order to “do what is right.”

As with every rule, there are exceptions. There are some returnees, particularly original or first-generation migrants, who due to their early years spent in the Ghanaian or African contexts, shorter sojourns in the West, or frequent visits to the continent during their time away, do not struggle with reintegration. This was the case with Mawumefa Quartey, who moved to the US at 19 to attend Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. While Mawumefa loved the Mount Holyoke bubble and the empowerment she experienced while studying in an all-female environment, she sorely missed home. She missed her family, the warm weather, and “the food that had pepper in it”. She came home every chance she got. After completing her four year degree and an additional year of Optional Practical
Training\textsuperscript{23}, she returned to Ghana. Despite having spent five years away, Mawumefa has found reintegration quite easy. This is in part because many of her friends from high school, also left to study in the US, Canada, and the UK around the time she did. While in the US, Mawumefa made an effort to stay connected to them. Many of them are also returning. She shared how this has eased her transition:

Coming back has been great. ‘Cause my friends who I didn’t go with, those who stayed here, I stayed in touch with them. So it was nice to just get back into the flow. And those that went to school with me, they are coming back slowly. So we are all just experiencing the same thing.

I suggested earlier that returnees generally find themselves being perceived not as racial foreigners, but as “cultural outsiders” (Tsuda 2009:327). Through my conversation with Helene Schulz, a biracial second generation returnee, I learned that there are some migrants who experience both. Born to a Ghanaian mother and Swiss father, her skin is a light caramel shade. In the Ghanaian context, where lighter skin tones are favored, Helene is a showstopper. Men driving past in cars crane their necks, eyes widening, even tapping friends on the shoulder to catch a glimpse of the actress. Helene appears oblivious to the attention. She appears uncomfortable with the idea that her biracial identity has contributed to her professional success, or eased her life in Accra in any way.

As we sit chatting, several gentlemen approach to greet her. Some are acquaintances, other are fans, giddy with excitement to see the well-known actress in the flesh. She takes a moment to greet them all warmly, exuding genuine kindness, and gently informs them that she has to do an interview, but will take the time to talk them when she is done. I struggle to figure out what it is that draws so many to this woman, their faces emblazoned with almost dopey, star-struck expressions: her complexion, her status as an actress, the Swiss-French lilt of her accent, or the genuine

\textsuperscript{23} When F-1 status students are permitted by USCIS to work for one year on a student visa towards getting practical training to complement their education
kindness and courtesy with which she appears to treat the people around her. By the end of our interview, I have a feeling it is a combination of these factors.

Due to her light complexion and having lived most of her life outside Ghana, Helene is positioned as not only cultural outsider but as a racial deviant as well (Tsuda 2009). She reminisced, her forehead creased with unease, about the moment she became aware of how local Ghanaians perceived her:

People still call me obroni, so that should tell you enough about my efforts to integrate. I walk down the street, and people shout “Obroni! Obroni!” And I like “I am not obroni!” Actually, I have a very funny story. So I’m in the Tema market and this guy is pushing a wheelbarrow, and he like “Obroni, obroni, move!” [lowers her voice to represent the gruff of man’s voice and scowl]. I am shopping with my mom. She is dark like you, and my dad is super white. Anyway the guy is like “obroni, obroni, move!”. And I’m like, “I’m not obroni! That’s my mum!” So he looks at my mum, he’s like “Aaaah! Do you speak Twi?” And I’m like “No.” He kisses his teeth “Ooooh obrooooooni! Move, move, move!!” Then I realized “Oh my God! Mum, this is so bad! You didn’t teach me Twi!”

With the difference in their complexions, the local man was not convinced that Helene and her mother were related, and thus would not accept her claim that she was Ghanaian. Since her appearance was an aberration from the norm, he gave her another chance to prove her Ghanaianess by asking her to speak the dominant language, Twi. During her formative years Helene’s family mainly spoke French. Living in almost a dozen countries over her childhood and adolescence, they spent a considerable amount of time picking up different dialects. Learning Fanti, her mother’s dialect of the Twi language, took a backseat:

