



CHAPTER 8

On Young Ghanaian Women Being, Becoming, and Belonging in Place

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The last leg of the three-hour trek to Asesewa from Accra is through winding mountain red dirt roads made hard by the steady flow of traffic. The ride is bumpy and dusty, and my driver, Yao,¹ has turned on the air conditioner so we can close the windows. As we ascend, I take in the lush hills and quietude that is broken each time we roll through a town, by the sounds of children chattering on their way to school, by roadside sellers hawking fresh produce from wooden stands, and by tro-tro conductors calling out for passengers. I do not yet know that these journeys will linger as clarion memories many years on. On this first trip, I rest my eyes to contemplate how to state my request to the assistant headmaster. (Adapted from my researcher journal 2014)

In 2014, I was on my way to Asesewa, Ghana. Remembrances of prior times in Ghana and of my work with Black young women were like the rays of light bouncing off Yao's windshield when the trees gave way to the sun, shimmering autobiographical artifacts reminding me how I came to be on this road but not fully revealing a way to make my research request. I have built long-term relationships with Ghanaian partners, but going into this research, I knew my time with initiates of Dipo (the rite of adulthood for girls and young women practiced by the

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Krobo), whose experiences I wanted to learn from and about, would be brief. I was unsure how I would be received, but I planned to present myself as someone come to exchange life lessons with them in the long tradition of Black girls and women talking story around open fires and kitchen tables (Haddix et al. 2016; hooks 2000; Ohito et al. 2023). As Yao focused on avoiding potholes, I was thinking about how to pose my interest in studying Dipo as an exchange of reciprocal value although I had come to them. Arriving at Asesewa Senior High School, I began the dance between layers of the school's administration, introducing myself and describing my study until, all protocols observed, I ended the morning by aligning the school's calendar with my iCal, assured that I could move forward. Conceding the research was my mission, not the initiates', I knew I would dip from the well of Black women's knowledges and perspectives (Muhammad and Haddix 2016) to be in right relationship² with the young women.

Working from my temporary base in the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the University of Ghana–Legon, I was studying how initiates of the Krobo Dipo rite assess its influence on their sense of agency or ability to enact the leadership (Duggins 2011; Zimmerman and Cleary 2005) expected of Krobo women (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2009). Sixteen years earlier, I had created Sister Sol, a rite-of-passage program for Black and Latinx young women of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol in New York City, New York, and established its international program, for which Ghana is a regular destination. Bro/Sis, familiarly, uses a pedagogy of African diasporic history, culture, and thought. Sister Sol members participating in both programs, I noticed, wove an interior landscape from the texts, discussions, and other curricula from their overseas experiences into complex personal narratives inclusive of their shared identity as people of the African diaspora. What they learned in the rites space uniquely materialized and was amplified in the place-based experience of Ghana (Wilcox 2007).

My Bro/Sis colleagues and I had invested in rites of passage to nurture young people's holistic well-being, and in Ghana, I was able to study an actual traditional rite. After months of reading up on Dipo, I realized that what was really sparking my curiosity was learning from young women who had gone through the rite about how they situate this tradition within their modern lives and interpret its influence, particularly in cultivating Krobo womanhood. Rereading the paper I presented at the end of my appointment at the University of Ghana–Legon, I be-

gan to think about the knowledge generation of the Dipo initiates related to the interplay between being and becoming, the liminal space of adolescence and Dipo, and the meaning(fulness) of place and space, concepts I thread throughout this chapter. By placing the Dipo initiates in Blackness that transcends geographic boundaries, a larger argument unfolded. Belonging offers a place of embodiment and freedom for Black teen girls, as illustrated in the geospecific cultural context of Dipo and through remembering Sister Sol's "critical pedagogy of love that lets both learners and teachers intimately explore the affective landscape of corporeal pleasure [and] makes possible gratifying learning spaces and conditions" (Ohito 2019: 142). Through Black girlhood studies, one understands the intricacies of their stories using a feminist lens that calls to mind Audre Lorde and bell hooks and reveals nuanced identities that have been ignored, undertold, and overshadowed (Halliday 2019; Smith 2019). Although rites of passage are a common topic within the genre, scholars have mainly focused on the Global North. This study adds to the conversation.

