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DOI
10.5117/TVGN2025.1.002.SPRO

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies

Amsterdam University Press

TIJDSCHRIFT VOOR GENDERSTUDIES 28.1 (2025) 5-22
HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.5117/TVGN2025.1.002.SPRO

Thinking with Curiosity. The Anthropology of Sexuality and Gender

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Abstract
In this inaugural lecture, Spronk proposes to use curiosity as a guiding method to uncover moral evaluations – both in the worlds we study and in our own theorizing as scientists. As Saba Mahood has argued for over twenty years, feminist analysis is based on normative and ethnocentric ideas that emerge from modern notions of subjectivity. The chair proposes to study sex, sexuality and gender more empirically and to investigate the traditional, but often apparent, oppositions between transgression and acceptance, and between the reproduction and rejection of norms and values. This will yield new decolonizing theoretical insights into power, subjectivity and agency.

Keywords: sexuality, gender, feminist analysis, ethnocentrism, normative/normativity

Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, collega's, familie en vrienden.[1]

Several years ago, colleagues led by Annerienke Fioole decided to embellish our building at Roeterseiland Campus and asked for inspiring quotes to make posters of them. I provided two quotes about curiosity that struck me and then also put them on the board next to my office door. One is by Zora Neale Hurston: 'research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose' (1991, p. 127). Hurston was a novelist, a folklorist as it was then called, and a documentary filmmaker born in 1891. She grew up in the segregated South of the US, and her work went relatively unrecognised during her life, but it gained traction later. Half a decade later, Michel Foucault (1994, p. 325)

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Fotograaf Ayda Abdan Kondoki

also defends curiosity. For him, it draws out care: 'it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.' Neale Hurston was an early anthropologist and perhaps Foucault was a closeted anthropologist, and their validation for curiosity resonates with my concern for theorizing *from* practices and experiences.

We could say that curiosity is the driving force behind the social sciences. Wanting to know what drives people is central to our *métier*. From its inception, anthropology battled with explanations about people across the globe seen as 'other' (i.e. from the 'non-West') born out of moral ideas of the so-called 'civilised West' (Boas 1940), although it was far from free from moral judgement itself. This entanglement between moral evaluations and scholarly knowledge is also a driving force in the field of gender & sexuality studies. For instance, there is a strong social idea that motherhood is rooted in biology and thus prescribes women's social roles as nurturers and domestic labourers of their families. Such an idea finds its way into the law, such as in the Netherlands with the law called *Wet handelings-onbekwaamheid*, which translates into the Legal Incapacity Act. Briefly, married women were until 1956 not considered capable of acting and needed permission from their husbands to, for instance, make financial transactions. Such convictions have been an important incentive for scholars to theorise how gender is not a biological principle but an important creation of religious, cultural and political discourses. Similarly, the way in which homosexuality has been scientifically described as a psychological disorder in medical manuals had

a moral justification, which we now look at as an aberration. It is due to the social studies dovetailing with social movements that it was corrected in the late 1980s. Undoing moral evaluations is thus an important stimulus in academia. And what may the role of curiosity be here?

Curiosity comes from Latin *cūriōsitās*, inquisitiveness, and from *cūriōsus*, which is akin to *cura*, care. Curiosity suggests openness and wonder. While we as scholars are quick to find more evaluations in the social world we study, I want to argue that we need more curiosity to uncover them in our theorising. In the following, I aim to traverse three scholarly fields: Anthropology, African Studies, and Gender & Sexuality Studies, which provide interesting insights when bringing them together. Particularly, this journey brings forward tensions between the aim of feminist theorising and its consequences out there, in the world we study. These tensions are important forces for me to think with and to theorise further how curiosity must become a leading method.

Anthropology

Anthropology is my home base. Becoming trained as an anthropologist provided me with answers and tools to understand the world around me. Not having grown up in the Netherlands, moving here, I remember well how I did not sense the logic with which my peers viewed the world. Moreover, they arrived at different judgements. Later, when I went to university, anthropology helped me to understand their logic, which was another logic from the one I had grown up with in northern Nigeria. It also helped me to see how ethnocentrism, the moral evaluation that posits the West as superior, is entrenched into the capillaries of Dutch society. Anthropology has the tools to poke and pry at self-evident truths and, I would say, therefore the world needs anthropology.

