

INTRODUCTION

Buried beneath Imperial History

The Search for “Odeziaku”

Onitsha had always attracted the exceptional, the colourful and the bizarre. Take the strange Englishman, J. M. Stuart-Young . . . a mystery man who was perhaps a doctor of philosophy and perhaps not.

—Emmanuel Obiechina, *Literature for the Masses*¹

AT DAYBREAK ON 30 May 1939, approximately 200 senior and influential Igbo women assembled outside a modest wooden house in New Market Road, Onitsha. Quaintly named “The Little House of No Regrets,” the property belonged to a British palm oil trader and poet who was known to the educated community as Dr. John Moray Stuart-Young and to the market women as “Odoziaku” (meaning “arranger, manager, or keeper of wealth”), a name he and his elite African friends persistently misspelled as “Odeziaku.”² He had died two days earlier in Port Harcourt after a long struggle against throat cancer. The women now gathering outside his house controlled the large market in Onitsha and they wished to make certain comments about the life of the deceased.

Inside the house, Solomon Obike grieved for the man with whom he had lived for nearly twenty years, first as a servant, boy-lover, and protégé in the late 1920s; later as a secretary and companion; and finally as a nurse.³ For many of these years, Obike’s wife and children occupied rooms at the back of the house, looking in on the affectionate, shifting relationship between the Manchester trader and the younger Igbo man.

At a signal from the women’s leader outside the building, the mourning party started to dance and sing, using the licensed performance space conferred on Igbo women at funerals to construct a forceful commentary on the life of the deceased. A funeral represented a critical chapter in a person’s life story in Onitsha at this time: the good name one had built up since birth could be reinforced or shattered by the oral performances of different groups of mourners.⁴ Core participants in the ceremonies—especially the different

women's groups linked to a lineage—could bring shame on the deceased by boycotting the activities required of them in protest at his or her poor behavior.⁵ They could also exploit formal lamentation genres by inserting grammars of disapproval and contempt into the lavish praise songs typically performed on such occasions. Aberrant citizens could thus expect to fall into a web of oral censure at some point in their lives.

The deceased man can be regarded as a perfect candidate for just such critical exposure: judged by the most normative Igbo cultural standards of the day, he had died as an isolated individual with no offspring to continue his patrilineage.⁶ Unlike the homes and workplaces of many of his fellow Europeans in the early colonial period, Odeziaku's several houses and stores in Onitsha exhibited no visible signs of a wife, wives, or concubines.⁷ Moreover, he had never brought honor to his name by investing in any of the status-conferring titles available for wealthy men in Igboland.⁸ Living on the first floor of the Little House of No Regrets, tended by his manservant, Odeziaku remained a "complete bachelor" in all senses of the term. He manifestly refused to embark upon any of the social pathways favored by Igbos to achieve full social adulthood.⁹

The fact that at his funeral the most powerful women in the community did not publicly judge Odeziaku to be a scandalous or anomalous presence reveals a great deal about the reasons for his long residence in Onitsha and provides the starting point for this study of different forms of agency, sexuality, and power in colonial Britain and Nigeria. Given Stuart-Young's perpetual "bachelor" status and his widespread reputation among Nigerians as a "woman-hater," it is surprising that the group of dancing women did not perform satirical or abusive songs, as they might have done for a male lineage member who disrupted community values.¹⁰ Instead, the women praised the way Odeziaku had brought wealth to Onitsha after 1905 and they hailed his long fight for African traders' rights in the face of colonial legislation that favored monopolistic European firms. They also praised his cultural and economic contributions to Onitsha since the 1910s, including his sponsorship of local youths. Finally, they blessed him as an honorary "son of the soil."¹¹ Declining the opportunity to construct a critical life story around Odeziaku, the senior women showered praises on him instead and, as the local newspapers reported, they "visited all his buildings singing dirges and eulogising his name."¹² Stuart-Young's generosity, justice, and fairness to the community had earned him the honor of dying a "good death" in the public sphere.¹³ All the while, the women's economic space, Onitsha's main market—usually one of the largest and busiest markets in West Africa—remained "practically deserted."¹⁴

Igbo women were the chief, but not the sole, producers of Stuart-Young's name for posterity. In pressrooms throughout Eastern Nigeria in June and July 1939, influential and elite African editors composed front-page tributes, hailing Dr. Stuart-Young's contribution to the intellectual and economic life of the region. Furthermore, at his lavish "second burial" several weeks after the funeral,¹⁵ an estimated 10,000 mourners filled the streets of Onitsha for a celebration that lasted four days.¹⁶ Unprecedented for a white man, this customary celebration involved every sector of African society and publicly confirmed Stuart-Young's good name. Diverse constituencies of Igbos, Nigerians, and West African migrants participated in the ceremonies, including influential political figures such as the chiefs of Onitsha, merchant queens, and elite African newspapermen such as Nnamdi Azikiwe. Market women, clerks, aspiring poets, schoolteachers, untitled youths, and the children of the town also crowded the streets. Special prominence was given to the Odoziaku (or Odeziaku) age-grade of males born between 1909 and 1911, established by one of Stuart-Young's favorite boys, Joseph Etukokwu, who had become a wealthy entrepreneur under the senior man's patronage (see chapter 4). At the command of the *obi* (king), other young men of Onitsha sounded the *ogene* in honor of Odeziaku, and war drums and tom-toms were played "as if for a free Prince of the land."¹⁷ "According to Onitsha customary rights," Etukokwu wrote in his memoirs, "I led my students to the funeral to pay our last respect to a great friend."¹⁸