I think if I spoke Twi, it would be easier for me to integrate. ‘Cause now it’s like “You don’t look Ghanaian. You don’t speak any Ghanaian languages. You’re not Ghanaian. I mean it’s sad. I’ve had that scene in An African City where Nana Yaa [the main character on the series An African City] gets to the airport with her Ghanaian passport, and the guy directs her to the foreigner’s line. With her, it doesn’t even make sense because she’s black, but with me, it’s like “You don’t like look Ghanaian.” I’m like “You’re holding my passport! Like my passport is in your hands. I am Ghanaian.” “Nooooo, you’re not Ghanaian! You, you’re white! You’re white!”
Helene felt angry and dejected at constantly being perceived and labeled as ‘other’ in her home country. She felt Ghanaians had an unhealthy obsession with pigmentation, and she was exhausted by the emphasis on complexion and deeply concerned about the culture of skin bleaching among darker skinned Ghanaian women, who aspired to achieve a skin tone similar to hers. Despite her initial frustration with being perceived as an outsider, Helene has come to accept that skin color and aesthetic politics are a deeply engrained part of Ghanaian society. She tells me, “It was always annoying me, and then I realized it’s an educational problem, and if I decided to take it lightly and just laugh about it, it makes my life easier, and it makes everybody else’s lives around me easier.”

In our conversation, Rachel Danquah-Aryee suggested that for many returnees, their otherness is initially imposed by the larger Ghanaian society, but eventually becomes a form of self-identification. By distinguishing themselves from other Ghanaians, they ascribe to themselves and their peers a degree of superiority. She laughs heartily, head tilted back, as she recounts a conversation with a friend in which this became apparent to her:

I was talking to a friend who was actually born here and lived outside, and he goes “It’s funny how Ghanaians think.” And I’m like “who is ‘Ghanaians’?” Aren’t we all Ghanaians? He’s like “I just think it’s funny how Ghanaian behave.” How can you try to be other here? Maybe there are people who are different, but you’re Ghanaian too! And for you to say “I don’t understand how Ghanaians think,” you’re putting yourself somewhere else.

The perspective voiced by Rachel’s friend harkens to the internalized colonial mentality described by Nkuzi Nnam (2007). Laura Hammond (2015) in her research on Somali return migration observed that in some instances, returnees embrace the perception that their time spent in the West elevates them in some way above your average local who has not lived outside and develop a superiority complex. Helene Schulz expressed similar frustrations she had from conversing with fellow returnees,
who identify more closely with their Western home than their ethnic homeland and struggle to feel a sense of belonging and comfort in Ghana. Though she has had her own challenges with ‘becoming local’, Helene suggests that for some returnees the alienation they experience is rooted in a subconscious disrespect for the homeland. She elaborated:

I feel like as long as you work hard to achieve what you want, and you’re respectful as well, it can be a lot of fun. But some returnees come back with this attitude of, “Oh I’m from England” [straightens out her posture, stick her nose in the air to demonstrate pomposity]. And I’m like “Dude, you were brought up in England, but respect where you’re from”. And they feel like they’re so much better than everybody else. My parents didn’t educate me like that.

On May 13, 2014 a satirical article was published on the website *Yesi Yesi Ghana!*, Ghana’s equivalent of The Onion, titled “Returnees to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group.” It poked fun at the foreign accents and bourgeois tendencies of returnees and quipped that they wanted the government to create a “returnee enclave where they could go to escape” from locals. This new “ethnic group” would have its own iteration of the Ghanaian flag with a white star in lieu of the black one, and the maxim, “we share the white man’s burden”. Though this was meant as a humorous jab at Accra’s returnee community, it reflects the chasm between former diasporans and their local peers. Rachel talked about how staying within returnee communities deepens this gulf.

I think it makes it harder integrate. In returnee circles, a lot of people complain and whine, “Ghana is not working! Ghana is not working!” It can get to you and make it hard to settle into life here. It sort of gives you nose-in-the-air attitude. So it’s better not to stick to those groups. But that can be hard, because they provide great support, especially if you’ve been away for a really, really long time. The country that you left can be very different from what you come back and meet.