This chapter is a weaving of research and lived experience, including those of my own being conjured. I begin with descriptions of rites of adulthood (Dipo and Sister Sol), followed by conceptual and theoretical framing that traces Black girlhood across the African diaspora. I describe the makeshifting methodology I used, then bring together what I am learning about being, becoming, and belonging from the initiates and what this tells us about the geographies of Black girlhood.

Rites of Adulthood: Dipo and Sister Sol

The need for ritual to recognize and celebrate different life passages is universal across Africa (Somé 1998), and those that signify the transition from childhood to adulthood, what Ampim (2003) referred to as the "Rite of Adulthood" (para. 6), are some of the most important. Initiates enter a rite with all of their life experiences, knowledge, skills, preferences, and aspirations and, upon completion, have learned how to act in accordance with their newly acquired social standing and are now authorized to do so (Adjaye 1999; Ampim 2003; Sarpong 1977; Somé 1998). The role of their community is to publicly approve, acknowledge, and affirm the performance to inspire initiates to fulfill their life purpose (Somé 1998).

The Brief on Dipo

Dipo is practiced by Krobo girls whose ancestral mountain home (Klowem) and shrine (Nana Kloweki) are in Ghana's Eastern Region. Hiking up Klowem one day during the department's annual field school for fourth-year students, Emmanuel, who later introduced me to Asesewa Senior High School, bent down to pick up a small blue Dipo bead and handed it to me. Had I had seen it in the dirt, I would have left it in place, but as a gift, even if lighthearted, I added it to a strand of even tinier gold and blue beads that I wore as a kind of talisman. Some Ghanaians might call this juju, similar to how some people perceive Dipo as unchristian.

Dipo initiates become Krobo women, approved and prepared for marriage to Krobo men, accepted into their husbands' families, and permitted to contribute to community decision-making (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2002, 2009). Historically, Krobo are known to acculturate other ethnic groups into their community by performing Dipo on incoming female members (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2005). Researcher and Dipo initiate Boakye (2010) said the ritual originally lasted three years on Klowem, then one year, then six months, until it was reduced to its current five to seven days, with activities in initiates' hometowns. Dipo was also previously performed in preparation for marriage, but with very young girls participating, it raises the question, Is Dipo still a rite of adulthood (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2005)? What has remained consistent is Dipo's three main stages (Steegstra 2002):

1. Preparation includes divination to receive spiritual permission to perform the rite, cleansing of the girls, and gathering of materials and fees for performing the ritual.
2. Separation includes undressing the girls, shaving their heads, drinking libations, adorning the girls with waist beads, and preparing the millet drink they will imbibe.
3. Climax includes killing the goat and pouring its blood on the girls, visiting the "old lady" (Nana Kloweki), outdoorizing of initiates (presenting them to their families and community), and taking photographs to prove Dipo was performed.

The authority of the Dipo spiritual leaders is unquestioned, particularly during the separation stage when, removed from their homes and daily

routines, initiates are “passive and humble” receivers of teachings about Krobo morals, taboos, and social responsibility (Ampim 2003).

The unrestricted role of Dipo priestesses/priests and the belief that the rite conflicts with Christian values have opened Dipo up to criticism. Human rights advocates and political leaders say it contributes to promiscuity, unwed pregnancies, and higher HIV rates (Adjaye 2002; All-Africa 2005; Smith-Spark 2006) and subjects initiates to “oppression at the hands of dominating and unequal ritual officiants who are the repository of cultural values, norms, [and] attitudes” (Adjaye 1999: 21). While writing this chapter, I searched Ghanaian media to see how Dipo was currently discussed in the public sphere and read that Nene Tetey Kwao I of the Luom-Osu-Doku Council (which has authority over the rite) wants to reduce teenage marriage by limiting Dipo to girls ages eighteen and older and requiring approval from the council to confirm the criterion is met (Hagan 2017). I also went back to my notes:

I read and frequently heard that Dipo leads to female promiscuity and the increase in HIV infection in their community. A colleague asked me if my research would lead to any recommendations and specifically those having to do with reducing young women’s promiscuity. He also noted that if a male is raised in a family in which his father and grandfather are polygamous, it is a natural lifestyle for him to live. But for women raised in a monogamous household, polygamy could cause emotional turmoil that would somehow need to be dealt with. I’m not sure if he meant polygamy should be accepted or not, but the supposition that African men are naturally polygamous alongside the critique that Dipo fosters promiscuity and increases teen pregnancy presents a tricky imbalance. (Researcher journal 2014)