Getting at the sensibility of people's way of thinking and doing is at the heart of anthropology. Being answerable to the people we work with is its most important qualification. This may come with ethical dilemmas, as I teach the second-year anthropology students in a core course where I present them with a case of a woman whom I met during my PhD research in Kenya, in 2001. She was an administrator at the University of Nairobi and had observed me for a while before she came to me and said: 'I also have a story to tell you, you must interview me'. I call her Joyce. Joyce explained how she had, what she called, 'circumcised myself'. She came from an ethnic

group in western Kenya where the practice of female circumcision had been disappearing. In the 1990s, her parents decided not to circumcise their daughters and to prevent them from being enticed into circumcision, they would send their daughters to the family at the coast during the long holidays, which was the season for circumcision. Joyce disagreed with her parents and one day hitchhiked back to western Kenya and joined what is commonly called a circumcision group, that is, a group of youngsters rallying others to join the week-long ceremony. She explained that circumcision was an important cultural ritual that others had demonized, but that people were finding their cultural roots again by connecting to this ritual. She explained the pride and sense of authenticity she gained from it. Joyce ended her story by telling me that she would circumcise her daughters too.

To come back to my point that being accountable to our interlocutors comes with dilemmas, this case is an exemplary one. Personally, I do not agree with female circumcision. Professionally, who am I to judge, knowing I would play into a long history of dehumanizing and objectifying people from Africa? I explain to my students that we must always see things in context. In her story, Joyce was referring to the surge in international NGOs from the late 1980s onward that were focused on eradicating what they called barbaric practices, later called harmful practices, such as female circumcision. In her region, a particular Western NGO had been rather assertive while, interestingly, female circumcision had been declining. It was a region with a long history of missionary activity, followed by many development projects. This fact tells us that generation after generation of Kenyans had met with Westerners telling them to change their ways of life, from colonial times onward, throughout the heydays of development work, to current days of universal human rights. When that particular NGO came to – what was euphemistically called – educate people, discontent started brewing about their uninvited meddling. The discontent echoed wider frustration: through time, Kenyans came to feel treated as second-rate citizens in an unequal world where, for instance, NGOs can determine their problems as well as solutions. The matter of female circumcision became a focal point of people's lost sense of sovereignty at the turn of the 21st century (Kiruthu, 2016). I discuss with students how the meddling people reacted against becomes acutely clear in the terminology: it is common now to speak of female genital mutilation. How respectful is that when addressing Joyce? I would lose her as the equal interlocutor who had invited me to listen to her story.

What Joyce tells us is that asserting cultural authenticity becomes an important assertion of oneself. The same applies to the current phenomenon

of TradWives, traditional wives, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, that presents on social media a so-called traditional way of life as the most fulfilling and original way of being (Sykes & Hopner 2024). In both Kenya and the Netherlands, gender and sexuality are important foci in seeking affirmation in a context that is in a state of change, which is in fact how we study culture nowadays. As Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere (1998) have so perceptively argued in their work on globalisation and identity more than 25 years ago, a world in flux is often responded to by a reaction to fix, to fixate. The call to traditional culture has strong appeal when people feel they are not in control of their lives. There is of course much more to tell about the case of Joyce and for the sake of this inaugural lecture, I picked out only a few matters, and I invite you to my class because this has become a classic case in my teaching on cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism has become a swear word and this interpretation rests on a misunderstanding. Cultural relativism is not about *excusing* ideas and practices, but about *clarifying* them. Regarding human rights, for example, being insensitive to other people's cultures may have effects that are opposite to the intention of fighting for people's well-being. As we are speaking, women in Gambia are calling for the *de*criminalization of female circumcision (*The East African* 2024)[2]. They argue that the criminalisation was an imposition by Western powers, which is not wholly untrue if we look at the current geo-political infrastructure of how human rights networks are organised. Laced with the language of neocolonialism and asserting the importance of cultural heritage and self-determination, they invoke the human right to decide for themselves. In an ironic twist, they employ the human rights discourse to argue exactly the opposite of what is intended. Their call also resonates with the demand for more awareness of ethnocentrism. Curiosity is needed. Curiosity towards what seems incredible, or illogical, helps to untangle and clarify how for instance claims of human rights have directly opposite aims.