Upon return, it can be challenging for both newcomers and hosts to come to terms with the fact that there is cultural nuance at play. Returnees, in particular, may come home with the notion that their affinity, be it Ghanaian or African, will allow
them to integrate with ease (Kim 2009, Song 2009). When this proves to be a more challenging feat than anticipated, and “social acceptance [does] not materialize” (Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009:133) both migrants and locals can become deeply frustrated. Returnees might reconsider their place in the homeland, and toy with the idea of going back to the host country. There are people from both sides actively working together to bridge what they perceive as a false gap between returnees and locals. Some believe that the collaborative effort of locals and returnees, bringing together their creative and intellectual energies, is needed to push not only Ghana, but the larger continent forward. Rachel suggested that a major sign of progress will be the dissolution of returnees as a distinct and different social group. “I really do love my life here. And I really do like being a returnee. But I hope that in the next few years that moniker goes away. And I hope that we’re just all Ghanaians and Africans. That’s one thing that I really hope for.”

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Back For Good? Or Simply Circling Through?

“Identity is not written in stone for any of us, and it can change with different preoccupations, different stages of our lives.”

– Eva Hoffman, Rites of Return (Hirsch and Miller 2011)

This thesis has discussed how while living abroad in the West, African migrants often idealize life in the homeland, setting it in a “celebratory romance of the past” (Bhabha 1994:9). In these diasporic imaginaries, the origin society is the protagonist and the host society, the antagonist: while the host society, for some, is the site of social exclusion and dreary obligations, the homeland represents freedom and belonging. It is through these essentialisms of the homeland that many migrants craft their national and cultural identities. Upon returning to the continent, Accra’s returnees find that their images of the homeland are challenged almost daily. They are
confronted with the realities of day-to-day life and infrastructural deficits. Women and men, accustomed to the gender norms of the West, have to adjust to the customs and expectations of urban, middle-class Ghana. And perhaps, most surprisingly for some, they find themselves perceived not as locals, but as newcomers or foreigners (Ni Laoire 2008). They are constantly asked to prove their affinity to the homeland. Yet for many returnees, it was a longing for home, a desire to firmly belong, that drew them to the ethnic homeland. If they are not local, then where do they fit?

Drawing from the work of the Martinician philosopher, psychiatrist and freedom fighter, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha (1994) highlights the tendency within colonial and post-colonial identity politics toward dichotomous alignment. He suggests that this is not representative of the diverse and discontinuous identities of formerly colonized peoples, many of whom migrate all over the world and become global citizens. Bhabha refers to Fanon’s time as a psychiatrist in the Algerian revolution, where he treated Algerian citizens. Fanon described Algerian citizens as living in a state of constant alienation in a homeland that was “hostile to put the individual back where he belonged” (Bhabha 1994:41). From my conversation with returnees in Accra, it seems many find themselves in a similar position of cultural suspension upon return, uncertain of where to place themselves culturally.

Homi Bhabha describes this as a “new internationalism” (1994:5) that challenges the idea of fixed national and cultural identities, and of organic national communities similar to those described by Benedict Anderson (1983). He posits a reimagining of migrants as inhabitants of a “borderline community of migration” (Bhabha 1994:9). This idea can be extended to Accra’s returnees. They find themselves in a nameless cultural space that harkens to Turner’s (1969) liminality. While the concept of liminality traditionally refers to fixed spaces of transition during
rites of passage, for these returnees this points to fluid and flexible cultural identities that are interstitial in nature due to their migratory histories. They are neither here nor there, neither wholly Western nor fully African. Whether in the host society or in the homeland, they find themselves in a constant space of in-betweenness, existing “somewhere between foreign and local” (Wang 2016:2).

The geographer Alison Blunt (2006) adds to the conversation on the transnational lifestyles of returnees by exploring how the creation of transnational communities, like Accra’s returnee community can result in a redefinition of the concept of home. She suggests that for many migrants home becomes a fluid concept, though still an important concept, that is constantly being shaped and re-invented. The different homes that they create “bring together both material and imaginative geographies of residence and belonging, departure and return” (Blunt 2006: 198). For 1.5 and second generation migrants their migratory history transforms them into global citizens, often honing the “bilingual and bicultural skills required”, to navigate the multiple cultural spaces they occupy” (Blunt 2006:163). Rouse reminds us that this blurring of cultural lines is not simply an implication of a new global order created by either total “homogenization [or] synthesis” (Rouse 2002:163), but rather of a social group with the growing cultural dexterity that is part and parcel of leading a transnational lifestyle.