One afternoon, Emmanuel, who is Krobo, told me his teenage daughter could not have Dipo performed because she is an unwed mother. Just barely containing his rage, Emmanuel stressed that she is undeniably Krobo, and he longed for her to be a confirmed Krobo woman. The pull to have their daughters secure the cultural prestige of Dipo is such that some Krobo Christians will have the rite performed before their daughters receive the Christian sacrament to ameliorate its figurative effects and in hopes that there remains no memory of the experience (Adjaye 1999). How and why has Dipo endured? Some of my University of Ghana colleagues would place Dipo among long-held traditions intentionally harnessed for the future (Anquandah, Kankpeyeng, and Apoh 2014). It is a culturally nimble and potent pronouncement of Krobo womanhood that, like culture writ large, is passed down by women (Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2009).

Sister Sol Rites of Passage

Whether or not a Ghanaian girl participates in a cultural rite of adulthood, she—like Black girls everywhere—will come of age through sociopolitical means upon reaching legal adulthood (voting and drinking age) or by gaining respect, maturity, or prominence as a married person, parent, provider, and/or community leader (Adjaye 1999; Lesko 2012). Esteeming the cultural, ancestral dimensions of development to reclaim heritages lost through slavery, more and more Black young women in the United States are participating in rites of adulthood inspired by African traditions.

Sister Sol scaffolds edifying, cathartic experiences and celebration of seminal milestones rooted in a Pan-Africanist and social justice curriculum with ritual phases adapted from The Brotherhood (founded before Sister Sol). Sister Sol chapters create a collective mission statement and definitions of *sister*, *woman*, and *leader* to cohere them as a group that will formally convene for four or more years. During their last year, members craft individual oaths of dedication about their aspirations and commitments, which characteristically include a review of their Sister Sol journey.

Reclaiming their African identities has been foundational to the Sister Sol members' self-knowing (Wilcox, Lazarre-White, and Warwin 2004), layering onto their strengths and wisdom (Dillard 2020) and fulfilling a vital need to connect them to female role models and deconstruct pervasive objectifying messages about Black women (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). Although some Sister Sol members enter the program with low trust thresholds, most leave strengthened by rituals experienced in solidarity with sister-friends. In Sister Sol, they bear witness to one another and lay bare their own vulnerabilities, sharing joys, sorrows, epiphanies, and hard-earned wisdoms (Wilcox 2021).

Theorizing Black Girlhood across the African Diaspora

Before theorizing about the Dipo initiates, I first introduce them here. They ranged in age from fifteen to nineteen and were Form 2 students (equivalent to seventh or eighth grade in the United States) at Asesewa Senior High School, a boarding school and the only senior high school in the rural Upper Manya Krobo District. All but two of the initiates are from Krobo towns. The average age they had Dipo performed was four-

teen, but a few were as young as nine years old. Save one, they all remembered their rite experience.

Asesewa was once a major market crossroad between Ghana's north and Accra on the southern coast, so significant to Ghana's economy that an English reader for primary school students featured the story "A Market Day at Asesewa" (see Figure 8.1). In 2002, the area was described as the