Clearly there was widespread local admiration for Stuart-Young between his first arrival in West Africa and his death in 1939. By contrast, colonial officials and members of the Roman Catholic Mission at Onitsha knew him as a peevish trader from the English lower classes who fought against their efforts to introduce "civilization" to African communities on the River Niger (see chapter 6). Other Europeans regarded him a little more affectionately, but also with reservations, as one of the many "queer fellows" to find a home in the British Empire.¹⁹

Focusing on the period between 1880 and 1940, *The Forger's Tale* asks how it was possible for this unconventional, boy-loving Englishman to earn such a majestic traditional funeral in a society where few Europeans recognized his achievements and where, more importantly, few Europeans achieved such prestige among the local population. Was Stuart-Young's homosexuality irrelevant to the Igbo community, elite and nonelite alike, or were local cultural resources made available at different levels of society to accommodate his sexual difference? In what ways did his record in Manchester as a forger and a liar follow him to Igboland and infiltrate his own and his friends' constructions of his biography? To what extent did his racial and political status as a

white man in colonial Africa help protect him from censure by the local community? In attempting to address these questions, *The Forger's Tale* pays close attention to different forms of West African cultural production, including newspaper articles and letters pages, oral naming practices, the symbolic spaces furnished by the spirit realm, and Igbo public debates about sexuality and ethics.

Stuart-Young lived for thirty years in a region that was experiencing rapid alterations to precolonial leadership structures alongside a consolidation of colonial rule. He dwelled in Onitsha during the period of its transformation from a small but strategic missionary and trading post on the River Niger into the regional headquarters of Onitsha Province, complete with colonial cantonments, military barracks, a courthouse, schools, and a European “resident” or district commissioner to oversee the work of a wide network of warrant chiefs and local rulers.²⁰ Changes in the architectural appearance of the town reflected these political and ideological transformations.

In Stuart-Young’s lifetime, Onitsha also experienced the rapid expansion of the international trade in palm oil and kernels, which created fresh opportunities for established and new classes of entrepreneurs—especially Igbo women and lower-class European men, respectively—to make their fortunes (see chapter 2). Indigenous women and lower-class white men thus encountered one another in an arena other than the sexual realm that tends to dominate studies of imperialism and gender. All the while, with increasing fervor and success as the twentieth century progressed, Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries proselytized from bases at Onitsha, penetrating Igboland along existing trade routes and spreading the Christian word to intrigued, increasingly receptive communities.²¹ A politically vocal and influential African-owned press helped to shape and interpret all these processes, while at a popular level the shifts in local power structures were reflected in the wide range of new African titles, names, groups, dances, and relationships that emerged in different Igbo towns.²² Each of these spheres of activity informs the individual story of Stuart-Young as it appears in *The Forger's Tale*.

As a “palm oil ruffian” on the waterways of Nigeria and as an importer of foreign commodities for barter with Africans, Stuart-Young was inextricable from the economic boom that reverberated up and down the River Niger in the early twentieth century. African communities along the rivers had long-established patterns of consumption for imported commodities; slaves rather than palm products would have been exchanged for them in previous centuries. Economically, the first quarter of the twentieth century differs from earlier decades in West Africa because of the expansion in European trading activity, the arrival of large numbers of men like Stuart-Young to work for the

European firms, and the concomitant rapid expansion of the African consumer economy (see chapter 2). Stuart-Young was different from his fellow traders, however, for he was one of the few independent businessmen in West Africa to survive in trade after the First World War and he was one of the few active poets in the palm oil community.

Local responses to these political and social transformations are frequently missing from cultural histories of imperialism, an omission that is especially problematic in the study of sexualities.²³ For a demonstration of the often subtle ways in which local agency can be erased by historians of empire, one can turn to the opening pages of Robert Aldrich's *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. This encyclopedic book analyzes the lives (and loves) of numerous men of empire, including T. E. Lawrence and Henry Morton Stanley, as well as lesser-known Europeans such as Stuart-Young. *Colonialism and Homosexuality* is not about the "colonised 'other,'" Aldrich emphasizes in his introduction. Rather, the book aims "to provide the context in which local men, for whatever motivation, contracted intimate relationships with foreigners."²⁴ This statement implies that contextual information about colonized cultures can provide few clues about local men's sexual motivations.

Colonialism and Homosexuality exhibits a curious, symptomatic tension between context and agency in the writing of imperial history. Local men's motivations remain unknowable, in Aldrich's view, for the western researcher cannot adopt an "indigenous" point of view and explain the "sexual imperatives and options in non-Western society."²⁵ While this ethnic humility is understandable in the context of postcolonial debates about "speaking for" the other,²⁶ Aldrich's lack of curiosity about nonwestern "imperatives and options" is also a form of silencing and disavowal. It serves to push away the very subjects who can provide the most revealing information about the European protagonists of *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, and it marginalizes the people who can reveal how homosexual European men were accommodated in diverse global locations at different moments in the development of imperialism. Such cultural information would help to fragment the monolithic, problematic category of "homosexual" that, as Aldrich himself recognizes, fails to represent accurately the vast majority of nonwestern sexualities that fall outside twentieth-century dichotomies of heterosexual and homosexual.²⁷

Aldrich is not alone in his exclusion of ethnographic material from the construction of imperial contexts for European sexual encounters. Among many others, and for different reasons, Ronald Hyam, Joseph Bristow, and Christopher Lane also refuse to speculate about how homosexual Europeans were perceived and remembered by the specific communities in which they fulfilled their desires in the colonial period.²⁸ In particular, Hyam's survey of "the

