Exchanges

In the *Exchanges* section of our journal, we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. We invite our readers to offer in this section their own thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaboration with university-based partners in particular and on engaged scholarship in general.

Below profiles the perspectives of Abigail Zita Seshie, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan (USask), and Reggie Nyamekye, a graduate student in Women's and Gender Studies at USask on culture, African women, representations, African feminisms, and resisting exceptionalisms with a focus on Ghanaian and Canadian contexts.

Through the Lenses of Culture: A Diasporic Sisters' Dialogue on Power Struggles Informing African Women's Representations in Ghanaian and Canadian Contexts

Reggie: Thank you, Zita, for creating this space to discuss our respective efforts to contribute to more accurate representations of African women, African feminisms, the operations of culture in women's aspirational movements in Ghana, and the limits of western feminisms, as you have encountered them in your graduate and post-graduate experiences in Canada. To begin, then, can you please tell me about your work, positionalities, social location, and scholarship?

Abigail Zita Seshie

Zita: My positionalities and social location have shaped my work and scholarship. Growing up in Ghana, West Africa, my identity was shaped by gender, ethnic group, and social class. A person's gender, to a large extent, shapes their worldview,

expectations, and opportunities in Ghana. In Ghana, females are expected to aspire to become a wife and mother above other ambitions they may want to accomplish. Ethnic groups are matrilineal or patrilineal in terms of kinship ties. These forms of kinship ties affect how a person performs gender roles and expectations. Also, a person's social class is instrumental in navigating the complexities associated with gender and ethnic culture. As a female belonging to a patrilineal ethnic group, I understood the notion of women being the "subordinate" gender. Among patrilineal ethnic groups in Ghana, kinship ties are traced through the male line. So, children born in patrilineal ethnic groups are considered members of their father's family. Male children have privileges because they continue the family lineage among patrilineal groups. This cultural understanding impacts how I have performed gender. I understood early on that my successes and accomplishments would not be recognized on the same pedestal as those of a male child. However, being raised in an upper-middle-income family in an urban city in Ghana, the severity of the cultural notions associated with gender and patrilineal ethnic ties were minimized. Although I understood the importance of male children in a patrilineal family, the blend of modernity in urban spaces in Ghana protected me against the harsh realities experienced by many girls and women in rural communities, where traditional norms are strict and strongly enforced.

Like many girls raised in urban parts of Ghana, I had the opportunity to attend a private school throughout my formative years. With an excellent educational background, I was able to gain admission to the University of Ghana in 2006, where I studied Sociology, Classical History, and Theatre Arts. In 2010, I completed my undergraduate degree with two majors —Sociology and Theatre Arts. I chose these majors because both focus on society and human subjects, but address social problems differently. Combining these positionalities and social locations inspired me to pursue a master's degree in Social Justice and Equity Studies at Brock University from 2012-2014. The desire to produce a body of work focused on girls' experiences in formal education influenced my doctoral research on the gendered impacts of education policy in Ghana. I centered my doctoral work on girls' education because my own formal education gave me the power to transcend the cultural limitations imposed on me by gender.

Reggie: Thank you. Please tell me also about *Girls Education in Ghana: The Voices from Within,* your award-winning documentary and the inspiration and goals behind that project.

Zita: My documentary film was designed to pay homage to my mother. Like many Ghanaian women born in the 1950s, my mother did not have the opportunity to complete primary school. As a female child in a low-income family, my grandparents believed my mother would become a wife and a mother. Therefore, her formal education was not seen to be as crucial as her brothers'. The documentary film highlighted how culture influences girls' educational attainments in Ghana and validated a theoretical framework I developed, while working on my doctoral research, known as the African Feminist Standpoint.