In other words, curiosity – care for what is going on – may lead to uncomfortable realities. But we have no other option if we claim to respect each other. Imagine me explaining to Joyce she was wrong, implicating that she suffers from false consciousness? I do not mean to say that the global force behind human rights is unethical, on the contrary, oftentimes civil society across the globe is on par. However, we need to be mindful of the context in which projects land and how they may create results opposite of those intended. We have a moral obligation to understand the effects of our doing, we also need to be curious about that. Curiosity may thus lead to hard ethical dilemmas, and it is our task to bring them into view. Anthropology

has the tools to do so. That is, ethnography is our gateway to opening up the complexities of the social world, including seeming contradictions.

African Studies

As an anthropologist I made my way into another scholarly field, that of African Studies. Area studies is being criticized for its Western-centred origin (Quayson, 2007), and rightly so. Take the term African Studies: it is the outcome of colonial projects, and anthropology has been foundational in establishing African Studies. It is a 20th century invention that makes no sense in a 21st century world where South-South relations are swiftly overriding the traditional North-South ones, although many in the global North are not quite aware of that. In a sharp analysis called 'On being Area-Studied', Keguro Macharia (2016) deals a death blow to the idea of Area Studies as the invention of Western scholarship by chronicling its various obstacles. Scholars based in Africa and/or working on Africa, are often relegated to a terrain that is considered to be at a lower level than other scholarly fields. Indeed, as my colleagues Linda Musariri, Yvette Ruzibiza, Jasmine Shio, Dilys Amoabeng and Amisah Bakuri (2024), argue in a recent article, African scholars are easily and only recognised as 'regional experts'. Furthermore, scholars working on and/or from Africa often receive comments on a submitted article that the local realities they analyse may fit an area studies journal better. The objection that the case study used is not a local matter but meant to theorise, just like case studies from Europe or the US are usually used, is often met with silence. This seems to be particularly true in gender & sexuality studies, or queer studies on which Macharia is writing. In Ella Shohat's (2002) words, 'when feminism is invoked in academic institutions outside of 'Western' spaces, it is often subjected to an (inter)disciplinary order that anxiously and politely sends it "back" to the kingdom of area studies.' (p.67).

And yet, I do not believe that giving up African Studies as a field of intellectual inquiry is the solution. What is needed is the dethroning of Euro-American status as the place to theorise from. I am saying nothing new here. From Dipesh Chakrabarty's inspiring analysis of the need to 'provincialize Europe' (1992) to current calls for decolonizing knowledge (Mbembe, 2015; Mignolo & Escobar, 2010), there is a strong recognition of the need to territorialize Euro-America as *one* of the many cultures across the globe. However, this call too often falls on infertile soil in gender &

sexuality studies. It is fascinating to observe how tenacious the status of Euro-America as the place to theorise from is. There seems to be no curiosity.

An important intervention, as Thomas Hendriks and I argue, is to theorize *from* Africa (2020, see also Matebeni 2021). Again, this is not exactly a new call, yet it is interesting how scholarship based on African realities struggles to find its way into customary theorizing. Theorising from Africa thus implies that, 'rather than analysing African realities by using (and exploring the limitations of) supposedly universal concepts – such as sexuality – one aims to look for theory in the same place where one might, otherwise, merely look for data: i.e. out there in everyday experiences, understandings, imaginings and experiments on the African continent' (Hendriks & Spronk 2020, p. 6). The goal of this Chair is to work towards disrupting traditional forms of knowledge-making. Africa is first and foremost a place *from where* to read, write, talk, (re)think and disturb. It is crucial to incorporate the so-called North as merely one of many sites in a multiple world – a world that can be (and must be) read from Africa as much as from anywhere else. In my future project, I will study the variability of erotic practice in two African and two European countries in a move to undo seeing cultural difference as taking Euro-America as the baseline to think from but, rather, to contrast cultures and seek similarities where they are not commonly looked for. And to reverse the investigation.