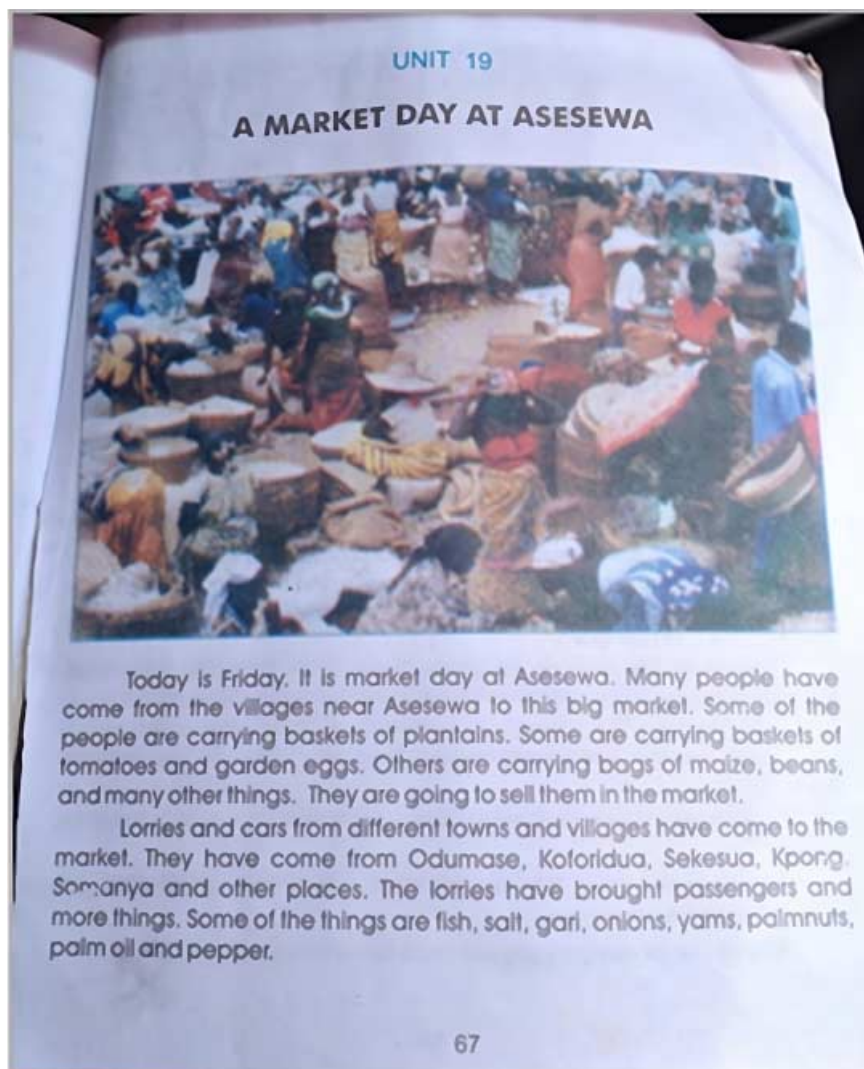


Figure 8.1. Page from a primary school reader featuring Asesewa. Author photo.

most deprived in the region (Kofoya-Tetteh 2012). In 2012, GhanaWeb reported that the immorality of students and tutors at Asesewa Senior High School was widespread and that there were allegations of sexual incidents and abortions, which the initiates confirmed, but that the school was also committed to academic achievement. These are some of the contradictions in which the initiates were swimming.

Dipo Initiates' Identities: Blackness, Place and Space, and Cultural Literacies

Dipo is foremost a cultural performance for the “accentuation of gender” (Adjaye 1999: 21) that assumes cis and binary gender identity as the norm. When I returned from Ghana in 2015, stating one’s gender pronouns was becoming standard practice in teen spaces. I recognize that the absence of a discussion about nonbinary, non-gender-conforming identities is glaring and conflicts with Black womynist thought that urges criticizing categories that cannot contain the Black feminine fullness (Green and Bey 2017). I am willing to concede this tension in this reporting given Dipo’s context.

My focus on Blackness in Africa is not meant to conflate Black American³ and African experiences, or Blackness with Africanness (as if each could be simplified into a singular reality); rather, I see them as old sister-friends sharing *histories* of patriarchy, colonialization, and structural racism and *herstories* of resistance, alchemy, and joy (Haddix et al. 2016; hooks 2000; McKittrick 2006). I use *Blackness* in the tradition of Pan-Africanism at a time of reenergizing unification of African descendant people around the world (Hudson 2020). Black is a common geography where physical proximity is inconsequential when “space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as ‘ungeographic’ and/or philosophically undeveloped” (McKittrick 2006: xiii).

When I step off the plane in Accra, I am immediately restored by the damp air that hits my skin. I hear Twi being spoken and breathe it in to release my weariness from America’s incessant racism. I have been going to Ghana for thirty-five years, I lived there for a couple of years, and I have spent over a year if counted in weeks in the Ewé village of Wusuta. I have been told that I move like an Ewé, but I am not naive. My American English and nil command of any Ghanaian language, among so many other things, mark me as *jevu* (a foreigner). Yet, Ghana is a geography to which I regularly return to relocate myself in ancestral knowledge and the bonds of chosen family.