The scholarly contributions of African American scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have emphasized the unique experiences of Black women, which were not well

accounted for in early feminist scholarship. While race, gender, class, and sexuality are critical intersectional identities that further deepen the oppression of Black women, African women experience another layer of oppression that stems from culture. The theoretical framework of the African Feminist Standpoint focuses on culture, a concept not fully articulated in intersectional feminist theory. The theoretical framework I proposed analyzes multiple variables connected to Ghana's ethnic culture. This response will briefly elaborate on lineage systems, family structure, and geographical location to explain why girls tend to have lower formal educational attainments in Ghana.

In Ghana, culture is defined based on an individuals' ethnic group. In the Ghanaian context, ethnic groups are people with a common descent, migration history, similar physical characteristics, and customs, not fully defined or connected by blood relationships. The social position of girls and women is different, depending on the lineage system. I believe women belonging to matrilineal ethnic groups have greater privilege compared to women in patrilineal families. I make this assertion because, in matrilineal ethnic groups, children trace their descent through their mothers. Only females can pass kin membership on to their offspring. Therefore, women in matrilineal ethnic groups tend to receive some protection because kinship ties are traced through female members

Apart from the lineage system, the Ghanaian culture legally recognizes polygamy as a customary form of marriage. Polygamy permits a man to be married to more than one woman at the same time. Therefore, girls and women in polygamous families will have different experiences and educational opportunities. Most often, polygamous families are large, with few resources to provide educational opportunities for all children. Furthermore, polygamy is predominant in rural communities where traditional cultural norms are strict. With preference given to male children, girls and women in polygamous families have limited formal educational opportunities.

Additionally, the bride price payment, part of marriage rites, makes girls and women an economic resource for their families. The bride price is comprised of gift payments offered by a male suitor for marriage based on traditional customs. Thus, the bride's family accepts livestock (as practiced by ethnic groups in northern Ghana) or other moveable property (like local fabrics, drinks, traditional beaded jewelry, and money) as a form of compensation for the loss of their daughter's fertility and labour. This cultural practice can deter low-income families from investing in the formal education of their girl children.

I was born and raised in an urban community in Ghana. Besides attending private school for primary and secondary education, most families in my city were monogamous, and most children, irrespective of gender, benefited from having private school education. My documentary highlights the idea that lineage systems, family structure and size (monogamous or polygamous), and geographical location (urban or rural) construct the unique experiences of girls and women in Ghana. Through the lens of culture, girls' and women's experiences in Ghana can be more adequately articulated, a gap I addressed in feminist scholarship with my proposed theoretical framework.

Zita: Your turn, Reggie. Please tell me about your ongoing thesis project, what inspired you to focus on Asante Queen Mother, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, and how your work explores the strengths and resilience of Ghanaian and African women.

Reggie: In my experiences, stereotypes about African women and stories about their struggles have long permeated western media and many spaces in academia as, seemingly, the only definitive story about us. When there is a positive story about an African woman, it seems as though that is seen as the exception and could not possibly be considered a norm. I believe that such views are deeply problematic, especially as many stories of the strengths and triumphs of African women exist. Focusing on Nana Yaa Asantewaa, who was the *ohemaa* (queen mother) of Ejisu (in the Ashanti region of Ghana) in the 19th and early 20th century, is a way to challenge the notion that "there are only struggle stories of African women." Nana Yaa Asantewaa is recognized in Ghana and in parts of the diaspora for her contributions in fighting the British in the Anglo-Ashanti war of 1900-1901. She was successful in protecting the Golden Stool (a sacred symbol for the Asantes in Ghana) and in pushing for independence. Thus, I am exploring her story as an example of the resilience of African women on the continent. The Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) once said "the single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." I could not agree more about challenging incomplete stories in order to make room for more complete stories.

Reggie: Let us talk, now, about privileges and power dynamics informing your experiences in Ghana.

Zita: Within the context of Western culture, a woman who is highly educated with a PhD is considered empowered and liberated. However, within the African culture, a highly educated woman represents a foreign ideal of womanhood. In the Ghanaian and African cultures, womanhood is defined based on marriage and motherhood (having children and taking care of your family). Women who do not fulfill these cultural markers of womanhood are perceived as going against the collective norm—making a highly educated woman a target of reproach in the African context. There is a difference between how the Western culture views an empowered woman compared to the Ghanaian culture.