I find encouragement in a transforming power dynamic in the world that I have observed in Kenya from 1997. Over time I saw how Euro-America lost its central position in the socio-cultural world and also more and more in the political arena. The current self-confident young generation in Kenya is vocal and poised in ways that older generations in Kenya look at with a mix of pride and disapproval.[3] During my PhD, I observed the start of this shift among *their* parents, when the economy and media were liberalised after decades of authoritarian rule. The South African broadcast Metro made its way into Kenya and people found recognition in fellow-African-created programmes where Africanness was self-evident rather than exceptional. Popular culture plays an important role in challenging the status quo, then and now. The internet has, besides creating a lot of mess, opened a traditionally Western-dominated field and connected people in more self-directed ways. While Euro-America is turning its look more inward, in Kenya, the opposite happens. To give a random example, Korean Studies and Korean soap series have become exceptionally popular. Joyce Nyairo (2004; 2007; 2016) analyses how popular culture in Kenya is *the* realm for the appreciation of a multitude of modes of being, based on a mix of local

and global qualities. But why would theorist Joyce Nyairo only be read by Africanist scholars?

In other words, African realities hold innovative analytical directions of global heuristic value for further theorizing, particularly concerning gender and sexuality. It is very tiresome to be seen or quietly relegated as not quite relevant. This ethnocentrism is alive and kicking in a field that prides itself on being deeply engaged and foundational to critical theory, namely gender & sexuality studies. A healthy dose of curiosity is needed.

Gender & Sexuality Studies

As an anthropologist and African Studies scholar, I also found my way into the field of gender & sexuality. Gender & sexuality studies is used here as a shorthand for the broader field of critical women, or queer, or trans, and – by implication – race studies, in short, critical feminist theory. Gender & sexuality studies has become the leading field for critical theory to deconstruct powerful truth claims, dissect hegemonic structures and postulate precise concepts for analysis. Think of the *Wet handelingsonbekwaamheid* and how it came into being in the first place. Gender and sexuality are perceived in every society as essential to the social and moral order: they are seen as crucial to social cohesion, for structuring subject positions such as gender and sexual identities, and thus for sustaining societal patterns of gender difference. Gender and sexuality are thus culturally shaped and historically contingent. Critical feminist theory demonstrates and explains these processes creating powerful truth claims about gender and/or sexuality. In particular, gender & sexuality studies has opened up the study of how gender, desire and body take shape beyond normative notions of heterosexuality and its attendant societal infrastructure.

So far, you have heard me talking about gender & sexuality as a common term. Yet, the Chair I occupy is called 'the Anthropology of Sexuality and Gender', indicating a small lexicological difference that reflects a much broader epistemological and political shift. I mean to draw attention to sexuality for a variety of reasons.

First, sexuality is a slippery term despite, or possibly because of, the fact that we are all experts by experience. Sexuality is easily used in a self-evident manner while, in fact, the term has a variety of meanings. It refers to a biological drive, a human capacity to be sexually aroused and have erotic experiences, and one's gendered sense of self or sexual orientation, as in 'my sexuality'. It thus refers to the body, by way of behaviour and practices, feelings and emotions, affect and affordances. But because these are not just

any practices and feelings, the term is also freighted with lust and titillation, and thus moral sentiments. 'Sexuality,' then, is a keyword in Raymond Williams' (2014) sense, meaning a powerful word that evokes connecting yet sometimes contradictory and contested meanings.

Interestingly, and secondly, in its narrow sense, sexuality is nothing but the invention of 19th-century European sexology. It denotes a very specific way of producing and organizing knowledge about sex, which first gave rise to the supposedly deviant category of the 'homosexual' and, only later, to its supposedly normal mirror category of the 'heterosexual'. According to Foucault (1978), the scientific study of sex thus produced what we now refer to as 'sexuality' when it transformed the (sinful) erotic *practice* of sodomy into a sexual *identity*: 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species' (ibid, 43). Similarly, Gloria Wekker (2006) showed in her landmark work in the 1990s how same-sex desiring Afro-Surinamese women do not see their erotic desire as the basis of their social identity: they *do* mati and *are not* mati. This distinction between sexual practice and identity is somehow overlooked in the coming of age of the field of gender & sexuality studies.