Even if Dipo initiates do not name Black as an identity, varied geographies have historically in-placed Black female bodies in subservient social roles and as sites for sexual and violent imagination (McKittrick 2006). Like Black American girls who are socially adultified (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017) and thought to not need tenderness or protection, Black femmes must continually locate their true selves and, for the Dipo initiates, find grounding between modernity and a traditional rite (Akomo-lafe 2020). Place is also a tangible geography where social relationships, power dynamics, and exploration of one's known and emerging identities play out (Rentschler and Mitchell 2016). Paying attention to the places and spaces Black girls enter alone or together, whether figurative or material, uncovers sites of resistance, resources, and more humane possibilities (Butler 2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume; McKittrick 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

Theorizing Being, Becoming, and Liminal Spaces

I conceptualize *being* as a perpetually fluid becoming (Attia and Edge 2017), and the in-between (liminal) space is infinite abundance. The liminal, or middle, state of a rite transverges being and becoming. It is a threshold or portal crossed only after successfully completing the spiritual quest and leaving behind nonbeing, so to speak, to be remade anew (Adjaye 1999; Steegstra 2002). Adolescence also has been described as a threshold in research primarily conducted in the Global North, therefore too narrow to contain African teenhood (Adichie 2009). More salient in an African context is the project of adolescence that serves to create policies for social order and spaces of adult surveillance with predicable foreseen and unseen instabilities (Lesko 2012). This framing gives authority to adults who may want to usher young women from a controllable childhood into an adulthood of self-control, as if these are dependent variables. In African societies where generational delineation runs deep and is manifested in gender relations and ritual symbolism (Abbink 2005), affirming initiates as Krobo women may push them through aspects of social interactions that are troubling in the hands of young women.

As I wrote this chapter, precise memories of the pleasures and discontents of being a Black female teenager were stirring. When asked why I work with youth, I often tell the story about my eleventh-grade health education class. Tucked in the turret of my school's Gothic building, an unusually intimate space for a New York City public school, a class of

racially mixed but mostly Black and Latinx female students were being taught sex education by a white, female gym teacher. On a day when we were learning about birth control options, I thought it appropriate, and admittedly brazen, to ask my teacher about her preferred method. I anticipated some reticence, maybe brief embarrassment, but truly thought she would overlook my cheek and give us a real answer. In the steadiest voice she could muster, dripping with an unspoken “How dare you?” she said, “It’s none of your business.” The Black young women I know embody contradictions of being “simultaneously mature and immature, old and young, traditional and innovative” (Lesko 2012: 184), living in the liminal pocket even when they have adult responsibilities. I knew my teacher meant to shame me, but I recognize it now as something more treacherous: it was a missed opportunity to be in right relationship; instead, she could only engage with us as disembodied beings.

Makeshifting Methodology

I am an educator and artist by training, practice, and disposition. The Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies (at the University of Ghana) was not an obvious fit for me, but it was open to what I had to offer. If you want to gain a wide-ranging grasp of the history and culture of a place, an archaeology and heritage studies program in which the researchers are from the places they are studying is a good start. I learned firsthand about the finesse needed to excavate fragile artifacts from dirt pits, the dexterity necessary to build community in Ghana where the sites are on private and public lands, and the discipline of ethnoarchaeology⁴ (ethnography practiced by archaeologists). These new insights added to the close attention I already gave to my positionality as a researcher and learner. Balancing remembering and learning, knowing, and producing new knowledge (Dillard 2020), I saw that my challenge here was to avoid flattening my data, analysis, and reflexivity, so I engaged in the labor of imagination, conceptualizing, and creativity that is makeshifting (Thomas 2020). Makeshifting boosted my ethnographic process of “excavating” initiates’ place- and space-based knowledges while bringing in remembrances of Sister Sol and my own being/becoming as a Black teen. It centered flexibility and being in right relationship with the initiates despite time and other constraints.

Engaging with the Dipo Initiates

Between April and June 2014, I met with the Dipo initiates during four sessions, each lasting at least two hours. I administered an intake survey with quantitative and qualitative items on the initiates' demographics, post-senior high school plans, and Dipo assessments, and an outro survey to elicit any shifts or nuance in their perceptions about Dipo. Adapting from and bringing Sister Sol into the space, I facilitated an identity exploration exercise in which initiates defined attributes of a girl, a teen, and a woman (see Figure 8.2), and screened a Sister Sol video as a visual text.