African women who have attained a high level of education and career success but are unmarried with no children occupy a unique space and navigate two paradigms. In one paradigm, a well-educated and accomplished woman is perceived as empowered and self-sufficient. The other paradigm is tied to oppression, because of cultural expectations connected to gender. The interesting part of feeling oppressed when it comes to not fulfilling the cultural expectations of womanhood is that older women often enforce prevailing cultural norms by questioning why a woman of a certain age is not married or does not have children. The role of older people as gatekeepers of cultural gender norms reminds me of the sociological term "hegemony," where an oppressed group consciously or unconsciously participates in their

oppression. I am privileged and oppressed at the same time because I have accomplished a lot in my career but have not fulfilled the cultural markers of womanhood based on Ghanaian cultural expectations.

Zita: Some may argue that Yaa Asantewaa's role as a matriarchal hero was shaped by her matrilineal lineage and social class (i.e., queen mother). What are your thoughts on this assertion?

Reggie: Certainly, in a matrilineal society like the Asantes, who trace decent through the female line and give recognition and respect to women, Asante queen mothers had an elevated role in society and, therefore, had the power to influence social and political arenas. I like to think a person on a stage with a microphone and an audience at an event will have more power to influence the people gathered than someone who is not even invited to that event. Some of Nana Yaa Asantewaa's well-known spirited speeches asking Asante men to fight against the British happened because, as a queen mother, she could attend these meetings in the first place, speak up, and rally the warriors.

Nonetheless, on the other hand, it is possible there could have been other queen mothers who had status and class but still could not have influenced the Asante political arena the way Nana Yaa Asantewaa did. Maybe there were other things Nana Yaa Asantewaa had that set her apart, that greatly elevated her in society. Perhaps it was her bravery, the strategies she adopted, a sheer determination to defend the Golden Stool, her desire to protect Asante sovereignty from the British, and more. The famous Yaa Asantewaa song below shows why she is considered a matriarchal hero by some.

Original in Twi	English translation
Yaa Asantewaa	*Yaa Asantewaa*
Obaabasia oko premo ano	*A woman who fights before cannons*
Waye be egyae	*You have accomplished great things*
Na wabo mmodene	*You have done well*

(Boahen, 2003, pp.62-63).

Ghanaian historian Arhin Brempong (2000) states that:

> Nana Yaa Asantewaa's role in the 1900 resistance war exceeded the normal political and military roles of Asante women. She did not merely dare the men to fight. The men recognized in her a potential leader and elected her as the first female *osahene* (war-leader); it was an achieved, not an ascribed, position. (p.108)

This suggests that perhaps Nana Yaa Asantewaa's contributions exceeded the expectations or her roles and responsibilities as a queen mother.

Reggie: Ghana was the first Sub-Saharan African country to gain formal political independence from the colonizers in 1957. As a formerly colonized country, the official language of Ghana is English and there is no Ghanaian language that is officially recognized. Would you agree that the English language offers you recognition as "educated" and a global audience, for better or worse? How do you navigate this persistent post-colonial paradox?

Zita: I recognize that the use of English and the privilege of being Canadian-educated offers me recognition and the opportunity to share my work with a global audience. However, it is essential to acknowledge that all ethnic groups have their unique indigenous language or local dialect. Few of the dialects are used by the larger society in Ghana. The estimated number of indigenous languages spoken in Ghana varies from 30 to 81 (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015). So how does a country with heterogeneity in language maintain an inclusive national identity? Although English and formal education are colonial legacies, they have been used in the post-colonial era to create a unifying national identity of "one nation, one people," which is a famous phrase often used by the political elites in Ghana.