British experience” in *Empire and Sexuality* revolves around the idea that colonial lands provided opportunities for “escape” from Victorian sexual prudery in Britain, giving men such as T. E. Lawrence the space to satisfy variegated and otherwise prohibited sexual drives.²⁹ European imperial expansion coincided with the codification of normative and nonnormative sexualities that made it difficult for homosexual men and women to explore their desires at home, so, in Hyam’s view, they traveled to the colonies in search of spaces for freer sexual expression. Political agency is thus reduced to purely sexual desires as Hyam seeks to demonstrate that “the formation of empires can be explained by sex drives.”³⁰

One of the few exceptions to the trend against ethnography in histories of imperial homosexuality can be found in Rudi C. Bleys’s *Geography of Perversion*, which sets out to reread and deconstruct colonial ethnographic documents in the search for examples of “male-to-male sexual behaviour outside the west.”³¹ In accord with Hyam and Aldrich, however, Bleys also concludes that for homosexual men in the colonial period, “escape from the rhetoric of decadence and marginality itself may have provoked a desire for exile, fed by the hope that the new-found habitat would embrace their sexuality in a natural way.”³²

While the real effects of fear and anxiety on Europeans with proscribed sexualities must not be ignored,³³ what is missing from all of these “great escape” theories of empire is a sense that the different members of the colonized community spent time examining and discussing new arrivals to their societies. Contemporary ethnography has done much to remedy the gaps and silences in the cultural history of postcolonial countries,³⁴ but the omission of the beloved and the local community from research into precolonial and colonial cultures leaves a vital gap in our understanding of the history of colonial homosexualities. This omission often gives the impression that a singular colonized society encountered a singular European colonizer. Scholars such as Aldrich, Hyam, and Bristow silence the “other” partner in the male homosexual relationship and render him a passive recipient of the white man’s desires.³⁵ Far more than half the story is thereby excluded. None of these studies makes space for a discussion of the complex, nuanced, but difficult-to-retrieve ways in which homosexual white men were treated by women, men, and children positioned on the other side of the imperial divide.

By contrast, the names and titles by which Stuart-Young was known in Onitsha at his death in 1939—including “Odeziaku,” “Dr. Stuart-Young,” “Eke Young,” and “Mami Wata’s wife”—offer points of entry into local modes of constructing history in colonial Onitsha. As chapter 5 demonstrates, different classes and constituencies of African conferred names on Stuart-Young, each

of which carried its own particular located commentary on his interactions with different sectors of Igbo society. The many local names for Stuart-Young exhibit the agency of local people in their shifting intellectual engagements with European society during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Recent innovative studies by Ann Laura Stoler, Catherine Hall, Antoinette Burton, Felicity Nussbaum, and other “new imperial historians” have challenged Hyam’s and Bristow’s assumptions that British colonialism took a similar shape in different geographical locations.³⁶ These scholars question the notion that whiteness was manifested in the same way around the world and that the metropolis was an uncontested national entity, untouched by colonial cultures and critiques. Imperial cultures, they insist, helped create metropolitan norms and values to the extent that both sets of cultural formations were mutually constitutive.³⁷ “Metropolitan society,” writes Burton, “had been both indissolubly linked to and continuously remade by Britain’s colonial possessions since the sixteenth century.”³⁸ “Europe’s colonies were never empty spaces to be made over in Europe’s image or fashioned in its interests,” write Stoler and Cooper in their ground-breaking essay on the importance of indigenous perspectives. “[W]hat Europeans encountered in the colonies,” they emphasize, “was not open terrain for economic domination, but people capable of circumventing and undermining the principles and practices on which extraction or capitalist development was based.”³⁹

Given this starting point and the insistence on a relational model of imperialism, it is surprising that patterns of exclusion toward local communities can be found in parts of the new imperial history. For example, while Hall and Burton carefully highlight the tensions in constructions of identity between metropolitan and settler colonial formations and the unsettling effect of foreign travelers in the metropolis, their lack of ethnographic detail about the places that were colonized serves to push local agency into the background.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Stoler and Nussbaum tend to focus on European colonial settlers, the bourgeoisie, and the tensions between settler identities and metropolitan values. In so doing, these scholars seem to situate concepts of gender, race, class, and sexuality within European post-Enlightenment value systems rather than within local cultural formations.⁴¹

In spite of the scholarly preoccupation with sexuality, domesticity, and homosocial colonial spaces as “dense transfer points” of power,⁴² indigenous homosexualities are rarely considered in this work, which emphasizes miscegenation and the imperial patrolling of male-female relationships.⁴³ Queer sexualities are excluded and the powerful local response to figures such as Stuart-Young remains inexplicable and lost to history in this framework. Yet, as the new imperial historians insist repeatedly, local perceptions of the colonial

encounter are as vital to the study of imperialism as metropolitan and imperial perspectives, most especially when the encounters are of an intimate or a sexual nature.⁴⁴ But also, as the story of Stuart-Young will reveal, local perceptions of colonialism are manifested in the literary relationships that developed between authors and readers in colonial settings far away from metropolitan literary culture.

In leaving Britain for West Africa—in becoming Odeziaku—Stuart-Young did not step onto a deserted platform, devoid of cultural colors and perspectives. If the foreign colony provided the freedom for European men to express their variant sexualities, as both Hyam and Aldrich argue in their books, then local communities would have witnessed the economic and emotional negotiations involved in these expressions at a microsocial level. Local people's own kith and kin participated in the sexual and economic possibilities offered by individual white men in their communities. These white men would have been talked about, talked to, observed, and actively interpreted by different classes of “colonized” subjects who would have found places for the newcomers in relation to their own dynamic cultural codes and structures.