As a treat and a chance for us to interact away from the school gaze, I asked the initiates to decide where we should go for an outing after our third session. They chose market day at the riverside village of Akateng, and off we went, accompanied by Mrs. Yansey, their housemother and the teacher assigned to assist me. Mrs. Yansey attended each session to be a watchful eye and to translate my American English into Ghanaian English. The mother of three Dipo initiates and someone who works with Krobo students, her knowledge of Dipo was incredibly useful.

At Akateng, I watched the initiates running from one vendor to the next to look for small trinkets and rolling up their school uniforms to



Figure 8.2. Dipo teens defining *girl*, *teen*, and *woman*. Author photo.

wade in the river. Had I closed my eyes and merely listened to their chatter and laughter, if they had been wearing their own clothes instead of uniforms, if the setting had been the Harlem Meer, it could have been a Sister Sol trip. Any sense I had as an outsider gave way to a diasporic belonging that made it possible for me to feel Sister Sol in our midst. I was a bridge between the girls of Asesewa and those of New York City, a corpus connecting our Blackness (see Simmonds [1997] 1999; Spillers 2006) and bonding these Black young women across our geographies.

Dipo Teens' Definitions: Girl, Teen, and Woman

Before and after our outing, the Dipo initiates and I conversed. I listened to them define and deconstruct *girl*, *teen*, and *woman*. Half of the initiates self-identified as a teen, followed by girl (five) and woman (three). Essentially describing themselves, they spoke about teens' biological (e.g., menstruation, broadening of hips), emotional (e.g., sadness, happiness, shyness), and social (e.g., feelings for the opposite sex) characteristics. They compared themselves to their mothers, saying they are more socially aware than their mothers due to "white people's technology" (e.g., movies, television, social media) exposing them to global popular culture. As if speaking to her mother, one initiate puffed out and thumped her chest and said, "My breasts are bigger than yours," implying that her mother had little to teach because the initiate is physically grown.⁵ With further discussion, the initiates challenged their own bravado, saying of teens, "We think we know better," or that teens hide their body from their mothers and consequently "do not learn how to bathe and take care of it properly."

The initiates' definitions of *girl* were less robust. A girl was described as "a person who is not yet a teenager," is unknowing and uninformed, and "reacts anyhow because they don't know anything about life," how to talk or dress, marriage, the "puberty rite of her society" (how they define Dipo), or things in the society. They are also aimless, "restless during the day because what they think is what they do." These critiques aside, initiates admitted that "girls of today know something."

The initiates first defined *woman* as a grown or adult person who is a family caregiver, wife, mother, teacher, and social and cultural transmitter. Because "she involve [*sic*] her idea with her husband in terms of decision-making," may enjoy her responsibilities, and passes down culture, she is agentic. A woman teaches her children, including how to speak to and respect elders, practice good menstrual hygiene, and "live [a] moral life and their traditional customs, such as traditional dances, wearing of

traditional cloth, etc.” Giving further thought to their definitions, some initiates said women are not always moral or good role models and that “sharing ideas with husbands and children” depends on the nature of the relationship (which might be affected by women working outside the home) or a love of money.

I was curious to learn who the initiates would identify as women leaders due to the role Krobo women are said to play in their communities. They named Mrs. Yansey because she “has a vision of the future of youth” and “organizes us,” and they said women are leaders in general because they “impart knowledge to youth,” including how to walk, dress, and “speak in a harmony way.” The initiates characterized leadership skills as “God-given gifts” yet described obstacles to effective leadership as human failings (i.e., having to face embarrassment, disagreements, fighting, disrespect). By saying, “a lot of your actions and duties must please people, and you too should take ideas from people,” one initiate characterized leadership as a give-and-take.

Who Am I Being and Becoming as a Dipo Teen?

“Every tribe has they [*sic*] own culture, and Dipo is also my culture, so I have to perform it,” one initiate said and most all others agreed. It is a rite all Krobo girls should go through, but as another initiate asserted, “to practice our culture is good, but some things need to stop.” These things were initiates’ having to walk naked in public (during the separation phase) and having goat’s blood poured on them during the climax.