Even with indigenous languages in Ghana, a hierarchy exists and has privileged certain ethnic groups over others. During the colonial era, the Basel mission schools and the Wesleyan Church translated the English Bible into Twi, Ewe, and Ga (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015). European missionaries' use of indigenous languages (Twi, Ewe, and Ga) resulted in some ethnic groups gaining linguistic dominance in Ghana. After Ghana's independence from colonial rule, the government included Twi, Ga, Ewe, and Dagbani (an indigenous language used by groups in the northern region) in the language policy for education (Opoku-Amankwa et al., 2015). This language policy is evident in the selected languages (Dagbani, Twi, Ga, and Ewe) offered by the University of Ghana as compulsory courses for all students, in order to promote inter-linguistic competency. My reference to the colonial history of language policy emphasizes the dominance and hierarchy of some indigenous languages in Ghana and how the language spoken by an individual can be a source of relative privilege or oppression. In my view, English as the official language blurs the hierarchical privilege and power associated with dominant indigenous languages like Twi and fosters an inclusive national identity.

Reggie: Narratives in the west are often problematic in their projections toward the African continent (despite work being done by decolonial feminists, writers, scholars, etc.), which is a part of what my research is about: challenging problematic and distorting narratives. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's famous argument about the dangers of a single story resonates with the late Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's saying, "Until the lions learn to tell their own story, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." What is your general response to this?

Zita: It is common knowledge that Western or European accounts of history and literature are often relied on as credible sources for learning about Africans. I call for Reparations of Knowledge, which means centering the voices of African scholars and using their work to tell African history and stories. No knowledge is value-neutral, implying that those who tell the stories of others will do so based on their own values and cultural praxis. I believe you and I are making our contributions through theory and storytelling as critical interventions in framing the experiences of Ghanaian women beyond Ghana, alongside those of other Black people from the African continent. However, change takes collective action, so it is crucial to consciously promote the work of African scholars, poets, artists, filmmakers, and storytellers through an inclusive curriculum of relevant media formats and content.

Zita: From your viewpoint, how can Africans use storytelling to solidify an African identity that moves beyond colonial ties or imperialism, for instance, in reference to women's empowerment in the African context.

Reggie: Storytelling is a powerful tool to convey a message, to evoke emotions, to speak truth, and to give people the opportunity to take their power back. In many cultures in Ghana, oral tradition—whether it was through music, proverbs, or stories—was a way to pass knowledge between generations and learn about ancestors, histories in communities, etc. Storytelling by Africans, especially in the diaspora, allows for our different cultures to be shared, for us to take the stage, take space, and share the plethora of experiences and stories that have shaped and influenced us and to break out of the monolithic box we are often placed in, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Storytelling, especially critical and decolonial stories, empower Africans to shape their own identities and challenge labels that have been damaging or deprived us of voice. With reference to women's empowerment, I believe there are many ways African women can be seen as empowered and that there cannot be one definition for African women. Any woman who is a farmer, teacher, mother, feminist, and/or fearless leader can be in the same room with each of the others and be celebrated for what they may be contributing to their respective communities. Empowered African women can take many roles and this message needs to be advanced in discussions about African women. Again, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) argues, when you "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again,. . . that is what they become." I believe storytelling allows for people—for African people—to define our own authentic identities beyond colonial ties and definitions.

Reggie: Are there many examples of genuine active allyship from white folks that come to mind in your work or research? Do you also find that problematic questions are still asked of you or only in rare instances?

Zita: Canadian Feminist Sociologist Dorothy Smith noted that our standpoint shapes our experiences and worldviews. Standpoint refers to privileging the viewpoint and lived

experiences of individuals and groups. Therefore, it would be challenging to expect genuine active allyship regarding feminism as seen and practiced by my white colleagues. Although women as a group, collectively, may have experienced varying levels of oppression, the lived experiences of white women are different from African women. Based on this understanding, I have taken the initiative to become a leading voice in advancing and understanding African feminisms. Considering that African cultures outline different gender roles and expectations for women, it would be disingenuous to expect white feminists to understand the African woman's lived experience, because the Western culture prescribes different gender expectations. The expectation I have when it comes to genuine active allyship is for my white colleagues to interrogate their standpoints and how their social position is rooted in racial privilege that shapes their understandings of the oppression of women as a collective. Through critical reflection on their worldviews, white feminists will refrain from asking Black feminists problematic questions about our struggles, as the experiences of Black women are heterogeneous as are the experiences of white women.