One of the reasons for imperial historians' neglect of ethnographic data collected in the colonial period relates to the methodological (and ethical) problems that arise in relation to the reliability, and transparency, of the “information” such studies yield about indigenous values and sexualities. In relation to the history of Igbo women, for example, Ifi Amadiume argues that it is impossible to separate content from tone in colonial anthropological accounts of African gender formations.⁴⁵ Whether undertaken by colonial officials such as P. Amaury Talbot and Major Arthur Glyn Leonard, missionaries such as Rev. G. T. Basden, or European women commissioned to study the motivations of African women such as Sylvia Leith-Ross, the anthropological material produced by European researchers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is saturated with Eurocentric racist assumptions about the sexuality of Africans.⁴⁶ In consequence, Amadiume argues, anthropological texts claiming to describe Igbo intimacies and gender codes can yield no useful or reliable information to the cultural historian and must be discarded in favor of alternative research methods.⁴⁷

Amadiume's forceful rejection of European ethnography and the colonial archive generates an innovative alternative methodology for her research into the history of gender in Igboland, in which local actors and oral historians take center stage.⁴⁸ Her best-known book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, reverses the trend against indigenous agency to be found in histories of imperialism and sexuality. Dispensing with English-authored publications, Amadiume turns to Igbo scholarship instead and makes use of indigenous

oral and printed histories to construct a precolonial and colonial history of women in the town of Nnobi using local concepts and terminology to describe her material. In the West, she emphasizes, gender is attached to biological sex in a manner that fails to account for the flexibility of gender in Igbo cultural formations, where biological girls can become “sons” and biological women can become “husbands.”⁴⁹

Like the new imperial historians, however, and in spite of the provocative title of her book, Amadiume does not address the issue of indigenous homosexualities. Indeed—unlike Stoler, Burton, and Hall and their contemporaries—she is one of several African scholars to suggest that the current western interest in sexuality forms an “obsession” that, in its application to Africa, serves only to perpetuate negative colonialist stereotypes.⁵⁰ Other African commentators agree that research into African sexualities endorses racist European myths about the absence of notions of sexual propriety in African cultures.⁵¹

More problematically, Amadiume also insinuates that there is no indigenous homosexuality in Africa to be researched in the first place when she expresses her opposition to appropriations of her theory by lesbians in the African diaspora: “How advantageous it is for lesbian women to interpret such practices as woman-to-woman marriages as lesbian,” she writes, insisting that “such interpretation . . . would be totally inapplicable, shocking and offensive to Nnobi women, since the strong bonds and supports between them do not imply lesbian sexual practices.”⁵² The “priorities of the West” are, she adds, “totally removed from, and alien to the concerns of the mass of African women.”⁵³

Amadiume is reacting against western constructions of nonwestern sexualities as exotic or aberrant, but in so doing she sets up homosexuality as an “alien” and recent import to Africa.⁵⁴ As Marc Epprecht argues, however, this crudely political labeling of homosexuality gives the impression of prejudice and denial and masks the subtle “cultures of discretion” that existed in many past African societies in order to accommodate diverse sexualities. “Blindness toward indigenous homosexualities . . . appears to have more complex origins and subtle manifestations than critics have allowed,” Epprecht suggests, for in many cases indigenous homosexualities were actively and carefully “discoursed into invisibility or ‘unsaid’ by specific cultural, historical practices” that deliberately placed “a curtain of silence” and toleration over homosexual encounters.⁵⁵

The denial of homosexuality—or the denial of cultural and linguistic discretion—also affects the construction of African social history by more recent scholars. Not once, for example, does Nwando Achebe acknowledge same-sex desire in her impressively detailed study of the spaces created for “extraordinary” women by the “flexibility and fluidity of the Igbo gender system.”⁵⁶ In a

similar manner to Amadiume's, Achebe's history of gender in Nsukka Division deliberately avoids the discussion of sexuality, presenting marital arrangements in terms of economic and social power rather than in terms of desire and pleasure or coercion. Both scholars throw out the baby with the bathwater when they erase sexuality in the process of breaking the European connection between sex and gender. A result of Achebe's refusal to engage with sexual desire, sexual coercion, and African "cultures of discretion" is that her vivid story of the female king Ahebi Ugbabe, who transformed herself into a "man" in the early twentieth century, remains highly narrativized and situated outside theorization or analysis. Achebe's descriptive account of this female king, who surrounded herself with wives, handmaidens, and bathmaids, carefully tiptoes around any encounter with either side of the polarized debate about the existence or nonexistence of African homosexual desires.

For different reasons, more sympathetic historians of sexuality also argue that the word "homosexual" is not adequate to describe the array of sexualities in nonwestern societies.⁵⁷ "Even the young man you may have just done everything with sexually will say no if you ask him if he is 'gay,'" writes Nii Ajen of West African men. "And if you should ask that same man if there is homosexuality in Africa, a likely response will be 'No, there is nothing like that in Africa.'"⁵⁸ As Bleys suggests, the concept of homosexuality has a distinctly western history and flavor, having emerged out of sexology studies in nineteenth-century Europe.⁵⁹ In the late twentieth century it came to connote a permanent identity or at the very least a lifestyle decision rather than a simple description of a physical act or a same-sex encounter that occurs within a range of other identity-defining behaviors that may include heterosexual marriage.⁶⁰ The argument that there are no homosexuals in Africa thus stems, at least in part, from the incompatibility between the modern western conception of homosexuality as a "lifestyle," or a constitutive identity, and alternative local constructions of sexuality as one element of human identity among many other more significant elements, including generation, social status, wealth, education, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.⁶¹