In the 1980s a new line of research appeared that was shaped by a rejection of essentialist arguments of gender and sexuality as a natural phenomenon outside the boundaries of society and culture. Social movements such as the women's, the civil rights, the gay & lesbian movement, have been the driving forces of the scholarly fields of gender & sexuality to unearth unrepresented experiences, to fight inequality and to claim rights. Since then, gender & sexuality studies has come of age and has become a burgeoning field of inquiry. The fight against discrimination and injustice remains a strong imperative and has opened up many subjects that were hitherto unstudied. Sexuality has proven to be a multiplicity: the acronym LGBT+ testifies to the variability of sexuality as it indicates the differentiations of gender and sexual orientations. On a closer look, the field of gender & sexuality is invested in and the product of liberal emancipatory politics, which is itself a product of modernity. The field's main goal is to outline the relations of domination and their suppressing qualities. As such it articulates values of individualism, egalitarianism, the belief in progress, and universalism. It is founded on and endorses the idea of the liberal subject as, on the one hand, produced by processes of subjectivation and, on the other hand, as capable of resisting and subverting these relations of domination. This gives rise to reasoning based on binary oppositions, articulated in notions of freedom versus constraint, openness versus conformity, or choice versus obligations when addressing power.

In short, the term 'sexuality' has a distinct Western cultural history endorsing notions of liberal subjecthood wherein the notion of identity is enfolded. Whereas Foucault's renowned analysis initiated a productive approach to studying sexuality broadly, its theorization that the idea of sexual identity is a recent Western development receives less attention. Despite the recognition that identities are performative (Butler 1993), there remains a tendency to reify sexual categories and to take antinormativity as a self-evident starting point (e.g. Halberstam, 2011; Wiegman and Wilson, 2015).

So, thirdly, this Chair will take up anthropologist Saba Mahmood's (2001) call, of more than twenty years ago, to challenge the normative inclination of feminist analysis, which rests on an idea of the liberal subject and which articulates particular ethnocentric assumptions of autonomy and subjecthood (see also Mahmood 2016). The normative inclination of feminist theory is that it constructs the solution in the formulation of its problem: the liberation of subjugated groups. How subjecthood is more than either compliance or resistance, a dominant trope is liberatory emancipation discourse, but a more complex process characterised by the 'paradox of subjectivation' (Butler 1997) often goes unseen. Similarly, how these groups see their own subjection and whether subjection is the analytically precise depiction, also does not really matter. More importantly, how the existence of contradictions and inconsistencies in people's lives are overwritten by normative thinking is avoided. We can perhaps say that feminist analysis is not led by curiosity for its own principles. If ethnographic research into sexuality tells us one thing, it is that people's lives, motivations and desires do not follow neat lines of normative and antinormative politics. Instead, it is much messier. Let me give a few examples of research I have been part of.

In a pilot study, Silva Harmsen and I analyse the idea of sexual identity among three generations in the Netherlands (2023). We conclude that people's sexual biographies often evaded the neat logic of identity and categories. People's lives and feelings and practices were much more diffuse, sometimes blatantly contradictory, and often happily inconsistent. This is interesting. What is also interesting is that most if not all research on LGBT+ or queer sexuality in the NL dovetails with the discourse of emancipation politics. Why do we read so little about what we may call the unruliness of sexuality?

We do read about it in the queer lives in African societies. The works by Serena Dankwa (2021), Serawit Debele (2022; 2023), Stella Nyanzi 2014), SN Nyeck (2011; 2021), Zethu Matebeni (2014, 2021), Aminata Mbaye (2018, 2020), all here with us today, are exceptional in detailing the variety and abundance of queer lives, and beyond. Similarly, the PhD projects by Peter Miller (2024), Janine Habel (2024), and Loes Oudenhuijsen (forthcoming)

exemplify exactly this: the conceptual framework based on concepts born out of liberatory politics does not help to understand same-sex realities. Think for instance of those who do not speak English or French, the former colonisers' language, and for whom the language-oriented way of understanding one's sexual life is somewhat of a curiosity.[4]