This is the case for Sierra Leonean-American, Lottie Komeh. While living on the continent will always be her number one choice, Lottie is open to the experience of relocating elsewhere for three to five years, should a lucrative professional opportunity pop up. A childhood of country-hopping on the African continent with her diplomat mother before moving to New York to live with her father has left her with a
malleable definition of home. She brims with enthusiasm as she speaks of her many homes, and elaborates on the difference between comfort and belonging:

It’s not like I don’t feel at home in New York. I could live in the US for the rest of my life. The concept of home varies for me. I feel at home in Ghana too. Yes, I’m from Sierra Leone, but when I land at Kotoka [sighs with relief] it’s like ‘Finally, I’m home!’ The more you know a place, the more accustomed you are to an environment the more it feels like home. Sierra Leone is definitely the place I feel most at home. Not the most comfortable, though. I feel there is a distinction between feeling comfortable and feeling at home. There’s a familiarity and that unquestionably without a doubt I understand this place. I don’t feel like a stranger. I feel a certain sense of ownership in New York. I feel a certain sense of ownership in Ghana. I feel that in Sierra Leone too.

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Are you back for good? This was the question I posed at the end of each interview. At the time, I thought the main purpose of the question was to gain insight into whether the return mobilities of my participants were permanent. In retrospect, I realize self-interest was at play in this query. When I crafted my list of questions, I was excited and hopeful at the thought of a growing and thriving Pan-African returnee community in Accra, and what this might mean for the future of the African continent and her diaspora. However, during my stay in Ghana, I began to feel disillusioned. I was frustrated with the lack of infrastructural development, the colonial mentality and inferiority complex that appeared to permeate almost all facets of society, the rampant corruption, and what I perceived as the complacency of fellow Ghanaians.

So when I asked my returnees, “Are you back for good?”, I subconsciously had an ulterior motive. Though cloaked in a false robe of objectivity and openness, deep down I hoped they would all instantly recoil at the question and answer “No way! I am leaving as soon as I can.” Because at the time, I was impatiently counting down the days until I could leave and return to Norway and to the
comforts of a life I knew better and felt more at ease with. Living in and around Accra made me realize how Western I was, and that made me feel ashamed of myself.

I was further humbled as my participants gave nuanced, open-minded answers to this rather confrontational closing question. Almost everyone struggled to give a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’. And perhaps it was misguided to pose such a tricky question and expect clear-cut answers. Still, it produced some interesting reflections from the returnees, who took it as an opportunity to look into the future and think about where they want to be, geographically and otherwise, in the coming years.

There were two different answers to this question. A couple of returnees did satiate my morbid desire for instant and unrelenting dismissal of life in Ghana. They were as disillusioned as I was, if not more, and were actively planning the next steps in their lives, and factoring Ghana and even Africa out of that equation. One of these was the Ghanaian-French-Italian returnee, Ruth Adjaye. Ruth scoffed and delivered a nice and neat ‘No’ before I even finished posing the question. For her, the main issue was feeling alienated on Ghanaian soil. She was worried that this was leaving her bitter and angry at her country. She was happy that she had heeded the desire to return, gotten to know Ghana better, and challenged herself to give life in Accra a solid try. Still, she could not imagine settling in Accra long-term:

I’ll probably stick around for a couple of years until my contract with my company is over, and then I’m done. I think I’ll be ready to leave after that. Where do I want to be in 10 years? Definitely not in Ghana. I would not change coming back and having this experience. But ten years from now, I will not be here.

Other returnees were fairly quick to answer yes. The majority of my participants fell into this category that I am calling ‘back-for-good returnees.’ For first generation migrant, Araba Forson, there is simply no place like Ghana:
Oh yea, I am back for good. Even when things are annoying, and this year has been a rough year, I don’t see why I should be a second class citizen anywhere else. Even though sometimes back here, you are still treated like a second class citizen. I’m sure if I am standing by the roadside with a white person [laughs], the taxi will stop for them because they see an economic opportunity, whereas they see me bargaining everything down, you know. Sometimes you feel that way here [laughs]. But, I don’t see myself living anywhere else. Home is home.

While Araba is certain that she will settle in Ghana, she expressed openness to temporarily living and working in other African countries. Rwanda, in particular, is a place she would like to live for some time, perhaps as a visiting lecturer or conducting research on the Central African nation’s socio-political and economic institutions. Ghanaian-British Kojo Gramson also believes that he is back in Ghana for good. However, like Araba, Kojo also welcomes the idea of temporary mobilities outside Ghana. He acknowledges that he may return to the UK at some point in future, and foresees a life between Accra and London:

I’ve thinking of doing a doctorate, so I might end up going back to London for some time. But I am thinking all the research would be based here in Ghana, so it would be more of a going and coming, than going for good.