In an attempt to surmount the terminological and ideological hurdles surrounding the historical study of same-sex desire in Africa, I have activated the word "queer" in this book in preference to "homosexual." Of course, both labels are part of modern western discourses about sexuality and desire that are not always helpful in the analysis of historical, or distant, cultural formations. Queer theory is, however, a great deal more flexible and accommodating than theorizations of "homosexuality," for whereas the latter term tends to be oppositional and definitional, caught up in the politics of identity and resistance, "queer" is an adjectival term that admits desire while questioning the

very basis of sexual oppositions and identities.⁶² Queer theory “seeks to find the cracks and cleavages between things rather than the things themselves.”⁶³ In the words of David Alderson and Linda Anderson, “queer” moves away from a concern with identity in order to privilege those sexualities that “carry the potential to subvert the very grounds on which . . . normative judgments might be made in the first place by refusing or rendering incoherent homo/heterosexual and—often at the same time—masculine/feminine binarisms.”⁶⁴

Focusing on discourses that fracture and constitute identity, queer theory accommodates without alarm the gender reclassifications and the delinking of gender from sex that occur in West African societies where women can become “husbands,” “sons,” and “kings.”⁶⁵ Questioning and opening up established western value systems, “queer” is therefore a term that allows space for societies where conceptualizations of sexuality are complex and plural, delinked from the physical body. In spite of its obvious French poststructuralist orientation, then, queer theory can include nonwestern conceptualizations of sexuality and identity.⁶⁶

In breaking away from the dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual in this book, my aim is to contribute to the “queer history” of Africa. I do not intend to interpret every detail of Stuart-Young’s life through the framework of his and others’ homosexuality, however, as is the tendency in some cross-cultural studies of sexuality.⁶⁷ Such a move fetishizes and oversexualizes the homosexual male body and, in a colonial context, fails to acknowledge the many and more complex ways in which individuals who are sexually marginalized or discriminated against in their home communities may engage in socially and politically dissident behavior in their host cultures.⁶⁸ As this study of Stuart-Young will reveal, “queer” desire is not necessarily manifested in physical, tactile ways or as a distinctive “gay” lifestyle and identity or even as overt political opposition.

Queer love may be a love that prefers not to name itself rather than the love that dare not speak its name: queer subjects may prefer to remain in a zone of untranslatability, outside names, classifications, and institutions. This is especially the case in places where the culture does not recognize same-sex desire as a permanent characteristic in the individual and in historical periods when mass homophobic prejudice causes secretive and closeted responses among its targets, as in Britain after the Oscar Wilde trials. In the story of Stuart-Young—which takes account of the public shaming of Wilde in 1895—political dissidence and discursive resistance can be identified as much through activities such as his secretive forgery of documents, his self-reinvention, and his charring of séances as through his political writings and his sexual (and textual) passion for boys.

Ironically, and in spite of their own disavowals of homosexuality in Africa, both Amadiume's and Achebe's accounts of Igbo gender formations help us to set up a "queer" theoretical framework for the analysis of colonial African history. In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, for example, Amadiume argues that Igbo gender constructions are far more fluid than the European "sex-gender system" that rigidly insists that biological males must behave in "masculine" ways while biological females must be "feminine."⁶⁹ From this starting point, Amadiume's entire study is located in a space of Igbo cultural "contradictions and inconsistencies"⁷⁰—in other words, a "queer" moment of Igbo cultural openness—whereby sexual dichotomies are deconstructed and binary oppositions are permanently destabilized. Her model of precolonial Igboland makes a discovery similar to that of recent queer theory, that classifications of sexuality are social and variable rather than biological, static, and essential.⁷¹ Indeed, she finds that the strict "dual-sex" principle that governed men's and women's separate access to land, wealth, status, and titles in precolonial Igboland was made possible in the first place by the "flexible gender system" that mediated the operation of power until the colonial invasion of the region.⁷²

This model has enormous potential when it is applied to the history of homosexuality in Africa, particularly in explaining the reasons why homosexual Europeans were often able to live without harassment in African cultures where gender structures were sufficiently flexible to accommodate their sexual ambiguities. Moreover, the links made by Amadiume and Achebe between individual wealth and the control of others' sexuality⁷³ greatly assist in our understanding of the manifestations of power in colonial Europeans' relationships with local people, especially in the asymmetrical arrangements that characterize the love of adult men for youths. The connections these scholars highlight between wealth, public status, and domestic power also support the emphasis in histories of homosexuality on the impossibility of regarding personal sexual practice as a private matter, separate from society and political culture.⁷⁴ Finally, Amadiume's and Achebe's attention to the wealth and power of "female husbands" helps demonstrate a point made by many historians of homosexuality in nonwestern cultures, as well as by classical scholars, that sexuality may be conceived of in social rather than sexual terms; that is, desire and the sexual act may be structured around power relations in society.⁷⁵

In maintaining a binary opposition between two continents and two sexual cultures,⁷⁶ however, Amadiume's model in particular remains rigid and essentialist. It does not fully account for the flexibility of gender in the west or for the links between sexuality and the exercise of power within and between the two communities. If African gender roles were flexible in ways that challenged

rigid Victorian sex-gender structures in Europe, not all sexualities in precolonial and colonial Africa were equally accessible and open to the local community. As Amadiume admits, “female husbands” were wealthy women whose “woman marriages” represented public manifestations of power and status.⁷⁷ Junior wives in this arrangement could not easily contract their own women-to-woman marriages, take titles, and become “husbands” in their own right. Relatively rigid economic and status hierarchies thus limited these gender-flexible marriages in Igboland.