Stories heard about Dipo from their mothers were constant reminders of the risk of the initiates being “sacked” (put out of their homes), which made Dipo unappealing. However, during its performance, initiates said they experienced excitement and joy, describing it as a “social celebration” with other girls who “know what you’re going through, though [they] are from a different community and families.” Even if not substantively transformative, through Dipo, the initiates learned history, Ananse⁶ stories, and important skills alongside co-initiates, with whom they exchanged stories. The initiates felt “confident and capable,” a sense of self- and family pride.

The initiates understood three functions of Dipo: (1) to “gain interest of Krobo man for marriage” and the attendant skills of housekeeping, mothering, and being a wife; (2) to maintain cultural norms and practices (e.g., how to speak to elders, traditional dance and drumming); and (3) to avoid being “sacked” from their home with a “broom and spatula” and shunned as an “outcast” for getting pregnant before marriage. They said

Dipo “helps in protection of our virginity” and “falls under custom and tradition to show our dignity and preserve girls.” A term they repeatedly used was *mentality*, the mindset required to resist engaging in premarital sex, although it is culturally permissible. To avoid compromising their aspirations, several initiates expressed a commitment to abstinence before marriage. In an aside to me, Mrs. Yansey shared a sobering assessment about the initiates: she believed only a third of them would realize their goals before becoming pregnant.

Alluding to a precarious balance between being “free to do whatever we want to do” and being troubled by the perception that they are “chasing boys anyhow,” the initiates affirmed critiques about Dipo while explaining that their parents were less protective of them, allowed more unsupervised activities (e.g., access to the Internet), and sometimes demonstrated low morals. Some adults charged with teaching and guiding the initiates in their schools also regularly sexually harassed them, perhaps with the promise of trinkets and good grades (Mojola 2014).

At the close of our last day together, an initiate asked me, “What do we get out of this?” I immediately worried that after three months, the group had not understood the purpose of my research. Then others spoke up and I understood they were reflecting on a question I had not sufficiently posed. They apparently learned something about planning, that they could “speak too with my colleagues,” and that “you don’t have to be shy” or “hide.” One said she learned to “think deeper, put my ideas and views out, try to raise my own point,” and another noted, “I can share stories with my own parents.” As I was wrapping things up, the initiates were dropping gems, demonstrating the agency they recognized in their mothers and implying the study had reciprocal worth.

Being, Becoming, and Belonging in Place

Before completing Dipo, it could be said that initiates were *being* teens or girls. They gathered self- and familial pride and more confidence but otherwise did not believe Dipo delivered them into adulthood. I know that the seeds educators plant may be imperceptible to young women until many years on, and the initiates may in time look back on Dipo with new understandings. At the time, they seemed content with being teens who were more knowledgeable than girls and could challenge adult wisdom but who did not have the responsibilities of *being* women. Dipo

is *the* means for becoming a Krobo woman, an embodied space that is tightly coupled to sexuality and sexualization. The initiates successfully met the cultural requirements for becoming Krobo women but could not freely locate themselves in an identity that demands nimble maneuvering of self-protection from sexual silencing, shaming, and harassment (Fine 1988; Mojola 2014).

I knew one of the members in the Sister Sol video was obviously pregnant, and for a moment, I questioned whether I should screen it because I did not want to suggest I had a particular agenda. Offering an authentic Sister Sol story was ultimately preferable, and it brought out more of the initiates' thinking. They were visibly in awe that a pregnant Sister Sol member was featured and had not been sacked from the program. They commented that when she was most in need, Sister Sol had not punished her for what they called "her mistake." Her pregnancy was not the final determinant of her *becoming*.

Can the liminal space between being and becoming hold a place of belonging for Black young women, spaces where their bodies can exhale and be playful? During our outing to Akateng, the initiates raced through the market with abandon and, later that afternoon, ran up and down a hillside of boulders they picked as a backdrop for a photo shoot in which they inserted me as their photographer and themselves as my muses. One initiate stopped running to stealthily pull her panties to one side and pee while still standing. I thought, What dedication she has to squeeze out every bit of pleasure, and what gracefulness. I was taken back to an amusement park trip with Sister Sol where they ran from ride to ride, periodically checking in to breathlessly ask how many more rides they could take.

Belonging in place, I saw the Dipo initiates' and Sister Sol members' playfulness (R. Brown 2013) and liberation: running, chitchatting, laughing, bending, and taking up space for their desires, while probably making some adults uncomfortable.