An article on same-sex marriages in Nairobi by Apostolos Andrikopoulos and myself (2023) details the lives of same-sex couples who live together, raise children, and have caring relations with their relatives. For instance, Pauline's life story exemplifies the hilly road that life in general can be. Pauline is currently in her fourth relationship. The first two relationships were with men. She married rather young, this first husband abandoned her and took their child with him when he left Kenya, which broke her heart, the second one abused her and she left him to start her own life, and during this relationship she started having relationships with women. Being a primary school teacher, she started a private school and became financially independent. She met a woman with whom she got married in a private ceremony ordained by two befriended Pentecostal pastors. She was proud to be a spouse, and elaborately explained how she paid bridewealth to her wife's family. Bridewealth is a ritual practice that cements social relations and is meaningful to the giver, customarily offered by the husband to the wife's relatives. For Pauline, giving bridewealth was important to her as it meant they accepted her as family, and also had an idea of the kind of relationship they had. However, her wife left her and left Pauline again heartbroken. Then she met her current partner, Jasmine, with whom she is raising children. She is very grateful to have children with Jasmine, it is an important fulfilment of her sense of self. There is, again, much more to share but I have to be brief. In short, while in three relations Pauline managed to create meaningful ties as kin, her own family disowned her for now living with a woman. Acceptance and rejection are not mutually exclusive. What generally stands out in the stories we collected is how being a parent and being connected to larger family networks is crucial to people's self-understanding and well-being.

What analytical implications do these empirical realities hold? This and other studies show that same-sex erotic practices often *coexist* alongside cross-sex intimacies and institutionalized heterosexuality. In many cases, as the work of Serena Dankwa shows in detail, the relative freedom to engage in same-sex practices is only possible because of the widespread verbal discretion that both conceals and allows for tacitly acknowledged same-sex desires, while open same-sex behaviour is publicly condemned. Another important analytical significance is that, often, people do not single

out their sexual orientation as central to their personality and as a result do not see themselves as a separate group in their social environments. Like the women Gloria Wekker writes about, they are not defined by who they desire. For Westerners, these women and men may seem to hold on to conservative principles – victims of false consciousness – as they do not come out of the closet and declare their 'sexuality'. But what if one's sense of being depends on a different logic, where being a parent is important as one follows and precedes others in a longer lineage of being, and where the logic of seeing whom you desire as the basis of your identity does not make sense? Is this being conservative? The answer lies in the question.

Life is broader, as the women in northern Ghana explain in a study by Colette Santah and myself (forthcoming). These women speak back to us, in our convenient offices, and ask: how are we represented and based on what kind of research? They 'speak back' as we phrase it, about (mis) representations and adverse effects. 'Speaking back' signals responding to power and, in the same act, taking agency in redirecting representations or knowledge production. They 'speak back' to the dominant global LGBT+ discourse that constrains the available ways of thinking about same-sex oriented experiences in their breadth, and to knowledge based on English-speaking, metropolitan and/or activism-mediated research. The question of representation is crucial here. The study about same-sex marriages amidst virulent homophobia in Nairobi by Apostolos, the story of Pauline, was met with disbelief by scholars during conference presentations. Following Stella Nyanzi's plea for a broader exploration of queer sexuality in Africa, we moved beyond the strictly sexual sphere to study the kinship arrangements of same-sex couples in Kenya. The study is based on intensive ethnographic research and even then, fellow scholars unbothered by their lack of knowledge about Kenya, distrusted the study. According to them, same-sex marriage cannot exist in Kenya because of homophobia. What does such a reaction tell us? Certainly a lack of curiosity to follow empirical realities.

Why is it so hard to accept that homophobia and acceptance are not mutually exclusive, in other words, that life is contradictory? Looking at much feminist literature, scholarly narratives of 'sexuality' struggle to accommodate exactly this: the intrinsic ambiguities, conflicts or contradictions of life. This is precisely what scholars from Africa theorize. Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) argues for the recognition of what he calls the incompleteness of life, of the imperfection and unfinishedness of world-making. Scholars need to embrace the *potentialities* of the unfinishedness of life, rather than seeing the vicissitudes of life as a lack that needs to be amended. This, however, goes entirely against the constitution of gender & sexuality studies: the

importance of the idea that progress leads to improvement. But what if the people we study do not follow our liberatory politics? Being curious reveals how thinking in binary oppositions of freedom and constraint is not productive. Approaching power as either oppressive or emancipating forecloses the existence of queer possibilities and affordances *within* the supposed iron law of heteronormativity. In the words of SN Nyeck 'such frictions are productive' (2011, p. 195) to think with, and this is exactly what the study of gender and sexuality from Africa has to offer. Empirical research on practices investigating the *apparent* contradictions between transgression and (tacit) acceptance, and how people reproduce and reject norms & values simultaneously, provides new theorizations about power, subjectivity and agency beyond its traditional dichotomies.