While Amadiume does not discuss the domestic or sexual encounters between Europeans and Nigerians in the colonial period, the greater flexibility of Igbo gender rules that she describes and the fact that “biological sex does not necessarily correspond to ideological gender”⁷⁸ certainly would have facilitated the Nigerian life stories of individuals such as Stuart-Young in ways that were unthinkable in Britain at the time. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain, the confession of gender irregularities carried enormous physical and legal dangers for the individual. By contrast, Igbo gender flexibility would have eased the intense anxieties of men such as Stuart-Young about their own sexuality (see chapter 5).

The Forger’s Tale is an experiment in biography, driven by my wish to contextualize and interpret an area of the imperial past that is neglected in current scholarship. At one level, my intention is to contrast the repression of homosexuality in Europe with a range of more amenable African sexualities. Gilbert Herdt describes this type of framework in *Same Sex, Different Cultures* when he states that “nonwestern societies are typically more tolerant [than western societies] of variations across the spectrum of sexual behavior.”⁷⁹ While largely endorsing this position, I also aim to show that this popular representation of nonwestern gender flexibility set over and against Europe’s sexual rigidity is problematic and overly romanticized. First, it tends to assume that nonwestern cultures place a positive valuation on homoerotic acts and roles;⁸⁰ second, it tends to be ahistorical, clumping data into monolithic categories; and third, it tends to essentialize cultural formations in “western” versus “nonwestern” terms. In consequence, the “rigidity versus flexibility” model misses significant moments in the cultural histories of both Europe and Africa.⁸¹

Many difficulties surround the search for a “queer history” of Africa, however, and this book is marked by several lacunae and methodological problems. Same-sex desire has remained hidden from African history until recently; its multiple forms are barely accessible to the researcher except in ethnographic descriptions of “unnatural vices.”⁸² There is a near absence of information in the colonial archives, although numerous colonial anthropological accounts of Nigeria refer cryptically to “unbridled license” and “other forms of wickedness”

to connote the range of sexualities that fall outside English Christian heterosexual norms.⁸³ In his extensive studies of southeastern Nigeria, for example, P. A. Talbot comments vaguely on the “licentious character” of several Igbo ceremonies, and notes the “real vulgarity and indecency” of some of the images in Igbo Mbari shrines, without clarifying his descriptions.⁸⁴ We cannot simply ascribe a positive valuation to these blurred sexual scenes from the past and expect their logics of perversion and degeneracy to melt away, leaving a clear map of what Bleys calls the “geography of desire” in nonwestern cultures.⁸⁵ Rather, this archive of descriptions actively helps to constitute the “ethnography of silences” described by Bill Stanford Pincheon in his forceful critique of ethnographic accounts of homosexuality in Africa.⁸⁶

It is immensely difficult to recover instances of indigenous agency from the colonial archives and almost impossible to retrieve a full range of historical evaluations of sexuality. As Kath Weston writes, the difficulties of “getting data” are considerable when one is looking for evidence of same-sex relationships and gender ambiguity.⁸⁷ The problems increase a hundredfold in getting historical data. Contemporary interviewees cannot be expected to produce historically reliable evidence when asked to recall characters and events from the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is essential for cultural historians to remain open to the many ways local populations disrupted Eurocentric dichotomies between colonizer and colonized and between heterosexuality and homosexuality in the imperial period. To achieve this goal, life histories and instances of disruptive agency must be reinserted into colonial history.⁸⁸

In response to the difficulties of conducting a purely “oral” historical project for the early twentieth century, *The Forger’s Tale* cautiously revisits the colonial anthropological archive, fraught as it is with the dangers of colonialist repetition. In order to construct a biography of Stuart-Young and a cultural history of colonial Onitsha, I make use of the work of British missionaries, anthropologists, and administrators who worked in Onitsha in the early twentieth century and I attempt to disentangle the different colonial elites from one another.⁸⁹ When faced with the many ethnocentric truth claims of this material, I try to read European anthropological texts for moments in which their authors appear confused and suspended between cultural categories or when Eurocentric presuppositions are unsettled from within by the sheer force of the African material.

I also analyze the neglected archive of palm oil traders’ memoirs and the voluminous writings of Stuart-Young himself with a view to moving beyond “official” documents and exploring the class tensions in colonial locations. I place the palm oil traders’ writings alongside material drawn from African newspapers in the early twentieth century as well as material from elite Africans’

autobiographies and from recent interviews with residents of Onitsha. In order to appreciate the diversity and magnitude of local responses to Stuart-Young in the 1920s and 1930s, the opinions of his surviving protégés and elderly people in different sectors of Igbo society are also incorporated into the frame of this book in the form of interview material and reminiscences.

Stuart-Young's life story is positioned at a point in history where the tensions and incongruities of imperialism had become particularly pronounced. Members of the British working classes—long regarded by the bourgeoisie through a racialized and highly sexualized language of “savagery”⁹⁰—entered imperial geography as travelers, settlers, and entrepreneurs, actively carving routes for themselves through the imperial map (see chapter 2). When he decided to settle down in Nigeria in 1905, Stuart-Young was not yet known or recognized in Onitsha, then a small riverside market that hosted a handful of missionaries, a skeletal colonial administration, and approximately forty-five white traders working for European firms.⁹¹ Within five years, he had acquired land on lease from local chiefs and constructed his own stores at strategic locations around town.⁹² By 1919, he had become the wealthiest independent palm produce trader in Nigeria and a celebrated local personality in Onitsha, especially for his controversial political views, which antagonized the local Catholic mission and the colonial government. With several stores in town and outlying settlements and a staff of African clerks and shop assistants, he conducted a busy trade with local middlemen and merchant queens who brought palm produce to his factories, as the depots were known, along the shores of the River Niger (see chapter 2). He had also become a celebrated local poet, philanthropist, and intellectual who sponsored many young Igbo men through secretarial and clerical training in Onitsha.