Reggie: Michelle Obama once said: "When you walk through an open door of opportunity, you hold it open." How do you practice creating opportunities for people of colour in this community, especially African women?

Zita: I believe the best way of creating opportunities for African women is to lead by example. Leading by example means being exceptional and getting recognized for my work. I have done exceptionally well in my budding career, and my commitment to ensuring gender equity in formal education in Ghana has attracted a lot of awards and recognition. This includes receiving a research scholarship from the Canadian Federation of University Women in 2017. In addition, I was awarded the 2019 Global Research Leadership Award for students at the University of Saskatchewan because my doctoral study demonstrated international impact, fostered the diversification and inclusiveness of communities, and improved the quality of life in communities. Also, I was recognized by the Canadian Sociological Association as an outstanding graduating doctoral sociology student in 2020.

Another way of opening the door of opportunity in my community in Ghana involves mobilizing resources to support girls as they strive to complete primary education. For example, in 2017, I partnered with the Saskatoon chapter of *Days for Girl*, an international non-profit organization specializing in distributing reusable menstrual health products. Through this organization, I received 120 sanitary kits donated to girls in public schools in my hometown. Existing literature on the barriers for retention of Ghanaian girls in school emphasizes that lack of sanitary pads is a significant deterrent. I also gave out school supplies and scholarships for selected girls in my hometown based on academic achievement. However, I believe the most significant impact was being present in my hometown in Ghana and having direct interactions with female students to encourage them to stay committed to learning, because formal education offers many possibilities that can positively alter their life experiences. It is a privilege to be able to create change and light the path of opportunities for African girls and women.

Reggie: You are a role model and an inspiration in the Black community here in Canada for many and even beyond this community. How do you go about sharing your wealth of knowledge with others?

Zita: My belief in knowledge sharing inspired me to produce a documentary film from my doctoral research project. Early in my journey as a scholar, I understood the importance of making knowledge accessible to the public beyond the boundaries of traditional scholarship. I do use my documentary film and other short videos produced by Africans in my foundational sociology courses. Consequently, my students gain a lot of cross-cultural knowledge because my course content relies on African materials and resources to provide a comparative framework for understanding concepts like gender, culture, marriage and family, and education. Finally, I stay engaged with different groups and organizations where I often get invited to speak during Black History Month and other public events on diversity and understanding the African experience in North America.

Reggie: How do you get your news?

Zita: With the advancement of digital technologies, such as the internet, online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow news to be delivered digitally. This era of digital technologies brings people together, irrespective of geographical locations and time differences. One of the positive aspects of digitalization is that interactive platforms have given Africans the chance to control narratives and shed light on stories not promoted by mainstream Western media. For example, last year, thousands of young Nigerians took to the streets to protest police brutality after a video of a man allegedly being killed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) went viral. Through organic coverage of the protest by ordinary Nigerians on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, the news became global, sparking what became known as the #EndSars demonstrations. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative by Western media of Africa and Africans is rooted in Eurocentric notions and ideas. However, I remain hopeful because digital media platforms continue to challenge traditional news reports and their power, as Africans today have the platform to contest narratives rooted in the historical experience of colonialism and imperialism. Thus, it is not an issue of how you get your news. Instead, African leaders should work on closing the digital divide between the continent and the West, so more ordinary Africans have access to internet services and can generate organic news reports by sharing their own stories on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Zita: What are some of the ways to combat deficient western narratives of Africa? How do we take ownership of our own voices?