Thinking With Curiosity

The Chair I accept today is called Anthropology of Sexuality and Gender. I usually joke that many scholars study sexuality, but omit sex research. Indeed, an important consideration is the dominant status of discourse analysis in the study of gender and sexuality. In its focus on social injustice and power relations, discourse analysis tends to leave out the practices and experiential qualities of erotic desire and gendered subjectivities. In short, it leaves out the messiness of life that ethnography uncovers. There is therefore a need to 'break with the analytic category of sexuality and the pre-theoretical commitments in which it is founded, [there is a need for the] radical rethinking of sex as the site of rights, and of sexual identities and categories' (Moore 2012, p. 15). In particular, the field of gender & sexuality needs an empirical investigation of the continuum between same-sex and cross-sex erotic practice and self-understanding. The boxing up of heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality is empirically not viable, as many of the projects I am involved in show. My new research project will focus on what I call unruly sexuality. It will study the formation of sexuality across three generations and in four research sites taking Africa and Europe on par, to decolonize the study of sexuality.

Being curious as an analytical method resolves some of the tensions I laid out in two ways: curiosity towards our research topic, as well as towards the normative evaluations we bring along. Theorist Naminata Diabate (2022) argues that scholars should do more fieldwork on sexuality and gender. According to her, scholars box up and confine the messiness and variability of life to the background because of our dependence on concepts. Concepts

often precede our thinking, hence the data has to be packaged and then being critical easily slips into a flattening of the unruly reality. Theoretical fads often seem to be more important in academia than being accountable to the people we work with and represent.

In conclusion, we need to blow up common repertoires, activist ones, liberal ones, feminist ones, repertoires that are based on a particular self-congratulatory logic of liberational politics. Life cannot be easily contained in dominant conceptual frameworks, it evades our categories and escapes our tendency for bringing order into messiness. Instead, we need to be more curious about life, we need a lust for life.

Acknowledgments

There is another reason why the world needs anthropology. It helps us to understand our own life. Take for instance the concept of 'wealth-in-people' (Guyer 1995). It is developed to describe prosperity beyond material goods and includes friendships, networks and other relations. Let me tell you, I am a *very wealthy person*. Thanks to many people, I have arrived where I am now, as a person and as a scholar. I am grateful to all of you.

I thank the rector, and their representative our Dean, and former Dean, of the FMG faculty and Chair of the department, for the trust in me and in this Chair.

Then I first want to thank my interlocutors and friends in Kenya, some of whom I have known since my master's research in 1997. Without your trust and knowledge, there would not have been anything called a career. *Asanteni sana*. The same applies to you, my partners in research, in Ghana. *Medaase paa*.

I started my career on sexuality under the wings of Han ten Brummelhuis, who taught me the devotion to in-depth ethnography of sexuality and gender. May his soul rest in peace. I was soon taken under the wings of Peter Geschiere and together with Birgit Meyer, you pushed me to always probe more, and you made me into the anthropologist I am. Peter, for more than 20 years you have been at my side and it isn't easy to express the wealth of knowledge I learned from you. Finding my footing in academia is an ongoing process but the following people have, and continue to be, crucial. Thomas, I miss you, but your curious and creative mind accompanies my writing. SN, I thank the gods our paths crossed and how you enrich my thinking. Stella and Serena, imagine, we have known each other for more than 20 years, and together with Zethu, Aminata, Phoebe, Serawit, Norah, you are my

intellectual soul sisters without whom the thinking and writing would dry up. Julie, Lotte, Graeme and Kim, thank you for all the thinking in progress.