Their choosing the spot and getting the "leaders" to ask me for snacks was reminiscent of US teens, the testing of adults, of how far they can go, how much they can ask for, how they can make an adult project fit their desire. I can't hate them for that. (Researcher journal 2014)

Enmeshed in the messages of traditional and contemporary cultures, the Dipo initiates were visibly free in the market, as I suspected they would be, and I wondered if they (un)consciously chose Akateng because Afri-

can markets are typically controlled by women traders (see Lyon 2003). This is complex, iterative work at any age, but if one understands Black girls' self-knowing as multifaceted, dynamic, and complex (Muhammad and Haddix 2016), one can envision the initiates making meaning from conflicting messages to resist control (McKittrick 2006).

Always Being, Always Becoming, Hopefully Belonging

People don't just happen. We sacrifice former versions of ourselves. We sacrifice the people who dared to raise us. The "I" it seems doesn't exist until we are able to say, "I am no longer yours."

—Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives: A Memoir*

Dipo and adolescence appear to be future oriented, whereas the initiates are natural Afrofuturists, being and becoming across their past (a traditional rite space), present (their day-to-day lives), and future (including the anticipated Dipo climax). Applying *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging* to adolescence and a rite of adulthood highlights an artificial distinction between past and future, before and after, childhood and adulthood, control and chaos, and competence and inability, which shifts ideas about time, space, identity, power, and potential. At least three ideas have been raised by this inquiry.

First, becoming an adult speaks to societal questions about the nature, quality, and role of power, and its rights are then negotiated (Durham 2000). Young Black women are awash in layers of authorship, authorizing their participation in a traditional rite, defining adolescent norms, and determining what is suitable and proper. Who are Black young women *being*, we need to ask, before pushing them toward *becoming* something else? How are they naming themselves before we name them? In the slipperiness between Black girlhood and womanhood, how are we co-creating with Black young women places of belonging where they can play like girls and think deeply like women? I think we must hold Black young women close and allow them to soar and listen to the richness in the cut, what Green and Bey (2017: 444) called "the moments of existence before the name or the category came to do its work upon the body."

Second, Black young women are makeshifters, sometimes quietly and other times boldly creating spaces to assert control of their lives and inhabiting places that offer possibilities. Black young women pull on tradi-

tional and contemporary cultures and on internal dialogue and external expectations to figure out complex, often conflicting notions. What are we noticing about their adaptiveness? What is the sweet spot between their modernity and diasporic traditions of coming to adulthood? How and where is the abundant gap between girlhood and womanhood showing up?

Third, identity is an ongoing construction of lived experiences. Liminal spaces contain rituals, memories, and an unknowable future. What knowledges and unique personhoods of Black young women do we overlook, neglect, or ignore for the sake of nurturing them onward? How are we being inattentive to the consents and restraints of their emerging sexualities and other identities that make us uncomfortable? What literacies do we need to be in right relationship with them?

To these questions, I can safely say we need a pedagogy of love, in spaces and places that evoke corporeal wisdom and pleasure and where young woman can sit languidly with their *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging*. The particularities will undoubtedly come through makeshifting.

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Notes

1. Apart from the school and town names, all proper names are pseudonyms.
2. Patel (2016) reminded us that there are many knowledge traditions in which right relation has a presence (see Gumbs 2010; Tuhiwai Smith 2007). Describing how Mary Hooks, the organizer, centers the principle of being in right relationship, a. brown (2020: para. 5) wrote, “your ancestors did not fight fair, and they didn’t teach you to be in right relationship with anyone. they didn’t give our ancestors time to wonder, ask for help, course correct, negotiate.”
3. Throughout this chapter, I use *Black American* when citing specific literature and when it is important for clarity.
4. Per Gavua (2012: para. 1), “ethnoarchaeology is the strategic gathering and studying of ethnographic data on human behavior and its ramifications by archaeologists.”
5. For many months before her eighteenth birthday, one of my Sister Sol members declared, “I’m about to be a grown-ass woman.” I cannot write these words without working my neck as she did. Many years on, we have had good laughs about this, as she now understands that she was hardly grown back then. She and other, older Sister Sol chapter alumnae still work that phrase as an audacious statement about becoming women.
6. Ananse is a spider and trickster folktale character of the Akan people of Ghana. Ananse stories are an oral tradition that play an important role in passing down knowledge from elders to children.

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