Reggie: I think in everyday conversations we must strive to share the beauty of our cultures; we have to tell more complete stories about the continent. We have to applaud or celebrate many instances of #BlackBoyJoy, #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackExcellence, and shine a light on

positive and inspiring stories emerging from the continent. More importantly, we must correct people who make assumptions or ignorant comments. I think little remarks that are "almost harmless" like "I am going to Africa," are actually harmful if not checked, corrected, or further interrogated. Such a remark is not an acceptable sentence, especially when a person is visiting one single city in an entire continent. The follow up question to the person should be "Where exactly on the African continent are you visiting?" Bigger remarks like "those poor Africans" must be universally challenged for the generalization is obviously soaked in stereotypes.

A continent like Africa, which continues to thrive, despite so much wealth having been stolen by colonizers, cannot be considered poor. I like to think you cannot talk about poverty on the continent of Africa without discussing the role of the colonizers in this. You cannot dismiss the gold, ivory, diamonds, and wealth of many African countries and categorize them with all African countries that may not have those resources.

Have people considered that wealth may be beyond money? That it could include overall resilience, spirit, joy, and a people flourishing despite the possible obstacles they may face? Such a remark should have us asking the speaker why they are so desperate to categorize an entire continent together, what is the purpose or intention, and who does it serve when such a question is asked? I think thoughtful discussions combat these deficiencies.

We must take ownership by operating from a place of kindness and respect in response to ignorance, arrogance, and unwarranted statements paraded as curiosity. In 2022, people have access to knowledge, storytellers, researchers, writers, books, and events. Thus, problematic and alarming statements and remarks whether overt or subtle have to be addressed; there is no excuse. It is a choice to remain uneducated about an entire continent: if a person wanted to do their part and learn, they would. If they do not, it is on them and as far as we are concerned, we will do our part to get them on a path of recognizing the implications of their stereotypes. So, in everyday conversations we must take ownership.

Zita: What are some of the end goals you wish to achieve with your thesis on Nana Yaa Asantewaa? How does this critical work focus on celebrating the strength and resilience of African women?

Reggie: It almost sounds too simple, but I hope it allows us to demand more truthful and complete representations about African women. I hope that historical analyses of the resilience of people like Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the Dahomey Amazons of Benin, and Yennenga and Nzingha Mbande, for example, are discussed when people find themselves faced only with struggle stories. That stories about late activists such as Miriam Makeba of South Africa or the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai of Kenya, need to be told more. Contemporary female role models and leaders from the African continent such as Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo or Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and other female storytellers, emphasize the strength and resilience of African women. Instead of people assuming such women must be the exception, they should ask instead: how many more are or were like her?

Reggie: What are your career goals? Are you actively working towards them? What do you hope your impact will be?

Zita: A goal I consider as a life commitment is establishing a non-profit agency that would partner with grassroots organizations across Africa to ensure girls' retention in public schools in order to complete their primary education. In terms of my career, I would like the opportunity to work with the World Bank Group or the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) as a senior gender specialist. With the experiences I would gather from working with one of the international agencies mentioned, I could offer consultancy services for the Ghanaian government on using policy to effectively include women in politics and other forms of leadership at the national level. Until women become an integral part of political and social institutions in Ghana, change will be slow and inclusion policies will represent the ideologies of the male political elites. The impact I hope to make is to promote gender-balanced leadership in Ghana and other African countries.

About the Authors

Abigail Zita Seshie obtained her doctorate in Sociology, and she is currently a postdoctoral fellow of the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan, where she completed her doctoral studies. Her areas of research interest include gender and transnational feminisms, health equity, international development, and social policy. Zita is passionate about scholar activism and community service.
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Reggie Nyamekye is a storyteller, scholar, and advocate. Her research interests include Afrocentrism, gender, policies, decolonization, justice, and agency of African women. Reggie also promotes respect, inclusion, thoughtfulness, celebration of diversity, and positivity in her interactions with others. She remains an avid volunteer who believes in giving back, supporting, and contributing to make a difference in every community she finds herself.

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