An important part of my wealth resides in the amazing anthropology department we are and continue to want (wink-wink). We are a wonderful group of passionate scholars and how I wish we could take more time to enjoy our vocation together. The academy is under pressure, it will only get worse, but we stand together. My comrades in the department, intellectually and organizationally, Julie, Trudie, Kristine, Erella, and all the others, we rock and we will continue to rock the UvA! Particularly, I cannot enough express my happiness for the awesome research group Exploring Diversity we have become, you are my anchor as scholar and manager. Thank you all. And we wouldn't be anywhere without the care of Muriel, and those who care for us in our organizational well-being Cristina, Janus, Marijn, Gezina, Elizabeth, Lex, Iwan, Barbara. Likewise, the AISSR Bureau. But also the fantastic AISSR research community, thank you for all the collaborations and hard work. The community of the Amsterdam Centre for Gender & Sexuality is an important lifeline, we are under pressure, but we stand solidly together.

A crucial part of my wealth comes from the PhD candidates I have worked with and with whom I continue to work: I hope I have told you abundantly how much I rely on your curiosity and sharpness, thank you Jonathan, Ben, Willemijn, Myra, Shuaishuai, Amisah, Lieve, Dilys, Peter, Janine, Loes, Carol, Yicun, Lysanne, Ke, and Bo. I am also part of two illustrious companies, one with the curious name of VOC, thank you for your intellectual stimulation for so many years, and the secret society of our intervisie groep: zonder jullie steun en toeverlaat had ik hier niet gestaan, dat weten jullie. I know myself surrounded by an important group of people without whom academia would be boring, I cannot name you all but I am grateful knowing you and working with you. Thank you Andie and Emma for helping out when someone has to submit a Vici research proposal, organise a seminar, teach and write an inaugural lecture all at the same time.

Life is larger than academia, as Tobias never tires to remind me of. And I would have been nowhere without my friends and family.

Lieve familie en vrienden, jullie hebben me worstelend zien groeien als wetenschapper, enthousiast over de inhoud maar soms zo verstoord door de lelijke ruis van de academie. Lieve Ak, Wil en Chris, jullie levenslust voor het goede heeft me overeind gehouden in moeilijke tijden, maar zeker ook in goede tijden van wandelen, musea bezoeken, dansen en meer. Veel dank en liefs ook aan de grotere groep van vrienden, jullie geven glans aan het leven. Marjolein, de rots in de branding van een jong gezin. Mn zussies, Esther

en Janneke, jullie staan al zo lang ik me kan herinneren naast me in het leven, en ik hoop dat onze zusterband me nog lang de nodige levenslessen zal geven die ik nodig heb. En dank ook Charlie, Nora en Carmen dat jullie mijn leven zijn komen verrijken. Mijn ouders, Neeltje en Cees, zonder jullie had ik hier niet gestaan in volle overtuiging van wat ik net heb uitgesproken. Jullie keuze om in Nigeria te gaan werken is niet het enige wat me gevormd heeft, de manier waarop jullie dat avontuur aangingen 50 jaar geleden is cruciaal, het is een levenshouding doordrenkt van nieuwsgierigheid en het daarmee gepaard gaande respect voor anderen.

Dan, de grote lieverds van mn leven. Julian en Tobias, ik weet het, wat een geleuter, het is tijd voor feest, maar *niet* totdat ik iedereen hier verteld heb hoe het *roasten* van dat moedertje van jullie, maar zeker ook jullie oprechte nieuwsgierigheid naar de wereld, me bij de les houdt. Vic, er zijn geen woorden om uit te drukken hoe het zonder jouw wijsheid, geduld en liefde, geen cent waard zou zijn.

Ik heb gezegd.

Notes

1. Edited version of the inaugural lecture upon accepting the Chair of Anthropology of Sexuality and Gender at the University of Amsterdam, on Friday September 13, 2024.
2. Accessed 17 May 2024 https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/gambia-mp-defends-bid-to-legalise-female-genital-mutilation-4584170
3. https://www.theelephant.info/series/journaling-kenyas-gen-z-revolution/
4. Only slowly is research about this group appearing, such as for example Awo Dufie's Anthology of older same-sex oriented women and men in Ghana, a project in the making and not yet published.

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About the Author

Rachel Spronk is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Her various research projects evidence a concern with the historical trajectories that have shaped the present, the production of knowledge about gender and sexuality and, ultimately, how the lived experiences of people inform our theoretical models. Overall, she investigates the interface between sexuality and the middle classes in Ghana and Kenya, examining problematic assumptions behind both terms.