As we sat in her dining room on Wednesday evening, eating and chatting, Rachel Danquah-Aryee told me that she was preparing to move back to the United States for a master’s in public administration at the Harvard Kennedy School. She was leaving that Saturday and her dining room was littered with Ghana-must-go bags of clothes, books, and knick-knacks that she was moving from her current residence (her mother’s childhood home) to her family’s’ newly built residence in East Legon, an upper middle and returnee-dense neighborhood. She expressed unease with referring to this as a ‘move’. Throughout our conversation, Rachel appeared contagiously happy with her life in Ghana and wanted to come back after her studies. She has however, had moments of concern that she may end

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24 Bags used by Ghanaian immigrants in Nigeria when they were expelled from the country in early 80s
up getting sucked in by the comfort and convenience of the life she grew up with in the US. She also loves the flexibility and exhilaration of her life in Ghana, and she thinks that this will always lure her back to Accra:

I’m moving my stuff to East Legon, not sending it back to America. So it’s not really moving; it’s just shifting. My Zimbabwean friend said earlier today “You’re not coming back.” And I said, “I am.” I told her, “if you see a picture of me at a World Bank recruiting session or something, reach into the photo and slap me.” [laughs] ‘Cause I know that I wanna be here. I am applying to business school in January. Business school would start in September after I graduate next June, so they’re back to back. Maybe after two years in another African city, I definitely plan to be back in Accra. It’s weird I don’t see my life anywhere else. I get to America, and after I’ve been to Walmart and Target and done my shopping, I’m ready to come back. I am afraid of the smallness of life in America. Yes, this place is a mess. The lights will probably go out soon, and the water will probably not run. But even with all that, there’s a fire in my belly. I’m not complacent because I know things can be better. I have a job where I can actually influence things to get better. That’s exciting to me. Yeah, when I come back, I think I’ll be back for good. Unless something catastrophic happens.

The desire of the back-for-good returnees to stay put in Accra is by no means a sign of naiveté about the realities of setting up a life in the African context. They shared many of the frustrations aired by Esther and I. While life in Accra can be challenging, it also sparks a desire within returnees to create change. For many, the liminal cultural space they occupy becomes a one of creative tension, providing “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (Wang 2016:3) and for social transformation (Van Houte 2014). They maintain a sense of optimism that things can and will change for the better, and they want to participate in these impending social transformations. They perceive themselves and their local counterparts as stewards not only of Ghana but of the African continent. With their cosmopolitan academic and professional background, they want to “contribute to the development” of the homeland (Van Houte 2014:17).

For Rachel, living in Ghana has increased her appreciation for the resources she had access to growing up in the US:
I think I have been extremely fortunate to grow up in America. We have an amazing public school system in Pennsylvania. I got some of the best education for a fraction of what my parents would have to pay if I had gone to private school here in Ghana. Unless you are a lucky hungry student in Ghana who did well in public school here, you won’t have a lot of opportunities. The one thing that my girlfriends and I all agree with is that if we are going to have kids, we are going to have to create some of the things we want for them here – summer camps, after school programs.

Rachel has started to contact organizations in Accra about sponsoring an after school club and a soccer club. She has also been looking into setting up weekend science and language programs. Many of the programs already exist in Accra but are extremely expensive. Rachel wants to make sure that these programs are abundant in Accra and that they are accessible not only to the middle and upper middle classes but to everyone.

Lottie Komeh is also interested in seeing how she can contribute to the African development project. In contrast to Rachel, she is not interested in recreating American institutions in Accra. She believes that it is important to interpret Accra, Ghana, and Africa through a local lens that takes into account the unique historical, geographical, social conditions that have given rise to its complex development challenges. She referred to these challenges as “this is Africa (TIA) issues”. Lottie does not suggest this to encourage complacency or inaction, quite the contrary; she is deeply motivated about using this understanding to mold a homeland her unborn son can be proud of. She is certain that returnees can contribute in a significant way to Africa’s socio-economic development project:

I think many of us come back, not just because we want to come home, but because we’re all tired of the perceptions of what and how Africa is, and we want to change that. If each of us individually, but also collectively accomplish our dreams, build them here and put down foundations, not only can we uplift other people, but also our communities, our countries and then the continent as a whole. I think that’s the guiding ethos: when people hear ‘Africa,’ you want the instant thought to be something positive.