What sets Stuart-Young apart from his peers and makes his story exceptional is that at each stage of his own journey he produced copious memoirs, articles, and poems. So great was his textual output by the early 1930s that, in the words of one of his African secretaries, “he wrote very fast like a machine.”⁹³ The two Igbo typists assigned to type up the work of this compulsive writer “hardly coped with the volume of manuscripts he wrote.”⁹⁴ As we shall see, Stuart-Young's texts played a key role in the production of “Odeziaku.”

Given the academic interest in popular literature produced in Britain relating to the British Empire, it is surprising that so little research has been undertaken into this ephemeral literature that was produced by lower-class authors living in the colonies and writing for publication in Europe or America.⁹⁵ *The Forger's Tale* seeks to retrieve and historically situate a selection of this neglected but rich archive of material by palm oil traders and lowly clerks in the colonies. Stuart-Young's writings occupy a central place in this canon, revealing

a great deal about working-class men's perceptions of class and race in Africa. His life spans almost the entire period of British imperial supremacy in Africa, and whether his topic was London's pederastic poets, the English countryside, or interracial love in the tropics, this author remained firmly located in his various West African homes, participating in the cultural and economic life of his adopted communities. In spite of his enormous literary production and political activity between the 1900s and the 1930s, however, Stuart-Young came from precisely the social class ignored by historians of imperialism in West Africa. Palm oil traders, European middlemen, and clerks lack a place in social histories of the region, and yet they played a vital role in sustaining interracial networks of trade, culture, and communication in the colonial period. Additionally, several of them wrote memoirs and novels in the 1920s and 1930s, few of which have been studied in the intervening decades. Of special interest in this respect is the manner in which Stuart-Young made use of his rural West African locations to forge documents and fabricate friendships with famous British personalities, conferring on himself an entitlement to the very culture and class position from which he was excluded at home.

Alongside this ephemeral European literature, indigenous African newspapers also played a vital role in the literary culture of the colonial period. In Nigeria and the Gold Coast (Ghana), African-owned newspapers were seminal in the "production" of Stuart-Young as a literary personality. Without the active support of his elite editor friends in Port Harcourt, Calabar, Lagos, and Accra, Odeziaku would have been nothing at all. Moreover, without the African newspapers, there would be few textual traces of his extraordinary life. With this in mind, *The Forger's Tale* suggests that African-owned printing presses played an important role in the literary networks that emerged in British West Africa in the early and middle colonial periods. This newspaper history provides a vital context for our study of postcolonial literatures in West Africa.

In his writing, as in his business life, Stuart-Young's primary market was African. He produced copious quantities of memoirs, poems, novels, and newspaper articles on controversial issues ranging from interracial love to the merits of colonialism and the nature of same-sex desire. Stuart-Young was one of the few Europeans to write for the African-owned nationalist press on a regular basis in the 1920s and politically stormy 1930s. Writing always "as an Englishman," he found sites for publication in newspapers that catered to an expanding and increasingly politicized West African readership. For a period of more than thirty years, his work appeared regularly in the Nigerian press. Farther afield in the Gold Coast, in London, and in the United States, his articles and poems appeared often enough to attract a large international mailbag to his Little House of No Regrets (see chapter 2).

British imperialism is a complex and heterogeneous subject area, and one way to comprehend its social history is through detailed, situated studies of specific instances of cultural or textual practice. In clustering sets of topics around the biography of a single individual, my aim in this book is to write against histories that present broad cross-cultural surveys of global imperial circuits. The absence of local perspectives from these broad-sweep histories is especially problematic when scholars discuss the lives of “queer” colonial men whose physical encounters required local bodies and whose lives were enveloped by ambiguous and contradictory relations of power.

One might, however, question the value of “the microscopic study of an eccentric or even an abnormal self” such as Stuart-Young and what it can “tell us about the social world of normal others.”⁹⁶ In addressing this question, *The Forger’s Tale* compiles a cultural and literary study around the figure of Stuart-Young. His biography is used as a magnet for the attitudes, values, aesthetic expectations, and popular tastes of his day. Situated at the center of these diverse currents, Stuart-Young remains pivotal to the progress of the book. Through detailed analysis of his life story—from his childhood and adolescence in working-class Manchester to his maturity in West Africa—I discuss the ways in which this poorly born but ambitious man could reinvent himself in Onitsha and forge his way toward an impressive Igbo funeral while never fully stepping out of the normative gender, class, racial, and imperial standards of his day.

The very smallness of Stuart-Young’s contribution to institutional discourses such as imperialism and English letters is precisely the reason why his biography opens up an intriguing and relatively unrestricted space in colonial history. *The Forger’s Tale* does not aim to inscribe Stuart-Young’s story back into the heart of the colonial project. It aims instead to use his biography and the stories of his African friends to open up an array of topics that have remained on the margins of imperial history, including the criminal and creative uses of forgery in Britain and West Africa, the cultural and literary life of lower-class traders on Nigerian palm oil stations, the complex reciprocity of pederastic relationships in colonial Africa, and the role of African-owned newspapers in producing keen, active, and class-conscious reading publics. In this, *The Forger’s Tale* participates in the project started by Antoinette Burton in her study of the life stories of three Indian travelers in Victorian Britain to interrogate precisely “what—and who—has traditionally been considered a legitimate subject of ‘British’ history.”⁹⁷ *The Forger’s Tale* adds to Burton’s agenda by addressing the question of what, and who, are the legitimate subjects of *African* history.