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There is great insight to be gained from studying the nuanced experiences of those who engage in global cyclical mobilities. Their lifestyles challenge the dichotomies and generalizations that tend to be present in studies that discuss identity, culture, and space (Van Houte 2014). By mitigating against incarcerating participants in strict spatial and conceptual typologies (Appadurai 1988), but rather understanding them as spatially and culturally “split at the root” (Hirsch and Miller 2011: 11), we can better understand their abilities to remain connected to as many or as few communities as they choose, at any given time.

This openness among back-for-good returnees to temporary mobilities on the African continent is a reminder that the choice to return is deeply nuanced. (Van Houte 2014). Many returnees would quickly answer ‘yes’ to the ‘back for good’ question, followed by a pause and then a variation of the statement “but, you know, never say never.” For these returnees, being back for good does not mean that they never again engage in temporary, medium, or even long-term mobilities outside Ghana. Whether for education and work, returnees anticipate, acknowledge, and embrace future situations in which they may leave.

Return is about more than being in Ghana or Africa at all times – it is about reconnecting with the motherland. Through Ghana, returnees have a base on the continent through which they can maintain this connection, regardless of where in the world they find themselves. In the words of Araba Forson, “home is home” and will always be there to welcome them. For many transmigrants, journeying to the ethnic homeland stems from a desire to become whole, to be in a place where we culturally belong. However, the homeland often becomes another “space of [cultural] splitting” (Bhabha 1994:44). Much like in the host country, we find our identities in pieces, unable to fit the cultural molds available. Our transnational lives and multilocal
identities disrupt ideas of discrete and pure cultural groupings. Though fixed cultures and geographies may not quite know what to make of us, I believe we find something of a homeland within the “cultural politics of diaspora” (Bhabha 1994:59). And in the creative, liminal spaces of diaspora, there are no limits to who we can be and the powerful contributions we can make to whichever home we find ourselves in at a given moment.

GLOSSARY

*Aba fresh*                      Ghanaian vernacular for a newly arrived returnee

*Akan*                          Ethnic group that makes us 60 per cent of the Ghanaian population. Compromised of subgroups: Ashanti, Fanti, Akyem, Akuapem, Brong, and Kwahu

*Akwaaba*                       Twi word for ‘welcome’

*Akyem*                         A sub-group of the Akan ethnic group

*Ashanti*                       The dominant sub-group of the Akan ethnic group

*Brofolized*                    A local term for speaking an indigenous Ghanaian language or English with a Western accent

*Chop bar*                      Traditional restaurants that serve local Ghanaian dishes, cater to low income and middle class communities

*Drop-in*                       Ghanaian vernacular for a shared taxi

*Dumsor*                        Twi for ‘lights on, light off’, refers to frequent loadshedding/powercuts in Accra
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fanti</td>
<td>A sub-group of the Akan ethnic group. Also refers to Twi dialect spoken by this group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghanaian Pidgin</td>
<td>A form of Pidgin English spoken mainly in southern Ghana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana-man-time</td>
<td>Refers to the generally relaxed attitude to time in Ghana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana-must-go bags</td>
<td>Bags used by Ghanaian immigrants in Nigeria when they were expelled from the country in early 80s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Half-caste</td>
<td>Ghanaian vernacular for ‘mixed race’</td>
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<td>Highlife</td>
<td>Music genre that originated in Ghana at the turn of the 20th century</td>
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<td>LAFA</td>
<td>Stands for ‘locally acquired foreign accent’ – when a person has an Anglophone Western accent without ever having lived outside Ghana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mmaa pe sokoo</td>
<td>Twi for “women love the luxurious life”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obroni</td>
<td>Twi word for ‘foreigner’ or ‘white person’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palmwine guitar</td>
<td>West African musical style developed by Kru people of Liberia and popularized by Ghanaian artists during 20th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slangs</td>
<td>American, British, Canadian English-speaking accents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tro tro</td>
<td>Repurposed mini vans used as public transportation in Ghana</td>
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