Ann Laura Stoler and Frederic Cooper insist that historians of empire must abandon center-periphery models of analysis in favor of a more integrated

“both-and” model in which colony and metropole configure one another in tense, productive, antagonistic, and complicit cultural and economic relationships.⁹⁸ This has important implications for the genre of imperial biography, for according to Stoler’s and Cooper’s model, the biographical subject must not be positioned in a way that replicates the binary oppositions that were generated within colonial discourse itself between colonizer and colonized and between black and white.⁹⁹ The search for Odeziaku exemplifies the need to move beyond binary oppositions, for it encompasses material ranging from the British popular response to Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality in the 1890s through to the rise of West African newspapers in the colonial period and the local impact of missionary-led debates about monogamous marriage in West Africa in the 1920s and 1930s.

The question of African agency motivates a large part of this book and prevents it from conforming to the rules of mainstream western biography in which the discussion of “other” subjectivities tends to remain secondary to the understanding of an individual’s psychological development.¹⁰⁰ *The Forger’s Tale* attempts to interpret Stuart-Young’s biography in Igbo terms as well as in British cultural terms, for his life story cannot be separated either from the social and cultural contexts that facilitated his choices or from the stories of other people, particularly the inhabitants of the West African town in which he settled and thrived. *The Forger’s Tale* thus uses the figure of Stuart-Young to open up a wider study of imperialism, (homo)sexuality, and nonelite culture in Britain and West Africa between the 1880s and the late 1930s, and the resulting life story is not that of an individual in isolation from his context, nor is it a set of cultural histories that can be divorced from this man’s particular life.

One factor makes this project especially complicated. Stuart-Young was an individual who was sculpted in important ways by the circumstances of his race, class, sexuality, gender, historical period, and geographical location. But his biography is queerer than allowed for by the relatively stable model of self in relation to setting or subject in relation to context. The problem is this: the chapters that follow trace the life story of a compulsive inventor of identities; a creator of names, titles, and signatures; a liar, a scribophile;¹⁰¹ and a wearer of multiple masks. Each of these slippery, open, unempirical identities plays havoc with the biographer’s method, for Stuart-Young wore each mask in a manner that was equally authentic—or equally inauthentic—as another mask. If we turn, in the search for evidence, to the many memoirs that he produced about his early life in Manchester, we find texts filled with forged documents and fabricated relationships from which it is impossible to disentangle a “true” or “real” subjectivity (see chapter 3). His African memoirs are no more reliable for the intimate friendships they construct with famous men. Indeed,

exactly when he took on the names “Moray” and “Stuart” is itself unclear, since he was born plain “John James Young” on 3 March 1881 in Ardwick, a working-class district of Manchester. Thus began a lifelong process of self-production, or masking by naming, through which Stuart-Young effaced young “Johnnie” and forged himself into a better social class.

Colonial Africa was central to this process of self-forging and self-reconstruction. In moving to West Africa in the early twentieth century, this poorly born but ambitious poet could take up one of the few opportunities for economic self-advancement available to lower-class British men. Born to a washerwoman and a manual worker, Stuart-Young made his escape to West Africa, leaving behind the clerical job, cramped housing, and restricted dreams that would have been his lot had he stayed at home in Manchester (see chapter 1).

Stuart-Young’s life is bound into complex areas of British and African cultural history, including the history of forgery and pederasty. His decisions and choices, and the ways in which he (mis)represented them textually, offer us singular access to these elusive areas of history. In attempting to account for the hiddenness of the forger’s “self,” it is therefore necessary to produce a form of biography that respects the careful, secretive ways in which he encoded his desires, but it is also necessary, in tension with this, to respect the performed nature of all his identities, the unrecoverability of his subjectivity, and the impossibility of simply “decoding” his inscriptions. Continually reaching away from his previous selves and constantly recasting himself in response to local expressions of approval or unease, Stuart-Young was the perfect forger in that he was never simply “at one” with himself; rather, he was permanently inspired to produce new, future-oriented selves.

Stuart-Young deliberately manufactured his subjectivity in order to deceive the outside world. Given the creativity of his forgeries, however, the biographical search for Odeziaku should not simply take the form of a quest to unmask a liar or a project to decode his secret language and expose his inner or “perverted” self.¹⁰² While the activity of decoding is vital to the recognition of forgery, the opposition it generates between authenticity and inauthenticity, or truth and lies, does not do justice to the creative agency of this forger. Nor does it recognize the fundamental importance of other people to the process of forgery. Each new incarnation of Stuart-Young depended for its success or failure on his accumulation of deposits of belief and goodwill among the people who witnessed the spectacle of his identity. A degree of mutual complicity was therefore involved in his relationship with his public.

Once again, queer theory can assist in refining our sensitivity toward forgery and the forger, for queer readings highlight “the constructed nature of sexual identities, their contingency and instability.”¹⁰³ Given that homosexuality is

often regarded as “a spoiled identity” in western sexual cultures, and given that forgery involves the spoiling of “identity” as a concept, forgery may be regarded as one of the rituals of queer expression involving the artful fabrication of a true self for public consumption and the equally artful partial concealment of the “spoiled” self in between the lines. As several chapters of this book will reveal, in Stuart-Young’s case, forgery, sexuality, subjectivity, and textuality are all woven together into a complicated web that “queers” our search for true biography and identity.

The Forger’s Tale adheres to Catherine Hall’s request that social historians of colonialism should respect “the imperative of placing colony and metropole in one analytic frame.”¹⁰⁴ The inseparability of colony and metropole necessitates a double vision without which it would be impossible to comprehend the sheer scale of Stuart-Young’s self-reinvention in Onitsha. The search for Odeziaku therefore begins not in Africa, but in the working-class district of Manchester where Stuart-Young grew up in the last decades of the nineteenth century, tightly confined by the range of imperial and sexual possibilities that were available to working-class men in Britain at the time.